

**«Things Fall Apart. Swiss Art from Böcklin to Vallotton»**  
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## Introduction

“Things Fall Apart” takes as its point of departure Sigmund Freud’s text from 1917 in which he speaks of three major humiliations of human narcissism in the course of recent history. The first one of these, as he puts it, is the cosmological humiliation that came with the abandonment of the geocentric description of the cosmos and was accompanied by the expulsion of the figure of the human being from the very heart of creation. The second humiliation -- a biological one – comes, Freud says, with the advent of Charles Darwin, and the realization that humans were not created in the image of one specific God; rather, they are precarious fruit of the process of evolution that encompasses all species. The third humiliation is psychological, and synonymous with the discovery of the unconscious (preceding Freud himself by few decades) which undermined human beings as masters in their own house. In this third case the ‘I’ (or ‘ego’) is nothing more than a fraction, a small part emerging from the great reservoir of the psyche which constitutes an ocean that the human cannot fully grasp or comprehend.

The exhibition “Things Fall Apart” explores the collection of the Kunstmuseum Bern from this vantage point: by drawing attention to the ways in which Swiss art in the 19th and early 20th century witnessed, described and interpreted the process of decentralization (and thus the de-fetishization) of the human subject.

The exhibition looks not only at the ways in which the frontally-pictured, self-contained and self-assured subject proceeds to abandon their contour and merge with the landscape, but also at how the romantic, picturesque and somewhat idyllic images of nature, typically seen as objective representations of the outside world waiting to be conquered, become an expression of nature’s indifferent monumentality: its impenetrability, desolation and menace. It also looks at how the artists, by populating their works with hybrids and wild animals of different sorts, gradually abandon their blind faith in the consistency of the subject and render it as elusive, alienated and radically liquid. Numerous representations of people asleep, in slumber, sick or drunk – in states that might connect them to their dreams, fears, instincts, and complex desires – are capturing the moments in which human narcissism is losing its ground. The works – fragmented, often sketchy, cut or unfinished – mirror the impossibility of delivering an objective and comprehensive representation of the (outside) world.

The exhibition takes its title from a poem by William Butler Yeats in which he aimed to capture the current moment of his time. Yeats began writing it in January 1919, in the wake of the First World War, the Russian Revolution, and political turmoil in his native Ireland. But his anxiety concerned more than political unrest and violence. It also included the social ills of modernity: a sense that “the centre cannot hold” any more.

What did he mean? What centre was he referring to and mourning for? Isn’t it the same centre that was described by Freud in his “Difficulty in the Path of Psychoanalysis” not even a year earlier, in another European city? Isn’t it precisely the centre that the famous psychoanalyst dared to call “human narcissism”? Where did these similar and nearly simultaneous fears originate from? How are they received, processed and expressed by Swiss artists at the turn of 19th and 20th Century? Where do these questions take us and what kind of mirror can they be for diagnosing today’s crises and

struggles? If this centre / narcissism had indeed fallen apart, why is it so present in contemporary societies, and making a return in today's politics across the world? "Things Fall Apart. Swiss Art from Böcklin to Vallotton" looks at the ways in which the art of the past becomes a mirror for the (art of the) present.

## 1 Shattered "I"

A revolution in thinking of the subject, the questioning of the clear division between outside the inside, was born in the middle of the 19th century. The Romantic subject is filled with contradictory emotions. Their feelings are impossible to grasp and comprehend, their future does not logically follow on from what went before, but is built on a fragile and lacunar network of memories, dreams, and projections, while their faith in reason and science is confronted with the overwhelming experience of loss and imperfection: a procession of misery, crime, suffering and madness. As early as 1846, the German physiologist and painter Carl Gustav Carus pointed to the unconscious as the basis of the psyche. After him Friedrich Nietzsche would become the key actor in the radical critique of the fetishism of the subject. At the beginning of *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886) he wrote: "As regards the superstition of logicians, I never tire of underlining a quick little fact that these superstitious people are reluctant to admit: namely, that a thought comes when 'it' wants to, and not when 'I', want it to; so it is falsifying the facts to say that the subject 'I' is the condition of the predicate 'think'. There is thinking [es denkt], but to assert that 'there' is the same thing as that famous old 'I' is, to put it mildly, only an assumption, an hypothesis, and certainly not an 'immediate certainty'."

It is interesting that in times propelled by the idea of progress, notions of decadence, deviation and degeneracy also thrive. The art of this period is one of the ways of reconnecting the fragmented representations of the subject haunted by dreams, underlying desires, unspeakable fears, obsessions, as well as all sorts of latent, often contradictory thoughts, moods and emotions. Pictured in sleep, with eyes closed, consumed by illness, or torn apart by instincts and impulses – the human figure takes to the stage when the rational and almighty "I" is absent. These images seem to be informed by the newly discovered mental illnesses: neuroses and hysterias which prompted the frontally-pictured, self-contained and self-esteeming subject to abandon its firm contour. Blazing, triumphant and sovereign before, they are now twisted, hybrid and utterly unsettled.

## 2 A Stranger in the Self

The opening question for Freud's investigation of the unconscious concerned the origins of madness. At a time when natural sciences were busy laying the foundations for much of what was present, this Viennese neurologist was asking questions about what was omitted, those things that elude the subject. Freud turned to dreams, mistakes, madness – the discontinuities that he placed at the heart of his analysis. His theory was radical in that it was true to experience: we all make mistakes, we all dream, we all have desires and fantasies. Freud included those formations as constituents of the human psyche: the gaps and lacunae in consciousness served as proof of the existence of a deeper, unconscious mental reality. Freud's discovery cast out the 19th-century subject not once, but twice: first from the surrounding world, then from one's own personal comfort, inviting a deep sense of estrangement.

This estrangement is most prominent in the experience of extreme anger, in an outburst of madness. An incoming wave that hijacks the thoughts blocks out the whole horizon – an experience that is radically different from a reflection acknowledging that 'perhaps those thoughts and emotions are not mine'? On the contrary: madness knows no doubt, just the ironclad certainty that what is thinking is

not-me. Madness directly contradicts the identity of the subject: the conscious, rational 'self' is no more than a tenant occupying the space of reflection.

### 3 Half-human – Half-animal

The name of Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) is linked to the birth of the notion of "criminal anthropology". In his monumental work *Criminal Man* (1876), borrowing from and twisting the ideas of Charles Darwin, he equated delinquency with atavism and, in doing so, emphasized the difficulty of gauging and explaining the dark, violent and diabolical nature of crime and madness.

Representations of hybrids of all sorts are a recurring topic in art history, invariably connected with attempts at conveying messages which elude language, which remain outside the rational, and beyond the existing norms and standards. A hybrid embodies an unnegotiable contradiction – it is a synonym of a freak, a renegade. Representations merging human and animal features hint at the elusive, uncontrolled and threatening aspects of humanity that cannot be expressed using existing, clear-cut categories. Violent, instinct-driven minotaurs, nymphs owned by emotions, alluring sirens in sultry scenes all populate the 19th century imagination and are an expression of tension between a form that hides terror and a premonition of a disaster and an attempt at conveying that which cannot be expressed. Such images are also a way of venting the eccentric (male) desires and fantasies of wild sexuality that came to the fore in the context of the impending crisis of the bourgeoisie in the end of the 19th century.

### 4 The Identity Crisis

The agricultural crisis in Switzerland in the second half of the 19th century, notably in the years 1880-1910, marks a period of collective trauma caused by the rapid transformation of the countryside: from a rural and relatively closed community into an industrial, urban (and permeable) society. The anxieties linked to these structural changes, as well as the confrontation with the fragmented and contradictory world, inspired a return to rural traditions and values. Many artists called for a 'natural' social order, one that preceded the constitution of the 'self' and was thus supposed to exclude all kinds of lack, tension and desire, and sought to rebuild a sense of unity of both the individual and the community.

The celebration of peasant life in the art of the second half of the 19th century is a direct result of its decline and exclusion from the society of the future. A sense of suspension, inactivity, and reverie prevails in the rural-themed genre painting of the time, oscillating between idyll and disenchantment. Rather than unfolding a narrative, paintings from the period freeze an atmosphere, feeling, or emotion. The individual figures seem withdrawn, oneiric and burdened by their thoughts. Group scenes, rather than evoking dialogue, appear empty, emanating trancelike silence and a sense of isolation. Activity, labour and praise of nature are supplanted by resignation, fatigue, and exhaustion. Those scenes, both individual and collective, seem to exude a sense of melancholia. Their biblical and arcadian overtones signal a longing for a lost identity, both individual and collective.

### 5 Bigger Nature

The art of landscape and the representation of nature were among the first poetic and pictorial disciplines in which the modern questions started to appear. Throughout 18th century and especially toward its end, landscape painters championed the concept of the 'heroic landscape' as a sub-genre

superior to pastoral scenes: this combination of imitation and narrative - historical, mythological or religious - was meant to go beyond the plain representation of nature. Parallel to the proliferation of such idealized scenes, other artists were obsessed by the 'credibility' of their landscapes which led to the development of 'portrait landscape'.

Rather than intellectual theatricality, those painters sought to depict nature 'as it is': as changing, vibrant and in transition. But the landscape was not only a field of scientific activity. Concerns about emotion and aesthetics also came to the fore. In his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1784) Immanuel Kant insisted on the difference between the notion of beauty and that of sublime. Sublime is - as he put it - a 'pleasure mixed with dread'. Contrary to the beauty which charms, the sublime moves and 'astonishes the soul'.

Painters like Alexandre Calame or Francois Diday created atmospheric spectacles by additionally elevating the peaks of the Alps and creating deep ravines. The romantic, picturesque and somewhat idyllic images of nature, seen as objective representations of the outside world, became the expression of nature's indifferent monumentality: its impenetrability, desolation and menace. The human figure, previously a brave knight and conqueror, is now pictured from a distance, almost invisible, decentralised and vulnerable at the foot of dangerous peaks. There is no difference between groups of individuals and the grazing groups of animals: they are all insignificant and equal in the presence of overwhelming nature. The landscape is filled with anxiety and threatening, frigid monumentality.

## 6 The Outside

The mountains stand for the epitome of stability and intransience, for reality that transcends time, and mystery that hides a greater presence. Internationally renowned Swiss landscape painters of that time, notably the Genevan Alexandre Calame, translated mountains into large formats and imbued them with political messages - as the supposed origin of the democratic order in the context of the newly created federal state, the Alps came to embody a sense of national identity.

In the hierarchy of genres however, the landscape has long been regarded as lesser. It was based on empiricism and served as an antithesis to theories centred around man. In the late 18th and, more particularly, in the 19th century the understanding of landscape changed considerably and the concept of landscape itself increased in importance. Whereas before the purpose of the human figure was to animate and enliven it, with time its gradual disappearance and alienation can be observed. In a manuscript lost today Ferdinand Hodler writes: "If the painter wants the painting to be touching and captivating, he will not use figures. A landscape must have character; express a passion [...]. Its character gives it its individuality. Figures or anecdotes not only add nothing, but weaken the gripping and direct emotional effect'.

This tension between the animate and inanimate is particularly revealing in his *Aufstieg and Absturz* - massive paintings created to celebrate the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1864. The lack of distance, the monumentality, the impossibility to frame the scene as well as the threatening forces of nature mixing here with a sense of tragedy and triumph. The figures not only stand on the edge of an abyss, but are already in free fall - a highly representative instance of the gradual disappearance of the human figure from landscape painting in the course of the 19th century.

Hodler's paintings are particularly significant here: too massive to be presented in an institutional context, the works were cut by the artist in pieces. The landscape parts have been destroyed and only the parts with tired, terrified and hopeless bodies and faces (an intriguing tension between landscape and portrait painting) survived. Additionally, the series was originally planned as a triptych: apart from *Aufstieg and Absturz*, the artists intended [?] to paint *Auffindung der Leichen* (Finding of the Bodies). This last canvas has, however, never been executed.

## 7 The Case of Adolf Wölfli

The enormous pictorial, literary, and musical oeuvre by Adolf Wölfli (1864 – 1930) was created during his thirty-five-year internment in a mental asylum. Melancholic, irascible quick-tempered and oftentimes aggressive, his art is a sprawling account of his experiences, memories and projections: a counter-world that he created as a way to escape the burdened present. On more than 25,000 pages – called by his doctor, Walter Morgenthaler, a 'gigantic biography' - he gives an account of a spectacular childhood and a glorious future: an alternative, rich and multilayered life that, for him, was more real than the one he lived in the asylum.

The encounter of Adolf Wölfli's imaginary life story is a mix of expansion and introspection, fantasy and reality, idyll and catastrophe. The meanders of his narrative are completed with intense drawings but also with the cutouts from popular magazines. The reproductions he chooses document his rediscovery of the private with the elements he is then able to find in the outside world: By quoting these he creates a connection between his own and public life at large. The border between them is unclear, is blurred.

The expression "Unglücksfall " is often used by Wölfli and it combines two ideas that dominate his thought: that of a fall, in a concrete anecdotal sense, and the idea of misfortune, deserved or accidental and unjustified. Fall also means "a case", and therefore carries both legal and medical allusions. As such, Wölfli oeuvre can be read as a study -written in first person- of entanglement, both mental, as well as social and institutional.

## 8 Landscape as a state of mind

The notion of the sublime as described by Immanuel Kant in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1784), has been used to describe objects inspiring awe because of their size, height or depth, the power they command, or transcendence. The sublime is, however, a two-layered experience. Kant writes that such objects 'raise the soul's fortitude above its usual middle range and allow us to discover in ourselves an ability to resist which is of a quite different kind...'. The sublime can therefore be read as a faculty of transgression and communication.

The artists of the beginning of the 19th century sought – exactly in this Kantian spirit – to evoke emotions in their viewers, hoping to connect with their souls and feelings, to inspire a sense of calm or thrill, sadness or joy, fury or melancholy. The art of the period was created to facilitate precisely such dialogue – an osmosis of human emotion and the vibration of nature. With time, landscape became a vehicle to communicate the artists' own fears, concerns and hopes: mirroring their thoughts and portraying them as gentle, compassionate and hopeful, or desperate, hostile, hesitant, helpless.

The scenery of these works is idyllic and offers retreat – for both the artists creating them and prospective buyers – from the rapidly industrializing and noisy world. Often, these images of simple, unspectacular motifs, in which light and color are of key importance, were created outdoors. Trees swayed by the wind, dark forests and shallow pools of water, coupled with the raging forces of nature, become the sole bearers of mood. In some instances the outdoors is only a point of departure, later developed, interpreted and adapted according to the actual – more or less stable – attitude.

In the course of the second half of the 19th century, the landscape has become an expression of the artist's state of mind: a particular type of self-portrait.

## 9 Explorations

One of the greatest thrills a human being can experience is the discovery of something that no one has ever seen or thought of before. By the end of the 18th century, the age of European scientific voyages across the globe, the hunger for knowledge had become insatiable, leading to the most active period of Earth exploration: the age of colonization. Scientific expeditions brought about a new perspective on humans and their environment. Topographical engineers and surveyors created new, more accurate maps and geographical reports. New discoveries were made in the fields of botany, zoology, ornithology, marine biology, geology, and cultural anthropology. By the 19th century, land and sea voyages were crucial for the territorial and political expansion of many, especially European, powers.

Those changes were also reflected in the explorations of the universe of psyche. The fears, pains, sudden bursts of joy or anger – all previously projected on the magnificent and menacing mountains, wild, voracious rivers, snide, ominous clouds or gloomy deep forests – were now, with the advent of psychiatry, moved into the realm of the psyche where thoughts of tormented subjects could be examined, treated and cured.

The term 'psychiatry' was first used in 1808 by German doctor Johan Christian Reil. However, it is not him who is considered the architect of this new field of science, but Philippe Pinol from Salpêtrière hospital in Paris who, along with his talented student, Jean-Etienne D. Esquirol, made the first attempts at distinguishing between mental deficiency and insanity and replaced the aleatory vocabulary of 'diseases of the soul' with an effort to trace symptoms, locate passions, describe temperaments. The later work of the celebrated Jean-Martin Charcot was a way to pave the ground for the modern classification of mental disorders.

The parallel conquest of the external and the internal world is, on the one hand, a sign of an insatiable and complex curiosity, initiative and agency of the 19th-century subject and, on the other hand, the site where the solid foundations of that subject begin to crumble. Rather than reassuring human omnipotence and domination, the new researches and expeditions portrayed the world as increasingly complex, fragmented and impossible to grasp unambiguously. The subject's pride, sense of power, and narcissism were thus faced with a challenge. The world, both outside and inside, was not increasingly subjected to the subject's will – it was becoming increasingly elusive.

## 10 Paradis artificiels

Along with the developments in medicine, in particular in neurology, in the second half of the 19th century the application of herbs, drugs and pharmaceuticals grew considerably. Alcohol, tobacco and opium, followed by the early instances of the use of chloroform in dental procedures around 1880s, were soon joined by other substances, among them absinth, cannabis, cocaine and morphine. The interest in the occult and the appeal of 'artificial paradises' were ways of seeking pleasures, intoxication, as well as exploring a whole new range of mental experiences. At the same time, this was yet another way at undermining the stability of the rational and self-aware subject.

The fascination with dreaming and first studies on the subject, spearheaded by Hervey de Saint Denis and his *Dreams and the Ways to Direct Them; Practical Observations* (published as early as 1867, in opposition to the positivist and scientific approach in which dreams were by-products of thought processes), the interest in games on the verge between hallucination and consciousness, reason and (intentional) irrationality, as well as the now-classic *Interpretation of Dreams* written by Freud and published at the turn of the century – all of these experiments in the shifting and elusive zone

between the two realms expose the 19th and early 20th century subject as homeless: internally split, opaque and essentially unsettled.

## 11 Haunted Houses

The realm of the home and the domestic is, first of all, synonymous with the world of the interior, the Innenwelt, the world of self-reflection. However, by means of reversals such as that of transforming the known into unknown, and the familiar into disturbing, the interiors pictured by artists of the late 19th century are replete with tension and affect. The tranquil and ordered aura of a Biedermeier décor gave way to interiors exuding anxiety: the rooms are oppressive, harsh and cold. The scenes of supposed intimacy are filled with a sense of entrapment and unspecified emotional violence. The gestures are repressed, often rigid and bleak, and the everyday family rituals seem dominated by silent conflict, mistrust and a sense of desolation.

It was Freud who analyzed this feeling of 'disturbing strangeness' – Unheimlichkeit – that lingered in those places: the house, the Heimat, being the most familiar to us, is also the most unknown. The interiors are haunted not by beings coming from outside, but by its own inhabitants. The corridors, the stairs, the half-opened doors or windows, as well as 'domestic' animals all point to that which is absent from the frame: not painted or expressed. The mirror plays a special role in this context as it is frequently connected with a revelation: isn't it that we look at it to see what cannot be seen without it (our own face, for example), to see what is outside of the eyeshot? As such, the mirror brings in what cannot be grasped, what escapes us, and what is beyond our space or our time. The deviation in the space on the canvas can be seen as a mirror of the 19th-century implosion of the subject along with the newly discovered sub/un-conscious.

## 12 Vertigo

The city is a new space with which the modern subject had to confront itself. The recent inventions which defined the cityscape: the railway, the post office, the telegraph, inaugurate the age of communication and mass mobility. The stimuli are numerous and intense. The weakest or the most unprepared were caught off guard by the 'murderous suddenness' of development. Esquirol wrote that that monomania (the term he coined around 1810 to describe an 'expansive fixed idea') is more frequent in more advanced societies. The society, as he put it, provides not only causes, but also forms of diseases and each historical period has its own monomania.

According to Max Nordau, the author of Degenerescence published in 1892, the inhabitants of modern metropolis are in a permanent state of nervous excitement. For him, the city affects the human organism like a poisonous swamp.

The images of the city become captivating, at times perverse, portraits of the modern citizen: fragmented yet obsessed with a certain thought, caught in constant, chaotic movement, surrounded by crowds yet alienated - full of contradictions. The omnipresent crowd carries the most irrational fears, desires and phobias. The multiple clinical signs of degeneration were convincingly attributed by Nordau to a fundamentally important state: the exhaustion of the central nervous system of the modern citizen.

It is interesting to note that the rapid development of cities, the fundamental changes in the structure of society, and the political revolutions of the 19th century all point to the fact that these are human masses in an urban setting that has shaped the course of history.