

**All tomorrow parties.
culture and youth
(21stc)**

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And here lies the key to everything: since adults never raise their eyes to the greatness and fullness of meaning, their experience becomes the Philistine Gospel and makes them spokesmen of the triviality of life. Adults do not conceive of the existence of anything beyond experience, of -non experiential- principles that we devote ourselves to.

Walter Benjamin, *Metaphysics of youth*.

Man is a recent invention, Foucault would suggest. When was youth invented? Is it a still more recent non inventible invention, from the beginning of this very century, the projection of something that still continues to be, and will necessarily always continue to be pending invention?

It could be: but I would prefer to venture a more specific genealogical hypothesis, at least for now: Youth is –as was *man* in the Renaissance and the Illustration- a romantic invention. They began to think seriously, as primordial horizons of the existence of man, death, poetry (*id est*: music) and desire. And that crucial crossroads is youth. Therefore, Werther is the first youth in the history of humanity. The wave of inspired suicides that followed his appearance was the first European youth movement (young is he who dies on time –in not having left off being so). Nowadays, Kurt Cobain is the last youth we have heard from. Too much yearning for life, too much passion over meaning, over truth. Too much desire that life itself have it all, be spoken all over, discover all its others –and inhabit them, disseminated throughout them. Too much tension over being and an absent disposition to be consoled with the negotiated solutions. Can I recall any others now?: Ian Curtis, before they premier the ridiculous movie they are sure to be making about his existence. They will never do him justice: a youngster is a precise and inscrutable relationship with his own interiority –something that anyone like him is capable of perceiving, but that a camera could never narrate.

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Certainly, the most recent contemporaneousness –the doorstep of the 21st century- situates youth in a place of previously unknown relevance. There is much to be said about this –it is a key indicator of the transformations of our age- but first and foremost we must distance this growing preponderance from the viewpoint the most elemental socioeconomic analysis would rush to contribute. Doubtless, the basic future of youths as figures of the era –and of youth in general then, as the major form of culture of our time- has to do with the ascension of youth as a wealthy consumer class –and that with an opulent state of societies capitalizing on leisure and therefore permitting it. While that analysis is no less certain, indeed, it is necessary to sharpen the perspective. The unquestionable centrality of the young look at the current world sinks its main root into something much deeper and more interesting: in the generalized devastation of certainties, in a tectonic upheaval of all the bases aiming at a global comprehension of the world. Without it, all youths –in other words: all those disarmed before the comprehension of our existence, all exposed to the inclemency of life, all with everything left to invent. Furthermore, they are alone in this role –the rest are out of

place, uncomfortable, displaced, condemned to the senselessness of early retirement or the pathetic phenomenon of cultural *lifting*, of being what one is not. But let us not convert that displacement into a question –we do not mean to refer to ourselves with respect to them, but rather to elude any paternalism, any position of surreptitious disdain (including lavish praise). We wish to admit, without concessions or palliatives, the evident superiority of youth culture. But this is almost a pleonasm: actually, today, let us say so once and for all, only youth is, authentically, culture.

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Such an affirmation immediately exacts arguments. I shall explain: I want to say that the terms in which the meaning of culture is redefining itself today indeed causes that notion to tend to leave off being predicable of territories, dominions, practices, disciplinary inventories, expressive vocabularies, cognitive sediments, ... various areas that, rightly, we used to call "culture". If we are speaking of complex operatives adequate to inhabit the world, one must say there are very few left –and they arise in places that, before, only with condescension were considered culture (they were habitually labeled as subcultures). We are now witnessing, however, a rebellion against those lesser, peripheral programs, in an all out assault on the bastions of supposed knowledge. Past are the times of the principality of ancient patrimonial culture based on experience, memory and sedimentary settling of what is already known: it lacks answers for the world we have, for the world to come. Not that youth has any answers. The thing is that in this lacking, youth feels comfortable, in its place. The world itself – in its refractory contemporary inaccessibility- that has become insultingly young, irresolute, and all the demands this implies points to the only sector of the population that has not lost its capacity to be itself –in the midst of that devastation (of intelligence, of the capacity to understand). What was said of surrealism some time ago can now be said of the youth culture: it represents the last picture of intelligence in the world.

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Herein is the reason why I do not like to discuss adolescence: because it must be determined within a *have not*, a *still have not*, a lack, (an adolent). But that is a false supposition, defined from the position occupied by one who believes he has managed to overcome it, to leave it behind. And that is erroneous: the adolescent does not define himself as being at fault, incomplete, nor even in the interim of a transition –but rather in the grandiosity of an excessive vision. It is he who comprehends existence in all its depth; it is he who intuits the scope of the challenge named by the human being. The latter access to a maturation of understanding –is nothing but an indignant deplorable succession of claudicating defeats –the apprenticeship of deception. Then, let us name it with that other more noble label –and painful for everyone who, knowing his heraldry, pales with envy at already having lost it. *Youth*.

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The totality of youth can build itself around one single image, one single song lyric. It is the complete world concentrated in one complex point, that is loaded with questioning, that beseeches the system in its totality. It may be that "my world" (I like to sound Wittgensteinian) would hesitate to build itself around black and white images of students throwing stones on Parisian streets, around the young pregnant woman who sang the one about hair full of flowers in the movie *Monterrey Pop*, around the stray image of Neil Young on the inner album sleeve of *Harvest*, around the pressure Lennon put on his headphones in search of the right tone to maintain, over and over again, *all you need is love* –what does it matter? I can just as well imagine a youth built around the image of an airplane blowing up one of the WTC towers: the object, the sign

in itself is not important, but rather the fact that at one point, the entire world gives away to its heart to become inexcusable, to become a succinct enigma. If it were possible to answer that (non) question contained therein; if it were possible to untangle the imaginary identifier there postulated, then the question of who one is would light up. A world, the world, that chilling unfolding of time on the always displaced, always fleeing point that outlines the elusive edge of the present.

All youths utter that terrible truth: that the only density of the world is always to come (and if it is expressed in some place, it only does so as a backlight of the unsaid –that the innumerable sum of what is cast like an incognito, as an enigma- as an undecided plus, as a gradient, as slope direction, as a moment of the strength of a system in *unstable equilibrium*). There is no real *knowledge of the world* –where one looks somewhere other than forward, as did Rimbaud, the fortuneteller.

For this reason, and not only potentially, every youth is *the* messiah –a live promise that the world is being saved, has been saved in him, will always be saved in its infinite possible transformations –at every instant.

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There is a transformation underway, of the meaning of culture in current societies, which causes its entire old antiquated signification to vanish into the air. We could describe it as the coming RAM of contemporary culture.

Up until very recent times, indeed, the meaning of culture was the construction of filed memories, ROM devices –memories accessible for reading- that permitted safeguarding the past, its sedimentation as a dispatch toward our present. Culture was primordially *Mnemosyne*, force of remembrance, that basic disposition that all our accomplishments could be read as the work of “dwarves to giant men”. Culture was the active instrument of that recurring presence of ancestors: it was the force of tradition, its inertial weight in the construction of the present.

But the new cultures are only RAM devices, process memories –not sedimentary, not archival- not reproductive. There is less and less need for archives, all the information is found on line, is merely operative, horizontal. All relevant data is active in the operational mechanics itself, in the programming it processes. There is no tradition; there is no memory –except for the very memory activated by work, by process. And it is a memory without image, a mere linguistic, functional disposition, a sort of spasmodic architecture of ones and zeros, of yeses and noes, that, at all times, plays its immediate *influenza*. The force that moves it is not remembrance, the tension of repetition of what is already known. There are no figures that can contain it –tradition is no longer operative, as a genetic force. The new signs enlighten themselves without the resource of any known forms, not even configured ones. The repetition of what is identical is no longer the profound structure of the form of our culture –finally, in the history of humanity, a mode of culture appears that does not work under the figures of tradition, of the re-presentation, of the repetition of what is identical. Actually, the idea of post-history is rooted here with all its force. There is nascent culture that is not constituted as an instrument of *reproduction of life* –of its worlds and modes, but rather, purely and simply, as a *production* device, as an effective machine of active construction of worlds of *new*, unknown life. For the future of humanity, everything is yet to be constructed. We can say it in two ways: humanity enters into a post historic phase –or our culture is inevitably and overwhelmingly becoming a blind instrument of compulsively *young* habitation of the earth, into a device and memory process with a zero degree of access to stabilized figures that can condition from the past the forms of the present with some *compulsion for repetition*.

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This characteristic –which converts production into the blind work of a purely intuitive machinotic, lacking any guidance, any imitative-reproductive-repetitive necessity- grants youth an exceptional power. Like the **ICS** -understood as a non figural and purely productive machine- he knows how to deal with those purely tensional states, defined as abstract games of forces. For this reason, actually, the young world always relates poorly with the production of images –and, however, they are at a substantial advantage before operatives such as music, which is strictly abstract, passionate, pure geometry of desire that only configures a tension of meaning in the state of suspension, levitated before being grounded in any identifiable forms ... (images: the figurative in relation to the repeatable).

That ever fading –suspended- state of the imagery appearing with the purest musicians: Joy Division, Suede, RadioHead, Muse ... All genuine music resists what is figurative, rejects being fixed. And every image is a fixed state, frozen architecture, graph, sign. While all music is a mere slope direction, more like an event –a “happening”- than a state ...

Equation: since culture is going RAM (abstract drawing without a filing device), the history of humanity is falling into the hands of youth (and it is characterized by a construction of the future, never again as a reproduction of the past). Corollary: the new imaginings find their geometries in the abstract tensional architectures (the musical and affective ones as models) –falling into disuse, however, is the potential of things figural (repetition, fixation of signs in identity schemes).

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All the contemporary engineering of the **self** (the technologies of the body, biogenetics, the multiplied possibilities of aesthetic surgery, the entire industry of appearance, fashion, cosmetology, biochemistry and cyberdelics) are creating an expanded youth territory. Contemporary demographic studies postulate a growing elderly population in the most advanced societies. This thesis, however, which in absolute terms (in average age of the population) is irrefutable, does not take into account the expansion of the space definable as “youth”. In the first place is the territory that, little by little, youth snatches –in a Mephistophelean operation, by way of which “time” is bought by exchanging the “soul”, constituted identity- from maturity, from old age. The average life expectancy in modern societies is constantly increasing, but it does so accompanied by quality demands –which do not imply a prolongation of the stage of maturity, and less so that of old age, but rather that of youth. Even the new elderly class is conceived (by all service industries, cultural tourism, engineering of experience) as a second youth –not even as prolonged maturity. Nobody wishes to delay the age of retirement, but to the contrary, to hasten it and gain access as soon as possible to that privileged state of second youth into which the new elderly class is constituted. The state of “maturity”, of responsibility, is the one that unfailingly tends to be shortened, in favor of states of expanded youth, which offer themselves as possibilities at any moment in the subject’s life, irregardless of the time on their biological clocks: here also (as with sex or the definition of gender) biology is no longer an absolute conditioner. The territories of definition of experience are virtual and belong entirely to the symbolical order –to the crossroads and the negotiation that the imagination is capable of maintaining with that, ever fading register that we call ... what is *real*.

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Also on the other end –that is, on the end of childhood/adolescence- the youth period is prolonged. Let us say that there is access to it **earlier**. The dominion of childhood is getting shorter all the time: educational tales and the relation to modes of comprehension of the world which characterize childhood are suspended earlier. The phase of children's stories lapses quickly into a relationship with discursive productions and practices (sports, evermore sexualized imagery, early leisure culture, teen and even preteen music, light nightclubs...) that we can identify as youth –the child and the adolescent are rapidly invoked by a culture that is omnipresent, in all the showcases, and that remains permanently present (the *Nike* culture, let us say). Their imagery of identification is hastily juvenile: an eight-year-old boy hardly negotiates recognition equations anymore in the offerings of the Disney Channel or the Cartoon Network: his imagery of identification are found in the television series about tainted adolescents or the whole subculture of the console, of *Lara Croft* and *Final Fantasy* (with imagery that correspond better to a youth culture, sexualized in explicit ways, than with the fabled narratives of moral models of the world). Ever more, ever earlier, the child-adolescent is a subject invoked to recognize himself pierced by the tensions that define existence as an interrogation, as an enigma, under a compulsion, impossible to renounce, of authenticity, of meaning –like youth.

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But behind, around and on top of all that, there is an definitive expansion of the territory of youth, which concerns the totality of contemporary psychic life: the fact that the new subjects of knowledge and experience are constituted as flimsy, unstable, incapable of flaunting any degree of consistence elevated (a level of resourcefulness) within them. The new subject finds itself continuously subjected to infinite mobility (mobility that is territorial, physical, social, economic, of class and beliefs, affective ...) that makes it extremely difficult for it to consolidate itself as a stable identity. The old Mega-machines that produced sociability –State, Land, Country, Religion, Family,...- that traditionally assumed the charge of producing the subject in a context of solid identification, are demolished like old dinosaurs from another time, seeing their roles displaced and replaced by new micro machines, generators of purely provisional and continuously revised effects of identity, or by identification mechanisms –logos, industries of collective imagery- that are banal and unstable. This converts ours into a “risk society”, as Ulrich Beck would say, societies of insecurity in which the subject lacks firm and stable structures to support his existence, and is facing the continual challenge of permanent construction. From this perspective, that of youth becomes the paradigmatic contemporary way of being. As a response to his demands, a new industry aimed precisely at supplying the subject those instruments of self construction is emerging and growing, an entire industry of subjectivity, of the spirit, whose task is defined in the order of immaterial work –the production of meaning and passion, of effects of meaning and desire- of the affective and intellectual work –that defines the new statute of advanced capitalism in the terms of a cultural capitalism.

Indeed, the cultural production assumes all the responsibilities regarding the processes of subjection, identity production and its inscription in collective communal contexts. That role and growing preponderance acquired by cultural industries –in their unstoppable fusion with those of entertainment and leisure- radically politicizes its spaces, making good Negri's conviction that the new political task is designed around one main scenario: that of social reproduction, of the worlds of life. If youth (defined as a subject undergoing the process of auto-production) is converted, in this perspective, not only into a new protagonist of history, but also into a unique potentially revolutionary subject, we can also affirm that artistic practices –as apparatus of critical construction of subjectivity and sociability, of experience and community- are

constituted as their most important instrument, in the most effective (if only potentially) revolutionary arms imaginable.

In a direct syllogism:

- A) The emergence of cultural capitalism dynamites the old strongholds constitutive of forceful arguments of identity. *Ergo*, contemporary societies are constituted as risk societies, for which every *subject becoming* is a work –precisely the work of becoming, of managing to be so. *Ergo*, a youth is raised as the subject’s paradigm of every contemporary way of being –since he is precisely the one who is “*not being*”.
- B) That same emergence of cultural capitalism displaces the potentialities (and the responsibilities) of identity construction toward the cultural industries. *Ergo*, art is gradually charged with a new political responsibility defined around immaterial work –the production of desire and concept, of meaning and emotiveness -: to build apparatus of community and experience that make possible the inscription and the criticism of the effect of identity construction induced by the efficiency of the new, and increasingly settled, industries of subjectivity.

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A few years ago, Retruécano participated as a young artist in a Young Art Show: “I am not an artist, and much less young.”

Today, without denying him the sharp aphorism, in all seriousness we could affirm the reverse: only when young is it possible to be an artist (Joyce in intuition). And inversely, also true: only when an artist is it possible to be young.

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It would be advisable to distance ourselves from any easy identification between youth and banality –in fact, that is the reason I do not partake in the use of the term “juvenile subcultures”. Undoubtedly, the leisure and entertainment industries and cultural consumption find an easy market in the juvenile sector (in that its demand to become is candent): but the relationship between youngsters and their objects is anything but superficial. To the contrary, their demands of them exceed any disposition to complacency –the adult stage is more likely to be constituted by claudicating, by accepting the organization of its existence under its empire (a trivial empire). Therefore, Benjamin is right to situate the statute of youth in relation to the expectance of the fulfillment of meaning, in relation to an incomparable greatness of values, in the rejection of the triviality of experience. In the end, adults are the ones who conform with *the world we have* –in its extreme insufficiency- whereas youngsters project always greater demands, defined by $n+1$, non conformable. Their horizon is constructed precisely in the perception of the infiniteness of the possibilities –and their approach to the concrete effect (the concrete object, the concrete subject, the person, the chosen life, the inhabited world, the chosen singular) projects that expectation to recognize in it the presence of the series, of the virtual infinity to which they belong, of the universe in which they find meaning, and the fact that through each specific singularity they express themselves...

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Three scenarios –to conclude- in which this projection of the virtual infinity of what is possible in the concrete singular is specified, is incarnated –like scenarios characteristic of the life of youth, of their own culture: the face (as a dimension

embodying the proper noun), the amorous experience and the party, as a community scene.

The first, the face –there is no scenario as scrutinized in the contemporary art that looks at youth. That flat and frontal look –as characteristic of those first photo booth photographs by Thomas Ruff as of the latest ones by Rineke Dijkstra- shows the youth confronting the scenario of an unaccomplished identity, subjected to the enormous tension of a world in which all the arguments of stabilized differential expression have been swept away, under the present *orientation of the reality of the masses*. Those young faces are moments of oscillation between absolute inexpressiveness of the *still-not-having-succeeded-to-be* one, all astray in the mass mute crowd and subjected to the vocation of being everyone, the passion of being an absolute, the series. The moment of the young face is the scarcity of features, of a personal gesture; it is zero affirmation. But that zero –that is telling of the absence of a proper noun- is simultaneously tension of virtuality, recognition in the series: not being anyone and being whoever without a name, the affirmation of the complete series in the zero. That expressionless face is also any possible face: all the possibilities of the *produced appearance* (the make-up, the hair-cut, tattoos and piercings, etc.) happen perfectly naturally, possibly. Faces are open laboratories of experimentation; every gesture, every modulation of the aspect, appears as a possibility (among many others): features are still not the incarnated memory of gestures, nor sedimentation, but tension with respect to the future, the route taken by singularity through the multiple space wherein it is inscribed, passion for multiplicity. The youth's face is not closed affirmation, but an announcement of possibilities, a sketch of the identity that speculates its project in the marks of difference, an affirmation of the multiplicity not declined to self scrutiny as also a dominion of the other, of all others –where the voice in “legion”, and at the same time “nobody”, utters its proper name as a community name, the only one appropriate for that inebriated state of the subject who gets lost in the recognition of his own contingency, in the disconcerting experience of his own unnecessary –and, refusing to build parapets falsifying certainties against this, he looks forward toward the abyss into which (his own adventure) he abnegates himself and delves deeply, like a mystery, like a promise, like an enigma.

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Second scenario, his *par excellence*, the youth's: the scenario of desire, of amorous passion. For the youngster, this is the definitively suitable scenario: here is where he measures all his strength and feels all the inducements. The construction of his economy of affection brings into play the singularized architecture that organizes his particular way of experiencing all the orders of things symbolic, the negotiations of real things with the potentials of his imagination. It is a territory in which, once again, the youngster moves with pleasure, precisely because he is dealing with an abstract economy, that works with variables, mute operators and virtual equations. Singularity once again encounters the universal equation, the tectonic figure. The articulating scheme of desire, the laws that regulate and administer their regulation clash with a perception that intuits the unlimited dimension of the structure: no constriction is lived except as a despotic imposition worthy of all disdain, all rebellion and an unlimited exercise of transgression. The universality encouraged by that intuition of the unlimited –*new skin for the old ceremony*- calls for the crossing of transgression: any figural law clashes with that purely tensional moment that defines his impassioned state –no longer his love but rather his desire to love/and to be loved. No precise figure satisfies this requirement, except as an expression and moment of the series. The loved one is always the totality of the objects of desire that appear on the other side of the oedipal norm, of the triangulation that subjects desire to the empire of repetition (“*many loved before us/I know that we're not new...*”, sings Cohen). Attracted by the abyss of infinite

possibility, the youngster also loves, in each one of his choices, all the others, all the unfulfilled ones. It is precisely this, that in the first place makes his adventure an unforgettable episode, such an exquisite intoxicating trance. But it is also what shapes it into a lover god –nobody who experiences that desire projected on the infinite series can resist its temptation, despite the boundless risk it poses- for the youngster who knows how to devote himself to that incomparable sweetness.

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Third and last scenario: the party –that place where the construction of experience is carried out by undifferentiated immersion in the group, in the community- in that perfect and contingent community that embraces and disseminates itself forever in the infinite nocturnal moment –the most perfect night of our lives, of all lives. The perfect unrepeatable singularity of that party –shared with our peers, with those others with whom, in their extreme contingency identical to our own, we recognize ourselves- deserves and demands, like the song of the inebriated Zarathustra, eternity, perfect and absolute eternity. The eternity of a time of plenary that expands into the accomplished conquest of one unique and perfect now-time, of an instant that forever becomes eternal –in its extreme ephemeral nature. An eternity fulfilled by having once been, if it was intensely. If we were at those parties, yes, we are invited (by Nico, still singing with Velvet) to all of the future ones. Their time belongs to all of us, in that enigmatic form of *community to come*, whose construction, it has been said, would indeed be the political task of our generation. And what can I say to you? It is exciting to see the lucid way in which it, with back turned to a world of such ostensible blindness, is confronted, day after day, by those who only look forward, by those who possess the entire future, by those for whom the meaning of culture is nothing but the expression of that incandescent tension toward an order of such non claudicating values, yearnings and expectancies, that only intuiting it brings tears to our eyes due to the remembrance of what –perhaps a long time ago, perhaps still- we love to become and the potency with which we radically refuse –then and maybe forever- to conform ... with even one iota less.