Undoing Apartheid’s mechanisms of reproductive power

The arresting image on the cover of Undoing Apartheid – the sculpture “Read, man, Read!” by Chumisa Fihla – perfectly captures the provocative thesis of author Premesh Lalu. Namely, that some humans, engineered through technological bits and pieces, have come to find their sensory and material existence defined by the mechanising logic of petty apartheid. The sculpture thus evokes the gestuary or repertoire of petty apartheid: the intrusion into everyday existence of a mechanical form of life, one that lodges itself in circuits of sense and perception. Lalu’s book offers a remarkable exploration of the subjectivity that came to accompany the broader, systemic features of apartheid in South Africa, and its continued reproduction in a post-apartheid world. To analyse the intersection of structure and subject, Lalu turns away from the grand apartheid familiar to most: the ideology of racial separation and the political acts of relocation and partition into ethnically defined homelands and racially defined Group Areas (p.27). Instead, he focuses attention on petty apartheid, or the system that controlled the minutia of everyday life. On his read, this daily life reflects more than the technical application of grand apartheid. It becomes a way to impel human beings to a “becoming mechanical”, that is, to adapt increasingly mechanised forms of life that stifle desire and creativity. Despite changes to a legal code or political order, apartheid comes to persist in the reproduction of the everyday. As a result, apartheid becomes difficult to surpass or move beyond; differently put, “undoing apartheid” is a labour in itself, one to be held as distinct from efforts to supersede it. To read the world on new terms means infusing acts of interpretation with a desires creativity that might interrupt the mechanical circuits laid down through petty apartheid.

Undoing Apartheid is organised around six chapters and covers a surprising amount of terrain. After a synoptic introduction, the second chapter takes seriously the “far-fetched mythic claims” (p.33) invoked to justify South African racist ideology through the origin stories told by Afrikaner nationalists, and considers how myth connected the technical system of slavery to that of industrialisation: simply debunking racial myths does not undo the economic rationales of efficiency that allowed racial domination to be quietly subsumed under industrialisation. Through a reading of Goethe’s Faust against William Kentridge’s Faustus in Africa, Chapter 3 traces the reconstitution of race – beset by conflicts between human, nature, and technology – as a collection of sense perceptions that consigns some to a mechanical existence able only to service (but never to be integrated into) the whole. Chapter 4 is the heart of the book, and narrates this psychological story as one that results in a subjectivity “whose sensory world has all but collapsed as a result of a sheer mechanisation of life that strips individuals of desire, striving, and futurity” (p.103). Not only does a shrunken sensorium ease the melt between human and machine, it also translates perception into preperception by robbing people of the raw materials: that Freudian Rohstoff, that fuels invention, imagination, and fantasy. For there to be an “after” to apartheid, one that is an emancipation from not just the partitions of grand apartheid but also those of sense perception, requires undoing apartheid subjectivity at the juncture where senses and technology facilitate a relation to power.

Resisting a turn to affect theory, Lalu instead explores the aesthetic education offered through “stumbling” (p.150): first, the stumbling of a slapstick theatre that uncouples technology and mythic violence, and then the reworking of the division between sense and perception so as to imagine new futures and new experiences of freedom. “Undoing apartheid,” concludes Lalu “thus requires setting to work on...crafting a workable concept of reconciliation, one capable of relinking sense and perception and staking a claim to truth content on its own terms” (p.187). It is work, insofar as it must slowly unravel the use of technology to maintain this links and to give these modern, neoliberal times the “meaning” of efficiency. Work, then, is deeply linked to political subjectivity rather than a Marxist class consciousness or an unalienated labour. It is the effort to render visible the divisions that sustain racial inequality, and the dependence on the immaterial labour of a racialised other (p.92).

Crucial to the iterability of apartheid is the double-take, or the uncanny doubling of its feelings, its patterns, and its reproductions (p.23, p.118). Undoing Apartheid is organised around a series of double-takes – the history of Athlone, at once a town in central Ireland, the name of the last British governor for South Africa, and a Cape Town district formed by the forced removals. Another is the repetition of the Trojan horse story, as voiced by Seamus Heaney in The Cure at Troy (and introducing the theme for each chapter), and its entwinement with the Trojan Horse massacre of 1985 in which anti-government students living in Athlone were ambushed by security forces. A third, already mentioned, is the reprisal of the Faust story. This panoply of figures serve as the mythic precursors for a racialised modernity that compresses the distance between the Global North and South, and that complicates any effort to separate this history or its archive. In contrast to those who distinguish the histories of the Global North and South – yet another division – Lalu does something refreshingly different with this history. He emphasises this uncanny as one that compresses time so as to confute past, present, and future. Yet these doublings are not recuperative – with one an example of a flawed history, the other a modern update that “gets it right” – but rather an opportunity to glimpse how the fantastical becomes real, and how that reality might subsequently be dislodged. The turn to puppetry (Kentridge’s Faustus is performed by Handspring Puppet Theater), shifts this intervention into the genealogy of race away from the register of mere representation and towards the register of labour: “The puppet is an uncanny prosthesis: one that conveys a sense of spirit, and that abides neither by received ideas of truth nor by premature declarations of reconciliation” (p.77). Static representation is replaced by dynamic process. Neither fully inanimate (the puppet master is all-too-visible) nor fully animate (it is, after all, a manipulated wooden object), the puppet challenges its viewers to reach ‘into a metaphysical core...of political transition’ and to attend to the process of making and its interdependencies, rather than the telos of history’s tragedy or redemption. The result is a gloriously complex approach to the making and unmaking of history in all its geographical and temporal sprawl.
Lalu’s account also gives his readers a provocative way of thinking change. Scholars have recently moved on from critiques of progress or enlightenment, and have instead sought to identify patterns key to racism’s persistence and recurrence over time. Rather than striding confidently forward and past economic underdevelopment or failed nation states, Lalu asks his readers to linger on how they have stumbled – on how they have stumbled to move beyond the debunking of racist ideologies, or beyond a critique of “failed progress” – and to search out the time-ing that would let them catch themselves and recalibrate interpretations. The emphasis on time-ing is more than (yet another) historical turn. Lalu argues that historicisation can only go so far in undoing racism, as the historicising move presumes that racism is irrational (p.9). As a result, historicisation struggles to identify those rationales that made the reconstruction of race so, well, seemingly reasonable. Instead, the appeal to time-ing is an appeal to context and the material logics that organise particular experiences (p.64). What would it mean to abandon the search for the “best” form of governance or the “right” representations? How might we side-step existing determinate logics? Again, in raising questions about “what next?” many might luxuriate in affect, revel in the aesthetics of ambiguity, or seek to unmask through genealogy. Each of these responses, however, marks a turn away from relations of power, away from political agency, and away from the messy work of politics. In keeping an eye insistently on technologies of power, Lalu redirects us to the work of building something and in a way that places craft, formation, and productivity back in the hands of ordinary people. Rather than being beguiled by spectacle and unseeing to the puppet masters’ manipulations, what would it mean to place the crafting of human beings (with their unsteady admixture of in/animation and in/dependence) in plain sight? How might people be taught or provoked to sense, perceive, and so act on different terms?

Such a framing of race as caught between the ambivalence of science and nature is an unusual way into a discussion of race and racial dependence) in plain sight? How might people be taught or provoked to sense, perceive, and so act on different terms?

Review of Undoing Apartheid

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