

## **Behind the “Death of the Author”: Radical French Philosophy and the Fascination of the Sacred**

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Jean Christophe Goddard, *Violence et subjectivité. Derrida, Deleuze, Maldiney*, Paris: Vrin, 2008, 240 pp.

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Jean Christophe Goddard’s book is undoubtedly a serious book *of* ontology and metaphysics, just as much as it is a book *about* the history of ontology and metaphysics. Its subject is what one of the most respected figures of Western metaphysics, at least since modernity’s philosophical trio formed by Descartes, Kant (and the tradition of German Idealism) and Heidegger has succeeded to establish itself: namely, subjectivity itself. More precisely, the book focuses on the deconstruction of subjectivity as it is conceived in the Cartesian representational tradition, setting itself in a radical quest for a transcendental dimension, both beyond and prior to the Cartesian separation between subject and object, or in Derrida’s terms, between “madness” and “reason” or philosophy itself. It is in this quest that the author brings into discussion the French contributions of Derrida, Deleuze and Maldiney, situating their conceptual sources and implications in a perhaps unfashionable manner.

Its key conceptual articulations gravitate around the figure of schizophrenia, as both an illuminating instance of paradoxical thinking, which surpasses the oppositional structures of Western philosophy, and as a figure of de-centered subjectivity, which is further assimilated by the author with “the figure of the emissary-victim”, equating the schizophrenic with the sacrificial subject and thus positing the relationship between primordial or transcendental violence and radical subjective positioning as the foundation of this new French philosophy. It is this foundation that the whole book tries to patiently argue for, constantly articulating this equivalence between the de-centered subject and the violence of primordial sacrifice and self-erasure. In each of the case studies discussed, be it Derrida’s anti-Hegelian reading of Bataille, Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza and Nietzsche or Maldiney’s reading of Freud and Schelling, the author tries to show not only that, but also how the question of the sacred and the dissolution of the subject functions as a transcendental argumentative figure in the articulation of French post-structuralist thinking and radical phenomenology.

Briefly, the book tries to shed light on the structural desire of French Philosophy to articulate the space of a “neutral, pure thinking, gotten rid of its author and liberated from the responsibility of decision” (p. 31), in which the fascination of the Sacred and the possibilities it opens up for articulating an ontology alternative to modern “rationality” plays, in Goddard’s opinion, a key role.

Not only its subject-matter, but also its argumentative style is unmistakably French: it is a book seemingly constructed by means of a patient exegesis and close reading of a series of interconnected authors and concepts, of which key figures are Derrida, Deleuze and Maldiney, seconded by Bataille and Levinas, set up against the background of Nietzsche, Hölderlin, Hegel, Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling and Freud and doubled by the artistic work of Artaud, Bacon or Giacometti. The tradition of commentary, specifically continental when taken as a methodological instrument, is pursued here with a typical “esprit de finesse”, revealing in an archeological manner (in the literal meaning of this term) the

foundations of a radical deconstruction and rethinking of subjectivity in Late-Modern Continental Philosophy. Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to state that the subject of the whole book reveals itself in the spaces created between the authors and the concepts that the author is setting up in a dense network of differences and similarities, repetitions and variations of the same topics.

It would be a useless and perhaps a much too tiring attempt to unravel here the whole of the dense network of concepts on which Goddard's analysis is set up, such as the Bataillian "unproductive spending", "loss of sense" and "sacrifice", Derrida's "pure consummation", Levinas's "subjection", Deleuze's "athletic station", "corps sans organes", "hysteric station" and Maldiney's "paint station" and "rhythm", among other well known signature - concepts such as the Deleuzian "intensive order" or the Derridian "différance". However, among all these concepts that make up an intriguing conceptual map of the Radical French Philosophy vocabulary, the figure of violence *as a transcendental figure prior to all separation* is patiently invoked and explained each time as the other necessary pole of any of these relational concepts. As far as the key thinking processes discussed by Goddard, Bataille's concept of "transgression" (of a clearly sacrificial origin and import) and its alternative readings by Foucault and Derrida can be taken up as an illuminating example.

Nevertheless, from the subjective point of view of an aesthete, a philosopher of art and an art theorist such as the author of this text, it is also remarkable that the deconstruction of modern egology we are dealing with is enacted in Jean Christophe Goddard's book by shedding light on the artistic and aesthetic dimensions of this endeavor. It is not by chance that the articulation of such "a-cephalic" thinking finds its illustrations mostly in artistic examples. It is also worth noticing the important part played by aesthetic phenomena as a privileged category of experiences in the articulation of a different understanding of subjectivity, at the core of which lies the ex-static dimension of the Dionysian experience as revealed by Nietzsche's writings on the topic. For each of the French philosophers in question, this deconstruction

of subjectivity is further illustrated by taking into account their own reading of several artistic examples, such as Artaud's "theatre of cruelty", Francis Bacon's painting and Giacometti's sculpture, thus taking into account specific aesthetic contributions of Derrida, Deleuze and Maldiney to the history of contemporary continental aesthetics.

It is in this sense that I consider this book to bring in, even though in an indirect or secondary manner, a major contribution to the continental tradition of what can be called, in my opinion, *radical aesthetics*. It is the name I give to as such a philosophy of aesthetic phenomena and experience, pursued in the field of ontology, in which the equation of art and representation, as well as the traditional equation of work and language, or of artwork as the expression of subjectivity, is genealogically brought to its both historical and transcendental roots and thus, it is "surpassed", "overcome" or "destroyed". Moreover, this tradition of radical aesthetics, whose persistent legacy is clearly one of the nineteenth century German romanticism in its intentions of expressing the totality of being, also questions the possibility of articulating a new form of thinking and language beyond representation, whose closest approximations would be found in the artistic field and the aesthetic understanding of being.

The main articulation for this possibly secondary importance of Goddard's book, which nevertheless also plays a crucial part in the articulation of its metaphysical argumentation, can be found in Deleuze's understanding of schizophrenia as the abolition of "image" and the regime of representation and rationality itself; in other words, as a "creative and progressive disorganization" of being and subjectivity itself (p. 8), which makes room, instead, for the occurrence of the "event" and consequently, for the long-discussed figure (mostly *via* Foucault) of the "death of the subject" or of Nietzsche's Dionysian "de-individuation". In other words, it is the overcoming of representation and its consequences which is explained as the possibility of creating a new meaning for artistic creation and aesthetic experience, in which these two terms coincide as *structures of subjectivation* (or rather of de-subjectivation if subjectivity is to be posited as a

given). Concretely, this possibility lies with Artaud in inventing a theater beyond representational language (or in Derrida's sense "writing"), a theatre which produces itself a space instead of situating itself in a given space (p. 54) which is "without audience, without spectator and without spectacle" (p. 60). It can also be found in Bacon's painting in which the extreme singularisation and solitude of the portrayed subject makes room in the constitution of the Image for a simultaneous movement of contraries, in which the dissipation of the Figure into flatness and its concomitant apparition from the flatness are artistic illustrations of the "hysterical" stance of the subject portrayed. Finally, it can also be found around a sculpture of Giacometti in which both the "systolic" and "diastolic" movements in Maldiney's terms may coincide inside a properly rhythmic temporality. Certainly, the paradox remains the privileged rhetorical device for addressing totality in the framework of the thinking the author is concerned with. One remarkable statement for the theory of subjectivity (and of artistic expression) that I would like to single out of a long series of paradoxes expressing for the author this radical re-configuration of subjectivity, is that self-erasure and absence of the subject in the work (or in the world) can also be posited without contradiction, in the "hysterical" sense, as an "excess of presence", of the subject to objects and of the objects themselves.

The illuminating lesson to be learned from Jean-Christophe Goddard's book, of particular importance in the fields of the History of Continental Aesthetics and the Theory of Contemporary Art, is that of always taking into account not only the sources of a specific thinker in a narrow, properly philosophical sense, but also the "mythology" and the latent onto-theological drives and desires highly influential authors such as Derrida and Deleuze are responding to. Although not a comfortable lecture for the analytically trained reader, due to its specific argumentative style and dense network of shifting conceptual references, the book has nevertheless the irrefutable virtue of pointing out the often forgotten or ignored sources and impulses of radical French philosophy usually associated with post-structuralism, which are most of the time neglected when

Derrida's deconstruction of Western Metaphysics is reduced to a mere "deconstructionist" methodology, or when Deleuze and Guattari's "schizoanalysis" is invoked as a merely methodological tool for the critique of subjectivity production in late capitalism. For, among other qualities, Goddard's study compellingly reveals to us both the persistent fascination of the sacred and the romantic desire for totality which lie behind the ideologically fashionable themes of the "death of the subject" or "death of the author".

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