

Note on the question of space

By Clémence Ortega Douville

The proposition that we just made on the role of memory in our perception of time leads us to some corollary consequences on the perception of space. As sensorimotor memory is encapsulated into a play of substitution with the production of mental images, what we usually call the signifier are merely possibilities left open in a world of meaning that is conditioning the global world of our action. Action is dependent on *agency*, which specifies how interaction is formalised in a context for interpretation, telling and meaning, mostly in terms of cause and consequence. So, it is dependent on the way that *language* (as including all that fall into the realm of interpretation) is structuring speech in order to orientate the narrative and address its audience as well as it tells something about the intention of the speaker. We invest some signifier, some mental object taken *for* a situation that is impossible to enact. We *play* the audience as well as we play the part for them, but we try to address something more personal that is at stake in our daily lives. Speech is, in a way, taken for some other spectrum of our interaction with others that social conventions forbid – that is partly why sexualities are one of the most difficult matter to address collectively. If the other person shows the signs that their world of understanding doesn't include the possibility for you to exist any other way than the way they prescribe their expectations on you, you may try or not to avoid confrontation over that particular conflict. Whether it is about gender, race, social class, validity or other social traits, we saw that there is a different measure from a prescriptive regulation of social interactions, based on the compulsory observance of prescribed conducts, to a proscriptive one that would be based on the mutual right to self-determination.

However, we mostly live in prescriptive society systems based on showing the signs of obedience, on what is visible in order to prove our right to be left in peace and that we mean no harm to the public moral order. Moreover, a social contract based on competition includes that we have to prove our will to participate if not being excluded from the race, from start or in the meantime. Trust becomes secondary. First, we have to liberate ourselves from the duty to justify our presence, for fear of a sanction, that could be either physical, emotional, social or material, sometimes only for not having the right gender, colour of skin, sexual orientation, belief, capacity or general appearance which will condition the way we are to be interpreted in shared spaces (even to ourselves). So speaking is often a way to show first the guarantee of our participation to whatever convention is put forth about the ongoing conversation, even more than a real capacity to invest oneself into dialogue. The political issues in the repartition of social spaces for the use of power become crucial to the elaboration of both individual and collective trauma, as well as to the capacity to feel safe enough to actually be receptive to others in those places. The symptoms of trauma are then often more destined to address the right to heal in the first place than the healing itself. Yet, would reclaiming the right to heal necessarily mean taking a debt to society ? It shouldn't be, yet it mostly feels like most of the time, we would not even have the right to be heard and listened to with enough care. It would be even more so as intermediary spaces for self-elaboration and dialogue tend to disappear under more and more extreme neoliberal political doctrines. It becomes then more difficult as well to elaborate a thinking that could result in positive and transformative action in and through those available spaces.

Repeating and remembering

According to Sigmund Freud – who initiated psychoanalytic study in the late 19th century, so

within his social and personal time and belief system –, the person who shows their symptoms as being the manifest problem would be 'repeating instead of remembering' what has already emerged as such to their knowledge, as they are subjected to the conditions of resistance.¹ To understand what they are resisting to when it comes to telling what hurts them, is to understand what debt would not yet be paid if it were told to someone that would not even have to hold it. If the debt has to be unlocked, so that the situation of pain would not be likely to come back again, some word has to be taken for it, that is likely to be someone else's – what we usually call 'transference' in psychoanalytic theory and practice. If I address the hurt somewhere while I am still concerned about some other space out there where the debt would still run on – that means that I have sworn, even in tacit agreement, to respond to any demand –, it appears quite clearly that my freedom to say anything here will only have a few consequences there : either to transform or break the contract. But it becomes more complicated when the debt is sworn to a whole society system and the latter is calling people like me to conformity or submission. The repeating of the symptom, as a defensive system, gets quite along with the performance of the debt : we respond as an anticipation to the calling. Maybe, because we fear that we would not be able to fulfill its demand, that is always and can only be too much. In freudian theory with the Second Topic (since *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920 and on), that is the idea of the Super-Ego, that constant moral authority upon the individual. The symptom then, as part of the trauma, is still a *response* to the pain and hurt ; however, as one cannot do anything about the pain itself, their sole capacity to respond anything remains one vital sign and call for their integrity and existence. Any sensorimotor system in any being, except in withdrawal, would spontaneously repond to contact, sensory or emotional stimulation. But in the sensorimotor paradox, some part of those stimulations relate to a situation of impossibility. Thus, they remain unrelated, unless we start relating them between them, making some rough correspondence.

What we learnt about time in the last article is that memory is still ongoing, generating itself. Memory is the symptom of and *for* a transformation, as the transformed organism and the effects of this transformation on the perception of reality will again lead to new and sometimes completely alien transformations. As well, speech and imagination always reactualise and renew the conditions and coordinates for evolving one's perceived identity. As a symptom of the sensorimotor paradox that we are maintained in, it permits the simulation of the neural connections that are derived from sensorimotor stimulations. Imagination allows us to stay alive though we are in a state of partial paralysis. It is quite clear in the elaboration of trauma, that we cannot represent to ourselves the moment of contact, the shock, for *there* is the moment to respond as a living organism. Then, the whole neural system for sensorimotricity is mobilised to the response. But nothing can prepare to a paradox. The state of sensorimotor paradox puts us in a perpetual state of anticipation, getting ready to and yet in an incapacity to respond in any *immediate* motion. But we have to question the modalities of our relation to the world, so to project possibilities, alternative scenes and situations, to which we cannot respond either. For a while.

Addressing the hurt

From here, we produce images without response as well as we produce trauma. Because it hurts not to know what to do, the indecision and suspension, to be contained. As a product of trauma, imagination and later on discourse are elaborated out of a situation that we cannot think nor address. Therefore, indeed, it is one thing to *remember* in the way the body adapted its knowledge of reality to trauma, and another to articulate memory into coordinate spaces for representation and transmission. A whole part of our lives is built on driving away from what we can't address by

¹ In Sigmund Freud, *La technique psychanalytique*, « Remémoration, répétition et perlaboration », PUF, coll. Quadrige, Paris, 2007 (1914), p. 121.

performing imagination, speech and social representation.

We learn to use different spaces for different uses and social practices. '*Go to your room*' is what we would say to a child when we teach them about what has become illicit to them in the shared place of the *living-room*. Their behaviour has become too deviant for the conduct that they were supposed to be taught to. They have to be managed in the education of the rules that counts for any adult to be grown. Each room obeys to different rules, and those rules replicate in the heterogenous social spaces out of home. However, being hurt by someone or something, especially when it comes to figures of authority, pushes trauma onto the person's boundaries. The violence of being hurt cannot be related to meaning, as the junction of pain and the agency of the other blurs the capacity to think the moment when pain was inflicted. But as one would be aware that the conditions for such an agency as the agency of violence are still valid in society, what could they ever say that would repay their right to heal, to transform or break the contract? In the context of our mostly 'Imperialist White-Supremacist Capitalist and Patriarcal' societies, as would bell hooks state, how could saying anything change the cycle of violence that still endures? Many people can be trapped in spaces where expressing oneself turns into drifting away from the prescribed and favoured normed conduct and subjectivity, and being punished for it.

Therefore, the hurt, in its most affective sense, gets mostly about not being able to drive oneself away from the norms and social patterns that state what is acceptable or not to be told about oneself. For many people, those would push away the capacity to situate themselves toward their own moral and physical integrity. Further more, they would dictate how one should adapt *optimally* to the selective structures of our societies. Some other forms of being and living are yet possible but likely to suffer and be confronted to refusal and outcasting, whether they are the source or not of actual harm to others and society. Often, the voice of the victims are unlikely to be heard and recognised as being their own agents and concerned about how they could *tell* the trauma that changed their worlds. But speaking of a victim implies that we invest a certain regime of justice, that is to *hear* what happened or is still happening. It means that the whole society is summoned here to address how we hear or not the acts of violence and what that says about the way that we make society together. It is never a solitary justice, for we should all be concerned by the way we collectively address the question of violence and the fact that it is as well generated by choices that we make as a society and its collective history.

When someone wants to be heard, whatever they say, what they do give away and ask from the person that they address their symptoms to by telling their hurt *by whatever means* available, is that they would rather address the fear of not being heard, of being refused a space for telling anything that would be worth hearing. The confiscation of the private and collective spaces hinders the telling of the very specificities and similarities of one's experience with others as confronted to the heterogeneity of social spaces. And it is still creating a doubt about the capacity to actually be heard and considered as a plain subject, in their integrity, for there is a much stronger prescription over what is preferable to be heard and which codified social identities to perform. Social norms will tell you the ways that are privileged when you at least try to address the question of who you are in the collective spaces. The less variety of those spaces, the more difficult it will be to hear different stories and the gaps there to fill. The categories of language, speech and social representation offer modalities for self-action and their justification. If you know that you are not supposed to show anything else than what is already told and prepared for – for you have learnt it the hard way or even by witnessing the uses of others –, you would be likely to transgress by showing otherwise. And no individual matter, as soon as it involves the telling, can be deprived from its collective origin.