

# SABOTAGING A GENERIC PRAXIS: THE CASE OF LUISA VALENZUELA

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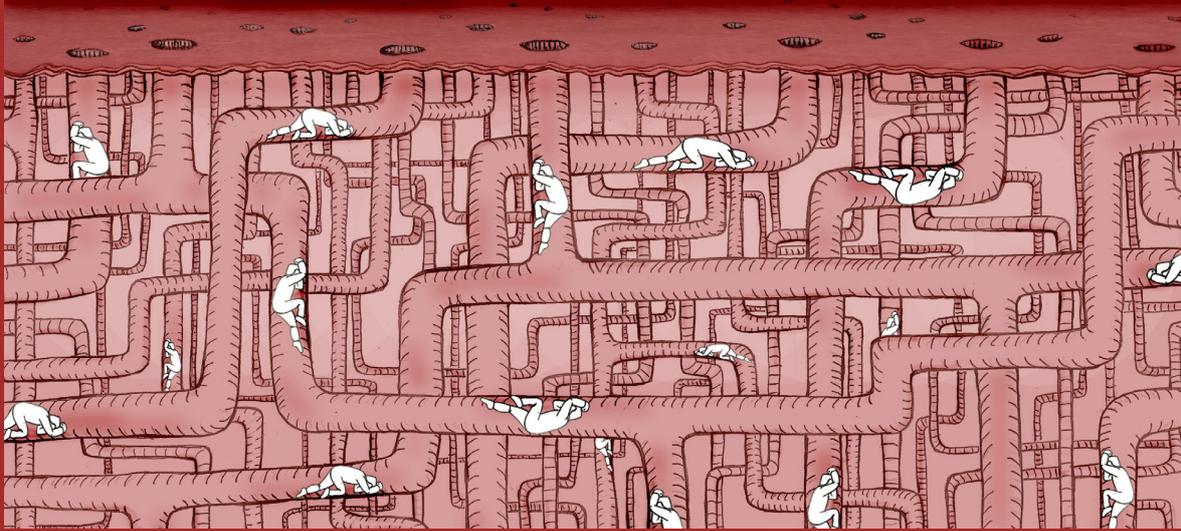
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**Abstract** || This article will propose two modes of criticism as ‘sabotage,’ as the present impact of this expression coined by Manuel Asensi leads us towards a new episteme. This article will analyse concepts that Asensi sets out in one of his early works, and place them in dialogue with a collection of short essays from a book of personal and theoretical reflections by Luisa Valenzuela.

**Keywords** || Criticism | Sabotage | Syllogism | Negative Transversality | Body.

## 1. Criticism as sabotage

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In a 2009 article, Manuel Asensi proposed to distance himself from classical notions of the ‘canon,’ and concern himself with what he deemed a ‘forthcoming canon’, defined as,

un canon abierto por sus bordes, un canon plástico, en cuya revisión, confección y mantenimiento participara un conjunto colectivo y democrático de agentes y actores sociales en representación de las diferentes instituciones y grupos que constituyen una comunidad determinada (2009: 48)

Beyond the obvious intertextual reference to Maurice Blanchot and his understanding of all writing acts as funereal (in respect to the act killing language, the reader and the referent, and resuscitating them in a sort of terrifying and subjugating vampirism (Blanchot 1981), this article will aim to emphasize the open concept that the canon is nothing more than a performative mechanism, or a method through which the regulatory, heterogeneous and plural bodies of the State fulfill their ideological expectations. To this day, the canon remains in dispute regarding issues around phallogocentrism and colonialism. Notwithstanding, what happens if we were to realize that every argument about the canon pertains to a broader issue, or to what Asensi calls, ‘el hecho contumaz de que toda formación social produce un *sistema de valores* que selecciona un conjunto de textos y excluye otros’ (2009: 46; my emphasis). None of the existing lists of texts could be seen as sacred any longer, nor their subjects regarded as a homogenous and unified collection, nor would literature be categorised as pointless and contained in the dreaded space of the blank page.

In fact, two years previous, Asensi himself noted that we must not conceive literature as a mere collection of verbally disposed grammatical rules, which their subjects use to communicate with each other and take pleasure in, but as something much more complex and rich in signification, akin to ‘una lámpara deformante que convive con otro tipo de lámparas deformantes’ (2007: 134). The subtlety provoked by this reflection becomes inescapable when reinterpreting literature: amongst other things, it signals the displacement of a mirrored vision—the mirror in the middle of the road that *represents* a reflected reality—towards a substitute vision, and consequently, is active. In effect, the mirror is there, but it deforms, or performs an action (albeit an apparently negative one) upon the object, calling its representational nature into question.

Similar to any other discourse of symbolic order (religion, politics, medicine, to name but a few), literature is one of many modelling systems that appeals to individuals and incites them to

carry out certain actions. The difference, or radicality appears in the method used to bring forth these actions, which is precisely what condemns them to a place of political and ideological irrelevance, namely a self-reflexive, metaphorical language whose very nature short-circuits the unclear connection with linguistic reality, due to its analogical structure -in other words, the category of the figure and the supposedly natural category of reality<sup>1</sup>.

However, if analogy, as Averroes wrote in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, represents a logical thought-structure that employs syllogism to distinguish itself, the rhetorical means employed by literature can be considered from another perspective. Yet, if we accept that syllogism, in its model function, opens up the connotative and associative dimension of words, its referential function makes the provocative and performative categorization of any language possible. Therefore, syllogism is perhaps the most specific epistemological form to generate a distinct view of literature that is much more oriented towards its own grammatical and mechanic? qualities. Indeed, its tropological structure confines it to the field of semiotic linguistics, so that it becomes impossible to think of any literary work -herein considered artistic- separate from its signifying articulation, in the same way that it is no longer functional to try to understand its complexity without maintaining the conflicting relationship it establishes with this same linguistic-semiotic organization, as well as its discursive and subjective function.

Otherwise, in many cases the capacity of a work to reach the reader and/or spectator comes from the direct proportion between the figural and the logical sense, in that the closer one is to the other, the more effective it will be to impose a world model, thus, putting the (dis)figuring enthymeme (syllogism) into practice will be more naturalized. On the other hand, the further apart they remain, the more critical the articulation of the performative mechanism, and subsequently, the more transparent the syllogistic composition.

However, this interpretation does not grant greater signification to the container over the content, nor does this article intend to succumb to an ontology of subjectivity whereby a previous subject would encounter referents offered by the discourse and identify with them. It will suffice to invoke the arguments of Maurice Blanchot (1981) in one case, and the ideas of Paul Q. Hirst (1979) in the other, in order not to confuse the reader. This article aims to emphasize (and from this stems the desire to vindicate the proposed article by Manuel Asensi on syllogism) how this comes to *supplement* what is perhaps the most suggestive void in any artistic and/or literary work: a referent that signifies it. Additionally, this article stresses the word 'supplement' so that the significance such an expression entails can be understood.

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1 | Both expressions come from principal questions in De Man's thought, that Manuel Asensi in-vokes and revokes with his analytical proposal of criticism and sabotage. In this way, what in 'Pascal's Allegory of Persuasion' is the formulation of an expected failure is affirmed in this essay, 'The question remains, of course, whether the pair figure/reality can or cannot be itself thus reconciled, whether it is a contradiction of the type we encountered when it was said that one is a number and is not a number at the same time, or whether the order of the figure and the order of reality are heterogeneous' (De Man, 1996: 61-62), in *Critica y sabotaje*, the recent essay by Asensi has become one of the most potentially critical contemporary poetics, in the sense that it does not hesitate to (im)pose on the role and in the closed academic field a determined/particular world model whereby literature, more than any other language, is presented as a disruptive act and at the same time, (per)formative (Asensi, 2011: 52-54). Examples come from affirmations such as: 'literature is not the place where the unstable epistemology of metaphor is suspended by aesthetic pleasure, although this attempt is a constitutive moment of its system. It is rather the place where the possible convergence of rigor and pleasure is shown to be a delusion. The consequences of this lead to the difficult question whether the entire semantic, semiological, and performative field of language can be said to be covered by tropological models, a question which can only be raised after the proliferating and disruptive power of a figural language has been fully recognized' (De Man, 1996: 50), which closes one of De Man's most emblematic essays, 'The Epistemology of Metaphor' (1978), at the same

To return to Asensi:

Aunque una obra de arte no tenga un referente necesario (para significar), aunque los actos performativos que se realicen en su plano del contenido, en su «historia», carezcan de fuerza ilocutiva «efectiva», *su manera de* «representar» la realidad es «real» por el hecho de que da a ver el mundo de un determinado modo ideológico y se convierte, por ello mismo, en un *percepto* a través del cual un sujeto percibe la «realidad» (2007: 140; los resaltados son míos)

Accordingly, the simulating faculty that any work of art possesses as textual machine, or what Asensi calls its 'way' (*'su manera de'*), presents the perceptive-ideological basis necessary to appeal to disparate individuals, and encourage them to face their own previous or current perceptive-ideological bases. Wherever they stem from, reinforcing or refuting them will overload syllogism with an affective dimension that must emphasize its validity. For this reason, Asensi insists:

el arte es una ficción, esto es, una deformación-modelización de la realidad fenoménica (una ideología), que produce efectos de realidad. Al hablar de «efectos de realidad» quiero decir que el espectador o lector adquiere una percepción del mundo que en muchos casos le conducirá a actuar de un modo determinado en el mundo empírico. Y es claro que la actuación queda automáticamente ligada a la dimensión ética y política (Asensi, 2007: 141).

Therefore, this article will not progress without considering the definition of syllogism as a supplement, as set out a few lines above. As we have seen to date, this rhetorical-semiotic means unites concept, precept and affect. If, as Asensi recalls, this causes ideological friction between linguistic and natural realities -ideological in that they work on 'a "representation" of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence' (Althusser, 1971: 162) - it is reasonable to question how syllogism will not eventually become like Jacques Derrida's definition of 'a subaltern instance which takes-(the)-place [tient-lieu]' (1997: 145).

Aside from the above approach, which limits itself to the question of the iteration/non-iteration of the text<sup>2</sup>, what seems more interesting is, firstly, the inclusion of this mark or footprint which represents the substitute in Derrida's imaginary within the group of subaltern appeals, and secondly, the categorization of these in the logic of becoming, which likewise, makes them circulate in a space of third signification, neither here nor there, but in progress (taking-place without a break or backward step, just as the hyphen separating the two terms indicates). Therefore, talking about subalternity in today's context assumes a pluralist vision, through which it can be defined as a vague and heterogeneous state: changeable, in that those who

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time serves as a portico for many of the ideas worked out here.

2 | This question pulsates through Asensi's methodological base, as a substratum or palimpsest, yet appears through his insistence on dealing with modes of signification, with simulacra of representation that separate subject and object and problematize their (inter/intra)relationships. In this way, Asensi's concept of criticism as sabotage presents itself as an analytic, metacritical procedure, rather than a deconstructive one: 'una crítica que se arroga la potestad de decidir cuándo puede ejercerse y cuando no' (Asensi, 2007: 150).

are subjected to it participate in multiple groupings; minority, insofar as it is relegated to an inferior place; and in spite of that, disruptive as a producer of a kind of metonymic consciousness, based on criticism and negativity.

Therefore, affirming that syllogism is a supplement to the representational void also means it can function as a subaltern challenge; an artefact of rupture through which a text attacks the context or contexts it is obliged to orbit, by locating itself in the lowest position. Thus, as a producer of concepts, syllogism possesses the faculty to perturb the perception of subjectivities and lead them away from the hegemonic. As Asensi concludes: “*Crítica literaria*” y desacuerdo es lo mismo, bien en relación a un texto, bien por sumarse a la disidencia del texto respecto a un línea molar’ (2007: 150). Thus he is pointing in that same direction, in proposing the relationship of reciprocity between literary criticism as sabotage (criticism as rupture, damage and deterioration) and its object of study (enthymematic syllogism, the contradiction between the constative and performative levels of a text). Not only because the function of the former is precisely to detect those cases in which the latter manifests itself in a persuasive manner, that is, with a clear intention to modelize subjectivities; but because in the same act of locating and classifying them, he is overcome by the isotopic value that syllogism stamps onto the textual machine in question.

Up to this point, he implies that literary criticism as sabotage and syllogism are at once the same and not the same, but they manifest within the same logic of meaning: due to contact, to rigour and the determination to materialize in thought, both proposals reveal themselves as analytic instruments which, through their functionality, become tools of comprehension, persuasion and most importantly, action.

This, in turn, refutes what Rodolfo Alonso writes in respect to the impossibility of substituting the voice of the authentic creator:

se lanza a reflexionar sobre su obra como «praxis concreta», como «texto» o «lenguaje» donde todo valor y sentido deben buscarse, pues no es por los servicios prestados a una u otra causa, por los favores conquistados o los halagos merecidos que aquella [la obra] debe ser juzgada (en Rosales, 2011: 12)

This issue needs to be clarified, and to a greater extent when it concerns the reflections Luisa Valenzuela produces from certain writing praxes marked with traces of the generic<sup>3</sup>, which serve as a portico to reintroduce the question of supplementary-syllogism, and direct it with what this discussion terms an episteme of *negative trans/versality*.

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3 | return to the term used by Rodolfo Alonso because it seems significant that the author herself subtitled one of her collections of essays, *Peligrosas palabras: reflexiones de una escritora* (2001). This title of great poetic beauty takes the liminal space that Valenzuela has occupied for more than thirty years in her dedication to writing as its manifesto: it deals with a collection of essays or thought, but as we discover during the course of a close and entertaining reading, it is also about writing, which for Valenzuela amounts to saying in words: ‘hete aquí que [ésta] es cuerpo y es nuestro cuerpo y la producimos con nuestros propios jugos a veces llamados saliva y a veces tinta’ (Valenzuela, 2001:26).

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Until now, we have seen the capacity of a critic to theorize about the concrete praxes of writing (literary or otherwise), about texts and languages amalgamated into a textualized and textualizing whole whose value and meaning -to use the words of Alonso- radiate precisely from this double directionality because text and language, as much as they are textualizations, represent masks of a desiring subject and of a body of living flesh, while as textualizers, they become structures criss-crossed with pleats and shot through with hidden practices that follow the hegemonic logic of a determined con-text - whether it is past or present - or else resist it, confront it or even dare to distort it. Yet what happens when someone who might be considered an authentic creator, -as Baudelaire and Alonso deem it- a maker of worlds and realities not quite parallel but transversal, decides to occupy the position of the critic and launches into (this 'launching' otherwise overloading Alonso's text with a quality he seems to sense but does not share: the militant attitude that all writing exercises imply) something by way of an explanation, something which Luisa Valenzuela somewhat sardonically and self-critically calls 'activismoliterario' (2001: 13)?

What happens is the supposed distance between one discursive order and another overlap, and the body and identity of the subjects become contaminated (Calafell, 2010).

## 2. Luisa Valenzuela, or sabotage as a writing praxis

Espejarnos en el libro, en el texto, la otra cara del cuerpo femenino.  
Luisa Valenzuela, «La mala palabra»

The author named above proves quite revelatory on this subject, proposing the mirrored projection within the domain of the written word of all identities that fall under the umbrella of the feminine as imperative, and for this, she requires the generic re-signification of the body, 'aunque —tal y como se encarga de constatar a renglón seguido— no tenga nada de *aparentemente* femenino' (Valenzuela, 1985: 491; my emphasis). It is important to note that in the subsequent reproduction of the text, this small but fundamental note does not appear, so the brief paragraph the quote is taken from ends with these succinct words: 'Espejarnos en el libro, en el texto, la otra cara del cuerpo' (Valenzuela, 2001: 41). On the other hand, it is also interesting to note how some terms are substituted for others that subtly plot a potential relationship of continuity. Thus, what in 1985 was a reference to a community of women ('Nuestra máscara es ahora el texto, el mismo que *nosotras mismas, las mujeres, las dueñas de la textualidad y la textura*, podemos —si queremos— disolver, y si no, no' (1985: 491; my emphasis), in 2001 she transforms herself into the most, or least, restricted of women writers: 'Nuestra máscara es

ahora el texto, el mismo que *nosotras las escritoras, hoy dueñas de la textualidad y la textura*, podemos —si queremos— disolver, y si no queremos, no' (2001: 41; my emphasis).

By way of an explication, it can be suggested that the difference in format of the two texts lies in their affiliation: one, an invited contribution to *Revista Iberoamericana*, the other, a personal collection of essays and reflections. However, we must not forget that a linguistic metamorphosis with these characteristics escapes with some difficulty from the historic processes that mark the permanence of the female subject in the bosom of western thought. In the 80's, when the author speaks of a collective of 'women' and links it to the possibilities of writing, -indeed they control everything the text refers to and furthermore, their corporeal opposite- what she is doing is following an inclusive and unifying general trend. A trend which successive critical-theoretical movements were reverting to and questioning, to a point where almost twenty years later, it is no longer valid to speak of a collective with no more identity than an amalgam of contradictions, but referring to just one of them - what being a woman, and moreover, a woman writer implies- and restoring its potentiality.

This would also explain the amputation of the quote that heads this section, clearly tendentious in a first draft, more ambiguous in a subsequent rewrite. Just as the writer herself senses and declares in the first version, there is nothing in the body of an individuality that signals the possibility of feminization. Interestingly, through a retroactive effect that Valenzuela restores as a writing anchor, the text also transforms itself into an empty denotative space. She then poses the question that if the appearance of a body, and consequently, that of a text does not permit the articulation of any kind of generic identity, or if the absence of referent strips them of a present signification, how to carry out the gesture she herself demands? (page number?) Or, how to take the leap from a physical body -a phenomenal reality- to a textual one -a semiotic reality- without succumbing to enthymemic syllogism that confuses the sexed and linguistic bodies and categorizes them ontologically?

Paradoxically, perhaps the key lies in the adverb that Valenzuela uses in the first instance and later deletes, highlighted here with a clear aim of sabotage: because it is important to remember that it tells us about a game of mirrors, a deforming mask. And as she explains in another text, '[I]a carne propia es una máscara. Puede ser la inversión del yo. La cara que hacemos para relacionarnos con los demás, la pintura, la conciencia del propio rostro' (Ordóñez, 1985: 512).

That a text appears as the mirror image of a bodythat, for its part,

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calls into question the possibility of a generic determination, indicates that there is no element that permits us to establish a referential relationship between the feminine and the body, and hence, between the feminine, the body and the writing of a literary text. However, in a disruptive turn characteristic of her work, Luisa Valenzuela once more extracts the syllogism that establishes the equivalency between those three axes, and plucks the vanishing point that re-semanticizes itself. Therefore, what in the first instance would, for the umpteenth time, seem to condemn the aforementioned triad as essentialist and barely functional, ends up defending the perceptive-ideological value that she herself produces, none other than simulacrum, metaphor, or -to continue with the terminology used by Valenzuela- the mask.

Likewise, placing the semiotic mode of representation under the scrutiny of signification is no mean feat; instead of having a bearing on the same representation, it implies placing itself in a space of fictionality where metaphor precedes metonymy and the signified the signifier. In De Man's terms it could be said that Valenzuela consciously accepts her own contradiction that every writing act which generates a friction between the constative level of the text (its predicate, outlined here in book form), and its more performative level (its practice), in the sense that it can, for example, give this object access to a market governed by readers' tastes. However, in accordance with Asensi's views, it seems that Luisa Valenzuela is risking her position a little more, if possible, and focusing all her attention on the simulacrum of representation, as such generating a sort of *iterable non-iteration* through which the analogy acquires its sheen of a critical praxis, which makes it effective in its non-referentiality, its deforming action, in short, becoming substitute example, but with a real performative force. In 'Pequeño manifiesto' she confesses: 'Como quien desbarata un mecanismo o desarma el juguete para ver cómo funciona es posible descubrir en el juego de connotaciones y asociaciones una posible verdad que se cuele contra todas las intenciones del emisor y delata sus falacias' (Valenzuela, 2001: 90-91).

Perhaps, rather than narrate her own illegibility, her texts recount the error of legibility that every literary textual machine generates, by taking over a body nourished by multiple significations. In this sense, it is important to refer to the sequence the feminine, the body, writing, in this order, because out of the three, the body has the most potential for creativity, a line of intersection and border-line of identities that walk the tightrope in an exercise of balance, walking through the threshold of their existence as subjects of gender/language. This hyphen is highlighted in an attempt to go beyond copula or opposition, because in this context, it deals with understanding the link from a space of dialectical contradiction, that is to say, from a perspective that surpasses the withdrawal of oppositions, and conversely, makes

a claim for the richness of becoming.

As Meri Torras notes:

[m]ás que *tener* un cuerpo o *ser* un cuerpo, *nos convertimos* en un cuerpo y lo negociamos, en un proceso entrecruzado con nuestro devenir sujetos, esto es individuos, ciertamente, pero dentro de unas coordenadas que nos hacen identificables, reconocibles, a la vez que nos sujetan a sus determinaciones de ser, estar, parecer o devenir (2007: 20).

These coordinates come marked by the ever-fragile borders of a word that in Luisa Valenzuela's universe represents 'a la vez cuerpo y escritura' (2001: 25) marking the counterpoint of her production. Especially if we dare to take the interpretative approach and consider that her word, the tiniest particle of writing material that, like quarks, lacks the necessary size to contain a life, but at the same time has a taste and a colour, and can manifest itself 'intercambiamente como partícula o como onda, según el ojo experimentador' (Valenzuela, 2001: 28). Thus the problem of supplementary syllogism becomes concentrated, in what she terms '[e]l creciente espacio de la duda' (Valenzuela, 2001: 54), and summons the experience of subalternity inherent to all implementation (or sabotaging) of the persuasive enthymeme.

As she declares on more than one occasion, if women must now usurp not only logocentric language – 'invirtiéndoles la carga a dichas palabras y a las palabras dichas para que se vuelvan liberadoras' (Valenzuela, 2001: 19) but what circulates concealed 'en los pliegues de aquello que se resiste a ser dicho' (Valenzuela, 2001: 23), it is because she senses that language and its minimum unit of signification – the word – are, seem to be, and can become tools of sabotage, or subalternate instances that take-(the)-place of the subterranean, the low-down, the negative, in the simple act of naming. For this reason, she affirms: 'La sabiduría de ciertas escritoras consiste en ir más allá del horror y la vergüenza y articular una forma de aceptación del rechazo. Se trata de un sutil movimiento de la percepción, o de un acceso al conocimiento sagrado por la vía negativa' (2001: 47).

Additionally, we must consider the predictions of Beatriz Preciado (Carrillo, 2004), who argues that we find ourselves in a period where the subalternate's access to production technology drives the necessity for a new episteme, that is to say, a new form of conceiving knowledge, consciousness and access to each, in order to conclude that examples like those from Valenzuela's work or the quotes from Asensi and Preciado allow the articulation of a new, contemporary or postmodern episteme, which is herein termed 'negative trans/versality'.

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*Trans/versality* entails that the critical subjects travel the edges of the system, interfering in the cracks while overflowing from them, and pay special attention to categories of crossing or, in other words, satellites, although these are always contextual: the tongue and language, authorship or sexuality and the body (to name but a few of the more representative examples). This also brings about the decision to cut the word into two halves, whose weight as signifier is by nature significant and signifying, in the sense that it does not just discard the original term (transversality), but overloads it with new, subtle significations, as if the prefix *trans-* communicates a movement that somewhat violently spits out the capacity to perforate and penetrate spaces that are other and almost prohibited. Thus the nominalization of the adjective allocates the subjective projection of the gesture, and it is no longer just the concepts but the percepts which undergo an change during the journey, and in particular, the affects of the subjects suffer a re-vulsion that per-turbsthem, and simultaneously, they per-form.

On the other hand, as much as the *negative* assumes 'la premisa según la que la mirada más privilegiada para alcanzar el conocimiento no es la que se sitúa en un afuera o en una posición superior, sino aquella que se ubica en los lugares más inferiores' (Asensi, 2011: 60), and from these inferior places, he takes this same position with a critical and negative outlook. This note is extremely important, not only because it refutes one of the most sustained theories on defining the un-communicability or un-translatability of what wanders through the lowest stratus of the social scale: although, besides giving it the power to speak, it adds a dimension that goes beyond the experimental and again places itself in the context of consciousness, or (perhaps) other consciousness, but consciousness all the same. Indeed, Beatriz Preciado writes:

los subalternos, mal que le pese al lenguaje dominante, hablan, y [...] además esos lenguajes minoritarios no sólo producen distorsiones de sentido, sino que también producen nuevas significaciones. Lejos de una intraducibilidad radical de la condición de subalternidad, lo que estos autores reclaman [se refiere aquí a los que conforman el Grupo de Estudios Subalternos] es el estatuto de toda [sic] lenguaje como fronterizo, como en sí mismo producto siempre y en todo caso de traducción, de contaminación, de desplazamiento, negando el carácter originario y puro de la [sic] lenguaje y por extensión de la identidad nacional, pero también de género y sexual (en Carrillo, 2004).

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