Culture after Humanism

History, Culture, Subjectivity

Iain Chambers

Comedia

CULTURE AFTER HUMANISM

Culture after Humanism asks what happens to the authority of traditional Western modes of thought in the wake of postcolonial theory. Drawing on examples from music, architecture, literature, philosophy and art, Iain Chambers investigates moments of tension – interruptions which transform our perception of the world and test the limits of language, art and technology.

In a series of interlinked discussions, ranging in focus from Susan Sontag's novel *The Volcano Lover* to the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, and from Jimi Hendrix to Baroque architecture and music, Chambers weaves together a critique of Western humanism, exploring issues of colonisation and migration, language and identity. *Culture after Humanism* offers a new approach to cultural history, a 'post-humanist' perspective which challenges our sense of a world in which the subject is sovereign, language the transparent medium of its agency, and truth the product of reason.

Iain Chambers is a professor in the faculty of Arts at the Istituto Universitario Orientale in Naples. He is the author of *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (Routledge 1994), *Popular Culture: the metropolitan experience* (Routledge 1996) and co-editor of *The Postcolonial Question* (Routledge 1996).

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CULTURE AFTER HUMANISM

History, Culture, Subjectivity

Iain Chambers

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2001
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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Typeset in Garamond by Florence Production Ltd,
Stoodleigh, Devon

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-24755-1 (hbk)
ISBN 0-415-24756-X (pbk)

In memory of my father,
Lionel Wilfred Chambers (1912–1995),
who first introduced me to the magic of music and
maps, to the insistence of history, and to a vulnerability
attendant upon being inhabited by distance.

To risk the Earth, dare to explore its forbidden or misunderstood impulses. Establish in so doing our own dwelling place. The history of all peoples is the ultimate point of our imaginative unconscious.

Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*

Bringing into play the danger of a new flowering devoid of protection. Unsheltered. Outside any abode. Unveiled?

Luce Irigaray, 'He Risks Who Risks Life Itself'

After the slow climb over Kaiser Pass, in an overloaded car with overheated brakes, we descended towards the camp site. It was on the second day, towards evening that we met the poet. Tall, tanned and pony-tailed, he stopped us on the trail wishing to know where we came from. Santa Cruz, aah, home of that great poet Adrienne Rich. The names – Robert Duncan, Gary Snyder . . . – fell on the alpine pasture. Italy. . . Fellini, the poet of cinema, segues into an anecdote invoking Anita Ekberg's arrival at the Beverly Hills Hilton in 1952 that brought the lobby to a standstill.

He is 70 and lives all summer up here in the Sierras, guiding tourists among the peaks on horseback early in the morning. Later that night, passing along the path by his tent, we hear the measured intonations of poetry coming from a cassette player. Underneath the trees, sacks swinging from their branches safe from the bears, words in the high mountain air: the replay . . . the repetition . . . the relay.

Iain Chambers, Mono Hots Springs, California, 1994

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Much of the material in the following chapters began its gestation in the preparation for talks, conferences, papers and lectures. So, I would like to thank the following for their invitations and hospitality: Ien Ang at the University of Western Sydney, for extending considerations on the stranger; Iain Borden at the Bartlett School, University College, London, for the prospect of buildings, space and historical places, and the same goes for Stephen Cairns at the University of Melbourne; Anthony Chennells at the University of Zimbabwe, Harare, for the whole experience; Rey Chow at the University of California, Irvine, for offering the space to teach, reflect and research; David B. Clarke at the University of Leeds for forcing me to confront the relationship between sight and sound; James Clifford and Chris Connery at the Center for Cultural Studies at the University of Calfornia, Santa Cruz, for the stimulus of a Pacific take on things; Tim Cresswell in Wales for the geographical bricolage in a bucolic weekend at Gregynog; the Dipartimento di Sociologia dell'Università 'La Sapienza' in Rome and the Dipartimento di Sociologia dell'Università 'Federico II' in Naples for the stimulus to return to the poetics of sound; Dick Hebdige at the California Institute for the Arts, Valencia, for, once again, proposing an experimental ambient; Tony Kaes for the invitation to participate in a research cluster at the Humanities Research Institute at the University of California, Irvine, and for inviting me to speak at both the Los Angeles County Museum and the University of California, Berkeley; Hamid Naficy for the invitation to think of home, homeland and exile at Rice University, Houston; Carlo Pagetti and the Associazione Italiana di Anglistica for providing the occasion to deliver a lecture in Milan that allowed me to consider some of the other sides of occidental modernity.

Returning to a domestic scene, I want to thank the students with whom I have participated in courses, seminars, research groups and conferences at the Istituto Universitario Orientale; they have been closest

to experiencing the development and deviations of this book. The final acknowledgement, as does the first, goes to Lidia Curti for her support, energy, enthusiasm, and for pulling me through and beyond the superficial film of immediate events into the unsuspected possibilities of the elsewhere.

Many of the arguments and perspectives in this book have already experienced the passage from talks to print. They have all, however, been substantially rewritten and extended in response to the architecture of this book. The section on positionality and postcoloniality in Chapter 1 first appeared in *Postcolonial Studies*, 2(1), 1999, while further parts of the chapter have appeared in English in *Anglistica*, 3(2), 1999, and in German in Jörg Huber (ed.) *Darstellung: Korresponenz*, Vienna and New York, Springer-Verlag, 2000. The discussion of Jimi Hendrix in Chapter 4 first appeared in Italian in Iain Chambers and Paul Gilroy, *Hendrix, hip hop e l'interruzione del pensiero*, Genoa, Costa & Nolan, 1996; other parts of Chapter 4 have also been rehearsed in David B. Clarke (ed.) *The Cinematic City*, London and New York, Routledge, 1997. Chapters 3 and 6 originally appeared in *New Formations*, 24, Winter 1994, and *Communal/Plural*, 6(1), 1998, respectively, while parts of Chapter 5 have appeared in Iain Borden, Joe Kerr, Jane Rendell and Alicia Pivaro (eds) *The Unknown City*, London, MIT Press, 2001. A different version of Chapter 7, entitled 'A Torn Map, a Fold in Time, an Interruption', is due to appear in Gabriele Schwab (ed.) *Forces of Globalization*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2001.

INTRODUCTION

Dunhuang, with its small crisp apples, wild grapes, scented plums and oasis melons, is a dusty desert town on the old Silk Road in western China. Seemingly a peripheral settlement, where China fades into central Asia and rural floodplains give way to sand dunes, where the Great Wall peters out in lonely fortresses abandoned to the wind, Dunhuang is one of the historical crossroads of the world. Here Buddhism and Islam, kebabs and dumplings, are brought together in what both Paul Gilroy and James Clifford would describe as a 'travelling culture' that reveals an intersection of diversities; all pragmatically moulded and lived in the shifting humus of historical appropriation. If the direct flight of China Northwest Airlines from Ürümqi to Jeddah, from Chinese Turkestan to Saudi Arabia, offers an immediate link across a shared Islamic world it is also in this region, in the spiritual journey out of India, across the Tibetan plateau, and then on into China and the Japanese archipelago, that Buddhism has left a significant testimony. Commencing in the third century after Christ, and spanning more than a thousand years of continuous development, the caves at Magao, south of Dunhuang, are surely one of the largest art galleries of Buddhist murals and sculptures in the world. (It was also a deposit for thousands of Buddhist manuscripts in Sanskrit, Tibetan and Chinese, most of them being pirated away to London and Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century.) Here in the diversified tonalities of colour, figuration and physiognomy of Buddha, his disciples, illustrations from his life and teachings, it is possible to trace how the initial 'Western' forms from the Indian subcontinent came to be modified and 'Sinified'.

This mongrel past and hybrid incubation betrays an altogether wilder and uncertain version of 'China', its people, language and culture, than that promoted officially. There is something else here, something more, that interrogates a sense of the past, and hence of the present and the future. This particular history 'lesson' is not, of course, peculiar to China;

it interrogates all state forms of national identity and their promotion of cultural modernity. However, in the 'tiger's leap' into the past proposed by Walter Benjamin, there also lies the revelation of another future: one that exceeds both the control of the present and the institutionalisation of the past.[1] Such an observation serves to accompany a traveller's obsession for 'the whiff of a snow leopard at 14,000 feet' (Bruce Chatwin) with a further narrative that crosses, complicates and connects the tourist track to a more unstable, and potentially more open, understanding of modernity.[2]

Rendering someone else's modernity problematic, plural and porous is also to render one's own modernity less secure. If the epoch of modernity can be characterised as the epoch of occidental humanism, of a world centred on the continual confirmation of the observing subject, then it might surely also be legitimate to consider what occurs to the authority of critical languages, historiography and the Western disposition of knowledge and power in the light of the questioning and dispersal of that particular historical arrangement. This is the principal argument that will be pursued in the following pages. Just how novel this procedure might be is initially questionable. For this is a story that has already been told; modernity has always picked a quarrel with itself, and its facile predication of 'progress' has always been accompanied by a series of histories speaking of, and from, elsewhere. It is in this light that the postmodern, as Jean-François Lyotard insisted, marks not the end of modernity but a *different* relationship to it. More immediately, and more incisively, postcolonial studies have extended a firm invitation to occidental culture to review not only its manners, but also its modalities, of thought. But there also remains something more at stake here than the transgression or even radical review of inherited understandings; there is something that persistently interrupts the drive for coherence and renders successive political adjustment and cultural accommodation altogether more arduous, if not impossible. In disentangling the web of modernity, not only is its design challenged but also its loose ends return to propose a diverse pattern of time and its subsequent inhabitation.

In considering these questions the following chapters are clearly indebted to Martin Heidegger's insistence that the recovery of a sense of being in the world is irreducible to the sum total of individual beings. Being in the world does not add up, it never arrives at the complete picture, the conclusive verdict. There is always something more that exceeds the frame we desire to impose. At this point, an inherited sense of the world in which the human subject is considered sovereign, language the transparent medium of its agency, and truth the

representation of its rationalism, comes under radical review. Again, what happens to history, culture, subjectivity and critical analysis once the languages that constitute these formations and practices are understood to precede and exceed individual volition and communal control? The site of this questioning might provocatively be referred to as post-humanism. Such a prospect does not inaugurate an anti-human universe, or announce the end of the subject, but rather, in seeking to displace the hegemonic ratio, proposes a *differing* subject, and a diverse ethics of understanding. Paradoxically, to critique the abstract universalism of Western humanism is to release the human into the cultural and historical immediacy of a differentiated and always incomplete humanity.

If all of this is to bend attention to the power of culture and to proclaim a political question, it is also to evoke a politics that reaches beyond instrumental solutions to invest the very reason of language and narration. Here the political slides imperceptibly into the ambiguous potential of language, into the journey of its poetical extensions. Pursuing this perspective, and registering the inseparable nature of the ethical and the aesthetical, has provided the scaffolding of this book. At this point, a proposed configuration that acquires shape *after* humanism touches an altogether deeper chord when an inherited universalism comes to be located in a precise historical and cultural landscape.

In Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement* (1790) and the noted discussion of the beautiful and the sublime, the philosopher maintains the necessity of critical distance and of the disinterested gaze in the appropriation of beauty and the subordination of the sublime to the universal consensus of reason. Although aesthetic judgement, unlike theoretical judgement, is unable to establish its validity on a priori concepts, in its insistence on the *universality* of the disinterested taste of the human community it participates in the realm of universal objectivity. With this rationalisation of sentiment, the basis of critical judgement and the continuing authority of the subject is assured. However, if reason is able only to exhibit inadequately what the sublime suggests, then the provocation of disquieting grandeur and infinite formlessness potentially alienates reason from itself. This leaves open a gap for the passage of the subsequent critique of the limits of a reason unable to receive a knowledge that exceeds and undermines its dominion. It was this indeterminacy, subsequently explored by German Romanticism and persistently exposed by Friedrich Nietzsche, that fuels the challenge to the systematic arrangement of knowledge in a self-referring, conceptual totality. What lies in this latter inheritance which, acknowledged or not, is also our inheritance, is ultimately the undoing of humanism as a critical disposition. For through this opening runs the release of

knowledge to follow other directives. Disciplinary distance is disturbed by unexpected proximities that transform the status of the aesthetic, of the poetical, and the languages that bear our potential.

This conducts me to seeing, hearing and experiencing in the art work a continual disturbance, a tear in the texture of the expected. A sense of displacement comes to be understood in the insistence of language that renders the order of the ordinary extra-ordinary, irreducible to a conclusive rationality, hence magical, even sacred, perhaps divine. For in exceeding ordained meaning, the work of art reveals not so much a distinctive 'message' as a sense that is ultimately a non-sense, a refusal to cohere that opens on to that void which resists rationalisation; on to that void where immediate meaning is in abeyance, suspended, silent.[3] In this fashion, the dissolution of the aesthetic and the severing of critical distance, is simultaneously the dissolution of the humanist paradigm that each has historically propagated.

Beyond the confines of aesthetic criticism a sense of beauty, that is neither systematic nor conclusive, emerges. This arises in the wake, both in the sense of a passage and a mourning, for what has occurred.[4] Such is a sense of the beautiful that is obviously post-Kantian, for it announces what cannot be contained. A rationalist pleasure is not confirmed. Rather a border, an intimation of the sublime, the shiver of the world, an encounter with the angelic and the extraordinary, is declared. We are taken beyond our selves into the eroticism of time and the subsequent sense of loss that proclaims an identity.

To take critical leave from the history of possessive subjectivism, and its self-confirming knowledge, need not mean to abandon 'use-value' and the 'human' to the fetishisation and alienation of modernity.[5] To propose a poetics of disquiet is not to propose a medium of communication, but is rather to sabotage that order and rudely review the premises of the subject, of historical agency and occidental humanism. In 1963, Louis Althusser wrote: 'So everything depends on the knowledge of the nature of humanism as an ideology.'[6] Considering anti-humanism in the light of the inheritance of Marx, Nietzsche, Freud and Heidegger, however, does not necessarily mean to opt for the bloodless logic of impassive structures and over-determined social relations, rather it returns critical force to the complexity of a world irreducible to a homogeneous vision or unique point of view.[7] At this point, the poetical that sings of the threshold and the non-represented invests the political; and it speaks without the immediate intention of informing or necessarily benefiting the subject. This is to return to understanding all the sensed cultural complexity of the textures, tensions and unresolved tendencies of historical formations.

To return to China for a moment, there lies in the millenarian practice of calligraphy the intriguing osmosis between writing and painting, where signification slides beyond immediate semantics into an altogether more ambiguous and freer sense. Unlike pragmatic understandings of writing, calligraphy does not seek to communicate an absence, to represent 'reality'. The subscription to painted characters turns attention to the medium itself. Calligraphy, in its diverse schools and styles, is not merely a means of communication, standing in for something else, but a means in itself: the art of writing – writing as art; a historical and cultural signature that ends up revealing much more than any intentional message. Beyond the obvious cultural and political authority of writing lies the intriguing nexus of a style of inscription that is also the symptom of a train of thought: a textual practice, a sense and direction, that simultaneously serves and surpasses the signified.[8]

I would like to suggest that the style and language of this book also seeks to evoke this possibility. Within a circumscribed time and place the following pages pursue the political and poetical implications of the languages in which we move and make our home. This is in order to suggest that, notwithstanding the instrumental understandings that hegemonise contemporary life, in its deepest implications and potentiality, reality both commences and concludes in the house of language. It is there in our material, historical, cultural and psychic life that we ultimately reside, recognise and reconsider our selves. It is in the light of this mode of residence that the following chapters consider cultural, geographical, architectural and historical studies with a view to their potential reassessment and reconfiguration.

Notes

1 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, London, Fontana, 1973, p. 263.
2 Bruce Chatwin, 'Introduction', in Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana*, London, Picador, 1981, p. 15.
3 In a few incisive pages published in 1970, and tellingly entitled 'The Most Disturbing Thing', Giorgio Agamben rehearses this argument, pondering whether the time is ripe for the destruction of the aesthetic and the subsequent acknowledgement of the void that permits the work of art to emerge in its 'divine terror'; Giorgio Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1970.
4 Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *L'Enjeu du beau: Musique et Passion*, Paris, Galilée, 1992, p. 16.
5 Gianni Carchia, *La legittimazione dell'arte*, Naples, Guida, 1982, p. 61.
6 Louis Althusser, 'Marxism and Humanism', in Althusser, *For Marx*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969, p. 231.

7 Also confirmed by the French philosopher himself in his later writings: see Gregory Elliot, 'Ghostlier Demarcations: On the Posthumous Edition of Althusser's Writings', *Radical Philosophy*, 90, July/August 1998.

8 This, no doubt, is to indulge in a minor orientalism. Writing and interpretation in imperial China was, above all, a regulated activity designed to ensure the central authority of the state. Yet, if graphic scripts 'were not simply transparent indicators of content', then styles of inscription betray something more than merely the authority of approved texts; see Christopher Leigh Connery, *The Empire of the Text: Writing and Authority in Early Imperial China*, Lanham, Md, Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

1

A QUESTION OF HISTORY

Knowledge, viewed as a transitive process, has no foundation – only a structure in time.

Roy Bhaskar[1]

From a flagship

The Bay of Naples, 1799. In the early months of the year a revolution had led to the seizure of power by the local liberal intelligentsia and the abandonment of the city by the Bourbon monarchy. The new state lasted a hectic five months before being crushed by the peasant army of Cardinal Ruffo, aided and abetted by the naval presence of Horatio Nelson and the British fleet. Many of the leaders were publicly executed in Piazza del Mercato: decapitation for the aristocrats, hanging for the bourgeoisie. Directly inspired by the French Revolution, the short-lived Republic of 1799 is still today lived by many Neapolitans as an open wound whose spilt blood stains the formation of the contemporary city. In this vision of the past, '1799' represents a lost moment, and subsequent history the testimony of the brutal negation of its possibilities. This historical, and historicist, explanation is considered to evoke a singular event – the sole independent republic in modern Italian history – that sets the history of Naples apart from the rest of the peninsula. Beyond the confines of an often numbing idealisation, there nevertheless emerges an important proximity between 1799 and, say 1999, when that specific history comes to be inscribed in a more extensive charting of occidental modernity. Perhaps the manner in which to appreciate this proximity lies not so much in once again investigating 1799 as a peerless historical affair, but rather in listening to the questions that emerge from that particular moment; questions that query the eventual conception and representation of both then and now.

I could begin with a simple scene, borrowed from the work of the American critic and writer Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover* (1992). There is a British warship anchored in the Bay of Naples that offers a view of the city from the sea. From the ship, orders are issued for the suppression of the fledgling republic. On board there is Nelson, Sir William

and Lady Hamilton. Sir William is a lover of Vesuvius, a founder of the new science of vulcanology and a member of the Royal Society. Nelson, Lady Hamilton's lover, is admiral of the fleet sent by London to sustain the Mediterranean front in the war against France. The previous year he had destroyed the French fleet in Egyptian waters at the battle of Aboukir. In the meantime republican France was on the verge of transforming itself into the Napoleonic state. The local Neapolitan revolution and subsequent republic were also part of this history.

This telescopic view encourages the insertion of the local history of Naples in a European, even global, perspective, and invites me to consider the events of 1799 under other eyes. Here, for example, Naples finds itself located in a genealogy of modern revolts and revolutions. This particular narrative commences in 1776 with the revolt of the British colonies in North America, which, in turn, lent inspiration to the most famous: the French Revolution of 1789. But the longest and most bloody was the revolt of the 'Black Jacobins' – the slaves of Saint-Domingue led by Toussaint L'Ouverture and directly influenced by the events in France. After thirteen years of combat against the British, Spanish and, above all, the French, the revolt resulted in the establishment of the first black republic of Haiti in 1804. In the year previous to the founding of the Neapolitan Republic, the Catholic–Protestant alliance of Wolfe Tone's 'United Irishmen' fought for Irish independence before being vanquished in blood. In the following twenty years all of Latin America was shaken by a series of revolts as the colonies violently seceded from the Spanish Crown. In the diversified contestation of authoritarian, centralised and non-representative powers (frequently in order to ensure local interests and oligarchies), it becomes possible in hindsight to identify the transit towards a modernity characterised by the uneven acquisition of mass politics, mass democracy and mass culture.[2]

To return to the Bay of Naples, to Nelson's ship. This warship, like all those of the British Navy, with 30 per cent of the crew composed of black sailors, had its decks painted red in order to hide the blood of those who fell in action. This ship, this fleet, represented the brutal pragmatism of an imperialism in which the Mediterranean, like the Caribbean, the Atlantic, the Indian Ocean and recently colonised Australia, were pieces of a global political economy. The question is whether this perspective represents only a view of Naples seen from a British warship and dictated by the Foreign Ministry in London, or whether this other point of view permits the emergence of a wider prospect? I would suggest, just as the presence of a Japanese project that presently dominates the architectural skyline of Naples, that the view that arrives from elsewhere offers, whatever the eventual verdict, an opening that

interrupts the official consensus of a local picture. Transferring the history of the Neapolitan Republic on to a less provincial and more worldly map, the events represented by the five months of life of the republic are able to acquire a wider ethical resonance and enter a more extensive political and historical configuration.

Before a wider horizon, the presence of France in this particular history, beyond the symbolic force of 1789 and the physical presence and support of French troops in the early days of the republic's constitution, reveals a series of concerns and conditions as difficult to explain as the presence of the British fleet in the Bay of Naples a few months later. The hesitancy of the Paris Directory in recognising the Neapolitan Republic, like its equal reluctance to accept the demand for the abolition of slavery in the richest island of its colonial empire (Saint-Domingue), exposes a policy dictated more by the political and economical needs of the metropolitan centre than by requests for local liberties. In this perspective there emerges a Naples as both the object of more powerful European interests and a particular European city caught up in the complexities of wider, global concerns.

One of the principal chains, largely invisible to its inhabitants, that linked the specific locality of Naples to the rest of the world in this historical period was a colonial system sustained by the labour of black slaves imported from Africa into the Americas. The recognition of the centrality of that economy to the cultural and political formation of modernity draws attention to subaltern histories narrated from elsewhere; in this case, to the 'Black Atlantic', as Paul Gilroy's important study eloquently suggests.[3] Returning that discourse to our initial locality, and restricting it to gastronomy, coffee, chocolate, tomatoes, chillies, potatoes and sugar were all goods and tastes that developed in the wake of colonial expansion, sustained by the same political economy that provided the basis for the demand for new political rights. New World 'discoveries' also inaugurated the new world of post-feudal political demands that came to a head in events as the English Civil War, the French Revolution and the Neapolitan Republic. It is to this paradoxical development that Jaurès referred when insisting that slavery and the slave trade were the economic bases of the French Revolution: 'The fortunes created at Bordeaux, at Nantes, by the slave trade, gave to the bourgeoisie that pride which needed liberty and contributed to human emancipation.'[4] Occidental modernity, whether evidenced in Georgian London or Bourbon Naples, were part of that shared picture.

Using a fictitious account in order to approach the question of the Neapolitan Republic, and thereby extract further dimensions from the story, might seem a rather oblique appropriation (illegitimate, subversive?) of

the historical archive. Still, beyond the rhetorical play of different points of view, such an approach is fundamentally connected to a sought-for reconfiguration of the contemporary sense of 'knowledge' and 'truth'. In the historical account, in the accounting of the past, I am here invited to consider, as Paul Ricoeur insists, that 'sense' does not arrive from nude 'facts' and isolated 'events', but is something that emerges within the temporality of the narrative, in the telling of time.[5] So, where and how does the distinction of the narration of '1799' proposed in the historical representation of Benedetto Croce and the careful research exposed in all its historical details in *The Volcano Lover* lie?[6] On what bases are such distinctions established? In narrating the world, from where are the protocols drawn? In the constellation of narratives that orbit around '1799', suspended in writing, in the language of representation, where does fiction conclude and 'reality' commence? Even if it were possible to return to the past and collate the 'facts', that reality would still have to be transmitted in the logics and languages of representation: public documents, private diaries, statistical data, the testimony of costume and the arts; elements that all require re-elaboration in order to become legible in a structure organised by writing. Here we are on the threshold of a debate in which the tropes of historiography, as Hayden White has consistently argued, become objects of analysis in their own right.[7]

To put the discipline of historiography in question implies a reconfiguration of its language, transferring it from the abstract regime of 'truth', guaranteed by the neutral 'scientificity' of 'facts', to a site in which language itself becomes the factor of temporal meaning. Historiography itself becomes history. At this point, and given the symbolic weight that 1799 has for the history and culture of present-day Naples, perhaps a more adequate manner to honour the sacrifice of those who died in its name lies not so much in a narrative of heroes and victims but rather in the elaboration of a mourning that opens up a living space in the languages that represent both that historical moment and our present selves. Considered in this light, the return to, and of, 1799 could be experienced as a disturbing question that interrogates our manner of using, understanding and constructing the past.

When a revolt and revolution becomes part of the official history of a city, of a culture, it is almost inevitably authorised in a narration of the past that contributes to the conservation of the hegemonic configuration of the present. In this use, and abuse, of history it is possible to read the betrayal of the historical constellation of 1799. Concentrated in a restricted historical–cultural specificity, the light that the Neapolitan Republic might throw on the present state of the city is actually obscured. In order to allow the emergence of another history of the Republic, a

history of a European city involved in a complex global scenario, and thus a history with political, historical and ethical resonances close to the contemporary world, it becomes necessary to undo and rewrite the version that holds sway. This calls for a critique of the culture that constructed and conserved that particular history. At this point, prior to entering into any attempt at a socio-historical and cultural explanation of the particular formation of Neapolitan society, it is necessary to consider the institutional structure of 'scientific' and historiographical 'knowledge', which, as Michel Foucault insisted, is always a structure of power, through which the particular manner of representing '1799' is established and diffused.

The vulnerability of interpretation

In the case of Naples this is to confront an approach to history identified with the premises (the ideology?) of historicism. To rethink the time and place of Naples is to dislocate the historicism that has directed the culture and the history of this city, and to open up that 'history' to a distinction between the closed consolation of the already determined and the vulnerability of a history susceptible to other modalities of narration. If historicism narrates the continuity of the winners, secured in a homogenous understanding of time and knowledge, a critical, open and vulnerable history might, on the contrary, be conceived as a narration, an account, suspended between inclusion and exclusion, between representation and repression, in which the final word never arrives. This would be a history that lies beyond the grand design of historical destiny. It would equally be a history irreducible to empiricist representation and the discursive tyranny of a purportedly objective realism. This would not be a history of the past 'as it actually was', but a history of the present shot through with the interrogations of the past, a mutual confrontation and configuration in which both past and present become sites of temporal transit, cultural translation, and ethical inquiry. This would be to abandon the impossible task of a neutral or 'objective' account of the past for the altogether more imperative terms of taking responsibility for the accounting of time, bearing testimony to past generations in a language open to judgement in every instance.[8] This, clearly, has:

> nothing in common with the self-effacing posture of the historicist, who fondly imagines that he can abstract from the conditions of his existence and who himself, as a result, turns into a bloodless shade. For Benjamin, as for Nietzsche, such selfless objectivity

> is in fact 'empathy' with the 'victor'. Historicism is thus far from disinterested; but the interests it represents are far from its own. The 'methodological' bracketing-out of the present, coupled with the contrary enthronement of the present as the sole presiding, sole surviving judge of the past – this constitutes the basic contradiction of historicism.[9]

If empiricism offers the incontestable authority of facts and artefacts, historicism proposes the assurance of a coherence that is impermeable to questioning, for it relies on a rhetoric that is oblivious to the ontological question of language and the unstable co-ordinates of narration. Where does the account commence; how, why and for whom? Where does it conclude? As Hans Kellner points out, 'the source of the assumption that the past is in some sense continuous is a literary one.'[10] If empiricism appeals to the non-mediated facticity of the world, historicism evokes the perennial structure of a unique temporality marching out of the past into the future. For both, historical truth lies not in the languages that provide us with our sense of inhabiting and making sense of the world but elsewhere, in the 'facts' and 'truth' revealed by reason. In particular, for historicism, intellectual coherence is guaranteed by the continuum in which history and reason mirror one another, resulting indivisible and unique. Here the historian is not so much one who returns to the past to revisit, represent and rewrite it, but is rather the custodian of the growing archive of human knowledge; an archive that remains stable in its form, fundamentally unalterable in its premises. This is a vision of the past destined to produce only 'victims': all is explained in the unfolding of the historical process itself. In a technical lexicon this is teleology, in more immediate terms it is 'destiny'. It is in this light, as Walter Benjamin announced in the 1930s, before the then triumphant storm of fascism, that historicism reveals an empathy with the version of the past proposed and imposed by the victors.[11]

That historical time may be both crossed, constructed and contested by, and in, language; that it can only be apprehended and interpreted in the framings of cultural transit that precede and exceed all appeals to the stability of meaning, poses an irrefutable challenge. Perhaps, instead of merely testifying to the official memory of the Neapolitan Republic as if it were now a closed event, buried in its defeat, it might be the case of seeking to extract from that historical and critical event the energies to crease, bend and fold the present in order to contest a destiny seemingly imposed by 'history'. This would mean to see in the events of 1799, in its specific details and complexities, not the arrest of a process that was expected to open up a direct passage leading the city

to modernity and the realisation of 'progress', but an altogether more disturbing sign: Naples as an allegory of the precariousness of modernity. Here the city would be transferred from a site where a determined continuity is reaffirmed and celebrated in a folkloric identity to become a disturbing place where it constantly confronts itself in the unfinished business of worldly modernity.

This is to think of the world I inhabit as a product of time. To think of time, and of my being in the time dubbed modernity, is to consider the categories that render this earthly transit comprehensible. However, to consider such categories is also to register the mutable configuration of time; it is to appreciate the cultural construction of how time comes to be represented: the languages and limits of what we usually refer to as history. If all that passes away is destined for the domain of history it is equally the case that not all that passes comes to be registered as history. The history of *time* is also the *history* of time. Diverse conceptions of temporality, and diverse configurations of its social and semantic organisation, have come to be historically hegemonised in the ascendancy of occidental modernity by a linear temporality. Here the representation of the past is subordinated to the insistence of progress. Whether conceived directly in causal terms, or in the contradictory developments of dialectical movement, historical time is presumed to reveal a teleological purpose. But whose particular time and definition is this? Can time be treated as the homogeneous transmitter of our desires and actions? Does time respond only to the linear imperative, to an abstract public identity that never dies?[12] Such metaphysical speculations seem impossible to respond to until we remember the proposed premise that time, what we instinctively register in a heart beat, the lines of a face, and what is officially custodised in monuments, museums and institutional archives, is always received, transmitted and understood in the languages, that is, in the cultural and historical formation, in which we emerge and make sense of our lives.

Such a history that does not lie outside each of us, as though an independent object to be investigated and explained, but is a history in which each of us is in-corporated and, as it were, 'spoken' and articulated. We make history under conditions not of our own choosing, Karl Marx rightly reminds us. History itself emerges from the act of incorporation that we might better grasp as the act of interpretation. In a television interview in 1969, Martin Heidegger deliberately glossed Marx's famous insistence in the *Theses of Feuerbach* that philosophy has only interpreted the world when the question is to transform it by suggestively rendering proximate the apparent opposition between transformation and interpretation. The transformation of the world, he argued, presupposes a mutation in

the *representation* of the world that is dependent upon *interpretation*.[13] To which Salman Rushdie's more recent words can be added: 'it is clear that redescribing a world is the necessary first step towards changing it.'[14] Marx's denouncement reveals a critical, philosophical announcement.

History is an interpretative act that presents itself in natural guise. Realism, as the privileged modality of historical narration, reinforces and extends this disposition until the limits of the historical discourse become the limits of the world. Out of the presumed division between imaginary and realistic accounts of the world emerge the modern disciplines of 'literature' and 'history'.[15] Both disciplines are nevertheless bound to an underlying matrix that limits the epistemological pretensions of 'history' to explain 'what happened'. Both proffer accounts of the world in the world. Both are sustained and verified in language, where language is not merely the technical support of linguistics and print culture but the ontological sustenance of making sense. That history is considered the bedrock of explanation and literature its imaginary embroidery, is itself a form of narration, a social articulation, that speaks of the history of a particular cultural formation.

History otherwise

Still, such a knowledge of the past, and the present, given its contemporary hegemony, and despite subaltern, counter-vailing, instances, cannot simply be cancelled. Its limits, what institutional 'history' itself represents and represses, can, however, be acknowledged and inscribed into further and contesting configurations of time. This would imply wresting modernity away from the tyranny of an omnipotent rationality and the universalism of a single, linear, point of view, in order to set its terms, languages, understandings and desires in a more open terrain, and there to move in a world irreducible to its identity.[16] In the mourning light of a positivist and self-assured modernity, there here emerges not the expression of grief for the lost figures of certitude but a necessary burying of the dead in order 'to reinvest the world and the self with symbolic significance'.[17] Such a mourning issues in a cultural and political constellation attentive to mortality and modesty, to limits. This is not to give up the dream, to abandon the utopic, but to transform it into a contemporary act, that is, into an ethics attendant upon the uncertain historical configuration in which it speaks and which permits it to speak.

But what, exactly, is this configuration? Where does it arise, and what does it respond to? To begin to answer that question is inevitably to acknowledge a differentiation of cultural and historical place that is