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MECHANISMS OF
IMPRISONMENT

TEXT

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ROBERTO NIGRO

On one side of the work, are books floating in a cage; at the opposite end, are men and women in a cell. These fields of visibility are often doubled by accompanying fields of audibility¹. So, while looking at the scene, one can also hear voices of human beings trapped, for instance, in the Aula Bunker of the Foro Italico, where one of the most important trials from the *Years of Lead* (the so-called “anni di piombo”) was celebrated. It is not a *re-presentation*². The line of time here is bent in the circle of the *eternal return*. Voices of *revolutionary* people in cages who mingled with the voices of the court return time and time again, not to recall our past, but to give meaning to how constitutive of our present it is. Prisoners and persecutors: persecutors become prisoners of their own prison, and we ourselves, prisoners of our own history. The fragmented voices of the protagonists, memories from the underground, still reach and affect, like an eternal return of a past that in fact does not pass and *cannot* pass. Like it or not, it is the soil of our history and the question to know how one has been trapped in the fences of our own history still pervades.

As mentioned, posed opposite the men and women in the cell, are books located in a cage:

¹ IN HIS COMMENTARY OF MICHEL FOUCAULT'S WORK, GILLES DELEUZE MAKES IT CLEAR THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THESE FIELDS. IN PARTICULAR, HE SPEAKS OF *VISIBILITY* AND *SAYABILITY* (WHICH INCLUDES DISCURSIVE AND NOT-DISCURSIVE PRACTICES) AND EXPLAINS HOW THESE DIMENSIONS SET UP A NEW CONFIGURATION OF THOUGHT GOING BEYOND (AND AGAINST) ANY PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH (G. DELEUZE, *FOUCAULT*, MINNEAPOLIS: UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA PRESS, 1988).

² VERY SIGNIFICANTLY PAUL KLEE REMARKS THAT ART DOES NOT REPRODUCE THE VISIBLE; RATHER, IT MAKES VISIBLE. THE FUNCTION OF REPRESENTATION IN OUR MODERN CULTURE HAS BEEN DEEPLY INVESTIGATED BY LOUIS MARIN IN HIS REMARKS ON THE POWER OF IMAGES (*ON REPRESENTATION*, STANFORD, STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2001).

reinforced and doubled within their imprisonment. Firstly, the writing captured the *sayable* (and, by the same token, the *seeable*); and then, such an experience, trapped in books, undergoes a process of meaning cleansing whereby its intrinsic polyphony has to be reduced to the only accepted meaning. Those who police meaning act powerfully in order to prevent any additional meanings: nothing should escape the fortress of the univocal meaning. Everything is to be locked in the citadel of the one and only permitted meaning: such was the control over the dissidence during the Stalinian period, which tells us a lot about the functioning of biopolitical power in our modern societies.

Nevertheless, books, things, bodies, and human beings are not the only inmates of the cells. The 8 m² of the prison cell on the Island of Santo Stefano, next to the larger Island Ventotene, doesn't entail anything, anymore, at least not apparently. However, does a real void exist? Supposing we take an imprint in lead of the floor from the cell of this prison. The heavy lead sheet has to be transported to the island, to be put down on the floor and hammered or treated in a way that the surface becomes the negative of the existing floor. At this point, it will speak to us. You will be able to see, to

hear, and to decipher fragments of stories, of people's lives, and their resistance; in a word what remains of their suffering. Bodies, lives, experiences, once imprisoned there, are still there to remind us that they were imprisoned once and forever.

To take an imprint of the floor of the cell is not only a technical procedure: it is a political method of historical analysis³. It consists not in showing how absurd or irrational our system is nor how excessively rational and inhuman it has become, but rather to reveal its intrinsic rationality. It is not a matter of recalling how absurd our daily life is. The absurd would only be the dark side of a meaning, which already left. On the contrary, Rossella Biscotti's work confronts us with power mechanisms and their functioning in modern societies. It is not a question of reason and unreason, rational and irrational, meaning and absurd, but of the understanding of the intrinsic rationality of systems in which we are trapped. What is at issue in her work is the organization of a gaze that lets appear the mechanisms to which we are linked and subjugated (the imprisonment, for instance). Her work aims at producing an experience trying to reach a certain point in life that is as close as possible to the unliveable, to that which can't be lived through. As Foucault

³ THE ARTIST IS HERE REDUCED TO ITS MOST CRUCIAL FUNCTION: THE INVENTION, THE CONNECTION OF FORCES. HE/SHE IS AN INVENTOR, A CONNECTOR OF FORCES; HE/SHE MAKES VISIBLE. (SEE GABRIEL TARDE, *L'OPPOSITION UNIVERSELLE*, EMPECHEURS PENSER EN ROND, PARIS, 1999; ID, *ON COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL INFLUENCE: SELECTED PAPERS*, UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, CHICAGO, 2011).

outlines, what is required is the maximum of intensity and the maximum of impossibility at the same time. It is not a question of unfolding the field of possibilities related to everyday experience, and attempting to recapture the meaning of everyday experience. It is rather a question of wrenching the subject from itself, of bringing it to its annihilation or its dissolution⁴.

The experience of imprisonment appears to many of us so far from our daily life. But certainly: to some it must also appear too close. So far, so close...

Let's take into account the perimeter of the former Nazi concentration camp of Bolzano, or the Panopticon structure of the prison of Santo Stefano: in either case the wall and the architectonic structure are still there, although, in a case, the wall has been re-used as fences for an apartment complex, and, in the other one, the empty Panopticon structure remains as a relic remembering its former function. It is still there to remind us that other Panopticon structures are still at work, albeit somewhere else. Both the Bolzano wall and the Santo Stefano prison play a paradigmatic function consisting in making comprehensible (that is visible, understandable...) a series of phenomena that haunt

⁴ THE CORE OF THIS POLITICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH IS OUTLINED BY THE WORK OF FOUCAULT. SEE "INTERVIEW WITH MICHEL FOUCAULT", IN *M. FOUCAULT, POWER. ESSENTIAL WORKS OF FOUCAULT 1954-1984*, VOL. 3 (EDITED BY JAMES D. FAUBION), THE NEW PRESS, NEW YORK, 1997, P. 241-248.

our daily life. Walls of concentration camps became fences for an apartment complex; prisons, internal and external borders populate our daily experience. And yet, everyday, we go round and round by progressively paying less and less attention to them. It is not a question of being provided with a supplementary eye in order to penetrate the depths that are hidden under the crust of the visible; everything is visible, all too visible. We are dazzled because of the excess of light illuminating everything. Oedipus had one eye too many preventing him from seeing. When his blindness, caused by exposure to too much light, left him, he was compelled to return to blindness if he wanted to stay alive; for so tragic was the knowledge he had acquired while he had sight.

The work of the artist consists not in showing the invisible, but in showing the extent to which the invisibility of the visible is invisible. The silence is broken; for the experiences described by Rossella blow up like a light breaking the darkness of the night. The thin line separating the border of our being from the journey at the extreme limit of human being is drawn behind us.

We experience the possibility that lines circumscribing confinements can extend larger than the

8 m² of a cell. The wall, for instance, closing the perimeter of the former Nazi concentration camp of Bolzano; the sea surrounding the island of Santo Stefano, locking the cells of the prison yet again: the sea, a cell of the cells. However, there are also other forms of confinements, of internal and external borders: the monochrome yellow enveloping the human brain in an indistinct space, where memories, dreams, and nightmares mingle with one another and make impossible the difference between illusion and reality, for instance.

Prisoners and prisons, patients and physicians, industrial plants and workers, utopian projects of ideal cities and the unknown motivation of an individual running across the ground of an industrial plant. Subjugated knowledge, subaltern classes, people deprived of any word find their position in this interplay between visible and *sayability*, as constructed by Rossella. But she does not give voice to those who, by definition, do not possess it by just imposing upon them her own interpretation. Her procedure consists of collecting and selecting notes, memories, fragments of life, in order to return what remains of a history.

We know to what extent (artistic and not only) works exceed the boundaries of the author's

creation. They always entail flight lines, margins that cannot be bridled into a unitary conception. The notion of author is highly problematic⁵. We are confronted with a work producing percepts and affects⁶. We are affected by it. Faced with Rossella's work, one feels, from time to time, a note of melancholy emerging here and there as a constant leitmotiv. This has nothing to do with any pessimistic conception of life. It is not at all a question of pessimism or optimism. It is a question, rather, of an emotive affection enveloping you; the same, let me say, you experience when faced with the great works of Primo Levi or Robert Antelme. One knows, their work does not deal at all with the idea of a (bad) nature of human beings. And it's known that they are not at all trying to say that we all are and were equally responsible for what has happened. Nonetheless, shame is felt at crimes perpetrated against other human beings: you feel shame at your powerlessness to prevent that such events took place. You feel shame at the small compromises you are obliged to make every day in order to survive. This draws a kind of "grey zone", as Primo Levi says, enveloping you and the whole of mankind; a grey zone that will no more leave you, that inexorably accompanies you from morning to night, from life to death. It is the shame you feel because you know

⁵ SEE M. FOUCAULT, "WHAT IS AN AUTHOR?" IN ID., *AESTHETICS, METHOD, AND EPISTEMOLOGY. ESSENTIAL WORKS OF FOUCAULT 1954-1984*, THE NEW PRESS, NEW YORK 1998, VOL. II.

⁶ G. DELEUZE/F. GUATTARI, *WHAT IS PHILOSOPHY?*, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK, 1996, PART II, CHAP. 7: "PERCEPT, AFFECT, AND CONCEPT".

how the machine functions and, nonetheless, you still let it go on.

To be sure: Rossella does not tell the story of an omnipresent power that incessantly overwhelms us from morning till night. It is not a question of repression or of an age of terror. To believe that society works, since people ignore how it functions, would be as misleading as the idea that it functions since everybody knows how powerful its mechanisms of control are. Neither ignorance nor excess of knowledge explains what allows society to get gathered.

When we look at this work, we understand that mechanisms of power are more effective and subtle than we can believe. Tiny lines of power do not stop crossing society at different levels. There are not only physical borders and lines confining bodies; but also internal and external borders; prisons can trap bodies, but can also be prisons for the soul; the Panopticon architecture extends to the whole of society and becomes the paradigm of the control society. We ourselves are the controllers of ourselves, even before being (or, at any rate, at the same time) controllers of the others. Panopticon is the first and only archaic form of social control. It is interesting that one of the last creations of Rossella deals with a dismissed prison, with

cells in which bodies have disappeared. Such disappearance is certainly the sign of a modification of penalty, but also the clue that the Panopticon system spread over society as a whole ⁷.

If the Panopticon allows for the understanding of the mechanic functioning of power (power works as a machine having no regard for the subjects involved in the mechanism), post-modern societies rest on a more sophisticated procedure of control to which neoliberal ideologies have given their broader development. Neoliberal societies need to keep elements under control in order to ensure their free movement. A very specific dialectic between production of freedom and control of freedom takes here place. Neoliberal societies are avid for freedom; therefore, liberalism consumes what it tries to produce. We are faced here with a new governmental reason that needs freedom, on the one side, and consumes it, on the other. And in order for it to consume freedom, it must produce it. If, on the one side, liberalism is in search of techniques that govern and administer life (that constantly escapes them); then on the other side, such encompassing administration turns against itself, since the best government is the one governing the least. The coexistence of these two aspects of liberalism is all the more

⁷ FOUCAULT'S ANALYSES OF THE PANOPTICON IN *DISCIPLINE AND PUNISH* (NEW YORK: PANTHEON BOOKS, 1977) ARE NO DOUBT THE MAIN REFERENCE TO THIS TOPIC. HIS ANALYSIS OF THE BIRTH OF BIOPOLITICS (SEE *SECURITY, TERRITORY, POPULATION. LECTURES AT THE COLLÈGE DE FRANCE 1977-78 AND THE BIRTH OF BIOPOLITICS. LECTURES AT THE COLLÈGE DE FRANCE 1978-79* NEW YORK: PALGRAVE MACMILLAN, 2008 AND 2009) THE NECESSARY COROLLARY. SEE ALSO THE CRUCIAL TEXT BY GILLES DELEUZE, "POSTSCRIPT ON CONTROL SOCIETY", IN *NEGOTIATIONS (1972-1990)*, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK, 1997, P. 177-181. ON THESE TOPICS ANTONIO NEGRI AND MICHAEL HARDT HAVE RECENTLY EXPANDED THE MOST: SEE, FOR INSTANCE, *COMMONWEALTH*. HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS, CAMBRIDGE (MA), 2011.

paradoxical for it leads to recurrent crises of governmentality.

Crises of governmentality emerge where power clashes with life. “The most intense point of lives, - Foucault writes - the one where their energy is concentrated, is precisely where they clash with power, struggle with it, endeavours to utilize its forces or to escape its traps”⁸. It is as if Rossella has assimilated and translated these words into a new and different language. First of all, you get the impression that she is profoundly interested in what Foucault names “The Life of Infamous Men”: all these existences wrenched away from themselves or from what is considered as the normal course. If it is probably impossible to speak of these lives, it is no doubt possible to put them on stage, as Rossella does. The field of visibility, she creates with her work, returns us, under a new form, to the impossibility of speaking in everyday language of an experience that is unspeakable.

Finally, Rossella’s work shows very well that power never takes life as its objective without revealing or giving rise to a life that resists power. So, the trial and the Aula bunker host “subversive people”; the archive of the anarchists is a fragment of the history of struggles

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MICHEL FOUCAULT,
‘THE LIFE OF INFAMOUS
MEN’, IN J. FAUBION,
ED., *POWER*, OP. CIT.,
P. 157-175.

and fights of workers, from the quarries in 1922 to the anarchical antifascism; the 168 sections of the human brain is a history of delirium, individual and collective, historical and geographical ... our delirium.

Roberto Nigro, philosopher, specializing in French and German contemporary philosophy, is a program director at the Collège international de Philosophie in Paris; teaches and works at the Institute for critical Theory of the Zurich University of the Arts in the field of political philosophy and theory of aesthetics.

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Teresa Iannotta

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Lesley Moore

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PUBLISHER

WILFRIED LENTZ ROTTERDAM
Stationsplein 45,
Unit C 1.140
Postbus 132,
3000 AC Rotterdam
the Netherlands
+31 10 4126459
office@wilfriedlentz.com
www.wilfriedlentz.com

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