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## Allegory and Interference: Representation in Sociology

### John Law and Kevin Hetherington

'Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters'. (Donna J. Haraway, page 154, 'A Cyborg Manifesto', in Donna Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women.)

'The underdetermined seems richer and more interesting. It is a much more precious concept in history. It mixes what is possible with what has been accomplished and makes bifurcations multiply. The underdetermined follows us without cease; it is the lightness of that which is anterior.' (Michel Serres, page 56 in Rome: The Book of Foundations.)

### Introduction

What is it to tell sociological stories, to represent the state of the social world? How might one represent the state of the social? These are our questions, questions about what it is or what it might be to be a sociologist, a sociological theorist.

Many neighbouring disciplines including cultural anthropology, cultural studies, radical feminism, cultural geography and technoscience studies have debated the many important theoretical, empirical and epistemological issues loosely indexed by the term 'postmodernism'. As a part of this, they have explored and debated their conditions of representational possibility. Though the term 'representation' is itself by now uncertain, various more or less radical possibilities have been considered: cultural anthropology has



used dialogic exchanges and the author has written herself into the text; performance is now being used in technoscience studies and also in feminism; the same two disciplines have also started to write science fiction, on the understanding that representation is always about refraction rather than mirroring; cultural studies uses pastiches of visual material; and a number of these disciplines have explored the possibilities of hypertext.

All of these and many more are ways of exploring and coming to terms with doubts about the status of grand narrative, questions about representation as a mirror held up to the world, and hesitations in claiming a place of special privilege for academic knowledges. In short, all of these and many more are ways of exploring and coming to terms with what we might think of as the crisis in representation.

And where is sociology in all this? The answer is: it is in many places. There are indeed experiments in representation. There are cases of multiple voices. There are collages and even occasional performances. And there has also been attention to reflexivity and autobiography. But our reason for writing this paper is our sense that, notwithstanding such experiments, the larger part of sociology and sociological theory in particular continues in traditions of representation that were laid down at or before the time of the Enlightenment. We want to suggest that most sociological representation (and we acknowledge that this paper is no exception) is

- literary in form;
- more or less linear in structure
- images or performs a distinction between a pre-existing world to be described, and its description;
- mirrors or re-presents that world;
- builds a more or less coherent and consistent literary subject-position.

Of course in the sceptical and changing times in which we live this is all done with some degree of modesty. Our stories, or so we are told, are provisional and revisable. But the idea that it is appropriate to build a discipline around a representational technology that is both more or less literary, and more or less centred has not been dislodged. Sociology, we might say, has yet to discover its theatre of cruelty in the way that some of the other disciplines that we mention have. And this is the reason for this paper. We want to ask questions about sociological representation and consider how its conditions of representative possibility might be broadened.

The paper falls into two main parts. First we offer a brief, formal, and deliberately terse analysis of what we will call 'economies of representation'. Here we lay out, in schematic form, a series of representational options. Our object here is to show that despite its attempts at generality, standard sociological discourses embody a series of quite specific representational decisions or options. Second, and this is the real point of the paper, we explore a series of allegorical economies of representation in more detail. These reveal the power – and we will argue the need – for indirect modes of representation in sociology.

## **Economies of Representation**

Let us start, then, with a definition. We will say that any theory or representation embodies and performs a distributional economy. By this we mean that it is a structured array which includes:

- whatever is described or given life in the description ('objects');
- links between whatever is described ('relations');
- assumptions about what may be known about objects or relations; ('epistemology'); and
- assumptions about what it is to know or be a knower ('subjectivity').

To talk of the distributional economy of a form of representation is thus to talk of the way it generates its elements, and allocates them roles and weights. This is a process which implies



both ontological decisions (about what there is in the world) and epistemological decisions (about the character of knowledge).

Decisions about ontology, about what there is, include the following:

- **Materialities:** Here the issue is: what is the stuff of the world? Is it filled with material objects, or does it include (is it restricted to) the immaterial? What counts as 'the material'? Does this or does it not include the social, the ideal, the emotional, the unconscious?
- **Spatialities:** This has to do with the spaces and the volumes of the world. Are these Euclidean in character, volumes filled with similarly volumetric objects? Or do they have some other topographical form – like a network, a fluid or a fold? Are they topologically complex? Are there spatial discontinuities and inhomogeneities as well as continuities and homogeneities?
- **Temporalities:** The questions here include: what are the times of the world? Does it have time, and if so does it have one or many? Do they move together? Are they continuous, discontinuous, or cyclic?
- **Objects or populations:** To talk of materialities, spatialities and temporalities is to talk about the conditions of possibility. But those conditions also – perhaps primarily – reproduce themselves in the objects that inhabit the world. In which case one may ask: what are the objects and the populations that inhabit the world? What exists? And what are their attributes? Are they fixed or fluid? To what degree are they determined? Are they active or passive, static or mobile, or motile? Are they either one thing or another, or can they be both/and?
- **Relations:** Here the questions are: What links to what? What is the character of those relations? Are the relations those of equality or inequality? Is the range of possible connections finite or infinite? What in the world is made important and what is made unimportant? Indeed, what is relationship?

These are ontological questions. That is, they are questions about the nature of the world and what there is in it. They ask about attributes, about ranking and ordering, and about including and excluding. Such ontological work is radical, since to deny existence is to expel whatever might have been beyond the conditions of possibility (ob-ject: to throw out). This is why we talk of 'distributional economy', for an economy is the organisation or the constitution of a whole which makes and distributes its components – in some cases beyond the bounds of existence.

But alongside the decisions about ontology there are also decisions about epistemology: these are questions about observers, knowers or subjects, and about what it is to know. A condensed list of such questions here would include the following:

- **Knowledge modalities:** How does the subject know? Textually? Visually? Audially? Corporeally? Cognitively? Emotionally? Aesthetically? Mystically? Or in some other way? How is knowledge transmitted from object to subject? Or is putting the question this way already too specific?
- **Subject materialities:** What is it that knows? Is knowing confined to human subjects? Or is it extended through – or indeed confined to – other materials such as animals, societies, machines, angels or gods? Is it a feature of materially complex composites such as cyborgs?
- **Spatialities:** Where is it that knows? Is knowledge focused to a particular point or place, or is it distributed, spread out? What are the topological possibilities? Are different parts of knowledge topologically similar, transformable, or not?
- **Homogeneities:** Is knowing a homogeneous condition or set of relations that is similar in kind? Is it possible to imagine integrated knowledge or is it heterogeneous, split, in a state of internal interference or irreducibility, in a state of tension? Is it, for instance, divided between the corporeal and the verbal, the mystical or the 'rational', or between machines and people?



- Ecologies or Economies: Is the knower separate from the known? Entirely? Or partially? Is the knower included within the known, or the known within the knower? Is the known passive? Is it an object? Or is there some kind of dialogue, exchange, uncertainty? What are the topological arrangements which assemble subjects and objects?
- Temporalities: Does the world, the object, exist before the knowing subject? Is it anterior, posterior, or caught up in temporal co-production? Or is it outside time? Is what is told, for instance, mythic, an invention, a fiction, which might (or might not) work through to what is? And if so, then how?

These two lists schematically lay out a range of ontological and epistemological possibilities. Our argument is that every representation is embedded in a particular version of those possibilities. That is, whatever it actually says, every representation implies a series of embedded epistemological and ontological assumptions. As we noted above, some are widely performed but others are not.

For instance, though it seeks to say something different, in adopting the conventions of the academic journal, the present text in practice adopts and performs a common Euro-American set of ontological and epistemological conventions. Epistemologically, this is a mode of knowing which embodies assumptions about subject modalities (knowing is textual and cognitive), materialities (knowers are human), spatialities (knowing is focused to a particular point), homogeneities (knowing may be integrated, it is conformable), ecologies (knowers are more or less separate from what is known) and temporalities (the world general precedes the knowing subject). Ontologically the assumptions performed by this kind of academic writing are similarly conventional, reflecting widespread assumptions about materialities (the world is filled with material objects some of which are social), spatialities (the world is topologically conformable), temporalities (the world has a single time), objects (these are relatively but perhaps only relatively fixed), and relations (certain features of the world are more important than others).

So – though we want to argue for alternative economies of representation, the paper performs one that is conventional. The problem, however, is that looked at from the standpoint of academic writing, many of those alternatives appear fantastic or fabulous, archaic, or merely whimsical. Indeed they are. For instance, some writing in feminism and science, technology and society, is influenced by the conventions and hopes of radical science fiction – fiction that seeks to turn itself into fact. Again, the seemingly archaic promise of allegory as a mode of representation, which has been alive for at least three hundred years, is achieving a modest revival with the recent attention to the work of Walter Benjamin. And this, or so we contend, is a desirable turn of events, since the art of talking about something other than what one is talking about appears to be a lost skill in the contemporary economies of representation in sociology. And as for whimsy – how could it be said that a house could think? We'll come to this specific question shortly. But, though we make the argument by conventional means, our object is to insist that none of this is pure whimsy. None of this is fantastic. None of this is gravely flawed. Not intrinsically. It is our argument that fabulation, story-telling, and allegory are all important styles for telling social theory with distributional economies which offer interesting possibilities for sociology.

Not necessarily the best. We can debate our ontological and epistemological commitments. But ask yourself how would you examine a doctoral thesis in sociology that was written allegorically or in the genre of science fiction? What if it tried to incorporate elements of the style of Sufi mysticism, or tried to dance chapter three? Would you rule it out of order? Would you take the view that it was whimsical, fictional, eccentric, or unthinkable? If so then you would be reproducing the dominant economies of representation in sociology. And it is this that we would like to see change.

To do so we now turn to (a direct discussion) of alternative and indirect economies of representation. Economies of representation which are in one way or another allegorical.



### Materials

We ask, is knowing necessarily a human phenomenon?

Figure 1 is an isographic drawing of a house in Santa Monica designed by architect Frank Gehry. Cultural theorist Frederic Jameson has visited this house and says that it is difficult or impossible to represent it in two dimensions. The drawing doesn't tell us enough, and photographs of its interior reveal complexity. Quite simply, it looks chaotic. It is full of odd angles and pitches. There are blank walls, wire-netting, and materials that look like corrugated iron. So from the inside (or at any rate from the photographs of the inside) it doesn't look the kind of house that one might expect to live in. But, startlingly, Jameson tells us that the house is a thinking machine:

'Frank Gehry's house is to be considered the attempt to think a material thought'

He's saying that the house is a technology for thinking new kinds of thoughts. Specifically, it is a method for thinking the kinds of knowledges needed to apprehend world reality as a result of the operations of global capitalism. It is a new material method for what he calls 'cognitive mapping.' But how?

His argument runs so. At the core of the house there is a conventional 'tract' house with a pitched roof, vertical windows, doors, rectangular rooms, a chimney and an upstairs and a downstairs. Around this core there is a new 'wrapper' with the chaos of angles, pitches and materials mentioned above. In addition, holes have been blown in the tract house: old walls have disappeared, and new rooms join the rectangular volumes of the old structure with the exotic shapes and materials of the new.

But what has all this to do with knowing? Jameson notes the juxtaposition between two houses:

|                   |                   |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| TRACT HOUSE       | WRAPPER           |
| CLASSIC MATERIALS | JUNK              |
| SIMPLE VOLUMES    | COMPLEXITY        |
| INSIDE/OUTSIDE    | NO INSIDE/OUTSIDE |
| FORM              | FORMLESSNESS      |
| FIRST WORLD       | THIRD WORLD       |

Table 1

If these were in opposition then the story would be about incoherence and the way in which things don't fit together. But Jameson isn't saying this. Instead, he says, there is tension between the two parts of the house – and the world. There is a spatial tension, a continual movement between them that doesn't come to rest and cannot be centred. In particular, it cannot be depicted in a flat representational form where everything important can be seen, all at once. His argument is that the house represents an irreducible inter-dependence, a constant movement and exchange, between first world (the tract house) and third (the junk wrapper). That is one form of tension. But there is also another kind of movement, of strain, of displacement. This is because it can also be imagined as a way of knowing the irreducible interdependence between the experience of 'lived reality' and the shifting, chaotic and hyperreal networks of global capitalism.

'There must be a relationship between those two realms of dimensions of or else we are altogether within science fiction without realising it. But the nature of that relationship eludes the mind. The building then tries to think through this spatial problem in spatial terms. What would be the mark or sign, the index, of a successful resolution for this cognitive but also spatial problem? It could be detected, one would think, in the quality of the new intermediary space itself – the new living space produced by the interaction of the other poles. If that space is meaningful, if you can live in it, if it is somehow comfortable but in a new way, one that opens up new and



original ways of living – and generates, so to speak, a new Utopian spatial language, a new kind of sentence, a new kind of syntax, radically new words beyond our own grammar – then one would think, the dilemma, the aporia, has been resolved, if only on the level of space itself.

This is a citation which makes it plain that Jameson is experimenting with a form of representation radically unlike most performed in social theory:

- Spatially, he is assuming that the world is complex, neither continuous nor discontinuous. The objects that we study, what there is, is not simple. They are not spatially Euclidean. Which means, however, that what we can know is also spatially complex, to a greater or lesser extent non-integrable, heterogeneous.
- He is also, and as a part of this, saying that the modality of knowing relates to bodily comfort: that knowing is in some measure removed from that which is cognitive or intellectual.
- Third, he is saying that knowing is materially heterogeneous. Yes, knowing is partly a matter of corporeal ease. But it is also a matter of bodies combined with architectures. This means that representation no longer has to do with the human knowing subject. Instead it is located in an interaction of heterogeneous human and non-human materials that neither reducible to the ichnography (around plans) of the Enlightenment and its texts nor, indeed, to that which may be said in as many words.

So the materials of knowing have been redistributed. People-in-houses may know by living comfortably. The location of knowing is motile and fluid. And if the argument sounds strange in sociology then this is not necessarily so in technoscience studies, post-structuralism, and in feminism which indeed sometimes locate the materiality of knowing only partially within (or in some cases outside) the human. Which suggests that if we choose to argue that cognitive humans are knowers then this is, of course, our right. But to do so is an epistemological and ontological commitment, and one that does not have to be that way.

## Others

Is knowing or knowledge something that can be integrated? Is it possible to draw it together, to say it in as many words, to lay it all out?

No doubt these questions are a little more familiar to sociology than talk of thinking houses-and-bodies. This is because they crop up in the guise of the 'Other'. Here is Jean-François Lyotard talking of Freud's analysis of dreams:

'Three kinds of components may be distinguished. The image-figure I see in hallucinations or dreams, the one paintings or films present, is an object set at a distance, a theme. It belongs to the visible order; it is a revealing "trace". The form-figure is present in the perceptible, it may even be visible, but is in general not seen ..., the Gestalt of a configuration, the architecture of a painting, in short the schema. The matrix-figure is invisible in principle, subject to primal repression, immediately intermixed with discourse, primal fantasy. It is nonetheless a figure, not a structure, because it consists in a violation of discursive order from the outset, in a violence done to the transformations that this order authorises. It cannot be intelligently apprehended, for this very apprehension would make its immersion in the unconscious unintelligible. The immersion attests, however, that what is at question is indeed the "other" of discourse and intelligibility.'

The 'unconscious violation of discursive order'. Lyotard is setting up some antinomies here. On the one hand between the discursive, that which may be told, that which may be, grows out of, order. And, on the other hand, that which cannot because it is dis-order: which he calls the figural. Here he is talking of the condensations of the unconscious, where the rules of grammar, the prohibitions of negation, and discursive time, are all in abeyance. This is a location where reality is put on hold – or in which the unconscious colonises reality. Perhaps unsurprisingly since words are running out and discourse is performing its limits, the move is into art. Lyotard describes a line drawing of a Picasso nude in the following terms:



'the coexistence of several contours infers (sic) the simultaneity of several points of view. The scene where this woman is sleeping does not belong to "real" space, it allows several positions of the same body in the same place and at the same time. Erotic indifference to time, to reality, to exclusive poses.'

Matters that don't go together in 'real life' or 'real space' go easily together in the dream – or in the figural space of art. For instance – another case – it is hopeless to try to puzzle out the action painting of Jackson Pollock, to attend to it with the hope of discovering some kind of image, or even a general form, a gestalt. Instead it is better to cultivate a form of unconscious scanning – and then to respond to the complexities that such a process detects. Art theorist Anton Ehrenzweig claims that there are modes of visual appreciation that have to do with attending to the peripheral, to in-attention, rather than that which is central, the point of focus. Here, then, knowledge comes through cultivating an embodied, distributed and temporal ability to glance out of the corner of the eye.

There is, no doubt, much that is troublesome with this. For instance, in this version of knowing Otherness is turned into a condensate: it is, as it were, all there, in a space that does not accord with Euclidean rules. However, we are not particularly seeking to recommend this way of knowing. Our purpose is rather to attend to the fact that it exemplifies the workings of an alternative mode of representation – or perhaps presentation – in which:

- The modalities of knowing are only partially intellectual or verbal. They are also, or instead, visual, emotional and corporeal, forms irreducible to one another. It becomes necessary to take peripheral vision, the tacit or the elusive seriously. Which means, of course, that as with the thinking house, knowing is irreducible to the verbal.
- The materiality of knowing is similarly complex, indeed a process rather than a thing. With the breakdown of the subject, the knower is both (or neither) human and non-human. The move, then, is again like that made by Jameson – though here the emphasis is on internal rather than external material heterogeneity and the precise character of materiality depends on structure of the libidinal economy, of undecidability.
- Again, another similarity, the spatialities of knowing are complex too. Thus the subject is distributed, because the knower is by definition topographically heterogeneous, dispersed into several spaces. Or, to put it differently, the subject is not singular, not any more – but neither is it plural. Indeed, if it is anything, then it is fractional. Which means that knowing cannot be integrated, it cannot be drawn together: the discursive and the figural are heterogeneous, 'other' to each other.

To repeat: we are not necessarily recommending this representational economy. What we are trying to show, as with Jameson's discussion of the Frank Gehry house, is the way in which subjectivities and knowledges are on the move once we start to think in such terms. Or, to put it differently, if we choose to argue that academic knowledge is primarily a cognitive activity – and that theorising is (or should be) primarily an activity that takes the form of, or produces, words – then in the abstract there is nothing wrong with this. But (this is the point) it does not have to be this way. There are other epistemological and ontological options.

## Angels

Is knowing something which has to talk in as many words about what it is saying?

If so, then it could never be allegorical, since allegory is the art of talking about something other than what is being said, a representational economy of indirection that has within it a hidden mimesis. Allegory seeks, though melancholy, baroque fantasies, a sense of fatalism and sadness to create a link between a hidden vision and its mode of representing that vision in another guise laden with symbolic clues. It seeks to create a mimetic relation through indirection and the fold. In its folded and complex topologies allegory challenges linear forms of representation and regional thought. It seeks, through the indirectness, the shifting play between signifiers and signifieds, to establish non-linear connections between seeing and saying. As Deleuze has argued, the different and not altogether related conditions of seeing and saying create the modalities for thought within any episteme and help to define its conditions of possibility. This is one of the most important insights in Foucault's archaeology



of modernity. Making something sayable, being able to speak its name, to create discourse, first requires that a discursive object be made visible. The form of link between what is visible and what is sayable is specific to an age, an episteme, a function of specific conditions of possibility. The modern project seeks to let the eye speak directly, but in allegory the relation is less direct. Allegory relies on similitude, on a chain of signs where there is no direct correspondence between matching signifier and signified. Instead, there is a mobile play of connections between them.

The attempt to establish an indirect link between seeing and the unsayable is also one of the main themes of Surrealism. This too seeks to make apparent what is hidden or silent to rational thought while keeping the connection veiled. Indirect yet mimetic correspondences, seeing something that others do not, seeing silence in particular and trying to give it a voice, these are the allegorist's main preoccupations. From Foucault's allegories for the impossibility of pure freedom even in the land of utopia/modernity to the Surrealists' lament at the restrictions that reason puts on unreason and the unconscious we find the folded topology of allegorical representational economy, the indirect connection between seeing and saying. We find it too in another theorist fascinated by the vision of the surreal, Walter Benjamin.

Of all twentieth century philosophers and cultural critics, none more than Benjamin have made allegory and its representational economy their own. From his work on the Trauerspiel through his various essays on forms of modernism, the city, to his incomplete arcades project, Benjamin's work, influenced in various measure by Marxism, Jewish mysticism and literary and artistic modernism, is illustrated by his allegorical mode of writing and its redemptive strategy – making visible what is unseen and giving voice to those who are not heard without giving in to the idea of direct correspondences.

Benjamin seeks to extract from the material flux of the world an eternal image, a monad, that comes to represent the world as a whole,

'The idea is a monad – that means briefly: every idea contains the image of the world. The purpose of the representation of the idea is nothing less than an abbreviated outline of this image of the world'.

Through the monad, elsewhere described as 'dialectical images' or 'dialectics at a standstill', Benjamin sought to hold time still so that the materiality and spatiality of human history could be crystallised in a baroque image, often of a ruined past, that would shatter the illusion of progress and offer redemptive glimpses of hope for the future (see Wolin, 1983). For Benjamin, these distilled images are the vehicle for allegory. They can reveal the lost historical memory of the defeated and oppressed, the unrepresented Other and redeem them through visibility. This allegorical monadology creates the conditions of possibility for a redemptive criticism that will free the past and the present and allow them to proceed into the future. So the monad-image arrests the flow of time for a moment. Instants of crisis, events, materials thrown to one side by the rush of history, are brought into view to reveal the mythology of the modern. The moment held in a static image, a figure, reveals a now-time that, when made visible, Benjamin believes, will undermine the idea that time is linear and progressive.

Benjamin was particularly interested in something similar to the 'figural' more recently described by Jean-François Lyotard. Even more, what he writes foreshadows what Michel Serres calls 'blank figures'. These are, undetermined or underdetermined figures whose ambiguity, uncertainty, unfinished or ruined state makes visible not only catastrophic and destructive force of history but also its multiple possible futures. For Serres the blank figures are elements whose multivalence and motility allow them to adopt the shape of their surroundings and become indispensable figures who make all manner of connections and act as a medium for transmitting the connections and the messages they carry. They may be jokers or tricksters, take the form of the winged messenger Hermes, or that other kind of messenger the angel.

Benjamin's allegorical monads are indeed very like Serres' blank figures. We see this most clearly in Benjamin's allegory of the 'angel of history' an interpretation of the picture *Angelus Novus* by Paul Klee. In the ninth thesis of his Theses on the Philosophy of History he says,



'A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.'

Many have commented on this densely argued thesis. We know that Benjamin was trying to restore the ability to see the unfolding of history to historical materialism by refusing to accept the idea that history progressed in linear fashion. He was also trying to show that by holding time still rather than moving with its flow/ideology of progress we see the catastrophic conditions that it has created and will create. So the angel is an allegorical image that allows us to see what is not normally seen and to say what we see rather than remain silent. The power of the figure lies above all in this relation between seeing and saying. The angel is caught in the blast of human history and sees all as catastrophe and ruin. Its eyes are staring in horror at the wreckage that humans do not see. And yet in that very act of seeing the angel is unable to say anything. It is mute, its mouth, like its staring eyes are open. Not only can it not stay because its wings are open and it is propelled backwards into the future, it can say nothing either, it cannot awaken the dead, it is difficult to speak, let alone be heard when one has such a gale blowing in one's face.

The angel is more usually a messenger who speaks because it can see all. Yet this particular angel, a modern angel, is caught between seeing and saying. This blank figure, ambivalent in its intermediary state between genders, between humans and God, between heaven and earth, allows us to see that our world is uncertain and topologically complex rather than certain and linear. It reveals the space of the complexity of relations and their power effects. Through the blank figure of the Angelus Novus, Benjamin passes us an allegorical message, a series of theoretical stories about power, agency, history. These images are images of truth revealed through figures and through materiality. Allegory folds and brings together two points that might not otherwise be connected, a point of seeing and a point of saying. Yet, if we were to draw a line between those points it would not be a direct, straight line but a languid, looping meander. The message of allegory is that two points can only be brought that close together through the fold because until there is a link between what is seen and what is said, connections can only be made indirectly, figuratively, through figures and images.

The message that allegory brings is that we can speak indirectly about materiality, spatiality, temporality and subjectivity in an interchangeable way. In Benjamin the means is through the figure, image or monad.

- In terms of temporality, Benjamin explores the way time is folded into space. Who else could describe Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century? Benjamin's monads are moments of time held still. They are moments of what he called 'now time' that reveal the hidden messianic time of redemptive possibility.
- Time for Benjamin is not only spatialised it is also made material. For Benjamin is a philosopher of the object. In the Parisian arcades, the ruins that represented the hope of past time, he saw those hopes of the past being forgotten as time rushed by, Hausmannised, scattering materiality as wreckage upon wreckage. But through his allegories of modernity and the fate of hope in the face of ambition, he revealed in the object a temporality of eternity being lost. Only the object can know. By holding time still in the forgotten object, the readymade, he was able to reveal knowing the past to the subject.
- Finally, Benjamin's allegories are also distinctly spatial. He writes about the landscape of cities and the memories they contain. He wants those memories to be realised by turning moments of time into spaces. Benjamin's spatiality is one of multiple topological possibilities. It is a spatiality of connection and flaneurie; a labyrinth of little glassed roofed



alleyways – arcades – criss-crossing the Hausmannised city of straight lines and Euclidean geometry.

## Interferences

Does knowing have to tell about what there is in the world, does it have to represent the world? Or can it tell about what there might be in the hope of performing it into being?

Technoscience writer and feminist Donna Haraway takes the latter view. She imagines that eyes are prostheses and that seeing is an active process which (as she puts it) builds in 'translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life'. So vision is never passive. Knowers don't know, or seers see, because of the passive working of lenses and mirrors. Neither are they all-knowing, disembodied and unlocated subjects. There is no objective 'view from nowhere'. So these are the alternatives:

'the view from a body, always a complex, contradictory, structuring and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity. Only the god-trick is forbidden'.

Forbidden, that is, within an epistemology of radical feminism which is going to emphasise the corporeality of knowing, its embodied character – together with its erotics, the pleasures and pains of knowing and its character as a situated and revocable conversation. But it will also insist on its complexity, its heterogeneity, in part for epistemological reasons to do with objectivity:

'So, not perversely, objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment, and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision.'

So objectivity is a matter of situation, the recognition that to know is to be situated and local – what Haraway calls situated knowledge. Partiality is a route, indeed the only possible route, to objectivity. But a feminist way of knowing will also have to do with splitting:

'Splitting, not being, is the privileged image for feminist epistemologies of scientific knowledge. 'Splitting' in this context should be about heterogeneous multiplicities that are simultaneously necessary and incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists. This geometry pertains within and among subjects. The topography of subjectivity is multi-dimensional; so, therefore, is vision. The knowing self is partial in all its guises, never finished, whole, simply there, and original; it is also always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another, to see together without claiming to be another.'

This argument against identity and self-identity is aimed primarily at the monocular vision of the god-trick, at the great Enlightenment trope which is also a trope of malestream social theory; it resists the idea of standing back in the hope of drawing things together into the smoothness of a single framework. So Haraway's argument is that matters are best understood as tensions, stutters or interferences, bits and pieces that depend on one another but fit together badly.

So the point is political too. Indeed, it is primarily political. Because Haraway wants to make a difference. She wants to imagine ways of knowing that interfere with what she refers to as 'the established disorder'. But does this mean that other forms of representation don't make a difference? That they simply represent things the way they are? Her answer is not at all: of course they make a difference. Representational optics interfere too. Their traffic is not, as the god-trick might try to claim, all one way, a displacement through lenses and mirrors from object to subject. This is because their representations are also articulations. But they are, or they seek to be, self-identical articulations. And as they purport to reflect how things are, they also remake them that way. They are performative, performative of the established disorder. As if, in that established disorder, there were indeed one single way of representing how things are. As if, somehow or other, in a prosthetic and heteromorphic world, there were ways of telling it all smoothly, homogeneously. Whereas, in fact, this is not possible. And, no doubt worse, it is a centring politics of homogenisation.



So if lenses and mirrors won't do, are there better optical metaphors? Haraway's science background suggests an alternative:

'Reflection displaces the same elsewhere; diffraction patterns record the passage of difference, interaction, and interference.'

Diffraction arises when two waveforms interfere with one another, for instance in the patterns of light and dark made in the x-ray diffraction of crystals, or in the patches of smooth water and choppy little crests in a tide race when waves cross one another. So this is the point of diffraction: its patterns are not the same as whatever it was that produced them:

'diffracted feminist allegory might have the "inappropriate/d others" emerge from a third birth into an SF world called elsewhere – a place composed of interference patterns. Diffraction does not produce "the same" displaced, as reflection and refraction do. Diffraction is a mapping of interference, not of replication, reflection, or reproduction. A diffraction pattern does not map where differences appear, but rather maps where the effects of difference appear.'

This is why Haraway, unlike Jameson, doesn't shy away from science fiction. It is not just that she doesn't suffer from technophobia. It is also that science fiction is a way of interfering with whatever or however things are now, a place for making myths to interfere with the established disorder. A way of making a difference. Which is the point of her best known metaphor, that of the cyborg. This is a product of the military imagination. In its fictional and not so fictional enactments it typically has superhuman powers of a gendered and destructive kind. But Haraway wants to interfere with this monster, to make it differently. She wants to redeem it. She wants to use it as a metaphor for the performance of split vision, for heterogeneous but necessary multiplicity. For the fractionality of that which is separate but joined. For the interference of prosthesis:

'A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important social construction, a world-changing fiction. ... The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women's experience in the late twentieth century. This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.'

So Haraway is telling stories of cyborgs – or cyborg-like stories that do not fit together comfortably. Those stories are about the heterogeneous machinic/fleshy places of knowing. But they are also about myths that, in being made and told, start to become realities in the interference between what is and what might be. For though there is much that is important about Haraway's epistemology and ontology, it is perhaps this that we should emphasise: that once the partialities of cyborg vision are taken seriously, the distinction between what is and what might be are blurred: 'the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.' And it is a performative political duty – but also a pleasure – for feminists to make myths and perform them in order to generate interferences which work upon the established disorder. Which help to remake it.

## **Representational Choices**

Allegory is the art of talking, writing, telling, performing, something other than what it is talking, writing, telling, or performing while at the same time trying to say something about that Other. It is the art of displacement. It is the art of indirection. It is the art of fracture or of repression. It is the art of mythmaking. It privileges connotation and demotes denotation. It works through similitude, and through a hidden mimetic faculty. Through indirection and diffraction it tries to establish, to make visible a relation between seeing and saying that otherwise remain unconnected and unvoiced.

Here is our main proposition. Contemporary sociology is fairly insensitive to the art of allegory. It has relatively little sense of the allegorical or representational possibilities unfolded by performing or writing in ways that are about something other than what they appear to be. This also means most writing in sociology defines the materialities, the spatialities and temporalities of the world in ways that are relatively similar. The economies of representation



of sociology are relatively homogeneous. Yes, there is a world. It is a singular world. It is there. It may be described. Technical limits aside, narratives about the populations of the world, their relations, may be recounted in words or other descriptive symbolic forms. This means that it is possible to tell general, albeit revisable, stories. And, as a part of this, it is possible to imagine a sociologically privileged place, a place from which it is possible to see more. More and better. Even if provisionally and modestly.

It would take more space than we here have to develop this point in relation to specific variants of sociological theory. If we were to do so we would need, for instance, to look at the dominant modes of theorising and empirical work, and show that these perform a literal version of description, that they assume a relative degree of conformability in the modern world and its processes, and that they assume that it is indeed, possible, to catch what is most important about those processes in a single and coherent description. None of this can we do here. However, what we can do is to suggest that it does not have to be that way: that what may appear to be general descriptions of the processes of the world are also rather specific. That even representations which claim generality also embody particular (local) epistemological and ontological assumptions about the nature of the world, about what there is in it, and how it is possible to know of it. But that these are assumptions that foreclose other representational possibilities – and in so doing set limits to the conditions of possibility for sociology.

We have pressed this position in two main ways. First, we have attended to the materialities of knowing. In the end, whatever the other materials along the way, sociology predominantly tells its stories in the form of words. As we earlier noted, this paper is no exception. To that extent it says one thing while performing another. But this is that point: that there are indeed other modalities, for instance the kinds of modalities which we have visited above. The erotics of a-house-and-a-body, may represent the world. They too may 'tell' a sociological story. As, for that matter, may a pattern sensed out of the corner of the eye. Or a work of art. Or a science fiction story. For if it is human subjects – and their paperwork and their methods – that are said to know in sociology, then this is not the case in parts of technoscience studies, cultural studies, or feminism. Other and heterogeneous material assemblages may have knowledge. For instance cyborgs. Or angels. And if we choose, in sociological theory, to remain committed to humans and their words, then it is important to understand that this choice sets limits to the conditions of possibility by endorsing and performing a specific and indeed restrictive economy of representation.

Second, we have attended to homogenisation and the desire for intellectual unity. Allegorists are not relativists. For them the world is real enough, in the sense that it has effects that are experienced as real. It is embodied and performed in complex and irreducible material-semiotic condensations, and it is as obdurate as hell. It is most certainly not that case that anything goes. But – and this is crucial – neither is it the case that the obduracy of the world implies that it can be reduced to homogeneity or simplicity. We repeat the quote at the beginning of this article:

'Single vision produces worse illusions than double vision or many-headed monsters.'

So this is both an epistemological and an ontological commitment. Donna Haraway's phrase 'the established disorder' catches the point. Yes, the disorder is 'established'. It is real enough. But, and this is the subtlety, it is also disorderly. Which means that it is not single but multiple or – more probably – prosthetic or fractional. The world, in this ontology, is more than one but less than many, an idea whose implications are difficult to grasp because they tend to take us beyond the current conditions of possibility which assume, by contrast, that what there is can be grasped in the illusions of single vision.

What has this to do with allegory? The answer is that if the world is homogeneous, then it is possible to represent it in a correspondingly homogeneous manner. Under these circumstances allegory loses its importance because there is no need to talk indirectly. Indeed there would be no need to speak at all. We could simply let the all-seeing eye take everything in. Instead it becomes an optional extra, a literary or performative flourish: there is simply no need to talk about one thing by talking about something else. Whatever it is one wants to talk about may indeed be talked about in as many words. And any problems of



translation between what is described, the object, and the description, become technical in form.

But if the world is heterogeneous these conditions no longer prevail. Instead there are irreducibilities. As a contemporary and radical allegorist, Donna Haraway knows that between singularity and multiplicity there is fractionality. That there is(are) world(s) that are more than one and less than many. This isn't quite the way she puts it – though it is quite close to the language used by anthropologist Marilyn Strathern. However, if the world is both a whole and also made of parts that are heterogeneous and irreducible to one another, if it is a world of established disorder, then this cannot be simply told. To tell of it at all requires indirect as well as direct speech. It requires a cyborg-like form of talking or performing in which different representational parts depend upon but are irreducible to one another. And (this is the radical and performative twist) it also requires the interferences that she builds between whatever is and whatever might be. It requires those interferences in order to make a difference.

And this the reason we have written the present – admitted unallegorical – paper. It is the hope that it might make a difference to the ways in which stories are told in sociology. For we're suggesting that the discipline performs, predominantly and by preference, a direct and non-allegorical economy of representation. Which means that it embeds and performs a series of strong ontological and epistemological assumptions, assumptions which restrict its options. It is not our argument that those conditions of possibility are unreasonable. The direct economy of representation of sociology is, to be sure, one that carries a strong ontological and epistemological warrant. But – and this is our point – as it performs that warrant it also limits itself and rules other more indirect sociologies out of order. And we would like to argue – as indeed we have, less directly and more allegorically in other contexts – that there is room for the possibilities entertained and performed in the indirections of allegory.

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