



You have reached your destination

Description

It sounds final. “You have reached your destination,” says my car SatNav. Achieving a goal is melancholic in several respects. Some achievers realise there’s nothing left. It’s not going to get any better. Then some think their achievement doesn’t accrue all the benefits they expected. Freud also explained melancholy as a tendency to focus on losing something, even if it is firmly in your grasp. Here’s a melancholic painting about finality by Arnold Böcklin – Die Toteninsel III [linked from Wikimedia Commons].

[Arnold Böcklin - Die Toteninsel III \(Alte Nationalgalerie, Berlin\)](#)

Achievement draws on a spatial metaphor. It’s what happens when you drive a car or, with more energy, go for a walk. Walkers in the countryside often aim for the brow of a hill, a place of prospect. What does the walker see from the summit? Answer: the lay of the land, the distant view, features, and cues to orientation.



But walkers also see the horizon, in various aspects, complete or in part, following the earth’s curvature, as a line marking the sky from the sea or the plain, or as a jagged profile. The horizon is roughly at eye level and marks things higher and lower than you are.

The horizon

The horizon is also one of the markers of melancholy. I've referred in [a previous post](#) to Walter Benjamin's focus on the horizon as a source of melancholy in Albrecht Dürer's engraving *Melancholia*. The mood is captured in the image of the distant horizon across the sea, the boats and other symbols of departure and journey, as much as the forlorn angel. The horizon is also prominent in B&W's painting above.

But arrival (and its disappointments) doesn't characterise every journey. Journeys repeat. In another post I've referred to the repetition of the journey experience as a traveller and tourist. The traveller ventures out, and returns, only to repeat the process, with variation. The journey is not over when it's over. There are other walks and revisits, as well as re-enactments in conversations, journals, and photographic records. The adventurer also encounters and seeks new horizons.

The horizon metaphor appears in theories about interpretation. To interpret a painting, design, book or essay is to move from one position of understanding to encounter a new understanding, as if a new place exposing a different horizon. The interpreter encounters the new in terms of the familiar, and each transforms the other. To mix metaphors, horizons get 'fused'. In that transformation resides understanding. (See posts tagged [Interpretation](#).)

Rescuing melancholy

Repetition and re-enactment also pervade the creative process. B&W created several versions of his painting, and other painters and film makers were inspired by his funerary motif, which he in turn derived from other sources.

I don't want to think of the repetition of a journey as a means of counteracting melancholy. Contemporary theorists have already rescued melancholy from loss and grief, and from the lexicon of mental health. Melancholy is a richly cultural mood condition, even a meta-mood, that preserves the complexity of people's emotional journeys, and our politics.

Melancholy pervades contemporary narratives of over-inflated ambition, delusion, and ignorance. See for example a *Spectator* article by Bruno Kavanagh from November 2016 [Donal Trump is a masterpiece of American melancholy](#). It is not all sad, and at least the journey is not over.

[Albrecht Dürer - Melencolia I - Google Art Project \(AGDdr3EHmNGyA\)](#)

Notes

- Some of the thoughts here elaborate on a talk I gave at an excellent conference last week [Beyond Data and Senses: Architecture, Neuroscience and Digital Worlds](#), organised by Anistasia Karandinou at the University of East London.

Category

- Nature

Tags

1. interpretation
2. melancholy
3. walking

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