

FOR HATRED OF CRYSTALS:

An Essay on Gernot Wieland's film *Ink in Milk*

Oskar Korsár, Berlin, 17/12/2018

"No, freedom was not what I wanted. Only a way out; [...] there was no attraction for me in imitating human beings; I imitated them because I needed a way out, and for no other reason."

– *The Monkey in A Report for an Academy*, Franz Kafka.

"The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence,"

– *Gravity and Grace*, Simone Weil

The anteater is an animal shaped by its surroundings. It has a long nose that is the inverted form of an ant tunnel, like a hand in a glove. Crystal shapes don't really fit together with anything; they all grow in solitude, reaching out into the void. The crystal has become a well-used symbol by airheads like, for example, the Austrian founder of the anthroposophical movement Rudolf Steiner, and other New Age thinkers that go under the pretense of being progressive but are, in fact, the opposite. (Or Rudolf Steiner thought more precisely that the crystal was the materialization of angels.)

Crystals make an image of the human as a mouthpiece that it just there to emit the colours of a higher power's light. This is the same structural idea that been following us from the time of the Sun kings through to the neoliberal feudalism we are facing now. This misconception has to stop.

It has to stop before it becomes like the crystals of Gernot Wieland's short film, *Ink in Milk*, in which a so-called 'uncle' (the uncle of good advice) senses sadness and, in order to comfort the young Gernot, forms his body into a sad crystal. This phenomenon grows to such an extent that nobody in the village does anything any longer other than constantly performing crystal shapes with their bodies. Nobody works any longer, and their valley becomes a desolate wasteland, and all their houses become swallowed by nature and fall into ruin. At least the cattle, who are free from humankind's prison of enforced narratives, run away. Here, the drawing that Wieland uses to illustrate the village — an aerial diagram of the village with its population forming crystals with their bodies — looks more like a mass grave or a village devastated by war. Bodies in deformed positions, postures carved by violence.

Let us now start from the beginning, Gernot Wieland's *Ink in Milk* is a 12-minute film. A film in which Wieland's unique poetic voice leads us to a portmanteau of watercolours, clay animations, found images, and staged performances shot on Super 8.

Ink in Milk starts with Wieland recalling a memory about his best friend coming to school in makeup and looking like a girl. This is a boy. The teacher shames him, hits him and then sends him home without any explanation. "The next day my friend came to school 'normal' as our teacher said", Wieland tells us. But now he was on the teacher's 'list'. Once the list had seven students on it, a sadistic game was to be played: a version of musical chairs in which the loser, left standing without a seat, receives a form of punishment.

This may seem like an innocent game that we have all played, but in this film, narrated with more symbolism than a dream staged for Freud, we have to make a quick stop and think of this chairless, leftover person. The loser in musical chairs illustrates what Marx talks about when he is talking about ‘surplus’: not monetary surplus, but the surplus labour or the surplus humans, their function in a capitalist society is to keep the workers’ wages low, to make the sitting person afraid of rising — the exchangeable loser.

Anyhow, in Wieland’s musical chairs, the loser gets punished by the teacher wrapping the towel that she uses to clean the blackboard around his head. Here Wieland describes how “the chalk (from the towel) would creep inside our mouths and the noses and stay there for days”. Since Austria is a Catholic country, and Catholic ritual is something that Gernot comes back to in his work, we have here to think of the ritualistic meaning of how the chalk recreates itself in the body and then transfigures the one that consumes to what has been consumed. Such is what we experience in the Holy Communion.

Wieland tells us that the Austrian term for a homeless person, ‘sandler’, derives from sand, “sand and chalk which poor workers in brick factories in Vienna had on their clothes all the time”. Here, we have to remember that sand is the destroyed body, the body that has been ground down, something that can blow away in the air, akin to the ‘precariat’.

Now my mind is drawn back to an earlier work of Wieland’s, a TED talk lecture-performance called *Depression in Animals*. In this, Wieland tells us: “The construction of human identity can also be determined by the exclusion and control of the other, namely the animal [...]” When once humans and animals were considered not so distant from each other, the distinction at some point became dualistic. Wieland locates this paradigm break with Rene Descartes’s separation of body and soul: “In his [Descartes’s] perception animals did not have a soul and the animal was reduced to the principals of physics — nothing but a machine.” He defines the human by the excluding of the animal. Wieland links this to Marx; Descartes saw animals as a product to serve the human being, envisioning the world with industrial eyes.

But what status does our human identity have today, in a time that’s still defined by Descartes, the father of rationality? Isn’t the ‘human’ just a rational concept that serves the society and thereby upholds the ‘precariat’ identity in itself? An identity that is reducible to production value. And in a time of automation, when humans are disconnected from the industrial productions, is not humanity as a whole going through an identity crisis? And isn’t it then time to try to redefine what actually identifies us and gives us a value in being?

Later in *Ink in Milk*, the same friend that comes to school dressed as a girl is detained in a psychiatric clinic. When Wieland visits him as a grown-up he tells us that he only wanted to walk up and down the stairs. The narrator says “Walking those staircases were not a matter of truth but of reality”. Here it’s interesting how Wieland divides truth from reality. Truth is what is, but it’s something hard to define, and reality is what has been defined. Reality is the model we consent to live under, even if it doesn’t have anything to do with the truth itself. It’s an agreement. Or maybe just something that it imposed unto us, like a kind of violence?

But it is a reality where the human identity is not allowed to move in other directions, no left or right, just along a sadistic and claustrophobic narrowness. The only directions given to us are up and down; up and down in value and validity.

Wieland’s friend later dies at sea. So what about the anteatater?