

The Normalization of Culture

Diego Sztulwark

Bright flagship stores that you call “city”

1.

Culture is the banal. There is nothing less frivolous, more serious or dire than to begin with the current reality that criticism seems to have been defeated from the start, as if it had already done everything it is capable of. The banal goes straight to the point: it provides precise replies to thorny problems. It is not mistaken for the ephemeral or the superficial, for the trends or styles of consumerism. The function of the banal is more organic and less trivial: it positions itself in what is permanent and structural in the production of the ephemeral and the superficial. It imposes and ensures its victory. It makes fashion rotate and consumerism consume us in its circularity, making perfectly sure that the spinning does not tend to rupture. The banal is not change or incessant flow, but that which governs mutations and regulates flux.

The banal is not the inclusion of the plebeian in consumerism, but the inability to exceed the very coordinates of production. It is not the distribution of wealth, but the codes of compatibility that life must align with so that consumerism actually takes place. The banal is not businessness as such, but the fact that the current form of business continues to reproduce—and to do so endlessly—an essential asymmetry in which economic dispossession disposes of people to be recruited by those who, due to their access to capital, design projects and set off a mechanism of social exploitation. The banal is indivisibly bound to twofold dispossession, that is, dispossession both economic and desiring in nature.

The Cultural is the reduction of all understanding of the social tie to the slogan “faith, surveillance, and entrepreneurship.” Not much else. Celebrity, willpower, and transparency. “Team”work, positivity, and proper behavior. Friendliness, permanent availability, and communication. Overwhelming transmission. Plurality at the service of a suffocating logic of order. A taming is at play in which the depths of the government of life ensue more and more through the creation of markets freed of any possible of community regulation.

Redundant and Machine-like, its devices facilitate obedience and make individual passions consistent with the *uberized* social. It renders the disconnected planes of existence a coherent whole by means of a concentric axis that lays existence, the central and the peripheral, over a single biopolitical diagram.

The banal is not compulsive proliferation or the uncontainable disruption of the passing or the snob, but a way of making city according to strict aesthetic parameters and to rigid security protocols. The triumph of *neighborocity*, of a conservative model of success by adapting prefabricated models. An enjambment of resonances that brings all desire together as desire for order, regardless of social class.

The productivist machine rules in a more and more abstract fashion. Bankarization, digitalization, and algorithms. Complexity itself. Transnational

laboratories, stochastic models of financial calculation, sophisticated marketing and design centers, the stereotypization of friendliness according to the parameters of coaching, opinion polling and market research, and customer service. The programmed world sets off obedience so absolute and voluntary that it could be said to be struggled for as if it were freedom itself.

2.

It was in December 2001 that the last large-scale countercultural act took place among us, when crowds took to the street with no greater symbolic articulation than the decision to bring barbarism to a halt. Televisions, left on, spoke only to the walls of empty homes. The abduction of barbarianism is lost when culture negativizes crisis—and that negativization is the essence of the Cultural, of the management merger of the apparatuses of communicational and financial techno-capitalism (the world of logistics).

The Cultural is anti-insurrectionary: it is nothing without the organizational force it deploys, the violence on which judicial order is based and that normalizes exception and creates sovereignty. Only the desire for order legitimizes Order, peripheralizing, pathologizing, criminalizing subjectivities who know what do with crisis. But it offers a promise as well: each and every one is invited to seek in neoliberal micro-policies a subjective gain (the pleasure of freedom, of consumerism, of security) whose abstract and general effect is the extreme dissociation and narcissism of the social networks and their use. A generalized racism that is nothing if not the underside of uselessness at sensible coordination. A fear of the real other particularly present in a pervasive progressive pedagogy.

The Cultural is, for that very reason, the deceitful, a patriarchal racialization constituted solely from proper manners. Visceral rejection of any vitality in crisis, of all nocturnal or borderline existence.

3.

There is a subtle but critical difference between seeing what must be seen and making visible the invisible forces that modify us. The Cultural lives on in the prohibition of access to awareness of those forces. Its logic is the virtual conjunction of everything that happens with no censorship: the integration of all fragments such that the real of each thing is left out. You're part of everything.

Consecrated insensitivity. Division, disconnect, ignorance of the world as forces. Any attempt to question genuinely, to take action or to resist, is—in the Cultural—awash in a sticky powerlessness.

Crisis, access to the forces that pressure bodies, gives rise—in, for instance, Bacon's painting—to the scream, no matter how frustrating awareness of the loneliness that that scream seems to produce in the short term. That fragility inevitably goes with body-to-body confrontation with those forces that hint at different possibilities. Rupture, flight, crisis: "The struggle with the shadow is the only real struggle."

Translation: Jane Brodie