

Reification and the spectacle: The Etymology of “bioptikon”

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Abstract: Bioptikon, a term spawned by cyberpoetic subculture in New York in the mid-1990s, is not simply a clever linguistic attempt to singularise “glasses” or “spectacles”. Implicit in the term is a richer autocritique of the very subculture that brought it into existence.

The bioptikon—as a cultural artefact, as a semiotic signpost and as etymological curio—can stand in as an indication of where we are “at”, of the “kind of thing one can say about a person these days: Jenkins Butler for instance”. The term originated in the mid-1990s in the discourse of the New York cyberpoet subculture chronicled in Liam Davis’s sociological investigation “From Beat to Cyberpoetry” (Liam Davis, 1998). Davis, referred to this subculture as “the bastard child of neoliberal Prometheism and postmodern culture jamming, shot through with a post-Kantian ethical brisance”, capturing well the heady atmosphere that spawned many linguistic neophytes, most of which, even now, defy categorisation. For an outsider, arriving on the scene some years after Davis chronicled this scene in its heyday, the sense of trepidation stepping into the now fabled Donkey Hospital Bar in the Lower East Side, dubbed the cyberDonkey by regulars, was akin to that felt by many a Jesuit arriving at some Melanesian outpost during the endgame of the first colonial phase (truncated by the battle for the Pacific in the second half of the “short 20th century”): “Hostility, insularity, messianism—a heady brew.” (Marus Felps, 1982)

This was not simply a cultural battleground, the last hurrah of the cyberpunks, as Nigel Phillips has argued (Nigel Phillips, 2001). The “scene” was a linguistic battleground too—something played down systematically by Phillips and the other apostles of “post-semiotic discourse analysis” (Brian Horace, 2002). Bubbling up from the cyberDonkey zymurgy was a rich foment of phases, rich in possibilities for an archaeology of cultural discourse. To some extent this was not new. It built on the Leet Orthography that had been born in the 1980s subculture of mainframe geeks, but

what was new was the extent to which the argot of the cyberpoet milieu saw itself, self-consciously, fiercely and narcissistically (Liam Davis, 2000), as a critique. In fact, contra Davis, one might argue that the work of at least a section of this milieu saw itself not simply as critique, but as auto-critique, the hallmark of critical-theoretical praxis (Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 1997).

This auto-critique took aim at the culture of reification of cultures that had given rise to the subculture itself. It was reflexive—supple.

The reification of this metaculture (one is tempted to say, with Horace, orthoculture) was not simply the transformation of the culture of relations (or the relations constitutive of culture) into their real-abstract referents, but also, conversely, the transformations of real-concrete referents into cultural counterparts: into “ghost forms” (Paris Brown, 2003).

Bioptikon is an instance of one particular meme within this wider anti-hypostatisation process/discourse. At a certain point, either 1992 (as Liam Davis claims) or perhaps slightly later, the critique of plurals came to the fore. This actually foreshadowed the ontological turn in the late Badiou, as several authors have remarked (for instance, Mark Robertson, 2002). The focal point of this sub-auto-critique was, interestingly, personal artefacts: in particular legware and eyeware. Later currents added footwear to the list. The first particular instance of what Davis has termed “critique by singularisation” (CBS) was that of legware. Trousers (pants in the US), in particular were singularised. There is some evidence, based on personal towelling through the verbal fossil record, that the first form of

this was to attempt to establish trouser as the CBS-form. But this was subject to a swingeing (if tacit) critique by the broader subculture. The trouser (pant) was simply a castrated trousers (pants). A new signifier was required. But the shift from what post-feminist subculture activists called castration-singularisation attempts towards what were now being termed semiotic singularisation strategies coincided with the shift (probably in late 1993) towards eyeware, in particular glasses, as a new “focus” (if one will excuse the play on words).

Here, as Robertson remarks, “We see the coming together not simply of attempts to singularise the plural, but also of various concerns of this community [sic], in particular: the geek-hood signifier par excellence, spectacles, and the obsession of cyberfreaks since the 1980s, a concern with the omnipresence of observation.” (Mark Robertson, 2002). Robertson could, but doesn’t, add that this marked the fusion of CBS with both the spectacle and the “spectacle”! Indeed the term used to replace glasses as a singular term, bi-optikon, was a riff on panopticon (Jeremy Bentham, 1995). This reflects the verbal riffing imported into this subculture from the wider subculture of culture jamming that began to impinge from the mid-1990s. The panopticon marked the reification, and through reification, inversion, of the “society” of the spectacle. With apologies to Marx, one might say that the American cyberpunks achieved in language what other nations (the British disciplinarians) were achieving with the “architecture of control”.

Bi-optikon is a ghost form for a reification of the CBS critique itself: subterranean rumours from an earlier age, inscribed upon the face of the present, indelible and faint, permanent and fluid, like the subculture it imputes as cogenerator of its semiotic backdrop.

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