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ADRIFT AND EXPOSED

Not to search for the reason of Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), but rather to reason *with* the work, to speak in its vicinity: what follows is the log of one possible route. The trauma of modern-day migration, here most obviously deepened and dramatised by the dangers of crossing vast and inhospitable spaces – the Sahara and the Mediterranean Sea – is also the trauma of that split in the unified image of the world that seemingly reflects and respects only our concerns. Subsequent fragmentation disseminates the insistence of possible and impossible transits and translations in which the refused, the expelled and the marginalised dissect and multiple the horizon. These are shards of history that are also parts of us. The narrative unwinds, confused by rhythms, tonalities and accents that befuddle the desire for a secure semantics and the reconfirmation of *our* world, of our possession of the account.

The images we confront are not mere representations, supports for a pre-existing narrative. They are themselves the narration, fragments of life lived, imagined, yet to come. The ubiquity of the sea is not a mere background to a human drama, but perhaps that “dumb blankness, full of meaning” (*Moby-Dick*) that speaks of an indifference to the liberal agenda in which “ethical standing and civic inclusion

are predicated upon rationality, autonomy and agency”¹. The screen of the sea, like the cinema screen theorized by Gilles Deleuze, proposes the dehumanisation of images as the visual is freed from the subject and released to yield its autonomous powers.² We are brought into the presence of a contingent, temporal relation, and the multiplicity of the present that is irreducible to its representation. This proposes the Deleuzian prospect of an altogether “more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time”³. Between perception and a response emerges a zone of feeling, a resonance, a vibration, the power of an *affect* that inaugurates a passionate geography, an “atlas of emotion”⁴.

We are presented with time that exists beyond the linguistic act of nomination, beyond the subject that produces its image. This is why for Deleuze, and here we can return to the immediacy of Isaac Julien’s work, art is not the expression of humanity, or an underlying unity, but is rather the release of imagination from its human and functional home. Impossible we might say, and yet a necessary threshold that a non-representational and affective art seeks endlessly to cross. The veracity of the image is now to be located elsewhere, it is no longer a simple support – realism, mimesis – for narration, but is rather the narrating force. These are not images *of* life, but images *as* life; a life already imagined, activated and sustained in the image. There is not first the thought and then the image. The image itself is a modality of thinking. It does not represent, but rather proposes, thought. This is the potential dynamite that resides within the image: it both marks and explodes time. This is the unhomey insistence of the artwork, its critical cut, its interruptive force.

“I met History once, but he ain’t recognise me”⁵

¹ Wolfe, Cary (2008). “Animal Studies and Disability Studies, or, Learning from Temple Grandin”. *New Formations* 64, 110.

² Colebrook, Claire (2006). *Deleuze for the Perplexed*. London & New York: Continuum, 43.

³ Deleuze, Gilles (1986). *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 17.

⁴ Bruno, Giuliana (2007). *Atlas of Emotion*. London: Verso.

⁵ Walcott, Derek (1992). “The Schooner *Flight*”, in *Derek Walcott. Collected Poems 1948-1984*. London: Faber & Faber, 350.

From the Black Atlantic to today's Mediterranean: a political and poetical passage in which the voice of the great creole poet of the Caribbean entwines with the prophecy of Walter Benjamin's philosophy of history that the past, no matter how much it is denied and ignored, continues to interrogate and illuminate the dangerous landscapes of the present.

If the Mediterranean is the mythical poetical space crossed by Ulysses, it is a space that has also hosted those such as Polyphemus and Circe, Medea and Calypso, or Caliban and Sycorax, who have "spoken of reasons that are inexpressible in the rationale of *logos* that triumphs in the Occident"⁶. In the tempest of the modern world, where a mythical Mediterranean is today brutally vernacularised in the fraught journeys of anonymous migrants, Caliban returns as an illegal immigrant, and Prospero's island, mid-way between Naples and Tunis in the sixteenth century drama, becomes modern day Lampedusa.

The language that frames the world always remains susceptible to appropriation by monsters, slaves, blacks, women, homosexuals, witches, migrants: the excluded who speak of unexpected, hidden, things that have not been authorised. Here the ghosts of history interlace the passage of poetics, creating powerful and disturbing images, difficult both to ignore and to digest. In this disruptive geography it becomes both possible and necessary to rethink the limits of the world and the Mediterranean we have inherited; it becomes possible to open a vista on another Mediterranean, on another modernity. In this particular passage we are invited to follow a route already indicated by Adorno in his celebrated work on aesthetics where he suggested that art works "provide the historical unconscious of their epoch"⁷. Aesthetics declines into an ethics that promotes a poetics that exceeds the political thought that thinks itself capable of rendering the world transparent to its will. Here poetics anticipates a coming community.

Such a prospect is secured in the premise that the right to migrate is a human right that sustains a democratic sense of the world. Today's migratory movements – overwhelmingly from the impoverished south of the planet – propose an

⁶ Centanni, Monica (2007). *Nemica a Ulisse*. Turin: Bollati Boringheri.

⁷ Adorno, Theodor W. (2004). *Aesthetic Theory*. London: Continuum.

unauthorised globalisation, a diverse worlding that has not sought *our* permission.

Faced with the actual political and cultural resistance to this prospect on the part of the First World, it is the case to insist that the passages and perspectives traced by artistic languages propose an ethics-aesthetics capable of undoing, interrupting and interrogating the existing powers of explanation. This also means locating such observations in the actual politics of panic where, under the apparent threat of illegal immigration, the liberal state has rendered the state of emergency permanent (to echo, once again, Walter Benjamin). In the subsequent scenario it appears that we are the “victims” and the immigrants the “enemy” to resist. What the continual elaboration of legislative and repressive measures actually reveals is the persistent structural violence applied *against* the foreigner. For it is not the despised stranger who is the source of violence, rather the violence lies in *our* reception, in our refusal to receive the immigrant. Through processes of exclusion and definitions of subordination, the figure of the migrant turns out to be not *external*, but *internal* to the formation of modernity. In the elaboration of state legislation, in the social and political authorisation of government, in the legitimation of a consensual cultural lexicon, the foreign, immigrant, body, becomes central to the articulation of such key concepts as “citizenship”, “culture”, “democracy” and “freedom”. In such a matrix, repression and racism are not individual, but *structural*, qualities.

When one speaks of the social and cultural integration of the immigrant, of her eventual inclusion in the social and political sphere, it is automatically assumed that there already exists a clear and fixed definition of the culture that will eventually absorb (and annul) the foreign body. As Édouard Glissant would put it, these are the certitudes that are cemented in intolerance.⁸ One’s own culture is always certain, secure in its knowledge and authority; it is the other culture that must bend and contort itself in order to be recognised in its necessarily subaltern condition. Here there emerge a series of responses that insinuate themselves in multiple levels and sectors of contemporary society: from laws and state jurisdiction to that sense of identity elaborated in the texts of a national literature

⁸ Glissant, Édouard (2005). *La cobée du Lamentin – Poétique V*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.

and history, to the diffusion of a “common sense” sustained and amplified by the mass media. Everything seems clear, even obvious in its implacable clarity. The power of the language employed is, at one and the same time, the language of power.

If this brutal clarity serves to reinforce that sense of identity required by the modern nation state, it also reveals the refusal to interact with the interrogation posed by a seemingly foreign body. In the best of cases, there is the prospect of toleration rather than repression, and always the proposal of regulation through the application of *our* laws, and *our* economical, cultural and political needs. Here the integration and the assimilation of the stranger impose the public cancellation of all of his or her signs of historical and cultural belonging. Reduced to what the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (after Hannah Arendt) has called “bare life”, the immigrant is required to strip herself of all those signs that might transmit a diversity that would disturb a culture that pretends to tolerate and eventually integrate her. The logic of superiority is explicit.

Already stripped of all in the passage northwards, across the desert and over the sea, the migrant, if she or he makes it to the European shoreline, is required to become a ‘bare life’, denuded of his cultural costume, her social inheritance, reduced to a negated, private, memory. Yet the migrant does not arrive from an external and distant elsewhere, he or she is always and already a part of *our* world, part of a modernity that precisely reveals in the irruption of the migrant to be not only *ours*.

For the ambivalence of our “tolerance” towards other cultures is also the symptom of a complex, emerging modernity that refuses simply to reflect and respect only *our* needs. Those who arrive seeking work and improved life prospects in the cities of the West have in a significant sense already arrived long before their departure from home in Africa, Asia or Latin America. They, too, are also modern subjects, subjected, as we all are, to the planetary political economy already foreseen by Marx 150 years ago. They, too, move in “scapes” elaborated by capital, using the languages of a modernity that has become the modern world. In other worlds, this modernity is also theirs. They are not merely the “objects” of planetary flows managed elsewhere, but are also “subjects” able to bend,



Isaac Julien, "Western Union: Small Boats" (2007)



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transform and translate the languages of modernity in senses, directions and possibilities not necessarily authorised by *us*.

Contorted black bodies gasping in the foam, abandoned on the beach in silver body bags amongst the sunbathers, or else writhing on the decadent palace floors of European hierarchies, replay history's darker rhythms, sounding modernity's heart of darkness, collating the Black Atlantic, memories of slavery and racialised oppression to the present-day Mediterranean.⁹ Frantz Fanon, writing over 50 years ago, reminds us of this deadly objectification: "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects"¹⁰. Once again, listening to Derek Walcott, a possible opening, appears as:

"the dark stain
spreading on maps whose shapes dissolve their frontiers"¹¹

An immediate, imprecise, proximity is the side of "globalisation", promoted by capital's radical deterritorialisation and reterritorialisation, which we are deeply reluctant to accept. We obviously prefer "them" to be objectified as non-modern, tied to distant places and traditions, secured at a distance in their 'underdevelopment'. When we speak of tolerance, we are instinctively speaking of the one-sided exercise, or negation, of *our* tolerance. We never refer to the toleration that might come from the non-occidental and, presumably, non-modern world. This toleration and repression, the extension and retraction of *our* world invariably acquire political and cultural forms that seek to halt the planet, circumscribe the disturbance and deflate the (global) processes in which immigration, together with structural poverty and ecological disaster, is one of

⁹ The scene of a black body writhing on a decorated, palatial floor, directly references the famous ballroom scene in Luchino Visconti's cinematic recreation (1963) of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *The Leopard* (1957). In both cases, the very same space – Palazzo Gangi in Palermo – traversed by the aristocratic decline of Europe and today by the anonymous south of the world, is transformed into the diverse and ambivalent places of planetary antagonisms.

¹⁰ Fanon, Frantz (1986). *Black Skin, White Masks*. London: Pluto Press, 109.

¹¹ Walcott, Derek "The Migrants", downloadable at:

http://www.disp.let.uniroma1.it/kuma/decolonizziamoci/Derek_Walcott_en.html

the most dramatic announcements. A politics capable of receiving the historical and cultural complexity proposed by contemporary migration points to a rough, unwelcomed and unguaranteed passage between national, and even more local, pressures, and that “planetary thinking” proposed many decades ago by the vital Mediterranean and Sardinian thinker Antonio Gramsci.

Yesterday’s migrant who left Genoa or Glasgow bound for Buenos Aires, and today’s migrant who leaves Senegal to be abandoned on Lampedusa, are separated in time and differentiated in space, but united in the same history. In the face of contemporary migration, there are frankly far too few willing to listen to those phantoms that constitute the historical chains that extend from Africa five hundred years ago to the coasts of southern Italy today and which link together the hidden, but essential, narratives of migration in the making of modernity. To negate the memory evoked by the interrogative presence of the modern migrant is somehow to register an incapacity to consider one’s own troubled and always-incomplete inheritance in the making of the present. Amongst human rights, perhaps the right to migrate in order to improve one’s life’s prospects should be recognised. After all, Europe’s poor, from Scandinavia, Ireland and Scotland to the northern shores of the Mediterranean (including some 26 million Italians), have exercised this “right” for several centuries. In this precise historical moment, however, we live in a world in which for the vast majority migration is a crime. Globalisation not only concerns the migration of capital at a planetary level, but also of bodies, cultures, histories and lives. While the former is considered inevitable, the latter is both fervently resisted and increasingly criminalised. It has been estimated that in the coming decades one sixth of the world’s population will be migrants, and will almost certainly be criminalised for this.

Here the migrant’s time – as a figure of negated and repressed time – becomes the migratory time of modernity. The distant shore and the marginal world that is hidden and ignored becomes immediate, is literally figured and exposed by the body of the feared foreigner, the despised stranger, the abhorred migrant. The migrant’s time creates a slash in our time through which modernity itself migrates and subsequently returns bearing other senses. At this point in the time of the world, “language will never be mine, and perhaps never was” (Jacques Derrida). The images of *Western Union: Small Boats* propose an unavoidable encounter; its

aesthetics expose an intractable ethics, a style of thinking. We are drawn to think *within* the images. The provoked interval remains open to interrogate the anxiety to return to that normality which requires the expulsion of the migrant in order to continue to hegemonise the sense and direction of the world. It is perhaps only here, in the open and vulnerable scene promoted by art, that it becomes possible to promote for an instance an unexpected proximity: that instance of unhomeliness before the unexpected in which we temporarily recognise the other, the foreigner, as a part of ourselves. Such an interruption, affected by the autonomy of the image, proposes a diverse Mediterranean and modernity. As the great contemporary Arab poet Adonis suggests, it is probably only here that it is possible to ignite a dialogue between temporarily equal partners. Here in poetics, in the perpetual movement and migration of language, there already exists the critique of the actual state of affairs. Living language to the full is to touch the transit, the transformation and the translations of what is yet to come.

Here, as Adorno, once suggested, we might begin to acquire a familiarity with the idea of not feeling at home when we are at home. In this state of vulnerability, the discourses that secure and anchor us in the world, the authorised knowledges that have disciplined and directed our understandings – from historiography, anthropology and sociology to literature and philosophy – now find themselves challenged by the same displacement and unhomeliness that they seek to explain. To return to Derek Walcott, – ‘I met History once, but he ain’ recognize me’ – perhaps it is only in the oblique gaze and the excessive and errant language of poetics that we manage to travel to where the rationalist analytics of the social and human sciences do not permit. The languages of the arts invariably leave politics wordless. For the artistic configuration of space-time, images *as* life and becoming, allow us to harvest the essential truth of the complex ambivalence of a historical constellation that does not simply mirror our passage, that does not simply mirror *our* passage...

It is the singular intensity of the images becoming *Western Union: Small Boats* that demands a new way of thinking.

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