

Critique as the question of conditions of visibility

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Probably no-one will dispute the general characterization of critical thinking according to which it consists in the exercise of our critical or reflective capacities (such as discerning, judging, analyzing, describing and naming) that is aware of its own historical situatedness and strives to influence aspects of this situatedness (either indirectly by presenting them in a new light or directly by making its approving or disapproving judgment heard). It is only when we start to examine the work of critical thinking in detail that disagreements arise. I propose here to focus on two types of disagreements, seemingly not having much in common: those regarding the critique's object (or objects) and those regarding its conditions of possibility. (In particular, but this is to get ahead of my argument, I am interested in the question whether critique's objects can at the same time be conceived as its conditions of possibility without ceasing to be real, worldly objects and hence without critique's ceasing to be pertinent to the reality that surrounds us.)

The motivation to address the first type of disagreement comes from Bruno Latour's analysis of the weaknesses of critical theory according to which the latter has misunderstood its object. It has done so by accepting an unwarranted separation between the human and the inhuman, the social and the natural, the secondary and the primary qualities, the perception in terms of meaning/value and the perception in terms of validity (bare facts or a "gaze from nowhere"). On Latour's account, the proper objects of critical thinking are the casualties of this separation: those "objects are simply a *gathering that has failed* – a fact that has not been assembled according to a due process"¹. (At another place he calls it for this reason an "imposture to treat objects as *objects*."²)

My interest in the second type of disagreement, about the critique's conditions of possibility issues from the above statement by Latour. If indeed the major fault of critical theory is the misconception regarding the nature of its objects (Latour uses the distinction between matters of fact and matters of concern to address the character of this misconception) resulting in loss of realism (or reality or of realist attitude), then this fault has to do with the precondition of critique rather than with its actual exercise (where the unfulfilled condition renders the whole exercise null and void). On Latour's account, this condition of any true critique, i.e., of one that is not merely an imposture, resides in gathering (of aspects, qualities, elements or, as Gilles Deleuze would say, symptoms). The term refers, as Latour explicitly indicates, to Heidegger's term, but it clearly also echoes Deleuze's notion of concepts as assemblages.

While Latour's first attempt to define gathering is by contrasting it with its opposite, to wit, subtraction or reduction,³ it is clear that rather than uncritical

1 Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern" *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 225– 248. 246, my emphasis.

2¹ Bruno Latour, *What is the Style of Matters of Concern? Two Lectures in Empirical Philosophy* (Van Gorcum, 2008), 15.

3 Latour, "Why has Critique Run out of Steam?", 248.

piling up of symptoms, the heart of critique is the judicious *selection* of the elements brought together in their focal point, a clinical concept: such a concept is a “meeting place of symptoms, their point of coincidence or convergence”⁴. Latour’s “failed gathering” does not fail because it has not gathered a sufficient number of elements but because it gathered a wrong constellation of elements and is therefore like a “badly stated question” Deleuze discusses in his *Bergsonism*⁵, leading to sophistries which, as Latour shows, drain the critical thinking of its force. At stake is in other words not mere gathering but the exercise of symptomatology which may take the form of reassemblage of existing constellations of symptoms or of creation of altogether new meeting points.

If symptomatology is defined as a judicious selection it must presuppose some form of understanding of the landscape or the spectrum from which it selects. This means that its failure can be attributed to the failure of this understanding. Then we might say that the reason for critique’s crisis of which Latour speaks is the insufficient understanding of the way in which the quality of overall landscape from which one selects influences the selection. For example, we need to ask whether what is selected is to be conceived as having already been there, waiting, or whether it must have been discerned or constructed. One must in other words try to understand the properties of the landscape and its conditions of possibility. One goal of this contribution is a plea for a more sustained examination of forms these conditions of possibility can take. To be sure, Heidegger has made an immense contribution to this project, that is now often linked to his term “disclosure” and to other notions conceived as related (*Lichtung*, *Ereignis* and *Entschlossenheit* – the latter translated as “unclosedness” rather than as more customary “resoluteness”).⁶ Heidegger’s major tenets of the background structures of conditions of intelligibility, such as the ontological context necessary for language (for example the relation between Dasein and world) have been widely accepted. But there have been new developments, new ways of addressing the problem leading to new questions. I take both Stanley Cavell’s work on the ordinary and Deleuze’s work on the plane of immanence to be new, very different variants of the exploration of the problem field of disclosure.⁷

At the same time, the very idea of inquiry into this landscape met objections. Habermas feared skeptical consequences of what he considered an excessive attention to the problems of disclosure in Heidegger, the evacuation of our critical possibilities, since in the worst case scenario disclosure determines in advance the possible directions our critique can take (it is the language that speaks and not the

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998), see introduction by Daniel W. Smith, xvi.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York, Zone Books, 1991), 17.

⁶ For the redefinition of *Entschlossenheit* see Nicholas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure, Critical Theory Between Past and Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).

⁷ The closeness of Deleuze’s understanding of the plane of immanence to Heidegger’s notion of disclosure can be seen in *What is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 41 where Deleuze and Guattari bring up Heidegger’s preontological understanding of Being as one of the examples of the plane of immanence. While they give there also other examples, their common feature is implicitness (or virtuality) – hence, not being disclosed in the ordinary sense. (40) But there are also significant differences: while the preontological understanding of Being is common to all human beings, the plane of immanence (the nonconceptual understanding to which our concepts refer) is projected differently each time by each philosopher according to the way he “lays out” his plane of immanence. (40)

human being).⁸ And Bruno Latour, from a completely different angle, expressed concern with the “flight [of the critical discourse, A.S.] into the conditions of possibility”, and with the “directing attention away from facts to what makes them possible, as Kant did”.⁹ The inquiry into the conditions of possibility (of facts) is for Latour a flight from realism, a retreat from realist attitude he advocates, detracting us from real experience. I want to focus on the latter concern.

Is it possible to conceive this ground of all judgment not as a spurious field of inquiry (because distracting our attention from reality) and not as something altogether beyond our agreements (hence not altogether beyond reason)? I take Stanley Cavell’s work on ordinary language to tackle these questions. For Cavell the ordinary is of interest because it is the space of disclosure: his whole work is permeated by themes of visibility and invisibility, obscurity, revelation, the struggle to achieve (self-)transparency. Skepticism is nothing else than a sensation of obstruction of vision; the “claim of reason” is the reclaiming of vision in acts of self-revelation (such as language use but also our other practices which, too are of exploratory nature); the ordinary is that which is in plain view but “unobserved”¹⁰ (hence we might call it the undisclosed condition of disclosure); and, finally, the whole discussion of cinema in Cavell begins with the revelatory power of the camera: “The invention of the motion picture camera reveals something that has already happened to us, (...) something fundamental about our existence”¹¹. I would tentatively suggest the following regions of disclosure in Cavell: inheritance (a language that we take over by imitating our instructors and predecessors; but also, at another level, the set of problems we inherit as philosophically or culturally important), acknowledgment (the taking up of what is inherited, the taking up that is by no means passive acceptance: “rebuke” or denial is also a form of acknowledgment), self-revelation (every act of acknowledgment contributes to it), and, finally, recounting (acknowledging one element in a certain way may, though it doesn’t have to, imply a reevaluation of other elements, a change of scale or a change in application of the scale).

At the same time it needs to be said that any naming of such regions will of necessity be reductive. If language we inherit consists of games and of projections from one context to another (where we never know whether a projection will be made or not) then the nature of this inheritance (mobile, undecidable, widely differentiated) influences the nature of the field of visibility: there is not one disclosure (or even two: the reflective and pre-reflective¹²) but there are (possibly competing) games and fragmentary projections of disclosure (as Cavell puts it “the revelation is unpredictable and interminable”¹³). After all Wittgenstein’s discussion of seeing aspects teaches us that only aspects can be seen and only one at a time. To return to my original question, whether critique’s objects, that which it studies, can at the same time be conceived as its conditions of possibility without ceasing to be real, worldly objects and hence without critique’s ceasing to be pertinent to

⁸ Nicholas Kompridis, *ibid.*, 150. Jurgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1987), 207.

⁹ Latour, “Why has Critique Run out of Steam?”, 245, 244.

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words. Pedagogical Letters on the Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 332

¹¹ Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 205

¹² See Kompridis, *op.cit.*

¹³ Stanley Cavell, *Emerson’s Transcendental Etudes* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 231

the reality that surrounds us: the object of Cavell's inquiry – what we say when, our ordinary language -- is something very mundane, intimately connected with reality. As J.L. Austin put it, these are situations “involving both words and world.” (Austin illustrated this by asking: “do we focus the image or the battleship”?¹⁴). At the same time the question “what we say when,” something that is within hand's reach and observable at any time, establishes the terms of disclosure (of how, and if, the reality is going to be revealed to us), hence determines the conditions of any possible critique. While there is a very concrete sense in which our language conditions our perceptions of problems, our terms of critique and envisaged solutions (think of the impact of naming in the discussions about the “sans papiers”: illegal, illegal immigrant, illegal alien, undocumented worker, unauthorized alien; or the discussions around IVF, where it makes all the difference whether it is thought to involve discarding of embryo's or killing human beings, finally, the discussion about the definition of the word “marriage” etc.), Cavell's explorations are usually directed at the less obvious sense in which our everyday expressions shape in an infinitely slow but intransigent way our moral notions, values and ideas of the future, hence our criteria of judgment and of any possible symptomatology, any possible judicious gathering, hence the preconditions of any true critique. When Cavell quotes Emerson saying that “in the history of the individual is always an account of his condition,” he does not fail to note that the meaning of the word “condition” is “talking together”¹⁵ – presenting Emerson's Transcendentalism as ordinary language philosophy *avant la lettre* (or his own thought as a species of Transcendentalism). He concludes: “conditions are also terms, stipulations that define the nature and limits of an agreement (...).[T]he irresistible dictation that constitutes Fate, that sets conditions on our knowledge and our conduct, is our language, every term we utter.”¹⁶

14 J.L. Austin, cited by Sandra Laugier, “Importance of Importance. Cavell, Film und die Bedeutung von Bedeutsamkeit”, in Kathrin Thiele and Katrin Trüstedt (eds) *Happy Days: Lebenswissen nach Cavell* (München, Wilhelm Fink, 2009), 300.

15 Stanley Cavell, *Emerson's Transcendental Etudes*, 71–72.

16¹ *Ibid.*