

Diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, and difference.

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Diffraction as Critical Consciousness

TNG: What kind of strategy is diffraction?

DH: First it is an optical metaphor, like mirroring, but it carries more dynamism and potency. Diffraction patterns are about a heterogeneous history, not originals. Unlike mirror reflections, diffractions do not displace the same elsewhere. Diffraction is a

metaphor for another kind of critical consciousness at the end of this rather painful Christian millennium, one committed to making a difference and not to repeating the Sacred Image of the Same. I'm interested in the way diffraction patterns record the history of interaction, interference, reinforcement, difference. In this sense, "diffraction" is a narrative, graphic, psychological, spiritual, and political technology for making consequential meanings. For these reasons, I end *Modest_Witness* with Lynn Randolph's "graphic" argument—her painting, *Diffraction* (1992).

TNG: Since "diffraction" is an optical phenomenon, describe the difference between it and reflection.

DH: Well, to begin with there are a number of not-so-private jokes involved in the use of the term "diffraction" within this context. One stream of American feminism deemphasizes—really anathematizes—eyes and visual process and foregrounds the oral and the tactile. The specular is always under suspicion. "Spectacle," "specular," "spectacular," "speculating" are coded white, coded masculine, coded powerful, coded extraterrestrial, full of domination, neh neh neh (*cracks up*).

TNG: I know what you mean from feminist film theory.

DH: And then coded in terms of the problem of the copy and the original and the process of vision always entails mis-seeing what it sees. Is it the same or is the same displaced elsewhere? Is the copy really a copy of the original? If you get a reflection and the image is displaced elsewhere, is it really as good as the original? All such theologies of representation are deeply rooted in a tropic system that emphasizes vision. Go back to Platonism, to John's gospel, to the Enlightenment. And feminists in part have been in reaction to that heritage where light is heavily patriarchal—moving from the dark woman's body to the light of the Father. So it is no surprise that a lot of feminist work emphasizes different tropic systems, especially the oral, the aural, and

the tactile. Fine. I have no problem with that except when it becomes dogmatic, when the eyes are forbidden. Visual metaphors are quite interesting. I am not about to give them up anymore than I am about to give up democracy, sovereignty, and agency and all such polluted inheritances. I think the way I work is to take my own polluted inheritance—cyborg is one of them—and try to rework it. Similarly with optical metaphors, I take the tropic systems that I have inherited and try to do something with them against the grain. It's in some ways pretty simple-minded.

TNG: There's modesty for you!

DH: Really, it's pretty simple. But in general we've been impoverished in the optical metaphors we've used—talking about reflection all the time and reflexivity. Optics is, after all, a branch of physics with a thick, interesting history. For instance, it involves the study of lenses, the study of the breaking up of rays of light. Think of Newton's experiments or Goethe's experiments with diffraction crystals. So all I say is let's not talk about reflection and reflexivity for a while, let's talk about diffraction. Physically, let's think about what diffraction is.

TNG: And?

DH: Well when light passes through slits, the light rays that pass through are broken up. And if you have a screen at one end to register what happens, what you get is a record of the passage of the light rays onto the screen. This "record" shows the history of their passage through the slits. So what you get is not a reflection; it's the record of a passage.

TNG: That gives me the chills.

DH: As a metaphor it drops the metaphysics of identity and the metaphysics of representation and says optics is full of a whole other potent way of thinking about light, which is about history. It's not

about identity as taxonomy, but it's about registering process on the recording screen. So I use it to talk about making a difference in the world as opposed to just being endlessly self-reflective. Obviously, I am not against being self-reflective, but I am interested in foregrounding something else. And then there is another part of the joke, which is to say semiotics is this science—this human science—that has the following branches: syntactics, semantics, pragmatics, and diffraction. I just added diffraction as another branch to semiotics. It's a joke really, just a tiny part of the book, but a serious joke.

TNG: In describing diffraction as you do, it's surprising that it hasn't been used before.

DH: It is odd.

TNG: And it certainly is an apt way to discuss your methodology—seeing both the history of how something came to “be” as well as what it is simultaneously.

DH: Here's an example that came out of teaching that shows some of the ways I like to work. A few years ago in my “Science and Politics” class, there was this really smart, savvy, politically engaged undergraduate who was a midwife here in Santa Cruz. She was part of the home birth movement and very opposed to medically mediated child-birth. For legal reasons she was in a relationship to licensed medical practitioners of some kind although much of the birthing movement of the early 1980s was involved in a gray area legally as well as medically. Anyway, she was very committed to the home birthing movement and wore diaper pins on her hat as a symbol of natural child-birth. She saw the diaper pin as a non-medical object, an object from daily use that signified women's relationship to their babies that was unmediated by the ultrasound machine, the speculum.

TNG: The safety pin?! I don't get it.

DH: Well exactly. So we took the pin back in terms of the history of the plastics industry, the steel industry, and the history of the progressive regulation of safety. And pretty soon we saw how the safety pin was immersed in all these state regulatory apparatuses, and the history of the major industries within capital formation and so on. I hadn't removed it from the context in which she was wearing it, but merely diffracted it, so to speak, to show that it has many more meanings and contexts to it and that once you've noted them you can't just drop them. You have to register the "interference." So I feel like that is the way I work, and the way I enjoy working. It's simply to make visible all those things that have been lost in an object; not in order to make the other meanings disappear, but rather to make it impossible for the bottom line to be one single statement.

TNG: Earlier, while you were describing this history of genetics and biology, I kept hearing, again, the way you write and work—how you go about analyzing culture through a kind of genetic analytical modeling of cultural analysis rather than merely the reverse—a cultural analysis of genetics. I mean you have taken a scientific model and turned it into a model of cultural critique.

DH: That's right. I think analyses of what gets called "nature" and analyses of what gets called "culture" call on the same kinds of thinking since what I'm interested in most of all are "naturecultures"—as one word—implosions of the discursive realms of nature and culture. Within this context I have written about cyborgs on the one hand and animals on the other, specifically about primates. And these primates raise the question of human-nature relationships differently than cyborgs do. In particular, evolutionary history emerges in sharp ways, issues of biological reductionism and the lived body, the fleshy body and who we are related to. Our kin among the other organisms is raised in potent ways in the primate story, much more so than in the cyborg story. The cyborg story raises questions about our kin among

the machines—our kin within the domain of communication—while the primate story raises questions about our kin in the domain of other organisms and raises the question of the nature-culture interface that has been articulated in the human sciences, in particular in physical anthropology in relation to evolutionary behavior and so on. And then there are the First World/Third World connections to unpack because of the particular conditions of access to the other primates.

TNG: You emphasize that your work is about the relation between nature-culture, whereas I always describe your work as about what gets to count as human and nonhuman or the almost-human.

DH: Yes—those two questions are different faces of the same question. It's like a gestalt switch. And in a way my act of faith is that nature-culture is one word but we've inherited it as a gapped reality for many reasons. One is the notion of the brain in a vat. In this model the mind is this entity that is enslaved inside the brain, which is in the vat with nutrient fluids. And so basically all it can do is represent and observe and do things instrumentally. There's this terrible separation between man and the world. There are gentler versions of this gapped reality, but my act of faith to counter such versions of reality has to do with the idea of worldliness, an act of faith in worldliness where the fleshy body and the human histories are always and everywhere enmeshed in the tissue of interrelationship where all the relators aren't human. We are always inside a fleshy world, but we are never a brain in the vat. We never were and never will be. And so my fundamental epistemological starting points are from this enmeshment where the categorical separation of nature and culture is already a kind of violence, an inherited violence anyway. That's why my philosophical sources are always those that emphasize a kind of worldly practice and a semi-otic quality of that worldly practice. The meaningfulness that is both fleshy and linguistic but never only linguistic.

TNG: When you say “linguistic” I sense you are referring specifically to

semantic linguistics and the notion of the diachronic evolution of a language system where the process of how signification develops is studied versus the synchronic where the words or language are approached as “things,” with no sense of their history or incremental development. My question then has to do with the arbitrariness of the linguistic sign and how this relates to the biologic sign, which is motivated by the materiality of the body. When, or how, does one draw the line so as not to fall into epistemological relativism? For instance if the immune system can be read as a “story” or construction, as it is in “The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies,” where is the practice of “science,” of the facts of the immune system that do not respond to interpretation? Isn’t there a bottom line? And if so, how do you resolve this?

DH: Understanding the world is about living inside stories. There’s no place to be in the world outside of stories. And these stories are literalized in these objects. Or better, objects are frozen stories. Our own bodies are a metaphor in the most literal sense. This is the oxymoronic quality of physicality that is the result of the permanent co-existence of stories embedded in physical semiotic fleshy bloody existence. None of this is an abstraction. I have an extremely non-abstract consciousness, pretty nearly an allergy to abstraction, which also comes from Catholicism. The content of my worldview is obviously quite different—none of it is Catholic anymore in terms of the dogmas of that faith—but the sensibility is still there in my flesh. And I think that makes me unusual in the academy.

TNG: I’ll say.

DH: There’s a history of discrimination involved here because there are relatively few Catholics in the U.S. academy partly because of the history of anti-Catholicism in this country. But just as the cyborg is a child of militarism and Big Science, I am a child of Catholicism and the Cold War.

TNG: I'm fascinated by your allergy to abstraction. Your writing and teaching are very evidentiary. By that I mean you are rigorously exemplified. You never use theory that isn't produced through concrete worldly examples.

DH: It's almost like my examples *are* the theories. Again it's that my sense of metaphor is drawn from literal biological examples and my theories are not abstractions. If anything, they are redescriptions. So if one were going to characterize my way of theorizing, it would be to redescribe, to redescribe something so that it becomes thicker than it first seems.

TNG: Do you think your tendency to always see the connectedness of the literal and the figural accounts for some of the misinterpretations of your work? I mean some minds aren't patient enough, or have not been trained to see, the theory in the redescriptions and therefore just can't see from a standpoint that is simultaneously literal and figurative.

DH: You might have a point, because I think my contribution is precisely this sensibility that people are forced to inhabit by virtue of their encounter with my writing or speaking. Actually, a lot of people get my stuff through the public performances first and only then find the writing more accessible. I've had this experience frequently because in public speaking all kinds of issues are possible to perform physically. It is such an intermedia event where voice, gesture, slides, enthusiasm all shape the density of the words. Oddly, I think people can handle the density better in a performance than on the page.

TNG: Interesting. There are tones and gradations and nuances available that are not as readily available in a written text. I think of your use of irony, which is such a large part of you as a person. Humor, laughter, joking is a constant and it's a form of theorizing for you. It's almost vaudevillian.