

The Accomplice

Alexander García Düttmann

Abstract: The refusal to take part in the race for the most convincing, the most incisive, the most original, perhaps even the most outrageous discourse about the relevance and the impact of the Corona-pandemic must not be confused with a refusal to analyse this race itself and the discourses that constitute it. In the end, it may well turn out that what distinguishes one refusal from the other is an astonished laughter.

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When, a month ago, I was asked to write a short piece about the current pandemic, I recommended an astonished laughter in the face of the interminable parade of all who seem to know what the pandemic is all about. They seem to have ready-made answers and are more than willing to provide them in public spaces. My friend Jean-Luc Nancy, who very kindly encouraged me to videotape a French translation of my piece, and who very generously produced a draft of the translation and suggested a few clarifications, was not, I believe, very much taken with what I had written. Why is the rush to produce global explanations so surprising, he asked me, if the pandemic, fitting so well into the world in which we live now, must be considered something that, knowingly or unknowingly, had been expected or awaited? To which I replied that such was the effect of all events. They cannot be foreseen and yet, once they take place, they appear to be utterly familiar, making everything they have transformed strangely recognisable – unless the alleged recognisability is the result of a denial of the event. My reply did not quite convince him. Perhaps he doubted that there was something truly eventful about the pandemic. Perhaps he thought that the pandemic was less an intriguing beginning than the massive confirmation and conclusion of previous developments – in which case I should have insisted and asked him whether he would not be willing to concede that if the spreading of the virus across the world seems to have brought matters into focus, this was not in itself an indication of something truly eventful, as if an event, to be or to operate as an event, had to keep happening again and again without for that matter becoming any more predictable. Of course an event “is” not and does not “operate”.

I would like to add a few remarks to Nancy’s idea of the pandemic having been largely anticipated, in more or less obscure or subterranean ways – an anticipation which I take to be inseparable from the strange retroactive recognisability that an event must trigger. It must trigger this recognisability so as to affect us, inescapably and unassailably, rather than vanish unnoticed.

My first remark is neither here nor there. The anticipation that cannot be distinguished from a confirmation and that may not even precede it is a straight and hence a conservative affair. No wonder all

the straight boys and girls who meddle with theory of whatever kind and want to prove how grown-up they are, or how much they belong, cannot get enough of the pandemic, though the straightest of the gang of exciting contemporary philosophers has chosen to withdraw into the rationalism of science and reflect upon the means to unleash and organise a revolutionary change. When the last pandemic held sway over Western countries and threw them and the rest of the world into the so-called AIDS crisis – can a title get straighter than “Crisis and Critique”? – it was not queer people who had been watching out for it but those who were not much stunned because, in their eyes, the prevailing libertarian and licentious forms of life had the impending disease written all over them. Faggots and druggies deserved no better, it was assumed. It is true that queer people who then contributed to the elaboration of the pandemic’s theory often ended up outstripping the conservatism of their adversaries. Conservatives are the ones who saw it coming, or who after the fact behave as if they had seen it coming. The virus that circulates in a pandemic turns into an accomplice of straightness and conservatism, the safe alternatives that preclude surprises.

My second remark is pro domo in nature. For I am startled by the fact that universities and especially art schools are so well behaved under the circumstances created by the pandemic and the measures devised to fight it, the sanctions imposed upon a majority of countries and their populations. Instead of engaging in radical social critique, they are content with reproducing bland social therapy discourses, discourses about pain and anxiety, while accepting and praising the creative virtues of digital communication and expecting online teaching to prove much more than a poor surrogate. Are not things digital, formal, and immaterial as they are, inherently safe, capable of being controlled, at least in principle? Are they not clean, as clean as the invisible virus itself that makes such a mess? Here, the remnants of the jargon of authenticity, relational aesthetics, and technology’s streamlined advances all meet to bring about the required conformism. The virus that circulates in a pandemic turns into an accomplice of state-of-the-art technology and the ideological justifications of its uses.

My third and last remark can be put just as simply. The virus that circulates in a pandemic turns into an accomplice of purism and puritanism. For who was more eager to see the virus proliferate than the many new purists and puritans who, in the past twenty-five years or so, have set about regulating everyday life and intercourse as thoroughly as possible, achieving an unprecedented juridification, which is designed to troubleshoot social relations, plug up openness, extend a safety net where exposure is unavoidable and eliminate every trace of filth, ambiguity, exaggeration, incoherence, one-sidedness, confusion, violence? Demonstrations against the shutdown and its handling, such as the ones that occur in the immediate vicinity of Berlin’s Volksbühne, are

denounced as indiscriminate and misguided, as attracting loonies who propagate conspiracy theories and both leftwing and rightwing extremists and malcontents. A “famous philosopher”, as a less prominent colleague calls him in a conservative Swiss newspaper, is brushed off for stating that the epidemic is an invention and for describing its consequences in too negative – or “critical”? – a fashion, thus ignoring all the new manifestations of solidarity and social cohesion and protection.

As I am writing this second piece on the pandemic, I am browsing through *Un jeune homme chic*, or, in English, *A Smart Young Man*, a book by Alain Pacadis, whose articles I used to read in *Libération* when I arrived in Paris in the mid-eighties. At one point, having travelled to New York in October of 1976 and having met up with punk singer Elodie, he has a conversation with her in her downtown flat. Elodie, who has been living in the city for a while now and feels at home there, mentions three things that are important to her and her people, namely the ability to “do without”, esoteric practices, and the collective sharing of ideas, which she calls “waves”, “streams”, or “flows”. Does not the heterogeneity and the incongruity of such an assemblage, the unlikeliness of such a gathering or of such a constellation, from which something no less unlikely may spring forward, defy the obedient uniformity that the virulence of a virus appears to support?

When, in a live broadcast on Instagram, Jean-Luc Godard highlights the importance of situating the virus in the context of the carrying and imparting of information – a host is required for transmission, or contamination, to come about – he is alerting us to the fact that, to communicate, or to acquire visibility and make an impact, it is not enough for the virus to cause a high number of deaths. Must it not also turn into an accomplice of hegemonic propensities, currents and movements in a given society, or in a globalised world?

What I have tried to do with my remarks is identify three such propensities, three scenarios of anticipation and confirmation. The virus, it appears, was with us before it started its rapid expansion and ascent into the limelight of generalised attention. Hence, to remind ourselves that this expansion is also perhaps something truly eventful, something all the more recognisable as it cannot be fully accounted for, or better still: something of which we cannot say how eventful it may be, is to recall that those propensities and scenarios have a limited scope, that they are not all there is. The virus is not merely an accomplice.

25th April 2020

On April 28th, 2020, the German weekly *Der Spiegel* published a conversation with sixty-eight-year old theatre director Frank Castorf about the pandemic. His is a voice that refuses to stifle dissent. Stifle dissent is what the State and its supporters, the population it is meant to protect, must do. They must do so in a situation in which self-preservation itself is said to be at stake – the self-preservation of the social order that the State ensures, the self-preservation of the State and, most importantly but perhaps not primarily, the self-preservation of the State's population.

Here are a few points Castorf makes in his conversation. He maintains that the pandemic has turned into a smoke screen and that this can be gauged from the fact that every piece of news, every article or discussion, is introduced by the stock phrase “In times of Corona...” The smoke screen dissimulates the urgency of issues such as social inequality and hardship, global climate change, warfare and migration on a vast scale. A further point Castorf makes is that we live in a world that deems itself immortal and that for this reason aspires to preserve life at any cost. When Castorf says that he is not willing to be rescued, to have his life saved, he wants to stress that there may be something more valuable than mere life and that to defend the worth of what cannot be reduced to it may be more important than staying alive. Could the cost of staying alive not be such that we lose sight of what has greater worth, perhaps art itself and other forms of thought? Do we actually want to live in a post-pandemic world, or in a “new normality”, if self-preservation becomes the main preoccupation of the survivors, especially of the less fortunate amongst them? Objecting that the possibility of valuing something more than self-preservation presupposes conditions that secure self-preservation in the first place is just as simple-minded a rejoinder as the objection that in order to ask critical questions about truth one must make a claim to it if one does not want to get entangled in a performative self-contradiction.

Castorf also observes that “in times of Corona” unfriendliness and unkindness have become pervasive in public life. People control each other nervously and anxiously. They monitor so-called irresponsible behaviour, as if ensuring compliance with the inflicted rules of social distancing had acquired an authoritarian aspect, independent of the protective function attributed to these rules. Castorf mentions an actor who is not allowed to visit his severely disabled parents, points out that taking leave from terminally-ill friends and relatives is no longer possible and stresses the emotional and mental consequences of keeping elderly people, who form a “risk group”, at bay. He states that Germans, who have so obediently accepted the curtailing of basic individual rights, appear to long for someone who takes them by the hand and gives them guidance. What others interpret as signs of solidarity, he stigmatises

as a symptom of conformism. This is why he is not prepared to have the German chancellor tell him – with a “whiney face” – that he must wash his hands regularly. He refuses to be treated like a child by someone who assumes the role of a concerned parent. How easily can the limit between reasonable and intimidated – and intimidating – behaviour be drawn? This question seems all the more pressing the more one keeps in mind that Adorno and Horkheimer, philosophers from the tradition of Critical Theory, have linked the genesis of rationality to the aims, needs, and ruses of self-preservation.

When I suggested that the conversation with Castorf should be placed on the homepage of the institution at which I teach, a renowned art school in Germany, I was met with silence and also hostility from a number of colleagues. They took my proposal to be overtly provocative. This was less astounding than the fact that they all felt they had to justify their rebuff by sending me detailed counterarguments to Castorf's assertions. Although Castorf does refer to statistics and speculates about alternative strategies pursued by governments in other European countries, although he appeals to civil rights and an alleged “Western normality”, thus creating the semblance of entering an exchange of arguments, it is rather obvious that his confrontational remarks, or his rant, do not invite refutation in a shared argumentative discourse. The rant is a gesture of defiance and resistance, a challenge from someone who, as a theatre director, or as an artist, advocates his readiness to reflect upon “what happens outside”. How come fellow artists and art theorists were not sensible to this difference and ignored it altogether? Does not showing good will by engaging fiercely in a discussion and exchanging arguments sometimes amount to a warding-off tactic? I chose not to exacerbate passions – his detractors often charge Castorf with adopting a self-absorbed he-man attitude and cultivating irritating harassment for the sake of doing so – and remembered the “sly style of civil disobedience” ascribed to Andy Warhol in Koestenbaum's biography of the artist: “When confronted with authority, go limp.”

A friend in another country, to whom I had sent the conversation with the heading “This is ‘my’ Germany”, qualified Castorf's comments as downright repugnant, adding that clearly one can be a great theatre director and at the same time an idiot. To this I took exception. I told my friend that by separating the artist from his political existence in such a manner, he relinquished artistic achievements to culture, which is always informed by a deep resentment against thought, whether it appears in the guise of art or in some other guise. Perhaps the widespread assumption that one can be a great artist or philosopher while remaining, and mysteriously so, a reckless political fool, an assumption I have underwritten myself in the past, is merely a prejudice, a convenient compartmentalisation aimed at preventing further and unsettling inquiry. Heidegger may be a case in point here. There is no doubting that he was

a Nazi, I believe, yet his active backing of National Socialism was also the result of an insight into the insufficiency of confining philosophy to its academic layout. When Foucault, who had been reticent toward May 68, backed the Iranian insurrection against the Shah and US imperialism, he did it out of the same insight, regardless of the gamble involved.

What the reactions to the conversation with Castorf put into evidence is that the more a uniformity of behaviour and thought is established to face the pandemic that the virus unleashes, the more dissenting voices must be heard and the more the disruption they trigger must be welcomed, at once reluctantly and enthusiastically. Such voices seem to be accomplices of the virus when in truth they admonish us of the fact that uniformity is never innocent, no matter what purpose it may serve, and that the pandemic highlights the tensions to which we have no choice but to expose ourselves if we are to withstand authoritarianism. An unruly and intractable remainder of unreasonableness that defies justification and sensible comportment, and that is the trace of an “outside”, cannot and should not be evacuated. There is always a point at which artists and philosophers, or whoever cares for thought and ideas, must stop talking to the ones whose chosen task is to watch over self-preservation, a point at which they have nothing to say to each other anymore, or at which their relationship ceases to have the form of an argumentative exchange, if it ever had such a form. The real accomplices are the ones who quicken the erosion of what they pretend to defend, democracy, by making it a safe place.

4th May 2020

The concept of “conspiracy theory” is a key concept when denouncing those who come out as opponents of the curtailing of basic civil rights that the government defends as unavoidable and, given the circumstances, reasonable. Supporting “conspiracy theories” is seen as equivalent to behaving like a loony. It is well known that times of crisis generate not only insecurity but also insanity. Yet at what point, exactly, can the support given to what is labeled a “conspiracy theory” be interpreted as a sign of unreasonableness and, in turn, the sign of unreasonableness interpreted as a symptom of insanity that calls for special treatment? Does insanity belong to the very definition of conspiracy theories, and are the ones who underwrite them all accomplices, members of a gang of loonies who have contaminated each other and are a possible threat to others as well? In a pandemic, the virus produces such gangs, perhaps even in the guise of mass movements, and reproduces itself as a contaminating idea.

I remember a Wittgensteinian argument put forward by moral philosopher Raimond Gaita in a discussion about reasonable and unreasonable doubts. Doubts prove to be unreasonable, if not outright irrational, when they target the most fundamental beliefs by which we live, or the established practices without which there would be no such thing as a meaningful life. For if one does not stop doubting, the ability to make distinctions is paralysed and life itself becomes unlivable. The example Gaita provides, as far as I can remember, is the example of someone who has doubts about the ingestion of meals served in restaurants because he fears that the waiter will poison him. This is where we must draw the line, according to the moral philosopher. Asking for an argument here, a justification, signals an aberration of the mind.

If it does not seem too outrageous to claim that the world of power is a world in which intrigues, plots and schemes, conniving, trickery, and machination reign supreme, both overtly and hidden from the surface, and that the strategies pursued to gain, maintain, and usurp power are not necessarily rational ones, why would it be insane to grant the possibility of the pandemic being part of a globally relevant conspiracy? It is not so much the mere conviction of conspirational activities on a large, or fundamental, scale and the concomitant refusal to accept the ways in which the crisis unleashed by Corona is handled, namely as a mere sanitary emergency, that should lead to a rejection of conspiracy theories. Such a rejection, to be sensible, needs to base itself, if at all possible, on the implausibility of the clues collected and exhibited to underpin the conviction. Yet will these clues be plausible or implausible irrespective of the theory itself?

A rejection of conspiracy theories should never lose sight of the moment of truth that inheres in them, whether they appear to be insane or not, or whether they are disseminated by one form of political extremism or the other. The difficulty lies in that the sphere of power is one in which the distinction between the plausible and the implausible is constantly blurred. It keeps fostering the moment of truth of conspiracy theories to the extent that it makes it more and more strenuous to disentangle the plausible from the implausible. This affects the grounds – the fundamental layer – on which our beliefs can unfold. But if we did not live by a belief that power can be checked and that mechanisms can be activated for such checking; if this belief did itself appear to be unreasonable and insane to the point that the only reasonable thing to do would be to grant the possibility of a worldwide conspiracy, or of power exploiting its arbitrariness violently and without restriction, we would occupy the same position as the skeptic whose doubts never come to an end. Can one draw a line and erase it at the same time?

25th May 2020

And then American youth, unimpressed by the virus and the persisting risk of infection, has taken to the streets throughout the United States, demonstrating peacefully or violently against racism, the police, and the Trump administration. The same is happening in Europe, too, in London, Paris, and Berlin. Must this not stimulate enthusiasm? Who dares to warn against the danger of promoting polarisation and enhancing the American president's chances of winning the upcoming election? Only accomplices of the powers that be.

8th June 2020

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