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Paranoiac-critical Performance

The performance paradigm is already indelibly marked with a promise of delirium. Jon McKenzie (2001) decisively signals this direction, as he locates in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*—the seminal investigation carried out by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972, 1980)—the key to the interpretation of the regime of signs that characterizes our contemporary condition. This is a regime of signs that is haunted by the performative: that is, obsessed with training, preparedness, achievement, effectiveness and effect, and unceasingly confronted with an exacerbation of the management of signification. But different semiotic engines signify differently, and Deleuze and Guattari were palpably interested in the cracks, traps and loopholes of the semiotic engines of our time: money, markets, capital, but also the bureaucratic state and information technology. Cracks, traps and loopholes that anticipate a paranoid form of signification. Perhaps the most fundamental intuition in that direction is that of a delirious regime of signs on which the performance paradigm piggybacks. Does this make sense?

A number of resources attuned to Deleuze and Guattari (1972, 1980) are available for an intensification of that intuition and for its incorporation into the framework imagined by McKenzie (2001). Salvador Dalí's "paranoiac-critical method" comes first to mind (Dalí 1978). This is a method that the author developed out of his own personal obsessions, but with the perspective of developing a sort of science: a method capable of decoding the repressed obsessional content carried by stereotypical representations that circulate massively in social space; *L'Angélu*s by Millet, for example, endlessly reproduced in prints and ornaments all over the world, conveying some vague universal meaning of piety, but also concealing a most bizarre phantasm of depredation, arousal and infanticide [see Figure 1]. Pierre Klossowski's "science of stereotypes" comes next: a refinement of Dalí's psychoanalytical intuition, an investigation of the phantasmal constraint inherent in any simulacrum (Klossowski 1970). This is a performative investigation, though, as the method is not about critiquing only but about stressing also—accentuating beyond excess, as Klossowski would put it—the stereotype's character of an obsessional replica of the occulted phantasm. And then, finally, Félix Guattari's "schizoanalysis" (Guattari 1989). This works, one may say, as a sort of an institutional correlate for these methodological

forays: a space in which this stress and accentuation—e.g. delirium—can operate in a transformative, collective, therapeutic way.



Fig. 1. A postcard of Jean-François Millet's *L'Angélu* (author's personal collection). Salvador Dalí conjectures that the scene is that of an infanticide: the representation conceals the presence of a coffin, the mother adopts the position of a praying mantis, and the father is sexually aroused (the erection is masked by the hat).

The current climate of planetary stress—environmental catastrophe, international war, global epidemic—certainly means an intensification of delirious potential. This is something that has been vocally emphasized by Bruno Latour (2015), who identifies a syndrome of eschatological disinhibition within the idea of a capitalistic solution to the climate crisis—and who himself engages incidentally with the language of performance (theatre, circus) as a potential response. The surge of interest in the theological unconscious of our performative condition needs to go hand in hand, at least in part, with a renewed attention to psychosis as a key to cultural analysis. This is precisely what seems to be happening also, for example, in current efforts to decode the varieties of “paranoid style” at work in contemporary political cultures in the United States of America (Barkun 2003; Crockford 2021; Fenster 2008; Knight 2000; Konda 2019). Metaphors of both faith and madness abound in the treatment of contemporary conspiratorial, millennialist discourse. The QAnon syndrome offers a case in point: a most distinctive mixture of conspiracy theories, political movements and spiritual cults that has proved quite consequential (Rothschild 2021). It is a performative syndrome, most recognizable through the massive circulation of abrasive stereotypes that are distinctively linked to the fear of inoculation (secret biotechnological laboratories, pedophilic satanic networks, horrible experiments with people, technologies for the control of the mind, corporate violations of personal sovereignty).

The QAnon syndrome offers, indeed, quite a testbed for an exploration of the “paranoiac-critical” in the performance paradigm. In a rather remarkable exercise of performative bewilderment, a member of the pseudonymous collective, Luther Blissett, recently developed an interpretation of QAnon that warrants attention here (Wu Ming 1 2021). The collective is known for its experiments in culture jamming, performed in a tradition that is not without relation to a certain spirit of schizoanalysis (Blissett 1995). Such experiments famously included media hoaxes on satanic ritual abuse in the Italian city of Bologna in the 1990s. However, the collective is also known primarily for its literary work: especially for one novel titled *Q*, which tells a story of tactics developed by a Vatican agent called ‘Q’ aiming at scrambling Anabaptist revolts in 16th-century Europe (Blissett 1999). Join the dots. Is QAnon (and ‘Q’) some sort of a Luther Blissett prank gone crazy? Certainly not. But this “coincidence” (?) surely opens a productive path for a paranoiac-critical interpretation. The method of culture jamming developed by this Bologna collective was about playing with conspiracy knowledge in order to disarticulate the conspiratorial mentality (e.g. phantasms of satanic inoculation), with an explicit focus on the medium of the internet (Wu Ming 1 2021: 62-67). In an anonymous 1997 right-wing pamphlet titled “Umberto Eco’s multiple name” (also a Luther Blissett artifact, it seems), one hypothesis was developed according to which Luther Blissett would be, in fact, an Umberto Eco “operative” (akin to ‘Q’ both in the novel *Q* and in the political fantasy of QAnon), the entire project being, in reality, about enacting the subversive potentials contained in the semiotician’s writings. The fact that some Luther Blissett codes are recognizable in QAnon (satanic ritual abuse, secret war) is probably not due to QAnon instigators being some kind of pranksters inspired by Umberto Eco. It is possibly a sign, however, of the efficacy of the “science of stereotypes” sketched out by Luther Blissett and which consists indeed in maximizing beyond excess the stereotype’s obsessional function.

Did Luther Blissett operatives hear about *Perform or Else* (McKenzie 2001)? In chapter 8, McKenzie (2001, 205-220) refers to the potentials of catachresis: a trope—a drifting metaphor—but also a method for the subversion of latent content. Something akin to a methodical slip or a recipe for culture jamming. This offers a key to a dialogue with the paranoiac-critical method within the performance paradigm: a dialogue that may recognize “paranoiac-critical performance” as both an immanent feature of our performative culture (e.g. QAnon folklore, discourse, and paraphernalia) and a lever for critical scrutiny (e.g. Luther Blissett and their ‘Q’ for ‘Qomplotto’). Dalí, despite the patent limits of his performative style, achieved indeed inventing a culture (a culture in which the social function of paranoia is made explicit) and devising the instruments for sabotaging it. Now that paranoia seems to be—again—on the rise, it may be appropriate to situate it within the project of the performance paradigm.

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