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## Culture Without Mirrors—Restructuring Creative-Cognitive Power

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A means by which a critical culture defines itself as such is for its art, architecture and artifacts to picture the human as a subject of history. This is to say that buildings, forms, images and experiences posit critique as a manifestation of self-consciousness where shapes, forms, and sounds articulate an explicit understanding and explanation of the forces that dominate the relations and values of society and the place of the human that is produced through them and by them.<sup>1</sup> This mode of explanatory aesthetics identifies culture as an illuminating mirror of a human identity that is captured within and alienated by systems of its own making. But it also *brings about* a particular aesthetics of alienation. In short, this means that culture has indoctrinated the concept that subjectivity is a product of forces that are beyond any decisive power that might override them or change them, and furthermore, that recognizing this dilemma is *the normative impulse to change* that conditions our aspiration to seek autonomy from it, the result of which can only underscore law as habit. Within this bind of a pre-political nominalism—a subject crafted before itself—the figure of the self becomes the mark of the impossibility to determine ourselves as *anything otherwise*. However, this thesis of constraint embeds a central contradiction where at the root of this humility is a remarkable persistence with the utopian fantasy that believes that the cultural exposition of contingent material in the public realm (this *being subject to* the unnatural laws of instrumental reason), results in achieving a status of a heteronomous nature as lived.<sup>2</sup> Here this culture as a form of consciousness obtains a transcendental

force, where consciousness provides access to a miasmatic participation with the nature of power as nature. So, it goes, culture can disconnect itself from instrumentalism to access a form of being—a free nature—through its self-realization *as culture*.

The subjectivity that is the consequence of this logic becomes the primary location and site for critique. It incorporates time and space, collapsing the subject and historical time as one manifest identity that presumes an essential specificity. As an obstructive mechanism or at best, a means of response by the understanding to what we might term the spontaneous history of an instrumental reason, our culture becomes the mirror of a self-relation to the nature of critique itself. In this identarian reflexive consciousness, culture manifests the multidimensional fabric of the city, the museum, interest groups and the home; it constitutes the communities that we inhabit and tells us that the present is all we have, since planning for longer term outcomes is not only impossible but morally suspicious. In these terms we are destined to the mythology of knowing self as the only exemplification of rational thought, and its aesthetic manifestation is not merely our extension but our replication of our desire to articulate the limits and the borders of reason. Read as a product of unnatural inorganic forces (this predilection to cause), the painful and tragic dilemma of subjectivity remains a strong fiction for culture to deride and to love—a problem to engross ourselves within and through which we can say that we have examined, interrogated and worked through the conditions that organize life.

In light of the destitution of cultural horizons, we must question the ways in which culture has embedded its comprehension of critique as an incorrect and unworkable form of metaphysics that had led itself to believe that it was operating under the rubric of a coherent materialism that sustained itself at the level of sensory materiality. This rejection of culture as a rational and representational operation demands work, for it is here where we must question the aspirations and methods for another comprehension of reason: a nontraditional metaphysics without traditional representationalism—that is, a culture without mirrors.

### Questions

How can reason operate without returning us to the paradigm of a tragic self-consciousness that to all extents contains the contradictory facets of: a) the duality of reason and percept that generate a crisis state of introspection and ineffability; and b) the vitalization of the human as a form of pre-political nature that rejects forms of autonomy that produce change? Can such a consciousness be extrapolated without

projecting a Rortyan-style private irony of a classic liberal posture that pays lip service to a decentered subjectivity, heralds culture as the primary mode of affecting change (a form of transposing culture to the role of science), and without any consequence to the prevailing systems of capitalist distribution for both?<sup>3</sup> When self-preservation produces self-destruction, can skepticism be given a project beyond its own certitude, that is, without idealizing the space of indeterminacy (known unknowns) as the primary expression of knowledge?

## Conclusions

### The Myth of the Human

The figure of the human subject and its destruction is our central distraction, occupying and determining the space of what is falsely claimed as critical culture. Rejecting concepts of the powerful individual agent that capital has provided us in favor of a weak or impoverished image of the human does nothing to support political or cultural critique. The aspirations for a radical ‘ungrounding’ of the subject vis-à-vis its sublimation through capital leaves us with only dismal outcomes: i) the projection of process as the ultimate reification of figure as duration; ii) the subject in a form of Judeo-Christian struggle whose determination to process as a thing in itself demarcates only an ethos of difference that is essentially content-free; and/or iii) the subject who assumes that the dismantling of subjectivity constitutes some real loss, since it can only be expressed as limits, finitude or another such dimension of the tragic. The strong body of ideology is replaced by the weak and yet sustainable body of *ideology critique*—one mythology versus another.

### The Social Realist Sublime and the Scientific Sublime

A result of this attempt to disengage representational work from culture ultimately results in a private expression of finitude that affiliates the image with the nonexplanatory and/or irrational. This perspective of cultural production holds and promotes doubt as a critical practice, and uncertainty and instability as the real of the image as well as the enterprise of political art. Here, we see the image taking place as a specifically general representational experience—as both spectacle and nature—a form of a redundant Kantian sublime where power is massive and disinterested: a form of capitalist social realism. Pitching the operations of one form of consciousness in direct correlative duality with another—such as free imagination versus standard mythology, or direct communication versus illusory images—only determines the site of critique that

dissects these as an uncritical fundamentalist subjective expression. In our paradigmatic examples of contemporary critical method, which span Kantian inspired reflection, phenomenology and affect, and scientific materialism, representations are consistently identified as a field that rationality cannot penetrate, only manage. A critique of representation is a means to access both the real of sensation and the objectivity of reason. In many senses the consciousness that is required for this critique is just not conscious *enough*. How images produce facts and make up rationally organized systems is crucial to our investigations.

### The Negative Space of the Image

A valorization of the interpretative subjective reading of images is harnessed through the mystery of the image *per se*, or the experiential irresolution of meaning evidenced over time, which demonstrates the pliability of language in duration. The image now facilitates infinite encounters, possibilities and responses because all referents are unavailable as standard anchorages for meaning. We encounter these approaches across the different critical methods of negative dialectics, territories of perception, and in post-structuralism and post-deconstruction where the image is idealized through its infinite potentiality. The potentiality of the image is purchased through the discursive and the processional, only to be secured as the site that opposes these elements in abstract unification of the image as a form of ‘oneness.’ In other words, by opposing ‘concept’ by means of the infinitude of discursive processes, the image returns to the space of the sensory which instigates a cultic form of authenticity.<sup>4</sup> Accessing what we might imagine to be pure abstraction in art paradoxically becomes the ultimate reification of the oxymoronic figure as duration.

### Failure to Act – Naturalized Skepticism

A comprehension of the image as essentially groundless and always already unstable in fact has a purpose and direction, especially when this theory is identified as the hallmark of a critical cultural practice. What is claimed as a defensible observation of the ‘noninstrumental’ or heteronomous nature of the image is in fact an unsubstantiated myth and ultimately a tool that moves from a theory of nature to a theory of the political. The agency of the image as nature in flux, in all its random and contingent identities is now at the service of various projects of democracy, equality, difference, and liberation in its work to undo and unravel all forms of stability in the political towards forms of disequilibrium. Problematically, because the idea of the image itself is assumed to be

adequate to nature, it is incapable of understanding the systems of force that organize its own construction, as a theory. This theory of the image as endowed with the spirit of the political and the body of the real is contradictory because it fails to recognize these notions of disequilibrium as 'goal' and as 'object' (or principle) as distinct categories. In short, although the theory of the image as nature occupies some unbridled, unregulated form that understands the image as 'real,' what is ultimately generated is another deeper skepticism of the image. This is because the image is asked to operate ironically as both nature and tool whilst neither can be accessed as such. This results in a failure to comprehend the condition of reality as well as the condition of a realist politics that might propose its adequation to this. This dualism of the image proliferates new forms of doubt that emerge from the conviction to refuse critical consciousness. A new critical negativity is universalized to the principle of skepticism, where a self-conscious critique is reestablished in dualisms that spring from pluralist hopes. These are unworkable for the project of real criticism.

### Project

It is important for us to extrapolate a distinction between the methodological paradigms of scientific knowledge and self-conscious knowledge (whether this is purchased purposively or naively) in order to organize a cultural practice that does not avoid a cognitive understanding of the conditions in which it finds itself, but crucially, also refuses to situate these as a negatively charged real-ideal identarian foundation by which to oppose and anchor a *different future*. The ideological character of a theory of cause, subject and historical consciousness has been classified as tethered to the forces of preconception and intuition, theology, belief, and perception. Reason has also been understood as the pervasive force of a dominant power that leads to the horrors of absolute mastery. As we have seen, the logic of escaping these assumed systems of dominance that are proposed in schemas of either unconsciousness (sensory, affect-based) or what I have termed self-conscious practices, results in underscoring a form of critique that continues to vouch for the myths of mastery and transcendence endemic to this description of reason, since therein exists the erroneous belief that we are free to choose or reject consciousness.

We can say then that consciousness and self-transformation are necessary to a shift in the political, since we require a shift in the standard conception of critical method and cause.<sup>5</sup>Inhabiting this as a commitment then becomes a question of how one might act according to this rationale. A simplistic denial of the systems of authorship, or to deny

authorship as individuation in favor of a collaborative interdisciplinarity, is a weak semantic approach to this problem.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the persistence of extending the ego towards objects does little to rethink the very format of consciousness and how culture might cease to exist as a mirror of this paradigmatic individual. When our conscious life is produced across the terrain of images, we need to propose a role for images that is coherent with this reality and which projects reality as a model that includes us, but cannot be about us.<sup>7</sup>

The question here concretely addresses how such thinking is capable of reorganizing not just the products of culture but the productive relations of society and culture together. This work requires consensus building and action towards a new universalism. This is to produce culture that is rigorously engaged in the conditions of these deeper realities. A politics that manifests the ‘as if’ is a culture that acts in accordance with the real of reality as a form of realism. It must determine the ‘as if’ to be *the case* and not the fictive thought of the ‘what if?’ We must be careful to occupy the grounds that demand correctness, rather than appeal to the folklore of a capitalist framework, one that as we have seen is the drug of familiarity, satisfaction and comfort dressed in the appealing moral garb of the crisis of negativity. To refute the conditions of a regime we require new proofs, but to transform the productive relations of a culture that serves capital in order to transform the system itself, requires not a general address to the image itself as the problem, but instead the operation of the image as factual weapon, one which can be deployed in carefully chosen battles.

A culture without mirrors—a culture that is not a reflection and therefore has no concept of a specifically *human nature* as its grounds—is the possibility to think representation without an investment in subject or cause. It might also predict the fear of a culture without empathy, solidarity and community, for how can we understand each other without this mode of identification? Would this risk a form of radical individualism and destroy the forms of collective consciousness that have been hitherto required for change?<sup>8</sup> This is a false anxiety since this fear fails to understand that images are not constituent parts of the human. Whilst we are images, images are not us and knowing this is not the formulation of some crisis.

We have been careful to distinguish this new culture from a culture without mirrors. But this different culture produces living operational models that figure the horizon for a culture as necessary, and which inscribe a reality that is performed within but cannot be accommodated by the prevailing principles of neoliberal power. The necessity and

urgency of understanding how rationalist and creative practices operate at the level of representation *and cognition* then is key: This is a question of how culture can present and inhabit reason.

We have outlined the requirement to dismantle the idealism that supports a universal notion that conditions the nonexplanatory identity of culture to a politics, and to refuse the normative representation of negativity as an object that holds a *democracy to come*. What is also clear is that a culture that self-consciously discloses, exhibits or analyses this nonexplanatory aspect of itself assumes a form of transcendental knowledge that further establishes culture as a form of eccentric work that fantasizes about its political power from the realms of bourgeois interior decoration.

The task for culture then is to comprehend the role of consciousness again, correctly, and, by doing so, to recast the operation of its representations. A culture that is critical, or skeptical, of the circumstances in which it finds itself should not be involved in the legacy of Cartesian paranoia of the kind we have been discussing here. Rather, this must be a culture with rule—one that ultimately disposes of myths that have already been proven as incorrect. To behave according to this other rule is now the task of a culture that rigorously *reflects without mirrors*. A culture as a projection machine that makes worlds that are not of the order of the pejorative-fictive (left to the alterity of the imagination), but a culture of a rational imaginary as an insinuation of proofs, ready for conjecture; casting off the DNA of self-doubt towards an operation that is grounded in a new epistemology, one that requires a rigorous consciousness, but with no anticipation of its limits.

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## Footnotes

1. We can cite neo-liberal capitalism as the figure of such power, but tied to this is the correlative relation between reason and cause.
2. Consider Hermann Hesse's novel *Steppenwolf* (1927) where a similar delirium of a cultic modernist subjectivity is accessed as a product of the social constraints that he faces.
3. We see this in the claims to the space of culture as the 'open.' The image combines the *never and forever* of production and refusal, of writing and difference. Images are innately negative: they are gatekeepers of the 'open' and take center-stage in catalyzing the political claims for culture as becoming. In Giorgio Agamben's essay "What is the Contemporary?," he writes of the operations of culture as something that sees beyond the conditions of the *visible given* to the darkness that is yet to be light. This anticipation from the contemporary producer of culture reads as a form of Nietzschean modernity where the artist resides in a time that is "out of joint." The resulting projection is a figure of a typically transcendent nature, and a place where politics happens

culturally by dint of its ability to escape the strictures of the given by not recognizing them as such. This is a description of the nature of the image and the task of the artist to realize this nature. Chantal Mouffe's theory of 'agonism' as a condition that acts as the defining framework for a radical democracy also rests upon a theory of negativity, where agonism guarantees the ungrounded nature of political action in processes of disagreement at the level of relational affirmations of communal identity differentials. These operations of difference are centered in a politics of recognition, where difference is recognized and tolerated as such. However, to build a political project upon this dialectic of negativity is naive and contradictory, because whilst we can say that we do not have adequate explanatory reasons for perception, this does not mean that this will always be the case. And, whilst we cannot rationalize images in any concrete sense, this does not mean that we cannot understand their operative function in context-based systems.

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5. See Reza Negarastani. "The Labor of the Inhuman, Part 1: Human." *E-flux journal*, 52 (February 2014). Web.

6. In *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*, Althusser denigrates the culture of interdisciplinarity as an insidious ideological force: "...interdisciplinarity is usually the slogan and the practice of the spontaneous ideology of specialists: oscillating between a vague spiritualism and technocratic positivism" (97). Luis Althusser. *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists*. London: Verso, Radical Thinkers series, 2012. 320. Print.

7. See Thomas Metzinger. *The Ego Tunnel: The Science of the Mind and the Myth of the Self*. New York: Basic Books, 2010. 234. Here, he identifies a future of avatar-to-avatar communications and autonomous self-managing brain design brought about through the expansive technological form of the ego tunnel in cyberspace. As image consciousness is transformed in technological mechanisms, so must we transform the projection of the human that generates life in an enlarged and unprecedented manner. How this modificatory paradigm enables some shift from the Kantian

notion of autonomy is the issue in this case since the question of what we desire to be is crucial—what Metzinger refers to as “consciousness ethics.”

8. As we have seen, such universalisms have been proposed in the discourse on the sublime, where in order to think the political, a private self-consciousness is grafted upon forms of public consensus and change, but ultimately this is incapable of guaranteeing any form of collective consciousness.

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