

The Wonderbox: Curious Histories of How to Live

Review Number:

1306

Publish date:

Thursday, 23 August, 2012

Author:

Roman Krznaric

ISBN:

9781846683930

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£14.99

Pages:

368pp.

Publisher:

Profile Books

Publisher url:

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

James G. R. Cronin

How should we live? Roman Krznaric, in *The Wonderbox: Curious Histories of How to Live*, tackles a question as old as civilization itself from a position more fundamental than philosophy, religion or psychology offer on their own. This position is historical. Krznaric is a flexible cultural thinker and a founding member of The School of Life, based in a small shop in Central London, which takes an activist educational stance. Intrinsically holistic in nature, it offers instruction and inspiration on questions of lifestyle directed by various ideas drawn from philosophy, literature, psychology and the visual arts to expand human potentiality. Indeed, individual book chapters read like potential topics from a possible educational curriculum. During a varied career, Krznaric has acted as advisor to international organisations, including Oxfam and the United Nations, on the practice of empathy to promote social and cultural change. He argues that promotion of empathy is central to personal and communal well-being, thereby, challenging a conventional idea that human beings are essentially self-seeking and self-serving. *The Observer* newspaper has named Krznaric one of Britain's leading contemporary lifestyle philosophers. His text is shot through with insights gleaned from a spectrum of careers he has pursued, from gardener to academic, thereby grounding his philosophical position in experiential learning and reflective practice. This stance, which significantly informs his project, acknowledges contingency as an agent at work in the process of historical subjectivity.

It's an intriguing idea to recall the Renaissance *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities, translated here as 'wonderbox', in the book's title. As a forerunner to the modern museum and gallery, historically the *Wunderkammer* reflected its collector's engagement with the world in microcosm through his act of collecting. Through this process, it became a memory theatre. Krznaric's *Wonderbox* functions as a cultural

theatre of memory by assembling a diverse assortment of past lives. Its pages are crammed with inspirational stories: St. Francis of Assisi and George Orwell engaging with lifestyle experiments in empathy; Adam Smith's pin factory and the birth of modern capitalist production; Albert Schweitzer engaging in philanthropic work from a vocational stance; Helen Keller, born deaf and blind, transcending conventional sensory communication; William Morris and his contemporary John Ruskin promoting holistic creativity; or the graphic self-immolation of the Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, performed as a sacrificial act of political activism. Such assemblages demonstrate how historical actors have responded to situations they have found themselves in and how they endeavored to transcend these circumstances.

To Roman Krznaric, a study of human history provides examples of numerous 'curious histories' of almost every possible lifestyle or philosophical premise. In *The Wonderbox*, he convincingly argues that the nature of contemporary Western culture is not intrinsically deterministic, but is inherently contingent on the vicissitudes of history. Our responsibility, as individuals and citizens, is not just to mine the past for inspiration; we also need to assume responsibility for our culturally inherited restrictive or tarnished ambitions and assumptions. Krznaric takes inspiration from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's maxim, 'He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth' (p. xii). Goethe is something of a touchstone for Krznaric, throughout his entire study, partly because this 18th-century poet and philosopher had the courage to abandon his privileged court position at Weimar, in the dead of night, to secretly embark on his Italian odyssey, and partly because Goethe understood that to know oneself requires moving beyond one's own perception to engagement with the world through travel and the pursuit of knowledge. Goethe provides, for Krznaric, the quintessential model of informed action, tempered by judicious reflection. The creative tensions, made manifest through this process, are played out in 12 chapters in this anthology of vignettes drawn from history and brought into dialogue, exemplifying modes of contemporary Western lifestyles: our relationships with one another, with work, with perceptions of time, with the arts and nature, with travel and with attitudes to death. His concluding chapter, calling on Westernised cultures to reassess attitudes towards death and dying, as in his use of 'deathstyle', evoking reaffirming connotations with 'lifestyle', is one of the most thought-provoking and poignant chapters in the book; it starkly portrays how uncomfortable contemporary Westernised societies have become with notions of death and dying and, as a consequence, how culture has become uprooted from a past where death was an acknowledged presence.

Many of us blithely exist within contemporary culture without becoming fully aware of its deeply tangled roots which entwine multiple histories: some clearly apparent, others semi-apparent, and still others forgotten. An interesting example of historical rehabilitation, included by Krznaric in his chapter on empathy, concerns Adam Smith, commonly remembered as the father of capitalism, but rehabilitated here as a prototypical ethical thinker. Economists generally assume that Smith believed that human beings invariably pursue their self-interest. 17 years before the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776, the work for which Smith will always be remembered, Smith wrote another, now largely forgotten book entitled *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* which expounded the world's first fully developed theory of empathy, which at that time was known as 'sympathy' (p. 57). The volume gives examples of how humans naturally step into the shoes of other people, without intending to benefit themselves. Although the 18th century is associated with the emergence of profit-hungry competitive capitalism it also witnessed the beginnings of the first organisations to combat child neglect, slavery, and cruelty to animals. Indeed, contemporary studies in evolutionary biology and neuroscience are beginning to support sentiments advocated by Smith in the 18th century. Historical rehabilitation, as exemplified by this example, demonstrates a need to continually challenge accepted beliefs enshrined in canonical historical narratives.

A leitmotif threading through *The Wonderbox* posits that a destabilising discontent lies at the core of contemporary Western culture. Roman Krznaric, by peeling back layers of deposited historical narratives, encourages his readers to become aware of the historically constructed nature of culture and how these traces continue to resonate through linguistic and cultural discourse. Two of the most salient ways he does this is by unearthing multiplicities of experience as embodied through language and the visual arts. Traditional historians, educated in archival history, are frequently uncomfortable with 'reading' the visual arts as analogous to documentary sources because such analysis frequently requires familiarity with disciplinary art

history. The interdisciplinary method Krznaric adopts demonstrates the usefulness of the visual arts not merely for echoing, but for amplifying historical traces through documentary evidence.

Cultural discourse is drenched in historical memory. For example, understandings of love and friendship in contemporary Western culture are now linguistically one-dimensional, argues Roman Krznaric, in comparison to the nuanced understandings of the ancients. Classical Greece, he argues, linguistically differentiated six different kinds of love, of which only one, *Eros*, resembled contemporary romantic love. These linguistic nuances spoke of *Philia* as the love between family and friends. *Agape* was understood as love selflessly extended to one's whole community. *Pragma* was understood as the mature love found between long-term partners. *Philauteo*, love of oneself, was seen as fundamental to being able to give love to others. Even flirtatious banter should not be dismissed out-of-hand because even the ancient Greeks valued such playful affection as *Ludus*. In the visual arts, the Renaissance iconography of the Garden of Love, featured in a portrait of a married couple, painted by the Dutch master Frans Hals in 1622 (p. 19), illustrates the quiet revolution in European marriage led by the Dutch during the 17th century. Similar to networks of relationships, the perception of time is a cultural construction enfolding multiple linguistic histories. Krznaric argues that contemporary anxiety with notions of the temporal, most notably in Westernised cultures, is psycholinguistically imprinted by socio-economic displacement, initially occurring in Britain during the first Industrial Revolution of the 18th century, and accelerating with the adoption of Fordism as an industrial processing model in North America during the early 20th century. Through these movements, the meaning and value of time became increasingly laden with symbolic capital as it took on the discourse of the commercial marketplace. A measure of just how deeply the discourse of the marketplace permeates contemporary culture is illustrated through a consideration of the iconography of money. The reverse of the sterling 20-pound note depicts Adam Smith in profile, set against his pin factory, bearing the caption: 'The division of labour in pin manufacturing and the great increase in the quantity of work that results' (pp. 82–3). In terms of a history of the senses, Western culture has come to be dominated by ocularcentrism, or the privileging of vision, since the 15th century. In visualising the senses, Krznaric chooses an anatomical illustration from the *Margarita philosophia* (1503), an illustrated encyclopedia widely used as a university textbook in 16th-century Germany. It illustrates how the outer senses of hearing, vision, taste and smell all meet in the *sensus communis* or 'common sense' in the front ventricle (p. 155). While the anatomy of the five senses has been challenged in recent centuries by biological sciences, the term 'common sense' has nevertheless remained in popular parlance to describe innate good decision-making. Krznaric cites Marshall McLuhan's eloquent quotation interpreting the seismic cultural impact of Johannes Gutenberg's innovation, around 1439, of moveable type print as 'a "twist for the kaleidoscope of the entire sensorium"', sparking a communications revolution "in which the eye speeded up and the voice quieted down"...' (p. 162). A second catalyst privileging vision was the Protestant Reformation in the 16th and 17th centuries. Reforms included a liturgical ban on burning sweet smelling incense in churches. The empiricism of the Enlightenment project further associated a sense of vision with objective understanding. In this, the Enlightenment still continues to resonate.

In order for us to culturally step outside our received histories we need not only to become aware of how linguistic histories came into being, but to begin a process of deliberately reprogramming our discourse. Roman Krznaric proposes suggestions as to how this may be achieved at the end of each of his 12 chapters. For example, the Balinese escape the tyranny of a linear concept of time by seeing it as a wheel. Liturgical time has a cyclical nature. The meditative practices of Zen Buddhism offer its exponents opportunities to replace the predominant perception of linear accelerated time, dominating secular cultures, with the slow time experiences of mindfulness. Placing received metaphors under scrutiny and experimenting with new ones potentially sets up a different dynamic as regards understanding our relationships with a dominant discourse. What would be the implications of thinking about leisure time as 'time on' rather than as 'time off'? Krznaric asks, intriguingly (p. 113). Travel is often linguistically framed as a form of escape. We speak of 'getaway' holidays offering relief from everyday domestic and work pressures (p. 202). He surveys a spectrum of journeying experienced across human history in the form of nomadic wanderings, pilgrimage, tourism and exploration. He urges his readers to discursively reframe their experiences of travel as integral to their lives as 'time on' rather than as 'time off' (p. 203). He advocates reconnecting with our inherent

ecological selves, succinctly encapsulated this quotation from a New England philosopher: “In Wilderness is preservation of the World”, wrote Thoreau, “Yes of the world. But also of ourselves” (p. 226). Taken together, the final section of the book, urging reconnections with the natural environment as expressed through biophilia, with belief systems and with our inherent creativity and imagination, offers to us the potential to re-imagine our circumstances. The word ‘luxury’ derives from the Latin for abundance. In consumer societies we have been taught to think of it simply in material terms, but we could reframe it as pertaining to lifestyle. Through history applied to lifestyle the reader is invited to step outside received cultural discourses to imagine alternative futures.

Postmodernist discourse has ruptured long-established canonical narratives of teleological progression; an aspect of its continuing legacy places an emphasis on the condition of human history as one marked by particularity and incompleteness. As a project of ‘applied history’ (p. xi), Roman Krznaric crosses into territory occupied by Alain de Botton and Theodore Zeldin in the popular imagination. While the majority of historical lives cited in the book are well known to students of history and the general reader, nevertheless, individually, these lives are often treated in much too cursive a fashion. In keeping with such a vast project, where any single chapter topic has potential to become a study in itself, the reader is frequently left with an impression that historical lives have been selected for inclusion so as to illustrate a particular philosophical position or lifestyle choice promoted by the author. In this respect, the project’s title perfectly encapsulates its author’s thematic emphasis on acts of historical excavation of lived experiences to illuminate, for his readers, alternative ways of being in the world. At times, the work exudes a prophetic polemic. Its clarion call to acknowledge history, but not to be bound by it, broadly reminds this reviewer of the thesis proposed in Paul Ricoeur’s *magnum opus* entitled *Memory, History, Forgetting* (1) in which this interdisciplinary thinker, working at the edges of history, philosophy and theology, proposes that the act of forgetting is linked to memory and faithfulness to the past remembered without anger and prejudice. If there is one abiding lesson to be drawn from *The Wonderbox* it is this: to be open to alternative futures one needs to become aware of multiple pasts.

Notes

1. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago, IL, 2006).[Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jan/13/wonderbox-roman-krznaric-review> [2]

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-wonderbox-curious-histories-of-how-to-live-by-roman-krznaric-6291819.html> [3]

Financial Times

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/00c926ae-36ca-11e1-9ca3-00144feabdc0.html> [4]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1306>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/29708>

[2] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/jan/13/wonderbox-roman-krznaric-review>

[3] <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-wonderbox-curious-histories-of-how-to-live-by-roman-krznaric-6291819.html>

[4] <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/00c926ae-36ca-11e1-9ca3-00144feabdc0.html#axzz24MYYWCMT>