

Three derivations about the human and a film as a desecration of the body

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Abstract

This text begins with the question about the human. A strange mystery that serves as a pre-text to approach the way a body operates. This is achieved through a dialogue between three different epistemological readings: Leroi-Gourhan and Gadamer, Agamben and Castoriadis, and Lotman and Pardo. This group of thinkers shares, in its way, alternative explorations that transcend the metaphysical records of humans to converge, without reaching a single universal definition, to the idea that everybody is assumed to be having a hard struggle with its surroundings, a recognition of exteriority. This is accompanied by an exegetical exercise of the film *Stoker*, by director Chan-Wook Park, which offers a desecration of the human revealing bodies that easily appear to being inhuman.

Key words: man, paleontology, body language, art, cinema.

Introduction

This essay makes an exploration of the difficult picture of the human condition. What does this unique label mean? Is there a consubstantial trait that guarantees humanity? Where is this feature? We believe that we cannot resolve these doubts in an affirmative way. All of them have a marked metaphysical accent. And also enough ink has run through the years (not to say centuries) justifying human nature and its importance. Our interest, perhaps evasive, is to follow three possible drifts of the human. And we say drifts because while they depend on other forms of thought, they move as if they did not have a fixed course. We evoked the idea of drifting, of moving as if, mainly, we were lost. We have chosen a group of authors who explore themes that, from our perspective, can help to revise this uncomfortable mystery of the human.

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Stemmed by themes such as body, space, art or language, our authors move away from any introspective basis. That is, they do not start from any interior to determine what a man is. They are not based on the soul, nor on the mind as a point of departure (nor as a point of arrival). They seem to follow a route that seeks in the outside, in what surrounds the men, some clue to that difficult condition that makes us human (or so we believe). That is why we offer in each of the derivations some suggestions that end up avoiding talking about man or privileging other concepts to replace it. And, in the end, we make a sort of encounter of these drifts in a specific film (like three rivers that end in a turbulent sea), that thanks to its narrative lines seems to want to eradicate any idea of possible humanity.

Paleontology of the human, anthropology of art

In this first drift we would like to follow a clue to think of the human from the point of view of paleontology, a discipline that becomes interesting as a study of man, not only because it is a return to the past, but because it operates through the analysis of remains. The man will be deciphered by what he has left over, so he remains when he dies. The paleontologist works with exo-somatic traits, operates on the technique that is maintained when the meat rots. Andre Leroi-Gourhan presents a study of man as an effect of different external mechanisms.

Among the systems of production of the human we find, in principle, the language and the technique. The living thing unfolds thanks to the technical capacity to model matter, to the capacity to construct mechanisms of symbolization. Leroi-Gourhan reminds us that both mechanisms are not exclusive to the human. Well it can be said, both operate in different biological dimensions. Thus, forms of language among other species are not free, for example, to mate or to generate devices of defense against threats in the natural life, nor exosomatic products that denote an own type of collective intelligence and that are the the result of organized techniques such as cobwebs or bird nests.

Our paleontologist also reveals how these devices are created for the man who makes community:

The social plays a hinge function for two reasons. (...) offer a whole range of frequencies of practice and a stylization that goes from the mechanical gesture (...) to the ceremonial (...); On the other hand, it offers a gradation of the levels of manipulation that extends from the physiological in the attitudes of the body (...) to abstract symbolism (...). Physiological, technical and social correspond to three progressive levels under the relation of the operative practices (...) (1977, p. 273).

However, there is a third mechanism that, while it does not completely separate man from other species, does generate a high degree of differentiation: aesthetic behavior. As such, such behavior has the capacity to create systems of symbols that can not erect all ethnicities in the same way (they are singularized forms, different from the techniques that tend towards universalization). Even the artificiality of aesthetic products, which can partly be separated

from its context of production, generates a universe of human invention, which does not mean that aesthetic behavior does not have a paleontological record of base in other living. In fact, Leroi-Gourhan reconstructs aesthetic experiences from sensory conditions such as rhythms of the body that can be harmonically organized or processes of observation that can generate visual compositions.

(...) It is possible to admit, at homo sapiens level, a certain shedding of aesthetic values from the summit of the figurative to the physiological and functional backgrounds, it is indispensable to start from the backgrounds, unique in being configured palaeontologically, if you want to appreciate the step Of the higher forms, and above all of the archaic which can still remain in them (Leroi-Gourhan, 1977, p. 268).

This path proposed by our paleontologist implies recognizing the basis on which aesthetic behavior is articulated and, at the same time, suggests not only a research procedure, but an attribution of this register to physiological conditions. This paleontology demonstrates that aesthetics is not a mere manifestation of the spirit but a system that adds to language and technology as forms of exteriorization. If, as a species, human beings are conditioned by technique (present in other species) and as ethnicity can be found languages that create distinctions to give rise to social identities, then aesthetics allows to individualize the behaviors within the ethnic groups until suggesting their own Singularity (from tribal dances, to the complexity of a symphony). That is why this notion allows the individual to persist within the group and find variations for the same reality. It suffices to recall, as our author points out, that the aesthetic territory seems to escape the language that would be, in this sense, a social dimension of the ethnicity. "Language, it seems, is not adequate to express aesthetic manifestations. The wonderful thing about poetry is to create a misunderstanding between the rhythm and the words carried by it..." (Leroi-Gourhan, 1977, p. 269).

On the other hand, we would like to explore, in this drift, a kind of anthropology of art, present in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer to establish a counterpoint with the perspective of Leroi-Gourhan. If we have already said that aesthetics operate as a condition of the production of individuality, we will now say that art is a type of practice that is the result of human inclinations, derived from an anthropology. Gadamer's commitment to the justification of art is not only an attempt to appreciate the art of the past beyond its historical dimension or as a document of memory, but to recognize in modern art a provocation. All art operates, independent of this game of recognition, because it emulates human temptations to deal with what opposes it.

For that our philosopher uses three concepts, of anthropological nature, to listen to the artistic territory. First, the game. The ludic dimension of man can not be taken lightly, especially since it not only reveals a system of pacts and rules between players, but recognizes that it is a shared experience, always played with another. The work of the work of art would involve a playful one in which the audience is someone who enters a game, is a co-participant or co-author of the world that the work unfolds. Second, the symbol. Taking back the Hebrew idea of a memorial tablet, the symbol displays a dimension of the meaning that makes the work

a putting into the presence of an ontological dimension that the reader fills (an incomplete figure that sums up a mystery that must be uncovered). Third, the party. As a celebration, the celebration is not only a community that is organized from a special time (the party is shared), but a way to commemorate and celebrate all con-tact with others. What is interesting, and this is our only comment to Gadamer, is that art is not only a retort of these anthropological traits, but that man is a consequence of these traits. That is to say, the human thing is done in the game, in the symbol and the party. Inverted anthropology that makes the human an artistic effect:

In the work of art, the idea of the inexistence the closed coherence of formation, but only in its passing flowing, becomes a permanent and lasting con-formation, so that growing into it also means, at the same time, grow beyond ourselves. That in the faltering moment there is something that remains. That is the art of today, yesterday and forever (Gadamer, 1991, p. 125).

Our first derivation, then, reveals to us how, in the aesthetic behaviors that allow the difference within the ethnicity and the justification of the art as an anthropological dimension, a world simulacrum is carried out. Simulacro that gives rise to an exteriorization. In paleontological terms, any human condition is externalized thanks to the institutionalized techniques, the shared languages, the exposed aesthetic singularity. In anthropological terms, art operates as a reflection of human tendencies to socialization from figurations. Collective bodies that play, symbolize and dance, will be but the surface effect of an art that invents the fantasy of man (the dream of the human condition).

Man as residue: instituting machines

This second derivation on the human (strange mystery that we have encrypted inside the body), looks on a possible bridge between the idea of the anthropological machine of Agamben (2006) and the territory of the instituting societies of Cornelius Castoriadis (2005). Both of these spaces might seem high-sounding. Even to maintain a topological metaphor, it seems that we are in the presence of two distinct tectonic layers. However, the problem they share, in essence, is the same (a core of pure shared fire). Both are asking about the constitution of the human, and although the routes are different, the evasion is equal. That is, both try to think of the human, or the origin of the human, beyond a simple spirituality proper to a metaphysical record. Agamben shows how the 'anthropological machine' produces a man as a spiritual residue that separates him from other species; more words, humanizing the animal or animalizing the human. Language, a product of the human machine, for example, "is not an innate natural fact in the psychophysical structure of man, but a historical production... If this element is removed, the difference between man and animal is erased (...)" (Agamben, 2006, p.73). Castoriadis, on the other hand, reveals how the 'institute society' makes man a product of the game of powers that unfold over bodies from the radical imaginaries determined by the institutional world. "What marks the humanization of man is the institution ... the individual is a social fabric ... what is not social in the individual is not only incapable of composing a society, but is radically and violently social" (Castoriadis, 2001, p. 122).

As the Greek thinker suggests: “Man exists only (in and through) society (...). Society as such is a particular (...) and even singular form. The form is linked to the organization, that is, to order (or, if you want, order / disorder)” (Castoriadis, 2005, p. 14). However, if we look at the edges of his speech, the subject emerges as one of its derivations. The relationship between the institute and the instituted allows us to understand a geology of the real. It is not gratuitous to define reality as a magma. This beautiful volcanological metaphor shows how the experience is sifted by the historical layers that melt in a slow movement that adapts its terrain to move and is, at the same time, shaped by the surrounding basin. The human body is enveloped in the magma of imaginary significations, which amounts to thinking that we are all that has dreamed us, what has told us, what has placed us. The imaginary institute supposes to return the human to the very forces of the unfolding of the social in its ways of being evident.

All the work of the institutional radical imaginary on the psyche is nothing more than the recognition of how the magmas put the subject to flow by an established flow. This movement forces the psyche out of its (false) nature so that it unfolds in the social as a mechanism of power. That is why Castoriadis recognizes that society manufactures individuals using the psyche as raw material. It is not gratuitous, therefore, to question the philosophy, for the author’s interest is to discuss how the individual, instituted by society, asks the question for *nomos*, *diké* and *telos*. He asks about a metaphysical ground that precedes him.

The emergence of unlimited interrogation creates a new historical *eidós*, reflexivity in the full sense or self-reflexivity, as the individual who embodies it or the institutions where it is instrumented (...) thus the birth moment of philosophy is not the appearance of the question for being, but the emergence of the interrogation, what can we think? (Castoriadis, 2005, p. 64).

The claim of autonomy for that human body that internalizes the institution, is the question for the thinkable for the ‘anthropological machine’. Participating in institutional power is possible when the man takes charge of the question of how magma gives way to the social. Agamben, for his part, wants to break the ‘anthropological machine’ after seeing it work for years. Dualist machine that places man as a separate product from the rest of the species:

(...) the machine works by means of an exclusion (which is always already a catch) and an inclusion (which is also and always already an exclusion). (...) the machine actually produces a kind of state of exception, an area of indetermination in which the outside is no more than the exclusion of an inside and the inside, in turn, only the inclusion of the outside (2006, p. 75).

Language is a very important clue. Thinking that language is empowered by the human soul is to keep anthropocentrism alive. However, the biological work that makes the language emerge from the materiality of the human animal itself, puts in crisis the vision of the machine. This particular game of exclusion exposes the way in which subjectivities are fabricated. As Agamben suggests, a non-man, a dead man, is manufactured when the animal is excluded from its body: “(...) here the human is obtained by the humanization of an animal: the ape-man, the *enfant sauvage* or *homo Ferus*, but also and especially the slave, the barbarian, the alien as figures of an animal with human form” (2005, p. 52). The thinker surprises us with

the idea of a naked life, a life delayed whose center of indeterminacy is empty. Or, if you will, full of the 'anthropological machine' that has opted for the exclusion of a part of the body.

In this second derivation, we can say, Agamben reveals how the machine of the human, like the animal machine, operate by disintegration coordinates. And as he points out, the task is to understand the mechanism that moves them to expect to be able to disarm them at some point. That disarmament is found in the claim of autonomy of Castoriadis. Recognition of the instituted body is only possible by updating the institutional question by the radical imaginary. With Agamben, man is that machine that does not recognize his animal production. For this reason, studying the mechanism involves recognizing the exclusions of its inside and the inclusions of its outside.

Structuralism, Semiosphere and Men in Chains

As the guiding thread of our third drift on the human, we have the recovery of the fourth philosophical question made by Kant: What is man? This question lies at the basis of the work of José Luís Pardo that characterizes the study of language from a structural point of view. And is that the work in the human sciences undergoes a radical rethinking in the twentieth century from structuralism. It might even be believed that, in general, the analysis model of human production varies radically when this domain of knowledge constructs another type of mechanism to solve the questions of the Western tradition.

Structuralism is concerned with cultural diversity (...) by differences (...) [where] the truth of man resides in the system of their common differences and properties (...). The term genuinely relevant is that of the system: intercultural differences and similarities form a virtually universal system (Pardo, 2001, p. 31).

From the outset, this problem arises on the horizon of language. Fundamentally, the shift from the 'substantialist' record to a 'relational' record, changes the picture (where meaning is not rooted in things, where words are not inherent in the world), to give way to a differential perspective constructed from conventions and codes of systems that, in turn, are articulated at different levels. It might be thought that the preoccupation with finding a skeleton to all kinds of devices of knowledge, the relations between the minimum atoms that make up this system, makes of structuralism a recovery of the sense as something inherent to the interactions or articulations between the parts.

This signic movement leads to what Lotman calls the semiosphere, a symbolic space (a kind of layer that surrounds the human experience) where semiosis is possible as a process of production of meaning. To this extent, the hypothesis of the Russian thinker is that the parts always depend on the structure, that the great cultural system conditions the mode of operation of the signs. The question that arises is whether there is anything outside the semiosphere. In a strict sense, it should be said that only the non-human resides, what is different from the non-thematized, and has not been the subject of semiosis. In other words, an indeterminate Outside:

Semiosphere is the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist. Just as by sticking different steaks we will not get a calf, but by cutting a calf we can get steaks, adding the particular semiotic acts, we will not get a semiotic universe. On the contrary, only the existence of such a universe -of the semiosphere- makes the particular sign act reality (Lotman, 1996, p. 12).

The privilege of linguistics is not gratuitous, which is why Barthes's criticism of the subordination of linguistic dominance to semiological domain is emphasized. From his perspective, every semiotic domain is parasitic of linguistic operations that ultimately, explain how a sign structure works. The result is a translinguistic as a tribunal of the semiosphere (every system of signs has as appendix, this strategy). In that line, Pardo's work recovers linguistic contributions (De Saussure), from semiotics as a Treaty (Umberto Eco), the problem of the sign as the expression of an absence that constructs its meaning by convention, that of the code that implies rules in the inside of each level of the language to articulate the syntagmatic chains. The reconstructions of the sign, for example, in Hjelmslev, extend not only the dimension of this mechanism as a language entity, but also explore other types of material, until the multi-expressive possibilities of any message according to their contexts of use are recognized.

Pardo, returning to the structuralist debate, tries to resolve a tension of his own in the disciplines of the twentieth century facing the question of meaning. On the one hand, we have the work of analytic philosophies, of positivism, which reduce all kinds of signs to a mathematical correlate of reality and, on the other hand, we have the hermeneutic work that supposes that the meaning is given by the weight of the spirit that weaves stories about the world. This tension, for the author, leads, at both ends, to a dead end. And although many Hermeneutics accuse structuralism of operating under the analytic procedure of positivism, Pardo's reading is another.

Structuralism is not only halfway between both approaches, but above its records, since it adds a third level that mediates the register of the real, proper to positivism, and the imaginary register, privileged by hermeneutics. This level is the symbolic register where the languages that mediate between material and immaterial are constructed. A space where the sense that necessarily depends on the real matters where it is updated, as well as the imaginary systems of meaning that print its users.

This territory borne by structuralism, which involves the world of signs, the semiosphere as the new space to think the meaning of human phenomena, are called art or science, has the merit of promoting non-'substantial' tools to order the life, as the recognition that cultural order is contingent and depends on historical transformations. That is why the question of the meaning of man (question that is at the end of Kant's Critiques) is solved in the structures, for the various ways of articulating material labor must be traced in the chains of sense which commands external experiences, such as the imaginary dynamics that shape the torso of the spirit.

Pervert the body, desecrate the soul. Stoker from Chan-Wook Park

We want, our derivations found or dissipated as if a particular place annulled them, to review a film that, in different ways, auscultates the human. But this act of inquiry does not follow metaphysical paths, nor is it associated with any humanism. On the contrary, it seems to opt for a certain animality as if the only thing that could serve to look for the human condition, supposedly coded in a body, was cruelty. In a sort of crudeness, man as a paleontological residue, as an anthropological machine, as an un-chained subject, lies in the perverse characters that presents us the work of the unclassifiable South Korean Chan-Wook Park.

Stoker, the first foray into the Hollywood territory of our director, is, without a shadow of a doubt, a portrait of desecration. The films of this Asian master have explored, in different coordinates, the act of desecrating the bodies (as if he believed that by dismantling them, destroying them, dissolving them, we could find the ghost of humanity under the skin). However, it does not seek to expose the flesh, nor the simple need to destroy a bodily dimension, but to violate a limit that is considered impenetrable. The point is that our director exposes the extent to which bodies are accessories to our culture. At least for the Judeo-Christian tradition they are simple cuirasses to preserve the soul which, in itself, is supposed sacred. Since what is profaned is always the divine, the body cannot be profaned. However, its degradation (from bloody torture) is the only way to desecrate the soul, to seek humanity with cruelty. In her trilogy of revenge (*Sympathy for Mr. Vengeance*, *Old Boy*, and *Sympathy for Lady Vengeance*) we can appreciate that the different abuses of the body only seek to overthrow the will that the flesh hides, to desecrate a singular space linked with the deities.

It is inevitable to think of some beautiful ideas of Agamben about desecration after watching the Chan-wook Park film (especially an essay entitled: *Praise of Desecration*). The Italian philosopher reminds us that the act of desecration involves bringing to the kingdom of men a fragment, a piece, a piece of the world of the gods. Thus the most profane of acts involves proving human flesh in a sacrificial ritual to ingratiate itself with any deity (and here a sort of symbolization assumes that art creates man as the surface that seeks immortality). In *Stoker* we are not in the presence of any act of cannibalism. However, we are witnessing the need to annul the flesh to desecrate. Our story begins with the death of the father, Richard Stoker, (Dermot Mulroney) on the 18th birthday of his daughter, India Stoker (Mia Wasikowska). That same day the figure of the stranger breaks the routine of the home (singular gesture that recalls the central argument of Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*), with even more force than the paternal death. An uncle, Charles Stoker (Matthew Goode), of whom little is known, serves as a representation of the sinister. He is finally a charming stranger who settles in the home. And we cannot stop thinking that the exteriority is folded over the figure of the house as habitat. To desecrate the body, the house must become monstrous. And the beautiful mansion becomes a territory of battle. Fold double face that disassembles the body, destroying the space of the dwelling.

The presence of Uncle Charles detonates a first mechanism of desecration. He seduces his brother's wife and reveals a disturbing interest in his niece (the sacrality of the filial bond is

desecrated, the anthropological prohibition of incest is called into question, the 'anthropological machine' suffers a mismatch, the instituting society dismounts). Slowly death is present. The whole story is narrated in a rhythmic way thanks to the fact that our director's chamber becomes an accomplice of desecration. As if it were an act of torture, we must wait patiently for their marks to conquer everybody. Our history only reveals its keys after various perverse games of desecration. And we discover that uncle and niece share a peculiar genetic inheritance that leads them to desecrate the same family bonds, to be angels of death.

There is only pleasure with total destruction. It could even be said that profanation is desecrated, nothing is preserved after it, nothing of the gods can be brought to the world of men (and the world of men is a struggle, resistance to institutionalization, recognition of the pre -figured as chains, resistance only possible thanks to an art that creates new games, which invites a perverse party). *Stoker* is a film that makes no concession to the public. And by this, we mean that there is no final reward after witnessing, not without some complicity, the desecration of the body, of the family, of the law of men, of divine commands (of any idea of humanity that our drifts suggest). Their high degree of perversity lies in the fact that there is no reason to justify transgression, and this idea is as disturbing as it is devastating. A beautiful young woman protected by her father discovers that without the protection of a benefactor she can free the most perverse existence. It seems that our director has challenged us to the point of making us think whether our own lives are nothing more than an attempt to suppress the need to desecrate (the task of the 'anthropological machine' and the 'instituting society').

As a colophon, we only mean that by desecrating bodies we recognize that they can be applied to them techniques, make them the object of language, modify their aesthetic behaviors. And that makes a cinema that from the pristine neatness of a wealthy family leads to the most sordid absence of any soul (only corrupt bodies, empty bodies). It seems that anthropology dies by default, the symbols are undone. The bodies of the characters destroy what they touch, disappears any humanity by excess, the characters create their own profane party in which they invent new games beyond any law (destroy the family)

It decomposes any human community into the most animal response of bodies that have no justification for their actions beyond the pure impulse that erases what history has imagined (there are only beasts on the screen). The instituted society falls, the machine breaks down when the body rips out of itself any social magma. Finally, this portrait comes to our eyes thanks to the cinema that officiates of semiosfera. It is within its surface that this game of revenge is available with the most joyful mechanism of signals (without the screen as place of inscription we could not recognize these signs that distance themselves from any metaphysical idea of man). The characters seem to have no humanity and officiate from fallen gods who only devour signs to quench their appetite (an act of swallowing that erases culture). They do not ask any substantial questions, they just drift out of their bodies the chains that certain cultural tendencies have created. Neither gods nor men, these bodies desecrate and are profane. They are before and after the human.

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