K N I R W O R K S H O P

22-23 February 2024

‘A Great Miracle is Man’:
Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism in the Early Modern Netherlands and Italy

Martijn van Beek & Marieke van den Doel

The period during which human activities have permanently interfered with the atmosphere and the geology of the earth is often referred to as the Anthropocene. The cause of this human behaviour has often been identified as a particular way of thinking: Western thought, or more precisely humanism. Humanism is said to have contributed to an anthropocentric – a human-centred – worldview. Braidotti suggests that this worldview took shape during the early modern period, referring to Pico della Mirandola’s *On the Dignity of Man* (1486) and Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man.*[1]

The KNIR workshop ‘A Great Miracle is Man’ will explore those European views on the relationship between humans and nature from the early modern period. In addition, it considers how Netherlandish and Italian thinkers and artists have confronted non-Western views on the subject. The workshop combines approaches from early modern humanism, philosophy, science, and art. Ideas on nature have been expressed in landscape or still life painting as well as in landscape architecture and other visual works that reflect the bounty of Creation.

It is noteworthy that alongside human-centred views, counter-movements and radical alternatives have been developed since antiquity. These alternatives are the central topic of this two-day event. Is Western intellectual history indeed responsible for a destructive relationship between humans and their environment or does it also offer alternatives or other points of view that could be a starting point for future solutions? The contributors will explore this self-examination, by focusing on the early modern emergence of humanism and anthropocentrism, starting from three questions:

1) Which arguments appear *within* ‘western’ / humanist thought but express *non-anthropocentric* worldviews? How are these arguments constructed, and which clues do they provide for dealing with a distorted relation between humans and nature?

2) What is the role of non-western sources in humanism on the topic of early modern ecocentrism?

3) How does artistic production influence the development of humanist ecocentrism?

[1] Braidotti, R., *The Posthuman,* Cambridge, 2013, 13 ff; Cf. Harari, Y.N., *Homo Deus. Een kleine geschiedenis van de toekomst,* Amsterdam 2020, 83 ff; Schwarz Wentzer, T. & Ch. Mattingly. ‘Toward a New Humanism; An Approach from Philosophical Anthropology’, in: *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 8 (1/2): 144-157, Cambridge 2020.

P R O G R A M M E

February, 22

10.00 ***Coffee/Tea***

10.15 ***Director's Welcome***

Marieke van den Doel (University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht) *Introduction*

Session 1: Nature and humans in European and non-European perspective

chair: Susanna de Beer (KNIR / Leiden University)

10.30 Kocku von Stuckrad (University of Groningen), keynote

The Detumescence of 'Great Man': Toxic European Heritage and Planetary Becoming

If we want to understand the roots of today's global regimes of exploitation, we need to address the toxic links between patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. Underlying these exploitative and extractive practices, the European distinction between 'nature' and 'culture' has played a decisive role in philosophical, religious, political—and artistic—discourse since the early modern period. To critically address and dismantle toxic regimes of exploitation, deep structural changes are needed that make it possible to envision new ways of being human in a planetary community of earthlings. The lecture describes current discussions about relationality, kinship, and nonhuman agency as indications of a paradigm shift that can overcome anthropocentric orders of knowledge. The alternatives to toxic European regimes of power come from intellectual debates outside of Europe, but also from European thinking that hegemonic discourses have pushed to the margins.

11.10 ***Discussion***

11.20 Bert van de Roemer (University of Amsterdam)

Indigenous Knowledge in the Work of Maria Sibylla Merian and Georg Everhard Rumphius

1705 was a remarkable year in the history of Dutch natural history. Two sumptuous studies appeared on the Amsterdam book market: Maria Sibylla Merian's *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium* and Georg Everhard Rumphius's *D'Amboinsche Rariteitkamer*. They became exemplary books of references in the field of natural history and left their mark in the history of Western knowledge production.

There are many differences and similarities between the works. One significant resemblance between Rumphius and Merian is their utilisation of what is often described as Indigenous knowledge. This issue has been addressed separately in recent publications, such as *Maria Sibylla Merian. Changing the Nature*

of Art and Science and *Rumphius Naturkunde. Zirkulation in kolonialen Wissensräumen*, but the two have not yet been compared on this point. In my presentation, I will take a first exploratory step in this direction. The following questions will be central: What has been discussed so far regarding Merian and Rumphius's utilisation of Indigenous knowledge? How did they use it? Are there any distinctions or parallels? What does this reveal about the different understandings of nature held by the unnamed Indigenous sources and the European writers?

11.45 Michael Kwakkelstein (Dutch University Institute for Art History (NIKI) / Utrecht University)

Leonardo's Anatomical Studies: A Creative Interaction between Image and Text

Leonardo's anatomical studies are characterized by an unusual relationship between text and image as they appear on the same page: often his notes do not describe or clarify what is represented in a drawing. This appears to be the result of his working method to first visualize his knowledge in a drawing only to use that image as a starting point for a seemingly spontaneous theorizing process by which he sought to deepen his understanding of the relation between the form and functioning of man's inner structures. This paper aims to define what kind of thoughts an anatomical drawing could generate in Leonardo other than those of an explanatory or descriptive nature and concludes with how we should understand the recurrent presence of memoranda and comments of a personal nature amidst even highly finished drawings of a publishable state.

12.10 *Discussion*

12.20 *Lunch*

Session 2 Nature and Art

Chair: Laura Overpelt (KNIR / Utrecht University)

13.15 Marieke van den Doel (University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht)

Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism in Early Modern Landscape Painting; Seeing through the Eyes of Latour and Rosa

Will the Netherlands soon be under water if we do not call a halt to the fossil industry? Western, anthropocentric thinking is said to be the cause of our poor relationship with nature. A change in this thinking is often situated in the early modern period. This paper examines early modern views on the relationship between nature and humans. Artworks show how these ideas were depicted over time. Using Dutch landscape painting, it examines whether the paintings show a human-centred perspective or an ecocentric one. Early modern depictions of nature, such as by Jan van Scorel (1495-1562), Guilliam du Gardijn (1595/6- 1647/57) and Allart van Everdingen (1621-1675) are analysed using contemporary sources on the subject, such as Willem Goeree's *Inleydinge tot de al-ghemeene teycken-konst* (1670) and Samuel van Hoogstraten's *De Zichtbaere Werelt* (1678), but also through contemporary ecohumanist philosophers, notably Bruno Latour (1947-2022) and Hartmut Rosa (1967). Does this self-examination provide handles or inspiration for a revised relationship between humans and nature?

13.40 Maurice Saβ (Alanus University of Art and Science, Alfter)

Tree, Axe and Stump: Ecosensitive Perspectives on Early Modern Art History

Early modern art history has so far been somewhat speechless with regard to the ecological crisis of our present, and it is unclear what contribution it can make in the face of the challenges of the Anthropocene. Part of the answer lies in critically questioning the ecological implications of early modern art and the categories we use to describe it. This critical questioning is indisputably important. However, this paper will focus on three different approaches to an ecosensitive art history that go beyond this: Firstly, I would like to use Matthys Cock's *Martyrdom of St Catherine* to illustrate how profitable it is to take the ecological ambiguities of early modern art seriously. Secondly, models of ecological sensitivity can be made visible, as I will illustrate with the negative example of Erysichthon. And thirdly, I will use Dürer's *Landscape with a Woodland Pool* to argue in favour of rediscovering the visuality of early modern 'ecologies of the other'. In short: using proven methods of our discipline to trace the ecological ambiguity, sensitivity and alterity of early modern works of art, opens up current horizons of meaning and sheds new light on old questions.

14.05 Joost Keizer (University of Groningen)

Early Modern Natures in a Global World

Early modern European artists' relationship to nature was double: they both venerated nature as old and potent *and* they were adamant to emulate her where they could. Some artists called nature a mistress, others an enemy. Meanwhile, competing ideas about nature in the Spanish Americas reached the European continent. In this paper, I will show how European artists navigated old and new ideas about nature. I will be defending the thesis that European artists embraced ancient and New World ideas about nature in order to come up with a new kind of art history.

14.30 ***Discussion***

14.40 ***Coffea and tea***

Session 3 The Water is Coming

Chair: Martijn van Beek (Utrecht University)

15.00 Claire Ptaschinski (KNIR / Pittsburgh University)

Catastrophic Thinking: Picturing Natural Disaster in Quarant'ore Altar Design of 17th-century Rome

On 7 December 1647, the Tiber River was recorded to have risen 16.41m above its banks, inundating vast areas of the urban center. When the rain continued, Pope Innocent X issued a decree requesting that the Eucharist be exposed on 13 December continuing for forty hours "in order that one might pray to God for the easing of the weather." This was not the first time, nor would it be the last, in which a call was placed for the prolonged exposition of the Eucharistic host on a temporary altar to ward off natural disaster. Accompanied by sermons, candle-lit prayer, and music, this practice was known as a *quarant'ore*. I argue in this paper that *quarant'ore* altars are apropos for considering how art and architecture were deployed in the face of overpowering natural forces. I look to this practice's remnants—drawings, prints, and written descriptions made after or in preparation for the altars themselves—less as evidence for an *apparato*'s

actual appearance than as illustrations of an ecological ontology underscoring artistic production in 17th-century Rome. Not only is much of the imagery surrounding this devotion closely tied to biblical stories of catastrophe—such as in Dominique Barrière's print of a destructive hailstorm recounted in the Old Testament, *Un gruppo di nuvole da folgari, da fulmini stracciata* (1668)—the exhaustion of material and economic resources required to produce these temporary altars—even though they were destroyed after just three days, some cost around 5000 scudi (about a quarter million EUR today)—signals also an awareness of the precarious state of human existence. When faced with overpowering environmental forces, the fragility of the human species is brought into focus alongside the inherent impermanence of this architectural form.

15.25 Gianmario Guidarelli (University of Padua)

Venice between Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism

Among the many paradoxes that represent the history and life of Venice, the most significant is its nature of complete artificiality combined with its dependence on natural and climatic factors, such as the height of the tide and the relationship with the sea. The Venetian lagoon is the last place to found a city, as it is devoid of any building materials (trees, fresh water, clay, stone, etc.), subjected to extreme ecological conditions (rising salinity, softness of the ground, high water) and with a constant shortage of land on which to build.

These conditions forced the construction of a perfectly controlled city, organized on a network of canals that distribute sea water and therefore influence daily life with the rhythm of the tides. This system of canals with their related branches constitutes the physical backbone of the urban structure which can be schematised as an archipelago of islands connected by bridges. But the canals also provide the main road system for the transport of things and people starting from the most important canal down to the smallest tributary.

This singular situation determined a completely singular way of life, but also forced the creation of particular construction systems which, as they were perfected, made building as a whole take on a characteristic and homogeneous appearance. But even at a macroscopic level, politics had to develop an overall and unitary vision of the city as a completely artificial organism to be governed as a machine was formalized through the establishment of commissions of public officials responsible for the maintenance and growth of the urban fabric.

In this way, Venice has faced the centuries thanks to a double principle of balance, adaptation to the environmental changes that condition its multifaceted, kaleidoscopic and flexible nature; a city in which any type of urban phenomenon has been experimented with so much as to provide an image for every possible city, as Italo Calvino (“Le città invisibili”, 1972) demonstrates. The aim of the paper is to show all these aspects by delving into the peculiar relationship between the anthropic and the natural in the history of Venice.

15.50 ***Discussion***

16.00 ***Afternoon Tea***

Book Presentation

Chair: Laura Overpelt (KNIR / Utrecht University)

17.00 Thijs Weststeijn (Utrecht University)

Thijs Weststeijn will present his book *De toekomst van het verleden: Erfgoed en Klimaat* (*The Future of the Past: Heritage and Climate,* 2023).

While the wooden poles under Amsterdam begin to rot, water levels in Venice are rising, archaeological sites in Pakistan are flooding and the temples of Babylon are collapsing due to salinisation. The climate crisis is endangering historical heritage all over the world, through higher temperatures and humidity, more storms and fires, and of course the rising seas. Monuments, buildings, inner cities and cultural landscapes are under threat, and museums like the Louvre have already started moving parts of their collections into climate-proof storage.

This book gives an overview of the subject and makes suggestions for solutions. There is a special focus on the Netherlands, where heritage has been closely bound to the natural environment since the seventeenth century – the Little Ice Age. Moreover, there is a lot at stake due to the rising sea level. Climate change means that we have to deal with history in new ways. Nowadays, historical heritage confronts us not only with the past, but also with the future.

17.45 ***Discussion and Reception***

<u>February, 23</u>

9.00 ***Coffee/Tea***

Session 4 Human and non-human actors

Chair: Marieke van den Doel (University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht)

9.15 Martijn van Beek (Utrecht University)

Juan Ricci de Guevara's Concept of Man as Imago Dei and Pluriformity of Creation in the Human Body

The illustrated manuscripts that were made by the Benedictine friar Juan Ricci de Guevara in Madrid and Rome are remarkable sources to gain insight in particular ideas on anthropocentrism within the larger field of knowledge collection and - formation in the 1660s. In Ricci's argumentation, humankind was divine, which allowed him to create an image of the divine that was as diverse as humankind and Creation itself. To balance the traditional views of medieval Scholastic theology and Ricci's desired innovative knowledge formation, he inserted a fundamental role for the artistic treatises by Dürer and Vignola. The aspect of proportion in the human body and in the architectural orders, in both its orthodoxy and diversity, was thus considered pivotal to bridge theocentrism and anthropocentrism visually.

9.40 Eric Jorink (Huygens Institute, KNAW / Leiden University)

Otto Marseus van Schriek and Rachel Ruysch

In the 1650's, the Dutch painter Otto Marseus, member of the *Bentveughels*, lived in the Vicolo dell'Orto di Napoli in Rome, and made daily trips to Villa Borghese. His target was to capture reptiles, amphibians, insects and other crawly creatures – both alive and in works of art. The idiosyncratic Marseus (a.k.a. 'van Schrieck') created an highly unusual but shortly very popular genre of paintings, later called *sottobosco*. Here, we find previously marginal creatures not depicted as marginal illuminations, but as active actors, struggling between life and death. One of Marseus' followers was the well-known (but surprisingly little studied) Rachel Ruysch.

In this presentation I will not address Marseus' highly unconventional techniques (such as putting butterfly-wings in the wet paint). Instead, I will address his fascination for previously despised creatures such as snakes, toads and fungi. As I will demonstrate, his work was not only turning the received hierarchy within art-theory upside down, but also the Aristotelean and Biblical *great chain of being*. His example was followed by, amongst others, Rachel Ruysch, besides being a great artist in her own right, also well-connected to the world of learning. As I will demonstrate, much of the inspiration of Marseus and Ruysch came from Leiden academic learning, were both ancient stoicism as new Cartesianism had a profound impact on viewing the place of humans within the cosmic scheme of creatures.

10.05 Barbara di Gennaro Splendore (ISI, Florence)

The Birth of Mycology and the 'Desire for Knowledge'

In recent years, scientists have redefined fungi as integral components of Earth's ecosystems, playing pivotal roles in ecological, environmental, and biological processes. Mycorrhizal partnerships with 90% of plant life, decomposition of organic matter, and contributions to ecosystem balance highlight the significance of fungi. The delayed recognition of fungi in modern science raises questions about anthropocentrism, suggesting a tendency to overlook organisms that are inconspicuous or seemingly non-essential.

This abstract delves into the cultural context of mycology's origins within the Western scientific tradition, an aspect that traditional histories of mycology neglected by pursuing a teleological perspective. Early studies on fungi in Europe, often driven by utilitarian motives, initially focused on sought-after truffles (Ceccarini) and classified mushrooms based on edibility and toxicity (Clusius), reflecting an anthropocentric bias. However, a unique perspective emerges from Federico Cesi and the Accademia dei Lincei, where the exploration and classification of fungi were guided by the 'desire for knowledge'.

While the concept of 'disinterest' in knowledge has faced scrutiny by historians like Steven Shapin, this paper suggests that a disinterested desire for knowledge, distinct from the utilitarian mastery of nature, was indeed a powerful engine for research. By exploring historical narratives regarding the emergence of a science of fungi in Western scientific thought, this paper explores disinterested passion to understand the natural world.

10.30 ***Discussion followed by coffee and tea***

Session 5 The Earth as a Garden

Chair: Martijn van Beek (Utrecht University)

10.50 Imke van Hellemondt (VU University, Amsterdam)

Gardener of the Earth. Humanist Reflections on the Relationship between Nature and Culture in Early Modern Landscape Design.

The shift of focus from landscape theorists and designers from an ideal, heavenly garden to earthly gardens and landscapes raised philosophic and theological questions on the appropriate attitude of humans toward nature. Humanist thinking about the relationship between nature and culture was exercised in the landscape itself, particularly in the garden. And in the designing of gardens and the practice of gardening ideals and ideas could be tested and applied. The introduction of the concept of 'third nature' in 1541 enabled a layered and plural perspective on gardens and human interaction with the earth, where both wild and ordered nature had a place.

11.15 Jakub Koguciuk (I Tatti / The Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies)

In the Age of Pastoral – Jacopo Sannazaro's Arcadia and Art in Venice ca. 1500

When the Neapolitan poet Jacopo Sannazaro (1457-1530) wrote the *Arcadia,* he not only provided a novel interpretation of the classics of ancient pastoral, Virgil and Theocritus. He also adapted the literature of shepherds and their lives into a new age and especially had a profound impact on the visual arts. Venice, a major center of the print industry, where most of the editions of the *Arcadia* appeared, was also home to artists who revolutionized painted landscapes: Giovanni Bellini, Giorgione and Titian. The text was pursued by the humanist-editor Aldus Manutius and its themes also influenced an important visitor, the German artist Albrecht Dürer. The pastoral of Sannazaro's time was therefore a multi-media phenomenon. Did the *Arcadia* signal a new conception of the environment? This paper will introduce the images related to Sannazaro's *Arcadia* from various media and propose that the pastoral preceded environmental awareness by transforming nature into an image.

11.40 ***Discussion and concluding remarks***

12.00 ***Lunch***

12.30 Site visit to Ninfa Archeological Park with contributors to the conference

The **Garden of Ninfa** is an Italian natural monument and an landscape garden which contains medieval ruins, several oaks, cypresses and poplars, grassy meadows, a wide range of exotic plants from various parts of the world, numerous watercourses and a large variety of rambling roses growing over the stone walls of the ruins.

The garden includes the ruins of the ancient settlement of Ninfa, whose name seems to derive from a classical era nymphaeum, a temple dedicated to nymphs, located on an island in the small lake. The village already existed in the Roman era; It was perhaps founded by the Volscians.

During the Middle Ages Ninfa had more than 150 houses, several churches, mills, bridges, two hospices, a castle and a town hall. The town was encircled by a defensive wall with guard towers. During the 17th century it was gradually deserted due to the expansion of the surrounding marshes and the arrival of malaria.

The garden at Ninfa and its surroundings were a neglected part of the domain of the Caetani family until the 20th century, when the estate was renovated and the garden was transformed. Ownership of the garden was transferred to the Roffredo Caetani Foundation. The garden was created by Gelasio Caetani from 1921, in the English garden style. He restored some of the buildings of the medieval town of Ninfa, especially the tower and the town hall, as a summer residence. Under the guidance of Ada Bootle-Wilbraham, he has planted different plant species that he brought home from his travels abroad. The plants thrived due to the favourable climate: the microclimate is very humid because of frequent rains and the river Ninfa.