

ERNST CASSIRER 1995-2025:
CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION

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PUTTING THE APPLE BACK ON THE TREE. CASSIRER AND THE CONTEMPORARY REJECTION OF SYMBOLIC AGENCY

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ABSTRACT

The essay examines the distinction Cassirer makes between sign and symbol. Using these concepts, it describes, in Cassirer's terms, two contemporary anti-symbolic trends: one linked to information and automation technologies, and the other linked to contemporary literature that explores the female desire to become a plant.

Keywords: Symbol, sign, information, woman, plant

RIMETTERE LA MELA SULL'ALBERO. CASSIRER E IL RIFIUTO CONTEMPORANEO DEL SIMBOLICO

Il saggio esamina la distinzione che Cassirer traccia tra segno e simbolo. Attingendo a questi concetti, descrive, secondo la terminologia di Cassirer, due tendenze anti simboliche contemporanee: una legata alle tecnologie dell'informazione e dell'automazione, e l'altra legata alla letteratura contemporanea che esplora il desiderio femminile di trasformarsi in una pianta.

Parole chiave: Simbolo, segno, informazione, donna, pianta



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At times when the foundations of life are perceived obsolete, philosophical anthropology once again becomes the field in which the most important questions are raised. Cassirer traces the history of philosophical anthropology in the first chapter of *An Essay on Man*, entitled “The Crisis in Man’s Knowledge of Himself”. Here he observes that, unlike the histories of Logic, Metaphysics and Natural Philosophy, «anthropological philosophy [...] exhibits a quite different character. If we wish to grasp its real meaning and import, we must choose not the epic manner but the dramatic. For we are confronted, not with a peaceful development of concepts or theories, but with a clash between conflicting spiritual powers. The history of anthropological philosophy is fraught with the deepest human passions and emotions»¹. Here we shall relate Cassirer’s views on the “deep emotions” that come to fore today in the desire to reshape humanity, thereby reopening the anthropological question.

Within global culture, these “emotions” manifest themselves in two extreme trends which, precisely because extreme, point to something that lies beyond them and which, in milder nuances, can be found in more widespread attitudes. The first of these tendencies aims to reintegrate human life into “nature”: we come across it mainly in novels and contemporary artworks imbued with a kind of magical realism, particularly in works by female authors who reiterate a standard plot in which a worn-out woman, having lost all empathy in her relationships with others, believes it is worth holding on any longer and decides that the best she can do is to abandon herself to an Ovidian escape that makes her into a plant². The other approach swings to the opposite end: although it too recognizes that it is unsustainable for humanity to keep on as it does and that urgent action must be taken regarding its “nature”, it does not seek to achieve this goal through a hyper-ecological metamorphosis that dissolves humanity into the natural cycle, reducing it to a “mere” element of the plant world. Instead, it chooses the hyper-technological route to alter human biology itself, overcoming its limits, since according to this view, the sense of frustration widespread in our age has nothing to do with the interaction between the individual and society, but stems from the disharmony between human nature – with its rhythms and conditions – and cultural and scientific ambition, the aim of which should be recognized as having the right to transcend such limits: that is to say, some of us believe to have projects too important to simply “settle” for an average lifespan³. These constraints are also of several kinds, such as those relating to perceptual capacities, but the greatest obstacle to overcome is mortality⁴. These developments directly imping upon the very significance that Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* may hold: the plant-based option runs counter to the anthropological distinction between propositional language and emotional language, which, according to Cassirer, is essential for the existence of the human subject. The technological option, on the other hand, is opposed to the “open” morphological objectivity of symbolic signification, which is even more crucial to Cassirer’s philosophy, because it is only to the extent that its own finitude endures that it makes sense for humanity to build, by symbolizing, an artificial and interpersonal environment, the history, in which to live. Without finitude, being practically exempt from mortality, humans could no longer be symbolic animals: very simply, they would no longer need to be. It is clear that these options – “all nature”, “all technology” – are cultural constructs, and are therefore “symbolic” in themselves: «We

¹ Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Culture*, Bantam, Toronto, New York, London 1970, p.10.

² See Elvia Wilk, *Death by Landscape*, Soft Skull, New York 2022.

³ Max Chafkin, *The Contrarian. Peter Thiel and Silicon Valley’s Pursuit of Power*, Bloomsbury, 2022.

⁴ Cf. Edgar Morin, *L’Homme et la Mort*, Seuil, Paris 1979; Yuval Harari, *Homo Deus. A Brief History of Tomorrow*, Harper, 2018.

can have words without a world, but no worlds without words or other symbols»⁵, as Nelson Goodman would put it in his constructivist interpretation of Cassirer's philosophy, but what they propose "culturally" is a refusal of culture understood as a "symbolic world".

In both cases, in fact, to resolve the anthropological problem, it aims to sever the link between sign and symbol, which for Cassirer is the very process through which the objectification of knowledge works, given that «every energy of spirit by which the content of spiritual signification is linked to a concrete and intrinsically appropriate sensuous sign»⁶. Separating the sign from the symbol results in two kinds of sign-based fundamentalism through which humans seek to govern life and the natural world. Symbolic knowledge, in fact, remains very far from this aim, because gains in understanding what it simultaneously loses in being; while it makes reality into an idea, a figure, an image, a symbolic outcome of any kind, it also distances itself from it⁷.

What is coming to the fore - at least as a wish, as an intention, not necessarily as an outcome, which ultimately makes little difference - is that contemporary culture, in two of its emblematic features, is moving towards the untenable separation of the sign from the symbol, a distinction discussed in *Meaning and Function*: taken in the abstract, without the symbol, the sign has the literal and referential value of a signal, through which a relationship is established with other things in terms of mechanical and reactive contingency. In *Das Symbolproblem und seine Stellung im System der Philosophie*, Cassirer is very clear on this point: the sign "brought to life"⁸ by the symbol belongs to a horizon of meanings, whereas as such it exists only at pre-cultural or non-cultural stages. The symbol that blends with the "sign" renders it visible: thus is forged the relationship that can attribute to the same sign different yet equally true symbolic meanings, and leads to that multiverse of the human environment that is history. For Cassirer, therefore, the sign and the symbol cannot be separated; they coexist and affect each other, to the extent that he tends not to distinguish between *Zeichen* and *Symbol*⁹. Such a distinction, however, does not correspond to the subjective conditions of knowledge, within which alone it is possible, according to Cassirer, to understand that knowledge consists of a representation that is both universal and relative - a feature of the symbol. In contemporary culture, therefore, there is a tension between sign and symbol that calls into question the validity of the Cassirer's assumption that a critique of reason can always also be a critique of civilisation¹⁰. On the one hand, hyper-ecologism, which regards human beings as a nourishing element for life on Earth within the cycle of its cosmic dynamics, and no longer as consumers who are never satisfied with the planet's riches; on the other, information and automation technologies that aim to transform every entity into an information agent interconnected with every other¹¹ - these are strategies of estrangement from historicity. At the level of language, the ideal they envisage - however it may take shape in contrasting ways - situates human beings either within a natural environment of signs or within an equally newly created artificial environment, itself based on signs; this

⁵ Nelson Goodman, *Words, Works, Worlds*, in "Erkenntnis", 1975, p. 61.

⁶ E. Cassirer, *The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences*, in Id., *The Logic of the Cultural Sciences*, ed. by S. G. Lofts, Yale University Press, New Haven 2017, p. 76.

⁷ Cf. Carlo Sini, *Il sapere dei segni. Filosofia e semiotica*, Rusconi, Milano 2020, p. 150.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 97.

⁹ See Paolo Fabbri, "Introduzione" to Umberto Eco, *Simbolo*, Luca Sossella Editore, Bologna 2018.

¹⁰ See Hans Jörg Sandkühler, *Language, Sign, Symbol: The Anti-Ontology of Ernst Cassirer* in "International Journal of Philosophy and Psychology", 2010, 1, p. 1-13; p. 5.

¹¹ See Luciano Floridi, *The Fourth Revolution. How the Infosphere is Reshaping Human Reality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014.

perspective clearly undermines Cassirer's pivotal concept of the "symbolic animal", for whom culture makes up his historical artificial environment. This is something new. Nowadays, as in other periods of great upheaval, philosophical anthropology takes on a "negative" aspect, whereby it is necessary to define what the "other" things are, in order to be able to say what man is not. Once the Renaissance, the *renovatio*, has taken on its most recognizable guise, the aim will no longer be to imitate the ancients, but to learn from them how to build a world that is "solid" as the Latin language and Roman walls have continued to prove themselves to be – yet a world that is entirely new, truly "renewed"; and a philosophical anthropology based on the two principles "agere et comprehendere"¹² will be proposed. Brunelleschi and Giotto are regarded as the historical emblems of this culture, whilst Pico della Mirandola is considered its leading theorist: «At man's birth the Father placed in him every sort of seed and sprouts of every kind of life. The seeds that each man cultivates will grow and bear their fruit in him. If he cultivates vegetable seeds, he will become a plant. If the seeds of sensation, he will grow into brute. If rational, he will come out a heavenly animal. If intellectual, he will be an angel, and a son of God»¹³. Even in that era, it was not possible to reorient humanity without recognizing that it is up to humanity itself to choose which "place" to occupy. This would also have been true for philosophical anthropology in its most academic sense - developed between the First and Second World Wars. And in their attempt to determine mankind's "Stellung", its three main theorists – Scheler, Plessner and Gehlen - setting aside their differences¹⁴ - first define the plant, then the animal and finally man. In 1927, Max Scheler observed that «in no historical era has the human being become so much of a problem to himself as in ours»¹⁵, particularly Europeans who suffer the incompatibility between Jewish, Greco-Roman and Darwinian traditions, as if they had three "anthropologies", leaving them devoid of a unified conception of what human is. Consequently, he started with the problems concerning the essence of man in relation to plants and animals. Cassirer himself begins *The Essay on Man* by emphasising that Darwinism is unable to resolve the problem of "culture"¹⁶, in some ways anticipating Daniel Everett's theory, which, in contrast to Chomsky, demonstrates that language is the most important invention in human history, not an outcome of evolution¹⁷: «The logical analysis of human speech always leads us to an element of prime importance which has no parallel in the animal world. The general theory of evolution in no sense stands in the way of the acknowledgment of this fact. Even in the field of the phenomena of organic nature we have learned that evolution does not exclude a sort of original creation. The fact of sudden mutation and of emergent evolution has to be admitted»¹⁸. Instead, we must turn our attention to a specific strand of medieval philosophical anthropology to find traces of a regression based on signs comparable to the one taking shape today. I'm referring to the literature of the *de contemptu mundi*, by theologians – one of whom, Lotario di Segni, became pope¹⁹ – who viewed humans as wretched beings responsible for having irreparably corrupted Creation by introducing into it the curse of sin and thus ugliness. This entity

¹² Giannozzo Manetti, *Dignità ed eccellenza dell'uomo*, a cura di Giuseppe Marcellino, Bompiani, Milano 2017, p. 93.

¹³ Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man*, Hackett, Indianapolis/Cambridge 1998, p. 5.

¹⁴ On this, see Joachim Fischer, *Philosophical Anthropology. A School of Thought of the 20th Century*, Alber Verlag, Baden-Baden 2022.

¹⁵ Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, Northwestern University Press, 2009, p. 5.

¹⁶ Interesting in Euxküll is his aversion to Darwinism, cf. Ivana Randazzo, *Antropologia e biologia in Ernst Cassirer*, Bonanno, Roma-Catania 2012.

¹⁷ See Daniel Everett, *How Language Began: The Story of Humanity's Greatest Invention*, Profile Books, London 2018.

¹⁸ E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, cit., p. 89.

¹⁹ Lotario di Segni, *De miseria humanae conditionis*, a cura di R. D'Agata, Pratiche, Parma 1994, p. 32.

should be eliminated by God as soon as possible, for Creation is a failure and therefore, wrote Tomaso da Celano «solvat saeculum in favilla».

But we must remember that at the same time there were also St. Francis and Hildegard of Bingen, advocates of a culture in which death is our sister and nature offers remedies to heal the body, within a Christian vision of *harmonia mundi* that finds everywhere correspondences and meanings, for man «stands at the centre of the universe and with his arms, head and feet, he touches the inner circle of the cosmos». To give an example, «the moon is beside man in the act of breathing, and so the blood and humours within man move in accordance with the lunar motion»²⁰. It is therefore interesting to note that, to date, these moments of crisis in our civilization have almost always been “resolved” by redefining both humanity’s ontological “freedom” and the distinction between humanity and the world. Even Cassirer’s philosophy of symbolic forms, as a philosophical anthropology, requires a reorientation towards the experience of the world. For Cassirer, a philosophical anthropology in keeping with the times must draw upon sciences, physics, the historiography of classical German philosophy, the Enlightenment, Cusanus, biology, ethnology and psychology, and, finally, the theory of culture, to reach the conclusion that man is not merely a rational animal, but a cultural and historical being – that is, a “symbolic” being.²¹

Although he had already traced the history of the symbol in essays devoted to Goethe, Schelling, Theodor Vischer, and as far as Hertz and Helmholtz – it is in *Essay on Man* that the comparison between symbol and sign takes on a decisive clarity which highlights the difference between emotional language, typical of animals, and propositional language, which is proper to humans. This is his way of distinguishing us from the rest of living beings. Since the sign is a “thing” that works as information – that is, a signal – every being based on the sign is enclosed within the bubble of its reactivity to the environment “generated” by its perception and its biology: «Organization spontaneously creates the environment of a living being, so that it cannot be defined as constant but, rather, as different for each being, as variable according to the organization»²². This gives rise to the idea that time and space are morphological structures generated by living beings, whilst reality appears to be layered in such a way that several worlds can be distinguished as overlapping environments within the same space and time.

This explains Cassirer’s keen interest in Uexküll and Goldstein, who “assist” him in defining the semiotic orientation that must be attributed to Kantian space and transcendental: «The world undoubtedly presents itself, at first glance, as a series of discontinuities: but the task of knowledge – and here lies its symbolic, “reunifying” root – is to constitute, through the operations of experience, perception, recollection, memory, and imagination, a layered web of associative references grounded in the contents themselves, which are ‘reawakened’ through our acts»²³. To symbolise, therefore, implies to give meaning to an expanding experience: a symbol is that predisposition towards meaning in which «a single pulse establishes thousands of connections»²⁴, whereas the sign, which is therefore not a function, establishes only simple ones, devoid of that sense of an endless search for reference that constitutes the energy of the symbol. This detachment of humans from the sign implies, in a very classical sense, that they do not have a specific environment

²⁰ Hildegard of Bingen, *Cause e cure delle infermità*, Sellerio, Palermo 2019, p. 68.

²¹ E. Cassirer, *Essay on Man*, cit., p. 81.

²² Among them, E. Cassirer, *The Problem of the Symbol as a Fundamental Problem of Forms*, in Id., *Metaphysics of Symbolic Forms*, ed. John Michael Krois and Donald Phillip Verene, Yale University Press, New Haven 1996, p. 52.

²³ Elio Franzini, *I simboli e l’invisibile. Figure e forme del pensiero simbolico*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 2008, p. 12.

²⁴ E. Cassirer, *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, III, p. 271.

of their own, as the thinkers of the Renaissance had already asserted, and that therefore their environment is not only dynamic and open, but is artificial – that is, it is history, the ever-evolving field of meanings that humankind elaborates by giving shape to the world as language, religion, science and myth. For the sake of simplicity, one might say that, according to Cassirer, human environment, insofar as it is symbolic, is always dual, in the “Pascalian” sense whereby human nature becomes comprehensible only through the inexhaustible exploration of its phenomena, of which Bayle – an important author for Cassirer – had provided an example in the field of philology²⁵. In this way, the symbol is akin to Vico’s Topic, as a unique form that «progressively reveals itself to be valid and effective for the discovery of new objects in the most diverse contexts»²⁶. It is fundamentally a discourse that, in the Goethian sense, is always also an image, in the sense of “symbolic significance.”

This issue was raised during his debate with Heidegger in Davos on the question “What is human?”²⁷. From Cassirer’s perspective, we create culture so that history may exist: culture shields the spirit and keeps it alive through the symbol, which embodies the ecology of our historical “artificial” environment. For many decades, this Cassirerian approach has inspired effective interpretations of culture and history – for example, art history – counterbalancing deculturalising or deconstructive perspectives. A significant example, apart from Goodman, is Reckwitz’s sociology of culture²⁸.

However, this is no longer the role Cassirer can play in the life of ideas today. We have seen, in fact, that there is growing evidence that human beings may not wish to remain symbolic beings. In our age of extreme weariness with the human, a significant part of culture does not opt for strategies of radical listening as Heidegger would have wished, but rather imagines far more radical paths of escape towards the end, identified – even unconsciously – in the rejection of *symbolische Prägnanz*. This weariness manifests itself at an intermediate level in a sound self-criticism regarding the exploitation of “nature” and in sensitivity to the polyphony of cultures. However, it also manifests itself in paroxysmal extremes which, as such, prove more revealing than moderate positions. In light of what we have just noted, both extremes are sign-based, not symbolic-oriented.

Indeed, nowadays an elitarian yet influential layer of society is troubled by the inconsistency between biology and culture²⁹, a relationship which was, on the contrary, a fundamental element in Cassirer’s conceptual framework: many have, or believe to have, projects for which a lifespan is not enough, yet they do not rely on “tradition” nor on continuity among generations, nor do they consider it right to entrust to a process as slow and uncertain as evolution with the task of bringing the length of human life into line with the vastness of human aspirations³⁰. Biotechnology, the de-extinction of lost species, chemical and biological alterations on a planetary scale, the entire apparatus of techniques that is making our own into “the synthetic era”³¹ as defined by Preston – the era of whole manipulation of nature – undermines the historicity

²⁵ See Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophy of Enlightenment*, Beacon Press, Boston 1955, pp. 161-162.

²⁶ Guglielmo Forni Rosa, *L'amore impossibile*, Marietti 1820, Bologna 2022, p. 150.

²⁷ Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 1962, p. 216: «No other epoch has succeeded in presenting its knowledge of man so forcibly and so captivantly as ours, and no other has succeeded in making this knowledge so quickly and so easily accessible. But also, no epoch is less sure of its knowledge of what man is than the present one. In no other epoch has man appeared so mysterious as in ours».

²⁸ Andreas Reckwitz, *The Transformation of Cultural Theories. Toward the Development of a Theoretical Framework*, Velbrück, Weilerswist-Metternich 2006.

²⁹ See Ray Kurzweil, *The Age of Spiritual Machines: When Computers Exceed Human Intelligence*, Viking Press, New York 1999.

³⁰ See Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus*, Bompiani, Milano 2018.

³¹ Christopher J. Preston, *L'era sintetica*, Einaudi, Torino 2019.

of existence; in fact, it seeks to erase historicity in a sign-based approach to the world, one that allows for its management on a global scale with the aim of bringing about the “death of death”. If symbolic form is the signifying power capable of being “contradictory” and yet “true”³², then the revolution in information and automation technologies tends rather towards an ontological redefinition of things that rejects contradiction through the regulative calculability of processes. Obviously, no process alters every element it concerns; there is always a part that eludes it.

However, its progression, in the mathematical terms that Cassirer considered unsuitable for human life³³, leads humans to a metamorphosis that is difficult to define, but which certainly leaves no room for a “symbolic animal”, whilst elevating the role of reactive knowledge to an imperial status, as it is advantageous for the redesign of things destined to be altered.

Federico Faggin has clarified that the information language is qualitatively different from human language: «Written words provide a good analogy for better understanding the difference between classical and quantum symbols. Spoken symbols are dynamic and can be described by sound waves. Written symbols, on the other hand, are static and are used to store dynamic symbols in a book or in a computer’s memory. Furthermore, written symbols contain far less information than spoken ones, because they lack aspects such as prosody and facial gestures, which are capable of describing what one feels much better. Despite this, personal experience is infinitely richer than the spoken phrase that describes it, and the latter is much richer than what can be expressed in written symbols»³⁴. However, although the author regards consciousness as irreducible – since humans are quantum entities, which in turn appears to be a “mystical” reinterpretation of Cassirer’s philosophical anthropology – the scenario remains one in which, faced with a declining symbolic artificial environment that presents itself as history, a non-historical, sign-based artificial environment takes over. Even more interesting, however, is the other extreme, the outcome of which – as far as symbolic animal is concerned – is identical. In this other strand of culture, weariness with the human condition manifests itself in a total symbolic denial. And this “happy dehistoricisation”, meet us precisely where Cassirer least expected it: that is to say, in poetry and literature. Especially in works centred on women in which the main character is unwilling to reconcile herself with society, rejecting any compromise with the culture as a whole because the pain she has suffered in her relationships with her peers, at work, and so on, has devalued even the possible Aristotelian joy of understanding and of making sense of things nonetheless. In these stories, pain destroys the symbol and finds refuge in the sign: it is a veritable trauma of the symbol; the symbol, as trauma, descends once more to the level of the sign. Since this literature has been emerging for decades, repeating what has now become a standard plot, it must be judged as a mirror in which the symbolic animal sees itself whilst preferring to cultivate the naturalistic isolation of a life “run” by the sign.

A woman begins to live as if she were a plant, or simply vanishes into a wooded landscape, as in Atwood’s short story *Death by Landscape*, which is also title to an essay by Elvia Wink exploring this global literature on the meaningless “meaning” of human life: «‘Death by Landscape’ is a kind of life through landscape, life only possible through landscape. This may be terrifying, but it may also be thrilling. At

³² E. Cassirer, *An Essay on Man*, cit., p. 60: “Contradiction is a fundamental element of human existence. Man does not, strictly speaking, have a ‘nature’; he is not a simple and homogeneous being. He is a curious mixture of being and non-being. He stands between these two poles.”

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Federico Faggin, *Irriducibile. La coscienza, la vita, i computer e la nostra natura*, Mondadori, Milano 2024, p. 184.

the end of the Atwood story, the woman who has lost her friend hears a human-sounding shout from one of her landscape paintings. It's not a shout of fear, as she might have anticipated. It's a shout, she says, 'of recognition or of joy'»³⁵.

These tales highlight a sense of alienation from humanity, within a sign-based vitality such as the intelligence of plants. These women say "enough is enough" to the constant morphological metamorphosis that culture requires in Cassirerian terms and, since they no longer believe that the benefits of culture and language are worth the cost they entail, they opt for an Ovidian metamorphosis, in which there is no longer any distinction between human, plant and animal nature, like the protagonist of *The Vegetarian* by Nobel Prize winner Han Kang: «Her voice was weightless, like a feather. It was neither sad nor distant, as one might expect from a sick person. But it was not cheerful or carefree either. It was the calm tone of someone who belongs nowhere, of someone who has entered a border zone between different states of being»³⁶.

The message of this literature is precise. For Cassirer, human beings become symbolic beings when they begin to live in time, which is a creation of language. To speak is to make time real as a world of transformation and individuation, distinguishing things from the indistinct chaos of the origins. The main religious tradition of the West tells us that history begins with the breaking of a ban: enveloped until then in light, immersed in a communicative immediacy of anticipatory understanding that required neither signs nor symbols, the progenitors of Eden lost this state of grace when they sinned – that is, when they spoke to one another – because the snake, representing the peril of language, made them feel envy towards God for the first time and tempted them towards evil. Language thus marks the beginning not only of time but also of desire. Language, the start of symbolisation, bears this responsibility, which from that moment onwards gives rise to history and culture. Culture is therefore the desire to continue eating the forbidden apple; it is the desire that makes human beings symbolic animals and at the same time exposes them to pain. Today we see in the prophetic foreshadowing of this literature the ebb: the feminine element that had plucked the fruit chooses to return the apple to the tree, to renounce knowledge and to put an end to language and thus to all symbolic meanings. Desires die out, and the desire to speak of the world is the first to vanish. The death instinct, to which the weakness of language bears witness almost everywhere, finds here the gracious form of an extinction. If, therefore, we want to understand what use Cassirer might be, one must not look to the obvious disciplinary certainties in which – from sociology to art history – but to where he is no longer to be found.

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³⁵ Elvia Wilk, *Death by Landscape*, Soft Skull, New York 2022, p. 24.

³⁶ Han Kang, *The Vegetarian. A novel*, Hogarth, London-New York, 2016.

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