STATUES OF AMERICA

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Abstract: The principal aim of this text is to look at violence and the position it takes in a formation of a semiosphere. Culturally significant events in a recent American history are brought forward to be interpreted in order to discover the underlying ties between signifieds and signifiers. A special place was given to semiotic dimensions of a City and its semioscape.

Keywords: Violence, Charlottesville rally, Semiosphere, Semioscape, a City.

We have recently witnessed some culturally significant events in modern U.S. history. The United States of America is not stranger to violence, in fact, it became its trademark. French thinker Jacques Derrida believed violence has its place in any process, shadowing even the most intimate and affectionate love or friendship.

"I can kill you, you can kill me,"

as Derrida puts it in *Politics of Friendship* (122/143). This premise is valid not only for the biological interaction of species and interpersonal relations but broader cultural processes. I believe what has happened in Charlottesville, Va., on August 12, and on other memorial grounds is not accidental. The recent conflicts are following an established pattern in which violence is the governing agent of the semiotic formation.

This paper will take a look at contemporary events, violence, and the spatial dimension of meaning-making. Western logocentric tradition sees presence before the absence, as well as kindness recognized before violence. The text is written from a position that sees violence as one of the chief guarantors of meaning formation which ensures the genesis of the semiosphere.

Firstly, perhaps naively, it would be right to give a personal definition to what seems to be the *causa prima*. I am afraid that a formulation will only render how tightly strapped we are to the Metaphysics. Uninterested in the dictionary's definition and ignorant to the descriptions of other men here is mine.

> In the finitude an attempt to overcome construe a mode of being which seeks the accord, the absolute point that ensures the plentitude, an impossibility against everything we have ever constructed, imagined or believed. The absence mediates the surrender to the presence, as the finite plea to the plentiful. In the *becoming*, it lay visible, open as the truth. In our attempt to see we create a play of interpretations, never stable it continually breaks under our feet, found or revealed it never guarantees the arrival but provide a new position from which we look. We are in a constant becoming. Our inventions are the invention of our self. In need to reach we break and create, we suffer and cause suffering in our search to overcome the finite position.

The Opposites

Images of the Charlottesville rally appear in social media instantaneously, collectively they create a photogrammetric imprint of the modern American culture. Suspended in a collective photo frame the opposing 'Others' carry a feeling of lethality. In this American story, both sides have something to tell.

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The proposition to remove the statue of General Robert E. Lee from the Emancipation Park in Charlottesville triggered protests and violence that occurred not only on the physical level but the event has also ruptured the semiosphere, triggering old signifieds to create new meanings in a meta-narrative of a unique cultural and political context. The conflict between the American South and the American North had exerted enough deadly violence in the past to echo itself to the twenty-first century without losing its meaning. The spinning momentum of the core ideological differences still revolves around the American values interpretation of which each side assert to be the right one. Perhaps time and economic benefits smoothened the edges but reason, time, and money could not cure the imagery of the past. A certain perception of phenomena fixed in the collective consciousness creates a collection of transcending symbols that evolve and change in time, yet carry the trace of the original negative. Often falsified by the victor's images of the past appear like the sacred totems, narrating present and the future as they wish.

The transcendental signifieds mediate symbols evoking the presence of the semiotic opposites; darkness/light, nature/culture, men/women. Each signified carries a trace of other signifieds; all symbols have traces of what they are not. In Derrida's vision, opposites not only oppose, differ each other, but they also defer each other. This is an essential aspect, as it shows the relevance and the positioning. Logocentric hierarchy position the spoken word before the written word, the speech before the text, and the reason before the madness. Jacques Derrida called it *différance*. Articulated with the letter [e] its meaning remains hidden until we observe written letter [a] appear revealing its new purpose. Speech is powerless in the case of *différance*, and this is what Derrida wants us to see. This meta-concept is meant to undermine the Western logocentric tradition in which a preference is given to present, as to the speech *parole* over the writing *gramme*. I would use a tracing-paper for this meta-concept and write over oppositions in the American context; North/South, white/black, right/wrong, old/new. The opposites are in flux, with no transcendental authority, thus no everlasting sovereignty a signified counters its opposite, while mirrored signified exert itself to suppress the other. The tug and pull of traced signifieds creates a play in which nothing guarantees the eternal, supreme position of one over the other. In a cultural sense, the play between conflicting Others guaranties a culture to see its continuation. In a broader, abstract thought, one may say that the attempt to overcome *différance* is what makes America be America.

No social strata could exist or function without visions of a future alternative to each other. A play of visions actualizes violent impulse to transgress the finite, established boundaries, thus guaranteeing an evolution of a semiosphere. Violence in Charlottesville did not rehabilitate the Confederate officials. On the contrary; it plunged the historical ideals that Confederacy stood for into a deeper descent. The reason why "white supremacist" groups cannot succeed is because they cannot create a meaningful action, a large picture with an original idea that would be greater than the living cultural semiosphere. Instead, radicalized groups appropriate old symbols as a symbolic representation of their new ideological stance. This process of "hijacking" old signifiers such as the Confederate flag, or the motto "don't tread on me," and pasting them into a new cultural and political context will not guaranty neither social acceptance nor the meaningful outcomes. On the contrary, detached from modern values, it only creates a narrower image of what the social strata could be. It does not reference itself to a higher world of transcendental signifieds but instead harkens back to signifieds that are broken down by the modernity. Suppressed and marginalized, supremacist groups remain hidden in a narrow slice of the world. This alienation comes back with a new energy in a new form. By pushing the bounds of opposing strata, they reiterate old signifiers, thus creating a mosaic of actions that are disturbing for the rest. On the other hand, the opposing side of the majority acts in a similar fashion, by taking old symbols they try express new ideas. None of the conflicting opposites come with a unique invention that could fully

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reflect their new political and the ideological positions. It is a game of reiterating old signifiers and fitting them into a new reality that both sides are playing.

Unable to create new symbols the opposing actors like *bricoleurs* make new meaning by reinterpreting old symbols. As loose particles, rubbing agains each other like bubbles in the foam they remain without a real control or a sight of the future. Acting in the present, filling the emptiness of the semiotic void with a new significance they wage wars or appropriate whatever comes into a sight (flags, mottos, old statues, memorial grounds.) From the antiquated ideological materials, they create a mosaic like picture of a new American society. The acting *bricoleurs* reflect nothing before nor immediately after the street-act; they have no real value nor any real choice. Worst, actors are disposable.

There is a play here, those who are at the actual control occupy the very top of the pole of semiosphere, they are the semiotic narrators. They score real political points, with very real results of their politics carefully translated into wealth and security. They are above the two dimensions of the social confines, thus unreachable and immune. Expanded into the whole semiosphere trough camouflaged violence, they are the masters of the social sphere. Immune, with no "skin in this game" they steer and affect millions of people. Does death of an actor come into a calculation? When did a specific political structure decide an obviously controversial nature does it spark a thought that there will be a violent clash, especially in U.S., and people will die? Certainly, it does. It doesn't stop anybody from acting. Occasional death is discounted as a part of the process. If the State officials dismantle statues in the hope of creating a new ground for racial and ideological tolerances, or as a countermeasure to violence, it won't succeed. It will be momentary satisfy one side, but drive those who protest against statue's removal into even harder, more radical and violent position. Fighting ghosts only brings them to live, it gives them a contemporary relevance.

The central question is what would be a common ground on which both sides could find their united picture of America? I am afraid that ruining statues just won't do. What can be done to bring the conflict to a common ground from which perhaps a resolution may be found? Unless a dialog that unifies the separated and radicalized views will take place, any attempt to redeem Southern heroes (whether by protecting them or by burying them even deeper) will make no difference.

An attempt to subvert, to hide the opposite is an attempt to get rid of the mirroring image, to erase the trace that marks the whole. It is not the first "turn of the wheel" sort to say, as it has happened before. The freewheel has been arrested by the strongest (by reason of the strongest), marks of the opposite were wiped only to be later re-marked, liberated and turned by the other, by the other opposite. The democracy, supposedly, stands on the turning of a freewheel, on giving the other a possibility to turn the wheel, to be able and to allow a return of the other.

In *Rogues* (*Voyous*), Jacques Derrida meditates over the questions and dangers that come with the democratic license. Surely any compressions of Derrida's ideas will only demand more explanations. I will just shortly reiterate my understanding of some small aspects of the text. The turn always implies the waiting, a suspension, to wait a turn to come, to surrender the power, to entrust the power to the other. If the reason is only a claimed domain of the strongest, the right of the strongest, the force of the law of the strongest, the rule of the most influential State, then the freewheel of democracy will have less possibility to turn. There is always a challenge of determining the good and the evil in the next turn of democracy. The line of determination between good and bad possibilities is never clear, which gives room for dangerous outcomes and even the halt of the democratic process. However, the same uncertainty opens the opportunity for the real, unplanned, unscheduled, un-forecasted future. For Derrida, the future of the democratic license shaped by the present perils thus a real democracy or as Derrida puts it *democracy to come* is always ahead.

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Like the turn of roulette, it brings wins and losses, but only when turned. With a surrender to the horrible possibility, an unexpected outcome of the turn one reassures the self-determination, the strength of being able to turn the wheel one more time despite the perils. It is only when the immune system exposes itself to external dangers that it acquires necessary robustness to sustain itself. If we cannot let go, if the possibility of the other to have his turn, which means the recognition of Other's sovereignty is too dangerous, too uncertain than perhaps we deserve to be on the spinning wheel for what we are. To receive a right amount of medication called the *Free wheel*.

Even then, with names uttered, it is still unclear what the definition of democracy is. As disengaged as a free clutch, its definitions disengage from a formalization, suicidal by nature democracy exists as a moving contour in a shape of its own.

A short digression into the very present "Las Vegas Strip Shooting."

While I am writing this text, a mass shooting in Las Vegas, already called by the media "Las Vegas Strip Shooting" takes place. It is the worst so far. The news keeps breaking. It seems each act is more intense, more shocking, 59 reported dead, 489 are injured. Most reports exclude the dead body of a mass murderer Stephen Paddock into the total count of the deceased. The major news channels describe the catastrophe, yet in their language, the victims presented as an estranged number, there is nothing personal to death in the way reporters speak about the tragedy. Doctored photographic images and an indistinct picture of a victim's body, face down, fade away from the screen. The newsrooms of CNN and other media outlets run over and over a state of the art, high-tech, digital map with each angle covered, all trajectories outlined. The image shows the casino building from a bird's eye view; a simulacrum bird flies over the pixelated terrain as something real, like something alive. The panels of well-dressed TV experts are simulating ideas in well-understood language about a thing that no one yet understands. The technical, buzzing words are; "sick man," "gunfire," "hotel," "casino," "gun laws," "moving forward," "first responders," "shooter," "victims." The words are there to describe the unknown, just like the maps are. Words are spoken in assuring, adjusted, comfortable voice. All this seems like a well-rehearsed theatrical play, only 'The End' part of the script is missing. The performance of the media's 24 hours news cycle keeps going without a final drop of the curtain, without the applause, leaving the audience utterly unresolved.

We have many words and high-resolution maps, yet we don't understand what had happened, or what is happening to our society. We, the urban beings, caught in-the-world naked, stuck between shopping malls and Starbucks, no longer ask God—not even between the commercial breaks—to unleash his wrath upon the villain for his evil deeds. No TV reporter hopes for the Hell to open up and swallow the soul of a killer, and no Zeus will be asked to send his thunderous lightning to avenge the death of a loved one. We do not look at things the same way as we did, not anymore, and perhaps we shouldn't ask or expect much from Gods. We have run out of those sacred options, now for what the man has made, it is the man who has to answer. I keep staring at my reflection in a turned off LCD screen, thinking; —What is a question, the question, what is the cause of all this?! The Presidential account tweets in response:

"I am so proud of our great Country. God bless America!"

Culture begins with a foundational act of violence. The act is remembered through rituals providing a centering function for a culture. If the ritualistic routines are no longer present in a culture, then the semiotic vacancy will be filled with acts of violence performed in the society in a seemingly random, senseless way. As René Girard points out in his book

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Violence and the Sacred, "because sacrificial rites have no basis in reality, we have every reason to label them meaningless." (1977: 6) However, each disaster or act of violence happens in a particular set of limited criteria. Located in a social semiosphere of the life-world, it can be studied and understood. John David Ebert, an American cultural critic, summarized the very basis of a potential approach to our catastrophic age in his book *The Age of Catastrophe*. I believe there is much to learn from a deconstructive approach to violence as well.

There is no hidden meaning to "Las Vegas Strip Shooting" massacre. It lays in front of us telling; —We are in an Ocean of violence trying to imagine an island of a *lesser* violence. The suppressed 'Other' unwounded itself. In the act of something we are comfortable to call violence, something that by definition should not carry a reason or a logical explanation. Perhaps it is merely a revelation of *Being*, a hidden part of the unknown that came into the presence.

The next level of intensity surpassed the previous one which, due to our insensibility and to our mutual acceptance, appears as normality. Regularly sacrificial murders will happen to fill in the semiotic void, to keep the old myths alive, and to keep an aged Western World alive.

The TV flares up and dims down casting a play of shadows on a wall. Another person, a muscular guy, speaks to the microphone; "We are built to be stronger than that," he said. In reality, it must be told, "we are that." The reporter shifts back to the studio in which the Mayor of Las Vegas, a blond, aging woman, speaks to the camera with a tonne of disgust and frustration; "I don't want to think of this individual, I don't want to call him an individual" she states. But she should be thinking of him. Yesterday, he was a successful millionaire, a poker player, a casino's regular, a member of the society, while today, he has changed America and the World once again. At present, he is symbolic of the time. Think of him! What did *he* mean to say?! How can we know our world, if we refuse to think of its deadliest moments?

In reality, words like "I don't want to think of him," "a sick man," "outrageous violence," "gun laws," "a shooter," or "the victim" describe nothing. They are the rolling of a blind eye in the face of the real world. No one can or wants to look at the reality, talk to it face to face. It will only reveal that our small imagined society is not immune to violence, it is its undivorceable part. The uncamouflaged force of violence is attractive and intolerable at the same time, it speaks to us directly, openly, revealing the reality of our condition. It shocks and changes us. It shows the unknown *Being*, one glimpse at the time. I think there was a revelation in Stephen Paddock. What has revealed itself?

What can we do? I doubt that there will be a non-violent society. Our cosmological position is never perfect, never too comfortable, and we will always feel it. To minimize the catastrophic occurrences, which are the direct outcomes of our self-positioning within the cosmos, we must take a good look at the ontological causes of violence before we even think to create a new blueprint of another, better society. We must look at violence as a revelation, extracting every bit of the information before we repeat our mistakes.

Semioscape

An imagined two-dimensional plane of a City continually expands and confines in an endless line escaping the plane by curving itself into a semionucleus which can last brief moments or millenniums in time. A living settlement rises and declines as the meaning appear and disappear within its confines. Its positioning is hard to determine, set in a particular, local world it continually tries to escape into the outer world beyond its fixed contour. It feels as if the city constantly spills onto the cosmos beyond. We, the pedestrian, urban beings move in different speeds on its surface, while the Sun travels alone casting a bright shadow on the city's walls. We walk in trodden patterns taking the city as our own, preferring some places

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and avoiding other for no apparent reason. We see our moving reflections in large windows briefly reminding us of our presence, we recognize each other, and we pass by not knowing the other. Inverted in the presence of the city-world we resemble *bubbles* within a foam; each is the creator of his own cosmos.

Intelligible only if revealed, we float on the surface of a city-line. Traces of our existence continuously appear and fade away as the *semioscape* analog the city. The transcendental signifieds no longer transfix the meanings we make. Thus, the *Sphere* as imagined by the Hieronymus Bosch on the exterior shutters of The Garden of Earthly Delights no longer resembles our dwelling home-place. The transcendental systems of meanings have been transformed into *Foam*, leaving the suspended remains of the Metaphysical age open for the idiosyncratic interpretations in which each of us becomes a sole holder of his micro-cosmological narrative. The unknown sphere, a magical realm of a City, slowly disappears or in many ways is already gone as we do not see the mysteries located within its cosmic walls. Broken down by the feats of modernity a City becomes an accessible location in a collection of other places in which we cannot derive meaning, but rather determine a function. Once a Maghreb sorcerer told Aladdin; "In a shadow of the city, you will find the City of Shadows." A place where secrets were kept and revealed is no longer ours. We have moved to a new home. Our current residence, a world of commodities and connectivity is not so much a place of dwelling and secrets, unsuited even for a regular *flâneur*, but a place of functions. For now, however, we still carry secrets within our inner walls, and a City still surrounds us with objects that are meant to reflect something primordial, something mythical, something important.

The glow of a city, a lit wall of a cave, always spoke for the humans better than we could speak for ourselves. The twentieth century captured the light in a new medium, the photographs, finally shifting the world stage from the city of lights Paris to New York the city that never sleeps. It is the appearance of a photo image of New York City skyline lit by the inner glow that finalized the transition. Toulouse Lautrec flooded his work with lights. It came from lanterns, stage lights, human faces. In Lautrec's *La danse au Moulin Rouge*, everything is light; it contained in a microcosm of a hall, theatre stage, street. Painted on canvas, it reflects the human's view of life's center. On the photographs made by American artists, light has exposed the city's outer shell. Captured on a strip of a silver film they report from a broader, global perspective. Somehow, in my mind, the glow of a city is the visualized voice of the semioscape.

From the beginning, a City came from the elemental, as a desire to elevate and prevent meaning fading away into the boundless.

> When a drop of water was found
> floating on the sand, they dug a well;
> and soon streets opened outward
> from the core like petals, and voices
> came together into houses full of air.
>
> —Wayne Miller.

The question we frequently ask, even before we ask the name of a person, is where is a person from? The location is not a place of bricks and mortars in one's mind, beyond the touristic attraction, it has not much of a value anymore, but the sign of cultural evolution, civilization. It was always the city, the settlement that gives meaning and takes part in a description of our identity. The city tells others a story.

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Somehow, meaning arises from our actions, words, emotions, and gestures performed individually and collectively. In some way becoming almost tangible and distinct to a specific location. How the people on the streets of Paris walk, sit, talk to each other**,** and drink coffee differs from how those in Munich do it. Not only what we do is important, but also how we do things. How we actualize ourselves in the life-world becomes specific to us and the place.

Objects located in cities dictate their presence in a similarly distinct way. Our places are filled with objects that translate meaning into the physical realm, visible, and even audible. They exert meanings referenced by a higher signified. Interpretations of meanings undergo constant change while interpreting we become associated with objects. Identity formation always linked to a place, to things that make it. Thus, semioscape is the meaning signified by people and objects that domes a specific place, with its particular semiotic contour. An intertwined network of invisible connections of meanings in organic and non-organic forms that position a place within cosmos.

Some perils undermine a harmonious genesis of places we inhabit. Nationalizing-State in an endless mode of State-building dictated by the immediate agendas creates an invented image of identity. It does so by producing enduring myths by misinterpreting history and feeding narrow ideological pieces into a much vaster social realm, designed in the end to be the collective memories of an "imagined community." Done from a perspective of an immediate needs and momentary political agendas with no transcending reason rooted in more archaic, humanistic, cultural background. Nationalizing-State is using landscapes, inscapes, stone, words, parades and memorial dates to evoke a feeling of national belonging and an imagined commonality beyond the humanistic impulse to gather, share, and coexist. It becomes more of an image of a monstrous being than a face or a real human. State creates a reality in which the desired synthetic identity would reinforce the continuation of the Nationalizing-State function and its lifecycle. This in itself is a form of violence. It constructs as well as demands to destroy what was created without really asking. It is the City that provides the actual grounds for a process of building the collective memory and enforcement of the social homogeneity presented through the creation of national grand-narratives. An array of installed non-organic symbols and the ideological objects whether performative or physical create a topology of identity, intrusive as it is this process disregards the human element. It builds something we humans find hard to adjust, understand or just well function. Progressively it becomes more of an obstacle than an aid to common wellbeing.

Symbols that do not interlink with larger transcendental signifieds, humanistic, aspiring, and timeless are doomed to be temporary, ugly, and nonsensical obstacles. One should be skeptical, if not openly critical to those processes. My personal feeling dictates me to voice an opinion which oppose and undermines the enforcement of current political agendas through meddling, modeling, and manipulation of a citie's landscapes and inscapes for political reasons and profits. In the long run, if not already, it will create a midden heap of semiotic rubble undecipherable to next generations. Leaving future generations less free and utterly clueless to what has constituted us.

An early American society once had a vision of what it wants to be —*A City upon a Hill*. This society's dream was to create a world and an enduring image that could transcend time and be handed down to the next generations. The vision was not set in stone and bronze, yet it helped to shape the livelihood, to find a personal strength, to connect each other and beyond. In a complexed world than, just as now, this purpose bound with immovable faith brought to the foreground the very best out of humans. There, on the plains, new meaning arose transforming the Old World into a unique place in which ideals meant to lead the society to its highest potential. Much written about this, yet I find this old vision as ever needed today, in our changing World.

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"You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden."
—Jesus's Sermon on the Mount.

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