

## **Borders and the violence of translation**

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‘The critique of violence is the philosophy of its history’

Walter Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’

Long before Jacques Derrida and Giorgio Agamben, Walter Benjamin’s essay of 1921 explores the fundamental violence exercised in the establishment of rights, confines, borders and the law: that is the instance of exception that creates a territory, an authority, a limit, and a new figure of thought. In this context, it is perhaps worthwhile recalling that the German for ‘violence’ (*Gewalt*) also means ‘authority’ and ‘power’. It is also important to note that Benjamin carries the question of violence beyond the bounds of legal theory into the realm of historical justice.

To think of the explanatory authority of a topological approach to cultural dynamics in the vicinity of questions of borders, migration and justice, is then to cross a conceptual territory with questions of power, violence, unauthorised bodies and heterotopias. This may well mean, *contra* the kinetic continuity proposed in geometrical figurations of time, transformation, and structure, this may well mean to insist on discontinuity, diversion and dispersal, suspended in the historical and cultural grammar of spatiality.

Thinking of topography and the refusal to respect the border, the confine, provoked by migration, invariably draws us towards the subversion of the two dimensional map by the three dimensional social and historical matrix. This slant pushes up against, and exceeds, the topological imperative associated with the long, powerful, occidental cartographical tradition of mapping. It also marks the limits of the theoretical gaze, ocular hegemony and its theatre of power, with respect to the Earth, to the terrain, to a territory, and the transit of bodies and lives that make of a smooth abstract space a multiplicity of unruly places. Topology, whether as a mathematical or metaphorical structure of thought and thinking, moves within the powers and limits of representation. How, in considering the politics of cultural analysis, is it possible to think and figure a historical justice yet to come within the confines and borders of such an analytical frame? For although the topological considers not simply spatial relations, but also their temporalities of change and transformation, its time appears fundamentally unilateral and empty, awaiting the development, or ‘progress’, of its spatial coordinates. To elaborate a topology implies the elaboration of a particular sense of time that veers towards a teleological blueprint, rather than that of a living archive that moves into the future through re-remembering and reconfiguring the past. How can a topological framing of cultural dynamics (although the choice of this seemingly more ‘neutral’ term, rather than ‘processes’ is perhaps significant) respond to the specificities inscribed in the historical and cultural configurations of modern citizenship, racism, economic deprivation, borders, rights, migration, democracy and their relationship to both the legal structure and historical insistence of justice? If the ‘event’ is the conjunctural or over-determined insistence of such a configuration, is the topological, as a geometrical figure, and no matter how dynamic, able to respond, rather than simply, register such an instance?

The topological, topography and topos form part of that register of conceptual elaboration that includes geo-graphy and historio-graphy: that is, the writing, or articulation, of space and time and their accompanying problematics. These are languages that are suspended between elaboration or writing and the conceptual constructions they refer to as ‘facts’; so

they are languages that emerge between the inscription of disciplinary protocols and the inevitable flight of their constructed 'objects' into a wider, undisciplined space that tends to interrogate the shape and the desire of the construction. So, how is our discourse itself here placed? For whom, where and why should we register its limits; which, after all, are perhaps also the limits of the universal pretensions of occidental social science.

Maps and models are themselves framed by the politics of representation and the epistemology of the ocular. If, in the West, we have slowly learnt that the unilateral conditions of sight can be complicated, challenged and intersected by other points of view, there also exists a politics of listening and an unsuspected poetics that registers the limits of representation in the very act of representation, casting a shadow over vision, interrupting clarity with the non- and unrepresentable. This carries us well beyond the instrumental and communication threshold of language into precisely that ambivalent zone in which language itself becomes the factor of truth. In order to look into things, it is necessary to acknowledge one's blindness. This is not to capture or represent some 'thing', but is rather to propose in its very materiality a figure of thought as a practice of articulation, of becoming.

It has recently been argued that 'the epistemology of the frontier puts into question the modern topology and topography of power, proposing an overturning of the traditional concept of realism based on principles of relatively stable separation, positionality and representation.' (Brambilla & Doni, *aut aut*, 341, 2009) The topos depends upon an external eye for its identification and evaluation: this is a universal prospect and position that postcolonial criticism suggests is impossible.

Just to add a dose of maritime criticism to the question at this point. One can think of the sea in terms of a perpetual erosion of the geometry of modernity. For modernity, with its clear, well-patrolled lines of demarcation continually excluding extraneous matter and putting its political and epistemological house in order, rationality is topological thinking. It is sustained and stabilised in the fixed properties of binary oppositions: home/abroad, us/them, domestic/foreign... It reduces frontiers to fixed lines of mutually exclusive properties, rather than ambiguous zones of future becomings. Its logic excludes both the colonial past and present, dispatching the colonial to a non-domestic space and thereby evading the disquieting historical and political formula that the moment of modernity is also and always the colonial moment.

Here, the sea crossing, yesterday the Atlantic, today the Mediterranean, is a transit zone that proposes a critical disposition able to challenge the norm and *nomos* of territorial identification. As precisely an in-between zone where political geometry and historical measurement are dispersed, the sea is no longer an unstable adjunct but becomes a critical disposition where history is made by the migrant and the emerging epistemologies that accompany the planetary processes that are refashioning modernity. This is precisely a challenge to the violence of a language that considers its maps, its reason, to be the unique measure of the world.

But then, returning to land, and confronting a topological model of cultural dynamics, we simultaneously also discover that these days borders, frontiers and confines are not physical but also mobile and flexible instances of authority and power. They follow many, and not necessarily coordinated, logics. As the Israeli architect Eyal Weizman puts it in his book *Hollow Land*, they propose modalities of 'territorial intensity' creating elastic extensions of power, invariably exploiting a fragmentation of actions and actors. This is deliberately induced through the structural management of chaos. Weizman is referring to the multiplicity of zones and levels activated in the Israeli management of Palestine, but

then perhaps contemporary Israel is simply a ‘laboratory of the extreme’ (Weizman) in which ‘Europe’, as a fundamentally colonial formation, is most extensively exposed.

The limits of representation refers us to what maps seek to represent while simultaneously repressing: those material textures and terrains of life forms, both human and non, that exceed the abstract sociological inheritance of the social construction of reality. Here an eco-logical and a post-colonial critique can provoke a series of cross-roads from where it becomes possible to reevaluate both the singular event and its planetary or worldly framing. The abstraction, sustained in the conceptual plane, is here bent and folded into a landscape which, in turn, becomes simultaneously more fluid and precise, specific and mobile, differentiated and dispersive. Here there emerges the implacable knot of a ‘double-bind’: if ‘nature’ is socially and culturally produced, it simultaneously also proposes some ‘thing’ – from the physicality of the terrain to molecular viruses – that precedes and exceeds our productive will.

So we are perhaps dealing with a ‘measure’ that is not merely ours to control and define, hence the challenge of a post-humanism in which the subject is no longer necessarily at the centre of the picture. Whatever the verdict, this, as Deleuze might have put it, proposes a new figure of thought. Here the physical and metaphysical terrain is no longer guaranteed by an ‘-ism’. It is in this sort of unstable and unguaranteed context that I think we should insert some comments on the possible dialogue between the topological approach to the dynamics of culture and the challenge (both historical and ontological) posed by modern migration and the bio-political marshalling of borders and confines.

In considering border crossings, we are considering not only the obvious, and frequently highly dangerous, physical transit, but also the implicit epistemological reconfigurations that emerge when the individualised and collective bodies of history, culture and thought traverse, contaminate and complicate each others’ trajectories, stretching from the noted themes of historical hybridisation and cultural creolisation to the unruly site of interdisciplinary studies. But we are also conversing in the vicinity of what is juridically sustained by the state and the often countervailing authority of the frequently ignored liberal discourse of Human Rights.

**Article 13.** of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by the General assembly of the United Nations, 10 December, 1948

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.
- (2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

If migration is a human right, it is certainly not a civil one. The modern state, the proponent of occidental democracy, does not recognise human rights, only the rights of its citizens. Take the case of migration today. It has recently been estimated that in the coming decades one sixth of the world’s population will be in a migratory state which, for the large majority, means that they will be in an illegal state.

So, we are inevitably drawn into considering the direct and asymmetrical relationship between migration and citizenship.

Borders, as both physical and immaterial instances of authority, are instances marked by the violent transformation of the translation of other histories and bodies into ‘objects’ of juridical, political and theoretical surveillance. Borders are ambivalent zones of reconfiguration and fear, of transformation and friction, and not simply fixed limits or

shut-off points: they propose shifting margins and thresholds. Here borders propose a critical, Janus-like figure that simultaneously looks in both directions: forwards and backwards, inside and outside... This idea of the border as a potential and performative aperture, a critical opening, certainly moves in the shared terrain of Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Nielsen's 'border as method'.

But to return to the idea that the materiality of a border or frontier need not necessarily be visible or physical is perhaps to propose a critical limit to projects that operate within the protocols of the visual immediacy of truth and their corresponding logics of representation. Crudely put, borders cannot always be represented. Perhaps there exist 'unseen orders' that implicitly critique what the visual regime of truth – its topographies, topologies, networks and cartographies – seeks to represent, hence map and contain. Alongside James Clifford's 'traveling cultures' (itself an amplification of Edward Said's 'traveling theory'), we need to add the idea of flexible and fluid frontiers.

For the idea of cultures that travel and 'translate', introduces an excess to inherited political reason. If the latter, in its critical versions, is intent on understanding and revealing the 'logic' of capital and power, the former seeks sustenance in ambivalence and the folds of the opaque. Perhaps that poetic excess is precisely the unrepresented potential of a politics to come?

The horizon of post-colonial art: Keith Piper *Re-locating the remains* (1998), Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007) and their work on liquid histories and solid seas. Where the bones of slaves and migrants become the white sand tracing the maps of the black Atlantic and the contemporary Mediterranean.

Rather than consider migration as a peripheral phenomenon, as something abnormal compared to the settled formations of the community and the nation state, as something that is fundamentally located at the edges of the making of the modern world, it might be altogether more suggestive to think instead of migration and modernity as synonyms. That is, to suggest that migration – from the days of slave ships riding in the Gulf of Guinea ready to transport their human cargo to the Americas, through the epoch of indentured labour transported from India to Africa and the Caribbean, not to speak of the migration of millions of Europe's rural poor (from Scandinavia, Scotland and Ireland to Greece and Italy), to the contemporary migrant body washed up on the beach of Lampedusa – this is to suggest that migration is central to the political economy of occidental modernity. But if migration is about labour, and about the national and transnational governance of its planetary processes, it is also about politics and cultural power.

The outsider, the stranger, the migrant is always and already framed (Fanon on the fact of blackness: *Black Skin, White Masks*). The theoretical territory proposed by topology is also a framing device of this type: certain procedures of identification are legitimated, others excluded, and even if the space-time continuum is abstractedly registered, it is the spatial understanding of processes and relationships that takes precedence over the temporal instance of their complication and unsuspected articulations. It is, after all, the continuum, rather than the disruption, that is signified in its semiotic logic. If we were to insist on the more ill-defined concept of historical processes rather than the seeming precision of topographical dynamics, then we would also have to register that we are dealing with a highly contested territory. Borders, in this sense, are performative spaces, irreducible to a unilateral reason or explanation. As sites of contrast, conflict, negotiation, transit, transformation and translation, they cut into the physical and metaphysical bodies of all the actors.

Here it is crucial to recall that migration, both yesterday and today, while apparently disciplined by spatial and temporal regimes of controlled access and rejection, also inducts the assumed stability of the host culture (Europe, the First World) into the migration, movement and mutation attendant on translation. This is a mobile matrix, where historical forces frequently exceed their political framings. For if we presume that we are translating the other into anthropological, sociological, historical, juridical and political ‘objects’ of cultural and political legislation, we are too easily forget that we ourselves are being translated and transformed by the very processes we seek to confine, discipline and explain. This leads to series of borders and confines that create unstable archipelagos distributed in the uneven rhythms and jagged temporalities of planetary space, cutting through and across the more traditional binary distinctions between North and South, centre and periphery, the West and the rest.

Perhaps topology itself, in the very nature of its language and articulation, is an unrecognised or unconscious form of territorial consciousness? It is itself perhaps an immanent form of occidental hegemony? Thinking mathematically, thinking abstractedly and universally, has, since 1600, acquired a specific location in time and space; it has acquired an epistemological status in which it is automatically assumed that philosophy and political reasoning, theory and history itself, is automatically considered to be of European provenance.

So, what precisely are we mapping here? Why the topological appropriation of the ‘world’, and what is the desire for certitude secured in a mathematical grounding of social and historical uncertainties? Is the mathematics, as Alain Badiou seems to suggest, a method of secularising infinity after the death of God? Is this a new scheme of order and visualisation for managing the historical moment? How does one ‘feel’ and respond to this particular theoretical landscape (itself the mirror of the hundreds of topographies proposed and sustained by the European Union in its supervision of a multi-dimensional Europe: and its knowledge management of everything from economic to ecological monitoring). There are pros and cons to be evaluated here. There are questions of power in which models of management, or modalities of representation, can overdetermine an understanding of resources, hopes and potentials. Here *techné* – which is not simply technology – can not only supplement but also supplant the very situation it is apparently representing.

By way of a conclusion. I have simply sought to suggest that there might be ways of learning from migration, and the associated concepts of borders, destined to uproot and deviate our apparatuses of explanation; there discovering that the world and its associated modernity is not only ours to define and explain.

Condensed in the discursive paths unleashed by topology is the request to rethink the laws of thought. The violence exercised on a landscape, on its human and animal population, on the stranger and the excluded, exposes, as Derrida explained, the violence of our laws and their construction of the ‘social’ and the ‘human’. The wager is whether topological thinking can register this ambivalence in such a manner as to foresake the violence of a self-referring and conclusive network that continues to exclude while constituting its inclusive interiority, its laws.

Perhaps it cannot. In the end, every model and metaphor is a prison. It can perhaps only pretend to wield the authority of a constitutive act that then abandons the conceptual scene for a performative narrative. This suggests a significant double valency to the term ‘network’, where nets suggest not only links and connections, but also the fact that a net is

full of holes through which things escape. This is also the possible line of escape from the North Atlantic academic machine and its voracious appetite for conceptual innovation, which is not necessarily critical renewal.

If topology, like the border, like migration, becomes a performative space, then the theoretical project yields to the critical passage.

We are here caught between the dreams of the social sciences seeking measurable certitude (and the long history of positivism and scientism that has frequently guaranteed its pronouncements) and the ontological complexities of the always incomplete of cultural and historical becoming. In the wake of the crisis of representation elaborated in philosophical, anthropological and poetical terms, are we now seeking refuge in the presumed allegorical neutrality of scientific models? Perhaps it is important to remember that as in any allegory, the figure of explanation employed, also evokes another history. In this case, the topographical model does not so much represent something, but is rather a modality that evokes another narrative, for which it can only serve as a point of departure prior to being subsequently abandoned. Otherwise, it already knows its point of arrival, its field of enquiry is predetermined or, rather, overdetermined, by the model, the map, the critical topos. Is the critical journey undertaken in the spirit of Ulysses – that is, occidental *Logos* – seeking to return to its point of departure, or does it depart knowing that it can never return to that point of self-confirmation?