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Unstable States, Mutable Conditions

Video introduction to issue 4

Cornelius Crowley

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Transcript:

- 1 The Anglophone world is an *area* of study and an *area* in the world we presume to be in an “unstable state”.
- 2 (Gresset and Mazodier could analyse the instability of this last proposition. Does the relative clause refer to “Anglophone world” or to “the world” or to “area of study”? All three, no doubt. Instability is now everywhere).
- 3 Consultation of the OED suggests that “states” and “conditions” are virtually synonymous:
state, n. Senses relating to a condition or manner of existing.
- 4 As for condition, there is the following OED quotation:
1817 S.T. Coleridge: “The air I breathe, is the condition of my life, not its cause.”
- 5 Coleridge presumably believed that “the air I breathe”...“the condition of my life” is immune to human agency. Or as Roland Barthes noted, quoted by Marie Olivier in her article on Louise Glück: “the sky the one thing that cannot be marked.”
- 6 But if human agency now conditions the state of the air that I breathe, then the state of the world is now decipherable against our anthropocene backscreen: the writing is in the sky.
- 7 This takes us into an unstable territory, one we’d read about in dystopian science fiction, while believing ourselves to be safely tucked up in a domestic or readerly “comfort zone”.
- 8 Jean-Daniel Collomb reads the writings of Baird Callicott in order to apprehend the changes which such man-made ecological mutation will now require of us.
- 9 The demarcations between village and jungle in Leonard Woolf’s novel *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), pointed to by Leila Haghshenas, seem porous and reversible. She quotes

Jacques Derrida about the reappraisal of the conditions of the human: our participation in a trans-species animality, now apprehended more precisely than in 19th century premonitions, no longer feared as the puncturing of a veneer of civility that might liberate an underlying “beastliness”. Reading Leila Haghshenas, one senses it is through the relocation of the human within the sustaining condition of its common “animality” that anxieties manifest in the gothic fantasies of the beastly and the romantic aspirations to the angelic might be overcome.

- 10 For the reader of literature, the challenge of “unstable states” is not the same as for a student of political systems. Zach Bastick examines the malfunctioning of the American political “machine”. He proposes remedies, revisits the discussions about “representation”. For Richard Anker, the intention is to decipher Don DeLillo’s take on time and on the intoxication with eternity. He writes of “an opposition [...] between an essentially poetic self-awareness born of the experience of finitude and a heroic or titanic drive to permanence and unity of being.”
- 11 I take this to mean that it is the metaphysical pursuit of permanence has got human agency into a “historical impasse”, through the abuse of the “titanic drive to permanence and unity of being.” Which implies that the challenge posed by any “unstable state” is the challenge of keeping upright by way of a precarious balancing conditional upon precious little, more like riding a bicycle than like cruising the streets in the stretch limo seen in the David Cronenberg adaptation of DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*.
- 12 In that direction lie possibilities for a certain levity, less “national-epic” perhaps than the elation of William Carlos Williams, insofar as the argument against our being able now to endorse Coleridge’s sense of the immunity of air also distances us from Williams’s confident claim to a new American language and to a new continent. Our inability to share the confidence audible in Williams’s voice is also conditioned by our exposure to the two counterpoint discourses of *Australia, territory, water*, placed side by side by Camille Roulière.
- 13 Anna Aublet, drawing on Williams, refers to language’s driving of a wedge that opens the world. The caesura between the event and its appropriation in discourse is the condition Toby Auböck highlights in his reading of two narratives, by an officer and an ordinary seaman, of their captivity after the American frigate *Philadelphia* ran aground off the shores of Tripoli in 1803.
- 14 Cécile Doustaly examines the “exhibitionary complex” of the Victorian era, here envisaged as a component in a project of “State Stability”. The latter is the corollary of *social* stability and *social* discipline. This raises a question of methodological instability or, at the least, duality. For if the “exhibitionary complex” is analyzable in relation to the exercise of power, and if as readers of Michel Foucault we can now decipher the discipline operative in cultural designs, Doustaly shows how the “exhibitionary complex” is also, inevitably, an act of municipal self-affirmation and performance. In other words, the aura of “*illusio*”, to use Bourdieu’s term in *Méditations pascaliennes* (1997), is a necessary condition for the effective agency of social control. Even “state stability” is conditional on a certain duality and instability in the social fact, which therefore requires a comparable heuristic lability on the part of the social historian.
- 15 To conclude with a question of colours. Richard Anker evokes the titanic pursuit of permanence: penetration to a timeless truth to end all truths. Charlotte Ribeyrol

evokes a moment in high culture and useful industry, the late 19th century infatuation with purple, violet, puce, mauve, indigo.

- 16 That the late Victorian colours could be forged through a chemical technology made them suspect to those for whom an elevating art required the “naturalness”, or at least craft-based origin, of the pigments through which the edifying motifs were depicted.
- 17 The Victorians repeated the anxieties of earlier societies, notably those of the Greeks. The more conservative and colourless Plato was indeed extremely wary of the instability and ‘restless versatility’ conveyed by the idea of *poikilia*. (he) [...] resorted to this term associated with the changing scales of the serpent to compare the democratic regime ‘to a shimmering coat that might appeal to women and children’.
- 18 The connotations of *Poikilia* are suspect: flash, *bigarré*, the antithesis of a presumed classical sobriety. *Poikilia* could be the chromatic mode of a Victorian or a more recent camp culture. As a modality of response to the visible world, in time and light, through language or materiality of paint, colour is a component of both a camp culture and a more haughtily sublime high modernism, the demarcation between the two best regarded as itself unstable and porous.
- 19 In Wallace Stevens’ poem “Sea Surface Full of Clouds” (1931), “motley hue” is part of the word palette rendering the play between light, ocean and air. It comes to mind as a possible translation for “*poikilia*”. The unstable status of what is “motley” is a condition of the rainbow performance.

The wind
Of green blooms turning crisped the motley hue
To clearing opalescence. Then the sea
And heaven rolled as one and from the two
Came fresh transfigurings of freshest blue.

ABSTRACTS

This video introduces the thematic contributions on ‘Unstable states, mutable conditions’.

La vidéo présente les contributions thématiques sur « États instables, conditions en mutation ».

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Keywords: video, literature, history, law, language, politics, colours

Mots-clés: vidéo, langue, littérature, histoire, droit, politique, couleurs

AUTHOR

CORNELIUS CROWLEY

Guest editor of Issue 4. Professor at the Université Paris Nanterre.