

ASPECTS OF ART LECTURE

## Everyman in Motion: From Bosch to Bruegel

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THE *PEASANT AND THE NEST ROBBER* works like a trap to catch the eye (Plate 1).<sup>1</sup> Less than half the size of the other Bruegels that now surround it, the panel hails you individually as you circulate through Vienna's art museum: a portable picture of motion directed to someone on the move. Bruegel centres on a striding peasant (a cowherd probably), whose body, gesture, and gaze accost you, engaging your attention before you have time to retreat. His finger-pointing and direct stare fit perfectly his type. For he is the sort who gets intimate with everyone, exuding a confidence that what seems funny to him will seem so to you, unless you come to seem funny to him, say by turning away, in which case, he will point at you. It helps that the peasant's right eye already seems to look through you, indicating that his intimacy is fleeting and impersonal, and that what he points to will now be our, not his, affair. And it helps that he is a man of the country and whomever he meets, whether they be patricians in Brussels, where the picture was painted in 1568, or tourists in Vienna today, they will be *of* the city, and therefore will feel off-balance facing him on his own ground.

The peasant shoulders past. His elbow thrust forward like a prow, he seems already beyond his standpoint, since we view his feet from above, as if by the time we see them, the peasant has pressed right up against us. Considered from the viewpoint of the history of art, the striding peasant

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<sup>1</sup> Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv. 1020.

flaunts the painter's skill in depicting figures in motion. As in Bruegel's more monumental *Peasant Dance*, the rustic embodies the mobility of life itself. In the fifteenth century, large-scale portraits of peasants in animated poses had been a specialty of Flanders. Flemish tapestries of dancing and labouring rustics decorated palaces throughout Europe. By Bruegel's time, this northern way of representing *life as motion* had been replaced by a different standard. The rebirth, in Italy, of antique visual formulas of mobility fascinated the art historian Aby Warburg. Motion surged through the motif that obsessed him: the classical figure of Nympha. Nympha's windswept garments indexed a body in ecstasy while her antique provenance evidenced the mobility of images through time and space. In 1890, this art historian launched an anthropology of culture with the following observation:

With the introduction of a forward-striding figure the beholder is forced to give up a comparative form of observation for an anthropomorphic one. The question no longer is 'What does this expression mean?' but rather 'Where does it want to go?'<sup>2</sup>

Thrusting us physically into the image, a figure in motion encounters us not as an iconography to be deciphered but as a human being endowed with a will. In Bruegel, the peasant's forward thrust quickens our movement into the picture. Never before in the history of art had a painter set a figure communicating *with us in* the picture as aggressively in motion *towards us from* the picture.<sup>3</sup> Rapidly we arrive at the peasant's discovery, at that red-trousered boy in the tree. But there our progress stalls. *Where, indeed, does it want to go?* Slowly we notice it is a nest he is reaching into, and the stuff in his hand is a bird. We bear down to the point where Bruegel's detail gives out and we stare at daubs of brown. But then, in pointing it out, the peasant implied that the bird-nester would be visually *hard to get*. The feat of grasping this detail, in Bruegel's painting as in the peasant's world, parallels the bird-nester's feat of snatching the bird. Of course, our surprise pales by comparison with what was felt by the bird

<sup>2</sup> Aby Warburg, 'Grundlegende Bruchstücke zu einer pragmatischen Ausdruckskunde', unpublished manuscript cited in Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement* (Paris, 1998), pp. 79–80 n 3; translation my own.

<sup>3</sup> On this point, see Wolfgang Kemp, *Der Anteil des Betrachter. Rezeptionsästhetische studien zur Malerei des 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1983), p. 54. In his treatise *On Painting*, Alberti famously recommended that there be in a painting a figure, called the *festaiuolo*, who 'admonishes and instructs us about what is happening in the picture' (*On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer, rev. edn. (New Haven, 1966), p. 78). Bruegel—uniquely for his time—shows the *festaiuolo* stepping into our space and (as we will see) into an abyss.

who, just before, rested hidden in its nest. This *plot* ends in the spoliation of dwelling, of being at rest in the world. Bruegel communicates this catastrophe in the free-falling hat. It has the shape and colour of the nest, so that it could almost be a nest. This stop-action detail gives the picture the tempo of the world. It indicates that the event we sluggishly grasp happened all of a sudden, as will events that might yet occur, such as the bird-nester's fall into that great ditch at the lower left. Behind the peasant, the nest-thief's sack suggests adventures before and afterwards. Round like the hat and like the contour of the pollarded tree, the bag draws us into a mesmerising play of forms. The formal kinship of nest, hat, sack, and stump disrupts the storyline. Intent on results, Bruegel scholarship ignores semantically useless correlations, even though they are what captivate the eye before, during, and after we have worked out what the picture, broadly speaking, means.<sup>4</sup> Riddles, such as what the boy is doing in the tree, lure us into the picture by appealing to our problem-solving instincts. But once inside, we are tossed about by a world that, like the unlucky bird's, grasps us more than we grasp it.

And thus it happens that the peasant got us right. We are indeed gawkers, like the crowds that feature in many of Bruegel's pictures. Consider how, in his largest painting, the *Carrying of the Cross* in Vienna (1564), villagers ring Golgotha hours before the grim event, or how throngs of curious bystanders press into hallowed space in the *Adoration of the Magi* (1564) in London.<sup>5</sup> Let us sketch how Bruegel's painting, in real-life, gets received. Moving casually through the picture gallery, we are waylaid by someone who tells us where to look. Bruegel makes us first seem to meet, then to pass the peasant: he, coming from the painting as from an enclosed lifeworld; we, arriving from elsewhere. He exiting from the indigenous; we, within the mobility of modern life, peering back in.

The peasant seems less absorbed than we are. Equipped with a knife, horn, and prod, he looks well put-together, a man with better things to do than stare. And because of his centrality—and because he mimes the display which the picture itself performs—we continually renew our

<sup>4</sup> Hans Sedlmayr—virtually alone among Bruegel interpreters—sought to describe and give meaning to such formal features. In an essay first published in 1934, he argued that in this artist's paintings and prints, space disintegrates into shapes that approximate simple geometric elements, and that this disintegration estranges vision, causing viewers to take a distance on what they see ('Bruegel's *Macchia*,' in Christopher S. Wood (ed.), *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (New York, 2000), pp. 323–76). See also his later (1957) essay 'Der Sturz der Blinden', in Sedlmayr, *Epochen und Werke* (Munich, 1985), 1. 219–356.

<sup>5</sup> Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv. 1017; and London, National Gallery, 3556.

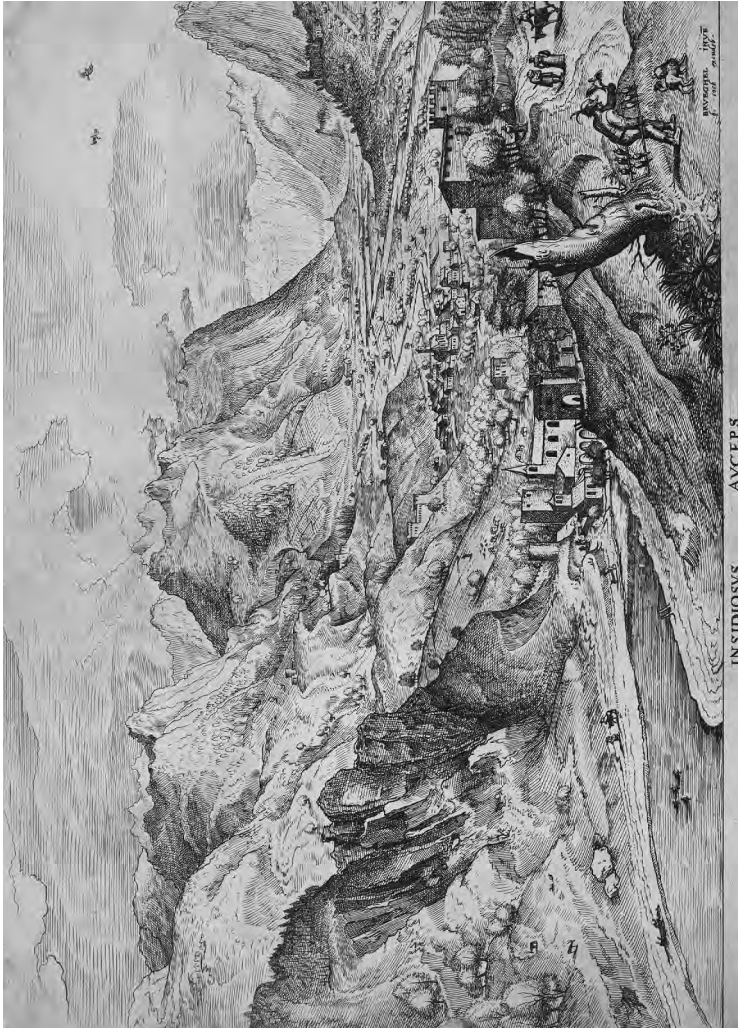
attention to him, discovering, for example, how Bruegel's picture seems centred on the curving seam formed by the opening of the peasant's jacket, and how that opening is jauntily fastened by laces. The first historian of northern European painting, Karel van Mander, launched the myth of 'Peasant Bruegel'. By his account, published in 1604, the artist's talent for painting peasants came firstly from his being born a rustic: 'Nature found and captured wonderfully well her man—only to be captured by him in turn in a grand way—when she went to pick him out in Brabant in an unknown village amidst peasants in order to copy peasants with his brush.'<sup>6</sup> Natural man tricks and escapes nature by representing her. A foundation story about human culture, the tale also inserts into Bruegel's biography the figure of trapping that so fascinates him. And it prepares us for the reversal that van Mander makes some lines on, when he describes how Bruegel, now a famous artist residing in the trade metropolis of Antwerp, used to sneak back into obscure villages 'dressed in peasant costume', so that the natives, thinking he belonged among them, allowed him secretly to paint them. 'Observing the nature of the peasants,' van Mander concludes, '[he] knew how to attire them very characteristically in Kempish or other costumes.'<sup>7</sup> In the first instance, Bruegel is the native informant; in the second, he is an anthropologist in the field who, immersing himself in the indigenous culture, goes native. Both identities, both the ethnographic curiosity and the curious ethnographer, distil what in the real world exists only in mixtures. But articulating movements from the autochthonous to the mobile, and from local to the global, they allow Bruegel *to perform his own modernity* as if it were a rite of passage.

An innocent nobody from nowhere, Bruegel discovers indigenoussness at the far end of a world voyage. 'On his travels', writes van Mander, 'he drew many views from life so that it is said that when he was in the Alps he swallowed all the mountains and rocks which, upon returning home, he spat out again onto canvases and panels.'<sup>8</sup> In the early 1550s, Bruegel launched his career with prints of Italian and Alpine views; and in the 1560s, he portrayed the means of long-distance travel through fastidious

<sup>6</sup> Karel van Mander, *The Lives of the Illustrious Netherlandish and German Painters*, trans. and ed. Hessel Miedema (Davaco, 1994), 1. 190. On the 'Peasant Bruegel' as an historiographical myth, see Jürgen Müller, "'Pieter der Drollige" oder der Muthos vom Bauern-Bruegel', in *Pieter Breughel der Jüngere und Jan Bruegel der Ältere. Flämische Malerei um 1600*, exh. cat., ed. Wilfried Seipel (Essen and Lingon, 1997), pp. 42–53.

<sup>7</sup> Van Mander, p. 190.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 1.** Joannes and Lucas van Doetecum after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Insidiosus Aviceps (The Crafty Bird Catcher)*, c.1555–6, etching with engraving, 32 × 42.4 cm. © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.

engravings of ships. Yet in the metaphor of Bruegel ‘swallowing’ the Alps, the artist also remains the ‘eating and drinking’ peasant he was before the trip.<sup>9</sup> Bruegel’s striding peasant himself has a certain knowledge. He knows of the bird-thief and of nests and how they might be robbed, hence his seen-that, done-that look. His confidence that we strangers should be interested in what he leaves behind suggests he possesses the type of cunning he points out. In one of Bruegel’s landscape prints, the label *insidiosus* qualifies the lore of trapping as low, mean, non-heroic: the estate, in short, of Mozart’s Papageno (Fig. 1).<sup>10</sup> The equipment the peasant gracefully bears serves for hunting or for herding. Such know-how is quintessentially *local*,<sup>11</sup> both because it pertains to a particular place—the shared habitat of hunter and prey—and because the procedures and tools that materialise know-how will tend to differ subtly from place to place. They possess what anthropologists call *style*.<sup>12</sup> Style is the fugitive characteristic of how, say, knives of a certain culture are shaped over and above their requirements for cutting. What Bruegel knows about peasants are their *styles*. This knowledge allowed him to dress up as a peasant so that, disguised, he could further study peasant dress.

Whether it is the way dough is knotted so that it becomes the distinctive pretzel of a particular village, or whether it is the type of mask used in local festivals, Bruegel shows an ethnographer’s attention to the tactics specific to a locale. In the *Battle Between Carnival and Lent*, dated 1559, Bruegel exhibits culture both as a traditional choreography and as an endlessly various, because always improvised, performance (Plate 3).<sup>13</sup> Participants are shown simultaneously to take part in the collective dance and to observe—along with us—the spectacle around them. Psychological plausibility (this is how people, in their specificity, act) intensifies the sense of ethnographic specificity (these are the specific

<sup>9</sup> Müller (“Pieter der Drollige”, p. 47) trace the source of this metaphor to classical rhetoric.

<sup>10</sup> René van Bastelaer, *The Prints of Peter Bruegel the Elder: Catalogue Raisonné*, trans. and rev. Susan Fargo Gilchrist (San Francisco, 1992), no. 10.

<sup>11</sup> See Clifford Geertz’s inflection of the term in *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology*, 3rd edn. (New York, 2000), pp. 15–16.

<sup>12</sup> My understanding of anthropological and art historical concepts of style has been influenced by: André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, MA, 1993), pp. 276–80; Pierre Lemonnier, ‘Introduction’, in Lemonnier (ed.), *Technical Choices: Transformation in Material Cultures since the Neolithic* (London, 1993), pp. 1–35; and especially Alfred Gell, *Art and Anthropology: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 154–68.

<sup>13</sup> Kunsthistorisches Museum Inv. 1016; on the picture’s anthropological perspective, see Joseph Leo Koerner, ‘Unmasking the World: Bruegel’s Ethnography’, *Common Knowledge*, 10 (2004), 220–51.

things these specific people make). In the *Peasant and the Bird-Nester*, the striding figure's uniquely knotted bows, then, are proof that the artist copying them (in van Mander's words) 'knew how' jackets like this were fastened. And the *place* where laces are tied this way, such that registering their particularity is an artistic achievement: that locality nestles the peasant as the world he leaves behind.

The landscape in this painting is one of Bruegel's most precocious creations.<sup>14</sup> Utterly ordinary yet suffused by boundless light and air, the view of two cottages built around a clearing in the woods anticipates the achievement of Rembrandt, van Goyen, and Ruisdael. But it also looks backward to a primordial condition of northern European landscape, when space was divided, in the laws and in the collective imagination, between what stood within a yard, or garth, and what lay beyond.<sup>15</sup> The philosopher Martin Heidegger pronounced that 'space', in German *Raum*, in English 'room', originally meant a place cleared for settlement and lodging. 'A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared, freed, namely with a boundary, Greek *peras*.'<sup>16</sup> Home, where the primordial social unit secured its everyday existence and peace reigned among family and friends, consisted of a yard and a house girded by a natural and social wilderness, what the Germanic languages called *utangards*, 'outside the fence'. This microcosm of the domicile was extended to the earth at large. The world of men was called *middilgard*, and the rest was chaos. J. R. R. Tolkien borrowed this old term for his fantasy realm, 'Middle Earth'. Tolkien's literary fantasy, like Heidegger's etymological one, are nostalgic instances of Bruegel's retrospective glance.

Bruegel's career began in Antwerp, a harbour city uniquely open to the world. The hub of a burgeoning commerce between Europe and Asia, Africa, and the New World, the city flourished on the increased mobility of goods and services enabled by new financial and accounting practices, more fluid capital, and accelerated forms of production, transport, and communication. A print from 1562 shows Antwerp observed, as the inscription puts it, 'from the Flemish meadows' (Fig. 2). In the foreground, a village street opens to the ship-filled Scheldt River, thoroughfare to the

<sup>14</sup> This landscape is celebrated in Wolfgang Stechow, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (New York, 1968), pp. 142–4.

<sup>15</sup> Aaron Gurevich, *Historical Anthropology of the Middle Ages*, ed. Jana Howlett (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 200–9.

<sup>16</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York, 1971), p. 154.



**Figure 2.** Melchisedek van Hoornen, *View of Antwerp*, 1562. etching with engraving, diameter 22.1 cm. © Copyright IRPA-KIK, Brussels.

world. To this teleology of motion belongs an attitude of *laissez-faire*. Above the church the motto reads: ‘Praise the God of all and drink the wine, and let the world be the world.’<sup>17</sup> The craft of painting flourished here. A global market, efficient distribution, and limited guild restrictions drew talent from elsewhere, as evidenced by Bruegel’s own migration to Antwerp.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, these conditions were themselves founded on new, standardised forms of inscription, to which painting importantly contributed. Bruegel entered Antwerp’s economy by publishing the drawings

<sup>17</sup> The etching is discussed in Walter S. Gibson, *Bruegel* (London, 2002), pp. 19–20.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of the Antwerp art trade, see Feilip Vermeylen, ‘Exporting Art across the Globe: The Antwerp Art Market in the Sixteenth Century’, in *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek*, 50 (1999), 13–29.



he had made on his travels. Transferred to copper plates by professional engravers, they were printed by Hieronymus Cock at a press with the self-consciously global name 'To the Four Winds'.<sup>19</sup> Much has been written about Bruegel's relation to the Antwerp geographer Abraham Ortelius, whose maps Cock also engraved.<sup>20</sup> I would simply note that modern cartography, born in Bruegel's Antwerp, at once requires and cancels mobility. Travellers, such as Bruegel, as well as ships, like the ones he frequently portrays, become instruments, which is to say *tracers* that draw on a piece of paper the shape of the encountered place.<sup>21</sup> The traveller enters new regions as an outsider, and therefore as the weak pole of an asymmetrical encounter between himself and the natives. Through his movements and inscriptions, however, he contributes to an increasingly stable map. Ortelius published his world map in 1570, long before the total outline of the world was complete (Fig. 3). No longer was Atlas a mythic giant shouldering an imponderable immensity; in Bruegel's Antwerp, an atlas became a gathering of pages that could sit on a desk. Born of mobility but itself fixed in its outline and location, the atlas engendered a new kind of centre. The stay-at-homes, who might have been the weakest, since they saw nothing personally, became suddenly the strongest, at home in more places than any native or individual traveller. This—as Bruno Latour has written—was how Europe itself constituted a centre that began to make the rest of the world turn around it.<sup>22</sup>

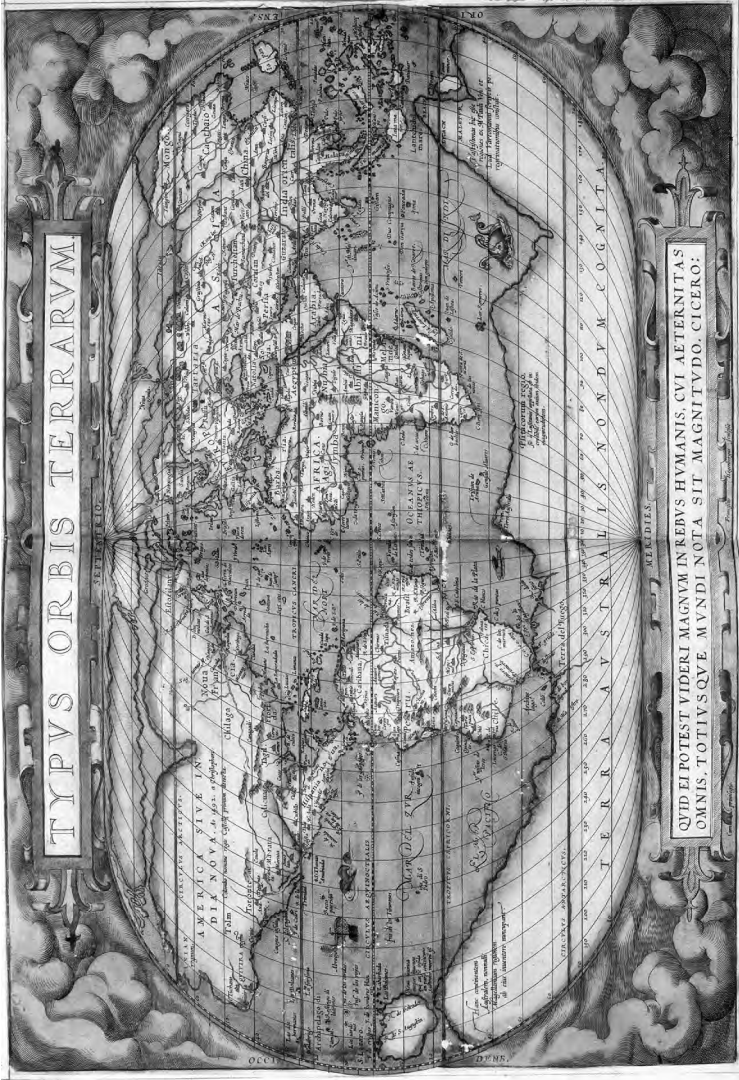
To fix and combine individual traces of movement, cartographers as well as artists developed standardised inscriptions. We can observe this in Bruegel's *oeuvre*, where his drawings are turned into etched and engraved

<sup>19</sup> On Bruegel's collaboration with Cock, see Lydia de Pauw-de Veen, *Jérôme Cock, éditeur d'estampes et graveur 1507?–1570*, exh. cat. (Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale Albert Ier, 1970); Timothy A. Riggs, 'Hieronymus Cock (1510–1570): Printmaker and Publisher in Antwerp at the Sign of The Four Winds', Ph.D. diss., Yale University, New Haven, 1971; and Timothy A. Riggs, 'Bruegel and His Publisher', in Otto Georg von Simson and Matthias Winner (eds.), *Pieter Bruegel und seine Welt* (Berlin, 1979), pp. 165–73.

<sup>20</sup> See especially Justus Müller-Hofstede, 'Zur Interpretation von Pieter Bruegels Landschaft: Ästhetischer Landschaftsbegriff und stoische Weltbetrachtung', in Simson and Winner (eds.), *Pieter Bruegel und seine Welt*, pp. 73–142; and Walter S. Melion, *Shaping the Netherlandish Canon: Karel van Mander's Schilder-Boeck* (Chicago, 1991), pp. 171–82 and *passim*.

<sup>21</sup> Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, MA, 1987), pp. 224–8. Engravings of ships, naval battles, and marine views after designs by Bruegel remain the least-studied area of his *oeuvre*; see van Bastelaer, *Prints of Peter Bruegel*, nos. 96–108.

<sup>22</sup> Bruno Latour, 'From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik, or How to Make Things Public', in Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (eds.), *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), p. 37.



**Figure 3.** Frans Hogenberg, *Typus Orbis Terrarum* (Image of the Countries of the World), engraving, 337 × 493 cm, in Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Antwerp: Aegid. Copperrnium Diesth, 1570). © 2003. Photo Scala Florence/HIP.

prints (Plate 4 and Fig. 4).<sup>23</sup> The motion of the artist's pen—palpable in his sketches—disappears into a regular system of intaglio lines. Prints publish some quirks of style while effacing others. The etchers of Bruegel's drawings also etched maps for Ortelius; the landscape in the etching *The Way to Emmaus* differs considerably from a map of the same terrain, but at the level of inscription they are similar. The publisher of this print, Hieronymus Cock, built his empire on reproductive engravings, that is, on prints that copied singular paintings. Although, through Cock, northern Europe dominated the industry, reproductive engraving reproduced chiefly compositions by *Italian* masters. Northern engravers, such as Cornelius Cort, excelled in evacuating the peculiarities of their own regional style in order to publish the flamboyantly individualistic style of painters from elsewhere. The dissemination, internationally, of a 'high style' for European painting based on antique standards owes much to the Antwerp print-makers, who mobilised the prestigious original by renouncing their own indigenous manner.<sup>24</sup>

Bruegel portrayed the ethnic styles embodied in peasant artefacts. This endeavour derived, I believe, from an impulse to imbue his own self-consciously global art with the hallmarks of local facture. For in the act of 'copying peasants with his brush', he also rusticated his own manner. Primitivism is the most fugitive feature of Bruegel's art. Scholars routinely observe that for nearly four hundred years—from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century—his paintings seemed crudely made.<sup>25</sup> Rehabilitated first as a 'folk painter', Bruegel came to be appreciated only after the demise of an aesthetics based on classical norms. What the twentieth century felt it had discovered in Bruegel, then, was not just a great painter, but a singularly natural one, unencumbered by an artificial style or by Christian or mythological subject matter. But did four centuries of viewers simply imagine Bruegel's awkwardness?

<sup>23</sup> Hans Mielke, *Pieter Bruegel. Die Zeichnungen* (Turnhout, 1996), no. 23; and van Bastelaer, *The Prints of Peter Bruegel*, no. 14. The drawing *Landscape with Three Pilgrims* (Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, T. 5098) is one of the two surviving drawings for Bruegel's so-called Large Landscapes prints, published around 1555. See, most recently, Nadine M. Orenstein, *Pieter Bruegel the Elder: Drawings and Prints*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; and New Haven, 2001), cat. 22–3.

<sup>24</sup> For an introduction to this moment in art history, see Timothy Riggs, 'Graven Images: A Guide to the Exhibition', in *Graven Images: The Rise of Professional Printmakers in Antwerp and Haarlem, 1540–1650*, exh. cat. ed. Timothy Riggs and Larry Silver (Evanston, IL: Mary and Leigh Block Gallery, Northwestern University, 1991), pp. 101–18.

<sup>25</sup> A history of Bruegel's reception has yet to be written; a useful collection of texts is given in Hans-Wolfgang von Löhneysen, *Die ältere niederländische Malerei. Künstler und Kritiker* (Eisenach and Kassel, 1956), pp. 141–52.



**Figure 4.** Joannes and Lucas van Doetecum after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Euntes in Emmaus* (*The Way to Emmaus*), c.1555–6, etching with engraving. 32.2 × 42.3 cm. © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.

One painter of Bruegel's time, Lucas de Heere, wrote a verse-invective against artists who style themselves as simple. A practitioner and exponent of the dominant Italianising style, de Heere targeted a 'certain painter' who mocked his rival's products as 'sugar pictures' because of their superfluous decor. 'It is astonishing that you are not ashamed of this,' writes de Heere, 'for you are yourself unmannered, since you ornament your paintings like carnival dolls.'<sup>26</sup> Most scholars now assume that the painter de Heere refers to is specifically Bruegel. If this is so (and I believe it is), then the artist's original audience observed a stylistic kinship between the peasant artefacts featured in Bruegel's works, such as kermis props, and the way he himself paints. In *Children's Games*, crudely made dolls shown in the lower left corner are miniature versions of the girls who play with them, not only in costume but also in their awkward anatomy.<sup>27</sup> Disguised as a rustic, Bruegel re-entered the unknown village, that enclave of innocence where nature herself initially captured him.<sup>28</sup> This dissimulation carried over into his art. Consider his rendering of the peasant in motion. In its disjointed members and crude divisions that only half-conceal a cosmopolitan performance, on Bruegel's part, of volume, contour, and foreshortening: in this hybrid of awkwardness and grace, of northern and southern *form*,<sup>29</sup> do we not discern Bruegel's own cultural mobility masquerading an indigenous formation?

Behind the peasant, the field cleared in the forest would be sufficient for a rudimentary economy. (Farms in Flanders at the time averaged two hectares.) Let this lifeworld stand for the elemental home or nest from which we will have always departed, either by abandoning it or by being snatched from it by an intrusive hand. Bruegel presses the picture plane

<sup>26</sup> Lucas de Heere, 'Invective, an eenen Quidam schilder', in *Den hof en boomgaard der Poësie* (Ghent: Ghileyn Manilius, 1565), p. 87–8; that the poem refers to Bruegel was argued most persuasively by David Freedberg, 'Allusion and Topicality in the Work of Pieter Bruegel: The Implications of a Forgotten Polemic', in David Freedberg (ed.), *The Prints of Pieter Bruegel the Elder* (Tokyo: Bridgestone Museum of Art, 1989), pp. 53–69.

<sup>27</sup> Kunsthistorisches Museum, Inv. 1017. All the Vienna Bruegels are available online on the museum's excellent website <<http://www.khm.at>>.

<sup>28</sup> On the myth of such 'enclaves' in modern thought, see Hans Blumenberg, *Lebenszeit und Weltzeit* (Frankfurt, 1986), pp. 48–69.

<sup>29</sup> Carl Gustav Stridbeck argued that Bruegel modelled his striding peasant on a *putto* in Michelangelo's Sistine Ceiling (*Bruegelstudien: Untersuchungen zu den ikonologischen Problemen bei Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. sowie dessen Beziehungen zum niederländischen Romanismus* (Stockholm, 1956), p. 285). More plausibly, Jürgen Müller referred the peasant's pose to the 'contraposto' pose as a signature stylistic device in both Italian Mannerist and northern Romanist art; see *Das Paradox als Bildform: Studien zur Ikonologie Pieter Bruegels d. Ä.* (Munich, 1999), p. 88.

up against the very boundaries of pre-modern space. The forward limits of the farmstead, articulated as the shore of a little stream or pond, curves from the right along the painting's whole lower edge. This forward horizon places us outside looking in. And it locates the peasant at the threshold of abandonment, where, for the inhabitants of a homestead unknown to the world, the unknown world might begin.

And it is here, at this cleft between the artwork and our world, where the peasant and the viewer stand eye-to-eye, that Bruegel sets *his trap*. In his next step, with the same sudden motion as the nest-robber's falling hat, the peasant will step into the stream.<sup>30</sup> Bruegel imagines the calamity for us in his canvas *The Blind Leading the Blind* (Plate 5).<sup>31</sup> Also dated 1568, it illustrates what happens in such a terrain if you do not watch your step; a gladiola, evocative, perhaps, of final judgement, blooms in the stream in both pictures.<sup>32</sup> In the Vienna panel, the pollarded tree seems almost to mime a tumbling body. At one level, the joke is on the peasant. Everything about him says he is at home and therefore would know every 'bend of the river'. But in his eagerness to share his secret, he loses his footing: we become his distraction. At another level, the joke is on us, because the moment we notice the stream and anticipate the peasant's fall, we realise, according to the picture, that we stand suspended over the same abyss. 'How sweet it is,' wrote Lucretius, 'when whirlwinds roil the sea, | To watch, from land, the danger of someone else.'<sup>33</sup> Bruegel refuses to grant us any fixed point from which to observe catastrophic mobility. He extends his trap from the bird through the peasant to ourselves.

About forty years after Bruegel's painting, the Flemish-born painter and print-maker David Vinckboons exposed its structure. A sketch by him from around 1606 shows two peasants so engrossed in the bird-nester that they miss the vagabond pinching their purse (Fig. 5).<sup>34</sup> At the far left, a second pair of rustics catch the trickery. Interfoliating cunning with folly, such plots demonstrate an artist's knowledge of the 'ways of the world'. As with setting traps, such know-how is mobile and

<sup>30</sup> This possibility was first noted by Gotthard Jedlicka, *Pieter Bruegel: Der Maler in seiner Zeit* (Erlengbach-Zurich, 1938), p. 342.

<sup>31</sup> Naples, Museo Nazionale, No. 84–490.

<sup>32</sup> For an extensive analysis of flower symbolism of Bruegel's picture, see Kjell Boström, 'Das Sprichwort vom Vogelnest', *Konsthistorisk Tidskrift*, 18 (1949), 77–89.

<sup>33</sup> *De rerum natura*, 2.1–2 (Lucretius, *The Way Things Are*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington, 1968), p. 52); on the vicissitudes of this passage, see Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence*, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge, MA, 1997), pp. 26–46.

<sup>34</sup> On the group of prints and drawings after Vinckboons which relate to Bruegel's painting, see Eddy de Jongh and Ger Luijten, *Mirror of Everyday Life: Genreprints in the Netherlands 1550–1700*, trans. Michael Hoyle, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Rijksmuseum, 1997), pp. 108–10.



Figure 5. David Vinckboons, *The Nest-Robber*, c.1606, pen and brown ink with grey wash and brown wash, 29.5 × 39.7 cm. Brussels, Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I. © Copyright Bibliothèque Royale de Belgique.



**Figure 6.** Hessel Gerritsz (?) after David Vinckboons, *The Nest-Robber*, 1606, etching, 26.3 × 34.9 cm.  
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improvisational, hence the ease with which an artist can shift around elements of Bruegel's structure. A print of 1606 based on Vinckboons' sketch introduces two rustics setting a fish trap in the stream (Fig. 6).

The forest peoples of West Africa are perhaps the world's most accomplished trappers.<sup>35</sup> They have different snares for every kind of animal, each engineered to suit the victim's habits and capabilities. Their subtlest traps are for chimpanzees, whose cunning—so the trappers believe—is surpassed only by human beings. One such snare consists of a thread that the chimp, due to its innate curiosity, will gently tug, releasing from above a bundle with poisoned arrows. The ape's near-human psychic mobility becomes its undoing. Traps conceal themselves through a representation, tailored to their target, of an inviting world. Working prosthetically, they use the movements of their quarry as a trigger. A most simple path-guarding trap consists of a concealed shallow pit lined with sharpened sticks; angled downward, these only work when the victim, acting on reflex, jerks his leg back up. Traps are the paradigm of a hostile imagery or enemy symbolism meant to annihilate its audience. Lethal parodies of their victim's ordinary lifeworld, they depend on a mimetic facility similar to fabricating images. The kinship between traps and artworks fascinated the anthropologist Alfred Gell.<sup>36</sup> It was also one of Bruegel's chief obsessions. The chief protagonist of his most copied masterpiece, the so-called *Winter Landscape with Bird Trap* (known in nearly 150 versions), is a crude device for luring and crushing birds. Like the trap, Bruegel's painting entices viewers to enter it. Art becomes akin to the craft of everyday survival, while death, in the trap or on the ice, becomes a global threat.

Typically, genre painting displays a special knowledge of ordinary life while also allowing viewers to enjoy their everyday cunning. But can one be expert in common sense? It is not because of any learning that we smile at the peasant's impending fall. Like Vinckboons, Bruegel could have added a second rustic to point out the folly of the first, and we would have identified with him. To get a feel for the sort of knowing at stake, consider a canvas by the popular American painter Norman Rockwell (Plate 6).<sup>37</sup> The artist's skill consists in getting right the material tissue of everyday

<sup>35</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Barricades mystérieuses et pièges à pensée: introduction à l'analyse des épopées Fang* (Paris, 1988), pp. 55–6.

<sup>36</sup> Alfred Gell, 'Vogel's Net', Eric Hirsch (ed.), *The Art of Anthropology* (London, 1999), p. 201 and *passim*.

<sup>37</sup> The painting appeared as cover illustration for the *Saturday Evening Post* (27 Dec. 1947).

life; viewers, in turn, enjoy getting the details one by one. Such a painting elicits in beholders pride in what they intrinsically know, which is to say, in their faculty for living. Perhaps that is why Rockwell repels most professional art historians, who hope to bring to objects a *special* expertise.

Rockwell's picture engineers the recognition that it is past closing time on Christmas Eve. Once understood, things fall into place in this scene of a salesgirl sitting slumped among unsold toys. Yet: what do we say 'aha' to in Bruegel when we notice the stream into which the peasant is about to step? It was long ago suggested that Bruegel's painting is a puzzle for which we have lost the solution. Viewers originally would have possessed that key, rather as we, looking at Rockwell, still know a Christmas rush. Now Bruegel himself makes explicit that one competence required of viewers is a knowledge of proverbs. His monumental panel in Berlin looks, at first, like a portrait of everyday village life (Plate 7). Only at second glance is it apparent that none of the depicted actions is ordinary. *Either* this is not human life at all but something alien, *or else* the people are doing something other than living, namely, acting out proverbs *about* life. In fact, Bruegel makes both these alternatives obtain. He displays an unreality that results from visualising proverbs, and then he allows that unreality, taken as a whole, to visualise a proverb about reality per se, namely, that the 'world is upside-down', and that our everyday activities, which at first we thought we saw reflected in the picture, are indeed as absurd as these charades. Bruegel devotes his images to what survives after their translation into words: note, for example, the mesmerising, but symbolically superfluous, presence of flour on the cutting board.

In the *Bird-Nester*, nothing overtly odd happens that it requires a saying to explain it. However, on another work by Bruegel, a relevant proverb occurs. The text—presumed to be autograph—at the lower right of the *Bee-Keepers* reads: 'He who knows the nest knows it, | He who robs it has it.'<sup>38</sup> In other words, having beats knowing, and there is no gain without pain. Leaving aside the fact that *The Bee Keepers* is made *more*, not *less*, obscure by this inscription, we can apply the words to the Vienna panel, since artists active just after Bruegel did so, too. The 1606 etching after David Vinckboons, which was itself a redaction of Bruegel's

<sup>38</sup> 'Dije den nest Weet dije(n) Weeten dijen Roft dij heeten'; Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Kupferstichkabinett KdZ 713; Mielke, *Pieter Bruegel*, cat. 66. The text on the *Bee-Keepers* was first applied to Bruegel's *Peasant and Nest Robber* by Georges Hulin de Loo, *Pierre Bruegel l'Ancien* (Brussels, 1907), p. 277.

painting, bears the inscription: 'He who knows the nest knows where it is, but he who steals it really has it' (Fig. 6).<sup>39</sup> And another print based on a drawing by Vinckboons, this one etched by the prolific printmaker Claes Jansz Vischer, repeats the text, but adds another twist: again, the knower himself gets 'had', but now by a woman (Fig. 7). Two more lines introduce a new subtext: 'Jessie looks up at the tree with zest, but what she really seeks is a bird in Johnny's nest.'<sup>40</sup> Some scholars have discerned an erotic connotation in Bruegel's panel, as well.<sup>41</sup> To them, the peasant's impending fall signals his misfortune in love, where success depends on well-timed action; or else the fall symbolises the peasant's cuckolding by the thief. Back home, the peasant's wife, and with her the domestic idyll, has become *unheimlich* through the entrance of a stranger to the nest. I am reminded of one of Eric Idle's Monty Python characters who adds to everything he says a disconcerting, 'Know what I mean? Nudge nudge. Say no more.'<sup>42</sup> The problem with an erotic reading of Bruegel's picture is not only that it lacks visual evidence. By disclosing something secret, it claims to have the hidden key. Now the peasant *is* the sort to say nudge-nudge, wink-wink. He accosts people indiscreetly, producing in them an anonymous laughter that comes from nowhere and spares no one. But it is he who is about to fall. And because the peasant is not merely represented *in* the painting, but, by looking out and pointing back, acts out the painting itself, Bruegel insures that everything and everyone shares in his ridiculous misfortune. A self-satisfied 'aha' is not an escape but the very trigger of the trap. It signals the instant when, as know-it-alls, we plunge into the depth.

Bruegel never tires of picturing this condition. He portrays it perfectly in his one autograph etching, where a rabbit hunter is stalked from behind (Fig. 8). 'A hare yourself, you hunt for prey', is one relevant proverb here.<sup>43</sup> This adage does not solve the picture's mystery; it encapsulates something about our being in the world, and our being before the picture, that Bruegel's landscape itself wordlessly shows. Being a subject entails not only standing over against objects as an agency and a measure, like a hunter taking aim. It presupposes *subjection* to a power outside of and

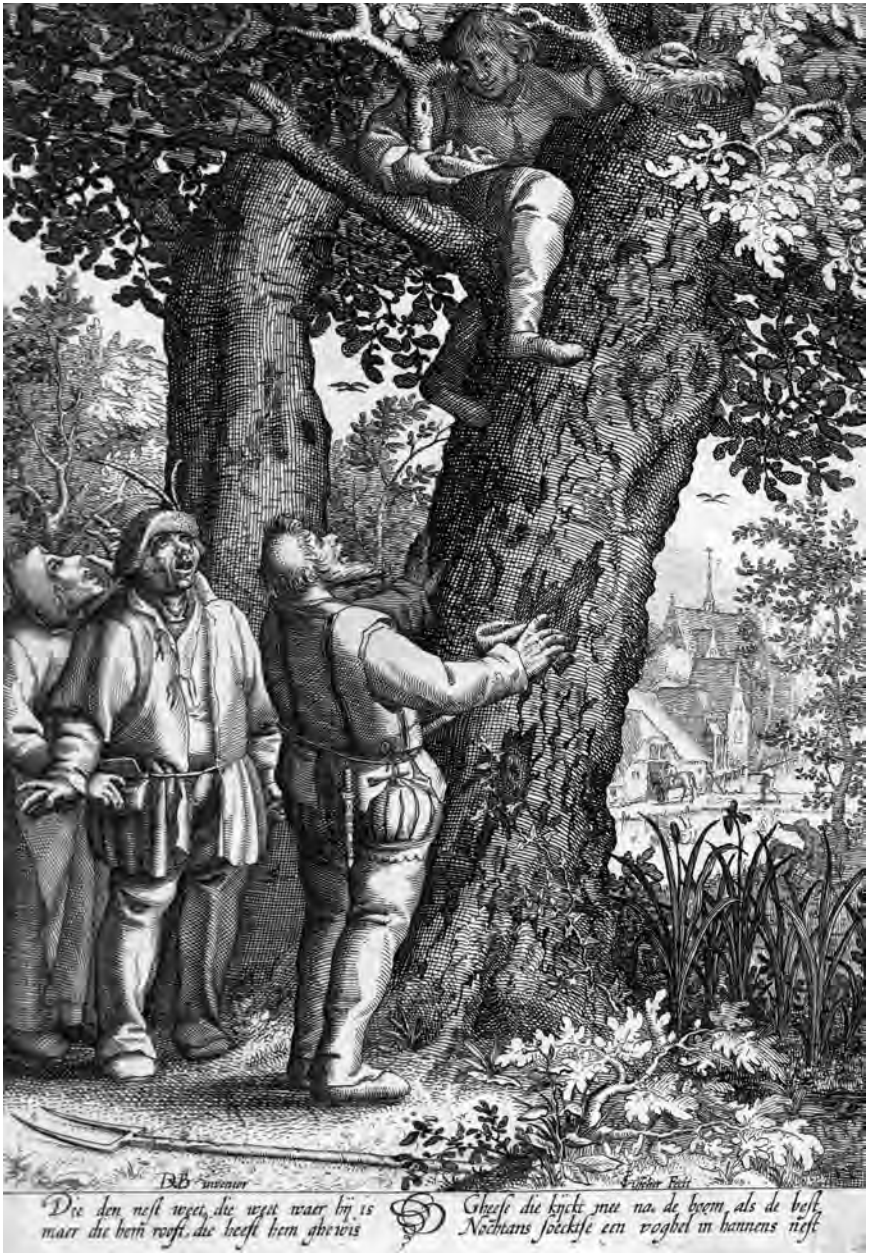
<sup>39</sup> 'Die den nest weet die weethen | Maer die hem roofd die heefden.'

<sup>40</sup> De Jongh and Luyten, *Mirror of Everyday Life*, p. 110.

<sup>41</sup> Most notably Jan Grauls, *Volkstall en volksleven in het werk van Pieter Bruegel* (Antwerp, 1957), pp. 161–2.

<sup>42</sup> *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, Season One (1969), Episode 3.

<sup>43</sup> See Margaret Sullivan, 'Bruegel's Proverbs: Art and Audience in the Northern Renaissance: Pieter Bruegel the Elder', *Art Bulletin*, 73 (1991), 431–66.



**Figure 7.** Class Janz Vischer after David Vinckboons, *The Nest-Robber*, etching, 20.2 × 14.7 cm. © Albertina Museum, Vienna.



**Figure 8.** Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Rabbit Hunt*, 1560, etching, 22.3 × 29.1 cm. © The Samuel Courtauld Trust, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London.

anterior to oneself. The hunter hunted, the trapper trapped, the viewer viewed: these reversals constitute subjectivity as reflexive turning or trope.<sup>44</sup>

In his catalogue of the Vienna Bruegels, Klaus Demus notes that ‘with certain works by Bruegel it is never easy to find the key to their idea’.<sup>45</sup> For the *Bird-Nester* specifically, ‘the key is still missing. We cannot replace it with our “own” interpretation. The simple, total meaning, the “literal” handle with which the content would be able to be “grasped”, eludes us still.’ In other words, even *with* the proverb about knowledge Bruegel’s picture remains unknown. Demus puts scare quotes around the word ‘own’ in the phrase ‘our “own” interpretation’. He ridicules understanding based on opinion, and seeks to grasp instead a ‘literal’ handle. But is that not just what Bruegel’s picture openly displays: the abyss between grasping and knowing? Juxtaposing the pointing finger to the thieving hand, Bruegel shows us that having a mental handle, as the striding peasant does on the theft, does not constitute sufficient grounds. Moreover, he who literally grasps the nest forsakes the ground and risks a fall. In Bruegel, handles are not safe; they are what trips the trap, like the thread that lures the chimpanzee. Whether it is building a tower to heaven or avoiding the trap of death, calculated behaviour fails to secure for itself its object and brings it to a standstill. Much still eludes us in Bruegel’s *Bird-Nester*; I doubt, though, that even possessing a better proverb, the picture would be firmly grasped. I cannot think of one painting by this artist where one can confidently say, ‘I’ve got it!’

Ludwig Wittgenstein tried to resist the urge for explanations. He wrote an ill-tempered commentary on James Frazer’s *Golden Bough*. There, he observed, ‘Even the idea of trying to explain a practice—say the killing of the priest-king—seems to me wrong-headed.’<sup>46</sup> Frazer regarded ritual as a form of ignorance. In early African culture, prayers to the King of Rain became, for Frazer, proof that people mis-attribute natural phenomena to divine intervention, and therefore try to influence them through their rites. Wittgenstein asked what happens if we interpret

<sup>44</sup> For a critical analysis of philosophical models of this structure from Hegel to the present, see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford, 1997), esp. pp. 1–10.

<sup>45</sup> Klaus Demus, ‘Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. im Kunsthistorischen Museum’, in Wilfried Seipel (ed.), *Pieter Bruegel d. Ä. im Kunsthistorischen Museum Wien* (Vienna and Milan, 1997), p. 122; Demus goes on to revise his own opinion, first published in 1982, that the iconographic ‘handle’ is lost, reading the painting in light of John, 3: 29 ff.

<sup>46</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen über Frazers Golden Bough/Remarks on Frazer’s Golden Bough*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. A. C. Miles (Denton near Harleston, 1979), p. 1e.

such rituals literally. He noticed the fact, left unglossed by Frazer, that rain prayers were never said when the land was parched and rain nowhere in sight. Prayer occurred with the rainy season. Placed in context, this custom seems no less rational than our rituals. Strangeness comes from standing outside the lifeworld where such rites occur; philosophy, then, consists in becoming a stranger *at home*, lost in the agreement of common sense. 'With customs', writes Wittgenstein, 'one can only *describe* and say: this is what human life is like'.<sup>47</sup> This perspective matches nicely that of Bruegel. Beyond whatever might inform its details, the *Bird-Nester* comes as close, perhaps, as painting ever has to showing 'this is what human life is like.' The painting looks odd not because there is something hidden that, uncovered, would make it seem familiar. The picture is odd because life is odd. Once we take with Bruegel that little step outside its world, where the striding peasant too is bound, the ordinary itself becomes strange.

How did Bruegel make this step? How did a painting of everyday life historically come about? It might seem contradictory to seek the everyday through a history. Does not the ordinary consist precisely of things that stay the same, immutable routine existence? To recognise, in Bruegel, that life is like *that* depends on an identity between his and our world. Genre painting speaks in universals, in the givens of food, drink, love, anger, folly, and death. Yet everything is also supremely ephemeral in genre. The minutiae of the customs and costumes that Bruegel records makes his pictures more local and more contingent than they would be were they set, say, in his own, more mobile world of Antwerp or of Brussels. The Kempishness of Bruegel's Kempish peasants which so delighted van Mander rests in its visible anomaly, its difference from the ethnic style obtaining just around the corner.

Attention to the particularity of culture, and to everyday life as captured by that particularity, runs throughout the genre tradition. In German, genre paintings are sometimes termed *Sittenbilder*, customs-pictures.<sup>48</sup> Rockwell's canvas illustrated how our recognitions depend on a fine-grained picture of material life back then, in small-town America in 1947, at five past five on Christmas Eve. By recovering lost contexts, art historians can rescue the acknowledgements that genre paintings pursue.

<sup>47</sup> Wittgenstein, *Bemerkungen*, pp. 3–3e, my translation.

<sup>48</sup> On the history of these terms, see Wolfgang Stechow and Christopher Comer, 'The History of the Term Genre', *Allen Memorial Art Museum Bulletin*, 33 (1975–6), 89–94.

But we sometimes treat genre as if it were *nothing but* the picture of a bygone lifeworld.

Consciousness of historical difference has made it hard to say, before works of art from a distant past, ‘life is like that’. The challenge is to allow genre still to teach us about everyday life while still accounting for its historical contingency, as a historically and geographically local artistic formation. Artists did not always seek to do as Bruegel does. They did not always unmask the world as a product of human customs. I will consider Bruegel’s departure by considering how mobility is treated by his most important precursor.

The two panels sometimes entitled *The Peddler* were probably made around 1500 in the workshop of Hieronymus Bosch (Plate 2).<sup>49</sup> They form the outer shutters of a winged triptych; you can still see an old lock that kept them closed. Thematically, they have enough in common with Bruegel’s *Bird-Nester* to make sense in a comparison. Bosch, moreover, arguably invented genre painting in the north; hailed in his day as ‘a new Hieronymus Bosch’, Bruegel learned from this artist *both* a thematics of devilry and a repertoire of everyday motifs.<sup>50</sup> As in the *Bird-Nester*, Bosch centres his composition on a striding figure whose forward motion gets entangled in a gesture backward, here a peddler’s glance behind. And more explicitly than in Bruegel, this entanglement derives from snares that everywhere abound. A dog snarls at the peddler’s heels; behind, occasioning the peddler’s gaze, highwaymen rob another traveller; above, crowds gather around a hanging. And in front, where the peddler is bound, a crack has opened in the footbridge. Despite these perils, Bosch shows the pleasures of the world. The dancing peasants and piping shepherd encapsulate the delectations that people will pursue. Bosch sets this world off against an abyss: the cracked footbridge traverses a stream into which the turned-away wanderer may fall. Bruegel set a similar snare, but in the *Bird-Nester* the ground gives way along the picture plane itself, placing the viewer inside the trap. Bosch shows the mechanism in profile.

<sup>49</sup> Madrid, Museo del Prado, cat. 2052; on attribution and condition, see Carmen Garrido and Roger Van Schout, *Bosch at the Museo del Prado* (Madrid: Museo del Prado/Aldeasa), pp. 123–56. The most detailed interpretation of these panels, with up-to-date bibliography, is Eric de Bruyn, *De vergeten beeldentall van Jheronimus Bosch: De symboliek van de Hooiwagentriepiek en de Rotterdamse Marskramer-tondo verklaard vanuit Middelnederlandse teksten* (‘s-Hertogenbosch, 2001).

<sup>50</sup> The epithet ‘novus . . . Hieronymus . . . Boschius’ originates with Domenicus Lampsonius in *Pictorum aliquot celebrium Germaniae inferioris effigies* (Antwerp, 1572) and is repeated—influentially—by Lodovico Guicciardini and Karel van Mander; see Jean Puraye, ed. *Dominique Lampson: ‘Les effigies des peintres célèbres des Pays-Bas’* (Liège, 1956), p. 60.



And he pictures the threshold of the present, that perilous but not yet catastrophic 'now' in which the wanderer is caught, by means of a split in the picture itself.

Bruegel centres his picture similarly on the midline of the striding figure's body. But that middle is a gentle curve (akin to the riverbank itself) which runs up the inner contour of the peasant's body. A mobile centre, the peasant keeps our entrance into the picture restless. Bosch centres the peddler far more rigidly. Divided by the vertical gap between the panels, his belt halfway up the picture, and his head, limbs, and pack sketching a rotary form, he pivots round the geometric centre of his support. Striding, swirling, and physically opening up, Bosch's multiply mobile centre pinpoints life to its restless here and now. It is where we typically meet everyman, lost, as Dante pictures him, 'in the middle of the path of life'. Christian anthropology assumed the permanent mobility of humans. 'Here on earth', writes Augustine, Christians wander 'as on a pilgrimage through time, looking for the kingdom of heaven'.<sup>51</sup>

Bosch's wanderer has a more negative charge, however. He is a peddler, which means he has neither a home nor a heavenly destination, but keeps worldly success in view, travelling bit by bit, pushed and pulled by paltry desires, fears, and regrets. Around 1500, due to increased migration to towns combined with changing religious attitudes towards poverty, localities enacted ever stricter laws against vagrancy.<sup>52</sup> Previously celebrated as a pious pursuit, begging became associated with laziness and criminality. A flood of satirical books portrayed vagabonds belonging to a secret society bent on deception. Masterless and mobile, the homeless were the vanguard of modernity, at frustrating and motivating new forms of state control. The gallows above Bosch's peddler remind us that vagrancy was punished by death. Peddlers bore the additional stigma of deriving their mobility from the circulation of material things. Selling merchandise from elsewhere, they profited from a love of worldly goods. In an engraving by Pieter van der Heyden after Bruegel, monkeys rob a sleeping peddler (Fig. 9).<sup>53</sup> Natural mimics, their misuse of things travesties use-value per se. Trying out boots, eyeglasses, mirrors, etc., peeing

<sup>51</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Gerald G. Walsh *et al.* (New York, 1958), p. 325.

<sup>52</sup> Michel Mollat, *The Poor in the Middle Ages: An Essay in Social History*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New Haven, 1978), pp. 247–50 and *passim*; 167–70; Walter Prevenier and Wim Blockmans, *The Burgundian Netherlands*, trans. Peter King and Yvette Mead (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 183–7; Jan van Oudheusden and Aart Vos (eds.), *The World of Bosch* ('s-Hertogenbosch, 2001), pp. 42–4.

<sup>53</sup> Van Bastelaer, *The Prints of Peter Bruegel*, no. 148.



**Figure 9.** Pieter van den Heyden after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Merchant Robbed by Monkeys*, c.1558, engraving, 22.5 × 29 cm. © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.

into the peddler's hat and smelling his behind, they also expose the relation of things to the body. Bruegel's *Everyman* engraving develops further the relation between persons and products (Fig. 10).<sup>54</sup> The wares on display are covered with trademarks, insignia, that is, of making and ownership. Bruegel's engravings are often multiply signed, naming the designer, engraver, and publisher. And in his depiction of peasant artefacts, he celebrated the visibility of their primitive facture. And yet in this print, *Everyman's* self-investment in things prevents self-knowledge.

In Bosch, the goods that *Everyman* carries on his back double his own body subject to death. The panels swing open to reveal the nothingness he seeks and is (Plate 8). Processing between paradise and hell, a formless mass of hay stands for the world that humanity seeks futilely to grasp. Centred like the peddler, and moving with him, hay reveals the body to be ephemeral, according the biblical proverb 'All flesh is grass.'<sup>55</sup> And the various snares in the peddler's world stand now consolidated in the cosmic trap of hell, because, on this model, the world itself is hell, since the moment we want to *have* the world, we are trapped.<sup>56</sup>

Closed, the shutters stand for life. Opened, they reveal the world we truly inhabit but cannot rightly see, because we are deceived into believing that living is our purpose. Note that at 1500, before it became the autonomous subject it will be in Bruegel, genre painting emerges under a negative sign.<sup>57</sup> By way of its material negation by the opening through its middle, we return to the mobile world again, but observed from a perspective that condemns it.

Plato called time 'a moving icon of eternity'.<sup>58</sup> The *Hay Wain's* shutters literally open the mobile 'now' of lived experience to an icon of eternity. At the midpoint of duration, the hay as world continually passes between absolute beginning and final end. It would be useful to survey the forms that motion takes in Bosch. Unfolding in time and auguring death, mobility is the medium of sin, hence the turbulence of sinners round the

<sup>54</sup> Van Bastelaer, *The Prints of Peter Bruegel*, no. 152.

<sup>55</sup> This reading was developed already by 1605 by Fra José de Sigüenza in his *Historia de la Orden de San Jeronimo*; and it had been signalled by Ambrosio de Morales in his 1586 *Tabla de Cebes*; see James Synder (ed.), *Bosch in Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1973), pp. 38 and 32, respectively.

<sup>56</sup> On the paradox—stated in John 1:10 and much discussed by Augustine—that God created the world but the world turned from him, see Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Reasons*, trans. Terrence Malick (Evanston, 1969), pp. 51–7.

<sup>57</sup> This negative origin parallels what Michel de Certeau postulates as the origin of secular 'literature,' in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984), p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> *Timaeus*, 37 d 5.



Figure 10. Pieter van den Heyden (?) after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Everymann*, c.1558, engraving, 22.5 × 29.5 cm.  
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

hay. Mobility becomes more frantic in hell, where punishments are simply the sin eternally pursued. Beyond its blanket condemnation, however, mobility has special representatives. Peddlers, vagabonds, mendicants, prostitutes, quacks, and *jongleurs*, as well as gypsies, witches, heretics, Jews and Turks personify the motion that captures all people. But by constituting an enemy, they establish, reflexively, the self's special preserve as belonging here, not out there. Bosch cultivates an aggressive double-thinking: we are mobile but some are more mobile than others. This paranoia about mutability within and about enemies without reflects the condition of urban life in early modern Europe. The mobility of goods and services that created towns effected a greater homogeneity of products and persons. Bruegel's celebration of indigenous style lamented this while also benefiting from it, since his own entrance into Antwerp depended on porous borders. Compared to Bruegel, Bosch was a native, belonging to the fourth generation of a family of painters in the provincial town of 's-Hertogenbosch.<sup>59</sup> Yet even they had arrived from elsewhere, from Aachen, as indicated by the artist's given name, Hieronymus van Aken. By calling himself 'Bosch', he indicated his belonging to the town's indigenous elite (secured, I might add, by an upwardly mobile marriage). But it also proclaimed his identity beyond his native town, since who there needed to know that he belonged? It is only the timing of his entry, plus talent, that distinguished him from the itinerant performers he hates. Bosch's vilification of mobility reflects the political dilemma of the modern age. It turns out that the old world of local nuance and endless cultural diversity did *not* pass to a new world of universal societies. Instead, the old world divided into internally mobile but externally closed societies.<sup>60</sup> And it was in these societies, organising themselves as nations, that a cult of the closed society was formed.

The figure of the conjurer, as Bosch portrays him, is an itinerant entertainer, an illusionist, and most probably a Jew (Plate 9).<sup>61</sup> Along with his thieving accomplice, he is a master of the rapid gesture. Bosch knows these snares because, an entertainer and illusionist himself, he too builds traps. Mobility marks this painter's products at every level. Hell—his

<sup>59</sup> Bosch's social milieu and its influence on his art has been developed most fully in Paul Vandenbroek, *Jheronimus Bosch: de verlossing van de wereld* (Ghent, 2002), pp. 169–200 and *passim*.

<sup>60</sup> Ernst Gellner, *Language and Solitude: Wittgenstein, Malinowski and the Habsburg Dilemma* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 20–5.

<sup>61</sup> Jeffrey Hamburger, 'Bosch's Conjurer: An Attack on Magic and Sacramental Heresy', *Simiolus*, 14 (1984), 5–24.

signature subject—consists of a hyperactive machinery of suffering. These engines are run by energetic monsters whose combinatory make-up showcase the mobile manner in which Bosch himself works. Born of fantasy, self-consciously novel, and thus free and wandering, Boschian devilry is also an abysmal play of resemblances. As a visual experience, it recalls the idols described by Lucretius: ‘like a skin or film peeled from the body’s surface’ they ‘fly this way and that across the air’.<sup>62</sup>

And yet, in all his pictures, at their centre and their periphery, Bosch establishes figures of radical stasis. Thus, in the *Haywain*, behind the mobile centre marked by hay, Christ sits in eternal judgement. Because he belongs to the eschatological order of paradise and hell, one assumes that, unlike the wagon, he will persist at the centre; yet his dialogue with the angel atop the hay suggests he floats with the wagon. Bosch, of course, needs to show that Christ does both. For Christ exists in an abiding now of eternity—what Scholastics termed the *nunc stans*. ‘The divine now’, wrote Boethius, ‘is the moment indicated when one says “God is now, is truly remaining”’.<sup>63</sup> The peddler, meanwhile, dramatised why this immobile present remains unavailable to experience. Looking back but striding forth, the human subject is that emptiness, that split, which opens to the nothingness of hay. Bosch routinely submits the split subject to this abiding now. Usually he does this by allowing the painting’s physical support to articulate a structure over and above the order proposed by the painted image. In the half-century before Bosch, Netherlandish painters adopted the technique of linear perspective, which centres the image on a contingent viewing view. Bosch himself expands the scope of the perspectival view, allowing it to encompass the known world. But he submits that global spectacle to a different centre, one that exists not optically but objectively, in the geometry of the wooden panels on which he paints.<sup>64</sup> Sometimes he adds a further twist, locating at that geometric middle a gaze that looks out at us. In a panel (sometimes called a ‘tabletop’) of the *Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*, the peripheral genre scenes depicting the sins are precocious paintings of everyday life: historically, they are the wellspring of Bruegel’s art (Plate 10).<sup>65</sup> Yet these scenes spin about the periphery of a divine eye which warns, on the inscription

<sup>62</sup> *De rerum natura* 4.27 ff.; Lucretius, *The Way Things Are*, trans. Humphries, p. 120.

<sup>63</sup> *De trinitate* 4. 72–4; H. Schnarr, ‘Nunc stans’, in Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer (eds.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* (Basel and Stuttgart, 1984), vol. 6, col. 989.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph Leo Koerner, ‘Hieronymus Bosch’s World Picture’, Peter Galison and Carolyn Jones (eds.), *Picturing Science/Producing Art* (New York and London, 1998), pp. 297–323.

<sup>65</sup> Madrid, Museo del Prado, cat. 2822.

around the pupil, 'Beware, beware, God sees.' Everyman appears in hectic motion from God. Observed from eternity, and transformed from a seeing subject to an object seen, the self becomes the vilified Other: it is a menacing vagrant in the invisible eye of the absolute, timeless, and terrible law.

Bruegel appropriated the mobilities cultivated by Bosch. At the level of subject matter, he modernised Boschian devilry, retaining its turbulence and variety while revealing humanity itself to be its final cause. At the level of style, he perfected the painterly manner pioneered by Bosch, sketching with translucent pigments on unprepared ground.<sup>66</sup> At the level of function, Bruegel completed the transformation begun by Bosch, in which religious pictures that had previously occupied fixed locations in cult space became mobile objects within art collections. And at the level of their deep structure, Bruegel's pictures are indebted to Bosch for those cunning traps that snare the subjects standing in and before the picture. The difference between the two artists thus lies less in their display of mobility than in their image of belonging. Bruegel does away with all those structures that subordinate painting to an absolute frame. The absolutism of centre and periphery, and with it the antagonism of us against them, is replaced by merely customary arrangements, centres marked and improvised within ephemeral rituals.

In the background of the *Bird-Nester*, however, a place of rest remains in view. Like the games, customs and proverbs featured in Bruegel's encyclopaedic pictures, the rustic edifice is a primordial artefact of culture, nature turned into an inhabitable place. As with the peasant who strides from it, the primitivism of the motif supplies the painter with his aesthetic idiom. The wavering outlines of the hut, registering the uneven earth and the looseness of vernacular technique, models the casual grace of Bruegel's picture itself, while its earth-tone hue merges with the picture's still-visible ground. And it is in this variable fabric, part made, part found, that we encounter belonging itself—human existence as it really is. Having renounced the unconditional structures with which Bosch repudiated mobility, and entering the unstable domain of everyday life, Bruegel discerns immobility not in God or in himself, but in the alien immobile human Other: the primitive he no longer can be.

This artistic discovery leads in two directions. On the one hand, Bruegel foreshadows the anthropological perspective. Assuming no

<sup>66</sup> On Bosch's technique, see Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, *Hieronymus Bosch. Eine historische Interpretation seiner Gestaltungsprinzipien* (Munich, 1981), pp. 59–67.

absolute standard for culture, such a viewpoint accepts difference in others. And indeed in the artist's own culture—for example, in the arguments for freedom of conscience made by Bruegel's admirer, the Dutch print-maker and controversialist Dirck Volckertszoon Coornhert—the intellectual groundwork for Enlightened toleration was laid. On the other hand, Bruegel exhibits the nostalgic conviction that belonging lies sedimented under mobility, and that culture's task is to rediscover its primordial identity. This vernacularism—Bruegel's powerful dream that his art, like the peasants it depicts, can dance itself: this paradoxically *mobile myth of indigenouness* prefigures the emergence of nationalism. Which direction, which aspect of art prevails, is an open question. In my view this is also one of the most pressing political issues of our day.

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