18 November 2013: Travelling Concepts III – Criticism after 9/11

*From Helen Slaney*

**Introduction**
Comparatism always involves taking up a position in relation to an Other, and this includes conceptualising tensions and conflicts – on occasion, irreconcilable differences – as well as convergence. This week, we read two academic responses to the 9/11 attacks: Emily Apter’s ‘Translation after 911: mistranslating the art of war’ from *The Translation Zone* (2005), and Slavoj Žižek’s *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002). Both of these apply psychoanalytic approaches: Apter is concerned with mistranslation and the politics of untranslatability, while Žižek reads 911 as shaking Western culture out of its consumerist numbness.

**Discussion**
- Is it ethical to use 911 in such a way? i.e., to abstract the philosophical dimension of such an event?
  - For Žižek, 911 had, or has, an inherent cognitive value.
  - But the points he makes about the unreality of experience are not original, e.g. his reading of *The Matrix*, which draws on Baudrillard and Plato. The idea that witnessing suffering as a spectacle can be unethical isn’t new either: the scandal of taking pleasure in looking at violence goes back to Aristotle. What Žižek recognises about the American consumption of spectacle has likewise been recognised before by Baudrillard, Lacan, and Debord.
  - Is Žižek’s emphasis on the visual just making a point about the senses (c.f. discussion on Nov. 4th), that spectacle enables the observer to distance him/herself while other sensory encounters entail closer involvement or co-presence?
  - But Žižek’s Real isn’t sensory at all – it’s just another construct, in the end, or a piece of theatre. For Lacan, on the other hand, the Real is the figure of the impossible, the ultimate unattainable desire. So according to Žižek reading Lacan, you can never actually access the Real; 911 as it was processed by the media became yet another simulacrum. Attempts to approach the Real are always thwarted.
  - 911 was an actual event, but it was nevertheless reassimilated into the culture of the spectacle.
  - The apparently epochal significance of 911 was another aspect of its opportunistic appropriation. Or was it a necessary part of processing the trauma?
  - Žižek’s conspiracy theories. Is he just being ironic? His stance is deliberately provocative and elusive, inviting us as readers of his essay to desire the Real ourselves; his argument is performed at the level of form. Žižek’s new film, *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, has him inserting himself into the fictional world of *Titanic* in order to make a point about its implicit agenda of class segregation. He’s engaging in a kind of Nietzschean trolling: if there’s no truth to be expressed, finding the most creative / performative language is the only credible goal.
  - Still, he does identify problems in the way 911 was mediated and/or manufactured.
- Some events evade comprehension, and the identification of 911 by a date rather than a name is a symptom of this, but do we really need Žižek’s concept of the Real in order to have a nuanced engagement?
- 911 represents a moment of penetration into complacency, but did it effect a paradigm shift? It’s not necessarily regarded as special in other parts of the world. Its apparent uniqueness is another conclusion based on how the event was mediated and disseminated after the fact.
- Comparison made with the Holocaust via Arendt’s famous statement that there could be no art after Auschwitz.
- The US media have directed the West to regard 911 as something special, because it affected “all of us”, and framed it as global. It becomes impossible to reflect on it in any other way. This dominant mediation is inescapable, and the way we respond has been predetermined. If you want to think about 911 critically, you are cast as the “enemy”.
- Žižek suggests that democracy is something imposed on us. To take the image of his opening parable, everything in Desert of the Real should be in red ink – but there is no alternative language available. To critique the (linguistic) system requires a level of complicity in the (linguistic) system. Is there no option other than complicity or destruction?
- Symbolic readings of terrorist events: 911 was something that had already entered American fantasies. Its symbolic force was created, in part, by the discourse that placed Manhattan at the centre of the world. Filmic representation shaped the event before it occurred. It was the visibility and also the familiarity of 911 that made it so shocking.
- Or perhaps it was constructed to feel like “our” catastrophe because we feel more vulnerable to similar attacks, in our otherwise insulated society, than to (e.g.) being shot at from a helicopter.
- The problem with psychoanalysing a whole society is it presupposes that everyone has identical reactions, and doesn’t leave space for individual initiative or agency.
- Apter discusses whether war is simply a given, part of the human condition: is it a rationalised manifestation of the Freudian death-drive or instinct for conflict? The anthropological perspective suggests that humans cultivate relationships of competitive imitation.
- Sport is a (healthy) sublimation of the same violent drives. Identity is formed when the self encounters an Other, or group defined as Other; self-identity is predicated on threat and/or attack from “outside”, and consolidated by loss or defeat.