

How can we talk about glaciers in a way that inspires change?

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Jean-François Delhom's presentation
(with a few additional references)

Storytelling:

Since our panel discussion is about storytelling, I have an anecdote to share with you. In a movie theater, at the end of an art film screening, a glaciologist was invited to come up on stage to talk with the film maker and the audience. The glaciologist arrived with a cooler. He opened it, took out a block of ice, placed it in a transparent salad bowl, and turned on a lamp that he placed behind the block to illuminate it from behind. It was simple, yet magical. The glaciologist explained that he had just come from a class where he had shown to his students this ice bloc 500 years old.

Then the interview took place. After the interview, I went with the artist and the glaciologist for a drink, because I knew them. The artist told us that he was struck by how much this small installation had awakened and stimulated the audience, making them receptive to talking about theoretical things.

Reason and emotions:

As neurologist, Antonio R. Damasio gives a scientific base to the observation that our reasoning is powerless if it is not driven by emotions (*Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*).

Concerning our topic of climate change, the knowledge is there, and information is circulating. We know the causes (Greenhouse gases)¹, we know the remedies². But to mobilize people, industrials and politicians to change

1. There are two books in English I warmly advise:

- Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*.

- Naomi Oreskes & Erik M Conway, *Merchants of Doubt. How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*.

2. On a technical level, diametrically opposed to techno-scientism and its fantasy of omnipotence, philosopher Gilbert Simondon states the ecological truism that “technical progress consists of slowing down entropy.” True technical progress therefore consists of improving *efficiency* in order to conserve material and energy resources as much as possible, rather than wasting them recklessly and leading to their depletion.

(Entropy: “Nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything is transformed,” as the saying goes.)

habits for a better ecological footprint, it is not enough to transmit knowledge; we must also *motivate* them.

Negative emotions, positive emotions:

Negative emotions can cause indignation, pity, anger, fear. They essentially drive us to fight or to cancel.

But to build something positive, we need other emotions: tenderness, admiration, altruism, and hope.

News media and negative emotions:

I mentioned motivation. News media often neglect this issue of motivation. They have focused heavily on bad news, with two recurring characteristics: 1) dwelling on the negative; 2) and failing to propose solutions (solutions are developed in long reports and especially in books rather than in the TV news). The constant repetition of bad news creates a feeling of powerlessness and despair in the public, which can lead to a loss of solidarity with those who are suffering or will suffer from the events reported in the bad news.

But negative emotions are also cultivated in order to keep the public captive to infotainment or disinformation media. This is a marketing or political manipulation strategy which is called emotional phishing. These things are well known, even if we often fail to be vigilant about them.

Art and negative emotions:

Many artists in the contemporary art world act as whistleblowers. They criticize, denounce, dramatize, and bring things to light. But what do they bring to light in this case? The negative.

This is often necessary, I don't dispute that, but I believe it is not enough.

Art and positive emotions:

If we look at the recent history of the philosophy of art, this last century, we can see that a large number of theorists have insisted that art should be recognized not as discourse but as epiphany, in the secular sense of the term: art is an event that reveals something that has value in itself. In the eyes of many philosophers, the function of art is to have no function. It frees us from functionalist obsession. In this sense, conceptual art, educational art, propaganda or militant art, and even art that claims to question, are forms that have forgotten the transcendent dimension of art.

We tend to contrast transcendence with immanence, much like the spiritual contrasts with the material, the concrete, the practical. But the transcendence I am talking about emerges from immanence; it is not a

This is what the second law of thermodynamics challenges with regard to energy, and what a fourth law of thermodynamics—proposed by Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen—challenges with regard to matter: energy dissipates, matter degrades, which is known as entropy.)

“behind-the-world” as Nietzsche would say. It emerges when we contemplate a work of art or anything else in the world around us, provided that we feel overwhelmed by what we are contemplating. Transcendence is then what tears us away from all forms of selfishness as well as anthropocentrism.

This transcendent dimension should not be confused with “Art for Art”, very closed on itself. What interests me is open art, welcoming art, poetic art.

Poetic art brings together aesthetics and ethics by allowing the feeling of beauty to coexist with the feeling of dignity (the dignity of the art piece itself, the dignity of what it represents poetically—for example, the dignity of glaciers).

Talking about dignity, here is a sentence of Kant that I love, which points the junction between an esthetic point of view and an ethic point of view:

“Everything either has a price or has dignity. That which has a price can be replaced by its equivalent; on the other hand, that which has no price, and therefore no equivalent, is that which possesses dignity.”

(Emmanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785.)

Contemplation is not passive:

Contemplation and action have always been contrasted, but I believe they complement each other. In my opinion, a contemplative attitude is one of the most powerful antidotes to the misery of our consumer society. It is a source of happiness that does not consist in possessing but inspire the care of what we have in front of us. Ecological awareness requires this prerequisite, even if it is not limited to it.

When hope is thin:

We have to face the fact our ecological situation is worsening (new oil extraction, revival of coal, resumption of the arms race, fanatical belief in GDP growth, etc.). Many people are desperate, and downplaying the dangers we face, will not motivate them to join ecological commitment. However, we can tell them that despair is no reason to give up. Even when it seems impossible to improve the situation, it is often possible to prevent it from getting worse. It is possible to be desperate and yet attentive and caring! First of all, it is more interesting; secondly, it is more elegant; and finally, it is more generous.

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What I convey about glaciers through my work is that they hide a universe of extraordinary variety in terms of shapes, colors, and textures within the depths of their caves. They are not just a mass of ice, but a rich and wonderful universe that commands admiration. When they are a source of distraction, we appreciate glaciers. But when they become a subject of contemplation, they can awaken in us a much stronger feeling. The transition

from “like” to “love” is motivating. That is what I try to inspire through my modest work as a photographer. This bring me to my slogan: “We have to start by loving this world if we want to find the motivation to protect it.”

Jean-François Delhom

I would like to thank the consulate of Switzerland and the Banff Mountain Film an Book Festival for doing me the honor of inviting me.