

Ignas Petronis, Geneva University of Art and Design

Critical Curatorial Cybermedia research-based Master program student.

How to interpret politically? Sketches on critical hermeneutics through civil disobedience of Serbian feminist art activism.

Abstract:

As acts of civil disobedience, social activism and political resistance usually find their support in artistic field, their affectivity and potentiality might be questioned by the means, similar to aesthetic analysis, especially based on the theory of understanding and interpretation due to their social character. The research, carried out in Geneva University of Art and Design, seeks to shape a conceptual model of political interpretation. By analyzing fusions and rifts between philosophy of interpretation and critical thought, the research revises existing paradigms of critical hermeneutics and tries to define openings for its further developments. For the Critical Information conference, a part of this research will be presented, supplemented by a perspective upon feminist artistic and political activists in Serbia, which are dealing with issues of historical memory and existing social tensions.

I discovered the feminist *Women in Black* organization in the early autumn of 2011, while doing a research project *Inventory* for the 3rd Biennial of Contemporary Art in Thessaloniki Greece. Our team, made by members of *Archive Books* publishing house and magazines *The Exhibitionist* and *Mousse*, headed from Berlin towards Thessaloniki and Istanbul. We met artists' collectives and political activists in Eastern Europe, acquired underground publications, produced under the notion of *samizdat*, and formed a substantial archive for an exhibition. This *odyssey* uncovered a

multiplicity of social and political issues in this region, caused by various schisms of the past two decades. The Serbian feminist activists and the group *Women in Black* represent one of the most prominent clashes in this post-communist area: the clash between dominating patriarchal power and liberal movements, that request to revise human rights and society's models. We drew our attention to this group, as well as various other feminist driven organizations in Belgrade, due to their self-identification as artists' collectives. The often vehicles of their activities are based on a medium of performance as a tool for public interventions.

The second criterion, which let us to include *Women in Black* and their collaborators in the framework of *Inventory* project, was their position in Serbian society. They are excluded and isolated from it by official political means, materialized in legal restrictions and prohibitions. They are situated outside; their activity is an underground activity. Nevertheless their position runs along the official Serbian government stance or at least its formal mediations: a representation of European aspirations, which are as leitmotifs of the most of Eastern European countries' politics. Despite that, any feminist or queer, or subaltern (as this discourse is relevant in Serbia's context as the Yugoslavia's successor) activism is counteracted by legislative policies and even military actions. The common character of these movements and of all groups that were taken into scope of *Inventory* project is that they stand for the weak part of societies. This allows tracing the main concept of the project and the principal method of such activism. It is *weak thought*, on which both (*Inventory* project and this activism) are based. However, its facets are different.

Weak thought, a term coined by Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo, finds its grounds on two schools of philosophy: continental tradition of hermeneutics with its supplements of Richard Rorty and post-Marxist thought. The concept's author firstly

draws it from an abandonment of pretenses to universality, held by metaphysics and its derived disciplines (Vattimo 2011: 96). Secondly, weak thought proclaims an interpretation of history and, by this interpretation, emend existing discourses and broaden the understanding of history by including its minors and peripheries. Interpretation of history is one of two facets that were mentioned, designated to the research project. The second facet of this theory ensues from the latter. Vattimo suggests, that by taking this interpretation (which might seem as a mere scholar thought) in action, therefore, by implementing it in social practices, emancipation can be attained. An argument for this idea is based on presumption that rereading of history (and, at the same time, rewriting it) necessarily weakens predominating structures in society. This debilitation of existing subordination or hegemony, expressed and diffused in social strata not only by economical means, but also by education, nationality and ethnicity, sex and gender, etc., is primordial objective for the weak members of society. This leads us to the second facet: weak thought is the thought of weak. As Vattimo states: " [it is] certainly not of dominating classes, who have always worked to conserve and leave unquestioned the established order of the world" (ibid.). This implies, that weak thought prevails in margins of society and should empower a deconstruction of marginal boundaries.

Hence weak thought can be apprehended as a way to strife against history what has established social, economical, political and cultural structures and has given background to postmodern condition. Moreover, it must be emphasized, that those, who find themselves in some sort of expulsion, which is a result of postmodern condition, carry out this strife. This attitude towards history and its implicative order drives the criticality of Vattimo's philosophy. It does so by attuning to the critique of historical materialism by Benjamin in his "Theses on the Philosophy of History".

"Theses" pay heed to historical ignorance over the minor ones (Benjamin 1968: *III* 254), historical knowledge of oppressed ones (Benjamin 1968: *XII* 260), monumentality and rigidity of history of victors (Benjamin 1968: *XVI* 262). If for Benjamin the rivalry against materialistic history and its politicized form - fascism - takes form of Messianic shock at *zero-hour* of oppressed history, Vattimo prescribes this struggle as a process: weak thought cannot become a strong one, i.e., cannot become a new established canon. The latter argument alludes to construction of new dispositions of reigning superiority, therefore further divisions and new milieus for weak thought.

In this sense weak thought might seem as interchanging dominances in history and in society. This nature perhaps comes into the theory from hermeneutic tradition of interpretation as a constant state of being or as a permanent dialogue. Yet Vattimo tries to ignore the latter, i.e. refuses to acknowledge these hermeneutical principles, and succumbs. In "Hermeneutic Communism", the main opus of weak thought explication, weak thought is put as a tool for constructing alternative political systems, a utopian weakened communism to which Vattimo advocates. Even though weak thought pretends to be sustainable, it leads to reigning establishments: his examples and analyses of South American governments as representations of weak thought in practice does not fulfill the promise of equivocality this concept supposes to bear. Vattimo's construction of weak thought fails to acknowledge multiplicity of interpretation, encloses it to a circle of interpreters, which can be exclusive itself. Furthermore, weak thought rests the thought: it is not a dialogical mediation and therefore one can question its dialectical strengths.

Thus weak thought might be political, but it is not an interpretive one. It is a surprising fact that Vattimo distantiates its creation from hermeneutic bases and takes

rather opposite and radicalized position, exploited by his precedent opposing Italian thinkers as Gramsci or Negri. However, limitations of one theory might be an opening for another. The following approach must raise a question how politics can be interpreted, and which forms such interpretation might take? I choose to take up this move and reinforce hermeneutical part of political interpretation, which, eventually, will give criticality *per se*.

Hermeneutics as a branch of contemporary philosophy describes as a theory of interpretation and by its definition includes a strong bond with philosophy of language. For hermeneutics, language is an ontological foundation of historical experience finitude, which constitutes our experience within the world and therefore makes this experience hermeneutical, therefore - comprehensible or interpretative (Gadamer 1975: 453). Interpretation and language is linked through conversation. As an interpreter of a text in a foreign language must always mediate not only between two languages (one of an original and other of a translation), but also between two texts (an original and a translation), he or she does so by tracing a meaning and translating it dialectically by interpreting it. "Stepping between and speaking has a structure of dialogue" (Gadamer 2007: 180). And *vice versa*: a dialogue as a social phenomenon is in language as an interpretation. Language serves as a basis for communality there (temporal) consensus can be reached. It is constructive matter for each dialogue, but this construction is not just juxtaposing one's arguments (expressed in words and sentences), but rather exchanging meanings and altering initial opinions. Such hermeneutics, which, at the first glance, might appear as abstract metaphysical deliberations, already undertakes a social orientation of such thinking: shared interpretation for hermeneutics becomes a possibility to achieve social solidarity.

Share and openness has long bestowed as a position of truly weak ones (e.g., as values of charity), but was mistakenly omitted from *weak thought*.

Despite the fact that such definition of interpretation as a conversation or a dialogue might maintain sustainability on dialogue's processual character, it does not indicate pursues for a change and necessary conditions for it, if taken alone. The latter might be inferred from language as well. At this point of shaping political interpretation, we should seek what is political about language. In hermeneutics, Heidegger after *Kehre* has addressed certain critique regarding positions to language, which prevailed modernity and its societal implications. In several essays and lectures ("Poetically Man Dwells...", "Language", "Building Dwelling Thinking") Heidegger attacks the human dominance over language, which, according to his opinions, has caused modernity's discontents, uncanny maneuvers and artificial nature of alienation (Heidegger 1971: 144, 213). If to paraphrase Heidegger, interpretation is impossible when language is dominated, put under subordination, thus modern thinking has restrained interpretation. This was done in order to prevent eventful and eruptive character of interpretation, which subverts dominance. Barthes has dedicated to this question his "Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France" in 1978. The difference between semiotic Barthes and hermeneutical Heidegger, Gadamer or Vattimo, is that Barthes takes an inverse approach: he states that language itself is a setting of power. However, while being a proponent of powers dissolution in social systems and its intangibility, he also accepted that language cannot become a direct target of struggle and emancipation, but rather this strife must acknowledge language as its inevitable environs (Barthes 1973: 432). Therefore language is the rationale of dominance for Barthes; the field for dominance to Heidegger, but at the same time it is a subject of a ruse against such hegemonies.

Therefore language is prerequisite for disobedience. To be disobedient means do disagree with preexisting language and try to change it. In order to change language, one must change language of oneself and then mediate this novelty to a broader field. An interpretation is this mediation, as it is a dialogue. To be disobedient, thus, is to reread the history¹, to interpret it (in order to produce alternative meanings to dominating discourses), to "install" it and make it acknowledged.

Now this endeavor is designated to an artistic practice as a possible method for an alternative research of history, for constructing new language dispositions and ergo entailing emancipation. This capacity is usually named under terms of poetry or literature, as the two are dealing with language greater than other arts, but such usage of these terms is referring to all artistic practices. There are several theoretical pathways to ground and shape these propositions. Vattimo in his prior work "Art's Claim to Truth" presents poetry as a discourse, which puts the world we are accustomed to into question and reorganizes it. Poetry is a realm where new language is founded and to which extent new world can be instituted (Vattimo 2008: 67). Similarly, Barthes associates the relation between power and disobedient with the relationship of language and literature (Barthes 1973: 435). Political virtues, coming from artistic field, are considered in an extensive and meticulous semiotic reading of disobedience in poetry by Julia Kristeva. By supplementing semiotics and the theory of signifying practice with psychoanalytic elements, Kristeva stresses out two crucial points of this project of political interpretation. Firstly, she explores changes in existing signification systems (thus vis-à-vis changes in societal order) (Kristeva 1974: 104) and argues for heterogeneity as a result, which, for Kristeva, is rooted in language itself (Kristeva 1974: 181). This heterogeneity of language is especially

¹ The history here falls into a paradigm of text, as used in hermeneutics philosophy, as a phenomenon of reality that is taken into considerations and is pursued for being understood.

relevant to feminist movement taken into regards as a projection upon society to be realized.

Apart from such sketches on language and resistance, they all share similar suggestions for art to take up utopian aspirations. This has been a common notion in art theory and aesthetics starting from the very beginnings of critical thought. I uphold its reverse: politics in its communal form (as of civil disobedience, for instance) must embrace artistic means of interpretation and henceforth make interpretation political, not only politically contextualized.

Hence political interpretation as tool of critical orientated hermeneutics can be defined. Firstly, it maintains two facets of weak though, that are enlargement of existing historical discourse with previously discriminated social histories (discriminated by historical materialism in critical theories, or objectification of human sciences in hermeneutical philosophy) and *weak position* itself (as an opposition to *strong* structures). Secondly, political interpretation is a creative process, which endeavors are directed towards eradication of existing establishments, founded in language. This breaching is effectuated by imparting new language - poetics or literature. It takes *aesthetical*² forms because of their (negative) dialectics - an opportunity to achieve new language, based on critique, to disperse it and to reanimate it when needed. Political interpretation fosters in those practices, where marginal communities are involved in the process of forming a multicultural, tolerant and open society of which contemporary politics craves.

From this perspective civil practices of Serbian feminist groups can be looked over. The emergence of feminist collectives came with the end of Yugoslavia state, which comprised many nationalities, ethnicities, religions and other minor groups

² Here I refer to *aesthetical* as artistic, but also as sensitive.

itself. The crack started few years after the fall of Berlin Wall. Serbian leaders attempted to suppress freedom movements of other Balkan nations and to keep the control over its former territories of authority. This attempt was carried out mostly by military force and led to crimes against humanity in various locations, most notably, the genocide in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These conflicts had many negative implications in society, especially of the most fragile parts of it, which faced terror, insecurities, exiles and deportations and constant danger for their lives. It affected women (since society was highly patriarchal due to wide spread orthodox Christianity), but also ethnic groups such as Roma people, religious confessions as Muslims and many more. Serbian feminist organizations - starting from Women in Black branch, ending up with NGO's for refugees and victims - have started their way towards emancipation in these conditions of the political rift. *Women in Black* started to organize public vigils for victims of war crimes. Their members initiated a weekly occupation of the main square in Belgrade. This intervention was carried out as a performance in Brechtian theatrical style. Public actionism went along with publications of literature, screenings, exhibitions; the activity had taken various media and reached different audiences.

It still forgoes until today and has comprised other issues into its regards. While memory of war crimes and culpability of Serbian government still makes a great part of their discourse, this organization is pursuing to defend other minorities in contemporary Serbian society by including them into their activities, whether artistic, social or political. It has been more than twenty years that occupation of the main square in Belgrade is taking place each Wednesday and usually is dedicated to separate minor communities and their issues, caused by the presence of nationalistic

and patriarchal politics in Serbia. *Women in Black* work in process, which seems to have no projected end.

I treat these activities, performed by the means of art, as an example of political interpretation. Firstly, either they authors find themselves on the outskirts of society (as feminists in patriarchal society), or their subjects are marginalized (e.g., protests for LGBT rights in intolerant social environment). Secondly, their material of work is history: it tries to undermine dominant discourses, which shape daily politics in Serbia. For example, performances in public spaces in 1993 were trying to disclose the ethnical Bosnia genocide, happening in neighboring region and concealed by local authorities at that time. These actions, in the framework of dialectic history in conceptual art practice, stand closely to Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* or Alfredo Jaar's *Postcards*. They are disclosing histories - and this ties up them with the theory of hermeneutics. And the third reason, which, in my opinion, was overlooked in the project of weak thought by Gianni Vattimo, is of language of art or poetics/literature, which is being brought into society not only to explicit hidden negative effects of dominating powers (as massacres in 1992-1993 or discrimination more recently), but also to anticipate them, to exclude them from *daily* or common language, which otherwise makes deterioration of contemporary society invisible and unquestionable. Art component in political interpretation bridges the practice with its audience.

Therefore acts of civil disobedience as interventions or protests should take these strands of political interpretation (weak origins, history of the weak, and the means of art, poetics/literature or new language) to attain situated practice and reach their audience. The further investigations, which I am conducting in the framework of my research, envision scrutinizing the concept of new language and its social and natural applications.

Bibliography:

Barthes, Roland. 1978(2002). *Leçon inaugurale au Collège de France* in "Œuvres complètes : [livres, textes, entretiens]". Volume 5th, Paris, ed. du Seuil.

Benjamin, Walter. 1968. *Theses on the Philosophy of History* in "Illuminations". United States, Schocken Books.

Gadamer, Hans Georg. 1975, "Truth and Method", London, Continuum.

Gadamer, Hans Georg. 1981(2007). *Text and Interpretation* in "The Gadamer Reader" ed. by Richard E. Palmer, Northwestern University Press.

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. *Language, Poetically Man Dwells..., Building Dwelling Thinking* in "Poetry, Language, Thought", New York, HarperCollins.

Kristeva, Julia. 1974. "La révolution du langage poétique", Paris, ed. du Seuil.

Vattimo, Gianni. 2008. "Art's Claim to Truth", New York, Columbia University Press.

Vattimo, Gianni. 2011. "Hermeneutic Communism", New York, Columbia University Press.