

Imagination and Artistic Research or how to make matters worse

“because white men can’t
police their imagination
black men are dying”

The poet Claudia Rankine points here to the immense influence of the imagination—how it materializes, how it informs nationalism and violence, how it affects life and death—and in this fashion she reminds us of its great importance.

Today we will talk about imagination as a force, a force for better or for worse. I will try to cast some light on imagination as a source for ethics in general and for academic work in particular. Given our current political climate characterized by fear and a shift to the extreme right where ethics are often left by the wayside, we may take up our topic with a sense of urgency and directness: what might artistic research be worth?

I have been asked to speak today about ethics, and I find it important to recognize both that the history of the interrelation of art and ethics is a tricky one and that such an interrelation is constantly being renegotiated.

In the wake of thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Antonin Artaud, much of art has fought hard to break with normative conceptions of morality. You may be familiar with Francis Bacon’s statement: “I believe it is the suffering of people and the differences between people that makes great art.”

In recent years we have witnessed a decrease in admiration for violent art carried out for its own sake, and instead a flourishing interest in art as resistance against inequality—in short, art as activism and art as responsibility. Indeed, given the contemporary situation, it is not very radical to claim (like Marinetti) that art “can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice.” It simply looks too much like the norm these days. Moreover, the political turn in art calls for an accompanying ethical turn in artistic research. My aim is to try to explain why this is the case.

Maggie Nelson, in her book *The Art of Cruelty*, states that it would not be very productive to claim that art merely obscures a normative perception of reality. Nelson instead focuses in on particular “works of cruelty” that have the capacity for changing what one is able to perceive and sense. To this experience I would like to add the phenomenon of reading, broadly construed—that is, reading as it operates to change one’s mental theatre and thereby to transform one’s desires and actions. I would like to imagine art and our artistic research as a critique of those things that are not what they could or should be.

Nelson, in her book, finally arrives at a John Cage quote: “Diary: How to Improve the World (You Will Only Make Matters Worse).” This notion is echoed by Gayatri Charkavorty Spivak, of whom I will try to give a fragmentary presentation today, when she notes: “The typecase of the ethical sentiment is regret, not self-congratulation.”

Let us follow this line of thought and see where it takes us.

Being able to work with artistic research is a privilege—the privilege, perhaps, of thinking art through the world. It is a somewhat paradoxical privilege since no one knows exactly how long artistic research will be on the agenda. Moreover, the contemporary hostility against the humanities makes the privilege dubious. But here we nevertheless find ourselves, in a world where both politics and ethics are needed.

Always remember that we undertake such research for the sake of knowledge—a knowledge that we will produce and pass on to society. As such we must be aware of both knowledge production and who we are as knowledge producers. So the question then becomes, “With respect to artistic research, what do you need in your ethical toolbox?” For me it has been productive to approach my research not only through Spivak’s theory, but also through the practical manner by which she engages with theoretical issues.

To begin, allow me to offer a few words on what I mean by ethics. Inscribed within normative and practical ethics is always a “should”—an imperative to act or rather a direction in which one ought to aim. This could be interpreted, for example, as a desire for justice. Dealing with art and life is to deal with power, and ethics operates then with both a desire for power and a critique of power. Put in another way, ethics could be understood as that which thwarts or holds back an assimilating and essentializing power. In this

fashion, ethics as a critique of power is a relentless interrogation of orders that maintain inequality.

In her later works, where ethical issues occupy a prominent place, Spivak combines her analysis of global capitalism with the practice of reading art and literature. She defines her task in the world in this way: “I am here to use my imagination.” Such a task is indeed hard work and for Spivak it plays out through the process of training the imagination with a definite purpose, namely to rearrange one’s desires. For this reason she highlights the necessity of aesthetic education. Such an education is itself a response to the anti-intellectual, violent, and planet-destroying force that is contemporary capitalism. To use the imagination in reading is to develop new habits of the mind whereby one, in Spivak’s view, does not abdicate the responsibility for being a trained intellectual. Here we see with clarity both our position and our task.

To understand what Spivak is up to one has to begin by recognizing the interconnectedness of the desire for knowledge and the desire to be good. What we have here is a question of *both* epistemology *and* ethics.

Discerning exactly how fucked up our epistemology has been rendered by a colonial, white supremacist history is perhaps impossible to do. However, by reading history and the contemporary context in a careful manner we are nevertheless able to take some steps in this direction. The method Spivak has been employing over her academic career is that of deconstruction as reading from the margins. More specifically, working with historical silences as a postcolonial critique has been the approach she has assumed for attacking the injustices of today. Basically, this process begins by affirming canonical texts authored by European thinkers, after which these texts are closely and carefully read so as to let in the silences. The task is, I quote, “to read and run with [the text] somewhere else.”¹

Such a task could likewise be carried out within artistic research. For example, in approaching a work of art with political implications we may read in terms of representation. Reading from the margins in this fashion means to search for the trace and not the sign. It means to look for something that is there yet not as the promise of the

¹ Nicholson, Linda: *The Second Wave. A Reader in Feminist Theory*, Routledge, New York/London, 1997, s. 370.

sign—that is, the proper representation, but rather, like something that depends upon a structure in the sense that it departs from it.

If this sounds complicated, let us unpack it a bit by seeing how Spivak plays with the concept of woman. A possible move one could make, she argues, goes something like this: “To call by the name of man all human reality is move number one: humanism; to substitute the name of woman in that mode is move number two; to put scare-quotes around “woman” is number three, not a synthesis but a provisional half-solution that always creates problems because it is or is not mistaken for the second move; therefore always looking forward, while making do, toward a fourth move, that never happens but always might.”²

This is the deconstructive practice: to affirm and to move. Such a practice is not to break with humanism altogether; no, it is rather a movement from within. It is to recognize what is impossible in language (to break with) while at the same time to see what is indeed possible (to move from within). This is a task without any guarantees—a point Spivak never fails to hammer home. To insist on the precarious and the incalculable becomes necessary if we are to avoid reproducing epistemological violence. Moreover, this task is to affirm the text by recognizing one’s own participation in it, in the structure of language, and in the unjust structure of the world. It is negotiating with, not collaborating with, the violent structures of text and life. This critical intimacy is the beginning of political change by which understanding from within begins to open a new horizon—a horizon towards a fourth movement that never happens but always might. It is to play with language yet all the while being aware of the fact that language at the same time plays with us.

You see, this is not a magical moment; this is not the interrupting event. One cannot turn to Spivak for that kind of revolutionary language. Ethics could instead be understood as preparation for political work and a corrective to political implementations. Ultimately, then, in my reading of Spivak ethics departs from the political even as the two remain deeply entwined.

² Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, Routledge, New York/ London, 1993, s. 146.

It may indeed be fruitful to approach the most obvious instantiations of political art with one's ethical toolbox: reading from the margins while being attentive to the risk of subalternisation, all the while holding up the question, "Who is it here that pays the price for representation?" Consider a simple example from the current political climate, namely the refugee crisis. Is this Europe's crisis or is it the crisis of the refugees? In other words, who, exactly, is entitled to make claim to the term "crisis"?

Spivak rejects the kind of revolutionary language that is often employed by other contemporary political thinkers, remaining acutely aware of the fact that in the name of freedom and justice difference is too often sacrificed. I think this awareness is due to her pointed critique of violence as well as her view that ethics requires an extended amount of time in order to prove effective. There is simply no quick fix for bringing about lasting change within the world. Is this too weak of an approach? Some might think so.

A common criticism of Spivak's thinking goes something like this: "There are no positive elements within your approach." Each time this critique is raised, Spivak seems to have a different response that builds upon her awareness of her own position. Moreover, in reply to questions concerning theory Spivak always points to her work as an invitation to share what she is doing. In this respect, she offers an example of what it means to be led by practice rather than by theory. Therefore I find her work suitable for artistic research.

"Everyone I know talks about border crossings these days"³, writes bell hooks in her essay "Being the Subject of Art." This is akin to saying that everyone writes or makes art about the globalized world. What is often missed, however, is that the experience of globalization is far from accessible to everyone. It is this lack of accessibility that Spivak addresses when she writes about borderlessness.

Spivak situates her thinking in relation to the performative contradiction of global capital in which borderlessness requires that borders must nevertheless be kept intact. Her method is a certain kind of literary reading, which relies upon the notion of the incalculable rather than that of borderlessness. (Borderlessness, as we know, is a privilege that comes with a passport.) Furthermore, Spivak's project turns on the requirement of training the

³ hooks, bell: *Art on my mind. Visual politics*, The New Press, New York, 1995, s. 133.

imagination so as to produce an epistemology for our time. Through such training, I quote, “we may be given habits that deeply relate to others first, the very principle of social justice.”⁴

The difference, according to Spivak, between the ethical and the merely moral, has to do with the incalculable—that is, with the desire to attend to borders, rather than simply to occupying them. Attending to the borders of bodies—bodies such as the female body or the body in pain on which hooks focuses in her essay—has to do with the French notion of *attendre*: to wait, to wait upon. This is slow work. It is, so to speak, far-removed from the speed associated with the desire for violence. Such waiting, argues Spivak, comes close to the singular and unverifiable function of art with all of its associated desires.

In that I find ethics to be so central, I would like to quote Spivak on this notion:

“Ethics is not a problem of knowledge but something like a call of relationship without relationship. This means that the goal of ethics is not to step into the other’s shoes, to become the spokesperson for the oppressed, nor worse yet, to pretend to let them speak for themselves. Rather, the goal of ethics and politics is that the subaltern, the universal exception as such, *might cease to exist*. This entails a revolutionary change, but apparently not the kind of change that will be brought about by traditional means.”⁵

Spivak’s aim is thus nothing less than the elimination of subaltern existence. But here one needs to be careful. As Spivak notes, “The subaltern is not a classy word for the oppressed, for [the] Other, for somebody who’s not getting a piece of the pie.” The fact is that one could never make the claim, “I *am* a subaltern,” but rather only the claim “I *was* a subaltern.” Do you see? When your voice is recognized, power has already shifted. As such, to make room for a future where one is neither being silenced nor being denied mimetic and political forms of representation therefore becomes the greatest task.

Recognizing the impossibility of innocence is a key component in Spivak’s thinking on ethics. In her view, the ethical situation can only be imagined and experienced in terms of the impossible—a claim that thereby says something about both the point of departure and

⁴ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: *Readings*, Seagull Books, London/ New York/ Calcutta, 2014, s. 15.

⁵ <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/21>. The italicized emphasis is my own.

the scope of ethics. We live without any possibility of reaching the radically Other and with contradictory moral imperatives that make it impossible to respond to the same Other in a proper way. With this we are now approaching the “Double Bind,” one of the central notions in Spivak’s later works.

In developing the concept of double bind within her thinking, Spivak looks to Gregory Bateson’s psychological work. For Bateson, a **double bind** represents a dilemma in which someone receives conflicting messages where one message negates the other (for example, the parent who, with folded arms, says “Come here!”) This dynamic creates a situation in which a successful response to one message results in a failure to respond to the other (and vice versa), such that one ends up in the wrong regardless of the response.

The double bind produces uneasiness, to say the least. Moreover, according to Spivak such uneasiness has everything to do with ethics. The double bind is not a philosophical paradox; rather, it can only be described as an experience. And it is not easily thinkable, because it is an experience of the impossible. Here we are in the midst of ethics. To decide is the burden of responsibility. To quote Spivak once again: “The typecase of the ethical sentiment is regret, not self-congratulation.”⁶ It is here that the consequences of this view for artistic research become clear. We will inevitably face regret—something which is a hard fact of our existence in a hegemony of global capitalism. This, however, is a good thing in that it allows us to become and to be awkward as well as to work in between those dichotomies that would otherwise imprison us: the abstract and the material, the rational and the aesthetic, the ontological and the epistemological. To remain uneasy, all the while shouldering the burden of our decisions, therefore becomes a means by which we might avoid the trap of totalitarianism.

The experience of the double bind carries some affinity with the discussion surrounding the problem of essentialism. That is, the essentialism that is unavoidable in that language and history play their games with us. We cannot lift ourselves out of the structures we criticize. We have to learn to live with contradictory instructions, and to remain in the game. As Spivak articulates it, the task of a researcher who is working within the in-between space may play out in this fashion:

⁶ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts/ London, 2012, s. 105.

“In the contemporary context, we can call this the double bind of the universalizability of the singular, the double bind at the heart of democracy, for which an aesthetic education can be an epistemological preparation, as we, the teachers of the aesthetic, use material that is historically marked by the region, cohabiting with, resisting, and accommodating what comes from the Enlightenment.”⁷

To use material that is inscribed within power structures—material which might carry both resistance to and confirmation of these same structures, is to become subject to the double bind. The connection with ethics has to do with how decision-making and responsibility are bound up with each other. As Spivak asks, “What can the mourning work of postcoloniality look like when it slips from figure to accountability?”⁸ Following that move, I think, may only be carried out as one mourns the losses of the past while simultaneously mourning the silences of the present.

The figure, in literature and art, is a place of both identification and alienation. It not only activates the imagination, but also calls for responsibility. Reading from the margins can turn figures upside down by letting in unpredictable motives and perspectives. It is a way of making yourself accountable for your decisions.

Please don't let the word “alterity” make you nervous. In a basic sense, one can think of alterity simply as a check on capital's reproduction of the same—as the difference of which capitalism won't take notice. Spivak also finds alterity at play in other places such as in the Muslim concept/metaphor of the *al-haq*, which could be translated as “the birthright of being able to take care of other people.” In another sense, alterity functions as a persistent form of critique. One central function of capitalism and colonialism is to arrange our desires towards profit—whether information profit, knowledge profit or artistic profit—and, as a consequence, we become immune to the desires of others. To transform our degraded desires, a mere shift in our habits of thought is not enough. Rather, as Spivak argues, what we need instead is a shift in the will of imagination. The aesthetic could be a place where such a shift may begin to happen, where it becomes possible to imagine oneself as another.

⁷ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty: *An Aesthetic Education in The Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts and London, 2012, s. 4.

⁸ Ibid. s. 109.

Radical alterity must be thought through imagining, argues Spivak. To think radical alterity, however, begins with the process of othering oneself. Imagination is our inbuilt capacity for self-othering. In reading and writing we both make and un-make ourselves. Although art brings neither salvation nor consolation, it does offer a way by which to become an object for the Other as well as to change our desire to assimilate and to dominate.

So what we have, then, is ethics—ethics not in the sense of imagining myself in another’s shoes, but rather ethics in the sense of taking the risk to become an object for the Other. (It is important to note, however, that one can dare to take this risk only if one has the privilege of being able to act, to write, and to speak.) Such a risk-filled dynamic is precisely what happens when you enter a gallery or when you read a book written for your eyes: all of a sudden you become the object for the artist’s or the writer’s imagination. But what happens then? Can you learn something from that experience? And can you undergo this experience without transforming it into a universal truth?

The next step (there is always a next step) is imagining the Other as another Self. This is really hard work for the imperialist self—for myself with my secret desire to make everyone a little bit more like ... myself. And it is precisely here where everyone in the position of privilege needs new habits, where we need to learn to perform within the episteme of **another** person. To any conceptual poets in the room: this required movement we are speaking of here cannot be reduced to semiotic systems, for rearranging language is not the same thing as rearranging desires. According to Spivak literature and art is, I quote, “an excellent instrument for a slow transformation of the mind. For good or for ill. As medicine or as poison, perhaps always a bit of both.” Ultimately, this far-from-innocent-task is precisely that of othering oneself as well as imagining the Other as another Self who might indeed possess a far different agenda and different desires than one does oneself.

Such a task could not be taught as theory, for, in the end it is and remains an experience. Put differently, ethics is always a task, never a calculation.

So in writing, just as in research, I find these attitudes rewarding. Let us consider the violent side of writing as an example. The author borrows and steals, using her experience or lack thereof; yet, it is the awareness itself of the violent potential that makes the work

into a responsibility. Once again, we here run up against the burden of decision. Moreover, the author might be healthy enough to write, but a healthy body is far removed from an unhealthy body—which anyone who has been ill can understand. It is almost impossible to translate between them. Writing has an element of violence inscribed in the process. Still, the author translates experiences all the time. Artistic research could be an investigation of translating experience.

In artistic research the researcher translates, and in a very specific way. She shuffles between inside and outside; she approaches her work with the oftentimes heavy burden of calling it into question; she seeks knowledge that in one way or another must be communicated, while at the same time she finds the theoretical resources insufficient. With this work, and especially when such work leads the researcher into the political realm, I would suggest that it is precisely here that the ethical as an issue comes to the fore.

Regardless of how singular, how relational or how site-specific your work might be, the act of research will nevertheless still usher you into the universal, into the general. Put in another way, the concepts you work with inevitably draw essence into your work as a consequence of the function and operation of language itself. And it is here that the ethical could be seen as that which messes with those essences, such as, to stay with the provisional half-solutions outlined above, responsibility. I can see no other path forward, for example, through the strange and misunderstood idea of identity politics, than that which assumes this slow and demanding approach.

Translation, according to Spivak, is necessary even as it remains impossible. For the sake of time I will not try to explain Spivak's abundant thoughts on language translation and cultural translation, but I do think, again, that her approach is exemplary. As she states, "Translation is the most intimate act of reading" that is expressed in terms of a "friendly learning by taking a distance." It is an erotic encounter where differences become more interesting than similarities and identity. And in the act of translation we witness precisely a sort of becoming-other that makes the constant movement towards the Other and that remains attentive to the silences and the in-between where no guarantees are provided.

Becoming-other is essential to artistic research not only in that, as a form of self-reflection, it benefits science, but also for ethical reasons. Deconstruction of the artistic subject is a

preparation for political work: it represents the creation of a space where one is unsafe, but at the same time is still surrounded by affirmation and affection. It is precisely for this reason that reading as translation is an important skill to develop—a skill that helps us to become attentive both to the silences in text and history and to our own desires for power as well as our will to be in charge.

Let us return to Spivak and one of her pieces—my favorite one, actually—where she discusses the writing of memoirs. Briefly stated, this piece takes up the theme of being inscribed in a genealogy of women, of fore-mothers, and being a body with a heritage—a big-boned body in Spivak’s case. What does it mean to be accountable to a female inheritance and to the sufferings that are not one’s own due to the fact that one moves in another class, another country, and is now marinated in privileges? Spivak weaves a beautiful story out of these questions, concluding her essay with these striking words: “I want to be haunted.” This is for me what ethics in artistic research is all about. To be haunted by those facts that you are unable to change, to be haunted by those fore-mothers that gave you life but still remain silenced in every sensible meaning because they have no access to those areas you are able to occupy. To be haunted by the Other whom you can never reach and who slips out of your hands in light of the very fact that she is another self. Simply put, to be haunted by the task of sustained listening rather than that of speaking.

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