

**“the reality of the limit or limit-text of culture is rarely theorised...”**

**Vicki Kirby (University of New South Wales)**

In “The Commitment to Theory” (1988), Homi K. Bhabha highlights the consequences of dividing the theoretical analysis of representation and the discursive from the existential urgency and activism of politics on the ground. He doesn’t dispute the effects of domestic power asymmetries and global economies of exploitation; rather, his argument’s focus concerns the place of theory within the lived pressures of the political arena. With weary frustration he notes the agonistic structures of debate on the Left that eschew complexity - the Orientalist logic whose unwitting redeployment, albeit it in reverse, discovers a worthy subject in an essentialised alterity. Abject, marginalised, exploited, outside - “the other” in this theatre of concern is immediately recognisable. Indeed, it is this negative indemnification of alterity’s true identity that quickly adjudicates the relative worth of different actors and modes of engagement as appropriate and effective... or not.

In an attempt to disrupt the conceptual infrastructure that underpins this way of thinking, and to further the idea that political practice involves a field of transactional and translational intersections where “the difference of the same” (8) is operational - in other words, where identity of any sort is constitutively messy and entangled with/in what it isn’t - Bhabha challenges the glib appeal to an “‘authentic’ sense of a ‘national’ culture or an ‘organic’ intellectual” (7). By taking “the cultural and historical hybridity of the post-colonial world” (7) as his starting point, we engage an origin, an identity or a cause that is already animated by what appears otherwise and elsewhere. For Bhabha, quite simply, reality’s clear lines of apparent demarcation can prove illusive and ambiguous if we shift perspective.

Over thirty years on, I want to acknowledge the importance of Bhabha’s insight that “the fixity and fixation of boundaries of meaning and strategies of action” (10) might be more errant and unpredictable than we tend to think. Foregrounding the question, “Whose Society?” - the theme of this year’s TC workshop - it seems fair to say that Bhabha’s response would focus on the internal arrangements and political unevenness of human interactions, where the economic, the political and the discursive are in dynamic play, and perhaps to an extent that the differences between these analytical headers become indistinct. Bhabha argues, for example, that subjects and knowledges meld with/in objects (11), and that critique and analysis need to move away from a dialectic of negation towards the blur and difficulty of involved negotiation (11). The sense of structural complicity and fuzziness that he evokes is explained by the intimate operations of language and the discursive. We are used to hearing that the discursive (culture) matters, that it materializes and realizes a world whose substantive facticity is absent from our reckonings, inaccessible because interpretation mediates and reinvents what it claims to describe. It follows that the weight and foundational insistence of nature, the body, the before - together with all those “others” whose differences are

segregated from what evolves later - can now be read as *signs*, back-projections of culture which effectively misrecognize culture as nature. Importantly, the comparative failures of nature's associated "primitives" are thereby freed from their diminished and prescribed status, their value now contestable because there is no outside of language. This perspective explains Bhabha's positive emphasis on "the difference of the same," a sameness wherein what appears "other" in space and time is now inseparable from what it is defined against. The political relevance of this insight comes in its activist promise: we can change things if identities and causes are contestable, pliable, and open to reinterpretation.

Bhabha's appreciation that identity of whatever sort is enduringly forged and constitutively implicated anchors his preference for cultural difference over cultural diversity. The latter discovers an aggregation of entities whose unique and identifiable achievements or failures seem to pre-exist the forcefield of their own emergence. Cultural differences are instead understood as "enunciations" of culture, articulated *by* and *for* culture - an expression of the internal differences *within* culture itself. Consequently, when read through the involvements of culture's systemic "unity" we note that its operations and "outcomes" are essentially heterogeneous and involved. Although we tend to conflate identity with a recognisable sense of unity and integrity - as in multiculturalism's fetishization of diversity - Bhabha argues for cultural difference because its expressions are inherently hybrid and cross-referential. The enunciation of a particular cultural difference could be likened to Ferdinand de Saussure's discrimination between *parole*, or what is said, and *langue*, the mother tongue of all possibles. As an individual expression, *parole* assumes an immediate reality in the here and now, whereas *langue*, a reserve of potential, is something entirely different because not present. Importantly, discrimination between the two is conventionally accepted as analytically necessary.

We can better understand Bhabha's position if we attend closely to the logic he deploys. When cultural diversity is interpreted through the *parole* versus *langue* analogy, *parole* becomes an aggregation of independent statements (one plus another one, plus another one, plus...). However, in keeping with Bhabha's position we could read enunciation as the differentiation of *langue* with/in and from itself; in other words, we could say that *langue* *paroles*. Importantly, when Bhabha evokes this sense of difference as "something" that emerges through a shared and entangled "origin," he undercuts identity's claim to integrity and autonomy.

But here is the rub. In an argument whose aim is to challenge the routine determinations of what will count as a legitimate political practice - the fixity of boundaries, the givenness of identity, the circumscription of origins and the isolation of causes - Bhabha is forced to reinvest in the very precepts he eschews. To explain this, Bhabha identifies "the social" with the activities and complexities that define what it is to be human. This belief that human culture is the object of our analysis but also the constitutive "stuff" from which we subjects are made, takes its leverage from the prohibitive circumscription that defines human identity against its

non-human context. Indeed, the engine of Bhabha's analysis isolates intertextuality (culture) from an outside that appears, unsurprisingly, as its mirror opposite (nature) - a primordial before, lacking the complications of language, cognition and agency that equate being human with being social and political. The recuperation of an inarticulate alterity - feminised, racialized and comparatively disabled - should not go unnoticed.

Bhabha worries that, "the reality of the limit or limit-text of culture is rarely theorised... The need to think the limit of culture as a problem of the enunciation of cultural difference is disavowed" (19). But if "systematicity" enunciates, and if all identities and lines of demarcation are entangled and emergent within its "economy," what then? What if the identity of that censoring bar of prohibition that divides the human from its others, culture from what is not culture, is as open to the play of *différance* as any other identity? Although Bhabha's final remarks acknowledge the importance of Jacques Derrida's work for his argument he reads Derrida's "no outside text" as just another acknowledgement of culture's definitive identity; its internal workings. Bhabha's representation of difference as an identifiable "something" - "the inter," "a Third Space," an "*in-between*, the space of the *entre*," "the split space of enunciation" (22) - effectively sabotages what he is trying to achieve. And this, ironically, because "the reality of the limit or limit-text of culture is rarely theorised..."

With this discussion as backdrop I want to return to the question, "Whose Society?" I am reminded of that wonderful book title, *Who Comes After the Subject?* (1991), because the suggestion that the subject is temporally and spatially dispersed, appearing both after and potentially before its own appearing, is intriguingly provocative: indeed, we must ask ourselves if "the Subject" is necessarily human, locatable? The space/time co-ordinates that fix the haecceity of human identity and its exceptional capacities seem awry here, and there is much empirical research, together with shifting theoretical perspectives (posthumanism), that suggest how aspects of "being human" might be non-local, or writ large. If Derridean systematicity can include the intended dynamism of Bhabha's *écriture*, then what we thought was outside, elsewhere, not here and certainly not me, is uncannily proximate. Strategically, at least for now, I read Derrida's *intratextuality* as an ecological writing whose self-involvements have enunciative expression. My preference, with Bhabha, is to stay in the weeds, to work with the difficulties and unforeseen conundrums that this reworked sense of the social/the political can evoke, even when it trips us up and asks us to think again.

To emphasize the potential assault in such an approach I refer to Derrida's seminars on the pedagogical achievements of the gene – its ability to communicate, instruct, or reproduce itself (*La Vie La Mort*, 1975). Derrida compares these actions with the reproducibility, or communicative structures, of social and cultural institutions. However, what might seem mere analogy, a device meant to encourage contemplation about two similar yet quite independent systems – nature and culture – has a significantly disorienting and even bewildering implication

because Derrida can make no appeal to a third term, an “in-between” one thing and another, as Bhabha assumes. It is the status and identity of the model as intermediary that Derrida works to problematise.

... that which we pretend then to accept as model, comparison, analogy with the view of understanding the basic living entity; this itself is a complex product of life, of the living, and the claimed model is exterior neither to the knowing subject nor to the known object.  
. . . The text is not a third term in the relation between the biologist and the living, it is the very structure of the living as shared structure of the biologist (1975, Seminar 4, 5)

How should we proceed if our starting point is not just split, as Bhabha conceives it, but entirely diffracted? And can identity return as an enunciative expression of this diffraction, now reconfigured as the political agent whose internal complexities Bhabha's work anticipates, albeit in preliminary form?

#### **Bibliography**

Bhabha, Homi. (1988) “The Commitment to Theory” in: *new formations* no. 5 ('Identities'), pp. 5-23.

Cadava, E., Connor, P., Nancy, J-L. (eds.). (1991) *Who Comes After the Subject?* Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, Chapman, and Hall.

Derrida, Jacques. (1975) *La Vie La Mort* trans. Antonia Pont. Jacques Derrida Papers, MS-CO1, Special Collections and Archives, University of California - Irvine Libraries, Irvine.