
History Against Historicism

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In the perception of its critics as well as of some of its partisans, so-called 'deconstruction' is often identified with the stance of radical historicism – as if to 'deconstruct' a certain notion equals demonstrating how its universality is secretly marked, overdetermined, by the concrete circumstances of its emergence and development, or how its purely notional inconsistencies and contradictions 'reflect' actual social and ideological antagonisms. For that reason, it is more than ever crucial to distinguish the strict deconstructionist stance from the historicism which pervades today's Cultural Studies.

Cultural Studies as a rule involves the cognitive suspension characteristic of historicist relativism. Cinema theorists in Cultural Studies no longer ask basic questions like 'What is the nature of cinematic perception?'; they simply tend to reduce such questions to historicist reflection upon conditions in which certain notions emerged as the result of historically specific power relations. In other words, we are dealing with the historicist abandonment of the very question of the inherent 'truth-value' of a theory under consideration: when a typical Cultural Studies theorist deals with a philosophical or psychoanalytical edifice, the analysis focuses exclusively on unearthing its hidden patriarchal, Eurocentrist, identitarian or other 'bias', without even asking the naive, but nonetheless necessary question: OK, but what *is* the structure of the universe? How *does* the human psyche 'really' work? Such questions are not even taken seriously in Cultural Studies: in a typical rhetorical move, practitioners of Cultural Studies denounce the very attempt to draw a clear line of distinction between, say, true science and pre-scientific mythology, as part of the Eurocentrist procedure of imposing its own hegemony by means of the exclusionary discursive strategy of devaluing the Other as not-yet-scientific.... In this way, we end up arranging and analyzing science proper, premodern 'wisdom', and other forms of knowledge as different discursive formations

evaluated not with regard to their inherent truth-value, but according to their socio-political status and impact (a native 'holistic' wisdom can thus be considered much more 'progressive' than the 'mechanistic' Western science responsible for the forms of modern domination). The problem with this procedure of historicist relativism is that it continues to rely on a set of silent (non-thematized) ontological and epistemological presuppositions about the nature of human knowledge and reality: usually a proto-Nietzschean notion that knowledge is not only embedded in, but also generated by a complex set of discursive strategies of power, (re)production, etc.

However, does this mean that the only alternatives to cultural historicist relativism are either naive empiricism or the old-fashioned metaphysical TOE (Theory of Everything)? Here, precisely, deconstruction at its best involves a much more nuanced position. As Derrida argues exemplarily in his 'White Mythology', it is not sufficient to claim that 'all concepts are metaphors', that there is no pure epistemological cut, since the umbilical cord connecting abstract concepts with everyday metaphors is irreducible. First, the point is not simply that 'all concepts are metaphors', but that the very difference between a concept and a metaphor is always minimally metaphorical, relying on some metaphor. Even more important is the opposite conclusion: the very reduction of a concept to a bundle of metaphors already has to rely on some implicit *philosophical (conceptual)* determination of the difference between concept and metaphor, that is to say, on the very opposition it tries to undermine.¹ We are thus forever caught in a vicious circle: true, it is impossible to adopt a philosophical stance delivered from the constraints of everyday naive life-world attitudes and notions; however, although *impossible*, this philosophical stance is at the same time *unavoidable*. (Derrida makes the same point about the well-known historicist thesis that the entire Aristotelian ontology based on the ten modes of being is an effect/expression of Greek grammar: the problem is that *this reduction of ontology (of ontological categories) to an effect of grammar presupposes a certain notion (categorical determination) of the relationship between grammar and ontological concepts which is itself already metaphysical/Greek.*²)

We should always bear in mind this delicate stance on account of which Derrida avoids the twin pitfalls of naive realism as well as of direct philosophical foundationalism: a 'philosophical foundation' of our experience

¹ See Jacques Derrida, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy', in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (London: Harvester, 1982), pp. 207–71.

² See Jacques Derrida, 'The Supplement of Copula: Philosophy before Linguistics', in *Margins of Philosophy*, pp. 175–206.

is *impossible*, and yet *necessary* – although everything we perceive, understand, articulate, is, of course, overdetermined by a horizon of pre-understanding, this horizon itself remains ultimately impenetrable. Derrida is thus a kind of meta-transcendentalist, in search of the conditions of possibility of philosophical discourse itself. If we miss this precise way Derrida undermines philosophical discourse *from within*, we reduce ‘deconstruction’ to just another naive historicist relativism. Here, Derrida’s position is antithetical to that of Foucault who, in his answer to a criticism that he spoke from a position whose possibility was not accounted for within the framework of his theory, cheerfully retorted: ‘Questions of this kind do not concern me: they belong to the police discourse with its files constructing the subject’s identity!’ In other words, the ultimate lesson of deconstruction seems to be that one cannot postpone *ad infinitum* the *ontological* question. That is to say, what is deeply symptomatic in Derrida is his oscillation between, on the one hand, the hyper-self-reflective approach which denounces in advance the question of ‘how things really are’ and limits itself to third-level deconstructive comments on the inconsistencies of philosopher B’s reading of philosopher A, and, on the other hand, a direct ‘ontological’ assertion about how difference and archi-trace designate the structure of all living and are thus already operative in animal nature. One should not miss here the paradoxical interconnection of these two levels: the very feature which forever prevents us from grasping directly our intended object (the fact that our grasping is always refracted, ‘mediated’, by a decentered otherness) is the feature which connects us to the basic proto-ontological structure of the universe.

Deconstruction thus involves two prohibitions: it prohibits the ‘naive’ empiricist approach (let us examine carefully the material in question and then generalize hypotheses about it...), as well as global non-historical metaphysical theses about the origin and structure of the universe. And it is interesting to note how the recent cognitivist backlash against deconstructionist Cultural Studies violates precisely these two prohibitions. On the one hand, cognitivism rehabilitates the empiricist freshness of approaching and examining the object of research without the background of a global theory (finally, one is able to study a film or a group of films without having to possess a global theory of Subject and Ideology). On the other hand, what signals the recent rise of quantum physics popularizers and other proponents of the so-called Third Culture, if not a violent and aggressive rehabilitation of the most fundamental metaphysical questions (what is the origin and the putative end of the universe?, etc.)? The explicit goal of people like Stephen Hawking is a version of TOE, i.e. the endeavour to discover the basic formula of the structure of our universe that one

could print and wear on a t-shirt (or, for a human being, the genome that identifies what I objectively am). So, in clear contrast to Cultural Studies' strict prohibition of direct 'ontological' questions, the proponents of the Third Culture unabashedly approach the most fundamental 'metaphysical' issues (the ultimate constituents of reality; the origins and end of the universe; what is consciousness? how did life emerge? etc.), as if to resuscitate the old dream, which died with the demise of Hegelianism, of a large synthesis of metaphysics and science, the dream of a global theory of *everything* grounded in exact scientific insights.

Against this false ideological spectre of Hegel, one should nonetheless insist that the Hegelian dialectic of the Notion is indispensable in the critique of historicism. How? Let us take one of the exercises of cinema-theory historicism at its best, Marc Vernet's rejection of the very concept of *film noir*.³ In a detailed analysis, Vernet demonstrates that all the main features that constitute the common definition of *film noir* ('expressionist' chiaroscuro lightning and skewed camera angles, the paranoiac universe of the hard-boiled novel with corruption elevated to a cosmic metaphysical feature embodied in the *femme fatale*, etc.), as well as their explanation (the threat the social impact of the World War II posed to the patriarchal phallic regime, etc.) are simply false. What Vernet does à propos of *noir* is something similar to what the late François Furet did with the French Revolution in historiography: he turns an Event into a non-Event, a false hypostasis that involves a series of misrecognitions of the complex concrete historical situation. *Film noir* is not a category of the history of Hollywood cinema, but a category of the criticism and history of cinema that could have emerged only in France for the French gaze immediately after the World War II, including all the limitations and misrecognitions of such a gaze (the ignorance of what went on before in Hollywood, the tension of the ideological situation in France itself in the aftermath of the war, etc.).

This explanation reaches its peak when we take into account the fact that post-structuralist deconstruction (which serves as the standard theoretical foundation of the Anglo-Saxon analysis of *film noir*) has in a way exactly the same status as *film noir* according to Vernet: in the same way that American *noir* does not exist (in itself, in America), since it was invented for and by the French gaze, one should also emphasize that post-structuralist deconstruction does not exist (in itself, in France), since it was invented in the US, for and by the American academic gaze with all its

³ See Marc Vernet, 'Film Noir on the Edge of Doom', in *Shades of Noir*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1993), pp. 1–32.

constitutive limitations. (The prefix *post-* in ‘post-structuralism’ is thus a reflexive determination in the strict Hegelian sense of the term: although it seems to designate the property of its object – the change, the cut, in the French intellectual orientation – it effectively involves a reference to the gaze of the subject perceiving it: ‘post’ means things that went on in French theory after the American (or German) gaze perceived them, while ‘structuralism’ *tout court* designates French theory ‘in itself’, before it was noted by the foreign gaze. ‘Post-structuralism’ is structuralism from the moment it was noted by the foreign gaze.) In short, an entity like ‘post-structuralist deconstruction’ (the term itself is not used in France) comes into existence only for a gaze that is unaware of the details of the philosophical scene in France: this gaze brings together authors (Derrida, Deleuze, Foucault, Lyotard...) who are simply not perceived as part of the same episteme in France, in the same way that the concept of *film noir* posits a unity which did not exist ‘in itself’. And in the same way that the French gaze, ignorant of the ideological tradition of American individualist anti-combo populism, misperceived through existentialist lenses the heroic, cynical-pessimistic, fatalist stance of the *noir* hero for a socially critical attitude, the American perception inscribed the French authors into the field of radical cultural criticism and thus conferred on them the feminist etc. critical social stance for the most part absent in France itself.⁴ In the same way *film noir* is not a category of American cinema, but primarily a category of the French cinema criticism and (later) of the historiography of cinema, ‘post-structuralist deconstruction’ is not a category of French philosophy, but primarily a category of the American (mis)-reception of the French authors designated as such. So when we are reading what is arguably the paradigmatic example and topic of (cinema) deconstructionist theory, a feminist analysis of the way the *femme fatale* in *film noir* renders the ambiguous male reaction to the threat to the patriarchal ‘phallic order’, we effectively have a non-existing theoretical position analyzing a non-existing cinematic genre.

However, is such a conclusion effectively unavoidable, even if we concede that, at the level of data, Vernet is right? Although Vernet effectively undermines a lot of the standard *noir* theory (say, the crude notion that the *noir* universe stands for the paranoiac male reaction to the threat to the ‘phallic regime’ embodied in the *femme fatale*), the enigma that remains is the mysterious efficiency and persistence of the notion of *noir*:

⁴ Typically, French ‘post-structuralist’ authors are often, together with the representatives of the Frankfurt School, labelled as part of ‘critical theory’ – a classification unthinkable in France.

the more Vernet is right at the level of facts, the more enigmatic and inexplicable becomes the extraordinary strength and longevity of this 'illusory' notion of *noir*, the notion that has haunted our imagination for decades. What if, then, *film noir* is nonetheless a *concept* in the strict Hegelian sense: something that cannot simply be explained, accounted for, in terms of historical circumstances, conditions and reactions, but acts as a structuring principle that displays dynamics of its own – *film noir* is actual as a concept, as a unique vision of the universe that combines a multitude of elements into what Louis Althusser would have called an *articulation*?⁵ So when we ascertain that the notion of *noir* does not fit the empirical multitude of *noir* films, instead of rejecting the notion, we should risk the notorious Hegelian rejoinder 'So much worse for reality!' More precisely, we should engage in the dialectic between a universal notion and its reality, in which the very gap between the two sets in motion the simultaneous transformation of reality and of the notion itself. It is because real films never fit their notion that they constantly change themselves, and this change imperceptibly transforms the very notion, the standard by means of which they are measured: we pass from the hard-boiled-detective *noir* (the Hammett-Chandler formula) to the 'persecuted innocent bystander' *noir* (the Cornell Woolrich formula), and from that to the 'naïve sucker caught in a crime' *noir* (the James Cain formula).

The situation here is in a way homologous to that of Christianity: of course, almost all of its elements were already there in the Dead Sea scrolls, most of the key Christian notions are clear cases of what Stephen Jay Gould would have called 'exaptations',⁶ of retroactive reinscriptions that misperceive and falsify the original impact of a notion, but nonetheless this does not suffice to explain the Event of Christianity. The concept of *noir* is thus extremely productive not only for the analysis of films, but even as a means to throw retroactively a new light on previous classic works of art. In this vein, implicitly applying the old Marx's idea that the anatomy of man is the key to the anatomy of monkey, Elisabeth Bronfen uses the coordinates of the *noir* universe to throw a new light on Wagner's *Tristan* as the ultimate *noir* opera.⁷ A further example of how *noir* enables us retroactively to 'deliver' Wagner's operas is his long retrospective

⁵ See Louis Althusser, 'The Object of Capital', in Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1977), pp. 71–198.

⁶ See Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin, 'The Spandrels of San Marco and the Panglossian Paradigm', *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, vol. B205 (1979), 581–598.

⁷ See Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Noir Wagner', in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 57–104.

monologues, the ultimate horror of impatient spectators – do not these long narratives call for the *noir* flash-back to illuminate them? Perhaps, however, as we have already insinuated, more than a *noir* composer, Wagner is a Hitchcockian *avant la lettre*: not only is the ring from Wagner's *Ring* the ultimate MacGuffin; much more interesting is the entire Act 1 of *Die Walkure*, especially the long orchestral passage at its centre that forms a true Wagnerian counterpart to the great party sequence in Hitchcock's *Notorious*, with its intricate exchange of glances: three minutes without a singing voice, only orchestral music that accompanies and organizes a complex exchange of gazes between the three subjects (the love couple of Sieglinde and Siegmund and their common enemy, Sieglinde's brutal husband Hunding) and the fourth element, the object, the magic sword Not-hung stuck deeply into a gigantic trunk that occupies the middle of the stage. In his famous centenary Bayreuth staging of the *Ring* (1975-79), Patrice Chéreau solved the deadlock of how to stage this rather static scene with an intricate, sometimes almost ridiculous ballet of the three persons moving around and exchanging their respective places (first Hunding between Siegmund and Sieglinde, then Sieglinde stepping over to Siegmund and both confronting Hunding), as if the role of the third, disturbing element is being displaced from one to another actor (first Siegmund, then Hunding). I am tempted to claim that this exquisite ballet, which almost reminds us of the famous boxing scene in Chaplin's *City Lights* with its interplay between the two boxers and the referee, desperately endeavours to compensate us for the fact that no subjective shots are feasible on the theatrical stage: if this three-minute scene were to be shot like the above-mentioned party scene from *Notorious*, with a well-synchronized exchange of establishing shots, objective close-ups and subjective shots, Wagner's music would find its appropriate visual counterpart – an exemplary case of Wagnerian scenes which, as Michel Chion put it, should be read today in a kind of future anterior, since 'they seem retrospectively to call for the cinema to correct them.'⁸ This interpretive procedure is the very opposite of teleology: teleology relies on linear evolutionary logic in which the lower stage already contains *in nuce* the seeds of the higher stage, so that evolution is just the unfolding of some underlying essential potential, while here, the lower (or, rather, previous) stage becomes readable only retroactively, insofar as it is itself ontologically 'incomplete', a set of traces without meaning and thus open to later reappropriations.

⁸ Michel Chion, *La musique au cinéma* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 256.

We are thus tempted to designate the two foreign misrecognizing gazes whose skewed point of view was constitutive of their respective objects (*film noir*, ‘post-structuralist deconstruction’) as precisely the two exemplary cases of the so-called ‘drama of false appearances’⁹: the hero and/or heroine are placed in a compromising situation, either over their sexual behaviour or over a crime; their actions are observed by a character who sees things mistakenly, reading into the innocent behaviour of the heroes’ illicit implications; at the end, of course, the misunderstanding is clarified and the heroes absolved of any wrong-doing. However, the point is that through this game of false appearance, *a censored thought is allowed to be articulated*: the spectator can imagine the hero or heroine enacting forbidden wishes, but escaping any penalty, since he knows that despite the false appearances, nothing has happened, i.e. they are innocent. The dirty imagination of the onlooker who misreads innocent signs or coincidences is here the stand-in for the spectator’s ‘pleasurably aberrant viewing’¹⁰: this is what Lacan had in mind when he claimed that truth has the structure of a fiction: the very suspension of literal truth opens the way for the articulation of the libidinal truth. This situation was exemplarily staged in Ted Tetzlaff’s *The Window*, in which a small boy effectively perceives a crime, although nobody believes him, and his parents even force him to apologize to the murderers for the false rumours he is spreading about them.¹¹

It is, however, Lillian Hellman’s play *The Children’s Hour*, twice filmed (both times directed by William Wyler), that offers perhaps the clearest, almost laboratory example of this ‘drama of false appearances’. As is well known, the first version (*These Three* from 1936) provided the occasion for one of the great Goldwynisms: when Sam Goldwyn, the producer, was warned that the film takes place among lesbians, he supposedly replied: ‘That’s okay, we’ll turn them into Americans!’ What then happened was that the alleged lesbian affair around which the story turns was effectively turned into a standard heterosexual affair. The film takes place in a posh private school for girls run by two friends, the austere,

⁹ As to this notion, see Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1950), pp. 127–133.

¹⁰ Richard Maltby, “‘A Brief Romantic Interlude’: Dick and Jane go to 3 1/2 Seconds of the Classic Hollywood Cinema”, in *Post-Theory*, ed. David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), p. 455.

¹¹ What we are dealing with here, of course, is the structure of the *perplexed gaze* as generative of fantasy and sexuation (see Chapter 5 of Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject* (London: Verso 1999)). This structure provides the general foundation of the pleasure involved in the act of seeing: there would be no movie spectator finding pleasure in observing the screen if the very fundamental structure of subjectivity were not characterized by this impassive fascinated and perplexed gaze.

domineering Martha and the warm and affectionate Karen, who is in love with Joe, the local doctor. When Mary Tilford, a vicious pre-teen pupil, is censured for her misdeed by Martha, she retaliates by telling her grandmother that one late evening she has seen Joe and Martha (not Karen, his fiancée) 'carrying on' in a bedroom near the student's quarters. The grandmother believes her, especially after this lie is corroborated by Rosalie, a weak girl terrorized by Mary, so she removes Mary from the school and also advises all other parents to do the same. The truth eventually comes out, but the damage has been done: the school is closed, Joe loses his post at the hospital, and even the friendship between Karen and Martha comes to an end after Karen admits that she, too, has her suspicions about Martha and Joe. Joe leaves the country for a job in Vienna, where Karen later joins him. The second version from 1961 is a faithful rendition of the play: when Mary retaliates, she tells her grandmother that she has seen Martha and Karen kissing, embracing and whispering, implying that she does not fully understand what she was witnessing, just that it must have been something 'unnatural'. After all the parents move their children from the school and the two women find themselves alone in the large building, Martha realizes that she does love Karen in more than just a sisterly fashion, and unable to bear the guilt she feels, she hangs herself. Mary's lie is finally exposed, but it is far too late now: in the film's final scene, Karen leaves Martha's funeral and walks proudly past Mary's grandmother, Joe, and all other townspeople who were gulled by Mary's lies.

The story turns around the evil onlooker (Mary) who, through her lie, unwittingly realizes the adult's unconscious desire: the paradox, of course, is that, prior to Mary's accusation, Martha was not aware of her lesbian longings – it is only this external accusation that makes her aware of a disavowed part of herself. The 'drama of false appearances' is thus brought to its truth: the evil onlooker's 'pleasurably aberrant viewing' externalizes the repressed aspect of the falsely accused subject. The interesting point is that, although in this second version the censorship distortion is undone, the first version is as a rule hailed as far superior to its 1961 remake, mainly on account of the way it abounds with repressed eroticism: not the eroticism between Martha and Joe, but the eroticism between Martha and Karen. Although the girl's accusation concerns the alleged affair between Martha and Joe, Martha is attached to Karen in a much more passionate way than Joe with his conventional straight love. The key to the 'drama of false appearances' is thus that, in it, less overlaps with more. On the one hand, the standard procedure of censorship is not to show the (prohibited) event (murder, sex act) directly, but the way it is reflected in the witnesses; on the other hand, this deprivation opens up a space to be filled in by

phantasmatic projections, i.e. it is possible that the gaze which does not see clearly what is effectively going on sees *more*, not *less*.

And, in a homologous way, the notion of *noir* (or ‘post-structuralist deconstruction’, for that matter), although resulting from a limited foreign perspective, perceives in its object potentials invisible to those who are directly engaged in it. Therein resides the ultimate dialectical paradox of truth and falsity: sometimes, the aberrant view which misreads a situation from its limited perspective, can, on account of this very limitation, perceive the ‘repressed’ potentials of the observed constellation. It is true that, if we submit products usually designated as *noir* to a close historical analysis, the very concept of *film noir* loses its consistency and disintegrates; however, paradoxically, we should nonetheless insist that Truth is on the level of the spectral (false) appearance of *noir*, not in the detailed historical knowledge. The effectiveness of this concept of *noir* is that which today enables us to immediately identify as *noir* the short scene from *Lady in the Lake*, the simple line of a dialogue in which the detective answers the question, ‘But why did he kill her? Didn’t he love her?’ with a straight, ‘This is reason enough to kill’.

And, furthermore, sometimes, the external misperception exerts a productive influence on the misperceived ‘original’ itself, forcing it to become aware of its own ‘repressed’ truth (arguably, the French notion of *noir*, although the result of misperception, exerted a strong influence on American movie making itself). Isn’t the supreme example of this productivity of the external misperception the very American reception of Derrida? Did it not – although it clearly *was* a misperception – exert a retroactive productive influence on Derrida himself, forcing him to confront more directly ethico-political issues? Was the American reception of Derrida in this sense not a kind of *pharmakon*, a supplement to the ‘original’ Derrida himself – a poisonous stain–fake, distorting the original and at the same time keeping it alive? In short, would Derrida be still so much ‘alive’ if we were to subtract from his work its American misperception?