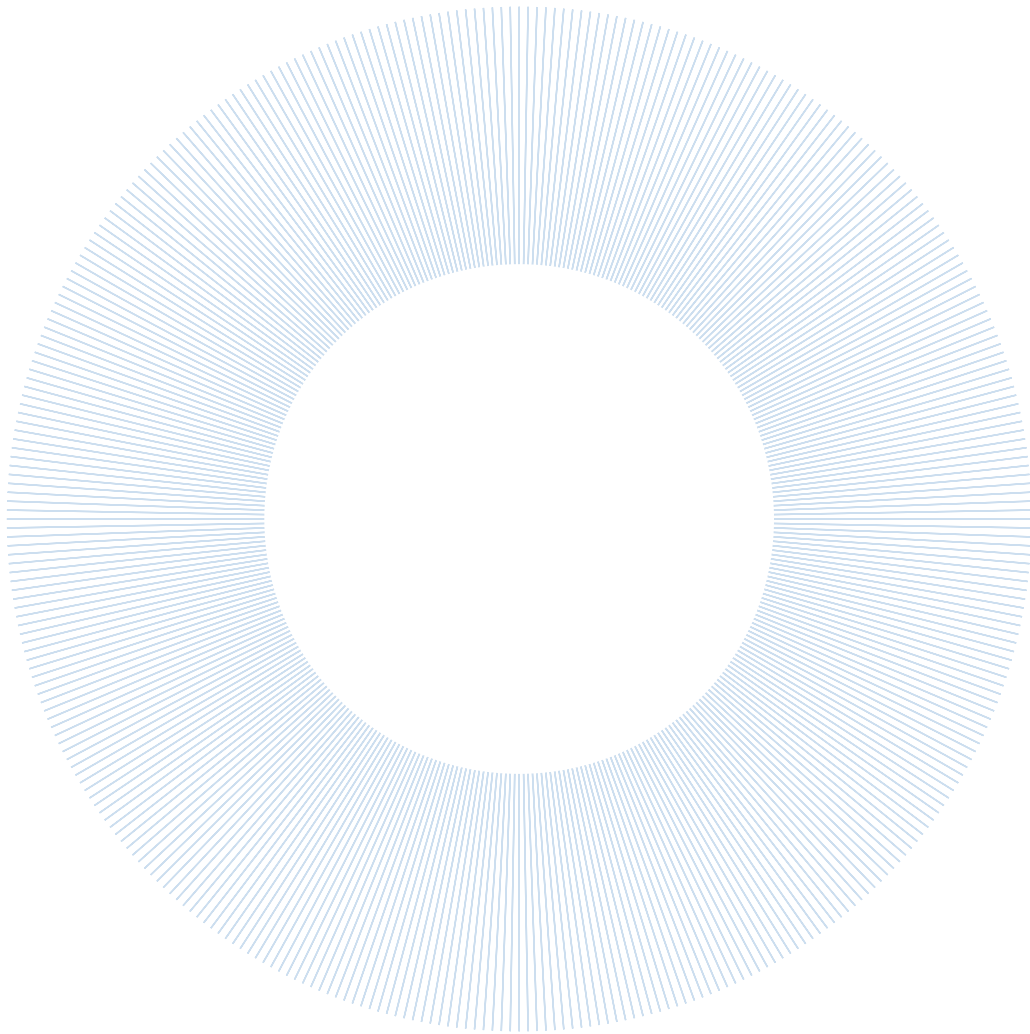


Maritime Criticism and Lessons from the Sea



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MARITIME CRITICISM AND LESSONS FROM THE SEA

I wish to suggest, in a very tentative and exploratory fashion, that insisting on the centrality of the sea and ocean space to the enterprise of modernity promotes the adoption of a more fluid cartography. The presumed stability of the historical archive, together with its associated 'facts,' and the cultural identifications proposed in territorial museums, academic syllabuses and political understandings, can all be set to float: susceptible to drift, unplanned contacts, even shipwreck. Deposited in the sea are histories and cultures held in an indeterminate suspension, connected, rather than simply divided, by water; they suggest other histories, other ways of narrating both a local and planetary modernity. Such histories promote a necessary passage from the self-assurance and closure of critical certitude to the vulnerability of an altogether more contingent criticism, one whose uncertainties and hesitations register sustainable procedures of thought and practice. Consensual understandings of 'progress,' 'development' and 'growth' are here exposed to unauthorised questions, called upon to respond to a world that does not merely reflect such conceptual imperatives.

I have approached this argument drawing upon three interleaved dimensions. First, by considering the sea as a liquid archive and the associated floating foundations of modernity. This, in turn, leads to the interrogation and interruption of the facile evaluations of a linear mapping of time and space, disciplined by the land-locked desires of unilateral progress and a homogeneous modernity. Finally, in considering how to 'map' or at least register an unstable sea of histories I have turned to the disposition of 'art,' not so much as an aesthetical witness to the past and the present, but as an affective and ethical configuration of time that is neither merely homogeneous nor simply the property of 'progress.'

The sea is a space, like nature itself, that is socially constructed (which is not the same as saying that both can be reduced simply to the 'social'). Hence it is continually susceptible to political figurations. We discover that the sea and the ocean is not, as generally assumed, a void or an emptiness to contrast with the 'fullness' of life on land, but rather promotes another, interrogative and critical space.



[...] history moves off rather than onshore (Gillis, 2007, p. 22).

The automatic assumption that European history will be told best and most powerfully when it is made to coincide with the fixed borders of its national states will also have to be disposed of (Gilroy, 2004, p. 164).

Seascapes

Commencing from the sea, rather than the habitual location of land and territory, is clearly to propose a slightly unorthodox style of argument in which unknown factors, critical uncertainty and accompanying historical anxieties are provocatively foregrounded. This choice of perspective has much to do with deliberately seeking to unsettle many of the disciplinary procedures and protocols of the social and human sciences. Opposed to dreams of systematic order and the assurance of canonical convictions, what I have chosen to call 'maritime criticism,' sets existing knowledge afloat: not to drown or cancel it, but rather to expose it to unsuspected questions and unauthorised interruptions.

Why water? This is to introduce the theme of a liquid archive and the accompanying idea of historical, cultural and social processes being suspended and sustained in a mutable and dynamic eco-system. This has radical implications for national histories, which tend to be the prevalent form of narrating the past and hence configuring the present, as well as for their accompanying epistemological rooting in the closed terrestrial confines of blood and soil. It is hardly necessary to insist on the racialising implications that grow out of that particular intellectual, social and political cultivation. The proposal is that of an uprooting that permits a re-routing or setting adrift so that existing premises and prejudices are forced to float, suspended in solution as it were, and there rendered vulnerable to extra-territorial interrogation: both in terms of national and disciplinary adherence.

The ontological challenge of water, as opposed to a rootedness in the ground beneath our feet, forces the adoption of fluid coordinates that require continual navigation and negotiation. If this is to adopt the prospect of routes rather than roots, it also suggests a hydro-politics of a radically more extensive kind than that associated merely with the management of water as a resource and accessory to human activities. It is to propose an understanding, or at least an acknowledgement, that exceeds our framing and explanatory powers. In other words, I am not simply working with a liquid metaphor, but rather proposing an image of thought that is tied to the materiality of the Mediterranean Sea and its associated cultures and histories as they criss-cross its surfaces leaving traces and deposits in its depths. In an 'in-between' body of water (Medi-terranean) that simultaneously unites and divides three continents – Africa, Asia and Europe – we are encouraged to move from the plane of the metaphor into the exploratory intricacies of a maritime modality of thought.

Initially, this necessarily means challenging inherited considerations of the sea as an accessory to, and extension of, territorial imperatives by proposing its provocative centrality in the formation of planetary modernity since 1500. Here significant connections are also to be made between the 'world systems' sustained by the classical and medieval Muslim Mediterranean, pre-European Indian Ocean trade, and subsequently the modern Atlantic world (Horden and Purcell, 2000; Bernal, 1991; Abu-Lughod, 1991; Hourani, 1995; Gilroy, 1995). All are bodies of water that not only sustained trans-national systems of trade, but also composed complex cultural ensembles that radically transformed the histories of their surrounding shores and hinterlands. The idea of maritime criticism and its evocation of the inconclusive and unsteady framing of histories promoted by the insistence of the sea, is precisely an attempt to rework radically those archives and the associated stability of their knowledge from the floating prospects of a maritime perspective.

In other words, the sea is here considered not merely as a surface that permits movement and migration between terrestrial referents, but becomes the site of migrating histories and

intertwining cultures, as most clearly evidenced beyond the Mediterranean in the complex cultural creolisation realised in the 'sea of islands' (Epel Hau'ofa) of the Pacific and the Caribbean (Spriggs, 2009). The sea at this point provides both a passage and a bridge; a *póntos*, as the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari suggests, that links together a complex heterogeneity in an *arch-pélagos*. Cacciari writes: 'The idea of the Archipelago is not that of a return to origins, but rather that of a counter reply to the history-destiny of Europe' (Cacciari, 1997, p. 35).

It is in this arduous and agonistic combination of communication and difference, of shared encounters and marked distinctions, of resonance and dissonance, that the Mediterranean proposes a multiplicity. This fluid matrix simultaneously interrupts and interrogates the facile evaluations of a linear mapping, disciplined by the land-locked desires of unilateral progress and a homogeneous modernity. We are invited to step off shore for a moment and consider inherited referents from elsewhere, through other eyes: the desperate vision of an immigrant riding the waves in a small boat, gazing hopefully northwards or, spiralling out of the very skin of explanation, James Clifford's sea otter contemplating central Californian change from the waters of Monterey Bay (Clifford, 1997). Or else there is the limitless opening of the world caught in the eyes of a terrestrial animal:

We know what is really out there only from
the animal's gaze; for we take the very young
child and force it around, so that it sees
objects—not the Open, which is so
deep in animals' faces (Rilke, 1987, p. 193).

This also carries us beyond the human plane into a planetary space in which 'man' and his 'humanism' is not the unique measure. What is invariably taken for granted as an apparently constant background – the dumbness of the sea and oceanic space – can brusquely be foregrounded and lead to the unwelcomed dispersal of the liberal agenda in which 'ethical standing and civic inclusion are predicated upon rationality, autonomy and agency' (Wolfe, 2008, p. 110). Sedimented in the sea, are historical configurations, which also cut into the landscape, that precede and exceed the shape we believe we are bestowing on them. Like Captain Ahab, with our harpoon of reason we seek to strike through the 'unreasoning mask' and render the world transparent to our will. We pretend that the opaqueness of the sea is a senseless resistance rather than an ontological challenge. The sea, however, is a screen, reflecting us back to ourselves while simultaneously challenging our limits with its open horizon and the darkness of its depths. The sea, like the endless prairie and the limitless steppe, is traversed, farmed and sacked, but its 'dumb blankness, full of meaning,' to quote Herman Melville once again, speaks of a seeming indifference to our presence.

Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere. No past slaughter or cruelty, no accident nor murder that occurs on the little ranches or at isolated crossroads with their bare populations of three or seventeen, or in the reckless trailer courts of mining towns delays the flood of morning light. Fences, cattle, roads, refineries, mines, gravel pits, traffic lights, graffiti'd celebration of athletic victory on bridge overpass, crust of blood on the Wal-Mart loading dock, the sun-faded wreath of plastic flowers marking death on the highway are ephemeral. Other cultures have camped here a while and disappeared. Only earth and sky matter. Only the endlessly repeated flood of morning light (Proulx, 1999).

Compared to a mere epistemological tool, the liquid insistency of the sea can provide ontological criteria with which to reconfigure the theoretical prison house in which we often seem to be held. No longer considered a merely instrumental adjunct – the source of food, the passage for trade and foreign conquest, the site of intercultural and international transport –

the sea, as Derek Walcott puts it, is history. Against the metaphysical desire for certitude and control, invariably rooted in terrestrial and territorial order, there emerges the Nietzschean provocation of the marine horizon where 'every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted, the sea, our sea, lies there open before us [...]' (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 209). Contemplating undulating seascapes, as opposed to the firm contours of habitual landscapes, can lead to rethinking ideas of time, space and change. In her 'Introduction' to *Seascapes*, Kären Wigen asks whether these might 'yield new constructs and new metanarratives to frame our social imaginations? Or will their value lie rather in replacing such fixed categories in favour of discrepant temporalities and amphibious identities (both inside and outside modernity, as well as on and off the sea)?' (Wigen, 2007, p. 17).

The idea of the sea as a potential 'plane of immanence' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2004) certainly proposes the laboratory of another modernity: here the hegemonic time and space of capital is viewed askance, diverted and subverted. The sea becomes what Michel Foucault (1986) calls the counter-site or heterotopia of modernity. As Cesare Casarino argues, the centrality of the sea and the ship to the making of Occidental modernity propels us to set modernity on floating foundations. Folding modernity's assumed stability back upon itself and reading the *Grundrisse* through *Moby Dick* and vice versa, for example, creates an 'interference between representational and nonrepresentational practices' (Casarino, 2002, p. 11). In the wake of Herman Melville's and Joseph Conrad's vessels, but also in the wake of the slave ships tacking back and forth between Europe, Africa and the Americas on Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic, 'the sea narrative questions not only its own foundations but also reaches beyond itself to question the foundations of a world that for several centuries had been run in all sorts of ways from ships – in questioning itself, it questions the whole world' (Casarino, 2002, p. 12). Precisely here, at the horizon's edge, the maritime passages and poetics of Coleridge, Turner, Poe, Melville, Conrad and Walcott, propose men at the limits of their provincial and patriarchal provenance.

Yet if the sea is predominantly framed by European desire and sexed by the male gender, it is also a space, as Monica Centanni argues, that has hosted those such as Polyphemus and Circe, Medea and Calypso, or Caliban and Sycorax, who have 'spoken of reasons that are inexpressible in the rationale of the *logos* that triumphs in the Occident' (Centanni, 2007). The language that frames the world always remains susceptible to appropriation by monsters, slaves, blacks, women and migrants; that is, by the excluded who speak of overlooked, unexpected, displaced and non-authorised matters. Today, that mythical Mediterranean is brutally vernacularised in the fraught journeys of anonymous men, women and children migrating across its waters: Caliban returns as an illegal immigrant, and Prospero's island, mid-way between Naples and Tunis in the sixteenth century drama, becomes modern day Lampedusa.

This ambiguous, heterotopic, seemingly uncontrollable, space is what the sharp conservatism of the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt sought to confront in his text *Land and Sea*, originally published in 1942. Through the brutal clarity of his understanding of the economical, political and legal order of European colonisation and imperialism, Schmitt anticipates the planetary scale of the historical processes of globalisation. Examining, in an essentialist, almost mythical, language, the sharply contrasted force fields of terrestrial and marine power in the making of the modern world (and foreseeing their supercession by the planetary power sustained in the air: planes, missiles and, above all, the electromagnetic waves that maintain modern communications), Schmitt incisively argues that sea travel and oceanic voyages have led to a radically new understanding of planetary space.

Still, the space of the sea, even if seemingly mastered by technology, is what the omnipotence of rationalism – *Ulysses* purposely ploughing the waves, forever homeward bound – tends to avoid. From a ship on the open sea the customary coordinates of the home, the territory, and the familiar ground beneath our feet, slip away, reduced to a distant shore. Not to cross, but to inhabit, this space is to abandon the theoretical temptation to ‘strike through the mask’ with the pretence to tap a planetary political design and rationally track the ‘mathematical’ being of multiplicity: the different, but conjuncturally connected, homes of Toni Negri, Michael Hardt and Alain Badiou. Processes and events thicken, deepen and acquire significance once they float free of precise *a priori*. Rather than conceptual conviction sustained in what Badiou announces as an ‘attempt to organize an abstract vision of the requirements of the epoch’ (Badiou, 2005, p. 4), there persists the storm raging outside that resists the rational certitude of a self-confirming logic which sees in scientific rationality the unique paradigm of thought. The philosopher’s map, secured in a classical concern with philosophy as philosophy, indifferent to plurality and the critique of the self-sufficiency of thought (as though the critical intrusions of feminism and postcolonialism, or the discourse on the ubiquity and asymmetrical procedures of power and regimes of truth, never occurred) is always perforated, torn and ripped by more worldly winds. Out of sight of land, forced to navigate in the waters of an unpredictable archipelago, subject to unauthorised winds and currents, theoretical drift is exposed to more than scholarly protocols and the overdeveloped world’s obsession with itself. In the end, it is the centrality of sea to the enterprise of modernity that promotes the adoption of a more fluid cartography in which the presumed stability of the historical archive, together with its associated ‘facts,’ territorial museums and nationalist interpretations, is set to float: susceptible to drift, unplanned contacts, even shipwreck. Deposited in the sea are histories and cultures that are held in an indeterminate suspension, connected, rather than divided, by water.

I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea fans,
dead-men’s-fingers, and then, the dead men.

I saw that the white powdery sand was their bones
ground white from Senegal to San Salvador [...] (Walcott, 1992, p. 349).

As a final gloss on this striated space, sedimented with bodies that intersect a hegemonic temporality with other times, with the times of others, Édouard Glissant reminds us that if, *à la* Carl Schmitt, the modern sea was the surface providing the royal highway of the West, for the rest of the world that same sea is also complicated by historical depth and deprivation. On the invisible sea bottom is traced the inconceivable violence and terror of slavery, drowning, racialised brutality and the wrecks of today’s savage migration (Glissant, 2005).

Fluid Archives

The fluid archive provoked by this maritime criticism and theoretical drift suggests a historiography of not how things actually were, as though fixed in time, the impossible objects of historicist desire and ‘scientific’ pretensions, but rather of how things exist in a complex but contemporary space that we call the world. Here there are artefacts, documents, material traces, but there are no historical ‘facts’ isolated from the human and social activity of interpretation. This leads to the Benjaminian insistence that history is always now; the present is always haunted and interrogated by the past: the dead continue to speak, even in the wordless insistence of images loaded with time. This suggests snapping the chains of a linear historicism that believes that the past is really past and thereby provides an unchallenged, unilateral and conclusive explanation of the present. You can change history; that is, you can configure its presence and present configuration so as to enter a diverse narration of both yesterday and today. To tread this dangerous ground is unavoidable; it is

constantly practised by the victors narrating their version of the tale. It can only be contested by counter-histories able to interrupt and interrogate that hegemonic version. This is to insist on a formation that is always heterogeneous and hybrid, and is always in the making. Such a line of argument seeks to interrupt the prevalent historical discourse with the insistence that history, precisely because it is always pertinent, always now, is not simply a matter for the historians. Here, adopting an interdisciplinary cartography, literary, visual, musical and culinary elaborations can become, for example, not merely the testimony of 'minor' histories and counter-examples, but rather can provoke and provide the critical syntax of precisely another set of histories. This also suggests, as Chris Marker so evocatively traced in his film *Sans Soleil* (1983), that memories – both those recalled and those consigned to oblivion – are indivisible from the media that record them.

If the archive is neither fixed nor permanent, then it is always under construction, always being defined. Opposed to closed narratives, invariably sealed in the narration of the nation, institutionalised in museums, school textbooks and university syllabuses, sedimented in the responses of common sense, the past never passes. Against the conceptual order proposed by the chronological lineage of events, styles, influences and genres (from historiography to art and literary histories) the archive is radically reworked – not cancelled – as an *economy of affect*.

There is, obviously, a struggle over interpretation, a fight for meanings. In this sense both the past and the future remain 'open'; that is, they continue to propose an unfolding space. This suggests that rather than being the mere outcome, or even 'victims,' of chronology we are brokers in the becoming of a critical space. Time is not the implacable verdict of what has been, but rather of what might be a cultural and social time of becoming. If all of this is to suggest that a sea of interrogations is washing against the discursive regime and disciplinary power of history, it is important to recall that this discursive regime could easily be replaced by others drawn from the social and human sciences: sociology, anthropology, literary studies, art history...

Opposed to a supposedly factual economy, and its underlying empiricism, is an affective economy that recognises itself in interested interpretations, and which seeks its rigour in the complexity of the historical locality and cultural constellation in which it moves. This is to work with the idea of an interrupted and interrupting history, a history of intervals and discontinuities, of multiple temporalities. It leads us into a shifting geography of memory (and forgetting) where meaningful details are connected with forgotten futures: a dynamic interweaving of past-present-future that is collected and collaged in a frame disciplined by the intensities of the present.

Art and the Critical Cut

This brings me to my final point and it concerns the critical disposition of the artwork. Here I am not seeking to make an argument about the politicisation of art to contrast to the aestheticisation of politics as Walter Benjamin sought to do in the 1930s. Rather, I wish to propose that the artwork should not merely be considered as a witness or testimony to a historical past, but rather provides and provokes a diverse configuration of time, being and becoming. We are not dealing with ornaments to add to the nitty-gritty and cruel drama of historical and cultural formations. Details and fragments – shafts of condensed time – sustained in artistic languages, in poetics, propose, as both Walter Benjamin and Aby Warburg argued in their different ways, another and radically different way of understanding and interpreting

those very formations. In other words, music, the visual arts, poetry, even recipes and food, are not merely metaphorical or symbolical. In their material affects and historical insistence, such languages in their very excess and undisciplined reach can also become critical, able to disturb and displace the authority of the disciplinary accounts provided by historiography, sociology, anthropology, art and literary history.

From the detail, the fragment of condensed time, from the dynamics of an image, the dissemination of sound, it becomes possible to rethink a space – the Mediterranean, modernity, Europe, the contemporary world – and propose an unsuspected sense of place and belonging which can no longer be presumed to be of a unique origin or explanation. Against the desire for conclusive transparency sought by policy and politics, by governance, there is in the excess of language, in its undisciplined reach, a poetics. It is this latter worlding of the world that not only leaves politics speechless but also perpetually promotes a critical interval and interruption, which, in inducing crisis, holds open a critical space that runs through, alongside and beyond the immediate pragmatics of time and place.

The screen of the sea, like the cinema screen theorised by Gilles Deleuze, not only reflects us but, in registering our limits, proposes the dehumanisation of images (Deleuze, 1986). As Claire Colebrook glosses Deleuze: the visual is freed from the subject and released to yield its autonomous powers (Colebrook, 2006, p. 43). We are brought into the presence of a contingent, temporal relation, and the multiplicity of the present that is irreducible to its representation. This proposes the Deleuzian prospect of an altogether ‘more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time’ (Colebrook, 2006, p. 17) Between perception and a response emerges a zone of feeling, a resonance, a vibration, the power of an *affect*, that inaugurates the passionate geography evoked by Giuliana Bruno’s ‘atlas of emotion’ (Bruno, 2007). We are presented with time that exists beyond the linguistic act of nomination, beyond the subject that produces its image. This is why for Deleuze, and here we should ponder on the intense immediacy of so much contemporary art works, art is not the expression of humanity, or an underlying unity, but is rather the release of imagination from its human and functional home. Impossible we might say, and yet a necessary threshold that a non-representational and affective art seeks endlessly to cross. The veracity of the image is now to be located elsewhere, it is no longer a simple support – realism, mimesis – for narration, but is rather itself the narrating force. There are not images of life, but images as life; a life already imagined, activated and sustained in the image. There is not first the thought and then the image. The image itself is a modality of thinking. It does not represent, but rather proposes, thought. This is the potential dynamite that resides within the image: it both marks and explodes time. This is the unhomey insistence of the artwork, its critical cut, and its interruption. In the artwork, in the movement and migration of language, denomination is sundered from domination as it races on, along an unsuspected critical path through the folds of a de-possessed modernity.

So, we have travelled with the ontological challenge of the sea to the critical cut of the artwork: both evoke an interruption and potential exit from a humanism that consistently seeks to secure and insure the world of the subject. The perspective that arrives from the heterotopic site of the sea and the artistic interval in representational reason provides the freedom for a critical piracy that raids the self-assured stability of a thinking grounded in the provincial immediacies of a unique locale and language. This is to suggest an idea of history, profoundly indebted to the critical *oeuvre* of Walter Benjamin, in which knowledge, sustained by the search for new beginnings, proposes history not from a stable point, but via a movement in which the historian emerges not as the source but as the subject who can never fully command nor comprehend her language.

The historian, as Georges Didi-Huberman argues, is set to float, called upon to navigate in languages, currents and conditions not of her own making (Didi-Huberman, 2000). From this 'Copernican revolution of the historical vision' (Benjamin, 1973) there emerges the post-humanist confirmation that what we see does not commence from the eye, but from the external light of the world that strikes it. In the same key, it is not we who research the past, but the past that researches us (Didi-Huberman, 2000). This is to engage with a history composed of intervals, irruptions and interruptions. It is a history that speaks of the past, of oblivion, while seeking to open the doors of justice on the future. This is a history delineated in the explosive explication of time rather than in the mental unity of an isolated intellect. All of which is to suggest a worldly modernity that migrates, susceptible to unlicensed winds and currents: a modernity that seeds a discontinuous history, always out of joint with the synthesis required of an epoch that seeks only the self-confirmation of its will.

At Port Bou in Spain there exists a window on the sea. There, where Walter Benjamin is buried, is the memorial by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan entitled *Passages*. Two steel walls, rusted red by the salt and the sea, plunge downwards towards the rocks and blue of the Mediterranean. A glass panel suspended between these walls of steel intersects our gaze; on it is inscribed a modified citation from the *Theses on the Philosophy of History*:

Schwerer ist es, das Gedächtnis der Namenlosen zu ehren als das Berühmten. Dem Gedächtnis der Namenlosen ist die historische Konstruktion geweiht.

(It is more arduous to honour the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned.)

Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless.)

A window on the sea, open to the storm blowing in from oblivion, sustains an aperture on a justice that has yet to come.



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Insights

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