



e-flux journal

issue #86

11 / 2017

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Imagine a big roll call. Names of nations, creeds, and genders are called out. Everyone is supposed to join their kin. Several hours later the crowd is all divided up into groups and subgroups, all neatly arranged on a large grid. There is just one person left. And this person says, “Sorry guys, I’m with the universe. Where do I go?”

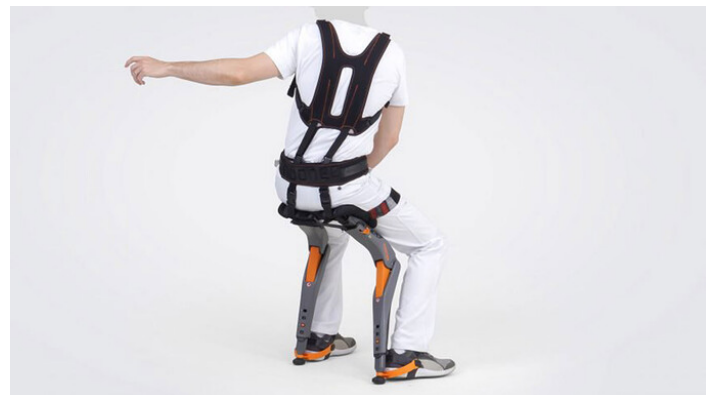
The universe? It does not figure on the grid. Today, the most important question is not what belongs to whom but who belongs to what—as in what kind of group. Sameness trumps equality. Similarity beats solidarity. Reality is a battlefield. If the era of the October Revolution was epitomized by Malevich’s *Black Square*, the current one is ruled by Reality TV.

The struggle for reality characterizes today’s reactionary turn. Populisms try to define the “real” people and mark anyone else as “unreal”—thus anticipating their erasure from reality altogether. In the populist view, reality is defined as brute inevitability, by ranking, ratings, and elimination, by literally showing people their place.

But is identity a natural given, or is it also data? How about iPads, iPhones, ego brands? How about facial recognition? How about chips and keys and passwords? IPv6? Blockchain reputation systems? Technologies boost identities and make them happen. Identities in turn obscure technologies.

Hito Steyerl, Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Stephen Squibb, and Anton Vidokle

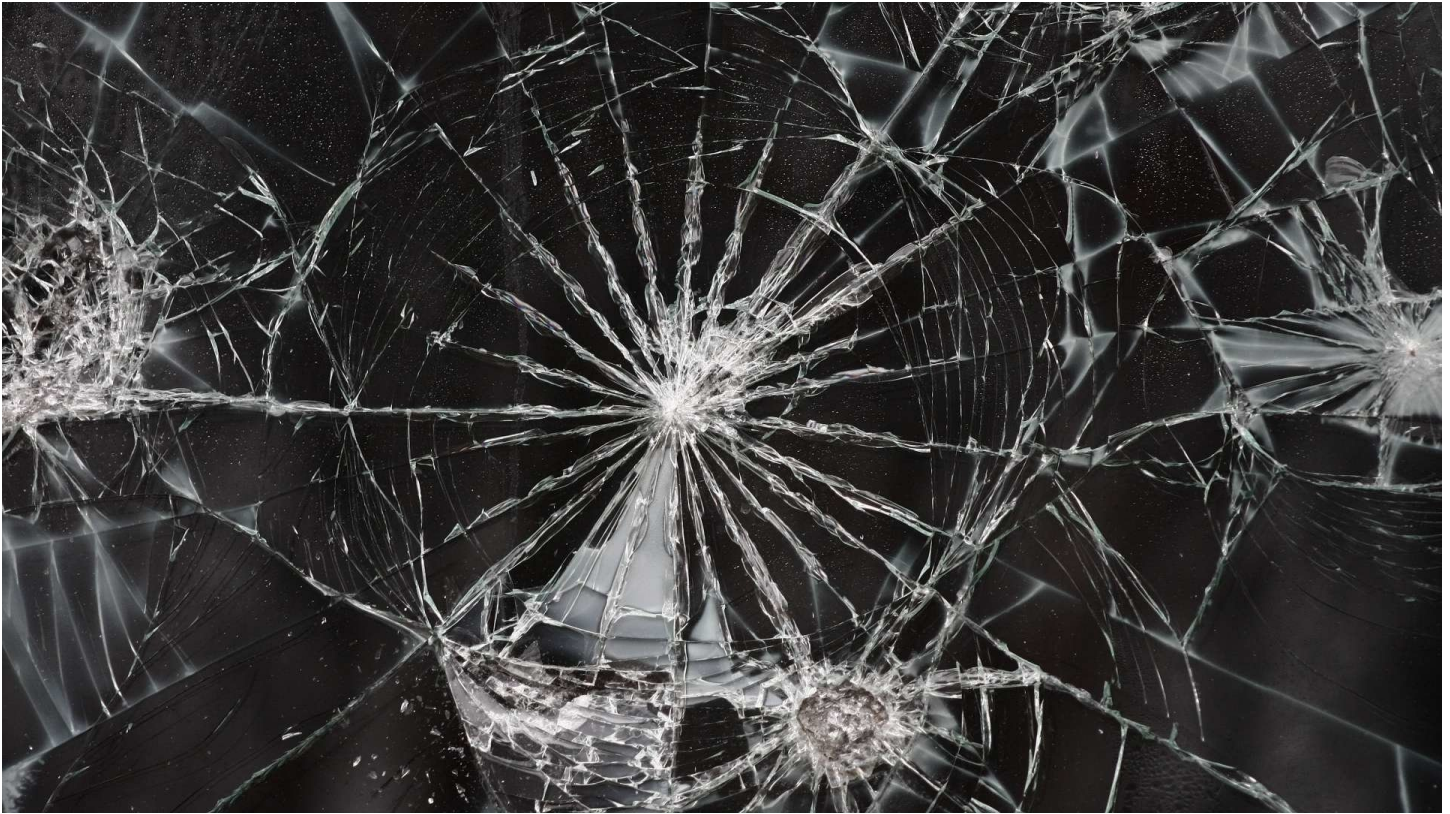
## Editorial— “Strange Universalism”



The worker's body dances around the chair in this exoskeleton design titled *Chairless Chair* by Sapetti.

Identity today is not what it was even twenty years ago. It pops up as autofill suggestions in drop-down menus. It is intensified by punitive quantification, by viral lynch mobs, material deprivation, browser memory. Traditional identities ran on race, class, gender, plain loyalty, money, or memory. Contemporary ones add proprietary operating systems to this mix. How is your newsfeed organized? Your loyalty scheme? How does your credit score soar or shrink? Who owns your interactions or opinions? To know yourself and kin today, forget about a shaman or a shrink. You might need a Ukrainian hacker.<sup>1</sup>





A close-up photograph of a cracked iPhone screen.

The roll call does not call people back to their origins or their true self. Rather, it drags them into an automated future. Identity appears *anew* when social relations are captured, privatized, and reorganized. Reality—the brute-force kind—is deeply algorithmic.

So, who does one belong to? Belonging is both about property and about social relations. Who owns social relations then?

### *Table Dance*

Marx's introduction to *Capital* features a cameo by a dancing table. The table, of course, is a commodity. It seems to move on its own, but this is an illusion. Its dance is animated by the interests and actions of the people around it, beneath it, behind it. Like a turning table, the commodity is animated by off-screen forces.<sup>2</sup>

Today the contrary applies. The table has transformed into a set of platforms, which turn people against one another, making their movements appear autonomous when they aren't. Their "dance" is animated by the interests and actions of underlying platforms—or rather than "animated": automated. To put it more succinctly: Digital platforms are not expressions of social relations among people. Social relations among people are automated by platforms.<sup>3</sup>

As technology churns out ever more universal aspirations—from cyberspace to the internet of everything to Ether—it works by segregation in high definition, fueled by organized depression, failing bureaucracy, magic sauce. Rancor is monetized. Rage fuels the machine. Hate pays off handsomely. Intensity is mined as industry. Digital chaos is a ladder, not a pit.<sup>4</sup> It divides people into peoples: defined as customers-slash-clans, linked by ancestry or algorithm, DNA or DNS, being @real yet unequal.

How does technological identity management relate to right-wing troll-powered isolationism? Do today's reactionary identity politics anticipate systems of pervasive technological address?<sup>5</sup> Do protocols of future quantification already cast their shadow over contemporary reality? How come quantitative realism—a roll call of a different sort—aligns so well with nativist politics?<sup>6</sup>

The algorithmic provocation of identity has engulfed art as well. Mega art shows gush about ritual and nonalienation while deploying clay and cymbals. But disavowing digital reality means falling under the spell of its prefabricated structures. Shows splinter into aggregated filter bubbles. Biography replaces context. Hashtag curating (#genocide) tosses ethnographic samples into 3-D space. As Marshall McLuhan flatly states: "A moral point of view too often

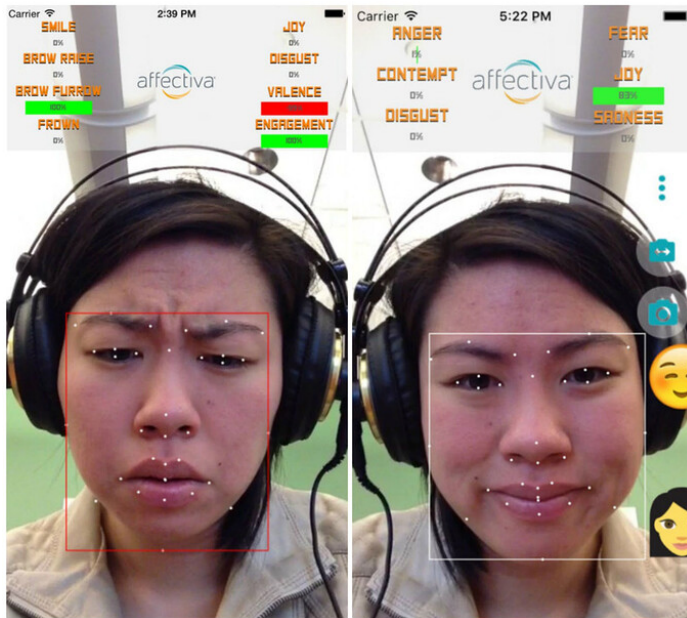
# **ENYA FAN CLUB LOOKING FOR LIKE-MINDED INDIVIDUALS.**



We meet every Thursday at 8 pm at the MacArthur Mall food court. If it's your first time you have to buy Sbarro for the club. Email for info.



serves as a substitute for understanding in technological matters.”<sup>7</sup>



Affectiva's facial recognition software promises to automate affective labor with "emotional recognition." It does so by interpreting facial expressions into easily readable emojis for AI to customize responses to clients' different emotions.

### *Black Square as Document*

That's where we circle back to the October Revolution. If contemporary realisms are algorithmic, how about abstraction today? Or—what is the equivalent of *The Black Square* in the age of Reality TV?

Let's look at *The Black Square* again then, from the perspective of today. What if Malevich's *Black Square* was a documentary image? What if it actually showed the universe in the sense of outer space?<sup>8</sup> This perspective on the universe would not be a claim on totality or monopoly, but a claim to reality itself, in its less-than-perfect, even fragmented form. *The Black Square* might show the universe in all its imperfection. From this point of view, the universe is not another territory to be ingested, not a frontier to be exploited and mined, not a maximalist scam or a kingdom come seen from above. It is a humble portrait in very low resolution—perhaps just one pixel, give or take.

This documentary approach to the universe is different from traditional philosophical or religious ideas of universalism, which claimed to be for all, but usually worked only for a few.<sup>9</sup> From this perspective, universality is not the biggest common denominator. It is not a generalization of everything. There is no general ordering position or definition. This kind of universality is not

strategic, but strange. Why? Seen scientifically, the universe is a strange and vastly unknown entity with many different interlocking dimensions. It potentially consists of strange matter, wormholes, and complex n-dimensional non-euclidian spaces, in which terms like "grid," "immanence," "territory," and "exclusion" dramatically change or even lose their meaning.<sup>10</sup>

Strange universalism is something both more and less than general, both below and beyond the realm of forms.<sup>11</sup> Under current conditions, it cannot fully grasp let alone own itself. It does not refer to a "whole" or a totality, but to something smaller than its parts,<sup>12</sup> each one potentially exceeding it in detail and complexity. Anyone younger than nine years old knows that a couple of universes easily fit into a pocket.

### *This is the Universe*

Seen from this perspective, *The Black Square* cancels the blank horror of the white canvas as a seemingly neutral and objective ground. It resolutely replaces its bleak tabula rasa with a fragment of the cosmos. *The Black Square* is neither ground nor figure, neither background nor projection screen. It is a base without a superstructure, full of hidden undercurrents shining forth through its cracks.<sup>13</sup> Seen as just space, *The Black Square* is both fully documentary and completely encrypted, both abstract and indexical. It shows absence as link.<sup>14</sup>



Pucker up! A protester in Macedonia weaponizes lipstick. Photo: Biljana Ginova & Jasmina Golubovska.

*The Black Square* is not the same as it was one hundred years ago, even materially.<sup>15</sup> Its meanings have been amplified through its own aging and history, even if Malevich *most definitely* didn't intend any of it. What if one chose *now* to see the network of its cracked and decaying paint as anticipating the recent detection of filaments of so-called dark matter—a web connecting





Deliveroo servers' downtime, January 2017. This image was originally used to illustrate the text "Far From Seamless: a Workers' Inquiry at Deliverooby" by authors Facility Waters and Jamie Woodcock, see →.

distant galaxies?<sup>16</sup> What other meanings will the painting lend itself to in another hundred years?

But all this avoids the question: What is *The Black Square*'s equivalent in the age of Reality TV?

The answer is very simple: today, *The Black Square* could be anywhere. It is potentially ubiquitous. It has pervaded reality without anyone noticing. It has gone viral like a 3-D meme. Today, *The Black Square* is any TV or phone screen that is switched off. *The Black Square* has become The Black Screen.

Whatever is shown on screens today is mostly numbers posing as people. In contrast, The Black Screen does not present media realisms, but rather the reality of mediation. It doesn't show Reality TV, but demonstrates that proliferating screens are real. The black surface of the screen could be the exterior of the black-box algorithms operating behind it. In this case, The Black Screen becomes a documentary image of real-existing technology and its nontransparent mode of operation. *The Black Square*'s white frame is replaced by a slim metal frame bearing the name of a corporation. This is the new normal, the standard blank page or canvas.

But one could also turn the table once again. The Black Screen thus becomes a platform *under* which people move undetected and undeterred. It is not like Uber, but like *unter*, not used from above but from below. In a grid

made of these kinds of Black Screens, every single square would point to the universe, and nothing but the universe. This grid might be the negative version of corporate and populist identity management, which classifies, ranks, and rates. If platforms turn tables against people, one could also turn the platforms: in this case, upside down.

So close your eyes a little, squint a bit: through the dark screen, the universe looks back at you.

## X

*Author's note: This is a draft for a future text and thus it does not yet contain the full credits and references. For the moment let me refer to Wendy Chun, Boris Groys, Helen Kaplinsky, Trevor Paglen, Stephen Squibb, David Riff, Fred Moten, and Stefano Harney—this list is far from complete.*

**Hito Steyerl** is a filmmaker, moving-image artist, writer, and innovator of the essay documentary. Her principal topics of interest are media, technology, and the global circulation of images. Through her writing practice, films, and performative lectures, Steyerl considers the status of the image in an increasingly global and technological world.

**Julieta Aranda** is an artist and an editor of *e-flux journal*.

**Brian Kuan Wood** is an editor of *e-flux journal*.

**Stephen Squibb** is intimately familiar with the highways linking Brooklyn, New York with Cambridge, Massachusetts.

**Anton Vidokle** is an editor of *e-flux journal* and chief curator of the 14th Shanghai Biennale: Cosmos Cinema.

1  
Sorry Ukrainian hackers! In this case you are performing a social service for people, such as US farmers who are not allowed to repair their own tractors because the software remains the property of a corporation.

2  
Table-turning—that parlor trick whereby spiritualist performers made ghosts dance for a select few—is Marx's metaphor for the commodity. [See also David Riff, "Was Marx a Dancer?," *e-flux journal* (November 2015) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/67/60712/was-marx-a-dancer/>]

3  
Of course, this is a complete oversimplification. People have agency. But what exactly moves people today, and *how* it makes them move, is difficult to assess in a world where platforms manipulate social affect through fake rage, perception management, and permanent disruption. By "platforms" I mean primarily social media, but this could also come to mean any kind of decentralized autonomous organization (DAO), smart contract, or coin scheme on a blockchain or high-definition digital-address system. A great example is described in Facility Waters and Jamie Woodcock's text "Far From Seamless: a Workers' Inquiry at Deliveroo" See <https://www.viewpointmag.com/2017/09/20/far-seamless-workers-inquiry-deliveroo/>

4  
Littlefinger meets Aleksandr Dugin.

5  
Of course they do. They also recall earlier systems of this kind, taking us back to the time of radio-instigated ethnic cleansing, printing-press disseminated anti-Semitism, and IBM/Hollerith-enabled deportation lists.

6  
See Suely Rolnik's wonderful analysis in this issue. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/163107/the-spheres-of-insurrection-suggestions-for-combating-the-pimping-of-life/>

7  
Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 245.

8  
This was an argument advanced

by the show "Art Without Death: Russian Cosmism," curated by Anton Vidokle and Boris Groys at HKW earlier this year. See also Groys's text in this issue. There is no indication that Malevich intended *The Black Square* to show outer space, except for abundant references to the cosmos throughout his work. Yet, reading a seeming abstraction as a portrait is encouraged by the red square of his *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*. I've made this point earlier in a text called *The Empire of Senses* (<http://eipcp.net/transversal/1007/steyerl/en> at eipcp) where I also discuss Alain Badiou's reading of *White on White* in *Die Passion des Realen*, Alain Badiou, *Das Jahrhundert*, Zürich: Diaphanes, 2006, S 70ff. This point has also been made by Trevor Paglen in unpublished presentations about his project *Orbital Reflector*.

9  
This point requires a lengthy explanation, which I will need to provide in a longer version of this piece to be written in the future. But the point is partly addressed in Boris Buden conversation with Darko Suvin in this issue.

10  
And potentially sunlight organizes in a semi-intelligent way, see Stephen Squibb's text in this issue. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/163107/the-spheres-of-insurrection-suggestions-for-combating-the-pimping-of-life/>

11  
See Yuk Hui in this issue. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/163107/the-spheres-of-insurrection-suggestions-for-combating-the-pimping-of-life/>

12  
Thanks to Tim Morton for making this clear to me and for pointing me to "On Black Negativity, Or the Affirmation of Nothing: Jared Sexton, interviewed by Daniel Colucciello Barber," see <http://societyandspace.org/2017/09/18/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing/>

13  
See Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's piece in this issue.

14  
See also <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94158/all-black-everything/>

15  
I am referring to the claim by

Russian's State Tretyakov Gallery, where *The Black Square* is housed, that the white border of the painting bears the traces of an erased racist graffito. There are different opinions as to who scrawled it, but regardless, in my view this is what the white frame in this composition is all about. See Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Inscribed Vandalism: *The Black Square* at One Hundred," *e-flux journal* 85 (October 2017) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155475/inscribed-vandalism-the-black-square-at-one-hundred/>

16  
See "Researchers capture first 'image' of a dark matter web that connects galaxies," *phys.org*, April 12, 2017 <https://phys.org/news/2017-04-capture-image-dark-web-galaxies.html>

# Boris Buden and Darko Suvin Only Intelligent Planning Can Save Us

**Boris Buden:** Universalism is not an innocent concept. In “The Grandeur and Twilight of Radical Universalism,” published shortly after the fall of historical communism, Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér, former Marxist philosophers and disciples of Georg Lukács, accused Marx and his followers of turning the Hegelian concept of universalism into a philosophy of praxis, a “predictive and action-orienting device” applied to change the world. This, they say, is what then led to the gulag and all the horror of so-called communist totalitarianism—the burden of guilt that seems to fall on anyone who dares to still claim a universalist stance today. Still, you have never abandoned universalism.

**Darko Suvin:** I’m not too fond of the term “universalism,” but I accept it as a shorthand that respects the fact that today capitalism has, with its attendant technology, put *all* our lives—that is, the universal existence of *Homo sapiens* and probably all vertebrates too—into danger and doubt. I don’t want to discuss Fehér and Heller, understandably shell-shocked as they were by the particularly repulsive Hungarian Stalinist terror up to 1956, and then by the ensuing stasis of “goulash communism.” However, as Brecht remarks, the stone does not excuse the fallen, and Heller in particular is simply a full-scale renegade fleeing to postmodernist neoliberalism.

Any intelligent—that is, radical—left necessarily responds to total capitalism and must therefore itself totalize and globalize. It must also historicize, in contrast to capitalism, which lives only for the next profit, which exists imaginatively only in the immediate future—only as far as the next day or the next year, but no longer. The left, if it is to exist, must imaginatively exist in the wrongs of the past (as Benjamin stressed) and in all the futures—immediate, medium, and long-term—and then apply all of these to a much richer human present. To give just one example: the overwhelming evidence (see Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything*) is that the capitalist-induced climate catastrophe is raising sea levels and will relatively soon create tens of millions of new “climate refugees” and force all the ports in the world to be rebuilt. This will of course result in new dictatorial powers for the exploiters, whether covert or quite overt. Therefore, only the neoliberal murderers of millions can afford not to universalize, and they can afford this because they make the 99 percent of us pay for it.

**BB:** But have they also succeeded in making universalism for us 99 percent definitely useless?

**DS:** Their anti-universalist arguments are generally feeble and disingenuous, for universal rule could theoretically be of any kind. It could be Stalinist, though this was evidently not in the cards. It could be the warfare-oriented dictatorship of financial capitalism plus a few Western





An image allegedly taken after the destruction of Monument to the Victory of the people of Slavonia in Croatia, 1992.

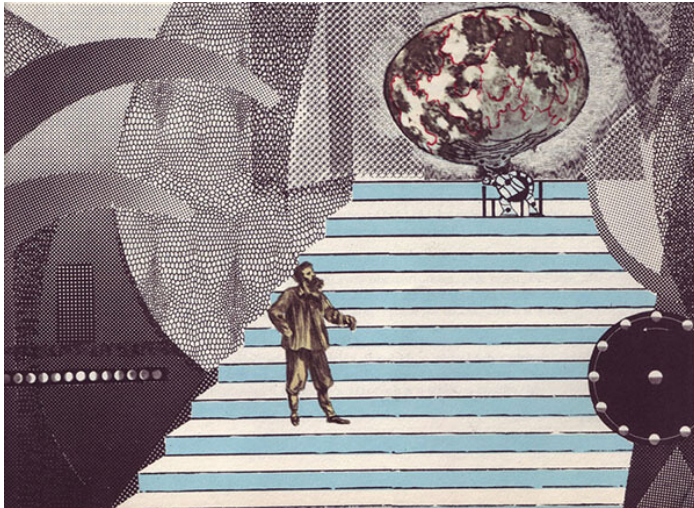
armies, as today; this could, in the coming dire emergencies, easily evolve into neofascist rule, which a fraction of the present rulers have already prepared as a backup. There could also be, in theory and in a truly libertarian communist-oriented practice, a universal direct and associative democracy. It all depends on us, on how we use universalism: as a strategic horizon that *does not* deny today for tomorrow or the local for the global, but rather defends here and now better because of the interaction of the general with the particular. All such strategies exist, as a first sketch, in people such as Brecht, Benjamin, Gramsci, and Gayatri Spivak, of whom the shell-shocked do not speak. They speak of a self-constructed straw men.

**BB:** Your mentioning the necessity to historicize evokes today, in our allegedly post-historical age, the famous demand by Fredric Jameson: “Always historicize!” Is this what you wanted to achieve with your recently published book *Splendour, Misery, and Potentialities: An X-Ray of Socialist Yugoslavia* (2016)—historicizing, not as saving the past from oblivion but as the creation of a genuine historical experience, one that, however particular and

concrete, can still be totalized and globalized for the sake of the future?

**DS:** Yes, the book in that sense follows Jameson’s warning, and he even kindly supplied a very pithy introduction to it. True, I officially trained in literature and theater—and have from my philological training retained, I trust, an eye for shapes and an ear for the meanings of words and artifacts. However, I’ve also had a lifelong fascination with questions usually posed by philosophy, such as “what does this mean?” or “what values are present or absent here?”—all of them inextricably wedded to political economics as our Destiny. And I was born and bred in Yugoslavia, living my childhood under the fascists and my youth as a Titoist activist. I could not understand how something that had started so well, as a genuine plebeian and liberatory revolution, finished in the worst possible way, as misery, hatred, and fratricide, leading to a full counterrevolution. So I wrote a book on this subject because I would have liked to read one and there wasn’t any. And then I realized that in fact nobody inside ex-Yugoslavia was supposed to write about it; it was discouraged. Hypocritically, it was not explicitly forbidden;





Illustrations by Adolf Hoffmeister for the 1964 Czech translation of *The First Men in the Moon* by H. G. Wells.

but nobody would finance it, nor could you make a scholarly career if you insisted on pursuing the subject.

**BB:** During the war in the Nineties this oblivion took even more oppressive forms, targeting not only “a better past” but also the utopian dimension of the future, which was a constitutive element of Yugoslavian socialist modernity.

**DS:** “Oblivion” is too normal a term for what was and still is happening in “post-communism,” in that famous “transition” to primordial, predatory, or *Raub* capitalism without a human face in the whole of the ex-Soviet bloc plus Yugoslavia. The counterrevolutions may have in some cases (not in most of ex-Yugoslavia) been velvet ones, but for the most part they always had an iron fist consisting of military violence and financial reengineering toward scarcity and dependence on private funding: in brief, a violence dependent on tanks and banks.

This violence, the suppression of alternatives and indeed of the memory of what was good in the Socialist Federal Republic (SFR) of Yugoslavia, seems to be twofold, implicit or latent and explicit or manifest. I don’t know which is worse. I have mentioned the implicit (the withholding of funds for unwelcome research). It could be enlarged to include, for example, the Catholic Church’s steady and successful drive to take over all the key posts in Croatian higher education. As to the manifest violence, we all know about the open killing of people in the Yugoslav Secession Wars, but few know that, for example in Croatia, which is where both of us come from and know most about, hundreds of socialist monuments commemorating the Liberation War of 1941–45 were blown up *manu militari* by Tudjman, a couple of thousand if you also include the commemorative plaques—all of this without any law or public debate. This included some great works of modernist art and architecture. Some of the best of those monuments (by the great Vojin Bakić, for example) looked

like futuristic spaceships taking off, probably towards the sun of freedom and openness. This symbolic example must be read as a deep hatred on the part of the new clerico-fascist rulers for anything that spoke of a radically different future.

The implicit and explicit violence fuse in the burning of books. All public libraries had to scrap not only all books printed in Cyrillic but also many in the approved Latin script that had an ideologically suspect horizon. This is quite equivalent to the 1933 Nazi burning of books. Yet Croatia was then admitted to the European Union as a virtuous member ...

Writing my book, I found out that the centerpiece of SFR Yugoslavia was an attempt at workers’ control over production and similar ways of organizing in the cultural sphere. It was a half-hearted attempt and did not seek full control. Still, it produced remarkable enthusiasm and economic results up to about the mid-1960s, and it was certainly in all respects better for the great majority of working people than what they have today. Thence all the suppressions and damnations of memory!

**BB:** In his famous essay on freedom of the press, young Marx compared freedom to the solar system: each of its worlds, while turning on its own axis, revolves around the central sun of freedom (*die Zentralsonne der Freiheit*). As a young Marxist in what was then Tito’s Yugoslavia, you turned your intellectual interests towards the Universe—by discovering and exploring the imaginary worlds of science fiction (SF). Was it the central sun of freedom that you were searching for?

**DS:** Of course it was: freedom and its twin, knowledge, understanding, or cognition. As Giordano Bruno told us (which got him burned at the stake), innumerable worlds exist and are possible. Somebody in the 1950s optimistically called SF “a general staff of mankind, planning on paper its future battles.” Maybe the metaphor is too militaristic, but only intelligent planning can save us all. We must understand not only the most disparate potentialities of people—or intelligent species, SF calls them “psychozoa,” which I rather like—living together that slumber in our bosoms, but also, most importantly, the *price* each of these potentialities demands in human suffering. Thus all good SF unavoidably fuses the sweet hope of utopia (the good place) with the bitter but salvific draught of dystopia (the bad place, so near to the tendencies we see everyday): in the past it was Wells, Zamyatin, and Stapledon who wrote such stories; in the Golden Age of 1940–74 it was the generation of Heinlein, Simak, and so on, to that of Le Guin and the Strugatskys; and today it is writers such as Kim Stanley Robinson.

**BB:** We have already mentioned Fredric Jameson. In his *Archaeologies of the Future* he praises you not only for generically linking utopia with SF—meaning your definition of utopia as a “sociopolitical subgenre of

science fiction”—but even more importantly, for having conjoined SF with the utopian critical tradition by means of the Russian formalists’ notion of *ostranenie*, or Brecht’s V-effect. You, however, have complemented these critical notions with a cognitive meaning (“cognitive estrangement”), which reasserts the realistic implications of literary texts. But today, in our brave neoliberal world governed solely by the TINA principle (“there is no alternative”), interest in the social critique and the utopian and future-oriented thinking of SF seems to have completely evaporated. It’s as though Kant’s Enlightenment slogan “The starry sky above me and the moral law within me” has been revised, via a horror vision of a world of global warming and neoliberal self-destruction, to say, “The burning sun above me and the predatory greed within me.” Do you feel like you’re among the last few who still remembers the future?

**DS:** If conceiving SF as a general staff for humanity is too optimistic today, at least it could be an early warning system. For the estrangement (Shklovsky’s *ostranenie* or Brecht’s V-effect) in SF is based on a critical distance from the norms under which we live, mobilizing an imagination of otherness. Thus, there are, as you say, realistic implications of SF texts or movies at their best (though SF movies are almost all hopelessly falsified by Hollywood). There are two interlocking components here: first, the reader must perceive a believable alternative world, aesthetically coherent, pleasurable, and interesting (whether dark or bright); second, her understanding necessarily compares that alternative world to the world in which she lives: through the aesthetics or the narrative, we cannot help but think of real science, of real politics, and of their utopian alternatives. Of course, postmodern capitalists have no use for this alternative world, and drown it in a masochistic wave of safe horrors, zombies, vampires, and werewolves. As you say, it is as if Kant’s old slogan has been replaced by its dystopian antithesis, the capitalist predatory greed within us. This results in a pitch darkness into which we are descending; you can even literally see it in the lighting of most horror and supposedly SF movies and TV shows—in the darkness, say, of *Game of Thrones*. We live in the anti-Enlightenment. Light has been degraded by military co-optation, beginning with the light of explosions caused by killer drones and bombs, and ending with the atomic flash that is “brighter than a thousand suns”—which we might well see again in North Korea or wherever.

**BB:** Do you remember Robert A. Heinlein’s story “Universe,” the first part of his classic two-part SF novel *The Orphans of the Sky*? It is the story of the so-called “generation ship” *Vanguard*, which is cruising without guidance through the universe. Long ago a mutiny killed most of the crew and their descendants have forgotten the purpose and nature of the ship. They have even regressed into an irrational, pretechnological culture dominated by



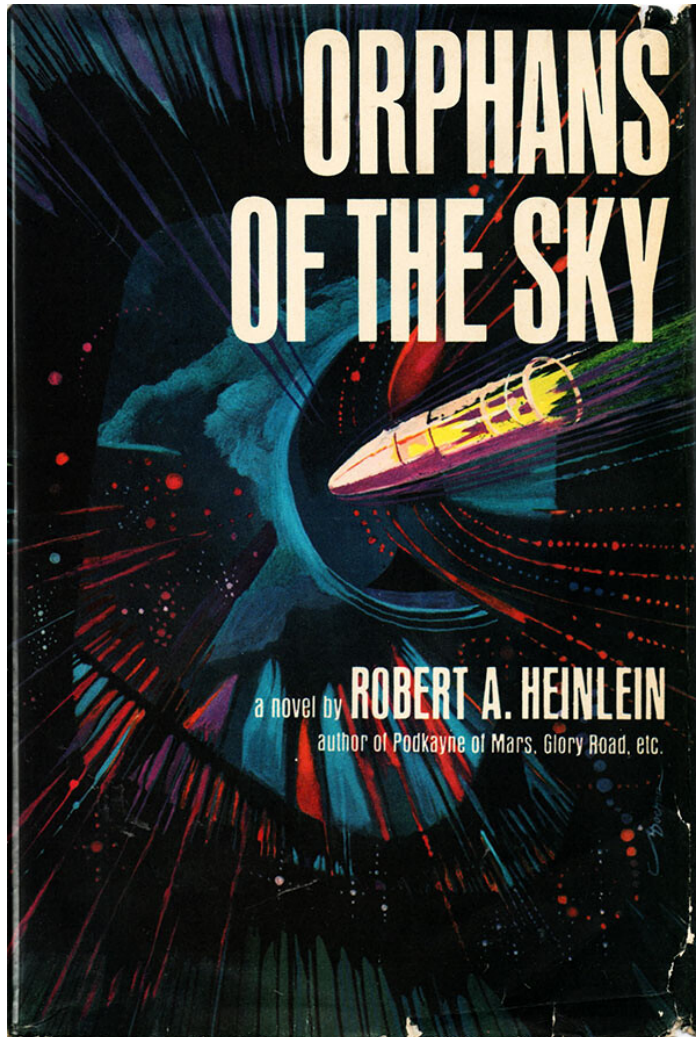
Monument to the Victory of the people of Slavonia. Designed by Vojin Bakić, built in 1968, destroyed in 1992. (Photo: Javno Vlasništvo/Public Domain). This image was initially published in the book Drago Zdunić, ed. *Revolucionarno kiparstvo* (Zagreb: Spekter, 1977).

superstition, and now mistake their ship for the whole universe. The picture weirdly resembles today’s identitarian communities; whole normative identity blocks (like the West) have forgotten their modernist, universalist pasts and adhere now to more or less fundamentalist religious beliefs: they mistake what they think or their own unique cultures for the universe itself. Imagine now that we both meet as passengers on that ship and I, like Heinlein’s hero Hoyland in the novel, similarly lost in space and time, ask you, “Hey! Shipmate! Where are we?”

**DS:** Indeed. Our friends Srećko Horvat and Igor Stiks say in their book’s title that we are “in the desert of post-socialism.” Fichte might say that we are in a perfectly sinful anti-utopia that actively suppresses historical memory and truth. Our shipmates believe they are forsaking a partially mythologized socialism—that at least had a glorious emancipatory past in almost all of Marx and most of Lenin—for rock-bottom reality. However, what they live in (and force us all to live in) is a totally mythologized, violent, and vengeful neocapitalism, talking of democracy not only amid obvious frauds such as the



money-driven US electoral system and the shamelessly ineffective elections of the European Union, but also—more importantly—amid the immiseration of the vast majority and the aided-and-abetted rise of neo-Nazism. We are in 1930 again but without any organized left—whatever its drawbacks—to fight against this rise. So we might well arrive at Fascism 2.0 (rebooted—the enemies being migrants and the left instead of Jews and communists).



Cover of the first US edition of Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel  
Orphans of the Sky (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964).

**BB:** It looks like those who have consciously abstained from historicizing are doomed to repeat the horrors of their past. Is the fear of grand narratives still strong?

**DS:** Doomed are those who have abandoned the courage to face the horrors of their present and who have allowed fear to command their minds. But good-old Kant knew it already—the problem is not our inability to think but our lack of courage to do so: “Dare to know!” he said. Back

then, as today, one had to dare. So, what has been the essence of history in the last sixty years? Using the slogans of free trade, civil society, and globalization, the rich have organized bundles of radical interventions by major states and organizations of international capitalism to make themselves vastly richer, while multiplying the poor in their nations, eviscerating any middle-class prosperity based on stable employment, and upping the income gap between rich and poor countries from 10:1 to 90:1. Facing the few thousand billionaires, today possibly three billion people struggle to survive, while more than half of them live in the most abject poverty, dying more or less quickly of hunger and attendant diseases; the hundred million dead and several hundred million other casualties of warfare in the twentieth century seem puny in comparison (though their terror and suffering was far from puny). It has been calculated that a 1 percent increase in US unemployment correlates with thirty-seven thousand deaths and an increase of four thousand inmates of mental hospitals, but the hidden psychic toll is surely greater. A large mass of chronically poor was thus created, then politically neutralized and turned towards neofascism by creating fear of even poorer immigrants. The purpose of the capitalist economy—profit—has led to mass death and unhappiness. For billions of people it means shorter and more painful lives. As the liberation theologian Franz Hinkelammert tells us, for everybody except maybe the richest 2 or 3 percent of the world, capitalism means disabling stress, gnawing want, and often utter despair.

It may well be that in the short term, our hope is realistically a hope without hope—*eine hoffnungslose Hoffnung* is the elegant German way of putting it (Kafka had some interesting things to say about this). The big difference from Heinlein's story is that this is compatible—as the Nazis proved once and for all—with the highest development of capitalist science and technology, thus multiplying the myth-masters' power by giga- or tera-factors, as they proudly say in bomb lore.

**BB:** Is all then lost?

**DS:** I think Mrs. Thatcher stole the TINA slogan from the left, very cleverly. But we can again say: socialism or barbarism, communist utopia or the collapse of civilization—TINA!

And nothing is ever finally lost—just look again at reborn Nazism. It depends on how people organize to change things for the better. But we better do it soon. Centrally, by using estrangement and cognition. Also much indignation, solidarity, and persistence.

X

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Hito Steyerl and Rojava Film  
Commune

# The Color of Women: An Interview with YPJ Commanders Dilovan Kobani, Nirvana, Ruken, and Zerin

*This interview was conducted on July 31, 2017 with four commanders of the YPJ, or Yekîneyên Parastina Jin (Women's Defense Units), an all-female military organization in Rojava. The commanders' names are Dilovan Kobani, Nirvana, Ruken, and Zerin.<sup>1</sup>*

**Rojava Film Commune and Hito Steyerl:** We would like to thank you for agreeing to talk to us, in this important and difficult time. As you know, the hundredth anniversary of the October Revolution is approaching. We think you are continuing the legacy of the October Revolution in a very different way. The October Revolution began as a women's protest. On March 8, 1917, tens of thousands of women in St. Petersburg demonstrated with banners for bread for children. They were women of all classes—farmers, female students, and later also textile workers. The dynamics of the uprisings, which began on that day, led to the revolution in November of the same year. What would you like to say about this?

**Dilovan Kobani:** In its beginning the October Revolution was kicked off by women, but soon after it succeeded, men took the power and pushed the women out. But in our case we (as women) formed an independent force. In the YPJ we are independent. We lead our armed force and political force ourselves. We do not carry out our revolution in the shadow of men. Our revolution is independent.

Women from all around the world are gathered here with us. German, Iranian, American—women from all nations joined us. And together we work on the revolution.

**Zerin:** The October Revolution was based on an economic premise. We don't need to go into historical details, but generally the main difference is the political foundation. In all countries and everywhere there are armies, right? And sometimes women also take part in these armies. But in our example, the women's force, the YPJ, is independent and our life, our fight, and our goals stand for this.

Women took part in every stage of the October Revolution. This cannot be denied. Women always played a role. Their effort is impossible to erase. And we consider ourselves their followers. But we have also realized that there are things we can criticize on a political level, and we have worked to improve these things.

What things? After the revolution was achieved, men said, there is no role women can play anymore. They excluded women. But in our example, women are even more visible and active than men. Because we do not want to repeat the same mistakes that were made back then.

After the collapse of real socialism, the remnants redeveloped as individual states. And these states fell under the influence of capitalist modernity. We are against this system of capitalist modernity, because we are





Commanders Dilovan Kobani, Nirvana, Ruken, and Zerin of the Yekineyên Parastina Jin (Women's Defense Units, an all-female military organization in Rojava).

socialists. This is vital for us: we do not want to become a state in the future. Because if we were to become a state, the role of women would disappear. Women's influence would disappear. Women would not be able to be fully active. We would like to make this life more beautiful through the color of women. Through the color of women, we would like to establish equality.

If women don't take part in a revolution, then that revolution is useless.

Without women, our revolution would collapse just like real-existing socialism.

Because women are leading, this revolution will survive.

**Nirvana:** The pioneers were Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, and Alexandra Kollontai. They worked for revolution but they remained in the shadow of men. Stalin disregarded women. These women revolted, but they couldn't form a movement. There was no sufficiently strong organization among women. And there was no armed power of women. For this reason, this system fell apart easily.

We are correcting their mistakes in our practice. Even when they were walking towards the gallows, some of the

women said, if we can be sent to the gallows, we should have the right to vote and be elected one day. But women restricted themselves by pursuing an electoral perspective above all else.

With the YPJ, our perspective has also become more universal. There are women from all nations and classes coming here and fighting. They know exactly what they are fighting for.

**RFC and HS:** What does it mean to fight for all humanity? While people are in their warm beds, young women and girls are literally crawling through barbed wire to join you to fight "for humanity." Why do you say that you fight for all humanity? Why keep up this internationalist tradition while many great powers isolate themselves and incite various groups of people against one another—and while many Western leftists retreat into ethno-identitarian or nationalist ideology?

**DK:** If we were fighting only for the benefit of just one nation, we would have been done by now. It would have been so easy. But our revolution is not only for Kurds. Look at Daesh. It is not only a danger to Kurds. Daesh has posed an enormous danger to the world as a whole. But no one in the world could stand in its way. We as the YPG [Yekineyên Parastina Gel; People's Defense Units] and the YPJ blocked it via a revolutionary war, and this revolution

was recognized. Yes, we are fighting for all humans, and the whole of humanity is also fighting with us. This revolution doesn't only belong to Kurds. This revolution is not only about the revolution of Kurdish women. This revolution is the revolution of women throughout the world. We are continuing Rosa Luxemburg's fight. If this was only for a nation, it wouldn't be called "revolution." We are waging this revolution for everyone. For people that are oppressed, for the women murdered in Sinjar, for the women oppressed in Europe and elsewhere. If today an Iranian woman is raped by a man and executed for this reason, I will ask for her rights.

We started this revolution for humanity. And for this reason humanity started joining us. And from now on, this will continue and grow stronger. As the YPJ, we say, wherever Daesh goes, we will go after them, we will not let them go. Wherever Daesh wages a war, we will take a stand against it as the YPJ.

Fighting for humanity is a big honor for us. We started this revolution for everyone, and we will continue. Until all women are free, we will continue our fight, we will not rest.

**RFC and HS:** In the YPJ, women from different places are active. How does everyone live together?

**Zerin:** Actually, it is not that difficult. Among us, there are Arab women, Iranian women, Turks, Americans, Germans. Some were killed in combat, like our German friend Ivana Hoffman, as just one example. We share the same political beliefs. In this case it doesn't matter where you come from. We live as equals. In our daily life, our education and training in fighting and tactics, we don't have problems.

Sometimes we have language problems with understanding each other.

But because we accept each other and our lives and politics, there is a great love towards each other. For example, between Arabs or Iranians—or no matter which nation—when there is pain and trouble, we can overcome them because of common sympathy.

There can be psychological or physical difficulties. But it is not difficult to live together, because we fight for the same thing, we live for the same thing.

**RFC and HS:** What can we learn from your way of living together?

**Nirvana:** Communality, women's organization, women's bravery and willpower. When women become more conscious, the fear in them disappears. When fear disappears, women become rebellious. They wonder about and research their history. They reclaim their history. What we are doing here is looking for our history that has been left in the dark for so long.

**Ruken:** Until now, no one initiated a revolution for women. Also, the history of women is not written truthfully. From the October Revolution until today, the true history of women should be revealed. It is true that women are fighting today on the frontlines, against Daesh and others. But without revealing the true history of women, our revolution might not bring full rights for women, just like the October Revolution.

**A male voice:** It would be nice if you could talk a little bit about the influence of the YJP over Rojavan society itself.

**Ruken:** Yes. We tried to explain that in the beginning. Over society, over men, over your mentality, too. [ *Laughter* ] Don't worry about it! ... It is all happening, slowly.

**RFC and HS:** What do you want for the future?

**Zerin:** As revolutionaries, as an army of women, of course our desire is equality, permanent equality. Not only for Kurds and their land, not only for the Middle East, but for the whole world. Because the pride of humanity is one, and in our times, it's trampled under foot. No one should be ruling, no one should be oppressed. We would like the whole world to know about our philosophy and politics.

**Nirvana:** As a friend stated, we would like to spread our paradigm, a women-oriented ecological democracy, to every corner of the world, from Asia to Europe to Africa, especially among women.

**DK:** We share more or less the same ideas: establishing equality in the world until everyone is free and equal. When we say freeing people, we mean that men aren't free either because of their mentality. Removing this patriarchal mentality is freeing all of humanity, and this is our main purpose for the future. And we will pursue this until the end.

[ *Laughter* ]

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*Translation by Reşit Ballıkaya, Baran Yoldas. Thank you to Şêro Hindê and Rojava film Commune.*

**Hito Steyerl** is a filmmaker, moving-image artist, writer, and innovator of the essay documentary. Her principal topics of interest are media, technology, and the global circulation of images. Through her writing practice, films, and performative lectures, Steyerl considers the status of the image in an increasingly global and technological world.



1

Note: I am just filling in here, as many of my journalist friends who would be much better equipped to do political interviews are in Turkish jails. Unfortunately, many Turkish professionals have been arrested, forced into exile, expropriated, and intimidated. As soon as Zehra Doğan, Meşale Tolu, Ahmet Şık, Omer Çelik, Seyithan Akyüz, Akın Atalay, Kemal Sancılı, and Deniz Yücel (to give just a random and incomplete list) and all others are freed, I promise I will go back to writing about JPEGs or VR. Please support the freedom of journalists, writers, artists, and liberal and leftist activists in Turkey, or you will have to endure more terrible journalism. —Hito Steyerl



Among the jokes in President Barack Obama's 2016 White House Correspondents' Dinner address were a few targeting Senator Bernie Sanders. Sanders was running a surprisingly strong campaign against former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination:

What an election season. For example, we've got the bright new face of the Democratic Party here tonight—Mr. Bernie Sanders! (Applause.) There he is—Bernie! (Applause.) Bernie, you look like a million bucks. (Laughter.) Or to put it in terms you'll understand, you look like 37,000 donations of 27 dollars each. (Laughter and applause.) A lot of folks have been surprised by the Bernie phenomenon, especially his appeal to young people. But not me, I get it. Just recently, a young person came up to me and said she was sick of politicians standing in the way of her dreams. As if we were actually going to let Malia go to Burning Man this year. (Laughter.) That was not going to happen. (Laughter.) Bernie might have let her go. (Laughter.) Not us. (Laughter.) I am hurt, though, Bernie, that you've distancing yourself a little from me. (Laughter.) I mean, that's just not something that you do to your comrade. (Laughter and applause.)<sup>1</sup>

Jodi Dean

## Four Theses on the Comrade

The last joke points to the socialist opening Sanders's campaign cut into US politics. At first glance, it seems like red-baiting, Obama's thinly veiled reminder that Sanders was a self-identified socialist and thus politically unacceptable. But this reminder could also have been less red-baiting than it was simply highlighting the fact that Sanders wasn't actually a member of the Democratic Party, and so wasn't Obama's party comrade at all. Sanders was running for the Democratic nomination, but he wasn't a Democrat. An additional layer to the joke appears when we recall the US right's attacks on Obama as himself a socialist or communist. For eight years, the right excoriated Obama as the most radical left-wing president the US has ever had. Calling out "Comrade Obama," it associated Obama with Lenin and Stalin, Che and Mao. This right-wing context makes sense of the unexpected appearance of "comrade" in the words of a US president when we recognize that the joke points not to Sanders as a comrade but to Obama as a comrade. Obama is referring to himself as Sanders's comrade, to himself as someone who shares with Sanders a common political horizon, the emancipatory egalitarian communist horizon denoted by the term "comrade." If they are on the same side, if Obama is Sanders's comrade, then Obama should have been able to expect a little solidarity.

The term "comrade" points to a relation, a set of expectations for action. It doesn't name an identity; it highlights the sameness of those who share a politics, a



common horizon of political action. If you are a comrade, you don't publicly distance yourself, even a little bit, from your party. Comradeship binds action and in this binding works to direct action toward a certain future. For communists this is the egalitarian future of a society emancipated from the determinations of capitalist production and reorganized according to the free association, common benefit, and collective decisions of the producers.

This essay presents four theses on the comrade.

### *Survivors and Systems*

Two opposed tendencies dominate contemporary left theory and activism: survivors and systems. The first inhabits social media, academic environments, and some activist networks. It is voiced through intense attachment to identity and appeals to intersectionality. The second predominates in more aesthetic and conceptual venues as a post-humanist concern with geology, extinction, algorithms, "hyperobjects," bio-systems, and planetary exhaustion.<sup>2</sup> On the one side, we have survivors, those with nothing left to cling to but their identities, often identities forged through struggles to survive and attached to the pain and trauma of these struggles.<sup>3</sup> On the other, we have systems, processes operating at a scale so vast, so complex, that we can scarcely conceive them let alone affect them.<sup>4</sup>

These two tendencies correspond to neoliberal capitalism's dismantling of social institutions, to the

intensification of capitalism via networked personalized digital media and informatization, what I call "communicative capitalism."<sup>5</sup> More and more people experience more and more economic uncertainty, insecurity, and instability. Jobs are harder to find, easier to lose. Most people can't count on long-term employment, or expect that benefits like health insurance and retirement packages will be part of their compensation. Many people's work is more precarious—flex-work, temp-work, contract-work—ideologically garnished as "entrepreneurial." Unions are smaller and weaker. Schools and universities face cuts to budgets and faculty, additions of administrators and students, more debt, less respect. Pummeled by competition, debt, and the general dismantling of the remnants of public and infrastructural supports, families crumble. Neoliberal ideology glosses the situation as one where individuals have more choice, more opportunity to exercise personal responsibility.

Carl Schmitt famously characterized liberalism as replacing politics with ethics and economics.<sup>6</sup> Correlatively, we should note the displacement of politics specific to neoliberalism. There is individualized self-cultivation, self-management, self-reliance, self-absorption, and—at the same time—impersonal determining processes, circuits, and systems. We have responsible individuals, individuals who are responsabilized, treated as loci of autonomous choices and decisions, and we have individuals encountering situations that are utterly determined and outside their control. Instead of ethics and economics, neoliberalism's displacement of politics manifests in the opposition between survivors and systems. The former struggle to persist in conditions of unlivability rather than to seize and



transform these conditions. The latter are systems and “hyperobjects” determining us, often aesthetic objects or objects of a future aesthetics, something to view and diagram and predict and perhaps even mourn, but not to affect.<sup>7</sup>

Survivors experience their vulnerability. Some even come to cherish it, to derive their sense of themselves from their survival against all that is stacked against them. Sociologist Jennifer Silva interviewed a number of working-class adults in Massachusetts and Virginia.<sup>8</sup> Many emphasized their self-reliance. Other people were likely to continue to fail or betray them. To survive, they could count only on themselves. Some of the young adults described struggles with illness and battles with addiction, the challenge of overcoming dysfunctional families and abusive relationships. For them, the fight to survive is the key feature of an identity imagined as dignified and heroic because it has to produce itself by itself.

Accounts of systems are typically devoid of survivors. Human lives don’t matter; the presumption that they matter is taken to be the epistemological failure or ontological crime in need of remedy. Bacteria and rocks, planetary or even galactic processes, are what need to be taken into account, brought in to redirect thought away from anthropocentric hubris. When people appear, they are the problem, a planetary excess that needs to be curtailed, a destructive species run amok, the glitch of life.

The opposition between survivors and systems gives us a left devoid of politics. Both tendencies render political struggle, the divisive struggle over common conditions on behalf of a common project and future, unintelligible. In the place of politics we have the fragmenting assertion of particularity, of unique survival, and the obsession with the encroaching, unavoidable, impossibility of survival. Politics is effaced in the impasse of individualized survivability under conditions of generalized non-survival, of extinction.

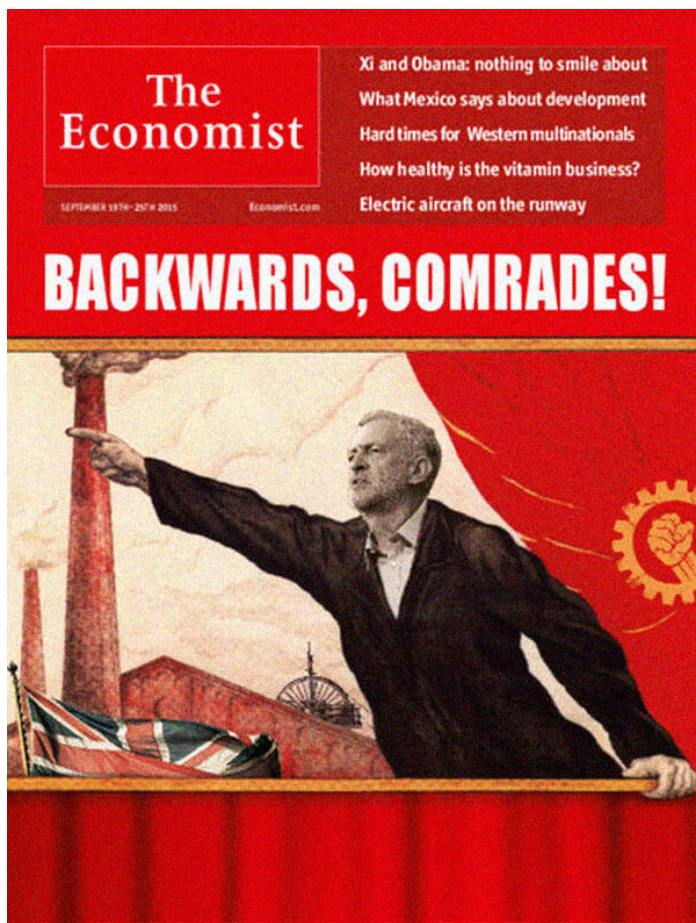
However strong the survivors and systems tendencies may be on the contemporary left, our present setting still provides openings for politics. Here are four.<sup>9</sup> First, communicative capitalism is marked by the power of many, of number. Capitalist and state power emphasizes big data and the knowledge generated by finding correlations in enormous data sets. Social media is driven by the power of number: How many friends and followers, how many shares and retweets? On the streets and in the movements, we see further emphasis on number—the many rioting, demonstrating, occupying, blockading. Second, identity is no longer able to ground a left politics uttered in its name. No political conclusions follow from the assertion of a specific identity. Attributions of identity are immediately complicated, critiqued, even rejected. Third, because of the astronomical increase in demands on our attention that circulate in communicative capitalism, a series of communicative shortcuts have emerged: hashtags, memes, emojis, reaction GIFs, as well as linguistic patterns optimized for search engines (lists, questions, indicators, hooks, and lures).<sup>10</sup> These shortcuts point to the prominence of generic markers, common images and symbols that facilitate communicative flow, that keep circulation liquid. If we had to read, much less think about, everything we shared online, our social-media networks would slow down, clog up. The generic serves increasingly as a container for multiplicities of incommunicable contents. Fourth, the movements themselves have come up against the limits of horizontality, individuality, and rhetorics of allyship that presuppose fixed identities and interests. The response has been renewed interest in the politics of parties and questions of the party form, renewed emphasis on organizing the many. Cutting through and across the impasse of survivor and system is a new turn toward arrangements of the many and institutions of the common.<sup>11</sup>

Against this background, I consider the comrade. The comrade figures a political relation that shifts us away from preoccupations with survivors and systems, away from suppositions of unique particularity and the impossibility of politics, and toward the sameness of those fighting on the same side.

*Thesis One: “Comrade” names a relation characterized by sameness, equality, and solidarity. For communists, this sameness, equality, and solidarity is utopian, cutting through the determinations of capitalist society.*

Multiple figures of political relation populate the history of political ideas. For centuries, political theorists have sought to explain power and its exercise via expositions of the duties and obligations, virtues and attributes of specific political figures. Machiavelli made the Prince famous (although he wasn’t alone in writing for or about princes). There are countless treatises on kings,





monarchs, and tyrants. Political theorists have investigated the citizen and foreigner, neighbor and stranger, lord and vassal, friend and enemy. Their inquiries extend into the household: master and slave, husband and wife, parent and child, sister and brother. They include the workplace: schoolmaster and pupil, bourgeois and proletarian. Yet for all these figurations of power, its generation, exercise, and limits, there is no account of the comrade. The comrade does not appear.

The absence of the comrade in American political theory could be a legacy of the Cold War. John McCumber's history of the impact of McCarthyism on the discipline of philosophy in the US notes the twenty-year disappearance of political philosophy from the field.<sup>12</sup> Political philosophy only reemerged in 1971 with John Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, a book that subordinated politics to questions of moral justification and secluded actual political and social issues behind a veil of ignorance. But the Cold War can't account for why few socialist and communist theorists produced systematic accounts of the characteristics and expectations of comrades. One exception is Alexandra Kollontai. Another is Maxim Gorky. Neither provides a systematic or analytical explication of the comrade as a figure of political relation. But they do give us an affective opening into the utopian promise of comradeship.

In her writings on prostitution, sex, and the family from the



early years of the Bolshevik Revolution, Kollontai presents comradeship and solidarity as sensibilities necessary for building a communist society. She associates comradeship with a "feeling of belongingness," a relation among free and equal communist workers.<sup>13</sup> "In place of the individual and egoistic family, a great universal family of workers will develop, in which all the workers, men and women, will above all be comrades."<sup>14</sup> "Comrade" points to a mode of belonging opposed to the isolation, hierarchy, and oppression of bourgeois forms of relation, particularly of the family under capitalism. It's a mode characterized by equality, solidarity, and respect; collectivity replaces egoism and self-assertion. In Russian, the word "comrade," *tovarish*, is gender neutral, so it replaces gendered forms of address.

Gorky has a short story from the early twentieth century, published in English in 1906 in *The Social Democrat*, simply titled "Comrade." The story testifies to the life-giving power of the word "comrade." Gorky presents "comrade" as a word that "had come to unite the whole world, to lift all men up the summits of liberty and bind with new ties, the strong ties of mutual respect."<sup>15</sup> The story depicts a dismal, "torturous" city, a city of hostility, violence, humiliation, and rage. In this city, the weak submit to the dominance of the strong. In the midst of this miserable suffering, one word rings out: comrade! And the people cease to be slaves. They refuse to submit. They become conscious of their strength. They recognize that they themselves are the force of life.

When people say "comrade," they change the world. Gorky's examples include the prostitute who feels a hand on her shoulder and then weeps with joy as she turns around and hears the word "comrade." With this word, she is interpellated not as a self-commodifying object to be enjoyed by another, but as an equal in common struggle against the very conditions requiring commodification. Additional examples are a beggar, a coachman, and young combatants—for all, "comrade" shines like a star that

# THE COMRADE



"THE CAPITALIST VAMPIRE" By WALTER CRANE.

guides them to the future.

Like Kollontai, Gorky associates the word "comrade" with freedom from servitude and oppression, with equality. Like her, he presents the comrade as opposed to capitalist egoism's exploitation, hierarchy, competition, and misery. And like Kollontai, Gorky links comradeship to a struggle for and vision of a future in which all will be comrades.

Similarly romantic celebrations of relations between comrades infuse the American journal *The Comrade*, published between 1901 and 1905. *The Comrade* was an illustrated monthly publication, targeted toward ethically minded middle-class socialists. It featured poems, short fiction, articles on industry and the conditions of the working classes, translations from European socialists, and autobiographical essays such as "How I Became a Socialist." Inspired in part by Walt Whitman's "manly love of comrades," the journal echoes Whitman's homoeroticism, homosociality, and celebratory queerness.<sup>16</sup> Comrade relations are relations of a new type, relations that disrupt the confines of the family and heteropatriarchy. The short story "The Slave of a Slave" is a good example: the protagonist is a tomboy who tries to save a poor woman from her brutal husband and, failing to do so, nevertheless expresses gratitude that she herself will never be a woman.<sup>17</sup> This queerness reappears today in contemporary Chinese where the term "comrade," *tongzhi*, also means gay.

*The Comrade* featured poems extolling the comrade and

comradeship. George D. Herron's "A Song of To-Morrow" dreamed "Of comrade-love, will fill the world."<sup>18</sup> Edwin Markham's poem "The Love of Comrades" evoked comrade-bees. An additional Herron poem turned "comrade" into a prefix: comrade-day, comrade-home, comrade-march, comrade-future, comrade-stars.<sup>19</sup> Russian constructivist Alexander Rodchenko expanded the field of comradeship still further. He included comrade objects, comrade things. In 1925 he writes: "Our things in our hands must be also equals, also comrades."<sup>20</sup>

These examples from Bolsheviks and *The Comrade* link comradeship to a future characterized by equality and belonging, by a love and respect between equals so great that it can't be contained in human relations but spans to include insects and galaxies (bees and stars) and objects themselves. "Comrade" marks the division between the world of misery we have and the egalitarian communist world that will be.

As in Russian revolutionary history and early-twentieth-century Whitman-inspired homosocialism, so in contemporary Chinese does the term "comrade," *tongzhi*, replace hierarchical and gendered designations of relation with an "ideal of egalitarianism and utopianism." According to Hongwei Bao, *tongzhi* is intrinsically queer: it "maps social relations in a new way, a way that opens the traditional family and kinship structure to relations and connections between strangers who share the same political views, and it transforms private intimacy into public intimacy."<sup>21</sup> Bao's queer comrades resonate with Jason Frank's reading of Whitman's ethos of comradeship in his Calamus poems: erotic comradely relations destabilize and overcome "identitarian differences of locality, ethnicity, class, and occupation, sex, race, and sexuality."<sup>22</sup>

Kollontai, Gorky, and their queer comrades inspire a first thesis on the comrade: comrade is a generic and egalitarian—and for communists and socialists, utopian—figure of political relation. The egalitarian dimension of "comrade" names a relation that cuts through the determinations given by the present. This sense of comrade comes through in the conclusion of *The Wretched of the Earth* as Fanon appeals repeatedly to his readers as comrades: "Come, comrades, the European game is finally over, we must look for something else"; and the last line of the book, "For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must make a new start, develop a new way of thinking, and endeavor to create a new man."<sup>23</sup> Comrade is a mode of address appropriate to this endeavor. It is egalitarian, generic, and abstract and, in the context of hierarchy, fragmentation, and oppression, utopian.

Today, in a setting that is ever-more nationalist and authoritarian, increasingly competitive, unequal, and immiserated, in a world of anthropocenic exhaustion, it's hard to recapture the hope, futurity, and sense of shared



struggle that was part of an earlier revolutionary tradition. What, then, is comradeship for us? My wager is that a speculative-compositive account of comradeship, one that distills common elements out of the use of “comrade” as a mode of address, figure of belonging, and container for shared expectations, can provide us with a view of political relation necessary for the present. Comrades are more than survivors. They are those on the same side of a struggle for an emancipated egalitarian world.

*Thesis Two: Anyone but not everyone can be a comrade*

Who is the comrade? This question animates Greta Garbo’s first scene in Ernst Lubitch’s 1939 film, *Ninotchka*.<sup>24</sup> Iranoff, Buljanoff, and Kopalski are three minor Soviet trade officials who are in Paris to arrange the sale of jewels confiscated from Russian aristocrats. Alas, they give in to bourgeois temptations and become corrupted by the decadence of Parisian wealth, donning tuxedos and drinking champagne. Moscow gets wind of these developments and sends a comrade to straighten them out. As the scene opens, Iranoff, Buljanoff, and Kopalski are at the train station to meet their comrade. But who is the comrade? “How can we find somebody without knowing what he looks like?” asks Kopalski. Scanning the passersby, Iranoff thinks he sees the comrade. “That must be the one!” agrees Buljanoff. “Yes. He looks like a comrade.” But looks can be deceiving. As they walk toward him, the man they’ve identified greets someone: “Heil Hitler!” Iranoff shakes his head, “That’s not him.” Anyone could be their comrade. But not everyone. Some people are clearly not comrades. They are enemies. Iranoff, Buljanoff, and Kopalski can’t figure out who their comrade is by looking at them. Identity has nothing to do with comradeship.

As they wonder what they are going to do, they are approached by a woman (Garbo). She announces herself as Nina Ivanova Yakushova, envoy extraordinary. Kopalski and Iranoff note their surprise that Moscow sent a “lady comrade.” Had they known, they would have brought flowers. Yakushova admonishes them. “Don’t make an issue of my womanhood,” she says. “We’re here to work for all of us.” That she is a woman is to be disregarded. Again, identity has nothing to do with comradeship—it’s about work, the work of building socialism.

That anyone but not everyone can be a comrade accentuates how “comrade” names a relation that is at the same time a division. Comradeship is premised on inclusion and exclusion—anyone but not everyone can be a comrade. It is not an infinitely open or flexible relation but one premised on division and struggle. There is an enemy. But unlike Schmitt’s classic account of the political in terms of the intensity of the antagonism between friend and enemy, comradeship doesn’t concern the enemy. The fact of the enemy, of struggle, is the condition or setting of comradeship but it does not determine the relation between comrades. Comrades are those on the same side

of the division. With respect to this division, they are the same. Their sameness is that of those who are on the same side. To say “comrade” is to announce a belonging, and the sameness that comes from being on the same side.

This sameness appears not simply in the relation between party comrades but also in the military expression “comrade-in-arms.” “Comrade-in-arms” designates those who fight on the same side against an enemy, another military, another set of comrades-in-arms. In his introduction to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that “every comrade in arms represents the nation for every other comrade. Their brotherly love is the reverse side of the hatred they feel for you.”<sup>25</sup> Sartre’s slide into the language of brotherhood brings out the ethnic and blood underpinnings of the nation that Schmitt’s term “friend” occludes. Sartre alerts us, then, not only to comrades-in-arms’ common relation to the enemy (the hated, the one to be killed), not only to how comrades-in-arms are those on the same side, but also to the distinction between the comrade-in-arms and the comrade as a figure of belonging in the socialist and communist political tradition: the solidarity of comrades is not an inverted hatred. As we saw with Kollontai and Gorky, it’s a response to fragmentation, hierarchy, isolation, and oppression. In their being on the same side, comrades confront and reject fragmentation, hierarchy, isolation, and oppression with an egalitarian promise of belonging.

To reiterate: that anyone but not everyone can be a comrade highlights how comradeship designates a relation and a division—us and them—a political relation but one that is not the same as the relation between friend and enemy, an absolute and exclusive state relation. Instead, there is a space of possibility: anyone can be a comrade, but not everyone.



*Generic Not Unique*

Evoking those on the same side, “comrade” is a term of address and designation of relationship in the military, sometimes among schoolmates, and typical in socialist and communist parties. We gain some clarity regarding



the emancipatory egalitarian kernel of the term when we distinguish comradeship from other relations.

The relation between comrades is not a kinship relation. It is not the same as that between brothers, sisters, parents and children, spouses, or cousins. One's cousin may be one's comrade, but when adding "comrade" one is saying something else, designating an aspect of relation that the relation between cousins does not designate. The term "comrade" adds a political element, highlighting the fact that the cousins are on the same side. They share a politics that exceeds their blood or kinship relation. Kin may and do disagree politically. We may be related by blood without sharing a politics. The same holds for marriage. People can be spouses without being comrades. Frida Kahlo famously said of Diego Rivera, whom she married twice, "Diego is not anybody's husband and never will be, but he is a great comrade."<sup>26</sup> And just as the relationship between comrades is not mediated by blood or marriage, so is it not mediated via inheritance. Rather than passing on property and privilege, comrade cuts against them, disrupting their hierarchies with the egalitarian insistence of those fighting together on the same side.

The comrade is not the neighbor.<sup>27</sup> Living near someone does not make them your comrade. We may be part of the same locality, the same community, tribe, or neighborhood, without being comrades. Comradeship does not designate a spatial relation or an obligation stemming from proximity or shared sociality.

The comrade is not the citizen. Citizenship is a relation mediated by the state. Comradeship exceeds the state. It does not take the state as its frame of reference. One finds comrades all over the world. *The Comrade* is interesting on this score as it collects letters, speeches, articles, and other sorts of writings from European socialists. Even as the new US socialists are not yet part of the "international," they emphasize and affiliate with an international political movement. Comrade's rupture of citizen also manifests when we note state fear of communists as traitors, as those with loyalties to an organization other than the state. In the US during the Cold War (and still today in right-wing rhetoric), "comrade" was used in a derogatory way to accentuate the dangerous otherness of communists. Comrades may oppose other citizens.

The relation between comrades is not the same as the relation between friends. Claudio Lomnitz's *The Return of Comrade Ricardo Flores Magón* helps illustrate the point. Lomnitz describes the lifeworld of the Partido Liberal Mexicano, a transnational network of revolutionary libertarian communists operating in Mexico and the US and engaging in the Mexican Revolution. Mexican émigrés and exiles living in the US intertwined political work and the work to survive under capitalist conditions. Devoting everything to their cause, some comrades opened

themselves up to the opportunism of the less committed, to the exploitation of those who began to prioritize making their own way in the US. Tensions around sharing and work, politics and commitment, bled into suspicion of infiltrators. Lomnitz writes, "And if a comrade was thought to be opportunistic and had personal ambitions, that person could be prone to selling out and maybe even to selling out his comrades. For this reason, the line between personal dislikes and suspicions of treason could get thin, and work was required to keep them distinct."<sup>28</sup> Comrades may be friends but friendship and comradeship is not the same. We see this most clearly when friendships fray. Personal dislike does not mean that the person is not a comrade. In tight associations, comrade and friend relations blur and overlap. Maintaining the difference, the distance, between them takes work, important work. Comradeship requires a degree of alienation from the needs and demands of personal life to which friends must attend.

We learn from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* that friendship is a direct relation between two people for the benefit of each other. It's a relationship anchored in the person, for the benefit or excellence of the individual. In contrast, comradeship is broad—bees and stars, someone previously unknown now revealed as a comrade. Comradeship extends through intimate relations to stretch into relations with those we don't know personally at all. Anyone can be a comrade, whether they like me or not, whether they are like me or not.

The distinction between the comrade and the friend points to the inhuman dimension of the comrade: comradeship has nothing to do with the person or personality in its specificity; it's generic. Comradeship is abstract from the specifics of individual lives, from the uniqueness of lived experience. It concerns rather the sameness that comes from being on the same side in a political struggle. In this sense, the comrade is liberated from the determinations of specificity, freed by the common political horizon. Ellen Schrecker makes this point in her magisterial account of anticommunism in the United States. During the McCarthy period of communist persecution, there was a common assumption that "all Communists were the same."<sup>29</sup> Communists were depicted as puppets, cogs, automatons, robots, even slaves. In the words of "one of the McCarthy era's key professional witnesses," people who became communist were "no longer individuals but robots; they were chained in an intellectual and moral slavery that was far worse than any prison."<sup>30</sup> The truth underlying the hyperbolic claims of this anticommunist is the genericity of the comrade, of comrade as a disciplined and disciplining relation that exceeds personal interests. Comradeship isn't personal. It's political.

The "other relations"—kin, neighbor, citizen, friend—index degenerations of comradeship, errors that comrades make when they substantialize comradeship via race, ethnicity, nationality, and personality. We see this

substantializing error in Italian and German uses of “comrade” ( *camerata*, *Kamerad*) as a term of address. For them, “comrade” is a fascist political name. Yet this substantialization is clearly a degeneration: the fascist cannot say that anyone could be a comrade. German leftists (socialists, communists, anarchists) instead use *Genosse/ Genossen* and Italians use *compagno/ compagna*. *Genosse* comes from the old German word “*ginoz*,” which designated the shared enjoyment of something, enjoying something with someone.<sup>31</sup> Back to my point: the emancipatory egalitarian energy of “comrade,” its life-giving capacity and ability to map social relations in a new way, is a product of its genericity—anyone but not everyone can be a comrade. When comradeship bleeds into nationality, ethnicity, or race, when it is mistaken for a relation supposed to benefit an individual, and when it is equated with relations mediated by the state, the cut of the generic is lost.

*Thesis Three: The Individual (as a locus of identity) is the “other” of the comrade*

Comradeship is not a relation of identity. As we see in *Ninotchka*, an issue should not be made of the comrade’s womanhood; all have work to do. Comrade does not specify an identity. On the left, comrade is a term of address that attaches to proper names—“Comrade Yakushova.” The proper name carries the individual identity; the term of address asserts a sameness. Comrade takes the place of “sir,” “madam,” “citizen.” Comrade negates the specificity of a determined title, a title that inscribes differentiation and hierarchy. It replaces it with a positive insistence on an equalizing sameness.

Oxana Timofeeva emphasizes that in comradeship identity vanishes.<sup>32</sup> Timofeeva gives the example of the masquerade used by Bolsheviks undercover. Anyone could be under that mustache. Schrecker provides a further example, a statement from General Herbert Brownell, attorney general under President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Brownell’s suspicions of communists were heightened because, in his words, it was “almost impossible to ‘spot’ them since they no longer use membership cards or other written documents which will identify them for what they are.”<sup>33</sup> In these examples, it’s the generic comrade who appears, carried by an individual person, yet the one who appears is one of many; it could be anyone. Schrecker quotes Herbert Philbrick, an undercover informer: “Anyone can be a Communist. Anyone can suddenly appear as a Communist party member—close friend, brother, employee or even employer, leading citizen, trusted public servant.”<sup>34</sup>

Berthold Brecht’s cantata *The Measures Taken* ( *Die Massnahme*) similarly explores the antithetical relation between individual identity and the comrade. Four agitators are on trial before a party central committee (the Control Chorus) for the murder of their young comrade.

The agitators describe how they went undercover in order to reach Chinese workers they were trying to organize. Each agitator had to efface their identity, to be “nameless and without a past, empty pages on which the revolution may write its instructions.”<sup>35</sup> Each agitator, including the young comrade, agreed to fight for communism and be themselves no longer. They all put on Chinese masks, appearing as Chinese rather than as German and Russian. Repeatedly, the young comrade substitutes his judgment for that of the Party, encouraging action before the time is right. He can see with his own two eyes that “misery cannot wait.” He tears up the Party writings. He tears up and off his mask. He substitutes his judgment for the Party’s, thereby exposing them all. Now fleeing Chinese authorities, the agitators and the young comrade race to escape the city. Yet they realize that since the young comrade has been exposed, since he is now identifiable, they will have to kill him. The young comrade agrees. They shoot him, throw him into a lime pit that will burn away all traces of him, and return to their work.

Comrades are multiple, replaceable, fungible. They are elements in collectives, even collections. School children may refer to each other or be referred to as comrades. In several Romance languages, “comrade” originates as a term for those who travel together, who share a room or enjoy something together. To be a comrade is to share a sameness with another with respect to where both are going.

In post-1991 Russia’s transition to capitalism, the term “comrade” started to become discredited. Alla Ivanchikova tells me that this is a political struggle, fought through etymology. New etymologies sought to depoliticize and mock the term. They highlighted its origin in the word “*tovar*” or commodity, a good for sale.<sup>36</sup> Ivanchikova explains that “this clearly serves the purpose of showing that underneath all talk of ‘comradery’ there are monetary and market relations that rule the day. Any comrade ( *tovarish*) is a commodity ( *tovar*), if you pay the right price.”<sup>37</sup> Counter-etymologies insist that *tovar* is much older than commodity or goods produced for sale. *Tovar* derives from an ancient word for military camp, *tovarŭ*.<sup>38</sup> Soldiers called themselves comrades.

Underlying this etymological warfare is an assumption of sameness. Interchangeability, whether soldier or commodity, schoolchild or fellow traveler, characterizes the comrade. As with puppets, cogs, robots, and slaves, commonality arises not out of identity—one can’t identify a comrade—not out of who one is, but out of what is being done—fighting, circulating, studying, traveling, enjoying the same things. Political comrades are on the same side. Communist comrades are those on the same side of the struggle to emancipate society from capitalism and create new, egalitarian modes of free association and collective decision-making for common benefit.

For anticommunists, the instrumentalism of comrade

relations appears horrifying. Combined with the machinic impersonality and fungibility of comrades, the fact that relations between comrades are produced for an exterior purpose, that they are means rather than ends in themselves, seems morally objectionable. This objection fails to acknowledge the specificity of comradeship as a political relation, being on the same side of struggle. It omits the way political work focuses on ends beyond the individual and so necessarily requires collective coordination. And it contracts and contains the space of meaning into self-relations, as if the abstracted, generic relations among those faithful to a political truth could only be the result of manipulation. In an interview with Vivian Gornick, a former member of the CPUSA described his life of meetings, actions, May Day parades, selling the *Daily Worker*, and endlessly discussing Marx and Lenin as “beyond good or bad,” “sweeping, powerful,” “intense, absorbing, filled with a kind of comradeship I never again expect to know.”<sup>39</sup> He was useful, living in the service of a struggle of world-historical significance.

*Thesis Four: The relation between comrades is mediated by fidelity to a truth. Practices of comradeship materialize this fidelity, building its truth into the world.*

By the end of the nineteenth century, “comrade” was a prominent term in socialist circles. Kirsten Harris finds the first recorded socialist evocation of comradeship in English in the journal *Justice* in 1884. Some English socialists were inspired by Whitman’s vision of the deep fellowship and interconnectedness of comrades. It spoke to their sense that the relation among those in socialist struggle, as well as in the new society to come, was more than brotherhood (prominent in the labor movement) or fraternity (an ideal from the French Revolution). And the term’s military background made “comrade” an able carrier of the ideal of a “bond that is forged when a common cause is fought side by side.”<sup>40</sup> The English embrace of Whitman resonated with US socialists. In a short essay in *The Comrade* published in 1903, W. Harrison Riley recounted some of his encounters with Marx (whom he said “was as good to look at as to listen to,” “well built and remarkably good looking”). Riley observed that “the Internationalists addressed each other as ‘Citizen,’ but I disliked the designation and frequently substituted Whitman’s greeting, ‘Comrade.’”<sup>41</sup>

Riley’s gesture to Whitman notwithstanding, “comrade” was already part of the political vocabulary of German socialists. In his writings, Marx used “comrade” to designate those in the same political party, those sharing the same politics. “Party” referred not just to a formal organization but to broader political movement. In his well-known letter to Kugelmann on the Paris Commune, Marx praises “our heroic Party comrades in Paris.”<sup>42</sup> The Communards were not Marx’s comrades in a specific party but in the party understood in a “broad historical

sense.”<sup>43</sup> They were all on the same side, that of “real people’s revolution.”<sup>44</sup> In a text for the International Workingmen’s Association written in 1866, Marx drew out this political dimension of “comrade”: “It is one of the great purposes of the Association to make the workmen of different countries not only *feel* but *act* as brethren and comrades in the army of emancipation.”<sup>45</sup> More than union brothers involved in local and national struggles, members of the IWA would be comrades in political struggle, fighting on the same side, the side of their class in the struggle of labor against capital. As comrades in an army of emancipation, they would combine and generalize their efforts. No longer would the differences between foreign and domestic workers be able to be used against them. As comrades they were all the same.

The idea that comrades are those fighting on the same side of a political struggle opens up into the fourth thesis. The “same side” points to the truth comrades are faithful to, the political truth that unites them. “Fighting” indexes the practices through which comrades enact their fidelity and work to materialize truth in the world.

The notions of truth and fidelity at work here come from Alain Badiou. In brief, Badiou rejects the idea that truth is a proposition or judgment to argue that truth is a process. The process begins with the eruption of something new, an event. Because an event changes the situation, breaks the confines of the given, it is undecidable in terms of the given; after all, it is something entirely new. Badiou argues that this undecidability “induces the appearance of a *subject* of the event.”<sup>46</sup> This subject isn’t the cause of the event. It’s an effect of or response to the event, “the decision to say that the event has taken place.” Grammar might seduce us into rendering this subject as “I.” We should avoid that temptation and recognize “subject” here as designating an inflection point, a response that extends the event. The decision that a truth has appeared, that an event has occurred, incites a process of verification, the “infinite procedure of verification of the true.” Badiou calls this procedure an “exercise of fidelity.” Fidelity is a working-out and working-through of the truth, an engagement with truth that extends out into and changes the world.

Peter Hallward draws out some of the implications of Badiou’s conception of truth. First, it is subjective. Only those faithful to an eventual truth, only those involved in its working out, recognize it as true. Second, fidelity is not blind faith; it is rigorous engagement unconcerned with individual personality and incorporated into the body of truth that fidelity generates. Hallward writes:

Fidelity is, by definition, ex-centric, directed outward, beyond the limits of a merely personal integrity. To be faithful to an eventual implication always means to abandon oneself, rigorously, to the unfolding of its consequences. Fidelity implies that, if there is truth, it can be only cruelly indifferent to the private as such. Every truth involves a



kind of anti-privatization, a subjective collectivization. In truth, “I” matter only insofar as I am subsumed by the impersonal vector of truth—say, the political organization, or the scientific research program.<sup>47</sup>

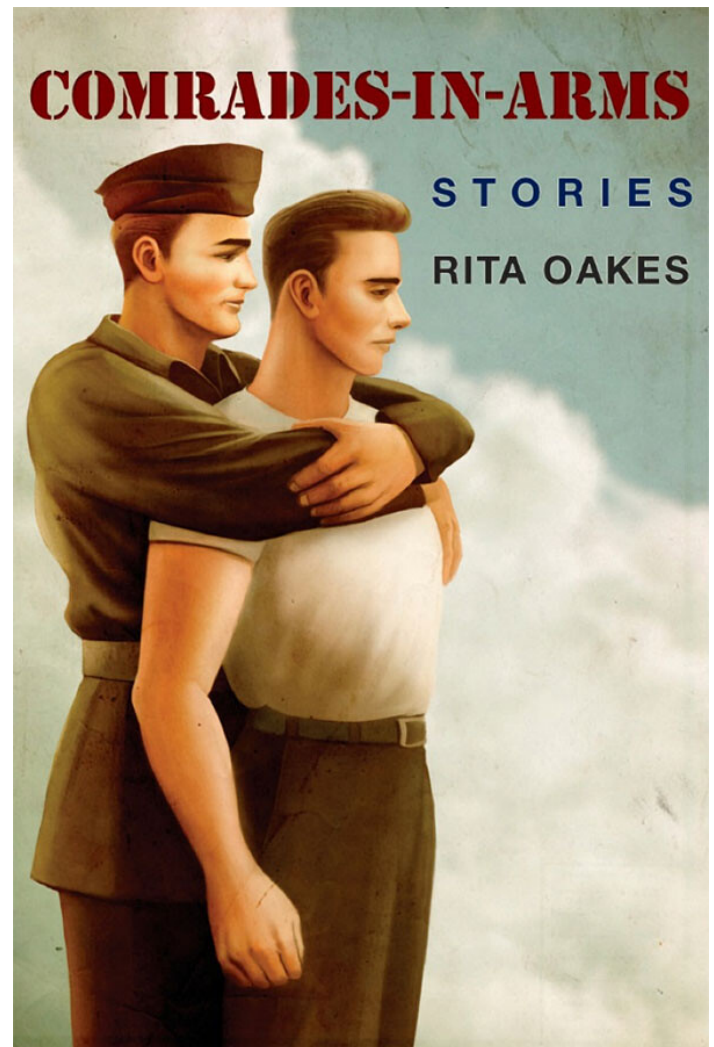
The truth process builds a new body. This body of truth is a collective formed to “work for the consequences of the new,” and this work, this collective, disciplines and subsumes the faithful.<sup>48</sup> Third, collectivity does not imply uniformity. The infinite procedure of verification incorporates multiple experiments, enactments, and effects.

As a figure of political relation, the comrade is a faithful response to the eventual rupture of crowds and movements, to the egalitarian discharge that erupts from the force of the many where they don’t belong.<sup>49</sup> Comrades demonstrate fidelity through political work, through their radical action and militant engagement. This practical political work extends the truth of the emancipatory egalitarian struggle of the oppressed into the world, holding open the gap it inscribes in its setting and building a new body of truth. In the socialist and communist tradition, this body has been the party, understood in both its historical and formal sense.

In *Ninotchka*, Nina Ivanova Yakushova can’t tell who her comrades are by looking at them. The Party has told her who to look for, but she has to ask. After Iranoff identifies himself, Yakushova tells him her name and the name and position of the party comrade who authorized her visit. Iranoff introduces Buljanoff and Kopalski. Yakushova addresses each as comrade. But it’s not the address that makes them all comrades. They are comrades because they are members of the same party. The party is the organized body of truth that mediates their relationship. This mediation makes clear what is expected of comrades—work. Iranoff, Buljanoff, and Kopalski have not been doing the work expected of comrades, which is why Moscow sent Yakushova to oversee them in Paris. That Kopalski says they would have greeted her with flowers demonstrates their “embourgeoisement,” the degeneration of their sense of comradeship. They are all there for work. Gendered identity and hierarchy don’t mediate relations between comrades. The practices of fidelity to a political truth, work toward building this truth in the world, do.

Comradeship is a disciplining relation: expectations, and the responsibility to meet these expectations, constrain individual action and generate collective capacity. Raphael Samuel describes the life of comrades in the Communist Party of Great Britain in the 1930s and ’40s.<sup>50</sup> The Party held meetings, rallies, and membership drives. It published and distributed a wide array of literature. It organized demonstrations, mobilized strike support, carried out emergency protests.<sup>51</sup> Samuel treats communist organizational passion as the discipline of the faithful—efficiency in the use of time, solemnity in the

conduct of meetings, rhythm and symmetry in street marches, statistical precision in the preparation of reports. He writes, “To be organized was to be the master rather than the creature of events. In one register it signified regularity, in another strength, in yet another control.”<sup>52</sup> Truth has effects in the world; comrade work realizes these effects.



### Conclusion

“Comrade” is more than a term of address. As a figure of political relation, it’s a carrier of expectations for action, the kinds of expectations that those on the same side have of each other, expectations that should be understood via Badiou as the “discipline of the event.”<sup>53</sup> Obama’s joke notes one such expectation: you don’t distance yourself from your comrades.

Kollontai affirms it: the primary virtue of comrades is solidarity; fidelity is demonstrated through reliable, consistent, practical action. Differences between parties often turn on what comrades can expect of each other, on

what it means to be a comrade. Broadly speaking, comrades in most revolutionary socialist and communist parties are expected to engage in the struggles of the oppressed, organize for revolution, and maintain a certain unity of action. Absent expectations of solidarity, “comrade” as term of an address is an empty signifier. Rather than figuring the political relation mediated by the truth of communism, it becomes an ironic or nostalgic gesture to past utopian hope.

To demonstrate how the figure of the comrade can be a figure for us, an operator for a politics of those engaged in emancipatory egalitarian struggle, I’ve offered four theses:

1. “Comrade” names a relation characterized by sameness, equality, and solidarity. For communists, this sameness, equality, and solidarity is utopian, cutting through the determinations of capitalist society.
2. Anyone but not everyone can be a comrade.
3. The Individual (as a locus of identity) is the “other” of the comrade.
4. The relation between comrades is mediated by fidelity to a truth. Practices of comradeship materialize this fidelity, building its truth into the world.

Together they articulate a generic political component activated through divisive fidelity to the emancipatory egalitarian struggle for communism. A comrade is one of many fighting on the same side.

**X**

All memes are courtesy of the author.

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## Onder Çakar, Rojava Film Commune, and Hito Steyerl “I don’t have time!”

**Hito Steyerl:** How did the Rojava Film Commune come into existence?

**Önder Çakar:** During the war in Kobane, many artists from all around the world joined the resistance. I was one of them. After the war receded to other fronts and some cities were liberated, it became necessary to build up and organize life in the liberated territories.

Cinema was a way of doing this. Particularly because of the Amûde Cinema incident, the people of Rojava have issues regarding cinema, but also a great desire for it.<sup>1</sup> The Kurdish language was forbidden until 1996 and it was not used in any cultural artistic products. Kurdish poetry was forbidden too. Therefore, there is a great need for local cinema. The Rojava Film Commune was one of the first organizations founded in the liberated territories. There were some filmmaker friends who made a few documentaries about the Islamic State massacres in Shengal, also some other folks who came to Rojava as internationalists and had experience in filmmaking. We joined forces and founded the film commune.

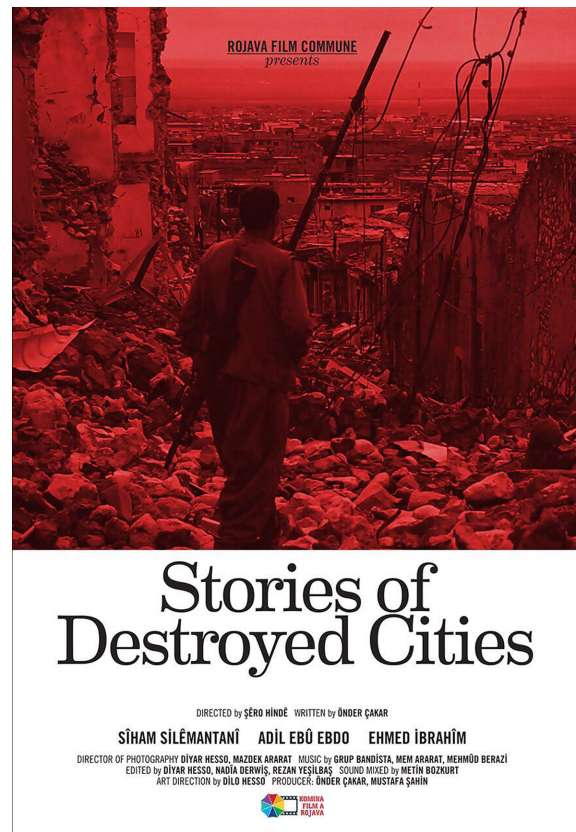
**HS:** And how did you start the movie *Stories from Ruined Cities*?

**ÖÇ:** I will try to answer this question from my personal experience. I didn’t go to Kobane and Rojava to make a movie. I didn’t think it was ethically acceptable to popularize the place, and go there with the purpose of filmmaking. I thought: What can I do? The answer was, I can transfer my experience to younger people. I went to Rojava for this reason. Then things went well. We founded a film academy. We had twelve students. A new generation of filmmakers was being trained. Along those lines I met a really talented filmmaker in the commune. And there was a good cameraman. Within six months, I gradually started to believe that a film could be made. We didn’t even have technical equipment. Later, we found some funding. With that money, we bought equipment from Istanbul. We smuggled the technical equipment over the border to the film academy as if we were smuggling weapons or other criminal goods. Things gradually came together and made me think that it was possible to make films. I didn’t have any idea about doing it myself, but I was trying to encourage other friends to do something.

**HS:** It sounds like the construction of the film and the commune went hand in hand. In that sense, there is no difference between this film and the student films; both are pedagogical and institution-building practices. They train people, besides being seen by audiences.

**ÖÇ:** Precisely.

**HS:** And the films that are still being produced now are the



Poster for the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016), the first feature film by the Rojava Film Commune.

same—they are all part of this construction period.

**ÖÇ:** Yes, and the making of *Stories from Ruined Cities* served as a second stage for the students. They graduated from the academy by making their student films, and got their field experience by taking part in the making of this film.

**HS:** It's interesting that *Stories from Ruined Cities* itself serves as a device for reconstruction. If we talk about the film itself, what is it about?

**ÖÇ:** I would like to tell you how I came to the point where I decided to write the script for it.

I went to Shengal. It was two months after it was liberated. There were bodies of Daesh fighters in the streets. The city was in a terrible state. And there I met Comrade Dilşar, who appears at the end of the first part of the film. He was a very emotional fighter. He knew I was a filmmaker, and he wanted to talk to me. I told him about the reasons for my visit. He complained about the documentary films that were made during the fight for Shengal. He didn't find them strong enough. He said, "You are an experienced filmmaker. Maybe you can make a better film about what happened here." I answered, "The Kurdish language was

decriminalized just recently. It will take time to build up the cinema of this region. We are training young people and I am sure they will make beautiful films."

**HS:** What were his disappointments about the previously made films?

**ÖÇ:** He said they were not good and effective. This is a place where the course of history has changed, but he thought the films did not have the potential to convey this. Then he remembered a French documentary that was made for Arte. He said that filmmaker was alone when he made the film. Sound, light, camera—all done single-handedly by him. And he didn't even speak Kurdish. "He came here, and made the film. And it was a good film," he said. "Why can't we make films like that? He was a young guy." And I smiled. I said, "Maybe this guy saw two-hundred thousand movies, and read twenty thousand books, and got himself a strong foundation in cinema education. Of course he is a great artist and a talented friend. Our young people have just started in this. There is an expression in Kurdish: 'hedi hedi' (slowly)," I said. But he said, "I don't have time!" I said, "What do you mean?" He answered, "All my comrades that are in that French documentary have been killed in battle. I am the only one left. And I don't have all the time in the world. I will get killed soon too. Who is going to record us then? We are writing history here. Isn't anybody going to record what we





In 1960, hundreds of Kurdish schoolchildren were killed by a fire in a movie theater in Amûde, Syria. In this photograph, the ruins are inspected by locals after the fire.

do?"

I am a scriptwriter, and I write fiction. I was moved by this request of his. I started to wonder if I could write a small and modest story in which he could appear. This is how I started to write the first script for *Stories from Ruined Cities*.

**HS:** Is he the character that appears at the end of the first part?

**ÖÇ:** Yes he is.

Finally, I broke my promise not to make a movie. I proposed to my filmmaker friend that direct it. He lost his wife in a Daesh suicide-bomb attack in Qamishlo when she was six-months pregnant, shortly before we started shooting. He was emotionally wounded by this.

Our director of photography lost his brother in the Amûde Cinema fire, when he was twelve years old, back in the

1960s. Despite this tragic loss, he wanted to become a filmmaker.

We went back to Shengal and did the shoot for our script. It took one week to film. We came back and did the editing. The result was satisfactory. We thought, by telling short stories like this one, we can make a film that can talk about the "reconstruction" of the whole territory.

**HS:** There was a story about women fighters that were guarding you in Shengal.

**ÖÇ:** Shengal is a war zone. There were bodies in the streets. They were moving the bodies and cleaning up the place. When we were filming, Daesh was two kilometers away. Nothing you see in the film is a prop. We didn't touch or change anything.

There were only fighters around, so we were their guests. When we arrived there were not enough teacups for everyone. Some of us were drinking tea, others were



Filmstill from the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016).

waiting for the cups to be washed. I said, "Are you crazy? The whole city, which was home to one hundred thousand people, is empty. All houses, shops, everything is deserted. Let's go and get twenty more cups, and everyone can have tea!" They said, "We are guerrillas. We can't touch any of it, it's not ours. We have what we need." I said, "I need a cup, so I will get one." They said, "If you need one, go and get it yourself."

Then we went to a unit of women fighters. They were on a hilltop and we needed to get some shots from above. The women fighters there were all young girls, twenty or twenty-one years old. There was a camp there where Yazidi people lived. We needed Yazidi people to do the voice-overs in the film, because they have a particular Kurdish accent.

When we arrived there, the girls saw us. We had the logo of the Rojava Film Commune on the van. They approached the van and said, "You go and do your filming now. But you have to come back here for tea." I liked the strict tone in their voice, and I replied, "Yes, we are absolutely not going to drink tea elsewhere." We went on and did the shoot, and came back to where the girls were. There were eight or nine of them. And they brought us beautiful cheese buns with the tea. They were so tasty. I haven't had anything like them in my whole life, and I am fifty-four years old! We might even find some footage of this gathering, because friends were filming. I ate almost all of them myself. Then I asked, "Which one of you made this?" The youngest one raised her hand and said, "I baked it." I asked, "Where did you learn how to make such tasty treats?" She said, "I am from Diyarbakir, and my mom taught me. She told me, 'Learn how to bake well, and you will bake for your father and older and younger brothers. And when you grow up and get married, you will bake for your husband. And then you will have kids and you will bake for your kids. And they will all tell you how tasty your

cheese buns are.'" I said, "And?" She answered, "The truth is, I didn't want to bake for any of them. I joined the guerilla fighters and I am baking these buns for my friends here!"

**HS:** What did you do after the shoot ended?

**ÖÇ:** We did not use actors in Shengal. But I can only write fiction, so I need actors. I told Shero (the director), "The camera work looks good. You are also doing great. But can we find some actors here?" He got really pissed off with my question and answered, "Are you crazy? We are in Mesopotamia. We have had theaters here for ten thousand years. How can you ask if there are actors here?" I told him, "Maybe they left because of the war?" He said, "The ones that make music videos and TV serials have left, but the theater actors are still here."

The conditions were not totally safe. There were explosions every now and then. The cleanup operations were going on, and we were accompanied by armed guards. I visited all the theaters in Rojava and saw their acting. I didn't speak any Kurdish. I watched their acting. And I realized that my Western mind was a bit crooked. Of course there were very good actors. Then I went back to Kobane. Kobane means a lot to me. I also got wounded there. So I went back there with Shero. We wandered around the city. We were moved by the kids in Kobane. We, as grown-ups, are living something, with great ideals and great resistance in our minds, but there are these little kids there. How is all this war affecting these little kids? All the martyrs, the ideology, the leadership, the new life ... we all talk about these things, but what do they mean for these little kids?



Filmstill from the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016).

**HS:** Was the city ruined when you were there?

**ÖÇ:** No, the city and I were ruined together. Later, I

revisited the place after it had been liberated. During the filming, it was all right. It was free.

**HS:** What motivated you to cross the border and join the fight?

**ÖÇ:** What can I say ... I couldn't take it anymore. The people over there were going to be massacred and murdered. We saw that happen in Shengal just three or four months before. If Kobane fell and an Islamist-fascist state was established in the region, it would have had big repercussions for the Middle East, including Turkey, and even for the whole world. If Kobane fell, Istanbul would have fallen also. I was defending Istanbul in Kobane. Even though we won the fight, the consequences were very painful. Through explosions in Istanbul and Ankara, the Syria War expanded and intensified. We are living in bad times, even though we won.

**HS:** When we were watching from Suruç, we could see the buildings collapsing and the city being blasted to pieces. Big explosions were happening by the minute, along with machine-gun fire, mortars, air strikes. It seemed impossible that people were still living over there, in the city.

**ÖÇ:** I was in one of those buildings myself. I was wounded in a mortar attack and my foot was sprained, so I couldn't walk. I was placed in the medical center with the other wounded. There was a young person assisting me. Because I couldn't walk, he was walking me around.

I fell asleep. When I woke up, there was no one in the room. My friend who had helped me wasn't there. I called out his name, thinking that maybe he was upstairs. I was thinking of making soup and taking some painkillers afterwards, because I was in pain.

I thought that maybe there was a meeting that everybody went to. Soon after, two fighters speaking Turkish came in. They said, "We have to evacuate this place. Everyone else evacuated already. This neighborhood is falling." This startled me, because the medical center was located in the safest area of town. If this place was falling, the situation was very bad. The headquarters was there, other administrative buildings were there. The medical center was located in the safest place in town next to the Turkish border-gate. I thought, "If this place falls, we are finished." I wanted to ask, "How is this place falling?" I don't remember if I managed to say this or not. There was an explosion and all my internal organs wanted to tear through my skin and get out. I'd never heard such a sound before and don't want to hear it ever again. There were three of them and we were all scattered to different parts of the room. I fell on my back and my whole body ached. I raised my head and saw the wall across from me fall apart, just like in a cartoon, brick by brick. I remember that my mind went blank. I couldn't think anything.

Then I heard one of the fighters say, "C'mon, hurry up, get up." I tried to get up but I couldn't. They carried me out of the room on their shoulders, towards the stairway. They asked me to move my hands and feet. I moved them. They were both very young; they could've been my kids. One of them gave me a slap in the face and said, "This time you were fine. Let's hope so next time too!" While they walked me downstairs, there was a second explosion. The wall next to us collapsed, but we were okay. The young fighters were constantly saying, "It's alright, it's alright."

Things I learned afterwards explained the situation. In the area there is a no-man's-land border zone between Turkey and Kobane. Because it is under Turkish control, the Kurdish fighters assumed that Daesh could not use it to cross over, so they did not watch it very well. But Daesh brought a truck loaded with explosives across the border. They threw everything they had at us that day. There were very intense clashes. And Turkey, in the presence of international institutions, also committed a crime by letting them pass.

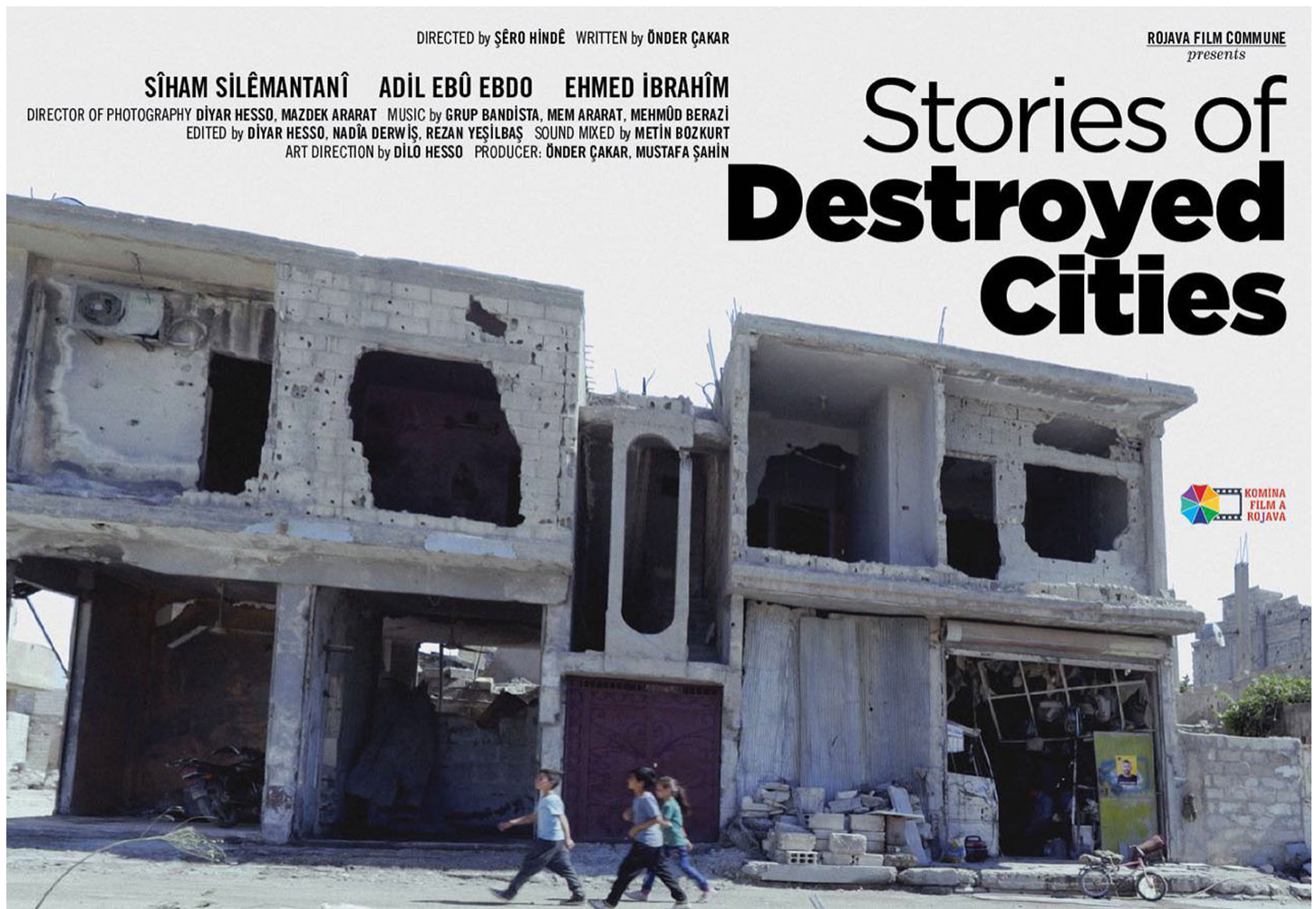
The truck was spotted by our forces before it reached the medical center. It was destroyed right there, so we were saved. There wasn't only the medical center but also many other administrative institutions around. During that first explosion, I fell. The second explosion that happened when we were in the stairway was caused by a Daesh suicide bomber with an explosive vest who was following the truck. He was crawling in the dark. There was a young female fighter, seventeen or eighteen years old, on the second floor of a building nearby. She had no bullets left because she had used all her ammunition to stop the truck. She saw him crawling. If he managed to get through, many people would die. She threw herself on him to reduce the impact. And she died with him.

We are alive because of that girl. I didn't learn her name, so I don't know who she is. Maybe this is just a metaphor, but I personally witnessed the collapse and resistance of Kobane. Since then, whenever I go to Kobane, for filming or for activities related to the film commune, I feel a great pride. We were there and we defended the place with our lives, and it didn't fall. Whenever I go there, it feels like I am going to my mother's home.

For example, I fought together with the old guy that we see at the end of the second part of *Stories from Ruined Cities*. He lost a son and a daughter in the fighting. He was wearing his daughter's vest. The press was showing interest in him, but he refused requests for interviews, including from the Kurdish press.

I said, "Let's just ask him." I didn't think he would remember me. We went to his home and he smiled when he saw me. I realized that he remembered me as a fellow fighter. We told him what we wanted to do, and he said, "Alright." We had that beautiful interview with him. But in the end, he cried a lot. We didn't use those parts in the





Poster for the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016), the first feature film by the Rojava Film Commune.

film.

And that was the end of the second film.

I said, "We are doing well. Let's do a third one and make it the best."

Then we made the third one too. We needed two actors. We couldn't find a female actor who fit the character in the script. The character didn't have any dialogue so we asked the head of the Association for Martyrs Families if she would play the role. She had lost a son in the war. Her husband blamed her for it, so she divorced him. She didn't talk much. When we asked if she would act in the film, she said yes. It started very well. We shot the scenes in Qamishli. Then we went to Ceza. When we were preparing for the shoot in Ceza, some fighters came to the set. They were our actors, and had roles in the film. Suddenly the woman went into an emotional crisis. She was crying like mad. As men, we stepped aside and let the women take care of her. They asked her what was wrong. She had mistaken one of the fighters for her son. They looked similar in a certain light. We realized what was going on

and tried to console her. That emotional state of the woman helped the film a lot.

There is a photo of a martyr in the film. In reality he was a young boy, fifteen or sixteen years old, working for a drinking-water company. We took a photo of him and used it in the film as a part of the background décor. We needed a young face of that age. From among seven or eight kids, we and Shero picked him.

After the film shoot was done, we were editing in Serekaniye. We were planning to do the final edit in Istanbul and Berlin, but we wanted to do the rough cut with the director. While we were still editing the film, there was an explosion in Qamishli. Sixty people died. That young boy was among them. I understood then why it is important to record things. It is important for those who remain.

It was a difficult time for all of us. But it was also fun. Three films were shot in three different times.

It was very hot. There was no electricity. And there were



Filmstill from the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016).

many mosquitos.

**HS:** Production-wise, how much was the budget for the film?

**ÖÇ:** We spent a lot of money. We shot the most expensive film in Rojava ever! It cost \$1000. It was the most expensive production because it was the first. It's just like the popular cinema PR slogans: "The most expensive film! The biggest project!" Ours is all that, because it is the first.

Then I went to Istanbul with the film. Something funny happened when I crossed the border. Turkish soldiers got angry with me because I went to Rojava.

**HS:** Did you cross the border between Kobane and Turkey?

**ÖÇ:** Yes, from Dirbesiye to Kızıltepe. There was a Turkish soldier on the border. I went there with my passport and told him I was a Turkish citizen and was returning to my country. Suddenly there were screams and shouts. They treated me as if they had captured a terrorist. I said, "Who did you capture? I came here by myself." The commander was shouting and hitting his fist on the table. I said, "Don't shout. I went there to make films." He said, with a condescending voice, "How come? Do they make films over there?" I said, "Yes." And I put the hard drive containing the film we shot on his table. I said, "Look, we made this film." He asked me, "What other movies have you made before?" I told him the names of some of them. He said he saw some of my earlier films. He relented after recognizing me. He let me pass. But he didn't even look in the hard drive. He wasn't scared of that work! I said to myself, "I failed by not becoming a filmmaker that could scare him. If I was, he would have seized the film and not let me pass."

I brought the film to Istanbul. There we worked on it

together with some friends. We made music for it. Then we brought it here to Berlin. We have applied to Venice and other film festivals. It was not selected by the Berlin International Film Festival or Cannes. Yilmaz Güney, a great master of Kurdish cinema, once said that a movie is complete only when it is shown to an audience and when the audience starts to think about it. We have to deliver the film to its audience or it will not be complete.

We are following the procedure of sending the film to festivals, to introduce the work of the Rojava Film Commune to different groups of people. It is also part of the training both for our students and for our friends in the film commune.

**HS:** What is the next phase for the Rojava Film Commune? What will you do with the students in the film school? Any new projects?

**ÖÇ:** The film school started its second year while I've been here. Now they have eight new students. The Film Commune has also active. The female members of the commune formed a group and made four short videos, in the form of public education spots, about domestic violence against women and child marriages. Shero made a documentary and a short film called *Mako Sare* (Mako is Cold).

Because they are Kurds they work all the time! They made all these things in eight months!

I myself am currently working on a script about Kobane that will be directed by Fatih Akin.

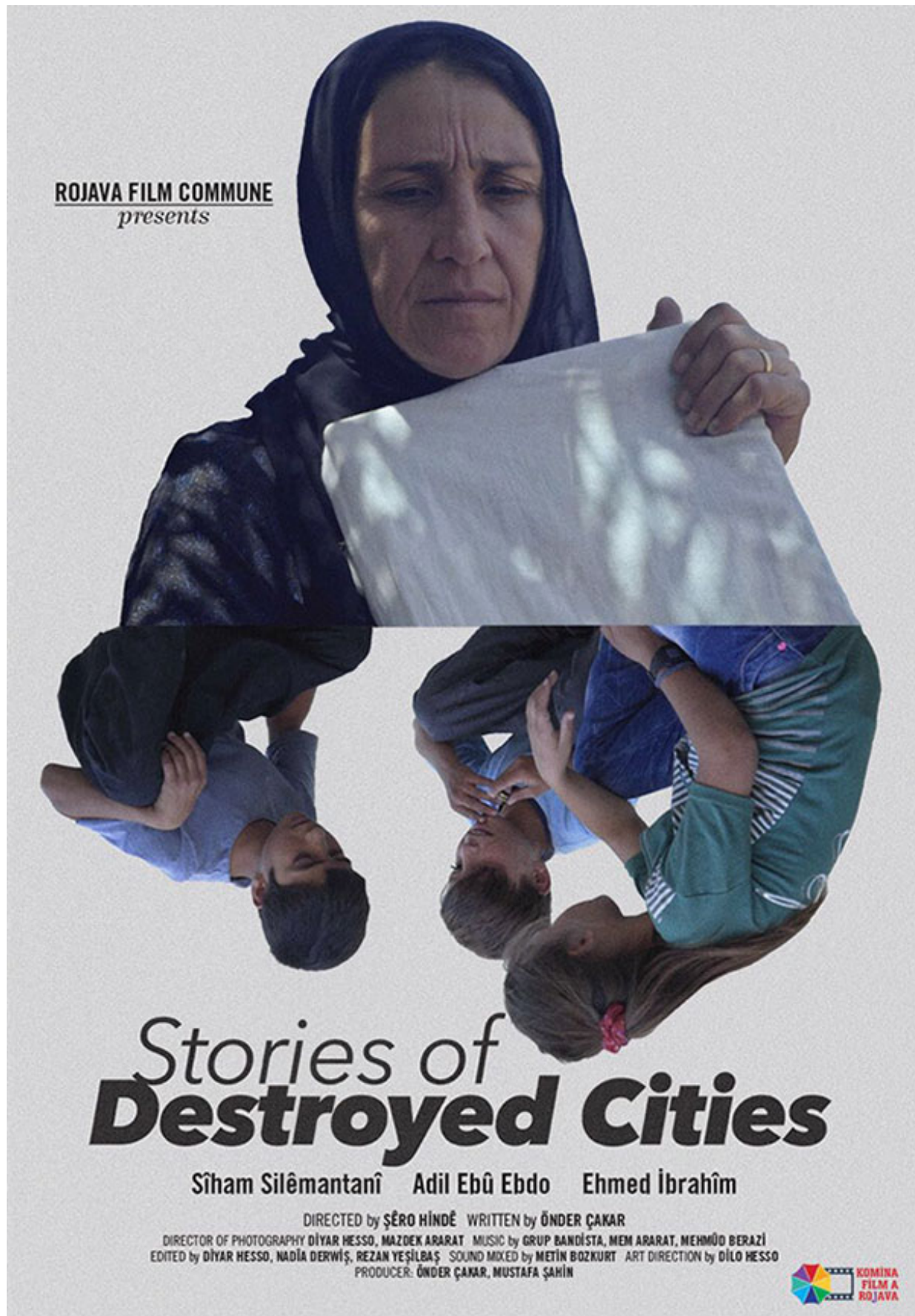
**HS:** The Turkish state is prosecuting you because of your activities in Rojava. What is the situation?

**ÖÇ:** Initially it looked okay, when I first crossed the border. But soon after, Tayyip Erdoğan solidified his power and came after everyone from the opposition. Then there was the coup and the state of emergency. So they came after people like me—filmmakers, doctors, journalists who went to Rojava for humanitarian purposes. We are all accused of supporting a terrorist organization. Currently, I cannot go back to Turkey.

**HS:** What are the charges?

**ÖÇ:** Supporting a terrorist organization. This is a serious accusation for me. That's why I wanted to make the film *Stories from Ruined Cities*. How can one call all those people I told you about terrorists? And how does the world keep silent about it? Even here in Berlin, the symbols of the YPJ [Yekineyên Parastina Jin; Women's Defense Units] and the YPG [Yekineyên Parastina Gel; People's Defense Units] are banned. What an ingratitude





Poster for the movie *Stories of Destroyed Cities* (2016), the first feature film by the Rojava Film Commune.



is this? In Rojava, I've witnessed it myself. They have done nothing. It was their home, then Daesh came and they resisted and defended their homes.

The technological advancements are immense. There are all sorts of satellites and surveillance systems. The whole world knows very well what has been going on there. It is very clear who is committing crimes against humanity and conducting ethnic cleansing. Calling people who are defending their homes terrorists is a historic disgrace for all humanity.

I saw this with my own eyes. And you can see it in our film as well; a lot of young and old men and women are carrying weapons. I am an artist. Of course weapons are not machines that serve humanity very well. But this is a very serious situation. You can't just say, "I am against weapons," and end the discussion. Why are these people carrying weapons? One should think about it. If they didn't have weapons, what could they do? Are they deliberately choosing weapons over other valid methods?

I get angry just thinking about it.

**X**

*The interview was conducted in Berlin, June 17, 2017.*

*Translation by Reşit Ballıkaya and Baran Yoldas.*

**Hito Steyerl** is a filmmaker, moving-image artist, writer, and innovator of the essay documentary. Her principal topics of interest are media, technology, and the global circulation of images. Through her writing practice, films, and performative lectures, Steyerl considers the status of the image in an increasingly global and technological world.

1

On November 13, 1960 a blaze at a cinema in Amûde, Syria killed between 180 and three hundred Kurdish schoolchildren, most of whom were under the age of fourteen. The Egyptian horror film *The Midnight Ghost* was being screened. Attendance was mandatory for schoolchildren, as proceeds were supposed to go towards Algerian fighters seeking independence from France. During the last showing of the day, the projector overheated and ignited the projection room. Flames spread quickly throughout the building, which was made of straw, clay, and wood. The children inside panicked. The fire exits opened inward and the children were pushed against them. There was no fire department in the city, and emergency services from other cities came too late. Due to the political oppression of Kurds, the incident became seen as a deliberate massacre by the Syrian state. See "50 years: Remembering the Amûde cinema fire," Kurdistan Commentary, November 11, 2010 <https://kurdistancommentary.wordpress.com/2010/11/11/50-years-remembering-the-amude-cinema-fire/>.

## Boris Groys

# Towards a New Universalism

The politicization of art mostly happens as a reaction against the aestheticization of politics practiced by political power. That was the case in the 1930s and it is the case now. For some time after the end of the Cold War, the political process seemed to be reduced to the tedious, boring work of administration. This bureaucratic work did not need art—and art was not especially interested in it. However, today politics has become a spectacle again. On its stage we see individuals who seem to have an artistic charisma of a certain kind. These individuals are celebrated but also passionately opposed. It is obvious that in this situation art cannot remain neutral, because politics has now entered the territory of art. It is also obvious that the contemporary art scene almost unanimously rejects the new populist movements and their leaders. This rejection has political reasons—but it has even deeper aesthetic reasons.

Even if art museums proudly remain in the centers of contemporary cities, the artistic community is, politically speaking, a minority inside every particular national culture. So it is not surprising that artists feel solidarity with segments of the population that are socially, economically, and politically underrepresented, such that art becomes one of the venues for expressing their grievances and aspirations. Art offers a public platform that allows the formulation of positions and the expression of attitudes that have no chance of attaining majority status in our current societies or of even being represented in the mainstream media. A good example of this solidarity is the exhibition “An Incomplete History of Protest” (currently on view at the Whitney Museum). It explores a long history (from 1940 to 2017) of political engagement by American artists in the struggles of black people for their rights, in struggles for women’s rights, in protests against the Vietnam War, and in campaigns against the stigmatization and neglect of AIDS patients. The retrospective culminates with *New No’s* (2016), a poster by Paul Chan and Badlands Unlimited that begins with the words “No to racists, No to fascists,” and that powerfully summarizes the message of the show. The vast majority of the works in the exhibition reflect on the situation of minorities and their political struggles in the US. And this is totally legitimate because in the current political situation it becomes urgent, indeed, to revisit the history of artistic resistance and protest. However, in the context of the Whitney exhibition there is one artwork that is related to the universalist, internationalist origins of contemporary art. Annette Lemieux’s *Black Mass* (1991) shows a demonstration that looks like an early Soviet demonstration, as we know them from films by Eisenstein and Vertov. However, instead of revolutionary propaganda posters, the demonstrators carry copies of Malevich’s *Black Square*. This produces a certain ironic effect. There is, indeed, an analogy between the October Revolution and Malevich’s *Black Square*: both were internationalist and universalist. Even if the masses have never demonstrated for avant-garde art, the image of Malevich is aesthetically compatible with the left-wing politics of his





Annette Lemieux, *Black Mass*, 1991. Latex, acrylic, and oil on canvas, 95 13/16 × 105 × 1 13/16 in. (243.4 × 266.7 × 4.6 cm.). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; promised gift of Emily Fisher Landau P.2010.173. © Annette Lemieux

time. But this image is incompatible with any return to nationalism and “traditional cultural values.” Indeed, it proclaims the nullification of these values.

Contemporary art has its origin in this break with national cultural and pictorial traditions—the break that the artistic avant-garde effectuated at the beginning of the twentieth century. The artists of the avant-garde wanted their art to become universalist, to develop a visual language that would be accessible to everyone, beyond traditional cultural borders. Often this universalist project was subjected to the criticism that modern and contemporary art was elitist. In our time the universalist claim of contemporary art has begun to be associated with the global art market and Sotheby’s auctions. In recent decades hundreds and thousands of words have been written against contemporary art, describing it as a manifestation and celebration of neoliberal globalism. The cosmopolitan, internationalist character of art has been seen as a sign of its complicity with the interests of globalized, Americanized capitalism—directed against the diversity of national and regional cultures.

Indeed globalism, and later neoliberalism, were seen in many places, including the countries of continental Europe, as serving primarily the interests of the US and Britain. The opposition to globalism was almost indistinguishable from a certain kind of anti-Americanism. That is why recent cultural and political trends in Britain and the US have been met with surprise and disbelief in European cultural circles. Suddenly, the cultural fronts

have been completely reversed. Brexit and the election of Trump confronted the outside world with a new wave of nationalist and isolationist rhetoric coming from the places that have always been regarded as the sources and centers of neoliberal programs of globalization. The reemergence of nationalism that had earlier been witnessed in such countries as China, Russia, and Turkey now reached the US. At the same time, globalized systems of exchange and information flow began to dissolve before our eyes. Not so long ago the internet served as the main symbol and medium of globalization. Today, one is regularly reminded that the corporations and organizations that operate the internet have real, physical, off-line addresses in territories that are controlled by certain states. As such, they are increasingly used as instruments of surveillance, propaganda, and fake news. Instead of constituting a virtual space beyond state borders, the internet is increasingly understood as a scene of struggle for interstate information wars.

Under these conditions the art field is still one of the few public spaces where resistance to these fateful trends remains possible. The reemergence of nationalist and sovereigntist ideologies and their pseudo-charismatic leaders reminds the contemporary art world of its internationalist origins—of a time when internationalism was understood as a political project and not a marketing strategy. The early artistic avant-garde was not interested in producing images that could be bought and sold everywhere. The goal of the early avant-garde was to unify politics and aesthetics, creating a new space of universal



Isaac Julien, *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007. Installation view, Metro Pictures, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York.

politics and culture that would unite mankind across its cultural differences. Of course, throughout the twentieth century the relationship between the political avant-garde and the artistic avant-garde was torturous and tragic—especially in the case of Soviet communism. But the reemergence of nationalism and cultural isolationism today brings art back to the nineteenth century—to a time before the avant-garde arose. Indeed, when one reads newspapers or watches TV today one gets the feeling that an invisible hand has erased the whole of twentieth-century culture, with its universalist utopian aspirations, and put us back into a world in which national-cultural identities dominate. However, without the project of universalism, all forms of modern and contemporary art lose their meaning, their true message; they turn into empty formalist experiments, into mere design. And in general, without political engagement, art ceases to be contemporary because being contemporary means being involved in the politics of one's own time. It is, indeed, the only form of contemporaneity that is accessible to us under current cultural conditions. Now, it would be a great mistake to think that the universalist project contradicts the interests of minorities and local populations. It is precisely the universalist resistance against the alleged homogeneity of national cultures that opens the way for minorities to assert their heterogeneity, their diversity. But there is one aspect of the contemporary political situation that immediately concerns and involves contemporary art. It is the problem of migration.

Migration is the one truly universal, international phenomenon of our time. And it is also perhaps one of the only phenomena that radically differentiates our era from

the nineteenth century. That is why migration has become the main political problem of our time. It is safe to say that it is primarily attitudes towards immigration that structure the contemporary political landscape—at least in Western countries. The anti-immigration politics of contemporary New Right parties is an effect of what can be characterized as the territorialization of identity politics. The main presupposition of the ideology of these parties is this: every cultural identity has to have its own territory on which it can and should flourish—undisturbed by influences from other cultural identities. The world is diverse and should be diverse. But the world's diversity can be guaranteed only by territorial diversity. The mixture of different cultural identities on the same territory destroys these identities. In other words: today the New Right uses the language of identity politics that was developed by the New Left in the 1960s–80s. At that time, the defense of original cultures was directed against Western imperialism and colonialism, which tried to “civilize” these cultures by imposing on them certain allegedly universal social, economic, and political norms. This critique was understandable and legitimate—even if it was one-sided. But in our time this critique has changed its political direction and its cultural relevance.

Today, the critique of universalism is directed not against Western imperialism but against migrants—especially migrants coming to Western countries. The New Right sees in migration a movement of homogenization that erases the specific cultural traditions and inherited ways of life of the countries to which “the flows of migration” are directed. Some European countries, such as Poland and Hungary, prevent migration altogether. Some of them, like

Germany and France, instruct immigrants to totally integrate and assimilate themselves by learning to behave and even feel like Germans and French people—obviously an impossible task. Even in the US, the decision to prevent immigration from the Middle East is explained by a stated desire not to become like Europe. The homogenization and internationalization of the world's national cultures through migration is mostly seen as a danger. But why? I remember a time when the adepts of the internet believed that it would bring about a new universal culture for the whole of humankind. This did not happen, because the internet makes information *about* the various cultures of the world universally available, *but not the cultures themselves*. In fact, only migration leads ultimately to the emergence of a universalist, international, global culture. It is what the radical avant-garde artists always wanted. And it should be what the left wants today, if it is to avoid intellectually capitulating when confronted with its own rhetoric of cultural identity—now directed not against Western expansionism but against migrants from the former colonies.

On the subject of art, I must say that recently I was very much impressed by the exhibition “The Restless Earth” (Triennale di Milano, 2017), which was dedicated to the history of forced or self-chosen migration from Africa to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea. Especially beautiful and poignant was a video installation by Isaac Julien entitled *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007). Its aesthetic revives the aesthetic of Italian Renaissance paintings that presented the torture and suffering of Christian martyrs in a perfect artistic manner: beautiful bodies in a beautiful setting. Today, we tend to see these paintings from a purely aesthetic point of view—ignoring what actually happened to their protagonists. However, when the same aesthetic is applied to the suffering of migrants here and now, we cannot keep a neutral, contemplative attitude anymore. Thus, our perspective on classical art also drastically changes. We begin to understand that the whole of art history confronts us with a history of suffering to which we remain immunized due to the conventional aesthetic forms in which this suffering is presented. However, looking at the works in this exhibition, I could not escape the question: Can such art change the attitude of Western societies to migration? It is, of course, a current version of an old question: Can art help us make the world a better place? I doubt it. But I still hope that it can prevent us from making it much worse.

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# Cosmotechnics as Cosmopolitics

The end of unilateral globalization and the arrival of the Anthropocene force us to talk about cosmopolitics. These two factors correlate with one another and correspond to two different senses of the word “cosmopolitics”: cosmopolitics as a commercial regime, and cosmopolitics as a politics of nature.

First, we are witnessing the end of unilateral globalization. Until now, so-called globalization has been a largely one-sided process, entailing the universalization of particular epistemologies and the elevation, through techno-economic means, of a regional worldview to a putatively global metaphysics. We know that this unilateral globalization has reached its end because of how the 9/11 attacks were misread as an attack on the Occident by an Other. In fact, 9/11 was an “autoimmune” event, internal to the Atlantic bloc, wherein its own anti-communist cells, lingering after the Cold War, turned against their hosts.<sup>1</sup> Still, the spectacular image of the event provided a kind of Rorschach test, onto which the representatives of unilateral globalization could project their growing insecurities about being stranded between the old configuration and the new—exemplifying what Hegel called “the unhappy consciousness.”<sup>2</sup> This is clear in an article entitled “The Straussian Moment” by one of the leading financiers of American neoreaction, Peter Thiel:

The modern West has lost faith in itself. In the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment period, this loss of faith liberated enormous commercial and creative forces. At the same time, this loss has rendered the West vulnerable. Is there a way to fortify the modern West without destroying it altogether, a way of not throwing the baby out with the bathwater?<sup>3</sup>

Thiel's unhappy consciousness recalls a past age of commercial glory renounced by the end of unilateral globalization, and aspires to a transhumanist futurism based on technological acceleration on all cosmic scales. This leads to a redefinition of the sovereign nation-state as a result of global technological competition (as the Russian president Vladimir Putin recently claimed, “whoever leads in AI will rule the world”). It is necessary to start imagining a new politics which is no longer a continuation of this same sort of geopolitics with a slightly different power configuration, that is, with the role of the leading power now played by China or Russia instead of the US. We need a new language of cosmopolitics to elaborate this new world order that goes beyond a single hegemon.

Second, the human species on earth is confronting the crisis of the Anthropocene. The earth *and* the cosmos have been transformed into a gigantic technological system, the culmination of the epistemological and methodological rupture which we call modernity. The loss





The main hall of the Chinese Science and Technology Museum, Beijing, August 2010.

of the cosmos is the end of metaphysics in the sense that we no longer perceive anything behind or beyond the perfection of science and technology.<sup>4</sup> When historians like Rémi Brague and Alexandre Koyré write about end of the cosmos in seventeen- and eighteenth-century Europe,<sup>5</sup> this should be read in our present Anthropocene context as an invitation to develop a *cosmo-politics*, not only in the sense of cosmopolitanism but also in the sense of a politics of the cosmos.<sup>6</sup> In response to this invitation, I would like to suggest that in order to develop such a cosmopolitics it is necessary to elucidate the question of cosmotechnics. I have been developing this concept of cosmotechnics in order to reopen the question of technology by undoing certain translations that were driven by the search for equivalence during modernization. This problematization can be presented in terms of a Kantian antinomy:

**Thesis:** Technology is an anthropological universal, understood as an exteriorization of memory and the liberation of organs, as some anthropologists and philosophers of technology have formulated it;

**Antithesis:** Technology is not anthropologically universal;

it is enabled and constrained by particular cosmologies, which go beyond mere functionality or utility. Therefore, there is no one single technology, but rather multiple cosmotechnics.

In order to elaborate the relation between cosmotechnics and cosmopolitics, I will divide this article into three parts. First, I will demonstrate how the Kantian concept of cosmopolitics is rooted in Kant's concept of nature. In the second part, I situate the "multi-naturalism" proposed by the "ontological turn" in anthropology as a different cosmopolitics, one which, in contrast to Kant's pursuit of the universal, suggests a certain relativism as the condition of possibility for coexistence. In the third part, I will try to show why it is necessary to move from cosmology to cosmotechnics as a politics to come.

### *§1. Cosmopolitanism: Between Nature and Technology*

The main difficulty of all cosmopolitics is the reconciliation between the universal and the particular. The universal tends to contemplate the particulars from above, as in the

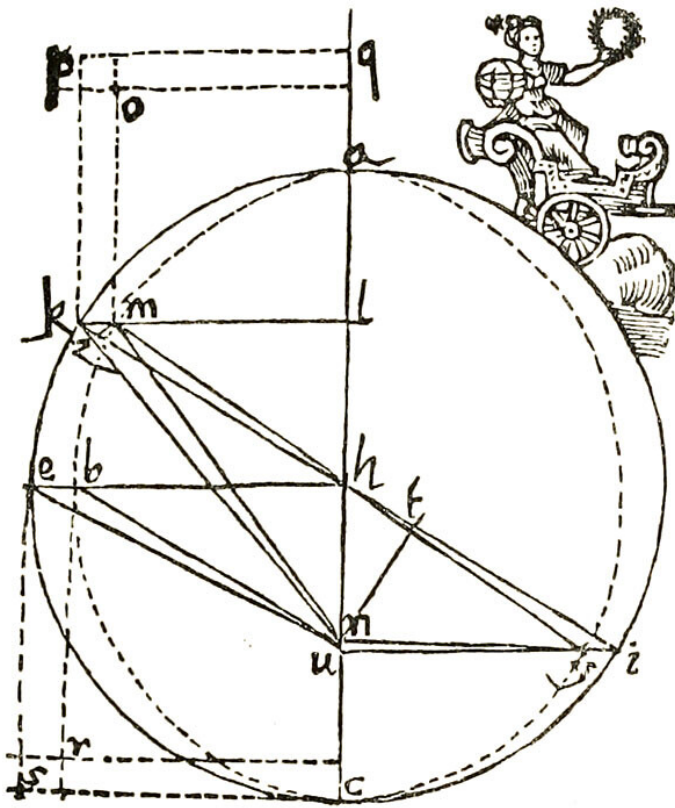


Diagram used by Johannes Kepler to establish his laws of planetary motion. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

way that Kant regarded the French Revolution, like a spectator considering a violent piece of theater from the mezzanine. Universality is the view of a spectator, never that of an actor. Kant writes, in his "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim":

There is no other way out for the philosopher—who, regarding human beings and their play in the large, cannot at all presuppose any rational aim of theirs—than to try whether he can discover an aim of nature in this nonsensical course of things human; from which aim a history in accordance with a determinate plan of nature might nevertheless be possible even of creatures who do not behave in accordance with their own plan ... [Nature] did produce a Kepler, who subjected the eccentric paths of the planets in an unexpected way to determinate laws, and a Newton, who explained these laws from a universal natural cause.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout his political writings, Kant maintains that this relation between nature and cosmopolitics is necessary.<sup>8</sup> If Kant sees the republican constitution and perpetual peace as political forms that may be able to bring forward a universal history of the human species, it is because he

understands that such progress is also a progress of reason, the telos of nature. This progress toward an end goal—namely, universal history and a "perfect state constitution"—is the "completion of a hidden plan of nature" (*Vollziehung eines verborgenen Plans der Natur*). What does it mean for nature to have a hidden plan? And why is the realization of cosmopolitics the teleology of nature?

Authors such as Hannah Arendt and Eckart Förster, among others, suggest that Kant's political philosophy centers on his concept of nature.<sup>9</sup> Arendt proposes a juxtaposition concerning Kant's perpetual peace: on the one hand, *Besuchsrecht*, the right to visit foreign countries and the right to hospitality; and on the other, nature, "the great artist, as the eventual 'guarantee of perpetual peace.'"<sup>10</sup> If after the 1789 revolution Kant is even more consistent in his affirmation of cosmopolitics as the teleology of nature, it is because he has developed the concept of self-organization, which plays a central role in the second book of his *Critique of Judgment*, and which affirms the two important categories of relation, namely community (*Gemeinschaft*) and reciprocity (*Wechselwirkung*).

Consider Kant's example of the tree from §64 of the *Critique of Judgment*. First, the tree reproduces itself according to its genus, meaning that it reproduces another tree. Second, the tree produces itself as an individual; it absorbs energy from the environment and turns it into nutrients that sustain its life. Third, different parts of the tree establish reciprocal relations with one another and thus constitute the whole; as Kant writes, the "preservation of one part is reciprocally dependent on the preservation of the other parts."<sup>11</sup> In such a totality, a part is always constrained by the whole, and this is true of Kant's understanding of cosmopolitical wholeness as well: "All states ... are in danger of acting injuriously upon one another."<sup>12</sup> Nature is not something that can be judged from a particular point of view, just as the French Revolution cannot be judged according to its actors. Rather, nature can only be comprehended as a complex whole, and the human species, as one part of it, will ultimately progress towards a universal history that coincides with the teleology of nature.<sup>13</sup>

Here we only want to show that as Kant develops his thinking towards universalism, his conceptualization of the relation between cosmopolitics and the purposiveness of nature is situated within a peculiar moment in history: the simultaneous enchantment and disenchantment of nature. On the one hand, Kant recognizes the importance of the concept of the organic for philosophy; discoveries in the natural sciences allowed him to connect the cosmos to the moral, as indicated by his famous analogy near the end of *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing wonder and awe, the more often and constantly reflection concerns itself with them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law

within me.”<sup>14</sup> Howard Caygill makes an even stronger claim, arguing that this analogy points to a “Kantian physiology of the soul and the cosmos” that unites the “within me” (freedom) and the “above me.”<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, as we saw in Kant’s citation of Kepler and Newton in “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim,” the affirmation of “universal history” and advancements in science and technology led in the eighteenth century to what Rémi Brague calls the “death of the cosmos”:

The new astronomy, following Copernicus and his successors, had consequences for the modern view of the world ... Ancient and medieval thinkers presented a synchronic schema of the structure of the physical world, which erased the traces of its own genesis; the Moderns, on the other hand, remembered the past and in addition provided a diachronic view of astronomy—as if the evolution of ideas about the cosmos was even more important than the truth about it ... Can we still speak of cosmology? It seems that the West ceased to have a cosmology with the end of the world of Aristotle and Ptolemy, an end due to Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton. The “world” then no longer formed a whole.<sup>16</sup>

New discoveries in the natural sciences thanks to the invention of the telescope and the microscope exposed human beings to magnitudes they could not previously comprehend, leading us to a new relation with the “entire span of nature” (*in dem ganzen Umfang der Natur*).<sup>17</sup> The Kantian scholar Diane Morgan suggests that through the “worlds beyond worlds” revealed by technology, nature ceases to be anthropomorphic, for the relation between humans and nature is thus reversed, with humans now standing before the “unsurveyable magnitude” (*Unabsehlich-Groß*) of the universe.<sup>18</sup> However, as we indicated above, there is a double moment that deserves our attention: both the enchantment *and* disenchantment of nature via the natural sciences, leading to a total secularization of the cosmos.

In addition to the revelation of nature and its teleology through technical instruments, technology also plays a decisive role in Kant’s political philosophy, when he asserts that communication is the condition of the realization of the organicist whole. Arendt made explicit the role of the *sensus communis* in Kant’s philosophy, as both the question of community and consensus.<sup>19</sup> But such a *sensus communis* is achieved only through particular technologies, and it is on this ground that we should problematize any naive discourse on the common as something already given or preceding technology. The age of Enlightenment, as noted by Arendt (as well as Bernard Stiegler), is the age of “the public use of one’s reason,” and this exercise of reason is expressed in the freedom of speaking and publishing, which necessarily

involves the technology of printing. On an international level, in “Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch” Kant writes that “it was trade that first brought them into peaceful relations with one another and thereby into relationships based on mutual consent, community, and peaceful interactions even with remote peoples,” later adding, “it is the spirit of trade, which cannot coexist with war, which will, sooner or later, take hold of every people.”<sup>20</sup>

## §2. “Ontological Turn” as Cosmopolitics

This reiteration of Kantian cosmopolitanism is an attempt to demonstrate the role of nature in Kant’s political philosophy. Kant somehow assumes *one single nature*, which reason compels us to recognize as rational; the rationality corresponds to the organicist teleological universality ostensibly realized in the constitution of both morality and the state. This enchantment of nature is accompanied by a disenchantment of nature, driven by the mechanization enforced by the Industrial Revolution. Brague’s “death of the cosmos” brought about by European modernity and its globalization of modern technology necessarily forms one of the conditions for us to reflect on cosmopolitics today, insofar as it illustrates the inefficacy of a biological metaphor for cosmopolitanism. If we start with Kant rather than with more recent discussions on cosmopolitanism—such as Martha Nussbaum’s rootless cosmopolitanism, Habermas’s constitutional patriotism, or Anthony Appiah’s cosmopolitan patriotism<sup>21</sup>—it is because we want to reconsider cosmopolitanism by examining its relation to nature and technology. In fact, Appiah’s rooted cosmopolitanism is relevant to our discussion below. He holds the view that cosmopolitanism denies the importance of affiliations and particular loyalties; this means that it is necessary to consider cosmopolitics from the point of view of locality. This crucial point is the reason I would like to engage with the idea of “multi-naturalism” recently proposed by anthropologists associated with attempts to present a new way of thinking cosmopolitanism.

The “ontological turn” in anthropology is a movement associated with anthropologists such as Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, and Tim Ingold, and earlier, Roy Wagner and Marilyn Strathern, among others.<sup>22</sup> This ontological turn is an explicit response to the crisis of modernity that expresses itself largely in terms of ecological crisis, which is now closely associated with the Anthropocene. The ontological-turn movement is an effort to take seriously different ontologies in different cultures (we have to bear in mind that knowing there are different ontologies and taking them seriously are two different things). Descola has convincingly outlined four major ontologies, namely naturalism, animism, totemism, and analogism.<sup>23</sup> The modern is characterized by what he calls “naturalism,” meaning an opposition between culture and nature, and the former’s mastery over the





Gisela Motta and Leandro Lima, *Xaipiri*, 2012.

latter. Descola suggests that we must go beyond such an opposition and recognize that nature is no longer opposed or inferior to culture. Rather, in the different ontologies, we can see the different roles that nature plays; for example, in animism the role of nature is based on the continuity of spirituality, despite the discontinuity of physicality.

In *Beyond Culture and Nature*, Descola has proposed an ontological pluralism that is irreducible to social constructivism. He suggests that recognizing these ontological differences can serve as an antidote to the dominance of naturalism since the advent of European modernity. But does this focus on nature (or the cosmos, we might say) in the interest of opposing European naturalism actually revive the enchantment of nature, this time in the name of indigenous knowledge? This seems to be a hidden problem with the ontological-turn movement: many anthropologists associated with the ontological turn have focused on the question of nature and the politics of the nonhuman (largely animals, plants, minerals, spirits, and the dead). This is evident when we recall that Descola proposes to call his discipline an “anthropology of nature.” Furthermore, this tendency also suggests that the question of technics is not sufficiently addressed in the ontological-turn movement. For example, Descola talks often of practice, which may indicate his (laudable) desire

to avoid an opposition between nature and technics; but by doing so, he also obscures the question of technology. Descola shows that analogism, rather than naturalism, was a significant presence in Europe during the Renaissance; if this is the case, the “turn” that took place during European modernity seems to have resulted in a completely different ontology and epistemology. If naturalism has succeeded in dominating modern thought, it is because such a peculiar cosmological imagination is compatible with its *techno-logical* development: nature should be mastered for the good of man, and it *can* indeed be mastered according to the laws of nature. Or put another way: nature is regarded as the source of contingency due to its “weakness of concept,” and therefore it has to be overcome by logic.

These oppositions between nature and technics, mythology and reason, give rise to various illusions that belong to one of two extremes. On the one hand, there are rationalists or “progressivists” who hysterically struggle to maintain their monotheism after having murdered god, wishfully believing that the world process will stamp out differences and diversities and lead to a “theodicy.” On the other hand, there are left intellectuals who feel the need to extol indigenous ontology or biology as a way out of modernity. A French revolutionary thinker recently



described this situation thus:

A funny thing to see these days is how all these absurd modern leftists, all unable to see anything, all lost in themselves, all feeling so bad, all desperately trying to exist and to find their existence in the eyes of the Other—how all these people are jumping on the “savage,” the “indigenous,” the “traditional” in order to escape and not face themselves. I am not speaking of being critical towards one’s “whiteness,” towards one’s “modernism.” I am talking of the ability to peer inside [ *transpercer*] oneself.

My refusal of the above two extremes does not come out of any postcolonial “political correctness,” but rather out of an attempt to go beyond postcolonialism’s critique. (Indeed, I have elsewhere reproached postcolonialism for its failure to tackle the question of technology.<sup>24</sup>) I hold the thesis that an ontological pluralism can only be realized by reflecting on the question of technology and a politics of technology. Kant was aware of the importance of technology in his comment on trading as communication; however, he didn’t pay much attention to the *technological difference* that finally led to planetary modernization, and now planetary computation, since what was at stake for him was the question of the whole that absorbs all differences. Kant criticized the impolite guests, the greedy colonizers who brought with them “oppression of the native inhabitants, the incitement of the different states involved to expansive wars, famine, unrest, faithlessness, and the whole litany of evils that weigh upon the human species.”<sup>25</sup> Commenting on the defense strategies of China and Japan, Kant said that both countries have

wisely, limited such interaction. Whereas the former has allowed contact with, but not entrance to its territories, the latter has allowed this contact to only one European people, the Dutch, yet while doing so it excludes them, as if they were prisoners, from associating with the native inhabitants.<sup>26</sup>

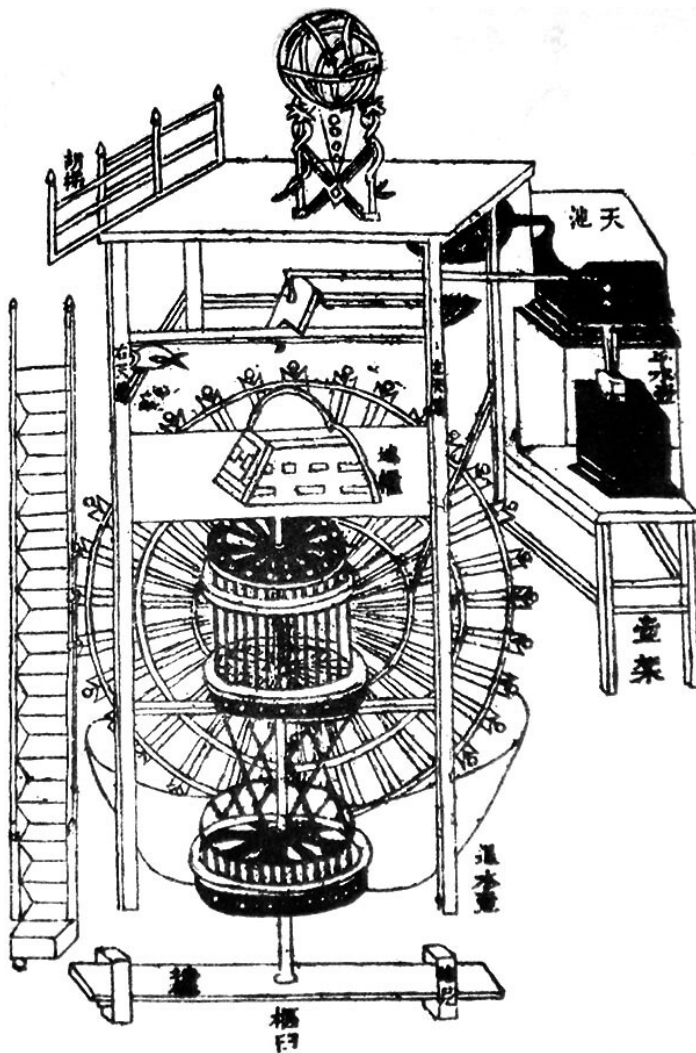
When Kant wrote this in 1795, it was too early for him to anticipate the modernization and colonization that would take place in Japan and China. If this phase of globalization was able to take place, it was because of the technological advancement of the West, which allowed it to defeat the Japanese, the Chinese, and other Asian civilizations. Nature, the guarantee of perpetual peace, didn’t really lead us to perpetual peace but rather to wars and more wars. To appeal for a cosmopolitanism today, I think we must reread Kant’s cosmopolitanism according to the

process of modernization and revisit the question of nature and technology anew. The arrival of modern technology in non-European countries in recent centuries has created a transformation unthinkable to European observers. The restoration of “indigenous natures” itself has to first be questioned, not because it doesn’t exist but because it is situated in a new epoch and is transformed to the extent that there is hardly any way to go back and restore it.<sup>27</sup>

Let’s review what has been said above regarding the ontological turn. Central to the anthropologists’ concept of “nature” and “ontology” is cosmology, since such “nature” is defined according to different “ecologies of relations” in which we observe different constellations of relations, e.g., the parental relation between females and vegetables, or brotherhood between hunters and animals. These multi-ontologies are expressed as multi-natures; for example, Descola’s four above-named ontologies correspond to different cosmological views. I believe that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to overcome modernity without directly confronting the question of technology, which has become increasingly urgent after the end of unilateral globalization. Therefore, it is necessary to reformulate the question of cosmopolitics in relation to cosmotechnics.

### §3. Cosmotechnics as Cosmopolitics

I propose to go beyond the notion of cosmology; instead, it would be more productive to address what I call cosmotechnics. Let me give you a preliminary definition of cosmotechnics: it is the unification of the cosmos and the moral through technical activities, whether craft-making or art-making. There hasn’t been one or two technics, but many cosmotechnics. What kind of morality, which and whose cosmos, and how to unite them vary from one culture to another according to different dynamics. I am convinced that in order to confront the crisis that is before us—namely, the Anthropocene, or the intrusion of Gaia (Latour and Stengers), or the “entropocene” (Stiegler), all presented as the inevitable future of humanity—it is necessary to reopen the question of technology, in order to envisage the bifurcation of technological futures by conceiving different cosmotechnics. I tried to demonstrate such a possibility in my recent book *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*. As one can gather from the title, it is an attempt to respond to Heidegger’s famous 1949 lecture “The Question Concerning Technology.” I propose that in order to rethink the project of overcoming modernity, we must undo and redo the translations of *technē*, *physis*, and *metaphysika* (not as merely independent concepts but also concepts within systems); only by recognizing this difference can we arrive at the possibility of a common task of philosophy.



A diagram of Su Song's (1020–1101) clock tower. The original design included an armillary sphere, a waterwheel, an escapement mechanism, and a chain drive. Photo: Wikimedia Commons.

Why, then, do I think it's necessary to turn to cosmotechnics? For a long time now we have operated with a very narrow—in fact, far too narrow—concept of technics. By following Heidegger's essay, we can distinguish two notions of technics. First, we have the Greek notion of *technē*, which Heidegger develops through his reading of the ancient Greeks, notably the Pre-Socratics—more precisely, the three “inceptual” (*anfängliche*) thinkers, Parmenides, Heraclitus, and Anaximander.<sup>28</sup> In the 1949 lecture, Heidegger proposes to distinguish the essence of Greek *technē* from modern technology (*moderne Technik*).

If the essence of *technē* is *poiesis*, or bringing forth (*Hervorbringen*), then modern technology, a product of European modernity, no longer possesses the same essence as *technē* but is rather an “enframing” (*Gestell*) apparatus, in the sense that all beings become standing reserves (*Bestand*) for it. Heidegger doesn't totalize these

two essences of technics, but nor does he give space to other technics, as if there is only a single homogenous *Machenschaft* after the Greek *technē*, one that is calculable, international, even planetary. It is astonishing that in Heidegger's so-called *Black Notebooks* (*Schwarze Hefte*)—of which four volumes have been published so far—we find this note: “If communism in China should come to rule, one can assume that only in this way will China become ‘free’ for technology. What is this process?”<sup>29</sup> Heidegger hints at two things here: first, that technology is international (not universal); and second, that the Chinese were completely unable to resist technology after communism seized power in the country. This verdict anticipates technological globalization as a form of neocolonization that imposes its rationality through instrumentality, like what we observe in transhumanist, neoreactionary politics.

My effort to go beyond Heidegger's discourse on technology is largely based on two motivations: 1) a desire to respond to the ontological turn in anthropology, which aims to tackle the problem of modernity by proposing an ontological pluralism; and 2) a desire to update the insufficient discourse on technology that is largely associated with Heidegger's critique of technology. I have proposed that we reopen the question of technics, to show that one must consider technics as a variety of cosmotechnics instead of either *technē* or modern technology. In my book, I used China as a testing ground for my thesis and tried to reconstruct a lineage of technological thought in China. However, this task is not limited to China, since the central idea is that every non-European culture must systematize its own cosmotechnics and the history of such a cosmotechnics. Chinese cosmotechnical thought consists of a long history of intellectual discourse on the unity and relation between Qi and Dao. The unification of Qi and Dao is also the unification of the moral and the cosmic, since Chinese metaphysics is fundamentally a moral cosmology or a moral metaphysics, as the New Confucian philosopher Mou Zongsan has demonstrated. Mou suggests that if in Kant we find a metaphysics of the moral, it is at most a metaphysical exploration of the moral but not a moral metaphysics, since a moral metaphysics can only start with the moral. Mou's demarcation between Chinese and Western philosophy situates his conviction that Chinese philosophy recognizes and cultivates the intellectual intuition that Kant associated with knowing the noumenon, even as Kant dismissed the possibility that human beings could possess such an intuition. For Mou, the moral arises out of the experience of the infinity of the cosmos, which necessitates infinitization as the condition of possibility for Dasein's finitude.<sup>30</sup>

Dao is not a thing. It is not a concept. It is not the *différance*. In the *Cixi* of *YiZhuan* (易傳·繫辭), Dao is simply said to be “above forms,” while Qi is what is “below forms.”<sup>31</sup> We should notice here that *xin er shang xue* (the study of what is above forms) is the word used to translate

“metaphysics” (one of the equivalences that must be undone). Qi is something that takes space, as we can see from the character and also read in an etymological dictionary—it has four mouths or containers and in the middle there is a dog guarding the utensils. There are multiple meanings of Qi in different doctrines; for example, in classic Confucianism there is Li Qi (禮器), in which Qi is crucial for Li (a rite), which is not merely a ceremony but rather a search for unification between the heavens and the human. For our purposes, it will suffice to simply say that Dao belongs to the noumenon according to the Kantian distinction, while Qi belongs to the phenomenon. But it is possible to infinitize Qi so as to infinitize the self and enter into the noumenon—this is the question of art.

In order to better understand what I mean by this, we can refer here to the story of the butcher Pao Ding, as told in the *Zhuangzi*. However, we will have to remind ourselves that this is only an example from antiquity, and a much larger historical view is necessary to comprehend it.

Pao Ding is excellent at butchering cows. He claims that the key to being a good butcher doesn't lie in mastering certain skills, but rather in comprehending the Dao. Replying to a question from Duke Wen Huei about the Dao of butchering cows, Pao Ding points out that having a good knife is not necessarily enough; it is more important to understand the Dao in the cow, so that one does not use the blade to cut through the bones and tendons, but rather to pass alongside them in order to enter into the gaps between them. Here, the literal meaning of “Dao”—“way” or “path”—meshes with its metaphysical sense:

What I love is Dao, which is much more splendid than my skill. When I first began to carve a bullock, I saw nothing but the whole bullock. Three years later, I no longer saw the bullock as a whole but in parts. Now I work on it by intuition and do not look at it with my eyes. My visual organs stop functioning while my intuition goes its own way. In accordance with the principle of heaven (nature), I cleave along the main seams and thrust the knife into the big cavities. Following the natural structure of the bullock, I never touch veins or tendons, much less the big bones!<sup>32</sup>

Hence, Pao Ding concludes that a good butcher doesn't rely on the technical objects at his disposal, but rather on Dao, since Dao is more fundamental than Qi (the tool). Pao Ding adds that a good butcher has to change his knife once a year because he cuts through tendons, while a bad butcher has to change his knife every month because he cuts through bones. Pao Ding, on the other hand—an *excellent* butcher—has not changed his knife in nineteen years, and it looks as if it has just been sharpened with a whetstone. Whenever Pao Ding encounters any difficulty,

he slows down the knife and gropes for the right place to move further.

Duke Wen Huei, who had posed the question, replies that “having heard from Pao Ding, now I know how to *live*”; and indeed, this story is included in a section titled “Master of Living.” It is thus the question of “living,” rather than that of technics, that is at the center of the story. If there is a concept of “technics” here, it is one that is detached from the technical object: although the technical object is not without importance, one cannot seek the perfection of technics through the perfection of a tool or a skill, since perfection can only be accomplished by Dao. Pao Ding's knife never cuts tendons or bones; instead, it seeks the void and enters it with ease. In so doing, the knife accomplishes the task of butchering the cow without endangering itself—i.e., without becoming blunt and needing to be replaced. It thus fully realizes itself as a knife.

What I have said above is not sufficient to be formulated into a program, since it is only an explanation for the motivation behind the much larger project that I tried to initiate in *The Question Concerning Technology in China*. Also, we must pay attention to the historical development of the relationship between Qi and Dao. Specifically, the search for unity between Qi and Dao has gone through different phases in Chinese history in response to historical crises (the decline of the Zhou Dynasty, the proliferation of Buddhism, modernization, etc.); it was widely discussed after the Opium Wars of the mid-nineteenth century, but such a unification was not resolved due to a very limited understanding of technology at the time and an eagerness to look for equivalences between China and the West. I have attempted to reread the history of Chinese philosophy not only as intellectual history, but also through the lens of the Qi-Dao episteme, with the aim of reconstructing a tradition of technological thought in China. As I have emphasized elsewhere, this question is by no means only a Chinese affair.<sup>33</sup> Rather, every culture must reflect on the question of cosmotechnics for a new cosmopolitics to come, since I believe that to overcome modernity without falling back into war and fascism, it is necessary to reappropriate modern technology through the renewed framework of a cosmotechnics consisting of different epistemologies and epistemes. Therefore, my project is not one of substantializing tradition, as in the case of traditionalists like René Guénon or Aleksandr Dugin; it doesn't refuse modern technology, but rather looks into the possibility of different technological futures. The Anthropocene is the planetarization of standing reserves, and Heidegger's critique of technology is more significant today than ever before. The unilateral globalization that has come to an end is being succeeded by the competition of technological acceleration and the allures of war, technological singularity, and transhumanist (pipe) dreams. The Anthropocene is a global axis of time and synchronization that is sustained by this view of

technological progress towards the singularity. To reopen the question of technology is to refuse this homogeneous technological future that is presented to us as the only option.

**X**

*The author would like to thank Pieter Lemmens and Kirill Chepurin for their comments on a draft of this essay.*

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- 1 On the autoimmune character of the 9/11 attacks, see Giovanna Borradori, *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); and Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Holt, 2004).
- 2 See Yuk Hui, "On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries," *e-flux journal* 81 (April 2017) <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/81/125815/on-the-unhappy-consciousness-of-neoreactionaries/>.
- 3 Peter Thiel, "The Straussian Moment," in *Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture: Politics and Apocalypse*, ed. Robert Hamerton-Kelly (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2007), 207. I also cited this passage in my "On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries."
- 4 See specifically Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1997).
- 5 See Rémi Brague, *The Wisdom of the World: The Human Experience of the Universe in Western Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); and Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1957).
- 6 On this point, see the work of Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I and II* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010, 2011).
- 7 Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," in *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*, eds. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11. (AK 8: 18.)
- 8 See Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim" (1784) and "Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch" (1795), and in between, "Critique of Judgment" (1790), a main resource for Kant's nonexistent political philosophy, according to Hannah Arendt. See her *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
- 9 See Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*; and Eckart Förster, "The Hidden Plan of Nature," in *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*, 187–99.
- 10 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 25.
- 11 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith, ed. Nicholas Walker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), §64, 199.
- 12 Cited by Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 53.
- 13 Concretely, Kant here is interested in the question of organization, which finds its highest potency in the organism. Kant's conception here has to be distinguished from Spinozism (pantheism), theism, and hylozoism, which Kant explicitly rejects in §72 of the *Critique of Judgment*.
- 14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 169.
- 15 Howard Caygill, "Soul and Cosmos in Kant: A Commentary on 'Two Things Fill the Mind ...,'" in *Cosmopolitics and the Emergence of a Future*, eds. Diane Morgan and Gary Banham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 213–34, 215. Caygill traces the relation between the cosmos and the moral in Kant's analogy (e.g., beauty as a symbol of the moral) to the influence of Brown and Haller's theory of irritability on Kant's *Opus Postumum*, affirming the organicist structure found in both.
- 16 Brague, *Wisdom of the World*, 188–89.
- 17 Immanuel Kant, *Universal Natural History and the Theory of the Heavens*, ed. and trans. S. Jaki (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1981), 164. Cited by Diana Morgan, "Introduction: Parts and Wholes—Kant, Communications, Communities and Cosmopolitics," in *Cosmopolitics and the Emergence of a Future*, 8.
- 18 Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 166. Cited by Morgan, "Introduction: Parts and Wholes," 8.
- 19 Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 70–72.
- 20 Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld, trans. David L. Colclasure (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 88. (AK 8: 364.)
- 21 I will not be able to comment here on these different approaches to cosmopolitanism, but for an overview, see Angela Taraborrelli, *Contemporary Cosmopolitanism*, trans. Ian McGillvray (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).
- 22 For this intellectual trajectory, see Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 23 Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 122.
- 24 Yuk Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotronics* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016), §28.
- 25 Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace*, 83. (AK 8: 359.)
- 26 Ibid.
- 27 On this question we will have to confront Viveiros de Castro elsewhere, since for him Amerindian perspectivism is anything but obsolete.
- 28 In order to better understand Heidegger's concept of *technē*, we should go back to his earlier writings. In the 1936 *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger attempts to reconcile Parmenides the philosopher of being with Heraclitus the philosopher of becoming through an interpretation of a verse from Sophocles's *Antigone*. The reflection centers on the description of human Dasein as *to deinaton*, the uncanniest of the uncanny ( *das Unheimlichste des Unheimlichen* ). According to Heidegger, "the uncanny" has two senses. In one sense, it refers to a violence ( *Gewalttätigkeit* ) associated with *technē*; here, *technē* is neither art nor technics in the modern sense, but knowing—a form of knowing that can set Being to work in beings. In a second sense, "the uncanny" refers to overwhelming ( *Überwältigend* ) powers, such as those of the sea and the earth. This overwhelming is manifested in the word *dikē*, which is conventionally translated as "justice" ( *Gerechtigkeit* ), although Heidegger translates it as "fittingness" ( *Fug* ). For a detailed analysis, see Hui, *The Question Concerning Technology in China*, §8, 69–79.
- 29 Martin Heidegger, *Anmerkungen I–V (Schwarze Hefte 1942–48)*, ed. Peter Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2015), 441. German original: "Wenn der Kommunismus in china an die Herrschaft kommen sollte, steht zu vermuten, daß erst auf diesem Wege china für die Technik 'frei' wird. Was liegt in diesem Vorgang?"
- 30 Mou Zongsan, *Collected Works 21: Phenomenon and Thing-in-Itself* (現象與物自身) (Taipei: Student Books Co., 1975), 20–30.
- 31 "形而上者為之道，形而下者為之器"
- 32 *Zhuangzi* (bilingual edition) (Hunan: Hunan People's Publishing House, 2004), 44–5. Translation modified.
- 33 Yuk Hui, "For a Philosophy of Technology in China: Geert Lovink Interviews Yuk Hui," *Parrhesia* 27 (2017): 48–63 [http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia27/Parrhesia27\\_Hui.pdf](http://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia27/Parrhesia27_Hui.pdf).

Stephen Squibb

# Parahistories of Self-Instituting Sunlight

Revolutionary theory begins with recognizing accumulation as a fact of planetary existence. We find ourselves on a rock on which five billion years of solar accumulation have already taken place. If we also find ourselves in a planetary crisis, it is because rather than capturing the energy already falling on the earth, we have rereleased previously gathered energy back into the air. Rather than shifting our legacy infrastructures away from digging up old, consolidated sunlight and towards capturing contemporary sunlight, the latter continues to fall while we add to it the sunlight buried beneath. This doubling up on sunlight—adding the energy from the ground to what continues to come from the sun—is the cause, unsurprisingly, of what is called “climate change.”<sup>1</sup>

Knowing what we know about planetary existence in the visible universe, it is likely that this problem—of climate change due to semi-intelligent, self-instituting sunlight burning the traces of a previous era’s self-organizing sunlight—is a fairly common one. Statistically, we can be confident that this planetary drama has played out countless times before across ours and other galaxies, and to various degrees of destructive intensity.

We can imagine a number of different planets confronting our problem in their own ways. Maybe some just solve climate change the way we solved polio. Maybe the sixth planet in Alpha Centauri just got solar power correct relatively quickly and the whole problem was avoided. But maybe this same planet struggled for centuries to construct an internal combustion engine. Maybe they never discovered the novel or invented their version of basketball. I wonder: of all the things we cherish about our semi-intelligent self-instituting existence together, which are truly rare in the universe and which are hopelessly common?

It is important to recognize that climate change is a problem we can solve, based on our institutional track record. It is a very big project, probably top ten, maybe top five, but it is totally manageable, and there are hundreds of thousands of semi-intelligent planetary societies that have solved similar problems. No doubt they struggled with other issues. Perhaps the arrival of the interstate highway system coincided with a residual commitment to fashion that resulted in centuries of passengers going without seat belts until some method was invented to secure these creatures with magnets. And that when confronted with the relative ease by which earth-critters invented the seat belt, representatives from the planet of seat-belt refusers will marvel at our wise intelligence the way we will marvel at how they solved the climate-change problem almost without realizing it.

Why has climate change been magnified to existential proportions of a planetary scale, in the way that seat belts were on Alpha Centauri Six? Because we have a peculiar material-ideological hang-up of our own, and that is a hang-up about accumulation. Rather than accept the



A film still of the sun in ultra HD titled "Thermonuclear Art." Photo: NASA.

process of planetary accumulation and the wasting or bloating disorders of over- and under-accumulation that accompany it, we become neurotic and agitated and accusatory. But these metabolic disorders are serious. They can be cancerous circuits of over-accumulation or they can be deleterious circuits of under-accumulation. Both kinds of disorder can be treated, but only if we understand that both are not only possible but inevitable.

This tendency towards mis-accumulation is what the political economist Thomas Piketty represents with his simple formula  $r > g$ , which states that the rate of return on capital tends to outpace the rate of growth more generally. One wants to say: "Yes comrade! That is what makes it capital!" For a capital is simply a circuit of accumulation, which attempts to accumulate more sunlight someplace rather than somewhere else. Left on their own, some circuits become cancerous and others get wasted as a result. Only conscious and directed intervention in the inherited institutional landscape can adjust these toxic circuitries.<sup>2</sup> The coincidence of the crisis called climate change with the centenary of the October Revolution invites a revolutionary theory of planetary accumulation and the metabolic disorders that accompany it. One hundred years after the storming of the Winter Palace, we still struggle to understand the relationship between palaces and winter.

### *Parahistory from Metaphysics to Political Economy*

Accumulation becomes historical at the planetary level by means of four parahistorical processes: reproduction, representation, production, and distribution. To the extent that we speak of a history of planetary accumulation, we speak of reproduction, representation, production, and distribution; and it is by these four processes together that sunlight comes to institute and recognize itself in the midst of planetary accumulation. This theoretical emphasis on accumulation at the planetary level is not metaphysical. We might call the character of the four processes universal, but we can't be sure. In any case, it is probably not necessary to appeal to the universal in order to say what we must about accumulation. Our planet is such that accumulation takes place. Often, when we refer to the universal, we are referring to the parahistorical.

These processes are parahistorical because they are both inside and outside of history, in the way that what is paranormal is understood to be both inside and outside the normal. The four processes constitute history, taking place both transhistorically—across any given historical scene—and also ahistorically, as that which stands beyond any given instance of history as its condition of possibility. Philosophy is laden with efforts at parahistorical thinking: God is one example; the social contract is another, insofar as it creates the individual and





Chimpanzees glow brightly under infrared light. Photo: Courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech

the society it claims to bind, even as, in order to be a contract, it must proceed as though its progeny preceded it. The social contract, society, and the individual are thus always already both inside and outside history, and in fact vibrate back and forth depending on whether we take the contract as something that binds what already exists or as something that creates two things in the act of declaring them bound.

Another example of parahistorical thinking, much closer to home, is Marx's concept of production. It is because Marx presents production as a parahistorical process that he can speak of a capitalist *mode* of production as one specific and contingent manifestation and constitution of that process. Without a parahistorical process of production, it would be impossible to record differences between modes of production as distinct instances of that process. We cannot record the difference between feudalist and capitalist modes if we cannot further specify what they are modes *of*. In order for there to be a history of production, production must be parahistorical relative to that same history.<sup>3</sup>

There is an inherent contradiction, or tension, or even straightforward difficulty to thinking parahistorically. Parahistorical concepts are difficult because their origins are contested by definition. On the one hand, it is easy to see that, over time, our repertoire of parahistorical ideas has shifted; on the other hand, the "parahistorical" itself,

by definition, can never be completely subordinated to history. The annals of experimental science provide many helpful illustrations. For example, the concept of "the ether" cannot be understood as something that could be displaced by history; neither can it be understood as something that has not been displaced by history. We are constantly struggling with how to recognize and record the parahistorical even as such recognition and recording has apparently always already taken place.<sup>4</sup>

Metaphysics is the archive of unsuccessful struggles with parahistory. Philosophy is the privileged subgenre of metaphysics, whose fate it is to perpetually encircle the parahistorical with concepts like the diachronic and the synchronic, noumena and phenomena, algebra and topology. When the apparatus of philosophy is trained on parahistory, it breaks apart, precisely because philosophy cannot admit of parahistorical experience without transforming it into the ahistorical, the nonhistorical, or simply the historical.

If the parahistorical demands recognition, even as it shatters, upsets, or traumatizes philosophy, what takes the place of this fragmented metaphysics? What do we call the long archive of efforts to reckon with parahistorical phenomena, that would include but not be limited to metaphysics? What is the syntax that corresponds most closely to parahistory?<sup>5</sup>



We call this syntax political economy, because it consists in notating the parahistorical in terms of a division between politics and economics. The tension at work in the parahistorical is built into political economy—"political/economy" we might write—because parahistorical experience is never anything other than a received division between politics and economics. To think a planet in which this division exists without reducing one side to the other is the object of political economy, which is more than metaphysics by being less. What political economy lacks in metaphysical neurosis it makes up in capacious rigor. Political economy says as much as possible, including philosophy but also beyond, around, and outside of it. Whereas metaphysics is a presentation of one division between politics and economics against a second, received division whose existence it works to suppress, deny, or undo, once and for all. Metaphysics is always a monotheism of the political/economic division, insisting on one true instance of this division, even as its articulation admits of others as the condition of its own legibility and significance. Monotheism of the division makes metaphysics a bad comrade, because solidarity means recognizing that the work of others on other political economic divisions is necessary, too. Metaphysics would rob the others of their parahistorical experience, reducing them to spectators at its own, total unfolding. Political economy understands that it is never anything more than a recognition and a record of the practice of others, occasioned by the parahistorical, and instituted as a division between politics and economics.<sup>6</sup>

It would be a mistake to think that history always lines up on one or the other side of this divide—that politics is what is historical while economics is what is ahistorical—because such consistency is always less available than the division considered separately from these assignments. Sometimes politics is one thing, sometimes another; sometimes economics is presented historically, sometimes it isn't, but a division of this kind persists regardless. Any content that would fill in *this* politics, *this* economics is subsequent to the persistence of the division itself and depends on it. No result is capable of crawling back behind this dividing such that the cut between politics and economics is no longer made. Metaphysics is an insatiable desire to fix once and for all the parahistorical division of politics from economics.<sup>7</sup> This desire quickly encounters the impossibility of accounting for shifts in parahistorical experience while maintaining a static division between politics and economics. Heresy and blasphemy proliferate. Children sing songs of a coming insurrection. Whatever was fixed as objects, means, or measures becomes unfixed. The line is being redrawn. But by what?

How is this movement from metaphysics to political economy possible? What is the condition of possibility for the record of political-economic shifts? If political economy and parahistory correspond, what is the

principle announced by this correspondence? Ricardo's answer to this question endures. Class struggle is the condition of possibility for the recognition of parahistorical shifts in the syntax of political economy. Class struggle is what authors the shifts in parahistorical phenomena that are recognized and recorded as political economy.<sup>8</sup>

Certainly the affective associations that we inherit alongside this phrase "class struggle" do much to inhibit the relatively affectless and precise way it is deployed it here, which is as a substitute for earlier metaphysical logics like dialectic, existence, structure, difference, or inconsistent multiplicity. Class struggle authored each of these and will author more so long as sunlight falls on planet earth. To note that the class struggle records itself as a shifting series of parahistorical phenomenon in the syntax of political economy is to describe planetary accumulation with maximum consistency. All that is needed for metaphysics is to pass over these parahistorical shifts in silence.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever can recognizing such shifts consist in? Too briefly, recognition consists in re-counting the set of forces and re-counting the set of relations. Consider Marx's intervention in the capitalist mode of production, which takes a political economy that counts wages as market forces and re-counts them as social relations. Take Judith Butler's intervention into the patriarchal mode of reproduction, which takes a political economy that counts sex as a biological force and recounts it as social relations. Recall Elaine Scarry's intervention in the mode of distribution, which takes a political economy that counts the body in pain as a force of nature and recounts it as social relations. Remember Hito Steyerl's intervention into the mode of representation, which takes a political economy that counts poor images as technological hiccups and recounts them as social relations.<sup>10</sup>

### *Accumulation, Institutions, and Revolutionary Theory*

In each of the above cases, the coordinates of the political-economic division are received as an *institutional constellation* composed of fixed capitals that function to legislate this division of forces from relations along whatever axis. It is in the nature of institutions, we might say, to secrete the political-economic division, as a symptom of their peculiar kind of accumulation. It is not just that we find ourselves in the midst of a planetary process of accumulation, but that within this process, some accumulations have become institutional to whatever degree. Institutions are what happens when planetary accumulation becomes an issue for itself. Sunlight moves from self-organizing to self-instituting when it begins to understand itself as divided into forces and relations. Certainly all planetary accumulations are precarious and contingent, but only institutions articulate a distinction between force and relation as a way of containing or resisting this contingency.



Gwyneth Paltrow relaxes in an infrared sauna.

Practically, this is why it is often easiest to recognize the class struggle in its anti-institutional, anti-accumulative, or insurrectionary valence, because institutions—in order to accumulate persistently—deny the essential contingency at work in any given instance of planetary accumulation, which they nevertheless consist in. No doubt reminding institutions of their fundamental precariousness is an eternal joy for partisans of class struggle, and political economy resounds with testimonies to the sweetness of such satisfactions. Yet insurrectionaries, too, become metaphysicians when they imagine such reminders are sufficient. Revolutionary theory teaches otherwise.

Revolutionary theory is the subgenre of political economy occupied with institutional contingency. Institutionalism is a form of accumulation, and like accumulation, it needs to be concentrated at certain points and reduced at others. Like accumulation, institutionalism is a fact of planetary existence. And it is interesting to consider the history of science-fictional imaginings of the relative insititutionality of other worlds. Are these otherwise-than-planetary societies maximally institutional, like *Star Trek*? Or minimally institutional? Or counter-institutional? One thing that makes the original six *Star Wars* films exceptional, whatever other serious failures may have occurred along the way—here's looking at you Jar Jar—is their institutional pluralism and self-consciousness. *Star Wars* is a world with complex and competing institutional stakes—the entire thing begins with a trade dispute—while *Star Trek*, in its perfect military institutionalism, limits itself chiefly to considering the exceptional adventures of a small kingdom presided over by a wise captain.

When we say that class struggle is the condition of possibility for parahistorical experience recognized and recorded in the syntax of political economy, what we mean is that class struggle is the *principle of possibility for shifts in the accumulated institutional landscape*.

Revolutionary theory is the recognition of these shifts, such that accumulation and institutionalization are *sometimes* one thing and *sometimes* another. The difference between revolutionary theory and metaphysics of whatever kind rests on this *sometimes*. As a subgenre of political economy, revolutionary theory has realist moments and rationalist moments but it never denies that *sometimes accumulation, sometimes institutionalization*.

It is metaphysical to imagine that planetary existence can take place without accumulation or institutionalization. Metaphysics refuses the parahistorical experience of planetary life. Metaphysics thinks the accumulation of sunlight on this planet is optional. Revolutionary theory recognizes the inevitability of sunlight accumulated to the point of self-organization and self-institutionalization, recorded as the four parahistorical processes of representation, reproduction, production, and distribution. Class struggle is sunlight confronting itself on these planetary terms. Metaphysics is all that fails to recognize the planetary being of self-instituting sunlight in the parahistorical experience of class struggle in and around accumulation and institution.

This is why it is metaphysical to suggest that accumulation is always bad or always good. Or that institutions are always bad or always good. We become revolutionary when we accept that class struggle results in a planetary political economy consisting in shifts of accumulation and institutionalization across four parahistorical processes. One of the ways metaphysics refuses political economy is by a moral approach to accumulation or institutionalization, insofar as one or the other is thought to be bad or good intrinsically in whatever measure. This judgment cannot be made without reference to the accumulation of planetary sunlight. Sometimes institutions and accumulations need to be encouraged and sometimes they need to be restrained. A(ny) political economy is articulated by the four parahistorical processes: the sex-process, the value-process, the labor-process, and the body-process, or reproduction, representation, production, and distribution.<sup>11</sup>

Class struggle appears in the form of these four processes, insofar as their unfolding cuts a division between forces and relations, which is then iterated thousands upon thousands of times until it is possible also to speak of a division between politics and economics.<sup>12</sup> Exchange, accumulation, and institution are present in and through all four process, whose constant unraveling leaves these as its trace. As a subgenre of political economy, revolutionary theory recognizes the complementary coexistence of politics and economics in the wake of these four processes.

Metaphysics consists in reversing the sequence, so that this or that political economic element, this accumulation or that institution, is presented as the cause, not as the result, of this or that parahistorical process, singly or in



combination. For example, a set of institutions and accumulations are organized by reference to the human. Humanity, such as it is, takes place as a specific set of parahistorical results diffracted over one another from the four processes of sunlit self-institution.<sup>13</sup>

institution and accumulation, to say nothing of the four processes that summon them and then send them away, if one has presupposed the human. Semi-intelligent, self-organizing accumulations of planetary sunlight begin self-instituting, which results, in very specific times and places, in a distinction being drawn between the human and the inhuman. But this result can no more be read back as a cause of the process that produced it then the ark can



The Naruto whirlpools photographed from a boat, 2008. Photo:Wikimedia Commons

### *Theoretical A-humanism*

The failure of humanists to be humane has everything to do with this mistake. They imagine that the human is the source of all authority and so they appeal to it to come and save them. In the early twenty-first century, the cult of metaphysical humanism is undergoing a great deal of pain. Partially this is because its expert professionals and their institutions are actually being subject to wasting, or relative dis-accumulation. But more importantly, humanism struggles to confront the fact that the human lacks sufficient reality to serve as an explanatory cause on which to base a revolutionary theory.

One cannot recognize the fundamental structures of

be said to be a cause of the flood. The human, like the ark, is articulated as a result of the interplay of class struggle and planetary accumulation.

Revolutionary theory is not anti-humanist because such a position would commit oneself to recognizing the institutional and accumulated coordinates of humanity—if only to reject them—regardless of whether these remain in any sense necessary. Revolutionary theory is a-humanist because the human is less parahistorical than the four processes. It is certain circumstances of the labor-process, the sex-process, the body-process, and/or the value-process that result in the distinction between human and inhuman being drawn. But it makes no sense

to play one side against the other at a theoretical level, because political economy is not the political economy of the human but of the four planetary processes of self-instituting sunlight. What matters is to measure these results against the criteria of over- and under-accumulation, and over- and under-institutionalization.

These interactions can take a number of forms, the most intense of which is refusal. Class struggle is simply sunlight refusing itself. Sunlight accumulates on a planet, begins to self-organize, begins to self-institute, and then refuses itself and so results in the four processes expressed as a political economy composed of institutions and accumulations of whatever consistency or nature.<sup>14</sup>

The labor-process appears when self-instituting sunlight refuses to exchange itself as labor-power in a certain mode of production. The body-process appears when sunlight refuses to release itself from the flesh in a certain mode of distribution. The value-process appears when sunlight refuses to recognize itself in a certain mode of representation. The sex-process appears when sunlight refuses to reorganize itself in this or that mode of reproduction. The material history of self-organizing on this planet is assembled from the strange capacity of the sun to refuse itself into distinct parahistorical processes, and to recognize its doing so in the accumulation and institutions that result.

It would be a mistake to think that this exposition of revolutionary theory consists in naturalizing accumulation or institutionalization. Indeed nature, like the human, is always evidence of a decision already made vis-à-vis this or that political-economic result of the four diffracting processes. Strictly speaking, accumulation does not admit of a natural/unnatural distinction at the level of planetary phenomenon. We can certainly speak of more or less institutionally intensive or saturated spaces, of which city/country is one of the most important gradients, but we cannot say with any planetary consistency that one is natural and the other is not. To do so would be to fall back into metaphysics.

It may be that we need to rapidly de-urbanize, if we are interested in maintaining certain transplanetary accumulations like coral reefs. But this cannot be because the urban is unnatural and the reef is natural, because the arrival of the city and the disappearance of the reef can't be linked to any fundamental break in the four processes, such that they can be said to be natural one moment and unnatural the next. This is why revolutionary theory places so much emphasis on refusal, because it is refusal that invites parahistorical reflection, and parahistorical reflection which undoes metaphysical philosophies of nature.

To refuse the human is to save the human. To be revolutionary is to recognize the necessity of a-humanism,

by recognizing the priority of the four process as parahistorical results of class struggle which sometimes overlap and diffract in such a way that the distinction between human and inhuman becomes convoked and operative. It would be a mistake, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary, to pound the table about whether the Bolsheviks were wrong or right. The revolution does not abolish the difference between the instituting and the instituted. This difference is eternal and encountered by all. It persists in every circumstance. Instead, the revolution abolishes the enslavement of what institutes to what is instituted, without erasing the difference between them. The revolution is like a stage: people step on and off of it all the time from one side or the other.<sup>15</sup>

There are two exits off the stage of revolution. Insurrection to the left and reform to the right. The left exit collapses the difference between instituting and instituted in favor of the former: a permanent instituting, a hatred of accumulation, or a metaphysics of insurrection. We exit the revolution stage left when we decide in advance that institutions are corrupt by virtue of their being institutions. The Marquis de Sade is the patron saint of insurrection, and the ultraleft neurosis is any attachment to institutional austerity that results in a sadomasochistic fixation on process. The process fetishist refuses every instituted thing in favor of a permanent and all-consuming practice of instituting.

The right exit collapses the difference between instituting and instituted in favor of immortal institutions and the consolations of conservation. We exit the revolution stage right when we decide in advance that institutions must be patronized or defended by virtue of their being institutions. The melancholic pseudo-patriarch violently identifies with every instituted thing against the slightest acknowledgement of its parahistorical contingency. The rightist hysteria is any attachment to the instituted past that results in blind vengeance against the present.

Many attempts to determine the legacy of the October Revolution once and for all deny the transhistorical reality of each of these three positions; ultraleft, right, and revolutionary. But the truth is that then, as now, there are those who destroy in the anxiety of envy and wrath and those who corrupt with fear of lust and greed. Between these go the revolutionaries, speckling the waves of a crisis like sunlight before vanishing beneath a phosphorescent wake.

## X

Thanks to Dayna Tortorici and Hito Steyerl for their essential feedback and edits, and to Steyerl again for allowing me to insist on referencing her own writing in this context.



**Stephen Squibb** is intimately familiar with the highways linking Brooklyn, New York with Cambridge, Massachusetts.

1 In a conversation with Anton Vidokle published earlier this year, Hito Steyerl noted how the baroque and bombastic style of Georges Bataille and his followers has inhibited the reception of their ideas concerning planetary accumulation. What follows is an attempt to consider this reality with less in the way of "synth violins and too much death metal," as she put it so perfectly. (See Anton Vidokle and Hito Steyerl, "Cosmic Catwalk and the Production of Time," *e-flux journal* 82, May 2017 <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/82/134989/cosmic-catwalk-and-the-production-of-time/>.) Beyond Bataille & Co., I should mention also what is known as the "surplus" approach to questions of distribution and relative prices within classical economics, in contrast to the marginalist emphasis on the substitutability of factors of production and the "forces" of supply and demand. The approach developed here has significance for both schools, I hope, but cannot pretend to less sympathy for the former. Tony Aspromourgos details the history of this tradition with a rare combination of excitement and erudition in *The Science of Wealth* and *On the Origin of Classical Economics*, while the debates on capital theory for which it is known can be found in the volume of the Palgrave dictionary dedicated to the topic, as well as G.C. Harcourt's *Some Cambridge Controversies in the Theory of Capital*.

2 Frequently the reasons for this overlap with the psychology of addiction: accumulation addicts over-accumulate sunlight and imperil the planet. Sometimes one can argue an accumulation-addict into recovery, sometimes one cannot. But there is good evidence that denouncing addicts as moral failures is not the most effective way of treating metabolic disorders of whatever kind.

3 Louis Althusser did the most to develop the significance of this concept as the first properly scientific object in the history of history. Althusser's Marx would be the discoverer of the scientific "continent" of history in the way the Newton was the discoverer of the scientific "continent" of physics. However, Althusser's commitments within a rapidly de-Stalinizing French Communist

Party required him to oversell, understandably, Marx's success on this score. Derrida noticed this immediately, and says so explicitly in an interview with Michael Sprinker in *The Althusserian Legacy*, and somewhat more elliptically in *Specters of Marx*. Happily or otherwise, we no longer need to think with respect to the internal stakes of the Communist Party (and it is interesting to read Althusser's discussion of Montesquieu's disguised critique of French absolutism, in *Politics and History*, as his own sly acknowledgement of this constraint) nor resist speaking directly about the limitations of Marx's approach to production, which fails to define itself as a concept in relation to other concepts, as tradition dictates. (See LeCourt's *Marxism and Epistemology* on this and much more.) Instead, Marx uses production to negate two distinctly nonconceptual or unscientific legacies: the Hegelian mystery of spirit and the anarchist fixation on circulation or exchange, or what I call "representation." Marx's "concept" of production is thus actually an anti-nonconcept consisting of two negations laid one on top of the other: a "political" anti-circulationism and a "philosophical" anti-spiritualism. (Discussed in Todd Hollander's *Economics of Karl Marx*, Howard and King's still-standard *The Political Economy of Karl Marx*, and finally in King's essay "Value and Exploitation" contained in Bradley and Howard's *Classical and Marxian Political Economy*.) This double negation has allowed partisans of production to shift back and forth between anti-representationalism and anti-spiritualism as needed, and so accounts (alongside the Abrahamic legacy more generally) for the incredible endurance of production as a theoretical master node, we might say. This legacy reaches its baroque peak in the first few pages of Deleuze and Guattari's *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, when the non-concept of production reveals its theological roots by expanding to include absolutely everything. My own efforts, here and elsewhere, are chiefly to give production the scientific dignity Althusser wanted for it but failed to establish: by defining it only against its peers, namely the concepts of representation, distribution, and reproduction (formerly consumption), and not

against whatever mysticisms might have come before it. Be careful of battling mysticisms, Nietzsche might have added, lest you become mystical.

4 Tortorici points out that 'ether' is probably not the best example here, and that something like 'the four humors' might be clearer. I keep ether because Einstein's discussion of it in "Ether and Relativity" hews so closely to the difficulty I am trying to capture with this idea of parahistory, even as he concludes the ether might not be destined for the dustbin of history after all! Not only this, but ether also allows me to cite the term's recent resurrection as the name for a cryptocurrency designed for the automated dissemination of 'smart contracts' which is as perfect example of a revolutionary development in what, further down, I call 'the value-process.'

5 The triplicate "syntax-experience-principle" (as well as the progression of the first four philosophical logics) is Laruelle's in *Philosophies of Difference*, though I don't know his project well enough yet to say with any certainty how my deployment differs, or doesn't, from his own.

6 The emphasis on recognition and recording is from Grace Lee Boggs, Cornelius Castoriadis & C. L. R. James, who write, in *Facing Reality*, that the essential task is to "recognize and record."

7 A subgenre of metaphysics, philosophy demands that its phenomena settle their accounts with history one way or another. When philosophy recognizes metaphysical desire at work in itself, it begins to negate its own name, if not always transcend it, and this is finally what sends it tumbling into the pit of anxiety to which it had fallen by the end of the twentieth century, when even the exponents of what-would-have-been-philosophy felt the need to identify themselves by its negation: Derrida's deconstruction, Groys's anti-philosophy, Laruelle's non-philosophy, Badiou's delicate and reactive "philosophy" that is already less than art, politics, science, love, mathematics, theater, and maybe even less than the anti-philosophy he diagnoses in Deleuze and Lacan.

8 This proximity or intimacy between class struggle and philosophy is what led Althusser to remark that philosophy is class struggle in theory, by which he meant that philosophy is class struggle by other means. This is often true, but it is for this reason that political economy is summoned to describe how this could be the case.

9 In the *Reply to John Lewis*, Althusser at last recognized the priority of class struggle, but was prevented from developing the significance of this priority. It was Harry Cleaver in *Reading Capital Politically* who showed in detail how the relative commodification of labor-power refers not to some kind of postlapsarian totality of alienation or reification as the Romanticists would have it, but to the relative status of class struggle at the point of production. I think we can say something similar for class struggle at the point of representation, reproduction, and distribution as well.

10 Some of the relevant works include Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*, Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* and *Thermonuclear Monarchy*, and Hito Steyerl, *The Wretched of the Screen* and *Duty Free Art*. The significance of counting and re-counting sets is from Badiou, of course, whose beautiful revival of idealist metaphysics finds him reading the four parahistorical processes of representation, production, reproduction, and distribution as a sequence of truth-events called art, science, love, and politics, respectively.

11 All of these processes have been theoretically recorded and developed across a huge range of works, such that the claim here is that most everything can be shown to concern them, singly or in combination, consciously or otherwise. As a result the only piece of *theoretical* originality I am prepared to claim is the insistence on a distinction between the sex-process and the body-process - between the mode of reproduction and the mode of distribution - which does so much to untangle the limitations left us by the legacy of Foucault, it seems to me, in particular. The inspiration for this separation is the surgery performed by Kozo Uno on Marx's *Capital*, in his

*Principles of Political Economy*, where he similarly insists on conceptually separating the value-process from the labor-process, which Marx's residual Hegelianism had confused in the first chapter of *Capital*. After living with this confusion for most of my intellectual life, I am afraid I must agree with Althusser that anyone reading Marx's big book for the first time should skip this first chapter on the commodity and begin directly with the process of exchange.

12  
The division into forces and relations is necessary to explain the division between this or that politics and this or that economics but in no way corresponds to it, any more than "the circulation of the blood" corresponds to this or that specific blood type or condition, healthful, maleficent, or otherwise.

13  
The significance of diffraction is developed in Karen Barad's *Meeting the Universe Halfway*. Little in the new century has contained as much genius, insight and possibility as Barad's book, which also includes a much more detailed and concrete description of what I mean by the division of forces from relations. Following Castoriadis, I call this process iinstitutionalization, while Barad follows Foucault, via Hacking et al., in describing it in terms of the apparatus. But this difference is, pardon the pun, immaterial. What matters (!) is her development, from Niels Bohr, of the concept of complementarity which describes also what I mean by the coexistence of politics and economics. Nor is political economy itself left unconsidered in Barad's masterpiece, as her sixth chapter offers a reading of Leela Fernandes' *Producing Workers* which is probably a better example of what I am talking about than anything I've managed to include here. Forced to dissent from Barad's framework, I might question her reliance of Foucault's idea of power, which to my mind is still a question-begging non-concept with a suspiciously mystical pedigree, and then also ask about the prevalence of 'production' throughout her text, which does not, I don't think, immediately escape the objections to this concept detailed above in note three.

14  
Mario Tronti develops the importance of refusal in his essay the "Strategy of Refusal." Somewhat heretically, one can see via the crucial work of Suzanne de Brunhoff in *Marx on Money* that bankers' refusal to lend in a credit crisis helps constitute the concept of value-power in a way that parallels how the refusal of work during a strike constitutes the concept of labor-power.

15  
This is Cornelius Castoriadis, in particular in "Socialism and Autonomous Society."

It is always a question of freeing life wherever it is imprisoned, or of tempting it into an uncertain combat.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1991<sup>1</sup>

The exhaustion of natural resources is probably much less advanced than the exhaustion of subjective resources, of vital resources, that is afflicting our contemporaries. If so much satisfaction is derived from surveying the devastation of the environment it's largely because this veils the frightening ruin of subjectivities. Every oil spill, every sterile plain, every species extinction is an image of our souls in rags, a reflection of our lack of world, of our intimate impotence to inhabit it.

—The Invisible Committee, 2014<sup>2</sup>

Suely Rolnik

# The Spheres of Insurrection: Suggestions for Combating the Pimping of Life

The world is in convulsion, and so are we. We are taken by a malaise, comprised of a mix of sensations. A dread in the face of the sinister landscape brought about by the rise of reactive forces everywhere, whose level of violence and barbarity reminds us of the worst moments in history. Along with fear, we are also taken by a perplexity in the face of another phenomenon, simultaneous with the first: the takeover of worldwide power by the capitalist system in its new version—financialized and neoliberal—which extends its colonial project to its ultimate limits, its globalitarian realization.

At first glance, the simultaneity of these two phenomena seems paradoxical, which blurs our comprehension and leaves us confused: the high degree of complexity and perverse refinement proper to the neoliberal way of life is light-years ahead of the narrow-minded archaism of the brute forces of this new conservatism. They are symptoms of radically different reactive forces, originating in distinct historical moments, coexisting in our contemporaneity. But after the initial shock, we understand that neoliberalism needs these rude subjectivities to do the dirty work of destroying all the achievements of democratic, republican culture, dissolving its imaginary and eradicating from the scene its protagonists—including the left in all its nuances, but not only. Lacking moral limits of any kind, reactive subjectivities fulfill their task at a dizzying speed and with intense violence—as soon as we recognize one of their coups, another has just happened. Carrying out this task gives them a perverse narcissistic *juissance* to the point of being pathetic. The ground is prepared for a frictionless and unencumbered free flow of transnational capital.

Added to the fear and astonishment, there is a deep



frustration with the recent dissolution of several leftist governments throughout the world, especially in Latin America—which, not by chance, happens simultaneously with the rise of reactive forces of conservatism and neoliberalism, temporarily united. Such frustration mobilizes the traumatic memory of the unfortunate fate of twentieth-century revolutions. A state of alert settles into our subjectivity, as when the scarcity of essential resources exceeds a limit, putting life itself at risk. These are traumatic situations before which we either succumb (a pathological response that saps our vital potency) or widen the horizon of our gaze, which gives us more precision in deciphering the violence and inventing ways of fighting it (a response which preserves our vital potency, and even intensifies it, in certain cases). In the moments when, in the face of the trauma that we are experiencing, the second response wins, we can see an insurmountable limit against which left-wing projects stumble, especially institutional ones. Such a view imposes on us the task of problematizing this limit, in order to create the conditions of its overcoming.

First of all, we are forced to recognize that this barrier is not located only outside the territory of the left, imposed by adverse forces that are external to it. In fact, it is chiefly located inside the left's own territory, whose horizon ends at the borders of the macropolitical sphere. This is the sphere of the shapes of a world, and its own modes of existence: the positions and functions set out in the social map, the modes of relation between them, as well as their codes and their representations. As the left-wing acts only in this sphere, its territory is confined to the dominant form of the world in which it has its origin and unfoldings: the colonial-capitalistic<sup>3</sup> world. The perspective guiding the resistance of the left remains thus trapped inside the logic of the very regime that it (we) wants to overcome. Keeping this in mind, it is not surprising that left-wing actions are not only unable to fight the colonial-capitalistic regime, but also result in its dreary reproduction.

It is indisputable that within this regime, the left-wing positions are the fairest, because in different ways and to different degrees the left seeks a less asymmetrical distribution of places—not only in the political arena, but also in the social and economic ones—as well as a state that supports this extension of equality. If this fight is undoubtedly indispensable and has an undeniable value, the problem is that it leaves out the microsphere: the sphere of unconscious formations in the social field, to which corresponds a certain dominant politics of subjectivation and its respective politics of desire, with which any regime, of whatever kind, acquires its existential consistency, and without which it couldn't be sustained.

Even when the left, especially the institutional left, talks about modes of existence, it tends to do so only from a macropolitical perspective. The left wing thinks of the oppressed as identitarian entities and tends to crystallize them, neutralizing the creating power (potency) of their

subjectivity, thereby preventing this “creating power” from fulfilling its function: to respond to the need for change that emerges in the relational fabric of collective life. Worse still is when the focus is on groups of disadvantaged people who don't fit into the category of the “worker”—the identitarian place where the oppressed are confined in the lefts imaginary, reduced to class relations. The lefts tend to fetishize these people or even to render them folkloric, giving to these figures turned into caricatures a lot in the official map of democracy, which will only allow access to civil rights. This is the central goal of the lefts resistance: what moves them in this operation is the an urge to promote the “inclusion” of such groups into the existing map, resulting in their submissive adaptation to the hegemonic mode of subjectivation. That is the case, for example, of the lefts approach towards indigenous peoples in Brazil. This focus on mere inclusion suggests us that left-wing not only assumes the dominant mode of existence as its reference, but also considers it as “the” sole and universal reference, denying any alterity. The consequence is that they lose the crucial opportunity to inhabit the relational fabric woven by these different modes of existence and, above all, to sustain its possible shifting effects that could render void the dominant cartography. More worryingly, when such effects happen and new modes of existence emerge within collective life, they are read by the left-wing through the same lens, and tend to be similarly confined to identitarian entities. This is the case, for example, with the current movements that disrupt dominant notions of gender, sexuality, race, etc. The singularization processes underway in these insurrections are ignored, thereby neutralizing their vital impulse for transmuting the dominant modes of subjectivation and the changes of the individual and collective forms of existence this impulse could unleash in such cartography. In short, what is ignored and neutralized is their strength for micropolitical resistance. Although some left-wing groups recognize these movements, their readings tend to reduce them to the issue of inequality, narrowing the focus of these uprisings to the class struggle. This persistent reduction of the vision and modes of action of the left to the macropolitical sphere is responsible for the left's helplessness in the face of the challenges of the present, which keeps it (the left) imprisoned in sterile academic lucubrations on democracy. In such lucubrations the lefts insist on “demo” (people in Greek) in the notion of “democracy”, which they translate as “government of the people”, denying a fundamental detail of its original sens in Greek which gives it the meaning of “self- government” of the people. This leads to reduce the discussion on the current crisis of democracy to the question of how to reform the state machine in order to better represent the people.

The dreary fate of left resistance and the repeated frustration it provokes in us, added to the confusion and the fear mobilized by the current state of things, is what leads us today to become aware of the absolute limitations of the macropolitical horizon on the leftist territory. Here

and there erupt insurrections with new strategies in response to the violence against life, in all its nuances, for which the pair right/left is no longer a sufficient operator to delineate the forces at stake and to hit the struggle target. Isn't the presence of micropolitical insurrection what surprises us in the new resistance movements bursting everywhere mainly in the younger generations—especially in the metropolitan suburbs, in particular among the women, black, and LGBTQ people—, as in the indigenous communities? Isn't this precisely what fascinates us in these movements, despite the difficulty of deciphering and naming it? It is not exactly such movements that are preventing us from succumbing to the melancholic and fatalistic paralysis that would throw us into the bleak landscape that surrounds us today? In these territories-in-information which are gradually being populated, there is an effective change of the politics of subjectivation. Their horizon expands the reach of our vision, allowing us to foresee the micropolitical sphere. How does the violence of colonial capital operate in this sphere?

air, the water, the sky, the plants, the animals, and the human species. In our species, such rape has particular characteristics, arising from the way the vital force is materialized, which depends on a process of creation that makes the options multiple, implying the need to make a choice. For this reason, Freud assigned the name “drive” to the human vital force, distinguishing it from instinct. On the one hand, this specificity of ours broadens the possibilities for the transmutation of world-forms when life asks for it; on the other, it makes our species the only one that can prevent the fulfillment of this ethical exigency. And when that happens, the effect is a disempowerment of life, interrupting its germinative process, destroying the vital energy sources of the biosphere—which, in humans, includes the subjective resources for its preservation.

If the Marxist tradition, originating in industrial capitalism, made us realize that the expropriation of the human vital force in its manifestation as labor is the source of capital accumulation, the new version of capitalism leads us to recognize that such expropriation is not confined to this domain. In its new fold, this regime feeds off the energy of



A frozen embryo of a Bark Anole (*Anolis distichus*), an arboreal lizard.

### *The Abuse of the Vital Force*

What distinguishes the colonial-capitalistic system is the pinging of life as a force for creation and transmutation. This force is life's essence and its condition for persistence, in which lies its greater goal, i.e., its ethical destiny. This profane rape of life is the matrix of the system in this sphere, to the point that we can designate it as pinging-capitalistic. The vital force of the entire biosphere is expropriated and corrupted by that system: the land, the

the drive: the very impulse to create forms of existence and cooperation in which the claims of life materialize into new modes of existence, transforming present scenarios and transvaluing their values. Diverted by the regime from its ethical fate, the drive is channeled to build worlds according to the purposes of the dominant regime: the accumulation of economic, political, cultural, and narcissistic capital. In short, the violation of the vital force produces a trauma that makes subjectivity go deaf to the

drive's claims, which corrupts desire: it stops being guided by the impulse to preserve life, and can even act against it. The results of this politics of desire are scenarios in which life seems increasingly deteriorated, reaching thresholds today that threaten its own continuity. This is precisely the violence of the colonial-capitalistic regime in the micropolitical sphere: a cruelty typical of a perverse politics of desire—subtle, refined, invisible, unreachable by perception. It is a violence similar to that of the pimp who, in order to instrumentalize his prey, operates by means of seduction. Under his spell, the prostitute tends to not realize the pimp's cruelty; on the contrary, she tends to idealize him, which leads her to surrender to the abuse of her own desire.

*Strange-Familiar: The Inescapable Paradox of Subjective Experience*

I propose the name "colonial-capitalistic unconscious" to designate the dynamics of the unconscious typical of the existing regime. The main feature of the colonial-capitalistic unconscious is the reduction of subjectivity to its subject's experience. But what is this experience?

Intrinsic to the sociocultural condition of humans and shaped by their imaginary, the function of the subject is to enable us to decipher the forms of society we live in, its codes and its relational dynamics. Such deciphering is done by the practice of cognition, made possible by our abilities of perception and feeling (psychological emotion), which are marked by the sociocultural representation repertoires that structure the subject and its language. We associate what we perceive and feel with certain representations and we project these representations onto it, which allows us to classify and recognize it in order to produce meaning. In this sphere of experience, sensory and sentimental, the other is experienced as an external body, separated from the subject, which relates to the other through communication based on a shared language. It is in the experience of the subject that habits are constituted, giving us a sense of familiarity. This is the macropolitical sphere of human life; inhabiting it is essential in order to live in society. The problem of the colonial-capitalistic unconscious is the reduction of subjectivity to the subject, which excludes its immanent experience of our living condition: the outside-the-subject. This exclusion is extremely harmful to life.

In our living condition we are constituted by the effects of forces, with their diverse and mutable relationships that stir the vital flows of a world. These forces traverse all the bodies that compose the world, making them one sole body in continuous variation, whether or not we are conscious of it. We can designate these effects as affects. It is an experience that is extrapersonal (since there is no personal contour, since we are the variable effects of the

forces of the world, which compose and recompose our bodies), extrasensory (since it happens via affect, distinct from perception), and extra-sentimental (since it happens via vital emotion, distinct from psychological emotion). We usually call "intuition" the extra-cognitive mode of decoding that is proper to affect's power of assessment. However, this is a word so worn out in our culture—because of a neglect of what is not from the rational order proper to the subject—that I propose to replace it with "body-knowing" or "life-knowing," an eco-ethological knowing.

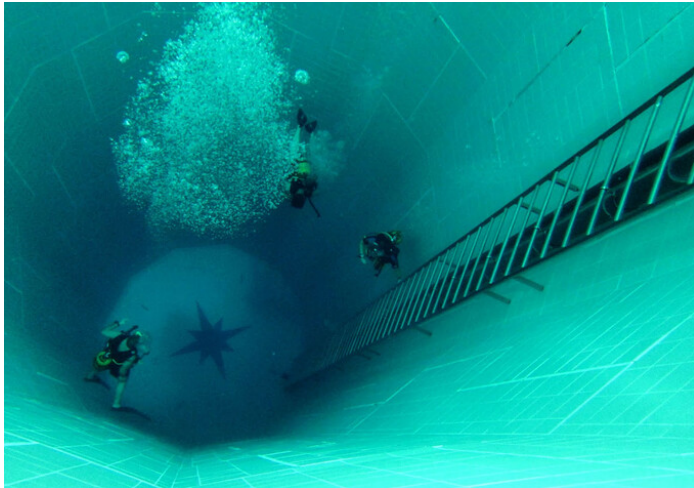
Unlike communication, the means of relating with the other in this sphere is empathy, in which there is no distinction between the cognizant subject and external object. In the subjective experience outside-the-subject, the other lives effectively in our body; it dwells in us through its effects, the affects. It is with its living presence that empathy takes place. By inhabiting our body, the forces of the world impregnate us, creating embryos of other worlds. These produce in us a sense of strangeness, distinct from the familiarity provided by our experience as subjects.

*The Malaise of the Paradox Calls Desire to Act*

The subjective experiences of the subject (the personal) and of the outside-the-subject (the extrapersonal) therefore produce two totally different sensations: the familiar and the strange. These work simultaneously and inseparably, but according to distinct logics and temporalities. There is no possibility of synthesis or translation between them; their relationship is marked by an irreducible paradox that is unavoidable in principle. Attempting to germinate, the embryos of worlds trigger the movement of the drive, leading life to take shape in other forms of world that would result from their germination. These are not made in opposition to existing forms, but through the affirmation of a becoming that endangers their perpetuation. Destabilized by the paradoxical experience of strange-familiar, subjectivity experiences a tension between two movements. On the one hand, the movement that presses it toward the conservation of life in its essence as the power for germination, in order to be embodied in new modes of existence. On the other, the movement that presses it toward the conservation of existing modes in which life is temporarily embodied and subjectivity can recognize itself in its experience as a subject.

The malaise caused by the tension between the strange and the familiar, as well as between the two movements triggered by this paradoxical experience, functions as an alarm that summons desire to take action in order to recover a vital, emotional, and existential balance, a balance shaken by the emergence of a new world and the dissolution of the existing worlds. A constant negotiation between these two movements is imposed on desire. It is

precisely at this point that the politics of desire are defined—from the most active to the most reactive. Action and reaction are distinguished by the results of a negotiation between those two movements, the kind of choice that desire will privilege. This choice is not neutral, because from it results distinct fates of the drive, which imply distinct unconscious formations in the social field, carriers of greater or smaller affirmation of life. Such is the battlefield in the sphere of micropolitics.



The second deepest indoor swimming pool in the world, Nemo 33, is located in Brussels, Belgium.

### *The Colonial-Capitalistic Unconscious*

In subjectivities under the control of the colonial-capitalistic unconscious and as such reduced to the experience of a subject, a reactive micropolitics prevails that tends to impose exclusively the movement of conservation of the forms in which life is embodied in the present. Dissociated from its condition of living and thus ignoring the ongoing process of change that characterizes the dynamics of the vital force (which in the human, corresponds to the dynamics of the drive), subjectivity experiences the pressure from embryos of other worlds as a threat of dissolution of the self and of its existential field, since “*this* world,” the one in which the subject dwells and which structures it, is lived as “*the* world,” sole and absolute. Under these conditions, to regain a balance, desire clings to established forms, which it seeks to preserve at any cost. The greater the destabilization, the more vehemently subjectivity encloses itself in what is established or received, defending it tooth and nail, and may even deploy high levels of violence to ensure its permanence.

It is this separation of subjectivity from its living condition that paves the way for desire to surrender (with *juissance*) to the pimping of the drive. Such surrender manifests itself in the conversion of the drive’s force for creation into

mere creativity, which re-accommodates the established cartography, producing new scenarios for the accumulation of capital. In situations of crisis, surrender manifests itself in the investment of the drive in collective movements clamoring for the maintenance of the status quo, such as in the case of the vertiginous rise of conservatism today. The *juissance* of the subject, in both cases, comes from its illusion of belonging, a placebo for the fear of stigmatization and social shame that the destabilization of its world provokes, since it interprets it as a threat of collapse. This type of desiring action results in a hapless fate for the drive: the interruption of the process of germination of collective life. And if it is in the collective existence that this process is interrupted, it is because even if the germination is suspended only in the existence of an individual or group, it necessarily generates a necrosis point in the life of the social body as a whole.

The profane abuse of the drive is difficult to grasp since it happens in an invisible sphere covered by a spell of perverse seduction. However, its numerous manifestations in the social field are fully accessible to those who can tolerate seeing the process of degradation of life, present in all these symptoms of its violation. The most obvious are the relations with the environment that generate ecological disasters. Or the power relations based on classism, machismo, homophobia, transphobia, racism, xenophobia, chauvinism, nationalism, colonialism, etc. These relations confine the other in an imaginary place of inferiority or even subhumanity, leading to its total invisibility and nonexistence, and even its concrete elimination, which, in extreme cases, consists in the very disappearance of its body. These manifestations are not mere epiphenomena of the regime, but symptoms of its very “bone-marrow” in the sphere of the dominant politics of desire and subjectivation.

In the face of this, it is not enough to subvert the order of the places designated for each character at play in the scene of power relations (macropolitical insurrection); we must abandon those characters themselves and their politics of desire (micropolitical insurrection), which may render the continuity of the scene itself impracticable. The dissolution of the regime depends unavoidably on the insurrection against violence everywhere and in all human activities in both the macro and micro spheres, which operate with disparate and paradoxical logics and temporalities. This is the necessary condition to achieve an effective transmutation of the present. In its new version, the regime has managed to colonize the whole planet, affecting its macro- and micropolitical guts, to the point that no human activity can escape from it today.

If the left horizon is limited to the macropolitical sphere it is because the subjectivity which tends to predominate in its territories is also structured by the pimping-capitalistic unconscious, hence its inability to reach the micropolitical sphere. It is already a big step to recognize this fact,



instead of remaining paralyzed in an endless melancholic lament over left impotency towards the new form of capitalism or frustration with left-wing governments. But it is not enough to realize it; we must take one step further, a step indispensable for creating adequate means of resistance to the actual state of things: we must explore the micropolitical sphere, its differences from the macropolitical one, and the inextricable connection between both. What follows are some notes in this direction.

### *I. Macropolitical Insurrection: A Programmatic Protest of Consciousness*

**Focus (visible and audible):** the asymmetry of rights in the social relations established by the colonial-capitalistic regime. These consist in power relations that are manifested not only in the context of social classes, but also in the context of relations of race, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, coloniality, etc.

**Agents (only humans):** all those who occupy subordinate positions in the power relations that predominate in all fields of social life.

**What moves its agents:** the urge to “denounce” the injustices of the world in its current form, which tends to mobilize consciences.

**Intent (empowering the subject):** to free oneself from oppression and exploitation; to leave the state of invisibility and inaudibility in order to occupy affirmatively a place of speech and possess the right to a dignified existence. It is about dismantling the asymmetry in power relations, promoting a redistribution of positions that is more equal—not only in politics but also in social and economic fields.

**Criteria for evaluating situations (moral):** a certain system of values. It is this moral compass that orients our choices and actions in the macropolitical sphere.

**Operating mode (by opposition):** to oppose the oppressor, to subvert the distribution of positions within existing power relations. These are strategies to fight against oppression and the laws that support it in all its manifestations in individual and collective life.

**Mode of cooperation (construction of organized movements and/or political parties via identity recognition):** such construction is programmatic, departing from a previously defined action plan with goal related towards a common demand (a concrete demand, in this case) and based on a similar subordinate position in a particular segment of society. In this position, which belongs to the sphere of the “person” in subjective experience, is drawn an alleged identity contour, which

facilitates the necessary grouping. The problem is when subjectivity confines and reduces itself to this contour, interrupting the subjectivation processes, which result from the tension between the personal and the extrapersonal. Several of these segments can be united in one movement (around the claims involving, for example, gender, race, and class), just as movements of different segments can get together around a cause that concerns all. This mode of cooperation generates pressure to force an effective reversal in power relations at the institutional level (which includes the state and its laws, but is not limited to it). This kind of work is finalized when such a reversal is effected in the particular field in which the struggle took place.

### *II. Micropolitical Insurrection: A Drive's Protest of the Unconscious*

**Focus (invisible and inaudible):**[footnote The idea of a “drive’s protest of the unconscious” is related to the notion of a “drive unconscious” proposed by the Brazilian psychoanalyst, João Perce Schiavon. See from this author: “Pragmatismo pulsional” (Drive Pragmatism), in *Cadernos de Subjetividade* (São Paulo, 2010), 124–31.] the perverse abuse of the vital force of the biosphere in all its elements, including the human, which is the very micropolitical matrix of the colonial-capitalistic regime. In sum, the focus here is the highly aggressive pathology of this regime and its serious consequences for the fate of the planet.

**Agents (human and nonhuman):** all the elements of the biosphere that rebel against violence towards life. However, the dynamics of response to this violence in human and nonhuman agents are different. The nonhuman instinctively recognizes the vital force anemia resulting from its abuse, and in the face of it produces transmutations that allow it to resume its course. For example, a river that dries out because of excess pinging-capitalistic trash may rebel, returning to flow now underground, where it is protected from these toxic effects;<sup>4</sup> or a tree may bloom before spring, preventing the sterility that can result from excess pollution.

Nevertheless, in humans, as the response to this abuse depends on the dominant politics of desire, it varies according to different cultures. Under the colonial-capitalistic culture, the reduction of subjectivity to the experience as a subject, inseparable from the abuse of the drive, leads us to interpret the fragile state in which we find ourselves as a sign of collapse. Desire thus clings to the status quo, acting against the perseverance of life, and not in its favor: we become the walking dead, or zombies. The agents of micropolitical insurrection in the human field are therefore all those who seek to resist the rape of their vital drive and resume the power to decide its fate, thus regaining ethical responsibility towards life. Assuming that the decolonization of the unconscious

necessarily implies the field of our relationships, from the most intimate to the most distant, the effects of any gesture in this direction are collective.

This kind of struggle traverses the whole of society, whether we are in a position of subordination or sovereignty—strange as this may seem when viewed from the macropolitical viewpoint and the habituated interpretation of reality typical of the left. Even stranger from this point of view is that nothing guarantees that all subalterns are, in principle, potential agents of this insurrection, for their subjectivity may be under the command of the unconscious typical of the dominant regime, even if they fight against it macropolitically. And vice versa: the sovereign may eventually become a micropolitical agent when it manages to move away from this dominant politics of subjectivation.

**What moves its agents:** the impulse for the perseveration of life, which, in humans, manifests as the impulse to “announce” worlds to come, which tend to awake the unconscious, aggregating new allies to the micropolitical insurgency.

**Intent (potentializing life force):** to reappropriate the life force and its power of creation, which in humans depends on the reappropriation of language so that the drive can find its utterance (in words, images, gestures, modes of existence, sexuality, etc.), in order to render sensible the worlds which announce themselves to life-knowing. This is the condition for the completion of the drive movement in its ethical destination, producing an event: the transfiguration of the reality of the self and of the world and a transvaluation of its respective values. In other words, combating the pimping of the drive implies building for oneself another body, leaving the shell of a body structured in the dynamics of abuse—as the locusts abandon their exoskeleton so another body, still embryonic, can germinate and take its place.

In short, the micropolitical insurgency is, in itself, a resurrection of the vital force. It is never given once and for all; to achieve it, it is necessary to remain alert about its movements. Producing the “potentialization” of life is thus distinct from “empowering” the subject, an idea belonging to the sphere of macropolitical insurrection. Both intentions are important; the problem is when the insurgency aims only for empowerment, causing us to remain captive to the logic of the very system we seek to combat. Differentiating potentialization and empowerment is especially indispensable for bodies considered of less value in the social imaginary—bodies of women, homosexuals, transsexuals, transgender people, black people, indigenous people, the poor, precarious workers, refugees, etc. When their insurrection embraces potentialization and refuses to restrict itself to the claim of empowerment, it is more likely that the drive’s movement will find its utterance and from it an effective transmutation of individual and collective reality will result.

**Criteria for evaluating situations (ethical):** what life demands in order to persevere every time it is weakened. An ethical drive-compass guiding desire’s choices and its actions toward a transvaluation of existing values, when these stop making sense and start to suffocate life.

**Operating mode ( by affirmation):** affirming life in its germinative essence, to abandon power relations. Not giving in to the abuse of the drive, which depends on the long work of overcoming the trauma that such abuse necessarily provokes, the de-potentialization of life that sets the stage for its violation. Resisting abuse is the condition for dismantling the power of the colonial-capitalistic unconscious in our own subjectivity, which leaves us entangled in power relations, be it in the position of the subaltern—even when we rise up macropolitically against it—or in the position of the sovereign—even when we are the most macropolitically correct. An example: a woman who remains dependent on the male gaze to exist and, therefore, not only falls into the trap of chauvinist sexist abuse but feeds it with her own desire. This is also true for women trying to get out of this place, but only macropolitically, rising up against inequality. While this rising up is essential, by not incorporating the micropolitical sphere the struggle remains prisoner to the logic of opposition to the male character figure. The combat becomes a struggle for power that keeps the male character figure of the chauvinist sexist scene as the hegemonic reference, and thus maintains the very scene it aimed to combat, contributing to its perpetuation.

But if a woman, or any figure occupying the subaltern position in the script of power relations—as the oppressor’s victim, or as his mere opponent—abandons her role, transfiguring her character to a different one or simply deserting the scene, the oppressor is left talking to himself and the scene can’t go on. Facing the anguish provoked by the destabilization of the scene where he had a place, the oppressor has several possible responses. At best—which is already happening, but only for a minority—this experience can propel him to overcome his disconnect from extrapersonal experience as well as his inability to sustain himself in the tension between the personal and extrapersonal experiences. From then on, he will tend to recreate himself in order to interact with these new character(s)—which, in turn, tend to transmute with this interaction—becoming himself an agent of micropolitical insurrection as well. In this collaboration, a new script might emerge, in which the politics of desire that guides the characters and the relationship between them is no longer subjected to the pimping-capitalistic unconscious, leading to the constitution of new scenes in the social landscape. But it is also obvious that the impossibility of continuing to act as an oppressor can equally provoke a violent backlash, driven by its exasperated will to conserve the scene and its characters at any price. This is, unfortunately, the trend that is most prevalent today, due in part to the tsunami of increasingly

narrow and violent conservatism plaguing the planet. One of its manifestations is the exponential increase of femicides in the regions of the world where feminism has intensified and expanded, as is the case in Latin America.

In the operational mode of the micropolitical sphere of insurrection, what is fought is the pathology of the colonial-capitalistic regime: resistance in this sphere is thus inseparably both political and clinical. It is about seeking to heal life of its impotence, which is the sequel from its captivity in the relational plot of abuse that alienates subjectivity from vital demands, holding it hostage to the current regime in its pimping essence. Such healing, on which depends the dissolution of the regime at a micropolitical level, involves a subtle and complex work interrupted only by death. But every time we take a step in this direction, it is a particle of the regime—within us and outside of us—that is dissolved.

**Mode of cooperation ( construction of the common, via empathy, through resonance between embryos of worlds):** to cooperate here is about weaving multiple network connections from distinct situations, experiences, and languages, whose unifying link is an ethical perspective: the affirmation of life in its transfiguring and transvaluating essence. Thus are created temporary relational territories, varied and variable, in which are produced collective synergies, providers of a reciprocal sheltering that facilitates the work of elaborating the trauma that results from the perverse operation of the colonial-capitalistic regime. This is the condition for success in composing an individual and collective body that is resistant to the pimping of life and capable of repelling it. From such collective reappropriations of the drive comes the potential constitution of fields for the emergence of events, in which other modes of existence and their respective cartographies take shape whenever the embryos of worlds require so in order to germinate. Such events, therefore, result from the processes of collective insurrection, unlike the macropolitical mode of cooperation, in which insurrectionary actions are preprogrammed.

We have to urgently address the challenge of improving our tools for the work involved in the decolonization of the unconscious, the matrix of micropolitical resistance. It is in this direction that I draft below some suggestions.

#### *Ten Suggestions for Decolonizing the Unconscious*

1. De-anesthetizing our vulnerability to the forces of the world in their variable diagrams; such vulnerability is the potency of subjectivity in its outside-of-the-subject experience;
2. Activating body-knowing: the experience of the world in its live condition, whose forces produce effects in our



After the coup, President Temer refuses to live in his former residency as vice-president due to the alleged presence of ghosts. Trolls then assaulted the palace for a picture, a humorous reminder that Temer's coup must indeed have left the house haunted.

living condition;

3. Unblocking access to the tense and paradoxical experience of the strange-familiar;
4. Not denying the resulting fragility of destabilizing deterritorialization that the strange-familiar experience inevitably promotes;
5. Not interpreting the fragility and its malaise as a "bad thing" and not projecting on it phantasmatic readings (premature ejaculations of the ego provoked by its fear of abandonment and collapse and its imaginary consequences: repudiation, rejection, social exclusion, humiliation);
6. Not giving in to the will of conserving forms and to the pressure they exert against life's will to power (potency) in its impulse towards differentiation. On the contrary, sustaining oneself on the tense line of this unstable state until the creating imagination succeeds in building a place of body-and-utterance, which, being the bearer of the strange-familiar's pulsation, is capable of actualizing the virtual world announced by this experience, thus allowing the agonizing forms to die;
7. Not running over the creating imagination's own temporality so that the process of germinating a world is not interrupted. Such an interruption would make the imagination vulnerable to letting itself be diverted towards its own expropriation by the pimping- capitalistic regime. In this expropriation, the creating imagination subjects itself to the imaginary that such a regime seductively imposes, thus becoming sterile;
8. Not renouncing desire in its ethics of life-affirmation, which implies keeping it fertile, flowing in its unlimited

process of transfiguration and transvaluation;

9. Not negotiating the nonnegotiable: everything that would obstruct life-affirmation in its essence as a force of creation. Learning to distinguish the nonnegotiable from the negotiable: everything that could be accepted because it does not preclude the vital instituting force, but on the contrary creates the objective conditions for it to produce an event, fulfilling its ethical fate;

10. Practicing thinking in its full function: inextricably ethical, aesthetic, political, critical, and clinical. That is to say, reimagining the world in each gesture, each word, each relation, each mode of existence—whenever life requires so.

Obviously, this is not a prescription for a supposed “cure” for the pathological effects of our culture, in a sort of clinical-political messianism that would replace the debilitated macropolitical messianism contained in revolutionary utopia. This bricolage of the self, on which depends decolonization in the micropolitical sphere, never attains its full and final realization. Through our existence, in the face of new tensions, we oscillate between varied and variable positions in the wide range of possible micropolitics, from the most reactive to the most active. We are always faced with the challenge of combating the reactive tendency within ourselves (the dominant tendency in our culture), of combating the power of the ghosts that take us back to the character we are used to playing in the colonial-capitalistic scene—with which we participate in the abusive relations, whatever our position on it might be.

The decolonizing of the unconscious implies a constant effort to dismantle this character, reappropriating the drive and, guided by it, creating many others characters that live up to life, embodying its transfiguring strength. Facing this challenge requires the infinite work of each and many: it is in this horizon that the reflections shared here are situated.

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*Translated from the Portuguese by Vivian Mocellin.*

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clinical-political pragmatic. She graduated in Sociology and Philosophy (Université Paris 8) and in Clinical Human Sciences at the Université Paris 7, where she obtained her Masters in Institutional Analysis and subsequently her D.E.S.S in Clinical Psychology); she has a PhD in Social Psychology at the Catholic University of São Paulo. She is author of *A hora da Micropolítica* (N-1, 2016); *Anthropophagie Zombie* (Black Jack édit, Peris, 2012); *Archive mania*, Serie 100 Notes – 100 Thoughts No. 022 (HatjCantz/Documenta 13, 2011); *Cartografia Sentimental* (Sulinas, Porto Alegre 1989; 7a ed. 2015) and with Félix Guattari: *Micropolítica. Cartografias do desejo* (Vozes, Rio de Janeiro, 1986, 13a ed. 2016), translated and published in many contries (in English with the title: *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, by Semiotext/MIT, 2006). Creator of the *Archive for a work-event. Project of activation of the body memory of Lygia Clark's artistic propositions* (65 film interviews and a booklet; 2002-2011). She was member of the jury of he Casa de las Americas Prize (Cuba, 2014) and, actually, from Prince Claus Award (2015-2017).



1  
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "Percept, Affect, and Concept," chap. 7 in *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 171.

*terra descansa* (Rio de Janeiro: Núcleo de Cultura Indígena, 2000).

2  
Translation from the French by Suely Rolnik, based on the English version in The Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, Semiotext(e), 2015), 33.

3  
"Capitalistic" is a notion proposed by Félix Guattari. The French psychanalyst takes as its starting point Marx's idea that capital overcodifies exchange value, homogenizing and submitting all economic activity under its domination. Guattari extends this idea to the processes of subjectivation, which would be equally overcodified and homogenized under the capitalist regime. With this, such regime neutralizes singularities and, above all, it interrupts the processes of singularization that emerge from the encounters between them and the transmutations of reality that these processes would tend to unleash. Similarly to what occurs in economics with this operation, subjectivities tend to submit themselves to the regime's purposes with their own desire, reproducing the status quo in their choices and actions. The suffix "istic" added by Guattari to "capitalist" refers to this overcoding; according to him it is one of the main operations of this regime, impacting all the domains of human existence. This idea of Guattari's has an important place in his thought, and has been further resumed in his work with Gilles Deleuze, as one of the main axes of their collaboration, since *The Anti-Oedipus*, their first co-written book.

4  
This actually happened to the Rio Doce (Sweet River), near a village named Krenak in the municipality of Resplendor. Some time after this part of the river was seemingly dead due to the devastating impact of its abuse by the multinational mining company Vale do Rio Doce, it was discovered that the river had started to flow again underground. See Ailton Krenak, "Em busca de uma terra sem tantos males," in *O lugar onde a*

## Stefano Harney and Fred Moten

# Base Faith

The earth moves against the world. And today the response of the world is clear. The world answers in fire and flood. The more the earth churns the more vicious the world's response. But the earth still moves. Tonika Sealy Thompson might call it a procession. The earth's procession is not on the world's calendar. It is not a parade on a parade ground. It is not in the world's teleology. Nor is the procession exactly a carnival played to mock or overturn this parade, to take over its grounds. A procession moves unmoved by the world. The earth's procession around which all processions move struts in the blackness of time. And the earthen who move around, and move in earth's procession, move, as Thompson says, like Sisters of the Good Death in Bahia move, in their own time out of time. God is so powerful in this procession that he cannot exist. Not because he is everywhere in the procession but because we are. We are the moving, blackened, blackening earth. We turn each other over, dig each other up, float each other off, sink down with each other and fall for each other. We move in earthen procession swaying to base even as its beat alerts the world's first responders. These responders are called strategists. Strategy responds to the constant eruption of the earth into and out of the world. The response takes the form of a concept upon which form has been imposed, which is then imposed upon the earthen informality of life.

Some say it was Alfred Sohn-Rethel who first figured out how the concept was, in this interplay of formation and enforcement, stolen into ownership, abducted and abstracted, weaponized in strategy. He said the abstraction of exchange, and later the abstraction of money, led us to think in the suspension of time and space, the suspension of materiality, and this led to the appropriation of the concept. But Sohn-Rethel only picks up the trail of this theft with the thief, the individual, already formed and ready for the strategized and immaterial concept, already formed and readied by it. He wants to convict this thief. We want to take him home.



Film still from Pier Paolo Pasolini's 1967 movie *Oedipus Rex*.

We want to take him out 'cause out is home. We're at home in the prophetic churning of the earth on the move,



A smiley face appears in a Hawaiian volcano's crater during an eruption during 2016.

the round run of the fugitive, visitation in our eyes, refuge on our tongues. Our unholy commune with those who keep moving and stay there, who keep out before they can be kept out. That's why the hellhounds of strategy are on our trail. They think they got the scent of our leader. But our leader is not one. Let's call her Ali, after Pasolini's "Profezia." Ali Blues Eyes. Pasolini thought she was coming in the procession from Africa to teach Paris how to love, to teach London brotherhood, to march east with the red banners of Trotsky in the wind. But she never arrived because we went to chant in Palermo, fast in Alabama, meditate in Oaxaca. So Ali became Tan Malaka and we went to the fête, the jam, the study group.

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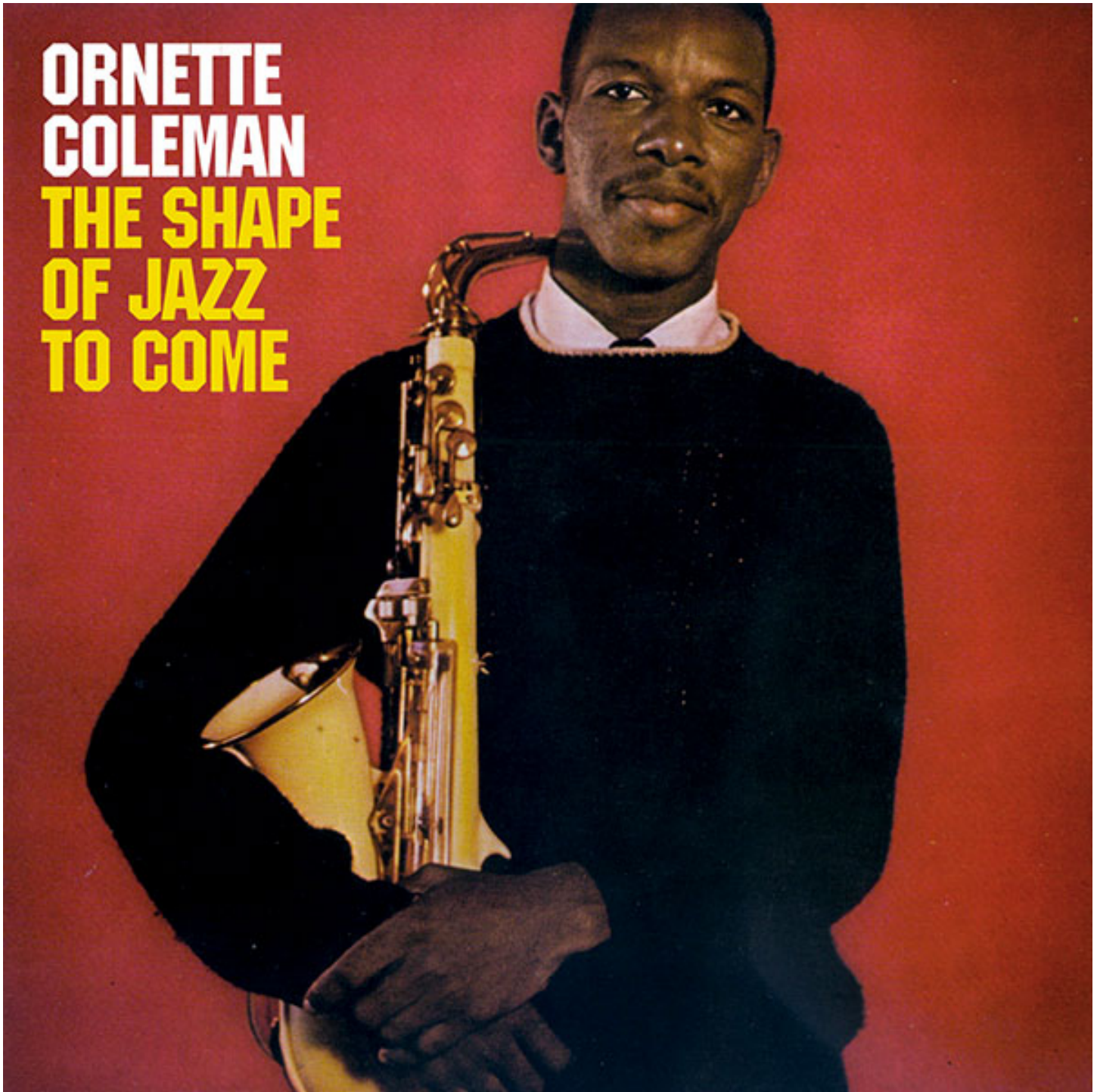
Ever since capital witnessed Lenin doing it better, capital has been running from strategy. Today when capital deploys a concept, everybody is supposed to buy it but no one is supposed to believe it. Capital might call this strategic universality. Or it might not call it anything because capital is not concerned with the dignity or the sovereignty of the concept. The concept served its purpose. And its main purpose now is to get out of the way of logistics or to become logistics' conduit. Its propriety and its proprietary commitments prepare it to be bought and sold into a roughened, airy thinness. Today's concepts in circulation are not the abstraction of or from the commodity; they are commodities and cannot, in their propriety and proprietary form, be used against the commodity-form. Their form is the air the commodity

expels, containerized, as all but impalpable units of exhaust(ion). They are just another strategy. And strategy, though it is not abstract, does not really matter, either. What matters is logistics. Logistics, not strategy, provides the imperative. Strategy just provides the friction. Logistics moves the concept around in the circuits of capital. The world's only argument against the earth is logistical. It must be done. The earth's movement must be stopped, or contained, or weakened, or accessed. The earthen must become clear and transparent, responsible and productive, unified in separation. This is not a matter of deploying the concept, strategically or otherwise, but of force, forced compliance, forced communication, forced convertibility, forced translation, forced access. Capital does not argue, though many argue with it.

Capital just likes disruption. Capital's been running from strategy, running toward logistics, running as logistics, running into the arms of the algorithm, its false lover who is true to it. All that's left of strategy is leadership, the command you find yourself in after logistics takes over, when the unit comes into its own. For capital, strategy is a just a form of nostalgia, or proof that it has nothing to fear from its enemies who embrace it, proof that they are not enemies. They are the commanded, repeating commands. They call it policy. Ali was never in command. She's just made up of the hungry. She's just made up of plans.

In his desire to make capital claim its materiality Marx took Ali's. Tried to make her a leader. But Ali's prophecy was too crowded, too black, too late, too loud. Submerged in





Cover art for Ornette Coleman's third studio album *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959).

capital, the earthen buried strategy and detonated it. The first respondents told us we need to learn to be more strategic. We will learn to need strategy, they say. But we know strategy is the delivery system for a concept, collateral and deployed. Indeed, strategy is itself just a concept in the world, the universal approach. But not even capital cares. Capital only wants things to run smoothly, which is to say universally. This is what disruption is for,

and leadership, and open innovation. Capital does not fear strategy. It can barely remember it from the days of worldly concepts. Marx made capital a concept. Lenin saw his chance. So capital learned to be material again. No, capital doesn't fear strategy. Capital fears the earth's procession. Ali's blues black saint eyes.

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God has everything but faith; this is why He so brutally requires ours. He looked around and was so lonely He made Him a world. Rightly, He didn't believe in himself and, wrongly, He didn't believe in us. We were neither sempiternal nor parental, just generative and present, like a wave. In His case, (over)seeing was not believing. Faithlessness such as His demands a certain strategic initiative. Ever get the feeling we're being watched? Well, that's just God's property, the police, the ones who proclaim and carry out His strategic essentialism. They have some guns that look just like microphones. Sometimes they write books. They tell us what we need. Often, they are us. We're all but them right now but we're gonna try to fade back in and out as quickly as possible. Mattafack, let's sound it out, let's talk it over. If you could start talking over us right now we'd appreciate it.

Unremitting predication—what if this is our existence, given in and as a practice of chant, a ceaseless and ceaselessly inventive liturgy? You could call it the historicization of a veridical protocol in which the distinction between falsity and transformation, untruth and unchecked differentiation, is kept sacred. And it's not even vulgarly temporal in the way that seeing aspects, as Wittgenstein describes it, implies a timeline—first it was a duck and then it was a rabbit. There is, in the simultaneity of “it is a duck” and “it is a rabbit,” a kind of music. Ornette Coleman calls it “harmonic unison” and we might follow him while also deviating from him but in and through him by calling it anharmonic unison, a differential inseparability. When essence leaves existence by the wayside, what ensues, for essence, is existential loneliness. What if the problem of the concept is the problem of separation? And what is the relationship between conceptual separation and individuation? What's at stake is the convergence of the body and the concept that is given in the transcendental aesthetic. Individuation and completeness follow. On the other hand, (en)chanted, (en)chanting matter, canted blackness (where flesh and earth converge beyond the planetary, in and as non-particulate differentiation). It's not about a return to some preconceptual authenticity so much as matter's constant aeration, its constant turning over, its exhaustion and exhaustive sounding, its ascentual and essentially and existentially sensual descent. The problem is the separation of the concept and our subsequent envelopment within it—this horrific sovereignty of the concept and its variously hegemonic representations. Did the invention of sovereignty require the concept or did the concept already bear the danger of sovereignty's brutal representation(s)?

Maybe the problem is the separability, the self-imposed loneliness-in-sovereignty, of the concept and its representations (as embodiment or individuation or subject or self or nation or state). How do we make sure that the concept still matters? How do we refuse its dematerialization, even if/when that dematerialization seems to have allowed the production of new knowledge,



A selection of perfume is featured in this illustration from a Soviet commodity catalog published between 1956-61.

of new critical resources? This is a question that is explicitly for Marx. When the senses become theoreticians in their practice, in communism, which is here, buried alive, they ask questions of the one who brilliantly, and for us, both charts and re-instantiates the dematerialization that capital pursues in the separation of labor power from the flesh of the worker or of profit from that flesh in its irreducible entanglement with (the matter of) earth. Was that an instance of “strategic thinking”? If so, it demands that we rethink strategy. Is there a way to think the relation between strategy and improvisation that alloys the maintenance of a difference between immediacy and spontaneity? There is a deliberate speed of improvisation that is not simply recourse to the preconceptual. Maybe what's at stake is the difference between movement and *a* movement or *the* movement.

What's at stake is the trace of perfume that has been released. It is changed in being-sensual, depurified in being breathed. There is a socialization of essence that is given in and as sociality itself and maybe this is what Marx

was talking about under the rubric of sensuous activity, but against the grain of his adherence to a logic and metaphysics of (individuation in) relation. All this makes you wonder what the difference is between strategy and faith. When we say difference, here, what we really mean is caress—how strategy and faith rub up against one another in a kind of haptic eclipse, or auditory submergence, or olfactory disruption, or gustatory swooning of the overview. In this regard, strategic essentialism is something like the soul feast's homiletic share or, more precisely, the ana- and anicharismatic sharing of the homiletic function in and by the congregation. When we say preach when we hear preaching we be preaching. It's like a conference of the birds—a constant rematerialization and proliferation of the concept; a constant socialization of the concept rather than some kind of expedient decree by some kind of self-appointed consultant who finds himself to have been gifted with the overlooking and overseeing power of the overview. The consultant's capture and redeployment of strategic essentialism is faithless and lonely. It exudes the sovereign religiosity of the nonbeliever. Let me tell you what we need or don't need, it says, always doubling down on you whenever it says "we" with a heavy, I/thou imposition, a charismatic boom that somehow both belies and confirms its sadness in the serial de-animation of its personal relationships, which is felt by us as the toxic solace of being spoken to and of by the one who is supposed to know. So maybe it's just a matter of where strategic essentialism, strategic universalism, or the concept, in general, are coming from. Unremitting predication bears a boogie-woogie rumble, where deferred dream turns to victorious rendezvous. Down here underground, where the kingdom of God is overthrown and out of hand and hand to hand, there's a general griot going on. His (and that of any of his representatives, the ones who must be representing us but can't) strategy is exhausted and surrounded by our plans.

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There's a movement of the earth against the world. It's not the movement. It's not even a movement. It's more like what Tonika calls a procession, a holy river come down procession, a procession in black, draped in white. The earth's procession sways with us. It moves by way of a chant. It steps in the way of the base, in the way of the dancing tao. It bows to the sisters of the good foot, carrying flowers from Caliban's tenderless gardens. The earth is on the move. You can't join from the outside. You come up from under, and you fall back into its surf. This is the base without foundation, its dusty, watery disorchestration on the march, bent, on the run. Down where it's greeny, where it's salty, the earth moves against the world under the undercover of blackness, its postcognitive, incognitive worker's inquest and last played radio.

The earth is local movement in the desegregation of the

universal. Here's the door to the earth with no return home and who will walk through it is already back, back of beyond, carried beyon', caribbean. Pasolini said Ali Blue Eyes will walk through the door over the sea leading the damned of the earth. Ali Blues Eyes. But we won't teach Paris to love. We can't show brotherhood to London. Ali took Trotsky's red banners and made something for us—a handkerchief, a bandage, a kiss.

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