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“Se lo do all’Uomo Nero”*
Political anatomy of passions

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* “Se lo do all’Uomo Nero” (Ninna nanna, ninna oh / To whom shall I give this baby? / If I give it to bogeyman / He’ll keep it for an entire year) is a verse of a popular lullaby that tells of night’s fears and of the Black Man (the Boogeyman) who comes and take away the children.
The Dancing Plague 1517

On 14 July 1518, a strange case occurred in Strasbourg: a woman, named Frau Troffer, began to dance fervently in the streets of the city / without music or reason, Frau Troffer continues to dance for days, in a trance, interrupting only when she falls to the ground exhausted, and then starts again. By the end of a week, 34 others were “infected” and took to dancing. It is the beginning of a real epidemic, which infected in a short time hundreds of citizens, predominantly women. People cannot stop dancing until their feet bleed. After days and nights of uncontrollable dances during which they scream and ask for help, the dancers begin to die: heart attacks, stroke, hunger, exhaustion. There will be more than 400 dead. At the beginning of September, the mad dancers are deported and interned, and the epidemic stops as mysteriously as it began.

The case of Strasbourg caused a sensation in sixteenth-century Europe, marked by economic crises, plagues, famines, social fears. A year earlier, in 1517, Luther had nailed the 95 theses on the door of the Wittenberg cathedral: the leaflet that had the most consequences in the history of mankind.

More, in the spring of 1517, the Spanish conquistadors appeared to the Maya in the Yucatan. The hypothesis formulated at the time to explain the collective dance epidemic is based on the theory of humours: the cause is attributed to the prevalence of one of the four basic moods, tending to excess blood, which presided over the so-called “sanguine temperament”, or “hot blood”. Like the blood - so even the Alsatian dancers were exaggeratedly playful and uninhibited / possessed by a cheerful hysteria / although this joy after a few hours was reversed in terror, and then in death. A social overheating of the blood’s temperature in the bodies.

Passions can assume many forms. They are contagious. They spread, are passed on. They are exchanged (economies of exchange).

Purpose of this talk is to analyse two implicit assumptions: that passions and emotions belong to the private and intimate sphere – that they are private; that they are immediate data, and then connected to instinct, to biologic heritage – they are inborn. These two assumptions (which are a sort of implicit metaphysics (we inherit - in language, for example - implicit premises, a frame within which we think, and this is why philosophy cannot be a specialised job) they have political implications. They define a precise political economy of affects, and this economy plays its role in strengthening racism and phobias.

We live in a post-ideological time, we hear it so often. What does this mean? It does not mean that we simply dismissed ideologies with their orthodox apparatus. It means ideas have lost their importance, their grip on the world, their consistency. What are social life and politics ruled by? The temperature of emotions has risen in public scene, opening it to authoritarian forms based on consensus (consent), rather than on obedience.

Here is a series of questions organising a line of thoughts:
present: if resentment has assumed a very definite political form (it rules this country), why do anxiety and depression remain private, to be handled by individuals? How do resentment and hate speech work? How do we react to resentment? With more of it? What are grammars of passions and how can we subvert and recombine them?

+ Words: emotions | passions | affects |(feelings) // A small glossary as orientation

In order to orient ourselves in outline, we can say that these terms belong to different debates and periods. The word “emotions” starts being used recently (end of the 18th century), and it was linked to the individual, to the birth of psychology and social and behavioural sciences. “Passions-affects” are more ancient notions, that belong to the traditional philosophical debates. Today, we’ll use them indifferently, but pointing out the differences when we encounter them.

| PASSION |

In the philosophical tradition passions are considered as the opposite of reason: where reason is the site of argument, of logos, of language, of abstract thoughts, passions are connected to senses, to matter, to corporeal, to errors. We need to get rid of it to reach knowledge, and therefore freedom.

*Etymology: from the Latin passio (suffering) derive both passion and passive / These words are not sexually neutral, they are associated with femininity: fear of emotions is associated - also in the word itself - with fear of passiveness: being emotional means being more feminine, subject to, vulnerable. An emotional education based on obligatory heterosexuality. In the active-passive conceptual couple a sexual representation is at work: the patriarchal male fear of the penetration. Being passive, being penetrated. Anal terror. 
Passion is also connected to another constellation of words: pathos, pathology, pathological, the “illnesses” field. Passions as body’s alterations.

Passion and passive imply something less, a decrease in comparison with the fullness of the healthy, heterosexual male subject, and therefore they indicate women, homosexual, feminised men, sexual minorities. Feminism does not only acknowledges and deconstructs this “less”, it do transforms it into an affirmation. Feminism always teaches us that “subaltern” is a place of the political and can therefore become a space in which to produce subjectivities: the body, the passions, the private, the domestic, the sex - traditionally excluded from politics, left out of language - they become political again.

| EMOTIONS |

Here we find a different origin: “emotion” comes from lat. e-movere, move outside, away from oneself (verb of movement) / migrate, move from one place to another / transportation / to move, to touch / tend to (the other) / motion/e-motion.

One of the many reasons why it is impossible to stop migrations is that we are “migration” ourselves, every e-motion is a movement from oneself outward.
Not only animals, but also the most elemental biological organisms have emotional states: this throws into crisis the central position of human and its hierarchies. A paramecium can recognize danger and reacts by moving. “E-motional movement” which make the paramecium move towards a more pleasant, richer in nutritional substances environment. Emotions can be read as tendencies.

Instead, I won’t use the word “feelings” at all. The neuroscientist Antonio Damasio described the difference between emotions and feelings this way: emotions are public, external, visible, they are manifestations, expressions, while feelings are an internal and private matter, they are the mental images of what is going on in our body when we are experiencing an emotion. Emotions and feeling are closely connected, but - contrary to what we could commonly think - emotions always precede feelings, they are the primary matter. Feelings occur after we become aware of physical changes produced by emotions, as snapshots of our physical state.

| AFFETTI |

I will mean the affects not as they are use in everyday language, but as they are outlined in the philosophical debate. This term recurs in western philosophy up to the XVII century and beyond, but it has returned to be considered as a crucial laboratory-concept within contemporary debates and feminist epistemologies (the Affective Turn).

Affetto/affect: past participle of afficio / I am touched, hit, influenced, put in a certain state / weakened, suffering (hunger weakens the body). Here something changes, the relational statute comes into play. Spinoza is the philosopher who, more than any other, dealt with affects, upstream in respect with traditional western philosophy: the radical assumption that there is no opposition between passions and reason represents the foundation of his political philosophy.

+ Non what, but how / Grammar of passions

At the beginning of The Cultural Politics of Emotions, the feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed invites us to ask ourselves not “what are emotions?”, but rather “what do emotions do?” How do they act? This shifting is a crucial movement of thought because it opens a critical perspective. Asking “what it is?” means asking questions about the essence, on a metaphysical level. On the contrary, the question “how do passions act?” highlights the performative aspect, the action. It instantly involves the dimension of doing.

According to Spinoza, affects are natural phenomena. He describes affects (emotions) in terms of bodies encountering, particles colliding. The best way to visualize affects as Spinoza means them, is imagining them as imprints, that bodies imprint on one another (impressions). I’m hot: an external body is operating on mine, solar particles are influencing my particles. If it’s too hot we feel bad, we get sad. But the warmth can also be pleasant, I am fine.

Another example from Che cosa piú un corpo, the lessons of Gilles Deleuze on Spinoza. I meet Luisa. I don’t like her, I’m affected by sadness, I keep walking. Then I meet Giulia, I like her, she affects me positively. When I move from the idea of Luisa to the idea of Giulia, something changes. This transition from sadness to joy, this change of bodily state is called affect. What does happen then, in this succession of ideas? My power (potentia) to acting increases or decreases. According to Spinoza, joy is an increase in a body’s power to acting, while sadness is a diminution, an impotence. To exist is this perpetual emotional variation, as a musical score, going from joy to sadness. Increase-
diminution-increase-diminution of the force of exist. Composition of bodies, pleasant and unpleasant encounters, continuous variation of affects.

Why is Spinoza’s theory still so interesting in our feminist perspective? Because it can be applied to human bodies but also to non-human, post-human and inorganic ones, without monopolies or hierarchies; it is a general theory of bodies and affects, it places the human back into nature, while nature is seen as an acting-thinking matter. Matter is active, alive, not a passive support, it is crossed by emotional trajectories and variations of intensity through which it is put together and broken up, it forms in new bodies and then it is broken apart again. This thought radically dismantle dualism: matter and thought are not two separate substances (as wanted by Cartesio), rather two modes of the same substance: substance, or matter, or nature, (or God) means infinite potential of thinking and infinite corporeal potentiality. Intelligence is in the matter as well, therefore also the body has its own intelligence: it is a crucial acquisition from the point of view of a neomaterialistic feminism I would like to propose here. And that’s one of the reasons why Spinoza has had so many troubles with the religious orthodoxy of his time!

So, not “what are the passions”, but “how do they work?” And then, how can we act? Questions of practical philosophy. How can I oppose the negative impression of a sad passion left on me? Still following Spinoza, and Deleuze with him: the will is useless, but this is something we all know very well, when we are sad, depressed or worried. Ethica more geometrico demonstrata. Geometry takes up moral’s place: not what the individual wants (and has to), rather what a body is capable of: on this way, the notions of guilt and will, so as those of order and control, lose importance. Recommendation is not seen as a moral command anymore, but as a sort of direction: directing oneself towards favourable compositions, doing only what produces favourable compositions. 2 + 2 = 4. No moralistic judgement. The ability of create positive situations is an art, an art of composition: “I will consider human appetites and actions as a matter of lines, surfaces or bodies” (Ethica). Choreography of affects.

And it is immediately evident how this art is a political art. People who have power (potestas) need the sadness of their subjects. To inspire sad passions is necessary to the exercise of power (potestas), still following Deleuze. In a bad encounter all of my vital energy is focused on driving back these negative effects: sadness, guilt, anguish, resentment. I’m closed, limited, focused on myself. If I’m filled with joy my force of existing expands. Sadness involves the diminution of our power (potentia) of acting, separates us from our effects on the world, from the possibility of shaping what surrounds us - we could call this ability also with another name: self-determination. Orienting one’s body in order to be in the fullness of this transformative capacity.

Anatomy of affections / Body–matter vs. inner being
For a long time, from Hippocrates until Renaissance, emotions and affects have been connected to the anatomy of the human body and to cosmology. The ancient medicine associated nature’s fundamental elements (water, earth, air, fire) with bodily fluids (humors) – black and yellow bile, phlegm, blood - and starting from this it elaborated a theory of temperaments, that suggested that there were four physical types and four personalities – melancholic, choleric, sanguine, phlegmatic. Human organs were associated to the qualities of the physical world, connected to planets, to seasons, in a system of mutual influences. Living and non-living organisms are governed by the same intensities. It is not necessary to be human in order to be affected by emotions: palms could fall in love, a bad wind could carry anger…

In 1638 Robert Burton wrote a text with the title The Anatomy of Melancholy: here the corpse is a feeling. Melancholy affects not only individual bodies, but also collective bodies: melancholy in families, in countries. As for countries, the cure against melancholy is Utopia. At the turn of the late modern period, we dismissed these theories as prescientific residues, but now we can riconsider them from the standpoint of affective feminist thought as theories which do not have the subject at their centre. They postulate new assemblages of human and non-human, living and non-living, organic and non-organic. New grammars for saying the world over again.

The idea of a closed inner being, an “inside” where emotions and affects happen, becoming inaccessible, is therefore the result of a long process of privatisation of affects. It is quite a recent idea, born with modern psychology. In the middle of the 19th century, family becomes the centre of the social organisation of capitalism. The reproductive labour required of women needs new strong ideologies (home as a private space). The spreading of romantic love works as an idealisation that reinforces, legitimises and makes sexual division of labour desirable.

They say it is Love.
We say it is Unwaged Work
Emotional economies: affects and passions become private feelings. Trans-feminism and radical lgbt/queer movements make political again the sphere of affects as a space for inventing new forms of living together.

Politics of emotions

Actually, the relation between passions and politics is constitutive, in particular that between fear and power. In Leviathan, one of the fondative texts of the modern political theory, Hobbes places fear as the base of politics: it is the cause from which the absolute State is originated and legitimised. Fear is a mean to rule and maintain order, it is a tool of government, in a framework of a negative anthropology that defines institution as a limitation and repression.

Are fears (emotions) actions or reactions? Are they an immediate and therefore inborn, instinctive act, or are they mediated by cultural stories, by one’s own memory or passed down ones? In dealing with this question, Ahmed says something really beautiful about a classical example in psychology literature, about the bear and the little girl. A girl sees a bear, gets scared and runs away. (Story Number Two). Classic psychology reads this chain of events as an instinctive reaction in order to survive. However, the bear is not scary in itself. More information is needed to the child so that fear is triggered, memories, stories, representations: the biological storage only is not enough. Fear is neither within the child, nor within the bear; fear is the matter in which the girl and the bear come into contact. This contact is shaped on past histories of contacts. It is a space filled with communicative acts, affective intensities, tales about the woods, ancient knowledges about humans and animals.

In perceiving something as dangerous a whole assessment system is activated: we recognize, we set values, we weigh up, we decode. All these complex procedures come into being at an unconscious level, this is way they seem immediate. But what does this mean in political terms? That the field of action is widening: perceive, being affected is a “doing”, an activity, not a mere automatic reaction.

Then, there are two tracks that seem interesting to follow for our discourses and our artistic practices here. The first one is that the dimension of the body gains primary importance. The construction of emotions, of fears, is re-codified in the logic of contact. There are no actions at a distance, one body acts on another one by contact. Emotions concretely shape the materiality of bodies and their tactile surface. They imply directions and orientation. Even within the “instinctive” reaction of escape, of running, a bodily repertoire is working. This perspective’s shift is crucial for those who working in artistic and performative languages.
The second one highlights that emotions and feeling are not inside the subject or the object, but are the result of a circulation, an exchange. This is why not all bodies are involved in the same way. Distribution of emotions - so as inequal distribution of wealth - is asymmetrical and is based on gender, sex and race. Another narrow opening through which to reconsider passions in terms of a feminist and new materialist politics.

**sameness | identification with | empathy**

Emotions spread, circulate, are transmitted from one body to the other. Lately we talk a lot about loss of empathy - we might say that the value of empathy decreases in the market of emotions. In some articles about empathy and unease Amador Fernandez-Savater, a Spanish philosopher and activist, argues that right-wing neofascist parties prevail not because they turn economic conflicts into identity issues, but because they intervene on cultural issues. They have something to say about culture: political battle moved to the field of ethics, of ways of living and of aesthetics, and whoever is capable of codifying reality more efficiently wins. Cultural roots of populism.

I would like to investigate empathy more deeply. Empathy is an outcome of identification mechanisms / put oneself in other people’s shoes. Identification is a prolific epistemological and cognitive process, but at the same time it is always an ambivalent process and I would like to examine it through two different lenses.

Identifying with someone is a theatrical technique: the actor identifies with the character, the spectator with the actor, it’s an emotional melting. Make people cry by crying, move by moving. This model has been widely criticized. According to Brecht, for example, mimetic identification produces in the spectator a sense of satisfaction, (catharsis), of balance, and therefore of acceptance of the world order. To identification (as reproduction of the “same”, of the “identical” that does not produce differences) Brecht opposes an aesthetics of “distancing effect”. The “estrangement effect”, in german Verfremdung, is a shifting, a displacement through which the object is placed outside recognition. In Italian, in the word “straniamento” there is also the word “straniero”, stranger, foreigner. So, it names an aesthetics that activates a foreign, cross-eyed look, that transforms something familiar, known, into something unexpected. **Becoming-stranger**, something that is both political and aesthetical.

Where can we find this kind of identification outside of theatre? Social media are full of it. In reaction to traumatic events - it is the case of terrorist attack in Europe, at Bataclan for example - knowledge is activated through identification: **what would I have felt if I had been there, I’m upset because I walked along that street a few months ago, I go to those concerts too… I need to put myself in someone else’s shoes, meaning that I can understand what happened only by figuring myself at the center of the event, only if I become the protagonist. A homeopathic treatment, curing one things with what is similar. Dubravka Ugresic, writer (I would like to say: a Croatian writer, but she does not like the nationalisms of former-Yugoslavia at all!), tells about a strange form of tourism: in Lithuania a theme park called Išgyvenimo Park reconstructs a ex-soviet gulag, with actors playing the role of guardians and visitors undergoing corporal and psychological punishments. “**1984. Survival Drama. Become citizen of a totalitarian state for one day!**”. If you plan to visit Mexico, you can book a **Caminata Nocturna** tour to live a day as a clandestine, including an escape inside a truck, searches, shootings, sirens and simulated chasing. This is called dark tourism and it involves travel to places of natural disasters or genocides, torture camps, ex-jails. Become someone else, but only for a few hours!
There is a double movement: the other becomes like me, becomes me, in order for me to understand it and empathise with it. A process of assimilation, which as every process of assimilation it contains a clot of epistemic violence – identify the Different (transitive verb) / making it like Oneself: this is the way colonialism acts. I become the other: I suffer for other’s pain and substitute it with my own (Sara Ahmed again).

It is an act of substitution (je suis), but the condition for which this identification works is that the other is “like me” (narcissism). I’m substituting the Other’s pain with my own, I’m the one who feels it, what I’m asserting is my indignation. Again, the other becomes invisible. Just think to the images of the dead bodies we are seeing these days, especially children. This indignation, which is easily consumed, turns empathic suffering into enjoyment. Alchemy of passions in the market of suffering.

**Asymmetries of skin**

The field of emotions is crossed by more or less explicit asymmetries: which bodies do I identify with, with which I empathise? Which bodies remain silent? **Look, a Negro!** Here I would like to share with you a fragment from *Black Skin, White Masks*, which has become a crucial reference in postcolonial theorization. In this essay Frantz Fanon, philosopher phychistrist and revolutionary from Martinica, analyses the relationship between colonized and colonizer and the effects of the colonial domination on the psychological and emotional experience of the black people.

“Look, a Negro!” It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile.  
“Look, a Negro!” It was true. It amused me.  
“Look, a Negro!” The circle was drawing a bit tighter. I made no secret of my amusement.
“Mama, see the Negro! I’m frightened!” Frightened! Frightened! Now they were beginning to be afraid of me. I made up my mind to laugh myself to tears, but laughter had become impossible.

{Story Number Three}

My body is shaped when in contact with other bodies. When exposed to a white look, the black body (Fanon’s) cannot find the usual way of gestures and postures. Look, a Negro! Fear is the place where the child and the Negro meet. Se lo do all’Uomo Nero, se lo tiene un anno intero // If I give it to bogeyman / He’ll keep it for an entire year. Scary stories, stories about black and darkness, nursery rhymes and lullabies - if you don’t sleep I’ll call the Boogieman who will take you away - precede the encounter. They prepare it. Can we still conceive of fear as a natural instinct, as an impulse to survive?

Economies, indeed: inequality rules in the distribution of the right of the bodies to movement. The nation-space is often pictured as a body, whose boundaries are represented by skin. That is a classic political metaphor. The narratives of the invasion, the reminds to intrusion, to vulnerability, to untouchability are connected to the myth of the nation as the body of a (white) woman which needs to be defended. Fantasies of rape that are agitating, even male fear of penetration. Reinforcing the inside-outside boundaries, making it safer.

We can consider the public space as a non-homogeneous space: not all the bodies have access to it the same way. The discourse on decency (decorum) interlocks with the racist discourse: the city is like home, is our home. The square is the living-room, the same conventions need to be respected. Where I feel like home. Where I don’t feel in place. City as domestic space, as dispositif for domestication: you can stay if you behave well. Good migrants who sweep the streets. Home means family: racism intertwines with the patriarchal construction of intimate relationships. The migrant can stay: as a servant? As domesticated servant? As caregiver who does not break the etiquette?

The case of the flower pots in Florence - a few months ago - is exemplary, and the disparity in public reactions to death of Idy Diene, a citizen from Senegal killed by gunfire by a racist on the street, and reactions to the destructions of some flower pots in the city center during a manifestation of the migrant community. Everything’s fine, they can kill you like dogs, but don’t touch the flower pots. We are more touched by the destroyed flower pots, we identify more with them than with the black body of a Senegalese man. Hierarchies of bodies, hierarchies of emotions.

+ Nationalism as creation of us

Here, narratives create an “us” separated from the other, create fears. They produce effects on reality. These narratives are not cold or just propaganda, they are loaded and warm. This dispositif, which emotionally charges national narratives, concerns ways of naming and imagining. So, dealing with
In arts and aesthetics, we speak about something that is not marginal nor accessory in this historical phase. It’s up to us to reactivate it as politically relevant discourse.

How does racist and neofascist rhetoric work? They don’t say: “we want to destroy you.” They say: “you want to destroy us, we have to defend ourselves.” This idea of legitimate self-defence helps creating an ideal of the nation as object of love that unites people from different groups into a homogeneous group. Sara Ahmed describes nationalism as non-reciprocated love toward nation. I love my nation, it does not love me back with its promise of love and a better life, it responds with (economic, social) violence / this increases the investment in love of the subjects. Love is a kind of affection which can exist even without reciprocity. On the contrary, this lack implies an intensification. Think about that: how many cases of killings of women are explained this way? Creating this “us” can also happen by appropriating discourses of minorities or subaltern subjects.

We protect women’s rights, you (you Arabs, you Muslims, you who practice infibulation) are uncivilized barbarians. We respect the rights of sexual minorities, you are homophobes. The feminist and lgbt-queer discourse is grabbed once again within the rhetorics of femonationalism and homonationalism: the construction of Us is obtained in exchange for the strengthening of the white privilege that unites us. White subjets, white women, white queers.

This is the sequence of images with which France has chosen to tell itself as a nation that defends women’s rights. Nice, August 2016.

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**Not Fear Only**

What is there beyond fear? How turn resentment into common actions of transformation? How do we connect with others? How do we intensify the relationship with others? In geometrical terms, a minus cannot be cancelled by another minus, a negative and sad passions cannot be contrasted by an equally negative emotion, but only by a plus, by an affect or generative force which increase the potential. Resentment cannot be transformed with more resentment. This is why I’m not convinced by strategies that follow racist and right wing rhetoric on their own field. It seems that a sort of mimetic desire is at work, I think about the media obsession with Salvini or the use of rhetoric of indignation. Indignation is a very fast consumption of a negative emotion, which rarely becomes revolt, action of affirmation, re-creation of the world.

We need to redefine an emotional grammar, at the emotional but also material, within forms of life, time passing, actions and experiences to do together. We need to re-create “common notions”. Art can help us this way, producing new kinds of knowledges and intelligences which could be used in the political action.

If it is true that what we enter into contact with shapes us, then we need new *politics of proximity*. For this to happen, we need new institutions, that is, spaces of corporeal proximity, where connection with others intensifies. We need to create high intensity areas that have to do with corporeal, affective, intimate relational intensity, and capable of not removing conflict.
We can also describe that in terms of democracy of affects: hierarchies between bodies, access to emotions, equal distribution of complex grammars through which it is possible to read, decodify and recombine what surrounds us.

I ask myself - I ask to all of us here - whether artistic and cultural institutions can play this role, being political in this sense. And what means can we use to hacker them, occupy them or invent new ones.

Rosarno riots, 2010

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READINGS:

Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1954.