

TRANSIT(ONT)OLOGY

The question of the subject in Mario Perniola

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Si latet, ars prodest; adfert deprensa
pudorem. Atque adimit merito temus in
omne fidem.

Publius Ovidius Naso¹

The greatest trick is to hide all trickeries
Mario Perniola²

1. « Larvatus prodeo »

In an early, fragmentary text entitled “Préambules. La crainte de Dieu est le commencement de la sagesse”, René Descartes writes:

Before coming on to stage, in order not to let shame appear on their foreheads, actors put on a mask. Like them, at the moment I come on to the theater of the world, on which so far I have been only a spectator, I go forward masked.³

The passage is broadly known because of its last words, which in the original Latin text sound “larvatus prodeo”: masked, I go forward. Masked, like actors coming on stage, I enter the “stage of the world”. As if Descartes suggests: first, I was somewhere outside where no mask was needed, and now, when I have to make a transit into the world, I dare not do it unmasked. This transit cannot be taken without precautions, which is why it must be made “larvatus”: masked, veiled, undercover. As if, in the very moment of his

¹ “Art if hidden, avails, if detected, brings shame, And deservedly discredits you for ever”; Ovid, in *Ars amatoria* (2. 313-314), and quoted in: Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 68.

² Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 117.

³ “Les comédiens, appelés sur la scène, pour ne pas laisser voir la rougeur sur leur front, mettent un masque. Comme eux, au moment de monter sur le théâtre du monde où, jusqu’ici, je n’ai été que spectateur, je m’avance masqué.” Descartes, *Œuvres philosophiques*, 45 ; my translation, MDK.

transit penetrating into the world, Descartes tries to remain separated from it; as if, getting inside, he nonetheless wants to remain outside. Why? To avoid getting spoiled, so it seems. Apparently, Descartes is afraid of getting infected by the outside, which is precisely the world *of the outside*: the *res extensa*, a world radically different from the free, thinking world inside, i.e. his soul. His inner soul should not get penetrated or even affected by the outside he is bodily entering. For life and truth can but be found inside. Outside, there is the dead, inorganic “stage of the world”, a scene full of unreliable spectacle. The soul, that seat of science, must discover its substantial truth behind that spectacle. Therefore, so Descartes writes a few lines further, one should be aware that science is like a woman,:

Science is like a woman; if chaste and staying with her husband, she is honored; if she gives herself to all, she debases herself. ⁴

Entering the world, Lady Science must hold on her ‘burka’, otherwise she will get besmirshed and defiled. That is why, entering the world’s “stage”, this Lady – as well as her seat, the soul, and her servant, Descartes himself – could better remain ‘larvata’.

In a way, Descartes tries to stay untouched by what we, nowadays, commonly describe as the world of modernity or post-modernity.⁵ It is the world as, for instance, described in the works of Mario Perniola, become well-known from titles as *Enigmas*, *Ritual thinking*, *Art and Its Shadow* and *Sex Appeal of The Inorganic*. The Italian philosopher characterizes our contemporary world as the universe of the outside: a universe of material things lacking any inside, essence, or origin.⁶ It is a world of “simulacra”, of ‘copies of copies’ no longer based in, or referring to any basic model. It is a world of mere “transit”, he adds, where every identity is ‘in transition’, not from the earthly ‘here’ to a transcendent or utopian ‘somewhere else’, but ‘from here to here’. The (post)modern ‘transit’ world is a radically immanent one. According to Perniola, identity is a simulacrum lacking any original ‘inside’ and being continuously in transition, not from itself to something else, but ‘from itself to itself’. The idea of ‘self’ has lost

⁴ “La science est comme une femme ; si pudique, elle reste auprès de son mari, on l’honore, si elle se donne à tous, elle s’avilit.” (My translation, MDK)

⁵ For Mario Perniola, our time is to be characterized as post-modern. However, according to him, post-modernity no longer thinks in terms of ‘past’ and ‘post’: “post-modernity essentially distinguishes itself from modernity only to the extent that it does not make any radical break therefrom”; “the change manifests itself as a transition, a transit.” (Perniola, *Enigmas*, 43).

⁶ See also *Enigmas*, especially chapter 3: “Towards a Civilization of Things” (Perniola, *Enigmas*, 39-58).

substantial ground, so Perniola claims. “Transit” has become the very form of identity or ‘self’. Even on the level of human behavior, the ‘self’ has definitively played its part.⁷ Human praxis must be considered as a ‘ritual’ not performing any truth, not even the truth of a myth. Human praxis is a “ritual without myth”. That is to say:

the only certain element is the external aspect of actions, which is not functional with respect to social life, or linked to the intimate life of the subject. In other words, there are no more gestures or modes of behavior that are more familiar, more proper, and more ours than others.⁸

Behavior, morals and ethics are no longer the expression of our inner ‘self’: they too are coming completely “from outside”.⁹ Performing an act equals performing a ritual referring only to a superficial ‘outside’.

In that world, Descartes’s *larvatus prodeo* seems to have lost any sense. What could it mean to remain *outside* the world through which I am walking, if there is nothing else but the outside? How can I stay outside, if I am myself as ‘outside’ as everything else? Or – to put it in the terms used in *Enigmas* – what does it mean to keep myself the status of an enigma, if enigma is everything’s and everyone’s status – if everything and everyone is a mystery without interior or depth? In a universe where everything is but a ‘transit point’ traversed by a materiality without inside, there is no longer room for a kind of outside position that was typical for the Cartesian subject.

2. Transitology / Transitontology

At least, this is the question I intend to trace out. Has Perniola’s ‘transit theory’ – or, which amounts to the same thing, his theory of ‘simulacra’ or ‘ritual without myth’ – overcome the Cartesian subject? Not the Cartesian subject as a metaphysical substance, but as a topological point: as a point ‘outside’ the world, a point that can remain *larvatus* for that world. Not the subject installed by the *Discours de la méthode*, but the subject supposed in the early fragment I started with. The outside *I perform* while walking through the world, and the outside *of* that world: are these two kinds of outside of the

⁷ We do “not seem to be any longer directed by custom or by individual conscience”. “Both Ethics, understood as a set of customs which contains a meaning in themselves, and Morals, understood as subjective and private will of the good and the useful, seem to powerless to give direction to the actions and behavior of contemporary man” (Perniola, *Enigma’s*, 46).

⁸ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 46.

⁹ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 47.

same nature? In other words, can I be as outside as the outside world? Can my transit be the same of the transit that characterizes the world I am traversing? Can I, consequently, speak *in the name* of the world's outside or transit? Can I speak in the name of what characterizes *being* as such: outside and transit? Can I claim *being's* outside, *being's* transit? If this is the case, this claim is an ontological one, and Perniola's 'transit theory' is to be considered as a '*transitontology*'.

What, however, if we cannot make that claim? What if we cannot speak *in the name of* being's transit? What if we can only speak *of* being's transit? Maybe we cannot overcome the Kantian critique forbidding us to speak in the name of real being, allowing us only to speak *of* it. Maybe we are definitively locked up in our 'logos', unable to claim it as an '*ontologos*, an ontology. In that case, Perniola's transit theory is a 'transitology', and *only* a transitology: only a 'logos', unable to make *ontological* claims.

I have the impression that Perniola's thought is rather a transitontology than a transitology. He is, not unlike so many other post-modern thinkers, at least oscillating between both paradigms. This oscillation, however, conceals an important philosophical question, which is the question of the subject. Not the question of the subject of being, but of the *claim concerning* being. It is the question of the *transcendental* subject: of the '*hypokeimenon*', the '*subjectum*', of the bearer, the platform, the support of that claim. Who is speaking when I am speaking? Even if it is not the self-conscious soul metaphysics dreamed of, even if it is something superficial and 'material', the question is still whether the materiality of the speaking subject is the same as the materiality of the world. Is the 'outside' speaking while I am speaking (i.e. while I suppose *I* am speaking) identical to the outside characterizing our (post)modern world? Can the one who speaks (or the 'thing' or 'non-thing' that speaks) claim the same status as the status of that what he/she/it is talking about?

In what follows, I want to show that this is one of the basic questions Perniola's thought leads to. The very logic of his explicit *transitontology* leads to an impasse circling around the question of the subject. It is there we will face the impossibility of making a transit from transitology to *transitontology*.

3. Fold's Enigma / Enigma's fold

In the first chapter of *Enigmas*, Perniola argues that the ‘world of transit’ is not “the society of the spectacle”, as described in Guy Debord’s famous book with the same title.¹⁰ Does criticizing society as dominated by spectacles not still suppose a secret truth hidden beyond them? When one considers spectacles themselves as secrets, truth remains the main reference also. In his *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*¹¹, his follow-up from 1988, Debord argues that, in the words of Perniola, “in the post-historical, neo-obscurantist and crypto-criminal world in which we live”, the most recent shape of the spectacle is the secret.¹² This however, so Perniola replies, still refers to a “concept [that] relies on the existence of a simple truth”.¹³ The very notion of secret presumes a hidden truth, and, therefore, denies the crucial point, i.e. that, beyond secret and spectacle, there is nothing at all. That is why Perniola prefers the word ‘enigma’, which evokes Hegel’s theory on the mysterious art of Ancient Egypt (pyramids, colossi, etcetera): these are not only mysterious to us, Hegel says, they were mere mysteries in the eyes of the Egyptians too. If they contain secrets, those secrets are knowable to no one. It is in that sense they are ‘enigmas’: secrets without author; secrets missing even a single one who knows their truth – missing even someone who knows if they refer to any truth at all.¹⁴

So, criticizing post-modern ‘spectacles’ does not lead to some concealed substantial kernel behind them. On its most basic level, critical thinking is not a “police investigation” searching for what is hidden behind a mass of the lies and half-truths. In that case, “thinking is assigned a secondary and, in the final analysis, an inessential role”.¹⁵ It is not an instrument to discover problems, and, thus, to annihilate them and replace them by supposed truths. Thinking is essentially ‘ex-plication’ of what, in a problem, is ‘im-plicated’. It is a ‘de-velopment’ of what is ‘en-veloped’ in the problem – so Perniola writes, referring to Deleuze, especially to *The Fold*, his book on Leibniz.¹⁶

¹⁰ Debord, *La société de spectacle*; Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*.

¹¹ Debord, *Commentaires sur La société de spectacle* ; Debord *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*.

¹² Perniola, *Enigma’s*, 3.

¹³ Perniola, *Enigma’s*, 4.

¹⁴ “The moment that the secret slips from the control of its owner, because reality assumes a shape that is more complex, intricate, many-sided and contradictory than was previously imagined, a different horizon, that of the enigma, comes into play.” (Perniola, *Enigma’s*, 10-11)

¹⁵ Perniola, *Enigma’s*, 4.

¹⁶ One can find the idea of philosophy as the unfolding of a problem already in one of his first books: Deleuze, *Empirisme et subjectivité*, 119: « En fait, une théorie philosophique est une question développée, et rien d’autre : par elle-même, en elle-même, elle consiste, non ps à résoudre un problème, mais à développer *jusqu’au bout* les implications nécessaires d’une question formulée. ».

Thinking is not the ‘other’ of the things thought about, it is not an ‘ideal’, ‘noumenal’ representation of a ‘material’, ‘real’, ‘objective’ world. Although both thinking and its object, both the explanation and what is explained differ from each other, they are not of different *nature*. Each of them is in itself a realm of differences, but they belong both to the same immanent world of “difference and repetition” – to quote the title of one of Deleuze’s major works.¹⁷ Referring to *The Logic of the Sense*, another of his works¹⁸, one can say that the realm of problems is a virtual world of differences, causing another realm, the one of events, which, disconnected from their causes, operates at its own independent level. The realm of the causes and the one of the events are connected ‘in their very difference’. That is what, in *The Logic of the Sense*, is called precisely the “sense”. This is nothing but the very articulation of that difference.

In *The Fold*, Deleuze’s main reference is Leibniz, according to whom the existing world actualizes an infinite series of virtual possibilities. The virtual is *enfolded* in an *unfolded* universe, making the universe in which we live to a ‘surface of folds’, i.e. to the field of unanswered problems and problematic answers constituting the concrete world in which we live. This kind of ‘unfolding/enfolding surface’ is par excellence realised in Baroque culture, so Deleuze argues. It is a superficial world, not of spectacles hiding some real truth, but of folds continuously enfolding and unfolding; a Leibnizian world, where God is the name, not of transcendence, but of radical immanence, i.e. of the immanent virtual actualised in the concrete universe.

When the Baroque universe “ceases to prioritise the fold over [unfolding and] explanation, or vice versa, explanation over the fold”, it ends up in our post-modern universe of “enigmas” and “transit”.¹⁹ It becomes a universe ruled by the ‘enigma of transit’, not from the same to the other, but from the same to the same: a never-ending repetition making clear that difference is not something ‘other’, but the very essence of immanent reality itself. This is the non-representable ‘self’ of reality, its difference ‘as such’: a difference that no representational logic is able to acknowledge, because it is ‘harder’ – more different – than any logical, even dialectical difference.²⁰

¹⁷ Deleuze, *Différence et Répétition*.

¹⁸ Deleuze, *Logique du sens*.

¹⁹ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 12.

²⁰ That is why, so Perniola argues, “the god *par excellence* of the enigma was Apollo, Phoebus (the pure), Loxial (the oblique)”. He was not so much the rational and harmonious god as the god of ratio *and* irrationality, “the meeting point between reason and delirium”, between self-control and trance (Perniola, *Enigmas*, 15).

Going beyond logic's oppositional and representational difference, it is the difference of *being* itself: the ontological difference. In the final analysis, enigmatic transit does not characterize logic but being. It deals with the nature of real things in so far as they cannot be reduced to fixed identities, but are, precisely, continuously 'in transit'. That kind of ontology that denies any identity, dates already from the very dawn of Western Philosophy, so Perniola stresses referring to Heraclitus. His thinking was

"the most resolute and profound negation of identity and the most rigorous formulation of the nature of transit, at once a process of passing from the same to the same and a persistence of what is in itself different, a restful transmutation and a transmuting repose".²¹

Since Plato and Aristotle, the mainstream in philosophy has repressed this idea of an immanent difference in favour of transcendent ideas like God, Identity, Self, or (even) Difference *As Such*. Although there has been a smaller, dissident tradition trying to reaffirm being's inner difference (materialistic antique philosophies like Epicurism and Stoicism, Dun Scotus, Spinoza, Leibniz and others), only post-modern philosophy – like Deleuze's theory of 'difference and repetition' or Perniola's own 'transitontology' – definitely picked up that 'ontology of difference'.

4. The subject of a 'transontological' claim

Where, in the universe of transit and enigma, can we locate the position of the critic, of the one who comments and criticizes upon the enigmatic transitional society? What is, in sum, the position of the critical *subject*? It can no longer be the 'classical' position *outside*: the position at least formally *opposed* to society in order to critically look at it. According to Perniola, in a world of immanent "transit from the same to the same", thinking and criticism must be located in this very transit position. Thinking makes no longer stand *against* society; it takes a transit-position, thus affirming society's own transit. It is not the act of a subject proud to have a position on his own *outside* society; it is rather an act that makes this so-called subject pass – and even disappear – into

²¹ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 17.

society's – or even into being's – very transit. In another chapter of *Enigmas*, Perniola writes:

[...] to read, to think and to write does not mean to express one's subjectivity or to fulfill oneself; on the contrary, it is to lose oneself, to feel that one is the intermediary, the passage, the transit of something different and foreign.²²

That is why, at the most fundamental level, thinkers and society no longer take position *against* one another. On the contrary, between both there is rather a

relationship of complicity [...], of essential reciprocal belonging: thinkers take to society like ducks to water".²³

Perniola's philosophy affirms the "transit from the same to the same", and, therefore, assumes the primacy of the present and of synchronicity. That is what the concept of 'enigma' is about: a change, in which the changed never neutralizes the difference that already was at work in the changeable. That is why time must be thought in a synchronical way, in the permanent presence of change and difference. As Perniola says: philosophy nowadays is only possible as a "philosophy of the present".²⁴ This not only means that thinking should be *about* the present – the present being its *object*. It is a thinking *of* the present as well – the present being its agency, its *subject*.

The present is, after all, more than the object of philosophizing: it is through philosophy that it thinks itself. 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 [...] in order to avoid placing obstacles and misleading screens in the way of an understanding of history's manifestations.²⁵

So, the individual subject of the philosopher must disappear and fade away in the 'flux' of society's and history's present, in order to express, not his own subjectivity, but the real subject of thought: history, reality, being.

²² Perniola, *Enigmas*, 40.

²³ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 40.

²⁴ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 41.

²⁵ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 43.

Here, we face the question of the subject. For, indeed, there is a subject in the philosopher's claim concerning the 'transontological' nature of the present. Only, this subject is not himself, his own subjectivity, in the classical sense of the word. The subject – the bearer, the support – of his claim is the present itself; it is society or being *as such*. And of course, neither presence nor society or being exist 'as such', but only 'as difference'; however, in the philosopher's claim, this absence of 'as such', this difference different from any 'as such' is nonetheless speaking. The philosopher, precisely because of his fading away, is speaking *in the name* of present, society or being. Of course, his speaking belongs to being, and cannot be located outside of it. But the crucial question is whether it is possible at all to speak in the name of that being. Can my claim be supported by – can it find its subject in – that what I am talking about: presence, history, being itself?

Notice that the question is not so much what the subject of being is. It is rather what the subject of that ontological *claim* is. Is the subject of that ontological claim itself ontological, or is it only logical? Has the subject of the claim speaking about being, the same ontological status as being's own subject? Is the transit *about which* we speak at the same time the support – the bearer, the subject – of our very speaking? Has that support a *transontological* status, or only a *transitological* one?

Perniola's philosophy never faces this question directly. Nevertheless, he sometimes comes very close to it, for instance where he reflects upon the practical side of 'transitontology'.

5. Enigmatic act & enigmatic actor

Does this kind of 'transitontology' generate a specific *paxis*? Or, as Perniola puts it in *Enigmas*: "how does enigma manifest itself in the sphere of action?"²⁶ Not by *jumping* into being's 'transit'. At least not in the way Slavoj Žižek defines the act, i.e. as a 'jump into the real'.²⁷ It is, on the contrary, rather an act of avoiding or delaying every jump: an act of postponing the act. To explain that "enigmatic action", Perniola refers, for instance, to Emperor Augustus' motto '*festina lente*': 'make haste slowly'.²⁸ An act should follow

²⁶ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 19.

²⁷ De Kesel, "«Ist Antigone nicht eine proto-totalitäre Figur?».

²⁸ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 19.

the synchronical differences of the present, and thus affirm the moments of transit. Paradoxically, an act *stands still* in the very transit-moments that *move* history.

Perniola's main reference for the practical implication of his 'transitontology' is Baltasar Gracián. This Spanish Jesuit moralist from the seventeenth century defends an ethics of 'prudencia', an art, so to say, of being alert to society's 'transitional vacillations'.²⁹ Human activity should be led by caution and prudence, waiting for the optimal circumstances to be performed. That is why acts should never be overhasty. They are 'true', not because of the truth they realise, but because they occur at the right moment and on the right place. Their virtue does not lie in any supposed truth, but in the fact that they occur at the optimal moment, at the right "*kairos*".³⁰ Human actions must anticipate the whimsical differences at work in current society. These differences, as we already know, are more whimsical, more 'different' than our representational logic is able to think. Beyond that logic, we should listen to the *real* differences at work in life and society. It is because of those that we constantly have to change and readjust the paths we take in our life.

The ground of Gracián's 'baroque' ethics is the virtue of "*detención*", which implies "deferment, stock-taking, delay".³¹ One should take distance towards one's act in the very moment of performing it. This is what makes us fitting into the unfolding and enfolding universe in which we live. That is why "*detención* has an ontological dimension", as Perniola explicitly claims.³² Precisely the postponing and delaying dimension of the 'baroque' act makes it compatible with the folds – the never ending game of enfolding/unfolding – constituting history, society or being.

So, what is an act according to Perniola? It is what, performatively, keeps history (or society, or being) open to the enfolding/unfolding game of differences that is its very nature, its ontological ground. However, an act is not so much the performance of *someone*, of a *subject* realizing its capacities in this act. On the contrary, in the act's performance, the subject disappears. More precisely, in the act, the individual subject fades away to leave behind an open space – a transit-zone, a zone of pure difference. If there is a subject involved in the act at all, it is only as a kind of 'vanishing mediator',

²⁹ Gracián, *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*.

³⁰ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 118-119.

³¹ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 21.

³² Perniola, *Enigmas*, 21.

whose vanishing generates an open, empty space. This empty gap is the only hallmark of the act's subject.

That is why Perniola defines the act, not as an intervention conquering someone or something, but as a "seduction". To act is to seduce. It is not penetrating someone's domain to take possession of it. On the contrary, to act is to invite – to seduce – the other to enter the space I created for him or her in my own domain. Here again, Perniola refers to Baltasar Gracián, especially to a central notion from another of his works, *Agudeza y arte de ingenio* (1642).³³ It is the notion of '*despejo*' – or, in the infinitive form, '*despejar*', which means: 'to keep open'. *Agudeza* links *despejo* to another main notion, which is '*concepto*', concept. Etymologically, so Perniola argues, concept means "gathering in, receiving".

To conceive does not therefore mean to appropriate anything, but rather to make room for it: it is not the act of a subject that takes an object, but the disposition to receive something from the outside that comes, occurs, arrives.³⁴

"Concepto" is the act of 'conceiving' things, of creating the openness that lets the event occur and actualises the virtual. Therefore, one should have the attitude of '*despejo*', i.e. "the attitude to efface oneself".³⁵ The act supposes the very erasing of any kind of personal individuality. This is the only way being 'as such' – i.e. being's differences, its 'transit' – can manifest itself as the support, the subject of an event. The effacement of the "*despejo*", as well as the emptiness of the "*concepto*" form the very locus where history, society or being 'as such' happens, occurs – in the *active* sense of the word. If being is radically immanent and therefore its own support or subject, than this subject may neither be considered as a substantial, never changing ground (as Plato, Aristotle and almost the whole tradition learn), nor as the 'self-sublating' lack of ground (as Hegel says): it is being's own differences, it is the unlimited field of differences beyond any dialectics or other logics of representation. The act is an active seduction to make the transitional ontological difference manifest itself.

6. Enigmatic power, ...

³³ Perniola wrote the introduction to the Italian translation of that book, included in his *Enigmas* as chapter VII "Strategic Beauty and Enigmatic Ingenuity in the Work of Baltasar Gracián" (Perniola, *Enigmas*, 111-124).

³⁴ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 122-123.

³⁵ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 123.

In *Ritual Thinking*, Perniola links the issue of “*despejo*” and “seduction” to the theme of government and political power. In the chapter entitled “The logic of seduction”, he repeats his thesis that “the seducer opens up an empty space that anyone can fill with what they want”.³⁶ And, again, Baltasar Gracián is one of his main references. This time, he mentions *El héroe* (*The Hero*), Gracián’s first book (1637).

“*Héroe*” is Gracián’s term for political leader. His thesis is that the leadership of the “*héroe*” is not the result of the force he used to conquer power. His power is basically due, not so much to those who have been *conquered*, as to those who have been *seduced* by him. And seduction is successful, not by flaunting his sublime personality, but precisely by not doing so, by letting his personality and his identity fade away. The leader’s seduction is the one that gives room to the people so that “they can fill [it] in with what they want”. The ‘*héroe*’ affirms the difference between himself and the people, but only in order to disappear into that very difference in favor of the people. He himself – i.e. his identity as political leader – is nothing but the repetition of other’s identities³⁷, i.e. the repetition of their lack of identity. He is a ‘*héroe*’ because he is able to leave his own supposed identity behind and, on the right moment and at the right place, disappear in the labyrinth of differences upon which society rests. According to Gracián, Henry IV (the famous Huguenot converted to Catholicism in order to obtain the French crown, which made him say: ‘Paris vaut bien une messe’) exemplifies the one “who «with the golden thread of *despejo* knows how to cope with such an intricate labyrinth»”.³⁸ Here Perniola, “with Gracián”, claims that

seduction is acknowledged as the essential condition of governing. [...] Seduction is the auto-suppression of the identity of power and the simulated repetition of the identities of the seduced. The logic of seduction is sympathetic to the process of derealization and radical culturalization which informs the world of the Baroque.³⁹

A leader is able to repeat the identities of his people, precisely because he gives up his own identity. And he can do so because he knows that the identities he repeats are, not

³⁶ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 124.

³⁷ ‘Repetition of identities’: this is also the way Perniola – erroneously – interprets the psychoanalytical concept of transference (see, for instance, Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 50-52).

³⁸ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 124.

³⁹ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 124.

unlike his own one, lacks of identity. In a way, he takes the position of the lack of identity that is characteristic for being as such. He takes the position of being's difference, of its 'transit' 'as such'. That is why the leader's seduction is sympathetic, not with being's supposed substantial reality, but with its "derealization", its "radical culturalization", in other words with being as a labyrinth of 'simulacra', a labyrinth of 'transits'.

Seduction is not only the strategy of the *individual* 'hero'. It is the strategy of a heroic nation as well. In that perspective, Perniola links Ancient Rome's imperial power with its capacity to seduce. Here, Perniola refers to one of Rome's famous 'war rites', the '*evocatio*'.⁴⁰ Waging war against an enemy, the Romans did not attempt to destroy their gods, as most nations then did. On the contrary, they tried to seduce them. In their own town, in Rome, they build temples for the foreign gods, and with rites and sacrifices, they seduced them to move into their new Roman residences. Conquering the foreign nations equalled seducing their gods and, finally, giving those nations room within the boundaries of Rome's imperial domain.

On the other side, the Romans feared the enemy's '*evocatio*'. For they too were able to seduce gods, including the Roman god protecting the 'City'. That is why the Romans kept the name of this god absolutely secret, *even to themselves*. That name was a real enigma, in the strong, Perniolian sense of the word: a secret without any knower.

So, how the 'urbs' (Rome) obtained imperial power over the 'orbis' (the entire universe)? By seduction's power. In its very heart, the City made room for all nation and all gods of the 'orbis'. And how could the City itself remain immune to '*evocatio*' and seduction? Because Rome's own god had no name at all. Rome was 'nobody', it had neither subject nor identity. And that is the very reason why it became the world-conquering seducer.

If as Ovid says, "the world's the limit for the city of Rome", if the deeper intention of the *urbs* is the urbanization of the world, it is because the *urbs* is not, as *polis*, equal to itself, with its own identity; rather it is different with respect to itself, an indiscernible copy of a true city, original, authentic, which has never been part of the Roman experience.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 121-122. For the notion of 'evocatio', see for instance: Scheid, *Religion et piété à Rome*, 122ff. For the evocatio pronounced by the destruction of Cartago, see: Macrobius, *Saturnalia*, liber III, cap. IX.6.

⁴¹ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 103-104.

Rome is without subject and, therefore, a first class seducer: “instead of positioning himself as a subject, the seducer [...] [is] nobody, a pure empty space occupied by the gods and the names of the seduced”.⁴² So, Rome, being itself without identity, becomes the identity of the entire world.

7. ... and its all too classical subject

However, is Rome really without subject? Paraphrasing Ovid, Perniola writes: “the deeper intention of the *urbs* is the urbanization of the world”. What does this mean? Not that the *urbs* has itself chosen to *urbanize* the world. If it succeeded in *urbanizing* the *orbis*, it is precisely because it chose not to choose, or, more exactly, it chose to *be chosen* by the foreign urban gods all over the *orbis*. Unlike the Greek “*polis*”, the Roman City gave up its supposed identity. But why is the intention to do so “deeper”, as Perniola says? In a way, the very word suggests already the answer: because *being itself* supports it. Being is not identity, but lack of identity; it is “nobody”. It is a multitude of identities and bodies ‘in transit’. So, why is Rome that powerful? It is because its power is “deeper”, i.e. more supported by being, than the power of the other cities.

Is Rome without subject? Not exactly. First of all, it finds its ‘subjectum’ in being itself. Its power is based upon an ontological – i.e. a transitontological – ‘hypokeimenon’ (bearer, support). And, secondly, it finds its subject in itself as well, i.e. in its own consciousness concerning its lack of substantial identity or ‘subject’. Rome is aware of its own transitontological (un)ground, of the non-identity and the fluid transit-movement it rests upon. And it is so clever to understand that other nations are not at the level of this knowledge. This is why, better than other nations, it can seduce, and, thus conquer power. Rome knows that, and even when it considers the world as simulacrum and transit, as “simulation [which] goes beyond the distinction between truth and falsehood”, this very knowledge itself does not go beyond that distinction.⁴³ It knows *for sure* – or, at least, it supposes to do so – that the whole world – ‘*urbi ét orbi*’ – is simulacrum. It is the convinced, conscious subject of that knowledge.

Of course, we do not deal here with a *substantial* subject, the never-changing support of a fixed identity; but, contrary to what Perniola claims, there is nonetheless a

⁴² Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 122.

⁴³ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 123.

subject involved here. As shown, it is both a self-conscious subject being aware of being's transitontological status, *and* that very transitontological being itself.⁴⁴ After all, Perniola's transitontology supposes one single subject, because the subject of the transitontological *claim* and the subject of transitontological *being* is in fact one and the same subject. That is what it has in common, at least formally, with the classical metaphysical subject, in which the bearer of the proposition is in the final end always supported by being as such. This also made the classical subject able to speak *in the name* of its real bearer, its real subject, i.e. in being's own name. It was Descartes who was the first to disconnect this classical metaphysical link, and, by means of his hyperbolic doubt, to drive a wedge between man and world, between what he *thinks* it is and what it *really* is, or, between the subject of the proposition and the subject of what this proposition is about: the being outside his mind.

8. Radical trickery, ...

Yet, what is the importance of detecting a classical subject secretly at work in Perniola's thought? Why should we be aware of this subject operating in Rome's imperial – or in our post-modern – strategies? For no other reason than the dubious trickery at work in these strategies. There is a dimension of deceit in it, which Perniola's writings seems simply to deny. Even if he acknowledges the trickery at work in the Roman Empire as well as in (post)modern ideology, he seems to remain blind for its negative and, more precisely, *perverse* side. And this blindness, I will show, is due to the fact he supposes too easily the question of the subject as superseded.

It is true, Perniola's project of transitontology is an attempt to rethink the question of trickery and ruse. Since its origin, human thought has been captured by the desire to master the tricks and ruses it permanently had to face. That is why it invented eternal truths and fixed substances. Transitontology has discovered the truth about what metaphysics called tricks and ruses. They are only tricky in relation to the presuppositions rational thinking makes. In reality, these supposed trickeries and ruses are more real than rationality supposes: they refer to differences, transits, lacks of identity, which characterizes being as such. Classical logic and ontology are too locked

⁴⁴ Rome's claim that it is nobody is supported by the transitontological status of being itself. It is only because being as such is 'no (substantial) body' that the proposition 'Rome is nobody' makes sense.

up in their own presuppositions to acknowledge them. It is up to transitontology to do right to what tradition defined as trickery and ruse.

However, is transitontology itself not trickery *par excellence*? Let us return to one of Perniola's transontological concepts: seduction. It proceeds from the seducer's insight that he is nothing and no one. However, must he, necessarily, not give the opposite impression to the one he seduces? The seducer must look as if he is "nature" itself. In *Enigmas*, Perniola links the notion of seduction to the one of "ingenuity", a concept borrowed from Baltasar Gracián's 'aesthetical theory':

Ingenuity is a matter of transforming nature into culture, but culture, when perfect, appears to be natural: the greatest trick is to hide all trickery.⁴⁵

Art is the artificial product of "ingenuity". Only, ingenuity's trick is to make it look like nature, and like any trick, this one too only functions if perfectly hidden. However, according to Perniola, the trickery of Baroque art is not so much an artificial *imitation* of nature: in its very trickery, it *repeats* nature's own whimsicality and capriciousness, for nature is a field of differences and transits rather than the supposed universe of fixed identities.

Yet, what if trickery has no longer any support in nature, i.e. in *being*, understood transitontologically? What if it is no longer supported by *being's* trickery? What if it is a 'real' trickery, in the sense that it has no real, i.e. ontological support at all, but only a logical one? Then, we are locked up within mere *transitology* and all Perniola's issues are to be re-considered from this paradigm.

In that case, Rome's seductive trick is to behave *as if* it is nobody, *as if* it is only inviting other nations to freely install themselves in the open space the City made for them within its boundaries; while, in reality, the empire simply – i.e. militarily – conquers those nations. This conquest is not built upon *being's* "deeper" transit-characteristics; it is built upon a trick that does *as if* this is the case. Of course, there is seduction involved here as well, but it operates only in the realm of the 'as if', in the domain of the 'logos', disconnected from any ontological support. In that case too, a subject is involved and neither is it the subject of a substance or an essence, nor of an

⁴⁵ Perniola, *Enigmas*, 117.

ontological difference or transit. It is the subject of mere 'logos', of mere imagination and representation: of a dimension never overcoming its 'as if'-status.

What or who then, for instance, is the subject of the Roman Empire? Let us first of all emphasize that this subject must be thought of as the subject of an imaginary entity, of an entity supported by nothing but an 'as if', having no ontological, but only a logical 'ground'. For at its most fundamental level, the Roman Empire is fantasy, consisting of mere logos – of 'signifiers', as structuralism defined it – and functioning *as if* it were reality. However, logos or signifier *as such* does not support it either; this fantasy does not rest in itself, but is borne by those who *imagine* being the bearer – the subject – of this fantasy.⁴⁶ In Rome, this is imperial government or, in the last resort, the emperor himself.

So, is then the government or the emperor the empire's subject? Not exactly. They only *imagine* they are its subject. And this imaginary procedure is indeed a trick, but a trick *not proceeding* from a conscious subject but a trick *producing* this very subject. In their very pretension of being Rome's subject, they too are trickery's victims rather than its authors. They cannot reduce the trickery they are living in (and they are the product of) neither to their *own* trick, nor to *being's* trickery (to its whimsicality, its transit-status, its differences, its lack of identity). In fact, they cannot but *lie* about their own status and position, and they have no remedy to connect their incapability for truth to an absence of truth on the level of being. They are doomed to do *as if* they are Rome's subject, never able to *really* be it. This means that, on the one hand, the subject of political power is to be located with them (*there* was the very locus of political hegemony at that time), but that, on the other, they are not able to make that subject their own.

So, there is indeed a subject – a platform, a bearer – where power and its empire rest upon. Only, that kind of subject has nothing to do with subjectivity in the ordinary sense of the word. The owner of the empire's subject is by definition not able to be consciously present to that subject, to feel it and to make it his own.

⁴⁶ In that respect, Perniola's thought illustrates a repression of the primacy of imagination, which is characteristic for the entire Western philosophical tradition. Heidegger, for instance, noticed that the real innovation of Kant's first *Critique* was the affirmation of the 'Einbildungskraft' (imagination). At least, this was the case in the first edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. The modification of the second edition already weakened – and even erased – imagination's primacy, so Heidegger shows in his *Kantbuch* (Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*). One can say that, contrary to the opposite appearance, many post-modern ontologies too repress imagination's primacy.

9. ... and its split subject

That is why the purely transitological reading of Perniola's *transitology* not only compels to re-introduce the notion of the subject, but – which is even more important – to consider it as a *split* subject.

The post-modern world is a world of transit, non-identities, and differences. Only, this unstable and fluid transit-universe is to be located, not at the level of being itself, but at the level of being's representations, at the level of the signifier, i.e. of mere 'logos'. It is possible that, at the level of being, everything is in transit as well, but we cannot base our transitology upon any transitological insight. The transit-universe we deal with is a representational one, be it a representational universe that has lost any connection with its real, 'presentational' reference. It is on that transitological level that, to us, everything is in transit and irreducible to fixed, substantial identities.

However, precisely because we deal with a representational universe lacking any ground in itself, we cannot but do *as if* it represents fixed identities. And even if we explicitly consider them as representing unstable non-identities, we believe and act *as if* those representations have at least a ground in themselves. Moreover, by means of those unstable transit-units or signifiers, i.e. by means of an unreal 'logos', we unconsciously construct some kind of fictive identity for *ourselves*. We can do this by denying the unreal and unstable character of these transit-elements, *but we can just as well do this by affirming it*. This is the main discovery of Lacanian theory (upon which I am leaning here): even when I explicitly declare that the world (including myself) is without identity, there is an imaginary ground, *installed by that very claim*, which collects the signifiers of that claim to a unit, giving myself and my world a fictional, imaginary identity.

So, Perniola is right in his attempt to acknowledge the transit-condition that we, post-moderns, are living in. But his thought is not able to acknowledge the transit-condition of the imaginary subject necessarily generated by this condition. It does not suffice to recognize that kind of persisting subject, the subject's own transit-condition must be acknowledged as well. That is why it must be analysed as a *split* subject. The subject of my identity never coincides with the point where I imagine my identity being mine. Or, to put it in Lacanian terms, my imaginary ego never coincides with the

symbolic subject bearing the desire I am (to be that ego). So, it is not only our post-modern universe that is 'in transit', the very point from where we acknowledge this is in transit as well: it constantly oscillates between the one we *imagine* we are, and the unconscious subject of the unfulfillable desire to really be what we imagine to be. When someone seriously seeks for him- or herself – as for instance is the case in a psychoanalytical cure – it will at the end become clear that the one who is seeking can never be the same as the one sought for. In the same way, the one who claims to be what he or she is, will never be *really* the one this claim is about.

Only here we face the ultimate consequence of what it means that our very identity is 'difference' and 'transit'. That difference does not even allow us to be settled in being's realm of differences. It deprives the transit we 'are' from any ontological comfort.

Neither seduction can give that comfort. Seduction, Perniola says, made Rome disappear in its non-identity, and, that way, gave it its power. So, the emperor got his power from the way he affirmed to be 'nobody'. But Rome's problem was the impossibility to appropriate that non-identity, that being nobody. This is for instance, what we read in Suetonius. His *Lives of the Caesars* tells the repeated story of an emperor, trying to be nobody, trying to disappear in his own identity in order to make room for the (non-)identity of the empire.⁴⁷ And what was time and again the result? Almost every emperor, although starting with the best intentions, in no time became a pervert monster. In his very attempt to be the non-identity or the 'nobody' the entire empire was resting upon, he became a sadist monster, literarily and cruelly applying that non-identity to others.

For this is the formula of sadism, formalized by Lacanian theory: the sadist denies his own 'difference' by transferring it to another, so that, once it is with that other, there, the sadist can deny it.⁴⁸ He literally carves his own painful difference – i.e. the split of his own identity, the fact that he never is what he desires to be – in the body of the other, and, while the other almost dies of pain, his executioner denies the very existence of pain, death, lack, finitude, impossibility, difference, transit, et cetera. The whole scene is

⁴⁷ The most cruel emperors did this often literally: Caligula put on "a wig and a long coat" to plunge in Roma's nightlife. Similar stories were told about Nero. (Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*: 140; 208, 224)

⁴⁸ Aulanger-Spairani, "La perversion comme structure". Lacan implements his theory of perversion for the first time in his famous essay "Kant avec Sade" (Lacan, *Écrits*: 765-790).

made to give him the impression that ‘difference and transit’ does not exist or, what amounts to the same thing, that they fully can be appropriated.

It was the Roman Emperor’s task to be the empire’s final support, its subject. But, even in the seductive affirmation of the empire’s non-identity, he was supposed to be its *unsplit* and *full* subject. Claiming to be the support of a transit-universe, he was not able to affirm the transit-dimension – the split – of that very claim. That is why he had no other way out than *deny* this split. And that denial could only be realised in perverted scenes as described by Suetonius.

The risk of perverted strategies does not only characterise Ancient Rome, it threatens Perniola’s post-modernism as well. At the end of his essay “The Logic of Seduction” – the essay in which he argues his theory on Rome’s seductive power – he claims that our “society of simulacra re-establishes the link between power and seduction”.⁴⁹ That is why “ideological power” is no longer to be considered as a “theatre” – a metaphor that still supposes the representational paradigm. And, so he continues:

the model of new power is the *holograph*, that is, the tri-dimensional rendering of the image of an object. The seduction of the holograph consists precisely in the fact that it is empty, that it provides no illusion and no hope, while at the same time being able to be experienced and appreciated for what it shows.⁵⁰

“Holograph” is a metaphor for ‘simulacrum’, i.e. for the abolished difference between reality and representation; it affirms reality as difference and transit *as such*. The holograph does not contain any promise or illusion, it is empty and lacks any substantiality, but it has

to be accepted ‘as it is’, as a ‘pig in a poke’ so to speak, maybe because what the poke contains is really not very important.⁵¹

Maybe it is not important what the poke contains, neither that it contains nonetheless an ontological presupposition (that the indifference concerning its content is supported by being’s indifference, or, what amounts to the same thing, its difference). However, really important is the fact that Perniola not even mentions the question of the subject of such

⁴⁹ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 126.

⁵⁰ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 126.

⁵¹ Perniola, *Ritual Thinking*, 127.

an acceptation “as it is”. How can the subject, accepting the word of difference or transit “as it is”, remain unaffected by this very difference or transit? As already suggested, this is only possible by means of perverted denial. Unnamed, Perniola’s transitology supposes a subject, and that subject not only – ‘neurotically’ – represses its existence, it – ‘perversely’ – denies its split.

Perniola’s acceptance of the holograph “as it is” supposes a subject that, unlike the holograph, is untouched by the difference it experiences. This is why despite his own claims a Cartesian subject remains involved in his theory. Although it is entirely part of the transit-universe, it does not “take to [it] [...] like ducks to water”.⁵² Of course it is submerged in that transit-world of differences, it is ‘nobody’ in a world where nothing is a fixed body, but it is nobody in a transit, i.e. in a *split* way. That is why, so to say, it still remains ‘larvatus’, not only in respect to that differential world, but also to itself. And this makes the whole difference, and changes our very idea of a differential world. Actually, that world is a “stage”, a representational scene, disconnected from any kind of real, ontological world. And if the subject enters in it ‘larvatus’, it is not to conceal someone behind the veil, but to conceal that behind that veil, there is nobody, to conceal that there is nothing but a veil, separating the no-thing (non-identity, difference) of the world and the no-thing (nobody, non-identity, difference) entering the world. This separation, this difference remains different from the world of differences, but is indispensable for the affirmation of that world. In other words, it is indispensable for a Perniolean view of the world.

Here, masked, I leave the stage, and – fortunately or not, I do not know – I will remain masked.

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⁵² Perniola, *Enigmas*, 40.

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Summary

Mario Perniola, characterizes our contemporary world as the universe of the outside: a universe of material things lacking any inside, essence, or origin. It is a world of “simulacra”, of ‘copies of copies’ no longer based in, or referring to any basic model. It is a world of mere “transit”, he adds, where every identity is ‘in transition’, not from the earthly ‘here’ to a transcendent or utopian ‘somewhere else’, but ‘from here to here’. Identity is a simulacrum lacking any original ‘inside’ and being continuously in transition, not from itself to something else, but ‘from itself to itself’. The idea of ‘self’ has lost substantial ground, so Perniola claims. “Transit” has become the very form of identity or ‘self’. Even on the level of human behavior, the ‘self’ has definitively played its part.

This chapter focusses on the critique of Descartes implied in Perniola's philosophy. Has his 'transit theory' overcome the Cartesian subject? The outside *I perform* while walking through the world, and the outside *of* that world: are these two kinds of outside of the same nature? In other words, can I be as outside as the outside world? Can my transit be the same of the transit that characterizes the world I am traversing? Can I, consequently, speak *in the name* of the world's outside or transit? Can I speak in the name of what characterizes *being* as such: outside and transit? Can I claim *being's* outside, *being's* transit? If this is the case, this claim is an ontological one, and Perniola's 'transit theory' is to be considered as a '*transitontology*'.

This chapter questions the ontological claim supposed in Perniola's 'transitology'.

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