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Radical practice? Writing 'beyond' system

Abstract:

Might writing be at once the context or system that restricts and forms us but also, in some instances, the means to evade or transform this very system?

The question posed in the call for papers for this conference outlines the very grounds upon which the writing subject may be seen as negotiating questions posed by artistic practice and creative research. Here these are formulated around 'encounters' between seemingly autonomous or pre-determined realms: between subjects and objects, between knowing and being, between aesthetic systems however defined. This view accepts the fragmentary definitional world of capitalist social relations. What I suggest is that the kind of subject that is at stake in creative practice and research has much in common with a kind of radical subjectivity. What I suggest is that writing is a practice that can be seen through the lens of Karl Marx's notion of *purposeful activity*. Writing, in other words, is a critical/creative practice founding a radical view of subjectivity that attempts to overcome the dualism of subject and object via the category of human practice. Against an individual expressivist paradigm, or modes of thought that envision writing (and language) objectively, this might be called *radical practice* in that writing is a critical/creative practice: critical in that it is against what exists, and creative in that it seeks to move beyond it.

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Might writing be at once the context or system that restricts and forms us but also, in some instances, the means to evade or transform this very system?

The question posed in the call for papers for this conference outlines the very grounds upon which the writing subject may be seen as negotiating questions posed by artistic practice and creative research. These are the tensions between system and agency, between structure and transcendence, between autonomy and its restraint. Here the grounds of debate are formulated around ‘encounters’ between seemingly autonomous or predetermined realms: between subjects and objects, between knowing and being, between aesthetic systems however defined. This view accepts the fragmentary definitional world of capitalist social relations.

Since structuralism and post-structuralism have taught us to be sceptical of the category of subjectivity (seeing it as a fiction against the Kantian transcendental subject), struggles have emerged around how artistic practices that seem self-evidently engaged with *selfhood* can be recalibrated to include this view of subjectivity; or how a sense of agency might be achieved in the face of the overwhelming structures that construct and form our identities and our senses of self. That is, these struggles can be characterised as in some ways engaged with the return of the subject in the face of moves that have tried to evacuate or dissolve subjectivity, or reduce it to an element in a structure.

What I suggest is that the kind of subject that is at stake in creative practice and research has much in common with a kind of radical subjectivity. This is a subjectivity that not only moves beyond its philosophical category but also attempts to unite the divide of object and subject through what Karl Marx calls *purposeful activity*. Writing, in other words, is a critical/creative practice founding a radical view of subjectivity that attempts to overcome the dualism of subject and object via the category of human practice. Against an individual expressivist paradigm, or modes of thought that envision writing (and language) objectively, this might be called *radical practice* in that writing is a critical/creative practice: critical in that it is against what exists, and creative in that it seeks to move beyond it.

The system of language and the subject

In his essay ‘Cybernetics and Ghosts’, Italo Calvino suggests that literature is somehow a ‘combinatorial game’. ‘Literature as I knew it,’ he says, ‘was a constant series of attempts to make one word stay put after another by following certain definite rules...’ (Calvino 1989, 15). In effect, Calvino is asking us to see the writer as a ‘machine’, albeit a machine that ‘knows how it works’ because it uses a system, because language itself is a system, or rather was coming to be seen as a system: a system of rules and regulations, of styles and constructions, of referents and signifiers. After all, isn’t that what a writer is? Doesn’t a writer merely manipulate a system, combine elements. Is this what language is? And is that all a writer is – a manipulator of a system? Could a machine do what we do? To be fair to Calvino, he does go on in this essay to suggest that something else is involved in writing, something he calls ‘myth’ is involved. But I want to move beyond this ahistorical vision here.

To see writing and language as a somehow separate observable sphere from ‘reality’ is ably charted by Raymond Williams in *Marxism and Literature*. Here language ‘came to be seen as a fixed, objective, and in these senses “given” system, which had theoretical and practical priority over what were described as “utterances” (later as “performance”)’ (Williams 1977, 27). The reification of language finds its major theoretical expression in Saussurean linguistics with its focus on individual speech acts whose net effect, Williams argues, is to remove the focus on the social possibilities and potential of language as constitutive. This fragmentation and abstraction of language *as a system* reinforces the structuralist view of the uncertainty of the referential, particularly in relation to subjectivity.

Post-structuralists push the uncertainty of the referential to its ultimate conclusion. For example, in Paul de Man’s ‘Autobiography as De-Facement’, rather than trying to base a definition of biography and fiction on its referential status, de Man problematises that status by suggesting that the assumption of referentiality as a consequence of a life can be reversed – that the idea of ‘a life’ may just be a product of the literary act of autobiography (de Man 1979, 920; Marcus 1994, 202).

De Man suggests that the particular use of language provides the ‘illusion of reference’, which makes it ‘something more akin to a fiction, which then, however, in its own turn, acquires a degree of referential productivity’ (de Man 1979, 920–921). It is this ‘specularity’ (the mirroring relationship between writing and written selves, present and past consciousnesses) that produces an effect of truth that has an undecidable relationship to fictional discourse:

Autobiography...[is] a figure of reading or of understanding that occurs, to some degree in all texts. The autobiographical moment happens as an alignment between the two subjects involved in the process of reading in which they determine each other by mutual reflexive substitution (de Man 1979, 921).

The radical destabilisation of subjectivity posed by post-/structuralism has recalibrated the grounds upon which notions of subjectivity stand. As Simone Stirner suggests:

In a discourse that casts doubt on the credulity of metanarratives, that questions the hermeneutics of meaning, the rational, self-contained subject of modernism has had a hard time indeed (Stirner 2010, 2).¹

But this has done little to stem the tide of writing that may be seen as self-referential. Michael Sheringham notes the decline of the novel in the 1980s and ’90s in favour of ‘hybrid works exploiting the documentary impulse in such modes as autobiography, biography, the journal, historical writing, travel writing, and the essay’ (Sheringham 2009, 3). ‘[T]he most salient feature of this development’ according to Johnnie Gratton ‘has been the attempt to pursue a restored sense of the various dimensions of human agency not against but in light of [structuralism’s] preceding critique of the subject...’ (Gratton 2000, 11).

This ‘return of the subject’ is not a return to the Cartesian ego, or the Kantian transcendental subject, but a fragile subjectivity that acknowledges the radical questioning of the category by post-/structuralism and postmodernity, while all the

time seeking a new kind of construction of the subject via forms of concentration on identity or agency. What constructed notions of identity seek to overcome, ameliorate or acknowledge is the dissolved, divided, fragmented subject of structuralism. The subject returns from its post-structuralist attack, but it is a subject that has been reconceptualised and opened to construction and provisionality.

Recently, this has concentrated on forms of narrativity and performativity as attempts to reinstate agency in the face of the overwhelming structures that construct and form identities and senses of self. That is, while post-structuralism is happy to suggest the self is a self-deception or a construction, both narrativity (in constructing the self – or selves – as story) and performativity (in seeing identity as performance) are attempts to reclaim some sense of agency in that construction. Identity, now open to multiplicity and contingency, concentrates on a discursivity overdetermined by its position in relation to social and historical forces.

However, there are problems with both of these approaches that I think arise from the Saussurian moment of emphasising a systemic approach to language and reifying language as an ‘object’ of study. The first of these is an idealised individualism. Butlerian performativity, for example, is mired in an extrapolation from the linguistic ‘utterance’ of the individual (Bolt 2008). Further, the idea of the performance rests on individual intention, with performativity becoming an abstraction grounded outside itself. Under what conditions do we perform our identities and under what conditions are we motivated to transgress them? What allows the self to perform, or to see the self as performative?

Narrativity also suffers from this individualist and, in some forms, even bio-essentialist focus:

The gift of narrative is so pervasive and universal that there are those who strongly suggest that narrative is a ‘deep structure’, a human capacity genetically hard-wired into our minds in the same way as our capacity for grammar... (Porter Abbott 2008, 3).

More disturbing is Christian Salmon’s identification of the ‘narrative turn’ in recent political and managerial discourse. Salmon suggests three elements underlying capitalist rhetoric from the 1990s onwards: a constant injunction to change; emotional management as part of a general process of manipulation and commodification that constructs capitalism’s new subject; and an emphasis on the role of language, especially the role of stories, in management of those emotions (Salmon 2010, 62–3). Salmon goes on to suggest:

The chaos of fragmented knowledge facilitated the ‘narrative turn’ in political communications and the advent of a new era. This is democracy’s performative age, and its figureheads are no longer the advisers to the prince... but the prophets, the gurus, and the parties; spin doctors and their ability to tell stories and to mystify, has made them drunk. Storytelling is their *modus operandi* because it is the only thing that can get a hold on these dispersed interests and discourses. Never before has there been such a trend to view political life as a deceptive narrative designed to replace deliberative assemblies of citizens with a captive audience, while mimicking a

sociability in which TV series, authors and actors are the only things they are familiar with. Its function is to create a virtual and fictional community. (95)

These strategies for reinstating agency in light of the post-/structuralist moment of scepticism of subjectivity are problematic in that they maintain as a premise not only the underlying propositions regarding the constructed or fictional subject, but also the fragmented world of capitalist social relations. In the field of writing as an academic discipline this is nowhere more evident than in the mode of creative research.

The fragmentation of creative research

Creative research discussions are often contextualised in terms of the fragmentation and multiplicity of knowledge – with creative practice being seen as a ‘production of knowledge’, which requires the ‘connection’ of theory and practice to validate itself as ‘scholarly research’ (Barrett and Bolt 2007, 193). Creative research claims an epistemological foundation that seeks to separate itself from the objectivism and methodological positivism of empiricism, while emphasising situated knowledges and the ‘emergent nature of research’:

The conduct of research in, or through, creative practice is associated with the acknowledgement of uncertainty and contingency, the denial of grand narratives, a tolerance of complexity and confusion and both willingness and capacity to be led by the data rather than by a predetermined point of view (Webb et al 2011).

Here the maker/researcher is seen as a vanguard in this process: a subjectivity negotiating seemingly separate realms of activity for the promise of *outcomes* – whether they are for *innovation* or strictly as objects quantifiable under the rubric of various government- or market-imposed measures (e.g. research grant allocations; journal ranking listings; job training; market utility). Further, this subjectivity is seen by, for example, some practitioners, as existing in the autonomous realm of an academy somehow exclusive from the *real world* (a rather outdated notion) or for example, in the creative industries approach, as a purveyor of possible futures within the bourgeois marketplace of employment, innovation and productivity. The first manifests itself in ideas of *escape* or *retreat* of the maker from the rigours of the marketplace (‘if you can’t do, teach’). The second manifests either as an eagerness for the possibilities of market utility (i.e. creative industries), or as the acquiescence to structural imperatives (‘that’s just the way things are’) and an emphasis on functionality.

At the very least what the attempts to articulate the struggles and tensions around creative research do is to foreground the often mystified and elided role of the academy as a capitalist social relation. The seemingly autonomous forms here (marketplace; government; policy; art; research; creativity; academy etc.) reflect the fragmentation of capitalist social relations. Their tensions wend their way through discussions of and resistances to many of the formulations of creative research. The struggles and difficulties that arise from trying to situate the maker/researcher’s subjectivity result from the fragmented, definitional social world of capital; as does the promise and restraint of autonomy as expressions of agency and structure.

This suggests a problem in the acceptance and consequent lack of interrogation of the multiplicity and fragmentation of the social world under capitalism. In this ‘post-postmodern world’ creative practice as research is seen as a negotiating strategy for combining diverse *knowledges* from, or of producing *knowledges* for, social phenomena seen as separate (again, for example Barrett and Bolt 2007, 193). This strategy requires an epistemological approach that searches for (or produces) interrelations, or involvements, or overdeterminations, between predetermined sites located within a theoretical structure *outside* of history (Cleaver 1979, 33). While this leads in many instances to fruitful outcomes for both research and practice, such an approach, with its emphasis on the metanarrative of *locality*, fails to interrogate the fragmentation of the social world, while, perversely, advocating a new creative subjectivity in the face of the post-/structuralist² moves that have interrogated subjectivity as a misrecognition or fiction.

What I suggest is that creative research is one articulation of an attempt to stretch beyond its boundaries by advocating for a knowledge-producing subjectivity that rejects the methodological positivism of so-called *real* research (which in many ways is centred upon the presupposition of a transcendental subject), while negotiating the discourses of postmodernity and post-/structuralism which are suspicious of, or radically dismiss, subjectivity as a category.

Ideas of the subject need revision. A subjectivity is required that is not posited against objectivity, but embraces subjectivity’s creative/critical constitution against the fragmentary forces of the capitalist social world. And this is where I think that creativity and criticism, as practical human activity, as movement not only against but also beyond existing social relations, has a role to play in clarifying concepts of the *creative* subject.

Radical Practice?

A moment of writing from Karl Marx’s *Capital*:

We presuppose labour in a form in which it is an exclusively human characteristic. A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence *already existed ideally*. (Marx 1990, 283–84)

In this well-known passage, Marx is at lengths to emphasise the *ideal*, mental capacities involved in the act of labour. He goes on to discuss the ‘purposeful will’ and ‘close attention’ required ‘for the duration of the work’ (Marx 1990, 284). Both physical and mental elements are incorporated in his definition of *purposeful activity*, which he develops to discuss the role of labour-power in a capitalist mode of production. Within this is an intimation from Marx that the labour-process requires a projection into the future – a ‘projection-beyond’ (Holloway 2002, 16).

A second moment comes from Helene Cixous’ *Three steps on the ladder of writing*:

The thing that is both known and unknown, the most unknown and the best unknown, this is what we are looking for when we write. We go toward the best-known unknown thing, where knowing and not knowing touch, where we hope we will know what is unknown. Where we hope we will not be afraid of understanding the incomprehensible, facing the invisible, hearing the inaudible, thinking the unthinkable, which is of course: thinking. Thinking is trying to think the unthinkable: thinking the thinkable is not worth the effort. Painting is trying to paint what you cannot paint and *writing is writing what you cannot know before you have written*: it is preknowing and not knowing, blindly, with words. (my italics)

Although in a different register from Marx, with its idealist concentration on individualism in the psychoanalytic moment, this passage articulates the dual nature of praxis as a 'knowing' of what exists, and a projection-beyond, not only ideally, but through actual practice, actual writing, into the 'unthinkable'.

To extrapolate, we might think of this 'projection-beyond' as having a negative conjuncture with the existing. That is, a projection-beyond implies 'a want, a lack, a desire, a hunger' with what exists (Holloway 2002, 15). This in turn suggests two things. The first is that doing is emphasised over being, movement over existence, praxis over ontology. The second is an emphasis on this movement of doing as both critical and creative.

In capitalism, purposeful activity, as Marx points out in his explication of commodity fetishism, takes the form of commodities for sale in the marketplace. 'We move,' says David Harvey, 'from a social condition, in which we depend directly on those we know personally, to one in which we depend on impersonal and objective relations with others' (Harvey 1990, 100). For Marx, the commodity form objectifies individual, particular labour within market relations, where the human content of labour is objectified in the seemingly autonomous form of money and exchange (Marx 1990). The objective character of money appears to equalise and universalise particular and heterogeneous social relations of labour. Understanding that capital is a form of social constitution that requires as premise and outcome the *denial* of purposeful activity in the form of alienated labour is to understand the *antagonistic* mode of existence of human content in capitalist society. That is, human practice 'subsists in and through commodities in the mode of being denied' (Bonefeld 1995, 190). This is *human content* as the centrality of the creative power of human practice.

Trying to understand human practice as an external relationship between various structural or systemic elements, what has been called 'encounters' here, is to emphasise the reification of human activity and the fragmentation of subjectivity and objectivity as separate realms outside of a constitutive social process. What Marxism asks is that criticism becomes an engagement with and revelation of the human content in seemingly autonomous and separate forms.

Creativity here is the creativity of human practice, of purposeful activity, not a reified *creativity* hived off as an object of study, or formulated as pre-existing quality for an innovation economy. Criticism is the analysis of, resistance to, and search for the constitutive social relations, the *human content* of the seemingly self-determining autonomous forms that constrain and drive our activity:

It is better therefore to assume from the beginning that criticism of society must also be criticism of ourselves, that struggle against capitalism must be also struggle against the 'we' not only against but in capitalism. To criticise is to recognise that we are a divided self. To criticise society is to criticise our own complicity in the reproduction of that society (Holloway 2002, 72).

If capital, in other words, demands an objectivised subjectivity, then criticism, as creative practice, as a movement against negation of purposeful activity, must seek to understand the social constitution of the seemingly autonomous structures that we seek 'encounters' between.

This understanding of human practice, of purposeful activity, as a negation of what is and a movement beyond what exists, even in its most mundane forms, I think is what we may think of as a creative subjectivity, or a reinstatement of subjectivity as a mode of transcendence of capitalist social relations.

A radical practice seeks to emphasise creative human practice as a premise of capitalist society in the mode of being denied. It seeks, as I have suggested above, moving *beyond* what exists. The outcome of this movement *beyond*, however, should not be presupposed. We can, through criticism as human practice, project what is beyond against what exists (indeed this is the implication of Marx's definition of human practice), but we can never be certain of what that outcome might be. ('Utopias', as TJ Clark tells us, 'reassure modernity as to its infinite potential' (Clark 2012, 63)). Resistance, as movement against what is, as critique of what is, is the only immediate possibility (Holloway 2002, 128–131). This is a subjectivity that is constituted by practice as creative, in that it is based on purposeful activity; critical, in that it seeks human content as an internal relationship of, rather than *between*, seemingly autonomous forms. This is a subjectivity that marginalises the concentration on the object found in most expressions of research, realising that only subjectivity *as human practice* is constitutive of objective forms under capital in the mode of being denied.

This moves beyond trying to conceive of relations between sites and structures, of valorising epistemology ('knowing') as the sole product of creative practice, of reifying language as a system within which, or against which, writers engage (let alone be seen as 'machines for writing'). Writing in this mode is recognition of the possibilities of writing as purposeful activity to not only negate the present but to 'project-beyond'. To see writing as a 'system' is to take on face value the fragmented social world of capitalist relations. Radical practice reconceives the basis upon which writing might be reified from actual human practice to a systemic object and reinstates the idea that writing may provide, even in its most mundane forms, the possibilities of projecting beyond the existing negative form of labour within capitalism.

Endnotes

1. Stirner also notes Jacques Derrida's statement that 'A prevalent discourse of a recent epoch concludes with its [the subjects] dissolution' as well as discussing the return and rediscovery of the subject against postmodern paradigms that seek to dismantle the 'grand narratives' of subjectivity via the linguistic turns of structuralism and post-structuralism.
2. I use post-/structuralism here to indicate the continuum of thought from structuralism to post-structuralism without emphasising either one.

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