

Lukáš Likavčan: Carbon Care

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I

The year is 2034 and you are waking up into a late August morning. You might be 35, maybe 50, maybe more, in any case you still remember the last pandemic and the meandering twenties. There is a procession passing under your balcony, which resembles Passion processions on Palm Sunday – people carrying branchlets, with a group of children in uniforms in the front that look like nursery miners. They shout something like “Hosanna”, but you are not sure about that. Older people are crying. Your daughter wants to join her friends at the front of the procession and you promise her that next time she will be allowed to, for sure.

II

„Kneel down, move your lips in prayer and you will believe,” said Blaise Pascal and Louis Althusser repeated it after him in the 20th century. His point was that the reasons and causes of human behaviour lie in an invisible cobweb of commands and instructions and that faith in values, which lie behind these commands and instructions, usually comes later. Nevertheless, this cobweb might sometimes not be so invisible – it materializes in the form of crystallized and sedimentary layers of politics that we call infrastructures. Infrastructures of the coal industry, for example. Nobody has ever asked you if you approve of a coal mine or a coal-burning power plant in your town. No inquiry-based questionnaires were necessary, which would reveal if your community assents to the risks of coal mining – physical and mental health risks, social risks, environmental risks and economic risks. It wasn't the readings of PM particles in the air who was running in the last local elections. That infrastructure just landed here in the shape of a landing module of some huge and quite ugly

space ship, but it is pulling the strings and pulling rank on the whole region. But that's not all.

III

The head of the Passion procession is crawling towards the shaft. The crowd is pouring into the space fenced off by a worn out barbed wire. If you are wondering if it is a performance with elements of Land art, the answer is “No, it isn't.” The humming of the TV drones suggests that we might be dealing with a significant event here. The children in the uniforms are reciting something now. An old man with a crutch is yelling something about pioneers and leaving the crowd, but not many people pay attention to him. Then the curtain falls and the children line up into a regiment. A huge black cube is expanding in front of them and it seems as if some platonic body had just crashed into it and got stuck in its construction. It resembles a huge box with a button. Yes, “the platonic body” is nothing more than an ornamental description of a button.

IV

The culture is carried by technical objects, infrastructures. The first cultural infrastructure in history was the cave. There is a cave called Blombos on the shore of the Indian ocean in South Africa known as a site where a seventy-seven-thousand-year-old piece of an engraved ochre has been found with geometrical markings. It is probably the oldest evidence of human communication by means of an external medium, on which information had been recorded. We will never learn what the two horizontal lines and one vertical line were supposed to mean, but it is exactly this site that the Jamaican writer and thinker Sylvia Wynter determines as the site of the birth of a human being able to use symbols to create stories that carry the whole culture and society. The question “Who carries the carriers?” has been best answered by the anonymous artistic group that 36 thousand years ago left a message about their impact on the walls of the Altamira cave, located in today's Spain. From the cave, through amphitheatre and camera obscura up to a server housing in a data centre, culture and architecture have always walked hand in hand. And that's how it should be in the age of the environmental media, too.

V

The regiment of children in overalls bury their fingers into the harsh material of the button that lazily recedes deeper into the cube. Stray dogs around the shaft remind us that there once used to be an entrance into the Greek underworld here. And it is still here – we just decided at one point to use it not as a source of an eternal flame but as a site for its burial. Yes, we. I don't know if thirteen years is a long time or a short time, but it does seem pretty long for contemplating the cultural impact of infrastructures. When the end of the coal mining had been set – after long negotiations – to the year 2033, a question came up what to do with all that equipment that should have lain fallow. The owners of private capital haven't expressed any interest in the non-functional machinery, the state considered the ownership of this kind of infrastructure as a burden as well (and it was at the time when people started to show to the state that to be a state might actually be a burden for the state, too). That is how these steel cities got owned by local administrations and communities, which everyone considered at best a Danaan gift. At least ideas already existed at that time to curb emissions through capturing them retroactively in the air. That is how the field called “carbon care” was created, once derogatorily called “geoengineering”.

VI

Historical record from Wikipedia, the open encyclopedia, with the timestamp 20210326090345: “Carbon capture and storage (CCS) or carbon capture and sequestration, is the process of capturing waste carbon dioxide (CO₂), transporting it to a storage site, and depositing it where it will not enter the atmosphere. Usually the CO₂ is captured from large point sources, such as a cement factory or biomass power plant, and normally it is stored in an underground geological formation. The aim is to prevent the release of large quantities of CO₂ into the atmosphere from heavy industry, and so help to limit climate change. Although CO₂ has been injected into geological formations for several decades for various purposes, including enhanced oil recovery, the long-term storage of CO₂ is a relatively new concept.”

Long ago people used to say that the climate change crisis was the biggest uncontrolled experiment in the history of mankind. And, in addition, a kind of unconscious geoengineering – the technological modification of our planet. For a handful of people it has been a completely conscious and controlled experiment since the 1970s, when oil exploration and production companies commissioned initial studies suggesting a link between carbon dioxide emissions and the global average temperature increase of the atmosphere.

Early suggestions of a link proved to be certainties, and the ordinary industrial sector has turned into a planetary apparatus that has a stranglehold on the remainder of humankind. It has also been said that the retroactive capturing of carbon serves as an alibi for these corporations that would allow their stranglehold on humankind to continue. The released emissions might get captured after all and by the time the corporations won't be able to release emissions at all, they will already possess technologies that will put them into the role of green saviours. It will suffice to reverse the course of the whole infrastructure – not from the ground to the air, but from the air to the ground. It is hard to imagine a greater unfairness than to turn the main antagonists into heroes. What is not hard to imagine are other possibilities how to deal with burying coal underground.

VII

Carbon care sounded to some people perverse at first. How can impersonal technological infrastructure based on the know-how of mining companies become an instrument of care? Isn't care rather intimate, personal? Wouldn't the technically mediated care be cold and inauthentic? The answer to this question depends on how convinced you are that culture (including the culture of care) and technology are opposites and that nothing good ever comes out of their connection. There are places today which adopted Pascal's principle and they transformed the infrastructures of carbon capturing into sites of cultural life: new stories and rituals emerged around infrastructures, for instance August Passion plays remembering the month in which the mankind celebrated the "Overshoot day" – the day we have used more from nature than our planet can renew and we are in debt with our planet for the remainder of the year. While I have been explaining it here to you, the regiment of children has been trying to push the activating button of the system for capturing carbon in order to trigger the annual burying of the past into former mining shafts in which the ancient history of life on this planet has been resting. The planet which at least this community has finally decided to acknowledge and to conform to.

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