

The Essay and Singularity

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The essay as a genre signifies the very form of linguistic (ontological) practice that generates the being of the world as the existing one. It can never happen by way of reportage (representation), but only as direct linguistic testimony, as an event. The essay is naked singularity at work, a discourse that is not censored (i.e., covered) by the nihilistic horizon of power and abuse. Finally, I apply the theoretical findings of this paper to a concrete critical analysis of a recent essay about Slovenian art since 2000.

Keywords: literary genres / essay / singularity / interpretation

Introduction

This paper is a revision of a longer, unpublished essay dedicated to the same topic, but originally written in Slovenian. Due to limited space, I had to omit a great deal of the original extrapolations and most sections illustrating the performative nature of my essay. Unfortunately I had to eliminate those parts of my investigation that probe the double-bound nature of singularity in its textual production. I found this “unforced” exclusion of the performative aspect of my original essay to be a serious handicap, and I wonder whether it is not in the very structure of academic discourse to censor singular approaches that avoid academic conformity. “The constitutive lie of any university discourse lies in denying its performative dimension; namely, by presenting that which truly leads to a power-based political decision as a simple insight into the factual reality of things” (Žižek 199). I could list a number of authors that analyze the established discursive practice of academia along the same argument. Žižek, a self-proclaimed heir to Lacan’s psychoanalysis, is but one of them. In fact, a number of poststructuralist thinkers realized the importance of an in-depth analysis of discursive practices in light of their social background, seeing them as a symbolic expression of the social relations that they represent.

If considered seriously, the topic of my paper – namely, the double helix consisting of singularity and the essay – must be informed by the perspective mentioned above. In his book *Ce que parler veut dire*, Pierre Bourdieu points out that linguistics developed a model of understanding language primarily as an object of understanding and not as an instrument of action and power. Sociology can escape this trap only if the processes of construction of their

objects of research are illuminated in the light of their social representation and distribution of the basic terminology of a particular power structure that it represents. “We should not forget that any discursive exchange, any communication also *par excellence* represent relations of the symbolic power in which the relations of power between speakers or between their groups are realized” (Bourdieu 13, 14; all translations mine). According to Roland Barthes, “every author, facing the decision to write an essay, finds himself in the midst of a power play” (Barthes, “Inaugural” 48). He has to wrestle with the (linguistic) mechanisms of power, and pass the test required by the “signifier,”¹ the collective subject, possibly structured as a “political unconsciousness,” or rather by accepting the established codes of a group that controls socially dominant academic discourses and institutions. Humanistic discourse perpetuates its own social status and vice versa. In the post-Nietzschean world there is no doubt that university discourse serves the (established hierarchy of) authority, and not truth or knowledge. For a critical and politically aware author, this recognition features a moment of a possible epistemological rupture and confronts an academic researcher with a problem that was first formulated by the Greek philosopher Parmenides:

Come now, I will tell thee – and do thou hearken to my saying and carry it away – the only two ways of search that can be thought of. The first, namely, that It is, and that it is impossible for anything not to be, is the way of conviction,

for truth is its companion. The other, namely, that It is not, and that something must needs not be, – that, I tell thee, is a wholly untrustworthy path. For you cannot know what is not – that is impossible – nor utter it;

Is this a dilemma or not? This depends on the position one takes, one’s point of reference. For me, it is certainly not. Although it represents a complex nexus of an entire set of problems that cannot be easily resolved, the scientific way would be to “incessantly, putting our very existence on the line, reenact this epistemological break that separates science (from the break of theological constructions in the service of various forms of Power) and theology (as well as a society from theocracies with various names). This break, according to Gaston Bachelard in itself constitutes the act of scientific work, which exists, “provided it is continued” (Rotar 50). “The task of a future epistemology is to develop for knowledge the sphere of total neutrality in regards to concepts of both subject and object: in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities” (Benjamin, cited in Mules 75).

Warwick Mules considers the above quote from Walter Benjamin as the point where it is possible to address the problem of creativity, singularity, and *techné* – three closely interlinked phenomena that constitute the material, formal, and ontological features of the essay as such. “They suggest a way of engaging with creativity that does not rely on a transcendental subject” (Mules 75). According to Negri and Hardt, “Politics resides at the center of metaphysics because modern European metaphysics arose in response to the challenge of the liberated singularities and the revolutionary constitution of the multitude. It functioned as an essential weapon of the second mode of modernity insofar as it provided a transcendental apparatus that could impose order on the multitude and prevent it from organizing itself spontaneously and expressing its creativity autonomously” (83).

The path I want to follow in my essay is therefore clear. I follow the call for an epistemological break with the conventional approach to authorized knowledge, which, as understood from the above, represents a continuous struggle for such a political system and social organization that would enable one to spontaneously and autonomously express one’s creative potential. An essay, I argue, is fundamentally an act of such an independent process of creativity that can break with established notions and discursive practices. Singularity, on the other hand, introducing the key concept, is the exposition of creativity as such.

Singularity

To Mules, creativity is the release of singularity captured in form. “The method [of the systematic procedure of writing] could refer here to no other matter but to the discourse itself, as far as it fights for the possibility to dupe any discourse that catches up ... that is to say, the discourse that reflects on itself” (Barthes, “Inaugural” 31). For Roland Barthes, the discursive practice constitutes an exercise in the domain of power. “Language is legislation, speech is code. We do not see power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is classification, and that all classifications are oppressive: *ordo* means both distribution and commination” (Barthes, “Inaugural” 2). It is therefore imperative to fight the negative gravitational force of authority, even though it seems this is a battle lost in advance. Power when “exhausted, defeated here, it reappears there, it never disappears. Make a revolution to destroy it, power will immediately revive and flourish again in the new state of affairs ... the object in which power is inscribed for all human eternity is language, or to be more precise, its necessary expression: the language we speak and write” (Barthes, “Inaugural” 2).

An essay is something that is either written or read. There exists no “oral” essay. An essay shares something with the concept of weight and weighing, not because it is difficult to write or read, but because the essay has its own weight, its own gravity. It counts. Writing an essay, I want to suggest, is a subversive act. It is a dialectic process that generates energy but at the same time, in order to do that, it must destroy formal requirements. Power is a two-way force. It is a kind of gravitation. On the outside it attracts, but on the inside it collapses into itself – into a point of singular dimensions that escape our rational control (calculation). It is like a gigantic weight. “From a size of millions of kilometers across, the star crumples to a pinprick smaller than the dot on an ‘i’” (Joshi 29). I shall come back to this.

The Medieval Latin word *exagium*, from which the French word *essai* is derived, means an act of weighing. The French word is actually a compound: *ex-agere*, meaning to push too much, to exaggerate. An essay implies a fragmented, compounded, condensed conglomerate of arguments expected to be organized as an army. “Je n’ay point d’autre sergent de bande à ranger mes pièces que la fortune. A mesme que mes resveries se pressentent, je les entasse; tantost elles se pressent en foule, tantost elles se traînent à la file” (Montaigne, *Les Essais*).² An essay has to do with condensation and weight, and with order, but not as it is conventionally understood as a particular collective discipline or formal structure. “The essay is a kind of work that accepts impurity of a discourse, philosophical, scientific, and literary waste, direct corruption of a message no less than of desire: fears, anger, expressions on faces, threatening, aggression, musical (or artistic) fragments that feature an active language” (Barthes, *Učna* 34). Such an understanding of the piling up of any material within the reach of one’s grasp without any formal prearrangement corresponds directly to Benjamin’s understanding of “the possibility of creation according to the laws of configuration which are experienced directly, and not mediated by means of form” (cf. Mules 75).

Derrida’s account of the performativity of literature speaks of an experience of writing that he calls ‘subject’ to an imperative: to give space to singular events, to invent something new in the form of acts of writing which no longer consist in a theoretical knowledge, in new constative statements, to give oneself to a poetico-literary performativity at least analogous to that of promises, orders, or acts of constitution or legislation which do not only change language or which, in changing language, change more than language. (Weber 274)³

An essay has its own field of gravity that it is not governed by any rational form outside its inner domain. It is this particular force that generates its “laws of configuration.” This force does not come out of nowhere. It is a result of a particular kind of condensation of ideas, concepts, and

pictures within the normal discursive flow. Deleuze conceives singularities as pre-individual and a-conceptual points of condensation attached to the constitutive series of all structures, which are at one and the same time, indifferent to, and productive of, the relations of difference realized within such structures. An exaggerated condensation of the non-formal fragmentation features an event, a combination, a break with the normal interpretative discourse, “a collapse of a gravitational function” that cannot be reduced to its usual designation of something “that is” and forces us to choose a new way of being,” writes Alan Badiou (34), a rigorous critic of Deleuze, who developed the notion of singularity. According to him, Deleuze always begins his analysis of cases with an “initial formalism”: “Once the initial formalism is in place, the [categorical] method consists precisely in fashioning its nomadic subversion and showing that every relation and every fixed distribution must therefore, insofar as they are indifferent to terms that are arrayed within them, dissolve and cause thought to return to the neutrality ... of ‘extra-being’” (cf. Mules 76). Michael Halewood explains that

beneath the general operation of laws ... there always remains the play of singularities Specific difference ... in no way represents a universal concept (that is to say, an Idea) encompassing all the singularities and turnings of difference ... the distribution of singularities belongs entirely to the conditions of the problem, while their specification already refers to solutions constructed under these conditions The problem is at once transcendent and immanent in relation to these solutions Singularities are that which becomes problematised and which consequently constitute individuality; in themselves they are not individuals in the usual sense, as such individuals are resultants. Singularities don't express the solidity of objects, they do not exhibit the reality of Newtonian self-identical things The role of singularities is to provide a prior metastable state ... the existence of a 'disparateness' ... between which potentials are distributed. (Halewood 11–14)

There is no doubt that academia as an establishment first rejects or even excommunicates such subversive discourse, although later on it advertises and recycles it as the very foundation of its establishment, as its code. Let us just mention the case of Walter Benjamin, whose work *Ursprung des Deutschen Trauerspiels*, written to receive his professorship and today considered to be one of the masterpieces of the first half of the twentieth century, was found unsuitable for his department of German studies by Professor Franz Schultz of the University of Frankfurt and an “incomprehensible morass” by his colleagues at the philosophy department. Here is then a good illustration of such common academic procedure, succinctly elucidated by the quotation from Barthes above.

However, as I have already stated, things are not this easy. An essay, at the moment of being written, is not an instance of the triumph of power

avant la lettre, but its very singularity in the transcendence ahead of time. It features a moment of secession, of “extra-being,” and not just falling into the abyss of endless variations on the same theme without “passage to the limit.” To make this point clear, it is necessary to introduce Leibniz’s invention of the differential calculus; that is, his concept of the *infinitesimal* (a quality smaller than any assigned finite quantity) and the actual infinite as its result. “If the difference between two cases or two figures can be reduced below the level that is effectively assignable in concrete data, then it is necessary that this difference *can be reduced below any assignable quantity*” (Zellini 112). Therefore a point has been reached where all the differences, in a way, vanish, but at the same time, do not vanish at all. This concept is the concept of the *infinitesimal* – *a quantity smaller than any assigned finite quantity* (Zellini 115). The result is a visible demonstration of the actual infinite, rather than of continuity of infinities. Singularity can be said to constitute such an actual infinite. The very last line of the poem “Južni otok” (The Southern Island) by the Slovenian poet Kajetan Kovič categorically confirms this: “And the southern island *is*.” The “is” is what I take to be the ontological confirmation of the *actual (real) infinite*. The ultimate “is” of singularity as a monad.

Thus the historic perpetuation of power is perforated by some kind of functional distortion of occasional blackouts. Because power, according to Barthes, is inscribed in language, at the same time it is language that is structured by a permanent counter-positioning: a perforated flow of singularities (monads, as Leibniz would say). Chomsky would call them infinite expressions by limited means of language. Clearly there are two faces to the dialectics of language, two functions of language. I shall call them the *expositive function* and the *symbolic function*, respectively. The expositive function of language suggests the language of creation; that is to say, it is a performative, poetic exposition of singularity as such. Deleuze says that “the singularity belongs to another dimension than that of denotation, manifestation, or signification Singularities are turning points and points of inflection; bottlenecks, knots, foyers, and centers; points of fusion, condensation, and boiling; points of tears and joy, sickness and health, hope and anxiety, ‘sensitive’ points” (Winqvist 48). Winqvist continues:

“Singularities are points of resistance within the interpretative meaning of experience The singularity is an event around which thinking recoils. Thinking turns on itself in an experience of inadequacy. The singularity is yet something to be thought and we do not know it until it is thought whether it can be thought in the frame of its occurrence Singularities are those confusions in life that are sometimes fleeting but which can also be a complete breakdown of understanding (48–49).

Aletheia

There is a symmetry between power(s) and singularity(ies) at work in an act of essay-writing. They are both facets or effects of the same machinery. They perpetually generate each other in a double play of language and social relations. When I referred to Leibniz and his concept of the actual infinite in my use of the concept of singularity as a complete event, or when I discuss power(s), I do not use the terms in the metaphysical sense of the expression of “one.” Singularity is a particular play of endless and ever-changing differences and information that should be understood more in the meaning of the infinity set of Cantor and less as a commanding principle that runs all those differences within one and the same program. Each singularity features a unique event with its own textual topography and strategies. Once one finds oneself in the play of singularities, one no longer dwells in the domain of law and order, within the domain of power(s) – although, of course, one still does. Any repetition of any singular experience is never the repetition of the same singularity. Not even once does a person step into the same river. Within the distortions of singularity, one treads through a jungle of differences and information that is not governed by a common organizing principle, but by “the vanished event that is drawn from the absolute neutrality of the void. [No doubt, singular events] are supported by the action of a militant subject: Such action takes the form of an intervention that has the effect of undermining and overturning previous practices and forms of knowledge” (Gillespie 1). If writing an essay is considered an act of creative writing, it is possible to extend the argument about such an event further and expose the ontological status of such a militant action. It is not only Badiou but Montaigne as well, “the father of the art of writing essays himself,” who explains this discursive action in military terms. He compares the fortune of his thought to a squad of soldiers led by a sergeant. Such a creative intervention that undermines previous practices or forms of knowledge exposes the *poietic* instance of the language function. It is Plato that explains the ontological dimension of *poiesis*, a word commonly and incorrectly translated as ‘poetry’. The famous section 205b of Plato’s *Symposium* reads as follows: “Take the following: you know that poetry (*poiesis*) is more than a single thing. For of anything whatever that passes from not being into being the whole cause [205c] is composing or poetry.” I shall ignore the problem of this rather “poetic” translation because it is enough for my purpose to simply understand the role of *poiesis* as a “cause” (*ergasia*) for the “passage from not being into being.” Perhaps “creativity” would be the better term here in reference to the field of knowledge because it means “revealing,” bringing something out from being hidden (or forgotten). In fact, that is the actual meaning of the Greek

word for truth: *aletheia* (cf. Kocjančič 79). That which is not hidden (or is remembered again) – at least as it stands in the poem of Parmenides – is the only Being. In this sense, one can understand the ontological implications of creative writing as militant action and an event that overturns received forms of knowledge as it exposes Being in its nakedness.

Naked singularities

Two consequences follow from the notion of the ancient Greek understanding of truth as *aletheia* – the non-hidden Being exposed in its nakedness in the process of *poiesis* or in a stream of acts/events (*ergasia*) of creativity as the “passage from not being into being.” Creativity is the capacity to bring such pure affects together, singularities in “a virtual conjunction ... and each time [to] form a complex entity” (Deleuze, cited in Mules 77). “Poetry in the meaning above is speech that translates the non-being into ‘un-hiddenness’ and constitutes the essence of *techné* (knowledge, skill). Aristotle used a special term for this type of ‘revealing speech,’ which is not an exclusive domain of poetry, although it is its naked manifestation: *lógos apophantikós*” (Pirjevec 153).

“Creativity is the release of singularity captured in form” (Mules 76). This form of course is speech, it is a linguistic form. Thus one can argue that: 1) singularity/creativity/*poiesis* is a process of (essay-)writing that exposes the “un-hiddenness” of Being as such. Singularity as a textual phenomenon is an ontological machine, the truth of every manifestation of power(s), its symmetrical other – hidden, censored – side. There is no written or read text without there being this machinery at the very core as the other of its structure, regardless whether it is hidden or exposed. This is the first conclusion; and 2) an author should wrestle with the established forms of writing and develop such theoretical and practical formulations that aim to fully disclose the “un-hiddenness” of singularities. This basically means developing “knowledge [as] the sphere of total neutrality in regards to concepts of both subject and object: in other words, it is to discover the autonomous, innate sphere of knowledge in which this concept in no way continues to designate the relation between two metaphysical entities” (Benjamin, cited in Mules 75). The avoidance of any transcendental point of reference requires one to address the true reality of any act of writing as an intervention into the field of established oppressive social relations (the truth censored in the name of the literary or aesthetic nature of the essay).

Scientists have established the existence of two types of singularities in the universe. They are the black holes and naked singularities, the two possible outcomes of a collapse of a massive dying star. At the heart of each

is a singularity, a wad of matter so dense that the strength of gravity becomes infinite and the known laws of physics break down. In a black hole, the singularity is “clothed” – that is to say, it is surrounded by a boundary called the event horizon that hides it. Nothing that falls through this surface can ever resurface. There is no information that could penetrate this “clothing” to tell us what the reality of its singularity is. Singularity is a mystery beyond the horizon of knowledge; it is a mysterious essence that can only ever be addressed indirectly; we can only refer to it. The famous British mathematician and physicist Roger Penrose – a Platonist among us, as Stephen Hawking said – conjectured that the formation of a singularity during stellar collapse necessarily entails the formation of an event horizon. This conjecture is called the cosmic censorship hypothesis.

Naked singularity, on the other hand, has no such boundary. It is visible to outside observers. In fact, dying massive stars need not always collapse into a black hole. Only perfectly spherical stars with homogenous uniform density and neglected gas pressure fall into a black hole. The collapse of real stars is more complex. Their density is not homogeneous, the gas in them exerts pressure; quantum effects can slow down the collapsing star, and so on. In fact, astrophysicists have discovered scenarios of inhomogeneous collapse that leads to singularities, and yet remains visible to external observers (Joshi 28).

There is an obvious correspondence to be noted here between the ancient Greek notion of *aletheia* and the astrophysical concept of naked singularity. Gian Batista Vico, in his most famous book, *Scienza Nuova*, first clearly formulated the difference between two kinds of knowledge: *il vero/scienza* and *il certo/scienza*, which basically correspond to the present-day distinction between the natural sciences and the humanities. One might argue that using concepts from the natural sciences for interpretative strategies in the humanities does not contribute to a reliable academic debate. However, Vico himself claimed that only once one has combined both *scienze* can one form a doctrine that yields a full knowledge of facts. A number of authors developed their conceptual notions out of such cross-breeding of different knowledges. Badiou, for instance, claimed that “only mathematics can present Being *qua* Being to thought” (Gillespie 2). In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze specifically marks Leibniz as the source for his development of the notion of “pre-individual singularity in the field of vectors” (McDonnell 1). The Estonian semiotician Yuri Lotman tried to use mathematical models in his structural semiotics, whereas Jacques Lacan talked about the knowledge out there that is formulated by mathematics. Sociologists use statistics. And so on. As Yuri Lotman put it, “The problem of translation is a universal scientific task” (269). The transfer of

concepts and notions between various sciences is not only legitimate but is also a vital and potentially illuminating collaboration.

Exemplum

From what I have said so far, I believe it is possible to see the language machine of the power/singularity symmetry as two phases of a discursive practice that actually expresses the established ruling relations in a society. “We should not forget that a discursive exchange, a communication exchange *par excellence*, also represents relations of the symbolic power in which the relations of power between speakers or between their groups are realized” (Bourdieu 14). Basically, the controlling relay switch between the phase of power as dominance and the condition of singularity is actually an act of outside intervention of censorship, which is built into the conforming function of language. The conforming function of language *is* the execution of the censorship/power condition. The exposing “un-hiddenness” of this condition creates a singularity and by the very elimination of censorship annihilates the generative, transcendental symbolism of power. The intervention of this kind is a singular event (although it can have lasting effects). The moment singularity, which is the internal reality of a text (an essay), blanks out (with the end of writing or reading, although one should not eliminate the retention effects of the after-echo); it is the institution of power (the academy) that seizes it for its canonized repertoire of its formal references. This need not be an immediate act of acceptance because academic establishment always requires a period of time for the process of recognition (i.e., canonization) to take place. I mentioned the case of Benjamin. Thus an authorized interpretation or conceptualization represents a system of censorship and “authoritarian oppression” that basically rests upon the institution of canonized references. These in turn should be applied as presupposed connotations and mostly conveyed through summaries, although occasionally – when convenient – also through direct citation, but within the canonized frame of interpretation. The former notion of influence is thereby translated into the notion of intertextuality. In reality, one is dealing with citationality, meaning that one subjects oneself to, and accepts, the established hierarchy of power and its kind of knowledge. Citations that do not conform to this function are not welcome within academic papers. “The constitutive lie of any university discourse lies in denying its performative dimension; namely, by presenting that which truly leads to a power-based political decision as a simple insight into the factual reality of things” (Žižek 199). Of course, there are other functions of citation than this. The essay is one example. To paraphrase the famous dictum

of the German-Romanian poet Paul Celan; one could say: *L'essai expose!* An essay should not refer to an external text merely by a summarizing reference that conveniently introduces, and perpetuates, a canonized interpretation, but should try to expose the referenced text in its original visibility. In this way, an essay will feature a multitude of voices that all speak for themselves. Such an essay escapes the confirmation of an authoritative monologue, which always speaks on behalf and instead of them.

Finally: the two states of the power/singularity symmetry at a textual level correspond to two discursive “perspectives” that expose the position of a writer/interpreter as an agent of social and political oppression. An essay could express either a position of authority and power, or one of science and “truth” disclosing language itself as an aggregate that generates Being. Let us now proceed to a concrete case of an established authority’s intervention artistic interpretation. To do this, I wish to analyze an essay by Tomaž Brejc, one of the “leading” art critics in Slovenia, entitled “Painting and Three Conjectures by a Viewer.”

A practical example

Browsing through literature to find a concrete and clear-cut example to illustrate the two very different approaches to singularity sketched out above and their textual realizations, I came across an exemplary essay by Tomaž Brejc entitled “Painting and Three Conjectures by a Viewer,” which “superbly” demonstrates the discursive practices mentioned above. Before I showcase the phenomenon of citation, I should point out one of the main difficulties in the academic practice of interpretation, as can be seen from Brejc’s text. Academic interpretative practice, it seems to me, is no longer capable of imposing/masking its strongly power- and prestige-oriented strategies with their claim to some deeper truths, traditions, knowledge systems, laws, and norms ostensibly available to a “discipline” as a site of exclusive interpretation that authorizes itself through the autonomy of university curricula and academic discourse. The fact is that today every elevated interpretation that draws its validity by alluding to the supposed truth of the subject under consideration is a futile and rather pathetic undertaking, all the more dangerous because it masquerades its inherent violence (it operates on the back of institutions of social power, consolidating their criminal activities) as something dignified and irreproachable. Speaking about literature, painting, music, and so on from the position of “sensing” or a “deeper understanding” is no longer viable, unless it is expository (i.e., performative), whereby the key values and characteristics it describes are enacted by a sincere discursive or textual drive as well as an ethical – as opposed to

moralistic – stance (its evocation is not enough). The very title of Tomaž Brejc's essay is paradigmatic in this respect. To speak of the viewer's suppositions while removing oneself (the writing subject) to the side as someone that can hypothetically evaluate the viewer from a distance points to the problematic of such a removal into the shadows of hidden observation (what is known as voyeurism or secret control) as well as the problematic assumptions of knowing the viewer's experience based on one's own (but not presented as such) experiences, which are thus universalized.

The viewer is thus attributed the writer's own problematic assumptions, and the viewers themselves are instrumentalized as a screen for their projections, seen as "deeper" knowledge and "universal" truth. However, at least one of the viewers mentioned here does not act in accordance with the stated conjectures. As is seen later on, this withdrawal into the hiddenness of fictitious universal truth is repeated once again when Brejc speaks about trends in contemporary art criticism, noting an abandonment of modernist criticism, which, according to him, means "to criticize using the means offered by painting, that is to say, to analyze painting itself. Critiques, challenges, and revolutionary thinking have almost ceased to exist in painting today. Greater consideration is given to tradition and its conventions" (Brejc 120). Leaving aside this odd partnership between tradition and contemporary painting, which clearly points to the general character of our contemporary, socially uncritical, conformist, collaborationist, apolitical, business-oriented neo-liberal generation that seeks shelter in conservative and "profit"-oriented primary accumulation (of traditional capitalism that has just collapsed like a house of cards to burden public debt for generations to come), we are confronted here with another hidden and unproblematized facet to such interpretation: namely, the disappearance of the "critic" that is not a painter; the critic whose role in determining the social role of painting has been crucial from modernism onwards. This "erasure of the critic," which in reality means that the critic has withdrawn from the public (although he is still there, controlling it) makes me think that the above statement needs to be read differently, and should not be taken at face value. Critiques, challenges and revolutionary thinking are still abundant in contemporary art. However, they are not seen as respectful and therefore remain unacknowledged within the small circle of the chosen connoisseurs of "established art." This in turn partly follows the dictates of the market (selling to the richest, who tend to be the most conservative and "puritanical" buyers) and partly the increasing need for decorum and respectability, and is in itself a condition for being included within the circles of condensed social and economic power. It is precisely this fact that makes it possible to creatively problematize painting and prevents accepting the sole validity of the "peaceful illustrative painting." (Such painting typically reproduces illustrations from the covers of

some popular “new age” book about authentic channeling of dreams and energies, or, as in the case of Mitja Ficko’s painting, it illustrates exotic – for example, Japanese – stories or “traditional” folding screens, which are in themselves an instrument of concealment). It is the case that our present-day “respectable and selected” experts – one-time critics – have given up criticism proper, supplanting it with social and “political correctness,” which, they claim, “treats the painting and its rights the same way we speak of human rights” (Brejc 118).

This talk of rights is only ideological manipulation, mere talk, without real respect for or an attempt at realization of these rights. However, it is disrespectful to even discuss this in terms of a socially problematic practice; to analyze, question, or “criticize” it. A painting is “a personal and cultural medium that needs no external verification, control, or validation. This elegant, peaceful assuredness I might call (by analogy with the notion of political correctness) – ‘painterly correctness’, for it respects the painterly conventions, their creative traditions and stipulations” (Brejc 118). Furthermore: “This is a special sort of appropriateness (*decorum*), which respects tradition and convention ... dignity ... we see in this devotion to craft and tradition the revelation of a latter-day, sometimes, quite stoic conceptual Puritanism” (121). However, it seems I am getting ahead of myself. Let me go back to the beginning.

True and false painting

Mysterious paintings are usually more peaceful than not. Unpeaceful paintings betray an excitement of the spirit and of the work; openly displaying their own restless activity, even confusion and overstatement. A certain inner naivety is perhaps revealed in the loquaciousness of unpeaceful paintings: They show on the surface everything that is supposedly happening within: the subjects are animated, the gestures expressively active, all is in motion and agitated – but it is easy to interact with such paintings, and they can even be comforting, for such activity seems entirely ordinary and familiar to us. We experience drama in the look of these paintings, but their commotion only mirrors the excitement and agitation we have so often tasted in life ... at most, the lively picture intensifies our own everyday, occasionally even dramatic life experiences. Essentially, unpeaceful paintings preserve an experiential correlation with our own lives.

Peaceful paintings, on the other hand, can confound us; outwardly, they express nothing overstated, no drama or pathos. And yet, we sense the inner working of the spirit, a kind of relentless necessity which, however, is captured in a well-controlled appearance. In such works, catharsis

is complete, made real ... the only thing such a painting says (to me) is: "Calm down" ... Peaceful paintings withdraw into a meditative timelessness in which we cannot intervene. (Brejc 117)

All of the above statements are taken from Brejc's essay on the painting by Mitja Ficko, "a 'peaceful man,'" as he calls him, "and is so in several aspects that are important in determining the state of Slovene painting since 2000" (Brejc 118). However, let me return to the question of the two modes of singularity first. In my view, the passage above substantiates both modes. Brejc sets forth his experience of painting in the field of singularity itself. Interpreting Ficko's painting *Pristan I* (Harbour I), he writes: "The dark time and space in the passage from night to day is again a single open symbolic area/depth, the painting's *black hole*, as it were, which could easily absorb the birds and the pergola, sound and light, painter and viewer" (Brejc 122-123; my emphasis). As can be seen, here there is a mention of a "black hole" (a "singularity censored by an impenetrable event horizon of interpretation"), an obvious attempt at deployment of "clothed" singularity in the field of interpretation. But let me proceed.

It is not difficult to pick out both modes of "singularity" in Brejc's text. His writing strikes me as what he himself describes as a conjunction of "ideology and aesthetic effect." This is perhaps a perfectly good example of a "civilized" text intended for the sales catalogue, and which under the disguise of seeming expertise (*decorum* – appropriateness, composure, and dignity) offers a promotional model for how to entice a prospective buyer.⁴ I say this so as to explain my understanding of the model of discursive singularity that refers to the opaqueness of the event horizon; namely, its indirect presence ("And yet, we sense the inner working of the spirit, a kind of relentless necessity which, however, is captured in a well-controlled appearance"; Brejc 117), which is evoked as a premise but never explicitly revealed in the text (because then it would no longer be a "sense ... of a kind of relentless necessity captured in a well-controlled appearance"). I should however state that in my analysis of Brejc's text I do not write about the paintings of the "peaceful man" himself. Here too it would be possible to point out the hidden ideological kernel of his exoticism, but that will have to wait for another occasion.

The difference between the singularity that is concealed by an event horizon (as a text discussing it indirectly, intimating it), and naked singularity (meaning the text itself is an event that enacts it through the very effect of the text) therefore lies in either nakedness or hiddenness, a direct or indirect expression of singularity as a specific ontological condition of the text. Or, one might say, between descriptive and expressive functions. This difference can be seen to correspond to Brejc's conceptual differen-

tiation between peaceful and unpeaceful painting. Peaceful paintings are mysterious; there a catharsis has already happened, meaning that we are reconciled to the fact that we are unable to quite adjust to them because we are robbed of the direct (emotional) journey required for such an adjustment. We are told to reconcile ourselves to this fact. This of course is paradoxical because catharsis already suggests appeasement. A peaceful painting should therefore appeal to viewers' incapability to appease themselves and penetrate its secret. It urges them to accept the position of a "contemplative viewer who is just as peaceful, composed, and dignified" (c 117). "Peaceful paintings withdraw into a meditative timelessness in which we cannot intervene" (Brejc 117), meaning one can only loosely meditate on singularity, but cannot penetrate its "body"; one cannot "emotionally" experience it. One is presented here with that notion of singularity that offers itself as a "a kind of black hole," as one big open symbolic "surface/depth," an intimation of the workings of the inner spirit, and so on. In short, it is singularity that is accessible only as a symbolic space, as a metaphor. In a traditional setting of devotion to craft, respectability that honors received traditions and conventions (i.e., established social and political relations), and *decorum*, which is sometimes quite stoic (patient) conceptual puritanism, singularity (a black hole of sorts) presents itself as a metaphor for repressed (unseeming), unavailable, uncritical, submissive, modernist, meditative, lost archetypal or symbolic contents – namely, as a space, atmosphere, and event that has once again realized itself. Following Brejc's explication, this would suggest an activity that in contrast to "contemporary genetic science" does "care ... about the ethical standards of humanist tradition" (Brejc 117) (whose apexes of realization were the concentration camps, imperialism and preemptive wars against terrorism), except that it "treats it in the same way we talk about human rights" (Brejc 117) (with tongue in cheek). Hermeticism, which was once seen as the designating mark of modernism, has now been transposed to this domain of the new renaissance of tradition, which "one might expect to find in seventeenth-century French classical theory or in Lessing" (Brejc 117), but is now reborn in the mysterious gathering of "domestic and exotic birds" of the twenty-first century, "who do not know how to behave in this new freedom" and become an emblem of the "state of Slovene painting since 2000" (Brejc 118).

At this point, I have interpreted the obvious things in the work, but a painting is not merely an aggregate of texts and signs; it is not an anonymous surface on which I can simply overlay the meanings I understand; rather, it is a conceptual body with its own subjective existence and expression. Archetypal symbols, in other words, can be real only if they are personified to the extreme, even to the

extent that they become unrecognizable, enclosed in the (conceptual) darkness of the artist's body (Brejc 112).

The hermeticism of the dark artist's body thus serves to validate the great myth about the just humanist every respectable person should reconcile themselves to as though this were some objective, albeit hidden, truth in itself (as suggested by academic experts).

The painting of sovereignty, which is another term for singularity, concealed with a censored interpretative horizon beyond which I cannot see – otherwise the author would not have to tell us that behind it “we sense the inner working of the spirit, a kind of relentless necessity which ... is captured in a well-controlled appearance” (Brejc 117) – is pitted against “unpeaceful paintings” that “betray an excitement of the spirit and of the work; openly displaying their own restless activity, even confusion and overstatement. A certain inner naivety is perhaps revealed in the loquaciousness of unpeaceful paintings: They show on the surface everything that is supposedly happening within” (Brejc 117) (i.e., behind the event horizon). It shows people their own reality, “the excitement and agitation we have so often tasted in life” (Brejc 117). It is performative, enacting the “drama” of people's lives happening here and now, a fundamental dilemma that – drawing on Aristotle – calls for a catharsis. It suggests a confrontation with the horror of fate that, while surpassing us, is truth-revealing (the truth of unjust social reality and lies inherent in democracy). Fate, *moira*, means partaking in the cosmos, participating in the eventful singularity of the universe that takes no notice of the ways of man or gods and directs things in its own way. In its unconcealment, the great mythologies, both personal and familial, and the autobiographical contents burst like soap bubbles – naturally, with fatal consequences. Fate's intervention means an end to *decorum*, respectability, and suitability. It is not guided by “devotion to craft”; no “civilized, conceptually trained painter” can lay an exclusive claim to it nor can he or she avoid it. Nor can a dictionary of images or iconography escape its effect. Singularity is neither a metaphor nor academic discourse or craft. Naked singularity is a revelation of crime that halts, organizes, and eats away into the vitals of human society.

NOTES

¹ “A signifier represents the subject for the other signifier” (Lacan 66). This means that any author always represents this or that establishment of power (e.g., the university).

² “I have no other officer [sergeant] to put my writings in rank and file, but only fortune. As things come into my head, I heap them one upon another; sometimes they advance in whole bodies, sometimes in single file” (Montaigne, *Essays*).

³ I should add a thought by the Croatian philosopher Vanja Sutlić: “Upon beginning to contemplate something new, we somehow start expressing ourselves, but in a new fashion – thus feeling like strangers in our own language and seeming as such to our fellow countrymen (but not only to them) – not in order to speak another language, but to discover for ourselves the appropriate expression for what we are contemplating, for what is being unveiled” (*Kad počinjamo misliti nešto novo, onda počinjemo nekako i na nov način kazivati – pa se u vlastitom jeziku osjećamo kao stranci, a tako izgledamo i svojim sunarodnjacima (i ne samo njima) – ne zato da bi prešli na drugi jezik, nego da bi za sebe našli kazivanje koje je primjerno onome što mislimo, što nam se pokazuje*; Barbarić 84).

⁴ According to a marketing theoretician, there are “clear parallels between modern marketing practices and the teachings of postmodernism” (see Negri and Hardt 130–131) In the spirit of postmodernism, Ficko's painting *Pristan I* (Harbor I) may be interpreted as depicting a makeshift counter at a local fair, offering a diverse variety of poultry (or fish) from all over the world, as if on supermarket shelves or at a natural science exhibition at that very shopping center (e.g., snakes, fish, birds, rodents, and other animals; all for sale, of course).

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Esej in singularnost

Ključne besede: literarni žanri / esej / singularnost / interpretacija

V astrofiziki poznamo (če izvzamemo začetno stanje vesolja) dve vrsti singularnosti: golo singularnost in zakrito (črno luknjo). V polju literarne ustvarjalnosti temu ustrežata dva modela produkcije: simbolističen in eksistencialističen. Simbolizem in eksistencializem se torej ne kažeta kot dve kronološko različni literarno zgodovinski strukturi, ampak kot dve formi pisave. Simbolistični teksti reprezentirajo transcendentalno podobo sveta, eksistencialistični pa svet producirajo v odsotnosti kakršnihkoli metafizičnih počel v njegovi obstojnosti. Ta razlika se kaže tudi na ravni strategij pisave. Ločimo med deskriptivno (konformno) funkcijo in ekspoziitivno (performativno) funkcijo jezika. Prva zakriva primarno naravo tekstualnega stroja, druga pa jo izpostavlja. Primarni zmožnosti pravimo poietična (ustvarjalna, po stgr. *poiesis*). Deskriptivna funkcija jo postavlja v službo mehanizmov oblasti moči (nihilistične socialne mašine), ekspoziitivna pa pisavo generira kot ontološki stroj (*poiesis* kot vrenje biti), ki kot stranski proizvod razkriva tudi delovanje nihilistične mašine. V svojem prispevku pokažemo, da je esej tista hibridna forma ustvarjalnega zapisa, ki v polju transcendentalne distance in zakritega zapisovanja moči izpostavi primarno razsežnost pisave kot ontološkega (estetskega) stroja. Tovrstna meta naravnost ni samo-nanašalna, ampak izkazovalna. V polju strukturacij pomenskih povezav vedno znova izkazuje primarno razsežnost pisave, ki

je zunajpomenski generator postajanja in obstojnosti postanega. Naša trditev je, da ta ustvarjalnost dobavlja bit (obstoj) sveta. Esej v luči razkritosti biti pomeni tisto delovanje, ki omogoča pojavljanje biti kot biti sveta, označi ga *logos apofantikos*, kot je zapisal Aristotel. To pa se ne dogaja kot poročanje, ampak kot neposredno pričevanje. Esej je gola singularnost na delu, ki je ne zastira nihilističen horizont, v igri zlorabljanja sveta, ki obstaja. V zaključnem delu spoznanja, ki smo jih razvili v eseju, kritično apliciramo v njihovi konkretni analizi v nekem sodobnem eseju o slovenskem slikarstvu po letu 2000.

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