e-flux Journal is a monthly art publication featuring essays and contributions by some of the most engaged artists and thinkers working today. The journal is available online, in PDF format, and in print through a network of distributors.

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Editorial— "The New Brutality"

Every December, dictionaries and language societies across the globe identify the "words of the year"—words that resonated widely during the previous twelve months. In the mid-2000s, these lists were populated with words like "contempt" and "quagmire," "ambivalence" and "conundrum." A few years later, dominant words included "trepidation" and "precipice" and "fail," "vitriol" and "insidious" and "bigot." The *OED*'s word of the year for 2012 was "omnishambles." 2016, however, was for *OED* the year of "post-truth." Merriam-Webster selected the word "surreal." In the wake of Brexit and the US elections, Russia's annexation of the Crimea and Turkey's disregard for journalistic freedom, fake news and ever more puzzling hacks, and violence, all that violence, we are no longer just nervous about the state of the world: we are perplexed—bewildered in a wasteland of signs that were once familiar but no longer make any sense.

At what point did the balance of public discourse tip in favor of "post-truth"? When did lying, boasting, and bullying become the rules of the political game? The term "populism" does not even approximate the bad-faith tribalization and base savagery these developments elicit, or the racism and xenophobia they inspire. The degradation of the rights of women and members of the LBGTQ community is constitutive and fundamental to the cruelty and destructiveness that have run wild the past few years. Taking our cue from online discussions about "brutalism" as a sociopolitical attitude, but with a distinct awareness of the term's architectural legacy, in this issue we propose the new brutality.

Whether one lives in the US or in Egypt, Russia or the UK, The Netherlands or Brazil, we are confronted with a public sphere that is rapidly devolving, its privileges dissolving. Consider the proto-fascism of all those extreme right movements and the spineless political opportunism of the "centrist" right. Consider the corresponding intransigent puritanism of some popular leftist factions. As the political parameters stretch, ideological positions stiffen. These zero-sum views surrender reality to the domain of statistical overlords and data-as-opinion, capitulations which are especially worrying in the context of the alt-right affect: pirates angrily plundering those postmodern achievements of intersubjectivity, deploying bots and fake news to radically undermine (for political purposes as much as for profit and fun) the "fourth estate"—the press, traditionally the last resort for checking power before an uprising or militant upheaval. In the midst of this, governance by parliamentary representation is replaced by the tyranny of popular referenda. Grassroots interest groups echo the neoliberal reiteration of the rights of the individual. Public debates are increasingly indistinguishable from the rough and gullible "democracy" of the screen—we're thinking here of the manipulation of algorithms through satellite websites as well as the social media echo chambers of outrage and shame. Experts are not just censored but effectively banned from the public sphere.

Indeed, all those facts liquefied into "flows" in the past decades now harden—if only for a moment—into pulp fictions, from Hillary Clinton's pizza sex ring to the Flat Earth Society to the baseless incriminations of refugees in Germany. In times where even quality newspapers have foregone reporting in favor of opinion, their headlines churning with indeterminate snark, we no longer compete only with sensation, but with untruth itself.

What we once called civil society has fractured into countless pieces, small and hard—with little civility left between them. For whatever their material particularities, these discursive animatronics share a wholesale rejection of complexity. They induce a systemic leveling-down, a flattening of structural distinctions; they encourage a reduction of subtlety and intelligent or imaginative ambiguities in favor of monosyllabic sound bites, simplifications, and a readiness to insult and humiliate interlocutors. The new brutality is bewildering in its ability to consolidate individual, irrational, and antisocial preferences. The gangsterization of the social sphere by way of structurally rewarding and even monetizing bloodlust and naked cruelty leaves little room for argument. Politics is reduced to picking your own tribe and following a leader who could easily be a sociopath or a pyromaniac. Loyalty is a visceral issue, not a matter of reason: right or wrong, "he" is our man (as the fuss about Trump and Macron's handshake demonstrated, the gender in this saying is certainly not accidental).

The purpose of this issue of *e-flux journal* is to take a firm stance on the new brutality, a stance beyond critical bewilderment. We declare our faith in the persistence and power of critical intelligence. We want to both reflect on the ramifications of this new brutality for cultural practices, and contemplate the extent to which the arts and humanities in the wider sense might interfere in this imaginary, dismantling it, perverting it, altering it. We have invited thinkers from across the disciplinary spectrum: new media studies and philosophy, psychoanalysis and art history, critical theory and film studies. These contributions offer strategic points of interference, positions from which to reterritorialize the debate beyond the rule of the bullies currently running it into the ground—by all appearances intentionally. The battle lines are manifold: language (James T. Hong, Nina Power), memeticism (Geert Lovink), the gaze (Shumon Basar), child psychology (Aaron Schuster), trauma theory (Steffen Krüger), neuroplasticity and algorithms (Bifo), and even reality (Erika Balsom). If the brute operates through the fist, however tiny that fist may be, the subject theorized here comes to the debate with an open hand—the hand of Foucault's judoka, trusting and compassionate, but always ready to take over and redirect the energy elsewhere.

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The Language of the New Brutality

Following the defeat of Nazism, Victor Klemperer, a Jewish philologist and professor of romance studies, published *LTI—Lingua Tertii Imperii: Notizbuch eines Philologen*, a series of linguistic insights based on diaries kept under a certain imperative: "observe, study and memorize what is going on—by tomorrow everything will already look different, by tomorrow everything will already feel different; keep hold of how things reveal themselves at this very moment and what the effects are."[1] Translated into English as *The Language of the Third Reich*, Klemperer's astonishing analysis of the language of Nazism, and his account of what it took to survive the genocidal regime, remains the template for any future understanding of the role that language plays in reactionary and fascist times. "Language reveals all," Klemperer writes.

> The most powerful influence was exerted neither by individual speeches nor by articles or flyers, posters or flags; it was not achieved by things which one had to absorb by conscious thought or conscious emotions. Instead Nazism permeated the flesh and blood of the people through single words, idioms and sentence structures which were imposed on them in a million repetitions and taken on board mechanically and unconsciously.[2]

Under the New Brutality, we may wonder what the words, idioms, and sentence structures of our own times might be, what "tiny doses of arsenic" we are swallowing, which words have changed their values, which words have disappeared, how the way we speak and write is changing, and with what detrimental effects.

Klemperer describes the language of the Third Reich as no longer drawing a distinction between spoken and written language, such that "everything was oration, had to be address, exhortation, invective."[3] Fanaticism becomes a virtue. While the rally, the talk show, the shock jock, and the tabloid smear all exhibit these features, the internet provides us with another avenue of investigation. If spoken and written language continue to be blurred, such that every Trump tweet is indistinguishable from something he might equally well say aloud ("Getting ready for my big foreign trip. Will be strongly protecting American interests—that's what I like to do!"), we can also describe the blurring of the distinction between written language and the image in the form of the meme. Klemperer indeed noted that "the entire thrust of the LTI was towards visualization."[4] The internet meme, and a peculiar form of sly, ironic, vicious humor, have become part of our new linguistic and imagistic reality. Where Klemperer noted that the LTI was "impoverished and monotonous," the language-images of the New Brutality are ambiguous and uncertain.[5] They spill over from screen to street, from GIF to poster, from the anonymity and snark of forums to the murderous, smirking bloodlust of

German keyboards from the Nazi regime included the "SS" logo, seen here atop the number five key.

rallies, and the deadly attacks of supremacist individuals: "Until recently, it would have been hard to imagine the combination of street violence meeting internet memes … The 'alt-right' have stormed mainstream consciousness by weaponizing irony, and by using humour and ambiguity as tactics to wrong-foot their opponents," writes Jason Wilson.[6] Angela Nagle, long-term documenter of the alt-right and online culture, similarly describes a terrifying future:

> The emergence of the Alt-right should warn us of a now imminent nightmare vision of what the coming years might hold—a public arena emptied of any civility, universalist ideas or openly competing political visions beyond a zero-sum tribal antagonism of identity groups, in which the boundaries of acceptable thought will shrink further while the purged will amass in the fetid forums of the Alt-right.[7]

The neoliberal project to destroy the public sphere meets the hate networks of the internet, and it is these "identity groups" who will, unless things change radically, take to the streets: these spaces now also made to be places of ambiguity—privatized, unevenly securitized and surveilled—where IRL is increasingly constructed by virtual belongings.

What is the language of this ambiguous, violent tendency? It comes from online of course—from pornography, from casual and relentless insults, words that utterly demean and belittle. To focus on a particular word from this lexicon, perhaps an overly obvious one, that sums up the racist, sexist, vicious tendency of the language and imagery of the New Brutality, one need look no further than the word "cuck." From the old French word for "cuckoo" (" *cucu*"), this go-to insult captures a whole host of overwhelmingly male anxieties. In porn, a cuck is someone who stands by while his female partner has sex with another man (often black). In its current usage (sometimes expanded to "cuckservative"), the original meaning is preserved and politicized: cucks are effeminate conservatives who concede to liberal values, "emasculated" by their own cowardice and enjoying their own degradation. To be a "cuck" is to be screwed over, a victim of women and other men, sexually and economically. A recent post on the Anarcho-Capitalism subreddit asked:

> Is having daughters the ultimate cuckoldry?
>
> I cannot think or comprehend of anything more cucked than having a daughter. Honestly, think about it rationally. You are feeding, clothing, raising and rearing a girl for at least 18 years solely so she can go and get ravaged by another man. All the hard work you put into your beautiful little girl—reading her stories at

Der Spiegel's viral cover from February 2017 features Donald Trump beheading the statue of liberty, drawn by Cuban-born American illustrator Edel Rodriguez. Both Der Spiegel and Time Magazine have since worked with Rodriguez.

Pepe the Frog loses his head.

bedtime, making her go to sports practice, making

sure she had a healthy diet, educating her, playing with her. All of it has one simple result: her body is more enjoyable for the men that will eventually fuck her in every hole.

Raised the perfect girl? Great. Who benefits? If you're lucky, a random man who had nothing to do with the way she grew up, who marries her. He gets to fuck her tight pussy every night. He gets the benefits of her kind and sweet personality that came from the way you raised her.

As a man who has a daughter, you are LITERALLY dedicating at least 20 years of your life simply to raise a girl for another man to enjoy. It is the ULTIMATE AND FINAL cuck. Think about it logically.[8]

Predictably, confusion reigns as to whether the poster is sincere or trolling, and whether the text is "copypasta" (cut and pasted, often with trollish intent) from some other place. But whatever the *intent* of the original poster, this outline sketch of the "ultimate and final cuck," apart from filling the reader with revulsion, indicates the logical outcome of a certain mentality, and a certain language. If your major fear is of another man having sex with a woman you believe to be your property, be it your wife, your partner, or your daughter, and if this fear and suspicion is all-consuming, you will be easily manipulable if and when entire groups are portrayed as ready to "cuck" you over. The language of contemporary fascism is the language of victimhood—who would ever want to be a cuck? Better get the insult in quick—and the fear of victimhood: "A major taproot of the LTI is embedded in the resentment and aspirations of disappointed professional soldiers."[9] "Cuck" is an emotional term masquerading as an insult, a clear case of simple projection: insult the other before he can undo you.

Klemperer did not try to analyze the unconscious of the LTI so much as its material surface and the emotions it played with: "New words keep turning up, or old ones acquire new specialist meanings, or new combinations are formed which rapidly ossify into stereotypes."[10] Language is miasmic ("some kind of fog has descended which is enveloping everybody").[11] Klemperer tells a little story that encapsulates, in ways that bring tears to the eyes, the horror of inevitable compromise and complicity:

I am reminded of the crossing we made twenty-five years ago from Bornholm to Copenhagen. In the night a storm had raged accompanied by terrible seasickness; but soon one was sitting on deck under the beautiful morning sun, protected by the nearby coast, in a calm sea, looking forward to breakfast. At the end of the long bench a little girl stood up, ran to the deck rail, and threw up. A second later her mother,

A "Cuckservative" sticker is spotted outside of the White Boy Internet (WBI) and in real life (IRL).

who was sitting next to her, stood up and did the same. Almost at once the gentleman next to the lady followed suit. And then a young boy, and then ... the movement worked its way steadily and swiftly along the bench. No one was passed over. At our end we were still far away from the blast: it was observed with interest, there was laughter, there were mocking expressions. And then the vomiting got closer and the laughter subsided, and then people were running towards the rail from our end. I looked on attentively and observed myself closely. I told myself that there is such a thing as objective observation, and that I had been trained in it, and that there was such a thing as a firm resolve, and I looked forward to breakfast—and at that point it was my turn and I was forced to the rail just like all the others.[12]

We are memetic creatures. Images and words are damaging. We do not need to look for complex reasons why irony and ambiguity have become stand-ins for fascist feeling of all kinds (misogyny, racism, Islamophobia, homophobia). If we try to analyze the supposed *unconscious* motivations of the contemporary, particularly with a view of understanding and thus

preventing contemporary forms of fascism, we run the real risk of understanding nothing. Klaus Theweleit, whose 1977 *Male Fantasies* brilliantly examines proto-Nazi Freikorps fantasies, particularly those concerning women, highlights the danger of assuming that one is talking in the right way about the fascist unconscious:

Whenever the word "communism" is mentioned in our sources, not as the collective organization of social production but as a fear of being castrated by a sensuous woman armed with a penis, its usage is so overt and deliberate that, as far as I'm concerned, we really can't talk about an *unconscious* displacement, or an *unconscious* fear. On the contrary, it strikes me that concealing the kinds of thoughts we've been discussing, the ones traditional psychoanalysis would call "unconscious," is the last thing on earth those men would want to do. They're out to express them at all cost. The "fear of castration" is a consciously held fear, just as the equation of communism and rifle-woman is consciously made.[13]

It may well be that what we are looking for and looking at

lies hidden in plain sight, and that we should take people at their word. Indeed, Nagle suggests this is the best approach: "Journalists should be saying, 'I don't want to talk about Pepe memes and hand signs. Tell me what are the limits of what you're prepared to do.' We should force them to talk about what they really stand for."[14] What "they" really stand for is the murder of people who attempt to stop the abuse of Muslim women on public transport; the burning of mosques, violence against women, the shooting up of churches, ethno-nationalism, the killing of unarmed black men in the streets, and getting away with murder. The irony of anonymity deployed by the alt-right is not a complex literary form, but rather the nihilism of the shrug and the violence of the mob, a conformity to nonconformity. As Luke Winkie puts it in an article explaining how he used to be a "teenage troll":

> 4chan and other sectors of the White Boy Internet are a safe space for privileged animosity. It's the only place an ignorant white boy can go and be right, even when they're wrong. They can live out the fantasy, embrace the rage, and pool their frightened bitterness into something that feels righteous.[15]

From the LTI to the WBI … Theweleit makes it clear that much is on the surface: "Until now, it seems, fascists themselves have been questioned too little about fascism, whereas those who claim to have seen through fascism (but who were unable to defeat it) have been questioned too much."[16] The "frightened bitterness" of the White Boy Internet has become the self-appointed army for Trumpism, and for many forms of contemporary violence. When they say they are worried about having their dick cut off, or "their" women taken from them, or their spaces and obsessions "infiltrated" by women and "nonwhites," they mean it. White supremacist Jeremy Joseph Christian, who recently murdered two men who stepped in to stop his racist tirade against a Muslim woman and her friend on a train in Portland, Oregon, was reportedly obsessed with circumcision, writing on his Facebook page that he wanted a job in Norway (based on his fantasies of Vikings and racial purity) "cutting off the heads of people that circumcize babies."[17] This double decapitation imagery is not coincidental. Beheading, whether the literal cutting off of the head, and/or the fear of castration, is at the heart of our understanding of Western representation, leading us right back to our concern with images and words, and word-images. As Kristeva puts it in *The Severed Head,*

> To represent the invisible (the anguish of death as well as the jouissance of thought's triumph over it), wasn't it necessary to begin by representing the loss of the visible (the loss of the bodily frame, the vigilant head, the ensconced genitals)? If the vision of our intimate thought really is the capital vision that humanity has

produced of itself, doesn't it have to be constructed precisely by passing through an obsession with the head as symbol of the thinking living being?[18]

Beheading is, in some sense, the ultimate image of violence, and we must think through it if we are to survive the New Brutality.

The language of the New Brutality is a primal, irrational language, which is at the same time desperately fearful of the double decapitation. Videos of beheadings exist in some ambivalent internet terrain and are permitted, then banned from Facebook (unlike female nipples, which are always banned). Objects of fascination, recruitment, and warning, video footage of beheadings lurk behind representation as such. Pity the Facebook moderators whose eyeballs have to scan and screen, day after day, working under guidelines like "remarks such as 'Someone shoot Trump' should be deleted, because as a head of state he is in a protected category. But it can be permissible to say: 'To snap a bitch's neck, make sure to apply all your pressure to the middle of her throat,' or 'fuck off and die' because they are not regarded as credible threats."[19] The cartoon image of Trump decapitating the Statue of Liberty on the front of *Der Spiegel* in February this year caused outrage, despite its distancing style.[20] Comedian Kathy Griffin recently had to plead for forgiveness after holding up a bloodied, "beheaded" Trump mask in a photograph. We cannot think clearly about what these images are doing because they are so tied up with the limits of seeing as such—what we desire to see, how we desire to desire, and what exists at the limit of both how and what we see: our ways of seeing are tinged with horror. But we need philosophizing more than ever: "the exercise of reason, of logical thought, something which Nazism views as the most deadly enemy of all."[21] But whose reason? The alt-right may not believe that what they are doing is "rational," but they certainly think that they are a lot more reasonable than the "social justice warriors" they oppose, and that tactics of irony and scorn are ways of undermining perceived irrationalisms on the part of the liberal left. We need to think much more carefully about the word-images that surround us, to make distinctions between the way violence is described and presented, and not think that all images are equally interchangeable. We need to remember all the words and ways of speaking we have forgotten, and note the way in which certain words, such as "cuck," come to dominate our ways of speaking and thinking. We need to remain, not with Trump's idiotic exclamation mark, but with the question mark, "the most important of all punctuation marks. A position in direct opposition to National Socialist intransigence and self-confidence."[22]

Above all, we need to think about the relationship between representation and violence, whether we focus on decapitation or otherwise. "There are very few

Kathy Griffin's self-portrait with a bloodied Trump mask heavily references the art historical iconography of Salomé with the severed head of Saint John the Baptist. The scene is depicted here in a 1530 painting by Lucas Cranach the Elder. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

circumstances in which it is editorially justified to broadcast the moment of death" says the BBC's editorial guidelines for its news and current affairs shows.[23] So our image of the moment of death is largely fictional, unless we seek out "authentic" videos of decapitation. Why might we feel compelled to do so, or to think about them if we, the lucky ones, have the choice of whether to watch them or not? I do not rightly know, other than for what it can tell us about the fears that structure the language, images, and actions of the New Brutality. It is only through our collective thinking, our general intellect, opposed both to the solitary head of the sovereign state and to the hot-headed fears of violence that generate yet more violence, that we can understand how it is possible to think at all today, and to be careful not only with words and images, but also with each other.

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"Sexual assaults of female high school students by refugees; the case is hushed up"; "An older woman gets raped and dies of the consequences"; "A thirteen-year-old is attacked, robbed, and injured by four Syrian asylum seekers, the family receives death threats. The police keep the case, as well as ten other cases, secret"; "Parents and students in a school in Wurzbach are asked not to put liver sausage on students' sandwiches out of respect for the Muslim students."
—hoaxmap.org[1]

Steffen Krüger

Barbarous Hordes, Brutal Elites: The Traumatic Structure of Right-Wing Populism

Since February 2016, Karolin Schwarz, an ethnologist living in Leipzig, Germany, has been collecting debunked reports, stories, and rumors circulating online and off about refugees and immigrants to Germany and Austria. Each tells of a fake crime that these refugees have purportedly committed and about the scandalous ways in which the German authorities have responded, or failed to respond. Schwarz has registered over 450 such cases so far. With the help of an embedded Google map, her web page, hoaxmap.org, maps these fakes onto the cities, towns, and regions to which they refer. Clicking on one of the pins opens a text box with a short description of the story's main drift as well as a link to a mainstream news article debunking it.

Schwartz's page helps us understand an emerging form of ethnocentrism in contemporary Germany. Reading the rumors collected here as one cohesive "fantasyscape" helps us to understand how populism is lived and experienced by the people to which it appeals.

There are two basic, nonexclusive ways to use hoaxmap.org. One can focus on individual rumors and analyze their development in depth, or one can use the map's breadth and swiftly open one text box after the next, gliding from node to node in a network of hearsay and fantasy. Each single case that is marked on the map can be scrutinized, unpacked, and traced from hoaxmap.org to local and regional news platforms and blog posts. This makes for a chilling and fascinating experience. Looking at photographs of a retirement home rumored to be permanently transformed into a refugee shelter, casting its current residents adrift, exposes one to the mundane material realities to which the rumors attach themselves, exacerbating their harshness.

Yet the map's true potential unfolds when using its breadth. Upon loading the page, the Google map confronts the user with chaotic clusters of pins. The map is so covered with pins that its contours are partly drowned out. With each pin standing in for a rumor that has proved unfounded, the map's primary gesture is to the immense quantity of those rumors and the densely knit fantasyscape they weave. As a fantasyscape, however,
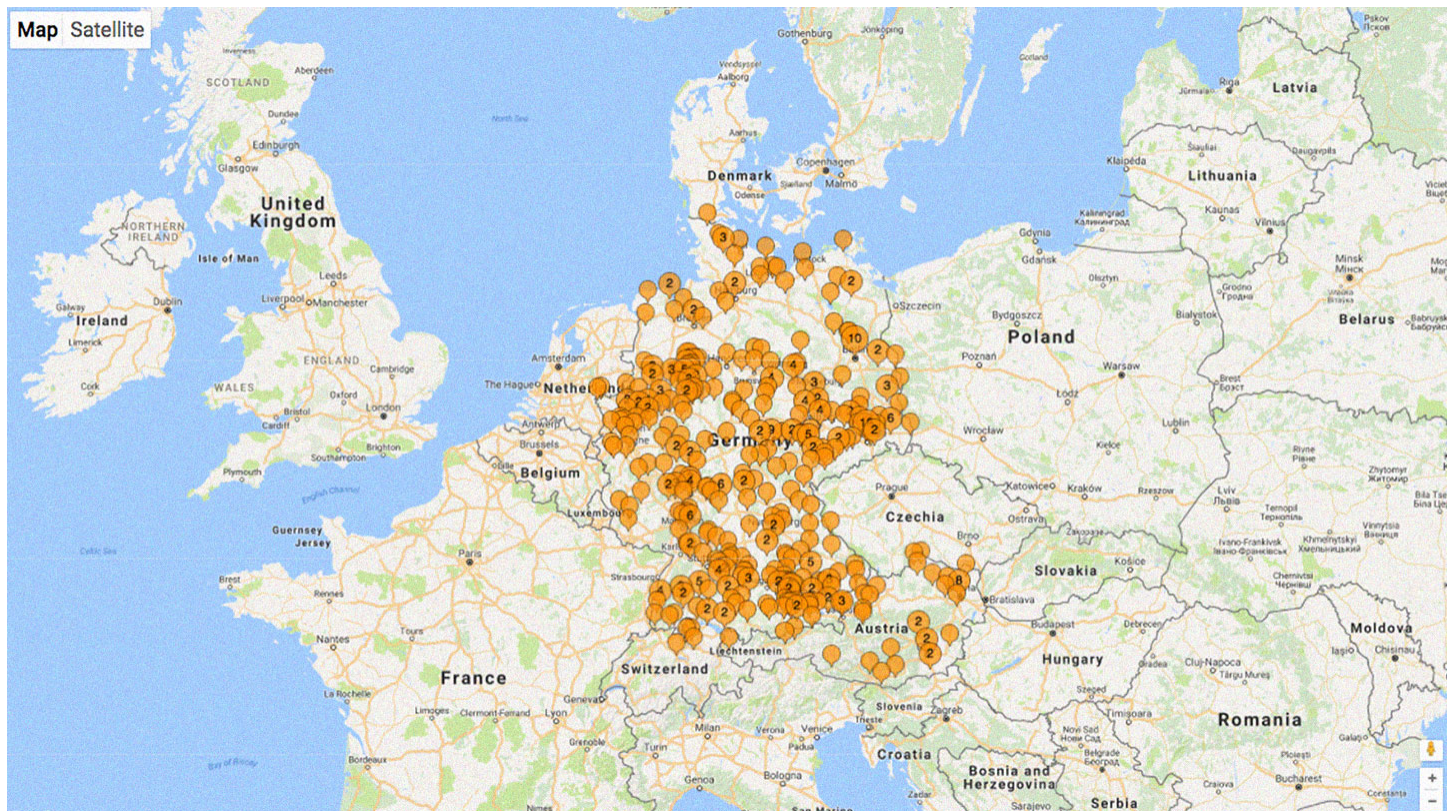
The website hoaxmap.org maps debunked reports, stories, and rumors circulating online and off about refugees and immigrants to Germany and Austria.

these rumors tell us less about the refugees and migrants than about the people who planted them. The need on the part of official sources to debunk the circulating stories goes to prove their "spreadability," i.e., their resonance with significant parts of the German population. Like myths and legends, their ability to travel and replicate, to become told and retold as personal truths, relies on their touching upon and reverberating with preexisting dispositions—wishes and desires—that become unfolded and articulated in this way.

As Freud wrote about the fantasies of "neurotics," hoaxmap.org "possess[es] *psychical* as contrasted with *material* reality, and we gradually learn to understand that *in the world of neuroses it is psychical reality which is the decisive kind*."[2] The lesson suggested by the map and other attempts at public enlightenment is not the "neurosis" at work in the fantasies shooting up all around us so much as it is their "reality-effect" for the people creating and circulating them. As with all neurotics, it is often more productive to first account for what makes this vision "the decisive kind" for the people holding to it, rather than bluntly trying to correct it immediately.

To the map's right, there is a box with labels categorizing the various crimes that the rumors entail. In the fashion of a "word cloud," the size of the labels is indicative of the frequency with which the imagined crimes show up in the

collected material.

"Criminal assault," "robbery/theft," "Payments/Benefits," "rape," "damage to property," "business closure," "cover up," "waste of public funds" … As informative as these juridical labels are, their variety actually makes the readings seem more creative and specific than they really are. The forty-eight distinct categories water down the sameness and repetitiveness that emerges from a reading of the material at large. Not only do the same rumors show up in various different places, often with minor changes in detail, but the entirety of the mapped stories points toward a strikingly limited number of traits.

Toril Aalberg et al. have recently defined right-wing populism of the kind exemplified by hoaxmap.org as a "complete populism." This is because it combines an appeal to the people with a double rejection of both "the elites" and an outgroup.[3] Hoaxmap.org allows us to see how this double rejection manifests itself in the structure of populist rumor along the lines of barbarism and brutality respectively. Time and time again refugees are imagined as barbarous—uncultured, uncivilized; rude, rough, wild.[4] The "elites," by contrast—i.e., the government, politicians, intellectuals, and first and foremost, Angela Merkel—are imagined as brutal, i.e., reckless, careless, and "coarsely cruel."[5] In other words, while refugees are fantasized as uninhibitedly following their sexual and bodily instincts,

An October 2015 article in Augsburger Allgemeine entitled "Refugees: The Myth of the 'Slut-Bus'." See →.

brutality is located in the "elites" who knowingly and cynically abstain from protecting "the people" from the barbarous hordes. This is how populism is imagined and experienced in the reality constructed by the fantasies.

In the vast majority of cases, the imagined wildness and barbarousness of the refugees coincides with an equally imagined and invariable young male identity. Fittingly, their victims are nearly always ethnic German women. In general, the rumors are intensely sexualized: rape is the second-most imagined crime (seventy-one cases), after "robbery/theft" (eighty-four cases). Frequently, the victims are imagined to be either very old, or extremely young—children. The younger the children, the less important the gender becomes; although they rarely attack elderly men, the projected sexual appetite of the refugees apparently does not discriminate between small boys and girls.

Yet, the kind of sexualization attaching itself to the migrants appears most clearly in the many rumors that entail an unmitigated, uninhibited orality. Repeatedly, refugees are imagined to steal horses directly from the fields of their German owners and eat them; pets from children's zoos are slaughtered, barbecued, and devoured on the spot; dogs are eaten, swans on a city lake caught and consumed; supermarkets are driven into ruin through uncountable small acts of shoplifting. These fantasies bleed into more clearly and aggressively sexual ones in which refugees grab, fondle, and molest schoolgirls or female cleaning personnel in their shelters. A rumor originating in the Zwickau area has several "dark-skinned men" jumping out of some bushes by the roadside, in front of the car of a female driver who they then harass. That rapes are frequently imagined as being perpetrated by large groups of "men of color" who force themselves on one single German woman itself reveals an oral

dimension: the high number of attackers triggers associations of *consuming* the victim, of *using her up*.[6]

"Oralization" continues even in imagined acts that have no obvious sexual dimension. When outright brutality is attributed to refugees, it is for utterly trivial reasons. A refugee sees a two-euro T-shirt in a shop and beats up the clerk in order to get it. The cheapness of the shirt is intended to signify refugees' proximity to primitivism, and their eagerness for antisocial reversion. In another case, petty cash starts a brawl; in another it is a purse; in yet another it is the small change in the cash register of a local shop. Invariably, refugees are thus fantasized as spontaneously resorting to brutality in order to satisfy immediate, bodily urges and drives. This same body is then perceived as the refugees' only source of power. The reduction of refugees to mere existence or "bare life" when they arrive in their host countries is perfectly misrecognized: it is not seen as powerlessness, but rather as a dumb, "corporealist" power. Refugees are imagined to use their bodies in order to force their will on others. One recurring fantasy sees them suddenly entering the car of an unsuspecting German citizen and violently demanding to be driven to a shelter or a registration office.

If the obscene closeness of the *Fremdkörper*, the alien body, drives the above set of fantasies, in another, this same body loses its individuality so that the many are turned into one big organism. In these cases, refugees are imagined to cover the body of the country or the self like a plague, feasting their way through the land and leaving behind destruction and barrenness. The rumor of the supermarket that has to close due to a massive onslaught of stealing migrants shows up all across the map: from Freiburg to Donaueschingen, Meßstetten to Münsingen, from Roth to Erfurt, from Eisenberg to Dresden. The pettiness of the crimes, their uninhibited, hand-to-mouth nature, again appeals to the sexualized character of the acts; it describes people who are naturally compelled to steal, grab, and incorporate—dumb, unthinking, headless, and purely instinctual masses, one gigantic mouth that demands infinite feeding.

At times, the emphatic corporeality of the imagined migrants is extended into the magical and totemic. In these cases, refugees are envisioned as attacking Christmas trees in market squares and other public places, because they identify them as tokens of a tabooed Christianity. Other narratives again complement this associational logic with that of contagion: a physical therapist is rejected because she is a Christian; mattresses are not accepted because Christians have slept on them; cooking utensils are refused because they have been used to prepare pig meat. In these latter cases, the refugees, whose corporeality is otherwise imagined to be crudely oral and a sign of their primitiveness, are characterized as hysterically anal, i.e., scrupulously and squeamishly focused on a notion of purity that the overall direction of the rumors has flatly denied them. Thus,

kitchens, bathrooms, toilets, beds, and all kinds of furniture are imagined to be ripped out of flats, thrown out of windows, hacked into shreds or burned in the yard, out of a fetishistic wish for purity that can only appear as absurd in view of the dirt and mess that the foreigners allegedly make. The rumor that captures both ends of this logic goes as follows: "Afghan refugees cut open the seats of [regional] trains and relieve themselves into them, because Christians have sat on them."

All across the hoaxmap, the refugees' barbarity is characterized by a sexuality that careens between the extremely oral and anal, i.e., the totally uninhibited and the hysterically controlled. The result is that a perverse notion of innocence emerges: these fantasy-foreigners are a force of nature and, as such, they simply cannot be blamed in any conventional sense for their wrongdoings. They are beyond the reach of rationality. They cannot be reasoned with; they can only be stopped by other means. This putative irresponsibility of the refugees is crucial, because it allows for the entire responsibility for their imaginary crimes to be placed at the feet of the elites.

The first theme that emerges in how the authorities—the "elites"—are presented in the rumors is that of disappointment. Commonsense surely demands a heavy-handed response to the refugees' rumored behavior, but, inevitably, the reaction of the authorities is nowhere near sufficient. Instead, the authorities are depicted as willfully ignoring the refugees' barbarities, while treating ethnic Germans with the contempt that the refugees seemingly deserve. It is this scandalously unequal treatment that creates the image of an utterly cruel and brutal "elite." A significant number of stories envision crimes of all kinds to be hushed and covered up by the police and/or other state authorities; e.g., parents of harassed, even raped children are forcibly silenced and threatened with retributions—apparently in order to cover up the true nature of the immigrants who are let loose on the Germans. Other fantasies deal with situations in which the local authorities talk shop owners and supermarkets into secret deals so that the refugees can continue to steal from them without being prosecuted. Businesses are offered reimbursements so that the refugees can do as they like, without their crimes becoming public. In other examples, the authorities tacitly tolerate stealing and theft. The obvious ingratitude of the migrants towards their host country is another related theme; the state is imagined to respond to this naive ingratitude with even more financial support, gifts, and privileges. Whereas ethnic Germans are forcibly expropriated and thrown out of their homes to make room for foreigners, these foreigners, who are spoiled rotten, move into the Germans' homes and are given brand new furniture—and we've heard what they do with that.

The brutality of the authorities thus resides in standing by and letting the "barbarians" come over and befoul native Germans; they are even imagined to invite this onslaught,

to facilitate and extend it artificially, all while cruelly savoring the unfolding scenes of suffering, like a cinematic Roman emperor consuming the sight of gladiators devoured by animals. One of the most repeated rumors has regional authorities handing out "brothel vouchers" to immigrants, or hiring "sex workers" and bussing them to the refugee shelters, apparently in order to abate the uncontrollable sexual hunger of the incoming male hordes. In the logic of the fantasyscape, such an arrangement amounts to the prostitutes—German women—being used as animal feed, as pieces of meat thrown into a piranha tank.

In this constellation, only the elite are granted any sort of agency, and this is what defines their brutality. Whereas the refugees' barbarism arrives without any self-awareness, as an instinctual, infantile force marked by its orality, there is control, purpose, and design in the authorities' cruelty, even if this purpose remains vague and conspiratorial. In a way, then, this constellation puts ethnic Germans and immigrants on par; since neither has control over their situation, they are like antagonistic, underage siblings in a seriously dysfunctional home. With Angela Merkel as the German chancellor, this familial dimension comes clearly to the fore. Merkel is the mother of the nation— *Mutti*, as she is ironically called—who, according to the circulating rumors, prefers her newborn "bastard" offspring over her older, rightfully conceived children. The German people in this populist fantasyscape are thus identified as abused, neglected, or otherwise unfairly disinherited children.

The Structure of Trauma in the Experience of Populism

The figure of the abused child recalls a classic formulation in trauma theory. In his 1969 "Trauma and Object Relationship," Michael Balint argued that it is not merely the experience of something excessive—excessively cruel or close—which accounts for trauma. Rather, trauma is only completed when, in the subject's subsequent attempts to have her experience acknowledged by a significant other, this other denies the reality of the experience. "What happens quite often," Balint explains, "is a completely unexpected refusal. The adult behaves as if he does not know anything about the previous excitement or rejection; in fact, he acts as if nothing had happened."[7] Only then, after this refusal, is the experience sealed as a traumatic one—only then does it become locked away beyond the grasp of our conscious means of elaboration.

Reading Balint's structural suggestions into the fantasmatic experience of populism captured by hoaxmap.org has the hoaxers effectively identifying as traumatized children, abused by their primitive "bastard stepbrothers," unacknowledged and refused by their parents. This traumatization is reproduced over and over again in the fantasies. What's in it for those who identify

with such traumatization?

The answer I want to offer is a speculative one, based on a rather cursory observation. In a study I recently conducted on right-wing anti-asylum pages on Facebook, the comment that the refugees were "all traumatized" appeared repeatedly.[8] Thus, on these Facebook pages, it is not the ethnic Germans that receive the label of trauma, but the refugees themselves. "Those poor traumatized asylum seekers, they are harmless and would never touch German women"; "They are all traumatized, those apes"; etc.[9] The intention of this cynical litany on the part of the pages and their followers is to decry any display of empathy with the refugees. Traumatization is set up *in advance* as the "elite's" apology for the refugees' excesses. *Don't tell us fairy tales*, goes the rebuke addressed to the "elites" and mainstream media, *those foreigners are neither "poor" nor "traumatized."* As the fantasies gathered on hoaxmap.org testify over and over, a quasi-natural, primitive state of savagery must be maintained as the root of the immigrants' crimes, in order for the elites to bear responsibility for them. This is why all official talk of trauma on the part of the "elites" must be discredited as covering up the barbaric nature of refugees, and by extension, the brutal cruelty of the elites.

The idea, however, that barbarousness can be covered up, or at least apologized for, with a reference to trauma is key to understanding why the structure of trauma emerges in the rumors collected on hoaxmap.org. After all, if the authorities can excuse the refugees' barbarity by calling them traumatized, this excuse might serve the ethnic Germans as well. In other words, by imagining themselves as traumatized and victimized, the "German people" also have access to the excessiveness, primitiveness, and barbarousness associated with refugees. If they now act savagely in turn, who can blame them? As minors with a history of serious parental abuse, they can neither be held responsible nor deemed guilty. But those who traumatized them, they had it coming. Crudely put, imagining themselves as traumatized makes it possible for ethnic Germans to turn the whole palette of sexualized barbarisms ascribed to the refugees against the latter—one murder, one rape, one assault at a time.

There is something uncanny arising from this reverie of traumatization. The sexual dimension in the crimes associated with the refugees really belongs to the fantasizing subjects. It is *their* hunger that will leave behind destruction and barrenness. Freud, in his text on Daniel Paul Schreber, suggests a sexualization and desublimation of the "social instincts" as his understanding of Schreber's paranoia.[10] The sexualization at the core of the psychic reality emerging from hoaxmap.org points toward another such desublimation of "the ties that bind." The strong sexual element in the fantasies points to the leaking out into the social of a violent energy that makes people feel that others come too close to them and, in response, turn against each other. It

is the "fuck" in "fucking it all up"—the first, exciting impulse towards an utterly nihilistic act, and the innuendo for something sinisterly orgasmic. Since trauma is not consciously remembered but immediately and unconsciously acted out, it legitimates the longed-for eruption of violence by reason of insanity.

The temptation is to end on such a forcefully Schopenhauerian note. But that would be to give in to the seductive elements in the rumors and even reproduce them in my own writing. What, then, could be an adequate response to the self-traumatizing logic of populism?

This logic is captured in a recent court case in Germany in which two men in their mid-twenties confessed to having thrown Molotov cocktails at a house where refugee families were living.[11] During the trial, the culprits begged forgiveness and said that, in hindsight, they related to their deed as to a bad dream and were relieved that nobody got hurt. The judge, however, was not impressed; he gave them prison sentences of several years—not so much *despite*, but exactly *because* of their show of regret and remorse, it seems. After all, what these feelings of regret imply is that the men have a fantastical belief in their non-culpability, as though the two understood their actions as entirely driven by their circumstances. In the eyes of the judge and in the binding reality of the judiciary, however, these two men did not pass as traumatized kids, but as fully accountable and liable grown-ups. And they were convicted as such.

In this respect, then, the most adequate response I can give to the circulating fantasies, as well as to those harboring them, is the following: *We see you, we recognize you, and acknowledge you, as we hope you see and acknowledge us and others. Our actions have consequences. Therefore, whatever it is you imagine that others have done to you, do not do it to them, do not do it to us, and inevitably, do not do it to yourselves.*

X

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17

"Artificial intelligence is not the answer to organized stupidity"—Johan Sjerpstra. "Please don't email me unless you're going to pay me"—Molly Soda. "Late capitalism is like your love life: it looks a lot less bleak through an Instagram filter"—Laurie Penny. "Wonder how many people going on about the necessity of free speech and rational debate have blocked and muted trolls?"—Nick Srnicek. "Post-truth is to digital capitalism what pollution is to fossil capitalism—a by-product of operations"— Evgeny Morozov. "I have seen the troll army and it is us"—Erin Gün Sirer.

Geert Lovink

Overcoming Internet Disillusionment: On the Principles of Meme Design

1. Internet Disillusionment

Our disenchantment with the internet is a fact. Yet again, enlightenment does not bring us liberation but depression. The once fabulous aura that surrounded our beloved apps, blogs, and social media has deflated. Swiping, sharing, and liking have begun to feel like soulless routines, empty gestures. We've started to unfriend and unfollow, yet we can't afford to delete our accounts, as this implies social suicide. If "truth is whatever produces most eyeballs," as Evgeny Morozov states, a general click strike seems like the only option left.[1] But since this is not happening, we feel trapped and console ourselves with memes.

The multi-truth approach of identity politics, according to Slavoj Žižek, has produced a culture of relativism.[2] Chomsky's process of "manufacturing consent" has taken hold completely. As Žižek explains in a British TV interview, the Big Other has vanished.[3] There is no BBC World Service anymore, the moderate radio voice that once provided us with balanced opinions and reliable information. Every piece of information is self-promotion, crafted by public-relations managers and spin doctors—and by us users as well (we are our own marketing interns). What's collapsing right now is the imagination of a better life. It is no longer the "wretched of the earth" who revolt, because they've got nothing left to lose, but rather the stagnating middle class and "young professionals," who face permanent precarity.

After hubris come guilt, shame, and remorse. Mass conformity didn't pay off. The question is how the current discontent will ultimately play out on the level of internet architecture. What is techno-repentance? What comes after the Exorbitant Detriment? Once the love affair with apps is over and the addiction reveals itself, the mood flips to cold turkey. What some see as a relief is experienced by many as frustration, if not hatred. The online Other cannot possibly be classified any longer as a "friend": "If people in the outside world scare you, people on the internet will downright terrify you" is a general warning applicable to all

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websites. The guilt is produced by the pressure to perform. Users are under constant risk of financial collapse, and once they're poor, they will be subjected to the post-money economy in which only imaginary entities circulate. After they're written off, being online is their last refuge.

"We're terrofucked." That's how Jarett Kobek sums up the general feeling in his 2016 novel *I Hate the Internet*. The guilt and frustration is both personal and political, on a global scale. Throughout the story, set in the gentrified streets of San Francisco, computers coordinate the exploitation of "the surplus population into perpetual servants." What happens once the realization sinks in that "all the world's computers were built by slaves in China" and that it is you who is using those same devices? What happens when we're personally addressed as the guilty partners, "suffering the moral outrage of a hypocritical writer who has profited from the spoils of slavery"?[4]

This is the intriguing part of Kobek's DIY philosophy, which he presents as a science fiction of the present. What if the current internet economy of the free is the default future scenario for the 99 percent? What will happen when the concentration of power and money in the hands of the few becomes irreversible and we abandon all hope for the redistribution of revenues? For Kobek, this is already the

case. Failed traditional money has been replaced by micro-fame, "the world's last valid currency," which is even more subject to oscillations than old-fashioned money. "Traditional money [has] ceased to be about an exchange of humiliation for food and shelter. Traditional money [has] become the equivalent of a fantasy world."[5]

Kobek calls himself a proponent of the "bad novel," in contrast to CIA-sponsored literary fiction from the Cold War, called the "good novel"—a category which continues to exist in the form of Jonathan Franzen, who writes "about people from the American Middle West without much eumelanin in their epidermises."[6] Bad novels are defined here as stories that "[mimic] the computer network in its obsession with junk media, in its irrelevant and jagged presentation of content," filled with characters that have a "deep affection for juvenile literature" such as Heinlein, Tolkien, and Rand.[7] This all makes you wonder in which category Dave Eggers's novel *The Circle*—an update of Orwell's *1984*—would fit. Can Eggers's internet novel about *Minority Report*–style measures enforced by a fictitious company that's a cross between Google and Facebook be classified as the *ur*–bad novel of this type? What happens when we can no longer distinguish between utopia and dystopia?

The promise of fame deluges people with images of

grotesque success. Everyone is a performer and a celebrity, as long as they believe in their dreams and strive to be like Beyoncé and Rihanna, who are inspirations rather than vultures. Such celebrity cases show "how powerless people [demonstrate] their supplication before their masters."[8] Fans are fellow travellers on a journey through life; they are not consumers that purchase a product or service. According to Kobek, "the poor [are] doomed to the Internet, a wonderful resource for watching shitty television, experiencing angst about other people's salaries."[9] Built by "pointless men," the net invokes nothing but trash and hate, leaving the poor empty-handed, with nothing to sell.[10] The poor make money for Facebook. It will never be the other way round.

Kobek has been compared with Houellebecq because of the harshness of each writer's characters. In *I Hate the Internet*, we wander through the cynical start-up environment of Silicon Valley, but Kobek shies away from taking us inside. Unlike the cyberpunk novel, we do not enter cyberspace; we don't swipe through profiles or flow through Instagram pictures. This is not about an "illusion of the end" (and that's the main difference from the 1968 generation: we have the uncanny feeling that something has barely started). In this hyperconservative era, we no longer confront ourselves with the historical duty to face the end of the welfare state, neoliberalism, globalization, the European Union, or other modern institutions. Instead, we're lured into a perpetual state of retromania, because, as the late Mark Fisher pointed out, it is the present that has gone missing ("Make America Dank Again").

Pseudo-events have no chronology, no development, no beginning or middle, let alone an end. We're beyond the terminal process, beyond the postmodern patchwork. Everything accelerates. This must be the twenty-first-century-style catastrophe that so many films have introduced us to. Still, we remain encapsulated, captured inside cybernetic loops that go nowhere, in which meaningless cycles of events, series, and seasons pass by. What happens when the anxiety of information saturation flips into a profound feeling of emptiness? Once we've passed this point, the digital neither disappears nor ends. Events simply no longer turn into Roman spectacles. Instead, we experience simulacrum as prime reality. We cannot process such a sudden overproduction of reality. We no long turn on television news thinking that we're watching a film. We've moved on. It is not life that has become cinematographic; it is film scenarios and their affects that shape the grand designs of our technological societies. Films anticipated our condition, and now we're situated in the midst of yesteryear's science fiction. *Minority Report* is now a techno-bureaucratic reality, driven by the integration of once-separate data streams. Virtual reality feels like *The Matrix*. Trump's reality TV show proved to be a rehearsal. The logic of the avant-garde is very much alive. The last industry to deal with the fake and real whirlpool is the news industry. Hyperreality becomes our everyday situation—regardless of whether we perceive it as boring or absurd.

Let's look at radical disillusionment as form and celebrate the return of its high priest, Jean Baudrillard. Our social media rage is not just a medical condition of the few; it is the human condition. Will the disenchantment turn into a revolt, as Camus once contemplated? The spiritual exhaustion is certainly there (#sleepnomore). Empty-handed, we discuss one powerless critique of the database form after another. To put it in spatial terms, cyberspace has turned out to be a room containing a house containing a city that has collapsed into a flat landscape in which created transparency turns into paranoia. We're not lost in a labyrinth but rather thrown out into the open, watched and manipulated, with no center of command in sight.

The *mille plateaux* of tweets, blogs, and Instagram and Facebook postings have created a culture of deep confusion. Fragmentation was supposed to enrich us, so why are we now paying the bill for all its unforeseen consequences? This was not supposed to happen. Is this the "difference" we once aimed for? Mainstream media play a crucial role in this process of decay. While their legitimacy has faded, their influence is still believed to be significant. This creates an atmosphere of permanent ambivalence. Why bother? Their role as "clearinghouses" of facts and opinion has been undermined for decades by growing centrifugal forces in society that no longer accept particular baby-boomer sentiments (and interests) as the legitimate consensus. The stunning inability of "the press" to deal with recent changes in society has lead to a widespread form of indifference. The theoretical blind spots of successive postmodern generations are too numerous to list. The elephant in the room here is Jürgen Habermas. Many of us still subscribe to his notion of the bourgeois public sphere as an arena where different opinions compete in a rational dialogue—even if we do not believe in the core values of Western society, such as democracy. And who's the "counterpublic" in this context? The "user-generated content" of 4Chan, Reddit, and YouTube? What's the organized answer to all this? What would a contemporary version of Indymedia look like? And if such a federated model of "independent media" is so 1999, then why is it so hard to put together a 2017 upgrade?

There is a crisis of "participatory culture." Let's look at the example of danah boyd and how she's deconstructing the "media literacy" discourse for which so many had such high hopes. The cynical reading of the news has overshadowed critical capacities. In the aftermath of Donald Trump's election, boyd asked if media literacy had backfired.[11] Have trolling, clickbait, and fake news undermined the classic belief in the democratization of news production? Whereas for the pre-internet baby-boom generation media literacy was synonymous with the ability to question sources, deconstruct opinions, and decode ideology, media literacy has now turned into

the ability to produce one's own content in the form of responses, blog postings, and social media updates. The shift from critical consumer to critical producer has come with a price: namely, information inflation. (The well-meaning "prosumer" synthesis never materialized.) According to boyd, media literacy has became synonymous with distrusting media sources rather than engaging in fact-based critique. Instead of examining the evidence of experts, it is now enough to cite one's own personal experience. This has led to a doubt-centric culture that can only ever be outraged, a culture incapable of reasonable debate—a polarized culture that favors tribalism and self-segregation.

The current situation demands a rethink of the usual demands of activists and civil-society players regarding media literary. How can the general audience be better informed? Is this an accurate diagnosis of the current problem in the first place? How do we poke holes in the filter bubbles? How can "do-it-yourself" be a viable alternative when social media is already experienced in those terms? And can we still rely on the emancipatory potential of "talking back to the media" via the familiar social networking apps? How does manipulation work today? Is it still productive to deconstruct the *New York Times* (and its equivalents)? How would we explain the workings of the Facebook News Feed to its user base? If we want to blame the algorithms, how do we translate their hidden complexity so that large audiences can understand them?

An effort at such translation is Cathy O'Neil's *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy*, in which she describes how "ill-conceived mathematical models now micromanage the economy, from advertising to prisons."[12] Her question is how to tame, and disarm, dangerous algorithms. These mathematical models are not neutral tools. However, in everyday life we increasingly experience ranking as destiny. Coining the term "Weapons of Math Destruction," or "WMDs," O'Neil writes: "Promising efficiency and fairness, [WMDs] distort higher education, drive-up debt, spur mass incarceration, pummel the poor at nearly every juncture, and undermine democracy."[13] In her account of the jobs she has had in numerous algorithm-focused industries, she shows that this software is "not just constructed from data but from the choices we make about which data to pay attention to—and which to leave out. Those choices are not just about logistics, profits, and efficiency. They are fundamentally moral."[14] And class-biased, she adds: "The privileged are processed by people, the masses by machines."[15] Once installed and running for a while, these WMDs create their own reality and justify their own results, a model which O'Neil calls self-perpetuating and highly destructive.

Techniques such as leaks, fake news, socialbots, *kompromat*, and agitprop confuse the political climate. Disorientation is sufficient; it is not longer necessary to,

for instance, manipulate election outcomes. In this "post-factual era," we're left with the instant beliefs of celebrity commentators and media experts. Look at Donald Trump's tweets, an ultimate form of media literacy and a perverse flood of self-expression. His personal tweets have become indistinguishable from policy, state propaganda, and info warfare. In this case, power no longer operates through the pornographic overexposure of the hi-res 3-D image. This is not big data, but singular data. Tiny messages with a "tremendous" fallout. At this level, we leave behind the realm of both Hollywood glamour and reality TV and enter the real-time realm of communication-with-consequences, a next-level hybrid in which sovereign executive power and marketing become inseparable.

What does contemporary psychoanalysis have to offer? As evidenced in Kristin Dombek's *The Selfishness of Others: An Essay on the Fear of Narcissism*, there is a renaissance of narcissism as cultural diagnosis. While Dombek avoids referencing internet cultures and refrains from selfie and social media complaints, she does point to a crucial change in psychoanalytic practice: from therapeutic to quantitative methods. Today's narcissism is social and contagious in nature; it consists of traits that "can be measured across large groups of people."[16] Generation Me spans the planet. We need to move beyond the illness metaphors when discussing Trump, the alt-right, and social media at large. It could be a fatal mistake to attempt to marginalize (as both diagnostics and tactics) the self-absorbed populist right as "sick patients." In a review of *The Selfishness of Others*, Jennifer Schuessler writes that "Ms. Dombek's own view echoes that of the philosopher René Girard, who argued that our tendency to see narcissism in parents and partners is an effort to reassure ourselves that if those we desire are less than ideally responsive to us it's because they are sick, not because we are uninteresting."[17]

Beyond the fear of narcissism, let's look at Trump again, a man who "seems supremely cognizant of the fact that he is always acting. He moves through life like a man who knows he is always being observed." This quote is taken from "The Mind of Donald Trump," a June 2016 piece in *The Atlantic* written by Dan P. McAdams.[18] Here, Trump is described as a "flummoxing" figure, exhibiting sky-high extroversion combined with off-the-charts low agreeableness. He's portrayed as a dynamo—driven, restless, unable to sit still, getting by with very little sleep. A cardinal feature of Trump's acute extroversion is his relentless reward-seeking. Prompted by the activity of dopamine circuits in the brain, highly extroverted people are driven to pursue positive emotional experiences. As McAdams writes,

> Anger can fuel malice, but it can also motivate social dominance, stoking a desire to win the adoration of others. Anger lies at the heart of Trump's charisma,

dominated by ebullient extroversion, the relentless showmanship, and the larger-than-life celebrity, who never thinks twice about the collateral damage he will leave behind.

Highly narcissistic people draw attention to themselves. Repeated and inordinate self-reference is a distinguishing feature of their personality. Over time, people become annoyed, if not infuriated, by their self-centeredness. When narcissists begin to disappoint those whom they once dazzled, their descent can be especially precipitous. There is still truth today in the ancient proverb "Pride goeth before the fall." The world is saturated with a sense of danger and a need for toughness: the world cannot be trusted. It is a ferocious combatant who fights to win. Are you preoccupied with fantasies that the world is ending because of the selfishness of others? McAdams:

> Who, really, is Donald Trump? What's behind the actor's mask? I can discern little more than narcissistic motivations and a complementary personal narrative about winning at any cost. It is as if Trump has invested so much of himself in developing and refining his socially dominant role that he has nothing left over to create a meaningful story for his life, or for the nation. *It is always Donald Trump playing Donald Trump*, fighting to win, but never knowing why.

What would a philosophy of disbelief look like today? Let's seek out a secular follow-up to the critique of religion. What is atheism in the information context? The multiplicity of sources and points of view, once celebrated as a "diversity of opinion," has now reach a nihilistic "zero point" in which the accumulation of possible meanings can either lead to critical insights (or even knowledge), or implode into a pool of indifference (possibly resulting in the disappearance of networks such as Twitter, which thrive on individual expressions, judgements, and preferences).

These days, institutional dogmas are hidden inside media folklore, hardwired into network architectures, steered by algorithms. The mental rejection of authority is now so widespread, and has sunken so far into daily routines and mentalities, that it's now irrelevant whether we deny, endorse, or deconstruct a particular piece of information. That's the tricky aspect of the current social media disposition.

Meme producers have become immune to the criticism of third-way liberal moralists. Their firewall of indifference has not yet been hacked. Ironic deconstruction isn't doing the job either. Says Tara Burton: "Given the ideological

anarchy inherent in shitposting, it tends to defy analysis. Shitposters, who are bound by nothing, set a rhetorical trap for their enemies, who tend to be bound by having an actual point." Burton concludes that "shitposting can't be refuted; it can only be repeated."[19] This is simply not the age of the Renaissance (Wo)Man. The disillusionment is overwhelming.
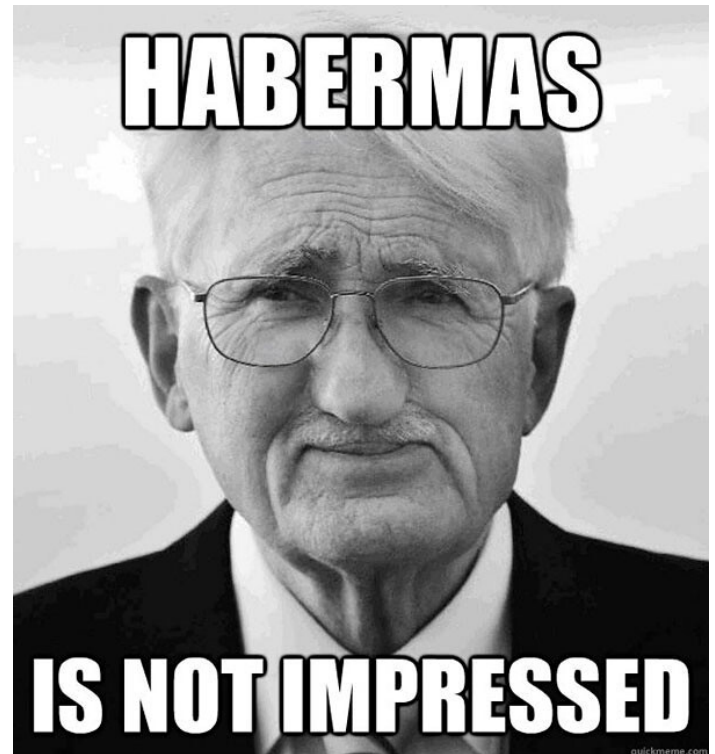
A meme posted at loltheorists.livejournal.com.

2. Defining the Rules of Meme Design

We're overwhelmed by media events that unfold in real time. Is this spectacle a smoke screen for more drastic, long-term measures? What's our own plan? The politically correct strategies of "civil society" are all well-meaning and target important issues, but they seem to operate in a parallel universe, unable to respond to the cynical meme design that is rapidly taking over key sites of power. Are there ways to not just hit back but also be one step ahead? What's on our minds? How can we move from data to Dada and become a twenty-first-century avant-garde, one that truly understands the technological imperative and shows that "we are the social in social media"? How do we develop, and then scale up, critical concepts and bring together politics and aesthetics in a way that speaks to the online millions? Let's identify the hurdles, knowing that it's time to act. We know that making fun of the petty world of xenophobes isn't working. What can we do other than coming together? Can we expect anything from the designer as lone wolf? How do we organize this type of
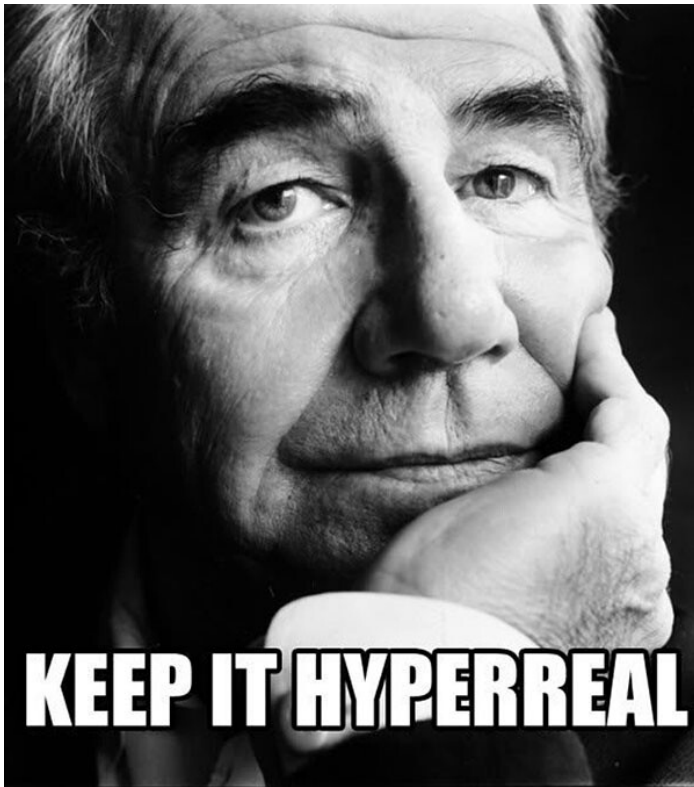
A meme featuring Jean Baudrillard posted at loltheorists.livejournal.com.

political labor? Do we need even more tools that bring us together? Have you already used Meetup, Diaspora, DemocracyOS, and Loomio? Do we perhaps need a collective dating site for political activism? How can we design, and then mobilize, a collective networked desire that unites us in a "deep diversity"? Is the promise of open, distributed networks going to do the job, or are you look for strong ties—with consequences?

Generations have studied the fatal mistakes made in the interbellum years, but what are the conclusions, now that we're entering similar territory? It's time to reread Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (in which we find David Rousset's famous quote: "Normal men do not know that everything is possible"). We should also revisit Wilhelm Reich's *Mass Psychology of Fascism*, Adorno and Horkheimer, Elias Canetti's *Crowd and Power*, and the opus that defined my own intellectual destiny, Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*. This is a subjective list; there are so many other classics in this genre.[20] Will these authors assist us in discovering the defining factors of our age? How can we identify these key issues and then act upon this knowledge? Crucial are alternative narratives, which, once they have been developed and tested, can be condensed into memes. As we know, memes can and must be mutated. This means that the overall narrative will have to be robust (while "agile"). Memes are designed to be jammed, yet the core message stays the same no matter how radically the meme is altered. We can also call this condensed semiotic unit a symbol, although the

symbolic aspect of a meme often remains invisible.

The Billbord Liberation Front has, in the spirit of culture jamming, been "improving" outdoor advertising since 1977. Prior campaigns have targeted ads by Exxon, R. J. Reynolds, and Apple Computers.

As soon as we understand resistance as organized interference, we can start doing counter-mapping, monitoring the silence and bringing out the hysterical realism that has been hidden for so long. We need to blast lasting holes in the self-evident infrastructure of the everyday. As we have learned from Silicon Valley business gurus, disruption is enough to bring down vast systems, which really just consist of meaningless routines. It's much easier than we think. This also brings closer the possibility of revolution—an event that even the most dogmatic critics of the neoliberal regime ruled out ages ago.

In preparation for things to come, I asked a few people the perennial question: what is to be done? I started off with Nick Srnicek, coauthor of *Inventing the Future*, who just published a treatise called *Platform Capitalism*. According to him, we should start getting into the habit of blocking users on social media. "The basic idea on social media also holds for broader issues of public debate: how to refuse voices that are purposefully attacking the basis of reasonable debate?"[21] Eva Illouz, author of *Why Love Hurts* and *Cold Intimacies*, argues that we need to start with the question of how to design truth:

> The problem is that they fight with lies. They have no moral limits. Immoral fighters have an advantage because they are not constrained. We would have to counteract with truth, but truth is binding and constraining, so the question is, how do you make truth as powerful or more powerful than lies, which have the advantage of being invented quickly and tailored to meet your needs?

23

A possible answer lies in the refusal to deal with memes as isolated digital objects that can be reassembled randomly. We should not start at the very end and get stuck on the Know Your Meme pages. Srnicek:

> We need new stories, and that's different from just thinking about counter-memes or stopping the flow of information. It's a different temporality effectively, but a new narrative then provides the basis for more immediate responses via social media, memes, etc. There *is* a narrative to Trump and the rising far right, for instance. And it's a seductive narrative for some people, which then gets expressed in various forms. The left is, mostly, missing that narrative. We need to get to the heart of the matter, rather than attempting to deal with symptoms. There is all this effort to block "fake news," but no one questions why the public has a new demand for these stories, or why they don't have the critical capacity to spot them. Just changing some newsfeed algorithms doesn't seem adequate.

Memes are the perfect way to enter a story—but which story? The cry for new narratives coincides with calls to go "beyond the fragments," as expressed by Jodi Dean in her 2016 book *Crowds and Party*. Can memes play a role in the centripetal social forces that bring us together? Dean:

> It will be a good experiment to see if meme wars can be effective in undermining the right (that is, making them appear unappealing and undesirable to potential supporters). The challenge is creating bubble-breaking memes since most memes tend to circulate within bubbles of people who already agree. But even if your memes don't break bubbles they can still be effective if they inspire the left. Bernie Sanders' Dank Meme Stash was a fantastic source of fun and inspiration during the US election.

Alex Galloway isn't sure "culture jamming" is as successful a tactic today as it was in the 1990s. "Memes seem to be operating almost entirely under what we used to call ideology. The power and interest that memes have is entirely due to their status as ideological machines, which doesn't mean they are useless, debased, etc.—on the contrary, it demonstrates how complex and powerful they are." Johannes Grenzfurthner from the Viennese art collective Monochrom adds: "You need a lot of user/follower/creator-power to really create outreach. 4Chan only became the breeding ground of super-memes because of their sheer endless pool of Darwinian non-archival users, some of them online for almost the entire day—and that for years." Grenzfurthner also

reminds us that creating political memes is a PR approach to internet culture:

> People sniff out PR very fast. And in the end it can turn against you and your campaign. I understand the need to create easily shareable counter-info-memes, but that's pretty much already happening. A ton of good images are already circulating in the specific bubbles. But how to get out of the bubble? You can't penetrate conservative bubbles with liberal content. Your content has to be so obscure and mysterious that it's not working as a propaganda tool anymore. Or will just be used for ridicule.

According to free software thinker and Anonymous historian Gabriele Coleman, we simply cannot afford not to use memes:

> When the alt-right was gaining ground and various journalists were horrified that images and emotions could "tug" at people and sway them politically, I was equally horrified that they were so naive and negative about emotions and visual culture. Yes, progressives and leftists must include memes and humor in their arsenal to fight back at some quarters of the right and to steer some portion of the Internet-crazed youth toward the left. Without it, we will lose a huge base of people. Whether this can be designed through a group effort or must bubble up from below is a whole other question. My sense is that it would be more effective coming from a subcultural base rather than an elite art vanguard.

I also asked Matt Goerzen, who's doing meme research with Coleman, about the sought-after recipe for a successful meme:

> The alt-right memes are so successful due to their bottom up, populist nature. I've come to understand image board memes as a toolset that can be put to different uses, but only where they fit the job at hand. Memes can be effectively weaponized, as in shitposting on Twitter, a form of cognitive denial-of-service attack, to use Rand Waltzman's term. But they're most powerful as a site of identification, coalescing the values of the individuals who identify with them through thematic sentiment.

According to Goerzen, a significant portion of alt-righters devoted their memetic labors to Bernie while he was still

in the running. Goerzen noticed that there was almost no attempt to meme for Hillary:

> It's worth wondering why that is. My understanding is that memes are sort of a vessel or coordinating point for organization, but without themes they are largely lacking in ideological value. They are like a vocabulary, and need to be animated and organized by an imperative or narrative. The trajectory of Pepe is very instructive in this regard, and I believe it is telling that the Bernie memes that were getting going utilized Wojak. Pepe and Wojak are like yin and yang—where Pepe is rash, manic, provocative, devious, extroverted, Wojak is deliberative, depressive, reserved, empathetic, and introverted. When Bernie was eliminated the positive identifications enabled through Wojak were stalled, while the positive identifications enabled through Pepe to Trump gained extra momentum, as many of the chan Bernie supporters were enraged by the foul play they deemed responsible for his disqualification—essentially Pepifying them. This is just one example, but the point is this: I believe the effective way to weaponize memes for ideological purposes is to steer ones already popular and meaningful for a contested demographic. This aligns with the "redirect method" that attempts to counter violent extremism circles. The idea of designing or topdowning memes (or "forcememing" in the parlance of imageboard culture) is a pretty challenging task. Many of the government types I've spoken with in elucidating these questions over the past months have ideas about how this can be done, but it involves pretty vast resources, and more resembles the sort of work done by Cambridge Analytica than anyone in the imageboard or alt-right cultural orbit.[22]

Apart from the need for a narrative, there's the issue of acceleration. Should alternative memes circulate at the same speed as the overall internet? Are we running out of time? How about slow memes? What if "real time" is itself part of the problem? According to Franco Berardi, we need a new rhythm of elaboration; we need to slow down sequentiality, heal from acceleration, and find a new tempo of movement. This cannot be realized through further acceleration. Real-time communication already ruins our bodies, our minds. According to Berardi, the digital realm is leading to "decorpetization," creating a "bodiless brain." The infosphere is one giant nervous stimulation. What we need, before we can even start telling the New Narrative, is a "reconfiguration of mental elaboration."[23]

X

Geert Lovink is a Dutch media theorist, internet critic, and author of *Uncanny Networks* (2002), *Dark Fiber* (2002), *My First Recession* (2003), *Zero Comments* (2007), *Networks Without a Cause* (2012), and *Social Media Abyss* (2016). In 2004 he founded the Institute of Network Cultures at the Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences. This center organizes conferences, publications, and research networks such as Video Vortex (online video), Unlike Us (alternatives in social media), Critical Point of View (Wikipedia), Society of the Query (the culture of search), MoneyLab (internet-based revenue models in the arts). Recent projects deal with digital publishing and the future of art criticism. He also teaches at the European Graduate School (Saas-Fee/Malta), where he supervises PhD students.

1
Evgeny Morozov, "Moral panic over fake news hides the real enemy—the digital giants," *The G uardian* , January 7, 2017 https:// www.theguardian.com/commenti sfree/2017/jan/08/blaming-fake-news-not-the-answer-democracy-crisis .

2
Designer-researcher Silvio Lorusso, who provided valuable comments on this piece, has noted that a similar relativism has taken over visual culture. This might be the reason why trained, professional graphic designers are the least equipped to produce effective memes. Instead, memes are often associated with underground amateur culture. Meme creation is therefore often described as a mysterious process, for instance in the documentary *The Story Of Technoviking* , which is about the "first meme" and which discusses meme production in detail. See http://documentaryhe aven.com/story-of-technoviking/ .

3
See https://www.youtube.com/w atch?v=ByKXcIPi7MI .

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Ibid., 199.

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Ibid., 218.

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Ibid., 8.

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Kristin Dombek, *The Selfishness of Others: An Essay on the Fear of Narcissism* (New York: FSG Originals, 2016), 75.

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Jennifer Schuessler, "'The Selfishness of Others,' or I'm O.K.—You're a Narcissist," *New York Times* , July 31, 2016 https:// www.nytimes.com/2016/08/01/b ooks/review-the-selfishness-of-ot hers-or-im-ok-youre-a-narcissist.h tml?_r=0 .

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Dan P. McAdams, "The Mind of Donald Trump," *The Atlantic*, June 2016 https://www.theatlanti c.com/magazine/archive/2016/0 6/the-mind-of-donald-trump/480 771/ .

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Tara Burton, "Apocalypse Whatever," *Real Life*, December 13, 2016 http://reallifemag.com/a pocalypse-whatever/ .

20
It's important to also mention here the work of New York psychohistorian Lloyd de Mause, whose 1984 study *Reagan's America* can be an important source of inspiration for us today.

21
All quotes from email interviews conducted February 13–15, 2017.

22
Cambridge Analytica is the UK-based big data firm that worked for the Trump campaign. See Hannes Grassegger and Mikael Krogerus, "The Data That Turned the World Upside Down," *Motherboard* , January 28, 2017 h ttps://motherboard.vice.com/en_ us/article/how-our-likes-helped-tr ump-win .

23
All Berardi quotes are taken from a lecture he delivered at Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam, February 8, 2017, as part of the lecture series "What Is Happening to Our Brain?" organized by Studium Generale Rietveld Academie.

Shumon Basar

LOL History

Act I

Kim Jong-nam, the eldest son of former North Korean leader Kim Jong-il, was killed in an attack at Malaysia's low-cost carrier airport, klia2, at around 9:00 a.m. on February 13, 2017. He was scheduled to take a flight to Macau later that morning. Two women, Vietnamese Doan Thi Huong (twenty-eight) and Indonesian Siti Aisyah (twenty-five), were allegedly asked to wipe baby oil on Jong-nam's face, and were paid $90 for this reality-TV prank. However, twenty minutes after the attack—which was caught on airport security CCTV—Jong-nam was dead. The autopsy identified the "baby oil" as the deadly nerve agent VX. Several North Korean male suspects, said to have been watching when the attack was carried out, all fled the country on the same day.

Did Kim Jong-un consider his half-brother such a threat that he orchestrated this brazen remote assassination on foreign soil — one replete with all the hallmarks of a twentieth-century Cold War operation - now unfolding live on twenty-first century, twenty-four-hour rolling news and social media?

On March 1, both Huong and Aisyah were charged with Jong-nam's murder.

Act II   Scene I

Soon after the murder, an image was publically released.

Clearly, it's culled from airport CCTV: low-resolution, a casual pose captured accidentally. And, although the release of the image had prosaic purposes—informing the public of a wanted murder suspect; or crowdsourcing our eyes to try to identify her—the ghostly quality immediately gave the image an unintended life. Especially in my own retinal imagination.

I became fixated. Arrested. By this picture of a person whose biography ("Duan Thi Huong," "twenty-eight-year-old entertainment worker," "contestant on the Vietnamese version of *American Idol*," whose last Facebook post said, "I want to sleep more but by your side") mattered way less than her "LOL" long-sleeve tee and ethereal gait.

The picture possessed worth. It felt like one of those self-contained images that history delivers to us and, reciprocally, delivers history. Images that feel both inscribed in the time they are from, and yet also equally out of time.

A ready-made.

A thousand things come to mind when I gaze at this image: firstly as a whole, then, increasingly, as a

Shumon Basar, Duan, 2017. Paper collage. Courtesy of the author.

Scene II

I was compelled to print it out. I zoomed into specific parts—her face, her hands, the bag she's clutching, the dark corona of her eyes, that flat, flat fringe—and printed these out too. I used Photoshop and Mac's Preview to enlarge the image, each time degrading resolution. Then, I'd photograph the printouts. Zoom in more. Print out again. Fidelity felt unimportant compared to some auratic essence. Locked in the glow of the pixels.

A press image issued by the Malaysian police in an attempt to publicly identify the murderer of Kim Jong-nam, son of the former North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

constellation of fragments.

Scene III

A man's fetish of zooming into photographs appears in the film *Blow Up* (1966), directed by Michaelangelo Antonioni, based on a short story by Julio Cortázar. The more photographer Thomas "blows up" a single frame to locate a murder, the less sure he is that the camera did, in fact, witness a murder. The camera's claim to truth, in that perplexingly Heisenbergian sense, is made all the more uncertain when human faith invests in it.

"A man's fetish of zooming into photographs appears in the film Blow Up (1966), directed by Michaelangelo Antonioni, based on a short story by Julio Cortázar."

A year later, and Michael Snow's *Wavelength* extended a single zoom shot of a single room to become the entire forty-three minutes of his seminal film.[1] It is almost tediously teleological. And though we may end upon the photo pinned to the wall of waves in the sea, we may also have missed a dead body that flashes for merely a brief moment somewhere between. Snow suggests that our yearning for forensic truth may be found not at the extremes, but in the incidental middle ground, where our attention is least attentive.

Scene IV

Other postproduction tropes are contained in Duan Thi Huong's digital portrait: Andy Warhol's reportage car crashes and electric chairs. Or Robert Rauschenberg's pilfering of newspaper photos into aestheticized pin-ups. Or David Hockney's Polaroid mosaics from the early 1980s, which lenses Cubism via cheap consumer camera format.

Duan Thi Huong's body floats in the darkness of her image, equally glowing, and also dissolving, like smeared data. That auratic glow may simply be what happens when sophisticated technology colludes with its own technical limits. But it's also the glow found in some of Gerhard Richter's best-known paintings of women. The inferred illumination of technology's soul. The substance Roland Barthes mourned in his elegy to his dead mother, *Camera Lucida* (1980).

The impasto paste around Duan Thi Huong also invokes the charged zones encircling Willem de Kooning's *Women*: vortices of matter, history, horror. Except in Huong's case, the horror is emblazoned in the letters "L,"

"O," and "L." This way, her image carries its own punch line, which seems so mordantly—or is it courageously?—at odds with cold-hearted killing.

Scene V

In 2010, Hamas official Mahmoud Al-Mahbouh was killed in room 230 of the Al Bustan Rotana Hotel, Dubai. A month later, the Dubai Police held a prominent press conference. They released a video composed of footage from hundreds of surveillance cameras in Dubai's airports, malls, and hotels. It traces the assassination to Israeli Mossad agents, and claims that at least twenty-six suspects were involved in this highly orchestrated operation. The video was broadcast on Gulf News TV and soon uploaded on YouTube.[2] It became a piece of forensic entertainment, almost, albeit one that ends with a real dead body. Soon after that, Chris Marker détourned this video by adding a haunting string composition written by Henryk Górecki for the Kronos Quartet. He titled it *Stopover in Dubai.* It too was made available on YouTube.[3] A twentieth-century espionage caper on a twenty-first-century distribution network facilitated by algorithmic face-recognition technology, in which Israel is often said to lead the world. Indeed, Facebook acquired Face.com in 2012, an Israeli face-recognition group, which had been supplying its technology to Facebook for years.[4]

Scene VI

In a BBC documentary about him, the author Don DeLillo spoke about the genesis of one of his novels, *Mao II* (1991).

It was April 1988 and the cover of *New York Post* featured an elderly man, in shock and rage. The man was the reclusive writer J. D. Salinger, and this was the first picture of him since 1955. DeLillo kept hold of the picture. Six months later, DeLillo came across a grainy image of a mass wedding conducted by Reverand Sun Myung Moon, from the Unification Church, which looked to DeLillo like "a rehearsal for the end of the world." He saved this picture too. Later, DeLillo reveals, "I began to understand the novel as an attempt to understand the connection between these two photographs."[5]

Act III   Scene I

If our memories are becoming more like the data sets used by Facebook et al. for facial recognition, then it's perhaps unsurprising that our eyes and ears have become search engine interfaces.

As I continue, till today, to zoom into the image of Duan Thi Huong, searching for something that beauty masks and reveals, I remember the seductive "gaze diagram" by

Gerhard Richter, Woman Descending the Staircase (Frau die Treppe herabgehend), 1965. Oil on canvas198 x 128 cm (79 x 51 in.). Roy J. and Frances R. Friedman Endowment; gift of Lannan Foundation, 1997.

Still from "The Assassination of Mahmoud Al-Mahbouh" video released on YouTube, 2010.

"Can one be as lovely as an image?" asks Catherine Belkhodja in Chris Marker's 1997 documentary and CD-ROM, Level Five.

Jacques Lacan.

at the apex of the second triangle. The two triangles are here superimposed, as in fact they are in the functioning of the scopic register.
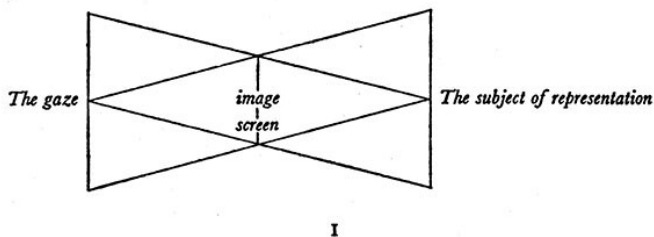
I must, to begin with, insist on the following: in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a picture.

"I am a picture," Lacan says. Today, are we not *pictures*? Billions of them, packets of electrical pulses, pinged between you and me, via machines learning to see things we never will, through deep-sea cables and actual arteries?[6] Forever *circulationing*?[7]

Scene II

Duan Thi Huong's face is certainly *not* "LOL." It is more nonchalant, closer to carefree. A skip in her step. A bounce in her stride, as if to say, "today is a *great* day." Once again, it is a face I've seen elsewhere. The same face on countless different women who Chris Marker would shoot—among them, Alexandra Stewart, the narrator of his film *Sans Soleil* (1982)—whereby the gaze coming from the image refused to entirely meet the gaze going into it. There's beauty, of course, but more strongly, tender isolation.

The thing is: something always *exceeds* the images of faces. Escapes complete capture. Maybe it is why we take so many selfies everyday?[8]

X

Shumon Basar is a writer, curator and cultural critic. He is co-author of *The Age of Earthquakes: A Guide to the Extreme Present* with Douglas Coupland and Hans Ulrich Obrist. He is Commissioner of the Global Art Forum in Dubai, Editor-at-large of *Tank* magazine and Contributing Editor at *Bidoun* magazine, Director of the Format program at the AA School, and a member of Fondazione Prada's "Thought Council."

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Aaron Schuster

Primal Scream, or Why Do Babies Cry?: A Theory of Trump

Many critics, journalists, and concerned citizens have compared Trump's temperament to that of a baby. Is he the nation's first toddler president, behaving in office like—to use Freud's phrase—"His Majesty the Baby"? In this essay I propose a more conceptual elaboration of Trump's childishness, starting with a general reflection on child psychology and baby crying, then examining one particularly interesting theory of the screaming tot, that of Immanuel Kant.

Terrible Forces

By the time it reaches the age of two years old, the average baby has cried four thousand times.[1] A colicky baby can scream for hours on end, driving the parents to the brink of lunacy and despair. For all the heartache and suffering caused by babies' crying, perhaps the worst offense is to the practice of philosophy. As Heloise of "Abelard and Heloise" fame complained: "Who can concentrate on thoughts of scripture or philosophy and be able to endure babies crying, nurses soothing them with lullabies, and all the noisy coming and going of men and women about the house?"[2] In this situation there is only one possible revenge for a philosopher: to turn the troublesome obstacle to philosophical contemplation into a theoretical object itself.

Why do babies cry? The English psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott analyzed baby crying in terms of four distinct motivations: satisfaction, pain, rage, and grief.[3] The first is perhaps the least expected: Winnicott underlines how crying is a source of pleasure for the baby, since, like any motor activity, it exercises a vital function (this accords with Aristotle's view: "Those are wrong who in their Laws attempt to check the loud crying and screaming of children, for these contribute towards their growth, and, in a manner, exercise their bodies. Straining the voice has a strengthening effect similar to that produced by the retention of the breath in violent exertions"[4]). Next is the cry of pain, that noisy announcement of bodily discomfort and distress, often triggered by hunger; for the infant, hunger is experienced not so much as a positive desire for food but as a crisis in the body, a pain to be alleviated. The cry of rage designates the temper tantrum, the baby overcome by anger and wailing till it's blue in the face. However unmanageable the raging baby may be, Winnicott underlines the positive side of anger: at least anger implies some degree of faith in the other, as capable of responding to its cries and altering the infuriating situation. Through its screaming the baby manifests a desire for change. A baby without anger is one that has become disillusioned and without hope, reduced to vaguely moaning or banging its head on the wall; eventually it stops crying altogether and lapses into silence. Finally, there is the cry of grief, which marks a significant advance in the baby's psychological development. Whereas rage is mostly a direct reaction to

Donald Trump holds baby cousins Evelyn Kate Keane, aged six months, and Kellen Campbell, aged three months, following a speech he delivered at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs on Friday, July 29, 2016. Photo: AP.

frustration, grief and sadness entail a more complex understanding of the self's relation to others, the whole drama of attachment and loss. Sad crying may also be seen as a minimally poetic gesture, and arguably provides one of the main wellsprings of music: it is an attempt at self-consolation, an unhappy song that the baby sings to itself in order to both give voice to its loss and keep itself company in the face of this loss.

Does this taxonomy of tears fully capture what is at stake in the infant's wailing? What is missing in Winnicott's nuanced and seemingly exhaustive account is a sense for just how crazy baby crying can be, its extravagant and even diabolical dimension, which stretches to the breaking point more commonsensical psychological explanations. As Ludwig Wittgenstein once put it: "Anyone who listens to a child's crying with understanding will know that psychic forces, terrible forces, sleep within it, different from anything commonly assumed. Profound rage & pain & lust for destruction."[5] These obscure and terrible forces, "different from anything commonly assumed," were the object of a whole other line of psychoanalytic theorizing, starting with Freud's idea of the death drive and later taken up in Melanie Klein's

psychoanalysis of children, with its emphasis on primitive anxieties and aggressions, attacks and counterattacks. Hanna Segal summed up Klein's surreal vision of the intrapsychic struggles of the baby as follows:

> A hungry, raging infant, screaming and kicking, phantasies that he is actually attacking the breast, tearing and destroying it, and experiences his own screams which tear him and hurt him as the torn breast attacking him in his own inside. Therefore, not only does he experience a want, but his hunger pain and his own screams may be felt as a persecutory attack on his inside.[6]

Wittgenstein famously stated that "if a lion could speak, we couldn't understand him."[7] But what about a baby? If babies could speak, would we understand them? Would they talk of devouring breasts and persecuting penises, like Melanie Klein? If the terrible forces lying inside the baby defy common understanding, creating a gulf between the worlds of the child and the adult, these forces

A modified plate from Charles Darwin's book The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals (1872).

are never completely vanquished by discipline and education but remain, in some sense, our own. Beneath the more obvious and explicit motives, what do we understand when an adult cries or wails or throws a tantrum? What if, for example, the president were to do so?

animals, simply because it regards the inability to make use of its limbs as *constraint*, and thus it immediately announces its claim to freedom (a representation that no other animal has)."[8] He continues:

The fact that his feeling of uncomfortableness is not

A woman tries to get her baby kissed by presidential candidate Donald Trump at a January 2016 rally in Iowa. Photo: Scott Olson / Getty Images.

The Baby's Complaint

Here I wish to focus on one particular explanation of the baby's cry, contained in a few marginal comments by Immanuel Kant. Kant advanced an eccentric yet intriguing theory of the screaming baby, on the basis of his moral philosophy and his notion of the autonomy of the human will. For Kant, when a baby cries it is neither exercising its lungs, nor expressing bodily pain; nor is it simply angry, nor grieving a loss. Rather, it is making a judgment, a judgment concerning the (unfair) conditions of its existence. To Winnicott's list of tears should be added a fifth category: the cry of injustice. Kant writes: "The child who has just wrenched itself from the mother's womb seems to enter the world with loud cries, unlike all other

due to bodily pain but to an obscure idea (or a representation analogous to it) of freedom and its hindrance, *injustice*, is disclosed a few months later after the birth by the *tears* which accompany his screaming; they indicate a kind of exasperation when he strives to approach certain objects or in general merely strives to change his position and feels himself hindered in it. – This impulse to have his own way and to take any obstacle to it as an affront is marked particularly by his tone, and manifests a maliciousness that the mother finds necessary to punish, but he usually replies with still louder shrieking. The same thing happens when the child falls through his own fault. The young of other animals play, those of the human being quarrel early

with each other, and it is as if a certain concept of justice (which relates to external freedom) develops along with their animality, and is not something to be learned gradually.[9]

Kant conceives the scene of the crying child as a kind of trial. Thrust into the world, the newborn quickly discovers itself trapped inside an awkward and ill-equipped form. It lacks motor control, its limbs are flailing this way and that, it cannot even stand upright. The child is helpless. Yet, at the same time, it has an obscure intimation of a power inside it, a sense of its inner freedom. And this consciousness of freedom comes to the baby precisely through the resistance exerted against it: it is the feeling of hindrance that alerts the child to its free will; the child becomes aware of its liberty to the extent that it is thwarted. This is why the baby's cry is not merely one of distress or irritation, but constitutes a veritable complaint: it is a denunciation of a situation that the baby deems to be unjust; its anger is a righteous anger. And because this complaint concerns not just this or that incident but the baby's generally hapless condition, it is as if the baby's judgment were a judgment against existence itself. If babies could speak, they might say, in a quasi-Greek way, "Not to be born like this!" Why consign free will to a useless blob of flesh?—such is the injustice of being born. The original experience of the body is that of an obstacle, a hindrance, a shackles, an "I can't," to turn around Husserl's phenomenological description of embodiment as a primordial "I can" (this is perhaps the origin of the ancient belief that the body is the prison of the soul). Indeed, one of the few things the infant effectively can do is scream: screaming is thus the very expression of freedom in the form of the denunciation of unfreedom. Now, Kant admits that the newborn does not yet have the cognitive capacities for making such a judgment, but argues that at around the age of three months the tears which come to accompany its crying bear witness to a dawning awareness of having been wronged. It is as if Kant had imagined the baby as a tiny, hapless adult, but, ironically, an adult that turns out to be far more childish than any child (or at least the child usually studied by psychology): the Kantian baby is an incredibly irascible and outraged creature filled with an explosive moral indignation. We might extend this idea further: would not adulthood then consist in a continual restaging of this trial and a reiteration of this complaint, an attempt to settle scores and prove that "I can" in light of this first traumatic raw deal?

Freud wrote about the infant's condition of helplessness (*Hilflogiskeit*), which makes it totally dependent on parents and caretakers for its physical and emotional survival. Lacan drew on the child psychology of his day to describe the imaginary constitution of the ego in the mirror stage: the fragmentary and uncoordinated body of the infant achieves a degree of mastery over itself through its anticipated unity as reflected in the mirror gestalt. Deleuze modified this scheme with his distinction between partial objects and the body without organs: the body reacts to its fragmentation by creating a smooth, frictionless body, devoid of pesky and rebellious parts. Kant, while starting from the same basic idea about the helplessness of the infant, sketches out a different conflict. His baby is caught between the uselessness of its sensible body, on the one hand, and a precocious intuition of its supersensible vocation, on the other. Although unable to do much except kick and holler, it already has a vague consciousness of itself as a rational being free to set its own ends. And this is what gives its fussing a special intensity:

> The cry of a newborn child is not the sound of distress but rather of indignation and furious anger; not because something hurts him, but because something annoys him: presumably because he wants to move and his inability to do so feels like a fetter through which his freedom is taken away from him.[10]

Of Winnicott's categories, the Kantian baby's cry is closest to rage, but it is a rage against an injustice, the feeling of being robbed or cheated. This is why the baby's cry is a distinctly human phenomenon. For Kant, animals are not free and have no sense of justice, hence they play in an easy and carefree way whereas humans are self-assertive and "quarrelsome" practically from the start. Moreover, this freedom is not something that is "learned gradually," it is not a cultural acquisition but part of the mind's inherent architecture. It defines human nature. If culture consists in a refinement of nature, a development of the human being's innate reason and moral sense (our capacity to do good for its own sake), there is also in human nature something that is recalcitrant to culture, and that stubbornly refuses the path of moral goodness. Contrary to the usual picture, this discontent is not the result of wild animal instincts (hunger, sex) resisting education and discipline, but is something peculiarly human: an even more wild and intractable passion for freedom. The baby's tantrums reveal the dark side of human freedom. Kant does not hesitate to refer to the child's "maliciousness" (*Bösartigkeit*, the same term he uses for radical evil in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*) in order to designate the infantile will that only wants what it wants, that goes its own way and fiercely defends itself against any outside influence or interference. This marks another contrast with Winnicott's account of rage. The Kantian baby does not want help and has no faith in the other; its pain cannot be consoled because it is not looking for consolation. In its fury the baby would rather destroy the other, if it were able.

Meme of Trump posted on God's Facebook page. Author unknown.

Kant avec Trump

How can the foregoing help to illuminate the crisis currently unfolding in American politics? Trump is often accused of infantile behavior: he is narcissistic, thin-skinned, has no sense of decorum, is devoid of empathy, petty, cruel, does not read, does not listen, cannot resist trading insults or getting into "schoolyard" scraps, lacks impulse control; like a needy child he is easily influenced and manipulated by strong authority figures (Bannon, Putin). "Donald Trump's childish tantrums threaten to derail his presidency before it has even begun," "The leaks coming out of the Trump White House cast the president as a clueless child" are typical newspaper headlines; the New York Times ran a column titled "When the World Is Led by a Child."[11] It is perhaps no accident that the Muslim Ban also turned out to be a Baby Ban; recall the five-year-old who was detained as a security risk, or the baby slated for critical surgery held up in Tehran. There is something too close for comfort in the figure of the baby, something too proximate to Trump's own tetchy constitution. He's been photographed in a kiddie pose mock-driving a semi truck, which spurred the parodic book The President and the Big Boy Truck; he's received an animated cinematic portrait in The Boss Baby. In his ongoing spat with Trump, Arnold Schwarzenegger recently made a nice interpretation: "I think he's in love with me," said the former Governor, turning the president into the proverbial little boy too embarrassed to express his affection any other way than grabbing a girl's pigtails, or in this case, sending mean tweets. Here I would like to propose a more conceptual elaboration of Trump's childishness, taking seriously, on the one tiny hand, Wittgenstein's observation about the terrible forces at work in the infant, and on the other, Kant's portrait of an obnoxious "freedom baby" (where one can hear the ring of Freedom Fries or the Freedom Caucus or the Freedom Party).

Like the Kantian baby, raging against its own clumsy and immature body, Trump is enraged by whatever obstructs his freedom. And not only is he upset, he is also filled with a profound sense of moral indignation; all that opposes him is unfair, his pain is couched in the language of right. This reached its apogee in his recent declaration, too absurd for comment, that "no politician in history, and I say this with great surety, has been treated worse or more unfairly." In contrast to the baby, however, it is not Trump's physical body that is obstructing, or better, persecuting him, but the even more unwieldy and fragmentary body of the State: laws, courts, and the Constitution, first and foremost, but also other elected officials, military leaders, the intelligence community, agency heads, the FBI, climate scientists, budget experts, inside leakers, and so on, the whole federal bureaucracy, not forgetting his overriding obsession and bête noire, the news media (now branded with the Stalinist epithet "Enemies of the American People"). Taken together, these disparate elements make up Trump's ungainly political body. They figure as so many obstacles to the free reign of his executive will. They are the inept—or to use a Trumpian best word, "stupid"—body within which the president's will is unhappily stuck. For Trump, the democratic State is a corps morcélé, a body in bits and pieces, an unwieldy collection of organs without the unity and mastery he sees reflected in Steve Bannon's ideal alt-image (if Trump has lately distanced himself from Bannon, it is to jealously assert his dominance against his model-cum-rival). With each media outburst, executive order, and Twitter rant, he expresses a deep contempt for this political body; his is a passion against institutions, up to and including that most fundamental of institutions, language itself.

To paraphrase Wittgenstein: if Trump could speak, would we understand him? Compared with George W. Bush's linguistic bumblings, which sporadically hit on the truth—recall such classics as "Our enemies are innovative and resourceful, and so are we. They never stop thinking about new ways to harm our country and our people, and neither do we" or "They misunderestimated me"—Trump's speech manifests a bizarrely avant-garde poetical spirit. During the election campaign Trump stated, "I know words, I have the best words." Though seemingly a boast about his oratorical skills, something darker was being intimated. Having the best words is not merely a matter of educational pedigree ("I went to an Ivy League institution") or rhetorical prowess (which is immediately refuted by their enunciation—these are, quite simply, the worst words). They are rather bluster aimed against language, their aggressive circularity an attack on the fundamental principle regulating political discourse, or any discourse whatsoever: namely, that words matter. It is as if Trump were dreaming of a language unfettered by

words, like a body unhampered by organs or a State without the rule of law or Capital without limits—a totally slippery symbolic space, evacuated of meaningful content and constraints. We now even have a proper name for this brave new symbolic space, supplied by a recent tweet which immediately went viral: "covfefe." Trump's Twitter typo presents a reverse Freudianism: instead of a slip that one disavows since it points to an uncomfortable truth, it is a slip that one proudly avows in order to confirm one's absolute mastery over sense and nonsense, which flow exactly as one desires. It is ironic that in covfefe-speak, composed of best-words, one of the privileged terms is "stupid," a slur used to delegitimize opponents not simply as wrong but as falling outside the universe of truth and falsehood and therefore unworthy of reasoned debate. One of the things confounding about Trump is that beyond the calculated lies and mendacity, which at least have the merit of paying lip service to the truth, there is the inertia of stupidity, covfefe immune to argument. According to a well-known philosophical slogan, "Language speaks." This phrase condenses an entire reflection on language as that which by furnishing the very horizon of intelligibility and experience escapes the control of the individual ego. We use language, but never in a way we exactly choose; we have to bend to its rules and meanings, it forms us even as we use it. Here it is not "Language speaks" but "Language—listen to me! I am the word master." This can only mean one thing: the degradation of language in general. Language, truth, symbolic reality should all become pliable material, to be reshaped according to the master's will. This pliability at the same time betrays a rigidity and a stale repetitiveness, as all speech is effectively reduced to a sole function: self-glorification. Words must serve Trump just like his name does. Hence the piecemeal construction, both risible and frightening, of a new post-truth reality, made up of unread decrees (Bannon), mangled speech and doubletalk (Spicer), and alternate facts (Conway). Ultimately, there can be only one best word, the "Trump" brand name itself.

Tzvetan Todorov described Kant's "strange interpretation of the first cry of the newborn child" in this way: "If the newborn child cries, it is not to demand what is necessary for life and existence; it is to protest against his dependency in regard to others. As a Kantian subject, man is born longing for liberty."[12] Usually, the baby's cry is understood as a cry for help; it is a plea, a demand, a call, a primitive form of communication springing from the pressures and exigencies of life. Kant reverses this perspective. First, the baby's cry is not a call for help but a cry which reveals the helplessness of others. It puts under pressure the other who does not know how to respond to or deal with the child's maliciousness. Does one ignore the baby (Obama's "parenting strategy," hoping it will settle down by itself) or fantasize about murdering it (see many exasperated leftists) or mourn one's defeat by it (Winnicott's self-consoling sad tears) or organize collectively against it (the promising signs of early mass protests)? Second, the cry has, at bottom, nothing to do
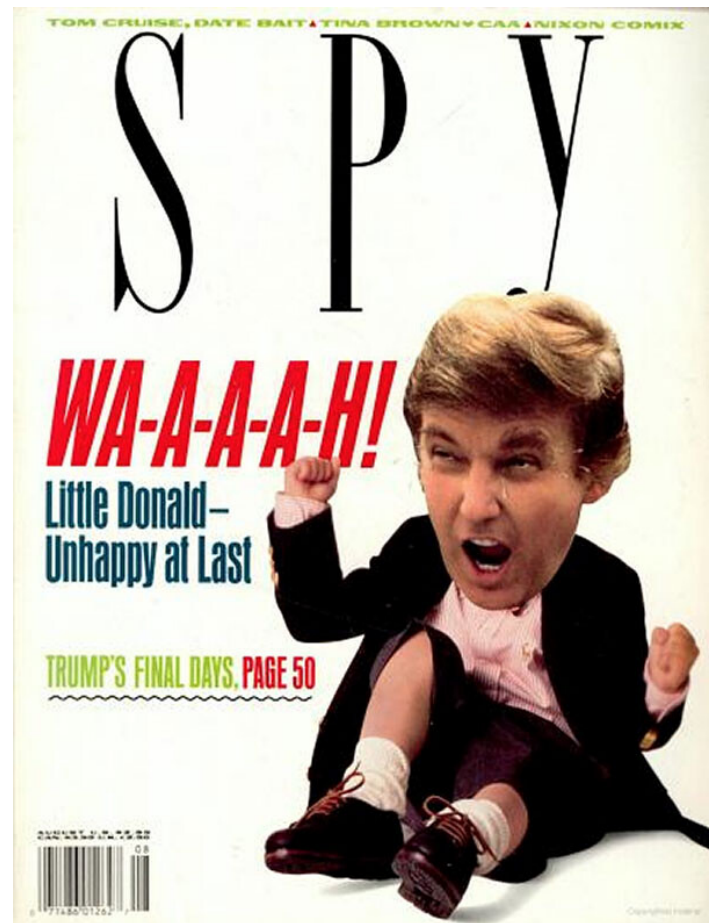
Spy magazine, August 1990

with "what is necessary for life and existence" it is not fundamentally concerned with vital needs, but expresses the subject's abhorrence of dependency and its unconditional insistence on doing what it wants. This is why the baby's tantrums can be so vexing: while it may be provoked by the smallest incident or frustration, the baby's rage touches on the Absolute. (Here we hit on another of Trump's traits, that any setback or insult can trigger an explosion.) What is the Absolute for the baby? It is to be a fully autonomous being, dependent on nothing, and detached from all ties and constraints ("absolute" in the etymological sense means to unbind or cut links). To be rid of external obstacles and reliant on nobody for realizing one's will: a dream of total independence, which, as Kant understood, would mean "to live scattered in the wilderness," in a "state of continuous warfare" (this is a destructive fantasy, filled with rage and pain).[13] Because the baby's inept body is the source of its misery, mobility is central to this vision: it wishes to be unencumbered, liberated from restrictions, to move easily and freely, to flow.

This notion of the Absolute points us in an interesting direction. For it is not so much the childish characteristics of Trump that demand critical attention but the way that

he incarnates a particular infantile fantasy. In our world there is one thing that corresponds with this fantasy of absolute freedom: money. This is exactly how Norman O. Brown, back in 1958, analyzed the psychological structure of capitalism, as appealing to and exploiting an infantile fantasy of autonomy and independence, itself stemming from the child's biological helplessness and anxiety-ridden dependency on its parents for its care and life. Initially caught in a sheerly passive relation to the Other, the infant is exposed to the threats of loss, separation, and death. In order to escape from this unbearable situation, it constructs an inner fantasy world without loss or dependency, making itself the sovereign of its own universe—but at the cost of plunging it into guilt and debt, the crushing load of psychic work needed to maintain its illusion of control. Kant's freedom baby, in protesting against its dependency, is the precursor to Freud's psychoanalytic baby, fleeing from dependency and helplessness into neurosis. According to Brown, the infantile fantasy par excellence is the "*causa sui* project," the dream of being a self-caused, self-generating, self-perpetuating being. In its most basic form, this fantasy, "originating in infancy but energizing all human history," is "the wish to become the father of oneself."[14] (And if this fantasy is strongly connected to capitalism, it is because money presents the ultimate self-generating circuit, what Marx called the "self-valorization of capital.") If there is one thing Trump insists on with tremendous pride, it is that he's a self-made man, someone who succeeded due to his natural gift for the deal, and not at all because of his father's wealth and connections. He is, in his own mind, *causa sui*, his own father, and beholden to no one. The flipside of this fantasized autonomy is the obsessive need for appreciation and self-aggrandizement: the incessant drive to make oneself praised through others. Trump thereby personifies the perfection of the neoliberal ideal of excellence, which ultimately signifies nothing other than itself: the vacuity of the best and the greatest. Indeed, if there is a certain greatness to Trump, it lies in the way he has exploited his infantile neurosis and magnified it to glorious proportions. Instead of being wrecked by neurosis, he has made it into a wrecking ball for everyone else: a compulsively serviced tacky spectacle that has managed to plaster its brand across the globe. "The show is 'Trump' and it is sold-out performances everywhere. I've had fun doing it and will continue to have fun, and I think most people enjoy it."[15]

If Trump is the infantile fantasy par excellence, then who is the adult? In today's political constellation, the adult is the center left or center right political manager, articulate, morally sensitive, and eminently reasonable; a politician filled with resigned wisdom about the way things are—the necessity of austerity, of globalization, of inequality, of perpetual war as peace—but brimming with half-believed hope about the future. For this political class, Trump is indeed a vulgar and petulant child. But his momentary victory over them does not simply signify a regression or a turn to darker times. It rather reveals the ugly underside of the system that they themselves have long supported and served. Trump stands for the merger of private capital and state sovereignty, so that the State should ultimately become part of the Trump brand—American democracy is the new Trump Steaks, grilled to a crisp at Mar-a-Lago—and a worldwide platform for his ongoing reality show. Who doesn't want to scream? Yet this is where we should part ways with the chorus of critics denouncing Trump's childishness: the problem with the satiric portrait of a preschool POTUS is that it serves all too well to reassure existing elites that they, and only they, are the real adults. This kind of complacent satire is one of the things that hobbled Democrats during the election, and what Trump has proven himself remarkably immune to; a true political comedy, on the other hand, would cut across political divides and skewer the so-called enlightened centrists and right-thinking realists along with the nativists and vulgar populists. Put simply, what Baby Trump reveals is the lack of a viable idea of political maturity today, and the urgent need to reinvent adulthood for twenty-first century politics. There is a double lesson here: don't underestimate Trump by calling him a baby, but also be wary of the self-satisfaction of those who would proudly consider themselves adults.

X

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11
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for KW

> Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins?
> —Bruno Latour

Have you heard that reality has collapsed? Post-truth politics, the death of facts, fake news, deep-state conspiracies, paranoia on the rise. Such pronouncements are often feverish objections to a nightmarish condition. Yet inside the echo chamber of twenty-first-century communication, their anxiety-ridden recirculation can exacerbate the very conditions they attempt to describe and decry. In asserting the indiscernibility of fact and fiction, the panicked statement that reality has collapsed at times accomplishes little but furthering the collapse of reality. Proclaiming the unreality of the present lifts the heavy burdens of gravity, belief, and action, effecting a great leveling whereby all statements float by, cloaked in doubt.

Against this rhetoric, a different proclamation: I want to live in the reality-based community. It is an imagined community founded in a practice of care for this most fragile of concepts. My desire, to some, is pitifully outmoded. Already in 2004, a presidential aide—widely speculated to be Karl Rove, deputy chief of staff to George W. Bush—told *New York Times* journalist Ron Suskind that any attachment to the considered observation and analysis of reality placed one hopelessly behind the times:

> The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality."[1]

Faced with such imperial fabrication, the likes of which have only intensified in the years since Rove's statement, the "judicious study of discernible reality" becomes a task of the greatest urgency—not despite but because so many claim it is not the way the world really works anymore. I, too, attended all those graduate school seminars in which we learned to deconstruct Enlightenment principles and mistrust empiricism, but given the state of things, it's starting to look like they might need salvaging.

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Film still from Kevin Jerome Everson's Tonsler Park (2017). 80", 16mm, b&w, sound. Copyright: Kevin Jerome Everson; Trilobite-Arts DAC; Picture Palace Pictures.

Imagined communities are called into being through media, and the reality-based community is no different. Documentary cinema is its privileged means of imagination. Why? With a frequency not found in other forms of nonfiction image-making, documentary reflects on its relationship to truth. And unlike the written word, it partakes of an indexical bond to the real, offering a mediated encounter with physical reality in which a heightened attunement to the actuality of our shared world becomes possible. But precisely for these same reasons, documentary is simultaneously a battleground, a terrain upon which commitments to reality are challenged and interrogated. To examine the vanguard of documentary theory and practice over the last thirty years, for instance, is to encounter a deep and pervasive suspicion of its relationship to the real and, more particularly, a robust rejection of its observational mode, a strain that minimizes the intervention of the filmmaker, eschews commentary, and accords primacy to lens-based capture.[2] In the glare of the present, these arguments must be revisited and their contemporary efficacy interrogated.

In the 1990s, the advent of digitization sparked new fears that photographs could no longer be trusted. The spectre of easy manipulation hovered over the digital image, threatening its evidentiary value. Reality was seen to be an effect of images rather than their cause; photographic truth was debunked as a discursive construction, the power of the indexical guarantee deflated.[3] Postmodernism heralded a realignment of epistemological foundations, with notions like historicity, truth, and objectivity coming under interrogation. Textualism reigned. If all images are the product of convention, of the play of codes, then what is the difference between fiction and nonfiction? As the argument went, reality, fiction, it makes no difference, everything is a construction, we live in a forest of signs. Jean Baudrillard infamously posited that we were experiencing a fading of the real, a pervasive derealization he saw as intimately linked to technology and in particular to technologies of image reproduction like cinema and

television, which offer powerful-yet-bogus impressions of reality in the absence of reality itself. In a chapter called "The Murder of the Real," Baudrillard offered his diagnosis in a typically totalizing manner: "In our virtual world, the question of the Real, of the referent, of the subject and its object, can no longer even be posed."[4]

These conditions understandably provoked a crisis for documentary. As Brian Winston put it in 1995, "Postmodernist concern transforms 'actuality,' that which ties documentary to science, from a legitimation into an ideological burden."[5] The assault on documentary came from both sides: its authority was eroded by simulationism's liquidation of referentiality, but occurred equally in the name of a progressive politics, as part of a critical project that sought to dismantle false, ideological notions like objectivity, authenticity, and neutrality—spurious concepts that had long denied their constructedness, masquerading instead as essences that concealed complicity with a will to power.

This crisis was, like so many are, a catalyst of rejuvenation. An efflorescence of "new documentary," as Linda Williams called it in a landmark 1993 text, responded to technological change and epistemological uncertainty by turning to reflexivity, artifice, and performativity.[6] These films took seriously postmodern critiques, but rather than succumb to cynicism, they foregrounded the construction of contingent truths. They took up strategies of reenactment, essayism, heightened subjectivism, and docufiction, delighting in precisely those forms of contamination once deemed anathema, and were accompanied by an efflorescence of critical writing that sought to take stock of these developments. The "blurring of boundaries" was held to be an inviolably noble goal. As the new millennium began, critics would repeatedly point to precisely these characteristics as typical of contemporary art's "documentary turn." For some, these strategies were evidence of a sophisticated approach to questions of truth that favorably differentiated them from that poor straw man, "traditional documentary."[7]

Eric Baudelaire, Also Known as Jihadi, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Paul Arthur has noted that each period of documentary is engaged in a polemical contestation of the one before it,[8]

and the 1990s are no exception. Through all of these calls for impurity, through all of this lobbying for the salience of precisely those techniques once outlawed by documentary orthodoxy, a bad object emerged: the observational mode, indicted for an apparently positivist belief in the real and a disavowal of mediation. The problem with this form of "traditional documentary" was that it was understood as asserting, rather than questioning, its relationship to reality. It lacked the requisite reflexivity. Or so the argument went—in propping up observational documentary as a bad object, its aims and strategies were at times prey to oversimplification. Whether implicitly or explicitly, critics, artists, and filmmakers positioned at the intersection of documentary and art decried the naturalistic capture of phenomenal reality as a stupid fetish: stupid, because it relied on the machinic dumbness of copying appearances rather than the creative transformations associated with artfulness; a fetish, since its impression of immediacy was a mystification in desperate need of unveiling by the non-duped who know better and acknowledge the constructedness of all representation. The notion that cinema suffers when it simply duplicates appearances goes back to Grierson's renowned dictum that documentary is the "creative treatment of actuality," and even farther, to 1920s film theory, where it is deeply tied to claims for film as art.[9] It is unsurprising, then, that when documentary entered contemporary art, a similar phobia of the facticity of recording accompanied it, amplified by a theoretical climate still indebted to postmodernism and poststructuralism. Of course, lens-based capture persisted as a means of making images, but its unadorned primacy, the idea that it offers privileged access to unstaged reality, was the sacrificial lamb at a postmodern slaughter. The very title of Williams's essay, "Mirrors Without Memories," underlines the historical unavailability of the observational mode at her time of writing: she proposes that the photographic image is not, as Oliver Wendell Holmes suggested in 1859, a mirror with a memory but rather "a hall of mirrors."[10] Winston went even farther, wagering that documentary's very survival depended on "removing its claim to the real"; it was best to "roll with the epistemological blow, abandoning the claim to evidence."[11]

More than twenty years later, nothing and everything is different. The toxic erosion of historical consciousness continues unabated. The constructivist pressure on truth and objectivity feels stronger than ever—indeed, such notions lie in ruins—but the emancipatory potential that initially accompanied the articulation of this critique has dissipated. We live in an age of "alternative facts," in which the intermingling of reality and fiction, so prized in a certain kind of documentary practice since the 1990s, appears odiously all around us. Questioning documentary's access to the real was once oppositional: it broke away from a pseudoscientific conception of documentary that saw truth as guaranteed by direct inscription. When Trinh Minh-ha wrote in 1990 that "there is no such thing as documentary," she wrote against this

ingrained tradition.[12] But many of the things for which Trinh advocated are now commonplace. Experimental documentary did largely follow Winston's call to abandon its claim to evidence, foregoing fact for "ecstatic truth," Werner Herzog's term for a truth "deeper" than that offered by the observation of reality, accessible only through "fabrication and imagination."[13] There is a lurking Platonism here: appearances are understood as deceptive seductions incapable of leading to knowledge. Meanwhile, essay films—with their meditative, questioning voice-overs—are everywhere, a veritable genre. The notion that we best access reality through artifice is the new orthodoxy.

Eric Baudelaire, Also Known as Jihadi, 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

No one assumes any longer, if they ever did, that there is a mirrored isomorphism between reality and representation or that the act of filming can be wholly noninterventionist. To assert such things is to tell us what we already know. And so why does it happen so often, whether explicitly or implicitly, in documentary theory and practice? What does it accomplish? Perhaps it is just inertia, a repetition of received ideas that stem from a paradigm by now firmly established. Perhaps. Yet it also reconfirms a smug and safe position for maker and viewer alike, guarding both against being caught out as that most sorry of characters: the naive credulist. We all know better than to believe. This might be called media literacy, but it also contains a whiff of the cynicism Williams hoped the "new documentary" would ward off. We breathe the stale, recirculated air of doubt.

Already in 1988, Donna Haraway recognized that though the critique of objectivity had been necessary, there were dangers in proceeding too far down the path of social constructivism.[14] She warned that to do so is to relinquish a needed claim on real, shared existence. Our planet *is* heating up. In the realm of documentary, too, there *is* a visible world "out there," the traces of which persist in and through the codes of representation. It is a world that demands our attention in all its complexity and frailty. A pressing question emerges: Is putting documentary's claim to actuality under erasure through reflexive devices in all cases still the front-line gesture it once was, or have such strategies ossified into clichés that fail to offer the

best response to the present emergency? In light of current conditions, do we need to reevaluate the denigration of fact inherent in the championing of "ecstatic truth"? This is not to diminish the tremendous historical importance of such strategies, which can remain viable, nor to malign all films that engage them. At best—and there are countless examples of this—departures from objective reality are enacted in order to lead back to truth, not to eradicate its possibility. At worst, the insistence that documentary is forever invaded by fictionalization leads to a dangerous relativism that annuls a distinction between truth and falsity that we might rather want to fight for. And across this spectrum, we find an underlying assumption that today requires interrogation: namely, that the task of vanguard documentary is to problematize, rather than claim, access to phenomenal reality.

Instead of taking for granted that there is something inherently desirable about blurring the boundary between reality and fiction and something inherently *un*desirable about minimizing an attention to processes of mediation in the production of visible evidence, we must ask: Do we need to be told by a film—sometimes relentlessly—that the image is constructed lest we fall into the mystified abyss of mistaking a representation for reality? Or can we be trusted to make these judgments for ourselves? If, recalling Arthur's formulation, every age of documentary rejects and responds to the last, perhaps now is the time for a polemical contestation of the denigration of observation. To echo Latour, the critique of documentary constructedness has run out of steam.[15]

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The interest of documentary lies in its ability to challenge dominant formations, not to conform to or mimic them, and yet uncertainty and doubt remain its contemporary watchwords, especially as it is articulated within the art context. What would it be to instead affirm the facticity of reality with care, and thereby temper the epistemological anxieties of today in lieu of reproducing them? How might a film take up a reparative relation to an embattled real?[16] It might involve assembling rather than dismantling, fortifying belief rather than debunking false consciousness, love rather than skepticism.

As a rule of thumb, bad objects do not stay bad objects forever; they make unsurprising returns to favor when the time is right. In the work of a number of important artists and filmmakers, a commitment to a reconceived observational mode is visible. These works leave behind a pedagogy of suspicion and instead assert the importance of the nonhuman automatism of the camera as a means for encountering the world. Departing from the now dominant paradigms of ecstatic truth and the essay film, they look to the facticity of phenomenal reality and demand belief in it. I can hear the objections: this is a return to positivism, a guileless trust in the transparency of

representation, a forgetting of all of the lessons we have learned. In fact, no. This is no simple throwback to the positions of direct cinema, which have, in any case, been unfairly characterized. Abstaining from techniques that pry open the interval between reality and representation, including voice-over commentary, these films revive key elements of the observational mode while challenging the epistemological claims that historically accompanied it through strategies of partiality, blockage, and opacity. They seek not to master the world but to remain faithful to it,[17] creating for the viewer a time and space of attunement in which a durational encounter with alterity and contingency can occur, with no secure meaning assured.

Film still from Libbie D. Cohn and J.P. Sniadecki's documentary People's Park (2012).

The films made by individuals affiliated with Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab manifest diverse concerns and take up divergent formal strategies. Nonetheless, across works such as *Leviathan* (2012, Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel), *People's Park* (2012, Libbie D. Cohn and J.P. Sniadecki), *Manakamana* (2013, Stephanie Spray and Pacho Velez), and *The Iron Ministry* (2014, J. P. Sniadecki), one encounters a shared reassertion of the possibilities of observation. These practices pursue ethnography through cinema rather than through the written discourse privileged by disciplinary anthropology, and thus it is fitting that the conception of the moving image one finds within them seizes on the non-coded powers of lens-based capture rather than the reductive linguistic paradigm of codedness proper to theorizations of film inspired by Saussurean semiotics. These films retreat from any posture of domination to instead provide thick description of the irreducible complexity of the world, its vital excessiveness and ambiguity. The modalities of vision one finds within them are never that of a dislocated camera-eye that would assert possession of the profilmic through the agency of the gaze. They are, rather, eminently situated and specifically cinematic. In *Leviathan*, GoPro cameras are strapped to laboring bodies

and thrown into the ocean. In *People's Park*, a seventy-eight-minute long take is filmed from a wheelchair that winds its way through a park in Chengdu, grounding the unfolding images within a spatiotemporal continuity and asserting the primacy of the filmed object over and above the subjective interventions of the filmmakers. In *Manakmana* and *The Iron Ministry*, the cable car and the train carriage, respectively, form enclosures that assure the mutual implication of filmmaker and subject. And in all four films, an unobtrusive acknowledgement of mediation is discernible in strong yet varied assertions of structure that intensify, rather than erode, their claims on actuality.

To say that observation is today experiencing a rehabilitation is not to suggest that commitments to it have been wholly absent in recent decades. Harun Farocki is often closely associated with the tradition of the essay film, but maintained for over thirty years a consistent practice of observational documentary, often, as Volker Pantenburg has noted, filming situations "marked by a sense of repetition and rehearsal" so as to install a degree of reflexivity at the level of the filmed scene.[18] Even though many of these works were television commissions, this investment by no means waned following Farocki's entry into the art context. He deemed *Serious Games* (2009–10) a "Direct Cinema film,"[19] and in many ways it is: Farocki carefully details the use of video game simulations for solider training and post-combat rehabilitation without intervening and refrains from offering any commentary until the limited intertitles of the fourth and final segment, "A Sun With No Shadow." In an interview with Hito Steyerl, he rather unfashionably proclaimed himself a "devotee of *cinéma vérité*," -just as he was beginning the observational project *Labour in a Single Shot* (2011-–14), a collaboration with Antje Ehmann.[20] The pair conducted filmmaking workshops in fifteen cities around the world in which people made single-shot films, one to two minutes in length. Aside from taking labor in a broad sense as their subject, these films were governed by only one rule: as the title of the project suggests, there could be no cuts, a parameter that forges an association with the preclassical *actualité* and preserves the continuity of time. Despite this policy of *montage interdit*, there is no presumption of total capture: the films' short lengths bespeak a rejection of totality. They are but fragments of larger processes that remain largely out of frame.

When shown at the eighth edition of the Contour Biennale in Mechelen, Belgium, Eric Baudelaire's *Also Known as Jihadi* (2017) was presented in the sixteenth-century Court of Savoy, once the seat of the Great Council and now the home of the lower civil and criminal courts—a setting that underlined the film's engagement with the production of truth. In one regard, the film is a remake of Masao Adachi's 1969 masterpiece *A.K.A. Serial Killer*, in which the director tests his notion of *fûkeiron*— landscape theory—which posits that social forces become visible through observation of the built environment. Following

Eric Baudelaire, Also Known as Jihadi, 2017. Courtesy of the artist. Installation view at Contour Bienniale 2017.

Adachi, Baudelaire's film is composed of a series of long shots of locations once traversed by a pathologized protagonist, in this case, Abdel Aziz Mekki, accused of travelling from France to Syria to participate in jihad. But Baudelaire departs significantly from the Japanese filmmaker by adding a second component to his filmic vocabulary: legal documents from the investigation into Mekki's activities, introduced between the landscape shots. The film thus engages in a comparative staging of two apparatuses tasked with the production of truth—observational documentary and the legal system—both of which are grounded in an evidential recording of reality that Baudelaire shows to exist at a remove from any guarantee of understanding. We are presented with evidence, yet Mekki's motivations remain elusive. *Also Known as Jihadi* poses the epistemological potential of *fûkeiron* as a question rather than taking it as a given, but the film's very existence demonstrates Baudelaire's conviction that this is a question worth asking. There is no overt manipulation of the image, no voice-over to direct the viewer through a poetic meditation on the impossibility of truth, no reenactment. *Also Known as Jihadi* is an open inquiry into how the media of law and documentary might—the conditional tense is fundamental—produce knowledge and how they might fail. The film's empty landscapes and reams of documents lead not to the arrogance of singular truth but to a suspended interval in which a humble reckoning with the limits of comprehension and the inevitability of unknowing occurs.

If there is one film that most powerfully underlines the stakes of rehabilitating observation, it is *Tonsler Park* (2017), Kevin Jerome Everson's eighty-minute portrait of workers at a polling station in the titular area of Charlottesville, Virginia, on November 8, 2016—the day the current president of the United States was elected. Using black-and-white 16mm film, *Tonsler Park* consists of a series of long takes of the mostly African-American women who facilitate the voting process for members of the local community. For privacy reasons, Everson did not record synchronized sound; instead, images shot with a telephoto lens are accompanied by wild sound captured in the same place and on the same day, though not at precisely the same moment as the image. This slight cleavage of image and sound ruptures any possible impression of total capture, ushering the film away from discredited notions of immediacy. This refusal of mastery is buttressed by the position of Everson's camera, which is out of the way, at some distance from the poll workers who form the ostensible focus of the scene. People pass frequently in front of the lens, close enough that only their torsos are visible. They intermittently fill the frame with vast fields of grey and black, creating what Everson has called, with reference to that most reflexive of avant-garde film genres, a "human flicker." The fullness of this reality does not yield to the camera. It is grainy, monochrome, obstructed. Vision is blocked, yet the film demands that we look nonetheless, that we look closely at an event at once quotidian and historic, at people and activities that might otherwise never be held up to view.

Film still from Kevin Jerome Everson's Tonsler Park (2017). 80", 16mm, b&w, sound. Copyright: Kevin Jerome Everson; Trilobite-Arts DAC; Picture Palace Pictures.

Foucault was right when he deemed visibility a trap. Exposure is violent; it makes the surveilled subject vulnerable to capture by apparatuses of power. Moreover, to see something clearly, fully, can easily slide into the mistaken assumption that it is known, comprehended in its totality—which is itself a form of violence, as Glissant has shown. But before romanticizing the escape of invisibility, we must remember that to be invisible is also to be cast out of the body politic, into the precariousness of ungrievable life. Visibility is, then, deeply ambivalent, particularly for populations more subject than others to police harassment and violence and more excluded than others from myriad forms of representation, as African-Americans are. *Tonsler Park*'s dialectics of revelation and concealment gets to the heart of this ambivalence and does so, no less, by capturing a day that would inaugurate a regime that would only exacerbate this double violence.

To watch *Tonsler Park* is to give oneself over to a phenomenology of gesture, comportment, and detail achieved through the presentation of images shorn of any great eventfulness. Through this heightened attunement, the film opens a protracted duration in which the concrete specificity of the represented event shares mental space with farther-reaching thoughts to which it gives rise: the first presidential election after Barack Obama's two terms, of which we know the disastrous results but the onscreen figures do not; the racialized and gendered dimensions of work; widespread voter suppression through the implementation of registration laws that disproportionately affect African-Americans; the permanent disenfranchisement of convicted felons in many states, once again disproportionately affecting African-Americans; the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and its place within the Civil Rights Movement, many demands of which we must continue to levy. None of these threads enter *Tonsler Park* as information supplied directly by Everson or his subjects. Rather, through its clearing of time and presentation of a world to be witnessed—an encounter markedly different from the experience one might have if present at the filmed event—the film

activates a labor of associative thought on the part of the spectator. Here, observational cinema facilitates a form of *thinking with appearances* that depends simultaneously on the image's ties to phenomenal reality and the image's differences from it.

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The documentary claim on the capture of life has historically been tied to domination, and in many cases still is, but this is not its only possibility. Following the devastation of World War II, critics such as Siegfried Kracauer and André Bazin found in the registration of reality possibilities of reparation and redemption; in our moment of ecological, humanitarian, and political crisis, the nurturing of this capacity possesses a comparable urgency. That documentary practices take up this task with vigor is all the more crucial given that the importance of profilmic reality is swiftly diminishing in much popular cinema. Even far beyond the genres of science fiction and fantasy, in apparently "realistic" films, computer-generated images fill screens with dreams of a world wholly administered, controllable down to the last pixel, drained of contingency. As the anthropocentric perfection of the CGI simulacrum is increasingly dominant, and as the rhetoric of a collapse of reality serves only those who seek to further it and benefit from it, there must be a thorough rehabilitation of the viability of observation in vanguard documentary. To be sure, there is ample evidence that this is already well underway in practice, in the films mentioned here and in recent works by Maeve Brennan, Chen Zhou, Ben Russell, Wang Bing, and many others. This is by no means to call for an invalidation of those strategies associated with the "new documentary"; let one hundred flowers bloom, so long as they avoid the pestilence of postmodern relativism. Rather, it is simply to insist that the aspersions cast for so long on the facticity of recording must cease. Creativity and sophistication are not found only in fictionalization, intervention, and proclamations of subjectivity. The appearances of the world need our care more than our suspicion. Giving primacy to the registration of physical reality can do something that "ecstatic truth" cannot: reawaken our attention to the textures of a world that really does exist and which we inhabit together.

There is nothing naive about the relationship to reality found in the examples mentioned here; in fact, they place an immense trust in their viewers. Truth is not out there waiting to be captured—but reality is. In the encounter with facticity made possible by these films, it becomes clear that to believe in reality is to affirm that we live in a shared world that is at once chaotic and unmasterable. The formal vocabulary of these films differs greatly from that most associated with direct cinema: they do not spontaneously track reality through a roaming camera, as if it could be fully encompassed by the representational act, but engage in strong, deliberate assertions of structure that assert a bond to reality while also marking

limits that are at once visual and epistemological. The significance of what one witnesses may remain uncertain, one's understanding may remain incomplete, and yet there is no doubt as to the reality of what is presented to view, nor of cinema's ability to provide valuable access to it. All objectivity is situated; all vision is partial. Simple truths and totalizing meanings are the real fictions. Although this may sound like poststructuralism, here these acknowledgements lead not into any hall of mirrors, not to any infinite regress, but assert rather the power of cinema as window, however dirty and distorting its panes may be.

According to Hannah Arendt, the preparation for totalitarianism

> has succeeded when people have lost contact with their fellow men as well as the reality around them; for together with these contacts, men lose the capacity of both experience and thought. The ideal subject for totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (*i.e.,* the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (*i.e.,* the standards of thought) no longer exist.[21]

Looking closely at images that affirm their status as traces of actuality provides one way that we can begin to reestablish the reality of experience and the standards of thought that Arendt rightly deems so important. Within this durational experience, we find ourselves faced with what James Agee called the "cruel radiance of what is."[22] Let us imagine the reality-based community together.

X

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Marion von Osten

Human Animal Song

X

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A Language that Was Spoken on the Moon

If, according to Martin Heidegger and his former student Hans-Georg Gadamer, the being that is understood is language, then it would seem that today it is English. It has become the de facto international language, and for any citizen to participate in today's world, the mastering of English is a social necessity. According to the promoters of English language learning, the lack of English education even constitutes a form of suffering:

> English has also become the lingua franca to the point that any literate educated person is in a very real sense deprived if he does not know English. Poverty, famine, and disease are instantly recognized as the cruellest and least excusable forms of deprivation. Linguistic deprivation is a less easily noticed condition, but one nevertheless of great significance.[1]

James T. Hong

The Suspicious Archive, Part II: Every Word Is a Prejudice

Heidegger had conceptualized the notion of "idle talk" a few decades before the end of World War II. The United States was still then in the process of usurping the British Empire's role as a superpower, and communication technologies had not yet reached today's heights of omnipresence. After the end of the war, the United States, with some participation from its allies, dictated the conditions under which a postwar world would be organized, but English had not quite yet become the international standard.[2] Now that it is, world events, wars, and crimes against humanity are not acknowledged unless they can be described in English. The disturbing title of Edward Behr's 1978 correspondent's memoir, which has become a refrain for many Western reporters, bears this out: *Anyone Here Been Raped and Speaks English?*[3] Despite some Western exceptions, credible sources must be in English. So-called "independent verification" is not simply the interpretation-translation into English, it is also a magical process of *consecration*. For example, victims' testimonies to South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission are translated into English before consideration.[4] In the international news media, for some foreign stories, CNN even quotes independent, unverified, and youthful bloggers, if they can speak English.[5] Non-English, non-Western news sources are more likely to be framed as dubious.

For fake news to exist, there must be a "real news." A lot of news, or what counts as news in Taiwan, for instance, is a weak kind of fake news, because Taiwanese news stories are frequently too trivial even to be considered news (e.g.,

a new restaurant forgot to include free napkins). In these trivial cases, truth or falsity does not even matter. But the "fake" in fake news has a metaphysical component. What type of metaphysics is a criterion for distinguishing fake from real news? For most people, only another story or collection of stories can prove that a particular story is factually wrong (unless one actually witnessed the news-making event). There is no way for a regular reader to go above and beyond any particular news story to adjudicate its truth value from God's point of view, so she can only arbitrate between competing stories filtered through her own prejudices and biases. Furthermore, something is usually off about any news story—a detail, a nuance, the choice of words, implicit and explicit prejudices.

By definition, the news is supposed to be a reporting of something noteworthy that has happened or is currently occurring. Here the presumed theory of truth is the correspondence theory: a news item is true because its referential content corresponds to a state of affairs that actually occurred in the recent past or obtains now. The news ostensibly reports facts. But the correspondence theory of truth, popular with philosophers for centuries, is problematic. What exactly is the mysterious relationship between mental beliefs or news stories and physical objects in the real world? How do our true beliefs map onto and/or mirror the external world? Can the news portray moral truth? (It probably aspires to.) Do moral facts

exist? (Presumably no.)

Consider this *Guardian* headline: "Trump anti-China tweet gives Rex Tillerson a fresh wall to climb."[6] What makes this headline true? Does it correspond to a *fact* somewhere in the world which consists of some relationship between a Donald Trump tweet, Rex Tillerson, and some newly baked wall? Are these objects (a tweet, Tillerson, and a wall) arranged in the world like a sentence which can then be mirrored as a headline? Obviously, there is no literal wall that the US Secretary of State needs to climb, and we accept that Trump wrote an "anti-China" tweet because of what we have already gleaned from the news about Trump's (previously) hostile attitude toward China. And without a clear context, his tweet could be interpreted in different ways.[7] The "reality" that makes Trump's tweet and the *Guardian*'s headline true cannot be separated from the semantic and cultural rules that determine these very truth conditions. According to the late American pragmatist Richard Rorty, "nothing counts as justification unless by reference to what we already accept, and … there is no way to get outside our beliefs and our language so as to find some test other than coherence."[8]

The coherence theory of truth replaces the isomorphism between language and the world with "coherence" among propositions or beliefs. So following this theory, the news is true when its referential content coheres with a view of

the world, of the past, of language, and with that of other news. Taken to an extreme, following this theory of truth, a news item could be considered true, even if its propositional content referred to a state of affairs that does not actually obtain. A story could be false according to the correspondence theory, but still be real news. (The *New York Times*' stories about Saddam Hussein's WMD come to mind.) A story is true because it is useful and it works—in society, for the pundits, and/or for the government. This sounds suspiciously like a pragmatic theory of truth, and it meshes nicely with a Nietzschean vision:

> What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms, in short a sum of human relations which have been subjected to poetic and rhetorical intensification, translation, and decoration, and which, after they have been in use for a long time, strike a people as firmly established, canonical, and binding ... the obligation to use the customary metaphors, or, to put it in moral terms, the obligation to lie in accordance with firmly established convention, to lie *en masse* and in a style that is binding for all.[9]

The American Way

Claiming the mantle of pragmatism from the American philosopher John Dewey (1859–1952), Rorty summarized Dewey's and the pragmatist position by asking: "What can philosophy do for American democracy?"[10] This question turns critical philosophical inquiry into a political defense, a nationalist agenda, while also begging the question, as his simply entitled essay "The priority of democracy to philosophy" makes clear.[11] According to Rorty, we should no longer ask "What is Man?" but rather "What sort of world can we prepare for our great-grandchildren?"[12] This "world" is clearly an all-embracing concept and includes not just the physical world, with its dwindling resources and warming temperatures, but also a world of culture, art, religion, and ideology. A will to remembrance and of being remembered gives Americans and other hangers-on yet another reason to promote English as the medium of legacy, history, and the archives. English as the common language would provide a convenient linguistic and ideological bond to one's children and their children and so on, and it makes sense as a basic, unquestioned, American aspiration. Hillary Clinton reportedly claimed that "I don't want my grandchildren to live in a world dominated by the Chinese."[13] Assuming that Clinton is not a white supremacist, we can at least conclude that she did not want a language such as Chinese with its concomitant worldview to replace the hegemony of English.[14]

I claim very simply and crudely that nothing is really true, that nothing really matters, unless or until it is in English. This could be called a form of "imperialist linguistic idealism," and it goes hand in hand with the implicit, globalist assumption that nature's preferred way of being represented is in English—scientific or otherwise. If the world in which we all live is the same, and languages are not incommensurable, then one language could be used to describe the entire world, and the world is indeed made smaller. It can then be archived, *wikified* even. English descriptions of social reality become persuasive as soon as people become aware of them.[15] As formulated in 1961 by the literary critic I. A. Richards, "An important consideration here is that English, through its assimilations, has become not only the representative of contemporary English-speaking thought and feeling but a vehicle of the entire developing human tradition."[16]

For Heidegger and Gadamer, "language is the house of being" which discloses the world to us.[17] Heidegger further claims that "man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language, while in fact *language* remains the master of the man."[18] The linguist Edward Sapir followed the same train of thought when he wrote in 1933: "Language is heuristic ... in the much more far-reaching sense that its forms predetermine for us certain modes of observation and interpretation."[19] The reification of language presupposes the existence of people who actually use language, and if a people already exist, then the power relations between those people also exist, which will presumably be reflected in their language. Since English is now the world language of business, culture, diplomacy, airports, pop music, advertising, and scientific thought, transnational power relations between individuals and between nations themselves will also be reflected in the international use of English. Furthermore, since stylistic quality is unique to each language, native English speakers often act as gatekeepers to the field of publishing and scientific research.

Even critics of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis must admit that the international domination of the English language carries definite political, ideological, and cultural weight. In many developing countries, English is the *prestige* language. Considering the use of a dominant language, Frantz Fanon wrote, "To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."[20]

Minimally, we should be aware that the English language as promoted around the world is not ideologically neutral. Regarding the use of English in South Africa, Njabulo S. Ndebele eloquently writes:

> There are many reasons why it [English] cannot be considered an innocent language. The problems of society will also be the problems of the predominant

language of that society, since it is the carrier of a range of social perceptions, attitudes, and goals. Through it, the speakers absorb entrenched attitudes. In this regard, the guilt of English then must be recognised and appreciated before its continued use can be advocated.[21]

A world in which English is not the global or dominant language is now difficult to imagine, and for many Americans, even more difficult to stomach. What would replace it? Chinese or Spanish? Conspicuously, the Old Testament presents multilingualism as the curse of Babel (Genesis 11). In *Blade Runner* (1982)*,* for instance, the lingua franca has been replaced by an internationalized gibberish called "cityspeak." However, the language of science (epitomized by Dr. Eldon Tyrel) and presumably also of the "off-world colonies" is still American English.
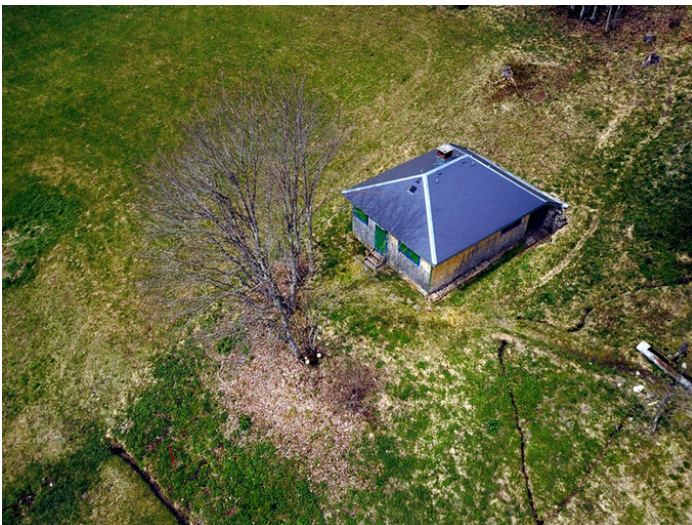
"Das Haus des Seins"

What has this to do with archives? What about the *Archives nationales* in France, the National Archives of Japan, or any other archive that is not in English? The working languages of the International Criminal Court in the Netherlands are English and, anachronistically, French (which is probably useful for indicting former dictators in Africa, a favorite target of the ICC).[22] The United Nations claims a number of official languages, but is, unsurprisingly, dominated by English.[23] Whether in diplomacy, literary theory, entertainment, or scientific research, international consensus must today be made within the realm of the English language. To garner international awareness or scrutiny, any interpretation of an archival body needs to (eventually) be in the English language and thus made, possibly, true. Resistance only results in obscurity.

Apologists for the world domination of English like to point out that a language in and of itself does not have any power or intentions. Languages are only invested with power by the people who use and promote them. By the same token, low-brow American bumper stickers and T-shirts claim that "guns don't kill people, people kill people," which is both literally and trivially true. A language cannot dominate, only a person can. Holding the English language up to some kind of ethical mirror does betray a number of prejudices, particularly when comparing linguistic conflict to a war, but like the gun, English *is* a weapon of the mind. Winston Churchill put it nicely in 1943: "[The promotion of the English language] offers far better prizes than taking away people's provinces or lands or grinding them down in exploitation. The empires of the future are the empires of the mind."[24]

In the language of American pragmatism, which dispenses with philosophical mind/body talk, Rorty elaborated the goal: "To say that it [a given organism] is a language user is just to say that pairing off the marks and noises it makes with those we make will prove a useful tactic in predicting and controlling its future behavior."[25]

Another apologist response is to deem any critique of English domination a conspiracy theory. Even if English as a language is itself innocent, and it is really the promoters and users of English acting in collusion while harboring self-serving intentions, is this not the very definition of a conspiracy? As Nigel Farage put it, "Our real friends in the world speak English."[26] It is the English language promoters themselves, especially those outside the native English-speaking world, who are conspiring to reproduce and promote its status. From the hermeneutically suspicious point of view,

> The English language and English language teaching are hegemonic if they uphold the values of dominant groups, and if the pre-eminence of English is legitimated as being a "common sense" social fact, thus concealing whose interests are being served by the dominant ideology and dominant professional practice [of teaching and promoting English].[27]

Overcoming English

Assuming the linguistically dominated have freedom and agency, the issue is whether they willingly choose this form of domination or have been duped or coerced into acquiescing. According to Pierre Bourdieu, "The distinctiveness of symbolic domination lies precisely in the fact that it assumes, of those who submit to it, an attitude which challenges the usual dichotomy of freedom and constraint."[28] In Taiwan and South Korea, English language instruction is mandatory for elementary school

students, and a certain minimal proficiency is required for advancement. In Japan, English will become a mandatory elementary school subject in 2020.[29] Some schools in China are also beginning to require a minimal command of English. These East Asian governments recognize that the ability of their citizens to negotiate or debate fluently in English is not only (possibly) beneficial to the students themselves but also essential for promoting their own national interests in the American world order. For the children and their parents, the learning of the English as a second (or third or even fourth) language is certainly not a product of free choice, but one of pragmatic complicity.

According to Heidegger's interpretation of Nietzsche's metaphysics, the course of Western history inevitably leads to a species of technocratic nihilism, exemplified by the pragmatic, American view of technological mastery and capitalist, planetary domination. Stuck in our current predicament, this nihilism can only be overcome within the conceptual language of this very nihilism. Similarly, Marx thought that capitalism could be overcome within the stages of late capitalism as the "negation of the negation." So perhaps too, the domination of English can only be overcome within this very domination of English as the world language.

2016 Human Rights Report

Promoting human rights and democratic governance is a core element of U.S. foreign policy. These values form an essential foundation of stable, secure, and functioning societies. Standing up for human rights and democracy is not just a moral imperative but is in the best interests of the United States in making the world more stable and secure. The 2016 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (The Human Rights Reports) demonstrate the United States' unwavering commitment to advancing liberty, human dignity, and global prosperity.

ALSO: 📄 Story

Notably, the language of English is often conflated with the language of morality and, most frequently, human rights as a mask of its own users' conceited and usually nationalistic, sometimes xenophobic, intentions. English is also deliberately associated with progress, prosperity, modernity, etc. However, all statements to moral *universality* made by any particular government are by default suspect, even if that state's particular actions might have done some good in some way according to some biased interpretation. In the fittingly titled essay "In praise of cultural imperialism?" David Rothkopf claims that

> It is in the economic and political interest of the United States to ensure that if the world is moving toward a common language, it be English; that if the world is moving toward common telecommunications, safety, and quality standards, they be American; and that if

common values are being developed, they be values with which Americans are comfortable. These are not idle aspirations. English is linking the world.[30]

For older monolingual people, language is a linguistic penitentiary, for it is highly unlikely they will take the time or have the motivation to become sufficiently fluent in another language. How does one resist, if is one trapped within the prison-house that is English? How do prisoners protest? They fast, bang on the walls, smear it with their own excrement, revolt, riot, try to escape. One can fast by not using English or, even better, by saying nothing. One can also embrace the ineffable, the untranslatable, and the incommensurable. English can also be used as language of opposition, as a critique of itself, its assumptions, its users, its attendant ideologies, and its dominance. The world can be made bigger again, if we, at the very least, use different words and diverse concepts.

English variants (or "World Englishes"), such as in India, Singapore, and the Philippines, have also expanded the possibilities for English as a critical tool of discourse. Local variants become purer transactions of communication with less ideological baggage from the English-speaking origin. English can also be used as a mobilizing force against the very promoters of its linguistic hegemony—"using one's own language against him" or "fighting fire with fire."[31] During the early years of the British Raj, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee wrote that "there is no hope for India until the Bengali and the Panjabi understand and influence each other, and can bring their joint influence to bear upon the Englishman. This can be done only through the medium of English."[32]

For Robert Phillipson, who has devoted much of his career to the issue of English language domination, the whole edifice of English language teaching rests on a few basic fallacies. The first two fallacies are: 1) English is best taught monolingually; and 2) Native speakers are the ideal type of English teachers.[33] Bilingualism and diglossia are frowned upon, as English teachers assume that the use of other languages in the classroom or when studying will reduce the effectiveness of learning English. Monolingualism was also a clear expression of power relations within the colonial period. As Phillipson puts it, "The ethos of monolingualism [in the classroom] implies the rejection of the experiences of other languages, meaning the exclusion of the child's most intense existential experiences."[34]

While some literature concerning English language pedagogy has warned against the overreliance on native English speakers, East Asian language schools overwhelmingly prefer teachers who conform to Western and East Asian stereotypes. In Taiwan, the ideal English teacher is white (regardless of her country of origin), so perfectly fluent Asian Americans and Southeast Asians

are discriminated against when applying for English teaching jobs. White English teachers in Taiwan are well aware of this, and yet, for the most part, make no effort to change or address it, while a steady stream of young, inexperienced teachers continues to preserve and participate in this inefficient and openly racist system. As the director of a chain of worldwide English language schools put it: "Once we used to send gunboats and diplomats abroad, now we are sending English teachers."[35]

It is by no means obvious that a native speaker of English will necessarily make a good teacher. Many such teachers, again here in East Asia, are unqualified even in the language of English, and many have been known pedophiles, alcoholics, sex tourists, criminals on the run, drug dealers, morons, and dangerous idiots.[36] If the native speaker is monolingual, as most are, he or she will most certainly have little to no insight into the local cultural and linguistic issues with learning English. The teaching qualification of most of these teachers is merely an accident of birth. Moreover, the physical presence of these teachers is not even necessary, as technology and international media outlets like the BBC and CNN are already regularly providing model native speakers of English. The vast number of unqualified, temporary teachers of English from the West must serve as an affront to the skilled educators who have devoted their lives to the profession.

So what about the domination of Mandarin Chinese (*Putonghua*) in China? Isn't it a hegemonic language whose promotion by the Chinese government is responsible for the slow but steady death of numerous local dialects? My response is that Chinese is not the world language, and because of resistance and racism, especially from Western countries, it probably never will be. To the US government, even a Chinese language processing computer is a weapon.[37] Only in a truly multilingual and multipolar world will a language like Mandarin Chinese, most likely, have its place among many.

The Argument to the Stick

What about competing interpretations of a text, an archive, or, say, a military conflict? How do we adjudicate between them? One hopes that the ideals of scholarship and Habermasian *communicative rationality* win the day, and that eventually the most rational and well-defended argument will become the most convincing. As a postmodernist, Rorty noted the problems with this kind of ideal when applied to ethical decision-making: "For everything turns on who counts as a fellow human being, as a rational agent in the only relevant sense—the sense in which rational agency is synonymous with membership in *our* moral community."[38]

Remember, according to Rorty, it is not useful to ask

foundational questions like "What is a human being?" and the reeducation or liberal redemption of obstinate adults is pointless and thus a waste of time. The power of reason alone cannot overcome the baser instincts and sentiments. The only universality is perhaps a Buddhist one: suffering and the cause of suffering. The pragmatic questions are: How can we reduce human suffering when it suits us? And how can we gain from suffering and its infliction?

As mentioned at the beginning of Part 1 of this essay, archives can be considered fragmentary repositories of the past, and as such, when interpreted well, they can function like myths that possibly teach us something about ourselves. Hopefully, there is a moral to the story. For religious or optimistic hermeneuticists like Paul Ricoeur, the ultimate goal of hermeneutics is not only fidelity to the text, but also apparently to find "in the hidden intentions of [the text] instructions on how to behave in the world, ethically and politically," i.e., "to make the world a better place."[39]

From a morally progressive standpoint, the public is prone to making unethical choices and supporting intolerant positions, such as warmongering and the death penalty. Rorty admitted that the death penalty had never been abolished by popular demand. It was the educated classes that decided capital punishment was intolerable. Popular referendums and elections bear this out. A decision abolishing the death penalty always comes from the top.[40] And what about the Syrian refugee crisis? What would a referendum decide? Hungary's 2016 referendum on refugees can be considered a model.

In a pragmatist society, can we democratically determine the essence of humanity? Can we stage a popular referendum that finally answers the philosophical question: "What is a human being?" For Rorty, whatever it is that makes us humans is not our ability to *know*, and we have no principal duty to knowledge.[41] Should we just accept this? Morality cannot be decided by polls. At some point, voting ends, and force begins, because force is the

most no-nonsense language.

X

James T. Hong is a filmmaker and artist based in Taiwan. He has produced works about Heidegger, Spinoza, Japanese biological warfare, the Opium Wars, and racism and recently completed a documentary about nationalism and disputed territory in the East China Sea. He is currently researching the concept of morality in East Asia and presented a new experimental work about Nietzsche and metempsychosis at the 2016 Taipei Biennial.

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The Second Coming of What?

> I sit in one of the dives
> On Fifty-second Street
> Uncertain and afraid
> As the clever hopes expire
> Of a low dishonest decade:
> Waves of anger and fear
> Circulate over the bright
> And darkened lands of the earth,
> Obsessing our private lives;
> The unmentionable odour of death
> Offends the September night.
>
> —W. H. Auden, "September 1939"

Franco "Bifo" Berardi

The Second Coming

The Congress of Versailles, 1919, can be viewed as the moment when the political landscape of modernity was fully shaped as a world-scape.

In the same year, William Butler Yeats—referencing the apocalyptic postwar context—wrote "The Second Coming," a poem about the collapse of social order and the decomposition of civilization.

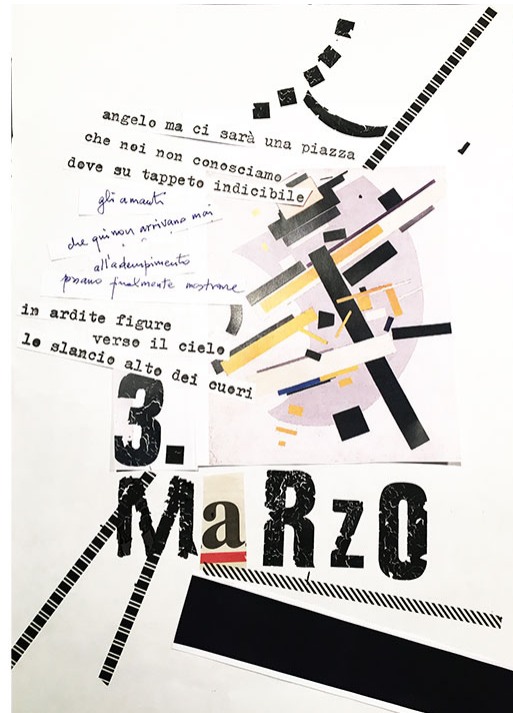"Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world"

In the years following the immense devastation of the First World War, Yeats speaks of the painful "blood-dimmed" chaos that is unleashed upon the world, and sees a sign of the second coming of Jesus Christ.

I'm reading Yeats from the point of view of today, 2017, and I want to interpret his words in a nontheological way, one hundred years after the beginning of the Russian Revolution, which aimed to eliminate war and exploitation from the history of the world, but resulted in the creation of a miserable totalitarian regime of oppression.

The second coming of communism will happen on grounds that have nothing to do with Leninist force and Bolshevik coercion, nothing to do with political dictatorship. The second coming of communism will happen as an effect of the trauma that capitalism (and the capitalist use of technology) has inflicted on the human mind. Economic competition and obsessive accumulation have provoked violence, frustration, and war. Communism means ridding ourselves of the superstition of property and the superstition of salaried work. The redistribution of wealth and the emancipation of social time from the blackmail of salaried work: there is no other key to the future.

What happened in 2016 (Brexit, the victory of Trump,

Illustrations by Istubalz (Istituto di Studi Balzanici). Courtesy of the authors.

spreading nationalism in Europe, spreading civil war around the global) is jeopardizing the mental world-map inherited from the modern age. This is confirmed by an article entitled "Toward a Global Realignment" by Zbigniew Brzezinski, published in *The American Interest* in June 2016.[1] Until his death in May of this year, Brzezinski was a leading foreign policy intellectual who for decades was an authoritative representative of the American establishment. According to Brzezinski, Daesh is only the beginning of a terrorist planetary war that will mark the current century. Westerners, Brzezinski says, have to realize that after five hundred years of predation, massacre, and humiliation, the colonized peoples of the world have started taking their revenge, launching religious and national wars everywhere. The oppressed of the world are able to take revenge now because of the accessibility of deadly and massively destructive weapons. After centuries of plunder and humiliation, the victims are reacting. On the other side, white Western workers, impoverished by the financial aggression of the last thirty years, are seeking social revenge and unleashing a global racial war. From an internationalist point of view, this is the worst-case scenario—a perfect recipe for the defeat of the human race.

The victory of Donald Trump is the price that the white working class is willing to pay in order to take revenge against the neoliberal left. Humiliated people sometime decide to identify with the humiliator in chief. Humiliated white US workers have chosen Trump because he is the humiliator of the humiliating neoliberal elite. They think: he is our man because he is the one who best knows how to

humiliate those who have cheated us.

Unavoidable and Unpredictable

In the crystal ball of our century, it's easy to see an increase in war and exploitation. But we should never forget that the unavoidable usually does not happen, because in history it is the unpredictable that prevails.

Our first task as intellectuals is to describe the unavoidable. We have to look straight into the eyes of the beast. But simultaneously we have to remember that the game-changing event that opens a new view and new possibilities is unpredictable. The more complex a system is, the less we can predict the wide-ranging effects of a marginal cultural trend or an unknown technical discovery.

Thus, notwithstanding our feelings of despair, we should not stop exercising the art of thinking and the art of philosophical imagination. I know that in the age of communication and speed, thought is dismissed as an old habit. Thought seems ineffective and ornamental. But this is part of the unavoidable.

We should not stop thinking because the unpredictable may soon need to be thought, and this is our job, our task: thinking in times of apocalyptic trauma.

This is why we should not stop repeating the word *internationalism*.

John Singer Sargent, Portrait of William Butler Yeats, 1908. Pencil, 9 x 6 in.

You know what internationalism is.

When Lenin wrote that "capitalism brings war like clouds bring the storm," he knew that the First World War was unavoidable, and he knew that this unavoidability could only be subverted by the unpredictable: a workers' revolution. In 1914, while French and German socialists voted for war credits, succumbing to the rhetoric of patriotism and accepting national war, Lenin said no to the war. I've never been a Leninist, but I cannot deny that at the Zimmerwald Conference in 1915, Lenin was right.

Similarly today, despite the unavoidability of war, we must say no to the war. We must organize desertion and boycotts; we must prepare the overthrow of the system that has generated the war. Internationalism is not a moral value nor an ideology, but the materialist understanding of a simple fact: the workers of the world share a common interest, which is having more of what they produce, and working less.

When workers are united in a social conflict, they can win. When they are captured by nationalist sentiment, when national fronts proliferate, war spreads and workers lose everything—no matter if they're German or French, American or Russian. The rising nationalism of our time is an effect of the defeat that the working class has suffered; the betrayal by the neoliberal left has deprived the working class of all political defenses. The neoliberal left bears the responsibility for the defeat of workers, for the impoverishment of society, and for the humiliation that is now turning people against progressive values. Workers hate the left (and rightly so), because it is identified with financial aggression and neoliberal cosmopolitan conformism.

Tony Blair is now trying to come back. He wrote a message to the British people saying that Brexit was a mistake, and the mistake has to be mended. He will come back to help Britain behave. If I had to choose between Nigel Farage and Tony Blair, I would not choose Farage, but nor would I choose Blair. Blair and the Blairist left have destroyed all trust in democracy.

The Ceremony of Innocence

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

—W. B. Yeats, "The Second Coming"

The line "The ceremony of innocence is drowned" makes me think of what is happening every day in the Mediterranean Sea, where innocent people are drowned by wars fuelled by the West. This is free association, of course—Yeats could not have imagined the tragedy that war and migration are provoking in the Euro-Mediterranean in our postmodern times.

European consciousness is denying the meaning of what is happening. Everywhere along the Mediterranean coast, concentration camps are built with EU money. In Turkey, in Libya, in Egypt, in those countries led by fascist murderers like Al-Sisi and Erdoğan, migrants are detained, tortured, enslaved, killed in those concentration camps that Europeans do not want to host on their soil. Auschwitz is under construction all along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

In the 1940s, the majority of Europeans did not know and could not have known about Auschwitz. Now we know. Now everybody in Europe knows that concentration camps are back. Europeans prefer to externalize the horror, to pay executioners who are far from the eyes of European children. Nazism is externalized.

The Yeats poem unchains many meaningful if arbitrary associations: this is what poetry does. Meaningful arbitrariness is the gift that poetry offers to our minds. Serendipity in the process of meaning-making. Poetical ambiguousness is the vibrational condition that leads to conceptual discovery, to the imagining of other possible lands that we cannot see now. What is happening in the Euro-Mediterranean will not be overcome in political terms. Political decision is impotent. What we need is a reactivation of human empathy, which is beyond politics. It's pre-political, or post-political, or meta-political—I don't know. If the majority of Europeans are unable to feel empathy for the thousands who have drowned in the Mediterranean in recent years, they are dangerously sick. And they are sick because of the long-lasting impoverishment that financial capitalism has produced in their lives. In such conditions of apathy and depression and fear, the political reason of governments cannot decide. And the wave of migration and despair will not stop crashing on the shores of our cursed continent-fortress.

The Limit

"The best lack all conviction / while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

The best? Who are the best that Yeats is writing about? I think of people like Vittorio Arrigoni and Rachel Corrie, who were killed by frightened people they were trying to

help. They were part of the community of cultural nomads who want to "stay human." These cultural nomads, who sometimes come together in sudden conglomerations called "movements," are not believers, and do not pretend to belong to any truth. They are skeptical and ironic; they don't care about dogmas, convictions, and prejudices, so they look at reality with an ironic and tolerant gaze.

Wittgenstein says that the limits of our world are the limits of our language. Poetry is the enunciation that overcomes those limits. Poetry happens when language questions the limits of language. Poetry happens when these limits are surpassed by an excess of meaning, a meaning that limited language is unable to express. The potential richness of social knowledge and of technology is limited and perverted by the semiotic container of financial capitalism. Finance is a semiotic transformer of human activity, transforming richness into misery, inequality, and abstract accumulation. This is the limit that we are unable to surpass. It's first of all a semiotic limit.

We don't see the possibility that is inscribed in the present composition of labor, knowledge, and technology, because we are limited by the limits of our language, of our superstition: the superstition of salaried work. Our vision of the possible is limited by the preconception that if one wants to survive, one has to work eight hours a day. This is the limit that we have to overcome, and poetry is the place where the research for this overcoming happens.

In a 2014 interview in *Computer World*, Larry Page said that Google already has intelligent devices that could replace 50 percent of existing jobs. 50 percent of existing jobs could disappear tomorrow if Silicon Valley implemented its current innovations. This implies that working eight hours a day makes no sense.

We are accustomed to listening to the discourse of the powerful, which is based on the idea that everybody must work, and that full employment will eventually be guaranteed one day. This is the hypocritical discourse of all the candidates in all the elections in the world: they promise jobs. But this is impossible, because work is no longer necessary. This is the simple truth that power is unwilling to say and we are unable to see.

People are supposed to think that only if they have a job, only if they waste their life earning a salary will they survive and be able to raise their children. But when people learn that their work is no longer needed, that migrants and robots can take their jobs, they freak out. They become violent and xenophobic. They vote for a fascist who promises that the Nation will become so powerful that those who belong to the Nation will have the privilege of being salaried slaves all their lives. Those who voted Trump were thinking: "Some Mexican or some robot is going to steal my job."

The problem is that your job is useless. Your time is no longer needed in the same way it was during the industrial age. But we are unable to see this simple truth, because we are unable to go beyond the limits of our language. A new division of labor time must urgently be developed. The goal is not to defend the existing composition of labor, but to disentangle the possibility of a new one, to emancipate the general intellect, to liberate the power of science, technology, and art from the limits of our language, from the limits of the superstition of work.
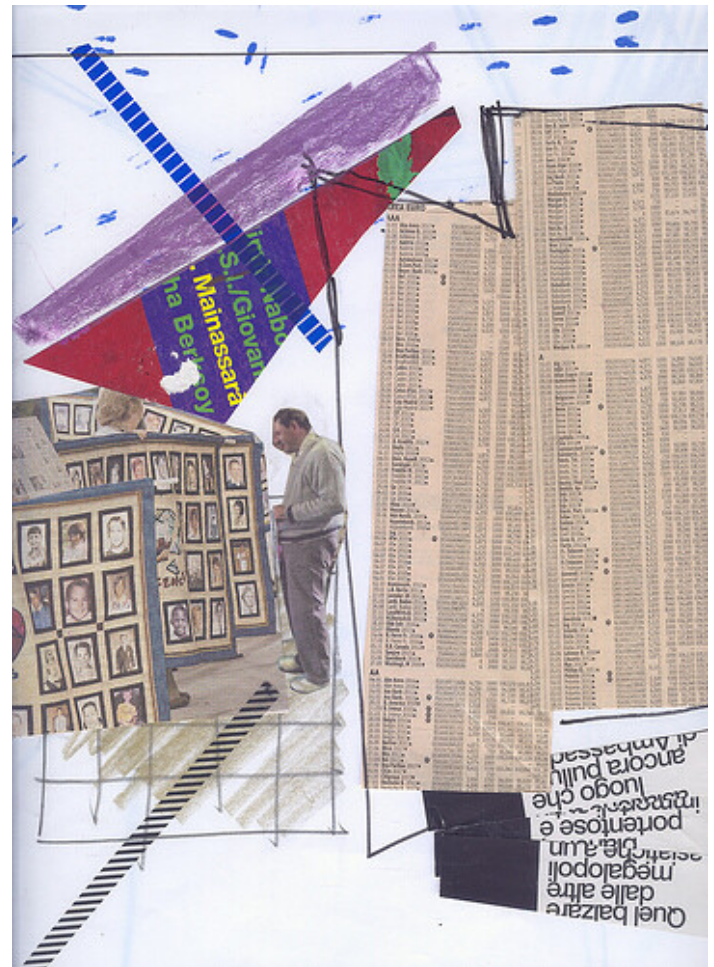

Illustration by Istubalz (Istituto di Studi Balzanici). Courtesy of the authors.

Irony and the Limit of Our Language

"The best lack all conviction," says Yeats. Think of the former German pope, Joseph Ratzinger—Pope Benedict XVI—who came to Rome promising the final establishment of truth. Ratzinger was an intellectual and a supporter of absolute truth. Right-wing Catholics felt emboldened by his ascent to the throne. He said: "God is one, and the Truth is one." In his best-known speech, delivered in Regensburg, Bavaria, the philosopher

Ratzinger denounced relativism, which he regarded as the plague of modernity.

I'm not generally a fan of Nanni Moretti, but I like *Habemus Papam*, the movie he directed in 2011. It's a movie about the fragility of human beings—in particular, about the fragility of a human being who is elected pope. In the movie, Cardinal Melville (played by Michel Piccoli) is elected pope. When he is expected to give his first public speech to a massive crowd assembled in St. Peter's Square, he realizes that he has nothing to say. All of a sudden, he is overwhelmed by the reality of the world, and he mumbles: "I cannot speak." Then he goes to a psychoanalyst (played by Nanni Moretti himself). The pope is depressed because he has seen the truth that he was trying to conceal: there is no truth in the world.

In February 2013, Joseph Ratzinger decided to follow in the footsteps of Michel Piccoli. Ratzinger became the first pope to resign in five centuries.

Today, the relationship between reality and imagination is growing more complicated than Jean Baudrillard could ever have imagined. The real pope imitates the actor impersonating the pope, and accepts the dark truth that he is not strong enough to sustain the responsibility of telling the truth because he feels that the truth is evading him.

Obviously, this is only my interpretation of the resignation of Ratzinger, which was an act of intellectual courage and moral humility. How does one understand the decision of a pope, who has been chosen by God through the intermediary of the Holy Spirit, to resign? I think the only possible interpretation is that Benedict felt depressed, and spoke sincerely with God, and humbly revealed his intimate apocalypse.

Depression is not about guilt, nor is it a limitation of the reasoning mind. It is the disconnection of reasoning from desire.

Then Mario Bergoglio was elected pope, becoming the first Pope Francis in the history of the Catholic Church. He went to the window overlooking St. Peter's Square and said: " *Buonasera*. I'm the man who comes from the end of the world." He meant Argentina, a country ravaged by the beast of financial capitalism. Since that moment, the apocalypse has shone through the acts of Bergoglio, because he is a man who dares to face the end. From the end of the world, Francis has been opening a new path in theology.

Shortly after his election, he gave an interview to the magazine *Civiltà cattolica.* In the interview, he reflects on the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. My interpretation of Bergoglio's remarks is that the main problem for Christians today is not faith. Nor is it truth. Something is more urgent: the focus of Christians today should be charity, mercy, the living existence of Jesus. The Church, in the words of Bergoglio, should be thought of as a war hospital.

It is sometimes called "compassion." It is sometimes called "solidarity." Deleuze and Guattari, in the introduction to *What is philosophy?*, speak of "friendship." What is friendship? It is the ability to create a common world, a world of ironic enunciations and expectations. Friendship is the possibility of creating a common path in the course of time. As the Zapatistas say, quoting the poet Antonio Machado, "Caminante no hay camino el camino se hace al andar." *We make the road by walking*. There is no truth, there is no meaning, but we can create a bridge beyond the abyss of the nonexistence of truth. "The best lack all conviction" means that the best have irony, the nonassertive language that aims to tune in to many levels of meaning. The ironic smile also implies empathy, the ability to share the precariousness of life without heaviness. When irony is divorced from empathy, when it loses the lightness and pleasure of precariousness, it turns into cynicism. When irony is divorced from empathy and solidarity, depression takes ahold of the soul.

For semiologists, cynicism and irony are related, because they share the presumption that truth does not exist. But we have to go beyond semiology: the two concepts differ because the ironic person is someone who does not believe but rather feels empathically the common ground of understanding. The cynical person is someone who has lost contact with pleasure and who bends to power because power is his only refuge. The cynical person bends to the power of reality, while the ironic person knows that reality is a projection of the mind, of many interwoven minds.

When philosophers realized that God was dead and there was no metaphysical foundation for our interpretations, different ethical stances emerged. One stance was based on aggressiveness and the violent enforcement of the *W ille zur Macht*: there is no truth in the world, but I'm stronger than you, and my strength is the source of my power which establishes truth. Another stance was irony: friendship and egalitarian sharing can build a bridge of meaning across the abyssal nonexistence of meaning.

Biorhythm and Algorithm

Depression can evolve in different ways: if you look at the present reality of America, you see that the prevailing evolution of depression is Donald Trump.

"The worst are full of passionate intensity," says Yeats. Faith in belonging and identity is the fake ground of passionate intensity. Belonging implies a natural ontological or historical ground of conformity among individuals. This is why belonging implies violence and submission. If you want to belong, you have to accept the

rules of conformity. Identity is the result of this process of conformity and subjection. Passionate intensity is the foundation of the identity that humiliated people crave. But identity has to be protected against existence, against transformation, against becoming, against pleasure, because pleasure is dis-identity. Identity is a simulation of belonging that is asserted through violence against the other.

"Surely the second coming is at hand. / … a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi / Troubles my sight."

In 1919, Yeats expected the second coming of Jesus Christ. However, in the decade that followed, Jesus Christ did not come back. Hitler came.

So we should ask: What is going to happen now?

I'll try to reframe the present situation from the point of view of rhythm. In particular, I want to say something about algorithm and biorhythm.

Rhythm is the singularization of time. Rhythm is scanning time in attunement with cosmic breathing. Rhythm is the vibration that aims to harmonize the singularity of breathing and the surrounding chaos. Poetry is the error that leads to new continents of meaning.

Although the theory of biorhythm elaborated by Wilhelm Fliess at the end of the nineteenth century is generally considered pseudoscientific, I'm interested in its metaphorical implications. The organism is composed of vibrant matter, and the pulsations of the organism enter into a rhythmic relationship with the pulsations of other surrounding organisms. The conjunction of conscious and sensitive organisms is a vibrating relationship: individual organisms search for a common rhythm, a common emotional ground of understanding, and this search is a sort of oscillation that results in a possible (or impossible) syntony.

Within the conjunctive sphere of biorhythm, the process of signification and interpretation is a vibrational process. When the process of signification is penetrated by connective machines, it is reformatted. It mutates in a way that implies a reduction: a reduction to the syntactic logic of the algorithm.

The word "algorithm" comes from the name of the Arabic mathematician Al-Khwarizmi (meaning, a native of Khwarazm), whose work introduced sophisticated mathematics to the West. However, I prefer a different etymology and a different meaning. "Algorithm" for me has to do with the Greek word *algos*, meaning pain. Furthermore, the English word "algid" refers to frigidity, both physical and emotional. So I suggest that "algorithm" has to do with frigidity and pain. This pain results from the constriction of the organism, the stiffening of the vibrational agent of enunciation, and the reduction of the

continuum of experience to the dictates of computation. When the social concatenation is mediated by connective machines, human agency undergoes a process of reformatting.

No one really knows what human agency is, or what humans are doing when they are said to perform as agents. In the face of every analysis, human agency remains something of a mystery. If we don't know just how it is that human agency operates, how can we be so sure that the processes through which nonhumans make their mark are qualitatively different? An assemblage owes its agentic capacity to the vitality of the materialities that constitute it. Something like this congregational agency is called *shi* in Chinese tradition. *Shi* helps to illuminate something that is usually difficult to capture in discourse: namely the kind of potential that originates not in human initiative but instead results from the very disposition of things. *Shi* is the style, energy propensity, trajectory, or élan inherent to a specific arrangement of things. Originally a word used in military strategy, s*hi* emerged in the description of a good general who must be able to read and then ride the *shi* of a configuration of moods, winds, historical trends, and armaments: s*hi* names the dynamic force emanating from a spatio-temporal configuration rather than from any particular element within it … The *shi* of an assemblage is vibratory.[2]

When the algorithm enters the realm of social concatenation, modes of interaction undergo a reformatting process, and algorithmic logic pervades and subjugates the vibrant concatenation. The insertion of the algorithm into the semiotic process breaks the continuum of semiosis and life. In the connective domain, interpretation is reduced to the syntactical recognition of discreet states. The vibrational sign is stiffened, to the point of losing the ability to decode and to interpret ambiguousness and irony. Difference is then interpreted according to the rules of repetition, and the indetermination that makes poetical misunderstanding (or hyper-understanding) possible is cancelled. As the semiosphere is reformatted according to the algorithm, the vibratory nature of biorhythm is suffocated. Breathing is banished from the semiotic exchange, and poetry—the error that leads to the discovery of new continents of meaning, the excess that contains new imaginings and new possibilities—is frozen. This is what Guattari called a chaosmic spasm.

The Gestalt Tangle and Chaos

In nonphilosophical parlance, what I'm speaking about here is our present impotence. Our cognitive activity is captured within the connective syntax, and the general intellect, separated by the social body, is expanding and producing according to the logic inscribed in the algorithm. The collaboration of millions of cognitive workers worldwide is entangled in the algorithmic form of
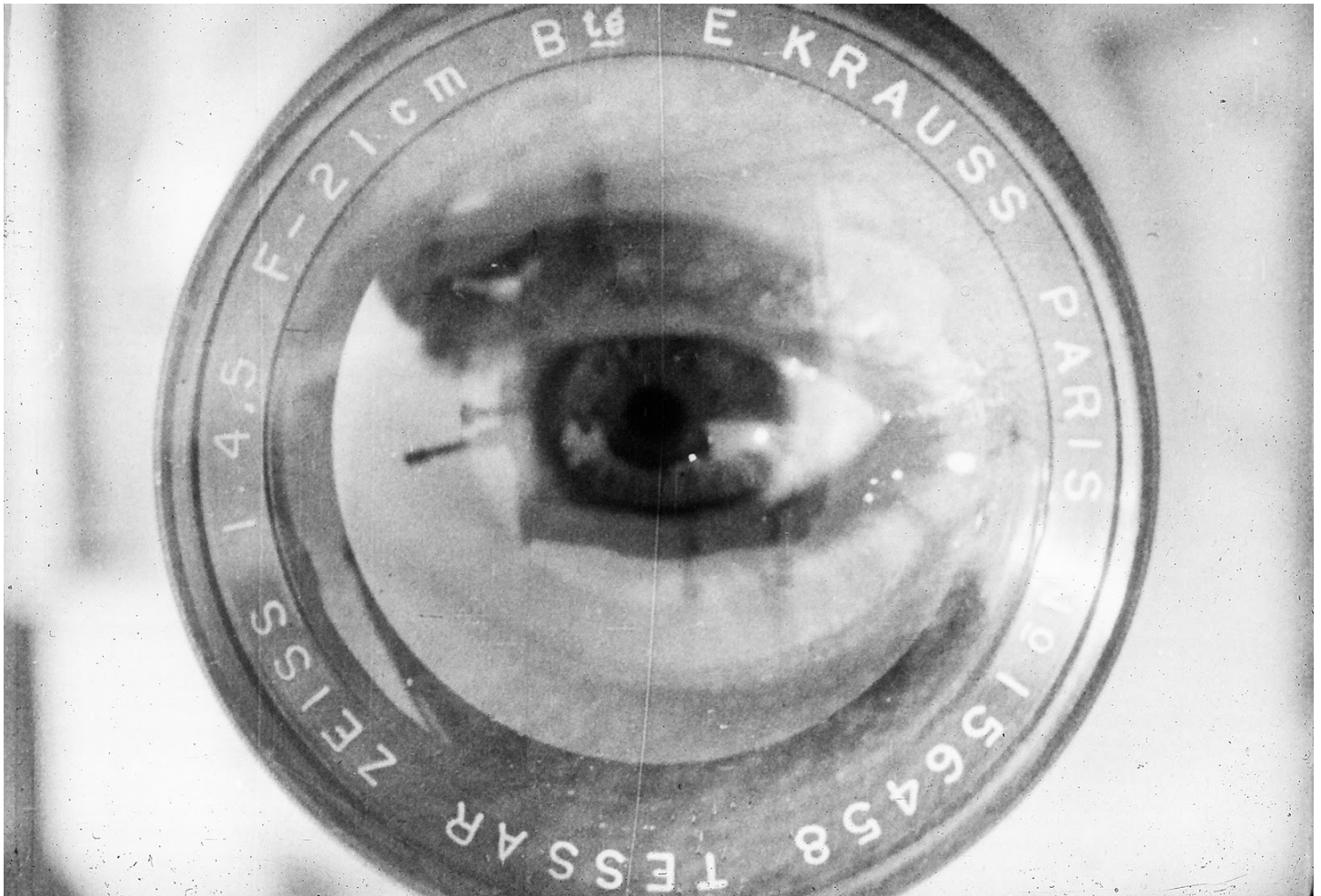
Film still from Dziga Vertov's Man with the Movie Camera (1929).

capitalism: knowledge and technology are directed and contained by the dominant paradigm, the gestalt.

A gestalt is not merely a form; it is a form that generates forms according to the gestalt itself. A particular gestalt gives us the possibility of seeing a certain shape in the surrounding flow of visual impulses. But by the same token, this gestalt forbids us from seeing something else in the same flow of visual impulses. A gestalt is a facilitator of vision, and simultaneously a disabler of vision (and generally of perception). Our present political problem can be described in terms of a gestalt of entanglement and disentanglement. How can biorhythm disentangle itself from the algorithm and eventually reprogram the algorithm itself?

In "From Chaos and to the Brain ," the last chapter of Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy*?, they speak about aging. Aging essentially means being invaded by chaos: the aging brain grows unable to elaborate the surrounding chaos.

Too fast, too fast—the infosphere around my brain is going too fast for emotional and critical elaboration.

Senescence is a defining feature of our times. People are living longer and reproducing less (with the exception of certain Muslim and African countries). The demographic decline of the white race is an explanation for the mounting wave of reactive supremacism, which is first and foremost an impotent supremacism. Trump won because of this sentiment.

Obama came to the fore proclaiming, "Yes we can." But the Obama years were marked by impotence. This impotence has fed frustration and rage, ultimately nurturing fascism. Is there a way out of this impotent rage? How can we heal the trauma and go beyond the post-traumatic effects of the present apocalypse?

We must shift the focus of our theoretical attention from the sphere of politics to the sphere of neuroplasticity. We must create technical platforms to enable a neurological reshuffling of the general intellect.

I call this perspective the second coming of communism.

X

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Franco Berardi is a writer and media-activist whose last book is *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, published by Verso (2017). He is currently engaged in the production of a movie titled *Comunismo Futuro* (director Andrea Gropplero), dedicated to the hundred years centennial of the Soviet Revolution.

1
See https://www.the-american-in
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2
Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A
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