

from ART & CON

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Question: (by Benjamin Friedlander):

The image of the shark cage in “Text and Context” is a vivid one, but I wonder how you’d apply it to the problem of people speaking out against oppression—in *National Geographic* specials the Great White Shark batters the cage, never quite getting at the diver—are our struggles that one-sided? That fixed? Or am I taking this much too literally?

“A cage went looking for a bird” (Kafka).

I’ll talk & toss items in. Here’s the original quote—from “Text and Context” (in *Open Letter*, Summer 1977, and *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*).

Atmospherically: what surrounds words may be more readily, and satisfyingly perceived than an iron cage of connection: referential connections which take place below the plane, out of sight, or earshot, therefore self-denyingly, without physique, or erotic delight.

The distinction between “possession goals” and “milieu goals”.

As in lowering the iron cage beneath the waters to be attacked by sharks, to be eaten alive by outside forces. Obedience to Authority vs. the improvisation of rules. If only the imposed representations could be loosed, deviance would be so much sweeter.

We’re all geeks. Battered from outside, we look for calm (& use—or engagement) by biting the heads off snakes. Of course we’d be better off trying to understand (that’s *fathom*) what batters us. Or, politically, put it into context by pushing at the limits of the various contexts in embodiments. *Choice as terror*. Terror as self-explaining explanation. *Tired of the same headbang?*

In the original passage, I’m marking out a separateness from this arena—almost a phobia—‘If I have to wear *that* [protective device] I don’t really want to go swimming. Maybe simply too quick with radical suspicion, limiting truck with the Already-Established-System—‘Iron Cage’, more luridly—which is a system of meanings already available, already imposed. *Discipline regulated life*. At that time, I was proposing a bigger attachment to the surface, and a less directly referential poetics; instead, to suggest a more formal practice intent on the disruptions & milieu & possible methods of the surface. ‘Fit’ and ‘lack of fit’. So, if this led to a ‘political’ engagement, it was a more limited “politics of the sign”.

The shark cage image indicated the problems of moving in the other direction. As if: Step One, you ‘buy into’ the cage, you enter voluntarily—“bought off”/“buy in”. And Step Two, you accept traditional methods to engage (or appropriate, or evade) ‘the outside’, ‘the deep’. You encapsulate (or ‘monadize’) yourself & still (or, *as a result*) get eaten alive by Circumstance. *The chain of command replaces The Great Chain of Being*. *Force to sign a ‘blank confession’*.

Ideology subjects us, makes us subjects —of the cage. *Cathartic vivisection. Make the enemy desire you. 'Failed to survive interrogation'*. I'm offering such a negative image of entering the cage... —which might also mean, of confronting society in a particular way, or with a particular stance... Still you can't forget *that protection* was the purpose of the cage. But here at least the cage fails. The status quo can't allow us to master 'the deeps' without getting us 'eaten alive'. (Sam Fuller's *Shark*, later retitled & cut for TV, originally used footage of the stunt diver/laborer who was torn apart by a shark in the filming of it. Image does devour us —whether we know about 'postmodernism' or not.) *Vernacular helmet. Substantialized calamity. Toupees of praxis. This is the big guy and they smell blood, blood. Hoover me some skin. The revenge of the objects.* (Isn't the *National Geographic* version all snug & safe —is that the social democracy version?).

But still: "below the surface" —this remains that place, or site where the meanings & values we can imagine getting our hands on are shaped before we get to them. *If by 'meaning' you mean 'dominant ideological constellations', then... Advisability of restricting. Socialism IS the prerequisite for democracy.* The question is: whether you encompass *within your own horizon*, within your writing, the limits of meaning. Not the formal structures which make it possible, but the social tinting & weighting which make it something specific. A social process of making meaning & making sense, a conflict-ridden process that now looks to me more & more, and more than ever, like struggles over ideology or discourse (a hegemonic struggle, much less fixed & with much less limited horizons). The usual 'fixed set' (or house menu) of referential connections isn't the Enemy; it's the overall accomplishments of the guard-dogs of Established Authority. Avoiding or insulating yourself altogether from *discourse* looks so precarious, an attempt at self-protection that runs the risk of turning into a narrowly aestheticizing & privatizing high-handedness. Can't we go below the surface without buying into the cage? After all, what you'd be involving yourself in is an ecology and, from that, you can't isolate the sharks; reference is an *ecology*, the interdependence of what you're examining *is* the sharks. So, the *construction* of that 'iron cage of connections' —not just who wins & who loses, but the entire tilt and character of it— is a moving context. Context in which (& over which) to struggle. 'Think globally, act locally' still has its charms —and fit.

This suggests a different politics. If you try to grasp —or comprehend— the largest possible horizon (of context, of bigger system, of what *coheres*) you can very helpfully guide the way you contest or "speak out against" oppression & the way you value the relations with people involved. *Without theory all you have is praxis.* So it's possible to offer a more positive image of going beneath the surface —without becoming sucker bait; a more positive prescription. It becomes a matter of actively participating in what goes on below the surface. And this is an ecology from which we can't separate ourselves —as 'masters', without being slaves. Nor can it be avoided. Not just what you'd like it to be but what it is. Not just what you think it is but what you think it *might* be. And *we are no such EXTERNAL people. We ARE Circumstance - We are embodiments of Circumstance.*