

"If we had but...! If we had but...! But..." At the climax of a rousing speech beneath the cross of Christ in Capitol Studio the Roman hero falters and looks beseechingly across at the director. Up to that moment the awe-struck film crew had been listening with bated breath to the actor's words. And then that. "Faith, Baird. Had but faith", prompts the man in the director's chair gliding through the studio ether before he shouts "Cut!"

This was the scene I had been waiting for. Without the slightest inkling. How better could a text about coincidence and good fortune start than with a stroke of luck? It was unusual that it took until Christmas 2016 for me to see the film "Hail Caesar!". Had I gone to see it immediately after it came out, as is my wont with Coen Brothers films, it is unlikely I would have started my text with this scene. It just wouldn't have come up, have entered my mind. I would have had to trawl it back from my memory, and then it would have been no more than another piece of the puzzle to fit in with the others, trusting that this might prompt a new stroke of good fortune.

Instead it thrust itself upon me. As a condensed reflection on faith and delusion or disenchantment it coincided with my misgivings about having to write about faith in this text. It was something I'd intimated after discussing the exhibition with Nasim Weiler and agreeing to her request that I write a piece on it – on a theme of my own choosing. I was apprehensive then, and now, even after having written about it, I still find it embarrassing. Because most of what people like me who adhere to no creed have to say about belief and believing quickly tips into pathos and unctuous kitsch or sounds vapidly liberal, cynical or nihilistic.

Joel and Ethan Coen's infallible choice of form for their reflections on faith was comedy, and in the scene described above they knocked the dilemma on the head. The moment you demand or name faith as faith, it vanishes. The magic evaporates. In the film it is not of course the recently converted Autolochus Antoninus who falls into a stutter but Baird Whitlock, who is playing him – who in turn is performed with brilliant gawkiness by George Clooney. In the studio the magic of faith he oozes with glowing eyes and poignant words to invoke human goodness is phoney. Intensity and self-delusion. Simply tremendous play-acting, as demanded of him by Capitol's studio boss Eddie Mannix. In the previous scene he confronted Whitlock,

whose kidnapping by a gang of communist screenwriters and a chat with Professor Herbert Marcuse had suddenly made a revolutionary of him, and rudely reminded him of the reality of film business with a couple of sharp slaps around the face, ordering him to "Go out there and be a star!" So Baird goes out and acts like a star. Up until the moment he flunks the crucial word. In the film the take is worthless, the disappointment immense, but in front of the screened film something clicks. While it is clear to the assembled company that a naïve faith in God has no chance of survival, that faith anyhow has never existed in a simple, true or innocent way, one thing is certain: faith in the transformative power of art.

So even if one shouldn't name it or invoke it, since that threatens to make the thing implode, I will still write it. I believe that all artists, depending on their significance, to a greater or lesser extent believed or believe in the incidence of something unexpected, of something other, of some unspecified change. This doesn't mean a belief in some notion of God or in the death of God or in Man as God, nor does it mean a belief in something or in nothing or just in oneself, nor a belief in laws, in commandments and pre-formulated promises of salvation. The belief on which artistic existence is predicated is rather something fundamental that could be described as a wholly unfounded faith in coincidence. A trust, perceptive to the world, that one's own acts of working/forming/assembling will bring something about that not merely did not previously exist in the world but as such was also inconceivable. Belief that a work comes about that can be perceived as being just as replenished with the world, as it is new beyond all the world's bounds, so that it has impact, so that it spreads out and takes effect.

Artistic action that places faith in coincidence differs fundamentally from an artistic act that deliberately, purposefully and specifically seeks to instruct or promises salvation, as is currently en vogue, because it avails itself to the hope in art's potential for political impact. Yet the current wave of politicisation is depleted from the word go, not just because it has little new to add to Benjamin's statement of the "politicisation of aesthetics", but also because it mostly knows something better rather than opening something up.

And this will not suffice in the complex fabric of the present-day world where the fundamental opposition that compelled Benjamin to react has been dissolved in a toxic cloud of complexity and diffe-

rence. Nowadays, rivalries erupt along undefined, brittle, volatile lines of opposition, while powerful communities mushroom within microseconds and whole swathes of people trust in politicians who talk them into believing the world is simple. In tune with this, growing numbers of individuals have surrendered to the laws of God and the laws of blood that dictate a radical truth. It was never easy, but now everything has become intolerably close, visibly and tangibly complex, entangled and concatenated.

In view of all the currently circulating antagonistic creeds it seems impossible, maybe even dangerous, to imagine belief and trust in a different light and to maintain an open mind. But my concern is not with finding a recipe but with experience. Belief and trust cannot be cherry-picked and donned; they arise from an open acceptance of a given disposition. They are the result of determination. The result of listening, of empathy, of attentiveness, of submitting oneself, the result of a sincere acknowledgement of the other, of others. Passivity, devotion and suffering account for more than half of an artist's life. Artists are not hipsters. They don't re-invent themselves everyday as shallow people assume. Creating art is not cool. If it looks like it is then it is play-acting, it is a protective shield. Ultimately, only trust in coincidence allows us to endure the constantly nagging, endlessly painful perception of this weirdly askew world and its countless disappointments. Courage to act – in humility towards all that exists and does not (yet) exist – can be drawn from the incalculable prospect of changing the world in some indefinably different and more felicitous way.

What else could Walter Benjamin have meant, albeit more comprehensively given the extremely sombre times he lived in, against the background of Marxist thought? His fragmentary writings on the dialectical image are fuelled by his trust in the – ever-pending – arrival of the Messiah. He had Paul Klee's "Angelus Novus" with him. Even Herbert Marcuse, who in the Coen Brothers film is given the opportunity to turn the naïve Baird Whitlock briefly into a revolutionary, believed especially in his later years in the advent of a free society in which the vital human need for happiness and joy would abrogate alienation (unlike Theodor Adorno who resigned in the face of the impenetrable context of delusion in false life).

Inspiration, wrote Emmanuel Levinas in his 1976 lecture about God titled "Witnessing and Ethics": "It is inspiration: to have received from who knows where, that of which I am the author." Whoever believes has always been inspired, above all prior to knowing and knowledge. For Levinas it was about witnessing divine presence in being. But what happens to that, of which I am the author? It is testimony and has to be delivered, to be given up. In other words, inspiration would amount to: attesting to and giving up that which has been received, without knowing to what end.

Artists work hard for felicitous coincidences. These are their gifts. They intoxicate. They appear to be easy and permeable, perfectly apt and utterly self-evident; yet in each of them the world is condensed in an unknown form. All successful works lead those who encounter them into the realm of not-knowing, draw them ever deeper into the seeing and thinking of that which is given, configured and dealt differently from themselves, without seeking to coerce or to accomplish something.

Faith in Coincidence

Ute Vorkoeper, Hamburg, January 2017

Remarks on the occasion of the exhibition

„über das Fügen der Dinge - Par raccroc“

Katinka Bock, William Engelen, Francisco Tropa

Galerie Jocelyn Wolff, Paris

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