

In Violence: Three Case Studies Against the Stratum

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Is there a way of writing in violence – but not as negative critique? I want to write – *in violence* – against representation. But I do not want what I write to be *predetermined* by the terms, or rather, the ‘rules’ I attack (the ‘rules of engagement’). I do not want to be *precomprehended* by a system which is put in place through the very act of writing against it.¹

Which is to say I am not, here at any rate, interested in deconstruction. Often, if theorists are not building the edifices of representation (and this architectural project seems to have ended long ago), they are knocking them down. And, if they are already in ruins, as is often the case, they are hanging around – *haunting*, as current vogue has it – those ruins.

I have in mind a different kind of violence. Something more *affirmative*.²

The imagining – perhaps that should be *imaging* – of alternatives. Utopias even. But *not* endlessly deferred ones. No Dying Gods, Fallen Angels or Broken Promises. No more hanging around in Messianic time. Alternatives which have a violent – *forceful* – quality, but which are *creative* rather than *reactive*.

A *productive* violence – if this is not a contradiction in terms (and I do not think it is). A *programmatic* violence, which, if understood – and, more importantly, *acted* upon (*actualised*) opens up spaces and places for a different mode of being. An *ethical* violence even.³

A *natural* violence. The violence of a storm, or of a volcano (*Violence: involving great physical force*). The release of ‘frozen’ energy in a bout of intense activity. The opening up of blocked channels and flows. It is this kind of violence that *creates* new worlds. Winds die down – liquids solidify. New landscapes emerge.

In fact, this is what violence is, and always has been – an endlessly creative force. To see the violence immanent in the stratum is to understand that the two are not dialectically opposed, but are moments, *events*, in the same process. Violence here announces precisely a change in state.

There is no line of flight without a consolidated base. There is no deterritorialisation without a territory. There is no sedimentation without, at first, a flow. *Thinking*

representation in this way – as a solidification (the subject as *stasis*) – opens up the possibility of transformation; of finding escape lines (the subject in *process*). This is *not* a move from the One to the Many (from the Simple to the Complex) – but the theorization of anoriginal multiplicity.⁴

Habitually we figure ourselves as *being* in stasis. We ‘are’ representational creatures. We are subjects in ideology, in language. We are Oedipalised from birth (forced into domestic representations). But we are also constituted by the possibilities of movement. A movement that does violence to our stability, to our very subjectivity.

It is this violence that I am interested in. I want to *do* violence to the *stasis* we freeze ourselves in – to write *in violence* against the *stratum* of (dominant) subjectivity (*Violence: the unlawful exercise of force*). So, below are three lines of flight – three strategic assemblages (three exploratory probes). Incarnated as three *conceptual personnaes*. Three allies against the stratum:

The Buddha. As the one who – *forcefully* – confronts reality – and, in so doing, *becomes* reality. An authenticity emerging from insight into the world. This knowledge – or wisdom – has two aspects. An understanding of the world – of being – as impermanent (as *flux*) – and thus as insubstantial (no being) – and thus as interconnected. And an understanding of how this relates to the human condition (self-knowledge). For the Buddha the self – *stasis* – is a delusion; a formation which is at odds with the world.⁵ This self is characterized by craving (greed) – for existence, permanence, being – and aversion (hatred) for the opposite – ultimately our own death. A whole apparatus – the ego – forms on/around this oscillation. Indeed, our experience of the world is determined by, and structured around, this contradiction of world and ego (hence *dukkha*, translated, approximately, as unsatisfactoriness).

The self is then a *sedimentation* of these habitual volitions. You are what you think.⁶ This is the law of karma (the law of cause and effect applied to physical *and* psychic phenomena).⁷ The Buddha finds a strategy to overcome this contradiction of subject/world (the subject/object split); a way out of the endless round of *rebecoming* – through insight into the true nature of reality (through meditation or otherwise).⁸

Hence we have the Buddha’s account of subjectivity/humanity as consisting of the five *skandhas* (literally heaps – or *assemblages*): of forms, feelings, perceptions or thoughts, choices or volitions, and changing states of consciousness. These categories are essentially processes. Upon examination there is no ‘place’ (no substance) in which the self could reside. The individual is then, spatially speaking, a conglomeration or aggregate, and, temporally speaking, an event, or *heaccity*.⁹ We are not so far from philosophy here (see below). Buddhism, here, offers an alternative system of individuation to that of the dominant order (representation). Buddhism, here, is as an implicit violence against the subject – and against representation.

Furthermore the *skandha*’s, ultimately, are themselves empty. The ‘breaking down’ of the subject into constituent elements is but a first (strategic) practice. As a conceptual account (description) of reality it remains an (intellectual) *interpretation* of reality.¹⁰ Knowledge of the *skandhas* is then ultimately superseded by the realisation

of *śūnyatā* – emptiness. All matter, ultimately, is insubstantial. Or, as quantum theory would have it, all matter is energy. Hence the first couple of verses of *The Heart Sutra*:

The Bodhisattva of Compassion,
When he meditated deeply,
Saw the emptiness of all five skandhas
And sundered the bonds that caused him suffering.

Here then,
Form is no other than emptiness,
Emptiness no other than form.
Form is only emptiness,
Emptiness only form.¹¹

The Buddha sees things as they *really* are. The Buddha overcomes ‘his’ own humanity. But it is an overcoming fraught with danger. The danger of losing your self – of deterritorializing too fast. Enlightenment or schizophrenia? Success relies wholly on the consolidation of a firm base (in Buddhism, meditation and ethics). The Buddha’s path is one of integration *and then* deterritorialization.

The Buddha is in this sense both human and *trans*-human. The Buddha – and even more so the Bodhisattva (the one who, on reaching nirvana elects to *remain* in Samsara for the benefit of all beings) – has a foot in two worlds: the world of conditioned existence (Samsara) and the world of the un-conditioned (Nirvana).¹²

The Artist. As the one who – *forcefully* – *creates* reality. The artist might himself be the art object – might ‘live aesthetically’ (see ‘The Buddha’ above) – but his *role* as artist is the creation of something else, something new. Not *representation* (of something already there) – and no critiques of *representation* either. Art as a map and *not* a tracing (no reliance on a predetermined). Art as precisely experimentation (as Lyotard remarks ‘the artist works *without* rules’).

Art as the *summoning* of other beings – and of other modes of being. The incarnation of other worlds. Here art practice is a hexagram drawn in chalk. Here the artist is a magician – and the spell replaces the image as the artist’s *modus operandi*.

Julia Kristeva gets this right when she reflects on – and writes about – the installation art at the Venice biennale:

In an installation it is the *body* in its entirety which is asked to participate through its sensations, through *vision* obviously, but also *hearing*, *touch*, on occasions *smell*. As if these artists, in the place of an ‘object’ sought to place us in a space at the limits of the sacred, and asked us not to contemplate images but to communicate with beings. I had the impression that the artists were communicating this: that the ultimate aim of art is perhaps what was formerly celebrated under the term of incarnation. I mean by that a wish to make us feel, through the abstractions, the forms, the colours, the volumes, the sensations, a *real experience*.¹³

For Kristeva, as for Deleuze and Guattari, the artist creates a 'bloc of sensations'. A *virtual* object with past history – and future possibilities – locked within. A frozen event. A temporary crystallisation. An independently existing assemblage which can be reactivated by the spectator.

Once reactivated art switches the register; spatially (from God-like to insect-like perspective) and temporally too (time lapse photography to still-life painting – speeding us up/slowing us down). Art focuses on the details *and* the bigger picture. Art takes us out of our own particular space-time. Art switches our co-ordinates.

Here the art object becomes a *devotional* object (a *portal*); not there to be *read* – but there to work back on/to effect the spectator/artist (art as a zone of *transformation*). But, again, the danger of losing it – of moving too fast (or, too slow) – of art deterritorializing into life – or worse, into death (hence the need always for strategic form).

The Philosopher. As the one who creates concepts (Deleuze and Guattari). As the one who experiments and explores the experiments of others (Lyotard). The philosopher here is a space/time traveller.

The philosopher offers a 'way out' *through* thought. A thinking yourself – and your relation to the world differently. Deleuze:

What we're interested in, you see, are modes of individuation beyond those of things, persons, or subjects: the individuation, say, of a time of day, of a region, a climate, a river or a wind, of an event. And maybe it's a mistake to believe in the existence of things, persons, or subjects.¹⁴

Here the philosopher is a guide to another world. Not completely of that world – like the Bodhisattva she lives in this one (she speaks our language). But she understands the *contingency* of this world (and of 'herself'). She is aware of the possibility of other modes of existence. A border guide/guard. Apart of our world and a part from our world.

And the philosopher's danger? Of becoming what she thinks – of crossing all the thresholds (Nietzsche). Of losing her 'self' in a stream of endless becomings. As Deleuze and Guattari say – you need to be able to reassemble yourself by morning...

The philosopher too lodges herself on the stratum. Situates herself (strategically) within representation. But only as a launch pad for the discovery – the exploration – of what lies beyond (*this* world seen differently). The philosopher finds allies from these strange places and spaces – allies which help to write *in violence* against the familiar, against the habitual.

Indeed, the Philosopher, like the artist – like the Buddha – has an existence *in violence* – a violence against the stratum.

¹ And by representation I mean also, and at the same time, any of the *tropes* of representation: ideology, semiotics, etc. Somewhere Lyotard warns about these ‘traps’ of representation. And the tendency for writers who are not ‘up with the traps of representation’ to be seen as naive. Indeed there is always a tendency, in Cultural Studies, as elsewhere, to have what you say/write *squeezed* back into representation. Frederic Jameson, to choose one writer more or less at random, performs this (essentially reductive) operation. Here he is from his afterward to *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: NLB, 1977): ‘Meanwhile poststructuralism has added yet a different kind of parameter to the Realism/Modernism debate...The assimilation of realism as a value to the old philosophical concept of mimesis by such writers as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard or Deleuze has reformulated the Realism/Modernism debate in terms of a Platonic attack on the ideological effects of representation...yet my own feeling is that we will not fully be able to assess the consequences of the attack on representation, and of poststructuralism generally, until we are able to situate it *within the field of the study of ideology itself* [my italics]’, p.199.

The attack on representation – and, presumably the offering up of *alternatives* – will only be ‘understood’ when situated precisely *within* representation (in this case, ideology). Of course this is *not* to suggest that things cannot be *read*. Of course they can. Anything can be *meaningful*. The point is that there are other ways of thinking the world besides representation. Felix Guattari is good on this. Here he is from an interview with Charles J. Stivale (the interview, ‘Pragmatic/Machine’ can be found at <http://www.dc.peacnet.edu/~mnues/guattari.html>):

‘Let us understand each other. The same semiotic material can be functioning in different registers. A material can be both caught in paradigmatic chains of production, chains of signification...but at the same time can function in an a-signifying register. So what determines the difference? In one case, a signifier functions in what one might call a logic of discursive aggregates, i.e. a logic of representation. In the other case, it functions in something that isn’t entirely a logic, what I’ve called an existential machine, a logic of bodies without organs, a machinic of bodies without organs’, p.15.

² This, I take it, is the important business of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brian Massumi (trans.) (London: Athlone, 1988) and Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy*, Iain Hamilton Grant (trans.) (London: Athlone, 1993).

As Lyotard says elsewhere – in reference to the work of the psychoanalyst Anton Ehrenzweig (see ‘Beyond Representation’ in, *The Lyotard Reader*, Andrew Benjamin (trans. and ed.) (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988) – the danger with negative critique is that ‘the thing criticised holds back and even consumes the one who criticises, as Sodom petrified Lot’s wife’, p.155. For Lyotard, as for myself, it is ‘more important to assert what is in fact the case than to deny that things work as others claim or have claimed’, p.155. This essentially *affirmative* task is, as Lyotard – and Ehrenzweig – remark, the ‘artistic point of view’, p.155.

³ An ‘Ethics’ in Spinoza’s sense; an account of reality – and an outline of the appropriate response to this.

⁴ Anoriginal multiplicity. This is mirrored in the natural sciences in the switch from a Newtonian Universe (a *representational* Universe) to one characterized by *complexity*. In terms of the subject it is the move from Cartesian Dualism to something more decentred. This ‘multiple subject’ can be thought as rhizomatic (Deleuze), as a libidinal economy (Lyotard), or as the pre-symbolic matrix/chora (various theorisations from Kristeva to Ettinger). Each of the theorisations have their strategic benefits and inevitable shortcomings. Which is to say they are all approximations.

⁵ Here Buddhism *seems* not so far from Marxism – figured as the *desire* for the end of alienation. Or indeed aesthetics understood as the promise of a (temporary) end to the subject/object split (reconciliation). Adorno – the Frankfurt School in general – are involved in exploring these two – a pursuit which Gillian Rose has given a good name: the *melancholy science* – for here, the desire is always already frustrated, the promise broken. Derrida and DeMan extend this project (deconstruction) but do not – indeed cannot – alter the temporal parameters of the project – a project we might name here as the Unfinished project of modernity.

⁶ Or, to put it another way – and thinking about *relativity* – you create your Universe through your desires and aversions (your ego).

⁷ Henri Bergson makes exactly the same point in *Matter and Memory* (New York: Zone Books, 1991). Here he is from the introduction: ‘But through this complexity, which is due to the complexity of reality itself, we believe that the reader will find his way if he keeps a fast hold on the two principles which we have used as a clue throughout our own researches. The first is that in psychological analysis we must never forget the utilitarian character of our mental functions, which are essentially turned towards action. The second is that the habits

formed in action find their way up to the sphere of speculation', p.16. Thought determines action. Action, in turn, determines thought. The mental and physical are not separate realms but exist on a continuum.

⁸ Traditionally, the path – to enlightenment – can take two forms: the path of wisdom (insight into the true nature of things) and the path of compassion (the dis-identification with your self – an identification with all beings). Ultimately each path leads to the other. Compassion and wisdom are two aspects of the same mode of being.

⁹ The ego positions us in a certain space/time. We are forever caught up in *past* memories and *future projections* (precisely representations). Meditation – in relation to this – can be understood as a training of the mind – a training in awareness – a learning to dwell in the moment.

¹⁰ Often this is as far as philosophy goes, indeed it is as far as philosophy *can* go (insofar as philosophy is an *account* of the world). Although see 'The Philosopher' below.

¹¹ This translation is taken from Sangharakshita's *The FWBO Puja Book: A Book of Buddhist Devotional Texts* (Norwich: Windhorse, 1973), p.22.

¹² Conditionality is another way of articulating the fundamental tri-notion of impermanence-insubstantiality-interconnectedness. All existent phenomena come about – are dependent on – all other phenomena (are conditioned). The Unconditional is that which is outside this process.

¹³ Quoted by Stephen Bann, 'Three Images for Kristeva: From Bellini to Proust' in, *parallax*, vol. 4, no. 2, p.69.

¹⁴ *Negotiations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p.26.

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