



The Missed

Evental Aesthetics

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Evental Aesthetics

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The Missed

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Introduction

Mandy-Suzanne Wong

Joanna Demers

"There is what happens, and what does not happen."¹ For the young protagonist of Terry Pratchett's *Nation* (2008), what does or does not happen trumps the "should," simply because the should is an ideal, and what actually occurs (or not) are concrete particulars with tangible, sometimes painful, consequences. The protagonist, a boy forced into adulthood all too quickly, meditates on this. He takes control of the should, which in certain contexts may be known as destiny.

Does not happen, he thought, and the words became a declaration of triumph and defiance. "Does not happen," he said, and the words got bigger and dragged him to his feet, and "Does not happen!" he shouted at the sky. "Does not happen!"²

The fact that not everything that seems as though it ought to happen is in fact inevitable, is reassuring to this frightened child. He invokes "Does not happen!" as a self-empowering mantra throughout his ordeals: as evidence of contingency and possibility, the does-not-happen as failure of the should, as unrealized potential and missed opportunity, is also new opportunity.

Examples abound in aesthetic and philosophical literature. Take this one: certain sounds fail to happen; others, typically unnoticed, come to attention in the so-called silence (John Cage). Conformity does not happen, an exception occurs: this is the happening of truth (Alain Badiou). An atom fails to realize its inexorably downward course. As a result, it collides with other atoms, forming the macroscopic beings that occupy our world (Lucretius).

But failed occurrences, thwarted preparations, can also be destructive, negative, and fatal. Pratchett's young man knows this, but only in a way that he cannot articulate except with anger and hard work, exhausting work, insistent efforts to preserve and grow and reconstruct himself in the aftermath of trauma.

More examples: an encounter does not happen ("Father, can't you see I'm burning?") – the missed encounter here is an encounter with the Real, the trauma and desire that drives human existence and psychology (Jacques Lacan).³ Another example: determination does not happen, discernment cannot happen; so what is left is "pure being," which is merely and powerfully nothing (G.W.F. Hegel). Consider, as well, the failure of best-laid plans, on which one has built all of one's hope, one's very life: the resultant disorder, the giving up that causes one, some one, to fade or violently excise oneself from the world (Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Verdi's *Rigoletto*).

From still other points of view, the contributors to the second issue of *Evental Aesthetics* explore the productivity and negativity of unrealized potential and missed opportunity. But we'd like to note that the coalescence of the articles around this disconcerting theme happened virtually by chance. An open call for papers opened unexpectedly upon a diffuse preoccupation, among surprisingly dispersed and disassociated thinkers, with the does-not-happen in a plethora of forms. Missed encounters, failures to acknowledge, failures of coherence, silence as the failure of speech...: these became opportunities for our contributors to espy and remark upon aesthetic and philosophical questions.

The *Collision*, an encounter with aesthetic phenomena in which questioning is paramount and answering does not (necessarily) happen, turned out to be a popular and effective venue for the overlooked. Isabel Sobral Campos deploys this new genre of brief but potent, speculation in a reflection on Johan Grimont's various methods of appropriation in his

filmic history of hijacking. She wonders if all forms of appropriation might harbor streaks of violence, as a result of which coherence, identity, and the sense of possessing a home, cannot happen.

In a moving encounter with the work of H el ene Cixous and the video artist Zineb Sedira, Anna R adstr om wades and wanders through, takes apart and rebuilds the word "passage." Treating the word as both a landscape and a quasi-organic body, R adstr om finds that, rendered in French and split in two, "*pas sage*" connotes the unwise or misbehaving, the failure to make a good decision: rationality does not happen. Rethought, however, the same word suggests an opportunity to remedy its own negativity, to take "*un pas sage*," a wise step.

Rich Andrew delves into the ways in which Facebook's aesthetic machinations both elicit the bad behavior inherent in human nature – our exclusionary and cliquish tendencies, our worship of beauty and social connections – and cultivate new pathologies. The editing mechanism that Andrew deftly identifies, the habit of responding "Fine" to any "How are you?" no matter how insincerely posed, evaporates on Facebook. While such responses might evince an inability to be true to ourselves, Andrew argues that they at least demonstrate an awareness of others, a humility in which we distinguish between that which we want to share because of its importance, and that which we can silently bear on our own. Facebook, in contrast, has transformed us into exhibitionists of the first order, because we not only presume that our supposed friends care what we ate for breakfast or which song we listened to on the way to work, but because we also become fans pandering to others' trivialities. In the process, Andrew argues, we miss perhaps the most important opportunity of all – the face-to-face encounter.

Tom Betteridge and Magdalena Wisinowska present longer evaluations of the productive and destructive potential of the missed. Betteridge demonstrates the power of silence and nothingness as he tackles one of the most challenging aspects of Alain Badiou's philosophy: his simultaneous fidelity to and rejection of Heidegger's thought. According to Badiou, Heidegger strongly implies an equation of philosophy and poetry, and remains enslaved to a conception of Being as presence. Contrastingly, in the work of Paul Celan, Badiou finds poetry that enacts the *inability* of poetry to think Being as presence. By posing questions about Being in poems built from "cut" language – from words and phrases sundered by violent hesitations and intrusive silences – Celan implies that

it is the *failure* of language that authentically articulates Being. In other words, the truly effective ontology is driven by Nothing, by silence and the void. Badiou therefore reads Celan's work as a counterargument and conclusion (in the sense of a continuation that culminates in a cessation) of Heidegger's.

Reading Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* through the tenebrous lens of Ingmar Bergman's *Through a Glass Darkly*, Wisniewska demonstrates how an excessively rigid sense of morality – which goes so far as to divinize the concept of “the right thing” – may actually prevent ethical behavior, causing opportunities for reconciliation and forgiveness to be passed over. Instead, Wisniewska suggests (in provocative contrast to Betteridge), the reciprocal recognition implicit in acts of forgiveness and dialogue is what is most important and productive. Indeed, for Hegel it is here, in the successful, mutually attentive encounter, that God is to be found – not in a reified idea.

The upshot of any reflection on missed opportunities is that they expose the question of fate. To what extent are missed opportunities truly missed, rather than simply hiccups on an inevitable march toward a preordained goal? We think here of an antipode to Pratchett's hopeful and empowering story: Krzysztof Kieślowski's film *Blind Chance* (1981), in which a single character leads three seemingly unrelated existences. The tragedy of *Blind Chance* is its suggestion of the unavoidability of fate: regardless of the political or romantic opportunities that he heeds or overlooks in all three universes, the protagonist comes up against the same kind of alienation. And when he finally approaches some sense of liberation, of being his own man, misfortune cuts his life short. The question is, then, where, if anywhere, does the power of contingency lie? To what does “the necessity of contingency” (a Hegelian turn of phrase) refer: the necessity that contingency, perhaps in the form of opportunity seized or missed, disrupt apparently inevitable courses; or the subordination of contingency to necessity, the illusory masking of a hopelessly teleological existence by necessity itself disguised as opportunity? Sadly, reflections on prior events or extant aesthetic works cannot provide answers to this question, only dangle the question itself before us in cold, effulgent light.

• Notes •

¹ Pratchett, Terry. *Nation* (London: HarperCollins, 2008), 72.

² *Ibid.*, 73.

³ Freud, Sigmund. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vols. 4 and 5* (London: Hogarth, 1953), 256-57.

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