

In defense of the analysis of everyday life: The courage of reading in times of SARS-CoV-2

Editorial

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We witness the advent of the number. It comes along with democracy, the large city, administrations, cybernetics. It is a flexible and continuous mass, woven tight like a fabric with neither rips nor darned patches, a multitude of quantified heroes who lose names and faces as they become the ciphered river of the streets, a mobile language of computations and rationalities that belong to no one.

Michel de Certeau in: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, (Certeau v).

The nature of academic writing and publishing dictates that a considerable time passes between the submission of the original texts and the eventual publication thereof. This particular issue of *Diffractions* has been in the making for quite some time and its contents were all written before what is formally called the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) which causes the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), appeared on the global scene. At the moment of writing this editorial, over 248,000 people have died world wide, many more have suffered and are suffering severe or milder health problems as a result, and perhaps even more will have fallen into poverty before all of this is over. A side-effect of the disease has been a biopolitical experiment on an unparalleled scale that has allowed – or forced depending on your perspective – governments to impose measures and limit public rights and freedoms that were largely taken for granted in some parts of the world while even further limitations were imposed in other parts. Supermarkets and large grocery stores around Europe are making record breaking profits while intensive care beds and ventilators are scarce. Refugees, particularly those in Greek refugee camps are some of the most vulnerable populations around Europe to be

confronted by this virus, living in abysmal conditions as a result of European policies that make sure further travel into the continent remains barred to them.

In the United States of America, it seems that the upcoming presidential elections will be won either by a man suggesting that he would veto medicare for all, or by a television show host who partly succeeded in rolling back what little social healthcare already exists as a residue from the Obama era, thus further translating inequality in terms of money into inequality in terms of life expectancy and health (Higgins; Simmons-Duffin). What the sociologist Erving Goffman once referred to in *Asylums, Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (1962) as “total institutions” like prisons, asylums, but perhaps also houses for the elderly and for disabled people, and sometimes even hospitals, are at special risk of not only keeping the people who live there captive against their will, but of exposing them to a biological threat that may be deadly for some during their captivity. All of this only exacerbates the unequal distribution of suffering that takes place not randomly but in accordance with already existing distributive schemes like class, race, and age.

In comparison to other places around the world, to perform acts of social distancing and self-quarantine in the richer parts of Europe and some of North America is, however, not only an injunction but a particular form of luxury as well. Indeed, I have not even begun to speak about other parts of the Americas, like Brazil where the far right president Jair Bolsonaro suggested corona to be but a little flu and where it is left to favela leaders in Rio de Janeiro to impose measures to limit the spread of the virus (Phillips). Neither have I referred to Asia, where president Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines has suggested that whoever does not follow government instructions should be shot dead by police forces, or Africa, a continent that was already projected to have enormous food shortages over this summer and is now bracing itself for both a virus outbreak and major famines (Capatides; Goodman). In other words: the everyday life of almost the entire world has changed in a matter of months not as a result of a freak occurrence but as the result of the increased inter-linkage of those lives themselves. Ever denser populations and ever more contact among them has made the eventual spread of a virus like the current one both predictable and inevitable. And in an attempt to combat that change and cling to whatever power they have, government and corporation officials are trying to keep ‘their’ populations not only healthy, but docile as well.

New forms of protest have already emerged and the first batch of critical and philosophical hot-takes has appeared (Foucault et al.). While the sweeping and less sweeping statements by renowned figures like Naomi Klein, Noam Chomsky, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and Roberto Esposito, certainly have their place in contemporary critical discourses around the disease, it is clear that all those who are theorizing on the virus and its results today are to some extent appropriating the current situation into frameworks that they had readily at hand. The state of exception, the critique of neoliberalism, the shock-doctrine and references to Michel Foucault's panopticon were all lying in wait as it were to confront the 'crisis'.

Apart from this editorial the current issue proposes to do something different. It will look at the ways in which the cultural objects that we are surrounded with in everyday life may operate as sites for critique and theorization of how those lives are led and structured. Ranging from analyses of a television series called *Transparent* (2014-present) and Stanley Kubrick's legendary *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) by Emilio Aguilar, to a collaboration between the author-artist duo Alexandra Ferreira and Bettina Wind, this issue aims to look at what can be learned from attentive readings of contemporary and less contemporary culture. We at *Diffractions* think that a certain measure of calm – the calm of attention to detail, the calm of close-reading – that comes with the work of the cultural analyst may operate as an example of how to deal with crisis.

This calm is entirely different from the docility that is demanded day in day out in the name of productive life and those living productively. Indeed, to ask for attention to the humanities today is to counter the assumption that in times of crisis only survival remains important, or that those writing in the field of culture must necessarily give way to airline officials and other large businesses demanding corporate bailouts. It is not because the humanities will have a solution to our current predicament, but because a search for that solution would benefit from the kind of questioning that the authors throughout this issue pursue, that we have chosen to go ahead with the publication of these texts. Perhaps Slavoj Žižek was right, at least this once, when he said, on *Russia Today*, that the situation that we find ourselves in today is "way too serious to be in panic" (Slavoj Zizek | Coronavirus Situation Is Way Too Serious to Be in Panic). What is needed now is a closer eye for the way in which cultural processes shape not only our present but our future as

well, and for the possibilities for intervening in those processes in a manner that is both theoretically coherent and politically effective.

The texts that are published here are examples of so many ways of pursuing these goals. The aim throughout this issue has not been to apply theory that was already available to objects of analysis, but to confront those objects in such a way that they may be conducive to new avenues of theoretical thinking and political action. To look at the contemporary from this perspective, it seems to me, would be to at once remain calm and refuse to continue business as usual at the same time. It is the calm of reading that is pursued here, not the calm of docile bodies. We hope that in reading these texts our audience will find a certain calm in return, and that these texts will operate, not so much as distractions, but instead as invitations for further thought.

The issue opens with a text by Frederik Tygstrup on *Information and the Vicissitudes of Representation*. In it, the author shows how a particular understanding of information as marketable data is crucial to a contemporary culture in which time itself is thought from within a new paradigm. Though Tygstrup does not use the term, his text is reminiscent of the Foucaultian description of an *épistémè* in *The Order of Things* (1966), and one conclusion that can be drawn from it is that an archeology concerning the sciences and economics of data and information themselves is much needed today (Foucault xxiii–xxiv). Tygstrup suggests that in an age of surveillance capitalism – a term he borrows from Shoshana Zuboff – our understanding of time is structured in such a way that there is a continuous sense of arriving a little too late to the scene of our own subjection. And if it makes sense to associate his description of how information works today with the notion of an episteme, the name he gives to the current epistemological conjunction is that of the *derivative*. His text reads like the description of a problem that may, at first, seem familiar but that involves a thorough reformulation of what it means to be represented through data today. “Data are metric indications of qualities that may, or may not, be relevant to the representation of the objects that they index”, he writes on page 16 of this issue. This remark is urgent in a time when body temperatures are ever more central to our understanding of what a human being *is*, and when sitting at home and engaging socially often means using apps such as Zoom, and Houseparty, as well as platforms like Google Hangouts, Facebook, and Twitter, allowing ever more data to be harvested from us.

Tygstrup's text is followed by Maaïke Hommes's *To Love and Not to Smother; Aliens, Love and Reproduction in Denis Villeneuve's Arrival (2016) and Christopher Nolan's Interstellar (2014)*. Drawing extensively on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy and referencing Judith Butler's latest book titled *The Force of Nonviolence (2020)*, Hommes has chosen to focus on the different ways in which notions of love are depicted in these two movies in order to show that these unorthodox and loving depictions of the alien may help rethink different modalities of what it means to relate to otherness. Working through a binary opposition between what Hommes refers to as feminine relationality and masculine imperialism, her work attempts to show how familial bonds in the form of what she calls "reproductive love" play out differently in both movies. Questions of contamination and the potentially contaminated other are at the forefront of the encounter with alterity here, and what Hommes's piece ultimately suggests is that a renewed interest in what it means to love the other is needed in order to understand how to engage the other ethically, even though it remains difficult to translate their sense of the world into ours.

When does a touch become violent, and what does it mean for me to witness such violence taking place? Moving on from love to sexuality, in *Fictitious Coercion: BDSM Practices and the Negotiation of Narrative Temporality in Transparent*, Emilio Aguilar picks up on the related concepts of consent and coercion in sexual practices. He argues that essentialist claims about safe and risky sex rooted in heteronormative understandings of what sexual practices should look like make it difficult to formulate ethically coherent notions of what constitutes consent and of when coercion is at play. Through a reading of the television series *Transparent (2014-present)* and Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, Aguilar suggests that different temporalities may exist in which consent and coercion are signified differently. Introducing the notion of "parasitic temporalities" drawn from Michel Serres' notion of the parasite, Aguilar argues that our understanding of time itself may have to undergo a process of queering in order to help grasp how consent and coercion interact in the context of BDSM practices, both fictional and real (Serres). Wondering if we ever consented to become witnesses to the violence in for example Kubrick's film, Aguilar's focus is not only on the content of the material that he studies but on the implied relationship between the viewer and the object as well. Drawing on the work of Jack Halberstam and Jessica Benjamin, Aguilar wonders how his analysis of sexual consent,

then, not only impacts our reading of Kubrick's work and the imagery in *Transparent*, but also has implications on the way that that reading itself comes about.

The next text ends our series of four on how to deal with the other and their representations. If Tygstrup worked on representations of the subject through new paradigms of information and data, Hommes and Aguilar worked on love and consent respectively, and on how to deal with mediation related to those notions in particular. In my own contribution titled *Placeholders there are: the other in the shadow of the bomb, A story in eight movements*, I turn to the traces that the other leaves after she has died. Analyzing an online image that is said to depict a permanent 'shadow' of a person who died in Hiroshima as the result of the atomic attacks during the final stages of the Second World War, I focus on the insecurities that structure our relationship with the other who has died and whose remnants are still with us today in one form or another. Throughout this text, and drawing on Judith Butler's work in *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997), I employ the concept of the placeholder to highlight the way in which images that are mediated multiple times come to stand in for a person who is lost to us (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*). I wonder how those images bring us both closer and further away from the individual who was once alive. Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida on cinders, I argue that the concept of the placeholder may help to draw our attention not to the numerical facts surrounding the attack on Hiroshima but to the way in which the loss that remains tangible both there and here has an incalculable quality to it.

Patrícia Anzini and Cassilda Alcobia-Murphy have translated, for the first time into English, some parts of one of the final philosophical works by Brazilian modernist poet Oswald de Andrade on *Antropofagia*; the cultural logic of cannibalism that de Andrade propounds. *Diffractions* is most honored to operate as a site where not only conceptual work and analyses are published but the hard work of translation itself is allowed to flourish. The publication of translations like these is particularly important because it opens up, not only one specific text, but an entire field of thought that is largely cut off from most contemporary discourses on modernism in the English-speaking field of cultural studies. Aside from the translation itself, Anzini has provided our readers with a succinct introduction into de Andrade's conceptual machinery where she introduces us to the idea that his oeuvre on *Antropofagia* consists of essentially three phases of which she calls this final one the third *dentição*. Like we saw in Hommes's work earlier on, part of de Andrade's

vocabulary centers around the duality between matriarchy and patriarchy. For de Andrade, we learn on page 83 of this issue, patriarchy is associated with a certain kind of messianism that needs to be overcome, and that will be overcome eventually with a renewed matriarchal energy introduced by the anthropophagic age that is referred to as the “matriarchal society of the machine age”. Through an elucidation of de Andrade’s work on cultural cannibalism, Anzini shows how the work of this Brazilian modernist is as urgent today as it ever was. Hers is an invitation, once more, to do the work of reading and reading well. Together with Alcobia-Murphy, Anzini has provided us with the beginnings of a translation, all we have to do now is study what was already there and appears here for the first time.

But this is not the only work on translation that can be found in this issue. Sarah Nagaty has interviewed Egyptian artist and singer songwriter Fayrouz Karawyia about the meaning of the notion of *tarab* in Arab music. In her short introduction to *Tarab in Arab music*, Nagaty notes on page 98 that a common translation of that concept would be that *tarab* “refers to traditional forms of Arabic music which are capable of inducing an emotional response”, and that the word is often interpreted to mean ‘ecstasy’. Troubling such straight forward translations, in the interview Karawyia connotes the word with a kind of deviation from trodden paths, and associates it with the possibility of reinventing, time and again, what music and song themselves can amount to. At the same time, and perhaps paradoxically, the interview highlights the way in which *tarab* is rooted in a longer tradition of religious music that has a specific background and place to it. This interview is not only meant as an interesting piece of writing in itself, but operates as an introduction to a larger audience of a concept that has received little attention in the writing of cultural analysis so far. It is our suggestion that *tarab* would benefit from more theorization, especially when it comes to its affective connotations and its religious backgrounds, but also, and perhaps most importantly, when it comes to its potential for traveling from one context to another. We hope that this interview may operate as a continuation on the path of what Mieke Bal refers to as a traveling concept that can be taken up in different contexts and spaces in order to analyze everyday cultural objects around us (Bal).

We close this issue with *Back to 0: What appears before us*, a reading by Bettina Wind of an artwork by Alexandra Ferreira that we have the honor of printing alongside the written piece. This artistic duo has given *Diffractions* the chance to broaden its scope from

the narrowly academic once more. The work that is analyzed here is part of a series titled *Imaginary Platforms* and the reading that Wind performs starts out from an interest in skateboarding and the larger economic and social contexts in which this practice takes shape. Interestingly the issue of skateboarding seems to be a recurring topic in cultural production off late with documentary films like *Minding the Gap* (2018) and feature film *Mid90s* (2018) as only some of the references that easily come to mind. Wind's piece, however, flows easily from the board on to questions of materiality and immateriality, and quickly the reader finds herself pondering questions of the parasite – Aguilar's piece is not alone here – and at that point we are only paragraphs away from references to Dorian Gray and Heinrich von Kleist. The flow of the text with the imagery represented next to it is a beautiful exercise in how to allow a work of art to speak through the writing of an analyst, connecting the most disparate references and making the entire procedure seem absolutely effortless.

The time has come to leave you to the work of reading. If this editorial has tried to say anything on its own, it is that calmness comes in many forms. One response to fear is to be meek, obedient, docile. Often this kind of response occurs when the alternative seems too daunting; when reading does not seem sufficient, when thinking for oneself becomes a frightening endeavor. Friedrich Nietzsche recognized this when he wrote in *The Anti-Christ* (1895): “[O]ut of terror, the opposite type [of human] was willed, bred, *achieved*: the domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick animal: man [...]” (5). If we have entered the age of the number, as Michel de Certeau suggests in the motto to this editorial, and if SARS-CoV-2 has made us more and more aware of the potential hazards that our numbers cause, let us make sure that we inspect the consequences of this shift away from the individual and the name. I hope that the texts in front of you will be nourishing in that regard as well, and would like to emphasize that, though they are the work of many hands, these texts are original because of their authors and the courage they mustered of paying attention to the everyday, the colloquial, the common. They are not meant as distractions in dire times, much less as solutions to the problems we face today, but as invitations to be bold and read.

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