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Idle Chatter

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“Nothing happens; this is the everyday. But what is the meaning of this stationary movement? At what level is this “nothing happens” situated? For whom does “nothing happen” if, for me, something is necessarily always happening? In other words, what corresponds to the “who” of the everyday? And, at the same time, why, in this “nothing happens,” is there the affirmation that something essential might be allowed to happen?”

—*Maurice Blanchot*

What happens when nothing happens? The real question may be, as the French theorist Maurice Blanchot asks, for whom does this “nothing happen”? What I take from Blanchot’s ruminations on everydayness, on a level that is defined precisely as the lack of events, is that the problem lies in the conjunction of a particular subject and a particular means of access. If the everyday is the level at which nothing happens for us, it is because we cannot pinpoint something happening there. Every mode of access we have is foreign to it. The essential trait of everydayness is consequently to be unperceived. The newspaper attempts to access and broadcast it, says Blanchot, but in so doing turns it into something else. The closest we can get to it may be the perception of boredom. Furthermore, the everyday escapes the subject, escapes me, because it is without a subject or happens where the subject is not. “When I live the everyday, it is anyone, anyone whatsoever, who does so” (18).

Nothing seems to be happening in Latin Americanism. From where I am situated one could also say that nothing seems to be happening in Comparative Literature or—why not?—in the Humanities at large. Nothing, that is, except for a generalized feeling of crisis in which we struggle to defend the value of the humanities not only to a general public or to lawmakers but to our colleagues in other fields and to our own administration, a crisis that is only heightened by a flurry of emails regarding, for example, the elimination of French, Italian, and Russian at SUNY-Albany.

Addressing the perception of a crisis in comparative literature in 2003, Hans Saussy proposed that what had happened was the generalization of the methods and terms of comparative literature so that comparative literature had triumphed, in a sense, through the expansion of its models but had in the process rendered itself obsolete since it no longer had a particular purchase on a method, theory or set of texts. Saussy’s observation is the figure that comes to

mind when faced with the question proposed by this special issue. It concerns the transformation not only of what one could call the content of knowledge but of the very status of knowledge. Something is happening to knowledge. It is being generalized and rendered normal. Or better, the kind of knowledge we produce can no longer aspire to the status of an “intellectual event.” It can no longer sustain itself as a specialized and circumscribed knowledge. Articles are published, dissertations proposed, reading lists confirmed but all such activity takes place as if it were the equivalent of washing dishes, taking out the trash or standing in line at the DMV; as if it were an item on the list of everyday routines. Using other vocabulary, we could say that the “special places” of the life of the mind are giving way to the “general intellect.” Even if specialized knowledge production goes on, it is increasingly difficult to map out this production and its place within a larger landscape. If “nothing happens” for us then it is because we, as producers of specialized knowledge, no longer have access to what may be happening out there.

Without Walls, What?

Saussy’s observation kept ringing in my mind when I first encountered Eyal Weizman’s “Walking Through Walls” which addresses a turn in military strategy to a set of critical theorists—Deleuze and Guattari, Bataille, the Situationists and others—to rethink the relationship to space. Such thought took place especially in several institutes and think-tanks established by the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), among those, the Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI) set up in 1996. Military actions such as the Israeli attack on the city of Nablus in April 2002 involve what its commander, Brigadier General Aviv Kochavi, described as “inverse geometry,” which he explained as “the re-organization of the urban syntax by means of a series of micro-tactical actions.”¹ Instead of understanding alleys, streets, courtyard windows and doors as openings through which movement takes place, they were interpreted, in the words of Kochavi as “forbidden” to pass through because an enemy could be waiting behind a door or window or because an alley could have been booby-trapped. Says Kochavi, “This is why we opted for the methodology of *walking through walls*. [. . .] Like a worm that eats its way forward, emerging at points and then disappearing. We were thus moving from the interior of homes to their exterior in a surprising manner and in places we were not expected, arriving from behind and hitting the enemy that awaited us behind a corner.” Shimon Naveh, a retired brigadier general and co-director of the OTRI until May 2006, described the choice of walking through walls as an attempt to turn striated space into smooth space using Deleuze and Guattari:

In the IDF we now often use the term ‘to smooth out space’ when we want to refer to an operation in a space as if it had no borders. We try to produce the operational space in such a manner that borders

¹ Eyal Weizman “Walking Through Walls” <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0507/weizman/en>

do not affect us. Palestinian areas could indeed be thought of as ‘striated,’ in the sense that they are enclosed by fences, walls, ditches, roadblocks and so on. [. . .] We want to confront the ‘striated’ space of traditional, old-fashioned military practice [the way most military units presently operate] with smoothness that allows for movement through space that crosses any borders and barriers. (Weizman “Walking Through Walls”)

At the end of his article Weizman draws attention to the fact that such a reconceptualization of space has consequences not only for military maneuvers but for understanding the place and function of politics. Naveh and many of his former colleagues at the OTRI, for example, supported withdrawal from the Gaza Strip and West Bank claiming that the ability to produce “effects” was more important than “presence.” In other words, withdrawing and erecting a wall was fine with Naveh as long as he could cross over the wall and act on the other side. Not only the walls of houses, but the wall separating two political spaces was to be seen as a transparent and permeable medium through which one can walk and which one could therefore “un-wall” and rewrite. Such inverse geometry, says Weizman, “that turns the city ‘inside out,’ shuffling its private and public spaces, and that turns the idea of a ‘Palestinian State’ outside in, would bring about consequences for military operations that go beyond physical and social destruction and force us to reflect upon the ‘conceptual destruction’ of political categories that they imply” (Weizman).

Undoubtedly such military maneuvers actively assist in the destruction of political categories, but faced with such a scenario Deleuze might suggest that the destruction of walls and the very distinction between inside and outside is precisely a hallmark of the shift from disciplinary societies to societies of control. His brief essay “Postscript on the Societies of Control” lays out precisely a transition narrative in which one of the main features of the shift is the crisis of social enclosures or institutions (factories, families, churches). It is not that these social walls simply collapse and fade, but (in Michael Hardt’s reading) that the logic which previously functioned within these limited domains would now be generalized across society like a virus (35). Man would no longer need to be imprisoned. Control would be continuous and ubiquitous like an electronic collar or an electronic card that could give access—or not—to a determined street, site of commerce, or building: “[What] counts is not the barrier but the computer that tracks each person’s position—licit or illicit—and effects a universal modulation” (7). In other words, we could also understand such changes in military thought as symptomatic of larger structural changes in the configuration of the political.

The transition narratives discussed here are all organized by the figure of a breach of walls which enclosed it—whether it be a particular kind of knowledge or a form of control—and which spreads *like a virus* into a wider space beyond. In Saussy’s narrative this process is described as leading to the effective hegemony of the methods and concepts of comparative literature within the academy. Likewise Deleuze tells a tale of the effective evolution and generalization of forms of control. The Israeli military’s use of critical theory cannot be

understood in such triumphal terms however. There is a discontinuity that needs to be taken into account when reading this re-purposing of critical theory. Weizman dryly comments that “Education in the humanities—often believed to be the most powerful weapon *against* imperialism—has been here appropriated as the powerful tool *of* colonial power itself.” The irony, however, is not that a powerful tool of resistance has been turned into a tool of oppression and war, but rather that the military found a use for a knowledge that is deemed useless by so many. Furthermore, this usefulness cannot in turn be made useful by the practitioners of critical theory just as the U.S. Army may publish *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (2007) with the University of Chicago Press and include references to academic work—using the veneer of academic legitimacy for its own purposes—but such a use does not actually translate into increased prestige for academic forms of knowledge. It is not simply that critical theory has lost its lofty abstract position and been rendered banal nor that it is now the province of all, as common as slang. Nor is this simply yet another iteration of the age-old transformation and travel of concepts. What is interesting is that it can’t be *put to work* from a certain intellectual location, from the university, but can by the military. This begs the question: what kind of effectiveness do we seek, if any? Are we simply unmoored because, as Bill Readings argued in *The University in Ruins*, the modern university has outlived its historical mission to form subjects for the nation-state, one of the consequences of transformations in political processes like the one sketched out by Deleuze?

The People Are Missing

The question of the effectiveness of knowledge—and its relationship to changing political processes—is raised with particular force by recent cinematic production in Latin America. The production of knowledge in this case—film—is not an academic or strictly intellectual one, yet historically speaking Latin American film inherits the *letrado* project which precedes it and which contained both artistic and intellectual, critical production. Effectiveness over a social sphere was central to this project. Those who wielded the pen under the colony understood themselves—by virtue of their control of the specialized technology of writing—as the lines of transmission of power and the architects of order amidst a barbarous continent. It was through writing that laws were laid down and carried over seas, through writing that new lands were opened up for the contemplation and, ultimately, control of others. In the post-colony, writing became the medium through which to construct the new nations—to lay out its laws and constitutions, to produce a new imaginary, to spread this imagined community among each and every newly denominated citizen. And when the nation-state failed to represent its people it was through writing that this failure was to be overcome. Writers—in a variety of genres, both fictional and not—sought to compensate for such failures by correctly representing the people.

Film inherited this project. In Deleuze’s large panoramic overview of film across various parts of the globe, Latin American film is assigned a certain epistemological privilege in that it reveals what is hidden by the mechanisms of power

in the first world. The conditions of oppression and minority that prevail in the Third World make it clear that the people no longer exist, or not yet, he says. The object of political cinema in such conditions—the cinema of someone like Glauber Rocha, in Deleuze’s analysis—becomes not so much to address a people that pre-exist, but to conjure up a people. The people are missing, then, but the category is fundamental to how the project of movie-making is understood.

Deleuze did not understand this project as a representational one (and indeed, specifically argued against such an understanding), but *cinema novo*, third cinema, or imperfect cinema should be understood as interventions within a political terrain conceived in representational terms. Such films operated within a horizon established by the emergence of the modern representative state wherein the state was understood to somehow express the common denominator of the “people,” unlike the monarchical state that preceded it and had held an arbitrary relationship to the people. The “people” thus implied an aggregate which could be boiled down to a single essence, identity, or agency which was transferred, expressed, and represented in the state. The correlation between the people and the state is one which, Paolo Virno tells us, was explicit in Hobbes. Regarding Hobbes, he says, “if there is a State, then there are people. In the absence of the State, there are no people” (22). The alternative to such a tight relationship between state and people, one that Hobbes and others worked so hard to discredit in the seventeenth century according to Virno, was the multitude—a form of associative life in which a plurality persists as such, without converging into a One, and therefore cannot be represented by the state.

The concept of representational politics that proved hegemonic in European modernity travelled to Latin America and subtended the construction of the post-independence states. It was, to use Roberto Schwarz’s term, “out of place,” since the states were often perceived as failing to live up to their function of representation. Even as late as the First Republic, the Brazilian politician Alberto Torres could measure out his disenchantment in the following formula: “This State is not a nationality; this country is not a society; this population is not a people. Our men are not citizens.” It was in this context that intellectuals and artists were often attributed with the compensatory or substitutive function mentioned above: they acted as the voice of the voiceless. Sometimes, as Deleuze would have it, they acted to invent a people that did not yet exist, to produce a voice that had never been voiced before. In this sense they recurred to the logic of temporalization used by the state to suture the gap between model and reality so that the state always “expresses at a higher level the still developing essence of that people” (Lloyd and Thomas 33). In other words the state (and sometimes the intellectual, artist and later filmmaker) represents the people as they will be. Or it represents the people as they should be.

This project can take many forms: Humberto Solás’s *Lucía* famously uses a sequence of three stories, with three different Lucías, who, as women—the most vulnerable members of society (in Solás’s world) and thus the place where society’s contradictions reveal themselves most transparently—represent the changing fate and constitution of the Cuban people from a white upper class Lucía into the mulatta, worker Lucía who embodies the revolutionary Cuban subject. While the movie’s strongly allegorical thrust suggests that it is repre-

sending or revealing a Cuban people that exist, the movie also suggests that this is an incomplete, ongoing process. Notably, the movie fails to resolve the power struggles between the last Lucía and her husband and the brief shot of the alarmed and the laughing peasant girl watching Lucía and her husband fight at the end suggests a blank space that is being left open for future Lucías.

Tomás Gutiérrez Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment*, on the other hand, can be read according to Alea's own writings as producing the people through the "viewer's dialectic," a movie which "negates daily reality (the false crystallized values of daily or ordinary consciousness) and at the same time establishes the premises of its own negation, that is, its negation as a substitute for reality of an object of contemplation" (125). By trapping the audience into identifying with the protagonist, an identification which leads to a dead end, the movie is trying to call into being a new audience, one changed by the experience of struggling with and ultimately negating the movie.

If the people are missing now, however, in this new century, it occurs in a much deeper and more radical way: the category no longer has purchase. According to Ruby Rich this change is anticipated in Fernando Birri's *Los inundados* (1962) to the extent that the film mobilizes the concept of "persons" rather than "people":

Equally important (to the film's emphasis on joy and the "vital subjectivities" of the squatter colony it portrays) is the film's creation of particularized characters who do not so much as stand in for 'types,' let alone archetypes, but rather, manifest marked identities, an expansion of individualism rather than the denial of it. With this film, Birri shifted the terms in which the downtrodden of society had been viewed, exchanging the singular term of 'the people' for the third-person plural, *persona*, so seldom used rhetorically. In this sense, Birri created the preconditions necessary for the attention to subjectivity characteristic of the New Latin American Cinema of the 1980s. (280)

Ruby's description of the shift falls into a narrative of enlightenment and modernization—a movement from populism to the reclaiming of individuality and subjectivity of a capitalist, democratic order. I would argue, however, that the waning of the category of "the people" is symptomatic of deeper and more radical changes, a larger epochal shift in politics that points not in the direction of the triumph of liberalism and democracy but which hews closer to the transition narrative offered by Deleuze from societies of discipline to societies of control. Rather than move in the direction of democracy, indeed, the crisis in the category of the people spells out a crisis in a representational understanding of politics that includes both populism and democracy.

Contrary to Ruby Rich, the waning of the category of "the people" not only gives way to the rise of a new, revitalized individual subjectivity but also falls back before the emergence of social movements that take on the appearance of the multitude. Many of these movements assume an anti-representational character—the "que se vayan todos" of Argentina is perhaps its most explicit formulation. The question then becomes: how does one understand the place of film

in such a configuration? There was a certain isomorphism in the sixties between a politics that was understood representationally and films that saw themselves intervening precisely in the sphere where political mediations were expressed, produced, and formed, namely culture. When politics was understood as, among other things, correctly “representing the people,” films (or literature, or art) could participate in the project and claim to supplement or correct the state’s representations, standing in for insufficient public institutions and actors. When a politics emerges that eschews representation, however, what do films—as well as literature, art, music—do then? How can we theorize the drive of many recent films in Argentina and Brazil (and other countries) to testify to experiences of marginality, violence and exclusion, a drive that some critics have understood as a certain “return” to *cinema novo* and other movements of the sixties? How do such films understand their own representational practice in relation to the social and political field? How do they understand their effectiveness?

We can identify at least two forms taken by this potential fracture between a cultural and a political project, between social transformations and the production of knowledge. The first is a tendency that I see most entrenched in Argentine cinema and that addresses the crisis of representation. Films that fall into this category include *Mundo Grúa*, *Los Muertos*, *Los Rubios*, *Historias Mínimas*, and *Buenos Aires Vice Versa*. The other tendency is one that I find more prominently in recent Brazilian films: this I would describe instead as using film to re-territorialize a social body that is being deterritorialized, which is breaking down or becoming illegible. Many of these films—*Carandiru*, *City of God*, *Bus 174*—were launched as testimonials, as films that continue the old representational project and that return a visibility to populations that are marginal and forgotten and “hungry for social existence.” I think that such a project should be read not so much as incorporating a people that has been left outside, on the margins of the country-club nation-state, but as a slightly more sinister project, not unlike the visibility produced when the police began using photographs and fingerprints to fix criminal populations and make them legible. Let me take as an example of this latter tendency an episode called “Correios” of *Cidade dos Homens*, a television series based on Paulo Lins’s acclaimed novel *Cidade de Deus* and Fernando Meirelles’s filmic adaptation of the novel.²

The episode begins with a confrontation between the favela’s inhabitants and the local mail carrier, who claims to be unable to deliver mail to specific homes because there are no street or address signs. Birão, the leader of the local drug cartel, persuades the residents to appoint Acerola, the teenager protagonist of the series, to the role of mail carrier. Acerola and his best friend Laranjinha fare well enough for a while but run into a crisis when they are unable to deliver a letter. They are told to return it to its sender but this leads them to an unsuccessful journey through various districts of Rio de Janeiro. On the way they pick up a map of the city and notice that the favela is essentially absent from the map (shown simply as a green patch). The boys then propose to map out the favela. The project sets off a frenzy, as everyone—first the local cartel members and

² I want to thank Eddie Piñuelas for drawing my attention to this episode. My reading here is indebted to his analysis of this episode in his dissertation exam.

soon thereafter the favela inhabitants—attempt to claim names of streets, alleyways, squares and other significant landmarks. The process of mapping the favela draws the inhabitants in not because it will serve as a practical means of navigation (since its inhabitants already effectively negotiate the favela space) but as a means of entering a representational logic. They want to put themselves—not just the favela, but their individual names—on the map of Rio and claim their place within the local networks of power.

As the boys are finishing the map, the local police invade their workspace and confiscate it in order to raid the favela. In response, the boys switch street and address signs in the favela, rendering the map obsolete. In other words, in order to secure a measure of protection from the police, the cartel members abandon the attempt to consolidate their space through mapping, and instead turn striated space back to its previous smoothness in order to close it off to the outside. They do so, according to Piñuelas, “not merely removing the signs, but by replacing them, turning each name into a parody, each promise of knowledge into a lie—when the fact is it was all a lie to begin with.” Nonetheless, the police are—even if by accident—successful in their invasion of the favela and manage to capture Birão. The false names turn the favela inside out (according to its representation on the map) but nonetheless the police manage to be effective.

This episode presents an interesting contrast to the military reorganization of space charted by Weizman. Whether or not the Brazilian police are undergoing the theoretical revolution of the Israeli military, it is clear that such a revolution has not happened within the world imagined by the television series. A series of binaries are still in place within the diegetic world of the episode whereby the state and its henchmen still operate according to the logic of a fundamentally modern project, which includes walls that enclose and maps that represent. It is still a project of naming and disciplining bodies, of occupying space. The favela inhabitants and the drug cartel embody an at least partial escape from this paradigm. They have not quite reached the level of abstraction of the citizen necessary to be inked onto a map (and have access to the public sphere and the city’s material infrastructure). Theirs is a non-space of sorts. And yet it is clear that their space is not represented by the television series as simply one of anarchy and disorder. It is not an illegible space. Indeed, the point of the TV episode is to fill in and compensate for the green blotch on the Rio city maps, a task it undertakes by tracking the shifting scenes and relations of power in the favela. If Birão determines originally who delivers the mail, it is the personal friendship between Acerola and Laranjinha that brings the latter in as an assistant postman. The project of naming streets is suggested by the boys and approved by a trio under Birão’s command while he is out of town, but the actual names of the streets are a result of firepower, money, persuasion and also fiat (the boys name one street “Temake” by merging the names of three women (Teresa/Maria/Kelly) who live there and who refuse to live under each other’s names. Reversals are part of the landscape: Birão is imprisoned and the younger trio takes over; Acerola does not have money to buy a *pastel* at the beginning of the episode but temporarily acquires access to money through his self-appointed job as cartographer. It is a world in constant flux. As Danny Hoffman speculates of the West

African post-conflict city, urban infrastructure is constituted not by a grammar of buildings, roads, neighborhoods, water, and gas lines, but by a diffuse array of “relationships between people, markets of exchange, occult imaginings, and temporary alliances and enmities” so that “movement replaces identification as the locus of production and political participation” (406). If the residents are interested in mapping it is because they seek a temporary stop to this movement and to establish a foothold within the relations of power by occupying the favela’s physical infrastructure. Birão’s request for a telephone and computer once he is captured—wireless communication takes over when face to face or voice to voice communication is impossible, as those in power communicate to the residents with a megaphone—speaks to a similar desire to remain on the map. The TV camera understands the project of mapping the favela as one of tracking precisely these shifting movements and relationships rather than representing the physical infrastructure. Indeed, film is a more useful map precisely because it is constituted by images that move.

I would argue that this episode—like movies such as *City of God* and *Bus 174*—views itself as a point of mediation whereby the camera undertakes a representation of that which has not been made visible within public discourse. The series is itself the map that lays out the social web of the favela. That is, if the Brazilian police cannot walk through walls like the Israeli military and—mistakenly—rely on a map to guide them through alleys to specific doorways (a map that is false yet leads them where they want to go anyway), the camera can and does walk through walls, mapping out the social relations of the favela and the logics which undergird it, making it intelligible to an outside world.

Common Places

Paolo Virno elaborates on the distinction (drawn from Aristotelian rhetoric) between “common places” and “general places” in language. “Common places” constitute the skeletal structure of language rendering every individual expression we use. They are “the woof” of the “life of the mind” (36), the generic logical-linguistic forms that establish the pattern for all forms of discourse. They are *langue* rather than *parole*: language before the individual. “Language [. . .] is a pre-individual sphere wherein the process of individuation is rooted. Ontogenesis, or the developmental phases of the individual human being, consists in fact of the passage from language as public or inter-psychic experience to language as singularizing and intra-psychic experience” (77). These common places are *inconspicuous*. Nothing about them draws our attention. They are so basic, so general, as to be invisible to us, taken for granted. What is perceived in the forms of our discourse are instead the “special places.” “Special places” are ways of saying something which are appropriate in one or another sphere of associative life such as the university classroom, the church, among sports fans of a certain team, or a bar. They are particular kinds of expressions, particular ways of saying things. To the extent that they are not general they can be incompatible with each other. They can function in one situation

and not another. Virno argues that in today's world the "special places" of discourse and argumentation are perishing and dissolving while visibility is gained by the "common places." No longer an unnoticed background, the "common places" but move to the forefront. Special places continue to exist, but they are no longer able to offer a standard of orientation or a trustworthy compass. "An ethical-rhetorical topography is disappearing" (36). Virno argues that this changes the very nature of the intellect which has traditionally been understood as separate from the public sphere, as an activity of a secluded solitary nature, an interior activity which separates us from our peers. Now, in contrast, he writes, intellect is becoming common. It becomes idle talk: the fleeting, sometimes vacuous character of everyday interaction where what counts is not so much what is said but the simple and pure ability to speak, the informal act of communication.

If nothing happens now, not only in Latin American studies but in disciplines of thought associated with the Humanities may be is related to the dissolution of these "special places" which produced the thickness and the orientation of our work. Such dissolution puts pressure on the subject of intellectual inquiry particularly tied to a project of mapping. Is there a field any longer? It is reproduced certainly in Ph.D. exams and lists of canonical authors but such a register is not the place where "things happen" any longer. In the Latin American cultural field, I think film is the one place whose attempts to map, to give visibility to the darkened corners, to respond to new forms of social mobilization and social life by territorializing them under its regime of visibility still carries weight and produces effects. And yet, this knowledge is out of place and—despite itself—shows the seams and limits of its own project. The function of mapping, the creation of a topography with distinctions between special places and common places, and the walls between them, dissolves. It can be taken up outside of the "special places" entrusted with its operations, just as the boys must take up the previously specialized function of the mailman, but then just as quickly, undone. The drug lord can be captured and bound within walls but telephones and the internet render those walls porous. Nothing happens perhaps for the mailman who cannot deliver the letters himself, who has not learned to walk through walls, but out there the boys—without money, without firepower, without knowledge of any particular kind—have learned to scramble space.

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