

Nachträglich of (Bio)ethics

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"In each of these texts we find Kafka's idiosyncrasy to a greater or lesser degree, but if Kafka had never written a line, we would not perceive this quality; in other words, it would not exist. [...] The fact is that every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future."

Jorge Luis Borges, *Kafka and His Precursors* (1951)

Those who have ever visited the Church of St Mary of the Rocks outside Beram, Central Istria, no doubt remember the perfectly kept frescoes, a legacy of the maestro Vincent de Kastav, a painter who lived in the region during the second half of the 19th century. Amir Muzur and Iva Rincic's article on the relationship between ethics and the cinema begins with this kind invitation to visit the interior murals of a tiny medieval chapel. What is the purpose of this roundabout introduction? Where does the charm of finding the magic of a film as of a neo gothic painting stem from? Without doubt in the joyous confirmation that our look transforms those images that have survived the passage of time. But also in the secret delight that they come back from the past to in turn resignify our vision of the contemporary world. Let us take as an example one of those frescoes. We shall call it a "Dance of Dead" or "Death Parade".



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The skeletons get ready in a dance macabre, together with doctors, tradesmen, kings and the very Pope himself. Does this genius vision of the medieval artist not anticipate a bioethical concern and very especially, concern for present-day *biopolitics*? In times when treatment of life and death are considered to be the object of Law, Medicine, but also of government and the Church, Vincent de Kastov returns to us the value of a *gesture*. Ironically, in this case, for as the dead mingle with the living and despite their festive attitudes, they do not seem to be at ease in their company.



A second example of this resignification of the past by the present –but as Borges’ epigraph points out, it is also the resignification of the present by the past- is found in Trajan’s column, a monument built near the Roman Forum in 177 AD and which commemorates Emperor Trajan’s victory in the Dacian wars. The condition that singles out this work of art is the manner in which the sculptural sequences are organized generating a peculiar narrative of the story that it recreated. The sculptor or sculptors carved the scenes in bas-reliefs, developed in twenty-three floors that spiral upwards, in such a way that each sequence can be thought of as a *film photogram*. And what has traditionally been criticized in the work as a lack of perspective could be seen in this new light, as an inspired cinematographic treatment: there are scenes for which a point of view is established to then develop the “shot” –aerial views in some cases, or the use of neutral elements such as a tree, to separate the different planes. As a curious corroboration of the exposed argument, one can observe a surprising detail: in one of the sides of the column it is possible to organize a sequence developed vertically from the bottom up, where one can see the “synthesis of the storyline” built with the most outstanding scenes from the Trajan epic.



Our third example, now definitely cinematographic, can be found in the two versions (1934 and 1956) of *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, by Alfred Hitchcock. It is a suspense film involving a young married couple who find themselves caught in a web of espionage when they witness the assassination of a mysterious agent who

before dying passes on information and the couple is left to thwart a criminal plan. In the first version the couple has a daughter, in the second, a son. In both cases the children are kidnapped by the assassins to use as leverage against the couple and stop them from revealing the information to the police. But both the woman and this *man who knew too much*, turned out to possess more cunning than the delinquents and the police had supposed, and they find a way to thwart the assassins' plans and recover their children safe and sound. What is interesting is that at the climax of the story, in both versions, the children are in mortal danger and it is the mother who proves to be the heroine who saves them. In the first version the mother herself seizes a shotgun from a policeman and boldly shoots at the rooftop and kills the man who threatened to kill her daughter. In the second version, Doris Day surprises the audience by singing a children's song at an Embassy reception to secretly draw the attention of her son, who had been abducted inside the residence. It has to do with intimate pacts between a mother and a son. In the first case, with an accurate shot the woman rectifies a previous mistake, when she distractedly failed at the clay pigeon shooting contest. In the second, she chooses a song that she and her son used to whistle and sing together. But at a closer, we could say supplementary reading, a crucial detail is added. The mother's "distraction" in the first version has to do with her flirting with a stranger, which in a way speaks of a point of dissatisfaction in her marriage. The final "rectification" shot becomes her uncalculated act of fidelity to her desire. In the second version this whole storyline is absent. However, reading it in light of the first, the woman's dissatisfaction could be perfectly conjectured – having had to leave her artistic career to follow her husband, a medical doctor, she reproaches him for not having a second son. In other words it is clear that the second version is a recreation of the first, but it is interesting to notice the reciprocal movement: *a chronologically previous event acts as a supplement to the later event*. When Hitchcock films the *second time* *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and leaves out the flirting scene, he calls our attention upon himself. It wakens him from a long lethargy, and allows us to rediscover him, transformed, in the new version, *beyond the calculations of its director*.

Alain Badiou once said that philosophy, as every great mythological creature, was born twice –first with the Presocratics, second with Plato. But in the first, philosophers were above all poets, such as Parmenides, who sang his marvelous versified treatise on Necessity, whereas in the second, the model was geometry and the poets were eventually expelled from the Academy. This tension between poetry and the rigor of mathematics remains to this day. How can one conceive such coexistence? A possible model is that which Sigmund Freud proposed with the concept of

Nachträglich, which could be translated as *a posteriori*, (retrospective) introducing a temporal discontinuity. As Laplanche and Pontalis have pointed out in their well known dictionary, it has to do with a conception of psychic temporality and causality; “experiences, impressions, mnemonic traces are ulteriorly modified according to new experiences or of access to a new degree of development. They can then acquire, in parallel to a new meaning, psychic efficacy”. In the words of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: “ [...] the original can only be the second, through constituting the repetition that makes the first into an act, for it is that that introduces therein the deferred action (*après-coup*) appropriate to logical time ...” It is important to point out the dialectical relationship between the terms: on one hand, determinism with deferred effect of the past by the present. Was it not Jacques Lacan himself who taught this structure of the act, when he came to resignify the Freudian *Nachträglich* giving it clinical actuality with the notion of *après-coup*?

As we will be proposing to apply this concept of *Nachträglich* in order to think the statute of contemporary bioethics, it becomes essential to make a methodological clarification. The concept, just as it was developed by Freud, explains the register of subjectivity, in other words, it supposes the existence of the psychic apparatus, the libidinal economy and the notion of psychic reality. Only in this context can a first mark or mnemonic trace acquire the scenic value for the subject. The complexity of bioethics is radically different from that of the field of subjectivity, entwining with history and politics. The way we apply *Nachträglich* supposes, therefore, an *analogy*. This analogy allows us to apply a new logical temporality *to think bioethics*, breaking loose from the idea of a lineal time, the passing of which is a succession of events that only link from the past towards the future.

How then do we think bioethics with *Nachträglich* in mind? From the chronological point of view, we see a first birth of bioethics in 1927, when Fritz Jahr first publishes his groundbreaking thoughts, and the second birth in the 70's, as of Potter and Hellegers' development of ideas on ethics. But from the logical point of view however, the sequence inverts. It is the disinterment of Jahr's work in the light of political, philosophical and analytical contemporary thought –especially our present knowledge of the bio-political dimension which comes to authorize, to establish the bioethical limits just as they were in the 70s. *A chronologically anterior event as supplement to a posterior one.*

In the first place, because both the pioneer term and the concept in 1927 are marked by influential Romantic European thinkers such as Theodor Fechner, Rudolf

Eisler, Arthur Schopenhauer and Richard Wagner, and by the legacy left by important predecessors such as Albert Schweitzer, St. Francis of Assisi and Immanuel Kant. In the second place, because it happens in the middle of the Inter-Wars debate: Fritz Jahr published his writings between 1927 and 1934, having to abandon his research work in 1933 when Hitler rose to power in Germany, and most progressive scientific publications such as *Kosmos*, where he had published his pioneer article *Bio-ethics: an analysis of the relationship between the human being and animals and plants*, were banned. Hans-Martin Sass's research –a synthesis of which is included in this number of *Aesthethika*, is clear on the matter. The (re)-founding of bioethics cannot dispense with this philosophical, political and aesthetic analytical dimension. A dimension that reaches *après-coup* the very Universal Declaration of Bioethics and Human Rights enacted by UNESCO in 2005, which now must be re-signified in the terms Alain Badiou suggests in his essay on the conscience of evil.

One of the most surprising aspects of this disinterment of Jahr's pioneer work is that of aesthetics. The reference to Wagner's Parsifal, as an inspirational gesture of the concept of bioethics, becomes decidedly precursory both to the literary look into bioethics and cinema as to the revalorization of the Greek tragedy as seen in the terms proposed by Jan Helge Solbakk.

The gesture of anguish and remorse of the youth in the first act, when he is confronted with the death of the swan, shows pathos in a unique way. Undoubtedly the deontological codification regarding the use of animals for research, finds in the words of Gurnemanz and the text of Jahr, an unavoidable precedent. But the Wagner sequence, thus re-signified, bequeaths



us with something more. It refers to a means to access the tension between the conception of the body on the part of science and the actuality of the gesture, which speaks of an erotica that avoids all formalization. Giorgio Agamben suggests this when he inscribes the gesture into the sphere of action, but he clearly sets it apart from acting (*agere*) and from making (*facere*). Gesture is that which is assumed and is held, that strange circumstance which represents not the means, but finality itself. Let us remember that the science of the end of the 19th century, that with which Jahr's texts

dialogue, was dedicated to studying everyday gestures, categorizing them as per parameters that referred to a strictly neurological map of organic consistency. Agamben points out that in the historical context in which *a society has lost its gestures*, the cinema makes its entrance. In other words, the entrance of the cinema temporarily co-exists with the descriptions that expel the gesture from the subjective sphere. In this way the cinema was to allow a recovery of the gesture, while the look remains in spellbound contemplation. If bio-politics has expropriated the gesture from its subjective reason, the cinema refers us to an *ethos* that returns to the human being its *action* in the gesture.

And as Jan Helge Solbakk suggests in his article, the cinema is our modern-day Greek theatre. The most polished synthesis of all arts thus invites us to this *Nachträglich* of (bio)ethics, going through Richard Wagner's Parsifal, Vincent de Kastav's neo-gothic frescoes, Louise Bourgeois' sculptures, Alfred Hitchcock's films and of course the actuality of Oedipus Rex and other classical tragedies.

As the epigraph by Jorge Luis Borges that opens this editorial clearly says, *every writer creates his own precursors*. And this creation effectively modifies both our conception of the past and our vision of the future.

Abstract

Freud utilized the concept of Nachträglich to depict the particularities of the psyche's temporal nature. This concept is here applied as a methodological analogy through which to analyze historical and political phenomena. The possible risks of said transposition are noted in this paper, along with the benefits of conceptualizing bioethics through a logical, rather than evolutionist, model. This paper conducts an analysis of manifestations in the areas of literature, sculpture, painting and film, focusing on the potentiality of the concept of deferred action, or, of resignifying an event from the point of view of a subsequent event. This schema is then applied to the recent discovery of the work of Fritz Jahr, who first coined both the phrase and concept of bioethics in the year 1927. Both the philosophical and aesthetic sources that gave life to his work, as well as political and historical context that framed his practice, impose a new horizon in the field of bioethics today. This act of reading retroactively implicitly calls for a need to reflect upon the concept as well as for the foundation of a new methodology towards its study.

Key Words: Nachträglich – Film – Tragedy – Bioethics.