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Agrarian Rituals and the Future Sublime

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Agrarian rituals

I have a romantic vision of farming as being almost totally devoted to working with both hands and one focused mind on natural material. But this must be wrong. It is a simplification that marks farming as something extraordinary and archetypal. I am not a farmer myself, so this simplification suits me. Contemporary farming, however, must be about working with and against many factors that are almost in conflict with one another. Contemporary farming in European countries includes nature development, competitive economies, social therapy and a life with partners and children who are not necessarily interested in farming as a business.

Farming is not about beauty; it is about production and delivery. The first farmers must have been very doubtful and distrustful of the landscape and natural or divine processes, never knowing whether they would work with them or against them. Accordingly, many rituals were developed during ages of adjustment between harvest and disaster. Watching the sky form clouds, watching the birds fly low, looking at the colour of leaves and roots to learn about the biological clockwork. Learning that nature is repetitive when circumstances do not change, but knowing that no new year provides the same circumstances. Many of these rituals have not only enriched agrarian production, they have also established the culture of agriculture and hence laid the foundations for culture in general.

The most evocative rituals not only relate to agrarian work itself but also include social side effects and cultural expression. Some of them still exist in evolved events, such as summer festivals at the end of a period of hard work by large groups of temporary employees. Relatively unfamiliar people gather, make merry and perhaps mate with each other. Harvest, fertility and labour deliver a temporary performance that shapes not only the land, but also a society.

Another ritual is Christmas, which evolved during Victorian times in the well-known form with a lavish dinner, colourful warmth and companionship, and again: a lot more people gathering than on most occasions. This revolutionized mid-winter ritual was tied in with the blossoming of the Victorian middle class and the desire almost to show off. Landlords invited workers into their warm, large homes, bestowing affection and sympathy. Sumptuous food and gifts expressed a deep understanding of reciprocal benefits. The gifts themselves and the colourful wrappings and ornaments did not, in fact, relate much to agriculture, but were essentially middle-class shopping items that revealed an increasingly urban and technocratic lifestyle.

However, the collective work in the fields, gathering hay, harvesting crops or marking the herd has become rudimentary in the contemporary versions of this old ritual. Sometimes these rituals can be discerned in still existing landscape features. For example in hedgerows, hollow pathways, solitary trees as a centre for activities, ploughing patterns, or rows of specific trees that double up as a windbreaker and a provider of broomstick wood. You can only read the landscape if you are knowledgeable about these rituals. The beauty of the agrarian landscape lies exactly in this interconnection between landscape element and human ritual. Such landscapes are close to our body, mind and society. *'In good times and bad I'm on your side'* this long-lasting marriage between man and landscape has made a deep imprint on our collective fantasies about agriculture and landscape in general.

As agrarian rituals change into urban rituals and the people who perform them become more urban and less agrarian, the rhythm of the ritual and most of its delightful character remain. It is possible to avoid the hard work and the painstaking effort of the agrarian labour and still enjoy the fun. Holiday periods still coincide with a forgotten agrarian rhythm. In modern times the provision of food and safety is no longer a full-time job. We can eat and be safe on top of the daily jobs we have, and many new (and fairly conceptual) jobs have sprouted from this opportunity. The old agrarian rhythm of rituals is somehow still embedded in our contemporary agendas.

Modern vampires

Allow me to introduce a very different standpoint to illustrate a troublesome perspective on the contemporary notion of rituals.

The vampire theme, fashionable in adolescent books, movies and television series, reveals a very different relationship between food, harvest and labour. The modern vampire is a much more evolved

creature than the ones we know from Gothic novels. The vampires in these series are not the obnoxious undead that cower before Christian symbols. Modern vampires are attractive and the vampire blood they carry in their veins is the best possible drug imaginable. Drinking this blood or having sex with a vampire assures you of the most sublime experience ever. The vampires themselves feed only on human blood or an equivalent synthetic reproduction. Modern vampires run a bar that lets people and vampires intermingle. They have the same social rights as any other minority group.

In these series, young people relate to vampires as society in general relates to nature. It can be read as a metaphor. Implicitly it says that vampires are closer to nature than humans because being intimate with a vampire confers a sublime experience. A sublime, divine, wild and natural experience. Vampires themselves can feel the wind, feel the leaves, feel all life searing through all living things. They are attuned to everything that lives, although they themselves are dead. The metaphor hidden within this identity is that of the romantic perception of a farmer. The farmer described in the second paragraph of this essay has such abilities. The idea that a dead creature such as a vampire has classic romantic agrarian capacities is deeply intriguing.

The modern vampire and the classic farmer have a lot in common. Awareness of and connection with a living environment gives them standing in the community and elicits awe from ordinary citizens who have lost touch with food production and the origins of nutrition. The difference lies in the fact that vampires do not need conventional food, such as vegetables or meat. In this modern mythology of the vampire, being close to nature has nothing to do with working hard at or being involved in the production of crops, cattle or clean water. Vampires can be very lazy because there are enough humans available; they are surrounded by them. The modern fantasy of being close to nature is to be surrounded with an abundance of food and, while consuming this food, to become one with your living and throbbing environment.

This can be read as a metaphor for the growing addiction human beings have with themselves. Nature does not provide food; it provides a sublime experience at the same level as sex and drugs. Eating and cultivating nature, as a geological, flora- or fauna-related activity is almost a desecration of the divine unity of life. I believe that this modern mythology harbours a very implicit, but incredibly strong suggestion that resonates within many young people: people should be able to live from synthetic food and enjoy a perfected perception of nature expressed in deep unison.

This is a very scary picture of our interest in nature and food production. The same utopian – or dystopian – image is present in science fiction where computers and robots find a way to feed on humans as the product of a renewed type of agriculture. Obviously, fantasy and science fiction are miles ahead of any politically correct message. These fantasies are not warnings of something we should avoid; they are the ultimate consequences of what is happening on a subliminal level of consciousness. Although we should be really concerned with food production and the cycle of nutrients, on a subconscious level many people might have already made up their minds. They might think we should perfect synthetically produced or genetically modified food to protect an idealized image of pure nature that we can enjoy in our spare time.

Nature, labour and artificiality

I have stated my case. Agriculture is no longer attached to society by its rituals. We do know the rhythm of former agricultural rituals; they still underlie many of our holidays and festivities, but without the labour involved in harvesting or tilling the soil. Rituals have become gradually so detached from labour that we might even believe that synthetic or modified food might be better for us. Meanwhile we have enlarged the romantic perception of nature as a place for enjoyment. We can hardly believe that nature provides food; food has nothing to do with living things, food is about dead things. Nature is about living things that need our protection and adulation.

Older generations will deny this principle for a while, but a new generation will be familiar with it. Agriculture has, in fact, never been very natural at all. It is a highly artificial method designed to accelerate and fool natural processes. Why do we need to fool nature? Well, we keep massive amounts of the same kinds of plants on a levelled plateau, rooting out every alien invader. We separate mother from child at birth, we harvest the milk from the mother and collect it in giant containers. And so on, and so on. We want nature to perform as we wish, on a relatively small plot of land, one we can oversee and nurture on a human scale. First we downgraded nature to the human scale, to the scale of our hands and our capacity to gather socially in tribes and families. Later, through the introduction of

machines and synthetic fertilizers we increased the scale of nature to meet (inter)national needs. Agriculture is not romantic. To some it is as romantic as an economically dysfunctional factory. It is a man-made invention and although it makes use of nature, it is not natural. The manufacture of any factory product is as natural as agriculture if you see the dynamics that operate in a factory – for instance gravity and centrifugal force – as signifiers of nature.

Many scientists seem to accept the need for new technological improvements to food production. They are keen to continue genetic improvements of plants and animals. But they are not welcomed by public opinion – even though the food-processing industry has already changed dramatically in the past two decades, with modified soy and corn ingredients, whether the public likes it or not. As long as consumers want cheap food in large quantities, industry and science will determine the ethics of new technologies. The argument that the world has to be fed and that famished people are even more unethical to look at, will prevail against any upsurge of romanticism in the coming decades.

So what will the land-use of the future be like? In what way will this landscape be attractive and desirable? What is the dream of a landscape architect such as myself? The world is still in need of more food, although the amount of land required to provide for these growing needs is hardly available anymore.

We are facing a global tipping point of climatic instability because of the disruption of several important life processes described as planetary boundaries.¹ Scientists finally seem to be embracing a kind of Gaia theory, which states that oceans, soil, biodiversity and chemical compositions are interdependent and that each has its own specific safe zone where it is resilient, but beyond which it will be irreversibly damaged. According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre, agrarian land-use can, for example, no longer be enlarged because of its unnaturalness and mono-functionality. We need land to grow new rainforests, wetlands and other large-scale landscape types that are part of the regulatory system of life. We have only recently begun to understand how forests and oceans and marshlands and deserts and flood plains have developed and what their position is within the life-regulating processes. In fact, this understanding grew as rapidly as industrialization.

Before industrialization the notion of thresholds of life-regulating processes was incorporated in classic agrarian methods and rituals. The human scale on which this was applicable neatly regulated the work of a family or group of farmers. But this human scale is no longer relevant to agriculture of the future. It is only logical that with the new international scale of production, we have to deal with thresholds on an international scale. The classic farmer, working as much as his body and some machines could handle, has developed into a new type of employment. The job description of the modern farmer should include the new scale of life-regulating processes.

The future sublime

We can also embrace the changing qualities of landscapes and celebrate both the ecological and cultural meaning of new landscapes – designed landscapes that show elements of agriculture and a natural biotope at the same time, productive landscapes that not only produce food, but can also clean dredge, provide healthy soil, fresh water and alternative energy sources, resulting in new types of ecological biotopes that will enable neo-Darwinians to see shoots of new origins of life.

We should not fall into the trap of compartmentalizing nature and landscape into leisure areas that have nothing to do with actual survival. We should draw on all our knowledge and craftsmanship to create living landscapes that both provide new types of food and energy and sustain our planetary boundaries. This is a challenge, grab it!

Nature and landscape are increasingly becoming idealized places where humans do not find food but comfort, thereby artificially maintaining a collection of 'best-of' agrarian and semi-wild areas that represent wishful images. These landscapes are like the pandas, gorillas and polar bears that are so effectively exploited by nature conservation organizations. One real problem connected with such an idealized image of landscapes is the preoccupation with visual appearance. French writer Roland Barthes mentioned as an important marker of contemporary mythologies: 'What the public wants is the image of passion, not passion itself.'² The public is not interested in how to manage and maintain the landscape, as long as the resulting image fits its expectations.

Fixation on an image also dictates the development of landscapes although, as part of the evolutionary process, they are more like living systems with inherent mutative abilities. Landscapes will continue to adapt to new circumstances via pioneer vegetation that most people disregard as weeds and new passionate human interventions that will only last through perseverance and patience. The problem with a fixed landscape image is the amount of Botox it needs to retain its everlasting youth.

My new living landscapes envision a nearby future where events such as erosion, evaporation, photosynthesis, tidal waves, nutrient exchange, insect- and other herd-keeping are the driving forces of living machines with no resemblance to Victorian or any other 'hard cast' devices. These are not machines, made of metals, plastics and suchlike, with fixed parts that repetitively produce only one thing. They are made of landscape features and are driven by landscape processes and, in the meantime, they produce a multitude of food products, natural biotopes, clean air, clean soils and so on. They might resemble parts of the Dutch landscape, which is in fact a giant laboratory for testing the control of water, but it is also an eclectic laboratory with many concurrent experiments that do not necessarily contribute to or interconnect with each other.

With the latest insights into ecological processes and life-regulating systems the capacity of trees to filter air and fine dust can be enhanced. Fish and cattle can be kept in semi-natural environments that are much more beneficial to the animals themselves and their nutrition values. The secret is that ecological knowledge is not only needed to protect and understand nature, but also to enlarge nature's capacity to deal with a greater demand for resilience to CO₂ processing, global warming, fresh water containment and biodiversity. We should help nature by effectively developing its intertwined life processes, instead of boosting a mono-function that creates a cascading downfall ending in devastation of its life force.

A landscape machine is defined by two main factors: first, the metaphor of the machine should be taken quite literally. These machines have a certain material input and output and are driven by a critical amount of energy. For example, in the estuaries of the South-western Netherlands, landscape machines can be imagined with water, salt, sediments, and surplus nutrients as input and clean water, food, blue energy and silted-up lands as output. They are fuelled by solar energy, which promotes photosynthesis and generates heat, and by tidal forces. The rationale behind their design includes coastal defence, sustainable fisheries and agriculture, and nature development goals.

Secondly, the natural processes within the landscape machine are continuously interacting with each other and therefore affecting the type, form, size and position of the resulting landscape components. The landscape machine evolves through interaction with physical, chemical and ecological processes. The mechanical components are landscape processes or the specific behaviour of herds of animals that are themselves affected by the ongoing events. This means that parts of the machine may fade out or even vanish and that new functional parts may come into being.

The interaction between the living components and an (artificially) introduced material input will result partly in a cleaning process or food production or the creation of a much more complex landscape structure and partly in an unpredictable or unintended output. In evaluating the efficiency of this landscape we must consider both the intended and unintended output because this exactly defines the difference between a hard-cast and a living machine. What may seem to be unspecified and unintended at a certain moment may evolve into something relevant. This is the miracle and efficiency inherent in natural processes, a survival strategy that results in adaptation of the non-relevant into relevant parts of processes.

The knowledge and practical experience that is needed to study and design such machines is essentially multidisciplinary and a feast for groundbreaking innovations. No single expert will understand the whole process or fully anticipate what will happen in the newly initiated landscapes. Uncertainty and curiosity will enhance working and designing with models, prototypes and dynamic relationship schemes. Landscape design, ecology, and engineering will be involved, but so will livestock experts, hydrologists and plant scientists. A typical mix of experts that can be found in the life-science universities in which crossover sciences are in growing demand.

Notes

1. Johan Rockström, et al., 'A safe operating space for humanity', in: *nature*, 461 (September 24, 2009) pp. 472-475.
2. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1970)