

On the Cosmic Caravan, Verticality, and other Human Pursuits

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On n'est pas fort sur la terre!

Fantasia

Jacques Offenbach, *Le voyage dans la lune* (1875)

I.

Many pages have been written on Wesley Meuris' representation of data and museums, archives and cages, statistics and infographics. This modern epistemic universe has shaped his work and gives it a visual appearance that might be described as a specific style. Some have even identified an "aesthetics" of Meuris: the clear geometry of his clean tiles and aseptic space, the standardized cabinets and a general centralization of information. Others have even claimed that there is an architectural inclination in his work.¹ "Architectural" is a generous term that critics attach too easily to artworks when they detect tectonic structures and aspects of interior design. Meuris' work includes these elements but he also intentionally abstracts human life from them. He is not interested in the human *dwelling* but in the structures of knowledge and inhabitation, from library card catalogues to cages and other interiors. His work shows what humans are able to conceive and build, how humanity has shaped up an interior for knowledge; it suggests how all this massive knowledge alters humanity's own perception of itself ... yet the human element is strictly the gaze of the viewer wandering around the gallery space. Meuris confronts the viewer with an uncannily inert view of the world, either as the static data of charts or as the pithy substance of file cabinets. If Meuris were a landscape painter he would paint immovable mountains. Despite this lack of vocation, he favours the modern scientific era, its protean evolution caught in lapidary images, precisely cut structures that fit anything from artists' biographies to exhibition types. Whereas in Meuris' previous work he concentrated on human pursuits that occur on the *horizontal* plane of the Earth, his latest work follows a *vertical* trajectory, namely mankind's conquest of space.

II.

Both in pre-modern, traditional culture and in our science-driven era, verticality has been a privileged trajectory signifying value. Life down here has been explained in relation to a view from above that used to mean the transcendent plane of God or the distant view from the cosmos, the image of the planet Earth as it appeared on the cover of LIFE magazine in January 1969. Since then, the human exploration of space has developed so much that both the Earth and its atmosphere have drastically changed. *Debris I* echoes the black and white image of our planet but Meuris emphasizes the mass of space junk surrounding it. Junk is arguably a direct human contribution

¹ Amongst other texts, see Herman Parret, *The Zoological Utopia of Wesley Meuris*, in *Artificially Deconstructed*, Galerie Annie Gentils (2007), pp. 17-19 and Christophe Kihm, *Exhibit, Classify, Subvert – Wesley Meuris*, in *Artpress*, December 2012, pp. 48-49.

to the cosmic landscape. Let us call all these space missions “the cosmic caravan”. The notion combines the verticality of the pursuit (towards the cosmos) with the old vehicle that has carried humans all over the world. The cosmic caravan - from the Apollo spacecraft to the countless satellites - moves upwards into the sky and collects precise scientific data. Yet “living” in space means transporting our earthly condition, our customs, and necessities. The cosmic caravan echoes the old dusty one: we pack what is necessary to survive but also a supplement, a sign of a past provincial and simple existence. Plants have long been taken on board spaceships for scientific reasons but the pictures of astronauts next to them mimic a homely interior. We see these astronauts next to flower arrangements, tiny plants, and even miniature Christmas trees. Hence, the cosmic caravan includes the highest degree of scientific knowledge *and* the cosiness of the human interior.

Meuris’ latest works include references to this organic life that is carried in space. *Reformulate I*, *Reconsider I*, *Replacing* suggest a certain Suprematism in their rationalist allure, a rectangular support retaining a few simple elements. *Capsule* appears as a vertical octagonal section, a mechanomorphic structure that echoes the interior of a satellite. The artwork touches the gallery floor by means of a piece of winding thread. Cables, wires, and mountings are visible and suggest the possibility of interconnecting these modules. Satellites collect information but all this data has its own life: humans bring it together in charts and it can be used to better understand our place in the universe or maybe to be sold or transformed in technology. Hence, the necessity captured in the title to reconsider and to rethink what the satellites, scattered in the cosmos, bring back home. Modern science began with the ambition of better determining our place on Earth. However, the collection of data overwhelms us to such an extent that works like *Verticality* make us wonder about the human scale. What happens to humanity as we have known it when it disappears into the mass of data and when science has lost touch with the lifeworld? It seems that Meuris’ recent work questions the tendency to subordinate science to technology without considering the effects that the latter can exert on the “stature of man”.² As Arendt argued, machines have effects that we cannot completely control and compute. Sixty years after her article on the *Conquest of Space*, we encounter these effects every day: the constant shift of digital data affects our human condition that has fast access to more information than ever before in human history. However, other effects changed our behaviour: humans are equally distracted, superficially scanning “results” that are evaluated exclusively by an instrumental reason. Scientific data is employed for direct technological applications that also affect humanity’s conception of itself. The stature of man has surely increased with the conquest of space. Yet the question is whether the immense arsenal of gained knowledge has diminished the natural attitude in which humanity has lived for so long, the limited time on the only planet that we can call “home.” Would it be a grave exaggeration to interpret the mountings and loose cables in Meuris’ work as the wish to connect the world of data to humanity’s tellurian existence?

III.

Connecting different realms is a constant in these artworks. *Probe 2* denotes the relation between the spaceship aesthetics and life on Earth through a beautiful contrast: a scallop shell is placed on the square volume. The

² Hannah Arendt, *The Conquest of Space and the Stature of Man*, in *Between Past and Future. Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, New York, Viking Press, 1961, pp. 265-280.

mechanomorphic wooden elements that include mountings and strings are combined with subtle organomorphic elements, curvilinear additions that point an earthly existence. Generic shapes with minimalist tones interact with other fragments of the vegetal realm, like turnips and eggplants. The radical formal and material difference between these elements suggest a connection with the human environment. They are indexes that return the generic bodies of the *Probes* back to Earth. In the Western imagination, the cosmic caravan has always carried the “earthbound life”, its tastes, sensations and the difficulty of inhabiting other environments. Take Jules Verne’s *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865) and *Around the World* (1869): both novels testify to the human desire to conquer space. Nineteenth century science fiction has proved to be the temporary fantasy of a scientific challenge that has transformed humanity. After all, the space ships of Verne have become reality. However, whereas his novels focus too much on the technological challenges, Jacques Offenbach opéra-féerie *Le voyage dans la lune* (1875) adds a plethora of human foibles, foreseeable adventures, and cosy provincialism. The opera shows how culture is always local because humans do not just travel through space without bringing a sense of *place* wherever they settle. Despite immense differences between cultures, humans travel with their desires and moods, like a small garden on a spaceship or, in the case of Offenbach, with a spaceship full of apples.

In Offenbach’s opéra, Prince Caprice and the scientist Microscope overcome technological problems, arrive on the moon but encounter other kinds of differences: Caprice is in love with princess Fantasia but the inhabitants of the moon treat love as a constitutional disorder. Children are not being born because of the love between two adults. They just arrive from a region that is specialised in producing them. In an ironical and biblical fashion, only the eating of apples can modify this emotional incompatibility of the moon inhabitants, the *sélenites*. Hence, humans project their desires when they arrive on other planets and science cannot change their humanity when they feel lonely. All kinds of cunning plans have to be conceived to adapt their both their bodies to new conditions and their culture, this solid block of customs and desires that resists change. Behind sophisticated graphs, rockets, and engine power, the cosmic caravan produces not just space junk but also the kind of emotional junk when a prince-astronaut uses apples to seduce women, like in Offenbach’s opera.

Meuris’ *Probes* seem to be cold and severe constructions, fragments of a large cosmic caravan. I wonder if they could constitute the scenography for the kind of bucolic adventures à la Offenbach and thus hopefully resist that recent philosophical *boutade* called the “posthuman”. Is all this systematic collection of data significant for our human existence? Will it ever change the fact that, unlike Phileas Fogg from Verne’s *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872), hopefully we will think twice before burning our own ship in order to sail faster from New York to England? If we follow Peter Sloterdijk in this respect, humans have turned their existence in a generator of speed.³ They have gradually transformed the planet from a series of specific places into a network of generic dots. Travelling no longer happens in order to learn but as a “sportive prestation”, merely a testimony of our kinetic vocation. Looking at Meuris’ probes and graphs, one cannot help but wonder what this generalized rush for data *means* for the human life? Do we *know* more by archiving data in the graphs and shelves that constitute the bulk of Meuris’ work? Collections of data are not the same as *insight* and *knowledge*, *intuition* and *imagination*, notions

³ Peter Sloterdijk, *Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals. Für eine philosophische Theorie der Globalisierung*, Frankfurt, Suhrkamp, 2004.

that make sense in relation to our existence on Earth, this patch of dirt rotating in space. Life as mere *bios*, differs from everything that fills in our agenda's, like intrigues and fashions, stories and newspaper cuts, caprices and varying moods. The question that these works bring to mind concerns the gradual impact that the unfathomable amount of data will have (and already had) on these dimensions of human existence.

IV.

The collection and capitalisation of data seem to already influence our behaviour and tastes, but will it also make telling stories a redundant thing of the past? After all, that is an essential sign of human life: the heroes of Verne too, are caught in scientific intrigues but someone does get to tell the story, to place it in a broader context that allows others to later read and understand what happened. The swashbuckling heroism of Prince Caprice and Phileas Fogg do not reduce the Earth to an irrelevant dot. They weave all these places where they have been into a story about people on a planet that needs constant care, and not just as dots recorded on a screen. Contrary to what is sometimes thought, showing and telling are inseparable from each other because the *temporal* dimension that comes with every told story is part of human consciousness and its earthbound condition. We cannot just vertically *point* to the sky without already suggesting our desires, our past and future. In this sense, Meuris' work does not just show these anonymous charts and houses of data. They also invite a continuous debate on what their prodigious collection means for us humans.

Other artists have cultivated the aesthetics of serial categorization and precise documentation. Think of Jef Geys' *Seedbags* and the *Quadra Medicinale* where plants are meticulously represented and arranged. However, the telluric element is central to Geys' work: all the plants belong to specific places and their representation emphasizes their healing power. The human element does appear in Meuris' recent work. Yet it is strictly reduced to the cerebral and instrumental, the abstract and analytical appearance of the graphs that accompany his probes. Instead of Geys' earthly garden, Meuris confronts the viewer with cosmic graphics, that anonymous background to human existence. The cosmic graphics do have their own cogent aesthetics that suggest a specific type of gaze, namely the analytical eye that discerns, documents and classifies. The series *Observation Satellites* carefully maps out what each satellite can do. They are portrayed like a gallery of ships, their appearance related to their achievements, from recording oceanic and atmospheric conditions to the causes of pollution.

In Meuris' work, humans are not at the centre of the representation but the verticality of the gaze remains profoundly human. Verticality is a constant direction in history, from the medieval calendars that observed the movement of the stars to Dante's wondering on the nine spheres of Heaven and to Kant's dictum about the moral law within and the starry sky above. Nevertheless, as Sloterdijk points out, in pre-modern times, the Ascension followed a vertical movement where the soul took off from Earth to never come back.⁴ In modernity, Earth has turned into an airport from which we continuously take off and land. We no longer look at our planet as a human province but from the "great outside". Yet this cosmic space has no place for cosy interiors, flower gardens and the convivial "conversation of mankind" (Oakeshott). Instead of the 17th century landscapes of the likes of

⁴ Peter Sloterdijk, *op. cit.*, ch. 3.

Waterloo and Lorrain and their strong sense of different and limited places, Meuris' cosmic caravan suggests an indifferent and endless expansion. His work motivates yet another kind of reflection that concerns the relevance of all this fervent cosmic quest. It demands an ingenious and subtle kind of connection – be it by means of threads and mountings – to the Earth that we leave behind.

Hence, the tension in the *Probes* and the accompanying infographics: the data they gather puts human existence into perspective but that *insight* itself is only relevant for an earthbound existence. Sometimes Meuris does suggest that planet Earth still has a central position, like in *Debris I*. However, the scientific appearance of Meuris' recent images, the colourful codes and clear notation system question the position of man in relation to all this data. But could we raise the hypothesis that all the cosmic junk and the collected data is relative to the “earthbound life”, the temporary home for our natural attitude? This concentric appearance returns in *Verticality*, in the colourful codes and clear notation system that precisely indicates the position of satellites. Even though the point of view is no longer human, the meanings of the images that these *Probes* produce is for the time being relevant to humans alone. That's where Meuris' recent work is relevant for a contemporary reflection on science: how does all this scientific representation affect the way humanity perceives its place in the universe? Will we dissolve as a species and as a place in all these accurate graphs or will they show that we have a privileged place in the universe and a condition that we should foster? Will telling stories to each other remain a constant of human culture regardless of this cornucopia of data that we collect?