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Thinking and Constructing Moments of Split

Abstract: The need to talk about change at a planetary level is dealt with in terms of the theoretical discourse's ability to point towards the things we have to surpass. We talk about the aspects we should leave behind in the name of a vague hunt for the culturally inherited "unthinkable" formulas of the present. We have a name for all the concepts of the old thinking systems that mark our capacity to delineate ourselves from them. Our entire envisioning of the future is based on the crossing out of the old worlds that structure us. Posthumanism is one of the major advocates of rethinking man, time, Enlightenment's humanism and anthropocentric reflexes. What this article tries to do is take a brief look at the mechanisms underlying discourses of the "new."

Keywords: Becoming; Posthumanism; Decline; Progress; Ethics.

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Introduction

The need to talk about change at a planetary level is dealt with in terms of the theoretical discourse's ability to point towards the things we have to surpass. We talk about the aspects we should leave behind in the name of a vague hunt for the culturally inherited "unthinkable" formulas of the present. We have a name for all the concepts of the old thinking systems that mark our capacity to delineate ourselves from them. Our entire envisioning of the future is based on the crossing out of the old worlds that structure us. Posthumanism is one of the major advocates of rethinking man, time, Enlightenment's humanism and anthropocentric reflexes. What this article tries to do is take a brief look at the mechanisms underlying discourses of the "new." Usually, for posthumanists, there is an "after" which needs to be thought in connection to an "ethics of becoming."¹ The possibility of ethics is postponed to the future moment when self-centered ways of living, dis-identifications, post-nationalist nomadism and "the decline of the unitary subject position"² will have succeeded. So, why is ethics advertised under the promises of future redefinitions? And is the model of becoming strictly connected to historical and paradigmatic erasures?



One of the first aspects of these dynamics of surpassing or leaving out which posthumanism envisions has to do with corporeality and materiality. As Katherine Hayles points out, posthumanism is the effect of a “contemporary pressure towards dematerialization,”³ referring to the cybernetic and media forms of dis-embodiment and also to the digital inscriptions relieving us from the physical and material forms of interaction. In our opinion, the tendency to liberate ourselves from too much material presence is only the reaction to a “logic of abundance”⁴ which has surrounded us with disruptive series of objects. The dream of dematerialization might have, beyond its utilitarian and social aims, an imaginary negation of the world as uninhabitable material reality. As Jacques Derrida has disputed with the “metaphysics of presence,” by continuously reinserting the haunting re-appearances of traces, de-centered details and apparently erased visibilities, the posthuman dematerialization drive struggles with its own desire of making presence possible with all forms of non-presence. The difference is that post-structuralism works with the idea that there are forces of non-presence shaping and directing presence from beyond representation, while posthumanism works with the idea that the surface alone is presence. As Slavoj Žižek observes, the contemporary digital world seems to operate a phenomenological erasure of the threshold dividing exterior and interior:

We are dealing with the loss of the surface which separates inside from outside. This loss jeopardizes our most elementary perception of “our own body” as it is related to its environs;

it cripples our standard phenomenological attitude towards the body of another person, in which we suspend our knowledge of what actually exists beneath the skin and conceive the surface as directly expressing the soul.⁵

One of our theses is that the rethinking of the world and its distributions of humanity and non-humanity by means of significance, as advertised by posthumanism, does not come from the theoretical discourse which re-envisions ethics and relations, but it is a directed rethinking triggered by the new phenomenological experiences made possible by our immediate reality. For instance, Cary Wolfe talks about the posthuman condition of the subject as absent spectator, a type of seclusion made possible by the idea of an observer taking a look at how the world looks after his disappearance:

In photography and film, on the other hand, the existence of the world is miraculously affirmed via automatism, but the price we pay for the world’s recovery is that it no longer exists for us. It is radically ahuman, other. We can’t know or touch the world precisely because it manifests itself unbidden, without our help. Film is thus what the world looks like when we’re not there.⁶

Thus, we might argue that the theoretical conception about “the death of man” (“It is no longer possible to think in our day other than in the void left by man’s disappearance”) or the posthumanist endeavor to think after the subject were not first



envisioned by means of philosophical discourse, but they were actually a phenomenological experience of automatism. Industrialism, photography and film seemed to stage and record our own absence from the world, as it appeared for the modern man watching the self outrunning his daily gestures. There is a certain exceeding of subjectivity by taking the immediate human agent out of the equation and integrating in representation the configuration of his own absence. It is precisely the “external gaze” that Žižek talks about when addressing fetishism, the possibility of looking at the human from outside. The experience of automatism also brought a necessary crippling of our field of action and vision, making us see, through our own disability, the finiteness of the unitary subject and the imaginary which lies ahead of the subject’s thinking the world through his absence. Carry Wolfe observes, following Derrida, that disability becomes an extended ability of perception inside a posthumanist paradigm that dreams of the possibility of erasing man from his own dreams:

In Derrida’s terms, it is the blind, the disabled, who “see” the truth of vision. It is the blind who most readily understand that the core fantasy of humanism’s trope of vision is to think that perceptual space is organized around and for the looking subject; that the pure point of the eye (as agent of ratio and logos) exhausts the field of the visible; that the “invisible” is only – indeed, merely – that which has not yet been seen by a subject who is, in principle, capable of seeing all.⁸

If disability, understood as a fracture inside the idea of the unitary subject, is given a positive value, being perceived as a window opening outside the “fantasy” of humanism, it means that posthumanism is actually looking for another type of beginning or origin and not for the future. The passion for documenting beginnings has an important part in our present culture and one of the forms it takes is the archive. After taking a brief look at one of the cultural forms of the passion for beginnings, we will also consider the passion for closed chapters or endings as related to the cultural ways of looking for the projected turning points in time.

Constructing Distances – Impressions of the Future

Impression (“the pressure of the printing”⁹) has, in Derrida’s views, a connection to psychoanalysis, by means of the inter-play it opens between surface and substratum, consciousness and unconsciousness. In our contemporary world, the substratum is formulated by a “prosthesis of the inside,”¹⁰ which is the archive. The inside needs to be constructed and sustained, otherwise the dialectics would be lost. This need of holding the inside has made us develop what Derrida calls an “archive fever,” meaning “a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.”¹¹ The desire to acknowledge the “absolute commencement” also implies, for the post-structuralist and posthumanist imaginary, a need for going beyond the human subject, searching for our lost



origin outside ourselves as humans. “Archive fever” triggers in us not a humanist inclination towards the past, but a compulsion towards the future, inside which concepts like responsibility and promise take on a different functionality, differentiating themselves from the dimension of the individual. “The archive as an irreducible experience of the future”¹² draws a logic of permanence which substitutes the experience of time as waste. Thus, we can argue that the future is searched for in terms of a yet unfounded and unwritten beginning encompassing and underlying processes of becoming. The unfolding of the search for “grand narratives” is still humanist, although the main character might be replaced or repeated as something different. Prosthetic interiorities are comprised and sustained in the vertebra of stories written for the yet unborn spectators. Thus we could argue that there is a profound connection between the prosthesis and containers we build in order to sustain and advance interiorities towards next generations and the self-perceptions we acquire inside temporality.

The narrative mechanisms of creating temporal distances inside the structuring of an unfolding present are defining for posthumanist discourse. How are the ideas of temporal distances created and are they already impressed inside our desires and revisionism? There are and have been multiple models of time with their own possibilities of reconciliation with lost, forgotten or yet unresolved meanings: circular time, interrupted time, messianic time, etc. The popularly appropriated model of time is, though, the one which best serves the ideology of progress, meaning teleological time. The understanding of history, since

Hegel, as a process of becoming, self-recognitions and re-appropriations of the Spirit has contributed to the added historical character of this model of time. Karl Löwith argues that the idea of progress is a secularized conception of the Christian time of redemption.¹³ The line of progress articulates itself on this impulse of a fulfilled time. What Löwith does not seem to mention is that the fulfillment of the Christian model of time happens outside time, after an implicit end of time. The ideology of progress does not acknowledge an end of time, but an accomplished realization of difference in relation to this world and this moment. Under this frame of time, losses, overcoming and oblivion are resolved inside a politics of the rest which has to be annexed to a past time in relation to which we must find superiority (both ethical and technological). The ideology of progress is indifferent to traces as vulnerabilities of time, although its passion for the archive might point to something different. As we have seen, “archive fever” is a form of caring for the imaginary of the future. Now, life can only be consumed as continuously flowing forces of change, which do not spring from the individual, but from the collective. Such impulses for the new make Paul Connerton address, in *How Modernity Forgets*, the question of how life becomes impossible to be memorized inside technological societies. Connerton’s thesis comes from Frances Yates, for whom time is indissolubly linked to space, memory being dependent on the stability of place. The constant dynamics of shifting and displacement break space as a screen of memory. Another aspect which Connerton does not focus on is the fact that the shifting is usually towards something



“superior,” rendering the quotidian to its own irrelevance.

Against the Ideology of Progress

The theories that oppose the ideology of progress are the ones speaking about the non-existence of a road and about the inside dialectics of multiple quests which cannot be reduced to a single narrative of time. Moreover, these ideas tend to operate inside the opposite schema, that of decline. For instance, Giorgio Agamben addresses the “destruction of experience.” For Agamben, the everyday life and its events can no longer be translated into experience because of two reasons: 1. “experiences are enacted outside the individual,”¹⁴ meaning that we have the media, a camera and screens which experience in our place and 2. experience as exposure to incertitude and indeterminacy has been replaced, since modern science, with the safe and controlled pathway of experiment. Indeterminacy and non-anchoring are specific to the “fleeting instant”¹⁵ which Agamben opposes to the nineteenth-century understanding of history as process. The possibility of experiencing time is opened by the idea of passage without the servitude to linear time. The “fleeting instant” and its half-glimpsed articulations is the resistance to external experience of time drawn by progress. Unlike Agamben and the creative and phenomenological power of indeterminacy, Bruno Latour opposes the idea of progress with that of translation. Bruno Latour tries to substitute the equation of progress with the schema of mediation and translation which generate networks of events and significances. The time Latour talks about is a time that goes

nowhere, but which keeps translating itself by means of the purifications and hybridizations operated inside the relationships between humans and inhumans. That is why this time which does not pass has the form of an unconscious driven by the separations and appropriations that we write among things: “everything happens by way of mediation, translation and networks, but this space does not exist, it has no place. It is the unthinkable, the unconscious of the moderns.”¹⁶ The modern idea of time that annuls its past used to serve the saga of civilization, but the schema of networks Latour talks about restores the relation between becoming and translation and dissolves that link we draw between becoming and erasure:

Seen as networks, however, the modern world, like revolutions, permits scarcely anything more than small extensions of practices, slight accelerations in the circulation of knowledge, a tiny extension of societies, minuscule increases in the number of actors, small modifications of old beliefs. When we see them as networks, Western innovations remain recognizable and important, but they no longer suffice as the stuff of saga, a vast saga of radical rupture, fatal destiny, irreversible good or bad fortune.¹⁷

These networks are historical and semantic, drawing the experience of time as an experience of continuous transformation and burden. The differences between what we must discharge and what we have to keep is written by the values constructed inside the movements of these networks.



A Sense of Twilight

There is, in critical discourse a temporality of the “after” which is conjured and summoned in the name of a twilight we are presently inhabiting. The “after” we are referring to is the after truth (*Farewell to Truth*, Gianni Vattimo), after man (*Les Mots et les Choses – Une archéologie des sciences humaines*, Michel Foucault), after metaphysics (Martin Heidegger and, after him, the post-structuralists), or after history (Fukuyama), all of which are addressed by philosophy. Is the “after” a strategy of creating temporal distance in order to get an autonomy of decision we need in order to proclaim a “brave new world” or is it a symptom of cultural exhaustion caused by deference to certain values? Whichever the reasons, there is a sense of twilight infiltrated in the possibilities of making sense of experience. So, the temporality of the “after” is not envisioned only in terms of overcoming, but mostly in terms of endings that can still cast their shadows upon us. One of the uses of the metaphor of twilight is in relation to cultural memory. Andreas Huyssen understands that there is an old acknowledged split between the way we experience an event and the way we remember it. In *Twilight Memories – Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, Huyssen tries to explain the amnesia characteristic for the end of the twentieth century not in terms of a *fin de siècle*, but in relation to a *ralenti* of time attracted by the sense of in-between and implicitly the sense of an “after.” Certain conceptions of teleological time have been compromised and also, most importantly, modernity’s temporal structure “with its celebration of the new as utopian, as radically and irreducibly other¹⁸.” “The new” is now historically

celebrated in the past as it has lost its disruptive forces upon time. The twilight turns our face back to the afterglow of modernity’s projects of “the new.” So, we could say that the metaphor of twilight screens the twentieth century’s hopelessness at holding things together in their last moment of intersection where “the new” is history and “the same” is present. The temporality of “after” investigates abandonment and projects ruins that should no longer exist in our world.

In his essay, “After What,” Jacques Rancière tries to articulate a response to the question of “what comes after the subject?” The main problem of the question of “after” is that we tend to believe there are people who do the thinking of the “after” and the others who cannot move towards this “after” because of their class inertia. That means that the “after” is a privilege of those who can afford talking about a “lost time.” They tend to place themselves outside the continuum as if this were the emancipatory gesture of time. The “after” separates not only historical times, but also the people of the remains and the people of the “new.” In order to have a subject that comes “after” and receives a story as his own, investing a willingness to affirm and liberate himself from it, we need to write and re-write what Rancière calls “the beginning of the end”:

To voice the beginning of the end, verbalize in its name is to appropriate for oneself the powers of suspended death and the voyage through time. We speak in the present of the anchor freed, the image undone or the name crossed out. But above all we settle into the singular schema of



the retrospective apocalypse. We rewrite indefinitely, in the past tense, the prophecy of the wrong beginning (forgetfulness, disguise – or, just as well, the lure of disguise or of forgetfulness) which makes us suffer endlessly: the sequence of ills resulting from the wrong schema, the forgetful schema of subjectivity.¹⁹

What we want to argue is that the temporality of the “after” implies a sort of impossible witness who can tell the story and come back to subjectivity only after having forgotten or suspended himself for a moment. This gap that the “after” cuts through marks the Hegelian formula of re-appropriation. “The beginning of the end” our discourses try to unearth is also related to this desire of re-appropriation. The mechanism of the “after” is actually dreaming of the future in terms of a reconciliation with that gap of subjectivity, that inhuman and unaccounted – for moment of split. What is interesting to see is that this concealed moment of split which founds subjectivity has acquired an intensified post-human and science-fiction imaginary that actually feeds the impossibility of reconciliation. The science-fiction imaginary is full of split creatures or characters that are cloven in-between natures or times. The distance towards ourselves implied by cultural consciousness, the inherited gap inside us is more than ever staged inside these narratives of humanity’s transformation towards the inhuman. The temporality of the “after” is not only marked by the anxiety caused by coming second after an already-written story, but, also, by the deepening and broadening of the unaccounted for gap of subjectivity.

Popular culture’s implicit question “are we turning into something else?” is actually underlined by the foundational dilemma of “have we always been somebody or something else?” Posthumanist discourse is yet unable to offer a re-interpretation of the suspicions dividing us from ourselves and the others. The told and re-told “beginning of the end” has only curated the imaginary of that “inhuman” moment of split which breaks the continuity, making us inherit a position in the story right in the middle of discontinuity. Posthumanist discourse claims that the temporality of the “after” is for finding a new ethics that would open the possibilities of integrating the alloys made out of this “afters.” What should be taken into consideration are the immediate possibilities of ethics outside a project of new ethics. The temporal distances we have constructed, historically or culturally, might actually aim at making us perceive the closeness of a reality which is the real distance in and out of ourselves. Temporalities of the “after” leave some unbridged ways between us and a supposed lost or overcome imaginary creating distances than can no longer be mirrored by our world and implementing a phantasmagorical thinking of those moments of split marking the acuteness of time.

Conclusions

We tried to catch a glimpse of the forms that continuities and discontinuities take inside our narratives of time. As we have seen, these narratives of the “beginning of the end,” opposing or justifying the narratives of progress, are a mechanism of subjective and collective self-re-appropriation triggered by the acknowledgment



of gaps. These gaps are translated as historical leaps or jumps in the narrative of time underlying the idea of movement and becoming. More and more, the pace of becoming reflected by the phenomenological experience of quotidian time becomes distorted by a certain confusion of times and unwritten beginnings. This is where the need of notifying endings and thresholds springs up in critical discourse. Gaps and leaps become time cuts increasing the

isolated familiarity we can get in relation to our present reality after having survived and recognized a certain rupture. Re-appropriation is, thus, sketched in terms of the forced possibility of being outside the story, in the “after” that works as a new fixed center. It is the “after” which decides what we should keep and what we should leave behind and this separation from the other in time gives us a sense of renewed relationship with contingency.

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