

# TODAY



Anna Galkina, *Untitled*, collage, 2013 - Courtesy of the artist

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## CONFESSIONS OF A TROLL

*Paolo Mossetti*

### 1. Self-profiling.

A few days ago a friend of mine wrote to me: "I heard that you had a Facebook fight with \*\*\*\*, a rising star of Italian journalism. Be careful, it might be dangerous for your career."

My friend was right. I don't know how many times I told myself: be more cautious, post a comment only when necessary. Click "like" only when it's not compromising. Avoid acid and polemical language.

It never worked. Most often, compulsion prevailed.

My only cold comfort is to know that I am not the only one afflicted by this weak spot. Another friend of mine once confessed: "When I read most online newspapers I get a surge of anger... Sometimes I can't help to speak out my mind, to do sharing, sometimes to insult. But for my job it's embarrassing. Sometimes I create fake profiles. Or I keep myself anonymous."

The very structure of social media, and more generally of the Internet 2.0 is based on the human tendency to share feelings and information, on our inability to self-control, on our lack of inner discipline. The problem is that social media are making our lives more and more transparent in a cultural system where social development depends on a myriad of signs, details and exams over which it is easy to stumble. Such a deeply massified but also insecure society makes us victims of our own technological addictions.

The first victim of this new panopticon jail, where everybody is controlled and controller at the same time, is the troll. The troll, an almost universally hated figure, that here I would like to defend. The word troll is used by today's biggest names in journalism in the same manner as politicians use the word terrorist: to stigmatize in the public eye any disturber of the system. The only way to avoid self-profiling is simple: respecting netiquette, becoming a fair and obedient Citizen of the Web, a fan of some trending guru, etc. In this case you'll become a number, and it's fine. But if you fall victim of the drug you are given ("How's it going, Paolo?". Er, do you really want to know?), you can end up on someone else's black list.

A fellow correspondent once shamelessly described, from the eighth floor of her UWS apartment, the "I have never loved you more" speech of President Obama as if it was the Gospel of Christ on Earth. She asked me to share her article. Of course: according to the introjected, automatized logic of self-promotion, I, a living number, was needed. But I allowed myself to disagree. With some caustic but still polite irony, I decided to publicly make fun of her.

Her reaction was utterly predictable: she unfriended me and blocked me on Facebook.

We didn't stop seeing each other, though, and we continued to meet several times for lunch or coffee. In a private message, she wrote to me: "You know I live on this job. What I post on Twitter or Facebook is what feeds me. If you ridicule it, with your silly jokes, why should I keep you in my friends' list?"

She was right. In times of crisis, there's no room for nuisance or controversies among the marginal. How many real-life friends have I lost, because of my online commentary? The depressive mood of this decade makes us accept any kind of judgement from our little bosses at work, as we are forced into the boxcars of the system. We only allow ourselves to explode and to become intolerant with our own potential comrades, with those with whom we could have a nice chat and, why not, even some fruitful quarrelling. For that, as always, "there's no time". And the time we spare from alienation in office cubicles and in the circus of consumption must be split between family and... the ubiquitous memes.

## 2. The Dialectic.

Getting past my personal, irrelevant example, it might be interesting to try to update the famous Hegel's master-slave dialectic for our times of trolls and Very Important Persons. The VIP/master (be it a journalist, an artist, an academic, a theorist, etc.), exposing himself, renouncing to his own unthouchability to assert his own truth, has achieved his primary purpose: elevating himself over what has become his now troll/servant. The main feature of the latter is being just a number, an entity which doesn't really count. Yet, the troll/servant becomes important for the VIP/master, as the maintenance in visibility of the VIP depends on the anonymous workings of the troll. The troll/servant, by reading a page, clicking, sharing, critiquing in his own ways, inflaming the debates, gives the VIP what s/her needs. The VIP can no longer live without the troll.

The subordination is also reversed: the VIP, yielding to a pathological need to "communicate", becomes a troll, as it's closely linked to the activity of the latter. Conversely, the troll, with his petty, constant work, somehow becomes "master" of the VIP. In short, in this dialectic the apparent superiority of the VIP does not ensure his control over the world that so tenaciously he tried to conquer.

Trolls have a precise function in the pathological universe where they move: they are an antidote to respectability, that can be as poisonous as clear-cut vulgarity.

Some of us just want to float over throbbing disputes, discuss only with the composure of gentlemen, but there are times when something is clearly, terribly wrong. That is when one feels the distinctive thrill of addiction: when something is clearly, terribly wrong, and I'm not talking about a Oh-he-mispelled-Gandhi's-firstname, I must admit to experience a certain pleasure in witnessing the shredding of another human being's arguments into pieces – and in this spectacle I also grow a personal, refreshing prejudice.

Virtually every day comes with its fair share of writers of some repute, young and older journalists, academics or thinkers complaining about the amount of rancour received for their publications. But is really the cost of increasingly rude online commentators so unbearable? It might be better to simply admit that decency in disagreement died when the Internet was born: we all know that type of troll which, hiding behind anonymity, comes to threaten and offend without restraint, posting pornographic or shocking images, mocking family grieves, physical defects and tragedies.

Nevertheless, whether we talk shit about soldiers killed in Afghanistan, cruelly mock someone's death, or we let a writer know he's clearly, terribly wrong, the trolling phenomenon is not only inevitable, but essentially healthy. The liberating power of a crude comment doesn't go beyond or above many other illnesses of our capitalism – in fact, it is

a deceptive power – but has the merit to uncover the emptiness of “education”. If one of the most popular mantra among the “educated” is: do not write online what you would never say in real life, we should answer that never, in the history of mankind, we have been flooded by so many opinions, jokes, puns, points of view, dropped from above and multiplied by the media. Perhaps there’s nothing natural, or gracious, about trolling. But there’s really nothing natural even about the bombastic reproduction of intellectualism, today.

The truth is that, in a certain way, we are at war. A war beyond words. It’s a war that has to do with immigration, religion, politics at a ground level. Our whole life is about sitting back and letting others get away with everything. Allowing our bosses to judge us, allowing ads to judge us, making them think that we are not important, that we are stupid rather than unique, that we belong to this or that - never to ourselves. We see them snigger. But some of us have realized the true meaning behind their smiles, behind their good manners and their etiquette, behind their pronouncements. An imaginary troll manifesto would begin with the words: “If this is your game, we’ll get into it with our rules and our barbarity”.

### 3. Self-consciousness.

The VIP tries to dominate the world in which s/he exerts his/her fame by demanding compliance, education and composure from his/her readers, on the premise of their supposed equality. But this is a misleading premise: readers don’t publish, at the most they posts a comment, and their commentary undergoes a filter. Even when readers turn trolls, as we have seen before, and the dialectic with the VIP goes so far as to make one dependent on the other, the distance between the two is never completely dissolved. Readers, whether they maintain their good manners or not, will always remain marginal. Even a simple nuisance can end up trapped by the Compulsory Comment Disorder (instigated by social media), while the VIP is standing on a pile of protections, contracts and alliances.

Trolls have my full solidarity. But what are the side effects of trolling? Funnily enough, the troll should perform a cost-benefit analysis. Some utterances, although intelligent, acute and precise, can have no other effect than damaging their authors. Paradoxically, the main mistake of trolls is often that of saying things too weakly and too strongly at the same time: too weakly to change anything, too strongly not to cost them dearly in terms of exclusion.

What to choose then? The co-optation in system of robotic-but-not risky participation? What Hegel called the “rise of Stoicism” or the “unhappy consciousness” of the servant? That feeling of exciting albeit only virtual emancipation, the awareness of living a life at the margins of the debate. This is where the obsessive clicking, the indignant sharing of conspiracy sites come from: a pretty gloomy way out.

Perhaps a better solution would be to exit the assembly line of online resentment through our control of our own desires. Through a type of work that would contain discipline instead of dissipation. Creating structured blogs and manifestos, organizing trolling actions without forgetting efficacy. A work that can have an enduring impact instead of getting lost in oblivion. As trolls/slaves create more and more products with greater and greater sophistication through their own creativity, they should begin to see themselves reflected in the products they created, and they should realise that the world around them is not only the one dominated by the VIP. They should produce a self-consciousness of their condition of social significance at the times of Facebook. A self-consciousness that can

only be reached if we compare our particular existence with the existence of others. Sometimes, the melody that derives from this exercise is not a beautiful exchange of loving opinions, but a fierce confrontation.

Some of us are not afraid to challenge social death – that is, today, the end of one's career, the exclusion from educated world – because we choose not to surrender to the media power of VIP. But the question is: is it still worth, in a society where everything is networking and careful balance between consent and assent, afflicting the comfortable ones rather than comforting the afflicted? Despite the temptation to have a more strategic approach to life and come to terms with educated society, I think that, yes, it's still worth it. Perhaps we will never reach certain audiences or we will never be asked to give lectures, and more than one of our friends will get angry at us. But we will still have a good laugh among us, a few to a few, in our little tribe of not-totally-alienated people.



## TEENAGE PHILOSOPHY

*Federico Campagna*

Philosophy, in all its many and wide articulations, is perhaps too large a discipline to encompass with only one definition. It is thinking developed into understanding, and understanding unfolded as imagination. It is theory – in its etymological meaning of passionate, empathic observing – of life and of the world. Having observed life, like sailors used to do with the stars at night, philosophers draw a map for the rest of their journey, which they follow and change as their journey progresses.

Although philosophy has been often thought to have to do with understanding the world, or with changing it, I would claim that it essentially has to do with the art of inhabiting it.

Yet, such a fundamental discipline has long been relegated to the miserable position of an ancient dance remembered only by the elderly, or of a fast-fading dialect. Something of a secret cult to be performed far away from the world, deep inside the catacombs of academia.

Such a regression, I believe, originates from two main sources: one is to be found among the philosophers, the other among those who are not philosophers, and in particular non-philosophizing young people.

### Academia

Today's complete identification between the figure of the philosopher and that of the academic seems to be surprisingly exempt from any serious questioning. Yet, it has only been since the times of Kant that academia has progressively claimed virtually all philosophical activity to itself. Most of the philosophers of antiquity and modernity – with the notable exception of the theology-imbued Middle Ages – simply classified as cultured gentlemen addressing other interested gentlemen.

Contemporary Western philosophy seems to have withdrawn from the buzzing life of the City of Men, deep into the intricate underground architecture of grammar and formalism, that little has to do with the pressing question of how mortal humans can inhabit the world. We could safely say that it has increasingly adopted the inward-looking, paranoid and formalist tendencies of what would be described in other fields of culture simply as 'hipsterism'. The relevance and sharpness of contemporary philosophy does not seek its validation against the background of the world, but rather against the churchly hierarchies and intrigues of academic life.

Today's academic environment increasingly resembles the anxious state of siege of the Salon of the *Academie des Beaux-Arts* in late 19th century Paris, or of the conservatories of classical music in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. When the Salon vanished under the assault of bohemian artists, and dodecaphonic classical music was swept away by jazz, a sudden burst of fresh air took the place of the smell of incense that was smothering both forms of culture. Unfortunately, philosophy seems to be still waiting for its equivalent of the bohemian and jazz revolutions.

Yet, it would be unfair to dismiss academic philosophy *tout-court*. Even at the court of Byzantium, or in the monasteries of Medieval Italy, philosophy found a fertile ground to survive in times of crisis. And academia, today, offers at least a safe shelter against the barbarism of late capitalism. As the world crumbles in what could be the end of the first

global civilization, academia protects its monks and their texts from the incursions of the new financial Vikings, waving their flaming torches of privatisation and profit. Contemporary philosophers take upon themselves the mission of the wandering book-people of Fahrenheit 451, turning their cultural production into stubborn cultural resistance, and their life into a professional testimony – in Greek we would say ‘martyrdom’ – of knowledge.

It is not a coincidence that contemporary philosophy is so closely courted by the contemporary art scene: as with the Illuminated Manuscripts of Medieval Europe, or with Buddhist mandalas, the mantra of endless repetition always calls for beautiful illustration.

## Teenagers

I will keep away from the silly hippy claim that ‘anybody is a philosopher,’ since philosophy, like all disciplines, requires skills and dedication, as well as talent. But I will happily claim that anybody can potentially be a philosopher, and that the path to philosophy doesn’t necessarily have to pass through the gateways of today’s academia.

In fact, the very history of philosophy teaches us about the possibility of de-linking this discipline from any academic environment. Before Socrates, at the time of the so-called *Phisilogoi* (‘scholars of nature’), philosophy used to develop without the aid of universities, classrooms, or even libraries. Curious minds – if endowed with enough wealth to free them from the burden of work – took pleasure in facing fundamental questions with the simple tools of dedication and time. The results were impressive: not only these uncultured – by moderns standards – men achieved to set the foundations of both science and philosophy, but they did so with a sharpness and precision that has rarely been matched ever since.

Obviously, this is not to say that libraries and schools have detrimental effects, but that a discipline such as philosophy can also emerge outside of their sphere of influence. And that a certain distance from the introvert attitude of institutions can often be more rewarding than sticking to the prescribed, academic path.

Let us return for a moment to ancient Magna Graecia, while also keeping in mind what we said about jazz, and also about French bohemian artists.

Similarly to the Homeric heroes sung in the Iliad, most *Phisilogoi* approached the pinnacle of their philosophical activity long before the average age at which students today begin their PhDs. They started producing original philosophy as adolescents, or, as we would say, as teenagers. Throughout the whole of ancient Greek history, philosophy was considered a discipline that was best pursued starting from the first years of puberty, if possible with the aid of an older master.

The same happened at the times of the jazz and bohemian revolutions. Due to their age and lack of classical training, most of those who were at the forefront of such history-making breakthroughs could have hardly applied for the position of Lecturer in any university of their times, or of today. Yet, with the impetus of a Gothic cavalry, they managed to crush the legions of the culture of their times and to raze the bastions of its monasteries.

What did they have, that contemporary teenagers lack?

## Work



Contemporary teenagers do everything: they make and mix music, they take pictures on digital cameras and artfully play with them on photoshop, they play and program videogames, they make films, they design choreographers, and so on. They make everything, except for philosophy. This is quite surprising, considering that philosophy doesn't even require any sophisticated or expensive technology in order to be produced. But, perhaps, this is exactly the point.

As capitalism colonized the culture of leisure time, the entire realm of 'fun' and 'leisure' has become a protectorate of the Work empire. Having fun is a job, and any job requires a minimum financial and technological investment to be legitimate: it has to conform to the dominant economic, technological and cultural environment of its time. Philosophy has none of these attributes. It doesn't really require any of the defining technologies of today, it doesn't allow for any remunerative financial investment, and it doesn't share the professionalizing tendency of contemporary capitalism – unless, that is, it takes place within the professional environment of the academia.

From the youngest age, children are now encouraged to develop any activity into a form of work-production. Whatever they do, it has to fit the ideal grid of what Work looks like. In the age in which technology has made human labour almost completely redundant to the economy, this means connecting human activity with the rituals of social conformism, rather than with any requirement of economic productivity. Work, today, is little more than a secular religion of submission of individuals to a cruel social narrative, founded on an everlasting guilt-complex and on the demand of their renunciation of their desire to fulfill the potential of their mortal lives.

We can witness this early focus on social conformism among teenagers, if we consider the phenomenon of 'cool' as a contemporary re-invention of the sphere of ethics. If we understand 'ethics' as the way a person binds him/herself to an idea of what is the 'good', or what a 'good life' looks like, we can interpret the 'cool' as a powerful, yet flexible, ethics of social conformism. Being 'cool' is a job in itself, in that, like Work, its ultimate aim is to submit one's life to a process of alchemical transformation, until nothing remains of the autonomy of the living individual apart from the very autonomous choice of submission to social conformism.

Considering this complete colonization of life – and particularly of the moments of 'leisure time' – by the demands of social conformism masked as 'Work', we can possibly have a glimpse at some of the reasons why contemporary teenagers do not engage with philosophy.

On the one hand, philosophy is naturally resistant to the requirements of Work. On the other, philosophy's main requirement – the availability of a truly free time in which one can develop one's own curiosity as well as inquisitive skills – has become as rare and fast vanishing among teenagers as virgin rain-forests around the Equator.

### **Bringing philosophy back**

Philosophy is in need of a tsunami of uncontrolled, fresh energy. It demands its own jazz revolution. I believe that the key to such a revival of the art of inhabiting the world and our lives, lies in the engagement of teenagers in the discipline. It will only be by undergoing a process of true popularization – alongside the maintenance of its academic confraternities, – that philosophy will be able to unfold its full potential of existential and cognitive empowerment.

However, contemporary teenagers seem to lack both the social encouragement to engage with philosophy, and the basic requirement of any truly free time, while at the same time being confronted with the byzantinism of academic philosophy.

If we were to imagine how such a situation might be reversed, we would have to consider a strategy of action on several levels, and particularly political, cultural and intellectual.

Politically, the struggle for a reorganization of economic production should be pursued also with the understanding of its implications for philosophy and, thus, for the possibility of autonomous and fulfilling living. De-linking income from Work, creating a functioning structure of free and universal social services, prioritizing the creation of free time – as opposed to the imperative of totalizing employment – would be the most immediate political measures to be taken, if we ever wanted philosophy to become a possible practice among teenagers. Philosophy demands radical political action, if not for ethical reasons, just simply for the evolution of the discipline itself.

Culturally, it would be fundamental to relentlessly challenge practices of social conformism, especially where they are strongest. This would require, on the one hand, the disenfranchisement of the individualist perspective among emancipatory practices – as opposed to the obsessive collectivism of most contemporary radical politics, – and, on the other, the propagation of this perspective not only through ‘alternative’ and minoritarian channels of communication, as it is most often the case, but also on the mainstream media.

Intellectually, contemporary philosophers should seriously consider complementing their academic production with the writing of more accessible texts, especially targeted at teenagers. Such books – or talks – shouldn’t only be dedicated to teaching readers about the history of philosophy through its authors and jargon, but mostly to the exposition of specific philosophical ideas as concepts which are profoundly related to actually lived life. After all, this is already what takes place in most so-called ‘self-help’ literature, where mostly mediocre authors expose mostly superficial concepts with an extremely powerful, extremely accessible style. Only when philosophers will accept to confront the competition of self-help authors on their same terrain, their work will truly be able to reach and inspire hundreds of millions of teenagers and adults living today. This might be too shocking a request for an academic world that has increasingly taken churchly characters. However, it was only through a man who was not afraid to learn how to speak with the birds, the scandalous Saint Francis dressed in rags, that the Church of the Middle ages managed to awake from its slumber and ultimately survive.

**ESORCISMI SATANICI ALL'APPARIR DEL VERO***Franco Berardi Bifo*

Non sono un accanito tifoso di Nanni Moretti, non tutti i suoi film mi piacciono e lui mi è abbastanza antipatico. Ma alcune delle sue prove (*Bianca* forse più di ogni altra) denunciano il genio. E quando vidi *Habemus papam* mi inginocchiai davanti alla grandezza di questo regista.

Sullo sfondo della splendore barocco della Chiesa di Roma, incarnazione terrena di una potenza ultraterrena, quel film parla della depressione contemporanea: il mondo che gli uomini hanno costruito è uscito dall'orbita dell'umano per entrare nell'orbita di una divinità tecnica che l'uomo ha creato e di cui ha perduto il controllo. Troppo complesso, troppo veloce, il mondo che la potenza tecnica ha sottratto alla volontà divina. Troppo crudele per poter essere elaborato secondo le categorie di cui l'umano dispone. E il divino è null'altro che la proiezione fragile di un'illusione umana, e a nulla serve dio, quando siamo finalmente capaci di comprendere l'ultima verità: che non vi è alcuna verità nella nostra storia, non vi è alcuna speranza, solo vi è il piacere dei sensi e della poesia, e la gioia della costruzione collettiva, che è illusione collettiva, costruzione di un ponte di sensi sull'abisso del non essere del senso. *Caminante no hay camino, el camino se hace al andar*.

Ma quanta energia occorre per camminare quando sappiamo che non vi è alcun percorso e alcun punto di arrivo, quanta energia occorre perché quel ponte possa sorreggere il nostro cammino, quanta energia occorre perché l'illusione possa produrre edifici eventi scoperte. Quell'energia si esaurisce quando l'entropia si impadronisce del cervello.

Alzheimer depressione invecchiamento del genere umano vanno di pari passo con l'ingigantirsi della meta macchina, della catena di automatismi tecnici che ci obbligano a continuare il gioco: Matrix, psicofarmacologia dell'illusione obbligatoria, finzione di eternità biotecnica. Il patto che Faust stabilì con Mefistofele all'inizio dell'epoca moderna gli ha offerto la potenza necessaria per sfidare il tempo, ma la vecchiezza non è solo decadimento fisico delle cellule, è anche (soprattutto) perdita di coerenza dell'ordine che permette di interpretare e di sorreggere senso – mentre il ritmo si accelera.

Esorcismi satanici all'apparir del vero.

Il martirio pubblico (mediatico) di Wojtila fu una grande lezione teologica.

La smorfia, l'urlo strozzato, le incomprensibili parole mentre la mano nel vacillare uncinava l'aria, dicevano che lo spirito santo si esprime nella sofferenza della carne, e che il messaggio non è articolabile in parole, perché il messaggio ultimo è proprio quello che i suoni disarticolati di un uomo torturato dal male possono comunicare: il venir meno dell'ordine molecolare che dà senso, la superiore forza del male, del tempo, della morte.

La sua lotta contro Satana quel poderoso polacco cresciuto fra gli operai e i minatori la condusse fino all'ultimo, fin quando, com'è inevitabile, Satana non vinse – poiché Satana vince sempre.

Benedetto si è cagato sotto, diciamo le cose come stanno.

Condivido politicamente il suo gesto di umana codardia, l'ammissione di fragilità che lo accomuna al Michel Piccoli di *Habemus Papam*. Quando Satana si è mostrato in un angolo della stanza vaticana in cui il vecchio pastore tedesco sonnecchiava, egli ha reagito com'è naturale che un uomo anziano reagisca: chiedendo di andare in pensione.

Milioni di vecchi torturati da decenni di lavoro, fatica fisica e psichica, umiliazioni patite per mandare i figli a scuola chiedono la stessa cosa: il diritto di andare in pensione. Ce lo negano questo diritto perché Satana neoliberalista si è impadronito decisamente del posto di comando finanziario e politico.

Purtroppo la medicina moderna ha messo a nostra disposizione strumenti farmacologici che ci obbligano a vivere molto di più di quanto il nostro corpo e soprattutto il nostro cervello possano tollerare. L'epidemia di Alzheimer cui siamo esposti è la spietata punizione per l'umanità che si abbarbica alla vita non perché la ami (come potrebbe amare una vita orrenda, il decomporsi lento della memoria, del riconoscersi?) ma solo perché è di sua proprietà, e siamo stati abituati a non abbandonare per nessuna ragione ciò che ci appartiene (ciò che crediamo appartenerci).

Benedetto ha compiuto un gesto enorme, dal punto di vista teologico, un gesto che venne compiuto una volta soltanto nella storia della Chiesa romana da quel Celestino che Dante condanna perché il gran rifiuto segnala un venir meno della fede nell'infinita potenza di qualcuno.

La lezione di Benedetto è che non vi è alcun dio che possa salvarci da noi stessi, e che faremmo meglio a prendercela calma: godere della vita e stoicamente apprestarci ad abbandonarla, coscientemente, volontariamente, lucidamente. Perché è il solo modo per farsi beffe di Satana, quand'egli, abbandonate le amabili vesti del seduttore deve (contro la sua stessa voglia, sia ben chiaro) malinconicamente apparirci come il maligno.

## NOTA

Un filosofo contemporaneo il cui nome tacerò ha detto recentemente non ricordo in che contesto che il pensiero filosofico deve essere essenzialmente una meditazione sulla vita. Naturalmente si può dire, come no, ma in questo modo si rischia la banalità pubblicitaria. Il pensiero materialistico, il pensiero ateo, il pensiero autonomo e comunista hanno bisogno soprattutto di una meditazione sulla morte. E' proprio la morte che il nostro ateismo non ha saputo vedere, che ha voluto nascondersi, rinviare, rimuovere. Col risultato che non sappiamo come comportarci quando un compagno muore. In alcuni casi ci rivolgiamo al prete perché la religione ha fatto della morte il suo argomento principale, mentre gli atei parlano della vita come se la morte non ne facesse parte, come se fosse un incidente marginale, e non come è, il senso di un percorso che non ha senso. Le conseguenze di questa rimozione sono insieme filosofiche e politiche: questa rimozione ci ha indotto a credere che fosse possibile la giustizia, la democrazia, il comunismo. Nulla di tutto questo è possibile, perché la morte è la verità sul cui sfondo soltanto possiamo pienamente apprezzare l'allegria della rivolta, la bellezza delle forme, la gioia della vita collettiva e la potenza della costruzione e della scienza. La verità è la materia, il suo degradarsi, la perdita d'ordine che accompagna il nostro percorso. Autonomia significa consapevole costruzione del mondo sul nulla, della felicità sull'illusione condivisa.

La morte va iscritta nell'orizzonte del materialismo, perché solo conoscendo il limite – del nostro tempo, della nostra vita – possiamo capire quel che il comunismo dialettico (idealista) ci ha impedito di vedere: che il vincitore non vince niente, e che la lotta per la libertà è sconfitta in partenza. E che solo nell'autonomia (però consapevole) dalla consapevolezza dell'inevitabile è possibile vivere felicemente, e morire consapevolmente cioè liberamente.

## OYSTERS!

*Robert Prouse*

If 'the world is our oyster' why are they so expensive? Shakespeare's formulation, that a poor man denied money may open the world like an oyster instead, takes on a very different meaning when the cheap food of the poor becomes the delicacy of the rich. Perhaps the shifting fortunes of the oyster are simply the most obvious example of a culinary and cultural refinement which has seen the pots of the many emptied on to the plates of the few. The crumbs from the master's table, 'authentic' and 'honest', have been plucked from the mouths of the poor who have been sold instead a pale imitation of the original loaf.

Oysters comfortably adorn the plates of the highest haute cuisine and the stalls of the saltiest salt-of-the earth artisans, yet it is no secret that they were also once plentiful fare for the English poor. Originally popular with England's Roman invaders who set slaves to work collecting the delicacy from the shores of the English Channel, these native delicacies were transported as far as the empire's capital. After the Romans left oysters fell out of favour but were popular again as early as the 8th Century and by the 1400's were consumed in great numbers by both the rich and poor. For the less well-off they would appear on 'fish days', during which no meat was eaten and which fell as often as Wednesday, Friday and Saturday in order to bolster both the fishing industry and the number of seafaring men available to the royal navy.

Up until the 19th Century oysters were consumed by the barrel by those who would never taste a fillet, chop or cutlet. Eaten raw, cooked or pickled, oysters were a far cry from the symbol of fine dining they have become. As cheap protein for the poor they were used as stuffing or padding in dishes whose meat content was financially constrained. Perhaps most famously the oysters in steak and oyster pies were present to balance the lack of expensive steak and they even had their own drink in 'oyster' stout. A cheap drink to be served alongside a cheap food and their ubiquity had Charles Dicken's Sam Weller state in 'Pickwick Papers' "poverty and oysters always seem to go together". However in time overfishing and a polluted habitat slowly raised the price of the humble oyster, pushing them beyond the reach of the common people and elevating them to the status we know today.

This transition of the oyster from sustenance to sublime is not unusual in the lineage of culinary refinement. Foods which traditionally had mass appeal carry with them a history which contains cultural and symbolic resonance, all of which adds up to a lucrative 'authenticity'. Nevertheless this refinement also contradicts a different tenet of the superiority of the food of the rich: Principally that a refined gastronomy, whether it be the most baroque haute cuisine, intricate molecular gastronomy or mud encrusted slow food is created by artists and artisans. These movements create a definitive break between the production and consumption of food, one in which the producers' act is elevated to an art form where formal experimentation, deconstruction and refinement eclipses the lowly alimentary worries of the poor. Moreover this culture reserves for itself every creative and cultural facet of cookery, with the food of the majority relegated to mimicry or simply subsistence.

The problem with oysters is that in their elevation nothing has changed. At a stretch it might be argued that various dressings and preparations are formal concerns, yet the truth is that today oysters are consumed almost exclusively raw. The hedonistic pleasure



indulged in an oyster bar cannot be too different from that experienced two centuries ago in a dock side pub. The conclusion to be drawn is that the formal properties which can only be extracted from the oyster's shell by a refined cooking are not a sea-saltiness, a moist suppleness or a giving bite but scarcity and monetary value. Form over function, yes, but let's not fool ourselves over which formal aspects are truly prized.

This conclusion in turn questions another assumption of the food culture of the rich, that refined cooking caters to a refined palate. The inverse of this proposition sees the poor staunchly opposing almost anything other than fat saturated carbohydrates, processed meat and the occasional boiled vegetable, yet once again the oyster's unaltered transition makes this rather hard to swallow. Oysters along with whelks, cockles and winkles not to mention wild game, offal and all manner of cheap cuts of meat and fish were once staples of a working class diet, yet today are to be found almost exclusively on the menus of a higher class of restaurant. Not all of these foods have undergone the rapid shift in availability and price of the oyster, some are still relatively cheap, however their disappearance from the tables of the poor suggests an altogether different shift. The post war move in one or two generations to a far more homogenised food culture has its roots in social imitation, the ever increasing marketisation of every aspect of the food chain and a steady decline in real wages. Yet underpinning this homogenisation is an active process of cultural cleansing.

As is clear the long history of oyster fishing in England, protected by an act of parliament which set up the Whitstable Oyster Fisheries Company in 1897, is one of the main constituents of the contemporary understanding of, and desire for, oysters. However this cultural aura is only safe as part of an isolated, historicised practice and not as a living culture: It is served at a premium with the trappings of an imagined mid 19th century, like the oysters themselves far from the pollutants of the modern world. This authenticity is heightened by the most minimal preparation, which supposedly gets the most from the finest ingredients and those who can afford it get the sublime ecstasy of an unmediated experience.

In contrast the food of the poor is marked by the highest possible mediation - it is processed. During the transformation from raw ingredients to finished product processed food will go through innumerable stages and accommodate multiple additives. Nevertheless the popularity of molecular gastronomy suggests this is not a problem *per se*. The real problem lies in the fact that this processed food is both relatively bland, leaving aside flavour enhancers, incredibly unhealthy and nullifies any food culture outside of that of the rich. With working class culinary history isolated from its progenitors and sold in vitro to the highest bidder, processed food deals a double blow to the emergence of a new culture. Firstly, along with the time demands and poor remuneration of work it relegates cooking to a worthless chore. Secondly in opposition to the food of the rich it completely dehistoricises food. With ingredients which are unrecognisable or hidden processed food exists only from the moment it is purchased. Shorn of the creative act of cooking or the shared communality of an existing culinary culture, processed food is the model simulacrum, an object without an original. It would be a crime to process an oyster and so the poor will never have them.

What is so dangerous about a working class food culture? Clearly there's money to be made from controlling what people eat and the totalising control of the food chain that this entails but that's not all. An engagement with cooking would be one part of a larger culture which might engender solidarity, dignity and shared contemporary values, rather than those forged in a disarming extraordinarily rose-tinted nostalgia. The destruction and



suppression of this culture therefore serves a twofold cause: To protect imposed and static symbolic properties of food from the pollution of the poor and to deny their culture any utilisation of the cultural resonances which food might have. Here, once again, oysters tell an illuminating story.

On the 8th December 1811 Timothy and Celia Marr, their 3 month old son and James Gowan, an apprentice, were brutally murdered in their home in Whitechapel, a crime which became known as the Ratcliffe Highway Murders. It was so vicious that it played a large part in prompting the formation of an organised police force in Britain, yet a further member of the house was spared her life as she had gone out to buy oysters. This kind of extreme violence was far from uncommon in poverty stricken boroughs but it was its association with England's prized mollusc, made so readily by Dickens, which meant the link between oysters and the poor must be severed. Today, in this context it is only too clear why 'Oyster Card' fares for London public transport were raised immediately on the inauguration of a conservative mayor. For the poor to have oysters they must be worth less, but if the poor actually have them they'll be worthless.

Likewise, whether grounded in the image of the goddess Aphrodite emerging from the sea on a giant oyster shell or in the visual similarity to female sexual organs the oyster has long been considered an aphrodisiac. For those in power however the problem of the poor is not their life of drudgery but their over-enjoyment and a lack of responsibility. This is apparently most visible in a feckless sexual hedonism and unintended procreation, so to allow the poor access to a noted aphrodisiac would be reckless at best. Clearly the unaffordability of oysters is not down to people being too poor to afford them but due to there being too many poor people. How can a food so enjoyable, so sublime, be the food of a class which clearly already has such an excess of enjoyment.

Much left-political discourse about food is focused on ethics whilst aesthetics and culture are the monopoly of bourgeois discussions over 'authentic' slow food minutiae. The ethical debate often focuses on animal welfare and many consider oysters one of the most ethical to eat due to their lack of a central nervous system. Nevertheless, oysters are eaten alive. What does it mean to eat something alive and what would it mean to speak politically about the aesthetics of a working class food culture? We could start by thinking about what happens when a culture is eaten alive. Much is made of Marx's analogy of the vampiric nature of capitalism but it seems especially appropriate here. The food of the poor which, like an oyster, once filtered the environment around it now, like an oyster, lies static on ice, ready to be swallowed whole, again and again. Perhaps it's time to bite back.

## ABANDONING NATIONALITY AND SUPERSTITION

Nathan Witt

*If you take a city such as Salonika or Smyrna, you will find there five or six communities each of which has its own memories and which have almost nothing in common. Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common; and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew,' or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century. There are not ten families in France that can supply proof of their Frankish origin, and any such proof would anyway be essentially flawed, as a consequence of countless unknown alliances, which are liable to disrupt any genealogical system.(1)*

Ernest Renan, lecture given at the Sorbonne, 1882.

This is an idea inspired by a comment about Cairo's City of the Dead as a place where the spiritual goal is to celebrate the absence of judgment, which is to be left for God(2) and in many other people's case in God's absence. The City of the Dead reveals more than a vernacularized classification of death or the cultural appreciation of idol worship - regardless of being urban or rural. It is also a place of mutual habitation between the living and the dead where people live, cleaning the family house: the Leichenhauser. That habitation is mirrored, anchored, by the collective memories of people and amnesia, trauma and other emotions. This text is nothing but an attempt to try and encourage an aspiration and joy towards an abandonment of judgementalism in social spaces without discussing participation or religion. The migrancy of people from the countryside to a necropolis might not be borne out of a desire to participate but socio-political pragmatism, or human despair- and motives that are also prone to migrate and change.

Imagine rejecting depiction and symbols- and to try and deal with the rejection and the demeaning or undermining the works of others in a way that is as quiet, positive and non-judgemental as one can be when one is saying "no". Consider the extremes between fallibility of memory and the collective consciousness and the pointlessness in positioning superstition where everything today is more or less displaced but numerically posited and epistemologically archived (art as a soft cultural export; specifically representation). Instead consider the superstitiousness of people: how varied and entrenched are their psychic fears? What is the relevance of the collective memory if a participant, for example, is not a willing participant? Or in another place? Or is an amnesiac? Or is resistant to just about everything?

This is an idea that not just desperately panders to the idea of abandoning judgement and superstition but is infatuated with the idea. That idea is based on all of the clichéd punkish, anti-establishment, atheist, anarchic reasons- and to submit ourselves to class-based, gender-based, post-colonial scrutiny if need be. But importantly out of a genuine scientific desire to engage other frequencies like gamma waves, beta waves, x-rays, infra red, radio, ultraviolet, bandwidth and waveforms; or touch, listening and smelling. The irony is of culture, continually discussing how it is feeling without touching. And if the eyes are the window to the soul then: what of the house- or the soul?

*"The builder arrived next morning with his men, and found a great rectangular trench, carefully dug in the ground. 'This is the foundation,' Krespel said. 'So set to work, and go on building the walls till I tell you to stop.'*

*'But what about the doors and windows?' asked the builder. 'Are there to be no partition walls?'*

*'Just you do as I tell you, my good man ' said Krespel as calmly as possible come quite right in its own good time.'*

*Nothing but the prospect of liberal payment induced the man to have anything to do with so preposterous a job—but never was there a piece of work carried through so merrily; for it was amid the ceaseless jokes and laughter of the workmen—who never left the ground, where abundance of victuals and drink was always at hand—that the four walls rose with incredible speed, till one day Krespel cried 'Stop!'*

*Mallets and chisels paused. The men came down from their scaffolds and formed a circle about Krespel, each grinning countenance seeming to say—'What's going to happen now?'*

*'Out of the way!' cried Krespel, who hastened to one end of the garden, and then paced slowly towards his rectangle of stone walls. On reaching the side of it which was nearest—the one, that is, towards which he had been marching—he shook his head dissatisfied, went to the other end of the garden, then paced up to the wall as before, shaking his head, dissatisfied, once more.*

*This process he repeated two or three times; but at last, going straight up to the wall till he touched it with the point of his nose, he cried out, loud: 'Come here, you fellows, come here! Knock me in the door! Knock me in a door here!' He gave the size it was to be, accurately in feet and inches; and what he told them to do they did. When the door was knocked through, he walked into the house, and smiled pleasantly at the builder's remark that the walls were just the proper height for a nice two-storied house. He walked meditatively up and down inside, the masons following him with their tools, and whenever he cried 'here a window six feet by four; a little one yonder three feet by two,' out flew the stones as directed."*(3)

ETA Hoffmann's Councillor Krespel

The common perception of superstition being of an image being strengthened by its depiction, of confirming social beliefs via representation. Hebrew, Aboriginal and Socratic oral culture - and conceptual art and atheism - have peculiar ages and life cycles. For a long time they have challenged visuality - and the reified material - in preference to the notion, lightness, the idea, the complexity of fact. The Internet and New Aesthetic has entrenched us into the eye and it is difficult to work out what has become of the notion, or where was art going before the Internet. Things that flow from a different binary ethereal world force conceptual ideas to become algorithms and literal formulas that no normal human can calculate, something [epistemological] philosophers also do.

"Propose to look at artworks in a context that rejects superstition and the language that underpins the work, including symbolism and belief." Consider superstition as the idea of things being weakened by being depicted. Where things are not necessarily about the medium - and not the individual - but of visual resistance. Could that be of use to a

resistance collective without being ritualized or fetishizing our displacement? Is it the value of experience we are actually after? Or Motive vs Desire? This desire being the simple putting to one side of computational, epistemic metadata as a means of economy - and for addressing inevitable creative revenge. It is also for making quietness quieter for people not at war and for those who are, trying to find a realistic space for them to flee to.

People constantly dispute realized projects - even individual artist's lives and their artworks - so why not the sum collective of artists and all of their works? Governments do this to art and psychologically it can be a particularly nasty thing to do - even as hypothetical or internal dialogue - and superstitious fear is something embedded, maybe cultivated, into Nationality and Religion(4). Religion is cursed by its historicity and society is cursed by it politic and both of their hegemonies -either inside or out - continually expose the superfluousness of morality and ethics. I'm interested in looking at things and considering all that has been represented as being systematically compromised because of the contents being depicted and spoken of. I know my Judgementalism spills into superstition, that superstition informs judgement and that judgement is embedded in Nationhood. I know the symbols of languages are safeguarded, memorized and repeated, changing each day, or what Anderson referred to as "emanations of reality"(5): emotional amorphousness... Such a juncture occurs when one is tired of reality and measuring things and simply wants to find the quickest, most effective method of leaving.

(1) Shlomo Sand and Ernest Renan, *On the Nation and the Jewish People*, Verso Books, P 47

(2) Di Marco, Anna Tozzi, *The Reshaping of Cairo's City of the Dead: Rural Identity versus Urban Arena in the Cairene Cultural Narrative and Public Discourse*. *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Volume 6, Number 2, Winter 2011, pp. 38-50

(3) [http://www.has.vcu.edu/for/hoffmann/krespel\\_e.html](http://www.has.vcu.edu/for/hoffmann/krespel_e.html)

(4) Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, Verso Books, 1983. Anderson argues that Nationality is something that originated in 18th Century Europe, P37

(5) Ibid P14

## AGAINST THE GIFT OF INTERPRETATION

Rebecca LaMarre

I address you all as a friend who has been burdened with the responsibility to speak above others.

I will say to you, my friends, that whoever has ambition to be heard in a crowd must press and squeeze and thrust and climb with indefatigable pains, till he has exalted himself to a certain degree of altitude above them. To this end, the philosopher's way, in all ages, has been by erecting certain edifices in the air.

Therefore, towards the just performance of this great work, there exist but three wooden machines for the use of those orators who desire to talk much without interruption.

These are: the pulpit, the ladder and the stage.

After conversing with Jonathan Swift, I have chosen, in order to emphasize my minor short comings so that you will not notice my larger ones, to employ the use of all three of these wooden machines; the lectern being the secular cousin of the pulpit. The purpose of this activity is to both elaborate and enact what I am calling a practice of reading.

*[take out ladder and stand on it behind lectern]*

As this must be brief, my words today will serve as the beginning of a model for what someone who calls themselves a Reader can look like, followed by a less desirable example and concluded with a proposition for the cultivation of more desirable ones.

I begin with a cursory list of readers who had an encounter with text that radically changed their capacity to engage with the social conditions in their immediate environment.

These characters include Dorian Grey's encounter with a certain yellow book, Augustine's *rendevouz* with St. Paul under the fig tree, Alissa and Jerome's rapture, and ultimate dissolution via philosophical texts in *Straight Is The Gate*, the puzzled followers of a wise Sufi in the *Book of the Book*, Tristram Shandy's *Tristramopaedia* painstakingly recorded by his father for his future benefit, Sherlock Holmes should be mentioned at least for his voracious consumption of fictional texts, and of course, Des Esseintes in *Against Nature*.

I mention this to suggest that as in *Against Nature*, my point of departure as a reader and all the activities in the course of my social life originated in the education I received, and that the practice of reading I am searching for is one grounded in an act of rigorous un-learning; one that enables me to interrogate where I have been taught to locate the social production of value.

As a child my parents regularly took me to a Pentecostal church in Ontario, Canada. This was my first exposure to an idea of community determined by encounters with specific texts, and I began to understand the nature of my existence as a reader when I discovered I have what is called "The Gift of Interpretation."

Gifts of the Spirit are described in 1 Corinthians 12:8 and include wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, the working of miracles, prophecy, discernment, and the most famous (or infamous) one - speaking in tongues. I discovered my particular gift in the following way:

One Sunday in church, I would have been 12 or 13 years old, the service was following its usual programme which involved a short sermon, singing hymns, and then an opportunity for someone to speak in tongues, 'if the spirit moved them,' followed by a space of silence for someone to provide an interpretation, again, 'if the spirit moved them.' The rest of the sermon would follow.

This particular Sunday there was a man speaking in some strange dialect, and while I was listening to the random glottal sounds being produced my heart started to beat quickly and my face flushed. I had an increased sensation of circulation in my body, and I understood this to mean that I should look in my bible, which I opened at random to find Romans 2 looking up at me from the page. As an aside, I still get this sensation when sitting in lectures that I am particularly engaged with.

My 12 year old self stood up, and the silent congregation turned in unison at the sound of my voice reading out: "... for whatever you judge in another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things." There was an audible gasp in the room. This was followed by a pregnant silence that lasted for what felt like an hour, when suddenly I found myself swept up by my parents and carried out of the room. We went immediately to the car where they interrogated me and asked why I had read out that particular verse. My response seemed perfectly logical at the time; "God told me to do it."

Before I continue, DH Lawrence would like to remind you to never trust the teller, trust the tale.

To my dismay, in my re-telling I have already allowed interpretation to infect my story - Susan Sontag would like to point out that to call my succession of affects "the voice of God" is to use language to turn something into something other than what it is, in this case, a series of sensations. According to Sontag, interpretation is a residue of the Enlightenment which acts as a translation of a text that has become unacceptable. The text, or the image cannot be discarded, so it must be covered in allegory.

This leads me to ask what was unacceptable about my reading of a Bible verse in a space allocated for direct messages from God to be heard? Why did my parents carry me out of the congregation?

I came to learn many years later that the topic of the sermon that Sunday was regarding the management of money in a church, and that the pastor was casting judgment on other churches in the city for not handling their finances well. He paired condemnation for other's fiscal practices with a call for an increase in tithing, which is where church members pledge to pay a percentage of their wages to the church.

The pastor delivered his sermon unaware that he had been discovered by the board of directors to be embezzling money from the church. There was a plan for the congregation to confront him at the end of his sermon that day, unbeknownst to me as I read from the second chapter of Romans.

Sontag argues against a separation of form and content. Whether or not my utterance was a direct message from God, we can be certain there was no separation between what was



being said and the meaning of what was said - the unacceptable utterance was formed in a crucible of contingencies - the meaning was clear in an individual way to each listener.

Sontag laments that we cannot go back to a time where one did not ask of a work of art what it said because one knew what it did. She argues that it is in the light of the condition of our senses and our capacities that the task of the critic must be assumed.

The gifts given on The Day of Pentecost are used largely to create an allegory of the Church as a body, each member a unit of a larger whole. From this we are given the first corporation with an absent patriarch as the source of the sovereign. Social participation and care is thus the responsibility of each individual member which then feeds back and becomes incorporated into the body of the church. This is not so different from socialism where all forms of labour are fed back into the State. This is not so different from Capitalism, where the sovereign is supposedly dispersed to the point of being un-locatable with corporations that are given the legal agency of bodies.

Forms of reading that come from this lineage are undesirable. Rather, the task of a Reader is different than that of the critic, although the imperative for an increase in the capacity of our senses is shared. The practice of reading I am pursuing requires a radical flattening of the historical and cultural hierarchies of text - all texts must be acceptable and available as material for use in thought and in argument. I am arguing for the presentness of any given text with no meaning outside the event of its utterance.

The kind of reading I'm proposing in the broadest sense is an engagement with the social and political implications of a text; an acknowledgement of the entanglement of affects and subtexts with the printed word, and a commitment to finding optimal ways for individual's voices to be heard within that entanglement.