

On Sensuous Utopia as Critical Ethicality after Humanism **Tjalling R. Valdés Olmos**

There is nothing more nor less than the *capitulation of man*. [...] I grasp my narcissism with both hands and I reject the vileness of those who want to turn man into machine.

– Frantz Fanon [1952] 2008, 6 (original emphasis)

With this position paper I wish to take up the focal point of this workshop, which is the question: “What is or could be critical ethicality *after* humanism in its Eurocentric tradition?”. I propose to think with this question through the practice of utopia. The aim here is to think how this ‘new’ critical ethicality might function if utopia is reworked as a practice/mode of critique that operates through the aesthetic/poetic, and not only in the space of *universal poesis* and *universal nomos* (respectively history and science). Thus, in thinking affirmatively with both Derrida and Wynter’s reliance on a reworked *scientific/historical/critical* project (the ‘Ceremony Found’) that proposes the radical practice of a mode of self-reflective responsible critique towards our situated origin stories, I pose that the notion of utopia, as experienced through the poetic/aesthetic, strengthens the potentiality to move the ‘we’ radically beyond the ‘We’ of modernity/coloniality. In turn, this will necessitate to not only ask ‘But who, we?’, but also to keep asking the equally ethically imperative question: but *how*, we?

Utopia as Relational, Critical Ethicality

Let me try to stay with this ‘who’ for a bit. I take upon myself the task to focus on the aesthetic/poetic and its utopian practices as that which is critical ethicality on the basis of a relational ontology. That is that the problematic of difference, revisited through Donna Haraway’s notion of diffraction (Haraway 1997), produces a change in ethics that rethinks difference (along Deleuzian lines) as not trapped within the dichotomous logic of Self versus Other. As such it becomes not an obstacle, but a necessary condition in the production of a relational onto-epistemology (and thus critique). In this particular line of thought I posit that instead of attaining for a co-existence with others via processes of (visual) recognition, this capacity of difference–non-dichotomous other–as always already part of the self, transforms the picture of the ethical, and thus critical, scene. Indeed, as Kathrin Thiele poignantly poses in her reading of the work of Karen Barad and Donna Haraway: “Rather than ‘learning to share’ in the sense of the need to create sharing grounds, we need to learn that the shared terrain in all its ambivalence, because made up of a-symmetrical power relations, is always/already (at) the beginning” (2014, 212). In my view the aesthetic/poetic (with its utopian ethicality) moves ‘us’ to a mode of meaning-making, knowledge production–i.e. world making–that is established as always/already shared and co-constitutive through its capacity of organising an *embodied (relational) experience* of what it means to be “*Homo Narrans*”. And this, as I will later expound on, happens not merely through text and language (that which I see still prioritised in the Wynterian reworking of *universal nomos/poesis*), but rather also through the embodied,

affective, and sensuous experiences of the entanglements between 'entrant'¹ and the performative matter of art.

With this emphasis on utopia as modulated through art, the point is to show that the ethico-political significance of utopia is not that of final solutions, but rather as Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor poses with Darko Suvin's notion of the *novum*, that utopia comes to function as a "politically radical process of ongoing critique" (Wagner-Lawlor 2017, 233). As such, I pose, that utopia (and thus critique) holds the potentiality for healing, regeneration, and creation. Utopia *practices*, by default, critical ethicality. Utopia always/already entails a critical ethicality, as it foregrounds a movement of healing (deconstructive and re-assembling/entangling), meaning that "the failure of ongoingness" (Haraway 2016, 134), or what Gilles Deleuze and Tavia Nyong'o have respectively characterised as "the people to come"/"the people missing" ([1993]1997, 4; 2014, 76), must be "brought into ongoing response-ability, not in the abstract but in homely storied cultivated practices" (Haraway 2016, 134). Indeed, the ethical imperative here with regard to critique, is that it should always hold a responsibility towards those absent/missing/erased. In that sense, it reverberates with the Heideggerian proposition that Derrida recites in "The Ends of Man": "But if man is to find his way once again into the nearness of Being (*in die Nähe des Seins*) he must first learn to exist in the nameless (*im Namenlosen*)" (Heidegger in Derrida 1972, 129). But here, with the responsibility to "learn to exist in the nameless," returns the question 'but how, we?'

Sensuous Utopia

If in the utopian (self) reflective recognition of 'our' 'genre-specific bio-cosmogenic origins' a space is cultivated in which the potentiality of a different difference is recovered, 'we' must take care in *how* utopia *images*² that difference. To *image* precisely not meaning to *represent* (i.e. to colonise), but rather keeping with the necessarily complex and ongoing question of how to engage the proper "but who, we?". This entails a strategy—a 'how'—of *disrepresentation*, taken up by those engaging in the critique/'reading' of aesthetics and proposing the embodied, affective, sensuous utopian experience (inherently a practice of critique) over the failing politics of representation. For example: take an engagement with Kara Walker's 2014 installation *A Subtlety* in which a large Mammy-turned-Sphinx made out of confectioned sugar, and surrounded by black children manufactured from molasses, enacts a radical practice of sensuous utopia.

¹ I pose that the term 'entrant' proposes a term that rethinks occularcentric terminologies such as 'spectator,' 'viewer,' or 'audience'. This paper indeed would enrich with an engagement of this particular notion of 'entrant' and its relation to the notion of Karen Barad's 'intra-action,' that would expound on the processes of becoming with, through, and between art and the entrant. For an elaboration with regard the notion of the 'entrant,' in relation to film, please see: Wibke Straube's 2014 *Trans Cinema and Its Exit Scapes - A Transfeminist Reading of Utopian Sensibility and Gender Dissidence in Contemporary Film*.

² Taking after Denise Ferreira Da Silva's (2014) use of '*imaging*' as proposed by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project* [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1999]: "It is not that what is past casts its lights on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what have been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been and the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural [*bildlich*]. Only dialectical images are genuine images—that is, not archaic—images. The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous moment on which all reading is founded." (Ferreira Da Silva 2014, 97)

A mixture of senses—the olfactory, the gustatory, the tactile—affect the entrant onto a plane from where one might individually, and yet also as communal ‘we,’ engage with entangled histories and memories of colonialism and slavery differently. Not as an engagement that only positions Blackness as the identitarian difference that serves its purpose in modernity’s/coloniality’s projects of recognition and representation but is nevertheless inherently tied to Blackness as the “total value produced by slave labour [which] continues to sustain global capital” (Silva 2014, 82), but rather as *imaging* Blackness as “creative capacity” (ibid., 83). Being in the presence of a taste and/or smell (in this case the taste and smell of confectioned sugar) familiar to a certain past/present has the quality of kin-making with community, even if that community might be physically absent. Nevertheless, in the case of *Subtlety* the simultaneous presence of a seemingly (to some) unfamiliar taste and smell of ‘rotting’ sugar (molasses) brings about a confounded, subversive, utopian becoming-with different histories, communities, matterings that are absent and/or have been erased (i.e. are to come/can be brought back). As Davide Panagia has theorised, the space where these multiple senses and their different affective productions come together should then be understood as the “site for the interruption of the commonality of sense” (2007, 193). I would pose that this interruption does not impose a strict bifurcation of a commonality of sense. Rather, it is the undeniably individual, unique, non-representable, and yet simultaneously communally embodied differential experience that needs to be acknowledged as fully co-constitutive element of the possibility of a non-homogenising commonality of experience, a non-homogenising commonality of memory, a non-homogenising commonality of utopia that enfolds critical ethicality.

Here the critical ethicality of relationality comes back into play. The aesthetic/poetic has the capacity to make the entrant—‘us’—the subject of a utopian practice from where a realisation, made possible through the affective economy of the senses, takes place that affirms that there is no “innocent starting point for any ethico-political quest” and, that ‘we’ are always already entangled with/in everything and everyone (Thiele 2014, 213). In this Fanonian-cum-Wynterian ‘narcissistic’ move that utopia makes, which entails a “great refusal” (Muñoz 2009, 135) of the illusory scientific mode of critique propagated by modernity/coloniality, the aesthetic/poetic allows the *sensuous practice of contemplation* (i.e. narcissism/self-cognition) to foreground that we do not live in alienation to ourselves or others, but that we are inherently always/already *feeling* and knowing with ourselves and others: with *nosotros*. Yet, finally I must make the ‘self-cognitive’ move myself, and ask whether the critique performed here indeed merely stays with the significant ethico-political question of ‘but who, we,’ but in the end—because of its limitations to text/language—undoes the critical ethicality of ‘but how, we?’ proposed in the concept of sensuous utopia.

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