Critique and uncertainty: The present seen from the distance around 1973

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The year of 1973 is often described as a momentous point in history. It is often singled out as a bifurcation point in the 20th Century: even if it seems to have been less dramatic than 1914 or 1945, it is regarded as the closure of the postwar boom and of the systemically-spread political upheaval begun in the late 1960s. The reasons for crediting such relevance specifically to 1973 tend to concentrate on politics and the economy, almost inevitably revolving events that held the United States as their main actor – and almost always in a dramatic fashion. If we group in the same picture the Yom Kippur war, the coup in Chile, the oil crisis and the financial crisis, the year of 1973 immediately stands out as a very dense year, a time full of gravity for the American-dominated world-system, with post-war optimism rapidly giving way to anxiety.

From the point of view of art and literary critique, however, it is perhaps not so simple to capture what that moment brought forth: it is not clear whether such growing anxiety has anything to tell about the state of critique around 1973. It is true that the field of critique was also changing, and in ways that can be retrospectively related to the surrounding societal change. But one process did openly mirror the other, and one can also see that critique’s dominating spirit of “reaction” (exercised most often in a personal fashion) did not reveal any sense of “coordination” among critics and scholars, which suggests that change...
was taking place in a rather chaotic way. As an attempt to give sense to that uncoordinated process, on this article I will outline some propositions about the relations between critique (especially literary critique) and the epistemological and political uncertainty looming around 1973. I will relate that feeling of uncertainty to a change in the perception of historical time and a simultaneous disarray in the art and literary institutions, which had until then kept untouched many of their 19th-Century assumptions. And as an explanatory description of that broad scenario I will locate that feeling of historical change not only in the academic production, but also in other less self-reflexive kinds of expression: one of my basic contentions is that around 1973, and probably only for a brief period of time, the “savant sphere” was responding to the “popular” sphere in ways that were direct and (surprisingly) positive.

The hit film *American Graffiti* was released in 1973. While it launched George Lucas, Harrison Ford and Richard Dreyfuss to fame, it was not its commercial success that would later grant its status as a classic. And a classic it is, since that in 1995 the United States Library of Congress, having claimed its “cultural significance“, selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry – so *American Graffiti* is now officially a classic, so to speak. But the source of its initial success and later recognition was not the money it made at the box-offices, but nostalgia: nostalgia for the “good old days”, for the innocent and wealthy postwar life depicted in the film, times felt to be long gone and never to be retrieved... The film was made for an audience who felt that their teenage world had vanished, a generation of nostalgic 30-year-olds who were ready to idealize their past – but the curious thing is that the year the action takes place is 1962, meaning that that past was situated mere eleven years before the film’s release. In a strictly chronological perspective, that 11-year lapse would correspond nowadays to looking back to 2002 and feeling it as a whole different epoch, a time when people dressed differently, behaved differently, when morality, habits and expectations were different, when hairstyles, technology, music and design was different... It would be like seeing 2002 as a world that is past, but we clearly do not experience that today: eleven years ago we behaved similarly, morality was pretty much the same, people’s clothes looked the same, we frequented similar places, habits were similar, design was similar, technology was on its way to become what it is now... So regardless of
the many dramatic events and technological developments that happened over the last
decade, when we look back we do not feel that society and culture were that much
different, while in 1973 things had changed so fast as to make 1962 look like a whole past
era.

Actually, in 1973 even the late 60s seemed to be far away: taking once again the
American imaginary as an example, how could one reconcile Watergate and stagflation
with the optimism of the 1967 “summer of love”? However difficult it is to generalize across
different historical experiences, my opening contention is that in the early 1970s a new
sense of the present emerged: a strong acceleration of time took place, making people
suddenly aware that the present had become different not only from one’s oldest
memories, but from a rather recent past. Such acceleration in the speed of change did not
lead to improvement, though: in fact, people felt that things were getting worse. Nostalgia
came therefore as a widespread response, while pessimism was just as intense. The early
70s became self-conscious in a way that forbade any naïve aspirations to a better future in
the short run: as the feeling of historical progress came to a halt, the 1960s utopia dissolved
and an immersion in the present took place. Progress might well be found in technology,
but not in history: whereas in past utopias (both political and fictional) technological
progress had meant historical progress, in the 1970s technological innovation could no
longer hamper the anxiety about the future – the Western world’s evermore technologically
sophisticated societies were not exempt from the feeling of dread.

To put it in broad terms, there was a twist in the perception of time: while people felt
that culture and society had changed fast, they also felt stuck in the present and
dispossessed of utopia. It was as if they felt stuck in a process of change that had led to
nowhere better; after the reopening of the future by the 1960s utopias, there was a halt,
leading to an abrupt immersion in the present. In a way, to be immersed in the present was
to see the present “from the distance”: as the change from movement to stasis had been
too sudden to be fully understood, a way to cope with it was to make one’s stand about the
present by rereading the past, be it in a critic, in a reverent or in a transformative way. In this
respect, the trajectory of the samba in Brazil is very telling, as it gave testimony to some
contrasting reactions to that new awareness of the present. Let us pinpoint a few names,
beginning with Paulinho da Viola, whom already in the early 60s represented a new
phenomenon in the Brazilian music scene as he treated the samba as a **canonized genre**: behaving as a young follower of an established tradition – and not as a practitioner of an everchanging style –, he paid reverence to the composers of old, which means that he treated the samba rather **academically**, i.e. not (or not only) as the vibrant expressions of **nowness** that it had always been, but as a historical **heritage**. Later on, in 1975 Tom Zé released *Estudando o samba* (literally: “Studying the samba”), an avant-gardish album that **deconstructed** the samba as a way to renew it as a musical **language**, in an intellectual approach that was blatantly distant from the samba’s original function and social environment. And further on in the decade, the old-timer Nelson Sargento, a kosher representative of the tradition Paulinho da Viola had claimed for himself and that Tom Zé had “structurally dissected”, released his classic tune “Não deixe o samba morrer” (“Don’t let the samba die”). So it looked like the samba was dying in the 1970s, and it doesn’t matter if such diagnostic made much sense or not: what it dramatized was the feeling that the samba was not **there** anymore, at least not in the way it used to be – as was suggested by the very fact that it was now crystallized for academic treatment... The intensity, the strength, the integrity of the early performers could not recovered; if their music had made immediate sense in the world it was born into, now there was a feeling of loss, the loss of a sense of belonging that had produced entire communities around the samba (just as it had done around politics) until the late 1960s. In the 1970s those groupings were shattered and the immediacy of the earlier forms was lost, just while insecurity was taking the place of utopia: as I like to put it, the world grew older around 1973.

But what about academia? How was the “ivory tower” affected by the social distress? In hindsight, what is significant is that uncertainty intensified the debate. On the political side, one started to look for ways to routinize the anti-systemic action after the cooling down of the 1960s’ turmoil, with the disbelief in immediate change and to the expectation of a longer and steadier (or maybe even perpetual) struggle for the political movements of the preceding decade. Indeed, the state of critique around 1973 cannot be fully understood without bearing in mind the impact of the failure of the “World Revolution of 1968” (in Immanuel Wallerstein’s words) in living up to its own utopias, for reasons both internal and external to the movements that had carried them forth. The political sensibilities would change deeply when the fast pace of the political unrest of the 1960s gave way to the
comparative slowness of the 1970s, with open conflict giving way to tense pacifications. Political thinkers then had to assume routinization as an unavoidable condition for the political struggle: in this regard, even deconstruction (despite it combativeness) can be seen as a way to polemically routinize the political debate – a way to inject polemics in the political routines by inhabiting the established discourses as a means to betray their regular assumptions.

At the same time, on the epistemological side there were strong dissatisfactions with the analytical frameworks inherited from tradition. In art and literary critique the erosion of the political and epistemological standards of authority, begun in the 1960s, helped to put forward some contentions that would disrupt the aesthetic debate. In hindsight, two things stand out: ideas of “cultural value” were progressively accepted as counterpoints to the notions of “aesthetic value” inherited from the late-Enlightenment and Romantic traditions, and individual justification became a regular demand to the artist.

A symbol of the emerging paradigmatic status of “culture” was the 1973 release of The interpretation of cultures, by Clifford Geertz. Today his notion of the anthropologist not as an objective observer, but as an interpreter of alien cultures might be perceived as a minor contribution, a small Gadamerian twist that would be later extended, at least in the field of literary critique, by works such as Edward Said’s Orientalism (his 1978 politically-charged best-seller), in a trend that would reach its climax by the end of the century with the spread of the so-called “cultural Studies” in Western (and specially American) universities. But in 1973 Geertz did represent a new sensibility as he located a gap, an unbridgeable gap between the observer and his cultural other, showing the kind of sensibility towards culture that would make certainties uncomfortable as it granted value to the particular: while 18th- to 20th-Century aesthetics had held universal claims about the art world – as it understood itself as a kind of “universal hermeneutics” –, under the emerging “cultural shift” that very universality would be seen as particular, i.e. as a set of assumptions specific to the Western artistic and intellectual traditions, regardless of its worldwide impact. Artistic universalism had its symbols in the literature Nobel prize, in the institution of the art museum and in the idea of Bildung, but now values seemed no longer to be “universally inherent” to any cultural pattern: in the opposite direction, they started to be associated to “local representativeness”.

As we know, such representativeness would soon be politically enfranchised as a sign of universal significance, under the paradox that claimed that anything that is “culturally unique” must be protected and preserved for its anthropological (i.e. “human”, and therefore “universal”) value. The logic of the canon would be reversed: whereas in the Bildung tradition a “classic” piece would deserve its title for being “universally” appreciated, after the “cultural shift” values were given to the “locally relevant”, leading to the recent (and ongoing) “cultural wars” waged over the inclusion of allegedly under-represented agents in the core institutions of the art system. Ironically, this institutional bent of cultural politics only reaffirmed the centrality of the Western art world that one so harshly criticized; at the same time, on the “upper” side of the political divide the appropriation of “culture” as a value-paradigm reinforced a sometimes naïve, sometimes condescending division of the world between regions of “good art” and regions of interesting “culture”, an attitude that only restated the earlier “center-periphery” divide under a more democratic guise. But regardless of its dubiousness, “culture” has played an important role in the aesthetic debate ever since, as we will see when we turn to the writings of Paul Zumthor.

The second symptom that we mentioned of the erosion of the foundations of critique was the mounting pressure for individual justification. It now seemed that each author must fundament his own work in his own terms, not relying on any underlying consensus, however minor or local it might be. The artist had to be a critic of his own work: while that need had been common to all modern art, in past generations artistic justification and legitimation had often been shared within collectivities, like those of the avant-garde groups (whose manifestoes lay the aesthetic, political and epistemic foundations of their own claims to legitimacy). But since the 1970s such collectivities have become rare. Even collective styles are difficult to find; except for a vague and exceedingly broad “postmodernism”, all “isms” have virtually disappeared. What I call individual justification is exactly this pressure an artist would now feel for providing the foundations of his own work all by himself, without the support of the rationale provided by the collectivities of old. This does not mean that there has been no meta-legitimizing discourse to recur to; quite to the contrary, never before were there so many grounds for legitimation simultaneously available for the artist’s appropriation, ranging from intra-aesthetic topoi to socio-political ones. It only happens that they have all become a matter of personal choice, even when
claims to universality are at stake. This personalization of justification indicates how consensus has become rare: not that there should be any consensus in the art world, of course, but it is also evident that since the 1970s the art world has not relied on any common foundations. And the popular arts are not in a clearer spot either: over the past decades, cultural politics has made the “popular” self-conscious in a contradictory way, for in order to be fully acknowledged and supported the “popular” has to be described and interpreted by “non-popular” observers (usually intellectuals or former “popular” agents who have learned to see themselves from the outside): no wonder there has been little consensus about what the “popular” means either.

But back in 1973 these predicaments did not yet dominate the scene. Amidst the pessimism, insecurity and frustration of the time there were joyful and daring attempts taking place in order to divert critique from its old expectations and habits, most of them inherited from the 19th Century institutional framework. Before we proceed, I should make clear that the patterns I have been subsuming under the category of “19th-Century model of critique” were manifold both synchronically and diachronically, reaching well into the 1970s. But despite this variability, for the purposes of this essay I will allow myself to read it as a set of conceptual assumptions that had endowed the critic with the authority to establish the meanings and social relevance of artistic and literary works, as well as the hierarchical status of different sections of the public. The “19th-Century critique” understood itself as a pedagogical and institutional activity: in its pedagogical bias, it was co-responsible for raising the capabilities of the public and therefore contribute (at least ideally) to the betterment of society; in its institutional bias, it received the contrasting function of defending high-quality art from society’s indiscriminate consumption. The first ideal reveals critique’s Enlightened heritage (i.e. the idea of Bildung); the second one reveals its post-Romantic tone (as it places the “genius” a step ahead of society’s “backwardness”). Under different but compatible political connotations, both ideals were implied in the concept of “autonomy”, which placed art both in favor and against society; while certainly not every critic shared each ideal in the same degree (nor under the guiding of similar values and degrees of optimism), both ideals kept their systemic prominence until the mid-20th Century, coming under suspicion during the 1960s. But one should notice that such suspicion did not arise in a merely negative fashion; quite to the contrary, it led to the
proposition of more flexible and more inclusive aesthetic concepts and analytical models, showing that philosophical dissatisfaction was producing positive changes in the critical practice. In the air there was a feeling of openness and renewal: crisis led to motion giving way to some positive responses, which I am going to address from now on as I debate the propositions of Wolfgang Iser, Paul Zumthor, Roland Barthes and of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. All of them responded positively to the legitimacy breakdown of the 19th-Century critique; all of them tried to make critique more socially productive in that changing political scenario.

Together, that generation would historicize the modern idea of art as they denaturalized the concepts that had sustained the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere by describing art as an extra-ordinary (and therefore socially justified) kind of production – i.e. the concepts of “genius”, of the “organic artwork”, of “originality”, of “aesthetic distance”, of art’s “autonomy” from the State and the economy... Among other consequences, those concepts had placed the critic as the decipherer and conveyor of the truth and value of texts: as one could read in one of Wolfgang Iser’s departing contention, it was up to the critic to define a work’s meaning, its social function and its place in history through an act of interpretation, traditionally understood as the unlocking of a text’s “secrets” to reveal its “underlying message” – but Iser would hold that the critic was nothing but a reader, subjected to the same constraints as any other reader. This “downgrading” came from epistemological (and not only political) reasons: the critic should lose his 19th-Century status not because his authority was authoritarian, but because literary texts are built in ways that forbid their objective assessment and final deciphering. The ultimate meaning of a text is always open for interpretation, the most impressive fact being that this apparently obvious conclusion still needed to be stated and defend as late as 1974...

Be that as it may, by focusing on the reader Iser programmatically diverted from much of modern literary theory. He did not, for example, focus on the texts’ immanence or on authorial “creation”. His theory had little to do with textual analysis even when it coincided with deconstruction by denouncing the impossibility of establishing a text’s final meaning. While deconstruction was all about textuality (turning the study of literature into a highly counterintuitive and specialized practice), Iser focused on literature’s complex strategies to provoke its readers: the synthesis of texts into meaning is not to be found in the texts
themselves, but in the mental proceedings of any ordinary reader, and not only the expert. Literature is not a means in itself, but an encounter during which the texts never act merely as a musical score to be followed (the process is never so unilateral as this), but as the initiator of a game that provides itself with its own rules – a game whose rules will be established during the duration of its play. Much like in Wittgenstein’s concept of “language game” (albeit apparently taking no direct inspiration from him), in Iser’s concept of reading there is no fixed score to be followed, given that texts operate as sets of stimuli organized by rules to be firmed jointly with the reader, in respect to each reader’s individuality, his backgrounds and momentary dispositions. The consequence is that there will be as many rules as there are players, and this is how Iser broke apart from the self-referential slant of modern literary theory: he defined texts as structures of appeal. Epistemologically well-grounded in phenomenology and gestalt theory, this proposition revealed its political bent (its democratizing shift) as it “empowered” the reader as a fully responsible agent, regardless of any hierarchized rapport with texts that critique still claimed for itself.

Iser gives us a first positive response to the state of uncertainty spreading around 1973. If uncertainty was largely propelled by the 1960s critique of authority, it showed it democratizing significance as it helped to undermine the standards of judgment dominant in the art world. Just as a broad questioning of the political and educational institutions was taking place, the artistic institutions would be confronted from the inside – as one would see in the Conceptual Art movement. The role of critique was pressed by an urgent question: if critique was to lose its authoritative position and could no longer justify itself in universal terms (especially after the emergence of “culture” as a value paradigm), if the pressure from the margins (in their strife for inclusion in the art world) tore it open for randomness, how could it preserve an active voice while remaining untainted by political ethnocentrism and/or epistemological obsolescence? Iser gave his answer by bringing the reader to the fore, a reader whose responses to the literary artworks were unpredictable but legitimate. The critic lost his place as an “institutional power-broker”, in a gesture that was much in tune with propositions coming from scholars like Michel de Certeau and Peter Burke, who also re-qualified reception and consumption as productive (and not passive) activities. This was a functional (or pragmatic) approach to culture that would bring anthropology and art theory together, under a new appreciation of art’s socially-local functions, that were now
associated to (more or less “spontaneous”) social practices, habits and rituals taking place within culturally-specific networks of production, presentation and distribution. Different arts were regarded as different practices developed within specific contexts, opening aesthetics for the appreciation of the “popular” – in a movement that finally tuned academia with the growing presence and influence achieved by the “popular” in Western societies after World War II. In order to do justice to culture as it was (and not as Bildung claimed it should be) scholars were developing analytical tools for the study of “popular” aesthetic practices in their own immanent logics, and not according to any “universal” paradigms: in a way, this is what Iser was doing when he replaced the immanence of the literary artwork with the individually-, culturally- and historically-specific pragmatics of reading.

It would be in a similar spirit that Paul Zumthor claimed that medieval poetry was closer to musical and theatrical performance than to actual “literature”. Surprising as this proposition might seem to the non-expert, its relevance was not restricted to the medievalist community: there was more at stake. Even if was only in the 1980s that Zumthor matured his main theses, already in the 1960s he was reacting against the strengthening of the “text paradigm” in face of the emergence of orality and visuality as the key characters of contemporary culture: in other words, already in the 1960s he was reacting against the anachronistic – but symptomatic – reinforcement of the text at the exact time when the culture of literacy was receding before the dominance of the oral and visual media, with the huge success of cinema, TV and the music industry. So instead of moaning the waning of the written culture under any accusation of “empowerment” (something many literature scholars would soon be doing), Zumthor decided that he would try to understand this new emerging culture in its own positivity, for which purpose nothing could be better than comparing it to the cultural patterns that had most resembled it in some decisive respects, i.e. the pre-literate culture of the Middle Ages. It was his concern with the present that led him to rethink the prevailing descriptive and conceptual paradigms used for the study of pre-Modern literary practices.

One of his departing claims would be that oral poetry (which included medieval poetry) can only be referred to as “literature” between quotation marks, if we understand the term “literature” by its “19th-Century” definition. And this is only logic, since oral poetry
is made to be performed in public: its performers might well sing and play along with it, but never actually read it. Their relationship with the public never produces the kind of intimacy that is usually established between a text and a silent reader, since oral poetry (which is alive and well in many parts of the world, including the Northeastern Brazil) is experienced collectively by groups of people, relying heavily upon the sensorial impression created by the voices and the bodies of the performers. It is made to be experienced within specific settings where “colors and odors play together, as part of a sensorial group where sight, smell, and touch take part equally. This group stands out from the continuum of social existence, without dissociating itself from it.” (ZUMTHOR, Oral poetry: an introduction, 124)

Such socio-sensorial involvement makes clear the inadequacy of modern concepts of “literature” for the analysis of oral poetry: it was by rejecting categories such as “authorship”, “self-referentiality of language” and “text” that Zumthor provided that “popular” artistic practice with an adequate conceptual and analytical framework, fulfilling a need that had not been felt by past generations of scholars – in yet another example of the “shift towards the popular” taking place in the early 70s.

In the same stroke, Zumthor claimed that literature, a historically-specific phenomenon like any other, might well disappear someday. We know how this anxiety would become endemic, appearing again and again in the following decades: not very long ago, it was Philip Roth who predicted on a TV show that the novel would disappear over the next 20 or 25 years... But what Zumthor was actually suggesting is that only a certain kind of literature might be dying, i.e. written literature in its 19th-Century institutional conception, canonized as it was as a “high” art form produced for a selected portion of the public. Zumthor did not dramatize its hypothetical demise, for he did not condone with the attribution of values implied in the very concept of “literature”: if what was agonizing was a certain idea (and a certain ideal) of literature allegedly materialized in a special set of texts, this was happening simply because the world had changed, and nothing else. It is now a post-Bildung world dominated by visual and auditory media, wherein individual or collective “formation” can happen in multiple ways without the guidance of the critic or without the experience of any “extra-ordinary” artistic productions. This is a world where art and literature cannot claim to having any guiding function in the formation of individuals or collectivities, and if Zumthor did not mourn the diminishing social presence of literature, it
was because the functions of pre-Modern “literature”, with its power of forming collectivities around itself through the socio-sensorial experiences it engenders (a power that is socially strong without being necessarily “noble”), these functions were alive and well in other oral “literary” forms such as those of rap music (which stands for “rhythm and poetry”) and folk singing.

Also devoid of pessimism was Roland Barthes’s *The pleasure of the text*. Released in 1973, that book took a part in the criticism of the long-term institutional consequences of the “19th-Century” aesthetic paradigms, with its canon of masterpieces and its educational mission. As he realized that that mission had crumbled, Barthes made an open provocation as he welcomed the end of Bildung and gave aesthetic pleasure a fully positive treatment, against many longstanding tenets of art and literary critique. While critique – so he claimed – had historically presupposed some “tacit goal” or “social use” for literature, pleasure has no apparent “use” or “function”, which explains the permanent suspicion of its “enemies”: the “rationalists” and the “political moralists” who “condemn and accuse” it. But to accuse pleasure is to simplify it, and Barthes refused to understand it as something simple, something we can circumscribe without much effort: on the contrary, he would state that pleasure is “afloat”, that it is impossible to stabilize by any “collectivity or mentality”. Pleasure is scandalous not for being immoral, but for being “non-topical”: it cannot be installed, be it through irony, which “always departs from a safe place”, or through violence, which is always “codified”. At the same time, pleasure is interior to the “institutions”, “conformed discourses” and “apparent finalities”: this is why hedonism was “repelled by almost all philosophies.” Barthes went as far as to imagine an aesthetics thoroughly based on the pleasure of the consumer: the consequences would be “enormous, maybe even shattering.” If we understand that such “shattering” consequences would not fall upon the public, but upon the authors and the critics (the historical bearers of the art system), this is probably the most polemical content of Barthes’s legitimation of pleasure: in its utter indifference regarding art’s moral or political adequacy, an aesthetics based entirely on pleasure would transfer the power of judgment entirely to the reader, without asking him to justify his choices and depriving the critic of any form of control. The reader would do as he pleases: his pleasure is self-fulfilling and self-legitimizing. For those who were still willing to exercise authority, Barthes took away all they had and gave nothing
in return: if it were ever to be practiced in its full extent, his proposition would make the literary system a lot more unpredictable than most critics would bear to stand.

This leads us to the last work I am going to comment here, a philosophical piece that would exercise a great impact on art and literary scholarship: *The Anti-Oedipus*, released in 1972 by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. I will refer specifically to their concept of desire, as it holds a clearer link with Iser, Barthes and Zumthor. This can be seen in Deleuze’s and Guattari’s rejection of the opposition between desire and “real needs”, a dichotomy that had historically placed desire as some kind of “pseudo-reality” imposed by society (or the “market”) upon the individual. Against any assumptions of the kind, in their definition desire does not derive from “lack” or “want”: on the contrary, it is a form of production. Instead of receiving a negative connotation, as in the moral tradition that depicts it as the drive which diverts the individual of his “deeper” (i.e. “spiritual”) needs, desire is described as a force that productively connects the individual to an environment that constantly bombards him with facts, demands, questions, pleasures, values, opinions – you name it. But what is proper to desire is its power to engender those connections sensually, and not rationally: what turns it into a productive stance is its power to sensually and intuitively conduct an individual’s thoughts, feelings and actions within a complex field of experience, one that is simultaneously economic, politic, biologic, historic, geographic... Therefore desire has little to do with “acquisition” or “consumption”: it is an active – albeit unplanned – stance of reality production.

This way *The Anti-Oedipus* internalized the explanation of events relative to a certain system (in this case: the individual) to the system itself, just like Maturana and Varela were proposing in biological systems theory at that same time. Desire is autopoietical, operating as a special kind of self-cause within the individual, a “teleological principle” that is internal to his “systemic functioning”: it is one of the system’s inner principles of causation, and not an external one (as one finds in “one-way” theories that describe desire as a psychological result upon the individual of the environmental stimuli). Instead of persisting on conventional oppositions between politics, capitalism and consumer society on the one hand, and the individual and his inner (i.e. imaginative and affective) reality on the other, Deleuze and Guattari internalized society, capitalism and consumption in the individual: in their description, the self behaves as a rizomatic synthesis partially produced by desire, in
its a-rational and non-reflexive capacity to converge contrasting stimuli into positive and relatively well-defined ideations. On the political level, the high relevance attributed to this non-rational process (with its inevitable political consequences) meant that the all-powerful subject, the agent of change that could intervene in reality because he stood outside it and above its standard routines (just like the avant-garde artist or the revolutionary agent), in Deleuze and Guattari that idea of subjectness was dead and buried. There is no “outside” to the world we live in, which can only be lived (and perhaps changed) from the inside: we cannot be omniscient because we are “blind” about the “world” or “society” (i.e. blind to what lies outside of us), but because the “world” and “society” are an inevitable part of our inner environments. And this novel description of our “ontological finitude” was nowhere close to political resignation: as the individual is not unilaterally victimized by “external” powers, and since everything external is internalized as part of his mental and affective landscape, his actions do not need to be exceptional in order to be effective. Being internal to the functioning of the system, our actions can be effective by being capable of changing surrounding trends and trajectories, even if in a minor scale and unconnectedly to any clear goal: one can always subvert the machine by inhabiting it, not necessarily by making opposition to it. So even if our connections with the world are small and unstable, this is for the better; against the determinism so frequent in critical theory, in The Anti-Oedipus strong words like “capitalism”, “society” and “politics” become dynamic: they become less unitary, less asymmetrically powerful and of much more unpredictable outcomes, projecting an unpredictability that keeps possibilities open against the shortcomings of planned practical action.

As I proceed to conclude my itinerary, one point should again be made clear: the ideas I have discussed did not make sense “as a whole” at the time they came up. There was no visible unity in things as they were happening around 1973; quite to the contrary, nobody knew where things were going. My selection was an attempt to give some retrospective coherence to an intellectual motion that happened mostly without coordination and internal dialogue: I have offered one of the many readings one could make of the state of critique at that time – it only stands out as a very liberating one to me. But what exactly does it show?
It shows that critique was very politicized in the early 70s, but also that the authors selected expressed compatible epistemological stands. In common, they denounced the lack of foundation of many longstanding aesthetic paradigms, while politically enforcing their “epistemology of critique” by bringing the ordinary agent to the fore: instead of prioritizing any ideal reader (the “good reader” as opposed to the “common sense” or the “philistine”) their model agent was anyone. Epistemologically, they did not respond to the lack of foundations by trying to establish alternative foundations, but by privileging multiplicity, variation and complexity against prescription. Once they gave up prescription and embraced historical chance, and once they quit searching for stable foundations and accepted singularity and contingency, they reopened the art system for change – a change, however, they could no longer predict nor conduct. Critique could now act as a partner, but never again as a guide or a tutor.

Singularity came to the fore. In Iser, a reader’s experience cannot be generalized: just like the experience of “pleasure” in Barthes, the emergence of “desire” in Deleuze and Guattari and a “performance” event in Zumthor, uniqueness, unpredictability and unrepeatability gained prominence. As one welcomed singularity and variation, there was no longer any sense in tying art to its own history, tradition of problems, inner disputes or self-referential (and sometimes tautological) self-deictions. Rather, the art system was turned to its outside. Orientation, prescription and prediction lost ground, as they all presupposed the reinforcement of shared values and assumptions: we will predict and prescribe only when we are too self-assured, but this was out of the question around 1973.

As I suggested earlier, the world grew older around 1973. The nostalgia that catapulted American Graffiti to fame came from a very concrete historical setting, in which the present was distanced from the immediate past and the feeling of historical progress came to a halt. For various reasons, many authors would later define 1973 as a watershed moment; in this paper, I have highlighted one of its rarely mentioned aspects: the extent to which epistemic and historical uncertainty and the breakdown of political authority opened the way for a reevaluation of the “popular” and a democratization of the aesthetic debate, both handled through a reassessment of critique’s foundations and a retooling of its analytical methods. The entanglement between epistemology and politics prevented that shift towards the “popular” from incurring in populism or demagoguery; quite to the contrary, the
responsibility for judgment was heightened as it was transferred to the individual. It also explains how Iser, Zumthor, Deleuze, Guattari and Barthes could respond positively to uncertainty by producing openness, by challenging old patterns of judgment, by looking for new research themes and by rethinking the task of critique. From all the reasons for anxiety in the air at that time, it is this sense of risk that remains stronger to me, as it shows how crisis led to motion and renewal around 1973.

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