



Responding: To Cooper

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I

The world today: destruction, explosion, collapse, catastrophe. Dark forces are at work, and not just in Mordor, continuously cutting, breaking, di-viding, splitting. ‘What is he building in there?’ “The destructive character is always blithely at work” (Benjamin) producing no wholes but rather fragments, components, pieces, percentages, shares, aphorisms, parts. No vision guides. But di-vision. He is not a collector but a disperser. He never arrives, he is always already de-parted. His daily routine is one of clearing away, he needs fresh air to breath. He is always in a state of un/in-formation. His cutting force is one of non-violent ‘pure violence’; beyond all violence. He sees in every shiny monument the image of the next catastrophe. He is not a member of the parliament of things or the war cabinet. He is the devilish nomad whose body is an open (battle) field. His deepest emotion is an “insuperable mistrust of the course of things and a readiness at all times to recognise that everything can go wrong”. He is “reliability itself.” Nothing is permanent. Destructive paths lie everywhere. What exists he reduces to rubble, not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it. But is there a whole in all this fragmentary debris? Do these scattered fragments of glass just cut endlessly or do they form a work of art? Do these de-parted parts live in uncontested open territory or are they positioned strategically? Do the divided components make up a war-machine or a child’s toy?

II

For a ‘philosophy of responding’! Is there one? No *one* philosophy of responding could call itself philosophy. And also, no philosophy without responding.

III

Should one ever respond in kind, offering back the response which was ‘asked for’? Or is the most effective response the one that transforms the grounds on which one is called to respond? Response as re-production. Response as transformation. If one responds on the same level as the call, is this *responding*, or something else (mimetic reaction, for example)?

IV

Responding implies a grounds of response, the prior formation of a terrain on which one responds. This terrain, or territory, is a network of productions of parts that produces parts that continuously regenerate and actualise the network of processes that produced them. Cooper’s assemblage continuously collects and disperses parts. It is an assemblage that tells us that “things come together and then fall apart, that relations are ephemeral, even ghost-like, events we cannot physically see or touch, that *possibilities rather than actualities* constitute the fabric of our world”. Cooper assembles possibilities or potentialities, responding in such a way that opens a field of actuality. The terrain’s becoming-territory is not only characterised by the sheer potentialities of re-production, but also by the ephemeral ‘closure’ of this virtuality which manifests itself in the actuality of a concrete situation. This concretisation, this actualisation, is an effect of diverse potentialities, but not a random one. Hence for Cooper, as for Benjamin, the critic has “the wind of history in [its] sails. The sails are concepts. It is not enough, however, to have sails at one’s disposal. What is decisive is knowing the art of setting them.” Thus the act of folding all potentialities into an actuality of the here and now requires an energetic intensity, a field of gravity, a pure destructive force.

V

Responding is an act, an *actuality*. The act of response is neither simply material nor ideal. Responding takes place in a field of determined possibilities. Response takes place in time. “The true vocation of a journal is to announce the spirit of its epoch. Such *actuality* means even more to it than its own unity or clarity. A journal would...be condemned to insignificance if there did not take shape within it a life which was powerful enough to redeem even what is questionable by the act of affirming it” (Benjamin). Actuality is the ‘eternal return’ of the different. A journal must always be *ephemeral* in nature, says Benjamin: “this is the just price demanded by its wooing of true actuality.”

VI

Responding means not seeing history historically. When we experience history, its sedimentation is not apparent. As Benjamin suggests, history flashes up as image when

a ‘moment of danger’ interrupts particular junctures of time and space. For Benjamin, therefore, history happens as a frozen flash, at a standstill: “It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill.”

VII

Responding is destruction. Here destruction “must not be understood negatively as involving the doing away” of a past. On the contrary “it seeks to indicate the positive possibilities of this tradition, which also means placing it within its limits” (Heidegger). Destruction is a response to an other that has yet to be questioned. Destruction shows the enabling boundaries of *excluded* possibilities. Destruction deprives pasts of their ‘intended’ or popularly consumed functions; it extracts fragments out of their ‘original’ context and rejoins them. For destruction past is the surface of monumental material. Destruction kills the illusory life of fragments and offers them potentialities.

VIII

A work of art responds. That is, it produces. This is clearly articulated in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in which the work of art exceeds both the artist and the domain of what is called ‘art’ and opens a domain of effects. It performs a ‘worlding’ of the earth, as Heidegger puts it. This is not to say that art is not worldly, but that it is never a simple mimetic reproduction of the ever-same. It is rather a mimesis full of fragmentary spontaneity. This ‘worlding’ is thus a destruction of the world. Cooper is an artist.

IX

One is sometimes called to respond to acts of violence. Here violence is seen as the violation of natural, religious or state laws. The response to such violation then often involves the mobilisation of state power to condemn those responsible and bring them to justice: *just* wars are fought, thousands of people held in prisons, the military is given a gigantic budget, the police has excessive powers of surveillance and interrogation. This power machinery is made legitimate by the force of laws put into operation by democratic parliaments, which for Benjamin “lack the sense that a lawmaking violence is represented by themselves; no wonder that they cannot achieve decrees worthy of this violence, but cultivate in compromise a supposedly non-violent manner of dealing with political affairs.” Hence parliaments are not conscious of the latent presence of their violence and their show an amnesia toward the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence. In other words, they are not able to recognise the violence that has created them and the violence that they continuously re-produce. Therefore, the state can only respond to violence, because it has codified a specific definition of violence and because it feels threatened in its lawmaking monopoly of violence. To truly

respond, however, involves violating apparently ‘natural’ laws; questioning them, re-reading them; re-formulating the notion of violence. This destruction is a force that stands outside the law; this is what Benjamin calls ‘pure violence.’

X

Responding means seeing potentialities and therefore impotentialities; that is, response always bears a relation to something that comes from without, a call or an invitation to which one constructs a relation. Proactivity is a fantasy of origin, and, as such, is impossible. Responding is re-production and re-presentation. The German *Ursprung* is usually translated as ‘origin’. This hides, however, the forceful movement of *-sprung*, the jump. Origin is bringing forth something; it is ‘worlding,’ which also involves seeing the potentiality of past darkness. Every reproduction and representation is the ‘jump’ into something new; it is the unique collection of parts. Pure repetition is an invention of the logicians. But reproduction requires intensity, an energy that stems from seeing a specific moment of danger. This intensity is actualised in the situation – a fold of actuality, potentiality and impotentiality.

XI

Cooper’s assemblage is a continuous collection and re-collection of parts, which bears in itself indefinite potentialities. For example, the mass-produced product coming off an assembly line is never a ‘finished’ or ‘ended’ product. It always connects to new parts. What we therefore ‘end’ up with is a multiplicity; an assemblage which is in continuous motion of configuration and re-configuration. To theorise his conception of assemblage and re-production, Cooper explicitly connects to the essay ‘The Work of Art in the Time of Technical Reproducibility’, in which Benjamin discusses how new forms of technical reproduction such as photography and film are essential for the rise of modern mass society. The ‘danger’ of these very re-production techniques is that they render themselves as tools for the ‘aestheticisation of politics’ so successfully practiced by the Nazis and the commodity of the culture industry. Benjamin’s destruction of reproduction techniques leads him to ‘invert’ profane actuality and open the possibilities of a ‘politicisation of art’. The specifics of such a project of politics are developed in one of Benjamin’s last writing projects, the collection of aphorisms ‘On the Concept of History’ (which is yet to be considered by Cooper), where time is understood as an ephemeral image that flashes up in the actuality of the Now: “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognise it ‘the way it *really* was’. It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.”

XII

Responding involves the formation of fragments, parts and allegories with the aim of responding to specific social formations, which means not fetishistically supporting them.

XIII

Cooper responds. That is certain, but what does he respond to? There is no question of responding on a single level. Cooper does not simply write social theory, nor philosophy, nor theories of technology, information or organisation. (But all these are happening too.) There is an assemblage without respect for traditional disciplinary demarcations. Perhaps we are guilty of a specific and unfair territorialisation by setting Cooper in relation to questions of organisation when, as he repeatedly insists, he is *not* a theorist of organisation. Organisation is something in which he has had little more than a passing interest. Here we are neither inside nor outside organisation studies, but perhaps that is the kind of place for *ephemera* to inhabit.

XIV

Cooper is an assembler of fragments. There is no great collection of books, no archive of works, other than one 'little book' and a collection of other fragments. His work will be forever incomplete, infinitely incompletable. The task of thinking. In this there are clear parallels with Walter Benjamin, who equally wrote fragments and stood 'outside' of the university system. In 1925 his book *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, which he submitted as a habilitation doctorate at Frankfurt University, was rejected. But he always mistrusted bureaucratic academic life anyway, so one assumes he preferred a life of financial difficulties and uncertainties 'outside' the safe haven of disciplinary boredom that is called the university.

XV

What you are reading now was not written in isolation. It was written in response – first of all to Cooper, but equally between the two of us, between Auckland and Copenhagen, and also unavoidably in relation to the present moment of danger. How can one not 'respond', in one way or another, to the present historical conjuncture? Responding, also, to a wonderful day that we spend in Staffordshire this July, when we spent six hours responding to Robert Cooper, and calling on him to respond. Then the emails that followed, as we tried to fix the *dynamis* of that day into a static, finished object.

XVI

“A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language” (Deleuze and Guattari). Playing the refrain of the minor *from within* the major.

XVII

“Then the war in which we had refused to believe broke out, and it brought – disenchantment. Not only is it more bloody and more destructive than any war of other days, because of the enormously increased perfection of weapons of attack and defence; it is at least as cruel, as embittered, as implacable as any that has preceded it...It overwhelms, with blind rage, anything that stands in its way, as though there were to be no future and no peace afterwards. It tears up all bonds of community among the warring peoples and threatens to leave behind an embitterment that will make any renewal of these bonds impossible for a long time to come” (Freud). How do we respond to such moment of danger, timelessly described in this passage? With silence?, as Benjamin contemplates: “where violence rules absolutely, ...everything and everybody must fall silent.” Does one respond by talking, because ‘it’s good to talk’? Does one hide in academic hiding holes, pretending to be blind? What does the intellectual do, asks Luis Aragon, “when confronted by certain basic and very simple facts: the fact that the workers face a police force armed with cannons, the fact that war looms and that fascism is already in power”? The critic’s task is to ‘respond’ to these fragmentary facts by narrowing them down to a few well-chosen weights and seeing them in the light of the possibilities they offer.

XVIII

The German word for ‘response’ is *Antwort*, which implies the reversal, the turning over, of a word. A similar meaning is produced by the word ‘catastrophe’, which in Greek times also meant the reversal (*cata*) of a text, or a rhyme (*Strophe* in German means verse, passage of a rhyme). Hence responding can be seen as the bringing forth of a catastrophe. However: “That things just go on is the catastrophe”, as Benjamin describes the situation. How can one respond to the continuous flow of catastrophic responses? For Benjamin the ‘key’ lies in bringing forth a ‘real’ catastrophe; which is a destruction of fetishised catastrophes of modernity, an arresting of images of so-called catastrophes.

XIX

Could we say that response is linked in some kind of way to questions of responsibility? This is, of course, one of the themes of Derrida’s recent work, particularly following ‘Passions: “An Oblique Offering”’. And here we are in the territory of the aporias of

response. I am called to respond; I know I must (*je sais, je dois*), but I also know that any response which simply followed a programme is unlikely to be responsible. I might have good faith, but not responsibility. Hence the aporia of responsibility – I can only respond responsibly when I don't know how to respond, when I am faced with a call to which I don't know how to respond. If I knew in advance what to do, how to respond, then I would not be *responding* in the strong sense of an engagement with an Other who calls me into doubt.

XX

So how do we respond to Cooper? We are not in the game of hagiography, and we wonder what would be achieved by establishing a new canon of great writers on organisation. Certainly we can be critical enough of certain aspects of his work, and we can let it take us to places which are well outside of it. But we know that in some way any responses we make will jump up from within the very field sown by Cooper (and others). Is it possible to use arms supplied from another against them? If responding is something that can transform an assemblage, then Cooper might reassemble a thinking of organisation. In various ways. But he is not a thinker alone. Further, even: Cooper does not produce revolutionary ideas. And all for the good. The task of the critic is not to produce revolutionary theses, but to transform the conditions in which certain theses are considered revolutionary and others are not (Benjamin). This transformative reassemblage, both in the reassembling Cooper himself achieves and in our reassemblage of Cooper, will be the object we hold before us in this issue. And so we conclude our own minor response as a sort of preface to this, a special issue of *ephemera*, in which we invite Cooper to respond to our responses to him, and also publish a series of responses to certain works by and about Robert Cooper.

discussion

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