

# (RE)THINKING OTHERNESS: HOW THE CONCEPT HAS BEEN RETHOUGHT IN RECENT PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACHES

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## **Abstract**

The essay examines how the question of otherness has been rethought in recent philosophical approaches. It consists of three parts. The first part discusses two possible understandings of otherness: The first presents it in a binary, dependent relation to identity. The second presents it as something which can be understood distinctively from identity, possibly as an enigma. The second part goes through Todorov's *Conquest of America* and discusses how certain characters of the book try to understand the Other. Finally, the third part discusses possible solutions to that problem, where the Other can be understood independently, beyond a given framework of an identity - which seeks to dominate over otherness - and it concludes that despite their necessity, identities must be thought as contingent and relational. Only in that way, the possibility of a more genuine understanding of the Other opens up.

## 1. Introduction

In Mike Cahill's *Another Earth* (Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2011), a planet identical to our Earth is discovered. Things become more perplexed when it is later revealed that the inhabitants of that other planet are also identical to the people of our Earth and that their lives are synchronised. This 'discovery' overwhelmed the inhabitants of our planet with feelings of fear, but also feelings of 'curiosity' (Golding, 1997, chapter 1). Who could be that identical Other me who at the same time is me but not me? How, we, the earthlings, are going to classify this enigmatic Other, which it 'resists straightforward formulation' but at the same time cries for 'recognition' (Connolly, 2002, p. 36)?

Consequently, the inhabitants of our Earth felt that need to classify that Other, possibly out of fear that they would lose their identity as the subjects inhabiting, of what they thought as the 'real' and 'sole' Earth. Hence, the discovery of this new planet came as a nuisance and a threat (Dominquez, 1989, p. 190) to the notion of their identity as 'a bearer of an intrinsic Truth' (Connolly, 2002. p. 46).

The film characters' reaction reflects – to a great extent – our reaction towards the Other, in real life. The question of otherness has always enjoyed a prominent part in several modes of life, especially the political, with many theories engaging in debates regarding the question.

The aim of this essay is to examine how this question has been rethought and critically evaluate whether otherness can be understood only in relations to an identity (for example as something that opposes it) or whether it has the ability to stand out, independently, of an identity's framework. The essay consists of three parts. The first part discusses two possible understandings of otherness: The first presents it in a binary, dependent relation to identity. The second presents it as something which can be understood distinctively from identity, possibly as an enigma. The second part goes through Todorov's *Conquest of America* and discusses how certain characters of the book (I classify them to different categories, according to their different understanding - or no-understanding at all - of otherness) try to understand the Other. It argues that, despite the different approaches to otherness, all characters failed to let the Other speak for Itself, reducing It to an object which must be either conquered or conversed. Finally, the third part discusses possible solutions to that problem, where the Other can be understood independently, beyond a given framework of an identity - which seeks to dominate over otherness - and it concludes that despite their importance, identities must be thought as contingent and relational. Only in that way, the possibility of a more genuine understanding of the Other opens up.

## 2. Hegelian Dialectics and the Enigmatic Other

Western thought, including philosophy, politics of identity/otherness and many other modes of our lives, 'has been constructed around a singular subject' (Irigaray, 1995, p.7). Indeed, we can trace that idea of the singular subject to the universal values (which I suppose to be the dominant Western values of contemporary societies) of the 'Enlightenment Project' (Wokler, 1996, p. 43) and the 'rights of man,' where the identity of a 'Western, rational, man' (Irigaray, 1995, p.7) stands out as the paradigm of the singular subject. Subsequently, everyone must imitate that subject, in order to become equal to it, and thus, to discover the universal and objective Truth (Golding, 1997, p. 12). Whatever does not conform to these universal values could be characterised as the Other. In that sense, a way of defining a subject's identity, it is by defining it by what 'it is not', an opposite which at the same time has the ability to negate the identity of the former. (ibid p. 11). This definition of the Other is often associated with Hegelian dialectics and it is based on an oppositional or a dialectical relationship (Widder, 2012, p. 12). Consequently, for example, the identity of a rectangle - regarding its shape - can be defined as 'not being a circle.' A rectangle is impossible to become a circle, hence a circle has the ability to nullify a rectangle - if something is a circle then it is not a rectangle - or in Woodward's example, 'to be a Serb is not to be a Croat' and so on (1997, p.

9). Hence, by applying this dialectic principle to the idea of the universal values of the Enlightenment, we could argue that the identity of the 'role model' of a Western, rational man is defined by what it is not, for example, an 'uncivilised, irrational' Other, in broader terms, someone who does not satisfy these universal values. This view, was often associated with 'the colonial discourse' (Bhabha, 1983 p. 18) and the idea of the 'white man's burden' to 'civilise' the 'uncivilised' Other in order to equal that 'perfect singular subject' (Irigaray, 1995, p. 7) and embrace in that sense, its objective Truth, or its 'static objectivity' (Golding, 1997, p. 13). The 'non-choice,' choice of this 'uncivilised' Other was either to be converted or to be conquered (Todorov 1992, pp. 45-47). What follows is that in both cases the voice of the Other is silenced (Root, 1988, p. 219).

The era of that form of colonisation technically ceased to exist, however, the colonial discourse is still alive and kicking, taking different forms, aiming to convert or to conquer the 'deviant' Other, which takes different forms accordingly - such as women, LGBT+ people, immigrants and so forth (Douzinas, 2013).

Consequently, that binary model of the relation between identity and otherness tends to be problematic, since there is always going to be an identity, which considers itself as the bearer of a single objective Truth, and it will be ready to dominate over the deviants.

On the other hand, the so-called 'radical democracy theories' - being critical to that dialectic model of identity and otherness - seek to move beyond that dialectical thought (Widder, 2012, p.11). The mistake of the binary model is that it presents negation as the opposite or as a part of something, which at the same time affirms that something (Golding, 1997, p. 12). What follows, is that the notion of the One, objective Truth, which is intrinsic to one identity (Connolly, 2002, p. 46) ceases to exist or it stops to be 'static or fixed' (Golding, 1997, p.13). In that sense, otherness becomes something 'enigmatic' (Widder, 2012, p. 12) which does not serve as a 'marker' - in Nietzschean terms - to define a subject's identity but rather it is something which is neither a subject's identity, nor subject's non-identity (neither a rectangle, nor non-rectangle). In that terms, 'the authority of the One' is suspended and we move to a model beyond the binary, dialectical model, where the Other becomes an autonomous and a different subject (Irigaray, 1995, pp. 11-12). The new way of thinking, or re-thinking otherness, leads us to the following question: How can otherness be understood, independently of an identity?

### **3. Todorov's *Conquest of America***

In the *Conquest of America*, just like the people Another Earth, the European explorers encounter for the first time something which is radically different from the conception they had for the Other, leading Todorov to suggest that this was 'the most astonishing encounter of our history' (1992, p. 4). In other words, the explorers had an encounter with an enigmatic Other. My analysis of the text focuses on particular characters and it examines how they try to understand otherness, focusing on the dichotomy between conversion/conquest and by drawing parallels with the contemporary conception of otherness.

In the first category, of reactions to the encounter with the Other, I classify Columbus and the Aztec King, Montezuma, because both characters remain indifferent in their understanding of the Other and they even turn to become more fixated on their own beliefs. We can see how Columbus' Christian faith predetermines his views and influences his interpretations (ibid. p. 16). This is obvious from the fact that he is not ready to abandon his belief in the existence of mythical creatures (such as mermaids and cyclopes) but on the other hand, he concludes that such creatures 'are not as beautiful as it was claimed to be' (ibid.). His indifference to understand the Other, usually leads to communication breakdowns and contradictory views, presenting sometimes the natives as evil and cowards but then as 'noble savages', generous, capable of becoming Christians (ibid. p. 36-39). Todorov's conclusion is that 'Columbus does not succeed in his human communications because he is not interested in them' (ibid. p. 33).

Similarly, king Montezuma's blind faith, on his beliefs, prevents him from understanding the Other and consequently, he becomes, maybe, the biggest reason for the Aztec purge. His obsession with interpreting natural phenomena as divine signs and his refusal to break out of his cyclical belief of time incapacitated him from understanding the arrival of the Spaniards just as a common human event (*ibid.* pp. 76-81). Hence, his denial to break free from the chains of his identity prevents him from understanding the real aims of the conquistadors and the annihilation of him and his people becomes inevitable.

A second category of characters are the ones who are capable of understanding the Other but only as something which relates to their identity - which they consider as superior. A consequence of their notion of holding a superior identity is the idea that whatever falls outside of that identity, is classified as inferior or evil and it has to be conquered and annihilated. Cortés and the philosopher Sepúlveda belong to that category. Cortés is interested in understanding the Other. His expedition is 'a search for information' (*ibid.*, p. 99) and sometimes he even shows admiration for the crafting skills of the Aztecs (*ibid.* p. 128). Nevertheless, his admiration does not stop him from massacring them. His relationship with the Aztecs is what could be described in terms of an 'I-It' relation. That is 'a typical subject-object relationship in which one knows and uses other persons or things without allowing them to exist for oneself in their uniqueness' (Campbell, 1996 citing Friedman, p. 113). His admiration, of them as craftsmen, is nothing more than an admiration of them as objects.

Similarly, Sepúlveda inspired by the Aristotelian notion of natural slavery, which suggests that some people are born to be slaves (Politics 1252a 31-34), understands the Natives but only as inferiors, even as sub-humans. He is a man who believes in hierarchy and consequently, that belief dictates that 'perfection must dominate over imperfection' (Todorov, 1992, p. 152).

We have seen that despite the distinction between indifference and willingness to gain information regarding the Other, the two categories remained fixed to the dialectical thought of otherness as a contradistinction of identity, leading to a failure of understanding the Other altogether, or to a limited understanding of It, as inferior. This notion of superiority has not yet eclipsed, especially from Western thought and it is relevant in the contemporary world. This is evident from the atrocities that take place 'in the name of defence of history and culture' against the Other, which takes different forms, (e.g. terrorism and foreign aggression) (Douzinas, 2000, p. 131).

On the other hand, another category of characters supports the notion of conversion over that of conquest. This belief is based on the idea of Christianity as an egalitarian and a religion of love. In that category falls the bishop, Las Casas. He identifies some Christian qualities in the Mexicans, similar to the one identified by Columbus. Because of this, he defies Sepúlveda's idea of hierarchy and he calls for equality based on the universality of the Christian doctrine of humans as equals (Todorov, 1992, p. 146-147). Nevertheless, this universal equality can only be achieved through conversion. The 'love' of Las Casas for the Other, refuses to acknowledge that Other's 'specificity,' condemning, for example, pagan religion as an innocent mistake, which through conversion can be forgiven. In any case, to the Christian religion, we are all sinners that have a chance for redemption and salvation. In contemporary terms, we can find that kind of approaches towards the Other, in the concept of 'toleration' (Connolly, 2002, p. 43). Tolerance usually takes the form of forbearance for the cultural difference of the Other, condemning it at the same time as inferior (*ibid.*). The pure essence of the word 'tolerance' presupposes that we consider something to be wrong, or inferior to what we believe to be the correct, or true (King, 2016). Consequently, sticking with that notion of objective Truth, which is connected to the purity and superiority of our identity, conversion (and its 'modern face' as tolerance) turns to be identical to the act of conquering.

In another category, we find characters who try to understand the Other through assimilation. La Malinche, an Aztec woman, learns the Spanish language and acts as Cortés interpreter (Todorov, 1992, pp. 100-102). Consequently, by initiating into the Spanish ways, she loses her original identity. Similarly, the Spaniard Gonzalo Guerrero becomes fully assimilated to the Natives' culture and identity and he eventually fights and dies to defend the Indians against the Spaniards (*ibid.*). In both situations, the two characters achieve to fully understand the Other

through complete assimilation - a negation of their original identity - which eventually is completely lost. Hence, it can be argued that this process of assimilation falls under the dialectical thought of identity/otherness because understanding the Other is conditioned by a negation of the original identity. In that sense, Adorno's claim that we cannot get a positive through negation is justified (2004, p. 160). Both characters, by negating their identities - by becoming the Other - they do not affirm their identities, but consequently, they lose them once and for all.

A final category, includes characters who try to understand the Other and try to give It voice but at the same time try to keep their own identity (Connolly, 2002, p. 44). One of them is Sahagún, a Franciscan monk, who represents an encyclopaedia of the culture of the Aztecs in his *Historia general de Nueva España*. In his representation of the Aztecs, he operates in a way which respects the identity of the Other but at the same time, he tries to distance himself from that identity. The whole of his works is a product of 'the interaction of two voices, two cultures two point of views,' says Todorov (1992, p. 239). Nevertheless, he remained a Christian until the end of his life. This is apparent from his conclusion that Christianity is still a superior religion, but contrary to his counterparts he suggests that the forced conversion of Aztecs led to the destruction of their identity (ibid., p. 238). Arguably, his work helped to 'bring out the enigma of the Other' (Connolly, 2002, p. 45), nevertheless his desire to remain distant does not allow to him to break the chains of his identity and engage in a thorough understanding of the Other. In other words, he is able to press against the code of his identity but he falls short of breaking it (Connolly, 2004, p. 175).

Having examined the different approaches to the Other, it can be argued that no one is able to break free from the identity/otherness dialectic, leading Todorov to conclude that 'we want equality without its compelling to accept identity, but also difference without its degenerating into superiority/inferiority' (ibid., p. 249).

#### **4. Otherness/Identity *Beyond Good and Evil*?**

The characters in the film *Another Earth*, decide to name the new planet 'Earth Two.' In that sense, they reduce it to something secondary to their own identity, acting similarly to Todorov's characters. Consequently, we are left with one question: Can otherness then, be grasped without the need of an identity or is it destined to follow the dialectical model and the problems it carries with it?

The necessity of having an identity is indisputable. Identity gives us the sense of 'who we are,' it gives meaning to our experiences as subjects (Woodward, 1997, p. 39). Nevertheless, in order to give voice to the Other, whatever that Other signifies through time, we have to come in terms with the idea that identities are 'contingent' (Connolly, 2002, p. 46). This supposes that no identity holds that objective Truth, or in other words, objectivity is no more 'static' (Golding, 1997, p. 12-13). If we follow that idea, we may be able to break free from the several discourses of a superior identity over the Other because every single identity is 'particular, constructed and relational (ibid.).' Identities are also ever-changing. Going back to Todorov, we can see how both conquerors and conquered contribute in changing each other identity causing the formation of many hybrid identities. Furthermore, we have seen how the understanding of the Other in certain characters was also ever-changing, with Columbus, for example, calling the natives evil and cowards and then all of a sudden, changes his view and he calls them good and generous. These are sufficient examples, which show that there is no such a thing as pure identity, let alone a superior identity - the 'bearer of objective Truth'.

How can we achieve that? Following Golding, I suggest through imagination and curiosity (1997, p. 22). Curiosity leads us to start a journey in order to find out the Other, to genuinely understand it, without taking anything for certain, fixed on a single vantage and filtered through our own identities. Subsequently, then, we have to follow the

change of heart that Las Casas had at his later writings, where he suggests that everything is a matter of perspective (Todorov, 1992, p. 193).

Only then the Other will have the possibility of becoming 'An-Other' (Irigaray, 1995, p. 8), which is not second to any other identity and does not aim to be any identity's equal, but an independent subject. Only then we will be able to go beyond good and evil and escape the need to define otherness as oppositional, similar, superior or inferior to an identity.

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