

Vanitas Extended or “Time 2.0”



Time flies. When Googling “time flies quotes”, six categories appear: “life is too short”, “family togetherness”, “Christian”, “achievement”, “dreams” and last but not least “a better tomorrow”. Were it not that one of our grandest scientists today came up with it as the name for his brilliant mind breaking study, I would have loved to secretly steal it as mine, and name this text: A Brief History Of Time.

In my memory ‘Vanitas’ lives as a name for all things dying and beautiful, for the melancholy—not of a Sunday morning stroll—but of a skull and its former inhabitant. It recalls strong contrast (clair- obscur) and a very precise and realistic painting technique. Flowers, night-butterflies, bruised all-sorts-of-things, decay, ... It is the type of paintings you are happy not to smell. It is a different era, 16th-17th century, a period highly praised by art history students much later, for it contains enough intriguing symbolism and narratives to write long, exquisite papers.

Mesmerizing morals of mortality.

Wikipedia tells me the Latin word “vanitas” means vanity. Today we understand vanity as the excessive belief in one’s own abilities or attractiveness to others. Back then it did not have such narcissistic undertones, and merely meant futility, in the sense of emptiness or a worthless action. The paintings depicting vanitas topics were ought to remind its audience of the ephemeral, fleeting character of their presence, and the endlessness of pleasure and life. Vanitas brings us back to the only rock-solid, bone-breaking truth we know; that all that remains of us in the end is our skeleton. It is, you could say, the art of the art of dying. Yet I do believe the other, more contemporary meaning of Vanity is never far; the one of being vain. Vanitas may discuss death and peeled lemons, but it is also a beautified version of these subjects. The very tactile, almost sensual way of depicting

We think only in signs.^{[16][17][18][19][20][21][22][23]} a 16th-17th century attempt to create the illusion of “exact realism”.

Unlike the ruling habit in paintings’ history, vanitas uses metaphors instead of human action or the creation of characters. The objects depicted, though mainly everyday common goods were charged with a meaning, a presence beyond

their physical nature, creating a vibrant still life. The image breathes, alludes through a vocabulary of objects, to abstract concepts of life and death.

For those Christian especially, the references to death served as a moralizing means. Emphasizing the brevity of human existence, was also a way to point at the bigger, the stronger, the one that does outlive us all; God. Recognizing your own petiteness to reconcile with the whole. The fear of decomposing, of ending, is one of the main reasons for people to be religious, or now, in a more “contemporary” approach to (zingeving) to consume, or to grab anything we can hold on to, really. We fear the void that probably awaits us, and we very often feel it lingering around the corner. We live at the bottom of an invisible, odorless and tasteless mass of air and seek/sin for more. “To death we are hastening, let us refrain from sinning”, people would chant in 1399.

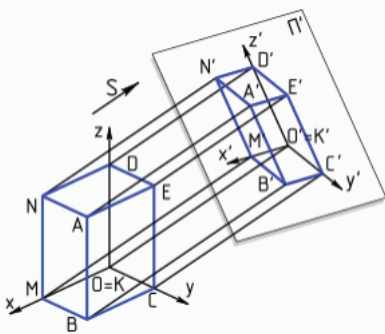
The heaviest, the darkest topics are brought in such utterly precise manner and masterly technique that the morbidity again revives. A viewer remains in awe, flabbergasted by the attractiveness of such greatness. Endlessness could also be, and is in various other genres represented by flames licking humanity’s ankles, angels with bird wings and demons dressed in red. “Common vanitas symbols include skulls, which are a reminder of the certainty of death; rotten fruit, which symbolizes decay; bubbles, which symbolize the brevity of life and suddenness of death; smoke, watches, and hourglasses, which symbolize the brevity of life; and musical instruments, which symbolize brevity and the ephemeral nature of life. Fruit, flowers and butterflies can be interpreted in the same way, and a peeled lemon, as well as accompanying seafood was, like life, attractive to look at, but bitter to taste.”

MY TIME IS NOT YOUR TIME

Time is a visual puzzle.

Furthermore, is it not merely the objects depicted that define what the painting is about? It is the state in which they are at that moment. The momentum, the part of the cycle depicted is that of worms eating (soon to be “our own”) flesh. Fleeting of time is translated in one image or experience, in which both the future and the past seem to be simultaneously present.

An anamorphosis is a distorted image that appears in natural form under certain conditions, as when viewed from a certain angle or reflected from a curved mirror. Endlessly bending my head over “time”, trying to grasp it, I went scrolling through art history and found a painting by Hans Holbein the younger, portraying in full glamour “The Ambassadors”. Gold chains and big fur are draped on two bearded men, who lean on the table that stands in-between them. The table is almost an altar of and for the rich and the smart; loaded with objects, instruments and world globes. Under them a long stretched shape appears, that cannot be read as the rest of the image. After closer inspection, seen from high on the right side, or low on the left side, the form arises as an accurate rendering of a human skull. It comes sweeping in. The skull is at first glance presented as a flying carpet, a light ink-stain, aligned under the globes and books of portrayed men. Due to the distortion, the anamorphic visual puzzle, the viewer can never see the skull and the figures in the “correct” shape at the same time. Either one will appear distorted,



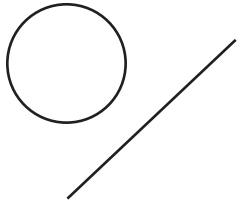
graphical drawing that could illustrate both perception and perspective

or the other.

Similarly we can very rarely rhyme real life with its erasing opposite. This could be a metaphor for our understanding of time and endings. Death becomes like a piled up version of life. Not only in that painting, but practically always, both time and our ending are an anamorphosis, something we only sometimes perceive or understand, that we have to move and twist and change angles for, to briefly grasp it.

~~We will all be composted.~~

According to the dictionary, in Zoology, Entomology, the term anamorphosis is also used to describe the gradual change in form during the evolution of organisms. By visualizing -even indirectly- the brevity of our existence, we understand death as a consequence of life. Using natural elements as fruit, insects and bones for that purpose, the human being is clearly put in the concept of "nature". We have an end, but we are part of a bigger cycle: that of nature.



circular and linear
perception of time

The artworks show a momentum of decay. Like compost, a mixture of organic matter, as from leaves and manure, that has decayed or has been digested by organisms, is used to improve soil structure and provide nutrients. Maybe vanitas does the same for us; improve our soil structure and provide us with nutrients for reflection. And fruits, in the botanical sense, are parts of the plant that contain the seeds. They are fleshy, tasteful seed carriers. Metaphors and meta-flora.

If you think about it, humans are like trees. They strive for fruit of labour, grow crooked after a storm, and grow towards the light. Circular seasons make them look like they're not growing while they are. Ageing is a process both circular and linear. In the city the tree and man are alone or grouped, for all to see. At land they bewilder at own pace, and everywhere they live of water and light.

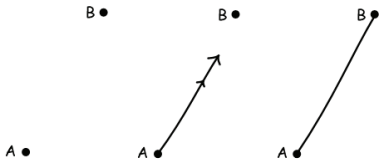
In vanitas artworks past and future seem to come together, it is in the pending moment degrading, that other life arises. Humanity is demystified, seeing its endlessness so promptly represented. Very strongly the passing of time is emphasized in this genre, but it also clearly, depicts one moment. A moment of transition, where linear time and circular time meet. The personal, linear way of perceiving time intersects with the natural cyclical. Whether that is through estranging photography or drone decibels, one may feel a (vanitas) vacuum when confronted with things.

Immanuel Kant holds that space and time "do not exist in and of themselves, but ... are the product of the way we represent things". Maybe vanitas is a tool to create a sense of perspective on that what we cannot see. We cannot see into the future, and to future tenses as death, or even where we will be in five years from now. We can only vaguely force ourselves to try to formulate an image to suit this moment yet to come. The funeral of others reminds us of our own ending, as does a hang over after a wild celebration of life. Most living things carry the seed of their death inside of them. And people look for them; think of addictions to all sorts of cancer-infusers like cigarettes, booze or sleep deprivation. The things that carry our own tragedy, are also the ones that, to say it in ugly but very applicable terms, have us by our balls.

The end: on endings

“The end of a melody is not its goal: but nonetheless, had the melody not reached its end it would not have reached its goal either. A parable.” Friedrich Nietzsche

After having attempted to dissect time and its endings, one ending is yours to choose. Two possible ends to this text, to personally pick, by chance from the same writer Franz Kafka:



a)
(kafka) The Trees

“For we are as tree-trunks in the snow. Apparently they are merely resting on the surface of the snow, and a little push would be enough to knock ‘em over. No, that’s not the case, for they are firmly attached to the ground. But see, only that is only seemingly the case.”

or
b)

(kafka) The Neighbouring Village

“My grandfather was in the habit of saying: ‘Life is astonishingly brief. By now it is all so condensed in my memory that I can hardly understand, for instance, how a young man can undertake to ride to the neighbouring village without wondering whether -even if everything goes right - the span of a normal happy life will be enough for such a ride.’”