

# The Place of Metaphor in a Metonymic World: Of Homi Bhabha's De-realizing Politics and Other Academic Events

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On the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 2001, Homi Bhabha delivered a lecture entitled "Democracy De-realized". The postcolonial theorist's audience was gathered in a Berlin auditorium for the inauguration of Documenta 11, Platform 1: *Democracy Unrealized*.<sup>1</sup> However, Bhabha was unable to meet his audience. Due to the complications following September 11<sup>th</sup>, it was impossible for the lecturer to leave the United States. To make amends, his talk was video-projected live from Cambridge, Massachusetts; a follow-up discussion was also facilitated through live video. To substitute for Bhabha's physical presence, German philosopher Horst Bredekamp was called in at the last minute: not to present a paper himself, but merely to occupy a place in the rather empty stage that extended before the audience. While not being exactly a panelist, Bredekamp wasn't exactly just another member of the audience. He was expected to be the first to pose Bhabha a question and to do so in an extended manner.

When his turn to speak arrived, Bredekamp was centrally critical of the metaphor with which Bhabha had

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<sup>1</sup> Documenta, a series of contemporary art exhibitions and associated conferences, held its 11<sup>th</sup> series of openings and discussions in 2001-2002; discussions were grouped into a series of different thematic platforms.

ended his own speech. In that metaphor, Bhabha had taken the image of the fallen Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre to deploy the image of what he termed “the Unbuilt”. In Bhabha’s words:

The times and places in which we live confront our sense of Progress with the image of the Unbuilt. The Unbuilt is not a place you can reach with a ladder...The rubble and debris that survive carry the memories of other fallen towers, Babel for instance, and lessons of endless ladders that suddenly collapse beneath our feet. We have no choice but to place, in full view of our buildings, the vision of the Unbuilt – the foundation of *possible* buildings... other alternative worlds. (2002: 363-4) <sup>2</sup>

Relying on Walter Benjamin and Karl Smichdt, Bredekamp accuses Bhabha of underestimating the psychological disaster associated to the image of the fallen towers and points to the inevitable failure of the utopian image Bhabha presents. Furthermore, Bredekamp subtly indicates that Bhabha’s metaphor reduces the towers to a sign of democracy and, in so doing, excludes both their historical occurrence and the more complex and complicit meanings that, as a sign, the twin towers produce. Bredekamp’s whole argument revolves around what he describes as the much more powerful image of the second tower falling. While the falling of the first tower could be read as an accident, the second tower marked what was happening as a momentous historical event.

Bhabha, listening throughout from the other side of the screen, is notably affected. In his defence, he builds an extensive argument. Somewhere, in the middle of that speech, Bhabha interrupts himself and breaks into a personal narrative. Although thematically relevant, Bhabha’s story is intrusive and not discursively linked to the rest of his

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<sup>2</sup> Page references are provided whenever possible for the lectures quoted in this paper. When a section has been edited from the published manuscript, time references will be given. Here and throughout, all emphases in text, unless indicated otherwise.

arguments. Bhabha is agitated, his voice pitch is higher than usual, his hand movements increase and he runs over his words as he pronounces the following:

I rushed out of my house to have a key made, to have a key to my new home copied in a shop. And there were these people standing there, and as I walked in they were talking about this narrative. I thought they were discussing a film that they had just seen on the ever-present television in hardware stores. So I said "Sorry, what are you talking about? Has something *happened*?" and they said "What do you *mean* 'has something happened?'" At which point I've no memory of... except of the fact that I ran all the way home and I turned on the television and I couldn't believe... so I don't... I've no memory of how I came to. And then I saw the second tower come down. (2001b: min.13:30)

Let me imagine, for a moment, Bhabha's intrusive narrative as a symptom. That is to say, let me read this short story Bhabha has told as a metaphor of the event taking place in the Berlin auditorium and its communicating screen.

In Bhabha's story, neither him nor the people at the hardware store ever discuss *what* has happened, the important thing is that something has indeed happened: an event has taken place. Phenomenological reality has been critically intervened and the narrated Bhabha is overwhelmed by the fact. He rushes home at the moment he hears that something, whatever that something may be, has actually occurred. He arrives home in time to see the second tower fall down, that same second tower which Bredekamp has just signified as the sign of the *event* as such, the image that inscribes the attack on the towers as a major historical occurrence. The narrated Bhabha, as a symptom irrupting in the theorist's answer to Bredekamp, is responding on behalf of his narrator: 'I am not underestimating the real dimension of the event, I was present at the moment of the second tower, I was present at the moment of the historical event'. Bhabha insists, twice, that he even lost his memory because of it, that is to say, that his

capacity to re-present reality was cancelled-out by the overwhelming *presence* of the event. But the Bhabha in the story does not rush off to the World Trade Center, he rushes home to his television set. The narrator is critical of “the ever-present television in hardware stores” and contrasts his realization of the fact that something had actually happened, with his initial belief that the people he met were “talking about some *narrative*”. Nonetheless, his lived experience is still centrally determined by the mediation of his own T.V. set. Thus, Bhabha, the symptom, answers Bredekamp once more: ‘I *am* aware of the phenomenological dimension of the event, but that dimension is always already mediated by the symbolic’.

Symptoms irrupt when something that requires expression finds no other outlet. In the context of the conference, Bredekamp’s way of approaching Bhabha is completely unexpected. The chair and the conference’s director have treated the postcolonial critic with great deference. Bhabha’s way of speaking, here and elsewhere, is extremely redundant in its politeness and constantly seeks to avoid confrontation. To such a point that the author begins his retort by agreeing with Bredekamp and then adds the phrase “on the other hand”, but he immediately corrects himself by saying “no, there is no ‘other hand’, I applaud you with both hands” (2001b: min.11:30). Furthermore, the criticism Bredekamp has confronted Bhabha with is symptomatic of the major and most insistent accusation posed on the postcolonial critic in written form: that he privileges the sign over lived reality to an unsustainable extent.

But something else is going on in that auditorium. In the context of the Berlin conference room, Bhabha himself is reduced to a sign on the screen. The mild laughter of the people at the auditorium, whenever technical mediations produce a lack of coordination between Bhabha and Bredekamp or between Bhabha and the chair, underline this fact. It is no longer just that Bhabha is being accused of

privileging the sign, but that he has been himself turned into one. He is functioning as the metaphor of himself as a sign. The bodily Bhabha is literally displaced and a sign of Bhabha, the sign-man, stands in his place.

But the image on the screen is not the only thing standing in for Bhabha's absence. Bhabha's physical substitute: Bredekamp is literally occupying the *place* of the former. In this way, Bredekamp is not only accusing Bhabha of disregarding the importance of the phenomenological dimension of reality, but he is also the embodiment of Bhabha's impossibility to access that realm. Bredekamp becomes a metaphor of the dimension Bhabha, once and again, desires or is desired to access but, once and again, fails to access.

#### **16<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Zurich, 1949**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, 1949, one of the participants at the International Congress of Psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan, delivered a paper that was to become a classic: "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience". In it, the French theorist posed that the subject is constituted in terms of his desire.<sup>3</sup> This desire marks his own (im)possibility, because fulfilling that desire would require him to occupy the *place* of the other, which is, by the laws of time and space, impossible.

The core metaphor around which the lecture is woven is that of a child seeing himself in the mirror, for the first time. The child identifies with his own reflection. Given that this identification involves a displacement, a projection of the self onto the outward, spatial dimension, this encounter marks the subject's subsequent and lifelong identification of the self in terms of the Other.

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<sup>3</sup> I reproduce Lacan's use of the generic masculine.

The reflection that the child beholds in the mirror is a complete, autonomous whole. This image clashes with the child's proprioception in the present, because he is not yet self-sufficient. His image also clashes with the child's experience of himself prior to the mirror encounter. Facing the mirror, the infant's previously undifferentiated, multi-sensory relation with otherness is now recalled as a threat of fragmentation. Thus, identification is always already structured around the Other as threat of self-disintegration and around desire for the Other. This desire is the desire to become that autonomous whole that the image before him promises and, also, a desire to return to a state of undifferentiated unity with otherness.

In this way, "The Mirror Stage" describes the infant's entry into the realm of the Imaginary. The realm of the Imaginary is where Lacan accounts for a primary sense of self as distinct from otherness, the first step in the constitution of subject-hood. But, for Lacan, the subject is only fully constituted in the realm of the Symbolic. The Symbolic is the space of language in which the subject is inscribed. I will now turn to the realm of the Symbolic, in order to account for the importance of occupying the *place* of the Other, whenever symptom or its literary counterpart – metaphor – are concerned.<sup>4</sup> I will do so by revisiting another of Lacan's lectures which, as the psychoanalyst himself recalls "took place on 9 May, 1957, in the *Amphithéâtre Descartes* of the Sorbonne and the discussion was continued afterwards over drinks" (1958: 738).

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<sup>4</sup> Actually, according to Lacan the psychoanalytic counterpart of metaphor is not "symptom", but the process of "condensation", which may be physically expressed as "symptom" (746-753). However, given that, in the literary arena, "metaphor" is the name for both a process and the material expression of that process, I presently use the term as parallel to "symptom" rather than to "condensation".

### **Descartes Amphitheater, Paris-Sorbonne, 1957**

Lacan's renowned 1957 lecture, "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious or Reason Since Freud" was, to a significant extent, determined by the particular nature of the audience that gathered at the Descartes amphitheater on that May 9<sup>th</sup>, fifty years ago: what all of the audience had in common was their literary training. Thriving on his audience's professional expertise, Lacan's central proposition that day was that the unconscious is structured like a language. To develop on this understanding, the lecturer translated Freud's concept of "displacement" as "metonymy", while translating his concept of "condensation" as "metaphor".

Making use of structuralist linguistics, Lacan's stated aim was to debunk common mis-readings of Freud that assigned fixed meanings to determined symptoms in isolation. Against this essentialist tendency in the interpretation of psychoanalytic symptoms, Lacan emphasizes the importance of syntax; hence his proposition that the unconscious is *structured* as a language (739).

In stating that the unconscious is structured like a language, Lacan is not saying that it is necessarily expressed by using the same material support as does the English or the Spanish language. The signifiers by which the unconscious is expressed find their material support in physical symptoms, slips of the tongue, dreams and jokes. So, rather than referring to the material support of language, the statement that the unconscious is structured like a language refers to the fact that it is based around the same articulating principles as those on which English or Spanish are based. As in other languages, the signifiers that correspond to the unconscious produce meaning by virtue of their combination along a signifying chain which is regulated by the laws of a closed order.

Lacan's heightened stress on the syntactic properties of language and, therefore, on the centrality of "place" in the production of meaning has a mayor ontological implication.

Inscribed in the realm of the Symbolic, the subject is to be understood, quite literally, as the place that it occupies in language. This is to say that the subject, in the *ontological* sense of the word, is non other than the subject in the *grammatical* sense of the term (745-746, 753-756). Therefore, in discussing metaphor and metonymy, Lacan is also discussing the constitution of the subject as such.

In order to expand on this central question, let me briefly recall Lacan's earlier lecture, "The Mirror Stage". There, the French theorist posed that the subject is constituted in terms of his desire. This desire marks his own (im)possibility given that his full self-realization is situated at two equally impossible extremes. Firstly, desire is anchored in the hope of a return to the state of undifferentiated unity with the Other. But this possibility is lost forever by the very fact of the self's awareness of his own self-hood. Secondly, this desire is anchored in a displaced ideal image of himself as represented by the mirror and subsequently by other human beings. This second site of magnetism is also unreachable by definition, as reaching it would literally require the occupation of the same time-space as the other.

Returning to "The Agency of the Letter": to account for metaphor and metonymy, Lacan recurs to Ferdinand de Saussure's diagram: "Signifier over signified", visually represented as capital S and small s, separated by a bar: S/s. Metonymy is the displacement from signifier to signifier along the horizontal axis of language, an incessant sliding of signifiers *above* the S/s bar (740, 744). In metonymy, the perpetual deferral that characterizes desire is acted out. The subject seeks to become fully *satisfied*, which is to become fully *signified*, which is to attain a perfect match between signifier and signified: a crossing of the S/s bar. But, as indicated in Lacan's 1949 lecture, this perfect match is an (im)possibility. The slippery chain of unsatisfied desire can never be fulfilled, and so metonymy is the place of the subject's lack of being (756).

Metaphor, however, offers a way out of this metonymical chain. Metaphor is the place where a signifier, quite literally, occupies the place of an other. In metaphor, the displaced signifier transfers its meaning onto the signifier which occupies its place at the stated level of discourse. This is to say that the signifier that is absent from the written level of the text becomes the signified of the signifier that substitutes it at the material level of language. The absent signifier thus crosses the "S/s" bar (745-746). By crossing the bar, the displaced signifier becomes fully *signified*, which is to become fully *satisfied*. Lacan poses that metaphor, while rarely occurring, is linked to the question of being (756).

#### **"Democracy De-realized", Real Player, Any Given Day**

The *record* of Homi Bhabha's lecture, "Democracy De-realized", finds its place of residence on the Internet. At first sight, the lecture is only another hyperlink in its hosting page. Once clicked, the hyperlink opens a new "window", in the centre of which "Democracy De-realized" starts running. Framing the centre of this new window, "user friendly" software enhances the contours of the box to emulate the three-dimensional borders of a television set. Augmenting the effect, a series of control buttons on the lower border serve their iconically stated purposes. On the top left corner, the software's brand name states, with an adjective, the effect that it seeks: Real Player. Left in automatic mode, the Real Player window occupies only part of the computer screen, and its frame cannot be hidden from view; the video appears to be superimposed, playing against the background of the host page.

Throughout this section, I will take the video playing within these boundaries as the cultural object of my concern.<sup>5</sup> Before doing so, let me recall that, outside cyberspace, frames

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<sup>5</sup> Due to its virtuality, the cultural "object" of my concern may produce the effects of both "object" and "event".

are the wooden or metal borders delineating the place that mirrors, paintings, or screens occupy in space. So, a frame not only marks the distinction between surrounding space and the material space occupied by the object, it also distinguishes “real” space from the “virtual” space represented at the object’s surface. The frame of a mirror or a painting calls attention to the fact that the illusory reduplication or representation of space is an artifice, not co-extensive with reality. The Real Player frame benefits from this effect of frames in general, and thus stages the screen it encloses as (ontologically) discontinuous from the surrounding surface. By indicating that a screen lies within its boundaries, it simultaneously denotes the rest of the computer’s screen as *non-screen*. Hence, the frame enclosing Bhabha’s video-lecture authenticates the remainder of the virtual space as real.

The software frame competes with the material frame of the computer to deploy my object’s – that is the video’s – context as constituted by the virtual space lying beyond the video’s limits. It draws attention away from the computer frame, which defines my object’s context at the juncture of socio-historical reality and virtuality. In so doing, it also draws attention away from the cybernaut’s understanding of virtual space as a technological effect. While Real Player benefits from the effects of the frame to stage different levels of reality, the screen, the frame and the context it deploys are actually continuous. This is precisely the *modus operandi* of virtuality, defined as that which is so “in essence or effect, although not formally or actually; admitting of being called by the name so far as the result or effect is concerned” (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

Following this definition, it could be said that a particular virtual object seeks to appropriate the name of a corresponding real one by simulating its effects. Consequently, virtuality can be understood as that which usurps the name of reality by simulating its effects. Bhabha’s call to de-realize democracy is significant in the context of Internet’s virtuality,

and of its concomitant exacerbation of “the real”.<sup>6</sup> This becomes evident if we follow the central line of argument of “Democracy De-realized”. Pointing to the teleological implications of the conference’s general title – *Democracy Unrealized* – Bhabha proposes to substitute the second term for “de-realized”. The lecturer explains he is using the word in two senses. First, in the Brechtian sense of “distantiation” and, second, in the surrealist sense of *déréalisation*, that is, in the sense

of placing an object, idea, or image in a context *not of its making*, in order to defamiliarize it, to frustrate its naturalistic and normative ‘reference’ and see what potential for *translation* that idea or insight has – a translation across genre and geopolitics, territory and temporality. (2002: 349)

Bhabha conceives “de-realized” as an alternative that, by abstracting the concept of democracy from its historical reality and ideological origins, may be creatively translated and strategically employed by minorities. Bhabha moves away from the term’s historical origins and towards the possibilities opened up by democracy when it is strategically employed in terms of its effects. Hence, in both the lecture and its virtual environment, “effect” is prioritized over “cause”, whether it be the effect of reality over the technological and social causes producing such an effect, or the strategic effect of democracy’s translatability over the geo-historically specific causes for the existence of “democracy”.

By “de-realizing” democracy Bhabha is proposing a suspension of disbelief allowing for a re-imagination of pre-existing concepts in order to creatively re-articulate the socio-historical realities which they name. Thus, as has been mentioned, Bhabha translates a historical site of destruction into a virtual place from which to re-think the world. Bhabha defines “the Unbuilt”:

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<sup>6</sup> See Hope (2006)

What you need once your towers have fallen is a perspicuous vision that reveals a space, a way in the world ... Neither destruction nor deconstruction, the Unbuilt is the creation of a *form* whose virtual absence raises the question of what it would mean to start again in the same place, as if it were elsewhere, adjacent to the site of a historic disaster. (2002: 363-64)

Bhabha's move away from ontological and teleological understandings of "the Unbuilt" is phrased in negative terms (*i.e.*, "it is neither this nor that"). The lecturer further poses a logical contradiction: "virtual absence". In logical terms, "the Unbuilt" can only be a virtual category because it does not exist *yet*. It is a virtual *presence*, and an *actual* absence. By inverting the terms, Bhabha cancels their logic and opens up a paradox. Hence, his definition, relying upon negation and contradiction does not state what the concept at stake *actually* is, but seeks to produce the *effect* of what it is in the audience. Furthermore, "virtual absence" does not describe "the Unbuilt" directly, but describes "a form", while "the Unbuilt" is described as the "creation" of that "form". Earlier, Bhabha has posed "the Unbuilt" as "a perspicuous vision" that reveals a further "space, a way in the world" (363). In these ways, Bhabha deploys different levels of reality within the virtual category of "the Unbuilt". While the lecturer's emphasis on effect is parallel to the *modus operandi* of virtuality, his layering of virtuality into different degrees of virtual/real is parallel to that of the software by which it is played.

Let me recall that the role of the software frame is to position the virtual as real. Its mode of operation is self-referential: by staging the effect of different levels of reality *within* itself, it relativizes the concept of reality as such. By resituating object and context within the boundaries of the monitor's screen, it draws attention away from the context extending beyond the computer screen. It attempts to disrupt history's hegemonic claim as the realm of "context" and "the real". The lecturer's call for the need of "de-realization" is

published in a context where socio-historical reality is already displaced to the margins. Bhabha's call for a suspension of disbelief could be read as a momentary movement away from socio-historical reality, to return to it from a different perspective. But, framed by Real Player, it also translates as a normative condition of understanding the world in cyber-cultural space.

### **"Democracy De-realized", Cyberspace, Same Given Day**

By definition, that which is virtual does not have an ontological dimension, while metonymy, as stated by Lacan, is likewise linked to the question of non-being (1958: 756). Unlike metaphor, metonymy is not; it happens, it produces an effect. The meaning produced by metonymy cannot be located, it can only be sensed as an after-effect of the comparison between two or more contiguous elements along the chain of signifiers. Furthermore, where metonymy is concerned, there is no way out of the chain of signifiers (the S/s bar cannot be crossed), there is only perpetual displacement. This produces a self-referential effect, whereby language (understood as the chain of signifiers) appears as incapable of escaping its own tautological nature.

The Real-Playing of "Democracy De-realized", in its self-referentiality, and with its substitution of actuality by effect may be described as metonymic. But the aesthetics of metonymy are not limited to Real Player, they are characteristic of cyberspace in more general terms. Take, for example, the hyperlinked topography of the video's hosting page. As discursive icons, hyperlinks emphasize the notions of connectivity, multiplicity and simultaneity. Yet, as operative mechanisms, hyperlinks perpetually *defer* connectivity, multiplicity and simultaneity.<sup>7</sup> The formal aspects of

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<sup>7</sup> The contrast between hyperlinks' operative and rhetorical functions has strong political implications which cannot be dealt with here. See Chesebro (2003) and Ciolek (1999)

“Democracy De-realized” as a video-recording also prove to share in the aesthetics of metonymy. The video posted on the Documenta 11 website, showing Bhabha as he speaks, is not exactly the same as the one which was projected in the Berlin auditorium on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The video on the web has one crucial difference: superimposed on the lower left-hand corner of the original image, there is a small rectangle. Its four sides are equally proportionate and aligned to the sides of the overall rectangle demarcating the image as a whole. Given that this smaller rectangle is analogous to the whole while being constitutive of it, it may be said that, in terms of composition, the small rectangle holds a synecdoche-like relationship to the larger one.

While the larger image portrays Bhabha as he speaks, the smaller one projects the synchronized recording of Bhabha’s audience in Berlin. In the smaller rectangle, the cybernaut not only sees the audience but also the monitor screen on which the audience is watching Bhabha. This third frame (*i.e.* the material screen in the Berlin auditorium) functions, in turn, as a synecdoche of the widest image within which the middle rectangle is inserted. Thus, the overall impression is that of the widest image endlessly reproducing itself inwardly. In this movement, historical time becomes confounded: scaling leads the cybernaut to conceive the smaller, embedded images as re-productions of the largest one. But the overall composition is only the result of the event reproduced in the middle rectangle, which in turn is synchronic to the smallest rectangle of which the largest frame is a copy. Time enters a closed cycle. Because of its substitution of the whole by a part, and because of the chain of deferral it establishes along contiguous elements, the image of the online-video may be described as metonymic.

The aesthetics of metonymy are thus characteristic of diverse elements involved in the publishing site and media of “Democracy De-realized”. But most significant is the fact that such aesthetics is shared by Homi Bhabha’s own use of

language. Bhabha constantly transfers semiotic or phonetic similarity along the horizontal axis of language. This is firstly evident in the author's frequent recourse to alliteration: "genre and geopolitics, territory and temporality", "a longer lineage of *fraying* and *fragility*" (349, emphasis added). Through the transference of sound from one word to the next, phonetics plays a considerable role in knitting the theorist's text into a coherent whole.

At a wider scale, the lecturer benefits from a parallel procedure, this time involving the translation of semantic charge from one concept to the next. The author introduces the concept of "de-realization". He then associates "de-realization" to "translatability", the semantic charge of which is then transferred onto the notion of the "incubational". The idea of in-between-ness posed by the notion of the "incubational" is then transferred onto the spatial dimension to reach the concept of an "intermediate area", the implications of which translate onto "intermediate life", then onto "double horizon", onto "third space" onto "minoritarian presence, as a sign of 'intermediate living' ", and so on and so forth, along a long line of associated concepts that are, nonetheless, handled as distinct, in varying degrees, by the theorist (349-361).

While the transference of sounds and semantic charges from one element onto the next is persistent, the transference of a given syntactic structure into a parallel, contiguous semantic unit is notably absent. Through both the phonetic and the semantic infiltration of one word or term onto the next, the lecturer's employment of translation along the horizontal axis of language emphasizes connectivity. Such connectivity is present, firstly, at the level of the lecture's phonetic texture. Secondly, it bursts open the semantic fields of the author's concern into a constellation of stated and implied associations. But while connectivity is stressed at the levels of linguistic texture and in the reciprocal resonance of contiguous elements in the semantic field, the teleo-logical

connections of the argument are constantly deferred. In the context of the video's formal composition and of its hyperlinked background, the lecture's phonetic and semantic textures are in tune, given that here, too, "connection" is endlessly announced and endlessly differed.

But even my own framing of "Democracy De-realized" as a cultural object on-line has been closer to metonymy than to metaphor. This is to say that I have explored the transfer taking place between elements whose only relation, at least on the (computer) surface, is that of spatial contiguity. Because of this fact, "Democracy De-realized" in and of itself can not be held accountable for some of the meanings implied when read against its technological support. Such meanings are an after-effect of a coincidental contiguity. However, this contiguity, precisely by being coincidental, describes a co-existence, a shared historical moment between the object and its surroundings. Affinity presents itself not because the object and its surroundings say the same things about their shared historical reality, but because they have similar ways of coding that shared reality. The elements contiguous to the live video-lecture, in their virtuality, do not *actually* alter what "Democracy De-realized" has to say. They merely point to the *place* that it occupies in a culture that exceeds it.

#### **Cendeac, Murcia, March, 2007**

When considering the predominance of metonymy in Bhabha's discursive strategies and its affinity to the aesthetics of the Internet, the actual event which took place on that 9<sup>th</sup> of October, 2001 in Berlin may be seen in a different light. The question arises: given that Bhabha's lecture as a whole is characterized by deconstructive strategies: privileging of the virtual and of the effect, self-referentiality and deferral, why does Bredekamp locate his entire problem with Bhabha's procedure in that single image of "the Unbuilt"? Why is he so disturbed by it, to the degree of dedicating his whole

participation to an undoing of that metaphor and the erection of a new one, *in its place*? Is Bredekamp concerned with Bhabha's incapacity to translate vertically, his incapacity to translate across and beyond language; his inability to translate across the sign, across the image and into the realm of lived experience? Or is it, rather, that Bredekamp is disturbed by the fact that Bhabha has, indeed, been able to get across? While all along his discourse Bhabha has been employing the deconstructive strategy of metonymic translation from signifier to signifier, in the metaphor of "the Unbuilt" deconstruction ceases to be a strategy and acquires ontological attributes. As a metaphor, the image of "the Unbuilt" displaces the falling towers – as signifiers of the lived historical event – and literally puts a de-constructed world in the place of reality.

The metaphor of "the Unbuilt" is effective because it points to a deconstructed scene in the physical world; but, mostly, because further scenes of de-construction pervade reality beyond the limited space of the tower's debris. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007, a number of academics gathered at Cendeac, Murcia for the first International *Encuentro* on Migratory Aesthetics.<sup>8</sup> Amongst us, art critic Pedro Cruz Sánchez contributed a paper examining the work of visual artist Jesus Segura. In it, Cruz Sánchez explored the possibilities that Segura's art opens-up in the postmodern world, a world in which the image has grown to the degree of becoming both invisible and meaningless. As posed by Cruz Sánchez, enclosed upon itself, the image has lost its capacity to mediate, to communicate, to make its meanings visible (469-70). Is not this all-engulfing, all-disempowering image described by Cruz Sánchez precisely that which disturbs Bredekamp? Is not the image of "the Unbuilt" a *symptom* of our times?

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<sup>8</sup> Thinking Mobility Two-Ways : Migratory Aesthetics, directed by Mieke Bal took place at the Centro de Documentación y Estudios Avanzados de Arte Contemporáneo (CENDEAC) on March 12 – 14, 2007.

As argued by Cruz Sánchez, the image is not the only strategy adopted by power once its towers have fallen. Obscenity, understood as 'vulgar content' is also no longer effective *per se* as a radical political strategy. By recuperating the etymological root of the word "obscene" as that which is off scene or which cannot be staged, Cruz-Sánchez finds that in Segura's work an alternative strategy of the obscene operates effectively. The "visible seam" exposes what is expected to be hidden: the image itself as a strategy of power, the place of transference between the image and that which it is not (473-76).

As evidenced in the work of another participant at the *Encuentro*, cultural analyst Maaïke Bleeker, the obscenity of the image in contemporary contexts is no longer a problem of content. In her contribution to *Migratory Aesthetics*, Bleeker analyzed an untitled artwork by visual artist Tanja Ostojic. Judged to be pornographic, the image in question was excluded from EuroParts, a mayor exhibition for young European Union artists. Bleeker's analysis exposes that what is obscene about Ostojic's image is not that it shows the object of desire, but that it evidences the way in which visibility is structured for metonymic translation to operate: displacing desire from the female body onto a European union trademark. As argued by Bleeker, the image cuts across into lived reality and threatens the *status quo* by staging not the object of desire, but desire itself; by staging the image as it metonymically translates within itself. This translation within the image is thus turned into a metaphor of a wider reality: of culturally determined modes of structuring the displacement of desire and the production of Europe's other (347-51).

In Sonja Neef's contribution to the *Encuentro*, Europe becomes a metaphor of translation itself. With translation as its origin, Europe is turned into an "effect of migratory aesthetics", not a thing, not a place but, in her words, an event "performed in the very gesture of drawing and signing". Europe "is never something which is unproblematically

identical with itself" (325). Europe endlessly becomes Europe, in and through the Other. Neef's metaphor of Europe-as-translation reveals Europe's self-performance as a metonymic process.

In the work of my colleagues at Murcia, the *status quo* and its places of resistance were exposed as having both politically effective and historically specific modes of translating. Keeping in mind that metonymy and metaphor are two such specific modes of translation, I may now recall the event that took place at the Berlin auditorium, six years ago. I return to the figure I left on the stage: Bredekamp, as he occupies the place of an other. Bredekamp is not affected by the other's inability to translate, but by the efficiency of his translation. But precisely that which *has* managed to get across is the fact that our attempts to translate across language are endlessly differed by an all-disempowering rhetoric. As a function of language, this endless deferral is not connatural to power, but it has, nonetheless, been co-opted by power. Unable to translate to Berlin, because the towers have, indeed, fallen, Bhabha is reduced to the obscene sign of the sign of the sign in my computer screen.

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