The Aesthetics of Neutrality, or Escape from the Identical

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Teaser

The functional reduction of language to transparent communication manifests itself in the often violent cultural conflicts in contemporary geopolitics. Deploying Roland Barthes' notion of "the neutral" through analyses of three artistic projects, an "aesthetics of neutrality" is figured as a counter-strategy which escapes linguistic clarity. The aesthetics of neutrality is both a cultural strategy and a political intervention that helps forge figurations which escape identitarian logic while emphasizing troublingly productive forms of being-in-relation.

Short Biography

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Publications (selection):
S. Dasgupta/M. Rosello (eds.): *What's Queer about Europe*. New York 2014; S. Dasgupta (ed.): *Constellations of the Transnational: Modernity, Culture, Critique*. New York et al. 2007; "Detours, delays, derailments: *La Petite Jérusalem* and slow training in culture". In: C. Lindner/A. Hussey (Eds.): *Paris-Amsterdam underground. Essays on cultural resistance, subversion, and diversion*. Amsterdam 2013; S. Dasgupta: "Permanent Transiency, Tele-visual Spectacle and the Slum as Postcolonial Monument". In: *South Asia Studies,* vol. 29 (1), 2013; S. Dasgupta: "The spiral of thought in the work of Jacques Rancière". In *Theory and Event* vol. 16 (1), 2013; S. Dasgupta: "Words, Bodies, Times: Queer theory before and after itself", *Borderlands,* vol. 8(2), 2009.

The Aesthetics of Neutrality, or Escape from the Identical

"Instead of identical, let us become one."(1)

The notion of 'escape' is a loaded term. It multiplies ambivalences since every rendition of 'escape' invites a qualification. Escape, for example, is often accompanied by the accusation of 'escapism'. Or, it might imply cultural representations of escape, provoking 'materialists' to question its efficacy– escapism again thus, as if the hard realities of social and economic life are avoided by escapism in culture. The possibility of cultural escape in my argument will not escape these ambivalences. Instead, by focussing on language, and the impossibility of escaping language's denotative drive, the term 'escape' will mine the possibilities of language despite the latter's enclosing function of naming, classifying and communicating. Escape, in this sense, will exploit the traditionally-defined role of language as a medium of communication, move through this enclosing and delimiting function, with all its claims to transparency, functionality and clarity. Rather than escaping from language, escape here will be figured as the exploitation of the gap between language and its referential functionality 'within' language.

Seeking to neutralize the instrumental logic of language, I will think through strategies of neutralizing language's referential function by engaging with arguments that emphasize the possibilities of language to provoke the senses to

register presence within the temptations of referentiality. To reference something through language is to think language as a medium pointing towards what is other to language. The senses, however, are intrinsic to this deictic function of language, whatever the medium. The gap that 'escape' denotes here is the possibility of deflecting the senses within media from determining meaning, and referentiality as their only goal. In this sense, the sensory function of language, its 'aesthetic' dimension, is crucial, in my attempt to think cultural escape through language as a compromised resource. Neutralizing the instrumental logic of language by making use of the senses otherwise, the 'aesthetics of neutrality' acknowledges the compromised position of any notion of escape while exploiting this aporetic dependence on language's enabling/disabling potential.

Europe's dark history was partly clouded by precisely a logic of identification. Language, rootedness in soil, and identity have been equated in painful episodes of its history including the Nazi glorification of primordial belonging, and the nation-destroying dynamic of identity-building through displacement and genocide that split the former Yugoslavia. Thinking cultural escape from this logic of identity, however, cannot be guaranteed by simply celebrating difference. A dialectical insistence on thinking a totality where differences coexist, exist, live, survive together, rather than die collectively, I argue, can be furthered by acknowledging the presence of difference without destroying identity through identification. This seemingly paradoxical formulation is captured in the phrase: "We are not identical, we are one". The refusal of the conjunctive "but", and the comma "," in this formulation insists on an adjacency rather than a contradiction, a co-existence of presences together in a "one" without identifying each difference and demanding their subsumption under readable identities.

The first section explores the quandaries of any attempt to uproot language from its naming and identifying logic. Thinking Adorno's notion of "language without soil" with Roland Barthes' articulation of "the neutral", the second section will go on to explore strategies of aesthetic neutralization which acknowledge disturbing presences while withdrawing from the clarifying and identificatory logic of language(2). The narrative development of an 'aesthetics of neutrality' will hopefully render indeterminate the distinction between theory and aesthetic strategy.

Uprooting language, soiling the name

What is escape escaping from? And where is escape directed towards? This spatial or topographical question brings up the problem of autonomy/incorporation, the mapping of a landscape and the demarcation of territory. Further, who and what escapes? Can processes of escape undo the subject doing the escaping? And what

happens to the subjects/objects/groups who are escaping? This brings up issues of identification, disidentification and naming.

In *History and Freedom*, Theodor Adorno addresses what escaping into freedom might involve within the determinations of history. In a lecture titled "Conflict and Survival" Adorno argues "that mankind preserves itself not despite all the irrationalities and conflicts [of history], but *by virtue of them*"(3). Surviving the contradictions of history means surviving by working through the possibilities these contradictions throw up rather than through an absolute escape from history. As Max Horkheimer and Adorno had already emphasized, the drive for self-preservation through history produced its opposite, the threat of annihilation of mankind (and of nature). There is no escaping this dialectic. An escape into freedom arises from the possibilities opened up precisely by the conflicts and irrationalities of history. The dubious virtue of conflict-ridden history is that the irrational use of Reason, manifested in language for example, can be turned against it by reasoning otherwise. If, as Adorno argues "there is something hollow and fatuous about telling people led entirely by the wants and depredations of everyday life that they should develop their individuality", the question of survival must go through precisely that historical product which imprisons man–'the individual'(4). The individual names an insufferable fiction produced by a society which also possesses strategies of naming and living "a damaged life" and working beyond it(5). "The question of freedom, including inner freedom, the freedom of human beings "arose in connection with the emancipation of the bourgeoisie"(6). This emancipation was always a specific emancipation, an emancipation of a class that immediately set limits on what individual freedom is by delineating who counted as an 'individual'. Escape into freedom takes on the paradoxical burden of surviving and transforming this 'individual' for another figuration of both the relation between individual and the socius. The very language which stabilizes the relation between subject and social space by identifying 'the individual', Adorno hopes, can be uprooted from the ground of 'this' specific logic of identification.

Exploring the compromised logic of naming, Judith Butler argued that agency is always caught in a paradox: the subject that resists power and exercises agency is formed and enabled by the power that subjects it. In "Gender is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion", Butler reads Willa Cather to focus on the ambiguous, sliding and often violent dislocations that take place around gender identity and sexual desire. She argues "the name not only designates a gender uncertainty, but produces a crisis in the figuration of sexed morphology as well. [...] What happens when the name and the part produce divergent and conflicting sets of sexual expectations? To what extent do the unstable descriptions of gendered bodies and body parts produce a crisis in the referentiality of the name, the name itself as the very fiction it seeks to cover? [...] The name fails to sustain the identity of the body within the terms of cultural intelligibility"(7).

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If the ontology of the subject based on naming and equating a body with desire starts collapsing, the referential function of the name is compromised. The name emerges as a necessary fiction, appropriating and subverting language within a circumscribed scene of identification (body > desire > identity). The disruption of the scene of identification, however, cannot take place outside language, but must pass through it. Adorno's "language without soil" registers the gap between the referential possibilities of language and the diversion of the senses from established scenes of intelligibility. The acknowledgement of opacity, registered at the sensory level, yet blocked from referentiality, is one way of soiling language by uprooting it from the ground of naming(8).

The politics of the name, the enormous and often violent power of identification through naming and categorizing–these are clearly evident in today's geopolitical frame. From the politics of asylum and the naming of 'illegals', from the discourses of a 'Judeo-Christian' heritage to name what Europe was and must be, to the language of 'terror' and the wars it triggers, the politics of the name is caught in this dialectic of transparency and opacity, escape and confinement, power and resistance. Gerhard Richter argues for "the need to come to terms with the uprootedness of language, the ways in which it is not stably anchored in the native soil of self-present speech or fully transparent thought"(9). To escape this imprisonment, both the subject escaping this prison and the language it might deploy, are caught up in a process of appropriation and subversion.

These philosophical arguments found their historical counterpart in thinking about popular culture too. The people who inhabit the term 'popular' are not outside the incorporating logic of power, so the culture of the people is always caught in a dialectic of incorporation and resistance(10). This dialectic manifests itself in the relation between aesthetics and politics, the construction of aesthetic form and the crises in history that form figures forth into representation. The often derided cultural form of melodrama, for example, emphatically deploys the sensory and the affective dimensions in the construction of meaning while precisely undermining a clear relationship between the two. The "mode of the melodramatic imagination"(11) is an aesthetic construction–it is a 'mode' of approaching a subject through the 'imagination' rather than the instrumental deployment of a tool (genre) to communicate oppression (gendered subjectivity in particular) solely through reason. Further, the melodramatic imagination assumed a political expressivity by tackling in different ways the question of social power and how subjects were formed.

The themes in melodrama shifted as this mode transformed from post-Revolutionary France in theatre to 1950s Hollywood melodrama and TV soap opera in the 1980s. Firstly, they staged the different social and political issues around class, race and especially gender in confusing (complicit and resistant) ways. They traded in the existing stabilization of social identities, while

simultaneously interrogating, undermining and displacing the terms, through which names were attributed to subjects. Secondly, this dialectic of identification and disidentification disrupted the equation of the private sphere–concerning feelings, gender and sexuality–with the home, as well as the equation of affect with the absence of reason(12). Film melodrama in the 1950s, for example, rendered the psychically-damaging consequences of both capitalism, sexism and compulsory heterosexuality within a racially-divided U.S, yet these 'themes' were registered in visually confusing and elliptical ways. As Paul Willemen argued, the layered construction of the sensory apprehension of these themes demanded a depth-hermeneutic since meanings were not readily readable off the surface text(13). Why, if the price of imprisonment and the attempts at escape are the topics of such films, is opacity–rather than transparency–often central to the visual experience of melodrama? Further, the possibility of 'masquerade' in spectatorship, for example, untied affective experience from gendered identity–in other words, disidentification rather than identification explained the complexities of melodrama more effectively(14). The relation between political critique, aesthetic construction and social identity were rendered indeterminate by the visual excess of the sensory encounter with film language. This destabilization was never secured however, since often the escape route from social oppression was paved by the liberal ideology of individual responsibility(15). The desire to transparently denote social oppression and gendered identity went awry, and an 'aesthetics of neutrality' becomes productive precisely in thinking this desire and its thwarting together.

The Neutral: The Presence of the NonIdentical(16)

The neutral helps thinking how to stay faithful to a language without soil, while not giving up on language. The task of thinking and identifying the neutral is aporetic, because the term itself seeks to cancel its determination in a world, which determinedly seeks to undermine speech by converting it into identifying language. If 'the neutral' designates a desire to thwart the identificatory logic of language, then speaking clearly of the neutral is to engage in a self-cancelling movement. This (im)possibility is already discernible in the essays which predated the posthumous publication of Barthes' lectures. The task, Barthes argues is "how to recognize the world as a tissue of aporias, how to live until death by going (painfully, pleasurably) through the aporias, without undoing them by a logical, dogmatic blow of force? [...] how to live aporias as creation [...] by the practice of a text-discourse that doesn't break the aporia but floats it as speech that tangles itself in the other [...]?"(17).

Like Adorno, surviving and living unto death through the conflicts and contradictions of history is to pass through the aporias of a world that privileges the force of logic and 'the dogmatic blow'. Language's identificatory functionalization exemplifies the force of logic manifested as a dogmatic blow, a striking demand that language must communicate meaning and identity. The neutral is a deployment of language against itself, not by unilaterally rejecting and thus repeating by inversion the dogmatic force of the logic of identification, but by playing with language, uprooting it from its classifying role in the stabilization of the subject and the social. Entangling with rather than escaping from the aporias of a social order is one way of thinking the redeployment of language within a dialectic of destruction and creation. Barthes renders this entangled relation with a social order as floating rather than rending the tissue of aporias. To approach this 'other' that speech entangles itself with however, requires moving further back in Barthes' own engagement with 'the neutral' to understand from which world full of speech aporias are set forth.

"Tell me how you classify and I will tell you who you are"(18). Barthes is ventriloquizing a voice which seeks to neutralize the other. This voice is the voice issuing forth from a social order which requires 'cultural intelligibility' (Butler) by equating the mode of classifying with the identity of the one who does it. In response, Barthes speaks in his 'own' voice here: "[T]he neutrality of an order [...] becomes an esthetic problem [...] society has always given an exorbitant privilege to charged signs and crudely identified a zero degree of things with their negation: for us, there is little place and little consideration for the neutral, which is always felt morally as an impotence to be or to destroy"(19).

As readers, one could turn the demand of the first voice around, deploying the classifying logic against itself. Who demands "tell me who how you classify and I will tell you who you are"? The equation between activity (classifying) and being ('who you are') exposes not just an operation but the place from which this equation is made as a demand. The certainty of this demand (it is also a pronouncement) issues from a social order, where the classifying function of language and the essence of being are determined clearly. And language use stabilizes this determination. Disorder is cancelled, because in this social order, and within this logic of identification, language must always be charged–that is, language must produce "charged signs", easily readable signs whose meanings are immediately obvious. Language mediates clearly, because the naming and classifying activity of the one classifying is responded to by the social order, which names the identity of the classifier in turn.

A reciprocal feedback loop is set up–both classifiers produce charged signs, filling the social order without any space for neutrality and the uncharged sign. The neutral is figured as neutered, impotent, and to be destroyed. Barthes' own language seems confusing. Why destroy that, which is felt as impotent? What

paradoxical potency might reside in an impotence within a society which grants language such an exorbitant privilege? Posing the question in this way is already to begin limning another possibility of and for language, an aesthetic possibility, of 'feeling' the moral potency of a language that refuses to 'charge' its signs.

Barthes' first invocation of the neutral took place in defence of Michael Butor's book *Mobile: Study for a Representation of the United States*, which was the subject of vicious attacks in the U.S and in France. This is how Barthes characterizes Butor's accomplishment: "To present America without any 'rational' schema, as moreover to accomplish for any object whatever a schema of no account, is a very difficult thing, for every order has a meaning, even that of the absence of order, which has a name, which is disorder. To express an object without order and without disorder is a feat. Is it therefore necessary? It can be, insofar as any classification, whatever it maybe, is responsible for a meaning".

The neutral accomplishes a paradoxical feat. It communicates without having to communicate meaning. In Barthes' reading of *Mobile*, Butor produces a "schema of no account", that is, a schema which has no rationality, save the perverse and accidental one of an alphabetical ordering of entries, to describe a country. It does not produce order through an expected classification, but neither does it produce complete disorder–it classifies differently. Barthes uncouples the expressivity of an object by refusing to choose between classification and its refusal in figuring a thought of the neutral. The irrationality of this construction disobeys any culturally intelligible schema for 'describing' the country, yet this alphabetical classification clearly 'expresses' an object: America(20).

Like the discussion of melodrama earlier, the mode of expressing an object does not coincide with an established order of meaning or appropriate classificatory scheme. The potency of this impotent deployment of language derives from discharging signs, that express a presence, but carry the responsibility for meaning differently. Instead of communicating charged signs, whose charge depends precisely on cultural intelligibility, what if language simply communicates its potential to communicate?(21) Exploiting the gap between order and disorder, expression and representation, charged signs for meaning and impotent signs that neutralize expected meaning–these functions of language escape the identificatory logic of language, without escaping language itself.

An aesthetics of neutrality plays with language, moving between presence and meaning. It does not seek to overcome contradictions (Adorno's "irrationalities of history"), but stays with them and produces entanglements, tangling with the other of language, with other languages, and other scenes. Edward Said–drawing on Adorno–describes persisting with these entanglements without resolving them as attempts "to tamper irrevocably with the possibility of closure, and leave the audience more perplexed and unsettled" through the sensory production" of a "non-harmonious, non-serene tension"(22). The neutral's taking of the aporias of

life elsewhere by floating them is one way of thinking of a language without soil. Firstly, the neutral maintains and displaces aporias and contradictions, including the paradoxical reliance on language's dominating function of identification and meaning-production. Secondly, the aesthetics of the neutral floats these contradictions, entangling with them and taking them elsewhere through expanding relational constellations of other "schemas" between order and disorder, deploying names and words, images and sounds in arrangements that deflect the desire for classification. Such an aesthetics aims less at the production of charged signs and recognizable classifications than at what Jacques Rancière calls "the sensible presentation of a nonsensible truth"(23).

Cultures in Europe

A demand for the sensible presentation of a transparent truth, however, is the instrumental logic to which language is put–whether through the images sensed by heat-seeking devices that scan cargo containers, the identity papers made sense of by immigration authorities, or the night-vision-binoculars through which bodies are tracked across borders. Here cultural escape often means escape 'into' a space, from which issues forth the voice "Tell me how you classify and I will tell you who you are". The strategies of neutrality in the encounters that follow all respond to this demand in different ways. They set the aporetic condition of using language, while diverting its use in different ways, and this "floating of the aporia" touches ground in words, images and scenes which confound the link between senses and truth. They disturb this link by subtracting a transparent sensible truth from the sensory apprehension of presence. And often, they employ a relational entanglement with other presences in order to neutralize the classifying demands of the language of order.

In *We, the people of Europe*, Etienne Balibar identifies "culture" as one of three "worksites of democracy"(24). The staging of Europe relies on the construction of a demos. But the demos is not peopled by a language of belonging and identification. The people 'of' Europe are not European people in the sense of citizens, the subjects identified by democratic discourses of the state. Rather, the sensory construction of Europe can be figured as the sensory apprehension of "cultures *in* Europe"(25). Balibar inserts culture into the political discourse of citizenship, first, to then uncouple belonging from place. Being *in* Europe does not imply being a European citizen. He suggests "European citizenship should be reworked as citizenship in Europe"(26). The equation between political identification–being a citizen of a (supra-)state–and a bodily presence in a specific location, is undone. This conceptual uncoupling of sensible presence from the sensible truth of citizen-belonging figures forth a nonsensible truth–the

nonsensible truth of the presence of Others which escape the identifiable, culturally intelligible contours of a nameable identity. And this nonsensible truth is everywhere to be seen, felt and encountered 'in' Europe.

At the Polish pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 2009, Krzysztof Wodiczko's installation *Guests* staged immigrants as silhouettes that whisper and move between the arches of a cathedral-like space(27). These silhouettes, moving within and between the arches of a vaguely Palladian architectural space, are figures of presence from which substantive identificatory markers are withdrawn. Silhouettes outline, they do not fill in–no eyes, no skin colour, no markers of cultural identity. Their presences, as guests, are made audible through headphones but their whispers do not help identify them–the sensible presence through sight and sound register presences but no identity markers. The site-specific architectural space of Venice and its historically-crucial status as a nodal city-state on the silk route links the 16th century mobility of goods and people to the present Europe of movements of people across borders. "Guests" mark a status but the sensory apprehension of their presence do not further an identification of these presences–presences which recall the history of Venice's place and its present location, 'in' which cultures proliferate fleetingly, like the street vendors in Saint Mark's Square or on the numerous bridges that float over the city's canals.

The audio-visual encounter floats, in Barthes' terms, the aporetic constructions of host and guest too. Are there hosts discernible in the shadowy silhouettes, and if so, how would we identify them? Strangely, only the arched contours of the spaces, within which the silhouettes congregate, signify a sense of place–that of Venice. The sensory encounter produced by *Guests* registers the co-presence of multiple guests (the Biennale visitors are mostly guests too) in an indeterminate visual-acoustic space which links the history of cities and nation states, connects and travels along a historical memory of mixed societies without settling into, in Barthes' words, "the exorbitantly charged sign" of multiculturalism for example.

The neutral's fungibility and uncertainty, is related to the sociological question of how we understand identity.

If Wodiczko's installation leans heavily on the question of presence, while preventing sensory markers from designating identity, the next example borrows the technique of collage between image and word (which is also an image) to establish an aporetic relationality. The aporia of language (neither order nor disorder, communicating by refusing the communication of meaning) and the floating entanglement between word and image both posit and undermine identities by a strategy of relational incoherence within a collage-form. Šejla Kamerić's multi-media artwork *Bosnian Girl* (2003) turns the Srebenica massacres into a public confrontation by constructing a shared image-space of words and images which interrupt rather than align with each other(28). Articulating gender and sexual politics with a war, which ripped Europe apart from within, she sets

image and word in motion by borrowing from the language of graffiti, fashion photography, street art and photographic identification. On the single surface of a poster, she presents herself in a black and white photograph, which has the feel of a fashion photograph one would encounter in a magazine or on a billboard. Scrawled across the image are the words "No teeth...? A mustache...? Smell like shit...? BOSNIAN GIRL!"

The narrative structure of the words, read from top to bottom, follow the classic format of an identificatory procedure. The words move downwards to exclaim the identity "BOSNIAN GIRL!" "We" have identified the image by following the words, but the question "who did the classifying?", to repeat Barthes, should help us identify the identifier. Despite the bad spelling, the words themselves do not help us accomplish this act of identifying the classifier. Further, the words do not describe the image they overlay. The words assert a presence but the collage-like confrontational structure of the composite image (photograph and words) only asserts two charged signs without signifying a sensible truth–in their relation, they make no sense. Since the words clearly do not accurately caption the image, there is no co-relation, except the co-relation of presence between word and image. This gap between word and image is closed precisely by maintaining the co-presence of word and image in their separateness while relationally linking them to another caption, printed in small type at the bottom: "Graffiti written by an unknown soldier on a wall of the Potocari barracks in Srebrenica, 1994/95. Dutch troops, as part of the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia and Herzegovina 1992-95, were responsible for protecting the Srebrenica safe area". One set of words (the graffiti) now make sense by their relation to another (the caption), but the image resists both sets of words.

As posters on the street, postcards and a photograph in art galleries, Kamerić circulates a piece of graffiti written by a "peacekeeper" about those he was supposed to protect. She stages herself photographically behind this graffiti which mark the aporetic construction of European space where maintaining peace and facilitating genocide, nation-building and nation-rending occupy the same time and place. These two "girls", the absent one about whom the graffiti was scrawled, and the excessively present one of Kameric's self, portrait multiple contradictions in a collage-like staging. The collage floats this aporetic relation by populating public space with an uncomfortable presence, where image and word will refuse to intersect but only interact and confront a perplexed audience.

On the one hand *Bosnian Girl* is very forceful, disturbing and confrontational. In that sense it is not neutral, its provenance is charged. However, by asserting a presence and then dislocating the image through the words, both the graffiti and the explanatory text, the image and words produce a contradictory staging–desire in the language of advertising and consumerism, shock through the reading of the words, and a disturbing ambivalence as word and text feed off each other. No

"rational schema" helps make sense of the sensory encounter, yet the schema constructed by the image's composite relationality and spatial mobility is far from "neutral". It neutralizes meaning, but multiplies presences in a co-relation. This establishes a politics of the neutral, not in the sense of not having something to say, but precisely by saying something that does not fit into a single defined category of spectatorial experience or of readily readable meaning. Kamerić's production of the sensory encounter with presence works between order and disorder, communicating without simply identifying, displacing the communicative function of language's identificatory logic by establishing counter-intuitive relationalities.

The two aesthetic strategies of neutralization above get entangled with the historically charged terms of freedom, right to return and the nation in Yael Bartana's multimedia art project "...and Europe will be Stunned" (henceforth *Europe*)(29). Premiered at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011, Bartana was the first non-Polish artist to present in the Polish national pavilion and her appointment for this role was clearly discernible in the topic she fabricates as an occasion for thinking freedom, return and the nation. *Europe* included three films, a manifesto, posters, numerous rallies and demonstrations performed across Europe. Staging a fictive movement, the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP), Bartana transforms contradictions into productive aporias that float the desire for identification with a nation, a group and a minority, into a confrontational overlap between historical identities, words and geographies. The words (in Polish) on a banner carried during a demonstration through Venice read "Nationalism = Terrorism". The function of a nation to guarantee the security of its citizens is converted into an equalization between nationalism and terrorism, in the aftermath of the fictional assassination of the Polish visionary Sławomir Sierakowski who calls for Jews to return to Poland by expressing the desire "Instead of identical, let us become one"(30). The confrontation staged by this demand forces both the painful history of Jews 'in' Poland into public space while the word "return" deployed in the context of the Jewish diaspora outside Europe overlaps uncomfortably with the right to return of the Palestinian people denied by Israel.

The project communicates by continually redrawing the lines, which trace the borders between Poles, Jews, Poland, Israel, the diaspora, and the experience of betrayal, support, displacement and exile. Bartana constructs relationality in the language of manifestos, demonstrations, rallies, uniforms and a post-nationalist nationalism. This aporetic floating of historically charged terms within the present towards a future is captured in the words of the manifesto:

"We wish to heal our mutual trauma once and for all.
We are revivifying the early Zionist phantasmagoria.
We reach back to the past —

to the world of migration, political and geographical displacement,
to the disintegration of reality as we knew it – in order to shape a new future. ...
With one religion, we cannot listen.
With one color, we cannot see.
With one culture, we cannot feel.
Without you we can't even remember.
Join us, and Europe will be stunned!"(31)

The form of the manifesto which is to manifest clearly and unambiguously an aim in the future blurs the speaking positions of identities which are rendered indeterminate–in such a scene, who will identify whom without transforming in the act of recognition? On such a stage, can classifying help identify the one who speaks, or does not speech literally tangle with the other in the act of floating these forms of confrontational relationalities? To be truly Poland again, the manifesto claims, the Jews should come back, addressing the tangled history of occupation, genocide, collaboration and expulsion. This demand "classifies" the nation differently, and if one were to imagine Barthes' imaginary speaker listening to this classification, what being could be identified from the voice issuing this demand? The classifying voice that issues the demand for a new Polish nation claims a "we", yet this "we", speaking in the name of Poland, desires to revivify a "Zionist phantasmagoria". What could "Polish" mean if this desire is met by a classificatory and identifying logic? Further, in the present historical context (after 1967), this demand for the "return" of the Jews relates to another people, the Palestinian, whose expulsion by Zionists led to the founding of another nation, Israel. A fictive manifesto of a non-existent movement establishes a many-in-the-one demand where the "we" and the "who" are rendered indeterminate. The words "with one religion, we cannot listen, without you we cannot even remember" make sense perfectly as a description of the wounds inscribed on another territory, in the Middle East, yet they are spoken by a fictive leader in a nation in Europe which seeks to think its unity as "the one" without demanding "the identical".
The compromised form of nationalist discourse and manifestos exemplifies the aporetic relation between order and disorder that Barthes identifies with the neutral. Rather than avoid this aporia which takes disturbing form in the history of "cultures in Europe", Bartana deploys, perhaps exacerbates, the charged discourse of nationalism and neutralizes its identitarian logic by establishing forms of relationality. Bartana argues "Nationalism is an imaginative and manipulative way of creating a sense of belonging, and I think the JRMiP employs that as well. But I'm criticizing fascism even as I use elements that originate in fascist aesthetics. Probably this can be confusing for viewers, but I wish to create optimistic conditions, not oppressive conditions. The aesthetics of propaganda I find to be very powerful, direct, communicative and simple, which allows everybody to

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connect to the work on some level. At the same time those images are also registered in our collective memory, related to a very different and negative history. It's my strategy also to flip these relations"(32).

Flipping the relations between direct, simple communication and the confrontational ambivalences of negative histories, *Europe* neutralizes by constructing what Fredric Jameson calls "utopia as replication"(33)–with a difference: It replicates the language of nationalism in the form of the manifesto, but torques the lessons learnt from this negative history toward a utopic future 'which intervenes in the present'*.* I read *Europe* less as a fabulation of a utopia to be worked toward than an interruption in the present by experientially constelling non-assimilable temporalities of genocide, nation-building and forced expulsion in Europe and Israel.

All the aesthetics of neutrality employed above occupy different locations within the capacious understanding of the neutral. They do not provoke dislocation in the same way. Neither do they assert presence in the same way. Minimally, they interrogate the reductive communicative functionality of transparent language. They operate figuratively calling forth presences which entangle with others across aporetic histories and geographies. They produce interruptions, forge relationships and disclose possibilities of escape from cultural enclosure. The aesthetics of neutrality exploit the gap between knowing and not-knowing, by knowing differently through the construction of sensible presences. A dialectic of knowledge and ignorance uncouples language from identification and enables figurations of presence, whose consistency persist within an order which seeks to dissolve them categorically. The aesthetics of neutrality seek to produce an encounter, which acknowledges the presence of alterity without knowing or desiring the stabilization of an identity. This (non)knowledge furthers imagining a being-together without being-identical by identifying.

This convulsive, wrenched trajectory of the neutral is foreign to the smooth trajectory of language as the manifestation of 'intelligible' presence: it figures escape as "the incursion into freedom" by expressing "alienation itself" as "the transparent crystals that may at some future time explode human beings' dreary imprisonment in preconceived language"(34).

Endnotes

(1) Yael Bartana: *...and Europe will be stunned. The Polish trilogy*. Brugge 2012, p. 121.

(2) T.W. Adorno: "Words from Abroad". In *Notes to Literature. Volume One*. New York 1991, pp. 185-199, here p. 192. Nicholson translates "Sprache ohne Erde" as "language without earth". Gerhard Richter captures the sense of an uprooted language in a foreign soil by translating the phrase as "language without soil". See Gerhard Richter: "Introduction". In: Gerhard Richter (ed.): *Language without Soil. Adorno and Late Philosophical Modernity*. New York 2010, pp. 1-9, here p. 3. The original text is T.W. Adorno: "Wörter aus der Fremde". In: *Gesammelte Schriften* 11, pp. 216-32, here p. 224. Roland. Barthes: *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the College de France (1977-1978).* New York 2005.

(3) T.W. Adorno: *History and Freedom. Lectures (1964-1965)*. Cambridge 2006, p. 50. Emphasis added.

(4) Adorno 2006, p. 80.

(5) T.W. Adorno: *Minima Moralia. Reflections on Damaged Life.* London [13]2006.

(6) Adorno 2006, p. 193.

(7) Judith Butler: *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'.* London [2]1993, p. 97.

(8) For the quandaries of cultural intelligibility in the context of a politics of recognition, see Alexander García Düttman: *Between Cultures. Tensions in the Struggle for Recognition.* London 2000.

(9) Richter 2010, p. 3.

(10) Stuart Hall: "Notes on deconstructing 'the popular'". In: John Storey (ed.): *Cultural theory and Popular culture*. London 1998, pp. 508-18.

(11) Peter Brook: *The Melodramatic Imagination. Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of excess*. New Haven and London [2]1995.

(12) See Michael Warner: "Public and Private". In: Michael Warner/Lauren Berlant: *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York 2005, pp. 21-63.

(13) Paul Willemen: "Distanciation and Douglas Sirk". In *Screen* no. 12, vol. 2, 1972, pp. 63-67.

(14) Mary Ann Doane: "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Sepctator". In: *Screen* vol. 23. no. 3, 1982, pp. 74-87.

(15) Lauren Berlant: *The Female Complaint. The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, N.C 2008.

(16) Adorno describes the "early craving for foreign words" as the lure of "a kind of exogamy of language, which would like to escape from the sphere of what is always the same, the spell of what one is and knows anyway". See Adorno, 1991, p. 187.

(17) Barthes 2005, p. 69.

(18) Barthes: "Literature and Discontinuity". In: *Salmagundi* 18, 1972, pp. 82-93, here p. 85f.

(19) Barthes 1972, p. 86.

(20) Barthes deploys this alphabetical counter-strategy in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. New York ²2010.

(21) Rodolphe Gasché: "Saturnine Vision and the Question of Difference: Reflections on Walter Benjamin's Theory of Language". In: Rainer Nägele (ed.): *Benjamin's Ground. New Readings of Walter Benjamin.* Detroit 1988, pp. 83-104.

(22) Edward Said: *On Late Style. Music and Literature against the grain*. London 2007, p.7.

(23) Jacques Rancière: *Mute Speech. Literature, Critical theory and Politics.* New York 2011, p. 56.

(24) Etienne Balibar: *We, the people of Europe? Reflections on Transnational Citizenship (Translation/Transnation).* Princeton, N.J. 2003, p. 177.

(25) Balibar 2003, p. 177.

(26) Balibar 2003, p. 177.

(27) See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UX1aj57VkKg for a short film and interview with Wodiczko. Accessed last on March 9, 2015.

(28) See http://sejlakameric.com/works/bosnian-girl/. Accessed last on March 9, 2015.

(29) Bartana 2012.

(30) Bartana 2012, p. 121.

(31) Bartana 2012, p. 126.

(32) Yael Bartana, "Interview", http://www.art-it.asia/u/admin_ed_feature_e/ JZcXnvrH5NCs2QyuOEGd/?lang=en Accessed March 9, 2015.

(33) See Fredric Jameson: *Valences of the Dialectic*. London 2010, p. 410. For Jameson, Utopia's heuristic value discloses the limitations of the imagination *in the present* rather than positing a blueprint for the future.

(34) Adorno 1991, p. 187.

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