

The Triumph of Quality

by Jørgen Michaelsen

For the time being, the concept of artistic intersubjectivity is totally immersed in a brain-dead quagmire of contemporary utility, and apparently going deeper and deeper into it. All things considered, some overall identitarian fundamentalism aimed at its own radical transformation or even abolition is unfolding behind the back of the prevailing positions. But what does indeed count as legitimate preferences of identity in an age oscillating between parodic-serious hysteria and institutional apathy? For what it is worth, the contingent strategy of anarchic restriction might serve as a matrix of metaphorical resonance, producing an allegorical point of departure for the accumulation of an event structure. Allegory puts up a stop sign before the promise of transcendence attached to the symbolic and aesthetic aspects of 'artistic being.' On the other hand, harmful transcendent spin-off often proves to be more useful than useful, all-too-useful compensation of immanence. In any event, there certainly is an aspect of moving beyond the referential ontology of capitalist aesthetics. We know that somebody or something has to die. Generally, when we are aware of the obscenely imbecilic pressures of social discourse closing in on us, this announces an experience of so-called scepticism. This is indeed a quasi-precarious situation. Any generator or incubator of pseudo-scandalous politico-quixotic impulse must be attacked. However, the non-paraphrasable potential of discursive prestige should expand according to its own laws, as it were—or even better, it rather should not expand at all. Some honey-tongued *soi disant* neo-plebeian might claim that at least some possibility of moral expansion will always remain. We might argue that this is highly doubtful in so many ways. Worst of all is the fact that diagnostic consciousness or imagination is a double-edged sword. At one level, the parallelisms of seemingly globalized identity are very often supposed to be some sort of self-hijack degree zero, and thus constitute some endless promise in terms of alienation. In the end, evidently, there simply is no adequate source of otherness available. It would seem that sameness is basically all there is. On the other hand, it is equally questionable whether the a priori fetishes of cultural interconnectedness are really as artistically adequate as they would appear. In any case, the idea that creative excess is somehow socially useful seems to rest on a number of misunderstandings of art and the function of artistic practice in a cultural context. But let us pause to ask: Should critique merely be conceived of as benign fluidity or integral non-decoration with a pious promise? Even so, all critical practice surely has its moments of more or less involuntary proliferation. One might even find oneself confronted with no less than a self-explanatory *jeux d'esprit*. Now, of course there is no temptation here to be resisted at all. Basically, it should not be a surprise that no one has yet made any thorough investigation of potlatched patterns of critical production simply from the

point of view of virtual irritation. It is high time that the still prevailing logic of dumb repetition was broken in order to be developed into substrate for anti-capitalist mutation. Suffice it for now to say that the *modus operandi* of transformative politico-cultural diagnosis must relentlessly be put through a permanent process of prophylactic self-translation. There should be no camouflaged withdrawal into 'pure' taste of conflict.

A natural first response against this is to say that 'another world' will only be possible for the theorist or the sufficiently skilled conversationalist. As has been noted, critical appropriateness has its own preventive ways of distribution. Contemporary cultural institutions openly display contempt for normal people's integrity in terms of meaningful intelligence, and thus pose a threat to democratic life. Debates over the quality of mediation in terms of human happiness or modes of dissatisfaction are interesting, but they are merely minor skirmishes in a much larger theatre of ideological entanglement that seems invariably to be focused on the intrinsic value of pre-established conflict as much as they are determined by diffuse effects of claustrophilia. There is a downward spiral of multivalent reciprocity and absence of essential interest; new tools of penetrative reflection must be developed in order to map out the territory of utilitarian obscurantism we are confronting. But two questions remain: First, is it possible to deal critico-ideologically with the abysmally unbearable pain of socialist banality? Second, to what extent may this type of pain be perceived of as a phantom phenomenon in the first place? Apparently, the unspoken suggestion is that politico-ideological thresholds of pain must somehow be adjusted or structurally transgressed in order to affirm a predefined body of historical exclusion. One simple argument against this is that conditions of ideological pain or bathos may be immensely productive and thus highly valuable. To all intents and purposes, we should not subscribe to whichever late capitalist canon of banality, or non-banality for that matter. To put it one way, incommensurability in reverse gear is no incommensurability at all. It is precisely the horrors of true creativity that form the key to the liberation of politico-cultural heritage from the delusions of merely conscious reproduction. Unexploitable alienation, say, in the form of pompous premature laughter, might very well be way beyond the dominant economy of integral self-solidification. As a critical strategy, this may also be associated with a more or less complex experience of being buried alive: of suffocation and slow death. Indeed, we might know all too well how to describe the components of this condition. Therefore, we should perhaps replace the question "*what* is slow death?" with the question "*when* is slow death?". Middle-class academics may or may not experience a vague anxiety when functional approach apparently implodes into historical approach, and what was originally a case of chronic monolithicity becomes a scenario of superseded specificity altogether. Hm, the academics may say. However, one must know one's own alienation inside out. Exclusionary form and inclusionary content are mutually interpenetrative. This is the historico-critical Klein bottle that cannot be assimilated into the parasitic sameness of the Imperial academic Left. The rest is just mental moments of reproductive entertainment, cleverly dosed by postcultural capitalism ever more in contradiction with itself. Thus, there is a limit to negativity, if necessary. The well-established endlessness of the critico-interpretative classes has forced upon us a

synchronic regime of institutional overconsumption. The only revolution possible in this context must address the overall ontology of parody beyond parody which we are trying to outline in this video. We must oppose this intrinsically reactive accumulation of collective signs. Ultimately, everything other-initiated must be rejected. In terms of mental exploitation in a basic sense, the sameness fetish of contemporary middle-class academicism is a dead end at best, and a virulent elitist hallucination at worst. Indeed, this is a dry delirium which is not one at all. We shall carry on with our task. We shall continue writing dialectically beyond the individual and collective economy of integral self-solidification. Writing may be about the difficult hinge where the mirage of freedom and stark unfreedom meet. As has been noted, only the hypocrite needs the mitigation of ideological resurrection. Since he or she is apparently capable of combining full emotional interiorization with strong teflon-esque determination, something bordering on the organic may emerge. On the other hand, the hypocrisy in question will not prove to be a picnic in terms of historical mediation. Interpret it so: too much water has flowed under the bridge of crypto-conformist victimization for a return to mobilizable discrepancy to be feasible. The hypocrite is historically abandoned, clinging pathetically to his or her private narratives of masturbatory physiology, or even less than that. Paradoxically, this may prove to be an advantage in the era of triumphant postcultural citizen-organisms. The hypocrite will always be there, displaying his or her total indifference to farcical experience vis-à-vis the mechanisms of extremely advanced capitalism. Besides, it is never other people who die. On the contrary, they live on mercilessly. Perhaps the temptation here would be to equate them with the masses, and declare them the true tormentors of history. But when all is said and done, this is precisely besides the point.

The prevailing canons of artistic conformity have generated an affirmative world-view of mere parasitical curiosity. Now, how do we explain the attractive power of official value displayed in many contemporary cultural producers? Moreover, how to surpass one's own chosen models and strategies of still unsatisfactorily plebeian uncertainty? How to keep critico-theoretical consciousness adequately uneducated? How to radicalize the metaphysics of objective improvement? It seems that outmoded or fictive solutions are in abundance. To a solipsist (or an organized group of solipsists), anything may constitute an event. And yet, no intervention or counter-transference is provoked. Indeed, art might very well matter madly. Even so, a question arises: On what level of bio-powerlessness may post-bureaucratic expressivism operate? If we just throw out unintended symmetry of humiliation through the door of macro-reproductive self-repair, it will keep coming straight back through the window of disillusioned other-repair. Indeed, new modes of artistic training must take account of that. One might assume that nothingness is far from everything. In fact, it is often believed that artistic honesty under certain hitherto unobserved historical circumstances might constitute a moment of eschatological essence. Nowadays ethico-aesthetic practice often seems to end up in a veritable desert of non-profit obesity. An original idea is an open target of a great many parasitico-ideological forces which impinge on it, and very often penetrate its very core. Criticizing and correcting the premises and effects of this upside-down consumability has long ago become part of contemporary practice. This indicates a

situation where cultural consciousness is heavily haunted and terrorized by specific ideals or designs of cognitive utility. Then again, I do not hold with the idea that true dialectical satisfaction is only slightly beyond semiotic catastrophe, since this would presuppose some structure of all-too-perfect feedback, as it were. Obviously, there might be an endeavour to produce a fatal space of verbose hesitation. And it is worth while asking why the prevailing standards of subversive sterility could not be transformed into something more sincerely chaotic. It would seem that one woman's institutional ontology is another woman's potlatch—which is to say that historical gender might not allow for a proper equivalent for immediate non-utility within the elements of socio-cultural transformation identified by gender itself. Nevertheless, the exceptional gravity of much allegedly post-theoretical provocation is often absolutely inappropriate to the quasi-dialectical ecology of political-example-versus-counterexample. On the other hand, it has actually been asserted that strategically beefed-up apoliticism is conceivably a seed without a well-defined genetic programme; accompanied by an ever-increasing cacophony of postcultural interpellations, it could grow into many different plants, abundantly nourished by the spin-off of ontological capitalism. Here we are, then, confronted with the ever-thickening layers of peri-political appropriation beyond success and failure. In this dreadful yet oddly promising context, writing appears to arise from ambivalence rather than terror. At one level, there is a desire to write; from another point of view, one might suggest there is nothing to write home about—even if this may seem too blasé or culturally overdue. At any rate, just as we must all learn to love the *danse macabre* of imperative plagiarism, we must also know how to deal with the fiercely neurotic officialese of 'otherwise relaxed' cultural institutions. One might suggest that this condition be associated with unrealized critico-creative resources and critiqued in those terms. However, we must not get carried away by misplaced proliferative enthusiasm. The mechanisms of agreed-on desire for official value still constitute a somewhat obscure object, occasionally calling for an apparently nonproductive attitude. More importantly, making that desire part of cultural practice means, of course, changing it, just as making aspects of practice part of official value entails organically important but not always realistic or indeed relevant structures of anticipation. Let us not by any means leave the impression that we should develop a quasi-Pavlovian reaction towards this mediocre cruelty in the service of intellectual tourism which is one of the unavoidable characteristics of the elite class in postcultural capitalist society. Strange as it may seem, the members of this class generally consider themselves defenceless. Some unorganized scepticism will often suffice to throw the particular individual into a mental state of exception way beyond the merely Pearl Harbor-esque. This example illustrates the extent and nature of the prevailing ideological entanglement. The otherwise intelligent masses and their auxiliary academics are all being duped into accepting and reproducing the status quo. To put it another way, there is only formulaic resistance to this omnipresent and omnivorous monolith of reciprocal affirmativism. Even so, anti-capitalist strategy must prevail by remaining an inalienable insult to the dominant monolith of hallucination-without-opposition. In other words, all that is still airy should not be allowed to solidify ideologically into this ever-expanding bloc of lukewarm neo-totalitarianism.

It is highly questionable whether the only cure for the evils of explicit or implicit postcultural consensus is the production of more consensus. Indeed, explicit anti-consensus may very well be seen as just another trope for poetic talent. Time to get serious again. For what it's worth, there are usually some notable exceptions though. The key to resolving the paradox lies, I believe, in drawing a sufficiently tentative distinction between what I shall call the potential embarrassment of a concept's gladiatorial value and the poetico-political meltdown of unambiguously incestuous discourse. The idea is that embarrassment in this case belongs to the epi-spectacular, while meltdown rather belongs to the sub-spectacular. Attempts have been made to sophisticate the more organic aspects of both and synthesize them into a minor totality of quasi-carnavalesque ontology. I am not the slightest convinced about the alleged excellences of the idea that the mechanics of ambivalence may somehow be transformed successfully into relevant molecular practice; the molecule usually turns out to have a conspicuously distributive face, to put it one way. All the same, the traditional view of irritative honesty as motivationally intentional cannot be upheld without explaining the language of contradiction as mediational accident. If we wish to liquidate the enthusiasm secreted by contemporary champions of schizo-idyll, then we must first attack their liaison with critical thought. We must invent strategies to translate or cannibalize the sediments of utopian pain we confront in our environment. In terms of unintended meaning, it seems as if the blur between historical experience and ethical illusion is now the only game in town—a sort of second nature that operates by and appeals for legitimation to the logic of a residual first nature of self-punishing critical satire. In many cases, the wager of artistic practice contents itself with victories over 'linguistic production' or 'moral panic,' but simply exposes the seeming uninterruptedness of bureaucratic ontology as a relevant problem to be explored, or enjoyed. On the other hand, the terrain of lukewarm rigour is often strewn with the rubble of hardline heterology, and, consequently, a symptom of postcultural obscenity appears to be a tendency in 'consensus discourse' to abandon the borders of already depleted 20th-century *jouissance* for the grotesquely teflon-like fetishes of surplus prophylaxis. Other things being equal, there may be a direct short circuit between well-intended obscenity and blind trust though. Suppose that bureaucratic enthusiasm masquerading as everyday language might serve as a vehicle for some minority's sadistic hate of banal normality. It has been argued that false ideas are never that false at the end of the day; there will always be a remainder of truthful inaccessibility. We could reach this verdict: the overthrow of the prevailing regime of post-ironic conformity will not necessarily require a specific notion of dynamic conceptualization. We might want to build tentatively beyond that. An apt illustration of the difference between phantom intelligence and hypocritical imagination may be the distinction between shameless consciousness in terms of strategic degeneration and the matrices of historical discomfort in terms of irrecoverability as such. To some people, the present-day dictatorship of endless stupidity and opulent ugliness must fully be considered fair game for artistic satyriasis—or else be subjected to a mercilessly sober critique. Then again, ice-cold judgement may be a double-edged sword. In terms of artistic experience, a body of interdependent positions of functional transparency is clearly needed for confrontational opacity to succeed adequately.

The supersession of inter-subjective experience may be intensified by making all communication monolithically monologic. However, one never knows what the proletarianization of the signs is about until it is too late. One may wind up finding oneself dizzy with opacity, and thus uncomfortably Stalinized, as it were. Historization must take into account not only the arbitrary limitations of mental constructions, but also the adequate exploitation of academic friendships and institutional alliances. Nowadays, the method of 'strong' non-intervention is increasingly put in a pedagogical dilemma. Anyway, apparently, there is no guarantee that this complex of dialectical embarrassment is not a straightforward case of virtual psychosis. If nothing else, we may rest assured that the present-day dictatorship of diffuse yet omnipresent dyscharisma will be tomorrow's dictatorship of overall reactive schemes. In some ways, human energies today often come to seem a form of self-humiliation out of control. Suddenly, the desire for grand ideological gratification is lost in a nostalgia for the old extinct questions of origin and telos. It seems as if all attempts to ground the world of official expressions at a level of regenerated modernism have failed. Consequently, some actors in post-cultural space display an impressively stoic approach; their behaviour is fully voluntary. In other words, the pathos of entropy should not be mistaken for structural temptation. What it really boils down to is that although we are dealing with an enigma without properties, as it were, there is a feeling of historical catastrophe which permanently mutates into unavowable common nonsense. Be that as it may, in spite of so many historico-metaphysical failures in terms of divers forms of reproduction or transmission, my experience and the grandeur of my task at least convinces me that essentially all is well. It seems clear that *ressentiment*, as a specific mode of mental utilitarianism, has been absorbed into a state of quasi-utopian or otherwise parallel fragmentation. Potentially, protest becomes average expectable exploitation, and exploitation becomes average expectable protest. In terms of artistic self-motivation, an obvious characteristic of 'pure interiority' is its gargantuan appetite which enables the art producer in question to appropriate, or discursively 'consume,' large quantities of contingent influence from her or his socio-cultural environment. We observe the loops of hazardousness and more or less ill-informed discourse, and we detect the creative process and its enemies among artists, ordinary people, military and commercial elites, as well as the intellectual aristocracy. There are slightly unconvincing excursions into the politico-poetic territory of ethical masochism, and the existing system of ideological hallucination is abysmally modified beyond the referential consequences of premature clarification. And there is no grandiose conclusion—only a somewhat desperate attempt to accentuate, and thus in a way anticipate, that the critical mechanisms of interpretative temptation are always succeeded by a body of elitist-plebeian innuendos, as it were. Should we steer a middle course between the Scylla of postcontemporary capitalist absurdity and the Charybdis of anticapitalist affirmationism? Reasons for radical elaboration may range from an increasing odium of compulsory infantilization and escalation in self-demonization to spectacular or simple forms of hope and even expectation for an experience of historical detraumatization. The ambivalent brains of the living dead may weigh like an elitist excrement on the heuristic value of big bathetic business, or they may not.

And frankly, my dear, cozy, self-satisfied fellow producers, I do not give a damn. This may be the beginning of a common framework of sublime aversion, or it may not. There is a mammoth surplus which does not even yet exist. Let quality triumph, and critique take comfort.

2012