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Floating signifiers

What we have said makes it clear that a poet's task is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen, in other words, what is possible (*dynata*) according to probability (*eikos*) or necessity (*anankaion*). The difference between a historian and a poet is (...) that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more scientific and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts.ⁱ

Aristotle could never have imagined that his characterisation of “poetry” would be used 2400 years later to analyse or justify such diverse forms of expression (and forms entirely incomprehensible and unjustifiable for a Greek man of the 4th century B.C.) as the so-called pre-obituary and the Situationist *détournement*.ⁱⁱ Yet both of these “genres” – and basically all forms of fiction – fit perfectly into the category of the “probable”. *In the Long Run* also clearly belongs in the same category: its credibility is entirely based on verisimilitude. Perfectly constructed, the video has the exact form of the pre-obits that newspapers and TV news programmes keep ready for celebrity deaths. In this case the celebrity is Madonna, and her death in a car accident is announced during a BBC news report. Archive images, a short biography of the artist, comments and statements. Wait a minute. Wouldn't it be better to add comments and statements after the event has actually happened? The specific information about the causes of death is also not realistic, if the video really is a pre-obit. In pre-obits the event is prepared for, but all the details cannot be known in advance. So, while it would certainly be realistic if the event had actually taken place, *In the Long Run* is not realistic beforehand. Therefore, *In the Long Run* is not a pre-obit. It looks like one but it isn't. It is presented as if it was one, and the painstaking care taken over the details shows that its aim is to deceive viewers, to make them believe that Madonna really has died in a car crash. *In the Long Run*, therefore, is not a “pre-obit”, but a fake pre-obit, a guerrilla communications operation, a *détournement*.

Yet it is not that either. The final images arouse the viewer's suspicions: the strange uniforms of the soldiers around the coffin, the American flag laid over it. Odd. Then, at the end of the video, a signature. Screenplay and direction: IOCOSE. So it is not a fake after all. When the Italian collective set out to perform operations of that kind, they did so differently. In 2008 and 2009 their action *Yes, we spam* was deployed according to a precise strategy. The collective created a fake site for the Italian Democratic Party (the main centre-left opposition party in Italy, which at the time was led by Walter Veltroni) and sent spam to tens of thousands of people in the country, containing political propaganda in a style strangely similar to that of Berlusconi's right-wing party. This was a fake based on exaggeration, but “probable” because the communication strategy used by the party at the time actually borrowed various elements from the right. Through hyperbole, the action highlighted this characteristic of the party's strategy. Some did not fall for it, others did, but the operation was

revealed and claimed by IOCOSE only once the campaign was over. Not like now.

So is the category of the “probable”, presented in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, and since then at the heart of most reflections on literary and artistic creation, perhaps inappropriate or misleading when it comes to describing and assessing artistic processes and products today? Perhaps, more simply, the “probable” or “improbable” manifest themselves differently now compared to Aristotle’s day. In the Greek philosopher’s considerations (and the situation remained the same until a few decades ago) the notion of “probability” or verisimilitude referred to literary or artistic products, namely “representations” (*mimesis*), that were clearly distinct from reality, as both the artists and the viewers were well aware. And the concept of “reality” – it goes without saying, really – was different from the present day one: Aristotle’s *Poetics* examines poetic genres (in its existing version, above all epic and tragedy), and therefore texts variously based on mythology. While for the ancient Greeks gods and mythical heroes were obviously part of reality (albeit with a particular status), it is clearly not the same for us. But Aristotle’s *eikos*, the probable, always refers to “representations”, that is, texts and shows that are known and accepted to be fictitious by the audience. The advent of the mass media in the first place, and the digital image manipulation techniques in second place, have significantly changed this situation. When something is too “realistic” it ends up tricking the viewer, who believes it to be “real”, and no longer a representation. Even if the material in question is correctly presented as a representation and not as a real event. In 1938 Orson Welles’ radio adaptation of the science fiction novel *The War of the Worlds* by Herbert G. Wells, broadcast by CBS, was presented as one of a series of radio dramas. In spite of this its realistic feel ended up deceiving many listeners (who hadn’t heard the start of the programme), even creating a few scenes of panicⁱⁱⁱ. This radio programme can indeed be classed as one of the first examples (albeit not entirely intentional) of “guerrilla communications”, namely simulations, fakes, presented in an ambiguous way, as used by many counterculture movements from the 1960s onwards^{iv}.

So how can we describe the situation created by the proliferation of information, based above all on images, images that come from multiple, incontrollable sources but are processed in such a way that makes them all, to some extent, “probable”? Images that may or may not correspond to the other sources (relational, visual, auditory) of our experience? Images that immediately appear convincing or persuasive even when they do not effectively correspond to physical reality, and that have hugely extended the category of the “possible” (*dynatos*, in Aristotle’s text, though “possible” is only one of the meanings of this word, which also corresponds to “powerful” and “authoritative”)? Paradoxical though it might seem, I think we need to talk about *the gap between the imaginary and images*, if not the actual destruction of the imaginary by means of images. Part of philosophy, from Nietzsche onwards, has attempted to acknowledge the situation in which the expansion of sources and experience and the demise of “intrinsic” (namely social, shared) criteria to make sense of the world renders the traditional categories of subjectivity impossible, and to seek a new description of the conditions of intelligibility of human experience. The frantic, labyrinthine, fitful “search for meaning” that characterised the literature and visual arts of the twentieth century is in my view linked to this situation, which is further radicalised (but undoubtedly not created) by the advent of digital culture. *In the Long Run*, together with many other expressions of contemporary art (technological or not, “media” or not, it is of little importance) seems to me to be another piece of this quest. Are there any images in art, any situations in literature, any concepts in philosophy that can help us, if not to interpret, at least to arrive at a better understanding of the situation?

I propose one, from Lewis Carroll, as it has been interpreted and reconstructed by

Gilles Deleuze. In chapter V of *Through the Looking-Glass*, the sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice finds herself in a curious shop:

Rub [her eyes] as she could, she could make nothing more of it: she was in a little dark shop, leaning with her elbows on the counter, and opposite to her was an old Sheep, sitting in an arm-chair knitting, and every now and then leaving off to look at her through a great pair of spectacles.

(...)

The shop seemed to be full of all manner of curious things—but the oddest part of it all was, that whenever she looked hard at any shelf, to make out exactly what it had on it, that particular shelf was always quite empty: though the others round it were crowded as full as they could hold.

'Things flow about so here!' she said at last in a plaintive tone, after she had spent a minute or so in vainly pursuing a large bright thing, that looked sometimes like a doll and sometimes like a work-box, and was always in the shelf next above the one she was looking at. 'And this one is the most provoking of all—but I'll tell you what—' she added, as a sudden thought struck her, 'I'll follow it up to the very top shelf of all. It'll puzzle it to go through the ceiling, I expect!'

But even this plan failed: the 'thing' went through the ceiling as quietly as possible, as if it were quite used to it.^v

There is therefore something, an object, described as “large and bright”, that moves from one shelf to another, that does not have a set place, and thus threatens the calm, tidy correspondence between objects and their collocation. Deleuze relates this excerpt of Carroll to Jacques Lacan's famous analysis of the story “The Purloined Letter” by Edgar Allan Poe^{vi}, to the elaborate linguistic rules that Raymond Roussel uses to write his bizarre and mysterious books^{vii}, and to other literary examples to illustrate his conception of the “simultaneous series” that represent *signifiers* and *signifieds* in our knowledge of the world: “the terms of each series are in perpetual relative displacement in relation to those of the other (...). There is an essential lack of correspondence. This shift or displacement is not a disguise covering up or hiding the resemblances of series through the introduction of secondary variations in them. This relative displacement is, on the contrary, the primary variation without which neither series would open up onto the other. Without it, the series would not constitute themselves through this doubling up (...) One of the two series – the one determined as signifying, to be precise, presents an excess over the other. *For there is always a blurred excess of signifier.*”^{viii} In other words, the indeterminate nature of our knowledge of the world is not a transitory condition, one which can be overcome when our knowledge increases. On the contrary, the excess of signifier over signified is a structural, permanent condition, a necessary consequence of the redundancy of language over the world, destined to emerge at every new step forward in knowledge. Naturally there is also redundancy, an excess of the world over language, and this is what drives language to create whole series of new signifiers, which, however, due to the combinatorial and creative character of language itself, constantly generate new excesses of signifier, in an ongoing and unstoppable circular process. The first to formulate this notion of “excess of signifier” or “floating signifier” was Lévi-Strauss in 1950, with regard to the ambiguous notion of “*mana*” in oral societies. In his explanation the French anthropologist related this concept to the contradiction between the discontinuity of linguistic processes and the continuity of cognitive processes:

But everywhere else, and still constantly in our societies (and no doubt for a long time to come), a fundamental situation perseveres which arises out of the human condition:

namely, that man has from the start had at his disposition a signifier-totality which he is at a loss to know how to allocate to a signified, given as such, but no less unknown for being given. There is always a non-equivalence or 'inadequation' between the two, a non-fit and overspill which divine understanding alone can soak up; this generates a signifier-surfeit relative to the signifieds to which it can be fitted. So, in man's effort to understand the world, he always disposes of a surplus of signification (which he shares out among things in accordance with the laws of the symbolic thinking which it is the task of ethnologists and linguists to study). That distribution of a supplementary ration – if I can express myself thus – is absolutely necessary to ensure that, in total, the available signifier and the mapped-out signified may remain in the relationship of complementarity which is the very condition of the exercise of symbolic thinking.

I believe that notions of the *mana* type, however diverse they may be, and viewed in terms of their most general function (which, as we have seen, has not vanished from our mentality and our form of society) represent nothing more or less than that floating signifier which is the disability of all finite thought (but also the surety of all art, all poetry, every mythic and aesthetic invention), even though scientific knowledge is capable, if not of staunching it, at least of controlling it partially.^{ix}

Like many creations of contemporary art, *In the Long Run* can therefore be considered an example of a "floating signifier": an indeterminate signifier waiting for a signified that might never come, or that, once established, might move it to another of the shelves in the sheep's shop described by Lewis Carroll. However, to correct the slightly vexatious (and perhaps affected) character of Lévi-Strauss' universalistic formulation of this concept, we cannot help but observing that the "floating signifiers" connected to *mana* in societies without writing had an urgent, exceptional nature, not only signalling an imbalance between knowledge and language, but also and above all between man and the world. They were the cause of illness, and this was why they manifested themselves as little objects (stones, bones) that the shaman would crunch in his teeth till his gums bled, then present to the onlookers as if extracted from the sick person's body. In our capitalist and late-capitalist societies, on the other hand, as a consequence of the hypertrophy of media and information, floating signifiers are increasingly present, proliferating all around us, on every screen, from computers to mobile phones. And this is why, while on one hand today it is so "easy" to produce them, it is ever more difficult for contemporary artists to present them and bring them to the attention of the public.

i **Note**

- Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451 a 35 – b 8.
- ii “*Détournement*: used as an abbreviation for the formula: *détournement* of prefabricated aesthetic elements. The integration of past or present artistic production into a superior environmental construction. In this sense, there cannot be situationist painting, or music, but a situationist use of these media. In a more primitive sense, *détournement* from within old cultural spheres is a form of propaganda, which lays witness to the depletion and waning importance of these spheres.” (*Situationist International* n. 1, June 1958, at <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline//si/is1.html>). See also: *Situationist International* n. 3, December 1959.
- iii The effect of the broadcast was exaggerated by the media and skilfully exploited by Orson Welles himself for promotional purposes. Recent studies have however redimensioned the scope of the event. See Robert E. Bartholomew, *Little Green Men, Meowing Nuns and Head-Hunting Panics: A Study of Mass Psychogenic Illness and Social Delusions*, McFarland, Jefferson 2001, ch. 14 “The Martian Invasion Panic”, pp. 217-224.
- iv *Handbuch der Kommunikationsguerrilla. Jetzt helfe ich mir selbst*, Verlag Libertäre Assoziation (Hamburg), Schwarze Risse (Berlin), Rote Strasse (Göttingen), 1997.
- v Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* [1871], <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12/12-h/12-h.htm#2HCH0005> Ch. V, “Wool and Water”, p. 39.
- vi Jacques Lacan, “Le Séminaire sur ‘La Lettre Volée’”, in *Ecrits*, Seuil, Paris 1966.
- vii Raymond Roussel, *Comment j’ai écrit certains des mes livres*, Editions Jean-Jacques Pauvert, Paris 1935.
- viii Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris 1969 (English trans. by Mark Lester, *The Logic of Sense*, Columbia University Press, New York 1990, pp. 39-40) (the italics are mine, A.C.).
- ix Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss*, in M. Mauss, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1950 (English trans. by Felicity Baker, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss*, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., London 1987, pp. 62-63).