

We Other Balkans: Identity, Difference, and *Jouissance*

The Balkans is a region that is always “hanging” between what is thought to be the end of Europe and the beginning of Asia. This European sub-zone extends, nominally, along the Balkan Mountains, from the approximate area of Croatia-Serbia to the border of the Black Sea. The “Balkans” have always made other self-assured Europeans anxious and somewhat excited; it is a zone of dark fantasies, superstitions, strange music, tribal identities, and mystic religions. It is the land of *Dracula* and *paprika*; these two terms could be used interchangeably, as both stimulated the fantasies of the Victorians at the time of Bram Stoker’s popular novel. Both the terms *Dracula* and *paprika*, in their difference, point to a kernel of pleasure and pain, what Lacan calls *jouissance*. It is perhaps this *milieu* that has shaped Zizek’s thinking, which holds a special place for what is perversely exciting. How is the “Balkan” play of difference, identity, and *jouissance* played out in the thought of Slavoj Zizek, Judith Butler, and Donna Haraway?

Zizek’s philosophy revolves around the notion of “radical negativity”; it is this splinter in the side, the kernel of the unfathomable Real that spurs the paradoxical construction of the ideological web:

Man is - Hegel dixit - 'an animal sick unto death', an animal extorted by an insatiable parasite (reason, logos, language). In this perspective, the 'death drive', this dimension of radical negativity, cannot be reduced to an expression of alienated social conditions, it defines *la condition humaine* as such: there is no solution, no escape from it; the thing to do is not to 'overcome', to 'abolish' it, but to come to terms with it, to learn to recognize it in its terrifying dimension. (xxvii-xxviii)

We can only attempt to repair the gap of meaning “masking a void” through fantasy (Zizek 141) In the case of the collective orchestration of fantasy the suturing work can reach peaks of aesthetic frenzy as if the Real has been magically banished through a full-blown

projection, something we can feel in the Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda film *Triumph of the Will*; as Žižek says: "Totalitarianism" demonstrates what applies to every ideology, to ideology as such: the last support of the ideological effect (of the way an ideological network of signifiers 'holds' us) is the nonsensical, pre-ideological kernel of enjoyment." (140)

It is the partial object of negativity articulated in proximity of perverse enjoyment that constitutes the backbone of ideological construction. As a bold example Žižek speaks of the Jew in the long tradition of European anti-Semitism: "*Jew* is a fetish which simultaneously denies and embodies the structural impossibility of *Society*: it is in the figure of the Jew this impossibility has acquired a positive, palpable existence." (142) As in Lacan's mirror stage it is the vision of bodily unity that articulates the desire of the infant.

Žižek is adopting Lacan's division of the three interconnected realms of being: the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. In short, these realms stand for the creation of fantasy-identity, suprasensible "unspoken" law, and brute reality. The interconnectedness of the three realms can be illustrated as a board game where the rules of the game are its symbolic core; the Imaginary are the parts we identify with a meaning although it is contingent (the "red player" could be theoretically substituted with another object and still act like the "red player"); the Real is the multitude of contingencies that disrupt the smooth functioning of the game.

Žižek speaks of Nazi anti-Semitism as a clear illustration of the three levels at work. According to Nazi ideology the Jew is the one preventing the assimilation of society into a coherent, beautifully ordered symbolic whole under the patriarchal guidance of the Führer (the law). The Jew is the (Real) intruder that threatens the rightful dwelling of the Aryan people in their Lebensraum. This imaginary dimension works on a system of identification. This is made visible in Nazi poster art where we often see the radiant blonde family living in their natural homeland (the Imaginary *Heimat*) while the Jew is shrouded in darkness and appears to embody moral corruption and bodily degeneration.

In his *Mein Kampf* Hitler directly mentions the anamorphic kernel of "Truth" in the deployment of propaganda: "Every change that is made in the subject of a propagandist message

must always emphasize the same conclusion. The leading slogan must of course be illustrated in many ways and from several angles, but in the end one must always return to the assertion of the same formula."¹ The anamorphic Thing condenses the opposing poles of difference and identity; in the proper functioning of the ideological web the nodal juncture is the gap that is perceived as the center: "Pure difference is perceived as Identity exempted from the relational-differential interplay and guaranteeing its homogeneity. We could denote this "error of perspective" as ideological anamorphosis." (Zizek 110)

The coupling of the tremor of the Real and the deferred libidinal release of fantasy produce *Jouissance*; it is the excitement of the laughing child that is hiding dad's car keys, dad's aggravation pushes excitement further or the child's excited fixation on a made up word, repeating it over and over with growing intensity. Where can we find this perverse suturing point of identity and difference in Butler and Haraway? I believe the best way to enter this space is through two partial objects that surface *in passing*: Butler's phantasm and Haraway's monster.

By definition a phantasm is something that "appears" it is not a human ghost but rather a generic apparition. The phantasm can be other than human although a ghost is nominally a phantasm. I believe the status of the phantasm is the key to Butler's project because it is the anti-essentialist and non-human/possibly human:

What, then, enables the exposure of the rift between the phantasmatic and the real whereby the real admits itself as phantasmatic? Does this offer the possibility for a repetition that is not fully constrained by the injunction to reconsolidate naturalized identities? Just as bodily surfaces are enacted as the natural, so these surfaces can become the site of a dissonant and denaturalized performance that reveals the performative status of the natural itself. (Butler 186)

¹ Hitler's quote was taken from the "Propaganda in Nazi Germany" page on Wikipedia.

The phantasmatic is the dimension of the Deleuzian virtual which holds the contingent possibilities of the actual: “By instituting the Symbolic as invariably phantasmatic, the “invariably” wanders into an “inevitably,” generating a description of sexuality in terms that promote cultural stasis as its result.” (71) For Butler gender and sex are not an essential unity; The performance of gender points to the inconsistency of sex/gender relationship. This is Butler’s hypothesis: Through the phantasmatic performance of gender sex also appears phantasmatic.

Butler seeks to fracture the historically consolidated specular image of *heteronormativity*. From a Nietzschean perspective Butler’s performativity is serving a metonymic function: Through the phantasmatic effect of the performance of gender the insufficiency of the initial referent “sex” is exposed. The “original” body is subjected to the refractive play of the “limitless differance of language, rendering all referentiality into a potentially limitless displacement” (Butler 54).

Haraway’s monsters, including women, simians, and cyborgs are bodies that signify. It is the monster’s *situatedness* that sets it apart from Butler’s semiotic project by virtue of its objectivity:

We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with primate colour and stereoscopic vision, how to attach the objective to our theoretical and political scanners in order to name where we are and are not [...] objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. This is an objective vision that initiates, rather than closes off, the problem of responsibility for the generativity of all visual practices [...] Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated

knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. (190)

Butler project seeks to dematerialize the body through the semiotic effect of parody “in which the original, the authentic, and the real are themselves constituted as effects.” (186-7).

Conversely, Haraway’s position echoes Merleau-Ponty’s primacy of perception with a “critical theory” twist: “I would like to insist on the embodied nature of all vision, and so reclaim the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere [...] I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges.” (188)

Haraway’s situated knowledge is reclaiming the “utopian and visionary” power of science that has been refused since the Heideggerian turn in American academia, she says: “One cannot relocate in any possible vantage point without being accountable for that movement. Vision is always a question of the power to see - and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices.” (192) The limitation of the scientific vision is the true advantage to be gained as opposed to a purely speculative, and ultimately rhetorical *play of difference*.

Donna Haraway’s position is indeed that of the mutant because it accommodates the critical discourse against *phallogocentrism* while at the same being aware of the ideological dangers of deconstruction labeled as a form of ungrounded relativism: “Relativism is the perfect mirror twin of totalization in the ideologies of objectivity; both deny the stakes in location, embodiment, and partial perspective; both make it impossible to see well.” (191)

What is it to see well? For Haraway it is a matter of creating hybrid mythologies grounded in objectivity; unlike theories mythologies create a space that demands engagement: “Feminist embodiment resists fixation and is insatiably curious about the webs of differential positioning. There is no single feminist standpoint because our maps require too many dimensions for that metaphor to ground our visions. But the feminist standpoint theorists' goal of

an epistemology and politics of engaged, accountable positioning remains eminently potent. The goal is better accounts of the world, that is, 'science'." (196)

What is the status of our vision? Can we see the sham of *status quo* through parody, as a subversive act of unmasking? Can we re-possess objectivity within the discourse of postmodernist Feminism? In a typical pessimistic lens, Žižek would say we only see what we are willing to see through our inadequate means of "vision"; the only certainty is crisis "truth itself arises through misrecognition." (64) Žižek's criticism of Kant could be applied to both Butler and Haraway in the sense of a critique of Kant's "external reflection" of the Thing-in-itself; both Butler and Haraway are assuming to get from here (A) to there (B), to arrive in proximity of the Thing (C), "*this Thing-in-itself is nothing but this radical negativity.*" (233) Their position is *projectual* rather than *processional*.

This is the paradox of communication, when we want to communicate by imitating a mechanical model of system of sender and receiver we rarely do, the intuitive grasping happens on the sidelines, as a *per-verse* splintering of meaning in the eye. There is no way to gain the proper positioning of oneself in relation to the Real, that is why there is a certain blindness at play in the process that involves the recuperation of the *gnostic* surplus; if Butler already acknowledged the inherent negativity of the sexual, or Haraway the techno-human actuality, there would be no room for theory, which would seem like a redundancy, and it is: "That is why the only way to avoid the Real is to produce an utterance of pure metalanguage which, by its patent absurdity, materializes its own impossibility." (Žižek 175) This is to say that we rarely "see" how marginal we are to begin with. We *other* Balkans.

Works Cited

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