

A CODEX FOR CON ARTISTS? OR: AN ETHICS OF DISAPPOINTMENT!

If only we dared to disappoint! How amazingly our relationships could grow if we knew how to initiate them by disappointment! Imagine if, in the crucial moment when a role is assigned, a job appointed, and the requisite behavior assumed, we had the guts to say: 'Wait! What you expect me to do or be is something I cannot possibly fulfill. The show you want me to put on is not the exhibition I will put together. What I will say on your behalf are not the words you would want to appear in print under your name. I can't give you what you want. And I won't decide—in your stead, on your behalf, in your name—what it is that you might crave; I refuse to represent to you what you desire for yourself. It's the hardest thing to admit but I cannot *mystify* you. I do not have what it takes to make you feel like you never knew the truth about what you want—and that it is me who can now reveal it to you. You know

what it is. All you will ever want to get may just be a version of what you had before or had all along.'

It's hard to accept—scary even. For where would it leave us? Satisfied. Paralyzed. That's what we fear. So, to keep alive the illusion that there are still things to aspire to, we need a steady supply of smoke and mirrors. Aspirational cultures thrive on unfulfilled yearning. It's what the middle class invented Romanticism for. Careerism wouldn't work without it: satisfied people don't struggle to rise above. They only remain driven enough to do so if specters of the unattainable appear, miraculously, in ever-new shapes in the smoke and mirrors before them, justifying the desire to reach ever-higher levels of exquisite alienation.

So there must be people to conjure up these specters, professionals to feed the engines of desire production. And here we are: cultural producers, writers, curators, con artists of all kinds, engineering the delicate frustrations that further belief in the simulacra of the unattainable. The ultimate act of resistance would be to disappoint this professional demand. It could easily be done. Just say: 'Forget the miraculous. All we have is just us. And our ideas, demons, and devils. Nothing more.' What a disappointment! What

a beautiful disappointment! And what exuberant irony! Watch June Carter and Johnny Cash, time and again in their long relationship, joyfully sing Dylan in duet, 'Go lightly from the ledge, babe / Go lightly on the ground / I'm not the one you want, babe / I'll only let you down' and then exult in unison: 'But it ain't me, babe / No, no, no, it ain't me, babe / It ain't me you're looking for.'¹ This is the kind of disappointment that would be perfect to begin with—if only we knew how to follow it through.

But of course we don't. It would cost us our jobs. At least that's what we fear. For who would hire people that introduce themselves by declaring it wasn't them you were looking for? This is no way to do business. Especially not today when *the promise of potential* is the capital everyone seeks to harvest. And what better way is there to cash in on potential than the con? In order to sell an intangible asset—like potential—it's inevitable anyhow to fake that there was something tangible to be traded. Any pledge is but a pretense when what you offer for sale is initially just an unfounded promise. To fulfill it you first need the means and opportunities, and those you only get when a client buys into your con. It's a circular affair: You need money to produce the kind of culture that would give you wide visibility and

ample symbolic credits. But it's the visibility and credits you need for raising money in the first place. No visibility, no money; no money, no visibility. Consequently, the best way to enter the cycle is to pretend you were already in. Acting as though you have the required credit will make you appear like a creditor worthy of receiving more (e.g., to attract funding it helps to suggest you already had some). So, out of sheer economic necessity, it would seem one must be initiated in the art of the con.

This is why *The Sting* (1973, dir. George Roy Hill) is a highly instructive movie to watch.² It shows how two con artists—played by Robert Redford and Paul Newman—collaborate on staging an epic sting operation, a *Gesamtkunstwerk* of con art. As an act of revenge on a ruthless gangster, a *parvenu* of sorts, who has violated the guild codex by killing an old friend, the two protagonists team up with a small army of fellow thieves to trick the unscrupulous upstart out of his fortune. To this end, they lead their target to believe he has been let into a secret betting scheme, which could earn him millions on the horses by relying on safe insider information. The scheme is a scam; it involves constructing a fake betting joint, complete with a cast of extras playing the bar staff, fellow gamblers, and

assorted riffraff. With a slight time delay, real races are relayed in the place. By the time the last-minute 'insider information' is passed on to the target, the winner is in fact already clear, so the information is always right. The dupe bets on a race that is run and gives his money to people who pocket it readily. He doesn't even realize he has been conned: an orchestrated police raid forces him to flee the bar and consider himself lucky he escaped unrecognized.

There is a self-reflexive element to the movie's irony. It can be read as an allegory of filmmaking—or cultural production in general, if you will. What the con artist collective creates is practically a movie; they employ all the means of filmmaking—plausible stage-setting and character-casting—to produce a fully immersive fiction for their target person (and viewer alike), which, in the counterfeit betting bar, includes even a fake audience! All the people who are there to listen to the races and bet, chat, drink, and smoke are hand-picked extras. They succeed in simulating an entire cultural scene to make an outsider believe he is experiencing a genuine event. It's very educational. Think about it: Why only mount exhibitions? Mounting audiences may be equally essential to engineering the tangible social momentum that donors, local politicians,

and board members like to see so as to feel they have put their money on the right horse.

But maybe it's already happening. Who wouldn't be familiar with the feeling of visiting major art events, the strange sense of playing an extra in a big con? The eerie thing is to not know who did the casting. And who we even think we're fooling.

Apart from its irony, however, *The Sting* offers a moral vision: In avenging the murder of their fellow member and punishing the ruthless *arriviste*, the con artist collective comes to embody the nostalgic ideal of a working-class community that knows and defends its morals. In one of the most visually captivating moments of the film, Newman delivers the aesthetics for the ethics: He poses, in a white undershirt and denim overalls, boyish smile on his lips beneath a grey moustache, leisurely leaning against a merry-go-round, that he tends to as part of his day job as a fairground mechanic. As a drop-dead gorgeous mix of the rough and the smooth, he is all you would want the leader of a trade union for honest thieves to be. He knows the life because he lives it. And for a moment the answer seems obvious: For a moral code to exist you need a sense of class consciousness—and someone to represent it. As cultural producers today, we could consider

ourselves heirs to the classic con artists' plight. We are people with special talents in a perpetually precarious position, always on the lookout for the next big job, for which we team up with people, who, like us, are part of a pool of professionals with skills that are just no good for regular employment. Assuming we finally got our act together to fight for some social justice—job security and adequate pay—the one thing we would need to develop is *a class consciousness for the new precariat*.

But then the movie continues. And soon it becomes all too clear why, today, the nostalgia for a firm class morality is deeply problematic. From an emancipated perspective, the structures that would have to prevail for such a morality to be enforced are quite simply unacceptable. The thieves' codex in *The Sting* is founded on die hard patriarchal standards of male loyalty. The only prominent female figure in the plot is a secret agent who seeks to break the bond between the father figure (Newman) and his disciple (Redford) by seducing the latter. She gets shot by the former and her sacrifice consolidates the male bond. This motif is a classic: Moral orders are sacrificial economies. For their principles to be confirmed, they require someone to be publicly offered up for slaughter (the preferred means of

execution in the cultural field today being gossip). The laws of this moral theater are deeply Oedipal. Indeed, if anything, the fascination with morality tends to testify to the desire to see a father return home and restore order by putting his foot down. The punishment that ensues is usually directed against someone who the class singles out as a violator of its norms. Uniting against its common enemy permits the class to understand itself as one and take action. In *The Sting*, this procedure seems justified. But history and experience show it to be otherwise. Usually, the scapegoats against which a class unleashes its violence are people who allow the class to define its boundaries, by marking out some as too *low* (who have less than the class aspires to) and some as too *high* (who have or want more than the class has to offer). It's an incredibly cruel logic. Could the creative class produce a consciousness and conscience that isn't premised on such Oedipal fascinations and scapegoating practices?

Admittedly, things can get quite tough. It's ironic. Sharing the troubles of a precarious life should make us act in solidarity. But the exact opposite is often enough the case: that out of general desperation, people readily use each other as steppingstones. There would seem to be a need for some morals. But who would want to

support a disciplinary system of social sanctions and reinforce a regime of icy glances and cold shoulders? We all know how bigoted that is. Besides, who would we entrust with the role of the moral arbiter? The critic? Heaven forbid. Being one, trust me, I wouldn't recommend it.

But if morals disappoint because they're such a farce, perhaps what we're left with is the bare irony of sharing the lot of the con artist, collectively. Embracing this irony, however, is hardly going to make anyone seem more sophisticated. You can't be smart about being a fraud when everyone around you knows you are, because that's what they are too. There's just no way to distance yourself from what we are all embroiled in. So if there was to be an ironic stance that would truly reflect this moment of communal entanglement, it wouldn't be the defensive type of irony designed to convey a sense of personal superiority. As if wits alone could make you untouchable! It would have to be an irony that renders you offensively touchable, one that speaks from the heart of the mess we're in together: an irony expressive of existential solidarity.³

Dostoevsky is incredibly good at voicing this sentiment. Take *The Gambler* (1866) for example: a novel about a motley crew of dubious characters stuck in a luxury gambling resort together.

The story is sad and hilarious to equal extremes. Its cast consists of an aristocratic Russian general who, through gambling and living above his means, squandered his fortune, including his children's inheritances, and is up to his neck in debt. His creditor, a shady Frenchman, is a member of the party. As is a Parisian lady whose identity (name and title) changes with the fashions. She considers marrying the general, but only if—and the entire party prays for it—his mother finally dies and leaves him her riches. She doesn't. Instead, the lively old lady shows up at the resort and embarrasses everyone by calling them out on their vanities. She then proceeds to become infatuated with roulette and loses the money everyone wants right in front of their eyes. The narrator, Alexey Ivanovitch, is part of the general's entourage. He's the private teacher for the latter's children and, as he's a pauper among the penniless, they let no opportunity pass to remind him of his subordinate class position. However, after losing a lot at the tables, he wins even more and offers it all to the woman he loves. Seeing her honor compromised by the pecuniary nature of the offer, she rejects him, even though she too had secretly loved him. So he surrenders himself to the Parisian who consumes his riches in one season. It's a disaster. But Ivanovitch

recounts it with the most ardent embrace of his own—and the entire party's—prowess for making matters worse for all. His irony, in short, lies in the inexhaustible passion for an entanglement in the hopeless. Upon first entering the gambling hall, Ivanovitch describes his motives as follows:

Of course it would have been extremely aristocratic not to notice the sordidness of all the rabble and all the surroundings. [...] And yet it seemed to me that all this was deserving of very close attention, especially for one who had come not only to observe it, but sincerely and genuinely reckoned himself as one of the rabble. As for my hidden moral convictions, there is no place for them, of course, in my present reasonings. Let that be enough for the present. I speak to relieve my conscience. But I notice one thing: that of late it has become horribly repugnant to me to test my thoughts and actions by any moral standard whatever. I was guided by something different...[‡]

What it is that guides him, he never writes. The *dot-dot-dot* that the paragraph ends with stays unexplained throughout the novel. Still, it is arguably these three dots on which Ivanovitch's philosophy hinges. Without taking them to a conclusion, the '...' continues his thoughts beyond the point where they end, insinuating that there is more to them, more to come, more to

life, somewhat *more* somehow. In view of the emotional turmoil into which the narrator is about to plunge, it's probably fair to say that this extra bit more—whatever it may be—also involves an excess of passion—the kind of passion that carries you and makes you carry on, against your better knowledge.

Carry on in pursuit of what? Dostoevsky's equally merciless and lovingly empathic study of his character's desires and pretenses would seem to suggest it is in pursuit of an experience of the human. There is nothing ostensibly humanist about this notion, though, for the experience Dostoevsky provides offers no comfort, consoles no one, and consolidates nothing. It doesn't generate explicit values or concepts. Still, it is itself invoked as a value and concept, albeit implicitly, by means of irony, through three dots and the novel built around them. This irony creates empathy within the reader—and solidarity if you will—for and with the *total disappointment* that every single one of the characters happens to be.

So it all comes back to disappointment. But not as an end point, as a beginning: a preliminary to something more, a means to get false expectations out of the way. The way to what? Not cynicism, for there is enormous exuberance to Dostoevsky's irony, reflected in his narrator-

protagonist's unrelenting insistence on something more being at stake in his absurd struggles. His irony is no pretext for resignation. It's the opposite of the fatalist conformism that cynics preach when they reason that, since people are bad and society won't change, there's nothing you can do but play the game as it's played. Dostoevsky gives no such excuses. He's unapologetically accurate in his character analysis. But he never concludes that nothing makes a difference. On the contrary, with him every little thing matters. Not least because—and this paradox is at the heart of Dostoevsky's irony—Ivanovitch, having nothing left to lose, still retains his *capacity to disappoint...* the woman who would have loved him, had he not presumptuously insisted on giving her all he had... and any high-minded reader when he confesses his readiness to be used and abused by the Parisian...!

Disappoint is the one thing the conformist cynic can't do. By claiming nothing makes a difference, the cynic suspends all criteria for judgment. So anything he does is just what it is. He's safe. (The classic: Why date an asshole? It's a safe bet. You know what you get. The risk of unexpected disappointments is zero.) The capacity to disappoint depends upon there being criteria, on things making a difference. Irony

testifies to this insistence as it demonstrates that nothing can ever be said to safely be just what it is, but that, instead, there always is something different, something more to it... Irony is the art of laughing while crying, and crying while laughing. It partially suspends the distinction between the two; yet only to even more provocatively point to the existential tensions between joy and pain, comedy and tragedy, justice and injustice. The irony of irony is that *it twists all distinctions to show that there are distinctions*. To embrace the possibility to disappoint then, ironically, is to reject cynicism and hint at a tacit ethics (born from the sense that some things do make a difference). In daring to disappoint, Ivanovitch walks a fine line where pride touches on principles, excessive self-consciousness on conscience, and obstinacy on resistance. So there are no morals to be drawn from the novel, but just a question: In the mess that we're in, do we still feel that there is a difference between joy and pain, comedy and tragedy, justice and injustice? If so, we'd better develop a sense of irony that could permit us to speak from the heart of that mess and voice, if not a class consciousness, then at least a rudimentary ethics premised on the awareness that it makes a difference how we act... precisely because, as creative people, we share the high capacity to disappoint.

- 1 A quick search for the duet on YouTube will produce examples from different years and decades, all slightly but decisively different in how each performance of the song brings out the subtle quality of acknowledged irony in the relations between the two singers.
- 2 I am indebted to Melinda Braathen for pointing this movie out to me.
- 3 I thank Joshua Simon for a very helpful conversation on this subject.
- 4 Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Gambler* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 19–20.