

IDENTIFYING HOSPITALITY IN HOSTILE CONTEXTS

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Abstract: *I often wonder “What are the limits of hospitality?, Are we allowed to enter in a private space, to accept freely the invitation of our hosts? Can we impose our own conditions in a place that is unfamiliar to us? And once a condition appears can we even think of the existence of a real type, a pure gesture of hospitality?”. From the Derridean perspective, the existence of a pure type of hospitality is practically impossible as there is always a trace of hostility in any invitation, in any request to enter, to accept to come in a new space. Thus, even though an invitation is proposed, this does not automatically imply that the master of the house, the lord, the host, will renounce to his/her mastery. The invitation “make yourself at home” entails a first limit, a threshold as the guest should never forget that he/she can only act as if he/she was at home and therefore some unsaid rules must be respected. The rules are imposed by the host upon the ones to whom he/she offers a “welcome”, an invitation, a call. Equally, the guests receive and accept the new situation in which they find themselves. Imminently, the question upon the “new comer” is raised: can the guest be given an unconditional invitation? The moment the threshold is crossed, meaning the clear delimitation between the exterior and the interior, the intimate and the foreign space, the private and the public, it represents the “entrance”, the “acceptance”, but not the “closeness” or the “coming”. The guest becomes the host’s liberator as if the first holds the keys, the full rights and the supreme power upon all the goods and people inhabiting the place or, on the contrary, the hosts can find themselves trapped in the guest’s space.*

In my search to find relevant answers regarding the concept of hospitality I focused my study on two cinematographic examples: the film “Theorem” directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini in which the foreigner/the guest is provided with a mysterious manifestation and an irresistible attraction towards his hosts and the film “The Exterminating Angel” directed by Luis Buñuel in which the guests accept an invitation and for some twisted, inexplicable reason they are caught up in a psychologically blocking state trying to escape. Therefore, the guests become the prisoners of an unfamiliar space and their limits are tested in unexpected manners.

Thus, with the help of this cinematographic demonstration the concepts of hospitality and hostility find their common root as they show their diverse and dissimilar facets.

Keywords: *hospitality, hostility, threshold, invitation, condition, acceptance.*

An invitation – such a normal, commonly accepted gesture! Starting with it, there are immediately established at least two relational, key elements: the host and the guest. Without the acceptance of one’s invitation the roles cannot exist anymore. The host must open the door of his/her home, of his/her private space as for the guest to enter, to pass over the threshold that is between them. In “Jacques Derrida, Negotiations, Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001” Elizabeth Rottenberg puts the accents upon the “invitation”, the gesture of “inviting” underlining the (un)conditional possibility of hospitality, an act that is equally pure and impossible. From the moment when the host invites his/her guests in his/her own space – *chez-soi*, he/she has full, unrestricted control upon all the goods that are present in that familiar space, thus, imposing limitations and conditions upon them, wishing to know

everything about the guest that (s)he received, invited, welcomed. Once the limitations are clear for the guest (s)he cannot feel naturally comfortable. That would be a real impossible gesture! Thus, in this particular case, the question is “how? how far? until what boundary or limitation can the guest find his/her place to feel “like home”?”. As stated in “Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida”, a host has this status in (s)he owns the place and owns the keys, meaning that the host “limits the gift”. The invitation “make yourself at home” has the sense of a mimetic feeling of acting as if at home, with the condition of never forgetting about the real owner. Derrida identifies a “tension” that transforms into “hospitality” that is similar to a “paralysis”. The hospitality shown by the host can materialize itself by “experience” – meaning that the guest must step over the threshold, go through, move into a new space or when s(he) “experience” the antithetic expression of moving – a “paralysis” (the inability to move). In order to transform the impossibility of a pure gesture of hospitality one must push the limits (either physical or mental), escape from the stillness, from the “paralysis” felt by the guest. But what happens when, after accepting the invitation of entering into a new, foreign space, after “experiencing” the proximity of the guest, the host find himself trapped, unable to move forward, to surpass an uncontrollable condition that will transform everything around and in him. The original and primary instinct of preserving the rights of property felt by the host will affect the pure gesture of being/becoming hospitable. Imposing the house rules on the guest generates a restless reaction from the guest. A law cannot give and take at the same time, simultaneously, cannot exist and disappear at the same time, and cannot enter a space in which its presence is already felt. From the perspective of a familiar point of view, from inside his/her own space, the host will feel in a more profound manner the sense of security, of possession, of higher rights and still (s)he will enter in his/her own space through his guest who came from an external space, a space just as unfamiliar for the host as it is the host’s home for the guest. An entire theatre of hospitality unveils before them and on that stage the guests became hosts and the hosts “prisoners”.

As envisioned by Luis Buñuel in the film “The Exterminating Angel” – originally titled *The Castaways of Providence Street*, the guests find themselves trapped in a space, unable to move, to cross over both a physical and a psychological boundary, making them forget about their social status or their image. The film is constructed as a lyrical dream in which the guests have no escape and their only chance is to return to their real, truthful, human nature. The pregnant feeling of returning to the human roots persists during the entire film as the director focuses the camera on fetishistic shots of legs and feet or uses cutaways to animal and insect life. The plot has a striking resemblance to Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist play *No Exit* from 1944 as the presence of confinement is the central element of the play as three recently deceased characters find themselves together in one room so as to realize that they shall remain for the eternity trapped.

Time and *space* play a part just as important as the characters. Buñuel alternates the scenes, in which time seems compressed or extended, the repetition of the same gestures capture the viewer’s attention as to comprehend the real reasons for development of psychological impulses that come to the surface as the characters cannot resist the pressure of being trapped in a place in which they have been invited. There is also an intense poetic

atmosphere mixed up with mystery that catches in an ambience of paralysis both the characters and the audience. The intension of Buñuel is clear : “the poetry, the mystery, all that completes and enlarges tangible reality (...)”¹ to be revealed on film. The human condition, the bare human reactions are exposed under stress circumstances leaving the characters in all their truthful nature.

Gilles Deleuze interprets Buñuel as the one who explores the profoundness of an “originary” world in which the trend is to “bring everything together in a single and identical death impulse”². As the gesture of an unconditional hospitality shows, in the majority of cases, its impossibility, the realities of the human nature can only return to the recognition of the basic survival needs in extreme conditions. The plot, the scenes, the reactions are quite muscular, imposing themselves on the viewer who remains (in his own turn) trapped in the attempt to decipher the fundamental significance. Not only space but also time was premeditated in designing the scenes so as to capture the very breath, physical contortion, ache and anguish suffered by the helpless characters.

Buñuel suggested to his audience that “time was abolished so only space happened in this film. Time was just a circle and when space becomes time the thing is solved³.” At a first glance the story is quite usual: a wealthy character, Nobile, plans to offer a formal dinner party for his guest – all aristocrats. As the guests arrive, the servants feel an irresistible desire to leave the house despite the possibility of losing their jobs if they do not perform their duties. For the films signed with the Buñuel trademark, what begins with a feast will most likely end in chaos. The rule applies perfectly for this film as after de diner and the customary entertainment, the guests cannot leave the room, they find themselves trapped and for no discernible reason. One should expect a physical confinement as the guests cannot pass over the threshold, but it is not the case. As time goes by, the food and water disappear, the characters’ moods change drastically, and we can observe the degrees of desperation and rage that obscure the aristocratic gestures of the guests.



¹ Luis Buñuel, “Poetry and Cinema”, *The World of Luis Buñuel: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Joan Mellen, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978, p. 109.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 130.

³ See “Arturo Ripstein About The Exterminating Angel”: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajmi_Iq_liU (from 7:55).



Scenes from “The Exterminating Angel”.

The physical condition of the group desintegrates rapidly and the characters’ intense dreams and phantasms take visible shape on the screen. The guest cannot act as a guest anymore, respecting the unsaid, social, legal, moral rules. They are simply driven by their basic instinct of survival, forgetting about their social - created image. Nothing can save them from the confinement, not even the plastic virgins, the keys from Kabbalah, or the Masonic symbols that the guests believed in. There are no delimitations between the rich and the poor, the educated and the servants, the powerful and the weak. There is only a matter of satisfying the primal needs. The rich can realise that what the poor needed and what they were taken for granted now became luxurious items. The secrets cannot be kept anymore, the decency vanishes, and finally the physical cruelty is exceeded by the emotional cruelty of the group that need to find the person to put blame on for everything that happens. The host, Nobile, will take the place of this sought character turning himself into a Christian allegory of crucifixion.

Another piece of a cinematographic puzzle that reveals the concept of “hos(ti)pitality” is revealed in the film *Theorem* directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini in which the *foreigner* is provided with a mysterious manifestation and an irresistible attraction towards his hosts. The former peaceful life of the hosts is irremediably shattered. The enigmatic guest suddenly appears, in an unexpected manner, his presence being both out of this world, sensual and organic. This time, the guest offers himself to his hosts, without any limitations, and yet, he ravages the comfortable serene life of his hosts who become equally subdued and free. His appearance might be considered Messianic if the hosts’ lives weren’t so irrevocably dammed.





Scenes from “Theorem”.

Unlike the case presented above regarding the “Exterminating Angel” –which may symbolise the annihilation of all that is artificial, untruthful and fabricated as to release the real nature of the human behaviour, in the case of “The Theorem” the guest is not trapped or controlled by any sort of condition imposed on him by his hosts, but on the contrary. While the hosts live their peaceful lives the visitor/guest arrives and changes their existence completely.

The hosts are either afraid or ashamed of crossing over their own “psychological thresholds and the untamed responsibility that the guest has is to release them. In this case the guest seems to be the only one that is able to break and pass over an entire milieu of social/moral restrictions: he either saves the maid from a suicide attempt, has an affair with his host’s wife reaffirming her desires, helps the daughter with her shyness but this experience will capture her in a state of stillness and nurses the father when he is ill. The guests’ involvement is neither positive nor negative - only by a flip of a coin with two facets his interaction will only disturb or unchain the family that was hiding behind a perfect, ordered bourgeois lifestyle. The film is a feast of visual and psychological experiences that transform each character and reshape the whole image of a peaceful guest. The arrival of the guest is Messianic as he has either the power to release his hosts of their limitations or to capture them in their own physical and/or psychological confinement. The guest cannot remain forever in his host’s home and as he is called away he says his goodbyes to each family member in turn. In some scenes the Visitor/Guest looks up and above his hosts as being aloof and yet present for the family that accomodated him. The scene in which the visitor reveals his departure to the daughter is immediately cut to the scene with the sand blowing across the desert, as though this is what the Visitor is seeing. Unlike the rest of his family, the father will be the only one that gets closer to the limit of being saved as he almost lives a mystical experience.

Taking into consideration these two cinematic examples in which the features of hospitality are inevitably linked with the essence of hostility that may always occur from an almost pure gesture of addressing an invitation, we may invite ourselves furthermore to reflect upon the condition of hos(ti)pitality: in offering an unconditional hospitality can there be overstepped the moral thresholds or the hospitality is conditioned by a moral code? or as Derrida believed „an act of hospitality can only be poetic⁴”.

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, Anne Dufourmantelle invites Jacques Derrida to respond, trad. de Rachel Bowlby (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 15.

Acknowledgement

This work was cofinanced from the European Social Fund through Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development 2007-2013, project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/140863, Competitive Researchers in Europe in the Field of Humanities and Socio-Economic Sciences. A Multi-regional Research Network

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