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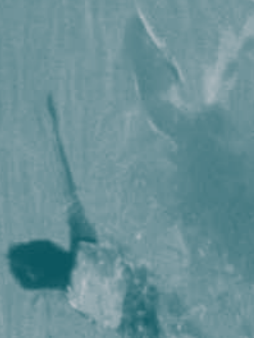
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ON DISCIPLINE

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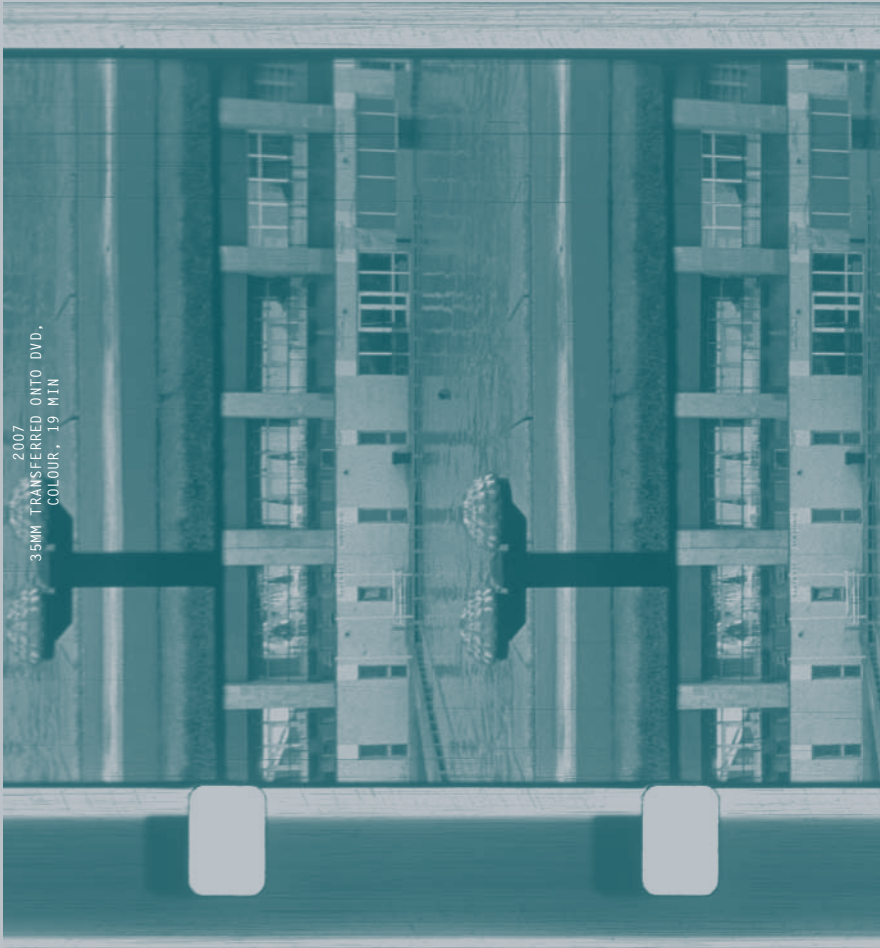
Why Discipline?

Sjoerd van Tuinen, Rotterdam, February 2011

Among animals the degrees of freedom between lazing around and vital activity are usually well-defined. If a lion is too lazy to go after its food, it dies, but it won't put more effort in killing its prey than is absolutely necessary. In fact, one of the reasons we like cats and dogs loafing about in our house is that they have the reassuring property not to act if there is no immediate need. In this way they remind us humans of the sovereign efficiency that is everywhere lacking in the 'rat race' of our everyday life. Not only do we constantly subject ourselves to ruthless competition, fitness drillings, health diets, meditative exercises in mindfulness and lifelong savings and education programs in the attempt to make the most of ourselves. We also never cease to scold the supposed idleness of others and to call for disciplinary measures against slackness, apathy or lethargy. But what exactly is the point of all these spiritual and physical exercises? Why do we discipline?

The most general definition of discipline is the labor of man on himself. As such it is more or less coextensive with human culture at large. This was the claim made by the most profound modern thinker on discipline, Friedrich Nietzsche. All of culture, he provocatively states in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), begins by cruel training and selection of human bodies through hard, painful and violent punishments. Its aim is everywhere the same: 'to breed an animal with the prerogative to *promise*', that is, to render man reliable, sociable and accountable - in other words, moral. Since 'only something that continues to *hurt* stays in the memory', Nietzsche argues, only disciplinary punishment is capable of 'fixing' a few ideas, a conscience or a soul, and of subordinating all other instincts to its domination.

Nietzsche discerns two types of discipline: discipline through punishment, the afflicting of hurt on others, and ascetic discipline, the afflicting of hurt on oneself. As is well-known, he was mainly interested in the latter,



since it is the most common and certainly the most contemporary. When seen from a distant star, Nietzsche suggests, 'the earth would be the ascetic planet par excellence, an outpost of discontented, arrogant and nasty creatures who harbour a deep disgust for themselves, for the world, for all life and hurt themselves as much as possible out of pleasure in hurting: - probably their only pleasure.' Yet what is this strange masochistic instinct in human life, a paradoxical form of life that seems to have an active interest in self-denial? In fact, Nietzsche argues, the contradiction is merely apparent. In reality humans have invented a morality of self-chastisement as a medication against greater suffering and thus as their means of survival. This can take the saintly form - Nietzsche describes saints as 'sportsmen of "holiness"' - of striving towards indifference or salvation, but it can just as well be found in the 'blessing of work', in other words, the hypnotic elimination of self-consciousness through mechanic activity and small rewards. In each case, however, ascetic discipline, although apparently renunciative in nature, is in reality the artificial instrument of 'the protective instinct of a degenerating life'.

Although Nietzsche's clinical definition of discipline is as compelling as it is vivid, it is meant as an 'untimely' and 'extra-moral' picture. It is light-years away from the historical and moral meanings men have given to their disciplinary practices. What Nietzsche calls self-renunciation, for example, Karl Marx calls the essence of human life. As he puts it, man is a species-being (*Gattungswesen*), an animal capable of (re)producing himself, not only according to his biological needs, but according to any standard whatever, even those of beauty. What we are coincides with what we make and how we make it. Productive work would therefore be the essence of man (*homo faber*), as is reflected by Marx' famous idealization of the course of a day in a future communist society from *The German Ideology* (1945): 'to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner'. This ceaseless activity is also reflected by the functionalism of modernist, especially

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by rendering them obedient, and conversely. 'If economic exploitation separates the force and the product of labour, let us say that disciplinary coercion establishes in the body the constricting link between an increased aptitude and an increased domination.' It is this constricting link and not human autonomy (or the humanistic emancipation from our 'estrangement' from it), Foucault argues against Marx, that lies at the basis of modern societies and their subjects.

What Foucault's study shows is that the processes of industrialization and urbanization have given a whole new meaning to Nietzsche's ascetic star, turning work discipline into the only truly global norm. Ever since the French Revolution, there has been an almost perfect unanimity about the imperative that anyone should earn his or her daily bread by means of work. Worse still, the ultimate revenge of the bourgeoisie against the virtues of aristocratic idleness is perhaps even stronger in liberal than in socialist societies: except for disability or retirement, laziness is out of the question and all individual choice precluded.

And yet there were times when it looked as if history would develop differently. At the dusk of the disciplinary societies, during the Great Depression, economist John Maynard Keynes expected that three hours of work per day would suffice for a life in comfort and peace. Thirty years later, reflecting the values of the revolution of the 1960s - laziness, playfulness and creativity -, the American futurist Herman Kahn would still prophecy that around the turn of the century Americans would have a four day working week. For both, the real economic problem was what to do with all the leisure time that will result from the massive increase of our wealth?

Today we know better. An average American employee still works thirty-seven hours per week, has very few holidays, and even combines work with long daily workout sessions at the gym. In Germany, there are over two hundred employment agencies for retirees. Although we occasionally escape in Slow movements, these are not real options. Woe to the politician

PARKING

2003
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who claims that the economic crisis has the advantage of leaving people more time to spend with their family and enjoy the small pleasures! Even when we go on holiday, we merely replace our usual activities with other efforts such as climbing a mountain, finally reading that huge pile of books, or rafting down a stream. Indeed, these alternative forms of self-disciplined activity are merely momentary reliefs after which we cheerfully go back to work. Should we therefore say with Foucault that our leisure activities are merely the continuation of our working discipline? Or with Nietzsche that they merely provide us with a necessary but temporary narcosis from the burdens of our daily lives?

In his most recent book *Du mußt dein Leben ändern* (2008), another Nietzschean, Peter Sloterdijk, gives a nuanced answer to these questions. Against Marx, he argues that work is only one out of many possible 'anthropotechnics', that is, techniques of self-drilling and self-enhancement through which the human condition is modified and kept in shape. And whereas Nietzsche focussed almost exclusively on the self-torturing asceticisms in service of the self-preservation of a deprived life, Sloterdijk emphasizes that we should not neglect the more general scope of ascetic discipline. In Greek, *áskesis* simply means training or exercise and also includes the protracted training of athletes or the strainful repetitions of musicians. Hence self-discipline can just as well be the instrument of a superabundant life, in which one instinct has become sufficiently powerful to have conquered virtuosity and subordinated every other instinct to itself.

Within Nietzsche's notion of ascetic discipline, Sloterdijk therefore distinguishes between active and passive ascetism, or between those who discipline themselves and those who are disciplined. This is an important political distinction, firstly, because it allows us to conceive of more empowering forms of disciplinary subjectivity than general servitude. It was in this fashion, too, that later Foucault, after having found himself in the political impasse of his analysis of disciplinary societies (how to resist if self-discipline has become omnipresent?), became



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interested in non-docile disciplinary ‘practices of the self’ such as those of post-Socratic philosophers. Secondly, distinguishing active and passive discipline also provides a criterion for evaluating contemporary forms of discipline. After the World War II, there has taken place a qualitative shift from disciplinary societies, which were essentially societies of production, to societies of consumption. Although today more than ever, our world is disciplined according to the principles of efficiency and effectivity, we should note that our moral virtues are no longer those of diligence, frugality, and modesty. Even if work is still the most dominant, we can now individually and reflectively choose from a variety of norms or lifestyles that fall within a general pattern of consumption. In other words, we know that we are disciplined subjects, but at the same time we cherish the illusion that we ourselves choose *how* we are disciplined. Our body, for example, is no longer merely a unit of production, but the object of body culture. But calling it lifestyle or culture doesn’t mean that discipline has disappeared, but rather that it has become an aspect of a new, media-based culture. On the one hand, this means that discipline becomes ever more intimate, subjecting us to the ‘interpassive’ (Slavoj Žižek) consumption of infotainment and the illusion of effortless self-enjoyment. Just think of all the repetitive actions we daily perform on our computers and digital interfaces and the compelling instantaneous feedback mechanisms of the blogosphere. On the other hand, it raises the question what active discipline could look like or by what means we can have an active stake in how we ‘become what we are’ today? For if the general norms of production in nineteenth century disciplinary societies left little room for subjective resistance besides the monastic self-discipline of monks and aesthetic self-discipline of dandies and bohemians, we now also have the opportunity to experiment with new processes of subjectification (*subjectivation*, as opposed to *assujettissement*) and new collective forms of life.

EXCURSUS ON FITNESS

2010
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Aquarena is realised in
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