

# The Cabin. Careful. On!

## Les règles du jeu – Picture Rules

Konrad Tobler

“The Cabin. Its Situation. Careful. On.  
At the inexistant centre of a rather formless place.  
Rather more circular than otherwise finally. Flat to be sure.  
To cross it in a straight line takes her  
from five to ten minutes. Depending on her speed  
and radius taken. Here she who loves to – here she who now can only  
stray never strays.  
Stones increasingly abound.  
Ever scanter even the rankest weed.  
Meagre pastures hem it round on which  
it slowly gains. With none to gainsay.  
To have gainsaid. As if  
doomed to spread. How come a cabin  
in such a place? How came? Careful.  
Before replying [...]”<sup>1</sup>  
(Samuel Beckett)

START HERE!

START HERE, TOP RIGHT!

Careful. Before replying. Does one go straight to the substance? Directly? Why? And what is meant by substance, anyway? Substance, because one thinks one recognises what is being shown? Because we can give them a name: that is a cabin, that is a walking man, that is a wrecked car, that is a ram. Ramshit? Bullshit? Questions, because there is not really any substance, so much as a story, because the first glance is deceptive. There is no story here.

Careful. Before replying.

TURN LEFT! Or conversely: Alois Mosbacher’s pictures do seem to add up nicely after all: they tell a story. About things that might happen in a wood, that have happened, will happen. About cabins that have been built in a place no one knows for reasons no one knows by someone no one knows. Or by people no one knows or perhaps one only thinks to know, people who walk and walk, as if they had got another of Beckett’s texts as instructions with them on their way, on their ways: “step by step / in no direction / no one knows how / small steps / in no direction / full of stubbornness.”<sup>2</sup>

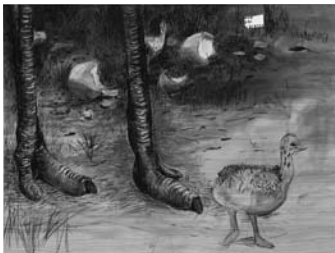
<sup>1</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Mal vu mal dit / Ill Seen Ill Said*, translation from the French by Samuel Beckett, Charles Krance, Routledge, 1996, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Samuel Beckett, *Flötentöne / Mirlitonades* (1977/78), translation from the French to German by Karl Krolow and Elmar Tophoven, Frankfurt am Main 1982, p. 55

Where are they going? They are going wherever they want to go, wherever they need to go, without us knowing, seeing, recognising their destination. Perhaps they are going the wrong way, anyway. Perhaps our first glance is taking us the wrong way. Perhaps the pictures are visual snares, picture traps.

The notion of picture traps is pleasing. The longer it takes root. The longer it draws and moves the gaze. Because it starts to touch upon what happens between us and the pictures, because in the pictures something happens as a picture happening, but not as the possible happening that the picture shows, but what is happening in the showing of something. If that's already happened, the seeing of the showing, then our interest is aroused. Which does not mean, in the commonplace sense, that the pictures would be interesting and we would have fulfilled our duty of judgement in saying so. And would have offended the artist with a commonplace word, there is, after all, scarcely anything more uninteresting than the common interesting. Unlike interest. When it is aroused, something happens: inter-est means, after all, that there is something in between. An in-between between the picture and me, an in-between in the picture itself, just as there is a between-the-lines in texts, what's happening where actually nothing is happening.

Something is happening – and so we fall right into the trap, irrevocably. And we like falling into it, we like being trapped. In the case of Alois Mosbacher.



Nun das Nächste! / Now the next thing!, 2008

NOW THE NEXT THING! There is evidence. We stick to it. There is nothing else one can do. Otherwise we will lose our grip once and for all. Just as, indeed, something unstable lurks enigmatically in Mosbacher's pictures. The evidence then: it's called a game and thus there are rules. This is conspicuous in the "New Order" series, where written game instructions like post-it notes cross the image plane: "NEW INSTRUCTIONS!" it says, for example. Or "WAIT HERE FOR ME!", "TRUST YOUR FEELINGS!", "FETCH HELP!" The instructions seem like an ultimatum – particularly as they are always placed in speech marks, inescapably. Although it remains unclear at whom they are directed: at people who – certainly fictitious – could crop up in the pictures themselves as part of a picture game? Or at the viewer of the picture? What should you do? Because the game that's being played here is one you don't know. It obviously is however really a question of a game, since the rules are formulated in such a way that there could be no doubt that it is indeed a game. Experience tells you that. The game is vague, the rules hard and fast.

It is impossible to escape this curious dialectic. Ludwig Wittgenstein said in his *Philosophical Investigations*: "<But still, it isn't a game, if there is some vagueness in the rules.> – But does this prevent its being a game? – <Perhaps you'll call it a game, but at any rate it certainly isn't a perfect game.> This means: it has impurities, and what I am interested in at present is the pure article. – But I want to say: we misunderstand the role of the ideal in our language. That is to say: we too should call it a game, only we are dazzled by the ideal and therefore fail to see the actual use of the word <game> clearly. [...] For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give the boundary? No. You can draw one: for none has so far been drawn. (But that never troubled you before when you used the word <game>.) <But then the use of the word is unregulated, the <game> we play with is unregulated. – It is not everywhere circumscribed by rules; but no more are there any rules for how high one throws the ball in tennis, or how hard; yet tennis is a game for all that and has rules too."³

So Mosbacher is playing a game with us in which something is ordered in the middle of the order of pictures. He also more or less outlines the scope of the game in "NEW ORDER". "There is no particular sequence to the pictures. The differently colored backgrounds of the panels suggest a different color harmony wherever

they are positioned next to one another. The texts on the bits of paper can also be seen as additional color”, as a notice at the end of the picture series says. Yet another order or instruction. But the rules have been changed by the back door: the rule-notes are now only elements of color, or, as it says, one has the option of seeing the notes as colors. Whereby language is then so to speak struck out by a linguistic meta rule: color composition rather than word composition and word sense. Objectlessness and abstraction instead of narration?

Hence a rule of freedom is given. I can approach the pictures as I wish; I can walk around in the pictures as I wish, as I please, as it pleases me. I can leave it to chance. One thing worth mentioning at this point: the playful element doesn't simply come from Mosbacher being inspired by the computer games that he knows from his children, but rather because he is picking up on the logic of the diverse paths that are possible in computer games. Thus: it comes out of playing games, it goes into playing games. The game comes into play. It comes open when pictures are grouped into constellations – here and there and here again. The pictures are thus configured as variables. The pictures' position and location are set for a particular situation, but the sequence in which they are viewed is open. I can create a picture story for myself. The artist's rules remain defining in the background, guiding me within my freedom: a circumstance that I only notice when I check the routes I have taken through the pictures.

One could always take a different path, directly in reverse or every which way. Just as one enjoyed playing snakes and ladders the wrong way round as a child. It was enjoyable because the rapid ascent that you had happily achieved in the previous game became a quick downward slide in the reversal. Although the board stayed the same.



Whichway, 2008

“CHANGE YOUR HABITS!” Rule 1: you may, you must set the rules for how you view the pictures or picture. My rules are like this: I may, I want to, tell an eerie story, a story that emerges, appears, begins to ensnare me. It's unavoidable. I push caution aside. The uncanny comes anyway, whether I want it to or not. Better to be insightful than careful. Before replying? There are still enough questions left. Mosbacher's pictures do not make me feel at home. Why? The cabins, for example: perhaps they promise security and protection, this might well be the reason why whoever it was designed and patched them together; however, because they stand hidden so furtively in the woods, they seem uncanny to those who come across them unexpectedly.<sup>4</sup> They seem secretive, full of secrets. The French translation of uncanny gives an idea of the meaning: *l'inquiétant*. Alongside the uncanny/secretive, its chief impact finds expression here: the disturbing. Mosbacher's pictures are disturbing. As a rule, in fact, they disturb you.

But why?

Let's stay with the cabins for now. They remind me of a location outside Bern. Until recently, when it had to be cleared, there was a car cemetery, in the middle of a plain, surrounded by farmland, by towering poplars, much like Böcklin's "Isle of the Dead" with its cypress trees. The cemetery had existed since the 1930s, there were still cars there that had been made in 1920; all these vintage cars, some of them once very elegant luxury models, now rusting away. Moss grew on the leather seats; bushes pushed their way in through the windows. This was the situation when Heinrich Gartentor, artist and first unofficial minister of culture in Switzerland<sup>5</sup>, initiated a "National Art Exhibition" at the location, which is called Kaufdorf im Gürbetal. Placed between the car wrecks, the artworks emphasized by contrast the uncanny nature of the place. This uncanniness was no doubt created by the morbidity of the place; even a car cemetery is a cemetery, a place of death.

<sup>4</sup> Sigmund Freud's 1919 essay "Das Unheimliche" ("The Uncanny") gives uncannily exact information about 'Heimliches' (homely, familiar) and 'Unheimliches' (uncanny).

<sup>5</sup> Sidenote: In Switzerland the post of minister of culture does not exist, yet another typically Swiss exception, although one should not assume that this means there is no culture in Switzerland. Thus an initiative group of artists created the post of minister of culture.

Not only do the cars become dying beings, their presence also tells a tale of the death of their former owners, possibly in an accident. They also tell however of lovers' rendezvous, of suicides, of loneliness, conflict, laughter, of long, final journeys. It is the fact that all of these existential situations are not there; it is the fact of their absence that excites the imagination and evokes images that lead into the uncanny. As if it was all suddenly real. The uncanny is not there, it transpires in the mind.

Something similar happens in Mosbacher's pictures. Exactly because nothing is happening, then something happens, could happen, will definitely happen, inevitably, one is just waiting for it to happen, for this incursion into the normal course of things – because here, apparently in passing, is the abnormal.

Suddenly the birds have grown, the delicate, cute blue tits have become monsters, scavengers tearing at civilisation. Heralds of doom. On the hard disks of composted computers, data is saved that will never be read again, that no one will ever want to read again.

“DO NOT LEAVE THE MARKED PATHS!”

Then in the undergrowth, the cabin, the makeshift shack. Shifty: the person who lives in the cabin is bound to come back any minute now, he's just gone to get water. He'll see the intruder as obtrusive, perhaps he'll start swearing and get angry, maybe he'll even pull out a gun that he's been hiding behind his back up till now. Like in the Wild West, where signs stand in front of secluded houses: NOT A STEP FURTHER! LIVE SHOTS WILL BE FIRED! Different laws apply here, ones that you don't know. A sworn community of outsiders lives here. They are outcasts, outlaws, and you secretly hope and pray, if you are one for praying, that they're living in the style of Henry David Thoreau. Then you would have got lucky for once.

“THEY HAVE GONE AWAY!”

But the dogs are roaming around, snapping aggressively.

YOU HAVE LOST!

YOU ARE LOST!

Poisonous substances have oozed into the ground. It stinks to high heaven, like the plague. The ram has yellow eyes like the devil once had.

The shoes dangling from the trees are evidence of a crime, there can be no doubt about it.

You just want to get away from here.

“LEFT AT NEXT FORK!” But there isn't any way, no way out in the spinney. It's like a nightmare, you can't put one foot in front of the other, if you want to turn right the trees spring up wildly as if to order, so you turn left, but the branches thrash you in the face. Straight on. There's someone standing there again. No, he's just going past, on his own. There's another person too. They're walking. Silently. Walkers between the worlds, surely. Between which worlds? Stalkers are at the end of the world, in the end you have entered a film, a protagonist of Tarkowski's film *Stalker*, perhaps on the way to the mysterious “room of wishes” – Sigmund Freud and the uncanny, after all. The suppressed desire for freedom. Is that what creates fear? Is it all far more peaceful, have you entered a Utopian situation that is simply not to be trusted? Has the world changed so much that civilisation as we know it is a thing of the past and the survivors have created a new world, a freer, simpler world? Or is it more like Chernobyl?

YOU ARE SCARED!

No. Yes. In the wrong film. You stand breathless, discovered, luckily: “FETCH HELP!” At last! Is someone fetching help? Or am I supposed to fetch help? But how? I don't even know the rules. I don't know what game is being played with me. Whether I am part of the game. What I have got myself into here.



SNOW, 2008



Nächste Abzweigung links! / Left at next fork!, 2008

“GO BACK TO THE START!”  
“USE YOUR HEAD!”



*Neue Anweisungen! / New instructions!, 2008*

Yes, I've got myself into a pretty kind of game here, a dangerous game. Lost my head a bit in the process. Spaced out. Couldn't see the wood for the trees, or the trees for the wood. Didn't pay attention to the subtlety of the strokes, the refinement of the drawing and the painting with which Mosbacher constructs his worlds; instead, I got tangled up in the lines like a spider's web, in the lines that evoke these images and which played this game with me. Saw real scenes as photographs where drawing or painting is, where black and white or tone-in-tone or the flow of color dominate as pure matter, where in fact there is not even the assertion or suggestion of reality. Where Mosbacher's pictures are actually a self-contained continuation of the long tradition in landscape painting. Where it is in fact apparent, and made apparent, that these are artificial worlds, where houses can fly, do fly, picture worlds which can be torn apart too, right through the middle, it too drawn however and seemingly exposing the paper underneath. And the order notes, while it's true that they are integrated into the drawings, also like a trompe-l'œil, seem precisely for this reason like another level, appearing in front of, and over, the landscapes and with their own texture, text, sign, arrow, direction:  
THERE'S A WAY THROUGH!

OUT OF THE PICTURE!  
ON TO THE PICTURE!

Locations, systems, orders then. “One wants to say that an order is a picture of the action which was carried out on the order; but also that it is a picture of the action which is to be carried out on the order.”<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein again, on orders and systems with which we have until now complied without thought.

Alois Mosbacher not only constitutes a picture-world within the pictures themselves. By designating the picture-worlds as corresponding installations, blocking the vision here and there, by creating new orders – indirectly new instructions, NEW ORDER – by producing real constellations, he constructs stages. This does not mean that the pictures become stage sets. It's more the case that the word “stage” is yet another game. On Mosbacher's stage there are no performances. There might be a plot and an unwritten, constantly changing dramaturgy: the viewer moving from picture to picture, perhaps going back to take another look at details in a previously viewed picture, a step backwards in front of a picture, stalkers in the exhibition – and then plot number two: the movement of the eyes reading, scanning, recording, seeing, misjudging, perceiving, recognising. So, there might be plots on this stage that isn't a stage. However, what unfolds are not given performances but emerging imaginations: the installation of the pictures is a stage for imaginations, creates stimuli for imaginations, enables the freedom of the imagination, the illusion, the associations, in the picture, from picture to picture.

Rule 2. Is to be careful. After the first glance.

Careful. Of the quick glance.

Careful: don't be scared. Of the question.

It is allowed to remain.

Does the question remain?

BACK TO THE PICTURES?

THERE'S A WAY THROUGH!

TRUST YOUR FEELINGS!

USE YOUR HEAD!

NO ENDGAME!

START HERE!