



## TEXT

### **Mihnea Mircan. *Werewords***

The following notes respond to facets of Nicoline van Harskamp's remarkable project *Englishes*, to intuitions and speculations contained within it, looking primarily at the most recent episode in the series, the film *PDGN* (2016). The notes do not amount to a close reading of *Englishes*, but hopefully to a dialogic engagement. One that listens to the words that are invented or warped, exclaimed and analyzed, puzzled over and parsed in a project that looks at the English language as an instrument of dominance and subversion; as a tool for the management of propriety and purity; and a medium of viral transmission. Instead of condensing the multi-perspectival proposition of *Englishes* into a single narrative thread, these notes inhabit the project's anamorphosis; the different timelines, geographical trajectories, desires and mutations, coding and decoding protocols that intersect in the works on show—the different points towards which they simultaneously unfold, delineating between them a site of divergence and composition.

Anamorphosis is precisely that, the unresolved co-presence of distinct perspectival grids onto the same picture plane, the space through which one turns between two positions, each with its own clarity surrounded by patches of opacity and smudges of color. The larger question here is whether syntax or phonetics, rather than pigment or pixel, can too be the materials of anamorphic stretching or deceleration.

My point of departure is a topographical detail in the making of *PDGN*, by no means central to the film's aesthetic and political program. Its seemingly toxic and strangely photogenic, Pasolinian location lies somewhere between the site of Expo '92 in Sevilla, Isla de la Cartuja, and an abandoned mining site. Together they form an allegorical trigger, as we can picture the spectres of growth, creativity, and planetary accord that haunt the imaginary of world exhibitions communing with the ghostly underlings that exit the mining pit, perhaps walking backwards. But I would like to invoke a different image of extraction here, believing that something of significance to the project can still be excavated from the depleted mine.

Classicist Richard Seaford argues that the introduction of coinage in the ancient Greek world effected a profound cognitive shift that was key to the emergence of Western philosophic, scientific, and dramatic traditions. The invention of “monetary abstraction” paved the way for further modes of abstract thought, such as metaphysics, geometry, and logic.<sup>1</sup>

No two pieces of electrum, a natural alloy of gold and silver in varying proportions, has exactly the same metallic value. For the first coins, made about 600 BC, to exist as functionally identical units within a system of exchange that could remunerate mercenaries or the actors of tragedies, something had to be added to the lighter coin, and proportionally,

something had to be subtracted from the weightier one. An abstract substance then operates as hinge in this process of standardization: an immaterial conjunctive tissue that is invented in mine pits and in the practicalities of currency, rather than in humanistic endeavours and other noble pursuits.

When Plato proposed the notion of “incorporeal being,” there were perhaps ten thousand slaves working in the mines at Lavrio alone. Seaford asks: Did the corporeal sufferings of the miners have anything to do—consciously or not—with Plato’s devotion to the immaterial? From this perspective, the narrative of edification in *The Republic*, in which Plato compares the general ignorance of humankind to a cave in which prisoners are able to see nothing but shadows, vacant images cast on the rock wall by a fire, seems premised on the act of averting his eyes, of looking away from the lesser subjects who were toiling at the material foundations of abstraction. This is, after all, an allegory, rather than the impossible story of those subjects’ emancipation: impossible because there were no words, and no frames of reference, for it.

Between these real and imagined dark voids, quasi-beings are transfixed by half-images or captive to the numbing rhythms of crushing stones, evacuated from both political and metaphysical scenarios: expelled—or deported—from both apparent reality and the invisible structures that subtend it. Neither real nor abstract, the miners were the living dead, leading a subterranean non-life, trudging through an inertness to which no substance could be added in order to retrieve value and meaning. They were already in hell—or what would become the template for our image of it—and their dead labour provided the basis on which future edifices would be built: secular theologies, mechanisms of validation and punishment, idioms of approbation and indictment. They are the annulled origin, that which the minting of a coin obliterates.

Seaford’s story contaminates the conventional understanding of abstraction, as it locates an impure beginning to any system predicated on a singular viewpoint, where the plenitude of order would reveal itself to a disembodied eye. It reveals abstraction that is not wholly abstract, that erases its traces in sites of tangible separation and meshes of language, desire and pain, to generate codes of power and subservience, regardless of whether they are sculpted in metal, flesh, or the more malleable material that borders are made of. These could be productive links between, on the one hand, the scene where abstraction is excavated from the ground and articulated with other ruptures in the texture of the world, with the production and valuation of political selves, and—on the other—the composite of excesses and insufficiencies in Van Harskamp’s film, which accelerate the communication between characters and slows down the viewer’s comprehension. The film pits multiplicities against the singularity of the English language, the ideological armature which it words and which underpins it; it perturbs syntax or phonetics with variations that read as the material traces of itinerant destinies, acts of resistance and flight.

In the textual and typographical experiment *Cross-examinations*, to which Van Harskamp is also a contributor, philosopher Vincent van Gerven Oei reflects on an object suspended between two regimes of representation. In ancient Greece, a *basanos* was an object and a technology, a

device recast as a judicial practice or vice versa; in either case an anamorphosis of purity and defilement. Like the interplay between geology and the netherworld of slavery sketched above, the *basanos* measures the purity of gold—for which it is a benchmark—and the veridiction of the slave's master, in its application as a form of torture.

“The slave,” Aristotle writes, “is a part of the master – he is a part of the body, alive, but separated from it.” In the earliest documents dealing with juridical procedures, it is the torture of this enslaved body that produces the most secure evidence of a sound verdict—the “speaking of the truth.”<sup>2</sup> It was a common conviction that when tortured, the slave could not speak but the truth, since the slave was not in possession of a true self, in whose recesses and capacities of simulation the possibility of perjury would arise.

The anguished exclamations describing the master's actions were forced out of the mouth of slave. The tortured body of the slave issues a language that is not his own and a pain that is beyond redemption or relief. In his broken words, the prosecutor seeks the purged speech of the master, as much as fragments of correct Greek: indexes of linguistic competence and forensic coherence, untainted by the extreme suffering that produces and inflects the language. A potency is physically inflicted and abstractly verified. It is the master, not the slave, who would be found guilty or exonerated: the slave is but a proxy in the examination. The slave's pain occurs in a domain where there is neither pardon nor incrimination—the slave is neither guilty nor innocent, only insufficient, a stand-in for the harvesting of gold and the telling of the truth. In the slave's world, truth and pain are indistinguishable, since they cannot be formulated in relation to a transcendent term, to a horizon beyond immediate denotation. The slave does not, in fact, speak.

If the body of the slave is a conduit for abstraction, an organic fragment in an otherwise inhuman assemblage that removes contaminates from language and law, I wonder if the position (and unruly movement) of the migrant or the refugee is not similarly catalytic today—in the embodiment of abstract terms such as sovereignty and autonomy, and in the writing of geopolitical frames of reference. Our condition has been called one of boundless containment, pervaded by hazy abstractions and governed by cacophony. The nowhere of the Union and that of the camp exist in an unspecifiable topographic relation, and so do, on other levels, temporary shelters and threats of deportation, porous or impregnable borders, new jurisdictions compounded to both satisfy humanitarian criteria and enact the operative procedures of nationalisms. Two worlds sit on top of each other: they intersect in new values and verisimilitudes, where laws catch up with—and make abstract—new lines of flight from famine or homes that have become bomb craters. New immunities are invented in relation to cohorts of new monsters (in the etymological sense of entities in need of a name, of an order of signification). Barricades are built around prefigured apocalypses, strategic non-sequiturs appear to integrate “fundamental values,” negative social contracts obstruct the visibility of ethical no man's lands, new application forms and new words for transit or stasis—speech turned to wall or to programmatic contradiction—are designed to silence the audibility of ampler predicaments. Obstacles appear out of thin, toxic air, whole communities are

subjected to the sociological yard-stick of “how many is too many,” a question that echoes infinitely its own meaninglessness.

The question of migration has produced an asphyxiating volume of political speech, but its adjectives and adverbs tether around the same operation: an interjection to mask the lack of the right words, a syllogism instead of an admission. The fractures between those who request and grant acceptance or safety are perhaps commensurate with the distance (and complicity) between two forms of verifying the veridiction of migrants: the dental tests proposed recently by a British politician for the Calais refugees, to determine their age, and the auscultations of forensic linguistics. Either by a gloved hand pushing down a chin to expose the mouth to an x-ray machine, or by the undisclosed parameters of a dubious science, a divide of unseeing or un-listening is reinforced, and a true speech act is obstructed. Enunciation is pushed back into the cavity of the mouth, or treated as a legally accountable configuration of vowels and consonants. Changes in an accent, its borrowed and hybridized phonetic form, are testament not to someone's origins (which is what forensic linguistics proves or disproves) but to an unstable lifestyle, common in those seeking asylum, who might speak in an irregular concoction of tongues and whose utterances might recount a journey rather than avow rootedness in a single place.<sup>3</sup>

As in all successful forays into alternative universes, it cannot be established when and where the future of *PDGN* occurs, which political events uncouple it from our present and realize its utopia: utopia, an elsewhere that has a law, in this case a jurisdiction effected through the use of language to which all speakers contribute and of which none are native. Something has disturbed, realigned, or cut through the processes through which scarcity and entitlement circumnavigate one another. Much like the newcomer whose arrival the film narrates, we visit a place where *homo diaspora* (the formulation comes from China Mièville's *Embassytown*), a figure of endless journey, has arrived at destination. Much like this newcomer, our accents and intonations will not be vetted and validated, our linguistic competence will not be tested, but allowed to the scene, to apprehend or formulate whichever realities or understandings it can.

The elsewheres of origin have been encrypted into the English variations in which the characters address one other: elsewheres turned into the “here” of the film, consequently recast as an elsewhere in relation to our thwarted, subtitle-aided<sup>4</sup> comprehension. This entanglement of points of departure and arrival, stamping words with a conversational efficiency that is agreed upon between protagonists and only partially revealed to us, made me think of a mimetic capacity in language, of a process of replication or incorporation by which experiences of place and crossing are inhaled in words and exhaled in intonation. Of language made through adherence, impregnated with traces or spores that are carried and distributed.

Perhaps it is this adhesive quality of a language, consisting of speech acts which work like contact images, that might give a sense of disorder in watching the film: of sediment, accumulation, surplus. We're listening to words in the wrong place, accelerated or slowed down between our understanding and the linguistic alliance that unites the protagonists.

Words in the wrong place, *werewords* perhaps—as if there were werewolves patrolling the edges of modern maps and roaming the imaginary of mutations, creatures that resist both domestication (as humans) and decorum (as wolves). Extrapolating from Van Harskamp’s proposition, we can picture mutant Germanic, Greek, and Latin roots re-planted in foreign soils, crossbred etymological trees, proliferating synonyms and antonyms, transgender nouns and prepositional relations that collapse “about” and “with,” relations between words that are twisted towards the present rather than some imaginary original language.

I believe the characters in the film belong to a recent category of otherness in art production. These others do not turn to us in order to allow a facial recognition, a celebration of exoticism, a validation of the tropes of relational aesthetics and post-1989 identity art, which I view as the main sources of the discourse this paradigm has replaced.<sup>5</sup> They do not immediately submit to being translated by contemporary art into English language: this, Van Harskamp quipped offhandedly in conversation, is perhaps what contemporary art does—translate the world to English. Rather than make themselves visible to us, they make themselves known to each other, and situate communality not within an art-worldly carnival of unveilings and recognitions, but in a fold that seems to be beyond our reach.

Such new figures of alterity appear in practices that do not seek to trap and tame the other—to, say, interview him or her about his or her traumatic history or vision of democracy. Rather, faceless others appear in wilful passage or forced transit, captured at deserted places of political interlocution. They are cogs and hinges in a semantic machine that perturbs the dialectic of distance and proximity we’ve inherited from the discourse of globalization, from those who wrote the narrative of neoliberal cosmogony as much as those who deplored its deadly homogeneity. Steering clear of phantasms of assimilation, these practices pursue modes of sense-making not premised on clarified identities but on the blurred image of their flight, on the muffled sounds of their speech. They navigate a multi-perspectival space, punctured by gestures of symbolic insurrection with no apparent direct addressee.

Van Harskamp’s characters are held together by emotional transactions whose details are not divulged: only they can give one another something that they do not have; only they can maintain the balance of a shared world; only they know why they are indispensable to each other. Such “others” flicker on a maps of nomadic trajectories, speaking in an itinerant idiom—that we could perhaps call *itineranto*—looking for the right word, which would hybridize belonging and dislocation in its vocal articulation. Camouflaged in language, receding in private relays of care and solace, nurture and livelihood, their world is not a symmetrical assembly of viewpoints whose frontality is to be reciprocated in our visitation. Here we wander into a space of faces turned away, half-buried in language; we are invited to think solidarity with reticent, foreign participants, in a public space that is bent around itself.

Their future exists beyond an abstract right to have rights. They have conquered English, extended the meaning of some of its words, deviated and changed others. They have inhabited the language, built a language in another language. I am adapting here one of the most resonant paragraphs in the 1989 manifesto *In Praise of Creoleness* by Jean Bernabé, Patrick

Chamoiseau and Raphael Confiant, which suggests that a form of citizenship can be shared in language, and operate politically as a heterolingustics. Such efficacy would be premised on two essential acts: the oath and the right to name.

These twinned acts—oath-taking and naming—are delicately but persuasively built into Van Harskamp's film. Watching it and wandering through the installation, English appears as both imperium and link language, as contestation and disparity between non-native and outnumbered native speakers, its exterior walls insulated against or vulnerable to a future obliteration, to the advancement of now subaltern languages. In its detour via futurologies, predictions, and imaginations; in its engagement with language as a metabolism, *Englishes* looks at how (and who) language sanctions. "To sanction" is a contronym, a wereword hiding in the Oxford English Dictionary, whose perfectly contradictory meanings are activated by intonation or context. The political intensities or emphases in the project unroll between these distinct positions of being sanctioned.

Visiting the installation, one imagines narrative linkages woven between the different films presented there. Perhaps the children in the experiment of liberated language, with new names and shredded dictionaries, staged in *Wer Mae Hao* grow up in the society of PDGN. The back-translations of George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* in *A Romance in Five Acts and Twenty-Five Englishes* send the social roles both delineated and transgressed in the original text swirling around a new set of social vectors and political divides, gauged against phonetic analysis of the artist's own pronunciation in *Her Production*. A Romanian collector of *Englishes* interviews residence permit applicants in Norway. This polyphony of intonations and aspirations, uses and counter-uses of English sounds like a negotiation within and without the language, around its nervous system and at the maximum extension of its limbs: a negotiation of norms and deviations, of good lives and bad lives, and the words or inflections that gauge their distinction. "How does one lead a good life in a bad life?"<sup>6</sup> With this question in mind, *Englishes* introduces us to the lexicon and procedures of a new science: an anthropology of the good life.

---

1 The argument is elaborated in the book *Money and the Early Greek Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). A condensed version appears in the essay "Coinage, Metaphysics and Drama," in Anja Kirschner & David Panos: *Ultimate Substance*, ed. Annette Südbeck (Berlin: Revolver Publishing, 2012).

2 See Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, "Lemma," in *Cross-examinations*, ed. Mihnea Mircan (Ghent: MER Paper Kunsthalle, 2015).

3 See Lawrence Abu Hamdan & Mihnea Mircan, "Conflicted Phonemes," *Nero*, no. 34 (Spring 2014).

4 Viewers of PDGN can opt for Dutch, Mandarin, Arabic or Spanish subtitles. The dialogue is not translated to standard English.

---

5 This idea is more expansively formulated in my “Visiting the Viewpoints of Others. On Nilbar Gures’s Camouflaged Portraits”, *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 36 (Summer 2014).

6 Judith Butler, “Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?: Adorno Prize Lecture,” *Radical Philosophy*, no. 176 (November/December 2012).

This essay was commissioned by BAK Utrecht, on the occasion of the first exhibition of "Englises" and "PDGN", in 2016