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Rag bodies, empty subjects

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ABSTRACT: It is evident that disciplinary societies have contributed a great deal to the invisibility of our bodies, but the fact remains that this 'disembodiment' can also be, to a greater or lesser extent, the visible symptom of a void in the subject in the contemporary world. The relation of Tony Oursler's work with the Dissociative Identity Disorder allows to extend this clinical pathology to a reflection on the vacuity of subjects in a world haunted by the images we all know, performative images that offer multiple identities with which to 'fill' that gap. The performativity of the images in the construction of 'alternate' subjectivities is, in this case, very obvious, and the specular relation of the subjects with the mass-media have consequences that have not escaped the analysis of important thinkers.

KEYWORDS: Tony Oursler, void subject, multiplicity of identities, construction of subjectivity, logics of delyrium.

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Fig. 1- Jerry Cooke, *Woman in a Straitjacket*, 1946.

Retrieved from the archives of the forties, this woman appears before our eyes as a battered doll. Her body, almost completely missing under a straitjacket, is a mere rag. Sitting alone, we cannot see her face because she does not look at us. Nothing to say. Only her legs, with unhealed wounds, can make us suspect her little and insignificant story.

Between 1942 and 1947, an important number of conscientious objectors in the United States replaced their military service during the Second World War with services in the crammed and underfunded American psychiatric hospitals. Naturally, that was taken as a punishment [1]. Many of these 'volunteers' took photographs, thanks to which the situation of the hospitals gradually became known through newspapers and publications. Based at the Byberry asylum, in Philadelphia, objectors started to get organized and managed to publish a bulletin at national level. Knowledgeable about

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the whole affair, the reporter Albert Q. Maisel offered an article to Life Magazine that eventually came out on May 6, 1946, with photographs by Jerry Cooke and Charles Lord. Curiously enough, he seems to be the same Charles Lord who had been infected with hepatitis when he was used for experiments on jaundice, and who had left us some photographs where the internment rules for mad people in spaces 'of difference' could have rendered Foucault himself speechless. It seems that things had not improved so much since the same subject caught Goya's interest. Many images of rag bodies have surrounded us since then.

Fig. 2- Charles Lord, *Block of the Byberry Mental Hospital in Philadelphia*, 1946.

Fig. 3- Francisco de Goya, *The yard of a Madhouse*, Medows Museum, Dallas.

And one of these images is that of our madwoman, taken by Jerry Cooke. Because she is obviously mad. And, in addition, she wears a straitjacket, an unequivocal symptom that she may be dangerous. Accustomed as we are to images repeated ad nauseam (in films but also, for example, in any of the tunnels of terror with which the amusement parks in our cities try to entertain us) of furious and menacing lunatics in straitjackets, we soon realize that we have no fear for this woman. Once again, her image does not match the stereotype. And we already know, because Homi Bhabha (2002: 91 sqq) has explained very well how unclear a stereotype can be.

The function of a stereotype, says Bhabha, is to create fixations on the other that will clearly mark the differences. The stereotype is a form of knowledge and identification that oscillates between what 'is always in its place', already known (it is what it is: a mad person), and something that has to be anxiously repeated. That is, that far from being a fixed category and a complete representation of the Other, it only becomes consolidated because it is compulsively repeated. Above all, this will betray a constant insecurity in the relation to an Other who needs a confirmation, a ratification necessary to certify the difference on each occasion. In other words, more than proving a certitude, it gives away an uncertainty that must constantly be overcome; this is a neurosis fed, moreover, by the very nature of the stereotype, that is always ambivalent. All Foucault's *History of Madness* (1967) reflects, among many other things, on this complicated relation with the classified stereotype (as in a garden, he says) of the insane.

And here comes into play the plague of fantasy that Žižek speaks of (2011/1997), because the real locus of fantasy on

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which any ideological construction is founded (e.g., that of the stereotype) are not the convictions and internal desires that lie in the subject's depths, but the *purely material conviction* of the external ideological ritual. We can think that our deepest fears are exteriorized in any tunnel of terror, but it is without question that the fear of alterity personified in the mad person, ideologically constructed and carefully spread in images, cannot stay out of the scene in all this affair. The spectator's gaze in the tunnel has perfectly assumed the recounted history of madness (of which Foucault so aptly elaborates the archaeology) and of all the representations derived from it. Because the amusement tunnel is no more than that: a succession of stereotypes. The truth is that we prefer to conceive society (and ourselves) as an organic whole that is kept together by more or less permanent bonds, but in reality, in the most insignificant situations, the plague of these fantasies shines an unexpected light. Because Žižek is right: "The relationship between fantasy and the horror of the Real it conceals is much more ambiguous than it may seem: fantasy conceals this horror, yet at the same time it creates what it purports to conceal" (Žižek, 1997: 7).

Fig. 4- Farocki, *Prison Images*, 2000.

Fig. 5- Farocki, *Prison Images*, 2000.

It is not easy to get along with rag bodies, but nevertheless a whole imaginary has shaped us as such. Farocki dealt with this topic in his *Prison Images* of 2000. Be it prisoners or drug abusers in rehabilitation, what we have before us are docile bodies, controlled bodies. When we look at these images, we understand Žižek's accuracy in claiming that fantasy (based on an external ideological ritual) is capable of shedding light on what it conceals. All these images, that we have taken almost unconsciously for granted and that have no doubt formed a recognizable fantasy of our body, do not cease to disturb us.

However, these regulated bodies may not be more than the tip of the iceberg. Nor is it easy to maintain a specular relationship with the stereotype of the mad Other, even though it is a more permeable experience than it seems. And, nevertheless, it is almost automatic to have that same relationship with the multiple stereotyped identities that surround us. It is true that disciplinary societies have contributed a great deal to the inexistence of our bodies, but it is equally true that that 'disembodiment' can also be the consequence of a vacuity of the subject in a world harassed by the images we all know, images that offer multiple identities with which to 'fill' that gap. Tony Oursler speaks of nothing else in each of his pieces. In the end, in the same film by Farocki, when the camera stops on the face of an individual, it can only recognize that its essence is, literally, 'undetermined'.

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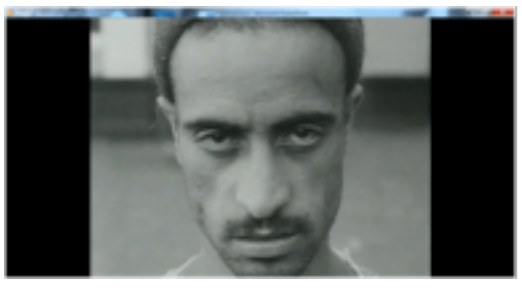

Fig. 7- Farocki, *Prison Images*, 2000.

Žižek (2011: 157) tells us there are four variants of the relation between the self and 'its' body that break the legal-moral rule of 'one person, one body'. Bearing in mind the idea we are considering about the performativity of images, and thinking of the great amount of images we are exposed to by the mass media, only one of these variants interest us for the moment: the possibility, close to the Dissociative Identity Disorder, of many people existing within one only body, without a clear hierarchy among the diversity of persons, without One Person who can guarantee the unity of the subject; that is, an 'undetermined' person. This issue could bring us immediately to think of the piece Judy that Tony Oursler showed for the first time at the Salzburger Kunstverein in 1994, in which he worked with the actress Tracy Leopold. The installation consisted of a set of objects placed along a diagonal line that crossed the gallery space. All the items represented the different personalities that Judy had developed as defence systems against a domestic setting charged with violence.

Fig. 8- Tony Oursler, *Judy*, 1994.

The object at the far back is *Horrerotic Doll*, a figure of circa fifteen inches, in a continuous scream of terror. The next thing is a big heap of clothes. A yellow flower curtain separates the next section, where a bunch of artificial flowers is tied to a tripod. On the flowers is projected the contemptuous face of The Boss, the alter who assumes a personality that relentlessly issues orders and threats. It is the representation of the abusing one, the inevitable re-encounter with the trauma that caused the dissociation. Next, under an uplifted sofa, lies Fuck You, another of Judy's identities, paralyzed under the sofa. Looking the spectator in the eye, she sends him out and asks not to watch, in a stream of obscenities. She also lacks a body: she is only a head joined to a rag. The forwardmost element is a remote control hidden inside the body of a figure outside the gallery. Spectators are invited to sit and manipulate the hidden camera.

As mentioned, the piece deals with the Dissociative Identity Disorder characterized, according to the diagnostic manual

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of the American Psychological Association DSM IV-TR, by the presence of two or more identities, each of them with its own pattern and even different names. On many occasions, Oursler has declared his fascination with the attempts to codify the human mind as, for instance, the MMPI (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory), a test used to identify personality structure and detect psychopathology. In fact, critics and the artist himself in some interviews (Janus, 1998), have linked his work with personality disorders such as the dissociative identity disorder. In *Judy*, Oursler quotes the words of a 'multiple' who, in a lucid appraisal of her condition, says: "I only experience isolation when I float above the room looking down under me where invaders torture the bodies of the other girls. I have created this in order to survive" (Kemp & Wallace, 2000: 204-205). In short, it is a defensive fragmentation of the self. As Oursler himself points out: "The multiple personality disorder [2] generally occurs in victims of the most extreme cases of sexual, violent, and / or psychological trauma. A defence is developed to protect the core self which creates persons to accept aspects of the unbearable torture inflicted upon them. Dissociation is the unconscious defence mechanism in which a group of mental activities split[s] off from the main stream-of-consciousness and function[s] as a separate unit" [3].

However, this is not the issue that may interest us the most here; not even is it the line in which Oursler continued to work on, because his problem is not limited only to a critical 'representation' of clinical illness. His intention goes a bit beyond: he tries to relate a pathology, classified as such, with all that affects the individual in a culture of solitude and mass in-communication. It is therefore inevitable to perceive in his work a keen sensitivity towards the impact of the new mass conditions, created by the tireless influence of mass media, oversaturated with images (always the same images), on the nooks of the individual's psychic intimacy. This does interest us here, because all these voices and these images influence subjects, shaping them.

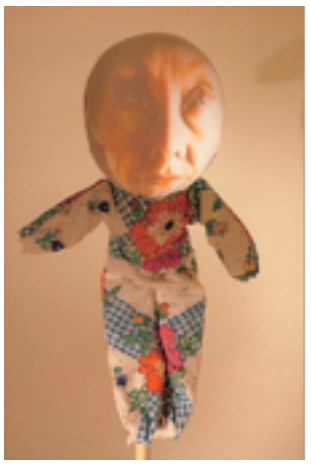

Fig. 9- Tony Oursler, *Hysterical*, 1993.

Oursler's best known pieces of the nineties have a more sculptural character and are based on the disturbing presence of dolls endowed with speaking heads, by means of videos of faces that speak and express themselves, then projected on a head-shape that is juxtaposed to a body made of rags only. As if they were in a straitjacket, the bodies are deprived of movement, although the faces keep on spitting out their monologues. Monologues that are, by the way, chiefly performed in those years by actress Tracy Leopold, and that were written following a process where radio and television were tuned in different stations and with the same volume, zapping, that is, surfing the waves and mixing themes, matters, emotions... A disorder is thus created in the discourse, that could easily be considered delusional and that faithfully reflects a state of permanent dissociation and dispersion.

In *The logics of delusion*, Remo Bodei (2007) is precisely interested in this topic. With the conviction that rationalism has pursued a model of unfeasible rigor for the human world and that, not finding it, it has left some extended and decisive

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areas of individual and social existence on the wayside of ignorance, leaving to the political and religious powers the task of establishing their regimes, Bodei continues in this essay a research program that started with the study of passions and of other phenomena where rationality does not seem to enjoy citizen rights [4]. The thinker is now committed to finding “logics within the delusion” which are obviously not recognized willingly, but about which it is possible to think, if one accepts that the incompatibility of delusion with rationality only makes sense from the point of view of a restricted, defensive and self-referential rational thought. A “hospitable and expansive reason”, he says, “more humble, but not less rigorous”, could recognize the “cores of truth”, “the contradictions and paradoxes of delusion, but not to be fascinated, caught and held by it” (Bodei, 2007: X). Despite all, these dolls’ delusion is, somehow, induced. We could think that it is even collective, and then it is no longer so clear that a humbler reason can recognize the cores of truth in the discourse. We believe, rather, that this hospitable reason needs to start thinking about the way in which a discourse has been shaped that may not escape its control as much as Remo Bodei would have wished.

Let us accept that delusion is configured as a failed attempt to translate to oneself in the present and let us take another look at Tony Oursler’s dolls. If we think of *Judy*, we can see how an unelaborated and traumatic past acts as a trigger of deeper psychical charges that bring to the surface turmoils of various remains of what has ceased to be. Up to this point, delusion and pathological trauma are clearly linked. But if we look at the other speaking dolls, things do not seem so simple.

Fig. 10- Tony Oursler, *Lets,s Switch*, 1996

We have already said that his monologues borrow from other fragmentary discourses, ‘stolen’ from mass media that function, in today’s world, in an almost specular manner, because they put before the defenceless spectators all the possible and desirable models and personalities. We know that a specular relation is always a fantasised relation (that is what *Alice in Wonderland* was written for), and that fantasy has, as a constituent trait, a radical intersubjectivity. Let us follow for a while the Lacan on which Žižek is based, the Lacan who was concentrated on the object that ‘is’ the subject, and who accepted a miminum of phantasmatic consistency for the being of the subject (that which ‘in me is something more than me’), which allowed him to consider himself as ‘worthy of the desire of the Other’, because then the question that is in the origin of desire, as Žižek pointed out (2011: 13), is not directly “What do I want?”, but “What do others want from me? What do they see in me? What am I for the others?”. Therefore, I cannot be ‘I in I’ because I am an ‘I in the Others’. The example Žižek offers (2011: 15) on anti-semitism is very clear and can be applied without any problems to our insane: the paranoia that makes us fear the fools reveals in exemplary fashion the radically intersubjective character of fantasy. The traditional theory of ‘projection’, according to which a ‘normal’ being ‘projects’ on the figure of the insane what he condemns in himself, does not seem satisfactory. The figure of the ‘conceptual fool’ cannot be reduced to

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the exteriorisation of my ‘inner conflict’, which would be phantasmatic. On the contrary, it bears witness to my original decentring, this is, of the fact that I take part in a dull network which logic and significance escape my control. Under these premises, Homi Bhabha’s concept of stereotype can be qualified. Works such as We *Have no Free Will* by Tony Oursler speak of nothing else.

Fig. 11- Tony Ourlser, *We have no Free Will,* 1995.

In advertisements, films, *reality shows*, even in the news broadcasts, there appear people who are constantly identical to themselves and with whom it is more than easy to ‘identify’. Here we use the concept of ‘identity’ as understood by José Luis Pardo (1996). To have an identity is *to be identical to oneself*, that is, to present ourselves to ourselves with no weaknesses or flaws, without fears and tremblings, not bowing before the truth of our life, our mortality. And also identical to the others, to the models of the media, stuck to them by a screen/mirror capable of creating more imposing relations than any political discourse. Finally, with no intimacy, if by intimacy we understand – still thinking along with José Luis Pardo – an inability to identify with anything or anyone and not be identified by anything or by anyone. At this point, we could even think that we are identical to ourselves and to our media models because they have constructed us as such, under the need of a disguise that would allow us to maintain a certain illusion of transcendence, something like ‘I am equal to me precisely because I am not different from my equals’.

Fig. 12- Tony Oursler, *Keep Going*, 1995.

Intimacy thus remains cornered and, in some way, full. In theory, this intimacy could only be felt from language, not from the words, but from what language does not say but allows to sense. And let us go back to Oursler’s insane. Is intimacy what leaks out in the inconsistencies of their learned discourse? If intimacy is what is being sensed there, then it only remains to affirm that we superimpose one identity on another (all of them learned, all construed) precisely in order not to listen to our core wound… or our void.

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Then, what persuades us in the delusion? At times, as in *Judy*, the authority of other voices, accusing and unpleasant, that superimpose on the trauma. And then we speak of pathology. But on occasions, as in the other speaking dolls, those voices that, in a Freudian fashion, follow the path of the ego ideal, add to the legacy of the double identification with the parents many other perceptions of people, real or imaginary, who have influenced and are influencing the subject; indeed, in all the subjects, because they are the same voices for everyone.

Nevertheless, Žižek (1997) is right again: one must avoid the temptation to hastily 'deconstruct' the border that separates the 'normal' from the 'pathological'. The difference between the subject suffering a dissociative identity disorder and the subject who is exposed to the media does not consist in the presence, in the second case, of a core self firmly grounded in 'true reality'. The 'multiple' [5] is, rather, all too firmly anchored to 'true reality': what is lacking is, in a sense, the void that explains the constitutive dimension of subjectivity. I will explain. The multiple egos that I internalize from the screens are 'what I want them to be', the way I would like to see myself, the more or less complete representation of my ego ideal, however changing it may be. They are therefore like the layers of an onion: there is nothing in the centre and the subject is, precisely, that 'nothingness'. Let us remember that Lacan's 'decentred subject' is not only a multiplicity of egos or of partial centres. Lacan's 'decentring' is the void of the subject in respect to its content (the ego, the bundle of imaginary and symbolic identifications). The split is, therefore, between the gap in the subject and the 'phantasmatic character' that is the 'matter of the ego'. Or restoring, as Žižek does, to a topological language: the split in the subject is not the split between one ego and another, between two contents, but the split between something and nothing. In other words, the process itself of changing between multiple identifications presupposes something like a blank band that allows to pass from one uninhabited identity to another. And that blank void is the subject itself. In it roam free a multiplicity of agents in competition, a plurality of self-images without a global centre of coordination. And now yes, we all are everyone. But there is something worse: being aware of our multitude of changing identities, of masks without a 'real' persona behind them, what is left before us are the violence and the arbitrariness immanent to the ideological mechanism of the production of the ego.

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Footnotes

[1] For more information on this subject, the book can be consulted (Sareyan, 1994).

[2] Already in 1994, in the first edition of the DSM IV, the name of this disorder was changed to Dissociative Identity Disorder. It is possible that Oursler was unaware of this.

[3] Quoted by Zaya, 1996, p. 13. In English, see http://tonyoursler.com/individual_work_slideshow.php?navItem=work&workId=120&startDateStr=Mar.%201.

[4] In this sense, this essay can be consulted: Bodei, R. (1991) Geometria delle passioni. Paura, speranza e felicità: filosofia e uso político (Geometry of passions. Fear, hope and happiness: philosophy and political usage), Milan, Feltrinelli.

[5] The person suffering from the Multiple Personality Disorder (obsolete term).

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