Concepts for Art History in a changing world

In an article written in 2002 by the art historian T J Clark he confronted his own past with a self-recognition that he had failed to "get right" certain works of art that were compellingly "contemporaneous" in his earlier years[1]. This was not a mere personal reflection but something of a commentary on certain trajectories of art historical work. For Clark then, the work of the 1960's with Warhol as an example could only be empty because it came to represent a failed project of art in modernity. In so far as art in modernism was caught between a fine line of critiques of spectacle and being part of, absorbed into the spectacle itself, it had nowhere else to go.

This view with which Clark battled throughout his connection with the Situationists and informed to the point of "haunting" his books such as *"The Painting of Modern Life Paris in the Art of Manet and his followers"* and *"Farewell to an Idea"*[2] appears to have infected more recent appraisals of contemporary art, commentators upon which cannot seem to shake off the aspirations of modernism. As Steve Edwards suggests in his recent review of Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh *Art since 1900: Modernism, Anti-Modernism, Postmodernism*[3] "These writers seem more and more

to confuse their own lack of sympathy for contemporary art with the capitalist colonisation of the avant-garde. They just don't like what the "young ones" are doing…"[4]

I am interested in what lays behind this difficulty and whether a different approach to the object of art is required, one that offers a way beyond the modernist canon and the philosophy, which ultimately underpins art historical discourse.[5]

 The impetus for Clark's article was a work by the American video artist Tony Oursler, entitled *The Influence Machine*, a large- scale outdoor installation of a face projected onto a cloud of water vapour, apparently talking garrulously about the Internet. It seems to be a ghostly apparition unable to be laid to rest in the interminable, unstoppable and ultimately undeletable world of new technology. Clark's question in the article is how visual artists can respond (in his terms *critically*) in a world that is already saturated with images. Clark's answer, in part, is to recognise that the visuality of the present era, coupled as it is to the speed and rhythms of consumerism, is nevertheless still a culture attached to the word, even as this word is collapsed into "*verbiage*". The fact that forms of knowledge still require an attachment to the word, however distorted, enables Clark to at least grasp a space for the dialectic with visuality and virtuality to keep awake, or is it re-awaken, the critical project to, in the words of Marx, "teach the petrified forms how to dance, by singing them their own song".[6]

Zygmunt Bauman has characterised contemporary culture as "*a culture of disengagement, discontinuity and forgetting*" where social relations and civic society are largely propelled by "consumerist syndrome".[7]

According to Bauman, "'consumerist syndrome' applied to culture centres upon an emphatic denial of the virtue of procrastination, of the "delay of satisfaction' precept-those foundational principles of the 'society of producers' or 'productivist society'". [8]

It may indeed be hard to think how a "critical" culture of the image can find ways to do its work in such an "abbreviated" culture. And where the aesthetic is everywhere except it seems in art works, there is need to (re) think what might constitute a "legitimate" response when desire is both cut short and accelerated at the same time.

Where a modernist social, cultural and political project was built upon the productive, substantialist human subject, arguably now the subject is not of substance but of moments and "its" pro-activity or creativity has to be grasped on that basis. Certain paradigms come to the fore suggesting the contemporary subject is a subject, not so much of the alienation and anguish the Clark still detected in Tony Oursler's piece, but of a peculiar kind of (in) difference. At the same time the indifference born of consumerism is vastly at odds with the plight of those who are literally and damagingly displaced and abused. Arguments persist of course to demonstrate the cultural consequences of late capitalism, its social imaginary, its global stream of spectaculars of "information" and absence of centre. But insofar as these arguments are based upon models of representation and a

collective *emancipation* born of the collective of "industrial", *alienation*, the question is whether they can still hold up against the plurality, fragmentation and absence of sense that *is* our world.

The "form", modes or vocabulary by which to think the subject and "its" world have been overstepped of late. It is by now well known that there has been certain shift from a thinking of the subject centred in "being"-however radical or dialectised between being and production, being and time, being and nothingness (Marx, Heidegger, and Sartre), to a thinking outside of substantiated being all together, whether in "becoming" (Deleuze), the event (Badiou), the "open" or potentialities (Agamben). Derrida's differ-ance and Nancy's various conceptualisations of "exposure", singular/plurality, spacing and touch belong here too, and it is their acknowledged debt and close reading of the "metaphysics" of modernity and a radicalised repositioning of ontology for contemporary contexts, that I aim to pursue here as a means to think another approach and a different conceptual space.

Before doing so I make a brief return to one great thinker of modernity Walter Benjamin, precisely because of his unstinting engagement with what were the then new technologies of the visual and his exemplarity in attempting a thinking that, to return to Clark, "[would] take the forms of the present deeply inside itself, at the risk of mimicry, almost ventriloquism; but that out of that might come the possibility of critique, of true destabilization…"[9]

For Benjamin, the destruction of experience as holistic *Erfahrung* in the era of modernity with its production of commodities plucked from "context" and instantly archaic is double-edged. It *disperses* the conditions for the transmissibility of tradition, which Benjamin characterises as *aura*, but at the same time provides transformed opportunities for auratic perception. "The disconnected moments of lived experience, now free from tradition, lie available for new and potentially restrictive modes of recombination."[10]

This is why photography and film are so important for Benjamin, precisely because they are both within the "destructive" regimen of modern life but also can be understood in the critical context of new possibilities for perception.

This is where the concept of "innervation" becomes so important for Benjamin. This is in sum, the transposition of the those mimetic impulses between the human body and "first nature" technology from more archaic times, the residue of which have now become individualised and fetishised, onto the plane of the collective experience of modernity. Here bodies are "automatonised" to the rhythms of modern urban life, including factory conditions, but such transposition can enable a "play" within those conditions, in the senses both of "movement" dispersing the "automatic" responses demanded of modern conditions and the transforming possibilities of "play" as the sphere of non-instrumentality within technology.

Miriam Hansen explains the significance of innervation for Benjamin first in terms of the context in which bourgeois culture had come to treat modern technology as "second nature".

"Benjamin does not assume an instrumentalist trajectory [for technology] from mythical cunning to capitalist-industrialist modernity. The telos [of the] ... 'domination of nature' defines the second, modern technology only from 'the position of the first', which sought to master nature in existential seriousness, out of harsh necessity. By contrast Benjamin asserts [that the] "second technology rather aims at the interplay between nature and humanity. And it is the training, practicing of, rehearsal of this interplay that Benjamin pinpoints as the decisive function of contemporary art, in particular film...Film has the potential to reverse, in the form of play, the catastrophic consequences of an already failed reception of technology.[11]

Technology was conceived, as "second nature" from the point of view of the domination of nature as an end in itself and "bourgeois culture had been complicit with that process by disavowing the political implications of technology, treating it as "second nature" while fetishizing an ostensibly pure and primary nature as the object of individual contemplation."[12] The point is to recognise the residual yield, the play and movement of photography and film as a means to reconnect with those mimetic impulses of non-sensuous similarity, transposed to the context of the modern experience of the always potentially dispersed, moving "crowd"; to put the "play" or, in other terms, the heterogeneity of historical layers of perception, back into modern experience.

"…film offers a chance...to bring the apparatus to social consciousness, to make it public. "To make the technical apparatus of our time, which is second nature for the individual into a first nature for the collective, is the historic task of film."...Innervation as a mode of regulating the interplay between humans and (second) technology can only succeed if it reconnects with the discarded powers of the first, with mimetic practices that involve the body as the "pre-eminent instrument" of sensory perception and (moral and political) differentiation...[13]

The key to film lies in its constructed nature as a matrix of sequencing, inter-relating, editing and cutting of images. The medium of film matches the transitivity of technology as "second nature" but brings this into play with the distraction of its audiences, distraction being both an openness to new possible configurations of perception other than fixed co-ordinates and as Sam Weber suggests, as dispersion or strewn-ness,[14] connects with the way of being of the masses, such that technology and bodily innervation may come together.

It is precisely in this sense that Benjamin reads technology through concepts, which are "completely useless for the purposes of Fascism" whilst being "useful for the formulation of revolutionary demands in the politics of art[15]." Fascism is capable of harnessing "second-nature "technology for auratic ends. Fascism can "attempt to organise the masses without affecting property relations", by "giving these masses not their right but their

chance to express themselves".[16] That chance comes most emphatically by way of "self-expression".

Benjamin has been at pains to recognise the proletarian masses as necessarily "dispersed" by the "atomising" forces of modernity, whereby bodily organs are "disaggregated" into various "functions". The point is not to disavow this by a "false consciousness" of an aggregated body, but to turn this around by recognition of a new topography of perception which demands an open field of politics which may shoot a star of hope across history.

It is this difference between a consumerist pleasure in the image as an assumed "self"-*expression* which Benjamin analyses to and in its extremis and a *productive resistance* to such assumptions which Benjamin captures through notions of "dispersal" and "distraction" as positive articulations of subject and image that interests me here. The conflict between the pervasiveness of the technological image giving us "back" an assumed expression of our selves and the potential to engage with such technology for critical intervention remains, but we have to think of it on the basis of a new premise.

Insofar as Benjamin's "dispersal" was premised upon a productive resistance based upon class divisions which presaged the overcoming of alienation to form a new totality it belonged an age of modernity which can no longer apply. It is on the basis of *difference* rather than *totality* that we a now required to think.

It is on this basis that Derrida will "divide" the time of technology. Nothing is more spectral than technology, but Derrida "divides" this spectrality between the unremitting speed and global scope of the apparition (that which characterises contemporary culture for Bauman) and the unpredictability and "out-of-time" of the "other-to-come" which crosses time which is the "other" mark of the spectral. For Derrida, hope is not in interrupting the pervasive unruly self-propelled course of technology in order to produce a new "programme" but in recognising how technology interrupts itself in its out-of-jointed-ness and that within this "differ-ance" of technology, criticality and the "messianic" "to come" of justice emerges.

Such hope is found in the interruptive "vibration" *against* whilst *within* the onslaught of the virtualisation of the tele-technological.

"We have suggested that the event we are prowling around here hesitates between the singular "who" of the ghost and the general "what" of the simulacrum. In the virtual space of all the tele-techno-sciences, in the general dis-location to which our time is destined...the messianic trembles on the edge of this event itself. It is this hesitation, it has no other vibration, it does not live otherwise, but it would no longer be messianic if it stopped hesitating; how to give rise and to give place, still, to render it, this place, to render it habitable, but without killing the future in the name of old frontiers..."[17] It is a question of whether art and the reading of it can assist in this.

Arguably Nancy's task has been to demonstrate how art can.

Nancy's thought is important because it starts from the premise that there *is* an absence of sense, as formerly constituted on the basis of foundation, totalising concepts, signifier and signified or world-view and that insofar as there is culture it is a multiplicity of difference and insofar as there is community it *is* as singularities always already in plural relation to each other, touching but continually effracting, bifurcating, separating in their "ex-position". Out of this Nancy thinks a new "creation" of sense, a sense of creation that hitherto representational and totalising theories have only repressed.

Insofar as Benjamin was presenting a transformation of the bodily sensorium in which technology played its part and which technologies of photography and cinema critically (re) presented in a *mimetic* sense, Nancy traces the relationship between bodily sense and signifying discourses against the grain of our ultimate reliance upon a thinking of this in terms of representation and mimesis. At the heart of Nancy's thinking is a "different demand of sense".[18]

 Insofar as fundamental ontologies as unifying principles, only serve to *repress* the *multiple and fragmentary nature of the sense* that the world is today, Nancy "allows" sense to emerge as "the multiple, fragmented and fragmentary real of the world to which thought is ceaselessly exposed at its limit."[19] Sense for Nancy takes us to a limit, which provokes a rupturing of signification; a rupturing of presence and on this basis we have to re-think an ontology and ethics of being in the world together.

This ontology is based upon the fragmentation of sense and the concept of self and community as a "singular plurality".

"…the analysis of existence is opened to the workings of a singularity that is always already in relation to a plurality of other singulars…subjectivity… happens in moments of encounter with each unique and irreducible other…community thus obtains in this plurality of singularities each existing on the basis of its relations with others, which makes it irreducible to systematic universal analysis…"[20]

Like Derrida, Nancy will resist the totalising or programmable gesture but without falling into the potent individualism of the fragment. Singularity is always already at the same time a plurality of differ-ance which Nancy will press as distinctive ontology. Nancy is presenting a materiality which is figured as an exteriority of "spasmic" spacing in which the singularity of the subject's existence *takes place*. As such it is *exposed to* other singularities in this "field" of *plural spacing* "prior to" any substantive identification. Insofar as identity is "inscribed" it is always already "ex-scribed" in this exposure. It is from this basis that we need to understand the importance for Nancy of "touch". Touch is the modality of sense that "embodies" the thinking of contact and separation/distance. Touching is the movement from exteriority, from the outside that involves both contact and separation/distance at the same time. In order for contact to take place there has to be exteriority and distance. It is modality that "presents" the limit of embodiment where embodiment "undoes", exposed to exteriority

Within this "un-realm" of the plurality of sense and community the ethical demand of art is different. Art provides a singular experience of the *fragmentation* of sense and "worlding of plural worlds" in its capacity to interrupt and discontinue ideologies of "sense" and being.

For Nancy artworks take the "worlding" of sense, the body as singular/plural contact/separation, technics and the modality of touch to a "second-power" by delineating, by presenting (*not* representing) the sense of sense, the presentation of sense, world as fragment. For Nancy, in their admixture of *technicity* and sense, artworks present "an exposure to an irreducible exteriority or being of sense…the-contact-in-separation, touch, and exscription of sense."[21]

Going back to the Oursler we might say what matters is the particular "force" of the image, not its representational status or its evocation of the "word", "as such". It opens us to fragmentary nature (techniques, tracing, talk, vapour) that *is* our world without *collapsing* difference and in that *intimate* force of *distance* the space for criticality emerges.

What Nancy presents is a move beyond and different to those ways of approaching the "image-like" and fragmentary nature of our world as it is, which have predominated to date. These approaches either seek to delve beneath or find alternative articulations to the fragmentary "surface" to find a material ground and production in a Marxian sense or posit a world of hyper-reality and surface spectacle out of which there is seemingly no

escape. The point is not to think art as bespeaking an alternative identification beneath the "specular play" of the image or to mourn this as now impossible, but to recognise the criticality of art in responding to the fragmentary demand to expose the fragility of signified sense.

It is in this sense that the reified forms of the pervasive technological image are made to dance.

Art can do this. We just need to read it differently.

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[1] Timothy J. Clark ,"Modernism, Postmodernism and Steam," *October* 100 (2002) 154-174

[2] Timothy J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life Paris in the Art of Manet and his followers* (London: Thames and Hudson ,1985 revised edition 1999) and Timothy J Clark *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes in a History of Modernism* (New Haven USA: Yale University Press, 1999)

[3] Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900:Modernism, Anti-Modernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004)

[4]Steve Edwards, "*October's* Tomb" *Radical Philosophy* 138 (2006) 43-46

[5] Here I mean an ultimately Hegelian view of art as the (re)-presentation of the Idea the trajectory of which and its overcoming is traced by way of an encyclopaedic history

[6] Karl Marx "A contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Introduction," in *Early Writings* Karl Marx (Harmondsworth, England, Penguin Books London, 1975) 247 Quoted in T J Clark *Modernism, Postmodernism and Steam* 161

[7] Zygmunt Bauman, "Culture and Management" *Parallax* 31 (2004) 71 italics in the original

[8] Ibid p.70

[9] Clark "Modernism, Postmodernism and Steam" 161 Here we see Clark's reading of Marx as Hegelian in his proffering of the Hegelian dialectic but in materialist rather than idealist terms

[10] Graham Macphee *The Architecture of the Visible* (London: Continuum, 2002) 209

[11] Miriam B. Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema," *Critical Inquiry* 25 no.2 (Winter 1999) 320

[12] Miriam B. Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema" 320

[13] Ibid., 321

[14] Samuel Weber, "Art, Aura and Media in the Work of Walter Benjamin" in *Mass Mediauras,* Samuel Weber (California: Stanford University Press, 1996) 102

[15] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* Walter Benjamin trans. Harry Zohn. (London: Jonathan Cape, 1970) 220

[16] Ibid., 243

[17] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx,* (New York and London: Routledge 1994)169

[18] Ian James, *The Fragmentary Demand: an introduction to the Philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy*(California: Stanford University Press, 2006) 8

[19] Ibid.,9

[20] Simon Malpas, "Touching Art: aesthetics, fragmentation and community" in *The New Aestheticism* ed John J. Joughlin and Simon.Malpas, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) 91

[21] James, *Fragmentary Demand*, 222