

PERIPHERAL/DRIFT

Philip Monk

PERIPHERAL/DRIFT
A Vocabulary of Theoretical Criticism

Philip Monk

Criticism is in a state of drift, out of control. Its loss, however, is willed; its drifting theoretical. Initially the question is: How is criticism presently adequate to its object? Yet, beyond this question, how is language itself adequate, as language is the role and "model" of criticism? Criticism as theory frees itself from its traditional object - the work of art; it is responsible - in its theoretical irresponsibility, i.e., in not answering, responding to the work of art - for its excess and loss. But in exceeding the object and losing it, is not this excess and loss, for itself, jouissance, its own bliss? Desire has no object - it is outside use, want and demand; and theory similarly no longer finds its impulses in the work of art, in an object, formerly its own object. It can still nominate a work of art, and say, "That's it for me," as part of the binary "That's it"/"So what"; but usually it says "What's in it for me?", or "How can I use this?".

Theory no longer assumes a subservience to its object (the prerequisite of a science) in a presumed secondariness of non-presence to the full presence of the work of art and the artist, the guarantor of that presence. Theory now, in a sense, is fictive. Nevertheless, as its own object, theory is not a metalanguage, which would return it to the formal, as a formal language. It is a drift. This drift is atopic, without a site: theory does not take itself to be central but peripheral (not centered in meaning, in society). Theory's displacement is the movement of its desire, the loss of its privileged site and meaning, its prescriptive and normative authority.

The following attempts to sketch a revaluation of the values (by disguise and theft) of art and theory through a critical vocabulary of intensive, shifting terms.

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AMBIGUITY/AMBIVALENCE

Representation leads to a singular reading and meaning. A reading that does not go beyond itself is representation, contained within the frame and limit of one meaning. Multiple readings, ambiguity, would open the work to desire, but also to ambivalence. Any intervention, however, opens itself (increases the openings, the sites of eroticism and perversion) to this possibility of positive action/function, recuperation, or negative response and reactionary usurption. Any art, any act, must be open to this lack of control, to the abandonment of the hierarchical distribution and unification (univocality) of meaning, to the release of a mechanism from which desire issues.

ANUS

What is this disgusting term "anus" but an inversion of values? In this drift, the Phallus loses its constitutive role as the social distributor of identity. Since the Phallus assures identity, the loss of identity means the inability to know the value or social and sexual function of the sexual organ, whether phallus or anus. And since the anus does not distribute identity, the knowledge of one's sex, male or female, is uncertain. This drift between sexual postures is an acceptance of - an indifference to - uncertainty, the refusal of identity, as is the theoretical notion of celibacy (e.g., celibate machines).

What would an art of the anus mean (as opposed to the socially acceptable art of the phallus), an art that escaped its social and civilizing status as sublimated anality? And what would an art be that hid the anus beneath the phallus, in fact, confused the anal with the phallic or, indeed, disguised the anus as the phallus?

APHASIA

The aphasic is outside any presence (the ideal presence of apodicticity and tautology). The aphasic, suffering from a similarity or decoding disorder, cannot select or identify. The code is damaged in focusing on the context. Unable to act as a subject (initiate a subject in a sentence), the aphasic is outside identity and exchange.

The apodictic, on the other hand, gives certitude of subject. But the apodictic does not "speak" so much as assert. Marcel ("beauty of indifference") Duchamp expressed the desire to escape the condition: "dumb like a painter." Prescient as his desire was, no one has commented on the continued "dumbness" of paintings - not the act of painting, but the objects "in themselves," i.e., the apodictic (phenomenological) art object. How can paintings betray some intelligence and lose their "dumbness," their apodicticity, their inability to signify, and thus be interpreted (plurally), except as a "sign system on a single level of articulation"?

BODY/CONVULSION

Through criticism I bring my body (my language) into crisis. What is my body to me but a representation, an image-repertoire, an identity? That is the representation I bring to my body as a subject. But I am also inscribed in representation from "outside": against the insistence of this recording gaze (a technique) I offer the resistance of the surface of my body. Yet against this representation, my body convulses; it breaks; it disarticulates this inscribed surface of representation and identity. It distends and extends itself; or rather, language/writing imposes a limit to the body, impels the body to the limit.

The "truth" of the body (its phenomenology) is an ideology (not natural but created, with its own history); its limit, this necessary fiction. Phenomenology cannot ensure the "truth" of the body. Its promotion of the experience of temporality is only the most recent of abstractions created from the meditative space of the art gallery, while outside I am condemned to the political technology of my body. Against this body, against the resolution of tension in the experience of the work of art, all that is left to me in my body is my own physical disgust and convulsion, my own control of my body in the willed loss of control and usurption by cataclysmic desire.

The convulsive body is exemplary in its lack of control, as a usurper of intensive moments, displacing energy over the body onto the other, outside of any hierarchy, identity or coercion. It is an anoedipal organ.

BREAK

Desire flows through the break; its force creates it. What prevents the break from taking effect? Structure: that is why the break is first a question of structure, then of content. The play of difference in a work is the play of structure against itself, a process of disarticulation and decomposition that can be accelerated. Structure playing against itself producing a difference is différance - the same which is not identical. This is not merely a slippage in the sense of the structure repeating itself out of sync, but a return of the same, a return out of control (as a split in the subject).

What brings us to this disarticulation of structure?: force, which through excess, fissures structure, and desire which issues through/from it as content. But this force and meaning of content has been repressed by structure, in that structure is the formal unity of form and content, but content formalized and subsumed within the structural. In the pretence of content in formalist art, content is brought to another order in its erasure - to the formal, structural - whereas form and structure achieve their "natural" order in transparency. In effect, transparency (including identity and tautology) reduces the gap which is the locus of the opening to and issue of content. The break, as a return within the structural, acts positively in the gap. It locates itself as an effect in disarticulating that structure, but its positive force is indifferent to it.

CONTENT

The necessary correlative of the death of structure (if that death can ever be announced totally outside a new economy) is the radical non-identical and disjunctive relation of content to form. To prevent content being recuperated to the substantive, we must use it disjunctively: as an a-formal force it is a completely different matter and issue.

Content is not traditionally conceived meaning or subject matter. Rather, it is the process and force of interpretation, an intensive issue of energy. What is the relation between content and energy? In one word, desire.

Likewise, the movement of interpretation forbids a substance or subject to rest within the act: "We have no right to ask who it is who interprets. It is interpretation itself, a form of the will to power, which exists (not as a 'being' but as process, a becoming) as passion." (Nietzsche)

DEATH OF STRUCTURE

The disarticulation of structure, or to accelerate the process, degeneration and dissolution, is perhaps the drift of death - an impulse or an indifference, not an instinct, an impulse out of order; not repetition which would be that order of structure. Drift as the death of structure and identity.

DESIRE

Desire is without object, consequently, without need and demand. Its positive force precludes any lack, however. Like theory without its object, desire is not a metalanguage; it is only a motion, without origin or end. It is outside representation: as a force, it cannot stabilize in a structure. Thus, the problem of its knowledge outside this force. Where to locate its condensations and displacements? It moves through the symptoms of the critical designations of this writing.

DRIFT

Drift as historical, as the drift of desire towards the periphery of indifference, as an index of indifference, but positively, as the opening to differences, to plurality.

"Drifting occurs when I do not respect the whole . . ." (Roland Barthes)

ECCENTRICITY AND DIFFERENCE

"Peripheral drift" - as one used to say eccentricity and difference. Still, eccentricity and difference are aside, peripheral to the centre (there is no centre) and to the notion of identity. They are an acceleration towards dissolution and exacerbation of the Same. Eccentric, that is decentered; different, that is, the same which is not identical.

EXACERBATION

Exacerbation seemingly is against the grain; finding the grain of its voice, it exacerbates. In exacerbating its own language, its position and identity, it exacerbates society which must retain secure identities for their social (capitalist) exchange value. To exacerbate is to take on society's symptoms, develop them intensively, obsessively and logically (i.e., perversely) and re-present them to society, as society's own desires - whether positive or reactive - freed from their ideological cover. This exacerbation is not an intention, but an effect - the effect of its own movement of desire.

HERESY

It seemed that he was engaged in a perversion that went against the whole modernist enterprise. His first heresy was to claim the mutual basis of Modernist and Minimal (phenomenological) art in formalism, that is, not an opposition but a complementarity. His second heresy was to call for content against form and structure: content as force and desire. His third heresy, after intentionally misinterpreting art to develop his own ideas (the critic must write about art and objects, society and artists both demand), was to fictionalize theory.

INHABITATION

Roland Barthes, writing on the ideological systems of language and literature, admitted that "To keep these spoken systems from disturbing or embarrassing us, there is no other solution than to inhabit one of them." In assuming these systems for ourselves, in inhabiting them through a disguise, we disturb them.

The codes of these sites of inhabitation are complex and syphonable. For example: production inhabits technology as concepts inhabit language. The ideology of production enters the ideology of language through concepts (reproduction). Technology and language, however, are the two fluid currencies that we possess and inhabit, the two that we can use (abuse). Theory (as theft) can inhabit language as language inhabits production, the fictional of production. The intelligence of theft is the theoretical inhabitation of production through language; to be peripheral, and yet inhabit, anonymously.

ISSUE

What is wrong, paradoxically it seems, is the way we stand in front of a work of art, the way we allow ourselves to stand in front of art, an act which creates an identity and constitutes a subject: the inescapability of perspective and representation, even in abstract art.

This facing of the work of art, this basic and unconscious physical presupposition of our understanding, is a symbolic relationship, whereby two things - work and spectator - are brought together - in identity or confrontation. But how is this symbolic relationship between work and spectator displaced to one of contiguity, where we are peripheral to the structure, as an event, sliding along it as a separate but contiguous part, parallel and asymmetrical to the work, instead of direct and identical?

Symbol as intention restores subject and substance. Intention is detention in meaning, just as the symbol detains the spectator in presence in front of the work of art. To drift, meanwhile, is to be outside even contention.

NETWORK

A network seems to coalesce as the "site" of the peripheral drift, composed as it is of shifting subjects, subjects created through the inscribed symptoms of recording techniques. The network is an eccentric and differentiated plurality of indeterminate entries and perverse connections: perverse because peripheral to use and predetermined response; perverse because it does not serve or seek to communicate a meaning. Nor is it expressive: it is performative. It only desires to proliferate and implement itself with force.

For example, "The Perverse Telephone Network": "A sub-network sending and receiving interactive pornography using new audio, video, and facsimile transceivers and the existing telephone system. This network, with its open and shut nodes, is impossible to locate; the hardware shifts or falls apart, is easy to build or repair on principles of theft and bricolage, as it is composed of widely-proliferating surveillance tools. The network per se is the telephone system. The individual participants are interchangeable."

Judith Doyle, "Model for a Prose Algorithm."

NOISE

Noise is a drift. In any signal there is a tendency towards noise. Taken as a value, noise is this drift from meaning and use, a drift towards perversion and desire. Noise is the intermingling of pluralities, an exacerbation and the grain of technology's voice: its pleasure in the perversion of communication.

PERIPHERAL

The peripheral is the locality of the drift, but not its end, just as there is not an origin to the drift, only a simple stepping aside, alongside. How is the peripheral a site when it is an atopic shifting non-site? And what coalesces at the periphery to make a limit-work? The limit and the periphery have no commerce with boundaries as the site of oppositions. The boundary is the metaphorical site and source of the dialectic, identity, symbol, and anything that we face and attempt to understand and use within its terms or those of society. Dialectic, identity, signification, communication: all imply use and want, and univocal meaning. Peripheral to these, there is only the implementation of experimentation, which is not yet a practice.

PERVERSION

My perversion is peripheral; but it is not transgressive. Transgression, since it concerns itself with the code in subverting it, returns to the centre, like eroticism. Perversion, as criticism, is decoding - an analysis of the code. Yet, perversion is also indifferent to any employ, perhaps even to abuse: hence, decoded as no code. Perversion is outside codes, peripheral to them; or, maybe, adrift in them (as an acceptance of the symptomatic).

SYMPTOM

While seeming to abandon society, I inhabit its symptoms at their limit. I inhabit through simulation which is ideological expression/representation, but also the condition of my disguise and my desire. My ability to simulate is a matter of desire and intelligence: intelligence as a disguise for desire (as in repression), and the companion to desire in its displacement. Since symptoms are, at once, both collective and individual, it is easy for me to anonymously disguise myself within society's symptoms by accepting them as a means and a site. The individual is no more a subject than society; to speak of symptoms is to conceive the subject; to accept symptoms is to deny the subject, to make it a fiction.

The symptom, I could say, is distributed by capitalism, but it is actually configured between the conjecture of desire and the conjecture of repression and ideology. It is more than a compromise (in the psychoanalytical sense); it is devious in creating a network, in "representing" desire in its own pleasure, in creating a network through displacement for desire's motion/flow. Desire is atopic, mobile and a shifter; so is the subject. This subject is produced only in the connecting network, as a symptom of perverse desire in the network.

THEFT

Theft (theory) acts through the revaluation of language, by distortion and disguise. Communication is the site of this endeavor; however, disguise is the opposite of communication. While appearing to signify, disguise diverts, devalues. Communication is eminently serious: its purpose is to relay a message that has a meaning. Any signal, however, tends to noise; and this noise is a drift from the use and meaning of communication. To reduce the signal-to-noise ratio to this drift allows desire to move disguised in noise, to distort the code for its own perverse pleasure and to assume its content within the guise of the code.

"In fact, today, there is no language site outside bourgeois ideology: our language comes from it, returns to it, remains closed to it. The only possible rejoinder is neither confrontation nor destruction, but only theft: fragment the old text of culture, science, literature, and change its features according to formulae of disguise, as one disguises stolen goods." (Roland Barthes)

WRITING

This writing breaks the codes of decorum and criticism. Desire issues through these breaks, as the multiple traces of writing. And my self as a subject/trace, not a self-constituted ego, is created in this writing, which is more adequate to my description than the so-called presence of the work of art. In the loss of its object, theory/writing (and my self) asserts itself as a positive force, not reactive criticism.

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RUMOUR

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