

SYMPOSIUMS **2**

Geopolitics and Religion

The Politics of Faith

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Religion: The Politics of
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From Religious Ritual to Mechanical Repetition – and Back

Religion is often understood as a certain set of opinions. There religion is associated with opinions about whether contraception should be permitted or women should wear headscarves. Correspondingly, religion is usually discussed in the context of a demand for a freedom of opinion guaranteed by law. As a set of opinions religion is tolerated as long as it remains tolerant and does not question the freedom of other opinions – that is to say, as long as it makes no exclusive, fundamentalist claim to its own truth.

But I would suggest that religion – any religion – is primarily not a set of opinions but a set of rituals. And the religious ritual refers rather to a state of lack of opinion, state of opinionlessness – *a-doxa* – for it refers to the will of the gods or of God that is ultimately hidden to the opinions of mortals. The ritual as such is neither true, nor false. In this sense it marks the zero level of freedom of opinion, e.g. the freedom from every kind of opinion, from the obligation to have an opinion. The religious ritual can be repeated, or abandoned, or modified – but not legitimized, criticized or refuted. Accordingly, the fundamentalist is somebody who insists not so much on a certain set of opinions than on the certain rituals not being abandoned or modified but faithfully, correctly reproduced. The true fundamentalist cares not about fidelity to the truth but about the correctness of a ritual, not about the theoretical, or, rather, theological interpretations of the faith but about the material form of religion. The fundamentalist is somebody who believes in the primacy of the letter over the spirit.

Now if we look at the religious movements that are especially active in our days we immediately see that they are mostly the fundamentalist movements. It is, of course, not accidental. Every religion is based on repetition, on reproduction. But we traditionally tend to distinguish between two kinds of repetition: (1) repetition of the spirit and in spirit, e.g. repetition of the true, inner essence of a religious message and (2) repetition of the external form of a religious ritual. The opposition between these two types of repetition – between living spirit and dead letter – informs the whole traditional Western discourse on religion. The first kind of repetition is almost always regarded as true repetition, as authentic, “inner” continuation of a religious tradition – the continuation that at the same time presupposes a possibility of the rupture with the merely external, conventional, historically accidental form of this tradition - or even requires such a rupture. According to this view the inner, spiritual fidelity to the essence of a religious message gives to a believer the right to adapt the external, material form of this message to the changing historical milieus and contexts without

betraying the inner truth of this message. A religious tradition that is capable to transform and to adapt itself to the changing circumstances without losing its inner, essential identity is usually praised as a living, spiritually powerful tradition that maintains its vitality and historical relevance. On the contrary, the “superficial” fidelity to the mere letter, to the external form of religion, to the “empty” ritual is as a rule regarded as a symptom of a lack of vitality of the corresponding religious tradition – and even as a betrayal of the inner truth of this tradition through the purely mechanical reproduction of its external, dead form. Now the fundamentalism is precisely that: the insistence on the letter against the spirit.

That is why the religious fundamentalism has always a revolutionary dimension: it breaks with the politics of spirit, e.g. with the politics of reform, flexibility, adaptation to the zeitgeist, and substitute it (I mean: the politics of spirit) by the violent politics of letter. The contemporary religious fundamentalism can be seen, therefore, as the most radical product of the European Enlightenment and the materialist view of the world. The religious fundamentalism is religion after the death of the Spirit, after the loss of spirituality. Because if the Spirit dies – it is only the letter that remains – the material form, the ritual as event in the material world. Or to put it in another way: a difference in the material form of religion cannot be compensated any more by identity in spirit. A break with the external form of the ritual cannot be compensated by the inner, spiritual fidelity to the religious truth. A material difference is now just a difference – there is no essence, no being and no meaning underlying such a formal difference on a deeper level. If you see a difference on the surface you may not look any more for the hidden, inner identity behind this surface – because such an identity can be only an imaginary one. In this sense the fundamentalist religion movements are religions after the deconstruction. If meaning, sense, and intention cannot be stabilized, the only possibility of authentic repetition is the literal repetition, the mechanical reproduction – beyond any opinion, meaning, sense and intention.

In his book *Difference and Repetition* Gilles Deleuze speaks of literal repetition as being radically artificial and in this sense as being in conflict with everything natural, living, changing, developing, including natural law and moral law. To practice literal repetition can be seen, therefore, as initiating a rupture in the continuity of life. Actually, Walter Benjamin also speaks in his remarks on the philosophy of history about the revolution as a break with the continuity of historical evolution – presenting a literal repetition of the past as a genuine revolution. (And he speaks also about the Capitalism as a new kind of religion that is reduced to a ritual – devoid of any theology). But literal repetition is not only a revolution – not only an act of violence against the flow of historical change, and even against life as such. The literal repetition can be seen also as a way to personal self-sacralization and immortality – immortality of the subject that is ready to submit itself to such a repetition. Not accidentally the working class that performed the repetitive, alienated, one can say, ritual work in the context of the Modern industrial civilization was in a certain sense sacralized by the Socialist movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whereas an intellectual or an artist – as embodiments of the creative spirit of change – remained profane precisely because of their incapability to repeat, to reproduce. Already Nietzsche proclaimed the literal repetition – eternal return of the same on the level of the world of appearances – to be the only chance to think immortality after the death of spirit, of God. One can say that the religious ritual is a *Urform* of the mechanical reproduction that dominates our contemporary world, especially our mass media. And that means that the mechanical reproduction can be in its turn understood as a religious ritual. That is why the fundamentalist religious movements became so successful in our time: They combine the religious ritual with mechanical reproduction.

The standard diagnosis of today's civilization is that, over the course of the modern age, theology was replaced by philosophy, an orientation toward the past by an orientation toward the future, tradition by subjective evidence, fidelity to origins by innovation, and so on. In fact, however, the modern age was not the age in which the sacred was abolished but the age of its dissemination in profane space, its democratization, its globalization. Once ritual, repetition, and reproduction were practiced in isolated, sacred places. In the modern age ritual, repetition, and reproduction have become the fate of the entire world, the entire culture. Even the progress is ultimately reproductive; it consists in a constantly repeated destruction of everything that cannot be reproduced quickly and effectively enough. One can say, that just as Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square* reveals the medium painting, because it caused all figuration to disappear – the today's fundamentalist religious movements can be understood as the avant-garde of our present world because they reveal the pure *mediality* of the contemporary media of reproduction. Especially, the medium of video reveals its structure through its use by the contemporary religious fundamentalist movements.

First of all, video became the chosen medium of a contemporary religious propaganda being distributed through different channels of TV, Internet, commercial video stores etc. That is true especially of the most recent and most active, even aggressive religious movements. Bin Laden – to refer to this well-known name – communicates with the outside world primarily by the medium video. (In fact, we know him as a video artist, in the first place). We are very much acquainted meanwhile with the phenomenon of the confession videos of the suicide bombers and many other kinds of video production reflecting the mentality of the radical Islam. But on the other hand the new Evangelical movements also operate by the same medium of video. If you ask the people who are responsible for the public relations and working for these movements to help you with some information you get some videos sent to you in the first place. The same is true for many other recent sects – Christian and non-Christian. The same medium is also operative in the kind of the psychological warfare that reflects the contemporary inter-religious tensions. The good example of such videos are the videos from the Abu Ghraib prison that in a very uncanny way evoke the images and techniques of the subversive European and American cinema of the 1960s. One is reminded, especially, of Pasolini but also of other videos of that time, such as for example the videos documenting the performances of the Viennese Actionists thematizing the complicity between sexuality and violence.

This use by the different religious movements of the video as the major medium of self-presentation is a relatively new phenomenon. The standard traditional media were, rather, a script, a book, a painted image or a sculpture. Now I would like to suggest that the use of the video as the leading medium by the contemporary religious movements is not something external to the message of these movements. And it is also not external to the understanding of the religious as such that is underlying this use. It doesn't mean that, as McLuhan would say, the medium is here the message. Rather, I would like to suggest that the message became here the medium – a certain religious message became the digital code. To illustrate this thesis I would like to reflect on two different – but deeply interconnected – aspects of the video as a medium: (1) of the video being a prominent example of digital reproduction and (2) of the video being a moving image – in contrast to the traditional images like painting or sculpture. And I would suggest that these both technical characteristics of the video are very much consistent with the practice of the contemporary fundamentalist religious movements.

The digital images have an ability to originate, to multiply and to distribute themselves through the open fields of the contemporary means of communication such as Internet or cell-phone networks spontaneously and anonymously, without any centralized control. At the same time the digitalization guarantees a literal reproduction of an image more effectively than every other known technique. Of course, it is not so much the digital image itself than the image file, the digital data that remains identical through the process of its reproduction and distribution. And the image file is not an image – the image file is invisible. The digital image is an effect of the visualization of the invisible image file, of the invisible digital data. Only the heroes of the movie *Matrix* could see the image files, the digital code as such. But the average spectator has not a magic pill that would allow him or her like the heroes of *Matrix* to enter the space of the invisibility behind the digital image – to be confronted directly with the digital data itself. And such a spectator has not the technique that would allow him to transfer the data directly into the brain and to experience it in the mode of pure, non-visualizable suffering like in another movie – *Johnny Mnemonic*. (Actually, pure suffering is, as we know, the most adequate experience of the Invisible). The digital data should be visualized, should become an image to be seen. The act of the visualization of the invisible digital data is thus analogous to the appearances of the Invisible inside the topography of the visible world (biblically speaking: signs and wonders) that originate the religious rituals. In this respect the digital image is functioning as a Byzantine icon – as a visible copy of invisible God. The digital data substitute the Invisible God of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The video is a moving icon – an effect of the substitution of the invisible God by the digital code. In this sense we can say that the digital code is an embodiment of Invisible as Invisible. The digital code guarantees the identity of different images that function as visualizations of this code – but not on the level of spirit, essence or meaning but on the technical level. Every demonstration of a video is a ritual – a literal repetition of the same.

In his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* Walter Benjamin asserts that the artwork – and also ritual object or ritual as such – loses its aura when it is transported from its original place to another space or when it is copied. So it seems that the loss of aura is especially significant in the case of visualization of the image file. If a traditional “analogue” original is moved from one place to another it remains a part of the same space, of the same topography – of the same visible world. On the contrary, the digital original – the digital data – is moved by its visualization from the space of invisibility, from the status of “non-image” to the space of visibility, to the status of “image”. Accordingly, we have here apparently to do with a truly massive loss of aura – because nothing has more aura than the Invisible. The visualization of the Invisible is traditionally regarded as the most radical form of its profanation. The visualization of the digital data can also be seen as a sacrilege – compared only to the attempt to visualize the invisible God of Judaism or Islam. But at the same time this profanation has a character of a sacral ritual – because every ritual is an act of bringing of the sacral in the world.

In fact, Benjamin ignores this ambivalence. He thinks traditionally enough: he describes the religious experience as, let say, spiritual experience – in this respect it is very characteristic how he evokes an experience of being enchanted by an Italian landscape as an example of a authentic experience that get lost through reproduction. (It is the experience of happiness, of fullness of life, intensity of life). But one can argue that the true religious experience is actually the experience of death rather than the experience of life – the experience of death in the middle of life. So precisely because the mechanical reproduction can be understood as the lifeless repetition of the dead image it can be also interpreted as a source of the truly religious experience. One can say that it is precisely the loss of aura that is the most radical religious

experience under the conditions of modernity because in this way a human being discovers the mechanical, machine-like, repetitive and reproductive, one can say, dead aspect of its own existence. But by putting human life in loop both practices – ritual and video – realize at the same time the Nietzschean dream of the eternal return of the same by the contemporary technical means. It is this new prospect of materialist, technical guaranteed immortality that the new religious movements offer their adepts – instead the metaphysical uncertainties of their theological and theocentric past.

Claire Brunet: I feel very impressed by the videos you showed and by the analysis you provided. But I'm going to come back to something different. I do agree, completely, with the main thesis, which is that repetition – even, I would say, repetition of death – is quite modern and quite, let's say, European. But I would like to come back to some of the principals of the lectures. First of all, I thought the use of concepts was somehow funny because I read in *Policy of Immortality* that you referred to Jacques Derrida's deconstruction... And therefore I would like to deconstruct a little bit the binary mode of your statement: this idea that religion has to be either opinion or ritual, either external or I would say intimacy, and, last but not least - you used saint Paul's distinction - either Letter or Spirit. I think you have an interesting reading of Saint Paul, but I would like to hear more. Because when you say – and I have the text –, when you write “the fundamentalist is somebody who believes in the primacy of letter over spirit”, it sounds very Christian to my ears. I mean it endorses the way saint Paul feels about Judaism, and the idea that “the letter kills” – I don't know what's the right thing in English, but I'm translating from French – “the letter kills and the spirit is on the side of life”. So I think that the religion that I would put outside from all the things you said is Judaism, because of the relationship that Judaism has to Text. And Text is not Letter as you hear it, and is not Spirit as you hear it also. So I would like you to say a little bit about it.

Boris Groys: First of all, Derrida was also very polemical, and you cannot be polemical without thinking of position, at least between you and other people. If you look at what he is doing, he always is against essence and things like that. So I repeat this gesture rather than I deconstruct, I'm quite a postdeconstructivist. Now, if you look at his later texts, partly written in English – I think Derrida is a good starting point – partly given as a lecture in the USA, he is speaking about media as being a purely Christian phenomenon, having nothing to do with Judaism and Islam. So he insistently, time and time again, looks for a certain kind of strange united front of Islam and Judaism against Christianity. And if you ask yourself what is that and why is it so, is that he considers Judaism and Islam as letter, with text. I vulgarize a bit; but I don't vulgarize very far, you know. And he somehow thinks that we believe in the image in a different way as we do it with the text. So reading all the stuff, I ask myself what he is actually speaking about, because our images, digitalized images, our text, it's image already turned into text. Because what does it mean to digitalize things? That means to write them down. So the career of digitalization in our time is nothing else than a technical continuation of the practise of conceptual art of the 1960s, and the complete erasure of all difference between text and image.

And of course what we have in our media is image being a text on the same level. So I would say, what I do, I try to deconstruct the positions of things I can sell, propagates for public gain in a very consistent way, because I really find that digitalization abolishes this difference. In this sense, there are no possible two paths to distinguish between Christianity, Judaism and Islam in these terms. What I have to do is the same: a relationship between text which can be letter and can be image but is still text, in his relationship to some religious messages. There is the same relationship: these images or text open us to this message, at the same time this somehow isolates us to this message. That's a traditional problem of any religion. That's what makes religion.

Claire Brunet: I do agree, and I would say the most interesting thing – at least what interested me the most in the paper – was, I think, the core of the demonstration: the fact that you avoided the psychological side and tried to explain what I would call the structural affinities between fundamentalism and modernity as time of mechanical repetition. I have many questions, but I'm going to try to have a dialogue, so I'm going to answer just what you said about Derrida. At this point, it's very interesting that you ended with an interpretation of the mechanical repetition of the last video we saw,¹ quite different then the one the artist himself provided (within the video itself), because he says that he wanted to show that this communist sacrifice gesture was a human gesture. I do agree with this critic you try upon the humanistic interpretation of human being. But I have the feeling that what you described is not only that the aura has disappeared, but that the subject has completely vanished. And the artist, here, tries to save something of the subjective dimension. I think it's very consistent, not only with the mechanical repetition, but also with what you say about the Letter. Of course, I have here my own readings – not Derrida but Lacan, and especially when he explains that the modern science, since it writes everything, has an effect that he calls "forclusion du sujet",² I would say a very strong way of rejection of the subjective dimension through the translation of every thing into letter. And that's where I would like to hear a little bit more, which is: what kind of definition of the subject do we still have if we want to avoid the only one that is consistent with such a world as the one you describe and which, I would say, is the subject as victim or mere effect of a trauma? Is it the last concept of the subject that we are able to use?

Boris Groys: I would say that – I repeat a point where I try to introduce a conceptual subject: subject as subjectivation, as submission to religion. It's kind of untied trauma thinking, untied trauma thinking in a sense that you submit to lacanian discourse [laughter]. You are not traumatized by lacanian discourse [laughter]. Trauma is a kind of repetition here, but the question is if you submit yourself to this repetition or not. And the same thing is here. There is a subjectivity, but not an image. And I would say the subjectivity is my decision, like Kierkegaard describes that, my decision which is unfounded, which is unexplainable, unmotivated and so on, and so on; but it is taken to submit myself to repetition. And it is a kind of sacrifice of a second order because the real subjectivity is sacrifice of originality, sacrifice of any kind of exclusivity, and so on, and so on... I decide to submit myself to the banal, to what is already there and I accept myself repeating this in eternity. It's a very unpleasant prospective, even if it is the only one possible prospective. So this completely unpleasant decision, which is the only possible decision, constitutes my subjectivity, I would say. My subjectivity is constituted by the loss of originality

1. Il s'agit de la vidéo performance de Rabih Mroué et Elias Khoury, *Three Posters*, 2000. Cette œuvre prend pour sujet une cassette vidéo réalisée par Jamal Satti, militant communiste libanais, avant son attentat suicide, où il « répète » la déclaration destinée à être diffusée à la télévision après sa mort. Bibl : Anna Hiddleston, « Rabih Mroué », in *Les Inquiets. Cinq artistes sous la pression de la guerre*, Paris, éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2008.

2. Foreclosure of the subject.

and any claim to whatever truth I would have in myself. So I'm just repeating this gesture of saying something without claiming the original truth.

Claire Brunet: My claim was not about originality, even from the point of view of psychoanalysis. And describing the subject as only being subjected to a discourse is, as a matter of fact, what as psychoanalysts we begin, but it's not what we wish to end, with. Here, I have a question about language, because in *Policy of Immortality*, I read a sentence, something like: "We are beyond the language. Today the language is not the essential place of our lives." So I was thinking that with this doctrine of repetition, the only language that is left seems to be the imperative one, the fatwa for instance. If the trauma is not what leads us to define the subject, then with your statement, I would say that the only subject that is left is the excluded one, is the rejected one, the one who cannot identify himself to any discourse or to any practise, which is sort of a paranoiac structure of the world. So I had a question here because I am totally willing not to circumscribe myself to any humanistic definition of the subject, but I'm not sure I'm completely happy about this paranoiac choice, I mean whether I am with the mass, identifying myself through the gestures, or I'm out. What's happening with the one who cannot identify? – for any reason, I mean. If for instance you travel, you are an emigrant, what is the discourse you are going to adapt to? That is my question.

Boris Groys: Maybe two examples. One example is related to *fatwa*. We are now analysing different *fatwas*, at least, by Iranian ayatollahs in relationship to visual images. One is very interesting: if you make a picture or a photograph of somebody using a flash, then it is OK. If you don't, it's not, because – I had this experience – if you're using the flash, at this moment you are blinded by flash and like dead. So at the moment you are dead, it is possible to take a picture of dead persons. But without flash, you're still alive. This is very complicated. But I had a personal relation absolutely related to all of this. I was going through a rainy evening in Boston, a couple of years ago. I came to Boston to see the exhibition of young artists, like students. I like every representative exhibition of time. It was mixed: with video-images, paintings, sculptures, performances, women, men, everything mixed. So it was a very usual thing. I decided to go and then I went to drink a coffee. And I was completely fascinated, because at the basement you could see the video confessions by these artists who described what they did. And you know, there were twenty-four artists invited. All of them said they do that because they were traumatized. All of them, without any exception. A girl, she was three when her father drove over a cat; so she is upset with cats. A guy, he learned when he was six, that his aunt hanged herself at the day he was born. Things like that. So all of them had different traumas, but the same submission for trauma.

Claire Brunet: It is the imperialism of psychoanalysis. A bad understanding of course of psychoanalysis.

Boris Groys: And so my point is that submission to a discourse is not only submission to a discourse of banalities, it is also submission to a discourse of exclusivity which is battle in itself. I mean, people are genuine, all of them are original, the traumas were completely different, but the discourse was all the same. And that fascinated me. I am fascinated by the repetition and not by the difference. It was the same discourse about different things; it was the same discourse of self-justification through trauma.

Claire Brunet: It is very interesting you say you were concerned by repetition and not by difference. At the beginning of your intervention, when you spoke about repetition as being something unnatural – I can understand that but there are doctrines who say exactly the contrary –, I was of course thinking about Hannah

Arendt and what she says is that repetition is specifically underside of natural life. We could hear that you disagree with it.

Boris Groys: Absolutely. I absolutely disagree with that. I really think that Deleuze made a better analysis, that in fact in nature there is no precise repetition. We are living in a culture with its claim of difference, and I know that what I'm writing is irritating people. Of course it is different, but it is also the same, and the sameness is overlooked. What our culture tends to overlook is in a very strange way repetition and similarities. Differences are not overlooked: they are shown, exposed, exhibited and insisted upon. This kind of subtext of our civilisation which is a subtext of repetition is somehow strategically overlooked. Maybe that's why I was stricken by this point because it seems to me that other people don't do that.

Claire Brunet: I do agree with this statement, but what you are talking about is what I would call a narcissistic difference. And I'm not sure that the whole topic of difference relates to this what I would call imaginary difference, because the claim is: "I am different." But I don't see how you can even think repetition without having somehow an idea that would not be this ego pattern of difference.

Boris Groys: I think it starts not with a point zero. It starts with some claim, and the claim is precisely as you said: "I am different." That is the claim of our time. I would say, yes of course, but you are different in the same way as other people are different. And your discourse of all that is absolutely the same. There is nothing bad about that. But I just immediately look at that and I think that it is very deep-rooted in our culture and very deep-laid.

Claire Brunet: I have a last question about video, which is that you don't speak at all, in this topic I mean, about the fact that these videos are addressed to somebody. I don't know whom they are addressed to. Do you think it's important to think about that? For instance, the last video we saw: of course it is addressed to the Lebanese people and to every people who would like to exist through this sacrifice style of political gesture and trying to say: "I would suppose there is something else to do than to sacrifice yourself." And I had the feeling that if the last relationship to language we have is submission to a discourse, there is something that is resistant I think to it. And that would be somehow a point where some psychoanalysts and some artists could be on the same side, which is the humour. Humour is a weapon, I think, against this identification and this submission to discourse.

Boris Groys: I agree with that.

Claire Brunet: Even you made humour when you say that Bin Laden is known as a video-artist.

Boris Groys: But the problem is that it is not humoristic; it's just a matter of fact.

Claire Brunet: That's where we disagree perhaps.

Boris Groys: The point is that Kierkegaard saw a difference between irony and humour. And he says that irony is how I am playing with things, and humour is how things are playing with me. So it's a different spirit. This different kind of spirit, maybe I practise it, but I just less practise it as I show how it's working. But the very short way to react to the problem is that we are speaking about a society of spectators, but I have a feeling that there is no spectator in fact. If you look at contemporary world, everybody is expressing himself, everybody is speaking, everybody is producing images and nobody reacts. We have this huge My Space and You Tube;

so people are just sending and sending and sending images, so the last spectator would be Guy Debord. And then he commits suicide because there is no spectator. And that is why there is no spectacle. So who is the spectator? I would say: to suggest yourself that whatever you do could interest somebody or something is to be paranoiac in an interesting way, in a positive way. So I agree with you that my discourse is paranoid, but I think it's paranoid in an affirmative and positive way.

Claire Brunet: Nietzschean paranoia.

Boris Groys: Yes, it's a good paranoia, because you should be paranoid to suppose that what you are saying can be understood, or be interesting for somebody or something. And that is another way of being religious in our times, to posit the spectator who is fundamentally good, who is the spectator of My Space and You Tube. It can be only good, because there is no human being who can look at it (rire). So we have more and more addressing events to say whatever they say. And this addressing event is of course a paranoiac religious gesture which I find very positive for our time. Look at the people, they are happy.

Marie Muracciole: I have a comment, not exactly a question, but maybe you could react to this and then I'll give the microphone to anyone who wants it. When we speak about repetition and reproduction – of course then it's mechanical reproduction – we have this idea of a model and it drives to the question of genealogy. I'm not sure that any mechanical reproduction is strictly exact. Everybody says the contrary. You have a lot of artists who work about this, Sigmar Polke for instance. And I'm not sure we can completely avoid any allusion to another type of reproduction, which is the sexual reproduction, and which is on the side of course not of immortality but of birth. And birth leads to mortality. So I wanted to have your opinion about this. Of course it reminds us of incarnation, and also of the genealogic "model" of the conception of the Christ - there is some invisibility in this genealogy, related to the intervention of the Holy Spirit. This is part of the many different possibilities of the "idea" of reproduction...

Boris Groys: I think that sexual reproduction is a thing of the past, of course, that continues. The past continues. So what progressive art was always dreaming of was artificial reproduction of human beings and cloning. And that's what is sacral. If you look at the contemporary mass culture, the sacral figures are clones. It's objectively speaking a thing of the past; so it's not true. Maybe what can save sexual reproduction are the same things that can save the digital reproduction. In fact, what is the same and what is different? Every visualisation of a digital code is an original performance and in fact very much dependent on the quality of your equipment. And also we are speaking about generation. Actually it is very interesting that rhetoric of generation and generating is applied to a video equipment and also computer equipment, so that we have also oedipal struggles. For example erasure of your text, what happens always by some incompatibility between generations, then I can't read my own text. So it is an inter-generational struggle. But what happens here is that the digital code is the same. In fact, you don't know that you believe it. So what you see is difference; what you believe in is repetition. You believe that it is the same digital code that you downloaded on your computer, even if the image looks slightly or even substantially different. In this sense, this repetition in the sameness is not on the level of visibility; it is on the level of some kind of original image which is inaccessible to you as a digital data. To a certain degree you can compare that to the sexual reproduction, saying that you repeat a genetic code, which is the same, effectuated in a different way under specific conditions. I think that development in genetic research and in image reproduction techniques, I make a parallel there, in both cases stands on the belief in the sameness

of something that is in the deep but are confronting in fact with differences. Whatever interpretation we give to that, confronted to the difference of the surface we believe to an identity underneath, which is not the essence or meaning like Derrida said. It is meant in as a kind of material support or information; we can differentiate between images as resulting of a material support. It is a completely different kind of discourse. So we can speak about difference on a superficial level, difference of images and text, and identity as a level of material support, a digital code, a genetic code, and so on.

Marie Muracciole: It drives me to another remark: about being different or not. Lacan says it, I think, like: each time we say "I", we loose ourselves in anonymity. "I" is the word of anonymity, of "us". Perhaps there's another way to think than being different or not different. When we speak, we're all the same. But in fact, there are others, not a big Other, simply: otherness exists.

Boris Groys: Otherness exists but it's more interesting for me to use the concept of difference – because if you speak to other people, it is because they are the same. The problem is that if there are others, they are not interesting to you, they are just others. There are different people using the same language Lacan speak about. And that is interesting and not their difference, because they refer to the same psychoanalytical theory. So what is interesting me is a kind of being infected by the same, having the same intellectual past, like Lacan and Derrida, or being conditioned in the same way. I am really interested in similarities and in repetitions, maybe because I'm an affirmative paranoid and I have not lost this kind of paranoid idea of a kind of spectator or reader. You need a structure if you write books.

Claire Brunet: I would personally like you – because some of us could be negative paranoiac people – to re-explain why Bin Laden is a video artist.

Boris Groys: He is a video artist because we are confronted with him through the videos he produced. And it is very interesting that a couple of times you see, maybe, some documentaries that show him, they were accidentally made by other people like journalists. And you almost don't recognize him. That means that his aesthetic is what we react to in the first place, his image. I really was very much impressed by this Byzantine image created in one of his videos addressed to American people, like golden and white, it looked absolutely like a quotation from the Gospels. So you have this kind of aesthetic and people tend to overlook that, of course, to overlook the artistic project that is guiding all that, because they just react to the information he gives. But just forget about what he says and look at how he does it, or somebody does it, you have a very clear cut, well formulated aesthetic. That makes him in my eyes a good video artist, and that's how I know him. It's what he is saying and what people are saying about him. But what I see is an interesting aesthetic message, it is formal.

Claire Brunet: There could be another question about what you said about totalitarianism, because we didn't speak about it at all. Are there any structural affinities between totalitarian politics and performance art?

Boris Groys: Yes of course.

Claire Brunet: I would like to hear you because it is the topic of the day I think too, these strange affinities. Probably you could say a bit more about this, I would say mad affinity, not only paranoiac affinity.

Boris Groys: I think performance art is not a totalitarian culture, I think it's rather that you appeal to everybody. That's the difference with a politic that is based on interests, particular interests, and the democratic liberal politic based on interests is always particular, is in this sense anaesthetic. Aesthetic appears, emerges in the moment that you don't figure any tangible interest, or if you are figuring any imaginary interests, like interests about Aryan race. And then inventing these interests or appealing on the basis of these interests to all of us, are these totalizing gestures. And it is fundamentally the same gestures that every artist does. Every artist invents something that he wants (or that she wants) to tell us all. It is a kind of leap from the individual project to the totalized media space. There is no other art as globalized, there is no other art as totalized, because the fundamental gesture is from here to everybody, everything, everywhere. That is how "mondiality" functions today. It's not the same for artistic activities that are not contemporary art or modern art, because these are also addressed to somebody, to the spectator. Modern art, modern writing, modern politics is appealing to everybody and nobody, like Nietzsche would say. And this gesture is political and at the same time aesthetic, because this gesture abolishes any particular economical and social interests. And that's interesting.

Claire Brunet: From my point of view, it's consistent to think that this kind of global appeal is necessarily an appeal to death or to sacrifice. But I'm not sure I would agree that all the modern art, for instance, would be an appeal to death.

Boris Groys: Every modern art is, as Kojève said, a kind of slow form of suicide. Derrida is also talking about that. But the relationship between totality and death reminds me of Hegel and his analysis of French Revolution. So he asked himself why after French began to look for *volonté générale*, they immediately began to kill each other and other people too. And then he explains that the *volonté générale* as what we are making all of us together, that's fundamentally we just destroy because if we do something positive, then we are confronted immediately to the division of labour. We cannot do that immediately together. If we build for example a palace. But if we want to destroy this palace, we can do that together. It is a kind of unspecific activity to kill people and destroy monuments. It is a general will in the sense, says Hegel, that it is an unspecific activity that is open for everybody to a certain degree. So in this sense modern art, which is fundamentally destructive in relationship to itself, so what is modern art is destruction of the image, as image of destruction. So there is a kind of complicity between the artist and the spectator. When for example, Malevich destroys everything through a black square, on one hand, it's a pity, on the other hand we are complicit. We say: "Yes, everything is non-sense. It is good to erase all the stuff." We have some kind of general complicity in destruction or self-destruction, which is of course how modern art is working, how modern writing is working, how modern politics is working. It's not everything, but it's one important aspect of that. And of course, I try to draw your attention to this aspect.

Marta Gili: Just going with what you said about paranoia. I think that I read – I don't know if it was in *Policy of Immortality*, you were talking about suspicion and about suspicion on the media, suspicion on religion. And at one moment you said something like: "Since a long time ago God has lost his credibility, this is the reason why religion now is coming back, this kind of fanaticism." I would like you to explain something more about that and also ask you if this kind of suspicion is also true for media and art. We are suspicious about contemporary art, we are suspicious about media, about religion.

Boris Groys: Yes of course because – I wrote actually a book about that, *Under Suspicion*, which is an analysis of this negative and positive paranoia in fact. What

I try to say is that we are at least – it's always difficult to say from what point of time – but in fact our attention is directed to some kind of image of something happening behind the scene, behind the image, behind consciousness, psychoanalysis, and so on. So something that is hidden behind what we can explore and see, something hidden because something barred by what we are actually seeing. And so we are looking for something that can betray in a sense, that we are looking for strange – a surrealist also looks for a kind of strange occurrences of this hidden truth manifesting itself through kind of holes in the universe or in the media, or whatever. So like people suddenly say: "Media images of September 11th, that's the truth, that's the return of the real." Of course, next week, as I already said, it's not true, it's kind of *mise en scène*. So we have these strange moments of saying: "That's as bad as we expected it to be, and maybe even worse." And if we see that thing, it must be true. There are some moments where we are able to believe. So we are in a kind of suspended stage of hesitation between positive and negative paranoia. That's what I tried to describe, and that's of course fundamentally religious because it's fundamentally about sub – like subconscious – sub and a kind of meta. And I think that the lacanian discourse is very much about that, some irrational difference between metaphysics and subconscious. So there is a kind of space behind where Lacan is thinking meta and sub at the same time together.

Claire Brunet: I can answer about Jacques Lacan, I think. At the end of his life, all his topological work, what people think is completely a mad thing, was precisely to avoid this metaphysical perspective about the unconscious. For instance to avoid thinking that we have to dig and dig and dig and we will find something that could be an origin.

Boris Groys: This is not metaphysic. I think metaphysical in a platonical sense, in a very traditional sense, like something that is meta. It is precisely that what you can't reach and you kind of dig it. For me it's a metaphysical position; metaphysical not in a dramatic sense, but in a very philosophical sense, like a Heideggerian sense, of something that escaped our analysis and our reach. It's a classical non anti-scientific philosophical position, which I recognize again in Lacan. So it's philosophy anti-science for me as a classical philosopher.

Barbad Golshiri: I have two questions. One is about that you said that there are no spectators left, something like that?

Boris Groys: Yes: no spectators and no readers.

Barbad Golshiri: I think that's a little bit too much because millions of people are watching YouTube, they are not just broadcasting. And I think still *La Société du spectacle*, the world that you just mentioned is still apparent, it is still dominant.

Boris Groys: Yes, but to say that millions of people are looking at that is the same thing as to say that there is no spectator. It's the same thing. Because there are no spectators in the classical sense of getting a message, hitting this kind of website. That's what God is actually doing, he's getting to a certain website. There is the monument for the unknown soldier. I agree, there is a spectator, but it's an unknown spectator. An unknown spectator, which is the same thing as God. So somebody who is non identifiable for us as a possible spectator or a possible reader, because we always ask for whom we are writing, for whom these video images are made. And they also would be for the unknown spectator. The unknown spectator can be human, can be alien, can be God, the unknown spectator as a complete mystical figure, which is completely unidentifiable for me as a writer or a producer of images.

Barbad Golshiri: Thank you. And something else about the metaphysics you just said. You exemplified Heidegger for it, but I think it's not always something that you cannot reach. I give you an example of Heidegger in that world *Bild*. It starts with grasping the image of an era by the means of metaphysics, and it's all about grasping that. It could be via *camera obscura* or via metaphysics, it's reachable in Heidegger I believe. Don't you agree?

Boris Groys: I'm not very sure about that because it's like Platon. He wants to be a philosopher and not a sophist. So he wants to be somebody who loves Sophia, the wisdom, without having sexual relationship with Sophia. It is an unshared love. So Sophia is the *femme fatale* of European philosophy. That doesn't mean that you don't see her dress here from time to time, or you look at her on some occasions. She remains inaccessible. And it's the same thing with Heidegger. What we can grasp is given to us by Zion, something that can't be named. And we can grasp that because it is given to us. What is given – *es gibt* – but this *es* that gives to us something, is in itself unattainable. So we can take and grasp what is given to us without knowing and under condition in fact of not knowing what is that, that is *es* and giving us anything. So this Sophia, this kind of *femme fatale*, she can give some presents, some signs of her recognition, for example, and that is a metaphysical love affair, and that's European philosophy. Maybe that's now psychoanalysis property, what do you think?

Claire Brunet: Well, if psychoanalysis is a hysteric position, then I would say yes, we are part of it. But I'm not sure that we wish to stay in this position.

Boris Groys: Nobody wants.

Claire Brunet: We have the choice between paranoia and hysteria.

Boris Groys: Nobody wishes, neither philosophers.

Video Programme

1 / Willie Doherty, *Non-Specific Threat*, 2004
7'46", installation monobande, couleur, son

2 / Maja Bajevic, *Le Voyage*, 2006
7'53", installation vidéo, couleur, son

3 / Yael Bartana, *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)*, 2007
10'50", film 16 mm transféré sur Digital Beta

4 / Adam Vackar, *Open Source*, 2008
installation et documentation vidéo d'une action

5 / Yuri Leiderman, *Duchamp le Hassidique*, 2002
1'29", vidéo, couleur, son

6 / Barbad Golshiri, *m ^ mi*
deux vidéos, 3', couleur, son et 5', noir et blanc, son