

THE ETHICS OF VIOLENCE

Introduction

Why do subjects engage in violence? What are they trying to solve by using open aggression against their fellow beings? What are the modalities of violence witnessed today, from direct bodily (ethnic, sexual) violence, such as rapes and lynching, through more refined forms of symbolic violence, up to the violent aspects of the very endeavours to circumscribe and fight violence? How is violence not simply external to symbolic communication, but also based in it and legitimised by it? Doesn't the very shift from the body and its violent materiality to thought's ethereal ideal universality involve the gesture of an extremely violent abstraction and/or repression? Not only does Kant's ethics, perhaps the most sublime philosophical expression of the ethical attitude, rely on a core of violence; its apparent opposite, Sade's assertion of the unlimited right to the pleasure provided by torturing other people, is itself based in an ethical stance - that is why Lacan insisted that Kant and Sade have to be read together. Acts considered as fulfilments of the highest ethical duty are often perceived by the community in which they occur as extremely violent impositions - consider the violence discernible in Christ's statement: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and his mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes even his own life - he cannot be my disciple'. (*Luke 14:26*) Doesn't the same hold for Antigone, this commonly accepted literary example of insisting on one's ethical duty? And how are perceptions of violence dependent on a specific cultural context, so that circumcision which, for a Western gaze is the utmost humiliation of a woman, is, in some cultures, perceived as an act that secures respect for women? And how do ritualised acts of violence in so-called 'primitive' societies differ from the 'neo-tribal' mutilations of the body (tattooing, piercing) in contemporary life-styles and artistic performances? In what way are today's 'irrational' modes of violence (like the juvenile delinquency acts in our suburbs) the product of the very tolerant multiculturalist 'open' society that more and more precludes any proper articulation of political antagonisms?

The present issue of *new formations* explores all these dimensions of the uncanny and ambiguous relations between ethics and violence. Étienne Balibar focuses on the intimate connection between ideality and cruelty, i.e. on the violence the very gesture of idealisation has to rely on. Following Henrietta Moore's psychoanalytic account of violent initiation rituals, Renata Salecl and Juliet Flower MacCannell deal with the rise of violent sadomasochistic practices in contemporary life and art, i.e. with the way these practices reinscribe and displace 'primitive' violent rituals. In her

analysis of *Crash*, Parveen Adams interprets Cronenberg's film as a special case of today's sexualisation of violence. The next group of essays deals with the fundamentals of power: Alain Abelhauser approaches in a new way the old Freudian thesis of the murder of the father as the origin of legitimate power, while Mladen Dolar engages in a dialogue between the Foucauldian and the Lacanian accounts of power. Slavoj Žižek deals with the connection between Kant and Sade asserted by Lacan: is Sade really the hidden truth of the Kantian ethics? The two texts that follow, by Alenka Zupancic and by Cecilia Sjöholm, focus on what is perhaps the highest exercise of Lacan's ethical thought, his reading of the figure of Antigone, and locate it in the modern philosophical discussion from Kant to Heidegger. Jane Malmo adds another literary analysis (of the violence of ethics in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*), while the volume closes with Marinos Diamantides's account of the violence involved in today's medical ethics.

The focal point of all the articles is thus that violence is the real, the hard core of every ethical endeavour: it stains attempts to contain or erase it, so the only authentic choice is to assume full responsibility for it. While the fight against racist, sexist, economic and other forms of violence is more urgent than ever, one should bear in mind that nothing is more shattering in its violence than an authentic ethical act.