

Disrupting the Story Line of the Mechanical Mind

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Piero della Francesca, Antoni Gaudi, and Salvador Dali

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*What city is this
Whose moments tremble
Azure sky and lime lights
Walking in the intersections
Through the squares of paradise*

People are solidly addicted to story line. Beginning, middle, end. They want to have it, over and over, in different guises.

The ultimate payoff of that addiction? There is none. Except the need for more.

Propaganda, media, announced government policy, education, religious messages, hundreds of medical treatments—the underlying theme is polished story line. Wrapped up and sold. When the wrong ending looms like a thundercloud, an order to goes out to hide it or lie about it.

When a relentlessly creative individual disrupts story lines, an unlimited number of universes opens up. And every one of them causes tremors in the addict.

“Don’t do that. I don’t understand what you’re doing. Stop. It makes no sense. You’re crazy. Where is the ending? Civilization is going to fall into the sea. What is your

message? I can't find it. Boil down what you're saying. God will punish you."

The addict feels his mind is cracking. He runs screaming in the night looking for his next fix.

For example, the open and basically endless poetry of Pablo Neruda, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and Arthur Rimbaud can have that effect.

So many new worlds moving through the old one.

Why does a story have to have a recognizable plot and a tuned-up climax? Same question: Why does a person need to inject heroin?

Look at Piero della Francesca's 1464 fresco, *Legend of the True Cross*—perhaps the greatest painting of the Renaissance. In a series of episodic panels, it traces the mythical history of the wooden cross on which Jesus was crucified. However, there are a number of puzzling "non-linear" representations in Piero's work, the most famous of which is the panel titled, King Solomon Receiving the Queen of Sheba. What does that meeting have to do with the purported journey of the timber on which Jesus hung?

The Roman Church would claim it is symbolic of an archetypal super-event called The Arrival, and refers to the birth of the Messiah or his later entrance into public life as a teacher; or Sheba had precognitive knowledge of the tree whose wood would be used to make the cross. That's an extraordinary stretch, to say the least. But it's typical of a strategy down through the ages: when a promoted story line breaks down, invent a way of claiming it's still coherent.

Buttress conventional story at all costs.

Mechanical minds will always reduce events, data, history, science, etc., to manageable stories.

Oceanic artists go the other way: they proliferate their work beyond any mechanical limit or summarized interpretation.

Why does that matter? Because, for these artists and their committed audiences, routine day-to-day experience is cracked open like an egg, out of which emerge vital energies of concealed dimensions. Life becomes LIFE.

When I was 21, a friend showed me photos of the architectural productions of the Spanish genius, Antoni Gaudi, scattered throughout Barcelona. My first reaction was, these buildings came from another planet. My second reaction: how was he allowed to build these structures?

Gaudi was a technical innovator of the first order. He developed forms and methods of construction that surpassed the engineering rationale of the great cathedrals of Europe. At the same time, he confounded old ideas of space. The experience of seeing or standing in one of his buildings yielded up the sensation of living in a DIFFERENT KIND OF CONTINUUM.

That new continuum disrupts the story line of consciousness by proliferating a new narrative that has no convenient ending. The old way of seeing has been given a bath in some mysterious dynamo and is vitalized.

Habitual categories and compartments of perception have dissolved.

Who would have known this was possible, unless Gaudi (1852-1926) had lived?

Our world, contrary to all consensus, is meant to be revolutionized by art, by imagination, right down to its core.

That this has not happened is no sign that the process is irrelevant. It is only a testament to the collective resistance.

Who knows how many such revolutions have been shunted aside and rejected, in favor of the consensus-shape we now think of as central and eternal?

We are living in a default structure, the one that has been left over after all the prior revolutions have been put to sleep.

Occasionally, an artist will take on the role of actor and performer, in order to deal with the denizens and mental dwarves of ministries of truth. Over the past hundred years, it would be hard to find an artist who carried out such a program with more skill and verve than Salvador Dali.

Let's start here. To absorb a work of imagination, one has to use his own imagination.

Since this is considered unlikely, pundits earnestly help us with step-down contexts, so we can understand the work in pedestrian terms. In other words, so we can reduce it to nothing.

Salvador Dali was not content to allow this to happen.

The critics would have declared Dali a minor lunatic if he hadn't possessed such formidable classical painting skills.

He placed his repeating images (the notorious melting watch, the face and body of his wife, the ornate and fierce skeletal structures of unknown creatures) on the canvas as if they had as much right to be there as any familiar object.

This was quite troubling to many people. If an immense jawbone that was also a rib or a forked femur could rival a perfectly rendered lamp or couch or book (on the same canvas), where were all the accoutrements and assurances of modern comfortable living?

Where was the pleasantly mesmerizing effect of a predictable existence?

Where was a protective class structure that depended on nothing more than money and cultural slogans?

Dali invented vast comedies on canvas. But the overall joke turned, as the viewer's eye moved, into a nightmare, into an entrancing interlude of music, a memory of something that had never happened, a gang of genies coming out of corked bottles. A bewildering mix of attitudes sprang out from the paintings.

What was the man doing? Was he mocking the audience? Was he simply showing off? Was he inventing waking dreams? Was he, God forbid, actually imagining something entirely new that resisted classification?

Words failed viewers and critics and colleagues and enemies.

But they didn't fail Dali. He took every occasion to explain his work. However, his explications were handed out in a way that made it plain he was telling tall tales—interesting, hilarious, and preposterous tall tales.

Every interview and press conference he gave, gave birth to more attacks on him. Was he inviting scorn? Was he really above it all? Was he toying with the press like some perverse Olympian?

Critics flocked to make him persona non grata, but what was the persona they were exiling? They had no idea then, and they have no idea now.

It comes back to this: when you invent something truly novel, you know that you are going to stir the forces trapped within others that aspire to do the very same thing. You know that others are going to begin by denying that anything truly NEW even exists. That DOES make the situation a comedy (among other things), whether you want to admit it or not.

It is possible that every statement ever uttered in public by Dali was a lie. A fabrication. An invention dedicated to

constructing a massive (and contradictory) persona.

Commentators who try to take on Dali's life usually center on the early death of his young brother as the core explanation for Dali's "basic confusion"—which resulted in his bizarre approach to his own fame.

However, these days, with good reason, we might more correctly say Dali was playing the media on his own terms, after realizing that no reporter wanted the real Dali (whatever that might mean)—some fiction was being asked for, and the artist was merely being accommodating.

He was creating a self (or selves) that matched his paintings.

It is generally acknowledged that no artist of the 20th century was superior to Dali in the ability to render realistic detail.

But of course Dali's work was not about realism.

The most complex paintings—see, for example, Christopher Columbus Discovering America and The Hallucinogenic Toreador—brilliantly orchestrated the interpenetration of various solidities/realities, more or less occupying the same space.

At some point in his career, Dali saw (decided) there was no limit to what he could assemble in the same space—and there was no limit to the number of spaces he could corral into the same canvas. A painting could become a science-fiction novel reaching into several pasts and futures. The protagonist (the viewer) could find himself in such a simultaneity.

Critics have attacked the paintings relentlessly. They are offended at Dali's skill, which matches the best work of the meticulous Dutch Renaissance masters.

They hate the dissonance. They resent Dali's mordant wit and rankle at the idea that Dali could carry out monstrous jokes

in such fierce extended detail.

But above all, the sheer imagination harpoons the critics. How dare a painter turn reality upside down so blatantly, while rubbing their faces in it.

The cherry on the cake was: for every attack the critics launched at Dali the man (they really had no idea who he was), Dali would come back at them with yet another elaborate piece of fiction about himself. It was unfair. The scholars were “devoted to the truth.” The painter was free to invent himself over and over as many times as he fancied.

Dali was holding up a mirror. He was saying, “You people are like me. We’re all doing fiction. I’m much better at it. In the process, I get at a much deeper truth.”

Dali was the hallucinogenic toreador. He was holding off and skirting the bull (shit) rushes of the critics and the historians. They charged at him. He moved with his cape—and stepped out of the way.

The principles of organized society dictate that a person must be who he is, even if that is a cartoon of a cartoon. A person must be one recognizable caricature forever, must be IDed, must have one basic function. Must—as a civilization goes down the trail of decline—be watched and recorded and profiled.

When a person shows up who is many different things, who can invent himself at the drop of hat, who seems to stand in 14 different places at the same time, the Order trembles.

(Fake) reality declares: what you said yesterday must synchronize absolutely with what you say today.

This rule (“being the only thing you are”) guarantees that human beings will resonate with the premise that we all live and think and work in one continuum of space and time. One. Only one. Forever. The biggest joke of all. The big lie.

Whatever he was, however despicable he may have been in certain respects, Dali broke that egg. Broke the cardinal rule.

He reveled in doing it. He made people wait for an answer about himself, and the answer never came. Instead, he gave them a hundred answers, improvised like odd-shaped and meticulous reveries.

He threw people back on their own resources, and those resources proved to be severely limited.

How harsh for conventional critics to discover that nothing in Dali's education produced an explanation for his ability to render an object so perfectly on the canvas. It was almost as if, deciding that he would present competing circumstances inside one painting, he perversely ENABLED himself to do the job with exacting skill, "making subversive photographs come to life."

That was too much.

But there the paintings are.

Imagination realized.

Like it or not, Dali paved the way for many others. He opened doors and windows.

And the pressure has been building. The growing failure of major institutions (organized religion, psychology, education, government) to keep the cork in the bottle signals a prison break in progress.

The pot is boiling. People want out. Even if they don't know where out is.

Somewhere along the line we have to give the green light to our own creative force. That is the first great day. That's the dawn of no coerced boundaries. Everything we've been

taught tells us that a life lived entirely from creative power is impossible. We don't have it within us. We should maintain silence and propriety in the face of greater official power and wisdom. We must abide by the rules. We must, at best, "surrender to the universe."

But what if, when we come around the far turn, we see that the universe is us? Is simply one part of imagination? Is a twinkling rendition we installed to keep us titillated with dreams that would forever drift out of reach? What if it turns out that we are the perverse ones and a Dali is quite normal?

What if we pop out of the fences of this culture and this continuum and this tired movie called Planet Earth?

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