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Max Ryyänen

DISGUSTING, ENIGMATIC AND INORGANIC

Mario Perniola, the Dank Humanities, and the Role of the Philosopher in Contemporary Culture

A philosophy of the present is (...) an enigmatic philosophy. Nor could it be otherwise, given that present-day society is itself enigmatic. (...) The philosopher is precisely someone who turns him- or herself into nothing in order to listen to the present and all its enigmas, the person who silences his or her own desires, his or her own untidy affections and his or her own deeply held opinions in order to avoid placing obstacles and misleading screens in the way of an understanding of history's manifestations. (Perniola 1995, 43)

In the late 1990s Mario Perniola commented that (Western, contemporary) culture had entered a transition-state. He wished to break at least some of the ties that modernity had forcefully woven between philosophy and ideological agencies such as Enlightenment, idealism and Marxism, i.e. 200 years of invisible power-structures and societal connections that had become fundamental for academics (“the order of things”, see e.g. Perniola 1998a: 62-63 on Foucault). In the 1990s, quite naturally, as it was the house concept of the time, he sometimes referred to the situation as postmodern (Perniola 1995, 42-43). This notion dropped away as naturally from his work in the 2000s, as “postmodernity” ceased to function

as an open platform for discussing ‘current changes’, and became a stale list of issues that today look like the last utopia of a world ruled by the white European middle class – fighting to keep its own heritage product, modernity, in the center.

Pier Aldo Rovatti and Gianni Vattimo, concluded in their *Pensiero debole* (1983), that the (at the time current) cultural changes were not about a radical break with the past, but a (hermeneutic) weakening of major beliefs and classifications (e.g. ‘art’ slowly becomes just a regulative horizon for artistic work). Perniola wrote “post-modernity essentially distinguishes itself from modernity only to the extent that it does not make any radical break therefrom!” (Perniola 1995, 43). He later criticized Rovatti and Vattimo’s ‘weak thinking’ for using the metaphor ‘weak’, accentuating that there was nothing ‘strong’ in modernity (see the dialogue with Vattimo in Vattimo 1990) – which is not hard to agree with when one looks at the incredibly stiff nature of classifications and categories of culture in modern thinking, and the way that for the most part it had only one (European) ethnic position as its base .

With this in mind, the transition-state and its new, still partly invisible potential that Perniola sought to understand and to fuel must have felt less like entering a state of demarcation or chaos, but just a dispensing within visible constraints that had kept philosophers of the previous era stuck in the old ideas of how to make sense. He describes his aim as not jumping on the wagon of hermeneutics, which he saw as spending too much time on the past, or any ‘future’-driven utopias (that dominated new forms of media thinking), but focusing on the cultural and philosophical situation of the present.– Finding partners in crime in the French excessive philosophy of the 20th century (he also found a philosopher of excess in his teacher Luigi Pareyson, see the last chapter of Perniola 1998a), and (in the footsteps of Peter Sloterdijk) the cynics (Perniola 1998a: 39).

Another practice that separates Mario Perniola from other philosophers is his fragmented, but systematic inquiry into what I call the ‘dank humanities’. The traditional meaning of dank is unpleasantly damp, moist, sticky and cold (e.g. a humid cavern); in today’s internet thinking it refers to excessive, nonsensical memes that frequently apply rogue aesthetics from bad image quality to saturated colors. The twofold concept captures Perniola’s voyage through philosophy and culture, where the age-old tradition of twisting logical, polished thinking towards the unpleasant, margins/basement of the mind and culture (studied by Blanchot, Klossowski, Lacan, Bataille, Cioran, Shestov, de Sade) meets the cold touch and often arbitrary nature of contemporary culture from the video revolution to the late internet culture, and their lack of rationality and order.

One main tenet in Perniola’s desire to trace and analyze the transgressions and transitions of experience and the interpretation of identity and pleasure is our human(ist) experience and the way he considered it to be driven into a transitional state. Descriptive, though suggestive, and never aiming towards clear answers, his thinking is challenging to classify as philosophy, cultural studies and/or psychoanalysis, but the same applies to the name thread mentioned above. It is no coincidence that de Sade is one of the examples Michel Foucault wrestles with in his “What is an Author?” (1969; in Foucault 2016), and that the list of the aforementioned “usual suspects” can be found wherever culture is mentioned, from universities and mental hospitals to punk clubs and underground events. Their overall humanities, united with a touch of the marginal and emancipated attitude, makes them easy to approach – there is no one true interpretation of their work – but also seductive to read.

In this article, written in honor of Mario Perniola’s lifework, I aspire to think of his writing as an example of free humanities, and to see it as a programmatic attempt to drive the potential of the humanities to reach beyond our controlled pleasures, sane understanding and safety-driven metaphysics, into experiences that are hard to accept if one wants to think in a

humanist manner, to differentiate one's life-machine from other machines and technology and from animals and issues that go beyond our understanding and acceptance.

When discussing Perniola's philosophy, my friend, Danish philosopher Carsten Friberg, has often said – that Perniola had an immense impact on him, but he couldn't really say what his philosophy is about, nor is he interested in writing about him. I felt the same way, but after Perniola's death I started to see his philosophy in a new light, as an organic whole, where humanity reflects on its new and yet newly revealed, archaic extensions. They are not the neat media-extensions of Marshall McLuhan (McLuhan 1964), where the impact of the (at the time) new media are discussed from a post-pragmatist point of view, accentuating communication and a social coming together. We are referring to the “video-man” (Perniola 1995[1990]: 27-30), an insensitive mediatic expansion of sensing, or the way today's people, due to the pressure of commodity capitalism and the digital/technological ambient, feel less and less human, in the traditional sense of the term, and begin experiencing themselves as only ‘things’ (Perniola 1994), in a life where they no longer own their own experience, as it is a product as much as anything else. The main accent is on the small twists that we are not yet happy to digest as our new human potential and/or capacities. To meet (really meet) the new quirky sides of ourselves is a life-long project and Perniola provided a road-map (or maybe it is better to call it a labyrinth that leads astray) for achieving it.

Ankle Robotics

At the end of the 2000s, during an excessive jogging phase, I broke my ankle – and had to consult a doctor. At the time I had studied tantric yoga for some years, and I was full of ideas of organic, spiritual holism. My doctor was one of those health professionals who, with a

background in natural science and no holistic, ‘humane’ training, could really make people feel that they were not treated holistically. She was a bit like a machine herself, and she treated me like a machine, an object and/or thing – barely human, although her treatment was not necessarily negative. She repaired me, like one robot repairing another. Being treated like an object, a machine and/or a thing was, of course, no new sensation. But I realized that it could also be a pleasant one. I felt a bit like a broken thing. I had worked so hard, too hard that I had to realize that the brain was a machine that could heat up, disturb your sleep and produce unwanted thoughts. And I had jogged so much that my body showed me that some parts did not live well with the broader picture of holistic vitality that I had been hallucinating about.

To recognize the pleasure of the experience, the cold touch of an unemotional doctor in a human repair shop called a Western hospital, might sound radical, but it is nothing new for our bodies and minds. When my partner sometimes uses me exclusively for sexual gratification – with her eyes closed – or when I feel like part of a well-oiled machine in a (sport/work) team, or recognize my role as a climbing platform for a cat or a mattress for a dog, it’s not that bad. Doctors “repair me” by sewing my skin and pumping technologically elevated medicine to my body and brain. Dentists insert plastic into my mouth. Action and horror films stimulate my stomach and soul as if I were a ragdoll (while I sit ‘passively’ in front of the TV). I lose my self while I jog like a machine on my concrete route through the constructed cube environment. I often experience myself a bit like a thing – especially when I put on PVC, when techno music and strobe lights hammer my subjectivity, and when car driving makes me forget that I am a separate body from the car (many phenomenologists like to think of the car as an extension of the body, but it often feels the other way around).

This does not wash away the hard work of ethical critical theorists. Recalling Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), which did not just problematize gender

power asymmetry in film, but where being an object for someone's gaze was raised as a painful topic for cultural studies, or, to take an older example, W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (Du Bois 1994 [1903]), where the African-American philosopher worked hard to convince his (white) readers that African-Americans had a (human) soul, it has for obvious reasons been more important to remind humanity that people are not just things, machines, tools and objects (or animals, who are more often used as things and machines).

Still, if we aim for truth, thinking should also take the opposite path. These days, the opposite path is more important than ever if we want to understand (paradoxically) what it means to be human, at least when we talk about the privileged human being of today. If the really underprivileged work with spades, living in shelters built from trash, selling one's body, organs and health in beds, factories and streets, the way the digitalized classes spend their time wired, stimulated by media, and connected to each other with smart phones, is a trashy dystopic version of the idealistic dreams of the pioneering thinkers of the computer age (McLuhan, Negroponte, Lanier), who wanted to somehow think that it is we who rule the machines and the machineries that surround us (and our lives), and not the other way around. It is of course not that the machines would dominate us, but that sometimes they do and often the difference between us and them becomes blurred. We can increasingly think of the experience of being just a thing, machine or object, as something that is more central in our life than ever before.

In *Enigmi: Il momento egizio nella società e nell'arte*, Mario Perniola writes about the "video-man" (1995[1990]: 27-30), a way of being, sensing and thinking that started to extend everywhere in human culture with the advent of video machines. If art and sensing, during the "bureaucratic era" (as Perniola calls the pre-video era) remained in the margins as a form(al) practice, the new era transformed art, aesthetics and sensing, into a dominant thing in everyday life (Perniola 1991, 39-43). Here Perniola comes close to Wolfgang Iser's

concept of *Ästhetisierung*, the idea that aesthetics, in some way, would have taken over the everyday (Welsch 1990). It is just that Welsch's concept accentuates the idea that we would be here gazing and sensing and reflecting, where the truth might be that sometimes we are here just as end-lines of stimulation, reaction and shared technological sensing. If Guy Debord, Perniola's peer among the situationists (and with whom he remained in contact, even later on, although most people burned bridges after the high days of the movement, that he took part in), thought that images bind society together, Perniola took up sensing and its new forms in a similar way, without really seeking a foundation for his thinking (in his desire to find a "strong" foundation Debord was still into "strong" modern thinking, to apply Rovatti and Vattimo's way of thinking).

In *Del sentire* (where these thoughts are expressed most clearly) Perniola accentuates how, in a certain sense, this transformation, extended by new media, takes away fragile sensitivity, while stiffening aesthetics and sensuality in the same way the theory becomes stiffened when it becomes ideology. Developing something that later on became incorporated into what we often think of as post-human philosophy, Perniola started to think that the senses were becoming dulled. It is not that we would have entered fantastically horrifying or beautiful phases of culture, but that dankness took over. He continued on the line inaugurated by De Sade, Blanchot and Bataille, but took his thinking more from the human realm, to the extension of man, claiming that the extension, the dominant sense culture surrounding us, would rule us, and that this was not as spectacularly excessive as these thinkers had thought it to be – but more boring and meaningless.

In a Danish interview he expressed it this way: since the 1970s banalization and corruption took over – free love (an ideal of the 1960s) becoming pornography, philosophy acting, politics mafia (Gunder Hansen 1982). It was as if the sensuous turn of the late 1960s had turned into a 'sensology' (note the earlier comment on 'ideology').

In *Il Sex Appeal Dell'Inorganico* (Perniola 1994) the main issue, what it means to be neutral (vs. male/female), what it means to be just an empty shell, and most clearly, what it means to feel like a thing, becomes central for philosophical reflection. Just as 'cool' and 'high' are concepts that demonstrate something about the narrow and chilly relationship to human beings as a whole in our times (Perniola 2004), the feeling of being a thing is something that shows one side of today's humanity, which in any case leaves out many traits discussed for centuries in idealistic philosophy and psychology. There is not always depth in what happens (e.g. unconsciousness, historical depth). The victory of sensology, a new mediatized, dank being – boredom and perversion – captures people's experience, from videos where car crashes follow each other to horror and fast-paced action movies, where the production of reactions in the audience is the main feature.

Philosopher as Intermediary

To come to terms with this – but not in the sense of controlling or apprehending – the philosopher himself/herself/itself, the systematic thinker, must become an intermediary, a gateway for phenomena – for the surprising, disturbing and astonishing things that surround us (Perniola 1995: 43). As new technologies, endless repetition, mass production and mass distribution, and enormous waves of images, all of this contemporary culture around us has become a part of us (we dream like we'd see movies, we feel like we'd change when we put Adidas sneakers on) – philosophy must also realize that we too are the mirror of the consumer society inside our bodies.

We have the steadily growing impression that a process of reciprocal osmosis has occurred between man and things, with the result that the former has

become similar to the latter, while the latter have assumed increasingly human characteristics. (Perniola 1995, 44)

It is not just that the organic tradition of feeling ‘spirit’ in tombstones and the like would continue in reacting to images as if they were true (our body, in some sense, of course believes that images are true, as we know from its strong reactions to movies) or to products as if they possessed powers (NIKE shoes), but as Baudrillard noted, it is hard to differentiate between seen reality and images, as images have marinated us in such a way that they are a part of our a priori when we gaze at a real landscape (Baudrillard 1991). The same might have happened, at least to some extent, in our relationship to things, mainly things of the consumer society. It is not just that we have partly built teeth (by the dentist), fake limbs, glasses and medication that changes the brain (this chemistry is very mechanical), but that cars possess our body when we drive and Christopher Nolan directed last night’s dreams – and I can never forget a lecture where anthropologist Michael Taussig told us that today some indigenous people see sneakers on their shaman visions, not eagles and leopards.

Hegel defined Egypt as the country of enigma.

In Egyptian culture, things have human faculties: to the statues of the gods, freed from the gaze of men, are ascribed the power to see the visitors to the temples; so-called Memnons, gigantic stone simulacra, ring out at sunrise; mummies are able to exercise every vital function. (Perniola 1995: 45)

In this sense, our situation bears a resemblance to the historical Egyptian one. We are possessed by things and we dive into the world of things slightly in the way that Barthes thinks that we write ourselves into literature when we work on poems and prose, thereby losing ourselves (our subjectivity) to some extent (Perniola 1995: 45). Possession and indifference – punk, heavy metal (Perniola 1995: 47) – come together at this moment. Even

vitalist sports and sex become (dull) processes of endurance and apathy for many (jogging, trekking; see also Perniola 1995: 47-49).

Recharging the Enigma of Philosophy

In 2013, my friend and colleague Jozef Kovalcik and I organized a conference on the aesthetics of popular culture in Bratislava. During a long, messy paper which was full of something that you could call name-dropping, our (other) keynote Ted Cohen whispered to me: “I think you have to accept that for some people our business is just about telling stories.”

I understood Cohen’s point, although I did not fully agree that this would always be negative. Explaining what other people had said, without really adding argumentation, did not make any sense in the paper being presented. Still, many of today’s theorists who I really read with care tell stories. Martin Jay writes about idea history but builds philosophical argumentation with it. bell hooks is all about personal stories, which then become framed philosophically. Mario Perniola did a bit of the same; it’s just that his stories are somewhat unconceivable, riddles.

What I think has been the most interesting aspect of Perniola’s work is the fact that he turned the humanities into not just story-telling, but a way of studying the dark side of today’s life. I see him as the father/mother of ‘dank humanities’, pre-developed by de Sade, Blanchot and Bataille, as well as Teresa de Lauretis. His work is dank in terms of content and form of expression or the lack thereof. Stories, more riddles than clarifying exemplifications, dominate over argumentation, and one can find no desire to turn this around.

Perniola's teacher, Pareyson said that true interpretation is what you have at the limits of what can be understood (see Carravetta 1989: 217). Gadamer's hermeneutics is about *Bildung* which in the end cannot be reduced to mere research results and clear thinking, and Paul Ricoeur's psycho-hermeneutics is about learning and psychology that also gives stories a constitutive role (we are partly what we tell others we are), but one could say that the tradition of philosophy, self-development and narration marches on in Perniola's work as a form of primal, sensorial, experiential and atmospheric knowledge production in a way which actually follows Pareyson's maxim. As *the* hermeneutic thinker of the early 20th century in Italy, Pareyson's *Estetica: teoria della formatività* (1954), which follows Croce's and Gentile's earlier major works on the topic, takes it, more than other approaches of the time, into the everyday, also the nest of Perniola's work. Pareyson's work features a processual and existential accent on what audiences of art do and how art works 'work'. The focus on form, which Perniola conceives to be the other side of the bureaucratic era (that Pareyson still lived in) (Perniola 1991: 43), is transformed in (his/our) time into a more holistic way of being, sensing, and atmosphere. And we are all a huge audience in a society that has passed non-sensical periods of bureaucracy and false rationality and which now focuses on sensing, affects and excessive consumption. Perniola considered Pareyson as a philosopher who, in the end, became transparent, as his traces were found everywhere – which also might have been true for some Italian philosophy of the late 20th century (at least) (Perniola 1998a: 133). In the same way, calling to mind the belief of Pythagorean thinkers that because the music of the spheres is everywhere all the time we can't hear it anymore, the way in which sensological society possesses us is transparent, and the audience, the members of the society, become its products, things at the end of the production line (we can hear echoes of Adorno here, although Perniola is not simply critical as Adorno was in his less sensological thinking).

Interviewing Perniola for his TV program and in the book *Filosofia al presente* (“Arte e illusione” in Vattimo 1990, 54-67), Gianni Vattimo kicks off the dialogue by referring to the age old way of art as truth/illusion, but Perniola claims that lately art has strived for “reality” - a reality more profound. He also says that art is no more illusion than decoration. (Vattimo 1990: 59) To understand today’s culture, the question of distance is complicated, if one aspires to aesthetics or art. Sensology touches all of us nearly everywhere, one could say.

Perniola believes that this is not the first period of this type of challenge, and for this reason he runs through the history of Roman decorum, Egyptian culture and many other communities in Europe and its (African, Asian) roots. We can of course go back even further. Why would I run too much? When the steps become automatized, after 3-4 miles, and when my head switches to hibernation mode, a bit like a machine, I lose myself, and become an empty shell, a running machine, soulless, slightly inorganic experience-wise in Perniola’s terms. Paradoxically it is, of course, the moment when I am more animal than ever, freed of my human metaphysics, running in a steady rhythm, forgotten deep in it, like the early (wo)man in the (natural spectacle of the) savannah, in the days when culture was taking its first steps.

Getting back to where we started:

The philosopher is precisely someone who turns him- or herself into nothing in order to listen to the present and all its enigmas, the person who silences his or her own desires, his or her own untidy affections and his or her own deeply held opinions in order to avoid placing obstacles and misleading screens in the way of an understanding of history’s manifestations.” (Perniola 1995, 43)

Is it not clear now, more than ever, that if we believe Perniola, the philosopher needs to be a thing too? It is not just that collective mass culture, which perhaps has been over-interpreted

to just share the same dream (this is one of the recurring themes of *Enigmi*), is ultimately hammering us into things that react according to the provided stimuli. It is not just that an empty (pagan) ecstatic experience takes over (as the) new form of religion. It is not just that ‘cool’ and ‘awesome’ now often overshadow the range of emotional possibilities in culture (Perniola 2004). (If we are to believe Perniola.) It is that thinking itself, at least sometimes, in a time so filled with stimuli as ours, when it aspires to grab the entirety of contemporary life in which we live, needs to suppress the modern thirst for rationalist narrative (argumentation) and the dream that philosophy could always lean on the early modern idea of scientific rhetoric. It is not about the literary character of philosophy that many key figures and critics of French philosophy have been accentuating as the (now already gone) future of philosophy, but about the fact that at least sometimes philosophy, in order to shed light on reality, has to comply to a more mimetic relationship to the culture it reflects on, like a sensing machine which is able to analyze complex data, without producing knowledge in any traditional, fundamentalist way of thinking, leaving the readers in the midst of the enigma, still able to see more of the darkness than before.

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