

You are always someone else's monster

Lucien Massaert

Paraphrasing Goya's oft-quoted title "the sleep of reason engenders monsters", Derrida puts forward a variant, "reason watches over a deep sleep, in which it has a stake". Reason itself seeks a certain blindness, a certain forgetfulness. An appeal to reason will therefore not in itself prevent you from sleeping. Indeed, that sleep might well be the sleep of a monster always about to be reborn, as shown by numerous recent world events. I hope to appeal here to a wakeful reason. I shall only be aiming to effect a minute displacement in the terms of the statement which has brought us together — underlining for instance the polysemy of the concept of monster.

The argument as presented to this working group enunciates an epistemological slant on research, theory and thought. Such an epistemological slant presupposes that those who wrote or thought out the argument have some knowledge in the area of (let us say) scientific research, or theory. Based on this knowledge in scientific theory they conclude that the research or theory brought into play or produced in the arts is of a 'monstrous' nature.

This view of things at once made me think of the argument of the "methodology of artistic research" working group led by Carole Gray at the Berlin ELIA conference in 1994. This argument put forward by Carole Gray already suggested that work should focus on theories such as chaos theory, nonlinearity, the uncertainty principle, hybrid methods. All of these can only function as metaphors for the artists involved, as they are unlikely to place them within their original scientific context with anything approaching rigour.

Would anyone even think of sticking such terms to the writings of established artists from the past? Would the thinking, the reasoning, the investigations of such artists as Klee, Kandinsky, Malevich, Matisse, or closer to us, Robert Morris, Mel Bochner or Gerhard Richter, would all this research in any way profit from being dubbed chaotic, uncertain, hybrid or monstrous? Or are we to believe that a recent epistemological break separates the writings of those artists from all the interesting thinking of today?

Isn't this tantamount to a return to age-old clichés according to which art is something quirky? Mightn't ill-understood, but widely vulgarised and broadcast scientific theories such as chaos theory, with its graphic suggestions, allow a confusion with the old saw of artists' spontaneity?

The question also arises of knowing to what extent an experimental research procedure is defined *a priori*. Let us envision various possible instances. Either it is a question of developing a creative process, and describing its experimental operation in the aftermath. In this case the artist would behave in chaotic, nonlinear, uncertain, hybrid fashion in his very creating. Or else there is a pre-existing theory, let us call it 'fuzzy' for the sake of brevity. This 'fuzzy' theory is then involved in the actual creative process. That creative process itself can be either systematic or 'fuzzy'. We notice that neither of the two hypotheses, of systematicity grafted on to fuzziness and of fuzziness grafted on to systematicity, can lead to any formalisable conclusion. This leads us to favour a fourth hypothesis, that of an initial, constructed and rigorous experimental procedure, which will then be displaced in the course of the artistic work. 'Displaced' should here be understood in its strongest sense: displacement is the paradigmatic figure of the 'artistic function', of the operation of art. The theory defined initially will therefore undergo operations of displacement in the course of the experimentation. It will then be possible to describe these operations of displacement and to present them as a breakthrough in art. Art can then be thought of as research in the fullest sense of that word.

It should be noted that what is suggested each time in the arguments of working groups at ELIA conferences is an odd, simplistic partition between so-called 'hard' sciences (including the humanities) and the type of thinking brought into play by artists. Of course it is never contended that artists are incapable of constructing a proper argument. Chaotic, nonlinear, uncertain, hybrid — monstrous — thinking is always advocated.

Either this dichotomy is the work of theorists who investigate the status of our research on our behalf, taking our place, or else we as artists find it very convenient not to have to answer for the rigorous scientific status of our research. We are then falling into line with common sense: all we do is research, art is by definition research, and we need not bother about epistemology or methodology.

As we have tried to show in a few words, from the vantage point of the philosophy of science this binary opposition probably lacks the requisite preciseness. Torn from their scientific context those qualifiers clearly fail to contribute

anything specific to artists' own research. The moot point is probably that of knowing who takes it upon himself to define a theory as 'monstrous', or what 'nonmonstrous' theories serve as a foil to the ones dubbed 'monstrous'.

I cannot avoid the suspicion that the parameter being used here is actually common sense, rather than any scientific reference. Now, I would not venture to come here and allude to some issues we broach in my teaching (both undergraduate and postgraduate) at the Brussels Académie des Beaux-Arts if these issues were not precisely opposed to common sense.

One paradigmatic example, indeed even cliché, of the interrelationship between science and art is the perfecting by artists of the Renaissance of the perspective process of representation. Only in the 17th century, with Descartes and the Port Royal logic, would there be a philosophical construction able to parallel this discovery made by artists. However, it is during the same 17th century that the earliest traces of a topological thinking appeared in Leibniz. This topological thinking will be destined to break open irretrievably the line of classical thinking which the 17th century had just perfected. This heralded unheard-of representations of space, or to put it more radically, unheard-of *spaces*, spaces which probably still seem monstrous to current common sense. This common sense, which is still with us, constructed itself, somewhat unwittingly, on the basis of classical 17th century thinking. The opposition common sense/ topological thinking will be our focus here.

I should like to use the few minutes I have here to demonstrate that monsters are not necessarily as you expect them, or that there are gentle monsters and other less kindly ones, to borrow the currently prevalent manicheistic phraseology found in "U.S. made" entertainment. Mr W. and his spotless good conscience seems a prime example of that 'common' sense with regard to which what I will now try to argue is bound to appear 'monstrous'.

I think we see today effects that are monstrous in a literal sense, not in the metaphorical sense we have used so far. Such literally monstrous effects are also part of what artists have to take on. There are monstrous effects today which are the children of common sense. There are effects of 'senseless' killing¹, Le Pen, Berlusconi, Haider or Fortuin effects which need some explaining. And nothing prevents art from also conveying the ideology produced by this common sense, often unwittingly, or thinking that they are being ironical, when such irony merely confirms what it purports to deride. Chakè Matossian, a colleague and (yet) friend of mine often maintains, as did Deleuze, that common sense has tyrannical effects. "Common sense is tyranny". The reason why I introduced a topological type of thinking into my teaching is that I wished to exert a philosophical rigour — a rigour which is no less strict than the scientific variety. There is a question which has always worried me since my teens : what if the works we produce turned out in the long term to convey values which are diametrically opposed to the ones we thought we were purveying?

The question at the centre of all this is that of representation — but we will not have time to do it justice here. Perspective representation, alluded to above, albeit a major achievement by artists, may well turn out to be today the main dead-end of thinking, the main dead end of common sense and of art. Most of the images produced by so-called 'new technologies', such as computers, digital photographs, videos, follow the old perspectivistic scheme, namely the scheme of identification. This occurs within a context in which our societies have witnessed a hijacking of the pinpointing of the subjective in favour of a 'hypertrophy' of the ego. We all think in terms of images, of projective images, of identification². I will use Lacan's terms and say that we think according to the Imaginary. It is on the basis of this register of identification, of projective, hence perspectivistic images, that we relate to ourselves, to others and to the world, and also to artistic creation. Nothing abnormal so far, except that this imaginary register, by becoming hegemonic, crushes all other registers, and engenders assorted pathologies. Indeed, it is also on the basis of this overblown imaginary, register that Mister W. designs his self-centred strategy of fighting the 'monstrous', flushing out 'terrorists' from the depths of their dark caves. There are bound to be mirror effects lurking under this. Isn't it Mister W. who should be flushed out of his 'Platonic' cave, out of his planet-wide video game, out of his shadow puppet play?

I will go so far as to advance that the crux of the so-called 'visual' arts is to escape from a fascination with the image. Maybe plastic arts should not be dubbed 'visual'. This appellation indubitably reduces their scope, playing a dirty trick on them. If we described music as 'sound' or 'auditory' art, this would sound ridiculous. The plastic arts should, according to the hypothesis I am going to try and advance, articulate a discourse in which the Symbolic is not entirely overwhelmed by the Imaginary. We will have to specify what we mean by the Symbolic. In representational painting, at least since the middle ages, the role of the Symbolic has been taken on by the various articulations of the *historia*. As this narrative dimension now no longer has the same symbolic weight, it is the entire Symbolic — symbolic in that it has to shoulder the instance of the law — which is undermined in favour of a hypertrophied register of the image, or else of a hypertrophied register of the object (but I will not be able to go into this here). It is imperative to emerge out

of the device of the Platonic cave, out of the perspective device, out of the Cartesian set-up. We should develop a strategy able as much as possible to thwart imaginary alienation, to thwart the omnipotence of the ego, of narcissism.

I must say that the latest developments in art seem to go in the opposite direction. Artists seem unaware that they should ask a few questions about this socially promoted highlighting of the ego, of narcissism. It is odd to say the least that in the art of the last few decennia everything new is considered worthy of interest. But then the medium term shows us that those new things which initially evinced so much enthusiasm are soon forgotten. A modicum of critical acumen, the development of a few ethical and political, then aesthetic criteria would allow us to avoid many a pointless drifting about. We should for instance ponder the complacency with which artists today tirelessly mine the autobiographical seam. The value of the undertaking usually seeks its chief justification in a narcissistic reference: "this is interesting, since I am talking about my precious little individual history, about my family album, about my family bric-à-brac, and I am, why conceal it, ever so interesting". But then there is no reason why art should avoid the errancies prevalent in our society, and chief among them, the inflation of his majesty the subject. Nor is there any reason, conversely, why we shouldn't challenge ourselves to exert the greatest vigilance. Why should we today escape *pompier* style, when the 19th century mostly got stuck in it? "Because we are not dummies, we are brilliant, obviously!" Our little self-centredness makes us confident that our course of action cannot possibly come a cropper: indeed we can now boast an unprecedented lucidity - a self-delusion which provides additional evidence of that very omnipotence about which we are so boastful.

Working according to topological procedures has had the considerable advantage that it has allowed us to leave the realm of traditional representation. Michel Serres has provided a particularly clear definition of these procedures, by way of a metaphor: "like the weaver or the knitter who move their fingers without seeing them, in them and through them, and not in the Euclidean cube"³. Working without seeing: this reminds me of Robert Morris sumptuous "blind drawings". Likewise some of the work developed at times in our studio in Brussels consists in a manipulation of topological surfaces⁴. Or rather, instead of the voluntarism implied by the action of 'manipulating', we might say that it is a matter of slipping into —yielding to — the logic of topological surfaces to explore their possibilities.

The world of images presupposes a subject of mastery such as Louis XIV contemplating his gardens at Versailles, to use another *topos*. The topological universe on the other hand forces on us an alienated subjective position, subjected to symbolic laws which are inherent in the logic of this or that specific topological surface. The subject is reduced to the status of an ant walking the topological surface in a loop, without any possible grasp of a totality, without any possible grasp of its path, in the form of a view or of an image. Could we then say that the creative subject has turned away from his narcissism and that this creative subject is subjected to the operation of the surface? There meaning ends: in this subject reduced to the experience of the surface. Very different is our relationship to the image. Isn't this relationship to the image ever and again a specular one? Isn't this relationship to the image ever and again the relentless repetition of the experience of the initial assumption of the *infans* in the face of the specular surface, of the mirror?⁵ From a meeting with the topological surface derive entirely different subjective consequences. Identifying with the image in the mirror is clearly not the same as identifying with the possibilities of folds and furrows, of twists and turns of the surface.

Michel Serres stated that an entire world view became null and void with the appearance of topological thinking. In the eyes of science, the metrics of Euclidean space, on which our whole way of thinking depends, has since the 17th century slowly become a mere local peculiarity linked to the sole question of the measurable⁶. This metrics has never been able to account for the qualitative. It is worrying to witness such a gap in today's *episteme* (in the sphere of thinking) between scientific views and artistic modes of presentation. Science thinks in terms of topology where artists go on living in the age-old universe of representation. What meaning can be given to such a crude anachronism? This break between art and science should make us ponder. Art has thus moved away from science and thinking, to come closer to the utilitarianism at work on technology. Art like technology is at the beck and call of the reigning hypercapitalism.

Jean-François Lyotard in his work *Économie libidinale* advanced the daring idea, an idea derived from a topological conception, that there is no thickness, no libidinal theatre, no stage, no depth. There is nothing to be seen behind, no meaning, no world concealed behind appearances, the appearances of the work of art for instance. There are therefore only surface effects, effects of intensity on the surface. There are energies, intensities linked in a continuity. Theatricality is thus nothing more than the effect of a folding of the surface⁷. In the plastic work produced, there is therefore no longer any subjective will to construct a form or to refer to a theme. Indeed, thematics is the new dominant regression of these last few years. Hence, away with thematics⁸.

Those who have heard about it know that no reference is made in topology to dimensions, to size, to proportion: a surface is only defined by a counting of holes and by its orientability, by its one-faced or two-faced character. No longer linked to size, to *Gestalt*, form is now the result of operations on the topological surface, as this surface allows: slippages, displacements, the play of over-under and back-front. The under and the back slip and appear over and in front, while the over and the front disappear under and in the back. There are various modes in which the strip can be pierced, or crossed, various cases of cutting and sticking back together, etc.

This is the monstrosity I'm asking you to envisage here: a qualitative world unrelated to the identity of a measurement, but also the bringing into play of an uncompromising scientific rigour. The appearance of the monster here isn't therefore a consequence of the artist's off-hand ways, but of an attempt to obtain more rigour.

The entire coherence of a system has collapsed over this impossibility of referring any longer to the identity of a transcendent measurement. We have thus gone over to another mode of thinking. If there was one and only one eye at the centre of the perspective device, there was more crucially the possibility of reducing everything, by way of measuring, to one sole reference. Hence the possibility of decomposing and recomposing the world in an ideal fashion starting from one unit, one measurement, one reference. This metaphysics of reference has gradually disappeared, until it has ceased to exist for us today.

I for one tend to think that structuralism represented a radical move forward in the 70's and that a failure to pursue this movement amounts to a regression in thinking, a regression such as all epochs must have known them. Of course, sometimes you step back the better to jump forward. However I believe that the current return to themes, to biographism is merely a reactionary turning away, and that we need the courage to continue the movement forward involved in the questioning of narcissism by the avant-garde since Constructivism. This seems all the more urgent to me as the prevailing belief in a kingly subject⁹ embroiled in the satisfaction of his every whim is the driving force behind the hypercapitalism under which we live. This new tyranny of capital and of the kingly subject is faithfully conveyed by the old conception of representation and of narcissistic images. This is the reason why the deconstruction of that system of representation and the search for different modes of plasticity is essential. Conceptual art had found as its only solution a move away from, out of plasticity towards an appropriation of the conceptual mode. Topological modes offer us a possibility of exploring other modes of plasticity. These topological modes may not be the only ones, but I haven't encountered any other ones. They seem to us today to meet important stakes in the political responsibility of art and of its teaching.

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translation: Philippe Hunt

¹ Pierre Legendre. *Leçons VIII, Le crime du Caporal Lortie. Traité sur le père* (Paris, Éd. Fayard, 1989).

² Pierre Legendre. *Leçons III, Dieu au miroir. Etude sur l'institution des images* (Paris, Éd. Fayard, 1994).

³ Michel Serres. *Hermès V, Le passage du Nord-Ouest* (Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1980), p. 69.

⁴ For further details concerning our teaching see Lucien Massaert. "Art and Theory. An Unorthodox Approach to Teaching," in *European Journal of Arts Education*, volume III, issue 2-3, pp. 25-33.

⁵ See Jacques Lacan. "Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du Je," in *Écrits* (Paris, Éd. du Seuil, 1966), pp. 93 à 100.

⁶ Michel Serres. *Op. cit.*, pp. 67 à 75.

⁷ Jean François Lyotard. *Economie libidinale* (Paris, Éd. de Minuit, 1974), pp. 9-47.

⁸ See Pierre Legendre. *Leçons I, La 901^e conclusion. Etude sur le théâtre de la Raison* (Paris, Éd. Fayard, 1998).

⁹ For a critique of the thematic approach see among others Jacques Derrida. "La double séance," in *La dissémination* (Éd. du Seuil, 1972), pp. 276 sq.