

Acting in the Interstices Thoughts on an Ethic of Hybrid Identity

The term “hybrid” has its roots in the field of biology where it refers to a cross of two organisms with different characteristics. The resulting bastard is not a mixture but rather a combination of the respective elements that remain intact in their original characteristics. In this way, it is more efficient and less prone to hereditary diseases. This observation also applies to technical systems whose hybridization brings forth heightened complexity and increased efficiency, and, indeed, does so through the combination of different technical materials and energies.

In the arts and humanities, the complexity of hybrids is a characteristic of mixed cultural forms that have been an object of research in the field of postcolonial studies since the ‘80s. The point of departure for many theories in this field as well as in other areas of scholarship based upon it is the approach taken by Michail Bachtin,¹ who, in his studies about carnivals and about the theory of the novel, defined the dialogical as a multiplicity of voices in the sense of a simultaneity of different social languages that juxtaposed themselves to each other in the hegemonic discourse. In the field of media theory, Marshall McLuhan² observed in the ‘60s the reciprocal effects of different media, which lead to the formation of and determine the hybrid media constructs whose interaction brings together disparate elements and thereby thematize and abrogate existing borders and taboos. The resulting hybrid culture shifts the concept of the border from an either/or situation to a not-only/but-also one. This means the end of the dichotomies that have substantially determined modernity and its concept of identity, physicality, time and space. In a culture essentially shaped by the reciprocal effects of media, the metaphysical points of reference of truth, continuity and authenticity as the undivided, discrete experience of the unity of the Self have to be called into question, and priority accorded to a new understanding of identity and the perception or consciousness of it. The Self thereby adapts itself to changed perception in the age of electronic media.

This is also described by Donna Haraway in her *Manifesto for Cyborgs*.³ Cyborgs (cybernetic organisms) constitute an extreme example of a hybrid identity; nevertheless, even the “natural” human organism that we still regard as 100 per cent normal today can be considered a cyborg in possession of a hybrid identity to the extent that our ways of dealing with our medial and technical prostheses have already made the transition into our flesh and blood. If we accept this state of affairs and turn away from seeking refuge in a discourse of a primeval idyll defined by naturalness and unity, then we can achieve flexibility that provides “a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves. [...] At the same time, this means the construction as well as the destruction of machines, identities, categories, relationships, spaces and histories.”⁴ Such thinking heralds the break-up of traditional Western dichotomies that, in a hybrid logic, have to be considered as constituting a network of reciprocal references and combinational possibilities. If we get accustomed to the fact that nature too is always artificial, that masculinity and femininity can function as a yin-yang principle, and that what lies behind the seemingly undeniable reality of manifest appearances is not nothing but rather more realities from which we have closed ourselves off solely as a result of our perceptions fixated upon dualisms, then our conceptions of truth and of the structure of our world lose their meaning. The same holds true for our conception of Self that, in the tradition of Western thought, is characterized by identity being constituted by means of a process of demarcation from the Other, who is

perceived as a stranger—whereby this is conceivable only in connection with a feeling of being estranged. Instead of “an Other,”⁵ the Self in a hybrid logic is “also the Other.” In this not-only/but-also situation, one is forced to undertake constant revision of one’s standpoint. In hybridity, then, the emphasis is placed on the interface at which the Self encounters the Other and recognizes it as an original part of itself. Hybridity means an amalgamation of heterogeneous elements in a single organism, whereby the resulting condition retains the separation of the individual components. This implies that the Self is continually dependent upon the Other due to cognizance of the fact that this Other is a part of itself. Thus, the encounter takes place at an interface that becomes a pre-discursive or non-discursive interstice at which boundaries are extended into thresholds. Bernhard Waldenfels⁶ limned this threshold realm in which borders “can be traversed without getting past them” as a space that means “neither a process of melting together in the sense of undifferentiability nor separation in the sense of absolute differentiability, but rather a form of retention of contrasts and the ability to stand out in a shared field.” Fixed standpoints become relational fields of difference. The term “threshold” as intermediate space in which the encounter of Self and Other becomes possible is thus of great significance for a hybrid identity, since it leads from a practice of exclusion to an understanding of identity as a flexible state of permeability. The question that then arises has to do with the configuration of this interstice in the threshold zone. In going about answering it, the philosophy of Jacques Derrida⁷ and his concept of *différance* seem to be quite helpful. With *différance*, Derrida seeks to resolve the long-established difference between the Self and the Other—a relationship understood as a rigid system of ascriptions of meaning, demarcations and hierarchies, to the effect that this becomes an interplay of differences without a fixed standpoint. In this process of continuous self-differentiation and reciprocal referencing, difference loses its rigidity along with its existence as a word or a term. *différance* defies conceptual determination in that it is conceived as a process, an ongoing deferral of specification—and thus as mutability. The Italian philosopher Gianni Vattimo characterizes this way of thinking as *pensiero debole*.⁸ It follows an intuitive practice of flexibilization of its own and other standpoints in the sense of ironically distancing itself from itself. In doing so, it takes leave of the Western categories of strength, integrity and presence as necessary features of the Self and opens up new possibilities of conceiving identity: namely, through the merger of similarity and difference as the movement of an “equivalence of difference” in which that which is one’s own always proceeds in the trace left by that which is strange and vice versa. The boundary between presence and absence is thus called into question; that which is present bears within it the trace of that which is absent. “That which is the same is precisely the *différance* as deferred and ambiguous transition from one manifestation of difference to another.”⁹ The question of origins or extraction no longer even comes up; cause and effect become manipulable magnitudes that refer to each other within a continuum of diverse possibilities with a logic of deferral, delay and detour. The way is the destination; being as process—identity defines itself anew from moment to moment as the sum of all possibilities, and derives its potential from its positioning in the interstice, the gap between the Self and the Other as empty space conceived of as a setting for activity and dynamism. It is a meditative emptiness in which the Self can experience itself outside of familiar structures in the process of confronting the Other. It becomes abundance by standing up to the friction that is generated by the confrontation of the Self and the Other, and by recognizing this friction as the chance for development. The path to one’s Self passes through the encounter with the Other. Derrida’s *différance* and Vattimo’s *pensiero debole* point to the fact that this is by no means a matter of how the Other confronts me. This has only to do with how I deal with the irri-

tation that this otherness confronts me with: whether I endure and withstand it, and integrate this experience into my identity, or whether I respond to the process of being called into question by the Other with the defensive reaction of exclusion and the erection of walls and bodies of rules that prevent the Other from getting too close to me. That which I exclude is not dependent upon the one who is excluded, but rather to a much greater extent upon myself and my capacity to recognize that that which I wish to keep separate from myself is always a part of myself—though, indeed, a part that I am incapable of integrating. If, however, the parameters of the understanding of identity change and this develops in such a way that, instead of segregation and confrontation, a practice of open encounter ensues, then identity becomes hybridity—a hybrid identity that, instead of remaining entrenched “at home,” is underway in a domain of “everywhere and nowhere.” From this point, it is in a position to not take itself so seriously and thereby to grant the Other a realm of respect and acknowledgment within the Self. The knowledge that the Other has always been an original part of one’s Self makes it possible to arrive at a conception of oneself that integrates the Other as impetus and opportunity in the process of ego constitution.

This is not a way of negating the primal bifurcation, which is ever-present as consciousness of one’s own heterogeneity. Once the concepts of unity and continuity as the pillars supporting traditional thinking about identity are demolished, fissure no longer means trauma; rather, to a much greater extent, it represents the integration of experience gleaned in the interstice between the Self and the Other. It is here that the chance emerges to live out integrity not as a process of reacting to prescribed moral values but rather as acting in the consciousness of one’s own diversity. Hybrid identities are cognizant of the fact that they’re fallen angels and are not in the midst of fleeing from the trauma of their fall. By regarding the division as a part of their Self, they can free themselves from a life lived according to prescribed patterns and get to a state in which “anything goes.” Letting things flow and being able to let go thus become central parameters in the process of coming to terms with their own dividedness. This helps in coming up with a playful and relaxed way of dealing with their own fears and weaknesses, a way that is conscious of the relativity of points of view and, accordingly, is in a position to kick back and relax, to withstand the emptiness, and thereby to gain entry to a space beyond value judgments, standpoints and approbations/condemnations. This space is the interface in which the Other continuously admonishes us as a mirror and as a entreaty to let go and to become free-free from the categorizations of the Self and the Other.

It is of prime importance to let the Other be different and not to respond to the experience of otherness and the irritation that comes with it with a reaction of fear and hostility. Strangeness always intrudes upon one’s own horizon and calls its patterns and structures of interpretation into question. It eludes the clutches of the Self and confronts the situation of its own powerlessness. Herein lies the danger of reacting, out of this feeling of powerlessness, either with defensive and aggressive mechanisms aimed at the Other, or, on the other extreme, with a gesture of resignation, to subordinate oneself to the Other. A hybrid identity means a distinct challenge to the Self to always act consciously on the threshold; otherwise, to run the risk of, on one hand, complete dislocation and self-renunciation, or, on the other hand, injury and destruction of the Other. The key point is thus a conscious mode of dealing with the needs of the Self and the Other; an essential aspect of this is the recognition that we are all weak and that we are also allowed to show and live out this weakness—for example, by means of irony. This is a most appropriate way of coming to terms with the heterogeneity of the hybrid state, since irony means a person’s capability of moving about on the border between “yes” and “no”. A consciously and clearly emphasized exaggeration is a way

to achieve this. It brings forth a discursive “yes” in order to intimate that what's behind it is actually a “no”. Thus, it's actually a “yes” that means “no” and vice versa, and therefore a hybrid practice of deferral and of reciprocal reference. It is hard to grasp but also hard to attack, since it oscillates among discourses and affiliations, infiltrates them while simultaneously announcing that it is not a part of them in order to utilize this position as a staging ground for forays designed to turn the logic of these discourses and their allegiances inside out, to caricature them and to put them out of commission.

In doing so, it loses neither its power of judgment nor its integrity, yet it reaches its decisions every instant anew. And they are not derived from moral considerations but rather from an ethical premise: recognizing the otherness of the Other and regarding it not as a threat but as an enrichment of the Self; and, from this perspective, to enter into the active intermediate interface of encounter with it; and, in going about this, to recognize that our originally divided, separated nature can only be overcome through the encounter with the Other. In this context, what our society needs is not so much a cleverly devised system of rules put into force by anonymous political and ideological bodies, but rather an ethic of consciously dealing with the expansion of our reality brought about by technical prostheses. After all, today's media-based society, as a result of the realities that this very society opens up, has confronted us with complexity that repeatedly puts us into situations in which we encounter the Other—although this Other is all too often reduced to a media image or stereotype. Hybridity makes it possible to get behind the images and their messages. Consciousness of one's own relativity and dividedness enables one to assess the origins of media messages. This can help prevent life lived amidst an ever-more-confusing reality from becoming a threat, a development that, in turn, brings in its wake terrorist acts of resistance and assault. Hybrid identities have the possibility to enjoy free passage amongst discourses and affiliations and, in doing so, to repeatedly reinvent themselves and to find their place in society without running the risk of a loss of Self. Their heterogeneity is less a steady state than an active practice of coming to terms with the Other, whereby they import the global village directly into their own Self. As the “glocal village”, then, it obeys the ethic of the interstice with which aspects of local coexistence can be integrated into anonymous, mediatized and technologized, global structures.

Translated from German by Mel Greenwald

- 1 Michail Bachtin: *Die Ästhetik des Wortes*, Frankfurt 1979.
- 2 Marshall McLuhan: *Die magischen Kanäle – Understanding Media*, Düsseldorf 1992, p. 39.
- 3 Donna Haraway: *Die Neuerfindung der Natur – Primaten, Cyborgs, Frauen*, Frankfurt 1995.
- 4 Donna Haraway, p. 72.
- 5 Arthur Rimbaud: *Lettres du voyant. 13 et 15 mai 1871*, Paris 1975, p. 113.
- 6 Bernhard Waldenfels: *Topographie des Fremden*, Frankfurt 1997, p. 65.
- 7 Jacques Derrida: *Randgänge der Philosophie*, Frankfurt 1976.
- 8 Gianni Vattimo / Pier Aldo Rovatti (Eds.): *Il pensiero debole*, Milano 1997.
- 9 Jacques Derrida, p. 24.