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Estranging the loop

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Loops make a fitful, but not insignificant appearance in Amin Samman's *History in Financial Times*. Loops must, to be effective, come with a shock. Oscar Wilde's related formula, "Nature imitates art", has faded, by now, into banality. The domestication of the term 'feedback loop', endowed with the appropriate pseudo-scientificity, has made it so self-evident as to stifle any possible philosophical content. The expression 'always already' – dense with temporal theory – has long since lost its Althusserian overtones and passed into everyday syntax.

Meanwhile, phrases like 'linear history', which were never much more than polemic strawmen in the first place, have flattened the terrain and encouraged the increasingly hectic traffic of all kinds of science-fictional conceptual and linguistic vehicles.

Visual familiarity plays its part; and the recumbent numeral that once meant infinity is now itself, in its rebirth as the Moebius strip, beginning to gather dust in the museum of post-modern temporalities.

The loop has its legendary, if not always acknowledged, ancestors. The James-Lange theory of emotion, for example, always seemed to put the cart before the horse by unsettling the notion of expression and attributing to our physiological reactions the origins of the psychic states that name them.

But it was surely Freud, in his more scientific period, who devised the first and most dramatic picture of what we would now call a loop. *Nachträglichkeit*, indeed, a powerful word, for which retroactivity seems little more than scientistic jargon, postulated a situation in which the child under three confronts a traumatic situation which will not become a psychotic experience until puberty, when the body is mature enough to receive it. Maybe there is a literary analogy in Proustian time, in which a present never really happens until it happens a second time (in writing).

At any rate, this is the first full-blown intimation of the loop in all its temporal splendor: an effect which precedes its cause (or in some sense may be said to have caused it). Paradoxes, however, remain dead ends until they are acknowledged as antinomies, and interrogated for their historical circumstances, their emergence as philosophical symptoms. The Althusserian *toujours-déjà* must be grasped as the expression of a collective semantic need, on the order of a vitamin deficiency: which, indeed, other contemporary theoretical efforts also attempt to fill. Foucauldian genealogy, or the more 'obscure' Deleuzian dark precursor (as well as his

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collection of filmic oddities in the *Time-Image*), testify to the recognition of the very real theoretical need. Derrida, however, who does not invent in that fashion (except for neologisms), hit, with unerring flair, on the 'trace' as the crucial neuralgic zone, the philosophical equivalent of the mysteries of photography, which Derrida and Barthes associated with death, but in which past and present are entangled in an untheorizable way, with disastrous results for both temporal concepts.

Yet reification by language is no less revealing and perhaps, as we inveterately associate our concepts with words, an historically more navigable path to follow. The trajectory of the word crisis, for example, is indeed an event in its own right, capable of producing new events fully as much as panics. Readers of Stendhal will not forget the famous moment in which Count Mosca, gazing after the carriage that bears the Duchess and Fabrice away from him into the distance, thinks to himself: "If the word love comes up between them, I am lost!"

The word is a name which unifies random data, producing a new object at the same time the latter is in objective emergence. The Flash Crash may seem realer than its name, but without a word for it, it would remain a painful and merely measurable period of clock time. If there are no real loops outside of Science Fiction and time travel, high-frequency trading and its accompanying ideology of 'post-humanism' get as close to it as we can imagine.

It is not a question of finding new words but of inventing new categories, and indeed, of whether it is possible to do so. Are we locked into the category of causality by human nature, or would it be possible to invent a new one to give conceptuality to what, in the form of the loop, seems for the moment to be mere figural malaise? Or do these old, wellnigh Aristotelian categories mark the limits of the human mind, as Kant thought and tried to show? Do categories evolve with time and history, like the senses? If so, their slow geological transformation would seem to be a process individual humans are poorly placed to observe with the naked eye. Loops are then a kind of figural leapfrog by which we try to imagine what thinking that future concept, or indeed a future category as such, would feel like. The history of the word revolution is in that sense not much different from that of crisis.

Perhaps one may at least say this, that something has happened to human time. The present, the famous living present, seems to have expanded its force-field to the point at which it has absorbed its own past and future into itself and reduced them to echoes or images. Owing to its resultant incapacity to project a credible future, this new swollen present is reduced to imagining itself as the cause of its own past. But this feat is a consolation prize, and it comes at the price of an inability to produce even the thought of the new or of real change.

References

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