

Modification

Cultural actors and Jørgen Michaelsen in conversation

Henning Pant: When you told me you were going to write a text about modifications, I thought we could start with two identical quotes, one from Isidore Ducasse and one from Guy Debord. Anyone who knows a little about modern French literature will know that Debord quotes Ducasse word for word in his book *La Société du spectacle*. And perhaps it would be a fine effect to have two completely identical quotations but with two different authors.

Jørgen Michaelsen: But why in connection with modifications? Wouldn't it rather make people think of cloning?

Henning Pant: Well, that may well be. But once you'd got some way into the text you'd find out that it actually isn't that easy to tell when something's a modification. Debord and his Situationist group incidentally didn't talk about modification, they used the word *détournement*. That means something along the lines of distortion, derailing. But Asger Jorn called his overpaintings of pseudo-art pictures modifications.

Jørgen Michaelsen: What quotation are you talking about? I haven't looked into the Situationists for some time.

Henning Pant [taking a Rhodos book from the shelf]: Well, in fact it isn't a matter of either modification or distortion, but of plagiarism. It goes like this: "Ideas improve. The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea." It's there as Thesis no. 207 in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*.

Jørgen Michaelsen: Here we have a whole lot of concepts or nuances of the same thing: modification, distortion, plagiarism, cloning. I'd better be quite honest: when *Øjeblikket* asked if I would contribute to a theme issue on modifications, my immediate reaction was that I couldn't really get my head around that, and absolutely not in a framework of 20,000 characters including spaces. Now I can see that the editors of course had Jorn's modifications in mind. But right away I got all sorts of associations that didn't directly have anything to do with Jorn and the Situationists.

Henning Pant: What associations?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Well that's rather a long story. In brief, for some time now I've been very interested in evolutionism, biochemistry, genetics and those sorts of non-humanities disciplines. Not only can many of their concepts, ideas and materials be

transferred into artistic praxis, as many artists have now found out; you can arrive at amazing insights when you use these disciplines as an extended perspective in interpreting the overall sociocultural environment that surrounds art, both structurally and historically. I'm also interested in how one can carry out a radical modernization of ideology critique by combining it with principles from memetics, which was introduced by the British biologist Richard Dawkins in 1976 and later developed in various directions.

Henning Pant: Dawkins, he's the one with 'the selfish meme', isn't he?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Exactly. Well, the long and the short of it is that I spontaneously started thinking about biological modifications, not the Jorn kind. But then I had the idea that in that context there could in fact be a basis for modifying the modifications in Jorn and the Situationists by biologizing them. Jorn and Debord planned to publish a periodical that was to be called *Mutant*. One of Jorn's books is called *The Order of Nature*. And anyway all his thinking is permeated by the idea of the natural. So there's already a whole lot of biology involved ...

Hans Olifant Kastrup [who has just come in]: Hi. Well here you are slacking off.

Henning Pant: Jørgen is going to write a text for *Øjeblikket*.

Jørgen Michaelsen: Yes, about modifications.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: Cool. So – Jorn, the Situationists and politics, right?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Yes, I assume so. But it turns out it's a bit more complex. We're just sitting talking about it.

Henning Pant: Jørgen thinks a kind of naturalizing approach could be used. But how does biology actually describe modification?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Jorn himself was probably thinking mostly about the normal definition, that is more or less 'fitting'. Evolutionary biology talks about the organism's adjustment to the given environment, but it would more likely be called adaptation. In genetics a modification is a change in the organism's physical manifestation, also called the phenotype, caused by influences from the external environment. Modifications are not hereditary and in that sense contrast with mutations, which have to do with the organism's 'internal' genotype. More elaborately expressed, modification is also the name for the selective methylation and glycosylation of the DNA molecule in bacteria. By modifying its own DNA the bacterium prevents its DNA from being broken down by the restriction nucleases that the bacterium forms as a defence mechanism against invasive foreign DNA.

Hans Olifant Kastrup [has sat down]: It's pretty obvious, and I suppose also relatively trivial, that Jorn 'intervenes' in the organism of the pseudo-painting and affects its 'phenoplasticity' from the outside. But surely the DNA metaphor can't be applied unproblematically to Jorn? Then the overpaintings would have to function as a kind of

internal defence against the effects of his own external defences. At all events it makes Jorn appear in a rather defensive light. But he was fundamentally a pretty offensive artist, not least in his collaboration with the Situationists?

Henning Pant: Just before you arrived we were talking about distortion, plagiarism and cloning. When Debord quotes Ducasse verbatim without citing his name, what then? Is that *détournement* or cloning?

Hans Olifant Kastrup [has also taken a Rhodos book down from the shelf]: According to the Situationists themselves, *détournement* is defined as an abbreviation of “*détournement* of prefabricated aesthetic elements”. And this is clarified: “Integration of artistic products of the present or past in a higher-order construction of the environment. In this sense Situationist paintings or Situationist music cannot exist, only a Situationist use of these media. In a more primitive sense *détournement* is, within the old cultural spheres, a propaganda method that shows how these spheres have been worn out and lost their meaning.”

Henning Pant: That must be an old quote.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: It's from 1958.

Henning Pant: If the Situationists had lived today, they'd presumably simply have talked about 'sampling'. The electronic musician samples short sequences of existing musical works and assembles them in a new totality, a 'higher-order construction'. But it can be quite confusing to emphasize the distortion as something 'elevating', as the Situationists did. Sampling seems more down-to-earth and user-friendly. And the genetic aspect is evident, isn't it?

Jørgen Michaelsen: It's an obvious possibility.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: But why cloning? What is biology's basic definition of cloning?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Cloning is a process that produces genetically identical individuals. In nature it can be seen for example in the asexual reproduction of bacteria, insects or plants. But people probably mainly think of cloning in the biotechnological sense, that is as processes for copying DNA fragments, cells or organisms. But the word has gradually been applied to almost everything that can be produced in large quantities and thus 'threatens' to obliterate the difference between original and copy.

Henning Pant: The word 'cloning' itself as an object of cloning ... But it strikes me that some connections are being made in what we're sitting here talking about.

Mikael Park-Hendriksen [has entered unnoticed]: Hi there! Well, how's it going, then? Are we having fun?

Hans Olifant Kastrup: Jørgen is going to to write a text.

Henning Pant: About modifications. For *Øjeblikket*.

Mikael Park-Hendriksen: Okay? Fine. Jorn and so on?

Hans Olifant Kastrup: Yes. But the ramifications are getting wider.

Jørgen Michaelsen: I got more to thinking about biological modifications than about Jorn's, although they're already rather biological. Up to now I haven't really been able to see how I should approach the text. Also because so much has been written now about modifications, collages, "L.H.O.O.Q.", Jorn, the Situationists' *détournements* and so on.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: But now we've been sitting talking it over. And some connections are being made.

Mikael Park-Hendriksen: Okay? That sounds really good.

Henning Pant: I'd like to go back to what we were talking about in connection with how modification is defined by genetics, that is the DNA metaphor that Jørgen mentioned. Hans says that Asger Jorn was an offensive artist, and so it isn't relevant to see Jorn's modifications as a kind of internal self-defence against the external self-defence, or its effects, or however it should be understood. In my view that doesn't necessarily make Jorn appear defensive, at least not in the traditional sense. On the contrary I think that the metaphor could give rise to reflections on how the necessary artistic immune system could be conceived as operating as a whole. That way you could gain great insight into the actual relationship between the artist as motivated organism and the sociocultural environment surrounding her or him.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: I certainly wasn't arguing against such an 'immunological' interpretation either. An effective immune defence is in the final analysis a precondition of all offensive behaviour, I would say. Even though the Monad has no windows, it still has to be wiped down, both on the outside and the inside. Wouldn't you say so too?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Yes.

Bente Zelda Vang and **Herdis Madeleine Heile** [have just come in and both burst out at once]: Hi there! The door was wide open! Don't you think about the climate?

Mikael Park-Hendriksen: We're talking a bit about modifications. Something about Jørgen going to write a text.

Henning Pant: *Øjeblikket* wants to do a theme issue.

Bente Zelda Vang: About modifications?

Henning Pant: Yes. They're probably thinking mostly about Jorn and that kind of thing, but it turns out there's much more to it than that.

Jørgen Michaelsen: The problem is that I mainly think about biological phenomena when I hear the word modification. I've arrived at the idea that you can easily apply reflections from biology and genetics to Jorn or to the cultural and social area in general. But the text mustn't be more than 20,000 characters.

Herdis Madeleine Heile: Including spaces? That's standard for a periodical article. You just have to organize the material in the right way. It sounds super-exciting.

Bente Zelda Vang: One of my friends is writing a student thesis about the hegemony concept, especially in Laclau and Mouffe. She told me something very interesting that you can read in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. The thing is that the early labour movement needed a scientific theory of history that could serve the strategic purpose of motivating revolutionary praxis. So they combined Hegelian dialectics with Darwinist evolution in an orthodox Marxist synthesis. That way they could safely say there were certainly changes ahead. But nothing really happened before Lenin raised the question: *What is to be done?* Hegel and Darwin apparently turned out to be a really bad crossover.

Henning Pant: Yes, that gives the matter a further historico-political perspective. At that time it was all about macro-motivation, but today the problem is presumably more at the micro-motivational level. The big political mass movements seem to have run out of steam as subjects that can be mobilized with a view to bringing about fundamental changes. You can't even dig up a local avant-garde. Instead what we find is an integrated social body that is still spreading both inward and outward. The citizens are increasingly being subjected to society's biopolitical gaze. What possible hopes does that give you at all?

Bente Zelda Vang: That's one of the things she wants to write about.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: But I was thinking, Jørgen, that you mentioned something before about modernizing ideology critique with the aid of memetics. Couldn't you say a little more about that? As far as I can see, what we're dealing with is an opposition between the humanities and a kind of offshoot of sociobiology. Traditionally those two haven't been able to stand each other.

Jørgen Michaelsen: Well, to put it briefly and a bit simplistically, I imagined that Richard Dawkins' idea of the meme could supplement ideology criticism with a sorely needed element of paranoid motivation – compare it with Hegel and Darwin, as Bente was saying.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: Paranoia?

Jonathan Øre [has come in and soundlessly closed the door behind him]: Hello-hello! Are you sitting here conspiring?

Herdis Madeleine Heile: Not at all. We're sitting talking about modifications and genetics and Asger Jorn. Jørgen is going to write an article for *Øjeblikket*.

Jonathan Øre: Aha ... But I thought someone said paranoia?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Yes, I was explaining my idea of how one could reconstruct ideology critique in a new powerful way by coordinating it with elements from memetics.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: That stuff about paranoia sounds very interesting. But I'm not quite sure how it connects up with memetics. Couldn't you briefly describe what memetics is?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Yes, but first I'd just like to add something in relation to paranoia, for in that respect it's important not to get the wrong idea. Of course I'm not thinking about the palaeo-modern paranoia that has to do with the big Other, surveillance and all sorts of configurations of gazes and voices and awful Things installed in some kind of central *unheimlich* position. I'm thinking more about a kind of sober model psychosis that could be used, on ideology-critical premises, and thus help to transform them so that the criticism can avoid being buried alive in its own parallel unreality and could seriously achieve total resistance to absorption into the capitalist body, at least to start with. But it almost goes without saying that the development, maintenance and expansion of such a model-psychotic state requires continued experiments. And in this respect I'm convinced that art that works seriously can contribute something.

Bente Zelda Vang: But Hans didn't get an answer about the memetics business.

Jørgen Michaelsen: Memetics is the science of the memes, just as genetics is about the genes. According to Richard Dawkins a meme is a unit of cultural heredity that is propagated everywhere in a culture. The meme is a so-called replicator whose only aim is selfishly to produce more and more copies of itself. The memes struggle among themselves to colonize the limited mental space constituted by human brains. They are transferred, or 'infect', through imitation. This means that you can only talk about a meme when it is articulated materially. A meme can't just lie 'latent' in a brain; fundamentally it only exists when it is manifested in the form of objects or behaviour that can be copied. It isn't so easy for memetics to define the meme as a concrete entity. As examples Dawkins mentions melodies, theories, catch-phrases, clothing fashions and techniques for making pottery or building bridges. One meme which, according to Dawkins, has had particular success in cultural evolution, is the God meme. When you see how counter-productive religion is in terms of elementary human interests, the spread of the phenomenon is best explained by reference to memetic transmission.

Henning Pant: As far as I know Dawkins also says that the genes are selfish. But the memes are even more selfish?

Jørgen Michaelsen: Some memeticists claim that the memes took over the 'control' of the evolutionary process that led to the present human being, when *Homo habilis* appeared around 2,500,000 years ago. This hominid is said to have been the first with mimetic behaviour. Since then there has been an opposition between the selfishness of

the genes and the memes. But at any rate it's the memes that are dominant now.

Bente Zelda Vang: Isn't it a fundamental problem for memetics that the meme is such a diffuse entity? At what 'level' does the God meme materialize, for example? Is it to be found mainly in a cathedral, in the Bible or perhaps more generally in the actual religious individual's pious behaviour? Would there be any point in unleashing memetics in an ideology-critical perspective if the theory is not even able to determine the scope of its object?

Odette Clotilde Pollen [has entered after knocking with demonstrative quietness on the door]: Well, well. No, a whole crowd! What are you up to? It's nice and warm here.

Jonathan Øre: It's a little talk about modifications, with special reference to Jorn, the Situationists, genetics, memetics and other good things. I've just arrived too. You can squeeze in here.

Odette Clotilde Pollen [sits down]: Oh, thanks. Go on, go on!

Henning Pant: Jørgen has been asked to write a text for *Øjeblikket*. And we're sitting discussing various ideas.

Jørgen Michaelsen: I imagine that the difficulty of determining the meme's 'extensional logical status' doesn't by any means have to be an ideology-critical disadvantage – on the contrary. It could be a point that you have to work with a methodological ambivalence as the basis of a model-psychotic strategy.

Odette Clotilde Pollen: While I remember – Bertha, Siska and Robert said they would look in, they just had to finish up. Sorry ...

Jørgen Michaelsen: That's quite OK.

Herdís Madeleine Heile: I think you've really got hold of a lot of things, and I'm quite sure a very fine text could come out of it. But I just have one question: what I hear you saying is that art should be political, but in another way than it is right now. But a model-psychotic ideological critique surely must be able to point to an opponent if it is to engage in politics. I think Bente also touched on this before, when she tried to question you about the meme. At a sort of low practical level I just feel that I could easily get a bit confused ...

Jørgen Michaelsen: But it's also only a working hypothesis that has to borrow its way forward, and then the whole thing could easily develop in a confusing way. But a model-psychotic approach must of course relate alertly to the all-embracing preservation crisis that is a crucial feature of present-day ultra-diffuse capitalism. The ever-growing quantity of products is accompanied by an extreme accumulation of late-modern theories and interpretations that create anxiety among the public. Neither institutions, organizations nor quite ordinary people know any longer what to do with themselves, and in that way they become active participants in the preservation crisis and its innumerable mythological spaces and folds. Anyone who claims that this

society is meaningless has no grasp of the matter at all. On the contrary, there's so much meaning in all this that it could even raise the level of the oceans a good bit above the level of the Pleistocene epoch. I imagine the opposite, that a memetic ideological critique could help to dry out the meaning.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: [has notice that someone is knocking at the door]: Oh, that must be the others. YES!

Bertha Underhammer, Siska Stegger and Robert Remus Hektor [enter all talking at once, hugging those already present, who have got up]: Well-I never-what-a-gathering-hey-how-cool-to-see-you-and-what are-you-sitting-here-doing?

Mikael Park-Hendriksen: We've been all around the space of artistic reflections.

Hans Olifant Kastrup: Jørgen is going to write a text about modifications for *Øjeblikket*, so we got talking about it.

Bertha Underhammar: Interesting – a shame we didn't make it, but hey, what a hectic week this has been. There's just been so much.

Siska Stegger [in a cryptic tone]: Bertha's maybe got a new job ...

Bertha Underhammar: Fuck, you promised not to say anything! Well, but I can tell you more about that later, if you can be bothered listening. On the other hand I can tell you that Siska and Robert are moving together again — but there's nothing new about that, if I can put it that way [laughs with the others, while everyone puts on their overcoats].

Robert Remus Hektor [looking at his mobile phone]: Shall we get going? We're a bit busy. Sorry for the delay, by the way.

Henning Pant: Jørgen, that was damn fine. How about yourself – did you get a bit more clear about it?

Jørgen Michaelsen: I enjoyed it a lot, and in no circumstances will there be problems with the amount of material. I'll certainly be able to think of something.