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Liquid Modernity and Cultural Analysis

An Introduction to a Transdisciplinary Encounter

Griselda Pollock

IN 2000, Zygmunt Bauman published a book entitled *Liquid Modernity*. Contributing to a history of the era of modernity, Zygmunt Bauman calls upon the mechanics of fluidity to provide the necessary metaphor through which to grasp a subtle but far-reaching change. Granted, Bauman admits, the notion of melting solids into thin air was articulated by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto* as the revolutionary force of industrial capitalism: but liquefying solids in order to consolidate once again into a new formation – a model of the succession of socio-economic systems, or political systems – is very different from a condition of fluidity that becomes a constant state of lack of solidity. The whole imaginary of political stability, of social functioning – and its opposite, of violent overthrow and revolutionary change – no longer have the same pertinence they once enjoyed. Their political articulation seems quaint or simply irrelevant in the context of a present that is characterized by none of these grand dreams, great designs, plans, models, schemes. Change is not the passage to the newly ordered; it is the condition of the permanently orderless. Certain images acquire a particular significance as indices of this altered consciousness and its determining conditions: information rather communication, and travel, movement, migration. Bauman writes:

Travelling light, rather than holding tightly to things deemed attractive for their reliability and solidity – that is for their heavy weight, substantiality and unyielding power of resistance – is now an asset of power. (2000: 13)

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This further indicates that the change from solid to liquid modernity is driven by the needs of the powerful, which means the economically powerful, whose ends are best met by an inversion of what once served them. Instead of settlement, location, national economies and political entities, which made the city its symbol against all forms of transitoriness, offering the order and discipline necessary for production and consumption; the liquid phase of modernity aims to erode frontiers and boundaries.

The disintegration of social network, the falling apart of effective agencies of collective action is often noted with a good deal of anxiety and bewailed as the unanticipated 'side effect' of the new lightness and fluidity of the increasingly mobile, slippery, shifty evasive and fugitive power. But social disintegration is as much a condition as it is the outcome of the new technique of power, using disengagement and the art of escape as its major tools. (Bauman, 2000: 14)

Bauman plots the impact of global power in its pressure for such liquidity on the core areas of our experience and social practice, time/space, individuality, work and community. In these chapters we may recognize features that can be named and understood as pressures, and inchoate anxieties that are the symptoms of the lived relations in this incompletely grasped stage of globalizing modernity. Thus Bauman concludes with a fascinating chapter 'on writing; on writing sociology'. In reflecting on the process of writing sociology, sociology itself is rescued from any residual functionalism.

What follows is that *sociology is needed today more than ever before*. The job in which sociologists are the experts, the job of restoring to view the lost link between objective affliction and subjective experience . . . sociology is one branch of expert knowledge for which the practical problem it struggles to resolve is *enlightenment aimed at human understanding*. Sociology is perhaps the sole field of expertise . . . in which Dilthey's famed distinction between explanation and understanding has been overcome and cancelled. . . . To work in the world one needs to know how the world works. (Bauman, 2000: 211-12)

What does Zygmunt Bauman's sociology of 'liquid modernity' mean for cultural analysis? What conversations are needed to explore this concept and to work with it in relation to current cultural theory and history? In this set of presentations, we create a *transdisciplinary* encounter between a sociologist of liquid modernity, a sociologist of the information society and an artist with a consistent record of profound social engagement and analysis by means of an artistic practice. This is done in order to take up the challenge of thinking with concepts offered by such a cultural sociology to those of us in fields divided from mutual understanding by the current maps of knowledge: sociology, informatics, aesthetics, cultural analysis.

This encounter took place at another intersection: a Leeds-based radical group of artists working with new media and its cultural complexities

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– Lumen and the AHRC Centre for Cultural Analysis, Theory and History. The latter, familiarly known as CentreCATH, is located at the University of Leeds. CentreCATH's purpose is to perform a transdisciplinary initiative within the field of creative art, art's histories and cultural studies and beyond, by engaging with social sciences and other relevant practices and theories of critical analysis.¹ *Transdisciplinary* is not merely a new naming of the more familiar interdisciplinary, which is a well established if diverse set of procedures for pooling different disciplinary resources to produce a single outcome, such as linking an engineer and a physiologist to create a new heart valve. Nor does it involve drawing on several disciplinary practices such as philosophy, literature, sociology, anthropology and film studies to create 'cultural studies'. The transdisciplinary tries to hold on to both the specificity of particular ways of thinking and knowing that define disciplines, while creating the space of their productive encounter so that a different kind of knowledge emerges in the act of intersection and traverse of varied fields through which a shared concept might travel. This rethinking of the transdisciplinary now appears to me to bear the imprint of what Zygmunt Bauman has named Liquid Modernity; a theorization and analysis of a current stage of socio-cultural processes that qualifies in productively transdisciplinary ways terms that are more often used for our current situation without such explanatory insight.

The foundational universities of Germany and Europe in the 19th century carved the fields of knowledge into discrete academic territories named disciplines, each of which developed its own methods, traditions and ethos with regard to its defining object. This distinctively modern cartography of disciplinary knowledge – or of the *disciplining* of knowledge – echoed, as Bill Readings (1996) has argued, the concurrent formation of the nation-states, which were to promise the solid ground of identity, belonging, community, political entities and economies. Thus disciplines for the study of cultures and societies, languages and histories serviced economies of identity and the creation of boundaried nations and peoples deeply indebted to varied theorizations of the intimate relations between nations, place and cultures that also shaped the emerging capitalist economies of the older and the newly formed European states.

In the 1960s, pressures from both within and without in the larger socio-economic processes that increasingly transcended or dispensed with the national boundaries of economies led to major shifts within the academy that are clearly indicated by the emergence of interdisciplinary models for study and knowledge production. Indeed this term, interdisciplinary, confusing as it often is, has become a current watchword – often employed with little understanding of its meanings or what it reflects of what is actually happening to us in the struggle between the fields of thought and transferable knowledge production.

The transdisciplinary shares the features of a historic and ideological deterritorialization of the processes of knowledge and understanding by opening the borders and dismantling the frontiers both between disciplines

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and the new interdisciplines, which have become institutionally just as disciplinary, with their degree programmes and benchmarks and so forth. It then becomes necessary to examine critically how we can engage with the possibilities of exchange and dialogue that alone will disseminate the practices of critical thinking, and yield understanding, if we have no common space of encounter but only newly institutionalized formations, subject to a continual process of auditing for excellence only at the level of a pre-specified product.

For many years, Zygmunt Bauman has endeavoured to explain the vital necessity for a critical sociology as the practice of thinking about what is happening in the concrete worlds of lived social, communal and individual experience and life-worlds. Serving as social diagnostician rather than a seer, who is, therefore, utterly embedded and engaged himself in the social processes which he analyses, Zygmunt Bauman has called our attention to the attenuation of the public sphere, the erosion of the citizen by the manufacture of the consumer, to the significance of the cultural disciplining of the body through regimes of fitness and performance, to the intensive individualization of identity as something not given but perpetually being made up with commodified tools provided by the ever encroaching but ever less visible forms of global capital. Yet Zygmunt Bauman is no Jeremiah, railing against the new.

It is in this sense that the publication of Bauman's theorization of our moment not as postmodern, but as liquid modern intends to open his thinking to a non-sociological audience and constituency who may not be daily readers of advanced sociological thought and debate. As members of our social worlds, we are well aware that things are shifting rapidly. We are offered several pat and some very profound explanations under the rubric of the term 'postmodern'. Many years ago I was struck by Zygmunt Bauman's statement that we do not need a postmodern sociology but a sociology of the postmodern. We need some critical relation to the processes that are currently forming us and from which we cannot escape, but which we need to understand in order to act within them as social agents, i.e. as what used to be dreamt of in the democratic ideals of citizenship and participation in the public realm.

Bauman invites us to consider the relations between the shift from solid, defined, localized, territorialized, nation-bound modernity to that which he has defined as *liquid* rather than *post* modernity. In this qualifier, *liquid*, Bauman catches up the effects of globalization, migration, nomadism, tourism, the effects of world-wide webs and internets, socket-free phones and texters: a world and its transforming subjectivities redefined by interaction with the huge and fascinating potentials of new technologies and information systems. In creating a transdisciplinary encounter to assess the implications of his theorization of liquid modernity, we invited Professor Antony Bryant to converse with Zygmunt Bauman. Uniquely able to bridge the worlds of information management and of sociological analysis, Antony Bryant works with Bauman's legacy to demythify new technology

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and the claims made on behalf of the ‘information society’, and to enable an intelligent engagement with its significance socially and humanly (Bryant, 2006).

Any productive intellectual project must engage with cutting-edge social thinkers who attend to what is actually happening to our life-worlds: globalization, new technology, information management and so forth. But against those who think in these larger, structural and synthetic ways, seeking out trends and patterns, we also attend to another kind of intellectual, social thinker and cultural analyst: the artist. So often positioned and self-positioned as part of the commodity marketing of mere entertainment, the shift from solid to liquid modernity has also shown itself in rendering archaic the heroic age of the artistic avant-garde. What becomes significant is not nostalgia or celebration but a careful critical analysis of the gap.

The third participant in this now virtual encounter is Gustav Metzger. Sharing aspects of a cultural, geographical and historical background with Zygmunt Bauman as one-time then exiled ex-citizens of Central European countries, Gustav Metzger bridges this moment of rupture while critically interrupting the flow with the singularity of his statements in his art practice. In his own field he works as a tireless analyst of the flow of information through the media. Training with David Bomberg in the 1940s, when he came as a refugee to this country from his birthplace in Nuremberg, Gustav Metzger drew on a whole history of political dissent in art and began to intervene against the growing commodification and political indifference of the art worlds in the late 1950s with his first manifestos and destruction performance pieces. Metzger made a huge impact as secretary to the immensely important Destruction in Art Symposium in London 1966: transdisciplinary and transnational event that brought together a range of artists engaged in a variety of practices whose processes, as well as effects, challenged the corruption of art by commodification, and the corruption and endangering of society through the irresponsible developments of inhumane technologies of destruction – from weapons to environmental damage to chemical infiltration of food. In an age of informational massification, what was once an individualistic gesture that belonged to the game-play of an avant-garde and a bourgeois public, the making of an art work by an artist acquires a new valency as a critical insistence on singularity – to speak in one’s own name not as a manufactured individual made up of a variety of purchased or pre-packaged identities. This is, once again, a radical gesture that halts the flow, requiring us to pause at work that does not easily yield a quick fix but demands work from us; work of decipherment, of being asked to think our way through the use of material, the choices being made to assemble signifying elements, to call upon a partner who is not merely a passing shopper. In a series he made in 1990, *Historic Photographs*, the viewer was not allowed to see the images exhibited unless they crawled under a cloth or moved away the boards that had been placed in front of the image. History needed to be confronted in active participation and discomfort; we had to be invited to be in a performative relation to

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meaning. In 1998, the Museum of Modern Art Oxford organized the first retrospective devoted to Gustav Metzger, placing an increasingly invisible programme of life work back in the view of new generations of artists and students, who found the prescience of the project and the fidelity of the artist to his analysis of the complex relations of destruction and creativity truly food for thought.²

Artistic practice can be one of the major sites of critical thought, and we need the ethos of artists compelled to interrupt the flow of culture around them, to destroy our illusions and expose the destructiveness of society's engines of production, consumption and blindness. Gustav Metzger was born in 1927, only two years after Zygmunt Bauman and, like Bauman, his youth was indelibly marked by the same irruption of fascist destructiveness and terror. Sent to Britain on the *Kindertransports* which, in saving their lives, exiled the children from their homes and separated them from their families, Gustav Metzger emerged as an artist in the heart of the cultures of the Cold War, in which the violent escalation of weapons of mass destruction held the world hostage to a perpetual terror of imminent destruction; setting the major systems of modernity – capitalism and totalitarianism – in deadly competition. The transdisciplinary encounter between sociological, informatical and aesthetic thought attends to key issues, each via a prism of specific modes of analysis that shed light upon current dilemmas of a modernity shifting under our feet.

Notes

1. See www.leeds.ac.uk/cath/ for further information on the Centre and its archive of activities and future projects.
2. In 2004, a DVD was published by the Arts Council of a film made by Ken McMullen. Here a detailed history of Gustav Metzger emerges out of a conversation that allows major strands of his thought, history and analysis to emerge as a portrait of an artist traversing these two different moments of modernity. Further details are available at: http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/aboutus/project_detail.php?sid=6&id=93&page=5

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