

# The Decadent View from Below

by [Friedrich Hansen](#) (March 2023)



*Vor Sonnenaufgang*, George Grosz, 1922-23

*The main streams of modern European and American thought,*

*such as rationalism, empiricism, utilitarianism, and pragmatism, stemmed from the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, as well as the ongoing Industrial Revolution. Hegel's philosophy had amalgamated the entire thrust of modern bourgeois thought from Descartes and Hobbes through the Enlightenment to Kant. There was, however, an important strand of thought which reacted against Hegel's philosophy as the embodiment of bourgeois principles. –M. A. R. Habib, Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present: An Introduction (Chapter 12)*

Part of this anti-Hegelian thinking was of course the “heterological” or alternative tradition of Arthur Schopenhauer, who inaugurated the view from below. Schopenhauer's philosophy aimed at representing the human animal, I.e. our drives and instincts: “he started off by launching a radical critique of Enlightenment rationalism. This perspective was subsequently taken up by a group of contrarian thinkers such as Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Bergson, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Derrida, and last not least the postmodern feminists. These latter thinkers challenged the very discipline of philosophy and its claims to arrive at truths through reason alone.” Hence these contrarians emphasized instead the role of emotion, the body, sexuality, the unconscious as well as other pragmatic interests.

Importantly this new train of thought exhibited some historical continuity with the Romantics as did the decadent symbolists at the turn of 19<sup>th</sup> century. In my classification this development represents an epochal descent from the auditive to the visual paradigm. The latter dethroned the former in the European Renaissance. The visual paradigm was genuine to Christianity while the auditive paradigm was a unique creation of Judaism. We owe to Hellenism in antiquity the most spectacular accomplishments of the visual paradigm

which influenced the West for the better part of two millennia. Yet during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century it gave way to its great rival, the haptic paradigm setting the stage for postmodernity which was welcomed by Oscar Wilde as the absorption of art into life.

Notably in the former, the spoken language or the word had been the formative source of thinking while since the *fin de siècle* and under the pressures of the haptic paradigm, i.e. sex, the visual image irreversibly took the lead. In my view this captures the decisive difference between modernity and postmodernity. The latter until today dominates our Western civilization and increasingly major parts of the rest of the world. This ontologically significant change was epitomized among others in Freudian psychology after the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The “visual turn” dethroned the word as was duly noticed by philosophical writers most famously by Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Italo Svevo. The marginalisation of language became obvious with the rise of the silent moving pictures immediately after the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Western thinkers’ affiliation with images followed the idolatrous traditions or bias of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Hellenism, the same Hellenism that had been already very popular with Renaissance humanists. Eloquent examples of the breakthrough of the visual paradigm in literature are Irving Babbitt in America and Matthew Arnold in England. And according to M. Habib aesthetic rather than moral views inspired four major Western albeit heterodox thinkers, namely Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Arnold who “continue to influence literary debate in our own day at the profoundest levels.” (see *Literary Criticism from Plato to the Present* by M.A.R. Habib, 2010)

Now the proverbial decadent *fin de siècle* famously reversed the divine, benevolent “view from above” toward the

animalistic or carnal “view from below” –as it happens a fitting definition of the postmodern perspective or persuasion. Given the usual paradoxes of secular, i.e., thoroughly visualized thought, the carnal symbolism of the fin de siècle also prompted by way of opposition a wave of emotionally committed attitudes such as for example veganism, which is basically an internalised romanticism. Behind this was the breakthrough of the visual paradigm into mainstream thinking thanks to the novelty of “moving pictures”. In its early days these movies were rife with visual symbolism and animal metaphors such as monsters or bugs. These became the preferred creatures enchanting the emerging postmodern mass society. This sort of animalism reflected the radical biological transformation of formerly transcendent religion. Here authors such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Ernst Jünger and Franz Kafka became popular, all of whom miniaturized the focus of literature from individual humans to mass creatures including insects.

If anything, bugs convey the view from below. Totally illiterate and restless animals like ants and scarabs came to represent the nameless masses of the industrial era. It was left to the genius of Kafka to come up with the metamorphosis of a man into a mysterious bug. If less brilliantly designed, this motive was equally present in the symbolist writings that would catch the moral imagination of the rapidly urbanized masses. Specifically the symbolist literature answered to anxieties shockingly prevalent at the time and underwriting the significance of the view from below. Again, the most accomplished symbolist writings epitomized by Kafka’s undertook a “head over heels” literary dive into evolutionary biology as the supreme metaphor of change.

This perceptual downfall and biologicistic inversion of the humanistic narrative was reflecting the postmodern focus on the stressed urban masses. And not for nothing did it embrace the perspective of the bug as the most fitting symbol of

postmodern mass creatures. Insects typically do not hear but depend on the combination of vision with feeling devices such as oversized antennae or antlers. A startling feature of the postmodern is the lack of a sense for proportion. No doubt this was a result of the materialistic or tangible turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It became prevalent with the loss of religious inwardness and depictions of the new carnal and outward looking consumer type. Ever since the Renaissance and Reformation the cognitive outward looking Adam I (cognitive self) had replaced the medieval inward looking and religious Adam II (moral self).

Unsurprisingly this transition would occasion first the eclipse and then the politicisation of the moral deed, which had for millennia delivered proof of truth by forming the bedrock of transcendental Western religion. Surely Martin Luther and the Reformation in general began to relativize and later abandon the righteous deed, once memorized through religious rituals that served as the touch stone of truth. It would be replaced by industrial work ethics and science. Luther's "Internalisation" of faith reduced the unique personal deed of Judaeo-Christian provenance to Gnosticism and group posturing. The Protestant concept of "confessions" began to "subjectivize" and relativise traditional truth claims, henceforth expressed by mere feelings in order to protect them from the rational evidence to the contrary. This made it possible to still later liquefy them into the "truth serum" of identity politics.

Ultimately Protestant internalization came to enable the total mobilisation of the modern individual catering to the needs of the industrial world. This was the whole point of Max Weber's work on the "Protestant ethic" enhancing capitalism. Moral deeds were taken out of their traditional context of the devout family and utilized for the alienating sacrifices of other-directed work of dependant wage earners. For all this the one-directional, mirroring and reactive properties of the

visual paradigm were suited perfectly. The Renaissance arts consisting mostly of paintings supported the public hegemony of the visual over the auditive paradigm. But it would end up replacing medieval auditive serfdom with its visual variety based on imitation. Compared to the multiple channels of responsiveness conveyed by the auditive paradigm with multiple gestures and languages, the reflective mirroring of the visual paradigm supported the success of linear progress. Apparently, this failed to convince conservative minds mostly because, even as the exchange of ideas was enhanced, it became more stereotyped and crippled by conformity and groupthink.

Nevertheless, the storm of images preceding WW I heavily loaded the time with insurmountable conflict and universal contradictions. As a result, the bellicose fin de siecle symbolic language in the visual mode would carry the day sidelining the diversity of the auditive paradigm, which had been conducive to voices of moderation and the chances of compromise. It is no coincidence that the breakthrough of visualisation which characterized the decadent fin de siecle also conjured up group think and ideological collectivism. This was built on the misleading model of visual equality which became the seductive and ultimately fatal inspiration of liberal politics. Yet pernicious groupism would eclipse the religious foundation of Western liberty and give rise to the decadent mass society before the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Only in hindsight can we decipher the inhuman aspects of this biological turn of the decadent period. Its fondness of the animal symbols in particular was fitting to masse society and the need of human diminishment. That's why symbolism resorted to the smallest species such as bugs and beetles.

Among the most popular symbolic images of the decadent fin de siecle was the iconic Egyptian scarab. All bugs being deaf, it undermined perfectly and acted an antidote to Marxist agitation. Little wonder that the scarab became a popular talisman, worn around necks as amulets. The scarab figured



prominently among the mascots of the silent and dependent industrial masses in the decadent, i.e., animalistic, late 19<sup>th</sup>-century as well as in Weimar culture that preceded the rise of fascism. It is for this reason that I am tempted to define decadence as the postmodern eclipse of the auditive by the visual paradigm in Western culture. It occasioned the reckless expansion of visual mass symbolism, culminating in quasi-worship of the subconscious. Part and parcel of this was Sigmund Freud's telescoping of human sexuality and his symbolism certainly helped corrupting the human soul.

At the same time, gender and race would emerge as the two biologicistic symbols of postmodern groupthink, ever so often vying for primacy. As visual categories of thought race and gender seem to have served perfectly the needs of mass societies, given their exemplary properties for facilitating verbal generalisations. This is perhaps the all-too-human penchant to which racism and genderism have always responded in the first place, thereby easily providing the answers to collectivist stress imposed by the political right as well as the left. The politics of both dwell on biologicistic if not animalistic metaphors and betray the political consensus of the enlightenment, namely regarding self-rule and the autonomous person.

This brings us back to the political terminology of the fin de siècle as the unique era of emergent racialist scientism. In the propaganda wars between nationalists and socialists, metaphoric use of words became overstretched and hollow. In particular, the use of racial or mass categories allowed the speaker to transgress the limitations of polite society. What emerges only in hindsight is the vulnerability of individualist categories in confrontation with biologist tribalism and groupthink. The science of biology at the time lacked far behind physics, but the Nazis took pride in abusing biologism as a weapon against the enlightenment. This racial drive of the Weimar political discourse pushed everyone closer



to the human instincts by that transforming cultural exchanges into something else: a seductive means for whipping up the instincts of the masses.

Not by accident did this follow the Freudian reversal of perspective, i.e., turning the gaze away from the sublime Western accomplishments toward the human animal. It was no longer religion and personal conscience that occupied Western thinkers but carnal impulse and sexual appetite. Both Nazi racism and Woke genderisms are congenial biologist categories for opening up this Pandora box of the Christian underworld. This should be fairly obvious and allow for a critical consent. Yet what emerges instead is a new expressive disposition whipped up by group think through externalisation and visualisation of sexual identities. This was to be expected after the collapse of Christian symbolism and the exhaustion of its sublimating energies. The climax of elevating the visual paradigm over the auditive paradigm was reached at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century. It became visible in little bugs—the famous scarab anticipating the nameless masses of soldiers in WW I. Since then, the white male was to be tarnished forever—or at least for the time being. It turned out the wasteland materialized more or less in the delegitimisation of the family man and the rise of identity politics defined by sex and lacking enduring institutional forms. It would appear that the West still suffers from the devastation wrecked upon our civilisation by the Great War. This has brought about the cultural decline including the standstill of scientific progress in the West. That was to be expected, given that sexual liberation comes at the cost of sublimation and its creative energies and capabilities which had made Western prosperity possible in the first place. This seems to be one of the hidden drivers of the Asian ascent in world economics and the West's descent.

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