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Editorial

It's unclear how many people still alive today can remember feeling the strange, warm rains that fell over the riverside city of Pripyat on the Ukraine-Belarus border in late April 1986. Pripyat was built in 1970 to serve the nearby Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, dedicated to harnessing the *mirnyy atom* ("peaceful atom") for the Soviet Union. For the past thirty-six years, Pripyat and a surrounding exclusion zone of inconsistent bounds bridging swaths of today's Ukraine, Belarus, and a bit of Russia have been off limits to most human beings. In this issue of *e-flux journal*, Svitlana Matviyenko disagrees with Paul Virilio when he says that the Chernobyl disaster was "the original accident" of war and peace converging in technological "shipwreck modernity." For Matviyenko, a Ukrainian scholar of cyberwar and nuclear colonialism, the full and non-accidental activation of the same nuclear-plant-turned-weapon happened this year, just a month ago.

Also in this issue, Boris Groys finds Vladimir Putin leading Russia into a self-destructive search for cultural foundations, to a point where even Western sanctions could be part of a much larger suicidal plan on Putin's part. But this fanatical drive to restore a non-Western essence becomes especially dangerous when such an essence may not actually exist. For Groys, what does exist is a very long story of restoration following the (also long story of) Russian Revolution; in this restoration, prerevolutionary symbols of capitalism, monarchy, and local culture are supposed to heal the wounds of revolutionary violence. However, the delusion that Ukraine should welcome being restored to its rightful place in a coherent "Russian World" shows that, while revolutions are often characterized by purposeful violence, restorations have their own kind of senseless and blind violence.

Boris Buden asks: What the hell is "the West," if not another vague regional abstraction, boasting democratic principles without even being a truly democratic political entity? In this sense, Putin's criminality doesn't exonerate the West for abandoning Ukraine to fight its war as a proxy while hiding behind money, bombs, and liberal values watered down from real revolutionary vision. Similarly empty of ideas beyond the expansion of its own identitarian bloc or "European family," the West is also the result of a counterrevolutionary project far more robust than Putin's. But crucially, for Buden, real revolutionary vision is what is sorely needed to prevent an accelerated decline into senseless identitarian war. Today we need to "make love, not war"—harnessing the radical utopian vision of sex and love embodied in that slogan, not its reduction to mere freedom of expression—in order to mobilize our common desire for peace and reconciliation for Ukraine and Russia.

Raed Rafei explores Pier Paolo Pasolini's visit to Beirut in 1974, during the golden era of leftist struggle in Lebanon. Just one year later, Pasolini would be dead and the

Lebanese Civil War would begin. As Rafei writes, Pasolini's intertwining of sex and politics speaks to how queerness might have shaped radical politics in 1970s Beirut and the Arab world if the civil war had not put an end to the cross-fertilization of anti-imperialist struggles and sexual revolution.

Gregor Mobius, a theoretician of visual languages, writes that recent events have radically shifted his perception of the world. Between the Cambrian explosion of 530 million years ago, when new animal species proliferated, and the literal explosions of today, the world "has gradually turned from a well-organized 3D structure into a flat, chaotic 2D universe." To restore some sense of synaptic order, Mobius considers possible scientific and philosophical starting points for a new "big narrative." Perhaps the next one can be more inclusive of the startling diversity of human civilizations, and can even imagine the possibility of an emergent, self-aware biosphere. What unit of time should the next big narrative use? Or should it dispense with time altogether? "It is important and necessary," writes Mobius, "to begin articulating a story about the world/life/existence that is completely different from one that is dissolving now."

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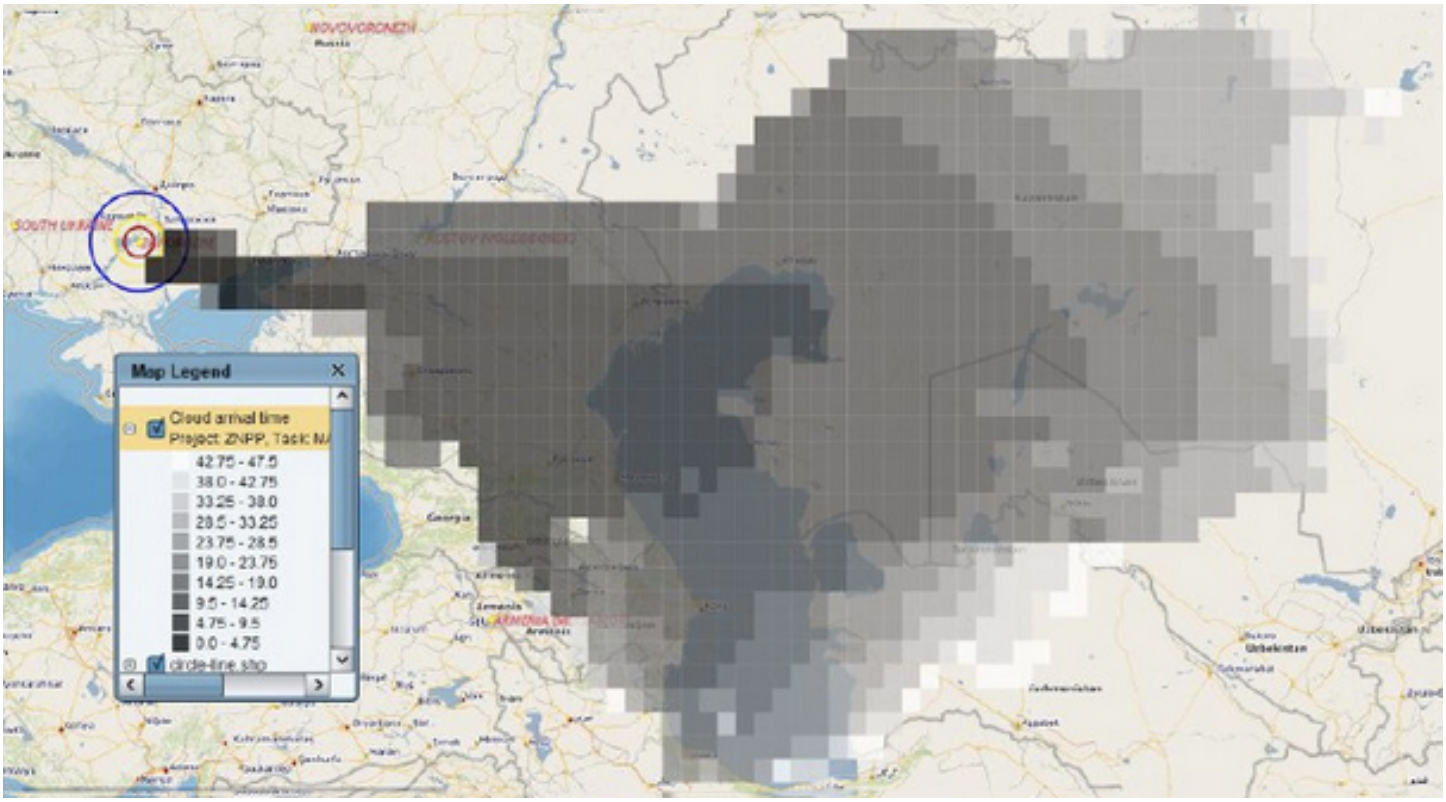
Svitlana Matviyenko

Nuclear Cyberwar: From Energy Colonialism to Energy Terrorism

Along with targeted airstrikes on the infrastructure of Ukrainian cities, one of the first events of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine was the February 24 occupation of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant. One week later, on the evening of March 3, a Russian rocket hit the industrial zone of Enerhodar ("energy's gift"), a satellite town within five kilometers of the largest nuclear power plant in Europe. The Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant (NPP), in operation since 1972, sits on the Dnieper river in southern Ukraine and has six active pressurized light-water nuclear reactors. After striking Enerhodar, Russian troops began moving through the night towards the nuclear power plant. They soon took over the plant by breaking through lines of local Ukrainian Territorial Defense units. Members of these units threw Molotov cocktails at the Russian tanks in response to their persistent firing at civilian infrastructure, including the destruction of a school and a residential building. After two-and-a-half hours of Russian advances, Ukrainian troops guarding the nuclear station facilities withdrew, refusing to engage in combat on the the NPP grounds.[1] The Russian army broke through the station's gate. Station personnel continued, in vain, to try to stop the troops. They shouted warnings via megaphone: "This is nuclear industrial infrastructure! There is danger of a nuclear accident! Stop shooting and leave the premises! This is an act of nuclear terrorism!"[2] Around midnight, a fire broke out in a training building on the plant's grounds due to the Russian troops' continuous shelling. Its flames burned for at least four hours throughout the early morning of March 4. The fire was eventually extinguished, but it became one of the most utterly terrifying broadcast events of our time.[3] The occupation of both Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia NPPs created a sense of catastrophic proximity and, in some ways, echoed and reiterated the nuclear threat articulated by Vladimir Putin on March 27, when he ordered the Russian minister of defense and the chief of the general staff to transfer deterrent forces of the Russian army to a "special regime of combat duty." These instances of "nuclear terrorism" lie at the nexus of "cyber" and "nuclear" warfare, where the two major forces of cyberwar converge for a full realization of its grimmest scenario. We should hope that we can still evade its consequence.

Nuclear Tensions in the Cyberdomain

Cyberwar is a radically invasive and violent event of high complexity. It is entangled in the operation of several information systems and cuts across various materialities and flows—from the digital to those of flesh and blood. Media scholar Nick Dyer-Witheford and I have recently theorized cyberwar by offering a broad politico-economic definition: it is a manifestation of the recurrent technological revolutions (industrial, electronic, cybernetic) by which capital renews itself. Originating in Second World War and Cold War cybernetics, cyberwar is oriented toward the future. It slopes toward the new levels



Calculation of cloud arrival time performed by the Norwegian Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority using the atmospheric dispersion model MATCH (JRODOS), hrs. Photo published on Telegram channel, Energoatom.

of *automation* likely to characterize all social relations, including war-making, in the twenty-first century. Unlike military and security specialists, we do not distinguish between cyberwar (in the form of cyberattacks, disinformation, psyops) and war on the ground. In *Cyberwar and Revolution,* we emphasize that cyberwar, in both its defensive and offensive aspects, may be distinct from, preliminary to, or simultaneous with other forms of hostility, including the "kinetic" use of weapons.[4]

Our work traces the history of *cyberwar*—both as an idea and a way of fighting—through a multiplicity of distant and related realms and contexts. Like all other writers on cyberwar, we also had to address the fact that its genealogy is paradoxically rooted in William Gibson's science fiction. *Neuromancer* gave us a vision of cyberspace, "a consensual hallucination experienced daily by billions of legitimate operators, in every nation, by children being taught mathematical concepts ... a graphic representation of data abstracted from banks of every computer in the human system," where a hacker is exploited by a corporate tycoon.[5] American pop culture movies of the 1980s, such as *WarGames,* also contributed to envisioning the possibility of an accidental nuclear war. In the 1983 movie, which allegedly so worried the fortieth American president Ronald Reagan that he perceived it as a warning, two teenage hackers log into a system of networked computers to change their high school grades. They go on to find themselves in the online gaming realm of chess, checkers, backgammon, and poker, only to discover more tempting offerings like *Theaterwide Biotoxic and Chemical Warfare* and *Global Thermonuclear War*. The name of the second game alludes to Herman Kahn's 1960 book on the same topic, which develops the strategic doctrines of nuclear war and evaluates its effect on the global balance of power. The teenagers choose to play this one as the Soviet Union, targeting American cities and reverting military cybernetic vision towards their adopted state. But within a computer network where new linkages constantly emerge to bring any previously disconnected realms into an unusual proximity, this playful simulation of an imagined enemy is misrecognized as real. As a result, the North American Air Defense Command's ensuing response almost leads to a Third World War carried out through cyberspace.

By the 1990s, cyberwar was no longer a fiction, although its scope and impact were still being debated by military and security specialists—either openly in the press or behind the closed doors of exclusive think thanks. Simultaneously, the United States, China, and other counties often initiated so-called "operations"—which were either purely digital or a hybrid model, where the digital aspects of operations unfolded as action on the ground. Operation Moonlight Maze, conducted around 1999, related to a series of probes into the networks of the

Rafael Mariano Grossi, IAEA Director General, shows the international press and media during his press briefing as he points on a map on the situation at the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Ukraine, IAEA Vienna, Austria, 4 March 2022. Photo: Dean Calma / IAEA.

Pentagon, NASA, the US Department of Energy, as well as private universities and research labs. Those early exercises were followed by Operation Makers Mark, Operation Storm Cloud, and other cyberattacks coded by somewhat strange names. One of the better-known examples is Operation Titan Rain in 2003, allegedly carried out by hackers from the People's Republic of China—possibly members of the People's Liberation Army—who attempted to penetrate the networks of US defense institutions, military contractors, and high-technology businesses. In the relatively recent case of Operation Grizzly Steppe, the hacker groups Cozy Bear and Fancy Bear allegedly leaked Democratic National Committee communications during the 2016 US elections. The "worst breach of US military computers in history," attributed to Russian agents, preceded it in 2008. Operation Buckshot Yankee was a catastrophic event in which a malicious code placed on a flash drive uploaded itself to US Central Command networks.[6] It was a turning point in cyber security for the US government and led to the creation, in 2010, of the United States Cyber Command.[7] USCYBERCOM has since been responsible for coordinating the cyber activities of different military services and conducting operations in the "cyberdomain," a realm which it institutionally categorized, in 2011, as equally important as land, sea, air, and space. In other words, the cyberdomain is officially a key terrain of irregular warfare with state and nonstate actors.[8]

In several of these operations, the cyberdomain of war intersected with that of nuclear conflict. Given both cybernetic and nuclear history, this connection is not new or surprising, but it has been certainly *renewed* within the last decade. The control and command of nuclear weapons depends on increasingly digital communication systems whose collapse may lead to catastrophe. And, as political scientists Erik Gartzke and Jon Lindsay remind us, cyberwar has always been "thermonuclear" in its strategy: while nuclear weapons and cyber operations are nearly complete opposites in their destructive capabilities, they are nevertheless "particularly complementary."[9] The ways to achieve such complementarity vary significantly. The most representative example of these complementary forces is Operation Olympic Games, a joint project of US and Israeli agencies known for deploying state-of-the-art Stuxnet nuclear centrifuge-destroying malware. Between 2010 and 2012, the operation disabled over a thousand centrifuges at Iran's uranium enrichment plant outside the city of Natanz in order "to sabotage Iran's uranium enrichment program and prevent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from building a nuclear bomb."[10] To this day, as cybersecurity journalist Kim Zetter writes, the Stuxnet worm is "known as one of the most sophisticated viruses ever discovered—a piece of software so unique it would make history as the world's first digital weapon and the first shot across the bow announcing the age of digital warfare."[11] Cryptologist Bruce Schneier estimated that the software could have taken eight to ten people six months to write, and required laboratory testing as well as gathering extensive intelligence for effective targeting.[12]

The Imperial Roots of Nuclear Occupation

Although Ukrainian troops withdrew from the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone without engaging in combat, the State Nuclear Regulatory Inspectorate of Ukraine reported that Russian troops' heavy military vehicles disturbed enough contaminated soil to significantly overload control levels of gamma radiation dose rates in the Zone.[13] Nuclear policy expert James Acton noted that the seizure of the infamous plant added "a disquieting nuclear dimension to the unfolding humanitarian catastrophe of Russia's illegal and unprovoked invasion of Ukraine," which is also a "brutal assault [that] violates the security guarantees that Moscow provided in 1994, when Kyiv allowed it to remove nuclear weapons left in Ukrainian territory after the collapse of the Soviet Union."[14] The occupation of Chernobyl weaponized the plant's entire remaining nuclear energy production infrastructure by turning it into a nuclear weapon. This transformation constitutes an act of *nuclear terrorism*.

A premediated and unlawful act of terrorism committed either by rebels or governments can be isolated, but it can also take place in the context of war. In this case, it should be distinguished as such. "Clearly war and terror are intimately related," historian Charles Townshend writes. "It is hard to imagine a war that did not generate extreme fear amongst many people, and sometimes this is more than a by-product of violence—it is a primary objective. The essence of terrorism, by contrast," he explains, "is surely the negation of combat. Its targets are attacked in a way that inhibits (or better prohibits) self-defence."[15] Russian forces, it seems by now, were better prepared for a parade than combat. They intended to achieve victory in

their failed blitzkrieg by a series of distributed terrorist acts. Their attacks on "not just selected but also random targets" were meant to seize attention and paralyze the country by shock, horror, fear, or revulsion.[16] The occupation of a nuclear power plant—one such terrorist act—equally targets local and remote publics, opening multiple channels of negotiation or pressure to compensate for the Russian military's disorganized invasion.

To better understand the recurring nexus of "cyber" and "nuclear" in cyberwar, let us look closely at the structure of two cases: Stuxnet and the occupation of the Chernobyl and Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plants. The occupations may seem extremely different from the sophisticated Stuxnet computer worm implanted to simulate and slow down the work of Iranian centrifuges. After a relatively easy takeover of the Chernobyl NPP, the occupation of Zaporizhzhia met significant local resistance. It was also significantly more risky and bizarre. The occupation was executed by shelling the nuclear plants' facilities with projectiles, many of which did not immediately detonate and were literally dropped on the premises like stones catapulted by a ferocious medieval army. Some of these projectiles struck the cooling system of a transformer serving nuclear reactors of the Zaporizhzhia NPP. Prior to being discovered, they were lodged in the buildings' walls and infrastructural elements without exploding. Then Russian troops proceeded to search, collect, and detonate this ammunition right on the grounds of the plant. In these events at the Zaporizhzhia NPP, we have finally encountered that barbaric dimension of cyberwar where the reality of its dystopian and even apocalyptic future temporarily or permanently invades the present.

If Stuxnet, a code, penetrated a system to intervene in its mechanical workings to *slow down* the supposed production of a nuclear bomb, Russian invaders' rocket-propelled grenades penetrated the nuclear plants' systems to destabilize their complex assemblages of networks that expand far beyond Ukraine and ensure international information exchange around nuclear safety control and regulation of energy production. These cases are structurally similar; the latter is simply a reversed version of the former. They both demonstrate that an act of cyberwarfare always assembles at the intersection of different domains; it involves different materialities; and it is necessarily linked to war. Unlike Stuxnet, the act of terrorism at Zaporizhzhia NPP aimed to *accelerate* the transformation of the industrial object into a potential nuclear bomb. However, as Energoatom CEO Petro Kotin explains, neither in the case of a potential accident at the Chernobyl NPP nor at the Zaporizhzhia NPP will we see a mushroom cloud. If the reactor with fuel in it is damaged, or if the container with processed fuel is damaged, or even if a strong explosion happens somewhere close to a reactor, it may start a chain of reactions or another system response to the "unusual activity." This in turn might eventually lead to what happened in 1986: an explosion of

Detail of the central part of the awards which were circulated to the "liquidators" of the Chernobyl disaster. This pattern represents a drop of blood through the radiation signs of alpha, beta and gamma. License: CC BY-SA 2.5.

a "dirty bomb" that releases and throws around a huge amount of radioactive elements.[17] If one container at the Zaporizhzhia NPP is broken, the damage would be equal to 10 percent of the Chernobyl catastrophe, Kotin says. But the Zaporizhzhia station hosts 173 containers on its premises.[18]

As with any act of terrorism, Russian forces' terrorist takeover of these nuclear power plants is highly media oriented, but only strives for exposure it can control. On March 7, fourteen journalists serving Russian state media visited the occupied Zaporizhzhia NPP to produce reports in which NPP workers were supposed to greet and thank the invaders for protecting them by means of the "special operation."[19] Other witnesses, including representatives of the IAEA, either did not have access to or were reluctant to visit the sites and could not evaluate their condition or the level of damage sustained. The reasons for the occupation of the Chernobyl NPP and the Zaporizhzhia NPP might be different, but they are similarly difficult to comprehend. Kotin speculates that a banal explanation might be that the premises of a nuclear station is seen as a good military bases because the vehicles are safe there from hits by Ukrainian air forces. Russia's intention might also be to add the Zaporizhzhia NPP to the Crimean energy system; or it might be related to discussions in the early 2000s, as Kotin recalls, when Putin propagated the idea that Ukrainian and Russian nuclear stations should be a united industrial complex

under the supervision and command of the headquarters in Russia.[20] The traces of this imperial fantasy are obvious in this unfolding case of nuclear terrorism.

In mid-March, the Ukrainian national nuclear company, Energoatom, reported the presence of eleven employees of the Russian state atomic energy corporation Rosatom on the premises of Zaporizhzhia NPP.[21] Here, the Russian military and a high-level state corporation participate in a joint act of nuclear terrorism. The imperialist genealogy of this act is rooted in Soviet times, when the construction of all Ukrainian nuclear plants—the South Ukraine NPP, the Rivne NPP, the Khmelnitsky NPP, the Zaporizhzhia NPP, as well as the decommissioned Chernobyl NPP—began almost simultaneously in the 1970s, when the USSR announced a move towards "a larger stake in the world market for nuclear energy" by "exporting enrichment services to Western European counties," envisioning "an expansion of their previously limited role" in international nuclear trade.[22] The original myth of the "peaceful atom" was embraced amidst Soviet enthusiasm for the atomic industry's promise of rebooting the stagnating economy towards what historian Paul Josephson describes as an "atomic-powered communism."[23] With their Soviet/Russian-built VVER-1000, VVER 440, and VVER-320 reactors, these plants simultaneously materialize the Ukrainian atomic present and constitute the remainders of the Soviet atomic past. Unsurprisingly, this infrastructural legacy attracts the Russian imperial army.

In Ukraine, the imposed narrative of the "peaceful atom" was the subject of ongoing subversion. Back in the seventies, a popular slogan expressing Soviet nuclear enthusiasm, "Let the atom be a worker, not a soldier" (*Хай буде атом робітником, а не солдатом*), was installed on the roof of #6 Sergeant Lazarev Street, one of the tallest apartment buildings in the city center of Pripyat, Ukraine. The sign promoted and prompted the "correct" way to think and speak about the "peaceful atom," although the clandestine production of weapons-grade plutonium was an open secret in Pripyat before the proximate 1986 disaster left it a radioactive ghost town.[24] Apart from cybernetics, the nuclear power industry was another agent of technological modernity: it contributed to the irreversible convergence of war and peace. The entangled scientific careers of its key figures also exemplify this space between a bomb and peaceful atom. "Igor Kurchatov, head of the atomic bomb project," Josephson notes, "late in life sought atoms for peace because of his horror over multimegaton hydrogen bombs. Anatolii Aleksandrov, his successor at the Institute of Atomic Energy … gained fame for submarine nuclear propulsion and infamy for the Chernobyl reactor design."[25] The letters of the "peaceful atom" slogan remain on the roof of that apartment building in Pripyat. Before the Russia-Ukraine war, a visitor to the Zone of Exclusion might occasionally spot a playful subversion of the ideological slogan: *Хуй буде атом робітником, а не солдатом,* which can be translated as "There is no way the atom is a worker, but a soldier."

Nuclear Colonialism

The invasion of Ukraine has mobilized the urgent necessity of engaging with critical perspectives on colonialism and empire to detect the anchoring points of imperialist fantasies and obsessions. The colonial history of Ukraine vis-à-vis the Russian Empire, as historians would note, is not straightforward. "One has to be rather cautious when applying the term *colony* to the Ukrainian territories under the Russian empire or Soviet Union," historian Yaroslav Hrytsak notes.[26] Indeed, the Ukrainian case is messy. Always as borderlands, always a meeting place of nomads. This is why, Hrytsak explains, it "represents a wide variety of colonial experiences that are hard to group together under the umbrella of postcolonial theory," so that "one of the most productive approaches is to apply the concept of internal colonization, or rather 'modernization with internal colonization.'"[27] Here he refers to historian Timothy Snyder's argument that "Iosif Stalin explained the logic of his first Five-Year Plan as one of internal colonization, in which Soviet power had to treat Soviet territories as the maritime empires treated their distant possessions."[28] Among these several readings of "internal colonization," philosopher Paul Virilio's term "endocolonisation" stands out for its emphasis on the role of a "war model" in the emergence and operation of the modern state (with the Soviet state as one example): "Unlike the exocolonialism associated with State territorial expansion and empire building over the last six or seven millennia, endocolonialism is a colonialism turned inward."[29] For Virilio, as social theorist Udo Krautwurst notes, this notion from *Pure War*[30] indicates "the intensification and extensification of war within and throughout actually existing state forms, an inwardly directed expansion of the principle of the State, manifested in an increasing militarization of the social."[31] Russia's acts of nuclear terrorism during the Russia-Ukraine total war—an example of complex "asymmetric warfare and the 'hostage-holding' function of military control in contemporary mediatized societies"[32]—evolves from colonialist control of the territories within the Soviet state's imperialist politico-economic domination of Ukraine. The occupation of the Zaporizhzhia NPP is not accidental. It is an imperialist zero-day exploit of cyberwar, when a barbaric army from a different age enters your land as if it still belongs to the politico-economic Union that collapsed over thirty years ago.

Russia's efforts at internal colonization also correlate with a different kind of colonialism: nuclear or waste colonialism. Although most of the Chernobyl Zone's contamination was a direct result of radioactive fallout from the 1986 accident, initial pollution of the site began a decade earlier through multiple accidents and leaks. The KGB archives on Ukraine reveal numerous reports of

View of a six-story L-shaped building, with the inscription "Let the atom be a worker, not a soldier," in Pripyat, Ukraine (now the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone). Still from found footage, Pripyat Film Archive. Courtesy: Oleksandr Syrota. License: CC-BY-NC-ND.

technical imperfections in equipment during the first stages of construction of the plant in the 1970s, followed by reports of significant radioactive leaks in the first half of the 1980s. Between 1983 and 1985, there were five significant accidents and sixty-three primary equipment failures at the Chernobyl NPP. These events were not reported to the public. Meanwhile, internal KGB communications show that following these leaks, the permissible level of radioactivity in nearby villages was exceeded hundreds of times.

For centuries, the total square kilometers controlled by the Russian Empire was "the largest in space and the most durable in time of all historical empires, covering 65 million square kilometers for Muscovy/Russia/Soviet Union versus 45 million for the British Empire and 30 million for the Roman Empire."[33] To manage its vast territories with ---ethnically and nationally defined peripheries, the Soviet Union adopted two opposite approaches to governing the population: forced resettlement and the obstruction of social migration. The latter strategy operated by, for example, refusing passports to entire villages, which prohibited their inhabitants from travelling.[34] The subsumption of the Polissia region during the construction of Soviet Cold War infrastructure—including the ballistic rocket detection radar Duga-1 and the Chernobyl NPP—is an overlooked case of nuclear colonialism.

Like other types of colonialism, "a system of domination that grants settler access to Land for settler goals,"[35] nuclear production in Polissia resulted in land dispossession—this time, by radioactive contamination. [36] The construction of the Chernobyl NPP and its array station in the 1970s introduced military rule to the Polissia region, a large forested and marshy area that spans portions of Belarus, Ukraine, Poland, and Russia. The military regime set up multiple security checkpoints to surveil the local population and erected internal borderlines to protect the critical new infrastructure from

random eyes. The proximity of secret plutonium production had devastating consequences for traditional Polissian cultural practices. For centuries, the region's terrain protected its inhabitants from invasion and isolated them from foreign influences. In the absence of these influences, Polissian people retained their traditional wooden architecture, their traditional dress, and a rich store of customs, rites, and folklore. [37] Because of this isolation, people in Polissia never formed a strong sense of Soviet or national identity, and instead identified themselves as *tuteshni,* or "those who live here," emphasizing a strong association with their land.[38] With the construction of the Chernobyl NPP, the *tuteshni* became dual hostages of Soviet nuclear colonialism: first by the force of its security regime and then by exposure to radioactive leaks, which they endured a decade prior to the Chernobyl catastrophe. "Pollution," researcher Max Liboiron writes in *Pollution Is Colonialism*, "is best understood as the violence of colonial land relations rather than environmental damage, which is a symptom of violence."[39] It is not accidental that the contaminated territory coincides with the areas of securitization and surveillance imposed by the Soviet empire.[40]

On March 31, after the fifth week of occupation, Russian troops suddenly announced their intention to withdraw from the grounds of the Chernobyl NPP by taking captive Ukrainian servicemen with them to Belarus. Presumably, some of the troops suffered the impact of ionizing radiation, to which they were exposed at levels beyond all norms. Unlike the occupation of the Zaporizhzhia NPP, which could have several potential explanations, the occupation of the Chernobyl NPP cannot be explained in any practical way. Unless, of course, it was purely symbolic, which is also typical for terrorist acts. Speaking of the symbolic meaning of the Chernobyl station, let us recall Virilio's theory of accidents. It implies that without accidents, we remain unaware of how technology functions or, more generally, what technological modernity is about. Without a shipwreck, the invention of the ship is incomplete: "The shipwreck is consequently the 'futurist' invention of the ship, and the air crash the invention of the supersonic airliner, just as the Chernobyl meltdown is the invention of the nuclear power station."[41] Virilio grants the Chernobyl disaster the status of "original accident," as a key representation of the aforementioned convergence of war and peace typical for technological modernity. I mention this passage here not only because it is tempting to speculate, with Virilio, about the afterward-ness of technological accidents, but also because I must now disagree with him. I propose that the full realization of the nuclear power station, as a representative technology of "shipwreck modernity," did not occur in 1986, but in 2022. The full realization of the nuclear power station as a key technology of modernity was not in its accidental meltdown, but in the non-accidental act of nuclear terrorism with an imperialist genealogy carried out during the Russia-Ukraine war.

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Boris Groys in conversation with Liza Lazerson

Putin: Restoration of Destruction

Russian journalist Liza Lazerson interviewed Boris Groys for her podcast, as **posted** *on YouTube on March 21, 2022. This is an abridged version of their conversation.*

Liza Lazerson: Boris, you probably know that Instagram is being closed down in Russia, and access to Facebook has been restricted. Does this mean that the era of global corporations, and the global world in general, is over, and we are again seeing a renaissance of nation-states?

Boris Groys: I don't think that is the case. Commercial enterprises are focused on money, on earnings, on income. This means that they must be guided by the public's tastes and needs and are dependent on politics and economics. And it means, among other things, that they are not universally able to embrace all viewpoints or satisfy all segments of the public.

LL: There had been a long-running discussion about whether these corporations would become quasi-states or meta-states. But we see that, on the contrary, they have become mouthpieces for the authorities of existing states. Has it transpired that capitalism has given ground to politics and ideology in the global sense?

BG: No, you cannot say that. The fact is that capitalism has always evolved within nation-states. Utterly international stateless capitalism has never existed, generally speaking. Actually, capitalism can grow only when militaries and police control the territories in which it has been established. What exactly is capitalism? It is making money by means of exchange. But if we look at the history of mankind, making money was mainly accomplished through robbery, as during the entire Middle Ages and the whole era before that. A certain amount of security and control had to be established first. It is natural that all capitalist institutions are licensed in some way by the state and are subject to the laws of the states within which they operate. This also applies, of course, to all IT companies. They are all registered somewhere, pay taxes, and are legally liable in their countries.

LL: The latest news is that Facebook has permitted users to post calls for violence against the Russian military. For the sake of one country's politics, it is willing to violate its own corporate laws. Previously, this would have been unimaginable.

BG: The fact is that globalization reached its peak during the Cold War. All the world's conflicts were subordinated, then, to a single conflict—the conflict between capitalism and socialism, between the West and the East, between the United States and the Soviet Union—and it dominated the entire globe. The Berlin Wall was the symbolic capital of the whole world, if you will. After the Berlin Wall fell, globalization initially—during the nineties—kept going by inertia. But since the early noughties, this one big conflict has disintegrated into loads of regional and minor

State Emblem of the Russian Empire, 18th century.

conflicts. The concept of ethnic-cultural identity and religious identity has emerged. The signal was, of course, 9/11, the attack on the Twin Towers in New York. For the first time, it was clear that regional and ethno-cultural conflicts were emerging and were more important than the old Cold War–era conflicts. As this central conflict waned, minor conflicts multiplied, along with ethnic and cultural identities. If you look at what has been happening in Asia, Iran, India, China, Africa, and Latin America, ethnic and cultural identities have come to the fore. The same is true in the United States. There is no dirtier word now than "universalism," at least in contemporary Western intellectual publications. This means that each and every cultural identity wants to be represented somehow, to control the mode in which it is represented and voices itself. Accordingly, it limits the possibilities for the large corporations to act.

There is another point that cannot be ignored. What is the internet, generally? It is a mirror that reflects you, it is a terribly narcissistic way of communicating with the world because you only get what you click. You know a word, and you click it, getting information about this word, concept, event, or whatever it is. But if something does not interest you or you don't know it, you cannot click on it and you cannot learn anything about it. The problem with the internet is that it is absolutely tautological: it basically cannot tell you anything new. It simply reacts to your existing desires, as shaped in the past. Naturally, if the internet is the dominant contemporary medium, then it constantly encourages your desire, possibility, or intention (even against your will) of staying within a rather narrow circle of existing interests, opinions, and needs. This is a rather interesting effect: so-called globalization has led to total localization. If you follow your friends or people you know on the internet, you live in a very closed and narrow world. And all the ads you receive are personalized. Meta's algorithms compute everything in such a way that you only see the things that you have already found interesting and pleasant, but you don't see anything you would find unpleasant.

LL: You are talking about processes of decolonization and deglobalization. Vladimir Putin is trying to propagate the so-called Russian World, uniting Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, and maybe even Northern Kazakhstan under its flag in some sort of imperial structure. Are his actions part of this trend or do they buck it?

BG: They totally fit the trend. Putin's is a regional politics: it is aimed at defending a particular region and its alleged ethno-cultural identity. Iran and the Islamist movements in general have served as the model for those seeking to banish all things Western in the hope that when you remove them, your true cultural identity (for example, an Islamic identify) will shine forth with its natural light. The same thing is gradually happening now in China and India. Cultural identity is discovered by purging the "Western abominations" that have accumulated like a dense layer on its surface. Russia has repeatedly evinced the desire to purge itself of the West—of Facebook, McDonald's, modern art, rock music, of everything that the Russian does not need and can do perfectly well without. The belief is that if this stuff is removed, the divine wisdom of the Russian spirit will shine with its own light.

The only problem is (and it is an old problem that has been around since the nineteenth century) that this process of stripping and purging Russia of everything Western can never end. There is a non-European cultural substrate in Iran, India, and China. So, when you purge everything European, something homegrown, something originally non-European, does emerge. I am not saying whether this exists in Russia or not. I can only say that all attempts to find it have proved futile and suicidal. That is, the movement back to origins and the Russian World have proved completely suicidal.

In this sense, Russia has reproduced a well-known trope of German culture. In the nineteenth century, Germans also argued that German culture was inherently different from Western civilization, that German culture should be purged of Western civilization to be manifested in all its might. Upon closer examination, however, it transpired that this power was purely negative. German thinkers reflected on this, even glorifying these suicidal, self-destructive tendencies to some extent. Russian culture did this to some extent, too. We can read about the suicidal search for one's foundations in Dostoevsky's works, for example. From a cultural perspective, the new paroxysm to purge things Western and get back to Russianness, which we are now witnessing, is a purely suicidal operation.

LL: It's a "special operation." It is interesting that you say that Vladimir Putin's schemes are based on the Islamic world's know-how. In this context, Ramzan Kadyrov's constant involvement seems super curious. This appeal to traditional values also exists in Russia, nationally, as well as locally, in Chechnya, Dagestan, and the Caucasian republics. Based on what you say, is Kadyrov's constant involvement intentional?

BG: His involvement has a definite tactical or political benefit, of course. Generally, though, I think that the Putin regime is trying to hark back to a very large Russian tradition—searching for the Russian World's foundations by purging it of the West. In this sense, I have the distinct feeling that Western sanctions are perhaps the most important goal of this entire operation, or, at least, one of its goals: finally evicting the West from Russian territory, from the Russian World. After all, this is what Iran and many Muslim states did, what Afghanistan showed us not so long ago. But, for this to happen, of course, it is vital that all people who belong to the Russian folk [*russkii narod*], including allegedly Ukrainians (who have been caught in the crossfire in this instance) live the same way, the "Russian way."

And yet, no one is asking people in Mali or Peru to live the "Russian way." This is the difference between today's Russia and the Soviet Union, because back in those days there were communist organizations and parties in every country of the world. They wanted everyone to live under socialism. It was a universal message aimed at the whole world. But the current "Russian message" is not universal: it is not addressed to the whole world. Second, it makes no sense to anyone. It is incomprehensible even to the Russian people, and even more incomprehensible outside of Russia, because no one understands what this Russian identity is. In the case of Islam, we can grasp this identity, but it is simply incomprehensible in Russia's case.

LL: You mean that this ideological confrontation between the West and Russia, which the regime has been trying to construe as the basis of a real conflict, does not really exist?

BG: Absolutely! What defense of traditional values? Those selfsame traditional values are defended by any conservative party in the West that opposes abortion, gays, and so on. This is just a normal Western European conservative attitude. There is nothing specifically Russian about it.

LL: In one of your books, you argue that the absolute value of progress is not obvious and that all revolutionaries and artists fought against progress to a great extent. Can we rank Vladimir Putin among them?

BG: No, of course not. He is not combating progress in this sense at all. When artists fight progress, they are fighting against the loss of harmony with their environment. What is progress? You lived in your cherry orchard, and you ate cherries. Then a man came and chopped down all the cherry trees. When he is asked why he cut them down and there are no more cherries to eat, he says, "That's progress!" This is repulsive, naturally, and you want to go back to the countryside. Putin supposedly lives in a country house, but he is not working to turn the whole of Russia into a cherry orchard. He has no such project. His conception of Russian identity and the Russian World clearly has nothing to do with this. It is something else, something pseudo-German.

Everyone focused on the historical part of Putin's history lecture, but I was struck by something else entirely. Maybe it is my German way of looking at things. When he said that history's main motive force is the will and that they who have the will are triumphant, and when their will weakens, they are defeated, I immediately recalled Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*. The theme of tension, power, and will is tantamount to this same theme of progress, if you like. Because will conceived this way is always manifested in terms of missiles and airplanes, in terms of something quite literally ironclad. And the will itself must be like iron. This is quite remote from the protest against progress that began in Europe in the late nineteenth century and continues to this day.

LL: If we rise above this entire situation, which today appears to be a catastrophe, how do you see the situation in Ukraine from a historical point of view? To what historical tendency does it conform?

BG: First of all, we don't know yet, because we don't know how this whole story will end. We are only at the beginning of this entire adventure. Hegel said that Minerva's owl must fly first, and then something can be understood. But it hasn't flown yet. One thing can be said, however. Russia has greatly discredited itself. It has caused a huge number of different misfortunes and suffering, and all of them have been documented. They are being watched in real time all around the world. So, we can say for sure that Russia will not be able to fully recover morally for a long time, and maybe it will never be able to recover.

LL: Really?

BG: Yes, I think so. Because it's all too obvious and it's happening in plain view. And at the same time, it is inexplicable. I must say that all the texts written in the West on this topic have asked the same questions: Why? What is the goal? Why have they done it? Any explanation would suit people, in a sense. But there is no explanation, no one can find one. We can talk about a psychodrama of some sort, looking for similarly self-destructive impulses and suicidal behaviors in the past, as I did now. But it is impossible to detect any practical rationale in all of this. It is unclear how it might end. It is unclear what the goal is and how it can be achieved.

LL: Russians seem to be illogical people who could really push the red button, for lack of a better word. Any Russian is capable of doing it, practically.

BG: They have already pushed it. They started a war with the West on Ukrainian territory, but the war's purpose is unclear. The only explanation I would offer is that it is an attempt to draw a border between themselves and the West; moreover, a border that would no longer be possible to cross. It would not be a border in the military sense, but a border that would make it impossible for Westerners to come to Russia and sell goods that corrupt the Russian populace, and for Russians to go to the West and pick up harmful ideas there. It would be a border between the West and Russia at the level of human interaction that no one would want to cross it.

LL: When this border between the West and Russia or the Soviet Union existed in the past, it was built by the Soviet authorities. But now it seems that the West is lowering this [new] Iron Curtain. It is Western companies that are leaving the [Russian] market, Western universities refusing to enroll Russian students. Basically, it's the Iron Curtain in reverse. How did it happen? How rational is it?

BG: I think you're wrong on both counts. Because Soviet Russia was very much integrated into global processes. There were communist parties everywhere; there was an international communist movement, and there were national liberation movements. Russians were ubiquitous. Maybe they were not the Russians who would have liked to study at Harvard. But those Russians who wanted to go to fight in Angola, or who wanted to help the Communist Party in Italy or France, they had the opportunity to do so.

LL: I mean, at the level of private life, foreigners always brought records and jeans to the Soviet Union, sold ties at Intourist, and treated Soviet citizens quite well. But now it is as if all Russians are being told, "Goodbye! We don't want to let you drink Coca-Cola anymore."

BG: No, it's not like that. Back then, there was an ideological standoff. But this confrontation was comprehensible. Everyone in the West understood what socialism was, what kind of economic system it was. Everyone knew about Marx, and Lenin and Trotsky were also read. The communist ideology was comprehensible and well-known, so when people from the West came to Russia, they came to a country that they understood theoretically. They would then, let's say, make friends with some Russians but not others, establish relationships, bring jeans, and so on. That's another matter. But everything was clear to them. Now we are dealing with an explosion of uncontrolled irrational violence that has come from this country.

When they see Russians in the West, people now don't know what their stance is. Are they agents of this violence? And so they give them wide berth. People are generally cautious. They don't want to get mixed up with something that may be dangerous to them, and Russia is something that has revealed that it is a danger to the rest of the world. It is the same with regions where there is flooding or volcanic eruptions. You wouldn't go there, but not because you have a bad attitude toward volcanoes. You just don't want something falling on your head. Western sanctions are targeted at Russia, not at Russians. They are directed against Russia as a state for the simple purpose of weakening Russian military power. Since Russians are implicated in the actions of the country in which they live, they have naturally also become victims of these sanctions. To be honest, it's hard to object to that.

LL: Yes, Boris, it is clear that there is a war going on and that this too is a way of impacting the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, the most expensive thing that the West buys from us is energy. There was a news item today about the nine billion euros that the European Union has paid for importing our oil and gas. In this light, some of the other sanctions look like plain old cancel culture. [Oil and gas imports], which can go a good long way toward fattening the military power of Russia (I was about to say the Soviet Union), have not been canceled, but, for example, the online learning platform Coursera, the IELTS English-language exam for university applicants, and some apps for cyclists—all are leaving the country. Those are lifestyle products that definitely will not affect the power of the Russian Federation in any way. These companies are all leaving just to make a gesture. Doesn't this look like cancel culture?

BG: Maybe it looks like it, maybe it doesn't. But, you see, people are comparing in this case the lifestyle of Russians and the lifestyle of Ukrainians. They believe that since bombs are not falling on Russians, their lifestyle is generally better, even if they don't have those apps. We can say that Russians have mostly lucked out. That is the first consideration. The second consideration is that the whole situation with oil has been cause for lamentation here [in the West]. There have been a million articles on the West's lack of foresight, that it did not foresee this possibility and prepare for it. This is really the case, and everyone here is quite unhappy about it.

LL: Maybe you know that the University of Tartu [in Estonia] has decided this year not to accept applicants from Russia and Belarus at all. Screenings of Sergei Eisenstein, conferences on Velimir Khlebnikov, and other cultural events have been canceled at some other universities. An Italian university canceled a conference on Dostoevsky. These are such direct instances of cancel culture. Russian people are being cancelled retroactively. How is Dostoevsky to blame for Vladimir Putin's self-destructive stance?

BG: Dostoevsky himself is not to blame and canceling yet another conference on Dostoevsky will do no harm to Dostoevsky personally, from my point of view. But in the current geopolitical circumstances, holding a conference on Dostoevsky or something else like it is tantamount, in the eyes of Western society, to public solidarity with Russia.

LL: It's clear that "caution" is such a delicate word, but in practice it means isolation. One way or another, Russians have become social and cultural outcasts. This is how it looks from Russia, in any case.

BG: It is self-isolation, Liza. Russia is engaged in self-isolation. It is not that someone is canceling it; it has canceled itself. Cancel culture is a peacetime notion. We are not in peacetime right now. Another logic has taken effect.

LL: One gets the sense that since brands are used to operating within this cancel-culture paradigm, they have to say so-long to Russia to maintain their reputations. Some companies are definitely acting on this basis, it seems. There is the example of Uniqlo, a Japanese clothing brand, which at first said that it would definitely not leave, because clothes are essential goods and Russians are not rapists and murderers. But then, apparently, they were pressured and changed their minds,

deciding that they would leave after all.[1]

BG: There is no such mechanism as "they were pressured." This is commercial culture, capitalism. You use the word "capitalism," but you must understand what it is. Capitalism is when companies depend on sales and consumption. Contemporary capitalism is consumer capitalism. In this case, consumption is more important than production. For corporations to stay afloat, they have to come across as pleasant to consumers. It does not generate a pleasant buzz when rockets are raining down on people's heads. That is the whole point. There is no deliberate conspiracy or peculiar decisions being made here. This is just the logic of capitalism.

LL: You have probably heard about the [new Russian] law on "fake news."[2] It is forbidden in our country to say the word "war" [this word has been bleeped out in the podcast —Trans.], but this is not news. Some time ago, politically correct language and strange euphemisms came to be used in Russian news reports. Instead of the words "explosion" (*vzryv*), "fire" (*pozhar*), and "quarantine" (*karantin*), the words "bang" (*khlopok*), "conflagration" (*vozgoranie*), and "non-working days" (*nerabochie dni*) were used. Those are the politically correct terms. What are the possible effects of language control?

BG: I don't think it can lead to anything in the long run because language evolves of its own accord. The Russian language has become quite Americanized, by the way. This is due not only to the large number of English words in usage, but also grammatical and syntactic constructions that are quite reminiscent of American English. This shows that the language develops on its own. You can try to control it and create an artificial official language—by forbidding obscenities, for example. But such control won't make them disappear from the language. Nor will other forms of the language disappear due to such control, either. Overall, the language will become more parodic, perhaps. That's how it was under Soviet rule.

LL: What do you think about the term "post-truth"?

BG: I think that it's a pretty stupid term because there has never been any truth, actually. If by "truth" you mean conformity to the facts, then different people see different facts. Each person will cite you a thousand "facts" in proof of what they mean. I don't think that it is a matter of truth or post-truth at all, but rather that when you talk to a person, you have to understand what they mean. I would like to return to that point. Nobody understands what Russia means to achieve.

LL: So, the fact is that the whole world talks about it this way, but inside Russia, in our informational bubble, we have an alternative version of reality, and people believe in it. Meaning, that there really is no truth. For millions of people, that is, the truth is still the one supplied by official propaganda.

BG: That's right. Because they want to think this, this is what they will think. And they will interpret all the facts and pictures they see in this vein. People simply believe that this ["special military"] operation is justified. To change their point of view, they must become disenchanted with it. If people think that the Russian World is a good thing and needs to be propagated, they will interpret absolutely everything accordingly. No facts, post-facts, or fake news will change their minds. They must become disillusioned with the war's goals and causes. Then they will change their point of view.

LL: Do I understand correctly that if the special operation is successful, and the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic are liberated and annexed to Russia, the Russian Federation will continue to live this truth? Will it be in our history books?

BG: Yes, of course. But what would it mean? Russia would be isolated from the whole world. We don't know whether it would be able to control those territories even after winning this war. It would live amid increasing repression. And at some point, people would grow tired of it.

LL: The law on fake news implies, among other things, that people in Russia cannot go to anti-war demonstrations. And yet, we remember that anti-war demonstrations were a driver of popular culture in the late sixties; recall the peace buttons. Most of the popular culture in the seventies—hippie culture, art rock—was based on such symbols of liberation and the struggle against the regime. Why does none of this exist in Russia, in your opinion? What has to happen for a body of art and culture to grow up in Russia around what is happening, in circumstances in which we cannot even say the word "war" and go out to demonstrate?

BG: All those laws and prohibitions are meant to strengthen the repressive regime, and nothing more. In America, the movement against the Vietnam War arose in the sixties amid the crisis of the old political and social system and the emergence of a new one. It was a revolutionary situation. There is no revolutionary situation in Russia. But it is possible that fatigue will set in. I don't know whether you remember the end of the Soviet regime. People just stopped working, nobody did anything. And they constantly said that they were tired.

LL: So, there was a collective national depression?

BG: People would drink coffee or beer during work hours. They would chat or talk on the phone. But they didn't do any work at all. And yet, they would say constantly that they were awfully tired. Everything failed, because all these apparatuses—bureaucratic, industrial, etc.—feed on living flesh and blood. They feed on the energy of the

masses, as Lenin said.

But when I look at today's Russians, I don't get the feeling that they have huge reserves of energy. Therefore, you can stage *Triumph of the Will* as you like, but you cannot force the masses to mobilize. If they don't mobilize and invest their energy, it will fail by itself, not because anyone protests against it. The Russian Empire failed in this way, and so did the Soviet Union. It failed due to fatigue; people lost their energy.

LL: It's quite interesting, because there is a sense of a rolling total depression on a national scale. But I'm also interested that many Ukrainians on social media at the everyday level often point out that Russian people are inert and lazy, and that is why such things happen to us. Is this a national trait, or are we just in a low energy flow right now?

BG: Russians have been in different phases, including very energetic ones. In particular, the phase at the beginning of the Soviet regime, the nineteen twenties, and so on. Those were terrible years, of course, but quite energetic. Working at the limit of their strength and capabilities, people did a lot during that time. It was an incredible cultural explosion, and a huge country was built. But there is no such energy now. This is a senseless suicidal adventure amid a total depression. I have no idea what the point is.

LL: There has been a particular reverence towards socialist realism in Russia in recent years. State-sponsored films—a huge number of patriotic war films—have been literally shot in the socialist-realist style. How effective has it been to invoke and try to resurrect socialist realism, thus making it serve [the post-Soviet state]?

BG: What is socialist realism, generally? It seems to me that socialist realism was something that existed in the nineteen thirties. Post-Stalinist art ceased to be socialist realist. The zeal for building a new world was no longer present. Post-Stalinist art described a world that had already been created, a world in which people actually lived. It often depicted that world ironically, as borne out by all the film comedies from the period.

Returning to those Soviet standards is a commercial strategy at its core. When you appeal to a large audience, you inevitably have to use the standards of speech, image, plot, and so on that are familiar to that audience. If you don't, the audience will reject what you produce. Naturally, the Russian audience knows Soviet films, Hollywood films, and video games. And so, when I see new Russian films intended for a popular audience, I see a combination of those three styles, with the battle scenes modeled on video games.

Consequently, a new type of mass art has appeared, which claims to cater to the public, but it is difficult for me to say how much the public actually responds to it. I would be surprised if it reacted particularly positively, because these films—unlike, for example, Jolly Fellows (1934), or Circus (1936), or something like that—are completely devoid of energy. They're not sexy.

LL: Besides the resurrected socialist realism 2.0, there has also been a very broad turn to classic socialist realism per se. When you wrote *The Total Art of Stalinism*, it was such a revolutionary work, maybe even countercultural, because it opposed the generally accepted point of view in academic circles that socialist realism was not genuine art. Some curators (for example, Andrei Yerofeyev[3]) said that socialist realist art should be relegated to storerooms or even burned. But now, after so much time has passed, the socialist realism of which you spoke so many years ago has been officially returned to its rightful pedestal. How do you feel about this?

BG: I think the problem is that when people return in their minds to the USSR, they forget that it was a socialist state. Contemporary Russia is a capitalist country, a money-driven country. People in Russia work to make money. No one wants to go back to socialism, including the current Russian leadership.

What did I argue in *The Total Art of Stalinism*? That there was still a life-building impulse in Stalinist culture, a desire to remake life completely, rather than leave it the way it was—using the methods at the disposal of the authorities. But this life-building energy was completely absent after Stalin's death. It disappeared. Soviet art after Stalin is a petty bourgeois paradise. It is absolutely devoid of utopian projects and life-building energy. The people we see on screen in the films from that era do not want to build world communism, but to get their hands on a two- or three-room flat. This was already underway in the sixties—the new housing estates filled with khrushchovki and all that.[4] It continues to this day.

What is the main thrust of twentieth-century Russian history? It is a very long story of restoration in the aftermath of revolution. It is the story of the French Revolution, which took twenty years to complete in France, but which has taken a hundred years in Russia. First there was the revolution, then there was the Thermidorian Reaction—that is, the New Economic Policy. After the Thermidorian Reaction, there was Napoleon—that is, the Stalinist dictatorship and imperialist wars. Then the slow restoration process began. It started in the late Stalinist period and ended, in fact, in the nineties. First, all the Suvorovs, Kutuzovs, czars, palaces, and double-headed eagles—the whole aesthetic of prerevolutionary Russia—were revamped and repainted, and then capitalism was restored. The process dragged on for many years. Anything could be bought and sold in Russia as early as the late seventies and eighties. In fact, the marketplace was already present in the country then. It simply resurfaced when the socialist

superstructure collapsed. Marx describes this typical situation: the base can no longer sustain the superstructure, so it falls apart.

LL: It is curious that you say that Russia spent the entire twentieth century recovering from the Revolution. Does this mean that the current special operation is also a kind of unfinished war?

BG: It is a continuation of the restoration. When a restoration process begins, the impulse is to restore everything. Just as when the process of revolution begins, one wants to revolutionize everything. As part of this restoration, the question arises as to where it should happen, geographically speaking. Solzhenitsyn, who outlined the program of the restoration, as we know, argued that Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Northern Kazakhstan were a single, coherent region in which restoration should take place. Restoration is also a violent process, in fact. It is often said that revolution breeds violence, but so does restoration. For example, the restoration that kicked off after Napoleon's defeat engendered a period of endless colonial wars. When the process was launched, it immediately turned quite violent—and immediately led to wars. It is now being repeated in Russia. This is a restoration that has taken a violent military turn. And since it is not a revolution, but a restoration, it is also dismal and depressing in spirit.

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Translated from the Russian by Thomas H. Campbell

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Boris Buden

The West at War: On the Self-Enclosure of the Liberal Mind

1. Only Revolution Ends War

One of the masterpieces of avant-garde film history, Dušan Makavejev's *W. R.: Mysteries of the Organism* (1971), begins with documentary footage of an anti-war performance by the counterculture poet Tuli Kupferberg of the band The Fugs. We are somewhere on a street in New York's East Village. The wall behind the performers is covered in graffiti: a row of hammer-and-sickles and "Only revolution ends war," most probably a quote from Trotsky. We are in the late 1960s, when the US is deeply entangled in the Vietnam War.

Today, when the morbidity of Russia's war on Ukraine consumes our minds, let's recall the event this scene documents: May 1968 and the utopia of love and peace coming together in revolution. Without this utopia, we cannot understand the Ukrainian catastrophe, nor see any way out it.

But first, a few more words on Makavejev's film. It was about Wilhelm Reich's idea of sexual revolution, which ultimately gave meaning to the main American anti-war slogan of the time: "Make love, not war!" The notion of love implied sex, and consequently sexual freedom—but not in the liberal sense of merely emancipating sex from the constraints of a conservative society so it can be enjoyed freely. Sexual revolution goes beyond the idea of sex needing freedom. Rather, it's the other way around: freedom needs sex because of its emancipatory potential, which can be mobilized to change the world—to liberate it from war, for instance. This was too utopian for liberals, whose counterrevolutionary appropriation of sexual freedom separated it not only from the idea of revolution, but also from the ideal of peace. Instead, sexual freedom became a juridical matter within the nation-state and subsequently a feature of Western cultural identity; indeed, it became a so-called "Western value." Today, sexual freedoms are the benchmark of the civilizational difference between the West and the Rest.

But what does this have to do with the war in Ukraine?

2. It's a Proxy War

The miserable reality of the war in Ukraine has very quickly found its equivalent in the cognitive misery of its liberal representation in Western publics. The mainstream media pushes a story about the Ukrainian nation heroically resisting Putin's aggression—and it's true that the Ukrainians defend their land heroically, and we can only hope that they will break the back of the Russian invaders. But there is one major flaw in this story. The Ukrainians, against their will, have been forced into this war and must now fight it, but not only for themselves: they must fight as a proxy for the West. The war in Ukraine has become a

Still from Dušan Makavejev's W. R.: Mysteries of the Organism (1971).

proxy war between two imagined adversaries, the West and Putin—who is depicted as a rogue autocrat, an evil totalitarian dictator who suddenly went mad, turning order into chaos and inflicting suffering on millions of innocent people, even bringing the world to the edge of nuclear catastrophe. In the figure of a mad Putin, the West has created an ideal enemy, entirely personified, pathologized, and ostracized.

As such a madman, Putin embodies a problem that can be not only projected onto the civilizational other of the West, beyond the scope of its rationality, but also easily removed. This has given rise to fantasies about a palace coup in the Kremlin that would eliminate the evil autocrat and solve the whole problem in one fell swoop. Such a coup d'état, it's believed, could end the war and return things to normal. But what would this normality actually mean beyond the happy return of McDonald's, Ikea, and H&M to Moscow? Would it mean, for instance, that Russia welcomes Ukraine's accession to the EU and NATO? That the Schengen regime is extended all the way to Ukraine's border with Russia? That Crimea is restored to Ukraine, and Sevastopol becomes a NATO naval base? If this had not been the West's idea of normality, the war could have probably been avoided. But why bother avoiding it when the price is paid by a proxy?

Unfortunately, mainstream media coverage of the war in Ukraine offers similarly few clues about the adversary on the other side of the frontline—the West. The notion of "the West" gives the impression of an acting subject: "the West must act," it "has its strategy," it "has made its decision," it "imposes sanctions" and "supplies arms." Sometimes, as we know, it also wages wars. But beyond one of the four cardinal directions, what the hell is this "West"? Is it a democracy? Has anyone elected representatives into its parliament? Are there free democratic elections in which the people of the West choose their government and president? Does the West have laws, a secretary of foreign affairs, a ministry of defense? "The West" has nothing like that, but plenty of culture, money, and bombs instead.

3. Cui bono ?

The question becomes: What has brought these two imagined adversaries, Putin and the West, into war against each other? The rationale given by Putin makes no sense. As much as NATO's expansion to the east is a historical mistake of the West, NATO has not directly threatened Russia—not to any extent that could be an alibi for war. Putin's czarist imperial fantasies are certainly one

motivation, as parts of Ukraine—due to historical, linguistic, and cultural closeness to Russia—could be perceived by Putin as a kind of no-man's-land where borders can be redrawn. But such a massive attack clearly aims at what the West calls "regime change." Even in Russia itself, Putin's rule was not seriously contested enough for him to need a war abroad to silence the opposition at home. In fact, if anything threatens his rule at all, it's this war. So, *cui bono*? Who stands to benefit from this war?

Though it may sound like a paradox, it seems that this war was needed by everyone except Putin, the Russians, and those who are now dying in it. If the Ukrainians as a nation have not yet been culturally and politically united—if, in other words, their nation-building process has not yet been completed—then Putin is now doing the job better than the most ardent Ukrainian nationalist. All those cultural rifts, political antagonisms, and, especially, class divisions that, until yesterday, tore the nation apart are now closed with the strongest possible glue, the Ukrainian blood spilled by Putin's forces making Putin the ultimate unifier of the Ukrainian people. The European Union looks like another beneficiary of the war. Only yesterday, many spoke openly about the real prospect of disintegration, about Brexit spreading like gangrene, about excluding the illiberal renegades on the EU's eastern flank. Now, almost overnight, all the members of the EU stand together firmly under the slogan "All for one, one for all!" Boris Johnson's Covid parties are forgotten, Germany has finally gotten rid of its guilt complex, Poland has reemerged as the bulwark of the West against the barbarians from the east.

The other side of the Atlantic has benefited even more. The shameful debacle of the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan and the coup attempt on Capitol Hill, which brought to light the deep crisis of American democracy, seem to have both vanished into the distant past. Or take NATO itself. Only recently declared "brain dead," today it rises again in full force. If before it had neither strategic nor moral justification for expanding to the east, now it has both. The decision to expand across the former Cold War divide now seems like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Finally, Putin has just launched a new phase of the global arms race, and with it a new cycle of capital accumulation. What luck for the military-industrial complex of the West! The opening of champagne bottles in its offices was probably louder than the roar of Russian cannons on the first day of the invasion. And there will be jobs for the surviving Ukrainians as well. Why toil over ploughshares when one can forge swords?

But there is one more collateral gain for the West in this war, an ideological one. Western publics are now vindicated in their dangerous self-delusion that criminal wars are waged only by non-democracies like Putin's Russia. This is simply not true. A senseless, unjust, and bloody military aggression abroad, even if met with strong protest at home, can nevertheless gain the blessing of democratic institutions. Western democracy offers no protection against involvement in criminal wars; the rule of law, a strong civil society, and a free and independent media are of no help in this matter.

Still, whatever benefits are reaped by the West in this war, the question remains: How has Putin so easily accepted the role of the West's useful idiot?

4. As a Condition for Their Survival

There is no dilemma whatsoever when it comes to assigning direct responsibility for the war in Ukraine: Putin and his Kremlin cabal are to blame. Even their demands imposed on Ukraine as conditions for peace are no more than blatant swindles: for demilitarizing Ukraine, it's already too late, unless this also includes demilitarizing Russia and the West; denazification is no less nonsensical, unless it's applied equally to Russia, beginning with Putin himself and his ultra-right clique—and this too should ideally extend to the West, to Poland, and further to Germany and France.

The only demand that seems acceptable for Ukraine now is to abstain from NATO membership, which raises the question: How did we arrive at this point in the first place? Does the West bear any responsibility for drawing Ukraine into NATO? Was this ever a smart or responsible path to pursue? Unfortunately, this question cannot be answered. There is no entity whatsoever that can take responsibility for what "the West" does. Rather, it seems that total irresponsibility—or more precisely, a priori impunity—is the very essence of the West. Even within the West, of course, there is no equality among Westerners. A Croat can be held accountable before a tribunal in the Hague, yet it's impossible to imagine an American, British, or French citizen being tried there, regardless of what they have done. On the contrary, when they commit war crimes—which they sometimes do—the person who reveals the truth about those crimes might be incarcerated, despite the rule of law, despite a strong civil society, despite a free and independent media. There is no need for Stalinist show trials when one can simply leave people to disappear into the labyrinthine judicial system before our very eyes, with our full knowledge of the injustice. This is what is now happening to Julian Assange.

However, the West's total irresponsibility does not necessarily exclude its total responsibility, at least when it comes to the United States. In 1997 Václav Havel, the most prominent of all East European dissidents and at that time the president of the Czech Republic, gave a speech in Washington with a very telling title: "The Charms of NATO." Havel enthusiastically welcomed NATO's decision to admit Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic, and called for the US to assume responsibility for the whole world. For Havel, only the United States could save our global civilization by acting on its values—values that

Still from Dušan Makavejev's W. R.: Mysteries of the Organism (1971).

should be adopted by all cultures and all nations, as a condition for their survival.

This megalomaniacal vision is obviously no less delusional than Putin's dream of a "Russian World." The fact is that the fantasy of global domination through imposing one's own values on everyone else is impossible. The planet we live on simply doesn't have enough resources to provide the "American way of life" to everyone, unless one believes that democracy can flourish amidst the endemic poverty, extreme exploitation, chaos, and corruption typical of life on the periphery of global capitalism—where profits are made to fund the high living standards of the consumerist middle classes in core capitalist countries.

5. Does Anybody Speak of "the Former West"?

Let's get back to the point: the total irresponsibility and total responsibility of the West are two sides of the same coin. The fact that they don't come into conflict is due to a censorship technique called "whataboutism"—a taboo that the liberal mind has imposed on dialectics in general. Not only is it considered improper to speak of obvious contradictions, but we feel obliged to always "stick to the facts" and think "realistically"—divorced from any utopian possibility. Take as an example the problem of returning occupied Crimea to Ukraine. The only "realistic" option to achieve this would be a Western victory in a nuclear Armageddon. If this is the "realistic" option, then we have every right to offer a more realistic one: a vision of a radically changed world in which a demilitarized Crimea belongs to the people who live there, people who—whether Ukrainian, Russian, or otherwise—build a social and environmental future for their children, sink destroyers and cruisers to make fish hatcheries, plant tomatoes in overturned tank turrets, and grow pea vines around rifle barrels. This may sound like a revolutionary utopia, but it's already too late for anything else. Moreover, without understanding the ideas of utopia and revolution, we cannot see how we have arrived at such a dystopian dead end.

Of course, there are many in the West who are very critical of the West's role in the war on Ukraine. These critics mostly point at NATO's decision to expand eastward following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The West, they argue, should have instead integrated Russia into the European security system. While this sounds like a realistic critique, it still lacks a broader historical dimension. It's not a question of this or that wrong decision by Western security officials, but of an epochal

failure.

Immediately after the so-called fall of communism in Eastern Europe, there was a moment of total historical openness in which a radically different, better world seemed like a realistic possibility. Words like "freedom," "democracy," and "justice," proclaimed by those who had fought for them, sounded like calls for unrestrained imagination. This is why the event was called a "revolution," or more precisely, the "democratic revolutions" of 1989–90. Yet the Western liberal mind acted promptly to contain such revolutionary fervor by appropriating the idea of revolution and depriving it of any utopian dimension. The upheavals came to be called the "catching-up revolution" (Habermas: *die nachholende Revolution*), meaning simply that the East was catching up with the West. More concretely, the East was adopting "Western values," from parliamentarism and the rule of law to the fire-sale of entire national economies—the shock therapy of neoliberal capitalism.

The main ideological tool deployed by the West to achieve this goal was taken from the arsenal of its colonial legacy: the concept of civilizational difference. Seen now through a quasi-anthropological lens, the post-communist East appeared not only as a cultural other of the West, but also as a historical relic—a belated and inferior civilization. In the bizarre concept of the "former East," the West found the means to resurrect its Cold War counterpart. The old couple was back on stage, separated by civilizational difference, yet bound together by a common denial of history: the West was beyond history because it had itself become the very measure of historical time; and the East was burdened by a past that had no value whatsoever, since it was merely the history of its civilizational belatedness. At the end of the 1990s, Slovenian art critic Igor Zabel, appalled by the persistence of the old blocs, challenged the prevailing notion of the "the former East" by asking: "Does anybody speak of 'the former West'?" There was no answer. The West succeeded in preventing historical change from spilling over into its own bloc. Revolution was fine insofar as it only went halfway—that is, not beyond the East. But in the words of Saint-Just: "Those who make revolution halfway only dig their own graves."

6. How to Make People Sick of Revolution in One EasyStep

Isn't it ridiculous to talk about revolution today? Isn't the concept totally discredited? Indeed, this is among the greatest ideological achievements of the liberal mind. The capitalist West—above all, the United States—has worked diligently on this since the end of World War II, not only politically and militarily, but culturally and cognitively. The crucial influence of the CIA and big private foundations like Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie on academic scholarship and more generally on intellectual circles (mostly left-liberal) in postwar Europe is well documented. Their strategic focus was the expansion of the social sciences, and they tactically targeted the concept of history. For instance, during the postwar period French historians were motivated by generous financial support to study *longue durée* structures and recurring historical cycles instead of social movements and singular historical events. As Kristin Ross has argued, this prompted not only the erasure from historical consciousness of the very possibility of abrupt change or mutation in history, but also an abandonment of the idea of revolution itself.[1] By the 1980s Europe had already forgotten the revolutionary origins of its own democracies; it was even ashamed of them. Yet the final blow to the idea of revolution was delivered by the West after 1989 with the proliferation of so-called color revolutions: "Orange," "Rose," "Tulip," and so forth, followed by a variety of "Springs." Most of these revolutions thought of themselves as nonviolent, yet many of the hopes they raised eventually drowned in a sea of blood. Ukraine is no exception.

The culmination of this revolutionary adventure of the West was the creation of a team of professional world revolutionaries in the guise of the Serbian movement Otpor ("Resistance"), a group of young activists involved in the overthrow of Milošević. They were trained by US operatives in Hilton hotels and showered with money—allegedly millions of dollars. The liberal *Guardian*, in the manner of the cheapest Soviet propaganda, hailed the leader of the group, Srđa Popović, as no less than a "secret architect of global revolution."[2] Members of Otpor have advised and trained so-called pro-democracy and pro-Western activists in about fifty countries, including India, Iran, Zimbabwe, Burma, Ukraine, Georgia, Palestine, Belarus, Tunisia, Egypt, Venezuela, and Azerbaijan. They have also turned their revolutionary skills into academic knowledge ("the new but fast-growing academic field of non-violent struggle, the influence of which is felt around the world"[3]), which they teach at prestigious Western universities like Harvard, NYU, Columbia, University College London, and so forth. They even write guides for revolutionaries with titles like "How to Start a Revolution in Five Easy Steps: Humour and Hobbits, but No Guns."[4] Of course "no guns," since the West cannot stand the sight of blood unless it spills it itself.

The fact is that most of the revolutions Otpor has advised have failed. Yet the West has still succeeded at one thing: making people sick every time they hear the word "revolution." The figure of the revolutionary has become synonymous with manipulating the democratic will of the people, with moral and intellectual corruption, and with the falsification of the real emancipatory experience of social struggle.

Still from Dušan Makavejev's W. R.: Mysteries of the Organism (1971).

7. Missing Lenin

What is missing today in the bloody drama in Ukraine is the idea of revolution. Or more precisely: we miss Lenin—a figure who radically challenges the binary logic behind the clash between two normative identity blocs. The West and Putin's Russian World each stake out an exclusive territory that is defined by their respective "values," which are in fact two sets of arbitrarily essentialized, sharply differentiated qualities. The West, as always, cherry-picks—"civilization," "democracy," "freedom," "the rule of law, "open society"—and has more recently sought to incorporate gender equality and LGBTQ rights as well. Putin's counter-bloc is arguably not so noble and might be summarized by a simple formula: "Russian soul plus czarist imperialism minus gay parades," co-drafted and wholeheartedly endorsed by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks stand for what these two warring identity blocs deny, and also what unites them beyond all arbitrary differences. Firstly: the two blocs occupy complementary and at the same time contradictory positions within the power structure of global capitalism, which constantly generates and is itself generated by such antagonisms—not only between these two identity blocs, but also in relation to their global other, the Global South. Lenin knew this. Even if Lenin's concept of imperialism no longer applies to our contemporary situation, it still reminds us that there is no capitalism without injustice, violence, and war. Forgetting this fact was merely a short-lived privilege of the West, rarely granted to the Rest. This is why "only revolution ends war."

Secondly: both blocs equally disavow the historicity of their so-called values. This disavowal is constitutive of their identity, since it stabilizes the boundary between them. Yet the legacy of the Russian October blurs this boundary and dissolves the very idea of normative identity blocs. This is why Lenin and the Bolsheviks are Putin's true nemesis and why we do not find "revolution" among the essential qualities of the West.

The Bolshevik Revolution not only overthrew the Russian Empire, executed the czar (who had pushed his people into a bloody imperialist war), and laid the political and cultural foundations for modern Ukraine. It went further. Today, when Russia outlaws the so-called public promotion of homosexuality, it should be remembered that Bolshevik Russia already decriminalized homosexuality in 1918. Soon thereafter, abortion was legalized and women were given the right to divorce by simply writing a letter.

Still from Dušan Makavejev's W. R.: Mysteries of the Organism (1971).

Bolsheviks passed progressive, gender-neutral marital and family laws unlike anything seen in the modern world. A few years later, a Soviet court declared a marriage between two people of the same gender legal, on the grounds that it was consensual.[5] These achievements of the Russian October are undeniable, even if Stalin reversed many of them in the 1930s.

What does this tell us? For one, that even by the standards of liberal "values," Lenin's Russia was ahead of not only the West of its time, but also the West of ours. It also tells us that those so-called "values" are nothing more than irreducibly contingent results of social struggle. More importantly, it tells us that our imagination must reclaim the idea of fast and radical change—as a condition for our survival.

What is the alternative? The West and NATO, after defeating Putin, resume expanding until the whole world becomes "Western"? This project has shamefully failed. NATO has become a truly defensive force with one single task: to fortify and protect Western values within its identity bloc. But this is already a recognition of defeat. What else is this "West" today if not the name for the self-defeat of the liberal mind, which mistook freedom for an identity and enclosed it behind civilizational difference?

This defeat is the late revenge of colonialism's legacy, which the West has never truly reckoned with. The ideological ghost of this legacy, which still haunts the West to this day, is the fatal binarism of "the West and the Rest"—and this binarism is what escalates antagonisms now, what incites violence and wars (not necessarily fought by the West itself). What has made Putin "mad" and, by the same token, a useful idiot of the West is this same exclusive binary logic: either the West or the East. In short, his madness consists of what is most Western in him: his identification with essentialist cultural difference and the construction of an identitarian counter-bloc—his delusional Russian World. Worse, this same binary logic—either the West or Putin—is shared by Putin's opposition at home, making it ineffective against Russian nationalism. In the opposition's mind, and more generally in the minds of the East European left, the Cold war never ended. It's still an exclusive disjunction: either the West or catastrophe.

The true catastrophe that has turned Ukraine into a killing field is precisely this binarism in which the West fights the very ideological monster it itself created. This war erupted not because the West should have penetrated even further into its eastern other, now called the "Russian World." Rather, it had already penetrated too far—with the

binarism of primitive accumulation (private vs. state property) that devastated this whole space and installed oligarchic rule. It's this same binary deadlock that prevents us from imagining any end to this war beyond the dystopian vision of a fragile armistice among ruins and hatred. How much time will it take to heal the wounds of this war that divides not just two nations and millions of families and friends, but also two civilizations, two worlds? Already we hear that it may take hundreds of years. Do we have that much time?

What Russia needs today is not a coup d'état that supposedly return things to normal. It needs a revolution—a Leninist one with genuine revolutionary violence that will not only remove Putin and his clique from power (he deserves the same fate as Nikolai II), but also destroy his entire system of oligarchic crony capitalism, expropriate the criminal expropriators, and call the oppressed of the world to join the struggle. But this is exactly what the West fears most.

The system of parliamentary oligarchy that upholds Putin, with its authoritarian and violent character, is not an exclusively Russian invention. It's the system that best serves the interests of the global ruling class today. This is why there has been so much sympathy for Putin among right-wing circles around the world. If Putin dies, someone else will carry his flag onward, not only in Russia but in many other places around the world, including the West.

8. Again: Only Revolution Ends War

Some thirty years ago now, Yugoslavia collapsed after a series of bloody wars. Already at the time, Giorgio Agamben offered a rather dystopian vision of what would follow in his book *Homo Sacer*.[6] He argued that the collapse of Yugoslavia should not be regarded as a temporary regression into a state of nature and a war of all against all, which would then be followed by new social contracts and the establishment of new nation-states. Rather, he said that the conflict marked the emergence of the state of exception as a permanent condition. In the Yugoslav wars, and more generally in the dissolution of Eastern Europe states, Agamben saw "bloody messengers" announcing a new *nomos* on earth. If not confronted, this nomos would overtake the planet, wrote Agamben. Invoking Carl Schmitt's thesis on the disintegration of the Westphalian order, Agamben suggested that this new nomos would be a post-Eurocentric global system of international relations dominated by "large spaces"—or what we can see today as normative identity blocs. In this transformation, as Schmitt had predicted, Europe and the West would lose their dominant position in the configuration of world power.

We should bear this in mind amidst suggestions that the West, the EU, and NATO are regaining their splendor, united as never before. This is an illusion created by Putin. The West has no ideological capacity to confront the major global problems of today. A look at the postwar reality of the former Yugoslavia is a sobering reminder of this impotence: deindustrialized and depopulated wastelands, nation-states whose sovereignty is a cruel joke, war criminals celebrated as national heroes, and new borders that violate international law but are at least partially recognized by the West. In short: Agamben was right, and he will be right again when it comes to Ukraine's postwar reality.

This also retroactively explains why the West failed in the former Yugoslavia. It did not have a vision of democracy that went beyond the nation-state. The reason for the war was not the civilizational difference between Western/European democracy and the endemic nationalism of the Balkans, but rather the final Westernization of the country, which imposed the logic of the nation-state in a space of extreme cultural, linguistic, and historical heterogeneity.[7]

The worst is yet to come. The West still has no vision of democracy beyond the nation-state, which is why an entity like "the West" exists in the first place: as a cultural and normative ersatz for its own lack of utopian imagination and revolutionary courage. This is why, when faced with a crisis, the EU suddenly forgets its noble values and relies on something much more sinister: The president of the European Council, when addressing the question of why the EU treats refugees from Ukraine differently from those of other war-torn countries, declared that Ukrainians and Europeans belong to the same "European family."[8] However sweet and benevolent, this metaphor can only mean that the EU is a community united by blood. Can unity through "soil" be far behind?

The former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was not built on an identity. Its legitimacy was based on a twofold utopia, which emerged from the 1948 clash with the Stalinist counterrevolution. The first dimension of this utopia was an expansion of democracy into relations of production and labor rights—the so-called system of self-management. The second expanded democracy as an active politics of peace into the sphere of global international relations through the Non-Aligned Movement, which Yugoslavia cofounded. While the first project dealt with the limits of democracy intrinsic to the capitalist mode of production, the second addressed the emancipatory interests of what was then called the "third world" as it emerged from anti-colonial struggles. In this way, Yugoslavia challenged two fundamental binaries of our age: private vs. state property, and the West vs. the East.

The events of 1989–90 doomed these utopian projects (which admittedly suffered from their own shortcomings and contradictions). The notion of democracy that won the Cold War regarded itself, in the old colonial manner, as

inherently superior (and Western), thus justifying its expansion throughout the empty space-time of the postcommunist world. Reveling in this "triumph of democracy," the liberal democratic mind was uninterested in learning from the failures of the democratic utopias that had been born from anti-capitalist and anti-colonial struggle.

What the ideological clash provoked by the invasion of Ukraine desperately lacks is a utopian vision of peace and reconciliation that will end the war, a vision that goes beyond a fragile armistice. Such an armistice can only produce a permanent state of exception, leaving everything to *longue durée* processes of mentality change, the creation of an appropriate memory culture, the prosecution of war criminals subsequently celebrated as national heroes, and the painfully slow transformation of nondemocratic oligarchies into slightly-less-nondemocratic oligarchies. This might eventually succeed, but in the relative eternity of liberal realism, we will all be dead by then.

Let revolutionary history and its utopian imagination suggest another vision of peace and reconciliation for Ukraine and Russia today:

The first step of the Revolution is successful and peace soon returns to Ukraine. Some Russian soldiers fraternize with their former Ukrainian enemies, while others abandon the frontlines en masse, eliminating any officers who get in their way. At the Kremlin, members of the revolutionary committee draft a new law to expropriate the oligarchs. A day earlier, in the basement of the palace, the perpetrators of the criminal war in Ukraine were executed. The process was much shorter for them than it was for Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu. But who will guard the leaders of the Revolution in their Kremlin headquarters? The oligarchs have already assembled private armies—lavishly financed, professionally trained, and well-armed by the West and NATO. History again has an answer: Ukrainian fighters, the best soldiers for the job, just like the Latvian riflemen who protected Lenin in Smolny more than a hundred years ago. And though there will surely be violence and losses, there will no longer be hatred between Ukrainians and Russians in their common Revolution. Only revolution ends war.

Does this sound too utopian? Perhaps, but there is no time left for anything else. Unless we reclaim the utopian vision of radical and rapid change, we are doomed. If they don't nuke us first, we will be burned by the sun.

X

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The marriage was between a cisgender woman and a trans man who was still legally regarded as a woman. See Edmund Schluessel and Sosialistinen Vaihtoehto, "100 Years Ago, a Forgotten Soviet Revolution in LGBTQ Rights: Review of Dan Healey's book *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia* ," *Socialist A lternative* , May 21, 2017 https://mronline.org/2017/11/07/100-years-ago-a-forgotten-soviet-revolution-in-lgbtq-rights/ .

6
Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford University Press, 1998).

7
This is the thesis of Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

8
See https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/10/12/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-following-the-eu-ukraine-summit-kyiv-ukraine-12-october-2021/ . In a similar vein, European Commission president Ursula Von Der Leyen said that when it comes to the issue of Ukrainian membership in the EU, "there is no doubt that these brave people who defend our values with their lives belong in the European family" https://nationworldnews.com/eu-chief-ukrainians-belong-in-the-european-family/ .

Raed Rafei

Pasolini and the Queer Revolution in Beirut

Raed Rafei, Pasolini in Beirut, 2014. Installation view. Part of the exhibition "A Museum of Immortality," Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, 2014.

The spring sun casts warm light on a makeshift soccer field overlooked by blocks of rundown buildings. Nearby, a man in his early fifties with a slim, athletic build is leaning against a pine tree. He follows the movement of a soccer ball as it bounces between a group of young men. Every now and then, he jots down some words or sketches some images in a small notebook.

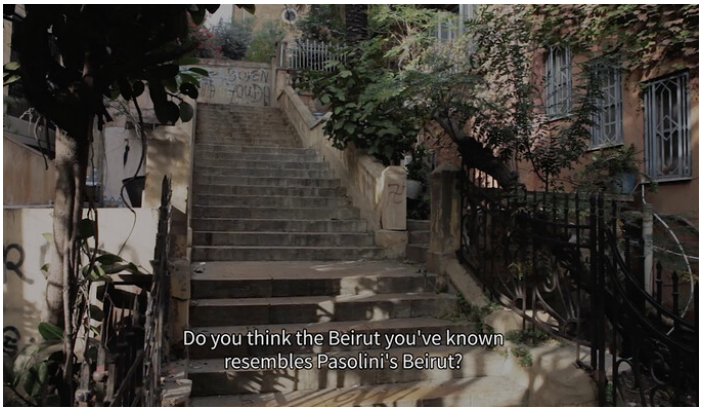
The person in this speculative scene is the Italian leftist and queer intellectual, poet, and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose centennial is this year. He was also known to be passionate about soccer and ephebic young men. The location could be any prewar, mid-1970s, poor neighborhood in Beirut, crowded with rural migrants looking for work in the prosperous capital. As it turns out, aside from such fantasized visions, Pasolini did indeed visit Beirut in May 1974. He spent forty-eight hours in the Lebanese capital and screened three of his films: *Oedipus Rex* (1967), *Medea* (1969), and *Pigsty* (1969).[1] These poetic works express Pasolini's fascination with sacredness in premodern times as well as his staunch criticism of the dehumanizing effects of capitalism on Western societies. At the time, those ideas had deep resonance in Beirut. The city was at a peak of intellectual fervor. Leftist protest movements led by labor and student unions regularly filled the streets in persistent attempts to dismantle the country's interlinked sectarian and capitalistic structures, and to erect in their place a system of social and economic justice. In those days, marked by decolonial awakenings and the end of the Vietnam War, popular struggle in Beirut was decidedly anti-imperialist and in harmony with the general atmosphere of international solidarity with oppressed peoples everywhere. The predominant mobilizing issue, politically and culturally, was Palestine—a cause that deeply fractured Lebanese society.

Uncovering Pasolini's brief visit to Beirut and processing its memory have provoked in me an irremediable feeling of

loss. It is a double loss: that of an idiosyncratic rebel poet who envisaged the world differently, and of a city that was once an incubator for progressive ideas and affects. In an uncanny twist of fate, both Pasolini and Beirut suffered fatal violence the year after his visit. It was as if both became connected by osmosis to their tragic, concurrent destinies. In April 1975, Beirut began a vertiginous descent into a spiral of civil violence when local and regional tensions and contradictions became unmanageable. The war, which went on to last fifteen more years, destroyed many lives and entire neighborhoods. It also brought a period of cultural and political effervescence to an abrupt, enduring end. In November of that same year, Pasolini was brutally assassinated under mysterious circumstances in Ostia, a seaside town near Rome. Allegedly, he was the victim of one of his frequent sexual adventures with young, underprivileged men. Many threads of evidence suggest, however, that the killing was political, motivated by Pasolini's critical stance towards the political class's collusions with the economic elite during those turbulent times in Italy.[2]

Years ago in my own life, an Italian man in Beirut with whom I shared a love story and a passion for cinema told me he had read somewhere in passing that Pasolini had visited the city. This led me to gradually discover several threads and documents related to the poet's encounter with Beirut. Preserved at an archive in Italy and in local Lebanese newspapers were an invitation letter, a brochure, and a couple of short articles. Eventually, I also found and recorded an oral history account that further animated the memory of the visit. This material, which had never been examined before (as far as I know), was very suggestive. I looked to the archive for its generative and radical potential as an "oracle to be consulted" to forge "weapons for the future."[3] But I found many "silences" and vanished or destroyed traces there too. These gaps sparked an impulse to fill them with moments imagined through a queer, speculative lens. In thinking history outside the limits of archival records, I have been inspired by Audre Lorde's invitation to resort to the erotic as a "resource" rooted in a "deeply female and spiritual plane."[4] For Lorde, a Black feminist civil rights activist, the erotic is a creative energy that women possess in them, and a source of historical, political, and spiritual power and knowledge if it can be liberated from suppression by a male-dominated world order.[5] Even as a queer male writer, I am moved by this sensual, feminine, erotic feeling within me to experience a deep connection across time with Pasolini's presence in Beirut.

Beyond investigating the visit itself, my desire is to return to the first half of the 1970s as the locus of a lost golden era of leftist social and political struggles in Lebanon. By looking deeply into this time while shifting our focus toward eroticism and sexuality, can we unsettle the way protest and dissent have been engrained in our collective conscience through masculinist tropes of courage and



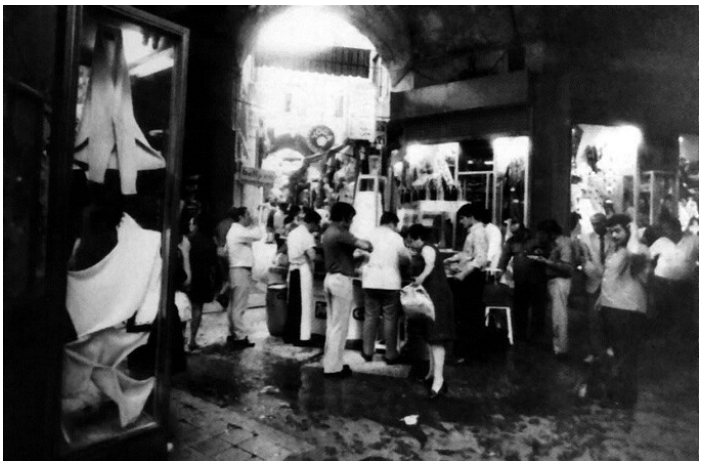
Film still from Raed Rafei's Eccomi … Eccoti (Here I am … Here you are) (2017).

defiance? These questions are primarily addressed to Lebanese and to Arabs more generally; think of how deeply the visual representation of resistance from that period is saturated with male militant fighters. Mainstream historical accounts have long held that the sexual revolution and subsequent gay rights movements started in the 1960s in the US and Europe. What if we imagined Beirut as the heart of a queer revolution where anti-imperialist ideals and sexual freedoms are tightly interlinked? What would happen if we imagined, further, that this was an all-encompassing revolution for "the wretched of the earth"—one that sought a definitive break with Western, capitalist, heteropatriarchal ideologies and drew inspiration from premodern spiritual wisdoms? Pasolini, a colossal figure at the nexus of queer sexuality and radical leftist politics, could help us reconfigure the past along these lines and envision alternate futures.

Before delving into speculation, the material traces of the visit merit a close look. The first meaningful document I found is a typewritten letter addressed to Pasolini and written in French by Samia Tutunji, herself a poet and prominent cultural personality in Beirut.[6] In the January 1973 letter, now preserved at the Archivio Contemporaneo in Florence, Tutunji confirms Dar el Fan (House of Art)'s intention to dedicate a week to the exhibition of three or four of Pasolini's films, and reiterates an invitation to fly in and host the Italian director. She assures him that the films could be sent in a diplomatic bag by the Lebanese embassy in Rome to avoid obstacles at customs. The status of the cultural center, Dar el Fan, which was "not officially a movie theater," would also shield the screened films from the eyes and scissors of censors.[7] According to the letter, Pasolini was expected in Beirut in October or November 1973. It's not clear why the trip was postponed until the spring of the next year. My hunch is that the change in plans was due to the sudden eruption of the Yom Kippur War between Israel, Egypt, and Syria, which had devastating consequences for the entire region. Tutunji ends her letter with the following words: "Be assured that we will do our best to make your stay in

Lebanon pleasant and fruitful for Lebanese and Arab cinema."

Another letter, from February 1970, reveals earlier attempts to hold a Beirut screening of *Medea*, and to invite the director along with Maria Callas, the renowned soprano who played the lead in the film.[8] Additionally, the letter carries a notably ominous tone and complains about major internal and international problems facing Lebanon—a situation that has never ceased to be relevant. "For Lebanon, currently experiencing a political conjunction immobilizing tourism," writes Robert Misk on behalf of Mouvement Social, "your presence and that of Madame Callas would constitute a cultural manifestation but also an 'event' consolidating the friendship that unites our countries." The letter ends with an assertion of hope and a belief that international solidarity can save Lebanon from imminent dangers, "a *je ne sais quoi* ... that can flatten obstacles by reducing frontiers and humanizing contacts." A letter from the Italian Cultural Institute in Beirut was sent a few days later in support of the invitation. Its author attempts to entice Pasolini by inviting him to visit Baalbek, "one of the most beautiful archeological sites in the world and full of 'ideas' that could spark your [Pasolini's] artistic interests."[9] As the archive in Florence holds only letters written *to* Pasolini, these documents emanate an eerie absence of replies. Did he consider accepting the invitation? What if he had visited Lebanon then? Would he have been inspired by the majesty of Baalbek's ancient Roman temples and considered making a film there, as he did in Aleppo's citadel in Syria for *Medea*—or in Palestine, Yemen, and Morocco for other projects?



Souk Ayass, Beirut, 1970.

What I do know is that Pasolini's senses were once aroused in Beirut. I found a manuscript for an article titled "The Pastries of Beirut" about the aftermath of the Israeli raid on the Lebanese airport that destroyed thirteen airplanes in December 1968.[10] In it, the poet expresses his belief that Arabs and Israelis could live in peace—a utopian idea that remains, according to him, "the only possible pragmatic solution." He argues begrudgingly that the conflict will be eventually driven by international financial interests and not nationalistic impulses, speculating over a future where Arabs and Israelis are united as producers and consumers. After a couple of paragraphs, Pasolini's poetic language begins to emerge between the lines of political analysis. "What a marvelous smell of pastries there was in Beirut a few nights ago," he writes. He describes his desire to try the Arab desserts beautifully displayed in the shop windows of the souk, even if he says he knew he shouldn't eat them for "hygienic reasons."[11] "In the air, with their smell," he adds, "there is a simple and inexplicable desire to live: *to make love, not war!*" The article ends on a foreboding note: "How lukewarm and sweet, although sinister, was the air of the evening in Beirut!" This document clearly reveals that Pasolini was in Beirut in March 1969, days or weeks before shooting *Medea*. Maybe he just passed through the city en route to scout film locations in Cappadocia or Aleppo.

Little is known from Pasolini's later trip of his sentiments about Beirut, and his intellectual and affective connections with its people. An interview with the filmmaker for Télé Liban would have elicited some clues.[12] But during the civil war, the film rolls it was recorded on were destroyed along with much of the Lebanese national television network's archive. A year and a half ago, I was able to contact Fouad Naim, the journalist who interviewed Pasolini in 1974. Naim, who was also a painter, actor, and theater director, said that he didn't remember anything from the encounter. "It's unforgivable but it's like that," he wrote to me in French in a WhatsApp message. "I am infinitely sorry."

Dar el Fan, the space that hosted Pasolini and the audiences who saw his films, was also destroyed shortly after the civil war started.[13] We cannot know if that public was impressed, intrigued, inspired, or offended by the three screenings. The building was located in Ras el Nabeh, a neighborhood in central Beirut close to the war-era line of demarcation. Dar el Fan was an exceptional institution, politically and prolifically central to Beirut's cultural dynamism.[14] Since much of the organization's archive perished under the rubble, I was surprised to find one of the surviving brochures for its *ciné-club de Beyrouth* on the other side of the Mediterranean, at the Florence archive.[15] Pasolini must have carried that copy with him as he left Beirut. Its cover shows miniature drawings of wrestlers in a variety of homoerotic positions taken from an ancient tomb in Egypt. The brochure contains several articles about cinema, including one that sells the merits of establishing a *cinémathèque* in Beirut, where films would satisfy their "hard desire to last." It ends with a catalogue of the film titles screened by the *ciné-club* between 1957 and 1971—an impressive list of world cinema that includes Kurosawa's *Rashomon*,

Varda's *Lion's Heart*, and Cassavetes's *Shadows*.

Beyond physical documents, I was fortunate to find one substantial trail of oral history in relation to the visit. Simone Fattal, a Lebanese artist, told me that she had lunch with Pasolini at Tuntunji's house. She recalled that Persian rice—cooked "very well"—was served.[16] (Tuntunji's parents had been ambassadors to Iran and hired a local cook.) She said that Etel Adnan, Fattal's longtime partner, was also among those present. "At the end of the lunch—I don't know how—music was played and because I can't resist music, I got up and danced," she wrote to me, stressing that she performed a belly dance. She also remembered that at some point, Pasolini removed himself from the conversation and went into the kitchen. In some iterations of my fantasized itinerary, the filmmaker's adventures in Beirut take a wild turn after that lunch.

Raed Rafei, Pasolini in Beirut, 2014. Installation view. Part of the exhibition "A Museum of Immortality," Ashkal Alwan, Beirut, 2014.

In the kitchen, Pasolini meets a young man, maybe Tutunji's driver or gardener. They communicate through body language. Pasolini sneaks out with him to go for a ride around his neighborhood. Once there, he recognizes "the refuse and odor of poverty" of the borgate romane*, , the lower-class areas of the urban-rural fringes of Rome.*[17]

Here, in this poor part of Beirut, he feels liberated from the limelight. He sees a group of boys "light as rags" playing soccer "with juvenile thoughtlessness."[18] *He rolls up his sleeves and joins them. Breathless, he stops after a little while. He leans against a nearby pine tree and pulls his red notebook from his pocket. He starts writing a poem. He recalls the ecstatic and humble feelings of the "intoxicated adolescent symbiosis of sex and death" that he once felt in his early years in Rome.*[19]

When I first visited the Florence archive, one of the archivists told me privately that Pasolini had a small notebook with him in Beirut where he wrote down words in Arabic. I imagined that they were poetic terms he gathered and used to flirt with Lebanese men. Maybe the notebook also contained his thoughts about the city and its people. Maybe there were improvised drawings and poems in it. I never saw the notebook (allegedly kept secret by Pasolini's niece and heir), and my recent inquiries about it failed too.

Even though the notebook is hidden, fragments of Pasolini's voice can be gleaned from short articles in local Lebanese newspapers. Upon his arrival to Beirut on the evening of Friday, May 3, a group of journalists intercept him with a provocative question about his seemingly contradictory adherence to both Catholicism and Marxism. At the source of the confusion is Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), a messianic film that shows the collapse of a bourgeois family in Northern Italy caused by the enigmatic visit of a charismatic young man. At first, Pasolini appears amused by the question. He laughs, raises his arms, and says: "Oh God! But that's magnificent! What a liberation!" But then he adds that he was only joking and asserts his atheism.[20] Speaking in French, he says that he was "very interested in mysticism" but not in organized religions. He calls "dreaming art" a religious act that's more important than the actual realization of works of art, which he describes as a mundane social activity. He also proclaims that he is decidedly a Marxist but is independent from any political party. Further down in one of the articles, Pasolini expresses his dismay that his most recent film, *Arabian Nights* (1974), will not be screened in Arab countries because of its unbridled look at premodern sexualities in the Arab region. He says that the film took a political stance against consumerism in big Italian cities, something he despised. "A horrible, horrible civilization," he says, in reference to contemporary Western societies. "Yes, I made a political film because the question of sex is a political question. If it was to be screened in Lebanon, uncensored … it would be a form of a political revolution."[21]

I see Pasolini's call for a sexual revolution as an invitation to revisit that period when sex and politics were deeply intertwined. Contemporary scholars like Emily K. Hobson, a historian of radicalism, sexuality, and race, have established solid links between struggles for sexual self-determination and the revolutionary internationalism of the 1970s.[22] Others, like Todd Shepard, a historian who studies the "end of empires," contend that Arab immigrants, as racialized others during the postcolonial period, were essential to the sexual revolution in Europe.[23] And some, like Jarrod Hayes, whose research interests include postcolonial and LGBTQ studies, look at instances of anti-colonial resistance in 1950s Algeria as forms of queer defiance of colonial heterosexuality.[24] I believe that rethinking the nature, ontology, and history of homosexual liberation in connection with anti-imperialist leftist struggles could help us grasp the potential of queerness

as a force of social and political change in a place like Beirut in the 1970s.

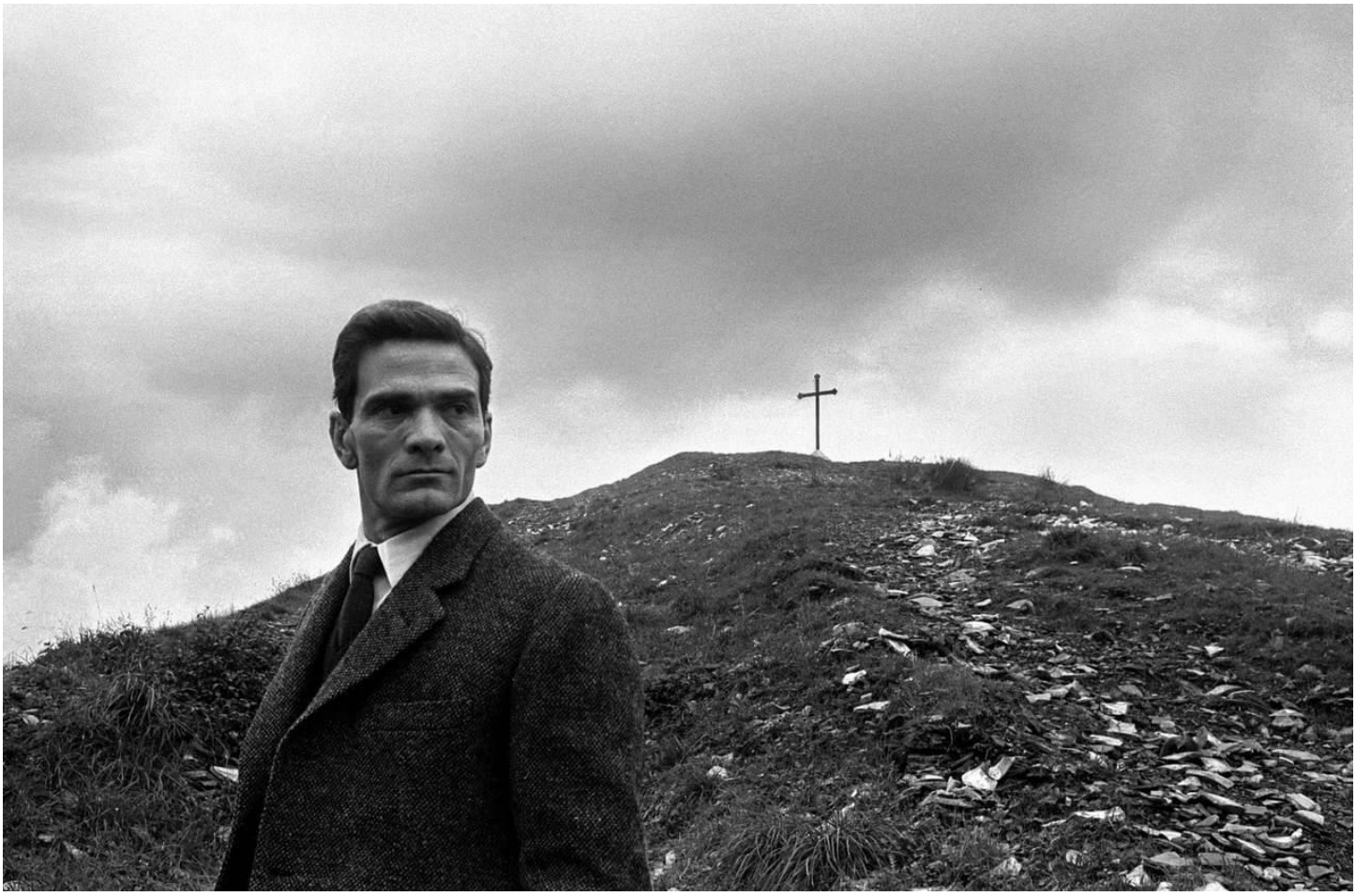
For political and intellectual historian Joseph Massad, the roots of the gay movement in Lebanon and the Arab region date to the 1990s when gay Western organizations waged an aggressive campaign to transform Arab men and women "from practitioners of same-sex contact into subjects who identify as 'homosexual' and 'gay.'"[25] Others, like Ghassan Makarem, one of the founders of the first Lebanese LGBT rights organization Helem (Dream), challenge this lopsided historical account. Makarem situates the founding mission of Helem in relation to international movements for social justice and shows, for example, how gay activists were deeply involved, from the early 2000s on, in protesting Israeli assaults on Palestinians and the US invasion of Iraq.[26] What if we stretch these more recent histories back again to the 1960s and '70s? Rather than thinking along identitarian lines, what if we think of queerness as an "insistence on potentiality and concrete possibility for another world," to borrow from queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz?[27] The queer people I have spoken with who lived in Beirut in the 1970s relate that homosexuality was kept a private matter. Beyond public visibility, then, we can focus the historical lens on how aspects of queerness oriented queer activists in the environment around them, how it fueled their ideologies, their alliances and activism in social and political arenas.

After the screening of Oedipus Rex *at Dar el Fan, Pasolini notices a handsome young man staring at him. The cinephile is overexcited to see his idol in the flesh. They exchange intense looks and end up drinking wine in the director's hotel room. Between moments of intimacy, they talk about radical beginnings for a postcapitalist world. The young man, who comes from a working-class family, studies political science at the Lebanese University and is an activist in the student movement. Lately, he has been organizing protests in support of factory workers. He tells Pasolini about calls for a third-world gay revolution in New York and about the Homosexual Front for Revolutionary Action (FHAR) in Paris writing statements of solidarity with Algerian migrant workers.*[28] *His vision is to create a grassroots queer movement inspired by the Arab region's rich and diverse histories of sexuality, one that would champion the causes of laborers and peasants. Pasolini is reticent. He no longer believes in revolution, but "cannot help but be on the side of the young who are fighting for it."*[29] *He mentions his plan to make a film called* Porno-Teo-Kolossal *that would reinterpret the biblical myth of Sodom. In his fantasized queer utopian city, homosexuality is the norm, and there is "the most absolute" freedom for minorities (heterosexuals, for example, but also Black, Jewish, and "gypsy" minorities ...).*[30] *Every year a "fecundity festival" ensures the perpetuation of human life. As loyal citizens, gay men and women fornicate in one big orgy. Pasolini says that he based this vision of Sodom on Rome in the 1950s where, he says, he strangely experienced more sexual freedom than he did after the sexual revolution of later decades. The story, he adds, ends on a catastrophic note. The hospitality of the city is stretched to its limits by a group of proto-fascists and Sodom perishes under a rain of brimstone and fire.*

Even though he is considered a major queer icon today, Pasolini was very critical towards the gay liberation movement. As art historian Ara H. Merjian explains, Pasolini anticipated that "the incorporation of marginalized identities to society's representational regime ... would hasten their commodification."[31] Patrick Rumble, a film scholar specializing in Italian cinema, also argues that the Italian intellectual was very skeptical of new forms of tolerance towards sexual difference in the West; he quotes Pasolini as asserting that this tolerance was imposed "from above" and aimed at turning individuals into "good consumers." He writes that Pasolini saw his own homosexuality in opposition to impulses towards conformity with a new heteronormative order, as a form of rupture and discontinuity and as "the apocalypse that massacred all categories."[32] His celebration of the unruliness of sexuality is clear in his film *Arabian Nights*, where he aptly attacks modern Western epistemologies of bodies and desire and reveals his fascination with the Arab region.

In fact, Pasolini saw in what was then called the Orient "a roomy place full of possibility" away from the denaturalization and alienation of Western cultures.[33] According to film and gender scholar Daniel Humphrey, Pasolini's fetishizing of the Orient and his eroticizing gaze on Africans and Arabs in several feature films and documentaries should be seen as auto-critical ethnographic endeavors where the filmmaker questions his own eurocentrism. Based on his reading of Edward Said, Humphrey suggests the term "queer Orientalism" to describe Pasolini's desire for Morocco or Yemen, one that materializes on the faces and bodies he recorded.[34] Scholar Luca Caminati, whose research deals with postcolonial theory in Italian cinema and media, also considers the filmmaker's fascination with the *elsewhere*, specifically the Third World, and sees it "not as escape but rather as possible political alterity" to Western progress.[35] He groups Pasolini with Genet, Sartre, and other European Marxists for their involvement throughout the 1950s and '60s "in articulating a form of transnational revolutionary universalism."[36]

Pasolini's work creates a queer space of possibility—a place for stories and histories yet untold. In the last part of *Porno-Teo-Kolossal*, Pasolini offers an alternative to his dystopian images of a European continent destroyed by "capitalistic homologation and cultural genocide."[37] This section of the script is set in Ur (a prefix that could mean archaic), a hypothetical city located somewhere in Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq. Pasolini imagines the epic voyage of his main character, Epifanio, from north to south—in what today feels like a counterpoint to the



Paolo di Paolo, Pier Paolo Pasolini at Rome's 'monte dei cocci,' an artificial mound made of ancient pottery fragments, 1960.

recent waves of perilous migration towards Europe. Witnessing European workers becoming petit bourgeois in his lifetime, Pasolini believed that emancipation could come only from African migrants, the new *sotto-proletariat*.[38] But he feared that even his cherished Orient, where old and new cohabitated, would eventually capitulate to modernity. In Ur, Epifanio meets a "short Arab" selling medals and souvenirs. He intimates to him that the Messiah was indeed born in these lands, but a lot of time has passed and he is now dead and forgotten. Upon realizing that he is "irremediably late," Epifanio dies.[39] The end of the film offers no clear conclusion. In the afterlife, Epifanio is pictured waiting indefinitely for something to happen. Resisting teleological resolution, Pasolini, who was increasingly interested in experimenting with new forms, imagined this scene to be an "infinite sequence shot."[40]

Did he witness the "rebirth of a myth" while watching the "wretched enjoy the evening" in the poor neighborhoods of Beirut? Or did these lines resonate again: "But I with the conscious heart of one who can live only in history, will I ever again be able to act with pure passion when I know that history is over?"[41] The unbearable postmortem images of Pasolini's disfigured face loom over a cruel world that allowed the destruction of a body he chose to throw "into the struggle," just as another destructive explosion in Beirut piles up new "wreckage upon wreckage."[42] Maybe there is solace in the perduring beauty of Pasolini's poems, just as more recent loud chants continue to resonate from Lebanese queer activists demanding the end of patriarchal control.[43]

X

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1
S. N., "Pasolini in Beirut: More Important than Realizing the Work Is Dreaming It," *Annahar Newspaper* (Beirut), May 4, 1974.

2
Ed Vulliamy, "Who Really Killed Pier Paolo Pasolini?" *The Guardian* , August 23, 2014 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/24/who-really-killed-pier-paolo-pasolini-venice-film-festival-biennale-abel-ferrara .

3
Nick Denes writing on Raoul-Jean Moulin, quoted in Anthony Downey, "Contingency, Dissonance and Performativity: Critical Archives and Knowledge Production in Contemporary Art," in *Dissonant Archives: Contemporary Visual Culture and Contested Narratives in the Middle East* , ed. Anthony Downey (IBTauris, 2015), 30.

4
Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 53.

5
Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 54, 55.

6
Letter from Samia Tutunji to Pier Paolo Pasolini, January 5, 1973, IT ACGV PPP.I.1179. 1, Archivio Contemporaneo Bonsanti, Florence, Italy. Unless noted otherwise, all excerpts from the archival documents and articles have been translated from Arabic, French, and Italian by me.

7
To this day, Lebanese filmmakers and distributors continue to fight against censorship of films imposed by religious and political interests and enforced by Lebanese security officials.

8
The invitation came from the Mouvement Social, a social and political organization founded by a priest and still active to this day. Letter from Robert Misk from the Mouvement Social to Pier Paolo Pasolini, February 19, 1970, IT ACGV PPP.I.1213. 2(a-c)/b, Archivio Contemporaneo Bonsanti.

9
Letter from the Italian Cultural Institute in Beirut to Pier Paolo Pasolini, February 24, 1970, IT ACGV PPP.I.1213. 2(a-c)/c, Archivio Contemporaneo Bonsanti.

10
Manuscript for an article entitled "Mostri e mostriciattoli. Beyruth. Mercks. I donatori di sangue," May 1, 1969, IT ACGV PPP.II.1.145. 37, Archivio Contemporaneo Bonsanti. The archive mentions that the article was published in *Tempo* 31, no. 19 (May 10, 1969) with a slightly different title: "Mostri e mostriciattoli. I pasticcini di Beirut. La faccia di Merckx. Donatori di sangue."

11
The souks of downtown Beirut, the popular heart of the city, were destroyed during the civil war. In the 1990s, they were privatized and rebuilt with fancy stores selling expensive international brands.

12
Télé Liban became Lebanon's first public television network in 1959.

13
Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan: Regard vers un patrimoine culturel (Beirut: Dar Annahar Press, 2003), 23.

14
Janine Rubeiz et Dar el Fan , 29. F ounded in 1967 by Janine Rubeiz, an "enlightened" bourgeois socialite, the center programmed, over a period of eight years, 240 conferences and debates, sixty poetry nights, ninety exhibitions, and 150 film screenings from different parts of the world. A 1972 manifesto makes clear the humanistic approach of Dar el Fan, describing its mission as "political engagement" with historical events considered as lived experiences that recognize "the suffering, the expectation, and the hope" of the Other.

15
Original brochure of the Ciné-Club of Beirut, May 3, 1974, IT ACGV PPP.V.3.213. 70, Archivio Contemporaneo Bonsanti.

16
Simone Fattal, email to the author, September 27, 2020.

17
The reference is from Pasolini's poem "The Ashes of Gramsci," in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poems* , trans. Norman MacAfee (Noonday Press, 1996), 23. In 1949, Pasolini fled his native Friuli with his mother and settled in Rome after being accused of "obscene acts" with minors in public. Even though he was acquitted, he lost his job as a teacher and was removed from the Communist Party (see Ian Thomson, "Pier Paolo Pasolini: No Saint," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2013 https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/feb/22/pier-paolo-pasolini .) It was in the *borgate* that he found his first cinematic inspirations crystalized in *Accatone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962). There, he also discovered the *ragazzi* and a violent homosexual world that would bring him both "fortune and fate." This is according to his friend and renowned Italian writer Alberto Moravia, interviewed after Pasolini's assassination in *Those Who Tell the Truth Shall Die* , a 1981 documentary by Philo Bregstein.

18
Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poems , 21.

19
Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poems , 9.

20
S. N., "Pasolini à Beyrouth: "Rêver c'est une forme de religiosité," *L'Orient le Jour* (Beirut), May 5, 1974.

21
S. N., "Pasolini in Beirut: More Important than Realizing the Work Is Dreaming It."

22
Emily K. Hobson, *Lavender and Red: Liberation and Solidarity in the Gay and Lesbian Left* (University of California Press, 2016).

23
Todd Shepard, *Sex, France, and Arab Men, 1962–1979* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

24
Jarrod Hayes, "Queer Resistance to (Neo-)colonialism in Algeria," in *Postcolonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* , ed. John C. Hawley and Dennis Altman (SUNY Press, 2001).

25
Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (University of Chicago Press, 2007), 162.

26
Ghassan Makarem, "The Story of HELEM," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 7, no. 3 (2011): 98, 102.

27
José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (NYU Press, 2009), 1.

28
Inspired by the call for "a third-world gay revolution" (a term used to include Black people, Latin Americans, and all other peoples of color) that appeared in a gay publication in New York in the early 1970s. "T.W.G.R.: Third World Gay Revolution," *Come Out! A Liberation Forum for the Gay Community* 1, no. 5 (Septem ber–October 1970), 12.

29
A statement that Pasolini made in an interview published by the French newspaper *Le Monde* on February 26, 1971 as mentioned in Enzo Siciliano, foreword to *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poems* , xiv.

30
Porno-Teo-Kolossal is a film that Pasolini wrote but never realized. Information from the script is based on Julie Paquette, "From Capitalist Development to the Endless Sequence Shot: The Four 'Utopias' of Porno-Teo-Kolossal," *Cinémas* 27, no. 1 (2016): 99. Paquette's essay provides extensive details of the script, including the following excerpt (in French): "Non seulement des minorités hétérosexuelles, mais aussi des minorités noires, des minorités juives, des minorités tzigane, qui vivent ici dans la liberté la plus absolue, y compris intérieure ... Sodome, ... tout est fondé sur un sens réel de la démocratie."

31
Ara H. Merjian, *Against the Avant-Garde: Pier Paolo Pasolini, Contemporary Art, and Neocapitalism* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 214–15.

32
Patrick Allen Rumble, *Allegories of Contamination: Pier Paolo Pasolini's Trilogy of Life* (University of Toronto Press, 1996), 135, 140.

33
Daniel Humphrey, *Archaic Modernism: Queer Poetics in the Cinema of Pier Paolo Pasolini* (Wayne State University Press, 2020), 108.

34
Humphrey, *Archaic Modernism*, 108.

35
Luca Caminati, "Notes for a Revolution: Pasolini's Postcolonial Essay Films," in *The Essay Film: Dialogue, Politics, Utopia* , ed. Eliz

36

abeth A. Papazian and Caroline Eades (Columbia University Press/Wallflower, 2016), 131.

36
Caminati, "Notes for a Revolution," 133.

37
Paquette, "From Capitalist Development," 107.

38
Paquette, "From Capitalist Development," 106.

39
Paquette, "From Capitalist Development," 106.

40
Paquette, "From Capitalist Development," 111.

41
The last lines of "The Ashes of Gramsci," in *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poems* , 23.

42
Reference from a posthumous Pasolini manuscript mentioned in *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Poems* , xi. The second reference is from Walter Benjamin's 1940 essay *Theses on the Philosophy of History* .

43
See Rasha Younes, "'If Not Now, When?' Queer and Trans People Reclaim Their Power in Lebanon's Revolution," *Human Rights Watch* , May 7, 2020 https://www.hrw.org/node/341597 .

Gregor Mobius

Personal Entropy

The End of Life/Observer Is the End of the Universe/Observed

Recently I began realizing that my perception of the world is beginning to change in a peculiar way. There are no longer distinctions between more and less important themes or work; both conceptually and visually, everything is becoming equally (un)important. Whether I am walking with my dog around the neighborhood, reading news about the tragic war in Ukraine, washing my hands after going to the toilet, checking the ongoing pandemic statistics, taking a public bus downtown, watching a lecture on YouTube about the Cambrian explosion, fearing death, trying to imagine a self-conscious biosphere, finding an old bone in a bush, writing these words … It's as if my world has gradually turned from a well-organized 3D structure into a flat, chaotic 2D universe, moving from a state of certain order toward a state of complete disorder. In becoming aware of this change, I thought it might make sense to try and articulate it through writing, and in this way perhaps regain some order in my mind. This is how this "story" came to be.

How would the modernizing New York art world have evolved had the Arensbergs not existed, or if Duchamp hadn't made his way to their door? The Ukrainians, it was said, would rediscover the truth of an aphorism attributed to Stalin: "Quantity has a quality of its own." Before early Cambrian diversification, most organisms were relatively simple, composed of individual cells or small multicellular organisms, and occasionally organized into colonies. Euler states that he believes this problem concerns geometry—not the geometry well known by his contemporaries, which involves measurements and calculations, but a new kind of geometry which Leibniz referred to as Geometry of Position. Recently, consciousness has also become a significant topic of interdisciplinary research in cognitive science, involving fields such as psychology, linguistics, anthropology, neuropsychology, and neuroscience. There is only a mosaic of social deviations, when the political, because of its immorality, turns into a monstrous one. Next time you poke your head underwater, notice how it is difficult to tell which direction sound is coming from—that's because it's traveling so fast that there is no time for you to notice which ear it hits first! Whatever their nature might be, those nonorganic living forms must in some way relate to their environment, at least by being able to distinguish hot from cold, light from dark. A man who was denied entry to the Museum of Modern Art because his membership had been revoked jumped over the reception desk and stabbed two employees on Saturday afternoon, the police said. Skorzeny also trained Arab volunteers in commando tactics for possible use against British troops stationed in the Suez Canal zone. The main character, Sgt. Nick Fury, later became the leader of Marvel's super-spy agency, S.H.I.E.L.D. The fossil is so immaculate that we can find an absolutely beautiful set of intestines within its body. This is a "tough but fair" article that discusses the harsh reality of

tsunami warning capabilities right now in the US system. Knowing this, we thought it would be a wonderful thing to introduce the baby to the sounds of all your voices, the voices we hope the baby will get to know out here in the world one day soon. The easiest way to determine if your comics fall into the "good" category is by looking at the cover price. In many concentration camps, hair was routinely shorn from prisoners, usually on arrival. Often cast as an intellectual, Hurt starred in films such as *Lost in Space*, but was also effective in other kinds of roles, as in *I Love You to Death* and David Cronenberg's psychological drama *A History of Violence* (2005). As conditions in the city have grown direr and the death count has surged, word of the humanitarian catastrophe has leaked out through intermittent phone calls, shakily shot videos, and testimony from the handful of aid groups still working in the city. Air crash investigators have pulled most of the drone's remaining parts from a large crater it created on impact, including a partly damaged black box that should reveal the drone's flight path. Speaking from his home office in Topanga Canyon, Dechant drills into the old movies that helped inform this *Macbeth* and explains how something called the Moss-o-Matic added oomph to his spartan sets. As is the case with verbal languages, it might be possible to define different grammars based on visual properties that would enable establishing a variety of visual languages to think in pictures, to understand and interpret the world and ourselves visually. A pregnant woman who was photographed being stretchered out of a bombed maternity hospital in Mariupol last week has died, along with her baby. Albert Mayer developed a superblock-based city interspersed with green spaces with an emphasis on cellular neighborhoods and traffic segregation. Research by media organizations and human rights groups has shown that police routinely execute unarmed drug suspects and then plant guns and drugs as evidence. An experiment conducted by scientists from the University of Tokyo has now reinforced the view that RNA's unique talents have what it takes to explain how life bubbled forth billions of years ago, backing up what's known as the "RNA world" hypothesis. There are moments in the film where the visual effects may be slightly insufficient, but hopefully never distracting. You can twist your brain into knots thinking about the implications of time travel. Personally, I really hope intelligence stays around, at least long enough to set up a way to von Neumann seed the rest of the galaxy with life, even if it's just lichens—that'd be enough to kick off evolution on those planets. We may soon be eating bespoke diets for our microbiome, taking drugs to improve our brains, and genetically modifying our unborn children to prevent disease. Theoretical, statistical, and analytical topics within the broad area of molecular evolution: in particular, elucidation of the relative roles of mutation and drift versus purifying selection in determining the pattern of nucleotide substitution, the dynamic and static features of the compositional architecture of genomes, and the relative fractions of functional and nonfunctional fractions of eukaryotic genomes.

The destiny of each individual organism is of no relevance for the entire biosphere, in the same way that a particular cell is of no relevance for the entire organism; a single mRNA is irrelevant for the cell metabolism; and a particular phosphate is irrelevant for an mRNA molecule. Each of these components is not unique within its structure and can be replaced while maintaining the functionality of the larger entity.

Then on the level beyond the entire biosphere, the question is: What might be the larger living entity that has a biosphere as its building block?

In the same way that it would have been impossible to anticipate the emergence of complex multicelled organisms like humans from within the "bacteria world" three billion years ago, it is hard for us to imagine a larger living structure beyond the scale of the current biosphere.

The biosphere during the age of bacteria was very different from today's, and it is impossible to anticipate how it will develop in the future—as a single living entity or possibly as one part of a much larger living structure/organism. Or, as the largest living entity, it would represent the last stage of the evolution of life on earth.

On the other hand, each of these components has its "own life," and remains unaware of the role it is playing within the larger structure. If there *is* self-awareness of the biosphere as a single living entity, it will most likely be the first case that includes conscious components. Not only particles and waves move through space, but also the processes and relationships—for example, cell metabolism or even something like our thoughts—that maintain their continuity.

If human colonies and their corresponding ecosystems are established on the moon, Mars, and other planets/moons, there is a chance that in some very distant future they will form biospheres of their own that hold the possibility of becoming conscious. Then the biosphere on earth could establish a larger living structure together with those other biospheres.

Growing interest in exoplanets and extraterrestrial life—and all the resources devoted to this endeavor over the last several decades—could also be an expression of the biosphere's desire to find out whether there is life beyond earth, or whether we are entirely alone in the universe.

Establishing and maintaining the distinction between "in" and "out" (later materialized through the membrane) is the fundamental property of life. The membrane separated and protected living molecules inside its space ("territory") from the outside.

This is how the distinction between "I" and "not I" became possible, enabling the exchange between "in" and "out"

through this separation "line." It is a kind of metabolism that involves observation: hot, cold, light, dark, silence, sound (vibrations).

Awareness of the "outside" from "within" requires some kind of memory. Without memory there is no "recognition" of previous experience, there is no observation.

A recent study shows how a molecule that remains crucial to the survival and reproduction of every living thing today can inch its way towards an evolving system if it works with it as a team.

"We found that the single RNA species evolved into a complex replication system: a replicator network comprising five types of RNAs with diverse interactions, supporting the plausibility of a long-envisioned evolutionary transition scenario," says evolutionary biologist Ryo Mizuuchi.

I try to imagine myself as a biosphere just "waking up" as a conscious living being. This would probably happen gradually, but at some point I would begin to realize that I happen to be in a very strange and unpleasant situation. I move alone through space tied to a rotating rock with one side warm and exposed to light (the sun), and another side that's cold and dark with one large bright spot (the moon).

One full rotation cycle (twenty-four hours) is my basic unit of time, like one heartbeat. I feel, observe, and am even aware of the situation but there is almost nothing I can do to change it, nothing I can do to have some control over my destiny. The question is how would "I" actually see, and what/where would my memories be? Am "I" one single "I" or multiple (dis)connected "I's"?

Travels to space and the moon gave the biosphere its first chance to see itself from a distance, through human eyes. How would such a complex entity, consisting of billions of smaller living entities, each with its own "picture of the world," perceive the world as a single being/mind? Would that be possible at all?

The biosphere's balloon-like body consists of the thin layer between the earth's crust below and the atmosphere above. It can perceive itself from within through the countless receptors of its components, and from the outside through human eyes on a space station, via satellite images, and so on.

Another question: What will be its relationship with highly developed technology (such as AI), which began with wood and stone tools? Archeological and human remains are biosphere remains as well and are preserved by it.

On the scale of the earth, the biosphere is almost like a cell membrane, but in this case on both sides of the membrane is nonliving matter. On the "inside" is lifeless soil, and on the "outside" is the atmosphere and beyond. It is as if all living processes are happening within the membrane itself.

Each living entity today, from a single microbe to the entire biosphere, has an unbreakable connection with the first life-form that ever appeared on earth. The biosphere was born with the emergence of this first life and continues to grow and evolve to this day. Will this process continue indefinitely, or, following the logic of life on earth, will there be a point when the biosphere dies like every other living being?

What about all the memories acquired and saved in each living being—what happens to them after each body dies? All these internal memories built into the body dissolve and disappear while new memories begin to form as each new living being is born ...

Pictures, films, texts are not memories until they are observed by a living (human) being.

From the position of survival, the earliest and simplest life-forms, like microbes, are as successful as any other existing and much more complex life-form. The emergence of life's mystery, the transition from nonliving to living matter, is one issue; while the necessity of the process that took place afterwards, which, through billions of years of evolution led life from the microbe level to me sitting in front of a computer and writing this, appears to be another kind of mystery.

The complexity of life-forms does not seem to be a necessity for their survival on earth, but it might make it easier to move life further into space, beyond earth's limits. This would imply that sending telescopes and humans into space is in some way encoded in the "living algorithm," and perhaps has been since the very beginning.

I wonder if members of other species contemplate the "origin of life" or are perhaps trying to find out whether there is life beyond earth.

The two most important events for any life-form are birth and death. As a living entity, an observer can observe another living entity and a nonliving one as well. It can also observe itself: self-observation. This kind of observer can "see," interpret, understand, and react to what it sees. Living is observing; it is a crucial property of survival. The question is whether it is possible for there to exist some kind of nonliving observer with similar properties.

Spreading life beyond earth and the solar system would only be possible through some multigenerational expedition on a large spaceship containing a micro-ecosystem/habitat (*Interstellar*), or if traveling faster than the speed of light became a reality. At this point, both options seem very far-fetched. There is also the possibility of substantially extending the human lifespan.

The existence of any living organization—a single cell, a complex organism, or a society—is based on two opposite requirements: stability and change. They have to be properly balanced, since overemphasis on stability leads to conservation (black) and death while tilting toward change could lead to chaos (white) and again to death. Life is a good balanced combination of both (gray).

It is strange how birth and death, events of cosmic proportion for any living being, are at the same time among the most common, ordinary phenomena in nature.

On the individual level, the main event in the life of any living being comes at the end—death. It seems there is no good narrative in which the death of an individual becomes meaningful and acceptable (the two best-known previous attempts are resurrection/reincarnation and posterity).

First there is fear of death. Then there is a sadness in realizing that life will eventually come to an end—not only any life or all life, but most importantly my/your life. That is the end of everything.

Memory is a story/narrative that gives meaning to life, enabling the idea/experience of "time flow."

Instead of a biochemical approach to understanding the emergence of life, perhaps a perceptual approach could be more productive. This involves understanding how the first life-form perceived and interpreted the world around it (inside-outside or living-nonliving). If we could "retrieve" such images, which could be "hidden" in RNA/DNA strands of present life-forms, we could also gain some knowledge about the earliest forms of life.

If we try to explain the emergence of life on earth through proto-RNA, it is most likely that a certain number of bases represented a "tipping point" at which a nonliving molecule became a living self-replicator, which was at the same time the first "observer."

Below a certain order of magnitude, we all consist of nonliving matter. However, transition from nonliving into living, from dead to alive, still remains entirely unknown and unexplainable.

A question here is: Where does living matter end and nonliving matter begin, and vice versa? Most likely it is not a clear binary case, but happens in stages: dead (black), almost dead (dark), uncertain (gray), almost alive (light), and alive (white). This might help to explain the transition at least conceptually from nonliving to living, with three stages in between that belong to both states.

The probability of life appearing throughout the Milky Way versus life being limited to earth seems to be fifty-fifty. This resembles the binarity of images recorded by the earliest life-forms. In other words, life appeared on earth and nowhere else, or the entire universe was "teeming with life."

This is an example of how we can come up with opposite conclusions from the same "facts." It is worth noticing that these statements/observations/assumptions are only possible from a living position; they are beyond the reach of nonliving matter.

Abiogenesis, the emergence of life—turning nonliving into living matter—is happening all the time with all living matter today. Below some order of magnitude, all living matter on the level of molecules of water or CO2 consists of nonliving matter.

As we zoom out and the picture gets larger, at what point do these nonliving molecules become alive, and what makes them turn into living matter ("proton motive force")?

Eternity is timelessness; it is nonliving death. Life is finite, temporary, but it is meta-nonliving. The living can see/observe the nonliving (and the living), while the nonliving cannot see either the living or the nonliving.

If 2D images derived from RNA/DNA sequences are "pictures of the world" recorded by living matter, then perhaps another kind of life-form, regardless of its molecular structure, might perceive the world in a similar way. Its "pictures of the world" might correspond to those recorded and saved within RNA/DNA.

In other words, if the two living forms are structurally different, having different or even unrelated material properties, they might still perceive the world in a similar way. Temporariness is the price life must pay in order to be able to see the world.

One of the most important properties of any life-form is the ability to, in a certain way, interact with/observe the world around it. But there is no observation without some form of memory. A life-form can see/recognize those properties of the world that have previously been observed and stored in its memory. The end of life (death) also represents a state without memory, a state of complete oblivion. Perhaps it makes sense to structure this transition from memory to no-memory in five stages/degrees, using the familiar five-element gray scale.

If the Big Bang hypothesis is correct, then there was a time when there was no life in the entire universe and life must have appeared as a process of abiogenesis. Thus, whether life appeared on earth or came from space (panspermia), it is a result of biogenesis—from nonliving matter came living matter.

There are three fundamental unknowns: What is life? What is consciousness? And what is intelligence? The question here is whether intelligence is a property of living matter

alone.

It seems that evolution was not necessary for life to survive on earth. For example, there are many more microorganisms now than there were three billion years ago. However, evolution appears meaningful and even necessary in case of some destructive catastrophe on earth (a huge meteorite, climate change).

Only life in the form of human beings could anticipate this kind of event and perhaps be able to move some of its members beyond the earth, thus preserving life.

In order to understand/explain the transition from nonliving to living matter, it will be necessary to come up with a completely new approach, something based on assumptions and logic very different from those that have been tried unsuccessfully so far. Perhaps a very different way of understanding what life is.

Two important properties of life are "pleasure" and "pain." No living entity is independent of its environment. In fact, pleasure and pain are two inseparable parts of life and its metabolism. In this sense, the crust, water, and air that make up the biosphere's immediate environment are its integral parts.

Perhaps we should use a different time scale for the period when the biosphere consisted only of one-celled organisms. It is similar, let's say, to a baby's first year compared to any year of its adult life. In other words, biological time is not the same as chronological time. This might mean that three billion years of a single-celled biosphere was in fact biologically much longer (?).

In the Cambrian explosion, life begins to go above and below the ocean floor. From horizontal 2D space, it begins to move up and down into 3D space.

It is important and necessary to begin articulating a story about the world/life/existence that is completely different from one that is dissolving now. The way that someone like Descartes already tried to do once upon a time.

The question today is: What should the properties of the next master narrative be? Who should be its leading characters and what kind of life-forms should they be? Should this story be based on individual characters at all? Also, what should the key notions (ideology) behind the narrative be? What should its concept of time be, if time should be one of its key elements at all?

There are two existing grand narratives, each with its own story that follows a chain of connected events/sequences and each with its own interpretation of the collective past. One takes the life of Jesus (or the creation of the World) as a starting point, and another begins with the first humans or the Big Bang.

Both narratives also contain a vision of the collective future: in one it is apocalypse, in the other it is progress. There are characters in each; some may be fictional and some may be real (historical). But in both cases, for those who believe in a particular story, these characters are "real."

All of this describes the collective narrative that determines the ideology and values of a certain social group. On the other hand, every group consists of individuals, each with their own personal story (life story) that begins with birth and ends with death.

There are also relationships between individuals of a certain group, and relationships those individuals have with people outside the group (not "us").

What is the relationship, then, between the stories of each individual and the collective narrative? How does the individual understand the end of life in relation to the collective narrative? (Think, too, of cases of self-sacrifice and martyrdom, when an individual life is sacrificed for the collective story/ideology).

How does one's everyday narrative (structuring "a day in the life") relate to one's individual life story and to the collective story? What is the relationship between the biology of life (including birth and death) and both the individual and collective narratives?

From nonexistence we came to existence, and from existence we will go back to nonexistence (birth—life—death; nonliving—living—nonliving). Again, the two key events for any individual are birth and death.

However, since there is generally no such thing as pre-birth memory, or memory of one's own birth, anticipation of death becomes the main conception of life/existence.

How will the next big narrative relate to the previous two mentioned above? Will it forget them or remember them in its own way (like a meta-history, for example)? The last two millennia of "Western Civilization" have been defined by Judeo-Christian and historical narratives. The next narrative should be broader, and relevant to other civilizations as well.

The way astronauts carry a micro-atmosphere with them into space resembles the first life-forms that moved from sea to soil, carrying within them a micro-hydrosphere.

One possible option would be a narrative from the perspective of some nonorganic (AI) entity, or from some alien, non-DNA-based life-form.

Another related question is whether the biosphere could ever reach the point of self-awareness, and if so, how would that happen?

If the biosphere ever emerges as a single being, what would be its main properties? Would it be able to "see" the world only from the inside out, or might it become capable of perceiving itself from the outside as well? This seems highly unlikely since it would have to be in a position outside of (organic, DNA-based) life as we know it.

Perhaps it might start as something modeled after a flock of birds and then morph into something modeled after an ant colony. At some point it might even become something closer to a complex living organism with highly specialized cells and organs, with a brain as its central organ. In the case of this biosphere, the human (brain) network would be parallel to a single (human) brain.

For higher, multicelled organisms, there is a specialization of cells and a division of roles/labor, but parallel specialization appears among ants and bees. Which of the two models of organizing living matter—bird flock or ant colony—might be manifested or expressed by this biosphere?

How would the phenomena of the emergence of living matter differ from that of nonliving matter? How does the transition from single-celled to multi-celled organism differ from the transition from one fish to a school of fish, or one bird to a flock of birds?

This question illustrates the fact that the same unit can take part in forming different types of emerging phenomena (i.e., a stream or a wave), and that it can even take part as a unit within another emerging event (i.e., a droplet and a wave). Also: the transition from, for example, a gas atom to a liquid molecule is not a matter of large quantity, but from a droplet to a wave it is.

Do the emergence processes of nonliving and living matter (like water and ants) have similarities? It seems that for nonliving matter, the tipping point is reached by amassing a quantity of units.

First, two gas atoms of hydrogen and one of oxygen produce a liquid molecule of water. Then a number of water molecules together produce a droplet of water with its own emerging properties. Then a single water droplet joins many others to produce a river stream or an ocean wave.

What is the tipping point in the process of moving from one stage (a single bird) to another (a flock)—from a single entity (unit) to a much larger group formation with very different properties? Does something similar happen in the transition from nonliving to living matter, and vice versa?

When the elements or parts of an emerging entity (a fish in a school, a bird in a flock, or an ant in the colony) take part in forming a new, larger entity, it appears that each individual part is not "aware" of this, that they do not and cannot "see" themselves as a part of the emerging phenomenon from the "outside."

The end of Life/observer is the end of the Universe/observed.

X

Gregor Mobius is a theoretician of languages that are expressed visually.

Tyler Coburn

The Petrified, Part 2

Continued from “”

The Spy and the Cleric

“Don’t choose England as a place to live. Whatever the reasons, whether you’re a professional traitor to the motherland or you just hate your country in your spare time, I repeat, don’t move to England. Something is not right there. Maybe it’s the climate. But in recent years there have been too many strange incidents with a grave outcome. People get hanged, poisoned, they die in helicopter crashes, fall out of windows. And look what’s happened now.”

This warning airs on Channel One Russia in early 2018. The news presenter adjusts two stacks of paper as he speaks. A few days earlier, someone had petrified on a bench in Salisbury: a former military intelligence officer and double agent for MI6. Throughout his career, he’s said to have blown the cover of three hundred Russian spies, passing intel by means of an artificial rock lodged in a Moscow park. This came to an end in 2006, when he was sentenced to thirteen years in prison. He got out early as part of a spy swap. He moved to Salisbury.

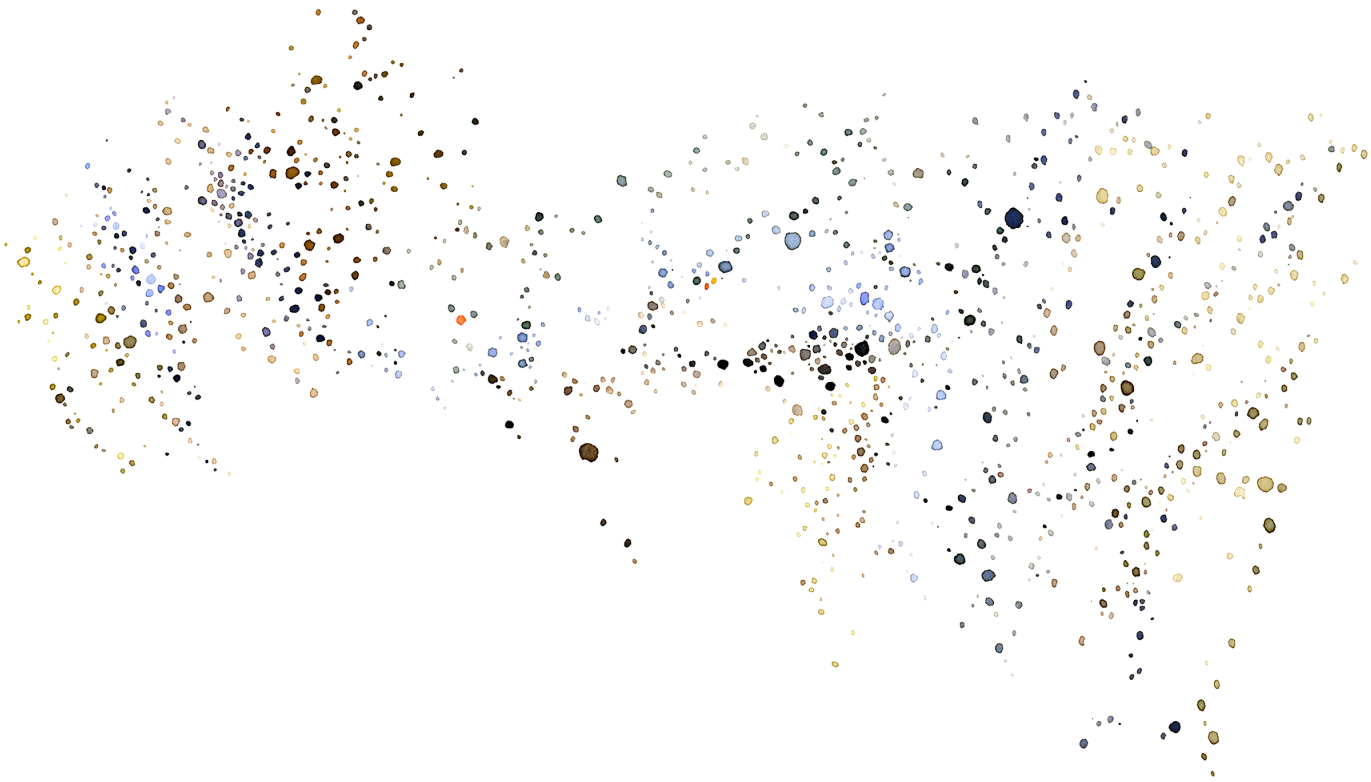
Russia has never claimed responsibility for citizens who meet untimely ends on foreign soil. Nor has it been particularly forceful in disavowing them. The news presenter’s speech is like much of what comes from state mouthpieces: a veiled threat to would-be traitors and an affront to international law. The Kremlin will do what it wants, wherever it wants—consequences be damned.

This is all to say that the petrification of the former spy is suspicious, especially coming a few weeks before the Russian presidential election. There’s also the fact that it’s the first time, in the nine years of petrifications, that someone has transformed outside a museum. The popular belief is that petrification is a voluntary, possibly conscious act. Could it also be compelled, coerced, induced? Was the spy forced into this state—or, faced with the prospect of death, was petrification his last line of defense?

*

The former spy had a shtick when he got into a Salisbury taxi. He’d kiss his ring and invite the driver to do the same, like the first stage of an initiation ritual. Then, the real performance began. His eyes would dart around the car, scanning the windows for signs of onlookers. Beneath his breath he’d confess, “I’m a Russian spy.”

Nobody believed him, of course. The sad old kook. He moved to Salisbury with his family, and they kept peeling away. His wife was lost to cancer a year in. The son died of liver failure, while on holiday in St. Petersburg, eight months before the petrification. His daughter was all he



had left, but she only stayed in Salisbury for a few years, and then returned to Russia to work for Nike. She told him the origin of "Just Do It"— a convict once said this to his firing squad when asked if he had any last words. Her father didn't like that story at all.

*

She is often asked one question, and always deflects. What's most important is her father's well-being. He's comfortable in his home, with a daughter to care for him. Her job, her flat in Russia: everything else can wait.

There's a temptation to read between the lines—to find in a genuine sentiment a genuine sense of terror. The Kremlin may have killed her brother and petrified her father; the less trouble she causes, the better. The West can call her father a martyr. It can point fingers at the Russians who visited Salisbury on that fateful day. She just wants to stay alive.

*

Eight months later, a Turkish cleric petrifies. He came to the United States in 1999 to be treated for heart disease and settled in a compound in rural Pennsylvania. From his prayer room, beside a table packed with pill bottles, the cleric would record messages to his flock. He extolled the value of religious tolerance. He argued that faith can be compatible with enterprise, if one invests in worthy causes. The cleric practiced what he preached. The cornerstone of his movement is a network of secular schools—more than a hundred in the United States alone. One of his followers describes it as an "Ottoman Empire of the Mind."

The cleric was instrumental in the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. It was a relationship of convenience that wouldn't last. When Erdoğan closed some of the cleric's schools, he was hounded by corruption charges. The cleric's followers, spread throughout Turkish bureaucracy, posed an ever-present threat. After the failed coup in 2016, the two reached a breaking point: Erdoğan accused the cleric of running a "parallel state" and stripped him of Turkish citizenship.

*

Ever since the coup, Erdoğan has asked the United States to extradite the cleric. Obama found the evidence wanting. Trump was more receptive when Michael Flynn had his ear. Anything for a fellow authoritarian. There was a meeting where abduction and rendition were discussed, but no plans were set.

Erdoğan gained some leverage in October 2018 when journalist Jamal Khashoggi was murdered at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. Turkey shared recordings that implicated the Gulf state, despite its denial of involvement. The message to the United States was clear: give us the

cleric or see your ally dragged deeper into scandal.

*

On its face, the cleric's compound has the look of a spiritual retreat. The twenty-six-acre property, nestled in the woods of Pennsylvania, hosts many visitors who come to study and pray. Still, there are telling signs, like the cameras and metal detectors installed throughout the site. Neighbors, unsure what to make of it all, have been feeding the rumor mill. (The War on Terror trained them well.) Gunfire, they say, can be heard in the dead of night—and helicopters landing covertly.

The failed coup raised the temperature. With the murder of Khashoggi, the pot boils over. Demonstrators gather along the perimeter of the compound. Planes circle above, trailing protest banners. A man sneaks onto the grounds without an appointment; a guard fires a warning shot, and he flees.

The cleric has a habit when journalists visit. Citing poor health, he remains in his quarters while a representative tours them around. Sometimes he really is ill, but that's not the point.

Can sickness turn a person to stone? Worry? Fear of returning to a home that's turned hostile? The cleric retires to his quarters as the protests continue, citing poor health. He is found petrified the next day.

*

The spy and the cleric. It reads like the title of a fable, though one without the satisfaction of a resolution. The first people to petrify outside museums are utterly unlike the rest: actors on the world stage, men spurned by the countries they left. If Russia and Turkey were looking for a new way to deal with dissidents—as effective as Polonium-210 yet untraceable—then they might have found it.

The spy is still in Salisbury, under the watchful eye of his daughter. After a career lived in the shadows, it's somehow appropriate that he's kept from view.

The cleric's compound is open—visitors can study and pray—but he remains in his quarters. Given Islam's prohibition on idolatry, his followers will not risk him becoming a monument. Perhaps, with enough faith, he'll return to them.

The Pagan

The first time she saw him, she stared, but he didn't stare back. His right arm was pulled close to his face, as if he were examining a detail on his skin—a blemish, maybe, or a bug that was just touching down. He seemed to smile at the sight of it, wrinkling his nose.

The lower half of his arm was degraded; only the bones were left. The bottom half of his body had disappeared entirely. Was it a smile, then, or a look of surprise: to find himself in so unbecoming a state, two thousand years after his death?

"He looks like a leather suitcase," a classmate joked. That, their teacher explained, was on account of the sphagnum moss, which preserves bodies found in the bogs by effectively tanning them. Certain things had resisted the process, like the hairs of his beard which stuck this way and that. She reached out her hand to fix them, then remembered: he was surrounded by glass.

*

In 1984, a peat cutter found the bog body at Lindow Moss near Manchester—some debris, gumming up the conveyer belt, that turned out to be a man. He was handed over to the British Museum, which spent the next two years cleaning, scanning, soaking, and freeze-drying him. Mancunians complained that their ancestor looked like a herring. Then they got angry.

"London has everything," a local headline read. "He should stay in the North." T-shirts were printed with a reconstruction of his face. An ode to repatriation was penned. Her primary school class got roped into the campaign; the video they made is still online. There she is on a staircase, recorder in hand—and again, in Celtic dress, near the bog. Singing, so earnestly singing.

The British Museum made the smallest of concessions and loaned him to the Manchester Museum from 1987 to 1988. That's when she saw him. The smile. The beard in a tangle. If you focused on it and ignored the rest, you could swear that you were looking at a living person. Two thousand years flattened by a miracle of natural preservation.

*

Twenty years later, she returns to the museum, trailing a procession of robed figures through the galleries. Her boyfriend hands her a rattle, then continues to drum. She shakes it once, certain that she came in late, and pulls up her hood. The procession stops at a familiar glass case.

It's technically the third time she sees him. She had come a few days earlier to the official opening, invited by a primary school classmate who's part of the show. The gallery looks nothing like it did in the late '80s. MDF blocks, painted in green and brown, divide the space. (She's told they resemble cut peat.) Voices are amplified throughout: of her classmate, the peat cutter who discovered the body, the curators of the British and Manchester Museums, the druidess leading the

procession. It's not just "the experts" speaking.

Her boyfriend is the real pagan. Until this point, she's gone along with it. But the ritual at the museum affects her. To see them pray to their ancestor, wave their flags and banners, place moss and leaves in the offering box beside him. To hear the emotion in the voice of the druidess, as she begs for his reburial. "This is a sacred, precious, and unquestioned gift," she says, that "we give every member of our community. Why not him?"

*

2008 feels like a turning point for the Manchester pagans: the first time a museum invites them to consult on a show and takes their counsel seriously. All across the country, the community is finding its voice. The druids of Avebury are calling on a local museum to rebury its human remains. Another is filing a lawsuit against an archaeologist, who uncovered the cremated remains of more than forty bodies at Stonehenge and is keeping them for "scientific research." She joins her boyfriend for the meetings, sees people nodding when she speaks up. It seems so obvious, the problem of displaying bodies in museums. Crammed in with ancient tools and pottery, they're no different than the artifacts.

The lawsuit is dismissed in 2011 and again in 2013; the druids vow to keep fighting. The museum in Avebury decides, in the end, to not rebury its human holdings. "There is no evidence," a statement reads, "for genetic, religious, or cultural continuity of a kind that would give preferential status to the group requesting reburial." The pagans draft a rebuttal. Proof of genetic continuity is nearly impossible to obtain: most parishes began keeping civil registers in the mid-sixteenth century, and so many have been lost to history. Religion is irrelevant: they honor all ancestral dead. And cultures change.

*

"If I were a tribal elder from overseas," the druidess once remarked, "and sought the repatriation of my great-grandfather's bones, museums would treat me courteously, pleased to perform the political correctness expected of them. There would be no question about the validity of my claim, nor doubts about my faith. However, because I am British, asking about the bones of my ancestors, too often the curator judges my beliefs as irrational and bases their rejection upon that."

Her comment, almost as soon as it's made, gets pushback in the community. Surely there are ways to advance the cause without drawing a false equivalence between Britons and foreign indigenous groups, who suffered at the hands of their colonial ancestors? If paganism has any hope of becoming widely accepted, it shouldn't be seen to abet white grievance.

These arguments are starting to falter: with every failed reburial campaign and successful foreign repatriation—in the wake of the Brexit referendum, which affirmed the pagans' nativist wing. Now, when she speaks up, their eyes glaze over. Nuance has lost the rhetorical war.

*

The last time she sees him is at the British Museum in 2018. She's been accepted into the petrification program and asks to transform nearby; the jury, touched by their long relationship, honors this request. Before leaving for London, she mails a statement to the local paper, pleading with the British Museum to return the bog body. If she petrifies, she hopes to become a model for other pagans—of how to achieve their goals through devotion, not distinction.

On her way to his case, she visits the gallery of *Living and Dying* to see Hoa Hakananai'a. A few months earlier, the people of Rapa Nui requested the return of this moai, which is the living face of an ancestor. British surveyors found it in 1868, buried to its shoulders in a ceremonial house. They dragged it down to the beach and put it on a raft. A Rapa Nui man who witnessed these events later tattooed them on his arm, to never forget what happened.

A delegation from Rapa Nui came to the museum a few days before her. Two men placed stone vessels on the plinth supporting the moai, filled with the red and white pigments that came off during its theft. The vessels are now gone, the moai still unadorned. She reaches out her hand, not sure what it wants to touch, but something stops her.

The Father

How does one tell the story of an overdose? What form should it take? A circle? A maelstrom? A line that stumbles and falls off the page?

In 2012, the year of the car accident, Staten Island doctors are prescribing painkillers at twice the rate of those in other boroughs in New York City. A painkiller like OxyContin is advertised to last twelve hours; his daughter comes to find that, six or seven hours in, the effects have already worn off, leaving her counting the minutes until the next pill. She gets into the habit of moving appointments up, when her prescription runs out early. Her doctor, coached by the pharmaceutical rep, understands that this isn't the behavior of an addict. Best practice is to up the dose.

She moves home that year, and her bedroom door remains closed for most of it. Any push for her to return to college or (God forbid) get a job is met with the same answer: she's still in pain, she needs more time to recover.

In 2013, New York launches a program to stop the overprescription of painkillers. Facing a new degree of scrutiny, her doctor ramps down her dose, and she goes into withdrawal. Her father can't keep looking the other way, or deferring to the medical establishment. The epidemic has found its way home.

*

During her first round of rehab, he begins to follow the local news. Every month, the place he lives finds another way to betray him. An ice-cream truck pushing oxycodone, a barbershop, the store that sells window blinds and drapery. It's like hundreds of tunnels have been dug to move product, and Staten Island is sinking.

The second time she returns from rehab, she moves in with friends on the South Shore. He offers to drive some stuff over (really, a pretense to see her), though he never makes it past the gate. She doesn't chain up the dogs. Her friends on the porch are too strung out to help. She can barely hear him over the barking; he should leave the boxes and go.

When New York tries to stop the overprescribing of painkillers, physicians and pharmacists fall into line. What this means is that patients who have developed addictions turn to the black market, where heroin sells for a fraction of the cost of opioids.

Heroin and opioids are just two forms the opium poppy can take. Another, developed by Paracelsus in the sixteenth century, was called the "stone of immortality" as if to suggest that, by relieving a person's pain, it could help them live forever. In fact, as history so often reveals—as his daughter's overdose painfully reminds—opium may prolong life but can also end it.

*

He doesn't find it in the group meetings, where everyone has the same story to tell. And the control booth feels like a hiding place, which probably isn't healthy. The sound, the lights—night after night, things need to go well. The more they disappear, the more *he* disappears, the more the people on stage come alive.

It's only when he digs that he can get beneath the grief. Turns out it's not just Staten Island sinking. Maine, Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky: the videos and articles and firsthand accounts press the limits of his hard drive. He drops into the tunnels, crawls against the flow of the pills, traces the network to its source: a squat building in Stamford, Connecticut skinned in mirrored glass—a company, Purdue Pharma, and the family behind it.

The father never thought of himself as "artsy." His work in the theater is technical, infrastructural. But he's been to The Met. He recognizes the family's name.

*

Since the [former] Sackler Wing opened in 1978, its main attraction is the Temple of Dendur, built in Egypt around the fifteenth century BC. The structure sits on an elevated platform partially framed by a reflecting pool.

Four statues line a wall of the wing, each depicting the lioness Sekhmet. The deity, like many others, is contradiction manifest. She's known as the "Lady of

Pestilence" who spreads epidemics amongst those who anger her. She's also the "Lady of Life" and the patron goddess of physicians and healers, said to possess every cure imaginable. Her priests perform rites of appeasement; her worshippers offer food, drink, and mummies of cats. They whisper prayers into the feline ears, begging the bringer of plagues to stop them.

Each time he applies to petrify, he mentions this, expecting the irony to be lost on no one—that the wing, which launders the Sacklers' image, contains four reminders of the epidemic they spread. If he succeeds in petrifying, he'd become the fifth, sitting across the reflecting pool to face them.

Each time he's rejected, he receives a standard-issue email. No option to appeal, no insight into the jury's decision, no suggestion that the museum (as he suspects) has deferred to the interests of its funder.

Who is more deserving than a man who lost his child?

*

He comes across it one morning on YouTube, or rather YouTube, knowing his viewing habits, pushes it on him. There, in the wing, are dozens of bodies splayed on the ground. They aren't speckled with color—this isn't petrification at work. They're playing dead, and they're shouting: "Sacklers lie, people die."

Demonstrators toss pill bottles into the reflecting pool. They unfurl a banner reading "Fund Rehab" and another, "Shame on Sackler." A woman makes a speech that articulates their goals: for the Sacklers to shift their philanthropy to treatment and harm reduction, and for museums and universities to stop taking donations from them. A guard enters the left side of the frame and grabs one of the banners. The dead return to the realm of the living and make their way to the exit.

The clip, dated "March 10, 2018," was uploaded by a member of P.A.I.N.: Prescription Addiction Intervention Now. Its founder Nan Goldin is a recovering OxyContin addict. The father looks at some of her artwork and is struck by an image, from a project about sexual dependency, of her face battered and bruised by a lover. He wonders if there's some analogy to be drawn.

Their protest is powerful, he reflects, but fleeting. Banners can be seized, pill bottles skimmed from the pool.

He watches the clip again, and it hits him: They didn't apply to do this. Nobody sought permission, nor should he.

*

Beginning in the summer of 2018, states and counties file thousands of lawsuits against the Sacklers and Purdue.

The following January, The Met announces that, in light of these events, it will reevaluate its gift acceptance policy. This is when his applications are leaked—when some employee, upset at the museum for not taking a stronger stance, confirms that the petrified man in the Sackler Wing is, as many suspect, engaged in a long-term sit-in. P.A.I.N. returns to protest outside The Met in an act of solidarity.

Only a year after the father petrifies does The Met announce that it will stop accepting gifts from members of the Sackler family linked to the making of OxyContin. The museum's CEO describes this as a "suspension," leaving open the possibility of a return to the status quo. In the meantime, the other family members are free to give generously.

I'm not surprised that this announcement, phrased with the utmost equivocation, doesn't rouse the father from his state. He, too, will remain in suspension—until the bringers of plagues are held to account.

My Colleague

There's a sculpture at The Met that I try to see when I visit—in the gallery of Chinese Buddhist Art. The figure is a celestial Buddha meditating in lotus position; a tombstone explains that it was made in the seventh century using a now-obscure technique. This Buddha was sculpted in clay and wrapped with several layers of hemp cloth, soaked in lacquer and glue. After the layers cured, openings were cut to remove the clay, and still more layers applied. Once stable, the surface was refined, finished, gilded, painted; splotches of gold and green and burnt umber are still visible today.

Sculptures like this aren't supposed to make their technique apparent. Few would know that they've been hollowed out and are masquerading as solids. But the celestial Buddha at The Met has deteriorated: at some point between the seventh century and its acquisition in 1919, both hands were lost, leaving two voids.

Each time I visit, I read the tombstone. I remember how this Buddha was made, and how it came to be hollow. I *try* to cling to these facts; the pull of the voids is stronger. A human once lived, and this shell *must have been* built around him. It's just about my size.

*

The technique spread to Japan in the eighth century, where it had a period of popularity before wood carving became the standard in the ninth. Lacquer underwent its own shift around this time, from a tool for building hollow sculptures to a drink the practitioners of Shingon Buddhism imbibed to hollow themselves out. The practice, one of many steps in *sokushinbutsu*, readies the body for perpetual meditation. A monk could expect to spend

thousands of days in preparation, restricting their diet to foraged nuts, roots, and seeds; to the toxic sap of the lacquer tree; and for about forty days, to nothing but salt water. As the body loses fat and muscle, and empties of fluids, it grows resilient to the forces of decomposition: a mummy in the making.

For the final stage of the process, a wooden box is lowered into a pit. It's here that a monk performs *dochu nyujo* (meditation under the ground). Their only sustenance is the water from two bamboo tubes, which also supply the box with air. Each has a bell that the monk must periodically ring; when they stop, the tubes are removed and the pit is sealed, destined to be reopened, in three months and three years, to see if the body is preserved—if the monk has become a living Buddha.

Hundreds have attempted this transformation, but only twenty-four successful cases are known in Japan—most still on view at various temples. Shrunk and desiccated, they continue to meditate.

The founder of Shingon Buddhism was a monk named Kūkai who crawled into his tomb in 835 AD to enter *dochu nyujo*. Kūkai intends to return 5.67 million years from that date, when he will usher a number of souls into nirvana. His disciples, following suit, might someday leave their state of suspended animation.

*

One of the last times I visit The Met, she's sitting there—facing the celestial Buddha. It's a surprise to see her, but more than that, I'm surprised to see the bench. They began disappearing after the petrification in the Sackler Wing, as if the very act of sitting posed a threat.

I'm torn in the way I always am with colleagues from the past: the desire to say hello; the anxiety at how, after all this time, we would even know where to start. But I'm getting ahead of myself—not reading the signs. The way she stares at nothing in particular, how she keeps her hands in *dhyana mudra*: a gesture of meditation that this Buddha is known to make.

I can't imagine why my colleague was accepted by the jury—her "compelling reason" for wanting to petrify. She never struck me as anguished. Disenchanted, sure. That low-level hum of not being at home in a world that bends and twists, flexibilizes and precaritizes. If I'm being vague, it's because her story hits close to home. One could call it "Millennial," though I think that oversimplifies the matter.

Perhaps it's a deficit of my generation that it feels easier to speak indirectly—to cloud a moment like this with reference. Seven Christians fleeing Roman persecution fell asleep in a cave around 250 AD; they awoke more than a century later in a Christian Roman Empire. Rip Van Winkle, in his twenty-year sleep, missed the American Revolution and (of greater significance to him) the final years of his awful wife's life. Does petrification give something similar to those who seek it: a fast track to a better world, or at least, to the idea of one? Is this why she applied?

Or am I wrong to assume that this pursuit is individual, not collective? A reprieve from life and not, like the living Buddhas of Japan, an ongoing vital practice? The pain of mummification was endured to alleviate our own; do the petrified, in their own manner, unburden us through their actions?

I'm not going to interrupt her to try to get answers. I'm not sure that she (or anyone) has them.

*

An elderly woman petrified on July 22, 2009. I came across my colleague about nine years later, as she made her own attempt. I've tried to tell their stories in the present tense, to restage the events of that period as if they're unfolding for the first time. To do this, we've had to keep hindsight at bay, pretending the final chapter hasn't already been written.

The early petrifications unlocked something in the public imagination: museums could do more than provide cultural edification. Whatever one's reason for wanting to petrify, they seemed to have the ability to help make that happen. But by the start of 2019, only ten people had transformed in total: eight at The Met, the Louvre, the Getty, the British Museum, and the Capitoline Museums—and two under mysterious circumstances in Salisbury, England and rural Pennsylvania. Petrification could have democratized museums, yet those who succeeded only added to their aura of exclusion. The petrified became like any rarity in the collection.

The low yield accounted, in part, for why the application programs came to an end. So too did the petrification protests: the pagan seeking the repatriation of her ancestor from the British Museum, the father who cast a glaring light on The Met's tie to the opioid epidemic. These events didn't occur in a vacuum: they lent fuel to broader activism. Seen in a cynical light, the return of the petrified to their families was, effectively, a stopgap, providing some appeasement to protestors while keeping funders and boards intact.

After the first petrification, The Met was concerned that the public would draw the worst conclusion, seeing museums as dangerous places where this could happen to you. Looking back on those years, there's something to be said for this fear. The institutions where the petrifications occurred share a singular belief: that the best place for the cultures of the world is within the museum that collects them. The force that pulls artworks and artifacts and spirits together may have finally

ensnared us.

The elderly woman remains on view: the first to transform, the only to not be identified—a person with nowhere to go. The Met has expanded her tombstone to include a brief history of the petrifications. The woman is described as an "exemplar of a folk practice," which emerged in the early twenty-first century and continues to defy explanation.[1]

X

Thanks to Joanna Fiduccia, Elvia Wilk, and Siqi Zhu for feedback on drafts of this text.

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1
This text includes content quoted or adapted from actual events, essays, and other sources. For "The Spy and the Cleric," see Marc Bennetts, "Russian State TV Warns 'Traitors' Not to Settle in England," *The Guardian*, March 9, 2018 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/09/russian-state-tv-warns-traitors-not-to-settle-in-england ; Mark Duell, "Kremlin Double Agent 'Boasted to Taxi Drivers "I'm a Russian Spy," Kissed a Black Wolf Ring and Always Insisted on Being Collected Away from His Home,'" *Daily Mail* , March 7, 2018 https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-5471795/Kremlin-double-agent-boasted-taxi-drivers-Im-Russian-spy.html ; Nicole Pope, "An Ottoman Empire of the Mind," January 6, 1998 http://fgulen.com/en/press/columns-en/an-ottoman-empire-of-the-mind , and "From 'Parallel State' to 'Terrorist Organization': Dissecting Erdoğan's Labeling of Gülen," *Journal of Middle Eastern Politics & Policy,* November 15, 2016 https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/2016/11/15/turkey-erdogan-gulen-movement/ . For "The Pagan," see Jody Joy, "Looking Death in the Face," in *Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum* , ed. Alexandra Fletcher, Daniel Antoine, and J. D. Hill (British Museum, 2014), 10–19; "Druid Calls for Reburial of Stonehenge Human Remains," *BBC News* , November 1, 2015 https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-wiltshire-34688929 ; "Human Remains to Stay in Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury," *Rescue – The British Archaeological Trust* , June 19, 2010 https://rescue-archaeology.org.uk/2010/06/human-remains-to-stay-in-alexander-keiller-museum-avebury/ ; and "Ceremonia Delegacion Rapa Nui Frente a Moai Hoa Hakananai'a," December 12, 2018, video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ML6603OaHJ4 . For "The Father," see Patrick Radden Keefe, *Empire of Pain: The Secret History of the Sackler Dynasty* (Doubleday, 2021); Sandi Bachom, "Artist NAN GOLDIN Stages #SacklerPAIN Opioid Protest Die-In @ Met Museum Sackler Wing 3/10/18," March 10, 2018, video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=by_aE_aMiHM ; and Elizabeth A. Harris, "The Met Will Turn Down Sackler Money Amid Fury Over the Opioid Crisis," *New York Times* , May 15, 2019 https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/arts/design/met-museum-sackler-opioids.html . The images in this text are watercolors by the author, respectively titled *The Met Fifth Avenue, Gallery 131* and *The British Museum, Room 50*.

Heather Davis

Plastic Media

Upon first glance, the photograph may appear somewhat banal. It pictures an empty lot: a cement foundation, hedges on either side, a road in the background. It is a photo of what remains. It looks as if it might once have been a driveway, now ridden with cracks, plants pushing through. The hedge on the left retains a round shape. There are tall trees rooted in a lawn that still looks like a lawn. Was this someone's home? A business? The move feels recent, as if, with little effort, the lot could be restored. In that animated, yet abandoned state, it seems haunted. The photo is part of the series *Solastalgia* by Courtney Desiree Morris. "Solastalgia" is a neologism coined by the environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht. Intentionally playing off the word "nostalgia," solastalgia refers to the distress produced by environmental change while people are still directly connected to their home environment. In other words, it describes the loss of a place in place. This is the type of loss that people are experiencing all over the world as climate change and other factors linked to extractivism rapidly reshape ecosystems through flooding or wildfires or drought or pollution. It describes how a place once familiar has been slowly made foreign. Unlike nostalgia, a loss produced by movement, it implies that there is no possibility of return. In Morris's series, solastalgia describes the forced displacement of her grandmother's community, Mossville, Louisiana, through plastics and other petrochemical production. While much of the focus of the environmental harms of plastic center on postconsumer practices and systems, to fully understand how plastic operates, it is necessary to examine its production, its implication with media, and the ways that plastic haunts particular bodies and geographic regions.

Plastic and Anti-Black Atmospheres

Mossville was founded in the 1790s as one of the first communities of free Black people in the South. The town was a haven for Black people throughout the backlash to Reconstruction and the Civil War and into the "1950s and '60s as the Ku Klux Klan resurged in defiance of the civil rights movement."[1] For over two hundred years, Mossville was a site of refuge, but now it is mostly abandoned. In 2012 the South African company Sasol began the process of buying up the property of the former five hundred inhabitants to expand its petrochemical plant through a large tax break and subsidy provided by the Louisiana government. The company now has the notorious title of being the second worst "super polluter" of airborne toxicity in the United States.[2]

Southern Louisiana is notorious within the United States for its high concentrations of petrochemical plants. In particular, it produces much of the country's PVC, which is transformed into shower curtains, piping, toys, signage, and traffic cones, among other things. Constitutive of contemporary infrastructures, and particularly the built environment, PVC is the most toxic of plastics produced.

Courtney Desiree Morris, Plant Construction Site, 2018, from the series Solastalgia, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

The building and construction sector uses 69 percent of all PVC. It is made through pyrolysis (thermal cracking) of petroleum, followed by the addition of plasticizers and stabilizers, added to create flexibility, durability, sheen, and adhesive capabilities. It is the plasticizers and stabilizers, key among them phthalic acid esters and brominated flame retardants, that can be toxic, releasing and off-gassing volatile organic compounds such as formaldehyde, benzene, and perchloroethylene. Owing to all these additives, PVC is nearly impossible to recycle. Because it is mostly used for durable goods, the toxicity from PVC is often localized in its production phase, transmitted through the bodies of residents near the plants, rather than being found in the wider environment, as is the case with waste disposal associated with polyethylene.[3]

In the *Solastalgia* series, the Sasol and other petrochemical plants appear in numerous photographs, like a kind of specter, hovering at the edges, in the backgrounds, with flares and lights and unknown emissions. Even before the residents were incentivized to move, the town was being transformed, undermined. The toxicity from the nearby PVC plants seeped into everything, permeating the water and air. In 1998 the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry drew the blood of twenty-eight Mossville inhabitants and found that the average dioxin level among the residents was triple that of the general US population. This finding is unfortunately unsurprising owing to the fact that between 2004 and 2013, 180,644 pounds of vinyl chloride were released into the greater Westlake area, where Mossville is located.[4] Presumably, this was not the first time huge amounts of vinyl chloride were discharged uncontrolled into the environment. As a result of these and other toxins, residents regularly suffered a range of health problems including cancers, diabetes, asthma, and skin ailments. It speaks to what the cultural theorist Christina Sharpe conceptualizes as the weather—that is, "the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate; and that climate is antiblack."[5] Plastic weather is anti-Black, it renders the atmospheres of towns in Southern Louisiana unbreathable, unlivable.

This is a pattern of legislation that has been widely contested, most recently by Rise St. James, which is fighting a proposed plastic production facility in its community.[6] The founder of the organization, Sharon

Lavigne, makes clear the environmental racism that is behind the placement of this project and others. In her statement to the councilors in her district to request a moratorium to the proposed project, she writes,

> We have observed that the only examples in recent history of facilities that have been rejected by the Parish government were those that were proposed for sites that are in communities that are majority white. To be clear, we are glad those facilities were rejected because we don't think *any* community should be saddled and burdened with these toxic industries. But it is painful to see a land use map that so clearly signals the disregard of our lives and communities—one that assumes that neither we, nor our children or grandchildren, will be on this land in the not-too-distant future, clearing the way for more industry, more pollution, and more harm.[7]

The letter goes on to spell out, in clear and eloquent terms, the necessity for an immediate moratorium. It speaks to the ways that pollution is used as a means of dispossession, the loss of place in place as a form of anti-Black racism; it speaks to the inability to desire or imagine Black thriving communities into the future.[8]

The slow violence in Mossville and throughout the region accumulates and concentrates white supremacy through plastic infrastructures. Black land and bodies are forced into an "ontologized plasticity," as Zakiyyah Iman Jackson has called it.[9] The land is presumed to be there for development, for progress, for infinite and limitless transformation. The loss that happens here is a loss imposed by this violent plasticity—the land, air, and water made plastic through petrochemicals, rendered unrecognizable and unlivable. PVC distributes the effects of white supremacy in the air, water, and soil. As Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, it is impossible to understand contemporary capitalism without acknowledging the ways that it is built on, and continuous with, the project of slavery. This is particularly evident in how capitalism endures through settler colonialism as a mechanism of dispossession and dislocation by making the land itself toxic. Toxicity is justified as necessary to progress and economic growth, where some bodies are deliberately held as accumulators of toxins so that others can profit. The collusion of the Louisiana government and industry continues this legacy, where slavery was not, as Sharpe argues, a singular event but rather a singularity.[10] This singularity continues, pulling into it bodies and land, here operating through plastic. Plastic's inheritance, the wealth and supposed safety and sterility that it brings for certain people, depends on the disposability of Black, Indigenous, and poor communities.[11]

Here plastic is transmitted onto people and land. "Transmission" has two primary meanings. The first is associated with conveyance or transference, from one person or place to another. Chemical transmissions are also a form of transference, transferring the harms and costs of technological progress onto peoples and places at a remove from those who directly benefit. The second definition speaks more specifically to the ways in which the concept of transmission applies to mass media, where transmission often refers to light, heat, sound, and electromagnetic waves, as in a broadcast. This latter definition is taken up in media studies, where transmission describes the flow of information from source to audience. However, as many media theorists have argued, the transmission of information is often full of noise, and the audience is not without its own capacity for response, or interpretation, as Stuart Hall has made clear.[12] In the process of plastic's transmission, it has encountered a lot of resistance. The Black communities that are being dispossessed fight all the way to keep their homes and bodies safe.

Chemical Media

It is not only through the content of *Solastalgia* that plastic is linked to photography; photography is a medium that has always been dependent on plastics and petrochemicals. One of the first precursors to plastics as they are known today was celluloid. Celluloid was the generic name for cellulose nitrate, made from a polymerization process derived from plant material. It was originally created to replace billiard balls and was later used as an alternative to horn or ivory. But celluloid became famously associated with media technology through its use in cinema. As the journalist Stephen Fenichell remarks, "Celluloid film succeeded in raising the first plastic's cultural profile from a medium of mere mimicry into a priceless repository of human memory."[13] Plastic becomes central, not just to the material culture of twentieth-century life, but to mass media and human memory, including in photography. Later, audiotape, vinyl, and CDs came to etch the human voice, music, and images onto various synthetic polymers. The worlds of art, representation, and imagination now rest on plastic and oil as their basic substrate. As Stephanie LeMenager writes, "Oil itself is a medium that fundamentally supports all modern media forms concerned with what counts as culture—from film to recorded music, novels, magazines, photographs, sports and the wikis, blog, and videography of the Internet."[14] Contemporary culture is saturated in oil. Moving from analog to digital did not lessen our dependence on oil or plastic; plastic constitutes approximately 17 percent of most electronic devices, including digital cameras and the computers and phones we look at photographs on. The infrastructure of digital media relies on plastic to function, as it coats the underwater and underground cables that are the invisible yet fundamental substructure of the internet. Plastic is used in these circumstances for its ability to insulate and

because of its nonconductivity. For, far from being an immaterial "cloud," the internet relies on very specific and highly material infrastructures, such as transoceanic cables and server farms, which themselves are very much dependent on the material of plastic.[15] In fact, plastic constitutes the conditions of digitality, included in everything from the networked infrastructures to the hardware to the production of various photographic and display technologies. It provides the infrastructure for the offices and other buildings in which all these materials are developed and produced—from the carpeting to the paints to the desks and clothes of workers.

As plastic has become so central to communications and infrastructure, plastic operates as a logistical medium—that is, a medium that sets the "terms in which everyone must operate."[16] Plastic determines so many of our relations, including the goods we can access, the distribution of food, access to water, medical supplies, and an infinite variety of other things that arrange and regulate the movements of people and the qualities of our lives. It is a leverage point of power, distributing and amplifying other systems of inequality.

Plastic as Medium

I want to suggest that plastic's makeup in mass and digital culture, the fact that it has become the medium through which life in the twenty-first century is negotiated, involves a haunting. This is not only because of the ways that plastic transmits a violence outward, and how it shores up white supremacy, but also because of the ways it relies on the unearthing of ancient plants and animals for its basic composition. Plastic can, in this light, be thought of as a medium, communicating with long-dead organisms to make their vital presence felt among the living. The unearthed beings of fossil fuels released in our present day through vast communication networks represent these multiple hauntings, of immediate and more protracted violence, in the form of toxicities and also in the undead relations of fossil fuels themselves.

Plastic haunts in part through its ability to preserve the images and voices of those who have passed, who live on in these media, as spiritual mediums to afterworlds. Cinematic and photographic media transform into mediums that enable the long-dead plant and animal matter compressed into oil to transfer the voice of the

Courtney Desiree Morris, Driveway, 2018, from the series Solastalgia, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

recently or not-yet-dead. Photographic prints now use polyethylene-coated paper, polymer ink, and film that is made of a plastic base; they utilize fossil fuels as the medium through which images appear. But these long-dead organisms also transfer their own messages. In his famous discussion of the punctum—the wound of photography that grabs the attention of the viewer—the literary theorist Roland Barthes speaks of a simple family photograph of his mother as a child, viewed after her death, and insists on the utter irreplaceability of her suffering and her life. The photograph operates, Barthes argues, as a melancholic accounting of the passage of time: the subject is frozen in time, in a deathly state, through the capture of the image; we are forever looking back at a moment passed (even when that moment was a second or two ago). The photograph is a continuous reminder of the inevitable passage of time, a record of life's passing. Yet in light of the fossil fuels that compose that image as an object, Barthes's photograph also acts as a fold in time, collapsing and compressing present, past, and deep geological time. And also, possibly, future, as plastic does not easily decompose. Through plastic, the photographs become the medium to our loved ones, and they then transmit petrochemicals out into the land and bodies. As Barthes argues, "It is often said that it was the painters who invented Photography (by bequeathing it their framing, the Albertian perspective, and the optic of the *camera obscura*). I say: no, it was the chemists."[17] By stressing the way in which photography, and mass media more generally, are thoroughly engineered, and the ways that this engineering affects photography's purpose and power, Barthes also prompts a consideration of photography's saturation in fossil fuels.

Kodak and Its Afterlives

In Rochester, New York, Barthes's melancholic analysis of photography can be read through the carcinogenic and other harmful legacies of the Kodak company. The images that capture our lives and that metaphorically foreshadow our passing are produced through the chemicals that have foreshortened many people's lives and caused many deaths. There, photographs and film become a vector not only to the lives of ancestors and others who have come before but also to the legacies of toxicity, which will have untold consequences for an indeterminate period into the future.

The Kodak plant's toxic transmissions go back decades. In 1990 Kodak paid a total of $2.15 million for chemical spills and extensive groundwater pollution because of a failure to notify the state immediately of a spill of "5,100 gallons of methylene chloride, a solvent used to make film and a suspected carcinogen, in February 1987."[18] However, despite this penalty, the company continued to pollute the air and water in the area. In 2000 Kodak was the prime contributor of dioxin, a known carcinogen, into New York's environment, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. And in 1999 Kodak was ranked "as New York State's leading producer of recognized airborne carcinogens and waterborne developmental toxicants."[19] Since this time, the plants have shut down, but their legacies linger, like ghosts, in the air and water of the area, the molecular hauntings of the desire for a moment, through an image, to endure. The capture of a particular time and place has transferred itself into the future not simply through the medium of photography or film but as a chemical medium that endures, in the land.[20] These long legacies illustrate the notion that "pollution is not just a harm in the moment but part of ongoing violence that stretches across generations, across communities, and across Land."[21]

Photographic media, soaked in oil, continue to speak, to roam and to affect the people in the area, demanding to be heard. The results of these pollutants, the messages of the long-dead organisms that have become petrochemicals, find their way into the bodies of the residents, living there and mutating, apparitions that trouble the bounds of life and death, pulling living bodies into untimely ends while proliferating the lively attributes of deathly substances. Barthes's conflation of death and photography suggests a present-moment haunting: the inability of the dead to let the living go. The petrochemicals and other toxins that were used in the Kodak factories do not simply go away with the closing of the plants themselves. Instead, the petrochemical past haunts the future, continuing to speak through whichever mediums they find, where lively petrochemicals continue to assert their presence. The toxic legacies of photography and cinema refuse to be transformed, remaining in waterways and in the air, transferring the grief of the land through the generations. It is often difficult, if not impossible, to remediate these landscapes. Instead, they will haunt future generations with imperceptible chemical threat, fading into the background, but transmitting the legacies of those that came before, much as with an old photograph.

They continue this haunting differentially, where the inheritors of the plastic project are often shielded from these negative outcomes. As Fred Moten writes, in a poignant critique of the lurking universalism in Barthes's analysis and the ways that it utterly fails to account for differences within death, within suffering, "You need to be interested in the complex, dissonant, polyphonic affectivity of the ghost, the agency of the fixed but multiply apparent shade, an improvisation of spectrality, another development of the negative."[22] What Morris's *Solastalgia* series pictures is not the suffering of photography, not the ways in which plastic is embedded in these modes of suffering through photography as a chemical medium; it instead stages the chemical medium's excess, drawing where the photographs of Mossville are animated with a "powerfully *mater* ial resistance."[23] The use of this chemical medium, the photographs that transmit so many messages between living and dead bodies, animate a powerful act of seeing a disappearance, which operates as a kind of abundance. This is an abundance of the power of

the ancestors, haunting, not just in a negative sense, but as a powerful force, in particular highlighting Morris's relationship to her ancestors, drawing on the power of her grandmother in her resistance to Sasol's erasure of Mossville. It is not just in seeing that the resistance is staged, but in not seeing, seeing what is not there, in this form of haunting.

Haunting

If we think of the petrochemicals as coming to tell us stories, to communicate their inhuman messages, we might also be invited to think about oil as a kind of grand-kin, highlighting the connection of our life force now with the lives of those long-dead organisms that appear as oil. But these more-than-human relations have been unearthed, weaponized. These are not easy relations but rather ones that disturb multiple boundaries of time, memory, the living, and the dead. Oil could be invited, as Zoe Todd asserts, as a reminder of the ancient life that came before ours, that is still a part of us, that makes our lives possible through intergenerational knowledge, through a deep indebtedness to our ancestors, through evolution. Recognizing these long-dead organisms, feeling their vibrancy, could be an invitation to a profound sense of interconnection. But these organisms have been unearthed from their resting place without their consent. As Todd writes, "To turn the massive stores of carbon and hydrogen left from eons of life in this place, weaponises these fossil-kin, these long-dead beings, and transforms them into threats to … the 'narrow conditions of existence,' which Blackfoot scholar Leroy Little Bear reminds us we are bound to."[24] Instead of an invitation into an evolutionary and intergenerational acknowledgment of the ways that our lives are made possible through the knowledge and creativity of so many others, human and other-than-human alike, we have turned these potential grand-kin against themselves. They appear as specters, all their compressed time and stores of energy unloosed to wreak havoc on the living.

In a brilliant article, Eve Tuck and C. Ree compare the different versions of haunting and ghost stories in American and Japanese films. They note that in America the narrative asserts the possibility of appeasement. As long as the protagonist does the right thing, the vengeful ghost will rest at last. Once the innocent hero destroys the monster, balance will again be restored to the world. In the Japanese films, on the other hand, the ghost often cannot be appeased, and "the hero does not think herself to be innocent, or try to achieve reconciliation or healing, only mercy, often in the form of passing on the debt."[25] Instead, people are forced simply to live with these ghosts. Tuck and Ree use these two genres of horror films to talk about two different approaches to settler colonialism. In the American version of the ghost story, the settler is an innocent bystander incomprehensibly attacked by a specter that will not leave them alone. We could read this as the continuing demands for land back, reparations, or abolition that fall on the uncomprehending ears of white settlers, or the narrativization of white fragility that includes death paranoia. The Japanese narrative describes something else. It describes a reckoning with the total violence of slavery and settler colonialism. It describes the way that there is no resolution or reconciliation, only the possible hope of mercy. It describes a temporality that is indeterminate, that refuses progression, and instead asks us to sit with what has been done, understanding that the harms committed are permanent, the lives taken cannot be returned. Tuck and Ree continue: "Haunting doesn't hope to change people's perceptions, nor does it hope for reconciliation. Haunting lies precisely in its refusal to stop."[26] This understanding of the ongoing and insistent legacies of plastic as an extension of the ecology of white supremacy functions precisely "in its refusal to stop." For the toxicities unearthed through plastic are not going away. The examples of southern Louisiana and the photographic practices that have also etched their marks in Rochester, New York tell of the ways that this haunting plays out in particular forms. Black and low-income communities are left with a devastating mess, a place that is no longer their place, a grief that has set into the land without a clear sense of how to clean up or move on. Plastic's increasing production mean that these harms will become more commonplace.

Instead of turning away in horror or fear, plastic's multiple and conflicting temporalities need to be taken seriously. Settlers need to learn the lessons of haunting, even as we are being haunted by this material that refuses to let us go. Full reparation here, carrying the meaning of the attempts to repair and also the desire to account for immeasurable loss and violence, is impossible. This does not mean that we should not be held accountable; on the contrary—accountability or reckoning may appear as a haunting. For we, white people, are certainly not innocent. Instead of moving so quickly to evade the present, producing times that circle violently forward and back, what would it mean to sit with this refusal, this total violence, white supremacy? What might we learn if we listened to what these chemical media were transmitting?

Under the conditions of white supremacy, knowledge systems and institutions are not well versed to be attuned to these hauntings, to all that has been lost. This is especially true because the social is built on the disappearance of those losses, but these memories, these hauntings and losses, give us a much richer sense of our present moment and offer a different, I would argue, decolonial, knowledge. For haunting involves a "transformative recognition" rather than "cold knowledge."[27] To make a world otherwise will only be possible when we face what has been lost. For haunting is an animated state where this violence is making itself known. It is a forced seeing, sensing feeling of that which has been repressed, excluded, or forced out. Through the commingling of ancient beings with raced and classed bodies, this

violence comes to the fore, as a refusal to stop. Avery Gordon, in her account of haunting, points to its strange potentiality: "To be haunted in the name of a will to heal is to allow the ghost to help you imagine what was lost that never even existed, really. That is its utopian grace."[28] This is a utopian grace barely recognizable as such, an opening that offers little safety but potentially some solace through lines of relation that open onto ancestors, those to come, and the more-than-human world.

X

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1
Heather Rogers, "Erasing Mossville: How Pollution Killed a Louisiana Town," *The Intercept*, November 4, 2015 https://theintercept.com/2015/11/04/erasing-mossville-how-pollution-killed-a-louisiana-town/ .

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David Mitchell, "Report: These 4 South Louisiana Chemical Plants are Top-10 'Super Polluters' in the U.S." Nola.com, February 26, 2020 https://www.nola.com/news/environment/article_39b8e060-58c4-11ea-8597-433bbb66a486.html .

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Roland Geyer, Jenna Jambeck, and Kara Lavender Law, "Production, Use, and Fate of All Plastics Ever Made," *Science Advances* 3, no. 7 (July 19, 2017): 2–3.

4
The production of PVC is one of the most toxic processes associated with plastics. It has been widely known, since at least 1970, to produce a range of cancers. Although many people have called for the outright ban on any chlorine-based plastics production, PVC is still being produced and distributed globally.

5
Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 104.

6
Formosa Plastics, a Taiwan-based company, plans to build a nearly one-thousand-hectare plastics factory known as the Sunshine Project along the west bank of the Mississippi River at a cost of $9.4 billion. This was enabled by a "competitive incentive package that would include a $12 million performance-based grant to offset infrastructure costs" from the State of Louisiana (see https://www.fox8live.com/story/38019337/governor-announces-94-billion-project-bringing-1200-jobs-to-st-james-parish/). The proposed plastics factory will produce ethylene glycol, polyethylene, and polypropylene for the manufacture of eco grocery bags, N95 masks, car casings, ropes, drainage pipes, artificial turf, large playground equipment, polyester fibers, and antifreeze, according to its website (see http://www.sunshineprojectla.com/).

7
Sharon Lavigne, "Request from Rise St. James for a Moratorium for New Land Use Applications," unpublished manuscript, September 13, 2019.

8
Fortunately, at the time of writing, the advocacy and organizing of Rise St. James has been making a significant impact, as a motion in district court in late 2020 suspended the company's air permits, citing concerns over environmental racism. This is a deeply significant ruling, disrupting the ways that environmental racism has gone unchecked in the region for so long. It is hard not to read this ruling as influenced by the ongoing work of local environmental justice advocates coupled with the Black Lives Matter uprising in the summer of 2020. David J. Mitchell, "Judge Delays Crucial Permit for Formosa Plastics Plant; Requires Deeper Analysis of Racial Impacts," *The Advocate*, November 18, 2020 https://www.theadvocate.com/baton_rouge/news/article_8b2e3284-29d8-11eb-9442-6f8b45c7fcb1.html .

9
Jackson, introduction to *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World* (NYU Press, 2020).

10
Sharpe writes: "Emancipation did not make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness." Sharpe, *In the Wake* , 106.

11
Ferreira da Silva writes that white people's self-actualization depends on Black fungibility. Here, we can read the production of plastic as a mode of white self-actualization, engaged in anti-Black acts of dispossession and dissemination of ill-health. Denise Ferreira da Silva. "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = ∞ – ∞ or ∞ / ∞: On Matter beyond the Equation of Value," *e-flux journal*, no. 79 (February 2017) https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/ .

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Stuart Hall, "Encoding, Decoding," in *The Cultural Studies Reader* , ed. Simon During (Routledge, 1993).

13
Stephen Fenichell, *Plastic: The Making of a Synthetic Century* (Harper Business, 1996), 63.

14
Stephanie LeMenager, *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 6.

15
On transoceanic cables, see Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Duke University Press, 2015), for a detailed examination of the conflictual role of cables as the central relays of the internet. For a critical appraisal of the use of oil and other potential toxic materials in digital technologies, see Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Duke University Press, 2017), especially 35–46, the section on oil in relation to energy and media production.

16
John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 37.

17
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* , trans. Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1981), 80.

18
Robert Hanley, "Eastman Kodak Admits Violations of Anti-Pollution Laws," *New York Times* , April 6, 1990 http://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/06/nyregion/eastman-kodak-admits-violations-of-anti-pollution-laws.html .

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Michael I. Niman, "Kodak's Toxic Moments," *Alternet*, May 28, 2003 https://www.alternet.org/2003/05/kodaks_toxic_moments/ .

20
In their decolonial feminist analysis of endocrine-disrupting chemicals (EDCs) in Aamjiwnaang First Nation, Reena Shadaan and Michelle Murphy organize their critique not around chemicals and bodies but around Land and bodies, privileging Anishinaabek and Haudenosaunee teachings. They write, "We use capital L 'Land' in this paper to indicate an understanding of land that is not commensurate with territory or earth, but rather includes nonhumans, ancestors, future generations and 'all our relations' stretching both backward and forward in time." Reena Shadaan and Michelle Murphy, "Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals (EDCs) as Industrial and Settler Colonial Structures: Towards a Decolonial Feminist Approach," *Catalyst: Feminism, Theory, Technoscience* 6 no. 1 (2020): 24. Land points to both philosophy and governance of Anishinaabek, Haudenosaunee, and other Indigenous peoples of the lower Great Lakes region and how those were actively and deliberately disrupted through settler colonialism. Pollution can be understood within this framework as the continuation of the dispossession of Land.

21
Shadaan and Murphy, "Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals," 10.

22
Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 196.

23
Moten, *In the Break*, 198, emphasis in original.

24
Zoe Todd, "Fish, Kin and Hope: Tending to Water Violations in amiskwaciwâskahikan and Treaty Six Territory," *Afterall*, no. 43 (Spring–Summer 2017), 104.

25
Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *Handbook of Autoethnography* , ed. Stacey Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (Left Coast Press, 2013), 641.

26
Tuck and Ree, "Glossary," 642.

27
Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

28
Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 57.