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The Relevance of Theory

LA Résonance de la théorie

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**“...and the Rest of the World”:
The Transl(oc)ation of Theories
as Theory
or
Theory “without” the European
and North American Spheres**

Every form of theory is characterized by a sort of double imperative which establishes the scope of its efficacy and at the same time constitutes the source of its internal tension: the implicit, perhaps even unconscious thrust to encompass retrospection and prospection. Furthermore, every form of theory owes both its existence and its legitimacy to this dual imperative. The retrospective impulse, on the one hand, circumscribes its sphere of action, bestows upon it the quality of affiliation to a particular history of thought — be it dominant or residual —, thus granting it an indispensable continuity, and consolidates its “archival” component: a component that in fact allows it to rethink, to reinterpret and even (or is it necessarily?) reinvent that object. The prospective impulse, on the other hand, attempts to supplement that “archival” component with its, strictly speaking, “theoretical” component, i.e. with the deployment of a “knowledge” that, applied to the flowing situations contemporaneous with the theoretical

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enunciation, seeks to provide the key to comprehend the “future”, that is to say, “what-is-to-come” out of those situations. As a result, theories always propose, along with a re-reading of current or past “state of affairs”, a sort of grammar of its imminent or possible articulations and transformations. And it is this double movement, this “to and fro” of every theory that generates its intrinsic tension; a tension that forces it to go through the constant — and the constantly renewed — process of its own redefinition.

What becomes evident in this tension is both the unstable condition of every theory and the dialectically interpretive character of its development: in order to “look forward” it must necessarily “look backwards”, it must find the traces of what it wants to see and do in what has already been done and seen *before*. Hence, the fact that every theoretical *moment* bears witness to a dialectical tension between *what has been retrospectively introjected into things already done* and *what is to be prospectively introjected into things to do*. In this way, in a complex dialectics — explored insightfully by Walter Benjamin — our “past” turns out to be rewritten, reinterpreted, reinvented by our “future” as much or maybe even more than the other way around.

Concomitantly, this complex dialectics brings to the fore the “epochal” character of every form of theory: the fact that it materializes a specific, “ordering” look at a definite time span and at a particular space. It is this character that bears out theory’s unavoidable filiation to a culture and to the mechanisms and processes of its transformations.

Like cultures, theories are inevitably *located*; although — unlike cultures — they often reluctantly acknowledge such a *location*.¹ Like cultural artifacts, theories bear irremediably the marks and the traces of their cultural situation; marks and traces which include language uses, *mores*, traditions, worldviews, institutions, etc. The very same dialectics of retrospection and prospection we discussed at the outset

¹ According to Webster’s dictionary, “locate” means: “to determine or indicate the place of; define the site or limits of; to set or establish in a particular spot or position.” “Location”, on the other hand, means “an act or the process of locating; the act or process of marking out an area of land; the surveying of a tract of land (as for settlement)”.

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as inherent in every theory anchors it necessarily to a space and a time in which those two impulses take form and from which they acquire meaning. Furthermore, even the utopian thrust of every theory never goes far beyond its assigned limits and almost always addresses essentially its “epochally” defined assumptions. Therefore, theories, like cultures, think within a specific “locale” and according to modes of representation and reflection that grow out of it.

If, however, the “location” of culture entails a complex process of appropriations and displacements — as Homi Bhabha has convincingly argued —, the “location” of theory must turn out to be a no less problematic gesture. First, the act of locating, as an attempt to set limits, necessarily implies the dialectics of inside and outside; a dialectics that — as Hegel has proposed — creates an inextricable relation between those two spaces. Second, as a strategy of containment and definition, the act of locating implies necessarily as well the dialectics of “same” and “other”; a dialectics that creates a no less inextricable dependence between those two “situations”. It is in fact the intervention of an Other that “delimits” the space, the scope, and the dynamics of a theory (of a culture), and provides it with its *differential* nature. This last remark brings us to the core of the issue at hand.

If we are to discuss about the “relevance” and the “resonance” (luckily, both words exist in English) of theory, we must begin by acknowledging that such a noun — “theory” — should always be thought of as a collective noun: a number of theories. Then, we must realize that the constituents of that collective make up not just a collection but a set of heterogeneous but complexly interrelated elements. That is why we should think of them in terms of “difference”, which is a relational concept, and not in terms of “diversity” or “variety” — a point made also by Bhabha in regard to culture. With these two *caveats* in mind, we can easily arrive at the conclusion that a theory, in each case, is a hybrid formation (cf. García Canclini and Bhabha) whose “relevance”/“resonance” must always be thought of in relation to different and differing theories. Its internal structure is the result of a positing that carries along both the traces of another theory and that theory’s refiguration. Hence, the “relevance” of a theory cannot be

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abstracted from the very act of its location; its “resonance” cannot be abstracted from the fact that it involves its own as well some other theory’s transl(oc)ation. The relevance of a theory thus indicates its degree of “pertinency” — a word that, symptomatically enough, is etymologically related to the idea of “belongings” —; its resonance, on the other hand, points at a theory’s “repercussions” in other theories as well as their “echoes” in it. This situation creates a complex intertwinement between theories that makes imperative the use of the collective, or to give to it an Althusserian spin, that forces upon us the conclusion that, in theory, there is no outside of theories or, in other words, that the outside of a theory is always another theory.

Before going any further, allow me a brief recapitulation. The location of theory entails the “coexistence”, in a complex space-time, of heterogeneous discourses of different and differing theories. This coexistence is the result of a translocation, i.e. a translation of those theories’ implications and applications into a new theoretical structure, whose effectiveness can only be measured by the ductility to transformation that that relocation requires. In each case, the discursive networks of theory must acquire the marks of the new “soil”. For this reason, every form of theory bears the sign of a perverse gesture: dislocation. And this leads us to conclude that, on a closer look, any theoretical enterprise is the result of an inextricable combination of three procedures: location, transl(oc)ation, and dislocation.

As both an example *and* an argument of what I have been discussing so far — and perhaps what is at stake in my approach lies beneath the implications of this “and” —, I would like to analyze some aspects of a particular cultural artifact that seems to stage the complex set of displacements and lags that defines, in my opinion, every theoretical project: the film *El viento se llevó lo que* (1998), by the Argentinean director Alejandro Agresti (1961).

As we will shortly see, the very title of the film puts us already in a complex space of translations and displacements. It obviously plays with the words of the *Spanish translation* of the title *Gone with the Wind*; for that reason, it has been (re)translated into English, according to the Internet Movie Database, as *Wind with the Gone*. Therefore, on a

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basically verbal level, the film reveals at the same time an inscription in the history of cinema — in linking itself, problematically enough, with one of the emblematic films of that tradition —, and a dislocation of that same inscription — in appropriating the words but dispensing with their concomitant content. But another complication lurks behind that title. The title *Gone with the Wind* was not, for grammatical reasons, literally translated into Spanish. Actually, the translated title — which has become as emblematic in Spanish speaking countries as the film itself —, *Lo que el viento se llevó*, would be the translation of another, quite different English sentence: “What the wind took away”. Agresti’s choice of title is, therefore, an inversion of this phrase, which instead of an a-grammatical construction (such as *Wind with the Gone*), constitutes a perfectly grammatical, albeit incomplete sentence: “the wind took away what...” In this sense, what can be read into this “new” title is that the process of appropriation and inscription consists not just of a scrambling of elements but of the production of new, perhaps incomplete forms of meaning (I shall come back to this point). In its own title, this film seems to enact the intricate process of theorization. But let us now move on to the film itself.

The transl(oc)ation reflected in the title becomes more meaningful after the first few minutes of projection. In “Rio Pico”, a town in the Patagonia, far to the south of Buenos Aires, the main entertainment during the 1970’s is cinema. But movies, in this town, have a very exclusive characteristic. They arrive, after countless projections in Buenos Aires and elsewhere, as a bundle of bits and pieces. Owing to that fact, the owner of the only movie theater in town has to (re)create those films acting as a singular sort of editor: he puts together those bits and pieces without taking into consideration either the original movies — which are never available to him — or any logical plot — which in that situation seems impossible even to surmise. The result: a collection of scenes (projected some times upside down and even in reverse motion) with no continuity whatsoever. The “cut and paste” nature of the title denotes, therefore, the very same nature of the films seen in Rio Pico. This situation could be perceived as simply “funny” were it not for the fact that the town’s inhabitants somehow develop, in their social exchanges and in their language, a logic that

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corresponds precisely to the — for us, outsiders — “broken” makeup of *their* movies.

The *serious* implications of this state of affairs — the voice-over of the main character reminds us several times that this is not a comic movie: “les aclaro que esto no es una película cómica” — are further reinforced by two ramifications of the plot. First, there is in Río Pico, a film critic, Pedro, who is as well a movie-maker, a director. Needless to say that the films and pieces of criticism he creates (cor)respond to and reproduce the “cut and paste” logic (could it be otherwise?) of the films he has grown accustomed to seeing. Second, when the main character, Soledad, who represents to a certain extent the “other”,² after the first shocking, estranging encounters with the town’s “logic”, falls in love with Pedro, symptomatically enough, her love fantasies gradually take the makeup of the town’s movies (black and white, broken logic, absurd dialogue)³.

Clearly, this film not only stages the implications of displacement and appropriation, of reception and distortion, but to an equal degree makes the site of those displacements and distortions what Bhabha calls an “active agent of articulation”, which *produces different* cultural artifacts and along with them *new or renewed* forms of experience.

In addition to that, all of this takes place in a town that carries the traces of a doubly marginal geographical inscription. On the one hand, Río Pico is a peripheral, almost rural community, far removed from Buenos Aires and its urban life (in her escape from Buenos Aires, Soledad gets to a point where the road abruptly ends, symptomatically enough, in a half built bridge). On the other hand, Argentina itself constitutes part of what we could call the periphery of Western culture. This double marginality ensures that the process of reception and appropriation has to go through a drastic dislocation, in preventing the unifying, standardizing effects of globalization.

² In trying to get *as far away as possible* from Buenos Aires, Soledad ends up in Río Pico.

³ In another revealing detail of the complexities of the film, during one of those fantasies, as Soledad pictures herself standing and musing in front of the movie theater, we are able to read the title of the movie featured: “El viento se llevó lo que”.

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There is, however, a particular sub-plot in the movie that bodies forth this marginal, peripheral condition even further: the town's favorite actor, the French Edgard Wexley (Jean Rochefort), appears at some point in Río Pico and apparently stays there, as a sign of gratitude toward his "true" fans, who appreciate him for what he is ("they like *me*" he repeats while watching the town people watch one of the "broken" movies in which he is the star) and not for the different personalities he assumes in them. This amounts to legitimizing the image these movies have construed of him as a new image of the actor, since Wexley, far from rejecting it as non-sensical, assumes it as the image of his true — although hardly coherent — self.

From a more formal perspective, the film turns out to be a meta-discursive, self-reflecting instance of movie making. In fact, the question: "What is the essence of cinema?" is explicitly asked and explored in some of its last scenes. The answer, however, seems to be *performed* rather than *provided* by the film itself. I mean that even though a "verbal answer" is offered at some point, this answer seems to be no more than one among a variety of possible answers — answers that coexist in the multiple registers of cinematographic language. As a particular instance of such a variety could be mentioned the display, in the film, of a gamut of movie genres: comedy — which seems to be the prevailing tone —, road movie, love film, drama, documentary (with what looks as takes from an authentic documentary piece)... each of which seems to propose a different but equally legitimate form of organizing experience. The fact that all of them are present in *one* movie, attests to the complexities that this "form of theorization" can effectively attain.

But even at the explicitly theoretical level, the film enacts the vicissitudes of theory's transl(oc)ations, in exploring the "local" character of notions such as relevance and resonance. Antonio, the town's "scientist", "(re)invents", at different moments in the movie, the theories of relativity, psychoanalysis, and Marxism (note that, in the movie, the succession of inventions follows the reverse of chronological order in which they were invented in the West). In each case, Antonio makes a trip to Buenos Aires in order to announce his new discovery, with little or no success in the case of relativity and psychoanalysis. For

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almost opposite reasons, it was useless to speak of relativity and psychoanalysis in Argentina in the 70's. Relativity, although a highly relevant theory, has had little resonance in the public sphere; besides, it was hardly news at that time. Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, had had — as it is well known — a profound resonance in Argentinean culture and had penetrated it to its roots. In both cases Antonio's anachronistic theories were all but irrelevant in regard to that specific place of enunciation. However, the third case, Marxism, was another matter. Antonio sets off again for Buenos Aires, but this time he stays away for a long time. He “disappears” and the town people start speculating on his “selling” the idea and keeping the money for himself (there are reports, they say, that his idea has been successfully applied in Russia). Later in the film, Antonio comes back to town and tells his friends, in perhaps the most terrible moment of the film, what happened. We learn that this time around people's indifference was of an altogether different kind: after a few attempts to divulge his “new” theory, he was arrested and tortured by the government's repressive forces. (Needless to stress that it is at this point that we finally and painfully realize that this it is not a comic movie, or at least not just a comic movie.) The relevance and resonance of an otherwise almost infantile anachronism are radically transformed by the fact that the place of enunciation is Argentina under a dictatorship around 1976.

All these issues show that *El viento se llevó lo que* functions as a complex theoretical apparatus. Allow me to summarize and discuss some of its most “relevant” performative claims. First, the film seems to bring to the fore the strong critical value inherent in notions traditionally and dismissively conceived for, and applied to, the productions of the “periphery”, such as marginality and belatedness. As we have seen, in *El viento se llevó lo que*, these situations even turn out to be the sources of a particular form of creativity: the “margin” reappropriates the products of the “center” for its own highly specific and critically reconfiguring purposes. Second, the film intimates that the refiguration, the dislocation of the elements of a culture in another can (and ineluctably will) generate new forms of experience, or, to be more precise, new forms of organizing and understanding it. This process brings along a remodeling of the dynamics of social exchanges

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(in the case of this movie, especially although no exclusively, of love). Third, the film, in an almost defying gesture, chooses to present these theoretical issues apparently in the framework of a genre that has rarely been conceived of as reflexive: comedy. Finally, the film shows that the very appropriation of the products (and theories) of the “center” entails a sort of transmutation according to which those products (and theories) now seem to embody a *critical stance* with regard to their original sites of production. Therefore, what might have been thought of as the margins of a theory, reveals itself as a legitimate and complex form of theory “with-out” (in the double meaning of the word) the “center”; a theory that, in its turn, reflects *on* that center and *on* its mechanisms for producing theory.

But — the question imposes itself — why are we talking about theory when we are discussing a film — and an Argentinean film, at that? The answer to this question necessarily furthers the claims of this paper. We *are* talking about theory in discussing a film *because* a film is, from this perspective, a *displaced* form of theory making, a *dislocation* and a *transl(oc)ation* of what has been considered as the natural form and the accepted body of theory, i.e. reflexive writing. In this sense, I would like to stress that I am certainly not proposing a “reading” of the film from the point of view of theory. My contention is of a stronger kind: I propose that this film is itself *making* theory or, to put it in more radical terms, that the *only* reading that can accommodate the heterogeneous, multi-layered aspects this film stages and embodies, is a reading that evinces its *performatively theorizing impulse*. And it is with this contention in mind that I would like to make a few more general and generalizing claims.

In the first place, if the relevance and the resonance of theory are to be understood in terms of localities, transl(oc)ations and dislocations, then the time has come for us to recognize that the distinction between theory (as an analytical activity) and cultural artifacts (as the objects of that activity) is too much of a reductive simplification. Theories — in the strict sense — are the result of the cumulative signifying powers of a wealth of cultural artifacts (from different times, from different cultures, from different spheres within a culture, etc.) and the intricate interrelations they have established

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among them. Thus, when we “theorize”, what we actually do is reveal, make patent the theoretical potentialities of those artifacts. We can then conclude that every cultural artifact bodies forth, stages and performs a legitimate — although at times highly unconventional — variety of theory. And, to give the argument another twist, is not precisely unconventionality *of the essence* for any theoretical enterprise?

This brings us to what I consider the kernel of any theoretical project: its critical power. This is a power that cultural artifacts of all sorts have historically brought to bear on cultures’ issues. And this power has necessarily to be linked with *difference*. Margins, limits, gaps are the natural places for critique because they assert the existence of the other and, in so doing, open up the possibilities to think from a space of alternative formulations and conceptions, of shifting disciplines and concepts. In this sense, we could go as far as to say that theorizing — understood as the quintessential form of critique — constitutes the very dynamics of change and transformation in cultures.

Before concluding, allow me to summarize what I have been trying to argue in the course of this paper. The relevance/resonance of a theory lies in its being a set of heterogeneous, differing, reflective, not exclusively verbal, and increasingly interdisciplinary practices, both historically and geographically determined, that attempt, on one level, to organize and/or supplement meanings produced by cultural manifestations, but that, on an even deeper level, propel the dynamics of cultural change. Let me spell out some implications on this “condensed” definition. First, such a set of practices is — or should be — a constantly shifting one not only because of such an intrinsic dynamics, but also because of its uninterrupted appropriations and relocations of elements of other theories, other cultures. This is an important point, since it allows us to avoid any illusion of disciplinary definition and closure: theory is most definitely a collective word without any other claim to identity than its constituents’ “family resemblances” (as Wittgenstein would put it). We could even suggest that there are always theories lurking in the gaps between theories. Second, the meanings that these practices organize and/or supplement

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are more often than not of a performative rather than of an apodictic makeup. This means that, fundamentally, they constitute active forms of meaning-production. We can conclude, then, that theory itself is a cultural artifact, whose very productions *create* meaning. Third, those practices are inextricably and unavoidably bound to historical and geographical settings; settings in which they accomplish both their organizing and their creative drive — and outside of which they turn into “potentialities” for theoretical transl(oc)ations and dislocations. Finally, they set the mode in which cultural artifacts are to be received: these practices make manifest a sort of second degree existence for cultural artifacts in ascribing a theorizing thrust in whatever it is that they produce. And this, in my view, is the theoretical move *par excellence*.

In order to account for theories’ relevance and resonance, we must be prepared to identify their relevance in the transfigured features we encounter beyond the frontiers of its original place of enunciation; and be prepared to encounter their resonance in the unrecognizable echoes that we receive from there. Transfigured features, unrecognizable echoes play the role of reminders that every form of theory is an adventure into the unknown. There is then a final “lesson” we could learn from the “distortion” in the title of Agresti’s movie. Theory as a practice of relentless transl(oc)ation always implies the repeated shuffling of its traits into new and differing configurations. *El viento se llevó lo que*, as a title, brings us back to the double impulse of retrospection and prospection I discussed at the outset. And this means that, even though a theory, a cultural artifact, may set off from the sense of a community, even form a community of sense — that is to say: from an interiority and a past — it has to reinvent itself somewhere else, time and again, as a sentence whose meaning requires the emergence of new forms of community — and this means its supplementation through an exteriority and a future.

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