

Tesco's- an obligatory passage point? Black Boxes vs an unreduced cosmos

Irresponsible appropriation of philosophy- spaces for thought, spaces for action...

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What happens when you break with 'space'? Charles Holland's reflections on the USO through Tschumi's quote 'There is no space without event, no architecture without programme': 'Architecture could not be dissociated from the events that 'happened' in it' is an excellent tool to think with.

The USO broke the normative use of the 'architecture' of Tesco: it was an imminent guerilla 'text', a USO 'lecture' that was there to expose, denigrate, sick-up; strip-bare with an acidic precision the text of a supposedly already 'politicised' space. On/w/e could argue that the architecture of a company is two-fold: the structural architecture of a discursive space- an 'out-there' spectrality that haunts the physical but which we have strategies to disavow- keep the fluorescent-night-light of non-time flickering over the aisles and the nightmare doesn't press too hard on your chest; then there is the 'physical' in which the movement of bodies is accommodated, ordered, formalised.

The performance of the USO text is at once bodily and discursive. It does not seek to address persons as though persons were isolated nuisances that must be neutralized; it attempts to puncture the two-fold 'architecture' of the omniscient mega-company with its event. It does not follow, lead, instruct, dictate instead it disrupts; it is a 'technique of transient passage' that is aberrant to the normal encoding of behaviour On/w/e 'must' re-enact in the architectures of capital.

So, if it is indeed so targeted against the meaning-machine of the institution of Tesco, why did it cause offence to a couple members of the public? Perhaps, the use of the address 'Wake-up' was folly on the part of the text we utilised that day. But our critique lay absolutely squarely with the institution and its unbounded arrogance regarding the manner in which it envisages we feed ourselves, and in which we produce ourselves in the production of food and the buying of it. As Dora has pointed out, it narrates itself as the 'friend' of the normal working person, while simultaneously works to occupy and monopolise the fundamental aspect of a nation's self-production: it's food. How many of the community-based (I'm not talking Spitalfields-over-priced tourist-haven extravaganza here) markets that have served localities of a few miles for hundreds of years are struggling to keep healthy margins? How many farmers are on the bread-line due to a contemptuous urbanity espoused by the previous government that squandered EU subsidy while Tesco's unmitigated spread is hardly checked other than by courageous and persistent communities and the councilors who have their backs over barrels in the face of the need for 'development', and how many pubs have had to close or become subsumed by major-breweries whilst Tesco's impressive stock of alcohol out-'values' the enjoyment of a pint or two at what *is* fundamental to thriving villages, towns and metropolitan boroughs. Not only this, but Tesco's idiotic policy for auditing the age of those who buy alcohol. It sells wine at a knock off price (a nod to consuming as much as you like) but sanctions those under 25 when they get to the till; over 25's

alcoholism is permissible perhaps due to their greater spending power? The hearth-and-home-like nature of pubs is here substituted for the laissez-faire instrumentalisation of alcohol purely as a means to profit. Furthermore, while publicans cannot host smokers inside their establishments Tesco's can stock as many types of cigarettes as it cares to- the government reaps the taxes while stamping out choice for forms of sociability with its hypocritical dogma: yes ministers can fill parliament's pubs with smug exhalations of tobacco clouds.

Which brings On/w/e to the question did USO's performance say the same thing to everyone? Or did it cause a further discrete space, unaccessible to all? If some agree with the latter, we could venture it is because of the crude and devisive politics of resentment and accusation that have been festering in the splinter-punctures in the flesh of the nation, per the sentiment that the 'privileged' go to university, while others toil only to lose their jobs to immigrants and their taxes to benefit thieves. Such rhetoric as espoused by the likes of the Daily Mail, coupled with New Labour's espousal that 'we're all equal as long as we're all academic ' has compounded a pervasive belief in immobility; indeed social mobility is and has been the lowest in Britain since the 2WW. If the delivering of a performance of a lecture is so disagreeable it is because of a framing identity politics that has enabled the sneering at each other under specificities of resentment, not per a specificity of desire or aspiration. We at the USO not only believe, but *know* that intelligence and political perception are not the preserve of the upper-middle classes. The turn-out at each demo running up to the vote on the 9th is irrefutable proof that those from all economic backgrounds are far wiser and politically sophisticated than the hate-mongerers in our tabloids and the politicians that employ vilifying rhetoric to condemn Us.

So, in the context of Tesco's once more: almost everyone, including members of the USO have shopped regularly in Tesco. In principle such an institution could be beneficial, but it has become unwieldy, mega- *and* mono-lithic. Recent country-wide events have stirred a sense of action that hasn't been seen in the UK for decades. People will not tolerate being exploited, up-rooted, disenfranchised and chided for presuming to question the pompous paternalism of governments that have sold us off left right and centre (party political pun intended). Tesco's 'power' amounts to an assault on the multifarious aspects that go towards creating and furthering localised, communal and yet sprawling, wandering and spontaneous sociabilities and material forms of production i.e. trade that doesn't flow only to one Sun-like centre, in a perverse extraction of labour that imagines itself as productive- Sun-like- but actually is more comparable to the death-throes of a dying sun; its core is so heavy it sucks all matter into oblivion.

This is where Latour's notion of the Black Box seems so acutely appropriate. I can't say it any better than Graham Harman so I will quote:

'a black box assembles various elements in a single package: 'when many elements are made to act as one, this is what I will now call a black box'...Initially an object is an object *in action*, identified by its great victories and its trials of strength against other actants. But over time, we forget about

this drama, and the black box turns into something like a substance....these things are retroactively endowed with a competence or potential, and in this way are mistaken for a solid essence...'¹

Tesco has become such an edifice, such an absolute presence it takes on the appearance of an impenetrable unified 'essence'. The term 'actant' may here be expressed in its most simple terms as anything; pebble, human or atom. An actant is its *relations*, it is specific and imminent, it is an event, a concrete occupation of time. While Latour's notion is itself arguable on a metaphysical level, the significance is his refutation of a notion of 'essence'- that which is the kernel of a 'being' and propels it through time and cosmos as some kind of radiant hero that endows the periphery with its munificence.

'Black boxes...do not automatically endure through time, unlike most traditional versions of substance. Since they are events they include all of their relations as parts of themselves. But since these relations shift from moment to moment, the black boxes do not endure for more than an instant, unless we consider them as 'trajectories' crossing time across a series of minute transformations...they must also be constantly maintained.'²

Thus the architecture(s) of Tesco: its physical 'support', and its discourse are a double-handed machine. Its 'acting' in space as a purveyor of goods maintains its 'trajectory' which, while capital would have us believe such a trajectory as an immutable and irrefutable essence necessary to the life of trade, is in fact a 'bundle of properties' that has taken on *the appearance* of an absolute and discrete quantity. Once we open up this Black Box it becomes evident how many entry-points we have at our disposal, how many ways our relation to the relations within this Black Box mean we can exert power against it. Latour espouses a dog-eat-dog metaphysics; actants are not prefigured as superior, it is the relations they set up and maintain as 'captivating' on networks of relation that give them the appearance of largeness, of bigger-than-you-ness. Thus it is with strategic optimism we close this missive- the Black Box of institutions such as Tesco's is a myth, there are many 'events' we can set up to prove the architectures of certain companies and governments as absolutely prime for dismantling and re-assembling. Actions throughout the country are taking up this optimism, and in solidarity we salute you!

Bibliography:

Harman, Graham. *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* re.press Melbourne, 2009

¹ Graham Harman *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* pp.45-46

² Ibid., p.46