

Another Publication
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Transpositions

Sitting on the ruins of the project of postmodernism, half-turned towards a horizon whose contours are anything but definite, the contemporary subject is enclosed in the finite space-time continuum of complex hybridity. Some parts of it resemble Walter Benjamin's angel of history, being blown backwards into a future, while other facets are cyborg-like and thus hang in a continuous present of flux and transformation.

Postmodernism was about the 'return of the others'. Genderisation, racialisation and naturalisation are, in the grand philosophical tradition, the three structural axes of Otherness. They produce the essentialized identities of woman/native/nature, which need to be connected transversally in a series of nomadic lines of inter-connection in order to produce a relevant cartography of identity and power relations. To say that the structural others re-emerge in postmodernity amounts to making them into a paradoxical and polyvalent site. They are simultaneously the symptom of the crisis of the subject, and for conservatives even its 'cause', but they also express positive, that is, non-reactive alternatives. It is a historical fact that the great emancipatory movements of post-modernity are driven and fuelled by the resurgent 'others': the women's rights movement, the anti-racism and de-colonisation movements and the anti-nuclear and pro-environment movements are the voices of the structural Others of modernity. They also inevitably mark the crisis of the former 'centre' or dominant subject-position. In the language of my nomadic subject, they express both the crisis of the majority and the patterns of becoming of the minorities. The whole point about becomings consists in being able to tell the difference between these different flows of mutation. This is an ethical project, which defined ethics as the effort to actualize and endure the affects or passions that enhance a subject's ability to enter into productive social relations or encounters with others. And, conversely, in refusing or rejecting those relations that engender reactive or negative affects or passions. This assumes a vision of the subject as an active or affirmative unit that is defined in the interaction with multiple external and other forces.

The qualitative project, which consists in transforming and cultivating positive affects and relations, differs from the dominant political economy of affects in our culture. Global capitalism translates into quantitative

pluralism: it works by multiplying and distributing differences for the sake of profit. It produces ever-shifting waves of genderisation and sexualisation, racialisation and naturalisation of multiple 'others'. It has thus effectively disrupted the traditional dialectical relationship between the empirical referents of Otherness – women, natives and animal or earth others – and the processes of discursive formation of genderisation/racialisation/naturalisation.

This complicates considerably the cartographic task of producing adequate analyses of power. Take femininity, for instance: it has exploded into a myriad different facets and faces which prevent any unified or essentialized discourse about 'woman'. For instance, the pathetic and despotic face of femininity, in the historical era of advanced technologies, bears a privileged link to whiteness as a term that signifies Sameness and thus indexes access to power and to the structural advantages that being white entails. The convergence between the new media and information technologies and bio-technologies propels a spectral economy that trades with equal nonchalance on corporate brands of gender, queer, multicultural, genetic and posthuman diversity. This results in a planetary circulation of global icons such as the white goddess Princess Diana or the black athlete Michael Jordan, the ubiquitous panda bear, the cosmic dolphin or the blue icon of the planet earth. They become commodities deprived of liberatory potential, and are all the more profitable for it. The circulation of such iconic commodities, albeit non-human ones, within the spectral economy of global transmission supports the global market of Sameness. It is a case of quantitative pluralism, as opposed to qualitative multiplicity, that saturates the social space with a flood of images and representations.

Once the traditional dialectical bond between self and other/sameness and difference is unhinged, advanced capitalism looks like a system that promotes feminism without women, racism without races, natural laws without nature, reproduction without sex, sexuality without genders, multiculturalism without ending racism, economic growth without development, and cash flow without money. Late capitalism also produces fat-free ice creams and alcohol-free beer next to genetically modified health food, companion species alongside computer viruses, new animal and human immunity breakdowns

and deficiencies, and the increased longevity of these who inhabit the advanced world. Welcome to capitalism as schizophrenia.

To translate this into a temporal mode: capitalist saturation of our social space by consumerism steals the present away from us; it deprives us of time, while offering all sorts of technological gadgets that promise to save us time. It is a system that arrests the flows of becoming, freezes the rhizomic propensity for multiple connections and expropriates nomadic intensities through quantitative build-ups of acquired commodities. It produces immobility in the sense of a stasis due to accumulation of toxins in the mode of commodities. It is also a suspension of active desire, in favour of the addictive pursuit of commodified non-necessities. The commodity circulates like a never-dead object of desire within the spectral economy of advanced capitalism. As such, it contracts the space-time continuum of the humanistic world order: it simultaneously embodies the promise of enjoyment and its perennial deferral. The deferred fulfilment, or simultaneous arousal and frustration of desire, means that the commodity embodies futurity, as time stored (future used) or time saved (a productivity enhancer). It follows that commodities become co-extensive with the inner space of subjectivity, as well as the outer space of the market and of social relations. This cycle of presence-absence of fulfilment lies at the heart of the affects induced by this system, namely a manic-depressive cycle of frenzy and fear, euphoria and paranoia. It induces addictive habits of consumption that enslave us and keep us coming back for more. Deleuze and Guattari's critique of capitalism as schizophrenia (1980) analyses the specific temporality of this perverse political economy of induced addiction to commodities. It becomes necessary to develop an ethical and political stance to create forms of resistance that make qualitative distinctions between degrees of involvement with this schizoid political economy.

As I look further into the ever-shifting power relations in the social landscape of the early years of the third millennium, I am struck by the fact that what 'returns' at the end of postmodernism, under the joint impact of advanced information and bio-technologies, is not only the 'others' of the classical subject of modernity: woman/native/nature. What returns now is the 'other' of the living body in its humanistic definition: the other face of *bios*, that is

to say *zoe*, the generative vitality of non-or pre-human, of animal and posthuman life. Accordingly, we are witnessing a proliferation of discourses that take 'Life' as a subject and not as the object of social and discursive practices.

Life is half animal, non-human (*zoe*) and half political and discursive (*bios*). *Zoe* is the poor half of a couple that foregrounds *bios* as the intelligent half; the relationship between them constitutes one of those qualitative distinctions on which Western culture built its discursive empire. Traditionally, self-reflexive control over life is reserved for humans, whereas the mere unfolding of biological sequences is for non-humans. *Zoe* stands for the mindless vitality of Life carrying on independently and regardless of rational control. This is the dubious privilege attributed to the non-humans and to all the 'others' of Man, whereas *bios* refers to the specific social nexus of humans. That these two competing notions of 'life' coincide on the human body turns the issue of embodiment into a contested space and a political arena. The mind-body dualism has historically functioned as a shortcut through the complexities of this question, by introducing a criterion of distinction, which is sexualized, racialized and naturalized. Given that this concept of 'the human' was colonized by phallogocentrism, it has come to be identified with male, white, heterosexual, Christian, property owning, standard language speaking citizens. *Zoe* marks the outside of this vision of the subject, in spite of the efforts of evolutionary theory to strike a new relationship to the non-human. Contemporary scientific practices have forced us to touch the bottom of some inhumanity that connects to the human precisely in the immanence of its bodily materialism. With the genetic revolution we can speak of a generalized 'becoming infrahuman' of *bios*. The category of 'Life' has accordingly cracked under the strain.

'Life' can be a threatening force, which engenders new epidemics and environmental catastrophes blurring the distinction between the natural and the cultural dimensions. The politics of death in our global war on terror are telling: the new forms of warfare and specifically the case of suicide bombers have shifted the status of the human body into that of a non-human killing machine. Equally significant are the changes that have occurred in the political practice of bearing witness to the dead or the suffering as a form of activism:

how motherhood, for instance, has shifted politically from the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo to the Chechnya war widows. The dislocation of gender roles in relation to death and killing is reflected in the image of women who kill, from the recent popular culture revival of Medea and Hecuba to Lara Croft. From a post-human perspective comes the proliferation of viruses, from computers to humans, animals and back. Relevant cultural practices that reflect this changing status of death can be traced in the success of forensic detectives in contemporary popular culture. The corpse is a daily presence in global media and journalistic news, while it is also an object of entertainment. The great epidemics have also returned: some are new, like Ebola, SARS, bird flu; others are more traditional: TB, HIV – so much so that health has become a public policy issue as well as a human rights concern.

The point is that contemporary culture does not function in a linear manner, but is rather web-like, scattered and poly-centred. It is not monolithic, but an internally contradictory process, the effects of which are differentiated geopolitically and along gender and ethnicity lines, to name only the main ones. This creates a number of methodological difficulties for the social critic, because it translates into a heteroglossia of data which makes both classical and modernist social theories inadequate to cope with the complexities. We need to adopt non-linearity as a major principle and to develop cartographies of power that account for the paradoxes and contradictions of the era of globalisation, and which do not take shortcuts through its complexities.

We need to develop some creativity here and invent schemes of thought and figurations that enable us to account in empowering and positive terms for the changes and transformations currently on the way. We already live in emancipated (post-feminist), multi-ethnic societies with high degrees of technological intervention. These are neither simple, nor linear events, but rather multi-layered and internally contradictory phenomena. They combine elements of ultra-modernity with splinters of neo-archaism: high tech advances and neo-primitivism, which defy the logic of the excluded middle. Contemporary culture is unable to represent these realities adequately. It tends to favour instead the predictably plaintive refrains about the end of ideologies, running concurrently with the apology of the 'new'. Nostalgia and hyper-consumerism join hands, under the expressionless gaze of neoliberal

restoration. In ethics, as in many others fields of contemporary social endeavour, we need to learn to think differently about ourselves and our systems of values, starting with adequate cartographies of our embedded and embodied positions.