

# **in defence of permanent resentment**



*on the hegemony  
of the universal*

# 1

I look around at the structure I find myself in. In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, I read that: “(...) recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world”. But who wrote that and for whose benefit? The discourse speaks of establishing a common ground, promoting liberal values for every identity, something that would be vital in every time and in every place.

The West in 2016 is a place of “neo-liberalism”, a worldview founded on the principles of liberty, equality, and economic liberalisation policies. “Everyone is”, “Noone shall”. Like, everyone, everyone? Really? EVERYONE? Including me? I don’t feel so adequate, though. Actually, even oppressed; in a system that declares itself as willing to guarantee freedom and equality, justice and peace.

That is the structure that I am a part of, the structure that I face, with the liberal ethos, claiming freedom and equality for all. But all is not equal as speech is not given to all. This structure presents itself as universal, but it is actually talking from a very specific point of view and set of references, which are merely rendered dominant.

On the hegemony of that “universal”, to reveal its power relations, is to dig in this frame which promotes freedom and equality for every being, and thinking about the individual feeling of oppression coming from that very frame.

I felt the need to explore this inadequacy, from the neo-liberal state considered as “normal” to the violence this “normal” state implies.

# 2

The “Universal Declaration” formulation implies a necessary paradox. The catch is, that to declare is a mode of discourse that aims to assert the authority of the subject, “the one that knows”. It comes from a distinct perspective, that of the one able to speak, and declaring it true for all. It amounts to claiming freedom by “freely” imposing

this one position. I am told that my freedom is assured, through the application of such a text by the international community. However, to declare implies a specific perspective on the part of the one speaking. Quickly enough, I understand that this conception of freedom and the universal is present in my own education, inherent to the cultural structure in which I grew up.

The pursuit of the universal derives from the conception that — as the particular is subjected to the whole — the desire for totality, for the “universal”, is but a research for freedom. The origin of how we tend to think about this “universal” dates back to Plato’s allegory of the cave in “The Republic” (514a-520a), and represents one of the foundations of Western philosophy. The human condition is envisioned in this allegory as a person chained to the wall of a cave. In breaking from those chains, those material bounds, one is able to walk out of the cave and arrive at the bright world of ideas. In so doing, one becomes free. The allegory brings the conception that, to escape particular bounds (social, environmental, physical, historical) and to reach what is common to all (in this case, the world of ideas, the reason) is a liberating act. To be free is conceived as transcending one’s particularity and gaining access to a universal worldview based on the precepts of reason; it is to access immortality, overcome finiteness, and therefore access truth, that is, universal reason. This is presented as the ideal that one should act for and towards.

The universal, trying to find what is common to all, is a unifying gesture for the “human family”, and therefore providing a flat, shared ground upon which to arrive at equality and freedom. The liberal vision thus creates an opposition between the collective and the individual in a simplistic antagonism. The collective would be the place for the particular, the character. Indeed, a certain collective embodies specific cultural aspects which are exclusive of other cultures, creating differences. The individual, on the other hand, would be able to rely on their reason and to disengage from their cultural roots (those of the collective). Being

liberated from the bind of these cultural roots, the individuals find themselves reaching their essence, of being an individual dwelling in the dimension of universal reason. This conception of freedom — escaping bounds to avoid subjection, to reach the “whole”—is inherent to western philosophy and its history of ideas. While presenting itself as universal, it only speaks from a certain position — not only presenting, but declaring.

I feel uncomfortable. How can I relate to such universality, to such a unified vision of what it is to be free? How can I construct myself in a flat, unified ground which is clearly declared to me? What are the qualities expected from me? This ground, as seen through the liberal conception, has its roots in reason. It does not rely on any divine source in order to provide a meaning and a goal. On the universal ground, to make sense does not come from an exterior religious origin but from inner individual ability to reason. The common ground of the universal is described by French philosopher Alain Badiou (The Caesura of Nihilism. n.p.) as “worldless”, as in it is devoid of a world. According to Badiou, we lack a notion that would give meaning to the complexity of reality in the same way that the belief in God would have. Because of this lack of divine meaning, life cannot be dedicated to some transcendental cause, thus creating the “Kulturarbeit”: cultural work, activity as a goal. All this relies on reason and the ability for a person to be the master of their own life. Such a ground can only promote the realisation of the self through a long life of material and cultural wealth.

Consequently, I see the qualities required to “be free”, to escape bounds, to conduct the long life of material and cultural wealth, as: autonomy, public activity, individuality, self-assertion and rationality. These qualities are very distinct, there is nothing universal in them. The figure embodying and promoting them is a specific one: the white, male, heterosexual, cisgender, Christian, whose claims are based on precepts of reason. The one already in the position of power, with the authority to declare.

So if what constitutes my identity is, let us say, emotionality, private solidarity, embodied experience, instability, softness, plurality — I am likely to think of myself as “Other”. I feel worried. I feel anxious. I feel oppressed.

Promoting equality and freedom is a pretty fair cover for something quite insidious. These ideals, which must be accepted in order to stand on the common ground, are determined by the figure declaring the common ground. Perpetuating these ideals guarantees the position of the same domineering figure. Not only does the universal ideology ensure domination, it also legitimises it. Accordingly, the universal being declared is not a neutral referent, but a specific perspective that aims to unify things and impose particular characteristics in order to maintain the power of a specific figure. The violence it involves is structural. This is why I feel violated by such a system: it tells me that I should strive for a “singular” freedom, this totality, this universality, that there is one direction that I have to elevate myself to. In order to escape subjection, to be free, I should have to stick to certain qualities; that if I don’t identify with those valued qualities, if I don’t strive to resemble the dominant figure, to assimilate its norms, I will be marginalised. Declaring those principles universal, creating the liberal system required to sustain, maintain and reproduce them, creates a process of violent imposition. You hear me well, what is oppressive is not a specific action but that of the whole structure. “What is the robbery of a bank next to the founding of a bank?” (Brecht n.p.) The whole thing? The whole thing. I get this, understanding that the ground I am told to stand on is a worldless one. I am expected from a whole way of thinking about beings and the world that I have to rely on my reason, that to escape bounds I have to be public, individual, rational. I have to assimilate those qualities and this way of thinking in order to be “free”, to strive for this life of material and cultural wealth as what should be my goal. I must understand, I stand against anything that has a “unifying” quality. To me, the hegemony

of the universal shows that to present one part as the whole, to flatten and find the common in things is oppressive. There is no necessarily inherent freedom in these norms, in assimilation of this “normal” state.

### 3

I look around and this is indeed what I see: the flat landscape of the universal project, aiming at the unit of human family while concealing the structural violence this supposedly neutral state entails. Based on precepts of reason, on rationality, the system stemming from it must be worldless, as Badiou expresses, or in another word: secular. The modern western State is supposedly founded on the separation of the Church and the State, not using transcendent divine concepts but rather rationality in order to build the law. To make everyone equal in front of the same referent. However, professor of social cultural anthropology Saba Mahmood states that there is an inner paradox in the construction of liberal democracies (857). Indeed, in such structure, everyone is equal before the law, but the aim of the law is to create and maintain public order — this necessarily turns upon the concerns of the majority only. The law is not a neutral referent for the “universal subject”; it is inscribed in an entire set of cultural presuppositions. It is therefore located in a certain perspective, asserting the authority of the State and the ones in position to access that power.

The Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek mentions the liberal regime and the modern democratic system as “post-political bio-politics” (Violence 40). It is post-political because it leaves old ideological struggles behind, focusing on managing the country; and bio-politics because it considers security and welfare as primary issues. This regime considers problems as something concrete that needs to be solved, its ultimate goal is to arrange the economic success of the whole and the wealth of the participants. Politics becomes administration. This is a key shift, that

explains how oppressive systems are created and perpetuated through the liberal democratic law. The State frames the law as existing to “manage” the country, it is given wide scope to determine what threatens and what protects national security, what makes subjects equal and what constitutes “free speech”. Therefore, a real political agency of action gets easily dismissed since it is redirected into the manageable category of administration.

The belief in rationality perpetuates the concerns of the majority (the ones empowered) as what the law should be framed onto. Cultural minorities cannot be addressed in other terms than the ones of the law, the ones of the democratic liberal system. I cannot defend the parts that constitute myself, but only through referring to the majority. The secular liberal structure can only see cultural specificities as something which should not interfere with the overall structure.

Mahmood gives the example that the split in the law, between religion and liberal principles, leads to the assumption in western societies that Muslims cannot be subjected to racism as they are a religious, and not a racial, group (851). They are thus not considered by the liberal regime as an administrative group, and therefore do not enter the frame of secular law. While attacks on black people would appear to violate the liberal principle of equality, blasphemy is seen as “normal”, if not a constitutive role in liberal’s notion of freedom of speech. This is the presumption that religion is a matter of choice. Indeed, cultural specificities are encouraged on the universal ground only if they are regarded as a “free choice”.

If a culture appears really as what it is, meaning a matter of substantial belonging, the subject is considered to be subordinated to it. But in order to make the choice, one should first extract oneself from those roots and assimilate the precepts of universal reason. The schema is repetitive: to deliver the “free choice”, one has to assimilate one particular position, to internalise specific norms.

Therefore, the liberal system building the law,

secular and administrative, is nothing neutral but following a certain point of view, and specific ontological and epistemological assumptions. It is denying the agency of cultural specificities and beliefs, that of minorities, because it refuses to see itself as ethnically located. Liberal democracies are allegedly building a neutral law for the equal rights of the population. However, they are structurally creating oppression by transforming politics into administrations, imposing certain conceptions that assert the power of specific groups and figures while dismissing the others.

In “Orientalism”, Edward Said deconstructs the West’s patronising perceptions and fictional depictions of “the East” as well as its fascination for “l’Oriental” as a cultural unit. He notably describes the ways in which Islam, a completely foreign worldview for Europeans at the beginning of the Middle Ages, was assimilated by an already existent worldview: Christianity (172). An analogy, domesticating the exotic, was created. Islam was seen as “a sort of” Christianity, Mohammed as an Islamic Christ — as a false, wrong adaptation.

The precepts of universality — in trying to find what is common to all — create the same analogies, therefore producing the conditions for discrimination. Indeed, to paraphrase Said, Mohammed appears familiar because he is like Jesus, a sort of Islamic Christ; but he is also alien because, ultimately, he is not at all like Jesus. The pursuit of commonalities thus paradoxically emphasises the Other’s difference. Perceived as no different than a fake copy of the original. I look at the “common groundness” of the liberal vision, I look at it, I look at it doing the same. Being gay is sort of like being straight, it is human sexuality but with a same sex person. Being of colour is sort of like being white, it is “humanness” but with a different skin colour. Those analogies, that supposedly find the common in all the differences, strengthen the dominant position. The Other is marginalised, insisting on the *but*. It is exactly why I perceive liberal tolerance as an irrelevant response to the struggle. Essentially, the

ones in power tolerate that I am a human, like you, by noticing that I am not quite like you. As it states, the Universal Declaration allows me to be a part of the human family “without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.” This implies that, as a predicate, such text is also in a position to disallow. The one in power, in order to give that tolerance, first had to take the position of privilege. Who gives the voice to whom? The tolerant attitude reiterates who has that privilege and who doesn’t. Looking for what is common between someone and someone else leads to an emphasis on one’s otherness to the other. The result is tolerance, when what is needed is emancipation.

Under the cover of promoting equality and freedom, the structure imposed is specific, built to sustain and reproduce a distinct figure while seeing this process as neutral. I don’t get anything impartial from it. Here is the universal subject, the tolerant one, here it stands, on the worldless ground, in the flat landscape, patronising, imposing its perspective, here it is: violence, oppression, I call out your name.

The discrimination provided by declaring liberalism “universal”, claiming for the common ground, for the neutrality of democracy, is not visible to itself. If I say “But I am oppressed!”, the response I get is that liberalism is defending freedom and equality for everyone.

A similar dynamic takes place when, as a reaction to “Black Lives Matter”, the response is “All Lives Matter”. Black Lives Matter is an international activist movement, originating in the African-American community, that campaigns against violence and systemic racism towards black people. According to an August 2015 poll conducted by Rasmussen reports, 78% of likely American voters said that the statement “All Lives Matter” was “close(r) to (their) own” point of view than “Black Lives Matter” was. However, to address black racism is not stating

the contrary, that was kind of the starting point actually. Yet, the fact that oppression is redirected in a more common, more universal place is a denial of that very statement. It only serves to ignore and dismiss the claim as if it was an egoistic one. “Black Lives Matter” is read as “Only Black Lives Matter”; when it actually says “Black Lives Matter, Too”. What has been asked for, is that everyone should get what they need, but the response only had the effect of dissolving the claim, redirecting it into a common principle. In that case, nothing has been done to improve the initial situation. Moreover, the denial of the claim prevents the subject from finding any agency to do so. It is hard to speak when you are not heard. The ignorance of such oppression doesn’t give the oppressed resources to escape the system — as well because the system presents itself as universal.

Deconstructing and analysing the dynamics of such a structure does not necessarily imply escaping it. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” asks Indian scholar and feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. The subaltern refers to a subject that has no or limited access to hegemonic power. Who gives the voice to whom? According to Spivak, even the post-colonialist thinkers are only rehearsing neo-colonial imperatives, in the sense that they decide what should be spoken. Those intellectuals see their input as positive, by looking at the effects of colonialism on colonised people. Yet, they are in fact only observing the response of the colonised to one thing: the colonial rule. The discourse focuses on a part, not the whole experience, which positions the “subaltern” in a specific way. The engagement occurs on the intellectuals’ terms, by so rehearsing the hegemonic relations that are already in place. Who gives the voice to whom?

What I share in common with someone else is not the positive experience of freedom and equality since the structure that it would happen in has been built up towards one specific model. What makes me alike, is the experience of negativity, the inadequacy-to-itself. Actual universality



appears in the same struggle. The common is not what lies beyond difference (the common only emphasises that difference), but is rather the very fact of difference itself, the identification with the same antagonism. According to French intellectual Jacques Rancière (16), to insist on the inherent differences in identities is to offer a space for dissenting invention and productive displacements. What brings us together is, let's say, emotionality, private solidarity, embodied experience, instability, softness, plurality — it is oppression itself, the fact of being the "Other". This is the very antithesis of universality: the rest, part, relativity, privacy, fraction, section, particularity. Here lies what is common to identities: intersectionality. Identities are profoundly plural, that is what makes them so singular for each being.

I don't see my identity as anything solely harmonious and unified. I don't have an identity, but identities, parts of them, acting on those differences and possibilities. Transformations arise not from a ground of unity and flatness but from one of texture and relief. There is a need for mountains, ravines and obstacles, a defence of the un-unified, unstable, fractional, poor, weak, incomplete and fragmental.

#### 4

I'm tired of sympathy and pity. I'm tired of tolerance. Staying neutral, flat and common in the face of oppression is a political stance in itself. Speaking out is a step towards transformation. Unlike the universal, solidarity is not an abstract ideal. It is because identities themselves feel oppressed, have experienced the structural violence of neo-liberalism, that they feel self-motivated to end all varieties of oppressions. When those concerns are dismissed, they become mute, written out of the political narrative. Oppression is not a debate, it is a fact. It is not even fresh or radical to address identity-based oppressions. Attacks on identity politics are not progressive, they *are* identity politics. I, for example, often hear that gender-based claims

have become "trendy" lately. If what is attacked is the monetisation of such claims, those critics need to be sharply contextualised. Otherwise, the critic has no purpose or effect than to dismiss the claim as a superficial one, as if it was not "important" enough to be represented as it is: popular, "trendy". Oppression is anything but superficiality. Gender-based claims are not trendy, they are finally starting to get heard.

What is at stake is to take responsibility, in our communities. To address racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, whorephobia, transphobia, biphobia, sizeism, ableism. Men should address sexist behaviour, white people racism, cisgender and straight people transphobic and homophobic behaviour, etc. We need to express states of oppression, to reflect, to admit being wrong or admit when our actions and discourses would cause harm.

#### 5

Soon enough the following confrontation arises: what is the subject? As I am expected to present the research plan for the present text, I struggle to narrow my argument down to a single entrance point. Should I? What is it that I want to write about? The whole structure? The whole thing? The approach would perhaps be too broad, a single text would not be able to handle it. However, I fear to dismiss the rest by narrowing down to one point. Should I fight the structure or withdraw from it? Should I particularise my research or make it more general? How can I render a heterogeneous protest in a single narrative? Is that even relevant? I would feel fixing a line of questioning when the subject is ever changing and evolving — as I am. The struggle comes from facing the paradox between protesting against the dominant model, but using its form and language in order to do so.

Indeed, deconstructing the universal is only possible if I extract myself from my direct cultural imperatives, meaning getting rid of my bounds — thus following the universal precepts. I wonder

if this process is being transformative or re-perpetuating the same mechanisms of thoughts and behaviours. To claim only makes sense in a particular frame, that is therefore implicitly recognised as legit. How to deal with the frame not anymore as an object for claiming but for transforming? How to meet somewhere else, outside of that frame? Or is it enough to claim for something from within? However, is that not going to, again, assimilate the rules of the contested structure? The constant conflict is that of feeling not entirely adequate to a certain structure, but still being a part of it. Fight? Claim? Address the issue? Withdraw? Sit down, learn, do nothing? The relevance of positioning is to put into question. Yet those two attitudes, to engage and to step back, are not necessarily antagonistic. There doesn't have to be one way or the other. Not everything has to fall into a conclusion, to result from an escalating progression. From paradoxes and conflicting notions emerges possibilities, what matters is the potential.

## 6

Those differences, pluralities, fragments, always changing as identity always changes — words make it difficult to think through this “scatteredness” and fluidity. Which language to use? There is a struggle in expressing and overcoming oppression when the tool that would address it is the same that conceptualised that very oppression at the first place. Language simplifies the designated thing, reducing it into a simple feature, what Claude Levi-Strauss called the logic of the concrete (see Said 166). The mind requires order; therefore it imagines things in secure boxes where they have a role. As for example, same sex erotic behaviours being defined as “homosexuality”. Michel Foucault, in his “History of Sexuality”, explains that the notion of separate sexual groups is a very modern invention. Indeed, the word “homosexuality” was invented in 1892. Before the 19th century, there were no co-

herent conceptual categories according to people's erotic behaviour. Foucault states that :

In the 19th century, medical professions classified people's pleasures. The 19th century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life. It was everywhere present with him, less as a habitual sin than as a singular nature. This marked the invention of the “homosexual” as an identity. (59)

As an effect, what a “homosexual” is was built within that single word. Therefore, constructing the representation of who that “Other” is. For example, the social integration of forms of homosexuality in ancient Greece has *no* link or continuity with contemporary notions of homosexual identity. If the concept of homosexuality itself has changed through history, there is then no reason to believe that it is experienced the same way by different people today, or even by the same person at different times. Using a single word unifies those different subjectivities into one commonness, as if the experience of being a “homosexual” was the same for all who supposedly identify as such. How can I challenge and overcome the oppression that is implied by the creation itself of that concept, if I am being forced to use that concept? The same goes for political terms. We feel free because of the lack of language to articulate our “unfreedom”. Is there even an antonym for freedom? “Slavery”? But who even came up with the idea of slavery? Who perpetuated it? Isn't it the same figure that declared the universal ground? The terms used to designate political issues (“war on terror”, “democracy”, “freedom”, “republic”) are “false” terms, mystifying our perception of the situation instead of allowing us to think it. The perspective is limited to the vocabulary that forms that very perspective. Those notions are thus put on a stage, where they are being stylised, sharpening the way those imageries are built. There is only learned perception, not a transcendental truth.



The failure I describe in language becomes even more apparent to me in the discourses around transgender identities, and particularly on transgender bodies. To refer to those bodies as “transitioning from male to female” (or “female to male”) is to reinforce the idea that ultimately the transgender woman is actually really a man. This suggests that women who are trans are born with a “male body”. Looking at a woman who is trans and stating “That’s a guy” is only to perpetuate the idea that trans identities are playing a fraud.

For Chase Strangio, an American attorney treating cases of transgender and gender non-conforming cases in various forms of detention, this language is “both factually wrong and dangerous” (l. 41). All biological components exist on a spectrum, not a binary ; it is a choice to refer to bodies as “male” or “female”. There is no medical imperative on that order, only an administrative and social one. Bodies change, they are dynamic, all components such as chromosomes, testosterone, genitals, sex vary remarkably from one body to another. Furthermore, if one believes that male and female bodies do exist, how would one call a woman that had her uterus removed because of illness? Is her body not “female” anymore? It is devastating to impose such binaries through language to something as organic, complex and alive as a body. It seems, of course, “easier” to understand such notions since the way they are thought of, corresponds to the secure boxes that apparently makes a man (a “male” body) and a woman (a “female” body). That easiness we must face and challenge.

Violence resides in this way of thinking about transgenderism, since in thinking this way one has to get through and use the words of the dominant “normal” state. One would refer to “man” and “woman” in order to think of “transgender” (as something that escapes and transgresses those notions), but wouldn’t refer to “transgender” to think of “man” and “woman”. By installing a “normal” state, this inherently creates violence on a structural scale for all those that do not fit into it, thereby perpetuating oppression. Transgressions using language, the tool

for mutual recognition, could appear to do harm to the normalised state; when the unconditional violence is that which language imposes a standard considered as normal.

The challenge is to transform the structural violence, to own the terms created to distance the “Other”. As for example; the word “queer”, popularised in the late 80s to escape the imposition of norms on identities and bodies, is being defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender”. Those terms, attempting to challenge the assimilative violence of normalised groups are thought of as “not corresponding”. Meaning, they are not defined as something, but as the contrary form of that something. They are not explained as “this”, but as “not that” — defined in the negativity, in the inadequacy. As I expressed before and will again, I defend those notions. The ones that are in the shadow, on the other side, situated on spectrums. Something else than the secure boxes consisting in whole entities. Those that destroy preconceptions and rebuild their meaning every time they are used, over and over, permanently. For identity as “singular they”. Those pluralities are where life is. To own the concept that created the difference, is to take it as an identification with the same struggle, for what I share with others. To trans-form the normalised state, to give it a fragmental shape, as I am, as we are.

## 7

Representation plays a central role in oppression dynamics. Who is looking at me? Who am I looking at? With which gaze? According to French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan in his XI seminar; what determines and constructs an identity, at the most profound level, is the gaze that is outside of oneself. Indeed, I can never find any evidence of my own finitude, I was not present at the moment of my birth, neither will it be at my death. I need the gaze of the Other to discover the limitations of my

existence, of the presence of my being. Through that external gaze, being of a multitude of mirrors, I realise that I exist, as well as what makes my identity. I, therefore, acknowledge myself.

Simultaneously, because the gazes, representations and results of my actions are exterior to me, the meaning resides "out there", in the receiver. Identity is being perceived differently with every gaze and at sporadic times. Meaning is not fixed, meaning floats. What is outside continuously constructs my own self, how I perceive and build my being. Representation and identity are tightly bounded, both inside and outside, in a constant and always moving exchange. Things are not fixed, but happen in a give and take movement. Representations of identities re-present at the same time as they construct. They shape how the represented is perceived, both from the gaze of the other on the represented as well as from the perception of the represented itself.

Those two gazes, the one I give and the one I receive (from the others but also from representations, images, discourses) are of political matter. Representations play a constitutive role in social life. They do not only mirror what is already existent but are able to constitute subjectivities. Since my childhood, I have looked at queer identities in mainstream media, in the media I had access to. In the best case, they are represented as marginalised, weird, unstable and in the worst case, non-existent. I have witnessed that those identities are in actual fact considered "inferior", not because they are ontologically inferior, but because they indeed get "inferiorised" through their representations. They also had to play a role on my self-acknowledgment. This external gaze is, in fact, the only way for me to relate to myself. If those representations show how I feel at that moment as being inferiorised, I will likely be considering myself inferior. This is why Stuart Hall named the representational discourse on the Other being of "epistemic violence". For the marginalised, the violence is outside, in the discourse of the one in power but is also inside, internalised in the self-as-other (445). I see representations of the Other built by and for the gaze of the one in power,

therefore sustaining and reproducing the same patterns of hegemonic distribution.

Zoya Patel, an American writer, addresses in an article on cultural appropriation (n.p.) this current issue with an example of western popular culture, one is so many: Coldplay's video clip Hymn for the Weekend. She describes how, still, in year 2016, India is constructed as an exotic "somewhere else", a stage for western fantasy. The country is depicted in that video as a magic spiritual world, populated by children throwing at each other colourful powder as a daily gesture. A country where the run down infrastructures don't appear as what they are, social misery, but as an enchanting set. Patel shares how she feels offended by those imageries. Of how such representations do not engage with the represented culture, stripping it of any agency. The video is simply appropriating certain aspects for the pleasure of a specific gaze: the one already in authority to build those representations.

Who is able to speak? Who can produce those representations? Who builds them? Once they are constructed, who is able to look? Who is able to identify? Who feels empowered? Who feels marginalised? I am in a structure where I see the ones in power building representations "in the name of", appropriating culture. The present hegemonic dynamics reinforce themselves. I look at them. The screen hurts, it causes pain.

As American feminist bell hooks experiences; the gaze given by the oppressed can also be one of political resistance, when facing that violence, refusing the assimilation and refusing identification with the biased representations. It can be a way to assert agency, resist in the struggle. Should it be by stopping to look, as an act of protest, to withdraw? Should it be by actively looking, engaging with those representations and deconstructing them?

In her 2005 essay "Giving an Account to One-self", influential American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler argued that we can only recognise someone else when we are decentered

from ourselves. Otherwise, we exclusively see the frozen concepts of other people, thinking that we know them is doing violence to their being. When we are in some way unable to grasp our own solid identity, we are able to recognise the Other. To get into that space of uncertainty is to engender a change of subjectivity. Recognition is the process by which I become other than what I was before. When experienced actively, a new sense of ethics can emerge from representation. Letting go of the “wholeness” of oneself, engaging with the changing fragments of identities, with the different forms and states they can take, is to challenge this ideal for “universal”, oneness, soleness.

The oppositional gaze, to effectively look at representations, is not only to stare but also to transform, to become decentered, to change subjectivities. Transformation is a way to defeat cultural appropriation that rehearses marginalisation. The hope is to get to a place where real exchange and engagement takes place, without being patronising. What is at stake is the creation of a disruptive space, where we would be able to access information and representation, manipulate it, reform it, put it back in the world, as a challenge to the binary.

## 8

I take the file, I can open it, a new performance every time. Copy-paste, and cut. The data, I can act on it, so as to render things alien, making it possible to constantly change who I am and visualise new subjectivities. A disruptive space, accessible to take informations and reform them, could appear in contemporary ages to be that of the digital space. In 1996, John Perry Barlow wrote “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace”, stating :

Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live. We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military

force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity.

The digital space: Internet and new media, could indeed be understood as a way to challenge the binary conceptions ensuing from assimilations made through representations and language. It was/is the utopia of the Internet, a space that could be everything to its communities, a transformative space. Does the contemporary Internet really manage to offer spaces of representation and resistance constructed “for us”, “by us”?

Hossein Derakhshan (n.p.), imprisoned in Tehran from November 2008 to November 2014 because of his activities as a blogger, shows in what ways the internet has shifted since the rise of social media. For him, the web and its blogs used to be the best place to find alternative thoughts, news and analysis. Through hypertext and hyperlinks, webpages offered to the user a diversity, a decentralisation — to create a system of nodes and networks, windows and bridges. On the internet, to link, to make the content richer, is an empowering gaze. When a link to another page is created, it connects it, it brings it to life. Without a link, without someone looking, without the bridging gaze, the content ends up being both dead and blind because it becomes disconnected. According to Derakhshan, social media, for instance apps like Instagram, are almost blind, in the sense that such apps do not allow active links to other platforms. The users mostly remain on the page of the app, the gaze is immanent to the page. Derakhshan sees the new operation mode that has made the internet as having greatly shifted, that is: the stream. Fewer users are visiting dedicated website pages, and are instead getting fed by a singular flow of information, picked for them by algorithms. An algorithm, a concept named after the medieval Iranian mathematician, Al-Kharazmi, is a self-contained step-by-step set of operations to

be performed. Eventually, it creates a rational output from numerous, orderless inputs. The decisions are a result of chosen criteria. This is what makes algorithms political: they optimise outputs the producer of those algorithms have pre-determined. The process in itself is neutral in the sense that it mechanically reproduces the same steps whatever the input, but the conditions to deliver output have been shaped and designed. The choice of those conditions are a political stance in themselves. They create what is going to be shown, and under which criteria. Therefore, just as with the “universal” the dynamics of the contemporary internet are of structural violence: to present a mechanism as a neutral referent, while actually optimising a specific perspective.

Those algorithms are of course maintained in highly secretive conditions and no one knows what the exact script is. But it is common sense in interacting with them that the internet user could draw the following conclusion. What the algorithm gives me as output, is what my friends or I have read or seen before, what has been largely shared or freshly produced. Basically what neo-liberal economy is made of: newness, freshness, as well as what I already like, what is efficient, my own cultural wealth. Instead of opening new windows and bridges, this new version of the internet ruled by the stream does not want me to be upset, it keeps me where I belong, with what I already like. Unifying, setting my own personal flat ground. Where I don't get surprised, or bothered with content that might be shocking to my eyes. I feel increasingly confined in one space. The one space actually answering the ideals of the universal, the wordless, the flat ground, where the valued qualities are self-assertion, individuality, autonomy, public activity.

Google, the company that has the quasi-monopoly on web research tools, also shows the imposition of the specific dominant values through the problematic of the algorithm, creating a violent assimilation. Such an example asks questions about language and how it is thought of, through

the digital space. As German media theorist and philosopher Boris Groys explains, every question on Google is formulated as a word or combination of words. The hierarchy that is implied in between words through grammar is removed. Therefore, the way to interact with Google is already a specific one, a certain conception of language, a particular structure. The answer the user gets from Google, is a set of contexts in which the inquiry is inscribed. The search is not infinite, but displays possibilities in already existing available contexts. But this answer is of political relevance: some contexts remain secret (because the user doesn't have access to them), and some individual contexts are prioritised (through popularity, advertised spaces, the assumed interests of the user, etc.). The user only sees what Google decides to show, and in most cases does not go much further than the first few pages of an answer. This forms a hidden subjectivity for Google, through its pre-selection and prioritisation of results, that of the algorithm. The algorithmic gaze is what the Internet user is submitted to, a gaze of technological matter. What is at stake is the data, that the internet user tries to protect behind private accounts and passwords. The internet was originally a space of referentiality and transparency, only after it stops being so does the user take steps to lock its data and have it technically protected. However, every technicality can be hacked, to know the secret is to gain control over the subject. Consequently, cyber-wars are of subjectification and de-subjectification. Giving agency to subjects with flows of data, also implies being able to remove this agency. Here again, I face structural dynamics of oppression. That is what the algorithm does: after succeeding in rational steps, it displays an outcome that could be seen as neutral (as the steps are rational) but is actually the result of the choice of how the algorithm is built.

It is clear to me that the contemporary dominators of the public internet, those that the common user interacts with (social media, Google),



are rehearsing the imperatives I have already stood against many times in this text. Nevertheless, if I focus on the characteristics of new media and Internet, I see potential.

New media theorist Lev Manovich, in “The Language of New Media” published in 2001, researched the specificities of digital data. The latter are described as fractal, of modular structure, that can be decomposed and recomposed infinitely. The data can be processed, stored, organised, manipulated, re-used or newly created. Potentially, new media are objects existing in infinite versions. Without degradation, they are mutable, liquid, and the structure and content can be treated independently. Those objects, documents, images, those data, are inherently variable. In relation to this variability, one making a choice involves moral responsibility.

The internet benefits all textuality, visuals and interactivity. The structure and its content do not necessarily establish a relation with the audience as consumers, but also as media users and potential reformists. Interactivity can be used to destabilise distinctions between user and producer. The goal is of a multimodal network of communication objecting to vertical dynamics. The internet was originally conceived as a tool to transcend and undermine the power of state bureaucracy, a platform for particularisation.

The web has a way out of the dominant paths. This is what it perhaps once was, and how it could still be used. The digital space is one that allows someone to create another presence besides the one they have in material reality, in the sense that it allows us to explore and transform our subjectivity. New media raise questions about what presence, essence, or soul I think I am on the internet — what identity. I can create a new originality every time. I can copy-paste and cut. Edit. Reform. We are content providers, who can challenge the dominant platforms and algorithms. To be able to access the information, take it, break it, reenact the content every time.

I can lie. I can start liking pages on Facebook that I disagree with, to subvert the algorithm. To make appear on my stream things that surprise and challenge me. To force the algorithm to be fragmental and precarious, unsure of what it is doing. The possibility of the internet relies in the negativity of things, in the distrust, in the lie, in the opacity, surveillance, inaccessibility, in the fragment, in the unstable ground, not in the rational one of the algorithm. I don't have to be transparent and authentic. I can be plural, modular, performing trans-activity. I can interact with my face, voice and body; without my face, voice and body; with another face, voice and body. I don't have to be one, I can change. Doing so, challenging the rigid and essentialist notion of authenticity, wholeness of individuality, of the universal. Conceptually, new media, with its modularity, fractality, variability, transformability, could represent a relevant material form for what I am in defence of: the contra-form, the precarious part, the fragment.

## 9

The “universal”, equal but not at all, neutral but not at all. A perspective declared as essentialist, but particularly coming from a western point of view, installing this “normal” state. This is the structure in which I have been evolving. The qualities implied from this point of view, and the figure it promotes, as the referents, are no less specific. There is nothing universal in that, here is my inadequacy, where the feeling of oppression comes from. This referentiality, this imposition of unwritten rules, I had to find the many ways in which it manifested around me: in identity construction, in the building of so-called democratic systems, in language, in representations, in the digital space. In my own way of proceeding as well, I see myself ending up following those precepts, those rules of the common ground. Indeed, to deconstruct the “universal”, I had to take distance, break from my bounds, thereby obeying the principles of the “universal”.

The dynamics perpetuating oppression form a structural violence, they try to unify, to look for commonness, to secure things in boxes and rational steps. They keep conceiving things as sole entities. I stand against any conception of universal unifying gestures. Things may be a certain way, but this is not the only way.

Facing the structural nature of violence, the response may also be structural. It is vital to reconsider that things may actually happen in their negativity, in the inadequacy-to-itself. To situate beings, things, informations, data, as how they are: fragmental. To challenge imperialistic notions of "wholeness", to break expectations of progressive linear vision, is to address the instability of things. Their intersectionality is a deconstruction of the binary and a release of potential. The need is to listen to claims of oppression, address them, let them be of fragmental state instead of trying to redirect them under unified visions. What I fight for is to construct politics representing difference, able to build bound through struggle and resistance, keeping real heterogeneity- that can draw lines without setting them for eternity.

There is no real conclusion, but to repeat the act of continuous deconstruction, again and again. I must ask once more, the discourse could begin here, again. Claims rest on words that stand on the ground. The whole effort is to make the ground un-grounded.



## references

- Badiou, Alain. *The Caesura of Nihilism*. Lecture delivered at the University of Essex, 10 september 2003.
- . *Logiques des Mondes*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006.
- . *What is a "people"?* New York: Columbia University Press, 2016. 21-31.
- Barlow, John Perry. *A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Davos: on Internet, February 8, 1996.
- Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *The Threepenny Opera*. 1928.
- Derakhshan, Hossein. "The Web we have to save" *Matter*, July 14, 2015. <<https://medium.com/matter/the-web-we-have-to-save-2eb1fe15a426#.f7931eqcj>>
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black skin, white masks*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952.
- Foucault, Michel. *Histoire de la sexualité I : La volonté de savoir*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994 [1976].
- Hall, Stuart. *Cultural dialogues in cultural studies*. New York: Routledge, 1996. 441-449.
- Haraway, Donna. *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*. London: Free Association Books, 1991.
- hooks, bell. *Black looks: Race and Representations*. Boston: South End Press, 1992. 115-31.
- Grabiner, Ellen. *I See You : The Shifting Paradigms in James Cameron's Avatar*. Jefferson: McFarland, 2012. 146-180.
- Groys, Boris. *In the flow*. New York: Verso, 2016. 147-156.
- Lacan, Jacques. *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse, Livre XI*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1973.
- Lordon, Frédéric. "Nous ne revendiquons rien." *Le Monde Diplomatique*, March 29, 2016. <<http://blog.mondediplo.net/2016-03-29-Nous-ne-revendiquons-rien>>.
- Mahmood, Saba. *Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. London: Penguin Classic Editions, 1969.
- Patel, Zoya. "How to appreciate a culture without appropriating it?" *i-D*, March 17, 2016. <[https://i-d.vice.com/en\\_gb/article/how-to-appreciate-a-culture-without-appropriating-it](https://i-d.vice.com/en_gb/article/how-to-appreciate-a-culture-without-appropriating-it)>
- Plato. *The Republic Book VII*. London: Penguin Books Editions, n.d. 365-401.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Les Scènes du Peuple (Les Révoltes Logiques, 1975/1980)*. Lyon: Horlieu, 2003. 16.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. Athens: The Georgia Review, 1977. 162-206.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988. 271-313.
- Strangio, Chase. "What is a male body?" *Outward blog*, July 19, 2016. <[http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2016/07/19/there\\_s\\_no\\_such\\_thing\\_as\\_a\\_male\\_body.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2016/07/19/there_s_no_such_thing_as_a_male_body.html)>.
- United Nations General Assembly. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Paris: Palais Chaillot, 1948.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Violence*. New York: Picador, 2008.
- . *Quelques réflexions blasphématoires: islam et modernité*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2015.

*thanks to Paula Albuquerque*

*text and layout - aurélien potier*

*printed at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie,  
Amsterdam in april 2017*

*second edition  
copy /15*



I used to be something else until I wasn't. Because there is absence of memory pressure it may just also never be. Since secularity, there is no way to lead myself to the Goal so the thing left is to explore. Identity is nothing fixed. The mirror is not my representation of today neither will it of tomorrow's. Certitude is also the doubt for later. "Become who you are" is just but a paradox stating that I am, already, there. But I am in the flow, in the rheology of beings and things that can be. I am singular they. Plural, unfinished, potential, infected by the exterior, carrying inner chaos.

There is no way to let it happen until it ends. The ends? There will be no end. There is a will there, the purpose of revolutions is to destroy, not to build the neo-structure. A point will come when I will be heard.

I am not afraid to address this, *ressentiment*. My sense of hostility develops. The opposite of moral egotism has nothing to do with altruism. Resentment makes me act against my own interests and maybe there it is : the true ethical act. The refusal to normalise the crime, the rejection to integrate it into a consistent life-narrative.

I never asked to be represented. Does it correspond to reality? My reality? There is maybe no accurate representation, because I am not authentic myself. My lack of sincerity occurs. I'd rather change my subjectivity than to obey some universal bullshit.

Should I consider the displacement of the revolutionary act? Behind total destruction actually lies the belief for indestructibility. God is dead, so the ruins will accumulate or just stay as they are but they never can return to nothing because they were not coming from: "nothing". In the prison of permanent change, there is always a context where my nothingness happen. In the surrounding muchness, actually.

It is not all there is. It matters. Intentionality. In experience and expression. My ontology is not merely regional but linked to other beings at a certain time and space. My reading is necessarily linked to the outside, that is the inside. Maybe somewhere (not everywhere), the hope that through this particular — but not excluded — but certainly flowing — but certainly floating — position there would be something of truth. Even of that very particularity, the alien, the poor fraction. Without subjectification there can be no politics.

The Middle Ages were for eternity, Renaissance about the past, Modernity in the future. Never before was man so interested in one's own present. We are about contemporaneity. I didn't inquire for an iPhone and even less for an administrative status. My brain alternates fog and razor-blade sharp mind and I can't seem to set up my "self".

Why do they expect that all of us should feel the same?

I stand on the ground but how can this ground be if I, myself, get plural — *myelves*. The ground should be removed from its "groundedness", becoming un-solid, un-founded, movable, precarious.

To interpellate for that missing scale of representations. Where is the multiple subject? Someone said, one day, (should I name the referent to make the statement legitimate) — there is not only good and wrong solutions but also good and wrong problems. The actual problem is to even change the reference of the good and the bad because it cannot be about good or bad but necessarily about politics of critics. To change referentiality each time, in order to look at what things are doing — not to what they are completing.

An accumulation of nothing(s). The goal is not change but transformation over transformations, that of the infinite. Finished unfinished finished finite infinite. Things and I could also be as being and evolving, something not contained that therefore escapes the fixation of language: \_\_\_\_\_.