A Tsunami of Metaphors

Language and imagination in a technical world

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"Your bedroom is a place to recharge yourself". That was the slogan of a new advertising campaign of a furniture manufacturer. "Because good sleep is important". Nobody will be surprised anymore that this manufacturer compares human beings with batteries that have to be recharged and of which the energy can be measured in percentages (in the commercial the battery goes from 1% in the red to a green 100% after a night in a room furnished by them). Human beings are nowadays "connected", "batteries", "computers". The metaphors borrowed from a technical jargon and reflecting only a technical world are legion.

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On average we use one metaphor every 20 words. Thus metaphors have left their mark on our language, our way of expressing ourselves. If language creates worlds then there are also those who have created languages to instil worlds in us. Actually, linguists all agree that metaphors play a dominant role in the conception of our thoughts and behaviour.

We – batteries – decide to not put energy any more in a relationship with a certain friend after having made an analysis of gains and losses of the respective friendship. As if we are perfect accountants that submit everything to a monetary analysis. Because time is money (you waste time and you gain time), and money, in turn, is health. When businesses take many losses then the economy is ill. When a human being is ill then something is not right in the machinery. There is a bolt that's not fitted very well or organs that don't do their job anymore.

Even though they might seem sometimes complicated, metaphors are used to make things more understandable. It's the only way to talk about certain things because literal language falls short when it's about abstract, relational, emotional things. We lack the physical experience of abstract concepts and so we use words that invoke a tangible suggestion. Thus we can "see" these concepts and almost have a physical experience of them. One example is our way of talking about time. We talk about it as if it is a space: the future is in front of us, the past behind us.

Literally speaking, most metaphors are insane. They confuse our senses. Arthur Rimbaud considered poetry to be an elementary hallucination that shakes our way of perceiving (our perception). That is exactly what metaphors do. They make us taste vengeance (sweet) and feel loneliness (chilling cold). Aristotle defined metaphors as the process of giving something a name that actually belongs to something else. We transfer the meaning of one word to another word. The old Greek already knew that it is a formidable weapon, especially in political discourse -

"because a metaphor isn't blindingly obvious". Aristotle went so far as to say that they who masters the use of metaphors, are masters of their surroundings. The thinker of the modern state, Thomas Hobbes, discarded metaphors as an abuse of speech. In his Leviathan he accused those who use metaphors of deceiving others. Numerous thinkers have considered metaphors as belonging to children, as an almost ridiculous trick for feeble minds. It was the terrain of the poets with their absurd inventions.

Today the use of metaphors is certainly not anymore the privileged terrain of poets. In all domains of society language abounds with metaphors. For example, the more technology advances – of which the real functioning generally evades our understanding, the more we use metaphors to try to grasp at least something. Even if we generally grasp the results of a certain technological process rather than its sequence. So we visualize "data" evidently as huge libraries, with the unfortunate consequence that bits and bytes of information take in our imagination the characteristics of intelligence and wisdom which are generally linked to the "culture" contained in the books of a library. An object becomes "intelligent" because it "interacts" while it is only preprogrammed sequences of algorithms. Intelligence will soon become "artificial" which points towards it supposedly surpassing "natural" intelligence, which belongs to human beings. The more our direct experience (not only physical but also mental and emotional) passes through a mediation (being nowadays mainly technological or religious or political), the more our language integrates metaphors that in turn, confirm the inescapability of the mediation. Metaphors become the prism through which we experience the world and that inevitability determine the experience that we make from this world.

So nobody will be surprised to learn that for a long time intelligence services have entire departments dedicated to the study of metaphors. For example, to understand and map certain conceptions in a given population. But also to create metaphors, yes, to guide feelings and thoughts. Orwell isn't far off. The methods can be very simple, as when in this text I ask you not to think about a pink elephant and subsequently you cannot stop "seeing" this pink elephant in front of your nose. A consultant who works for a privately owned business that "designs" metaphors for the campaigns of NGOs and charity foundations, has a metaphor for metaphors: "It's a room. The windows and doors allow for a certain view, a frame to see the exterior through. Put the windows higher in the room and people will see only trees. Put them lower and they'll only see grass. Put the windows only on the south side and they'll always see sun. The inventor of the metaphor makes their architectural choices unavoidable." Unavoidability and coercion merge fast. Coercion in thoughts and in imagination; imprinting moral imperatives in brains and behaviours. When we think about it there are thousands of metaphoric expressions that participate in the reproduction of domination by the sensations they evoke. In the military domain there are "surgical strikes" or "peacekeeping missions", in the economical domain we have "the stock market that crashes" (there's nothing anyone can do about it) or "the economy recovers" (thanks to the political measures). And to what extent has this awful metaphor dating back to Antiquity become established that society is like a human body with each organ its place and function and where the head commands and the arms get tired? How rapidly did we absorb the concepts of cybernetics and computing that say people are "connected" even when they never saw each other, "networks" are "social" while they atomise, technology is "green" while it's colourless, flavourless or else rather white and grey?

And the jargon of anarchists? Certainly, the new world we hold in our hearts also has to find an expression through a language capable of creating worlds, a subversive language, an imagi-

nation that peers into the untold horizons. But all that is very different from illusions bordering on frauds. We call to make "war on society", but how many really leave the comfort zone of differences of opinion? We say we want to liberate our passions... by affirming it on the internet. The anarchist language creates worlds, should create worlds, but cannot be open to fraud, to self-deceit, to a kind of collective hypnosis that will only strengthen patterns of followers or the consumption of any subversive tension. Did you already notice how comfortable expressions like "the seed of subversion lies beneath the snow" can be for those seeking to justify waiting? Besides, the "fire" that burns in our hearts can extinguish very fast when things turn complicated and the "solid rocks of our ideas" erode rather surprisingly fast when the trumpet of the next "social movement" sounds.

Should we then abandon the imagined language, the metaphors to talk about what we cannot talk about, declare the death of poetry (in passing; isn't it already numbed and then killed by the progress of technology and its world of images?), in order to purge language from manipulations, from biased strategies, from camouflaged hypocrisies, from moral imperatives imprinted in the expressions themselves? A fact in and of itself is nothing. The statement of a fact, stating something "objectively", is impossible. Language relates our being with our experience. It will always be lacking, a bit false, approximative. For that reason it would be a declaration of defeat to oppose the metaphors that shape dominant thought with a factual language. The battle of metaphors is being waged on the terrain of imagination. The language of subversives cannot be "detached" from reality like the technological language "detaches" us evermore from our direct experience. But it cannot want to coincide with reality, because it would block the horizon of imagination with its massacres, its oppression, its dullness, its exploitation. No, subversive language has to build bridges, always anew and different, between a fact and its expression, between a fact and its interpretation, between a fact and its surpassing. To end with a metaphor, breaking through the vicious circle of the production and reproduction of the existent also goes through the expression and language *other* than the one of modern domination that is technical and riddled with nonsensical metaphors.