

## THE MIRRORS OF NARCISSUS. UN-NATURAL CONSTRAINTS<sup>1</sup>

Massimo Filippi

All this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, would help her give birth to the creations that now lie dormant in her womb.

Benjamin (1940: 394)

### **1. The dichotomy between nature and culture is the extension of the one between human and animal, however in another form<sup>2</sup>**

The nature/culture dichotomy is arguably the most fundamental one amongst the antinomic and hierarchizing dualities of Western metaphysics. It is clear that ‘culture’ corresponds to ‘Man’ and ‘nature’ to ‘Animal’. Thus, the nature/culture opposition is another clever gimmick to effectively occult the inconceivable pile of corpses that every day builds up to the sky, like a storm, behind Man’s back.

### **2. Nature/culture dichotomy is a Western Christian invention<sup>3</sup>**

The nature/culture dichotomy is not an anthropological invariant, but rather an historical product of the European tradition. For instance, Amerindian, Chinese and Mesoamerican cultures have never foreseen the existence of ‘Man’ both outsider and superior to nature, so that it can manipulate the existent, making it bleed in its most intimate folds. The separation has not always been as clear-cut as it is today, even in our culture: before the Renaissance, before the industrial revolution, before the arise of the modern techno-scientific business and before the imperative rhythm of the capital, the

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<sup>1</sup> English translation by Irene Sottile and Francesco Di Maio. The Italian *in-natura* recalls both the sense of *contre nature* and that of being inside nature itself. Every occurrence of this neologism is to be understood this way (Translator’s note).

<sup>2</sup> ‘Throughout European history the idea of the human being has been expressed in contradistinction to the animal. The latter’s lack of reason is the proof of human dignity. So insistently and unanimously has this antithesis been recited [...], that few other ideas are so fundamental to Western anthropology. [...] Humans possess reason, which pitilessly follows its path; the animals from which they draw their bloody conclusions have only unreasoning terror, the impulse to take flight on a path which is cut off’ (Horkheimer and Adorno [1947] 2002: 203-4).

<sup>3</sup> ‘[A] Great Divide, the same gesture of exclusion that made the human species the biological analogue of the anthropological West, confusing all the other species and peoples in a common, privative alterity. [...] [N]onhumans, as we know (but how in the devil do we know it?), are just “poor in world” (not even a lark...). As for non-Occidental humans, something quietly leads us to suspect that where the world is concerned, they end up reduced to its smallest part [...]. [T]he millionaires, accumulators, and configurers of worlds. Western metaphysics is truly the *fons et origo* of every colonialism’ (Viveiros De Castro 2014: 44).

line between what was considered culture and nature was much more blurry than how sharp it was to become afterwards. Actually, only Western Christian people can lose nature; others cannot simply because, being embedded in nature itself, they never could own it. Thinking that there is a completely stranger nature outside Man - it does not matter if this division is positive or negative - is both a speciesist and colonial gesture.

### **3. Overturning the culture/nature dichotomy does not prevent the arrogance of human imperialism<sup>4</sup>**

Willingly or not, the uncritical repetition of this antithesis cannot help but ensure the executive exclusion and the excremental inclusion of the Animal by the Man. Overturning the axiology of this contraposition ('Nature first!') does not change the function of the sectioning machine that produces it, which, at the same time, feeds on the contraposition itself: Man is the animal able to think about nature. Thus, the Animal becomes a fixed entity (blocked, imprisoned), devoid of history. The Man is free and can free himself from the chains of his species, but the Animal remains in any case a mediocre specimen owned by his (or her?) own species. Despite the increasing quantity of empirical evidences endorsing the existence of non-human cultures, the endemic gibberish of the return to nature seizes the last remaining form of culture from the Animal (the one that even anthropocentrism cannot deny any longer). As always, nature speaks the language of the most obscure conservatism. Changing the order of the factors ('Nature is good; culture is bad') does not change the existing state of things. Rather, it emphasizes it with more Force-of-Law.

### **4. The invention of nature is functional to the preservation of the hegemonic culture<sup>5</sup>**

Within our tradition, we think of nature as a norm to which society should adjust (nature, neutral and impartial, is hierarchical, white, heterosexual, cisgender, able, etc.) or as a savage bestiality to tame (as a regressive whole of instincts, passions, violence, madness, infections, epidemics, etc. opposing the calculative inferences of reason). Contradictory at first glance, this ambiguity is actually the expression of the most powerful naturalizing and normative ideology, that aims at justifying (at making believable) and at maintaining active those devices of dismemberment which regulate the social framework based on irredeemable guilt and unsolvable debt. It is natural that things are this way and it cannot be otherwise (naturalization and production of the unnatural); This being the

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<sup>4</sup> '[L]ove of nature can so easily be conciliated with the primacy of utility [...] that it has been the most common [...] means of compensating for utilitarian societies. There is obviously nothing less dangerous, less subversive, or even less wild than the wildness of rocks' (Bataille 2012: 56).

<sup>5</sup> 'There is no nature, only effects of nature: denaturation or naturalization. Nature, the meaning of nature, is reconstituted after the fact on the basis of a simulacrum [...] that it is thought to cause. [...] [It] is a nature that does not so much give as lend. And that lends more than it gives. It *extends credit*' (Derrida 1992: 170). 'There is no nature, only effects of nature: denaturation or naturalization. Nature, the meaning of nature, is reconstituted after the fact on the basis of a simulacrum [...] that it is thought to cause. [...] [It] is a nature that does not so much give as lend. And that lends more than it gives. It *extends credit*' (Derrida 1992: 170).

Truth, both those who do not answer for it and those who do not want to adapt to it must be drawn back to reason (normalization and production of the anormal). Nature is the shining hero that hides and validates the obscenity of the Law. This is Narcissus' mirror, but one made of smoke.

### **5. Nature is the backlash of a culture grounded on the culture/nature dichotomy<sup>6</sup>**

Nature comes to life, in the form of a simulacrum, as the dichotomous culture gains hegemony. It is the result of a cultural cut, aiming at the multiplication of the usefulness power and of the operational efficiency inherent to the gear wheel of (proto) capitalism. The alternatives are: being inside of nature (as living creatures) and thus not theorizing it, or putting us outside/over it, and thus thinking it as a residue/gap (cadaverous). Nature as in the culture/nature dichotomy - in every variant - is the industrial byproduct of the work of cultural re-interpretation, directed at the annihilation of the present, endorsing a never existing past or a future exclusively conceived as progress. Naturally, this phantasmatic past and this fantastic future are both normative and normalized. Ruthless illusions.

### **6. The line between culture and nature is undefinable<sup>7</sup>**

Even when the confrontation between culture and nature goes sour, it is never possible to clearly tell them apart and draw the alleged line of division. How much of natural (or cultural) is left in a wood when it is crossed by cadastral lines and geographical borders? How much of natural (or cultural) is left in a sky sailed by electromagnetic waves and contrails? How much of natural (or cultural) is left in aqueducts or oceanic water soaked as they are in plastic microparticles? How much of natural (or cultural) is left in the air, filled with the cries of the oppressed and with the exhalations of the factory? How much of natural (or cultural) is left in a domesticated animal, an engineered rat or a wild boy? If it is always been so difficult to draw the line between culture and nature, it is even more so now than ever. The immense ecological crisis that rapidly approaches us has turned the Earth into a moral and political actor, crucial in the assessment of the destiny regarding the ways of life and that of the 'human' quest towards automatic processes resistant to every form of cultural control. The break-in of the Earth in the World of Man states that natural history is not a euphemism, nor a simple geologist's and geographer's idiom. Are storms, floods, tornados, droughts natural phenomena or byproducts of a criminal cultural system?

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<sup>6</sup> 'One should bear in mind here the central tension in the Christian notion of the Fall: conceived as a "regression" to the natural state of enslavement to the passions, it is *stricto sensu* identical with the dimension *from which* we fall, i.e., it is the very movement of the Fall that creates, or opens up, what is lost in it' (Žižek 2014: 128-9).

<sup>7</sup> 'At first sight it is not difficult tell apart what is nature from what is culture [...]. However, the distinction is not always such easy. On my walk [in a wood] I follow alongside an hedge, made of spontaneous flora, of hawthorn, of hazel trees, of snowy mespilus, of dog roses. I can say that the bush is a natural one [...], but this bush has been fixed up, trimmed, looked after by humans and it is there to separate two lawns according to the land registry border [...]. Thus, it's the product of a technical activity, meaning of a cultural one. It even has a legal function, meaning a cultural one. Most objects that belong to our environment, including ourselves, find themselves in a intermediate position, being at the same time natural and cultural' (Descola 2010: 7-8).

## 7. Behind the border between culture and nature, reality shows itself to be multiple<sup>8</sup>

Once taken off from the mainland of Man, the World turns into worlds and the culture/nature dichotomy dissolves. Outside of a grimly anthropocentric perspective, it is difficult to deny that other animals inhabit the world culturally. A wood, a hedge, a vase, a table or a lamp are different 'things' for a bird, for a squirrel, for a fly, for a mouse, for a pig, for a mint or for a moth. These various point of bodily 'view' of a bird, of a squirrel, of a fly, of a mouse, of a pig, of a mint or of a moth read, in different ways although always cultural, what our tradition had reduced to one dimensional objects. Is it truly still impossible to recognize the cultural processes that take place above, below and beyond our visual spectrum? On a cosmological, galactic, planetary level? On a subatomic, molecular, and cellular level? On an informatic, inorganic, machinic level? In overwhelmingly scented trails, in the silence of ultrasound, in the clanging tactility of bodies that softly touch with nails, hairs, pelvises, tears, teeth, droolings, tongues, sweat, liquors? This is not cultural relativism at its finest; it's a materialistic affirmation of the blazing power of the inhabiting, it's multi-realism. There isn't a single reality to be manipulated nor sacralized, but an infinity of realities that exists. The real is fragmented. As fragmented as the bodies crossing, forming, deforming and reforming it, as they form, deform and reform themselves.

## 8. Not 'All is culture' nor 'All is nature'<sup>9</sup>

To run away from the wreckage of the complete culturalization, or seemingly, of the complete naturalization is to affirm the plane of immanence where 'All becoming-culture and all-becoming nature'. It is to search for ways to exchange fixity and fixedness, owners and owing the categories and classification, for excessive and exceeding vibrancy of bodily desires. From the sensefulness of the sense to the senselessness of senses. From the anthropological state of exception to the subversive exceptionality of existences. From ontology to politics.

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<sup>8</sup> 'I think that today we are at least far away from the ridiculous immodesty of decreeing from our angle that perspectives are *permitted* only from this angle. Rather, the world has once again become infinite to us: insofar as we cannot reject the possibility *that it includes infinite interpretations*. Once again the great shudder seizes us' (Nietzsche [1882, 1887<sup>2</sup>] 2001: 239-40).

<sup>9</sup> 'Bands, human or animal, proliferate by contagion, epidemics [...]. Unnatural participations or nuptials are the true Nature spanning the kingdoms of nature [...]. [C]ontagion, epidemic, involves terms that are entirely heterogeneous: for example, a human being, an animal, and a bacterium, a virus, a molecule, a microorganism. Or in the case of the truffle, a tree, a fly, and a pig. These combinations are neither genetic nor structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations. That is the only way Nature operates - against itself' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 241-2).

### 9. Antispecism is un-natural (or it is not)<sup>10</sup>

The question antispecism should ask itself is not 'What is nature?' nor 'What is culture?', but rather 'How does it work and how can it be disassembled the cultural naturalized *dispositives* of dismembering denaturation, hiding behind those dichotomous terms?' Antispecism is about some other opposition; one, however, that should think and act itself as a terminal opposition, whose *dispositif* is to cancel itself, once given up the contemporary oppositional structures. An opposition that goes against itself. Antispecism is an amplifier of mysterious chills, a great shiver of pleasure, down the sensual haecceities; it is the acceptance of becoming unnatural, going through un-natural constraints, it is the acceptance of becoming-un-natural through those constraints, it is the immersion/emergence in/of a gaping world of life, of fractures, of cracks and gaps into the Real.

### 10. Un-nature is a mystery<sup>11</sup>

Sensual haecceities are not inside nor outside nature, not inside nor outside culture. Not across nor on the same side. They will not be saved nor in the progressive future of the techno-scientific business, nor in the irenic past of some garden of Eden. They won't be saved, because here and now they are unsalvageable, because ex-isting, they in-sist in the powerful fragility of a generation that does not cease to come. Because they already are forced to the grace of the impersonal. Because they are in between and within, lost in sensual rhizomes of senselessness of matter running away. To run away from the stillness of capital is to bankrupt the identity of the unceasing delay that brings together, breaking apart. It is to fall. It is to kill oneself out, inside the plane of immanence. This is the picture of the mystery. The one of un-nature that - as any mystery worth its salt - cannot be changed at will nor can be venerated as (that which has) been. The mystery is that which cannot be seen and that exists as unknowable. The mystery is the invisible line between culture and nature, with cultures and natures. Between bodies and within them.

We came out of the shadows, we had no glory and we had no rights, and that is why we are beginning to speak and to tell of our history.

Foucault (2003: 70)

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<sup>10</sup> 'Now if you consider the vase from the point of view I first proposed, as an object made to represent the existence of the emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing, this emptiness as represented in the representation presents itself as a *nihil*, as nothing. And that is why the potter, just like you to whom I am speaking, creates the vase with his hand around this emptiness, creates it, just like the mythical creator, *ex nihilo*, starting with a hole' (Lacan 1992: 121).

<sup>11</sup> 'The between-bodies is their images' taking-place. The images are not likenesses, still less phantoms or fantasms. It's how bodies are offered to one another, it's being born unto the world, the setting on edge, the setting into glory of limit and radiance. A body is an image offered to other bodies, a whole corpus of images stretched from body to body, local colors and shadows, fragments, grains, areolas, lunules, nails, hairs, tendons, skulls, ribs, pelvises, bellies, meatuses, foams, tears, teeth, droolings, slits, blocks, tongues, sweat, liquors, veins, pains, and joys...' (Nancy 2008: 121).

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