De-Regulation
With the Work of Kutlug Ataman

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One of my favourite characters to inhabit the uncategorisable world of Kutlug Ataman’s eloquent talkers, recouters and fabulators of hair-raising narratives is Demet Demir. A transsexual prostitute, a carer for poor and ill friends, a feminist and political activist, a recipient of much family and police abuse and the first representative of transsexual prostitutes in the International Human Rights Court in the Hague – she holds forth a seamless narrative which is as funny as it is harrowing in its endless details of the bigoted desires, homophobic aggression and political backwardness she encounters in her daily life. Towards the end of her narrative she says categorically, ‘I can say that everything with me is fine, just fine’. This is the line I always wait for in her segment of Women Who Wear Wigs,1 the line that cheers me up and sets my epistemological spirits soaring, the line that exemplifies Ataman’s counter-move around ‘experience’ – that extreme experience is not automatically a mark of moral authority or the validator of oppressed conditions. Conventionally the trajectory of narratives of experience goes in one direction only, from those who have it and are active in this exchange to those who do not and are its passive recipients. More than anything else Demir’s ‘just fine’ communicates to me that she knows I can hear her precisely as she has set out to be heard. I do not need to mobilise empathy, sympathy or identification in order to be an appropriate listener, I am simply taking part in a mode of address which requires me to complete its circuit. The ‘De-Regulation’ of this title is the de-regulation of experience, of who has the right to define and categorise it and of how it can become a participatory mode.

My soaring spirits are the mark of an encounter with a body of artwork that is not representational but instead opens up several paths; ones of theoretical inquiry and others of contextual affinity, narratives that capture the attention and bypass conventional modes of identification, work that enables other work and spurs on questions. Such an encounter is exemplified by the video work of Kutlug Ataman that I have recently curated under the rubric of ‘De-Regulation’.2 The research project that has developed out of our engagement with Kutlug Ataman’s
work is called ‘Istanbul – Skin of the City’ and it includes many materials: a stranger’s photographic cycle of the city; a ‘visual essay’ of Istanbul by Stefan Roemer, an archive of wedding cultures throughout Turkey assembled by Nermin Saybaşili, archives of photos of Atatürk and of Fim posters from the 1970s gathered by me, many hours of TV from Istanbul recorded by Ataman, books and magazines, some on our website, all encountered on the way. The works of art have made us work and in turn that work has been put forward in the exhibition not as a context but as a set of membranes which wrap around the video installations and complicate our relations to them.

Before continuing with this argument, I do want to say that I have been working with Kutlug Ataman’s videos and film installations for some years now and my own ‘experience’ of this work process has been a very puzzling one. I find the work interesting and I find that it produces narratives and subjects in the world that did not pre-exist it – Women Who Wear Wigs, for example, produces a whole new category of linked stories of radicalism, illness and sexual transgression, and moral outrage that would normally have circulated in the world under their own aegis, under pre-existing categories: of brave journalist, ironic former urban guerrilla, outraged Muslim student and dissident transsexual prostitute. But these are grouped together through the device of WIGS, of the different necessities of wearing wigs as a disguise, as a vain compensation, as a
substitute veil, as a device for appearing more desirable, more beautiful. As such they produce a new subject in the world and WWW becomes a mode of linking female subjectivities and making disparate narratives speak to one another and transform into a bigger world perspective. And it is here that they become art to my mind, in the inventiveness of the process of producing a subject that did not exist before.

So why has this experience been puzzling for me? Because the bulk of the work that Ataman has produced as artwork (to distinguish from his feature film work which is quite different) is made up of great swathes of talk, hours and hours of people talking at you, great long streams of language that flood over you, a Scheherazade-like experience of being seduced by eccentric and extravagant narratives that get more and more detailed, more and more complex as they unfold, following their own weird lines of stream-of-consciousness logic. They are seductive stories to be sure, but they are also a mode of address and as such they demand a response. When I first worked with these pieces I watched hours of tape every night in order to be able to write an exhibition catalogue and then would go to sleep and dream in Turkish monologues, a language I do not understand or speak. It was a very limited and unsatisfactory response to the address I had experienced: an address to be seen, to be heard, to insist on one’s reality, to be allowed to mix fact and fantasy as the building blocks of one’s life’s narrative.

The puzzling nature of the encounter with this body of work, then, is how to relate to being addressed. I think this is significant enough to make a point of it – this work is not documentary, it is not a body of information about a place, or a demographic, it is not social or cultural history – it is an address and it demands a response.

Now, I am a theorist, and that is significant because it is my mode of address and it too makes a demand. A demand to entertain with me the possibilities of critically inhabiting the edges of paradigms and of unsettling assumptions and of imagining other possibilities than those we have been habituated to. What I have to say about ‘experience’, then, about its narratives and manipulations and validations and false assumptions, comes out of this double address: that of Ataman’s artistic gestures of speaking from elsewhere and that of the demands of theory of seeing and hearing from elsewhere. Sometimes, not often, works of art drive you on to think beyond them, about issues and problems that they open up, drive you to actually operate in the world in a different manner.

LONG STREAMS

Long streams of language, of detailed, precise and animated talk, pour forth in Kutlug Ataman’s video installations. While different in many ways, many of these works have in common female subjects who insist on giving an account of their lives, on having a voice, a language and a history to tell. In each case the artist has seemingly come along and provided a frame for a narrative that has been coming together in the subject for almost a lifetime. Regardless of their age or experience, and some of the protagonists are quite young, it is the way in which their life narratives weave in and out of larger contexts – of historical events, of geographical locations, of families or communities or
fleeting solidarities – that make them such grand and performative narratives.

Whether these are documentary or fiction, whether they follow or reflect the format of television interviews or confessional TV chat shows, whether the artist is playing illusionistic tricks with our desire to peer into the intimate details of other lives, are all moot points. For what these are in fact are sweeping incantations to narrate and to listen, in places where neither speaking nor listening has been all that prominent. Spaces marked by gender and by geographical and cultural marginality, by the seeming isolation that overwhelming obsessions perpetuate and by the state of being at odds with the world one inhabits. Much of the work is located in Turkey, a country and a cultural location which have previously circulated through tropes of extreme Orientalism, or by being located in some half fantasmatic space called the Levant, or by being characterised obliquely as poised between East and West. Geography, as we know, is a system of cognition and of world ordering founded in Western Enlightenment values mounted upon a Western colonial world-view.

WHAT IS GEOGRAPHY?

What is geography beyond the charting of land masses, climate zones, elevations, bodies of waters, populated terrains, nation-states, geological strata and natural resource deposits?

Geography is a theory of cognition and a system of classification, it is a mode of location and a site of collective national, cultural, linguistic and topographical Histories.

Geography therefore is a body of knowledge and an order of knowledge that requires the same kind of critical theorisation that any other body of knowledge demands. Geography as an epistemic category is in turn grounded in issues of positionality, in questions of who has the power and authority to name, of who has the power and authority to subsume others into its hegemonic identity.3 The ‘Turkey’ that emerges in Ataman’s work defies all those easy categories and perceptions which Western Europe had invented in order to establish and police the borders of itself, to keep the so-called Barbarians at the Gates. The Ottoman Empire stretched from the late Middle Ages to the early twentieth century and countered all those easy divisions between East and West by including both within itself, haunting the borders of numerous Western empires in Central Europe, the Balkans and the Middle East and in the process became the boundaries of a Western consciousness. Instead the Turkey in Ataman’s work expands internally rather than being bounded from the outside and kept at bay. In WWWW, Semih B. Unplugged4 and Never My Soul5 geographical references abound: to studies in Germany in the 1930s, to working in Iran during the revolution in 1979, to fleeing the country’s military police to places unknown, to being displaced in Switzerland, and to travelling to Human Rights courts in the Netherlands. Internal references to Turkey as a familiar place are often ironic in these narratives and convey the sense of a place unstable in its identity and in an endless process of often violent transformation.

References to place need also to transcend its concrete material specificity and begin the work not towards some misguided notion of

4 Semih B, Kurlug Ataman, 1997
5 Never My Soul, Kurlug Ataman, 2001
universality, but towards the ability of one place to point to or highlight aspects of another place. In the exhibition ‘De-Regulation’ there is an archive of images I have collected, because I was so struck by Atatürk’s constant presence everywhere on the skin of the city. In every shop window, kiosk, restaurant, on city walls and public offices, his pictures are omnipresent, standing guard over the Republic, willing its continuation as the secular break with Ottomanism, with the past, with irrationality. Seemingly nothing could be more local and specific to Turkey than this visual marker that is Atatürk. But when the exhibition moved to Israel, an audience member asked me if I could imagine making a similar archive of images of the former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. He recognised the same qualities and the same mythologies, the same purpose of mythically ‘holding together’ a secular nation that define the role of Atatürk in the Turkish public sphere. In this instance the place that is Turkey could become a model for reading the place that is Israel, a crooked mirror in which the one can reflect hidden and veiled entities in the other. Within this relational geography, the ‘Turkey’ that is invoked in Ataman’s work or through the effects of ‘De-Regulation’ is more a reading strategy for the performance of place than a set of informing sociohistorical contexts.

**THE LIVES**

The lives, whose testimonies richly spill out of Ataman’s dense video installation works, are also lived as a form of parallel existence. They run parallel to every form of normative sexuality, familiality or social order, be it a patriarchal authority or that of the state. The bodies on which this speech is inscribed have been breached by illness and fatigue
and odd imperatives to cover up, by sexual ambivalence and the desire for sexual transformation, by cruelty and abuse and shame, but they maintain an unexpected integrity. The emotional grandiosity of the melodramatic narrative, through which these monologues are heard, gives voice to the disempowered and the disenfranchised by producing a narrative structure which they can actually inhabit as their own. They are mostly Turkish lives, but the complexity of their specificities makes them that much more than the inhabitants of a national, cultural category. The narratives reach out and map a web of interconnected territories: inherited ones from the Ottoman Empire and contemporary ones of linked revolutionary movements, old ones of Axis Powers and modern ones of new social movements like left-wing revolutions, feminism, homosexuality, ecology and human rights. Sometimes, as in the case of Semih Berkoşy in *Semiha B. Unplugged* it is the imperative to study abroad, or in the case of Ceyhan Fırat in *Never My Soul!* it is illness that propels the subject to cross the border, sometimes, as for Melki Ulagay in *WWW*, it is radical political subterfuge and at other times, as for Nevval Sevindi in *WWW*, it is marriage and a journalistic assignment which land her in a revolution. In the process they undo all kinds of conventional subject categories we have so often been confronted with such as ‘Women and Islam’ or ‘Muslim Women and the Veil’ or any of
the other stereotyped banalities that package non-Western cultures for Western consumption. Those old formulations, which are based on a long tradition of Orientalism, depict a passive, dormant femininity, sleepily enfolded into the regimes of an oppressive Muslim patriarchy. Here narrative and mobility combine to shake off those caricature strictures to reveal the immense complexities of actual lives and the unexpected links that they forge.

INSTEAD

Instead, each work proposes and produces new subjects in culture, ones made up of unexpected conjunctions. The anonymous student in WWWW, a devout Muslim, who spews forth a great complaint about not being allowed by her secular university to wear a covering veil or scarf, actually ends up producing a discourse of secularity in place of all that we had heard about the coercion of women. Another of the protagonists in the piece, Nevval Sevindi, an accomplished journalist who has suffered cancer and lost her hair in chemotherapy, wears a wig in tribute to the beautiful hair she so valued. She speaks lovingly of those intimate spaces of the hairdressers and the home in which women are comforted and understood. That space has been of great concern to curator Vasif Kortun, who has characterised the preoccupation with domestic and family space as a major thread of contemporary Turkish art.

But after all, we are in the relative safety of the home, the place where artists conspire from. Home as a site of conspiracy keeps recurring in the works of many artists. Home offers a respite between identity as self limitation and the emancipatory individualism.

Kortun argues that in the modernist position the exterior experience was the challenge of avant-garde innovation and rupture while the domestic sphere was a place of retreat and the comfort of a less challenging continuity. ‘What seems to have changed’, he says, ‘is that in these days the home/interior has not only become an accepted way of being in the world, but it is also the conspiracy ground of new work’.6

Certainly the Nevval Sevindi who speaks so eloquently about the caressing safety of interior spaces for women mentions, in the same breath, moving to Iran and taking part in the Iranian revolution, refusing to cover up when it was demanded of women in Iran in the aftermath of the revolution. She says, ‘Revolution, war, military intervention, I experienced them all in a short period of time’. Equally, Melek Ulagay, who circulated in the popular imagination as the supposed infamous airline attendant and saboteur ‘Hostess Leyla’, speaks in loving detail of all the different spaces – apartments and dingy shacks and hotel rooms – in which she hid out in her many years of being on the run as a militant activist against the government. She says with great pride that she is the only left-wing activist who has been on the run for thirty years and never been caught. Part of this elusiveness she attributes to her creativity in the use of blonde wigs as part of her disguise and part to her ability to assume identities and to her gendered ability to blend in with all the varieties of private spaces she describes. While obviously a person of great

political belief, the testimony we hear her deliver does not elaborate on any of these, and constitutes her as a woman severed from any organic home spaces and living out an existence of assumed fictions and spatial negotiations.

FICTIONS OF IDENTIFICATION

Fictions of identification are everywhere in these video testimonies, whether required for physical escape or the mechanisms of psychic projection. Semiha Berksoy has re-written her life as a grandiose adventure story in which she is the heroine in the most amazing amalgam of popular cultural tropes: a rags-to-riches story of a talented young woman sent to study singing and who becomes a great star, the seductive young girl whose innocence beguiles the great men of her generation, the betrayed artist whose talent threatened all the lesser mortals around her, the egomaniacal monster whose demands have driven everyone away. Equally, Ceyhan Fırat, star of Never My Soul!, playing the role of a popular Turkish star who is making a pornographic rendition of Little Red Riding Hood, constantly complains of her own real-life position as an immigrant in Switzerland, living a hand-to-mouth existence and hooked up to a dialysis machine. Counter-narratives of lives are told through a vast amalgam of popular fictions that women can identify with and which take their daily circumstances and recast them in the high tones of melodrama. The point about melodrama is not its excesses and its sentiments, though these are certainly part of its pleasures, but rather the odd and circuitous ways in which melodramatic narrative can connect its protagonists with a larger social sphere not through public, but precisely through private acts. The emotional grandiosity of melodramatic narrative gives voice to the disempowered and allows for identification through the small-scale events of everyday private lives. Melodrama has its roots in the ‘illegitimate’ popular theatre of the eighteenth century that received its legitimisation through the French Revolution. It championed spoken rather than official and read language and was based on ‘the elimination of the hero and of the fatalistic emphasis on “dignified” endurance of fate as an acceptable tragic stance’.

Instead of all that dignified stoicism, melodrama valorised everyone’s right to raise his/her voice in noisy and inglorious complaint. This shift in the possibilities of dramatic narrative has always held great appeal for subversive and radical politics, so that it began to be mobilised as a political force during the French Revolution and continued to be taken up at intermittent periods. The political radicals of the 1970s took up the cause of film melodrama as part of an argument about the importance of so called ‘women’s films’ which had been seen as second-rate art forms but actually tackled life at the level of domestic realities and allowed for a politics of complaint about the stifling domestication of women in postwar cinema. In the 1990s we see melodrama and the voice of complaint taken up by many scholars of the postcolonial condition. Not only did it become clear that cinematic melodrama was able to connect many so-called ‘Third World’ cultures through structures of identification with poverty and oppression and the strict tensions between crises of modernity and domestic traditionalism. The films of India, Turkey,

7 Christine Gledhill, *Home is Where the Heart Is – Studies in Melodrama and the Woman’s Film*, BFI Books, 1992
Egypt and Iran circulated far beyond their own cultures and languages and were a source of pleasure and solace wherever people needed catharsis through collective identification. Their sentimentality is an important part of their effectiveness. As Christine Gledhill says:

A sentimental dramaturgy emerged, demanding a new kind of spectatorial response of recognition and identification with familiar characters in effecting circumstances. Poetic justice was the morality of feelings, the tragic catastrophe either moves its spectators to moral recognition or resolution, or can be avoided altogether by a change of heart. 8

In ‘De-Regulation’ we have put together an archive of film posters from the 1970s whose garish colours and unabashedly blatant imagery play out every trope of the genre: orphans and kindly protectors, country girls and action heroes, city slickers and petty criminals all vie for attention with scantily clad beauties and downtrodden working women. Putting together hundreds of these posters on the walls of museums of contemporary art whose affect is usually more minimalist and subdued served to enhance the immense noise with which they claim our attention and force our identification with hardship and with the fantasy that is so necessary for psychically surviving these hardships. It is the uninhibited noise of complaint and the wonderful irrationality of changes in dramatic narrative that makes the melodrama not just a great tool for creating counter-narratives for gendered lives as in Ataman’s films and videos; it has emerged equally as a great strategic tool in contemporary cultural politics. It brings to mind a lovely sentence from Salman Rushdie’s ‘Outside the Whale’ in which he advocates taking issue with George Orwell’s assumption that there is an inside in which to be passively swallowed up in assimilation:

In place of Jonah’s womb, I am recommending the ancient tradition of making as big a fuss, as noisy a complaint about the world as is humanly possible. Where Orwell wished quietism, let there be rowdyism; in place of the Whale, the protesting wail. 9

**SEXUALITY ABOVE ALL**

Sexuality above all is up for grabs in the melodramatic narratives of Ataman’s work. Here femininity is unstable, never determined by biology and it is draped like a mantle by both men and women whose sexual permutations we are made comfortable with by the length of time we get to spend with them on tape and by the flow of their talk which draws us into their world. In this world that Ataman produces, there are few categories of true sex, discrete gender and specific sexuality as heterosexual women, transvestites and transsexuals take us through the complex details of, in the final analysis, their not dissimilar lives. As Judith Butler says:

(while) the structure of impersonation reveals one of the key fabricating mechanisms through which the social construction of gender takes place. I would suggest as well that drag fully subverts the distinction between inner and outer psychic space and effectively mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity. 10

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8 Christine Gledhill, op cit, 1992, p 17
Virtually every one of Ataman’s heroines and heroes strives for some form of femininity, takes great pleasure in its material and fantasmatic details but rarely inhabits it with any form of natural ease of belonging. Sexuality is rehearsed in differentiations between bodies and souls. As we are told, in Turkish film melodrama there is a convention that if a female protagonist is raped, she will claim that her assailant has taken her body but ‘never her soul’. This seems to make a seamless transition into complex contemporary sexual politics. As Judith Butler says:

The soul is precisely what the body lacks; hence the body presents itself as a signifying lack... In this sense, then, the soul is a surface signification that contests and disputes the inner/outer distinction itself, a figure of interior psychic space inscribed on the body as a social signification that perpetually renounces itself.\textsuperscript{11}

Sexuality is the field on which many of these contradictions are rehearsed and odd accommodations seem to take place through a new model of mixings which here takes place.

The fourth figure in WWWW is the aforementioned Demet Demir, transsexual, prostitute, political activist for left-wing youth associations, human rights, the environment, feminism, experimenter with lesbian relationships, ironic raconteur of personal melodramas, teller of hair-raising tales of police brutality which included repeated harassment, beatings and the shaving of her head.

Demet Demir became a student in 1982, immediately following the military coup in Turkey, by joining a night school where she organised a meeting to mark the first of May, and was ultimately expelled from the left-wing youth association for homosexuality. She was the first transvestite to become a member of the Human Rights association, had an early sex-change operation, educated herself to become, she says, a feminist and an environmentalist, and has fought long legal battles with the police. All this side by side with ruminations about clients who are disappointed to find out that she doesn’t have both a penis and a vagina, for these days, she says, one needs both. All of these are not contradictions, they are entanglements and mixings that produce a rich field of possibilities and new subjects that I would like experimentally to term \textit{creolised subjects}, not because they have anything to do with those locations but because of the way in which they embody complex forms of incompatible mixings.

\textbf{EXPERIENCE}

In our cultural world, ‘experience’ is invoked primarily in relation to two realms. One is to do with claiming an authenticity of knowledge through direct exposure and interaction rather than abstract perception, and the other is to do with a claim for authenticity. The ‘proximity’ to a real implied by experience always seems to endow a claim with a direct validity, legitimacy and genuineness.

That ‘experience’ has always been a mobilised term, invoked precisely in order to claim an upper hand through an illusion of direct encounter, to claim validity through some assumed genuineness, is rarely

\textsuperscript{11} Judith Butler, op cit, p 135
discussed. Furthermore ‘experience’ is always the purview of the actor, the one who had the experience. Contemporary historiographers of ‘experience’, such as Martin Jay, have spoken extensively about the class-related projects such as E P Thompson’s attempt to write ‘history from below’ or the social historical projects of ‘oral history’, or ‘everyday history’ whose epistemological drive was to shift from ‘great’ moments and figures, from legitimate archival materials and validated official voices, to the ‘ordinary’ materials of everyday life. In these projects we can find the arbitrary utterances of not just minor figures but also of chance passers-by who in the process became as emblematic of their historical moment as those whose reputations survived as major players within the mise-en-scène of History with a capital H.12

It is not often that we engage with what it means to be the audience for narratives of experience, of how these narratives position us, the ones who did not have that particular experience. At the same time we have been through several decades in which our artworld has hungered for ‘authentic’ experience, for reports of fiercely different ‘over-theres’ in which frissons of danger are attached to extreme violence or to politically precarious situations. As Nordstrom and Robben say in their exceptional anthology Field Work Under Fire, in which the excitement and seductions of doing one’s ethnographic studies in proximity to world historical events and at the edge of comfort zones are seriously weighed:

The antics of violence... i.e. the lived experience of violence... and the epistemology of violence... i.e. the ways of knowing it and reflecting upon it, are not separate... experience and interpretation are inseparable for victims and ethnographers alike.13

And the same goes for being able to see, to hear, to perceive knowledge in the accounts of extreme experience and of violence.

The work of Kutlug Ataman allows us to enter these turbulent waters in an even-handed mode in which both the speaking and the hearing of experience, even when these are quite violent, are mutually imbricated. Even more so, subjects are not reduced to their experience but emerge through their ability to weave complex narratives that complicate their speaking positions. In Vicious Circle,14 Troy, a Jamaican cook living in Berlin, rails against the Germans’ inability to accommodate difference without turning it into a performance of exoticia. At the same time he too manifests a fair amount of racial bias in his caricatural depictions of his fellow Berliners whom he can only see through the most narrow and banal stereotypes. Wry and ironic, his narratives circle the globe with impressions from London and New York and Iowa and produce a recognition of the inexorable nature of racism and racial bias and of the degree to which we are all mired in them. Troy, then, is not a victim of his specific experiences but the meeting ground of certain migratory inevitabilities in which one can only be simultaneously an insider and an outsider of the culture and embody the battlefield between contradictory drives and desires.

And sometimes experience is the unbearable burden of hardship. ‘I was happy when I was a virgin’,15 says Mehtap, one of the inhabitants of Kiïba, burdened by children and stepchildren, without access to any
form of exteriority. Happy before marriage, children, dislocation, domestic isolation and the trappings of a regulated adult life in extreme, difficult circumstances. In the proliferation of narratives that spatialise the perimeters and make up the site of Küba in this installation, we hear often of the clash between the drive to try and imagine a life and the demands of ‘regulated experience’. To consider this dichotomy I would want to think about Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s ‘state philosophy’ applied to a notion of ‘state experience’ and of how Kutlug Ataman’s work snatchs experience back to some kind of ‘deregulated experience’ that both describes a given reality but also dares to speculate about possibilities. The narrative spatialisation of Küba is the zone of this deregulated experience.

Deleuze and Guattari, speaking of official lineages of philosophy, of rationalist metaphysics as ‘state philosophy’, say that it is populated by ‘bureaucrats of pure reason who are in historical complicity with the state’. Their discourses, that of these bureaucrats of pure reason, ‘are of sovereign judgement, of stable subjectivity legislated by good sense, of rock-like identity and of universal truth’. State philosophy, they say, is representational thinking, thinking which is analogue – it seeks to establish a correspondence, a similarity of thought, an analogy between the subject, its concepts and the objects in the world by which these concepts are applied. This supposed unity is obviously a hugely privileged assumption. Sitting here amidst the inhabitants of Küba it seems laughable that one could posit a world so without ruptures, fissures, chaotic disruptions and necessary mobilities that it might allow one to sustain this fantasy of unity between the subject, its thought and the objects in the world to which this thought is applied.

Obviously Deleuze and Guattari are highly critical of ‘state philosophy’ and they offer their own brand of vertiginous contingency, of process in flight, as a direct opposition to the rock-like identity of official thought that supports and sustains the state.

Taking off from their critical characterisation of thought, I wanted to think about a parallel proposal, that of ‘state experience’. It seems to me that ‘state experience’ is experience that can only be understood through the markers that frame and legislate experience; birth, marriage, profession, war and the legal parameters of belonging: location, home and citizenship.

Much of the discussion we encounter concerning experience focuses on the demise of its force and authenticity. Walter Benjamin in ‘The Poverty of Experience’ locates the horrors of the First World War as emblematic of a modernity that wreaks havoc with a notion of having an individuated and accountable experience, while Giorgio Agamben in ‘Infancy and History’ laments the sensory bombardment of humdrum contemporary urban life that has robbed people of the ability to have or to speak of their experience.

Kate Love reads this, far more interestingly, as: ‘neither the events of modern life, nor the individuals who experience them, have sufficient authority to render them as experience’. Her take took me back to one such instant which occurred in my not too distant teaching life in California where there was much preoccupation with multicultural pedagogy. Of great concern was the often observed exhortation to minority students to ‘speak from their experience’ –
setting up an assumption that majority students had no experience, because experience was equated with oppression, suffering and marginality of one kind or another. These were the breeding grounds for ‘authentic’ experience and these were the legitimisations of its authority. The issue of who could hear, of how they could hear, of what they had at their disposal to comprehend what they heard, never entered the picture. The entire scenario operated through moral guilt – those who do not suffer, who are equated with the forces of privilege, of comfort and with unconscious collusions with oppression should be made to sit and hear – but can they hear? How would they know how to hear the notions of address and response, which did not figure in the discussion that largely followed the logics of ‘state experience’, operating the binary dichotomies of belonging/unbelonging?

In Kûba, something very different takes place and I would propose that it is the constitution of an alternative zone to ‘state experience’ – that of ‘deregulated experience’. Women speak of marriage as a necessity, a required right of passage. They speak of children as an uncontestable but grim reality that requires Herculean efforts. Men speak of work or the lack of it and of fighting. There is little pleasure in any of these markers of a regulated adult life and there is absolutely no unity of subject, thought and encompassing world. There is nothing and nowhere to belong to and the village that was left behind is never a site of nostalgia or a possible site of return. Pleasure only enters the monologues through the unexpected kindness of strangers, the loyalty of friends, the solidarity of the fight, the ability to make a picnic out of disparate scraps or to beg enough outside the mosque to afford three metres of cloth. Every so often people say that Kûba is leftist but never detail its politics and we assume that they occupy a generally oppositional space. Certainly their encounters with authority, the police or the school board are instances of hostile clashes in which they are positioned outside the protected space of Turkish law and citizenship. Their Kurdishness is usually referred to via their lack of spoken Turkish and the difficulties and isolation that it dictates.

And so the act of speaking, the topography constituted by these forty voices, and all of the others that they reference in their stories, this little Kûba army of talkers, produces a zone of ‘deregulated experience’. Grounded in actual suffering, it transcends its material harshness to become a gesture, demands a mode of listening that cannot simply be explained by knowing more about the miseries of what it is to be a poor Kurd within the Turkish megalopolis. Rather it dares us to listen differently, speculatively not empathically, to spatialise and to imagine space when that much grief and discontent and sheer bloody language is enfolded in its midst.

If we were to leave Kûba with some notion that we knew something about Kurdish migrants into Istanbul or about ghettoised ethnic communities – we would have failed it. If, however, we open up some speculation about how to listen, how to hear this, if we understand that what is being addressed is the limited categories and tropes that we think in, then that address has indeed taken place.

Most recently Ataman’s Paradise stages another realm of experience, a fantastic one of having all of one’s desires materialise in the form of a place, Southern California. The extreme tensions between the rhetorics
of the good life prevalent in California, the underlying political and economic tensions and the complexities of a multicultural, migratory melting pot give the materials a very distinct edge. And for all of their celebrations of individual freedoms and individual gratifications, they also provide a means of approaching the US at this point through an oblique look at these seductive fictions that seem so compelling to so many. For it is, after all, in the name of these freedoms and their need to be protected that so much effort has been mobilised of late. And an odd sort of address is set up here too, for how do we respond to claims of ‘having it all’ and ‘living out one’s desires unhindered’ and of ‘being able to fulfil all of one’s fantasies’? Once again neither identification nor envy nor a secret disdain sustains us as listeners but rather an awe that reflects a collective social drive in these immense individual desires to have and to be. In Paradise, as in so many of his other works, Ataman manages to denaturalise the normative, to ‘other’ that which has always been the index of measure of a Western Modernity, to create a muddle, a funny ironic muddle out of the powerful certainties that rule our world.

CREOLISED SUBJECTS

Creolised subjects have come increasingly to interest me recently. Like many cultural critics raised on postcolonial discourse, I have been wondering about the possibilities inherent in notions of creolisation to provide more complex and more appropriate modes of cultural engagement. Wondering whether within notions of creolisation we might be able to get away from binaries of colonisers and colonised as well as from later notions of hybridity in which this and that came together into something else, some newer and more contemporary cultural formation.

In the many discussions on cultural difference taking place within cultural criticism, a model has began to emerge which does seem to have potential as an alternative to some of the postcolonial, postfeudal paradigms. In this understanding creolisation is a process of cultural mixings, an entanglement of cultures as the result of slavery, colonialism and plantation culture. Its components are highly slippery signifiers since the original Créoles were Whites who through long exposure lost their originary identity. White settlers who had become indigenised, facing black slaves, Africans born in the location of their enslavement. Créolité is the construction of a project out of these entangled mixings. While thinking of it I was also watching hours of video work by Kutlug Ataman, trying to write the catalogue for this forthcoming show in Vienna. In this work Ataman has produced a new subject in the world, a creolised subject in which something called WWWW unframes all the tedious narratives about women and Islam, women and the Muslim state told in the West about the East and produces instead a heady mix of women and sexuality and Islam and patriarchy and the state and vanity and desire and rebellion and melodramatic sentiment - all connected through wigs and exceeding the boundaries of anything that might actually circulate under the aegis of the proper name of woman.