

INTRODUCTION

Learning from the Future

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The Theft of the Present

In the era of globalisation, technological mediation, live coverage and endless connectivity, we may be embarrassed to catch ourselves thinking that time is out of joint. The speed and complexity of the globalised world induces effects of de-synchronisation and of structural jet-lag: we are systematically behind schedule and getting up to date; being synchronised with the present is a real challenge. Loaded with, and addicted to, technological gadgets of all kinds—whose alleged *raison d'être* is to help us save time, though they end up costing much more of it—we are tendentially out of synch and out of breath. The management of time in our world is based on the short-circuiting of presence and proximity, which gets perversely marketed as a form of live, constant and instant interconnection.

The unhinging of temporal continuity is linked to the political economy of advanced capitalism, which spins around the imperative: 'I shop, therefore I am'. This consumerist injunction supports a system that saturates our social interchanges with quantitative accumulation of commodities, rather than qualitative modes of relations. It also suspends active desire and replaces it with the stupor induced by the addictive pursuit of commodified non-necessities: repetitions without difference. The cycle of presence—absence of fulfilment sets the frame for the de-synchronisation of lived time, or the suspension of the present. This schizoid loop generates the contradictory affects that are integral to our social system, namely a manic-depressive, bulimic-anorexic cycle of frenzy and fear, euphoria and paranoia. These extremes being per definition mutually exclusive, they leave us no middle ground but keep us swirling. Being kept hanging on is not only addictive, it is also intrinsically frustrating: it defers pleasure to an ever-receding 'later' moment. The continuous present of eternal consumption leaves us suspended somewhere between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' of unfulfilled desire. It is an essentially pornographic regime of serial repetitions without release, which leaves us wanting for more and thus unsettled and unhappy in the here and now of a no (wo)man's land.

Being nothing more than this all-consuming entropic energy, advanced capitalism lacks the ability to create anything new: it can merely promote the recycling of spent hopes and repackaged longings. Biogenetic capitalism is a hybridising machine driven by entropic power: it simultaneously establishes new hegemonies and denies the structural power differentials that constitute them. It lacks both visionary insight and genuine powers of invention. It has no blueprint for the future because it is not grounded anywhere. It coincides with the turbulent, homogenising flows of capital that market hybridity and differences for the sake of profit. Perennially fragmenting and splintering, it spins into a void, setting the mood for capitalism as schizophrenia.

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By extension, this means that the key idea of 'feminist time-lines' or 'generations of feminists' finds itself caught in the system of capitalist consumption, which trades on youth, body fitness and beauty with unprecedented violence. New social hierarchies are established, based on sexual attractiveness, perfect health and Eurocentric standards of beauty. The myth of global girlhood and the dictum 'you can never be too thin or too rich' rages through the rank and file of our anorexic social order, leaving the younger generations gasping for air. While ageing is criminalised as a social disease and the fantasy of being forever young dominates popular culture, within the feminist communities other traditions and modes of inter-generational relationality are being experimented with. The question of how to actualise and explore these alternative modes of relation and resistance to the theft of the present is central to the essays assembled in this special issue. The assumption that underscores them all is that we need to be more creative in thinking communities along the lines of non-linearity and social sustainability, so as to pursue an effective form of inter-generational justice. The challenge for us consists in finding ways to conceptualise and represent the continuity and connection across the generations in a manner that is adequate to the radicalism of the feminist movement. This is one way of resisting the present; or rather, the theft of it.

Feminist Time, Again

Feminism since post-structuralism has settled into a family quarrel with both the notion of the linearity of time and the possibility of a specific women's time (as argued by Claire Colebrook in this issue). In feminist philosophy, much emphasis was placed on the circular and cyclical nature of women's embodied temporality and on its many variations according to ethnicity, age and class. In more sociological terms, the debate has focused on the extent to which the fragmented and repetitive nature of women's time can be said to be organised by a social division of labour that confines women to repetitive and menial tasks. Two key issues are at stake in this debate: knowledge transfer and the transmission of the cultural and political memory of the women's movement. These issues are discussed in a variety of powerful ways in the different essays that compose this special issue.

Linearity is problematic also for methodological and strategic reasons, in that it is a very inadequate way of accounting for intergenerational relations among feminists. Central to the issue is the zigzagging nature of feminist time-lines, cultural memories and political genealogies. If it is patently false to assume a notion of continuity based on a chronological '*crescendo*' between those who came before and those who come after 'the' event that is feminism, it is not very easy to challenge the hierarchical relationships that are socially predicated on this very chronological scale. Social stratification and power relations in our culture follow a sort of gerontocratic structure, which is especially potent in the transmission and communication of knowledge. This is evident in the case of the continuing influence and media presence of major feminist icons from the second wave. The case of Germaine Greer is emblematic, as is paradoxically enough, that of her nemesis Arianna Stassinopoulos, who has even outclassed Greer in terms of influence and visibility in her more recent reincarnation as Arianna Huffington, the Western world's most influential blogger. It is indeed difficult to get past (some of) the second wavers.

The linear, sequential vision of what happens in the space between women promotes a specific political economy of affects, one that pushes us alternatively to

nostalgia or to envy, in a continuous scale of emotions, degrees of identification and speeds of e-motion. On the one hand, the emphasis on the 'authentic' experience of the pioneers of the 1970s movement shows a tendency to a nostalgic attitude that upholds the authority of the past. On the other, there is no underestimating the alienation many baby-boomers may feel from the youth culture of today and its body-politics. If many of the younger feminists cannot help thinking that they were born too late and long for the political intensity of the 1960s and 1970s, the older ones wonder how they can find a place in the altered social landscapes of today, dominated as they are by neo-liberalism and perennial warfare. The envy factor is neither one-dimensional nor uni-directional: it spills all over the place. The best antidote to it is an anti-Oedipal brand of feminism (as argued by Iris van der Tuin in this issue).

It is against this vicious circle of pluriform and ever-spinning envy and against the short-circuiting desire in the actual *here and now* that I want to posit active processes of becoming as the antidote. We need flows of empowering desire that mobilise the subject and activate him/her out of the gravitational pull of addictive consumption and coercive frustration. Resistance to the present takes place from within by fighting stasis and yet fighting velocity. What gets reconstructed through this political struggle is the window of opportunity through which the social seeds of hope can be spread. Hope for change and transformations for mobility and becomings—that is to say, for sustainable futures—is the key to twenty-first-century affirmative feminist politics (as argued by Angela McRobbie in this issue).

Feminist Space, Revisited

A systematic kind of 'time travel' affects the production and circulation of feminist theories. Travelling theories are central to the political economy of feminist genealogies (as argued by Hemmings in this issue).

The feminist method of the politics of location is central to this debate, in that it provides the means both to explore the need for and to experiment with alternative representations of our shifting social locations and the kind of hybrid mix we are in the process of becoming. The politics of location refers to a way of making sense of diversity among women within the category of gender of sexual difference. The method aims at achieving epistemological and political accountability by unveiling the power locations which one inevitably inhabits as the site of one's subject-position. The practice of accountability (for one's embodied and embedded locations) as a relational, collective activity of undoing power differentials is linked to two crucial notions: memory and narratives. They activate the process of putting into words, that is to say bringing into symbolic representation, that which by definition escapes self-representation and can only be disclosed by the active intervention of others. Charts of these 'politics of locations' are cartographies of power that go beyond genealogical self-narratives and express a view of subjectivity that is relational and outside-directed. This is expressed through *conceptual personae* or figurations. *Conceptual personae* or feminist figurations are ways of situating and framing the feminist subject position and its political and epistemological practices. Significant examples are provided by the contributors to this issue and range from the very notion of a feminist subject of knowledge to a nomadic, queer, cyborg, transnational or third-wave subject position. Figurations are materialist cartographic mappings of situated, that is, embedded and embodied, positions. A cartography is a theoretically

based and politically informed reading of the present. As such it responds to my two main requirements: namely, to account for one's locations in terms both of space (geo-political or ecological dimension) and time (historical and genealogical dimension); and to provide alternative figurations or schemes of representation for these locations, in terms of power as restrictive (*potestas*) but also empowering or affirmative (*potentia*). I consider this cartographic gesture to be the first move towards an account of feminist subjectivity as ethically accountable and politically empowering. A figuration renders our image in terms of a de-centred and multilayered vision of the subject as a dynamic and changing entity. It is a dramatisation of processes of becoming (as argued by Sally Macarthur in this issue). The definition of his/her identity takes place in between nature/technology; male/female; black/white; in the spaces that flow and connect such seeming binaries. We live in permanent processes of transition, hybridisation and nomadisation. And these in between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation, precisely because they are zigzagging, not linear and process-oriented, non-concept-driven.

Feminist Time-loops

The scrambling of feminist time-lines today, according to the schizoid logic of advanced capitalism, takes different but significant forms. Splinters of archaism are mixed up with the most advanced social, urban, technological and cultural developments, to produce the paradox of simultaneously opposite social effects. In a global context of warfare, structural injustices and environmental depletion, the local and the global are shot through with internally contradictory interrelations and temporal convergences. The geo-political situation of women across this chequered landscape is as polarised as ever. The alleged 'clash of civilisations' is postulated and fought out on women's bodies as bearers of authentic ethnic identity and as indicators of the stage of development of their respective civilisation fault-lines. The Burka-clad bodies of the Afghan women are set in polar opposition to the allegedly liberated Western women in a specular game of mutually incompatible models. The political climate today favours an ideology that opposes 'our women' (Western, Christian, white or 'whitened' and raised in the tradition of secular Enlightenment and hence liberated) to 'their women' (non-Western, non-Christian, mostly not white and not whitened, as well as alien to the Enlightenment tradition and hence still backwards and in need of ever more coercive forms of 'liberation').

In a global context of racism and xenophobia, this type of gender politics results in mutual and respective claims about authentic and unitary female identity on the part of the 'liberated' West and of its allegedly traditionalist opponents. Both reduce to silence and invisibility the patient and pragmatic work accomplished by the women's movements over the last 30 years, also and especially in the non-Western world, such as the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA).

Conservative political leaders abuse feminism as a pretext to launch their commercially driven wars of conquest. The political discourse that circulates in the global economical world disorder re-essentialises the specificity of women's condition as the terrain on which power politics is fought. Sexual difference has returned on the world stage in a fundamentalist and reactionary version, reinstating a worldview based on colonial lines of demarcation and Cold-War-style binary politics.

Another perverse time-loop is the issue of feminist secularism: it is as if some Western feminists had fallen into nightmares of their own, reliving the memories of their

own struggles against the Christian and mostly Catholic Church on the back of the Muslim headscarves debate, or the never-ending discussions about the veil. While all the emphasis is on the Muslim religious revival, far too little attention is paid to the over-zealous Christian fundamentalists whose influences on campuses throughout the United States (Harding 2000) as well as in the developing world (Moore 2007) is fast-rising. We need to reconsider this unbalanced approach. Because the clash of civilisation is Islamophobic in character and because it contains an explicit message about the status of women and gays regarding degrees of tolerable emancipation, no feminist today can be secular in a simple or self-evident manner. An unreflective and normative attachment to secularism runs the risk of complicity with anti-Islam racism and xenophobia. Recognising that the specific configuration of these religious movements is a product of advanced global economies and not the return of a semi-forgotten past would be a step in the right direction: it would synchronise us with the present.

Another remarkable time-loop is the specific type of historical amnesia and the memory lapses induced by feminist neo-liberalism and by right-wing feminism. Considering financial success or high status as the sole indicator of the status of women, neo-liberal feminists celebrate the global value of profit as the motor of women's progress. This implies a complete disregard not only of any sense of a common connection to other women but also of the basic social democratic principle of solidarity, which are dismissed as old-fashioned and parasitic. As a result, this position supports some formidable reinventions of tradition, which take the form of ignorance of the history of women's struggles and of feminist genealogies. This is expressed, for instance, in the transformation into feminist heroines of women who had explicitly chosen to keep distant from the women's movements in the radical years. This approach has its creative moments, when a posteriori feminist credentials are granted to strong individual personalities, mostly women artists, like Louise Bourgeois, Yoko Ono, Madonna, or to public figures who happen to be women, like Madeleine Albright, Benazir Bhutto, Mother Teresa or Princess Diana. When it comes to a reappraisal of right-wing or fascistic figures such as Leni Riefenstahl or Evita Peron, however, I start to get edgy. The most contemporary version of this phenomenon is provided by the American Republican Vice-President nominee Sarah Palin, who became an overnight sensation with the aggressive, Karl Rove-inspired one-liner: 'God, Guns and Lipstick'. Not unlike Margaret Thatcher, Palin fits into a well-established lineage of right-wing women who play the card of tough femininity with great confidence. The comparison with left-leaning feminist candidates is staggering. Neither Angela Merkel nor Hillary Clinton ever managed to find the right balance between aggressiveness and femininity. Merkel is rather shy and body-conscious, so she always strikes a girly look, though she is a superb and tough politician. Hillary Clinton can never appear as convincingly feminine, no matter how much she sticks to her man and defends family values. In a perverse twist to gender politics, a hard right-wing message is being drilled into millions of Americans by an embodied female candidate whose appeal rests on the ease with which Palin perpetuates a proto-camp variation of the feminine masquerade: 'good mum, great shoot, nice shoes'. Gender is a vector that conveys right-wing conservative values of the worst kind.

In this context, squashed between a stolen present and a frozen past, the only possible source of inspiration is the future itself. This means that the conditions for renewed political and ethical agency cannot be drawn from the immediate context or the current state of the terrain. They have to be generated affirmatively and creatively by

efforts geared to creating possible futures, by mobilising resources and visions that have been left untapped and by actualising them in daily practices of interconnection with others. Gatens and Lloyd (1999) rightly call them: 'collective imaginings'.

Sustaining Possible Futures

This project requires more visionary power or prophetic energy, qualities which are neither especially in fashion in academic circles nor highly valued socially in these times of commercial globalisation. Yet the call for more vision is emerging from many quarters in critical theory. Cornell West (1994) and bell hooks (1990), for instance, argue eloquently for prophetic criticism, as do Hardt and Negri (2000) in their call for more conceptual creativity and visionary passion.

Feminists have a long and rich genealogy in terms of pleading for increased visionary insight. From the very early days, Joan Kelly (1979) typified feminist theory as a double-edged vision, with a strong critical and an equally strong creative function. Faith in the creative powers of the imagination is an integral part of feminists' appraisal of lived embodied experience and the bodily roots of subjectivity, which would express the complex singularities that feminist women have become. This visionary dimension is alive and well not only in the formidable tradition of feminist theology and spirituality, and in the environmental and ecological feminist movements, but also in epistemology and social theory. Donna Haraway's work (1997, 2003) provides the best example of this kind of respect for a dimension where creativity is unimaginable without some visionary fuel. Theories of sexual difference, with Irigaray and beyond, have always emphasised a materialist, evolutionary dimension to the feminist project (see Parisi in this issue).

Prophetic or visionary minds are thinkers of the future. The future as an active object of desire propels us forth and motivates us to be active in the here and now of a continuous present that hangs on in between the 'no longer' and the 'not yet' of conspicuous consumption. The yearning for sustainable futures can construct a liveable present. This is not a leap of faith but an active transposition, a transformation at the in-depth level (Braidotti 2006). A prophetic or visionary dimension is necessary in order to secure the one element that advanced capitalism is systematically depriving us all of: the present, as the launching pad for sustainable becoming or transformations. A qualitative and creative leap induced by a prophetic, visionary dimension is the only way to repair and compensate that which we are running out of: time, breath and inspiration.

It is a present-based practice, which reactivates both past and present into producing sustainable possible futures. The future is the virtual unfolding of the affirmative aspect of the present, which honours our obligations to the generations to come. This project acts as an equaliser among generations.

The pursuit of humble practices of hope, rooted in the ordinary micro-practices of everyday life, is a simple strategy to hold, sustain and map out sustainable transformations. The motivation for the social construction of hope takes place for no reason at all, other than profound responsibility and accountability. A fundamental gratuitousness and a profound sense of grace (as argued by Patricia MacCormack in this issue) is part of it. Hope is a way of dreaming up possible futures: an anticipatory virtue that permeates our lives and activates them. It is a powerful motivating force grounded not only in social and political utopias but also in the political imaginary, unconscious desires, affects and creativity.

Contemporary feminism works towards a more affirmative approach and helps subjects synchronise themselves with the changing world in which they try to make a positive difference. Co-synchronisations constitute communities across generations. Fitting-in-with-the-world in order to help it along the horizon of hope and sustainability expresses an evolutionary talent. It is about the ability to adapt and develop suitable navigational tools within the fast-moving techno-, ethno- and gender-scapes of a globally mediated world. Against the general lethargy on the one hand and the rhetoric of selfish genes and possessive individualism on the other, hope rests with a non-rapacious ethics of joyful insurrection and gratuitous acts of becoming. Resistance is yet to come.

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