

Flashes of a Century: A Breviary of Images

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For all those who have called the 20th century ‘this century’, to speak of it now as the ‘last century’, albeit somewhat disdainfully, betrays a certain paradox. I believe, however, that in a general way the atmosphere is not very nostalgic. Rather, the idea which is now gaining ground is that we are not only departing from a period but are well rid of it.

It is hard to accept this idea without question, even so, since for the majority of people the 20th century remains the only vital stage; yet the transition from one century to another took place amid a mixture of inertia, frivolity and relief which highlighted both present doubts and the burdens of the past we would prefer to forget. The 20th century has been a fascinating period from various points of view and at the same time a harsh, cruel and bloody period.

Europe had taken leave of the 18th century with the promise of the Enlightenment and of the 19th century under the auspices of the utopias. The world – and not only Europe – emerged from the last century with no definite prophetic outlook within the social framework despite encouraging prospects in scientific fields. It might be said that the 20th century oiled the wheels of ‘humanism’ to such an extent that it carried humankind to the brink of the abyss, stripping it of moral references hitherto held to be untouchable. Thus we are advancing into the new century with a strange combination of reforming zeal and ethical disarray.

What we perceive now, although we lack the words and concepts to define it, is a direct consequence of the greatness and the woes of a historical period characterized by gigantic strains. Prometheus and Mephistopheles have shared the most profound symbolism of the century: Prometheus on account of the largely unforeseeable progress in science and technology, the unbelievable construction of cities, the abolition of frontiers, the dreams of immortality; Mephistopheles for the ever more sophisticated powers of destruction of mass warfare, refined torture, the poisoning of the air and the mind.

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We have gone far beyond the challenge of Babel as well as of Icarus and we have even experienced all the delirium of Faust. The achievements of the 21st century have no antecedents in any of the areas where humankind has striven to exceed its limits. But its ambitions have been dearly bought. The Second World War totalled more dead than all previous wars put together. In Hiroshima, in a single day, the death toll was so high that it could only be compared with the divine exterminations recorded in mythology. The very breath of the planet where we live was brought into question.

To take more mythological images, it is possible to see this century, at once innovative and hapless, like a horse racing unbridled through history towards noble designs while trampling underfoot all that lies in its path. In its wild canter it raises a dense cloud of dust, making it difficult to distinguish dreams from nightmares. The 20th century, at its birth, was that of utopia, as it grew it became that of the Apocalypse and, lastly, in old age, it ended as that of survival. It had suffered too much upheaval to preserve the illusions and hopes forged by early humanism.

Auschwitz, the gulags, the cold terror of the following decades: a good proportion of enlightened and romantic projects as well as of 'modern' ideas were completely sunk in the mire. The second half of the 20th century lived in mortal repentance for what had happened during the first half. It was a difficult path of atonement which brought about the more or less turbulent end of 'great ideals'. But at the same time it had been a period of apprenticeship. The new illusions which are bound to occur – it has always been like that in human history – will doubtless have been hatched in this seemingly lack-lustre, post-Utopian and post-Apocalyptic segment of the hundred years which recently drew to a close.

All the centres of gravity of our present *chiaroscuro* were set during the coldness of the 20th century: the population explosion which demands colossal migrations; communication with its universal dimensions; the osmosis of cultures; the modification of nature thanks to technological intervention; the creation of ghostly realities; scientific proclamations against old age, sickness and death. And naturally, in parallel, we find a radical transformation of our perceptions of 'truth', with the dismantling of old models – religious, mythical, ideological – beneath the thrust of the new iconographical model of publicity and actuality on a worldwide scale which would submerge us daily in a global showcase.

It is precisely that global showcase which, like a polyp, embraced the planet in its suffocating and almost endless tentacles and ushered us into the 21st century, after the events of September 11 in New York and Washington. All of a sudden, we had the impression of having lived through an unprecedented trauma which is doubtless true if we consider the immediate global extent of the repercussions of what happened. But when we look at those events with fresh eyes, we shall almost certainly realize that these abrupt turning-points enter into the history of humankind as a whole. After the tempests of the 20th century, the calm of a supposedly mainstream model of progress became widespread. However, as is often the case, when one thinks that the house is sounder than ever, one forgets the work of the termites.

Until September 10 of the year 2001, everything seemed stable, promising, a straight path lay ahead, leading away permanently from the worries of the past. Twenty-four hours later, the house was filled with rubble and, without warning,

the sky clouded over. That moment was described as 'the war of the 21st century', people talked of the 'fear of the 21st century', the new drums of the Apocalypse.

Nevertheless, and despite what was said, the pictures of the exterminating machines, which resounded as they hit the World Trade Center in New York, although they were already part of the future because they were imprinted on our retina with stark insistence, well and truly bore the memory, hate, rage and cruelty which belonged to the century which had just ended. Indeed, the Pentagon was one of the most important symbols of the wars of that particular age, the Twin Towers stood up as the proudest representatives of triumphant capitalism; terror bore the stamp of the marginalization, fanaticism and violence which the 20th century had carried to a paroxysm. The angels of steel, the aeroplanes used instead of bombs, were part of the great technical achievements of the century; and the bruised city, New York, both frightening and enthralling, which until then had never been violated, unlike the other imperial capitals of history – namely, Rome, Byzantium, Berlin or London – the most Promethean and the most Mephistophelean city, had been rightly acknowledged as the capital of the 20th century, just as Paris had been that of the 19th century.

Consequently, we shall understand nothing of present uncertainties unless we acknowledge that the marks of our present day and the signs of our future were all hatched in other centuries and most especially the last one. The 'dictatorship' of the present wielded by the media, because they are far more powerful than our critical barriers of resistance, condemns us irremediably to amnesia. The power of what is current, to a great extent totalitarian, inevitably courts oblivion; but the loss of the diversity preserved by memory can only further a repetition of the worst mistakes of the past. Research on the *imago mundi* of the 20th century is therefore well and truly relevant, not for nostalgic reasons, but because a sense of responsibility towards our existence and our future demands it. Thus, the evolving of a visual canon which would draw together the most vigorous trends of the recent past – whether visible or subterranean – might contribute to the revolt of memory against oblivion and add to a complex explanation of the phenomena which determine our present movements and conduct, thereby providing a means of resisting the simplistic discourse of the showcase civilization.

As I see it, this short visual canon, a breviary of images, conceived as flashes on the subject of a century, cannot but be bitter-sweet. It is full of light and shade, faithful to the duel, the encounter, the aversion and the affinity between Mephistopheles and Prometheus. I am neither optimistic nor pessimistic, I entertain neither terrible nor idyllic images. Moreover, I do not think that we have left behind once and for all an inferno or a golden age never to be repeated.

Further – and beyond the simple and ingenuous maxim that 'any time past was better' – I believe that we have never been equipped to draw up a balance-sheet of the recent past except by *chiaroscuro*, light and shade. In fact, even great mythical and religious elaborations, great ideal projects and great technical constructions are dominated by human instinct, conscience and destiny. I am proposing my icons on that basis, like a dance of construction and deconstruction. And I shall begin in a practical manner with a pedagogical exercise on the latest collective stir, the symbol of construction and deconstruction which is already seen as the universal repre-

sensation of the transition from one century to the next: the Twin Towers of New York, now gone.

Greatness and woes of Babel

The race to construct the tallest buildings in the world has been one of the most extraordinary symbols of the century. We sought to defy the skies. By altering the biblical admonition, we have raised ourselves well above the belfries of the churches of yore and scrutinized the horizon with almost boundless expectations.

All the great ideological protagonists of the century were involved in the race. This was the case with the mysterious whimsical and abominable duel between Stalin and Hitler, who wanted to construct the 'largest building in the world'; that duel was never fought out because of the war and then because of the collapse of the great totalitarian regimes. But, like a capitalist icon, Babel reached dizzy heights in the 20th century, ranging from the Empire State Building to the Twin Towers, where it stayed as long as New York continued to dominate, as opposed to Moscow and Berlin. Next, the global unfurling of capitalism meant that the century ended ultimately with the skyscrapers – also twin towers – of Kuala Lumpur and with the project, which could not be more ultra-Babelian, of the 'world tower' of São Paulo.

The megapolis

This is a truly representative project because probably no other city demonstrates as well as São Paulo that idea of the universe concentrated in an urban structure. In this case it is no longer the old town or the old metropolis but rather a monstrous spider's web capable of capturing all worlds which approach it.

Like most of the great megapoles, São Paulo is a 'universe in miniature' where one finds religions, cultures, races and traditions in movements at once bizarre and unexpected, at once centripetal and centrifugal. Fusion and confusion, symbiosis and particularism, crossroads of a world, our world, where the global village and the tribal metropolis are superimposed. Overcrowded megapoles are places where the great migrations which dominate our time can converge and also places of potential friction.

The reign of the masses, envisaged at the beginning of the 20th century as obeying the great hypothesis of social revolution, has been replaced by mass nomadism which will doubtless reflect the greatest spiritual upheavals of the last millennia.

Utopia defiled

The 19th century came to an end amid prophetic proclamations and Nietzsche was the undisputed visionary. Creation and destruction, Utopia and Apocalypse, sunshine and shadow. Subsequently art and the avant-gardes set this out with almost astonishing lucidity. But the prophets of emancipation obtained a consensus

unknown since the days of the flowering of the great religions. It brought a new world, a new human race, paradise on earth. Even in the very entrails of its buildings, Moscow symbolizes and emphasizes the extent to which the city was impregnated with the Revolution; at the same time, it illustrates the dreadful collapse which followed. The Third Rome – after the First and Byzantium – had succeeded in making itself known as the capital of the empire of equality: it was the first and only one to have established a social idealism in history. Very probably no other ideological phenomenon had played a role of massification of that magnitude since the expansion of Islam. Communism sailed through the 20th century like a wild promise and, at the same time, opened a wound of devastating proportions. We are far from having helped to heal this scar. The revelation of the gulags was the tragic outcome of the grand European social philosophy which steered the world towards totally different scenarios. The fall of the Berlin wall was no more and no less than the breaking of the last dyke which held back the revolutionary flood waters of a period in danger of drowning in its own illusions.

The conquest of paradise on earth, which ended in implacable disaster, has introduced us to a new period governed by pragmatic and utilitarian reason. But far away a growing pauperism can be descried on the landscape, affecting broad swathes of the planet. The new states which are emerging may yet prove less easy to control, perhaps because the origin of their embers is older, than those set aflame in the age of the Enlightenment and during Romanticism.

Mass death

Before the 20th century, human dreams may never have been transformed into a nightmare in such a fashion. Considered from the side of the living, we are already in a position to contemplate or at any rate to imagine the most unlikely metamorphoses. From the side of the dead, we have met with unsuspected barriers both as regards sophistication and as regards quantity.

Quantity above all: mass destruction, par excellence. Thousands of wars have been recorded in the course of history; in one of them, the Second World War, the 20th century totalled more dead than all the others put together. We introduced full mobilization and all-out war: the forces of destruction attained a degree which had been foreseen only by nihilistic mythologies. The combination of totalitarianism and technology has been unbelievably lethal.

Auschwitz was only the tip of the iceberg of mass destruction. Its images and their worldwide dissemination bring together the ways of planned death which, on the basis of ethnic genocides, culminated in the systematic annihilation of all differences.

The plague of the 20th century has turned out to be the new technical capability which is predominant; it remains icy and unconcerned by the mass death it provokes. Having no transcendental limits it appears to be subject solely to the law of the greatest number: many millions of people count for nothing beside the mechanical ways of the world.

Birth of a god

In a separate chapter of this vicious circle in degrees of quality, we have Hiroshima and the icon of the nuclear mushroom. In one respect, it is another episode, probably the most cruel, of the plague: total mortality is on the same level as the murky prowess registered for the century. In another, however, the proportions are totally different: purer, more universal and more essential. Mass death on the fields of battle and in concentration camps is baroque, due to an over-accumulation; but the silhouette of the nuclear mushroom is abstract, it is the fruit of minimalism and stylization. Never before had such pure lines killed so many.

Until the 20th century, only God or nature had provoked, with their vengeance and their cataclysm, what humankind had achieved entirely on its own. Even if nuclear energy technically has been released by people, it represents such wonderful and monstrous progress for the potentialities of destruction and construction that it may be likened to a theophany: the 20th century has helped to make known a god of terrible ambivalence, while we continue to live in gloom beneath the clouds provoked by that event.

In search of the grand interlocutor

Let us not be too harsh on ourselves; if we sold our souls – consciously or unconsciously – to Mephistopheles, it is because we were worshipping Prometheus. There is no doubt that the 20th century has been the darkest in history but it has also been the one which has pursued with most valour the end of the solitude of humans, brought about by the sudden diaspora of the gods.

Travelling through space is, in this respect, a major sign of identity, although, it is true, the principal pathways of that essential adventure have been more winding than might have been expected by the optimistic end of the 19th century.

We risked our fate through cosmic space but as we gradually colonized new regions others, even more ravaged, appeared. We launched our first rockets while the oceans were practically inaccessible. Beyond the noise we make, there is only silence.

From Gagarin's flight to the landing on the moon, space exploration, of course, illustrates the desire for adventure but over and above all it indicates the need to stimulate the interplay of a dialogue which grouped the most sensational pieces of news in the history of humankind. We have always behaved as prisoners of our irremediable monologue and for consolation we have created a long procession of gods.

Often we continue to appeal to them, but now we have set our sights on our own search for the grand interlocutor. For the time being, the Hubble telescope serves us as a scrutinizing eye and we hope to be able to call upon even more mighty instruments.

The inner cosmos

We contemplate our inner self with the same ardour. At the end of the 20th century, we coveted spatial colonization, which has proved utterly remote. Now, it seems as if our greatest hopes are placed on our own body: we endow it with revolutionary powers to confront old age, sickness and death.

Having discarded our other utopias, our principal dreams today are of a biological utopia.

If intervening in nature has always been a feature of civilization, the growing ability to transform the body of the world and our own body undoubtedly opens untold avenues. If research in biogenetics leads to essential alterations in the course of life, we shall have to face unprecedented revolutions and dilemmas: perhaps even achieve the long-coveted dream of modelling our own existence.

A major inheritance from the century which has just ended and which will lead us into domains hard to conceive is the new symbiosis between macrocosm and microcosm. Our spatial adventure in a sense matches our mental adventure. The intellect and the universe rub shoulders over such issues as the science of the future and offer a new symbolical dimension to old words like 'soul' and old expressions like 'soul of the world'.

The new oracles

Where expectations are concerned, the 20th century exhausted its resources by encouraging the image of a lame giant. One leg, that of science and technology, is stronger and stronger while the other, the leg of spirituality, is more and more shrunken. Because the great ideological discourses had crumbled, utopias could be achieved only by catastrophe, and because certain resurgences of religion had been diverted towards fanaticism, humankind in the late 20th century was pushed into spiritual apathy and critical renunciation. At the height of the 'golden age' of scientific truth we find ourselves in a kind of 'bronze age' of moral truth.

No-one, so to speak, has dared to propose long-term ethical strategies or more or less totalizing alternatives for collective behaviour in our time. In such a context, the immediate human prevails: the person who resorts to instrumental, pragmatic, utilitarian reason.

So it is not surprising to see an ordinary human figure stand out against the landscape: homo oeconomicus rather than a 'man of desire' or a 'man of production' (even the production of leisure). Being accustomed to assessing the state of public health on the basis of the health of the economy, the individual in transition between two centuries proceeds anxiously towards the electronic notice-boards of stocks and shares just as his or her ancestors turned to idols and oracles. Even the capitalist economic model, adopted with no alternative in view, seems so obvious and natural that it is no longer named. It is the unnameable.

Unlimited reality

In actual fact, one might say that the great icon bequeathed by the 20th century is precisely the lack of a definite or even definable icon because our power of transformation and manipulation has annihilated all boundaries in real life. Kafka was right to provoke the metamorphosis of Gregor Samsa. Our world is a world fed by permanent metamorphosis.

If, for Paracelsus, imagination was the ability to create 'imaginary worlds', our imagination, technically speaking, is practically boundless. Moreover, although our mind has been adequately trained by the magical power of the cinema, other even more powerful and efficient tools have appeared in the firmament of visual alchemy.

At every level, the awaited horizon of virtual living is a new and mythical Pandora's box at the bottom of which the slightest 'principle of reality' languishes among the shadows of utmost ambiguity. Our world is the most alchemical of all possible worlds, with spells which carry our visions from one stretch of the imagination to the other. What is odd, however, is that despite the sophisticated means available nobody seems to be looking for the philosopher's stone.

Ghostly truth

We do not know whether it was Prometheus or Mephistopheles who donned the conjuror's cloak, but it is quite certain that under the spell of his magic, 'our magic', we have forgotten the importance of knowing. We are not seeking the truth: we accept it.

And the truth we accept implies a profound modification of the human conception of truth we have held so far. It is functional immediate truth, constructed technically on the spur of the moment, narrowly linked to the production mechanisms of today.

It is a ghostly cold truth which does little to commend us but, apparently, does not condemn us either. It is the truth of the giants of information, of the armies of total publicity. In the face of that, the ardent, secret, difficult complex truth, which demands culture and freedom, seems obliged to have to swim against the tide.

But if we try to understand the spirit of a period, if we try to project the *imago mundi* of the century that was ours, it is because, after all, we want to know, as far as we can, where we stand. So it is not for theoretical or academic reasons or even with the will of the taxidermist who fashions the skin of time, but in order to continue the journey and preserve the desire to know.

Our chief source of error, perhaps, but at the same time our supreme justification.

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