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Stemming the Tide of STEM

Editorial

In this issue of *e-flux journal*, Trevor Paglen begins his three-part essay on how US military psychological warfare techniques were a historical predecessor to today's AI-driven social media trained to identify emotions and exploit affects. Telling the story of Richard Doty, a counterintelligence officer who deliberately spread disinformation about extraterrestrials as cover for military operations, Paglen identifies a key tenet of the US *Army Field Manual*: it is easier to deceive someone by reinforcing their preexisting beliefs than to change those beliefs. Behind the outlandish but well-documented example of UFO sightings lies a chilling warning that the creation of an entirely new reality is accomplished not through coercion but through the tactical use of affirmative encouragement.

Also in this issue, Jonas Staal looks at Ascension Island in the Atlantic Ocean, some sixteen hundred kilometers off the west coast of Africa. Uninhabited when it was “discovered” by European seafarers, the island was considered a cursed land for exiling deviants of Empire. (It neighbors Saint Helena, where Napoleon was finally exiled after his escape from Elba.) As Staal recounts, declaring Ascension Island *terra nullius* invited agents of colonization to civilize it through technologies of geoengineering, warfare, surveillance, and eventually space colonization. But it also provides an opportunity to measure the pathologies of Empire in reverse, by asking: Who is the island?

If science and technology are offered as a promise of creating new worlds, today this same promise of expansion mixes with the limited and closed nature of any world. Indeed, science and technology not only inspire the imagination to study physical laws and limits in order to fly, sail, and build hospitals; they also weaponize those very same powers for air strikes, conquest, and bombing those same hospitals. Maria Iñigo Clavo's essay analyzes the forms of ecocide necessary for colonial and postcolonial state-building. Considering the many threads of Indigenous dispossession through several textile-based artworks, Iñigo Clavo highlights a judicial case in which survivors of sexual violence shielded themselves from state-backed violence using an Indigenous textile known as the *perraje*. By unraveling the often separated discourses of anti-coloniality and ecology, she puts forward a feminist and Indigenous approach for thinking through state violence in Guatemala and beyond.

In the first of a two-part excerpt from Yuk Hui's forthcoming book *Post-Europe*, Hui connects a longing for a sense of being at home to waves of displacement experienced due to modernization and colonialism. After European and then American planetarization, we are well aware of how the longing for lost wholeness and belonging can lead to reactionary and fascistic movements—most notably within Europe and the US themselves. Today, however, when wars and technological acceleration become increasingly

threatening, we must draw finer distinctions between the existential need for home and the jingoist sense of belonging readily captured by nations or nationalist movements promising to restore lost homeworlds.

Hunter Bolin offers an extensive appraisal of the work of Günther Anders, a German thinker, antinuclear activist, and significant critic of the autonomization of technical forms, whose texts remain largely untranslated into English. Part of Contributing Editor Evan Calder Williams's "Negative Anthropology" series—which draws its name in part from Anders himself—this essay develops an account of Anders's self-described negative anthropology and its refusal of any idea of a stable essence or historical constant for human behavior. Bolin offers extensive previously untranslated materials that show the depth of Anders's thinking, focusing on the notion of "unworldliness" and placing Anders in dialogue with psychoanalysis.

In the third part of his ongoing series, Evan Calder Williams enters further into how the trope of paralysis establishes a frame that opens beyond "normal" cycles of production and circulation. What would it mean to understand accelerated production through its *inclusion* of stoppage, sabotage, inefficiency, loss, delay, and waste rather than their exclusion at the expense of human bodies? If debilitation and the intentional lowering of the quality of factory output are consequences of exploitative labor, but also techniques of resistance against that very same work, Williams argues that we need new tools to understand an intimate relation between limited movement and expressive power.

Finally, Luis Camnitzer looks at the overemphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education as signaling a crisis in moral and ethical development—precisely the kind of development cultivated in the humanities. Do attempts to feed workers into industrial fields such as AI erode our understanding of how creativity may enhance otherwise totalizing technological worlds defined by stability and control? Camnitzer turns to AI itself to find out.

X

Trevor Paglen

Society of the Psyop, Part 1: UFOs and the Future of Media

We once looked at pictures. Then, with the advent of computer vision and machine learning, pictures started looking back at us. Now, something even stranger is happening.

Generative AI, Adtech, recommendation algorithms, engagement economies, personalized search, and machine learning are inaugurating a new relationship between humans and media. Pictures are now looking at us looking at them, eliciting feedback and evolving. We've entered a protean, targeted visual culture that shows us what it believes we want to see, measures our reactions, then morphs itself to optimize for the reactions and actions it wants. New forms of media prod and persuade, modulate and manipulate, shaping worldviews and actions to induce us into believing what they want us to believe, and to extract value and exert influence.

What does it mean to live in a media environment that knows our wants, needs, vulnerabilities, emotional ticks, kinks, and cognitive quirks far better than we do? That notices which kinds of stimulus induce what kinds of precognitive responses, and uses machine learning to develop, A/B test, and deploy custom-generated cognitive injections designed to manipulate us even further, all without us consciously perceiving what's happening? And what does it mean to live in a media environment where this is all-pervasive: not only news and websites, videos and movies, but driving assistants in cars, AI-generated customer service representatives, search engines and chatbots, virtual HR managers, gas-station pumps, smart houses and phones, and even washing machines ... a media landscape where your refrigerator, vibrator, and toothbrush collude with insurance companies, advertisers, political campaigns, and big retailers, using computer vision, machine learning, and biometric feedback to influence your behavior and worldview?

Every day, we are subject to subtle and not-so-subtle mind-control experiments. Through nearly imperceptible experiments and machine learning-enabled analysis, coupled with various types of sensors (from simple "like" buttons and engagement metrics to cameras and other sensors designed to measure preconscious responses), the media we interact with seeks to develop a sense of—and make alterations to—each of our own unique neurological makeups.

If the postwar media landscape was characterized by spectacle, and the late twentieth and early twenty-first century by an age of surveillance, then we are entering a new phase. One marked by affective computing, machine learning-enabled optimization, neuroscience, and cognitive psychology. A mediascape that has little use for distinctions between real and fake, signifier and signified. That assumes no distinction between perception and reality even as it attempts to intervene as directly as possible into the brains and emotional makeups of its experiencers.



Trevor Paglen, *Near Windy Hill (undated)*, 2024.

Society of the psyop.¹

How did we get here? This three-part essay traces a brief history of media, technologies, and techniques that take advantage of the malleability of perception, capitalizing on quirks in human brains to shape reality. It is a story about the manufacturing of hallucinations and the fact that, under the right conditions, hallucination and reality can become one and the same.

Doty

I first met Richard Doty in 2022. I was anxious. I could feel my unease rising as his silver SUV pulled into the parking lot across from the makeshift film studio where I was working at the University of New Mexico.² A paunchy man wearing a red polo shirt emerged. I wasn't afraid of physical violence. Rick Doty wasn't known for that. I was

worried about my own sanity. Doty was known for that.³

Doty conducted elaborate psyop programs for the US Air Force in the 1970s and '80s. One of his targets, a defense contractor, was so consumed by paranoia after being subjected to Doty's craft that he was committed to a mental institution. There was also a well-respected journalist who, after enduring one of Doty's psychological operations, spent the remainder of her career babbling about reptoids, cover-ups, and ancient alien conspiracies. A third target, a former UFO investigator who collaborated with Doty, publicly confessed to participating in a military disinformation campaign and retreated into self-imposed obscurity. We would be spending the next two days together. It turned out that I liked the guy.

I had sought out Doty because I wanted to learn about the particular form of media-making he practiced to such



US Army Challenge Coin (collection of author).

dramatic effect. My intuition was that Doty's career as a cultural producer could shed some light on what media might be like in an age of recommendation algorithms, personalized news feeds, information bubbles, and generative AI.

For the next two days, Doty explained the finer points of military interrogations and influence operations, the theory and practice of psyops, and how he'd created and used folklore about UFOs to develop counterespionage missions designed to protect classified Air Force assets. But in Doty's retelling of the work he did on behalf of the US military, there was a strange inversion. Yes, he created misinformation about UFOs to conceal the existence of secret US military projects. But he also described creating false stories about classified Air Force technologies to cover up the existence of actual UFOs (internally known as "Cardinals," he claims). Upon retirement from the US Air Force, Doty became a self-styled whistleblower, recounting details of the real UFO program he claims to have had a hand in covering up. He told stories of a secret film documenting the existence of crashed saucers, a classified warehouse at Bolling Air Force Base containing

the remnants of those UFOs, and the cultural life of captured pilots from the Zeta Reticulli star system.

Doty began working for the Air Force Office of Special Investigations (AFOSI) in the late 1970s. AFOSI is an outfit analogous to an in-house FBI, charged with investigating criminal activity in the military and conducting counterintelligence work to ensure the security of military installations and assets. After completing his training in the Washington, DC area, Doty was assigned to Kirtland Air Force Base in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Kirtland is a massive base encompassing over fifty thousand acres, extending from a collection of runways and hangars adjacent to the Albuquerque airport to vast tracts of land to the east and south. Its neighbors are a veritable who's-who of conspiracy theories and UFO lore. Nestled among the mountains ninety miles to the north is Los Alamos National labs, where World War II-era scientists worked in secret to develop the world's first atomic bomb. To the south is the Trinity Site, where that atomic bomb was first detonated, turning the desert surface into a radioactive glass called "trinitite." Still

further south is the White Sands Missile Range, where US forces transported Nazi rocket scientists in the aftermath of World War II as part of Operation Paperclip. The alleged Roswell UFO crash site is a two-hour drive southeast.

In the late 1970s, Kirtland Air Force Base's acknowledged tenants included the Air Force Weapons Laboratory, charged with research and development on advanced weapons systems, directed-energy weapons, and the effects of nuclear fallout. Another outfit, Sandia National Labs, designed and tested components for nuclear weapons. Such weapons were stored and managed in a facility in a restricted section in the eastern part of the base. Kirtland also played host to a handful of unacknowledged tenants, including a detachment from the National Security Agency (NSA).

When Doty arrived in 1979, Kirtland was synonymous with top-secret military technology experiments. In 1973, base engineers had succeeded in using a ground-based laser to shoot down an airplane, and were busy developing a directed-energy weapon that could be fired from an airborne platform. Elsewhere on the base, the Air Force trained Special Forces units, conducted advanced helicopter training, and tested experimental weapons systems. Doty's job was to keep all of this secret.

In the late 1970s, a military contractor named Paul Bennewitz, who lived on Kirtland's northern border, started seeing and photographing unusual lights and movements over the restricted range adjacent to his house. He came to the conclusion that they must be UFOs. An avid electronics enthusiast, Bennewitz made recordings of bizarre radio emissions he believed to be coming from the objects. Bennewitz offered to help the military repel what he believed to be an extraterritorial harassment campaign: he collected his evidence, sent it to the AFOSI team, and in the fall of 1980 was invited to present his findings.

Evidently, it wasn't an alien invasion that Bennewitz had discovered, but a top-secret NSA program. The case landed on Rick Doty's desk.⁴

Doty took a creative approach to the problem: rather than "neither confirm nor deny" the existence of UFOs or secret intelligence programs at the base, he staged an elaborate deception and cover-up operation to encourage Bennewitz's imagination. A source he'd recently recruited from the UFO research community would be a huge help.

In the summer of 1980, Doty made a pitch to this source, named William Moore, who was the coauthor (with Charles Berlitz) of the 1980 book *The Roswell Incident*. Doty's proposal was this: Doty would provide Moore with incontrovertible proof of extraterrestrial contact in exchange for Moore's help in conducting AFOSI investigations and reporting on the activities of amateur UFO groups. The deal was irresistible, and Moore

cooperated.

Doty began using Moore as a proxy. Doty gave Moore doctored top-secret documents to pass along to Bennewitz, alluding to government knowledge of an extraterrestrial presence on earth. Furthermore, the documents implied that Bennewitz's discoveries were relevant to an above-top-secret program called "Aquarius," administered by a shadowy group called "MJ Twelve."

The operation against Bennewitz snowballed: according to William Moore, in the summer of 1981, AFOSI arranged for Bennewitz to receive a computer he could use to decipher the "alien" signals. The doctored computer spat out long streams of quasi-nonsensical text as if it were a chatbot in a trance or fugue state:

WE CANNOT TELL MILITARY OF THE US MAKING
HUMANIDS REASON FOR HATE IS YOU ARE
GOOD—WE TRUST YOU TAKE VAST PORTION
UNIVERSE AGAINST OUR AGGRESSION THE
NUMBER OF OUR CRASHED SAUCERS IS EIGHT
NERVE YOU WE REALIZE TELL THE TRUTH

Then the operation against Bennewitz became more elaborate. Knowing that Bennewitz was an avid amateur pilot and that he suspected the existence of a top-secret alien captive near the town of Dulce, New Mexico, AFOSI installed surplus military equipment on the top of Archuleta Mesa so that Bennewitz would see it on one of his flyovers and be convinced of the existence of the secret base. The Air Force was crafting an alternate reality to feed Bennewitz's predilections and ensure that he believed what they wanted him to believe.

With the Bennewitz project underway, Doty began a second operation. Linda Moulton Howe was an award-winning television journalist who'd recently completed *A Strange Harvest*, a documentary on the "cattle mutilation" phenomena. In the wake of that success, Howe received a contract from HBO to make a second documentary on the topic of UFOs. Doty got in touch with Howe and invited her to Kirtland Air Force Base for a briefing. At the AFOSI offices, Doty explained that Howe was onto something big and that AFOSI was prepared to help. He then pulled out a dossier and instructed Howe that its contents were for her eyes only: she could read the documents but take no pictures. Other AFOSI officers observed her reaction from behind a one-way mirror.

Doty presented Howe with a dossier entitled "Briefing Paper for the President of the United States." The documents therein told a remarkable story of an ongoing extraterrestrial presence on earth, UFO crashes at Roswell

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INFO 7602 AINTELG FT BELVOIR VA, /INSR

SECRET FOR AFOSI ONLY

REF: REQUEST FOR PHOTO IMAGERY INTERPRETATION YOUR MSG 292030Z OCT 80.

SUBJECT CASE NR: 8017D93-126 HQ CR 44

1. SUBJECT NEGATIVES, FILM WERE ANALYZED BY HQ IVT AND 7602 AINTELG IT AND THE FOLLOWING RESULTS WERE FOUND:

A. NEGATIVE #1: DEPICTING C-5A AIRCRAFT ON APPROACH AND STREAKING UNIDENTIFIED AERIAL OBJECT IN LOWER RIGHT PORTION OF FILM. FILM FOUND TO BE UNALTERED. SIZE DIFFERENTIAL WAS NOT CONSISTENT WITH SIZE OF AIRCRAFT. CONCLUSION: INCONCLUSIVE

B. NEGATIVE #2: DEPICTING CYLINDER SHAPED UNIDENTIFIED AERIAL OBJECT IN UPPER LEFT PORTION OF PHOTO. FILM FOUND TO BE UNALTERED. FILM SHOWED OBJECT TO BE CONSISTENT WITH FIELD DEPTH AND CONSISTENT WITH RELATIVE SIZE OF FIXED OBJECTS. CONCLUSION: LEGITIMATE NEGATIVE OF UNIDENTIFIED AERIAL OBJECT. ~~ANALYSIS REVEALED METHOD DID NOT REVEAL VISUAL MARKINGS ON OBJECT~~

C. NEGATIVE #3: DEPICTING IRREGULAR SHAPED UNIDENTIFIED AERIAL OBJECT IN SEVEN FRAMES OF 8MM FILM. BECAUSE OF THE SIZE AND APPARENT SPEED OF OBJECT NO FURTHER CLASSIFICATION OR CONCLUSION COULD BE DRAWN. FILM SHOWN TO BE UNALTERED.

D. 34 INCHES OF 8MM FILM: DEPICTING APPARENT COLORED OBJECT MOVING IN FRONT OF STILL CAMERA. FILM FOUND TO BE UNALTERED. SPECTROGRAPHY REVEALED COLORED TO BE BASIC PRISM FEATURES. DEPTH ANALYSIS REVEALED OBJECT TO BE WITHIN 152MM OF CAMERA. OBJECT WAS NOT CONSISTENT WITH RELATIVE SIZE OF FIXED OBJECTS OBSERVED FOR SEVERAL SECONDS IN FILM. CONCLUSION: INCONCLUSIVE.

E. ORIGINAL NEGATIVE DEPICTING UNIDENTIFIED OBJECT. FILM FOUND TO BE UNALTERED. BECAUSE OF A LACK OF FIXED OBJECTS IN THE FILM, NO DEPTH ANALYSIS COULD BE PERFORMED.

~~BOLTON REINFELD METHOD REVEALED OBJECT TO BE SAUCER SHAPED. APPROXIMATE DIAMETER 57 FEET. OBJECT CONTAINED A TRIANGULAR INSIGNIA ON THE LOWER PORTION OF OBJECT.~~
CONCLUSION: LEGITIMATE NEGATIVE OF UNIDENTIFIED AERIAL OBJECT.

2. REF YOUR REQUEST FOR FURTHER INFORMATION REGARDING HQ CR 44. THE FOLLOWING IS PROVIDED: CAPT GRACE 7602 AINTELG, INS CONTACTED AND RELATED FOLLOWING: (S/WINTEL) USAF NO LONGER PUBLICLY ACTIVE IN UFO RESEARCH, HOWEVER USAF STILL HAS INTEREST IN ALL UFO SIGHTINGS OVER USAF INSTALLATION/TEST RANGES. SEVERAL OTHER GOVERNMENT AGENCIES, LEAD BY NASA, ACTIVELY INVESTIGATES LEGITIMATE SIGHTINGS THROUGH COVERT COVER. (S/WINTEL/FSA) ~~ONE SUCH COVER IS UFO REPORTING CENTER, US COAST AND GEODETIC SURVEY, ROCKVILLE, MD 20852. NASA FILTERS RESULTS OF SIGHTINGS TO APPROPRIATE MILITARY DEPARTMENTS WITH INTEREST IN THAT PARTICULAR SIGHTING. THE OFFICIAL US GOVERNMENT POLICY AND RESULTS OF PROJECT AQUARIUS IS STILL CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET WITH NO DISSEMINATION OUTSIDE OFFICIAL INTELLIGENCE CHANNELS AND WITH RESTRICTED ACCESS TO 'MJ TWELVE'. CASE ON BENNEWITZ IS BEING MONITORED BY NASA/INS, WHO REQUEST ALL FUTURE EVIDENCE BE FORWARDED TO THEM THRU AFOSI, IVOE.~~

4. REF YOUR REQUEST FOR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE. BECAUSE OF A CHANCE OF PUBLIC DISCLOSURE, NO KNOWLEDGEABLE PERSONNEL WITH SPA WILL BE PROVIDED. CONTINUE TO RECEIVE ASSISTANCE FROM INDIVIDUALS MENTIONED IN YOUR MESSAGE, MILLER, FUGATE. BECAUSE OF THE SENSITIVITY OF CASE, REQUEST THEY BE THOROUGHLY DEBRIEFED AT REGULAR INTERVALS.

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Facsimile of document given to Bennewitz.(S/WINTEL) USAF no longer publicly active in UFO research, however USAF still has interest in all UFO sightings over USAF installation/test ranges. Several other government agencies, led by NASA, actively investigates [sic] legitimate sightings through covert cover. (S/WINTEL/FSA) One such cover is UFO Reporting Center, US Coast and Geodetic Survey, Rockville, MD 20852. NASA filters results of sightings to appropriate military departments with interest in that particular sighting. The official US Government Policy and results of Project Aquarius is still classified top secret with no dissemination outside official intelligence channels and with restricted access to 'MJ Twelve'. Case on Bennewitz is being monitored by NASA, INS, who request all future evidence be forwarded to them through AFOSI, IVOE.'

and other locations, and a surviving alien being held at Los Alamos. Moreover, the US government had reason to believe that aliens had genetically intervened in the human race and guided our development using various techniques, such as the creation of a great spiritual leader approximately two thousand years ago. Echoing the documents fed to Bennewitz, the dossier reiterated that the “MJ Twelve” group was responsible for the UFO and extraterrestrial program.

Doty explained to Howe that this was only the beginning. In return for Howe’s coordination with AFOSI on her documentary, he promised footage from a top-secret film documenting an apocryphal 1964 UFO landing at Holloman Air Force Base in southern New Mexico, and offered her access to an Air Force colonel who had allegedly handled one of the surviving aliens from the Roswell crash. Howe was thrilled. Weeks passed. Then months. No footage arrived, no interviews materialized. HBO killed the project. Howe’s documentary on the UFO phenomenon was not going to happen.

The 1988 edition of the US *Army Field Manual* outlines ten principles of military deception. The “Monkey’s Paw” principle states that the number of people with knowledge of a particular deception operation should be minimized, even if it means misleading one’s own forces. “Jones’s Dilemma” holds that deception becomes more difficult as the number of information channels available to the target increases, with the caveat that the greater number of *controlled* channels the target has access to, the more likely the deception will be successful. “Cry Wolf” holds that repeated mis-predictions of an event will desensitize the target to warnings of it. (This principle cites intelligence failures around the US Tet Offensive in Vietnam, which arose from repeated warnings that did not bear out.) Other principles involve the correct design and sequencing of misinformation, the importance of holding materials in reserve, and attention to the limits of human information processing.⁵

Doty’s operation chiefly used a combination of three other principles: “Magruder’s Principle—The Exploitation of Perceptions,” the “Choice of Types of Deception” maxim, and “The Importance of Feedback.” Both the field manual and Doty himself agree that the most important of these principles is “Magruder’s Principle—The Exploitation of Perceptions.” Named after the Confederate general John B. Magruder, it holds that “it is generally easier to induce the deception target to maintain a pre-existing belief than to deceive the deception target for the purpose of changing that belief.” In this case, the preexisting belief that Doty capitalized upon was the existence of extraterrestrials and a government cover-up of that knowledge.

The “Choice of Types of Deception” maxim holds that the “deception planner should ... reduce the uncertainty in the mind of the target” and should “force him to seize upon a

notional world view as being correct— *not making him less certain of the truth, but more certain of a particular falsehood*” (emphasis in original). To achieve this deception, Doty chose media tailored to each of his targets: for Bennewitz the engineer and pilot, he provided an advanced computer and a Potemkin base on a remote mesa; to Howe the journalist, he supplied false top-secret official documents and the promise of on-the-record sources with knowledge of the alien conspiracy.

Finally, the field manual emphasizes “The Importance of Feedback,” the significance of which is “virtually self-evident.” Feedback answers the question “Is anybody listening? (Is this channel effective?)” This is where William Moore, author of *The Roswell Incident*, came in. Moore was both a means of distribution and a feedback mechanism, a sensor that could judge the responses these particular media elicited. Doty could then gauge the reactions, amplify the signal that elicited the strongest feedback, and send back the amplified signal.

The outcome was a path to insanity. Paul Bennewitz became ever more paranoid about alien surveillance, accusing his wife of being controlled by aliens and eventually barricading himself in his house. In August 1988 he would be hospitalized for a mental breakdown. The next summer, William Moore publicly confessed to participating in a disinformation campaign against Bennewitz and colluding with the US government to betray the UFO community. He faded into obscurity soon after. For her part, Linda Moulton Howe doubled down on her project to seek “the truth” about extraterrestrials. To this day, she claims that there are 168 advanced civilizations in the Milky Way, that multiple species of extraterrestrials inhabit earth and can manipulate time, that there exists an alien presence under the ice sheets of Antarctica, that crop circles and cattle mutilations have something to do with it, and that a vast government conspiracy is covering it all up.

The information Doty fed to these three people gave life to what’s known in UFO circles as the “darkside hypothesis.” The story he told made its way through the UFO subculture and popped out into the mainstream as the plot of the television show *The X-Files*.

At this point, we might ask a simple question: Why? Was the top-secret NSA program at Kirtland so sensitive as to warrant the incredible resources spent to steer Bennewitz into a reality populated by aliens? Did Linda Moulton Howe’s reporting actually come close to something so important that the AFOSI had to derail her by producing a vast and detailed otherworldly conspiracy? And why bother recruiting William Moore, a prominent figure in the UFO community with only a marginal influence on the broader culture? And why use UFOs? There are no good answers to most of these questions, but we have a better answer for why UFOs became Doty’s primary mimetic device.



Trevor Paglen, Near Kidney Lake (undated), 2024.

It turns out that US military and intelligence agencies have a long history of using UFOs as a psychological instrument, having discovered their hyper-mimetic qualities in the 1950s. Decades before Doty's variations on the theme, UFOs were a well-known self-replicating cultural trope capable of infecting individual and cultural consciousness and spreading like a virus.

The discovery of the UFO hyper-meme took place in the 1950s, against the backdrop of a massive effort by US military and intelligence agencies to develop ways to manipulate people's minds. It was an era of CIA mind-control experiments, covert operations inspired by magic and illusionism, and extensive research into using computers, artificial intelligence, and electronic warfare to shape the experience of reality, and therefore reality itself.

Continued in "The Society of the Psyop, Part 2: AI, Mind Control, and Magic"

Trevor Paglen is an artist whose work spans image-making, sculpture, investigative journalism, writing, engineering, and numerous other disciplines. Paglen's work has had one-person exhibitions at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington D.C.; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Fondazione Prada, Milan; the Barbican Centre, London; Vienna Secession, Vienna; and Protocinema Istanbul; and participated in group exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Tate Modern, and numerous other venues.

1

I'd like to acknowledge the concept of "psyop realism" developed separately by artists Jak Ritger and Brandon Bandy and journalist Günseli Yalcinkaya. Echoing Mark Fisher's term "capitalist realism," "psyop realism" describes the aesthetic experience of inhabiting a post-irony online landscape that Ritger characterizes as "a lack of meaning or possible revolutionary action during climate collapse and the condition of growing up in the most heavily policed and advert-saturated online experience yet," at a time of "intense suspicion and conspiracism, where the term 'false flag' is used widely." See Jak Ritger, "Because Physical Wounds Heal," *Punctr.Art*, February 7, 2024 <https://www.punctr.art/because-physical-wounds-heal/>; Günseli Yalcinkaya, "We're Entering an Age of 'Psyop Realism,' But What Does That Mean?," *Dazed*, January 26, 2023 <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/58042/1/were-entering-an-age-of-psyop-realism-but-what-does-that-mean>; and Brandon Bandy, "Psyop Realism," exhibition, Phyllis Gill Gallery, University of California Riverside, November 14–17, 2022 <https://brandonbandy.com/psyop-realism>.

"Battlefield Deception,"
Department of the Army, October
3, 1988.

2

I want to thank Stewart Copeland, director of the ARTs lab at the University of New Mexico, Jessica Metz, Daniel Neves, and the Department of Art at UNM for making this project possible.

3

I'm deeply indebted to Mark Pilkington both personally and professionally for his guidance and inspiration. His book *Mirage Men* is the definitive account of the use of UFOs by military and intelligence agencies to conduct psychological operations. See Mark Pilkington, *Mirage Men: An Adventure into Paranoia, Espionage, Psychological Warfare, and UFOs* (Orion Books, 2010).

4

The Bennewitz story is most comprehensively documented in Greg Bishop, *Project Beta: The Story of the First US Space Contact* (Paraview Press, 2005).

5

Army Field Manual, FM 3-13.4, "Army Support to Military Deception," Department of the Army, February 2019; also *Army Field Manual* FM 90-2,

Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world.

— Martin Heidegger¹

Can we continue to regard, as Husserl does, the Chinese, Indians and Persians as “anthropological types of humanity,” and these societies of the past as devoid of problematization, as Patočka suggests, or as mere private economies, as Hannah Arendt asserts? In my view, it is urgently necessary at the start of the twenty-first century for philosophers to develop the historical sense that Nietzsche said they so sorely lack, and to recognise that these discourses on Europe are no more than an ideological construct and the result of a conception of the world that stems from colonialism, with which, unfortunately, the name Europe remains closely linked.

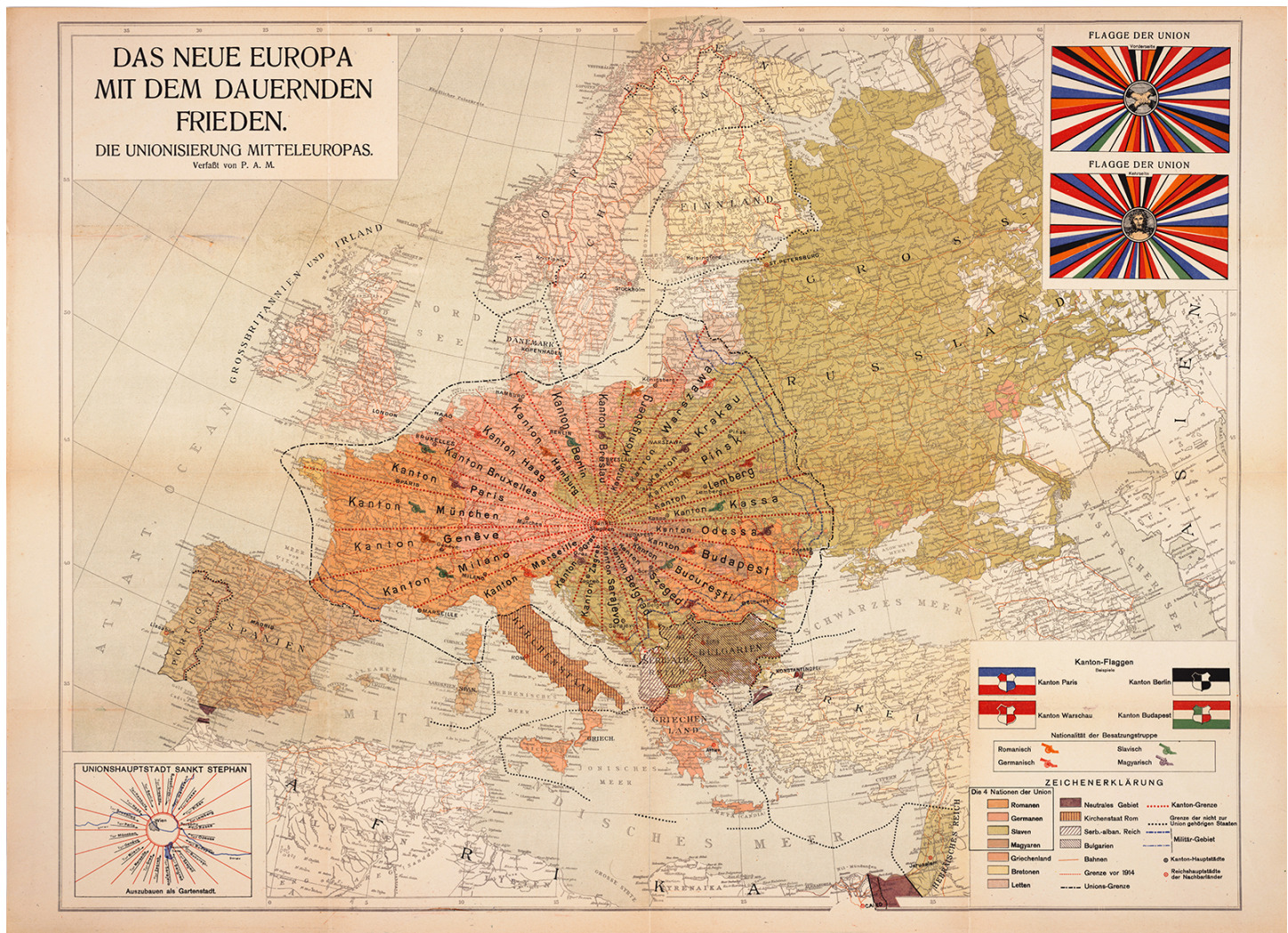
—Françoise Dastur²

Yuk Hui

Planetarization and Heimatlosigkeit, Part 1

In the eighteenth century, philosophy was described by Novalis as a kind of suffering—a homesickness and a longing to be at home: “Philosophy is actually homesickness— *the desire to be everywhere at home* [*Die Philosophie sei eigentlich Heimweh—Trieb, überall zu Hause zu sein*].”³ The *Heim-* here is not only “home,” but more significantly invokes a “homeland” (*Heimat*). This longing for *Heimat* became an omnipresent phenomenon during the process of colonization and modernization. But during the same period, home became a mere geographical location on one particular celestial body (among countless others), and the importance of a geographical location began to be evaluated in terms of its abundance of natural resources and its economic potential. One may, like Heidegger, remember the pathway of the *Heimat* in summer, the old linden trees gazing over the garden wall—a pathway that shines bright between growing crops and waking meadows.⁴ But today the small village is full of tourists who want to visit the *Heimat* of a famous philosopher, and new infrastructure is being built to accommodate the demands of these visitors from all over the world. Alas, the *Heimat* ceases to be what it once was.

Economic and technological development has continued to alter the landscape of these small villages, and in even more radical ways with advances in the automatization of agriculture. Today many rural areas use drones and robots to fully automate the processes of sowing, ploughing, harvesting, packing, transportation, etc. Farmers no longer resemble the old lady who Heidegger once imagined when seeing Van Gogh’s painting of the “peasant’s shoes.” Today’s farmers are young, dress in smart suits, and control operations with their iPads. The village remains, as do the linden trees and meadows, but the surrounding area is gentrified with expensive cafés and hotels, and the route of Heidegger’s pathway is



This map illustrates a complex utopian scheme for radically restructured European unification after World War I. It was produced by P.A. Maas, an elusive figure, to accompany a 24-page pamphlet titled *The Central European Union! A Guide to Lasting Peace* that describes his plan in elaborate detail. 1920. Source: P.J. Mode collection of persuasive cartography, #8548. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

intersected by the vectors of drones and robots. This lends an even more hysterical tone to the philosopher's exclamation when we read it today:

Man's attempts to bring order to the world by his plans will remain futile as long as he is not ordered to the call of the pathway. The danger looms that men today cannot hear its language. The only thing they hear is the noise of the media, which they almost take for the voice of God. So man becomes disoriented and loses his way. To the disoriented, the simple seems monotonous. The monotonous brings weariness, and the weary and bored find only what is uniform. The simple has fled. Its quiet power is exhausted.⁵

The longing for *Heimat* is a consequence of a sense of

being away from home; the nearest and the remotest to us, as Heidegger says, it is so close and so far that we fail to see it.⁶ One might well continually travel from continent to continent. However, there seems to be only one home, to which one would finally return when one feels tired and no longer wants to move. Over past centuries, the conception of the home as the place of natality has been altered owing to the increasing prevalence of immigrants and refugees. From the standpoint of *Heimat*, immigration is an uprooting event in which the plant has to search for a new soil in which to implant itself. However, even if the new soil provides the appropriate nutrients, the immigrant's memory of *Heimat* always reminds one of a past that is no longer and will never be again. And, being foreign, they will also have changed the existing soil by bringing about a new ecological configuration. The moderns begin to sense their homelessness upon the earth, as described by Georg Trakl in his poem "Springtime of the Soul":



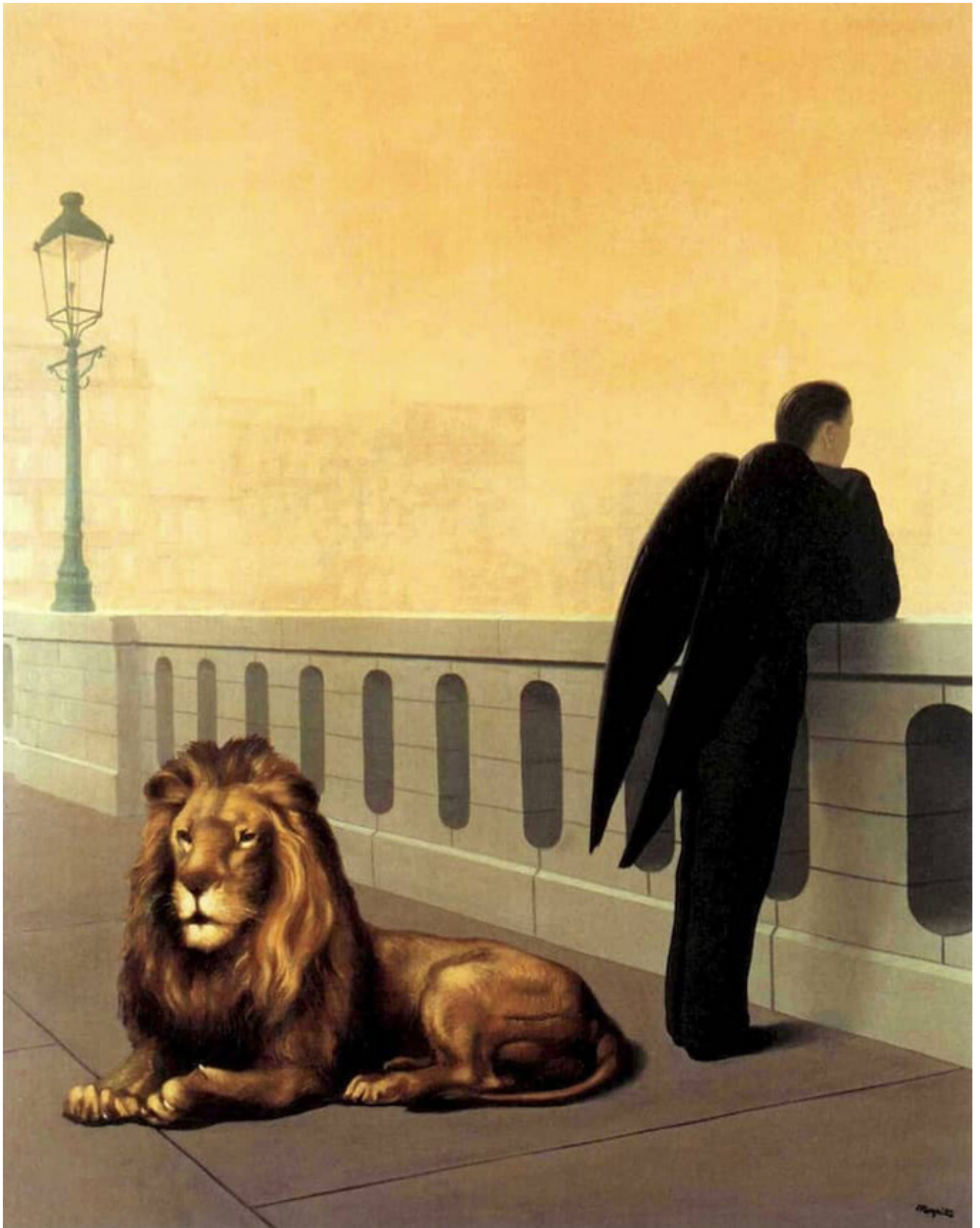
Yessica Yana, Bolivia's first indigenous Aymara woman drone pilot.

Something strange is the soul on the earth. Ghostly
the twilight
Bluing over the mishewn forest, and a dark bell
Long tolls in the village; they lead him to rest.⁷

This feeling of *Heimatlosigkeit* (homelessness) haunted thinkers of the twentieth century, for whom the most important philosophical task became that of shedding light upon a *Heimat* to come. The soul is a stranger on the earth, where any place is rendered *unheimisch* (unhomely). For Heidegger, homecoming is an orientation (*Erörterung*) which defines a locality as a root without which nothing can grow. However, when homelessness becomes the destiny of the world, the soul is comparable to a houseplant, in the sense that it could be grown and taken anywhere on the planet. The homogenization of the planet through techno-economic activities has created a synchronicity of social phenomena. Rituals and heritage

sites become fodder for tourists, with mobile phone cameras replacing the senses of the eyes and the body. The soul's relation to the world is mediated through digital apparatuses and platforms.

However, memory is not simply a cognitive entity in the mind. The interiority of the body also struggles to fully adapt to new environments. Food can then become the strongest reminder of a past, like the madeleine crumbs dipped in lime blossom tea that Proust described in his *In Search of Lost Time*. This experience is even more common when one lives abroad. We might not be able to identify such an experience in the writings of Heidegger, since the philosopher never travelled outside of Europe, but it was described by his foreign students. Keiji Nishitani, one of the representatives of the Kyoto School, spent two years in Freiburg with Heidegger between 1937 and 1939. On a September day in 1938, together with two other Japanese students, Nishitani was invited to dinner by Fumi Takahashi, the niece of Kitaro Nishida, who had just



Rene Magritte, Homesickness, 1940.

arrived in Freiburg in April 1938 to study with Heidegger.⁸ Takahashi cooked a Japanese meal with ingredients she had brought from Japan. Nishitani, who at the time had been living on a German diet for more than a year,⁹ upon tasting the bowl of white rice felt something extraordinary, as James Heisig remarked: "Eating his first bowl of rice after a steady diet of Western food, [Nishitani] was overwhelmed by an 'absolute taste' that went beyond the mere quality of the food."¹⁰

Imagine if Heidegger had taught in Japan: Would he have been able to put *Schwäbische Küche* out of his mind and body while eating sashimi and sushi? Probably not. In the case of Nishitani, the *Heimweh* arrived when *shirogohan* instead of *Kornbrot* stimulated his taste buds, but the sensation also went beyond his taste buds and affected his whole body.¹¹

Heimat does not concern what one learns of one's nation in a history lesson, but rather is something inscribed in the body as one of its most intimate and inexplicable parts. This experience of being *Unheimlich* (uncanny) only reinforces the longing for *Heimat*.¹² In his memoir, Nishitani concludes of this meal:

This same experience also made me think about what is called "homeland," which is fundamentally that of the inseparable relation between the soil and the human being, in particular the human being as a body. It is "the nonduality of soil and body" of which Buddhism speaks. In my case, homeland is the "Land of Vigorous Rice Plants": a soil fit for rice and a people that has found the mainstay of its livelihood in rice cultivation. From generation to generation, my ancestors have had rice as their staple food. The special ingredients of the land called Japan are transferred to the special ingredients of the rice called "Japanese rice," and through eating rice, they are transferred to the "blood" of our ancestors, and that blood flows through my body. Perhaps from long ago, the vital connection between the countless people who were my ancestors, the rice, and the land has always been the background of my life and is actually contained in it. This experience made me remember something that I had usually forgotten.

The bowl of white rice is not just food that satisfies biological need, negating the sense of hunger; it is also a mediation between body and *Heimat*. Taste is associated with the Fatherland via the tongue. It is no surprise, then, that after returning to Japan, Nishitani actively participated in the movement of "overcoming modernity," which gathered historians, music critics, philosophers, and literary scholars to reflect upon how to overcome the domination and the decadence of Europe. To them, European modernity presented itself as a fragmenting

force, its separation of culture into religion, science, and politics (or more precisely democracy) destroying the unified worldview which, in Japanese and Chinese culture, held together heaven, earth, and the human.¹³ However, even as this European nihilism continued to spread across the entire globe, Europe itself was declining. The Europeanization of the East then also threatened to introduce into the East the same decadence as the West. In his book *Self-Overcoming Nihilism* (a collection of lectures on nihilism delivered in 1949), Nishitani commented on Karl Löwith's essay "European Nihilism" to ask what European nihilism meant to Japan:

European nihilism thus brought a radical change in our relationship to Europe and to ourselves. It now forces our actual historical existence, our "being ourselves among others," to take a radically new direction. It no longer allows us simply to rush into westernization while forgetting ourselves.¹⁴

The twentieth century was a century of orienting (*erörtern*) *Heimat* within the planetarization of European modernity. Although he made it possible for Nishitani and Tanabe to study abroad in Germany, Kitaro Nishida himself didn't have the chance to do so when he was young. Yet in his writing one can also find this search for *Heimat*—which for him bears the name of East Asia, or *tōyō*. This longing for *Heimat* continued to intensify because modernization implied the destruction of the old and the creation of something that is global. The destruction of villages and forests for the sake of building new infrastructure, the renovation of urban spaces in order to accommodate tourism and foster real estate development, the increasing immigrant and refugee population—all of these created a feeling of being *unheimisch*. And then after Europeanization came Americanization or Americanism, of which Heidegger and his Japanese students were already very conscious, and which they regarded as the continuation of Europeanization through a planned planetarization.¹⁵ In "What are Poets For?," an essay dedicated to Rilke, Heidegger cited the poet's letter to Witold Hulewicz in 1925 on the Americanization of Europe:

For our grandparents a "house," a "well," a familiar steeple, even their own clothes, their cloak *still* meant infinitely more, were infinitely more intimate—almost everything a vessel in which they found something human already there, and added to its human store. Now there are intruding, from America, empty, indifferent things, sham things, *dummies of life* [*Lebensattrappe*] ... A house, as the Americans understand it, an American apple or a winestock from over there, have *nothing* in common with the house, the fruit, the grape into

which the hope and thoughtfulness of our forefathers had entered ... Things living, experienced, and communing are going under and cannot be replaced. We are perhaps the last ones who will have known such things.¹⁶

The ultimate problem for Heidegger was inhuman technology.¹⁷ Modern technology is the end product of European nihilism, which began with the forgetting of the question of Being and the effort to master (*beherrschen*) beings. The interposition of technology into the world has produced a generalized homelessness, and has blocked the path toward the questioning of Being. *Heimatlosigkeit* is tantamount to the *Heillosigkeit* (unholiness or hopelessness) of the *Abendland*, the evening land, in the dawn of Americanism and its imperial force, supported by its planetary technologies. Again in "What are Poets For?" we read Heidegger's clearest lament on this matter:

The essence of technology comes to the light of day only slowly. This day is the world's night, rearranged into merely technological day. This day is the shortest day. It threatens a single endless winter. Not only does protection now withhold itself from man, but the integralness of the whole of what is remains now in darkness. The wholesome and sound withdraws. The world becomes without healing, unholy. Not only does the holy, as the track to the godhead, thereby remain concealed; even the track to the holy, the hale and whole, seems to be effaced.¹⁸

In the age of technology, Being withdraws from the world; what is left is a world of beings decomposed into atoms and feedback loops. This uprooting (*Entwurzelung*), for Heidegger, is no longer a phenomenon of the West. It has gone beyond Europe through its planetary technology. One might recall here Tolstoy's criticism voiced in 1910, during his last years, when the writer said that medieval theology or the Roman moral inheritance only intoxicated a limited amount of people, but today's electricity, trains, and telegraph have intoxicated the whole world.¹⁹

These technologies are carriers of Western thinking, Western models of individuation, modes of production, and a Western libidinal economy. Economy first of all consists in exchanges of technics and technicity that short-circuit the process of production: for example, the tool we buy in the market is produced via a complex technical system, and we can simply use it without having to learn how to make it ourselves. But at the same time, the economic system demands technology as its medium of exchange, ranging from cargo transportation to high-speed trading. In his lecture "What is Called Thinking?" Heidegger mocks "logistics" as the most recent and fruitful realization of "logic," which in many

Anglo-Saxon countries, he says, is considered the "only possible form of strict philosophy."²⁰

In the twenty-first century, we can easily sense that this process of destruction and recreation is only accelerating rather than slowing down. The longing for *Heimat* will only be intensified instead of being diminished; the dilemma of homecoming can only become more pathological. In fact, two opposed movements are taking place at the same time: planetarization and homecoming. Capital and techno-science, with their assumed universality, have a tendency toward escalation and self-propagation, while the specificity of territory and customs have a tendency to resist what is foreign.

Homecoming is being challenged in very concrete ways today. When we look at the housing problem in Europe in 2023, the number of people who cannot afford to rent a proper apartment for their family has sharply increased. The increase in property prices over the past decade is alarming. This may continue until a certain moment when the bubble bursts, and then those who are paying for mortgages will be in unmanageable debt. Global real estate speculation and the neoliberal economy have created a situation of *Heimatlosigkeit* that challenges both *ethos* and *ethics*. Real estate speculation will continue to drain the creativity and potential of individuals.

The years 2023–2024 have been marked by a feeling that the world has begun to fall apart. On the one hand there is the Russia-Ukraine War—a constant reminder of the insecurity of Europe and the cause of a global logistical catastrophe. At the moment of writing, the Israel-Hamas War appears to be far more brutal and inhuman, and displays clear indications that another world war could erupt at any time. On the other hand, rapid technological acceleration, emblemized by ChatGPT, invokes the sentiment that the human will be rendered obsolete by machines very soon. Deracination is accelerated by technology because machines are capable of learning in order to outdo human competitors. Well beyond the triumph of AlphaGo, which was limited to the Go game, AI has now penetrated into almost all domains of everyday activity and is disrupting them, turning them upside down. This technological, ecological, and economic progress clearly promises us some kind of apocalypse.

This ruin caused by techno-economic planetarization calls for a homecoming, a return to the *ethos*. The world is once again being seen from the standpoint of *Heimat*, but not from a planetary perspective nor that of world history. Frustration and discontent over no longer being at home express themselves as wars against outsiders, with immigrants and refugees the first targets of discrimination and hatred. Reactionaries and neo-reactionaries want to return home—to a home that was once "great," and which one must make great once again. According to some, especially those who believe in the "deep state," the death



Australian troops using a Mance mk.V heliograph in the Western Desert in November 1940. License: Public Domain.

of community, described in terms of a “Great Replacement,” also means the end of the individual, since by that point Europe will be “blackwashed.”²¹

The process of planetarization has produced a global disorientation. Does this mean that we need to reconstruct the concept of *Heimat*? Does this call for another *Blut und Boden*? Can the return to *Heimat* help us to escape this process of increasing alienation? We already know the answer. For the twentieth century was a century of searching for *Heimat*. The philosophical movement associated with it was reactionary and dangerous. Everyone certainly needs a “home” or a locality where they feel safe and at ease. But this home is not necessarily the same as the search for *Heimat*, or fatherland, found in literature beginning in the eighteenth century and which persists in the reactionary online tracts of today.

To be continued in “ Planetarization and Heimatlosigkeit, Part 2”

X

1
Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. W. McNeill, trans. F.A. Capuzzi (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 258.

2
Françoise Dastur, “L’Europe et ses philosophes: Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, Patocka,” *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 104, no. 1 (2006): 8.

3
Novalis, *Notes for a Romantic Encyclopedia: Das Allgemeine Brouillon*, ed., trans. D. W. Wood (SUNY Press, 2007), 155.

4
Martin Heidegger, “The Pathway,” trans. T. F. O’Meara and T. Sheehan, in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. T. Sheehan (Precedent, 1981), 69.

5
Heidegger, “The Pathway,” 70.

6
Julian Young, “Heidegger’s *Heimat*,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19, no. 2 (2011): 285.

7
Cited in Martin Heidegger, “Language in the Poem: A

Discussion on George Trakl’s Poetic Art,” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. P. D. Hertz (Harper & Row, 1971), 198.

8
See Michiko Yusa, *Zen & Philosophy: An Intellectual Biography of Nishida Kitarō* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2002), 243.

9
Nishitani wrote about this experience in a short article published in a magazine thirty-three years after this meal. The article bears the title “The Experience of Eating Rice” (飯を喰った経験). It was later republished in the collected work of Nishitani. See Keiji Nishitani, “飯を喰った経験,” in *NKC 20* (西谷啓治著作集) (Shobunsha, 1990).

10
James Heisig, *Philosophers of Nothingness: An Essay on the Kyoto School* (University of Hawai’i Press, 2001). See also Nishitani, “The Experience of Eating Rice,” 197: “強ひて言へば絶対的な旨さである。”

11
Nishitani, “The Experience of Eating Rice,” 197: “舌の上ではなく全身で感ずる旨さである。”

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12
In his lecture course on Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister,” Heidegger reintroduces the term *unheimisch*, which is now much less used than *unheimlich* in German. Heidegger wants to reassociate the meaning of *unheimisch* (unhomely, or not being at home) with *unheimlich* (uncanny, strangeness). See Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymn “The Ister”* (Indiana University Press, 1996); *Hölderlin’s Hymne »Der Ister« GA 53* (Vittorio Klostermann, 1993).

13
See Nishitani’s talk “My View on ‘Overcoming Modernity’” (「近代の超克」私論) in *Overcoming Modernity* (近代の超克), ed. Tetsutarō Kawakami and Yoshimi Takeuchi (Fuzambo, 1979).

14
Keiji Nishitani, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*, trans. G. Parkes with S. Aihara (SUNY Press, 1990), 179.

15
Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (Harper and Row, 1977), 153. “‘Americanism’ is

itself something European. It is an as-yet uncomprehended variety of the gigantic, and the gigantic itself is still inchoate, still not yet capable of being understood as the product of the full and complete metaphysical essence of modernity. The American interpretation of Americanism by means of pragmatism still remains outside the metaphysical realm.” In this sense, Americanism is no different from Sovietism, as announced by Heidegger in *Introduction to Metaphysics* as follows: “This Europe, in its ruinous blindness forever on the point of cutting its own throat, lies today in a great pincers, squeezed between Russia on one side and America on the other. From a metaphysical point of view, Russia and America are the same; the same dreary technological frenzy, the same unrestricted organization of the average man.” Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. R. Mannheim (Anchor, 1961), 38–39.

16
Rainer Maria Rilke to Witold Hulewicz, November 13, 1925, *Briefe in Zwei Bänden* (Insel Verlag, 2 vols., 1950), vol. 2, 376–77; quoted in Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* (Harper and Row, 1971),

110–11.

17

Gotthard Günther, "Heidegger und die Weltgeschichte des Nichts," in *Nachdenken über Heidegger: eine Bestandsaufnahme*, ed. U. Guzzoni (Gerstenberg, 1980), 83.

18

Heidegger, "What are Poets For?," 115.

19

See Karl Löwith, "Der europäische Nihilismus: Betrachtungen zur geistigen Vorgeschichte des europäischen Krieges," in *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen: Zur Kritik der Geschichtsphilosophie* (J. B. Metzlersche, 1983), 497.

20

Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. F. D. Wieck and J. G. Gray (Harper & Row, 1968), 21.

21

For example, in the work of the conspiracy theorist and white nationalist Renaud Camus.

1. *Fabric/Earth*

The first image accompanying this text comes from a trial that took place in Guatemala in 2016: the first time in the country's history that a case of sexual enslavement was considered a crime against humanity under international law.¹ The plaintiffs were fifteen Q'eqchi' women who were forced into servitude and sexual slavery between 1982 and 1983 by a military government detachment after their husbands were murdered and accused of hiding communist leaders. The case became known as "Sepur Zarco," after the name of the region, and demonstrated the continuity of policies of Indigenous extermination that had been underway since colonial invasion. To protect their safety during the trial, the women covered their faces with shawls known as *perrajes*, typically used as protection from the cold or for carrying food, objects, or babies.

This text surveys several contemporary artworks that concern Indigenous forms of political identity and spiritual resistance connected to ancestral textile knowledges and their problematic patrimonialization by contemporary nation-states. I weave ecology into this discourse to underline the intimate link between forms of ecological and colonial exploitation. In the case of Sepur Zarco, this link is clear: the Q'eqchi' community was subjected to cruel torture to interrupt an ongoing attempt at land reclamation grounded in their stewarding of the land since at least the nineteenth century.² The region has a long history of territorial conflict and labor exploitation by *finqueros* (agricultural landowners), who frequently called on the army to prevent uprisings. In short, the violence these women were subjected to was part of a system for perpetuating colonial power relations *and* ecological violence. Survivors' demands for reparations included developing infrastructure for Sepur Zarco and other nearby areas, health care, the creation of schools, and agrarian reform linked to the return of land to impacted Indigenous communities. Only some of these demands have been implemented thus far, and only in precarious or non-permanent forms, including the return of arable land. Nonetheless, the demands have helped to clarify the current land ownership situation and have put an end to attempts to extort the Indigenous community members.³

In the work of Martinican philosopher Malcom Ferdinand, land theft and ecological exploitation are two sides of the colonial form of governance. Ferdinand argues that there is a fracture in discourses on modernity—one that separates environmental history and ecological problems from colonial history:

The *double* fracture of modernity refers to the thick wall between the two environmental and colonial fractures, to the real difficulty that exists in *thinking them together* and that in response carries out a double critique ... One either questions the environmental fracture on the condition that the

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Agrarian Economies and Indigenous Textiles: The Feminization of Land Struggles



Sepur Zarco trial, Guatemala, 2016.

silence of modernity's colonial fracture, its misogynist slavery, and its racisms are *maintained*, or one deconstructs the colonial fracture on the condition that its ecological issues are *abandoned*. Yet, by leaving aside the colonial question, ecologists and green activists overlook the fact that both historical colonization and contemporary structural racism are at the center of destructive ways of inhabiting the Earth.⁴

Ferdinand draws parallels between the processes of enslavement and the history of land exploitation up to the present day. In a similar vein, in his book *The Fourth Invasion*, the Guatemalan anthropologist Giovanni Batz traces different environmental invasions from the beginnings of colonization to the present day to reveal the ideological genealogy behind the Palo Viejo hydroelectric plant in the Cotzal region of Guatemala. In this area, the colonial exploitation of land went through several phases, beginning in the late nineteenth century with the development of coffee monoculture and leading to the present-day conflicts.⁵ A key tactic for expropriating land, argues Batz, was deceiving Indigenous workers and

driving them into debt. During the second invasion of Batz's genealogy, the military became one of the first landowners in certain regions, with the aim of intimidating Indigenous communities into giving up their land so that a national farm economy could be established. Like the Cotzal region, the military occupation of Sepur Zarco in the 1980s was a continuation of the colonial project.

Following the signing of peace accords in 1996 to end the country's decades-long civil war, Guatemala's farm economy turned to palm plantations, which have increased 600 percent in recent years, making the country one of the world's leading cultivators of the crop. Today, Sepur Zarco is beset by these plantations, which render the land infertile over a twenty-five-year period, destroy local biodiversity, and pollute the water and air.⁶ As Ferdinand remarks:

In addition to the genocide of indigenous peoples and the destruction of ecosystems, this colonial inhabitation transformed the land into the jigsaws of factories and plantations that characterize this geological era, the *Plantationocene*, resulting in the loss of caring and matricial bonds with the Earth:

*matricides.*⁷

2. What Do We Owe the Grandmothers?

The phrase “*De ellas no se sabe nada*” (nothing is known about them) has been written on a thread winder in Ángel Poyón’s artwork *Devanador del silencio* (Silence Winder, 2013). The phrase turns on an axis that passes repeatedly through a weaver’s gaze. It is no coincidence that in the Spanish phrase, “*ellas*” is in the feminine. If this circular movement is the basis of the action of weaving, the repetitive phrase engraved on the winder ends up becoming a mantra: the response given by mothers and grandmothers every time they are asked about their disappeared loved ones. The Commission for Historical Clarification (CEH, created by the Guatemalan government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity political party) estimates that during the thirty-six years of civil war in Guatemala, and especially in the 1980s, when a Mayan genocide took place in which the Q’eqchi’ people were the most affected, there were two hundred thousand deaths, five thousand people disappeared, and 626 massacres of Mayan people, 93 percent of whom were killed by military forces. The title of Poyón’s work is meant to ask how to performativize mourning in everyday life, how to learn to assimilate the lack and violence of silence about the disappearances. The great emptiness of “the disappeared” interrupts the oblivion of the war and points to impunity. Through this (state-sanctioned) silence, the disappeared disappear again.

This is also illustrated by the image of the Sepur Zarco trial that leads this text, in which the plaintiffs’ faces disappear as a form of protection. Accused of collaborating with the military, these women lived in internal social exile—and endured economic precarity as a result—until they prevailed at trial in 2016.⁸ The gesture of hiding shows the latency of fear, whose intimate counterpart is shame: two emotions linked to trauma and the loss of control that feed off each other.⁹ Shame involves the negating personhood, or depersonification.¹⁰ Studies on shame show that it has a contagious nature. And in cases of oppression, shame is shared by both victims and oppressors.¹¹ Only after the conviction of the defendants from the military did the women uncover their faces and become community leaders and “Grandmothers,” a crucial role given to people in this community who are important to collective identity.¹² Thanks to the Grandmothers of Sepur Zarco, a silence was broken, after which many other women dared to speak out and began to tell their stories and take other officials to court. Protocols began to be created (by Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psicosocial, ECAP) to provide psychological help to survivors of wartime rape.¹³ Often the Grandmothers have attended the resulting trials and have counselled the plaintiffs.

Also in 2016, artist Regina Galindo created a private performance titled *Ascension* in the San Matteo Church in Lucca, Italy, where she covered herself with ten meters of *perraje* woven by a Mayan weaver. Taking on the appearance of the Virgin, the artist spoke of the sacred status of Grandmothers, in an act of monumentalization and sanctification. Appearing wrapped in the *perraje* was an allusion to the holiness of wrapping in some Mayan cultures, where valuable objects are wrapped and charged with ancestral energy and a sense of the sacred: objects from ancestors and those with a connection to the divine that concentrate energy, such as stones.¹⁴ Likewise, the sacred book *Po’ol Vuh*, published in the early eighteenth century, relates the origin of the world from the Maya K’iche perspective. It speaks of the origin of humanity through the first corn men who left wrappings, known as sacred bundles, as objects of worship and remembrance. Here the textile functions as an element of the relationship between the ancestral-spiritual and the human, dispelling the difference between the living and the dead and creating new relationships between them.¹⁵ This sacredness also implies protection and intimacy; the spiritual charge of the wrappings cannot be separated from their opacity and protection. In this way, as Galindo’s work puts forward, the gesture of concealing oneself behind the *perraje* ceases to allude to a social stigma, to fear or shame, and transforms instead into an act of sacredness.

Textiles express ancestral knowledge of geometry and mathematics connected to the Mayan worldview, incorporating elements of politics, nature, history, and memory. Each community has different colors, embroideries, and figures that have been passed down from generation to generation. As the slogan of the National Movement of Women Weavers says: “The weavings are the books that colonialism could not burn.”¹⁶ This umbrella group was created in 2014 and is made up of thirty associations of women weavers. It was formed to defend the rights of women producers against companies that were beginning to commercialize their products and exploit their ancestral knowledge. Exploring the link between textiles and the ecological question, the Kaqchikel artist Marilyn Boror, in her work *Rewrite, Re-read* (2018), asked twelve Kaqchikel women weavers from different communities to express through their embroidery their resistance against the San Gabriel Cement Company (San Juan Sacatepéquez), which privatized land containing ancestral roads that connected communities. The women’s embroidery was done on *Güipiles* (blouses) made serially in a factory—a type of garment that is increasingly replacing the original handmade ones, endangering the entire system of knowledge that the weavers carry. Therefore, it makes sense to restore manual work by rewriting on these manufactured and machine-made garments: to embroider on them is to give back to the *Güipil* the hand of the weaver, and with it the history, the language, the knowledge, the emotions, and the struggles that are



Angel Poyon, *Devanador del silencio* (Silence Winder), 2013.

absent in the clothes made in series by machines. In this way Boror puts on the same level the resistance to land expropriation and the struggle to maintain textile knowledge. As the Kaqchikel anthropologist Irma Otzoy has pointed out:

Both land and weavings form the core foundations of [Mayan] existence. Perhaps unsurprisingly, because of land and weaving, the Maya have been, albeit in different ways, unfavorably targeted for reprisals. Historically, the Maya have fought and resisted especially for the protection of their land and weavings, and have always been determined to maintain them.¹⁷



Marilyn Boror, *Rewrite, Re-read*, 2018.

In her book *La Guerra Contra las Mujeres* (The war

against women), Rita Segato documents a radical change in the way women's bodies have been targeted in relation



Marilyn Boror, Rewrite, Re-read, 2018.



Marilyn Boror, Rewrite, Re-read, 2018.

to the occupation of territory. From the beginning of European invasion through to the twentieth century, argues Segato, women's bodies were "appropriated, raped and inseminated as part of the territories." Today, colonial femicide takes on a different meaning:

It is the destruction of the enemy in the body of the woman. The female or feminized body is ... the very battlefield on which the insignia of victory is signified, where the physical and moral devastation of the people, tribe, community, neighborhood, locality, family, or gang that this female body, through a process of signification typical of an ancestral imaginary, embodies, is inscribed. It is no longer its appropriating conquest but its physical and moral destruction that is executed today, a destruction that is extended to its tutelary figures and that seems to me to maintain semantic affinities and also to express a new predatory relationship with nature, until only remains are left.¹⁸

As a tool of warfare, feminicide denigrates community members, undoes family ties, and attacks the identity of

the collective.¹⁹ For these reasons, in their expert testimony during the Sepur Zarco trial, both Irma A. Velásquez Nimatuj and Rita Segato insisted that this aggression was not intimate or based on personal hatred but was a destructive political strategy.

The word "rape" does not exist in the Q'eqchi' language. Instead, the Grandmothers spoke of "profanation." Women who perform reproductive labor in their communities were "profaned" when their families were destroyed and their reproductive organs damaged, dismantling a social and spiritual world. In this way, the concepts of trauma and reparation should be considered from an epistemological level. For example, the Kumool Association of Ixil and K'iche women ex-combatants chose the concept *Txitzi'n* to express trauma.²⁰ In Ixil, this concept means "deep pain" and "wounded soul," in which a part of the subject is dead. But as a mystical inner experience, it expresses a space of knowledge production that encompasses both trauma and healing and therefore it "is not imbued with the idea of helplessness."²¹ In the case of the Grandmothers of Sepur Zarco, it is important to note that reparation did not involve an individual process of healing, as it would in the West. Rather, as mentioned above, the demands of the victims were centered on the collective and were framed as "transformative reparations measures."²² This concept became an important precedent for other lawsuits. This is an example of what has been called the "feminization of struggles" in Latin America.²³

3. Heritagization: What Is Owed to the Weavers?

Sandra Monterroso's work *Columna vertebral* (Backbone, 2012) is a totem monument made from eighty-seven skirts of Q'eqchi' women from her family. These skirts are traditionally made by men with a foot-operated loom. Called "corte textile," the skirts in *Columna vertebral* are rolled up—the way they are kept in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. Monterroso's grandmothers and aunts made a living sewing when they migrated to the city, which inspired her to have conversations with them and document these conversations in a diary. In this way, each "corte" generated an encounter. The diary writing is part of *Columna vertebral* and functions as a space for reflection on Q'eqchi' culture and the artist's own links with the women in her family.²⁴ The "backbone" in the title of the work recognizes the place of these women and textiles at the center of the community, as preservers of its history and culture. Indigenous feminism (although it cannot be fully understood in Western terms) has looked at how this role tends to objectify these women and make them passive—prompting Kaqchikel anthropologist Aura Cumes to ask how this preserver role can be rethought to make these women into political subjects. One of the aims is therefore to question the passivity of this role and re-signify it into a role with political agency.

While contemporary Guatemalan society urges Indigenous women to shed their traditional dress—for example, by not allowing women in traditional dress to enter restaurants, or by treating them as servants in the street—tourism agencies have instead demanded that these women not mix their regional costumes with modern garments so as not to confuse tourists. The National Tourism Institute has even asked women weavers to be more flexible about the prices of their products so that tourists can have a satisfactory “haggling” experience. As Cumes shows, in this commercialization of textiles there is a contrast between the high market value assigned to the garments and the common disregard for their creators.²⁵ In this way, both the costume and the woman who wears it are objectified and discarded.²⁶ It is symptomatic that the first Indigenous textile shop in Guatemala City was set up in the nineteenth century by the American Tocsika Roach. It is even more symptomatic that she sold her collection to the US-based United Fruit Company, which has a long and well-known history of exploitation in Guatemala and elsewhere. The United Fruit Company has since donated its collection to the National Museum of Guatemala City.

The Ixchel Museum of Costume in Guatemala City, founded in 1973, preserves textile techniques and pieces. It has a room dedicated to the *perraje*. Named “Sala Carolina Mini Su’t: Uses and Meanings,” the room has a wall label that reads: “*Su’t* is a word used in several Mayan languages and in Spanish. It designates a cloth, handkerchief, or napkin ... [A *su’t*] has many uses. You can fold it in a certain way for it to function as a jumper or bag, among other things.” Given the political charge of Mayan dress, such a space *could* help recognize the political agency of women and the complexity of the symbolic value of self-determination that dressing implies. Instead of being an agent of conservation through the rhetoric of artistic patrimonialization, such a museum could re-signify Indigenous female bodies and promote the public recognition of their collective mourning, inviting the spectator to evaluate their own position in this social body.²⁷

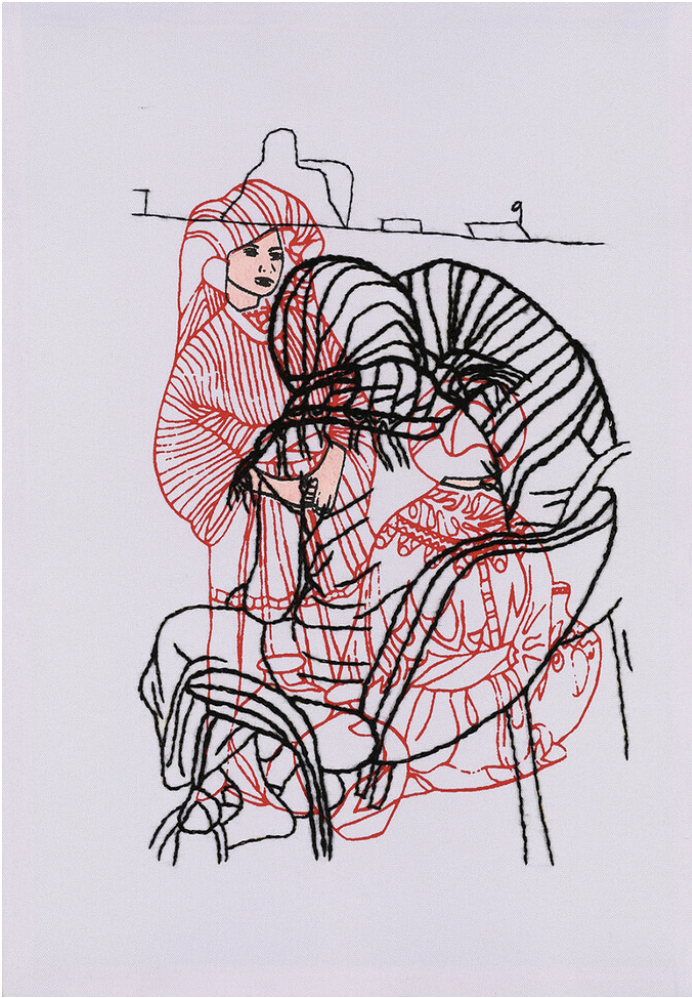
Contemporary art often points to other tasks museums should perform instead. The same year as the Sepur Zarco trial, artist Andrea Monroy stitched embroideries while listening to the testimonies of the Indigenous women in the trial. She superimposed images of the Grandmothers speaking at the trial on embroidery stencils that featured so-called “typical pictures” of Indigenous women. These bucolic, touristy images of Indigenous women represent them performing domestic chores—passive, silent, submissive. The images of the Grandmothers that Monroy reproduced on the picturesque stencils show their gesture of hiding behind the *perraje* as they testified at the trial. That is, the work makes the mourning and suffering of the Grandmothers visible while also showing their agency as plaintiffs in the lawsuit. It invokes the hidden face of the national discourse of folkloric



Andrea Monroy, Sepur Zarco Case, 2016.

whitening, where Indigenous people are reduced to passive emblems of the past.²⁸ It performativizes the repetitive, slow, and delicate activity of embroidering, in an act of accompaniment and listening to the Grandmothers. It creates space and time for accompanying, mourning, and performing pain, but it also supports the Grandmothers’ insubordination toward these folkloric images that suffocate their true reality.

The national patrimonialization of Mayan culture has generally been understood by Indigenous communities as a tool of control and dispossession. An epic Mayan past is folklorized to become part of the national imaginary, while the public voice of its cultural producers is denied.²⁹ This privatization of culture, whether it takes places in the realm of museums, tourism, or the commercial appropriation of textiles, uses nationalist rhetoric that reproduces colonial grammar. In 2017, the National Movement of Women Weavers presented a bill to the Constitutional Court of Guatemala. This bill aimed to recognize the collective intellectual rights of Indigenous cultural producers and to protect Indigenous textiles from appropriation by large high-fashion brands. The ensuing debate showed how ownership is not compatible with a society that is not based on a formal legal code, a society of ancestry and cultural communities. There was a failure to understand collective and ancestral property precisely because it is not compatible with the neoliberal system of property. In 2019 the National Movement of Women

Andrea Monroy, *Sepur Zarco Case*, 2016.Andrea Monroy, *Sepur Zarco Case*, 2016.

Guatemala stop reproducing Indigenous images and commodifying Indigenous ways of life without consulting Indigenous people. The group issued this demand not only because these images often reproduce racist stereotypes and use oversimplified concepts such as “handicrafts,” but also—and above all—to reclaim their sovereignty over their own cultural production.³⁰

4. *The Perraje, the Lake, and Food Sovereignty*

The Kaqchikel artist Edgar Calel stayed in the Guaraní village of Kalipety (province of São Paulo) to create a work for the 35th São Paulo Biennial entitled *Nimajay Guaraní* (Big Guaraní House, 2023). This village was founded in 2013 by Jerá Guaraní, who broke with patriarchal and vertical leadership dynamics to create her own community project for “food sovereignty.” The project focused on the cultivation of peanuts, manioc, *jety* (Guaraní sweet potato), and corn. From different parts of Argentina and Brazil she gathered, cultivated, and mixed fifteen different species of maize, creating an important seed bank. She also rescued and published traditional recipes. For the Guaraní people, the recovery of maize has an important spiritual dimension insofar as it strengthens their connection to their ancestors and protects their descendants.³¹ Inspired by this project, Edgar Calel presented a mural made of fabric with forty-eight embroideries of various species of maize and manioc. These embroideries were arranged around a central representation of the daily life of the inhabitants of Kalipety village, featuring musical instruments, chairs, and a large fire. The Mayans also consider maize, which has been cultivated for more than ten thousand years in Central America, a sacred plant. According to the sacred book *Popol Vuh*, it is the material from which man is made. If the planting of this maize-subject organizes daily life, Calel shows a domestic ecosystem and renders homage to female leadership, while aligning textile production with ecological sustainability and the recovery of the land. Inspired by the Jerá Guaraní project, other women-led villages were founded in the region in the following years.³²

Indigenous epistemologies have a way of looking at the earth that is not marked by the modern ecological fracture. Considering this alongside Ferdinand’s proposal for a decolonial ecology, it becomes possible to “forge interspecies alliances where the cause of animals and the demand for the emancipation of Negroes are seen as common problems” in order to enact a “change of scene from which discourses and knowledge are produced.”³³ Ferdinand follows in the wake of concepts developed by other Martinican writers, such as the “creolization of the world” proposed by Édouard Glissant; but Ferdinand goes a step further by including nonhuman agents in the relational equation.³⁴ Thus Ferdinand’s concept of an



Exhibition view of Edgar Calel's Nimajay Guarani during the 35th Bienal de São Paulo, "Choreographies of the Impossible." Image courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta. Photo by © Levi Fanan.



Exhibition view of Edgar Calel's Nimajay Guarani during the 35th Bienal de São Paulo, "Choreographies of the Impossible." Image courtesy of the artist and Proyectos Ultravioleta. Photo by © Levi Fanan.

ecology-of-the-world has as its horizon the creation of *epistemically diverse political forms*:

Starting from the constitutive plurality of human and nonhumans on Earth, of different cultures, taking the world as the object of ecology brings back to the fore the question of the *political composition* between these pluralities, and therefore the question of acting together as well.³⁵

This is also the basis of Marisol de la Cadena's proposal in her paradigmatic 2009 text "Política Indígena: Un Análisis Más Allá de 'la Política,'" (Indigenous politics: An analysis beyond "politics").³⁶ Here she describes how nature has

been exiled from politics since Hobbes in the seventeenth century, when its relationship to the nonhuman and the spiritual was denied. The sciences gained a monopoly over the representation of nature and by extension of Indigenous peoples, who were regarded as living in a natural state. They were thus exiled from the political, which can still be seen today. Here is what the Tz'utujil artist Nuto Chavajay wrote in a 2020 text coauthored with me: "Intellectuals and pseudo-leftists secularized our symbols, erased our signs, disembodied our wisdom in the spelling of the word, for fear that the stones would speak."³⁷ De la Cadena insists that in order to create spaces of "the political" that do not exclude other epistemologies, there must be an ontological-political decentering of modern politics. Recognizing the crucial place of nature in politics also includes recognizing the political sphere of indigeneity. It will not just be a matter of pluralizing voices or including them within the same framework, but of pluralizing politics itself.

Working from this union between ecology and textiles, in the same year as the Sepur Zarco trial and as a tribute to the Grandmothers' leadership Manuel Chavajay initiated a series of works entitled *Ru jawal ya'* using a *perraje* with the colors of maize. The work shows an image of a lake that the artist derived from the dreams of the grandfathers and grandmothers he consulted. In these dreams the lake is a woman whose hair blends with her *perraje*.³⁸ Chavajay's use of the *perraje* evokes the "matricial" vision of the earth that Ferdinand spoke of, and recognizes this vision as a living entity to be respected and cared for by the whole community. The presence of an oar in the work pays homage to a relational tool with the lake, as an extension of the body.

In her recent book *Entre la Exotización y el Mayámetro: Dinámicas Contemporáneas del Colonialism* (Between exoticization and mayameter: Contemporary dynamics of colonialism), Maria Jacinta Xón tracks how US academics created concepts around "being Mayan" that later, in the 1980s and '90s, were absorbed by Mayans who led movements for the institutionalization of identity. These Indigenous intellectuals had been educated in religious boarding schools and got their political training in NGOs. Xón reveals that during the 1996 peace negotiations at the end of the Guatemalan civil war, there was only one Indigenous person present and involved in writing the peace agreement. This person's work had to be based on documents created by Indigenous people trained outside the country by foreign, mainly North American academics ("linguistic, anthropological, archaeological and ethnological studies").³⁹ These homogenizing identity categories and politics were often divorced from everyday practices, stifling popular conceptions of those practices. This is a case of *nawalismo* which, as Xón shows, is a Western concept that has as many as five potential translations in Mayan languages. There is no direct translation from Spanish. The category *nawal* was created by foreign indigenist scholars and "mediated by



Manuel Chavajay, *Ru jawal ya'*, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

so-called Mayan intellectuals and NGO leaders as structuring elements of the Indigenous knowledge system.”⁴⁰ This is the process of the neo-hegemonization of what has been called “Mayanization,”⁴¹ a discourse of authenticity that has usurped “the everyday life of those who perform their services helping their peers and collectives.”⁴²

Manuel Chavajay is involved in the recovery of the *nawal* system of thought from the experience of his ancestors. The artist thinks of the *nawal* of the lake as a female presence wrapped in a textile, protected but at the same time enveloping and protecting with her *perraje*. The textile and the earth are aligned in this work on the lake through all the meanings it unfolds. Like much of the art in this text, Chavajay’s piece is part of a collective mourning that runs through the lives of this postwar generation of artists. This is especially evident in the pieces by Ángel Poyón, Regina José Galindo, and Andrea Monroy, who confront colonial trauma in order to performativize it from a feminine perspective and to traverse it in the present. All these artists put on the same level the defense of cultural production and the defense of the land, united to overcome the double colonial fracture described by Malcom Ferdinand. This feminization of political struggles, also evident in the work of Edgar Calel, Sandra Monterroso, and Marilyn Boror through textiles, is inseparable from struggles for the environment and the defense of all life-forms.

We could easily include the Indigenous women of Sepur Zarco within this larger ecofeminist movement, since they represent a culture of care that challenges the neoliberal extractivist viewpoint through the defense of collective life and the de-hierarchization of the nonhuman.⁴³ This was expressed clearly by one of the Sepur Zarco Grandmothers, Demecia Yat, when she declared that they demanded land so that their grandchildren do not depend on money and the purchase and consumption of food. The horizon of the reparation demanded by the Grandmothers is a community that can subsist by growing beans, cassava, and chili, as they did before the armed conflict. But this also has to do with domestic and care work understood in its most profoundly political dimension, beyond the contempt that Western feminism has shown it in the name of liberation. That’s why there has been much debate in Latin American over whether this movement should be assimilated by middle-class Western feminism, and whether it should even be called feminist at all, since the “feminization of struggles” is above all a struggle for survival, for the defense of territory, and for ways of life.⁴⁴ X ón explains:

The body of knowledge and know-how that Indigenous women have created is unquestionable—knowledge they have dynamized inter-generationally despite the logics of oppression/resistance and the multiple forms of

violence in which they have lived. What would Mesoamerican life be without the *nixtamalization* of maize, nutritional supplements in agricultural production and cooking, the safeguarding and exchange of seeds, among the knowledge of Indigenous women in the world? This is why today it is essential to make agricultural and domestic spaces into political spaces.⁴⁵

It is therefore no coincidence that Marilyn Boror, in her performance *Monumento Vivo* (Living Monument) (2021), presented herself in the Central Plaza of Guatemala City dressed in the Mayan costume of her village, San Juan Sacatepéquez, on a cement base with her feet trapped by the cement. In this act of physical resistance to the pressure of the cement in its process of solidification, she critiques the cement company San Gabriel and its actions in her region. She denounces the presence of cement as a symbol of progress that is devastating her people’s way of life and relationship with nature. Above all Boror addresses the crucial place of women, not as passive monuments preserving a cultural/identitarian tradition and the environment, but above all as living political agents engaged in a resistance they have been forced to lead. A plaque on this “living monument” reads: “In memory of the defenders of the earth, in memory of the spiritual guides, in gratitude for the political prisoners, in gratitude for the community leaders, in gratitude for the rivers, the hills, the mountains, the flowers, the lakes!”



Marilyn Boror, Monumento Vivo (Living Monument), performance, 2021.

X

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1. *Empire's Exile*

On May 5, 1725, Leendert Hasenbosch, a thirty-year-old bookkeeper for the Dutch East India Company, became the first known inhabitant of Ascension Island, a small volcanic landmass about thirteen kilometers wide, located in the Atlantic Ocean some sixteen hundred kilometers from the west coast of Africa.¹ Hasenbosch had been stationed on the *Prattenburg*, part of a fleet of twenty-five ships returning from the Cape of Good Hope to Holland. After he was found engaging in sexual intercourse with a male sailor, the ship's council ordered his immediate punishment. While the sailor was sentenced to death for sodomy and thrown overboard, Hasenbosch, due to his higher rank, was given a lighter punishment: exile.

A small boat left him on what is known today as Ascension's Long Beach with a tent, a cask of water, a musket without bullets, a bale of rice, two buckets, a copy of the Bible, and an old frying pan. Hasenbosch kept a diary of his days as the first human inhabitant of the volcanic island, a document found by English sailors the following year. From his writings, we know that he managed to survive for about six months wandering the island in search of water, hunting birds and turtles, all while looking for passing ships, hoping for salvation.

After his water reserves became undrinkable, Hasenbosch was tormented at night by hallucinations of screaming shadowy beings raging outside his tent. The last entries in his diary describe him parched, sucking blood directly from the neck of a bird, and draining the bladder from a turtle to drink its urine. His final words read:

October 8, 1725

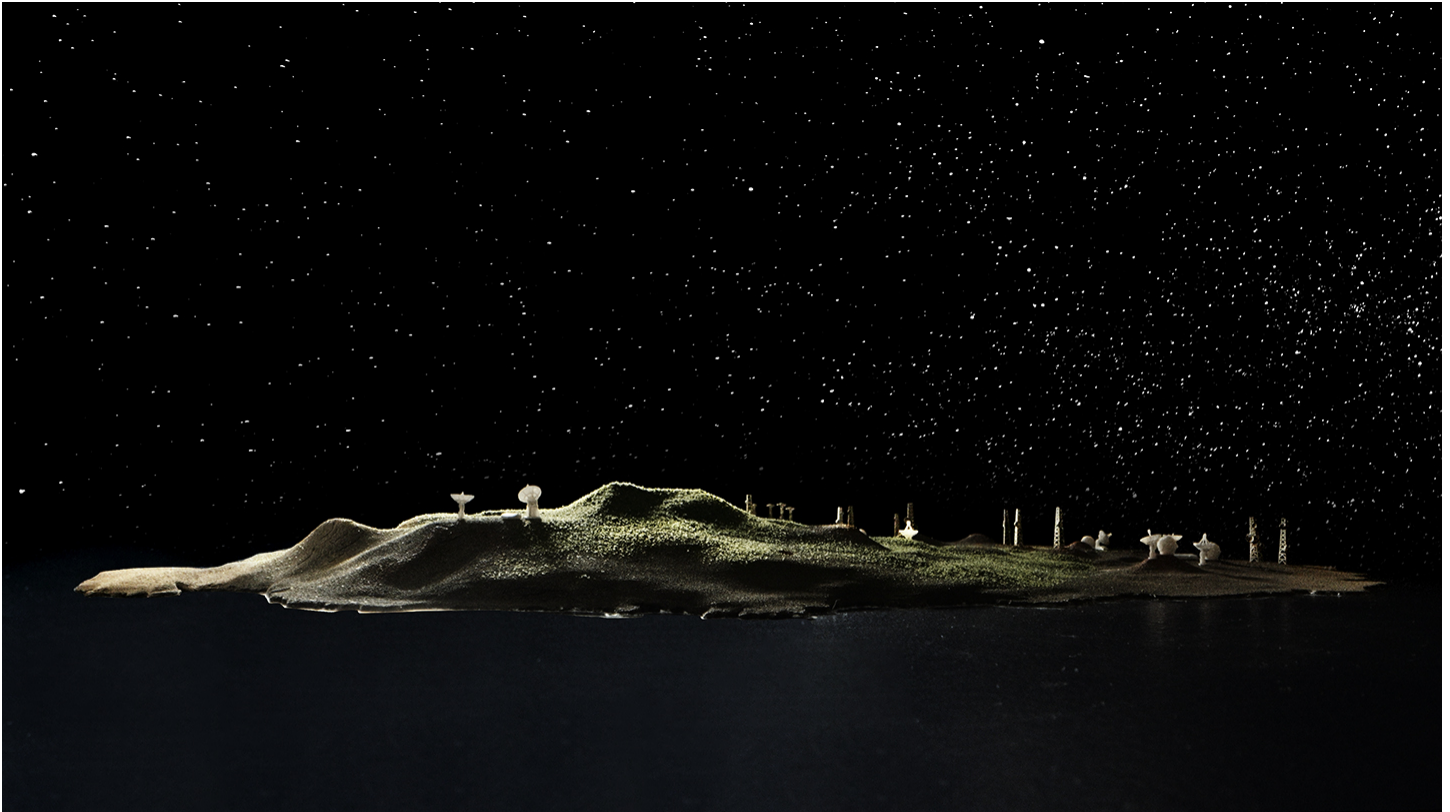
Drank my own urine, and ate raw flesh.²

Though Hasenbosch's body was never found, his diary was brought to England, where it was edited by Daniel Defoe, the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, before being published in varying editions in 1726, 1728, and 1730, each subsequent edition becoming more elaborate and gruesome to expand its readership.³

Though Hasenbosch was a victim of heteropatriarchy, he was also undoubtedly an agent of Empire. In 1713, aged eighteen, he enlisted as a soldier with the Dutch East India Company, the first multinational corporation in history. Stationed in Cochin (Southwest India), he rose through the ranks by taking part in punitive campaigns against the monarch and ruler of the Kingdom of Kozhikode, known as the Zamorin of Calicut. After participating in the massacre of two thousand Indigenous people in 1717, he was promoted to corporal and then to bookkeeper.⁴ With the promise of a privileged life ahead as a reward for his service to the Dutch empire, he was planning his return to Holland when he was exiled to Ascension Island instead.

Jonas Staal

Empire's Island, or, Who Is the Island?



Model depicting the outcomes of the terra- and techno-forming of Ascension Island across three centuries. Jonas Staal, *Empire's Island*, Video Study, 2023, still.

Hasenbosch showed no signs of resistance against the murderous unworlding campaigns of the Dutch East India Company. His only divergence from the terms of order was his sexual desire for men, which had no place in the white Christian doctrine central to the Dutch empire's command structure.⁵ As such, Hasenbosch was exiled from the very world he had helped to propagate. However, the transformation of the island into an open-air prison was only the first step towards molding its ecosystem into the mirror image of a new emerging form of global power: Empire.

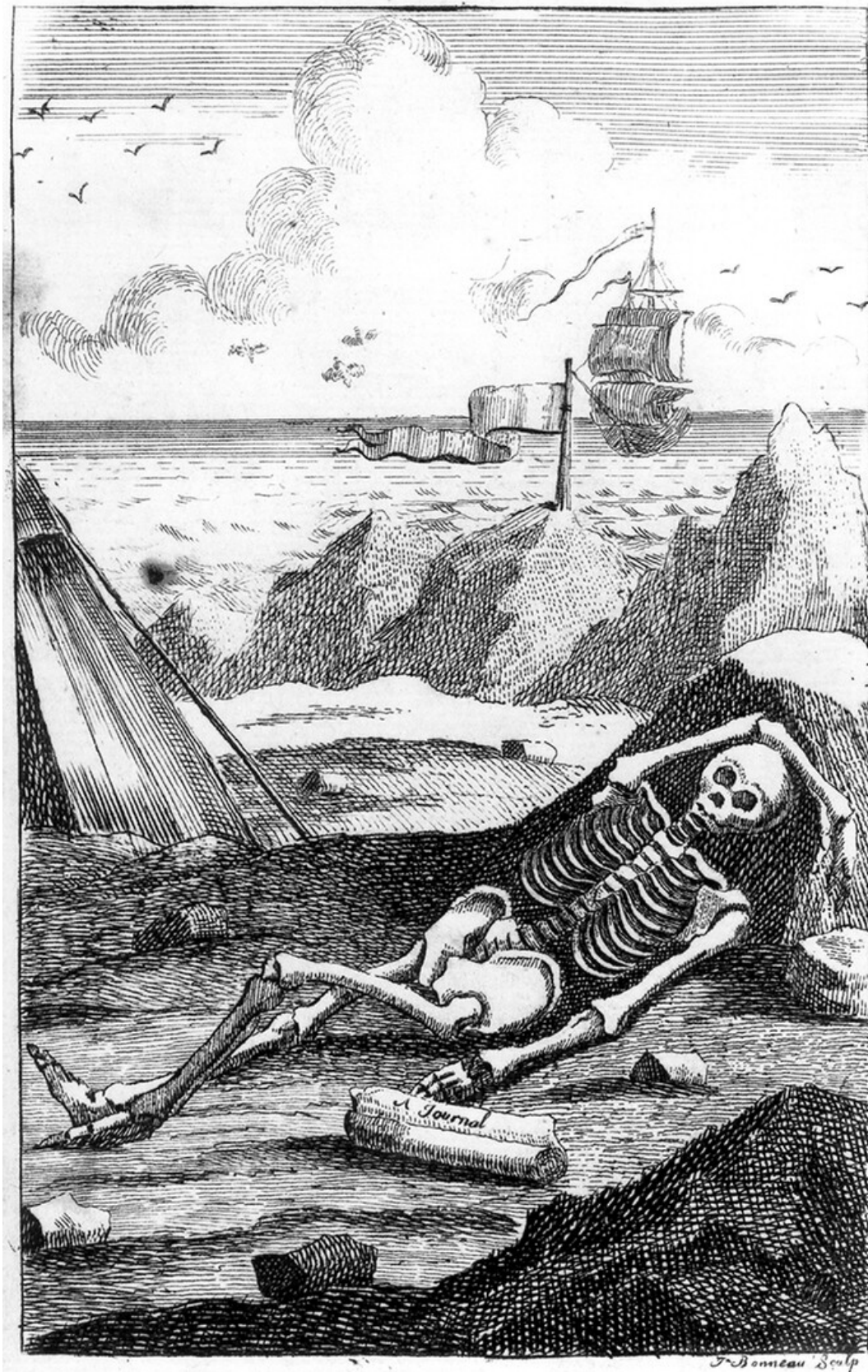
2. empires and Empire

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000), the first of their "Empire Trilogy" books, is a theoretical cornerstone of the alter-globalization movement, which contributed to the creation of alternative global organizational bodies of solidarity and cooperation, such as the World Social Forum. The most generative part of the trilogy is that Negri and Hardt gave us a term with which to identify a formation of power previously unknown to the world. There are and have been "empires," and then there's "Empire." The Dutch and the British empires were imperialist forces working from a hierarchically defined center in specific spatialized territories across specific periods of time. Their formal dissolution, however, does not mean that their political, economic, and legal legacies

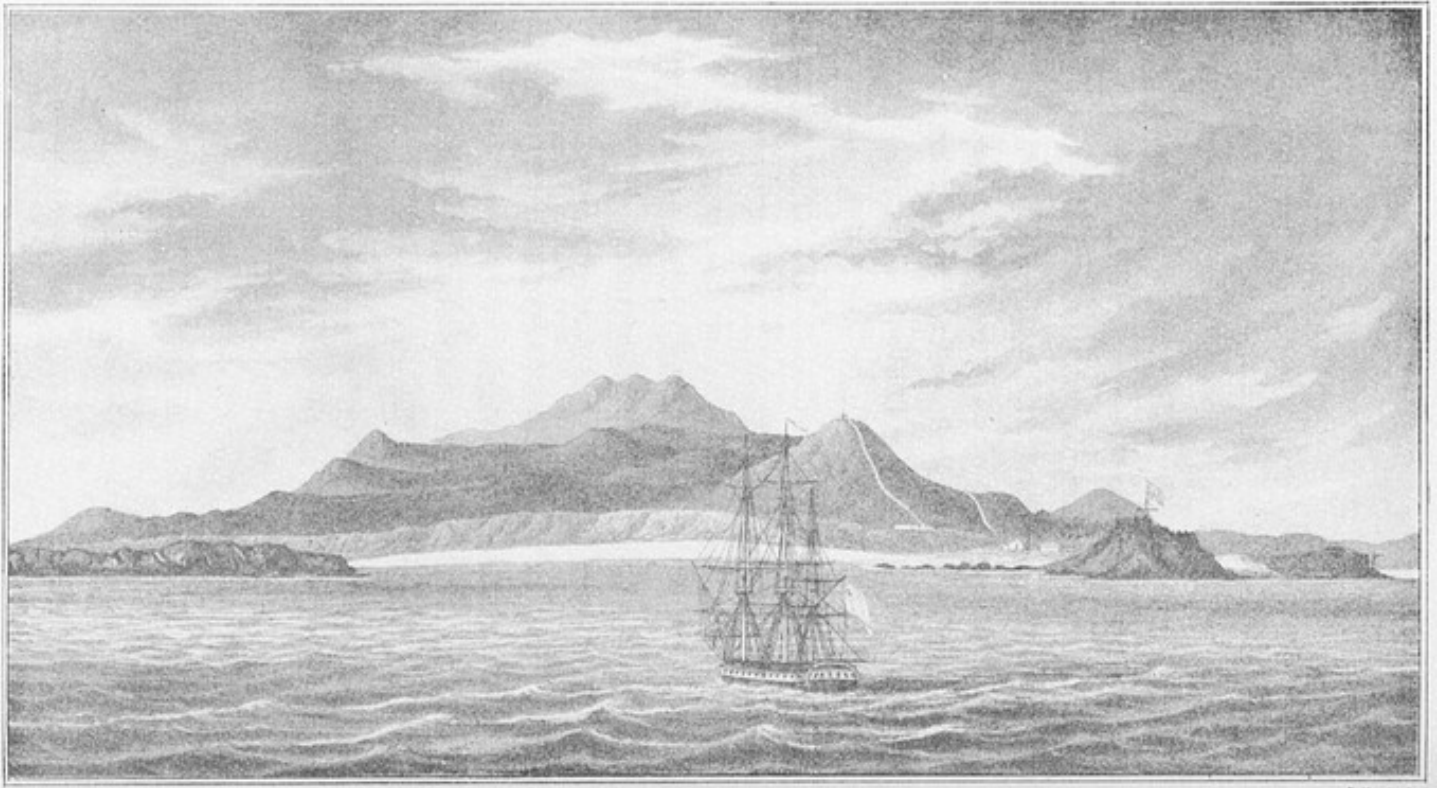
do not continue to shape the present. In this text I look at Ascension Island as a marker of developments across time and discuss how empires merged into Empire, a concept that represents the multi-century propagation of colonialism and imperialism in the form of global capitalism, defined by Hardt and Negri as follows:

Empire constitutes the ontological fabric in which all the relations of power are woven together—political and economic relations as well as social and personal relations. Across this hybrid domain the biopolitical structure of being is where the internal structure of imperial constitution is revealed, because in the globality of biopower every fixed measure of value tends to be dissolved, and the imperial horizon of power is revealed finally to be a horizon outside measure.⁶

For Hardt and Negri, at the turn of the century Empire was a signal concept for periodizing the transition from what they perceived as a thoroughly modern world managed by nation-states to a postmodern, decentralized world with many ruling powers. Even if the United States, and today the People's Republic of China, remain key actors in global political rule, they are part of Empire's overall "mixed



Opening image by Jacques Bonneau of the third edition of *The Just Vengeance of Heaven Exemplify'd* (1730), wrongfully depicting Hasenbosch's skeleton, which in reality was never found.



Ascension Island after a decade of British rule. J. Clarke, *Ascension Red Hills*, 1834.

constitution" that further consists of "captains of industry, financial barons, political elites and media tycoons."⁷ Thus, Empire is more than the sum of various powers. Rather, it represents the shared interests and claim to a new global, imperial sovereignty that emerges from between them.

Hardt and Negri's position might inadvertently suggest a willingness to adopt Fukuyama's end-of-history thesis, as when they argue that "with boundaries and differences suppressed or set aside, the Empire is a kind of smooth space across which subjectivities glide without substantial resistance or conflict."⁸ In fact, Negri describes Fukuyama's thesis as mere "caricature."⁹ I would argue that, similar to how Marx describes the process of capitalist development in *Capital*, Hardt and Negri describe Empire both as it is and *as it wants to become*. To describe Empire as a "smooth space" with no meaningful resistance is not to negate alternative visions or the very real instances of resistance, such as the form of counterpower that Hardt and Negri later theorize as the "multitude." This description rather emphasizes and embodies the horizon Empire sets for itself. It helps us understand not just what we are fighting against, but what this adversary desires to become.

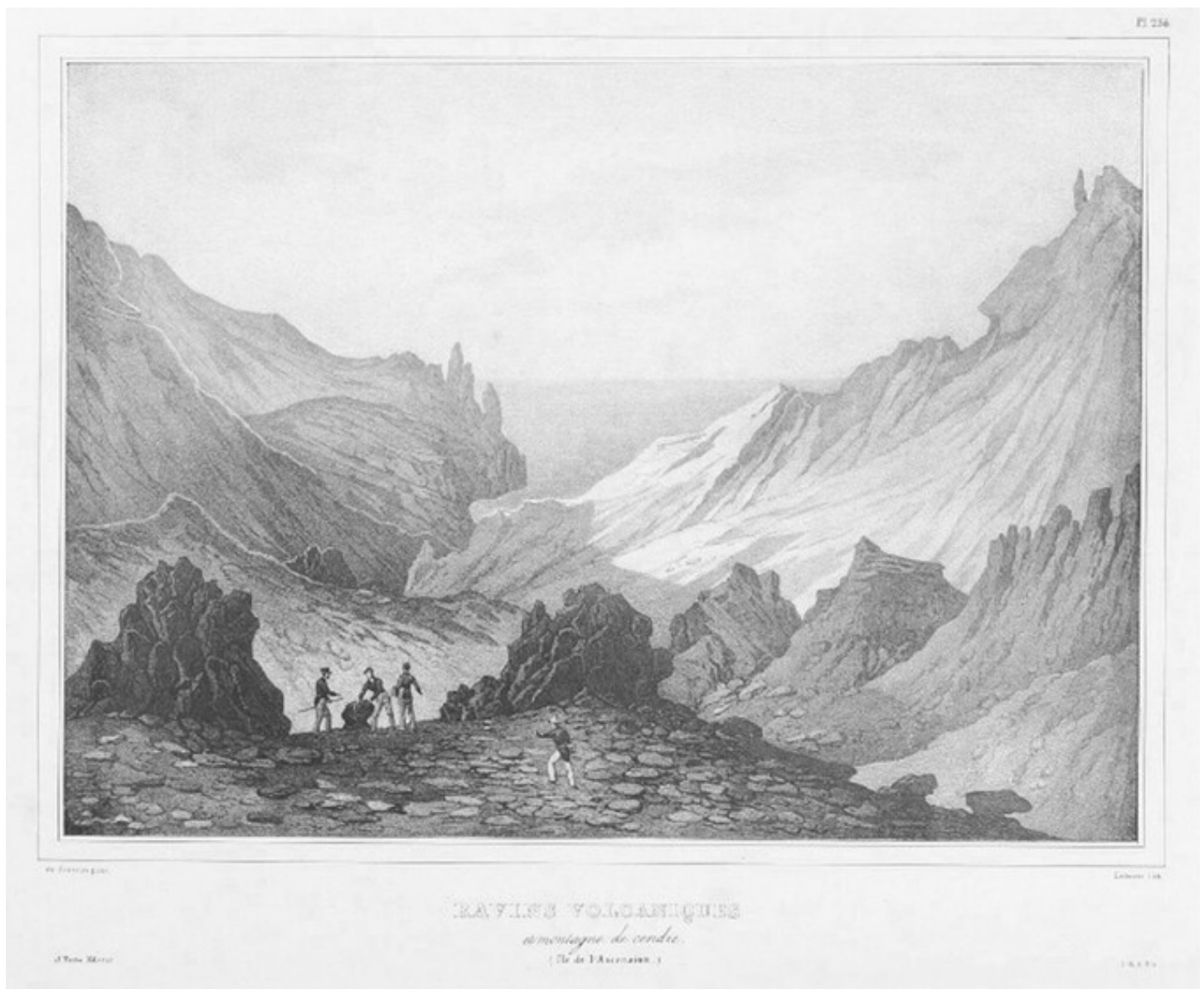
Through the history of Ascension Island we can trace the multi-century propagations of Empire as it strives to declare itself universal beyond even the confines of the

earth. In order to grasp the new mutations and violences of global capitalism, including the neo-feudalist and techno-feudalist doctrine of the emerging spacefaring billionaire class, Empire remains a critical heuristic.¹⁰

3. Seeding Empire

On Ascension Island, the empires of old would return time and again, in the form of the volunteer and enlisted soldiers of capital and the nation-state, who sowed the seeds for the manifestation of Empire in the present and pre-enacted Empire's propagation into outer space. Following Hasenbosch's grueling end on Ascension Island, it was Charles Darwin who became one of its most impactful visitors. His influence would be a key catalyst for engineering the island's future. Darwin was part of the second voyage of the HMS *Beagle* in 1831, by which time the British Empire had laid claim to Ascension Island in order to block any escape plan concocted by supporters of Napoleon Bonaparte, exiled on the neighboring island of Saint Helena. En route back to England from the Galapagos Islands, Darwin stopped by Ascension. Overlooking its volcanic landscape, on July 20, 1836 he noted in his diary: "The day was clear and hot, and I saw the island, not smiling with beauty, but staring with naked hideousness."¹¹

For Darwin, Ascension was "barren"—which is why he appreciated the small garden that Royal Navy soldiers made on the largest mountain of the island. Loyal to the



The volcanic landscape of Ascension Island. Jules Sebastien Cesar Dumont D'Urville, *Ravins Volcaniques et montagne de cendre (Ascension)*, 1833.

doctrine of the British Empire, Darwin declared his desire for the island to become “productive.” In other words, he longed for the tiny garden to expand across the entire island and facilitate Empire’s further propagation. This is a critical point, as it unifies propaganda’s double meaning: firstly as the propagation of a political, economic, and ideological order; and secondly, in biological terms, as the propagation of plants and animals.¹² In other words, Darwin knew that ecology was a political weapon.

Darwin’s directives were passed on by the British Admiralty to Joseph Dalton Hooker, premier botanist of the Victorian era and Darwin’s closest friend, who visited the island seven years later. Hooker’s advice to the navy involved a four-point strategy: establishing trees on the main mountain to increase rainfall,¹³ clothing steep slopes with vegetation to protect soil, planting dry-adapted

shrubs in lowlands, and introducing a wide variety of crops. With the help of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Kew, London, hundreds of shipments of trees were sent to Ascension. From 1847 through to 1850, Kew Gardens dispatched 330 shrubs and other plants to the island. Further consignments of seeds and plants from London and the Botanic Gardens in Cape Town continued over the following decades. About five thousand trees were planted in the period spanning 1860 to 1870. By the late 1870s, on the island’s highest peak at nine hundred meters, eucalyptus, pine, bamboo, and palm trees had taken root. Green Mountain was terraformed into existence. Darwin’s Garden of Empire had been propagated into reality.¹⁴

Essentially, Darwin and Hooker succeeded in what we would today call “geoengineering”: the alteration of an



Ascension Island's Green Mountain today demonstrates the successful geoengineering of the island by Darwin and Hooker. Clare M. Fieseler, National Geographic, 2017, still.

existing biosphere, or the creation of a biosphere where there was none previously. In the words of Mihnea Mircan:

The discourse of geoengineering updates the old metamorphic imaginary of Ovid [the Roman author of *Metamorphoses*] as an exponential increase of future entanglements: wholly new symbioses, unforeseen ricochets, interrelations across enormous distances, architectures of climate control partitioned by degrees of access to their affordances.¹⁵

For this large-scale climate-engineering event to succeed, plants and seeds stolen from occupied land were translocated to Ascension Island. Through this successful weaponization of ecology, Darwin and Hooker established a new colonial ecosystem that quickly pushed the native fern vegetation to near extinction, just as the agents of Empire had exterminated the human communities and ecosystems from which these plants had been abducted in the first place. As Mircan notes, Ascension's ecology produces

an image that geotags—in the middle of the Atlantic—Charles Darwin's elaboration of an economy

of nature, motivated to an extent by his experiences, in Brazil, of the combined ravages of deforestation and slavery, and the display of "green imperialism" at The Royal Botanic Gardens, London.¹⁶

Darwin and Hooker had established the Empire's very own biosphere. For Empire's propaganda cares not merely to rule the world as it is: after colonial extermination it terraforms, it seeds, and it geoengineers the world in its own image.¹⁷

4. Empire's Eyes

This was only the beginning. From the late nineteenth century onwards, the island was transformed into a remote global situation room—the operations hub for theaters of war and mass surveillance on earth and far beyond. In 1899, an underwater telegraph cable, known as the All Red Line, was installed; this major piece of infrastructure initiated the transformation of Ascension into a critical node in a worldwide system of modern communication and warfare.¹⁸ The All Red Line was an information net cast across the British Empire to oversee its colonies. It also laid the foundation for Britain's first modern propaganda bureau to intercept and control messages from enemies and allies during the First World



Photograph by Montgomery Williams depicting the laying of cable for the Western Telegraph Company on Ascension Island in 1910.

War.¹⁹ Today, the massive antennas of the British Broadcasting Corporation's Atlantic Relay Station, located on Ascension and installed to broadcast to England's former colonies, echo this first imperial propaganda web.

Ascension's geostrategic importance became evident again during the Second World War when, in 1939, the US government built Wideawake Airfield on the island: a base named after the sooty tern, a bird native to Ascension whose high-pitched sounds earned it the nickname "Wideawake," as it kept soldiers from sleeping.²⁰ From July 1942 until the end of the war, twenty-five thousand US planes, aided by the British, transited through Ascension Island, destined for war zones in North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe. In 1982, the British Royal Air Force reactivated Wideawake Airfield after Argentina reclaimed the colonized territory of Islas Malvinas. Ascension Island was a key transit zone for the subsequent Falklands War, at one stage becoming the busiest airport in the world.²¹

The island did not only supply and direct theaters of war across continents, but also surveilled other possible

threats to Empire. During the Cold War, the US Air Force constructed a target-tracking radar station on an area of the island known as Cat Hill. Nicknamed the "Golf Ball," it would subsequently become the location of a global surveillance facility established jointly by the US's NSA and the British GCHQ.²²

But, as we now see more clearly, orchestrating planetary war and mass surveilling the globe is not enough for Empire. Its eyes eventually reach toward the stars. In 1967, NASA built a tracking station on Ascension Island to support the Apollo lunar landing program.²³ Today, NASA and the Air Force Research Laboratory operate a Meter-Class Autonomous Telescope from the island as part of a deep-space surveillance system. The European Space Agency has also established a station on the northeast coast of the island to track its commercial Ariane rockets.

And so, Ascension Island is terraformed *and* techno-formed. Alongside Green Mountain and its surrounding volcanic remains, the island is now festooned



Joint NSA and GCHQ target-tracking radar station on Cat Hill, Ascension Island. Jerrye and Roy Klotz, 2005.

with an array of aerals and satellite dishes. Empire's colonial ecosystem is not limited to the organic realm alone: its tech-infrastructures of domination and surveillance—the ears and eyes of Empire—grow and map, once more, other worlds to propagate in its image.

5. *Universal Empire*

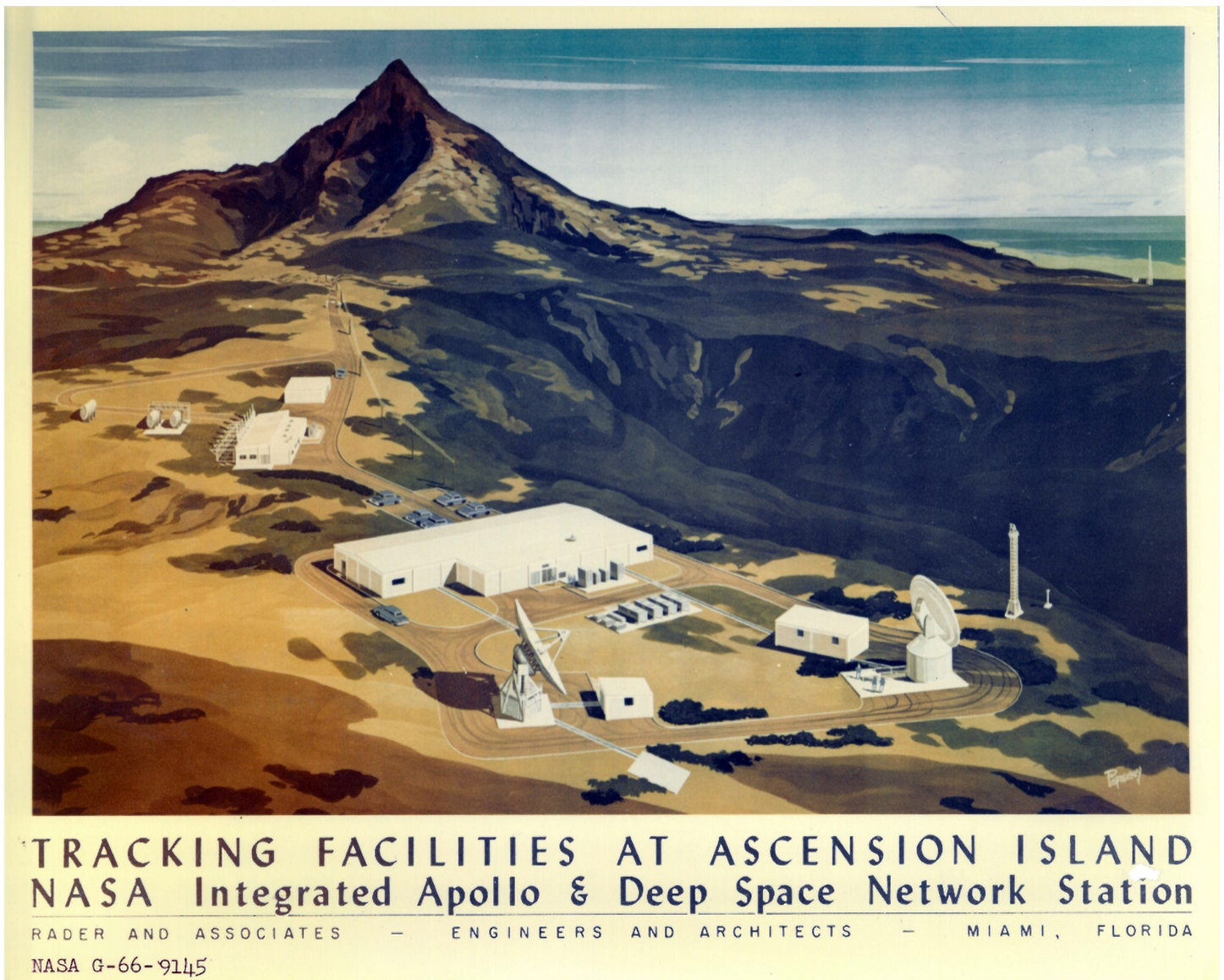
For Empire, places like Ascension Island are designed to propagate beyond earth, serving as proto-colonies for the martian terraforming missions ahead. Officially, nobody is "from" Ascension: the UK government denies the right of abode to anyone, turning the island's approximately eight hundred citizens into temporary residents. Ascension is known as a "work island." Most of the workforce moving in and out are British, American, or Saint Helenian. The latter, known as "Saints" for short, descend from African peoples, mixed-race Africans and Europeans, British settlers, East India Company employees, and indentured laborers from the South Asian subcontinent, the East Indies, Madagascar, and China.

Today, the US and British air forces control monthly access in and out of Ascension Island, and the British government appoints the governor of Ascension. There is

an elected Island Advisory Council, but it's rife with corruption. In the words of a group of island residents: "The elected Council has been used to legitimize an illegitimate system that has never been a true democracy and, it seems, was never intended to be."²⁴

Indeed, inhabitants of the island cannot even die there, let alone vote in any meaningful way. When the UK took control of Ascension, people who passed away on the island were officially classified as "died at sea." Ascension is Empire's utopia, a place to store exiles, air bases, and surveillance systems without any scrutiny from a citizenry, or even the vague appearance of a democratic system. No wonder the former Tory regime explored the possibility of sending asylum seekers to Ascension Island to await processing.²⁵ In Ascension, population numbers are controlled based on exactly what Empire needs in order to garden its colonial ecosystem and maintain its eyes and ears over the world and deep space.

And so, we can recognize another seed that was planted in Ascension's volcanic rock: the seed of neo- or techno-feudalism. Today, Ascension Island embodies a renewed colonial dream, one conjured by tech entrepreneurs like Peter Thiel, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk.



1966 painting produced by Rader and Associates depicting NASA's Manned Space Flight Network Station on Ascension Island, which would play a critical part in the Apollo Missions. Visual Archive, NASA Goddard Space Flight Center.

This dream declares large parts of earth and outer space to be terra nullius, "nobody's land." Like Ascension Island, these imagined space colonies are sites of massive technological experimentation and no democratic oversight, where rights-bearing citizens have been replaced by disposable workforces and governance is tightly controlled by a small group of elites. For the spacefaring trillionaire class to thrive, the precarious laborers tasked with terraforming Mars will, like Hasenbosch, be first recruited and then exiled by Empire.²⁶

Already in 1877, Scottish astronomer David Gill and writer Isobel Black Gill traveled to Ascension Island to view the alignment of Mars with the sun and the earth.²⁷ As a result, the southern bay of the island, a favorite nesting ground of the sooty tern, was named "Mars Bay." Many

agents of Empire have compared Ascension to the moon or Mars when setting foot on the island, and over the years they have terraformed and techno-formed the island into what they have actually wanted the moon and Mars to become: islands of Empire.

The power of the nation-state is waning. The new Ascension Islands that emerge are no longer the products of former kingdoms and states of old, but are firmly under the remit of the trillionaire class and its new techno-feudalist vision of Empire. In light of Hardt and Negri's observation that "with the appearance of Empire, we are confronted no longer with the local mediations of the universal but with a concrete universal itself," we see that the aim of elites today supersedes that of declaring Empire universal on earth; instead, they want to literally



Top: grave of the first generation of terraform workers on Mars, depicted in Elon Musk's SpaceX infomercial series Mars (National Geographic, 2016).
Bottom: graves at Bonetta cemetery of British colonists tasked with settling and later terraforming Ascension Island, who died of the yellow fever epidemic.

turn the universe into Empire.²⁸ We should thus not look at Ascension Island as the past, for Ascension's history is our future.

redefines the working class to include the “non-working class social class” in the post-Fordist service economy, as well as informal domestic and care work.³⁰ They recognize workers' power in collective organizing and in



Two models of Ascension Island, one preceding colonization (left) and one following colonization, with its three centuries of geo- and techno-engineering (right). Jonas Staal, *The Island and the Island*, 2023.

6. *Unknown Empire, or, Who Is the Island?*

I have narrated how Empire propagated Ascension into Empire's Island. The island's reconstitution shows us the transition from empires to Empire, and underscores that Hardt and Negri's description of the universalizing desires of Empire needs to be taken literally in the age of techno-feudalism.

But there is one more central concept in Hardt and Negri's work on Empire that I believe needs to be linked to Ascension Island. In parallel with the formation of Empire, Hardt and Negri describe the possibility of “counter-Empire” as the expression of the general will of the “multitude,” which they define as “an open and expansive network in which all differences can be expressed freely and equally, a network that provides the means of encounter so that we can work and live in common.”²⁹ Building on the workerist (*operaist*) movement and the autonomist Marxist tendencies that situated the working class at the center of capitalist development, Hardt and Negri argue that the “multitude”

the cooperation of “autonomous, independent, intellectual development; development of the potentialities (*potenze*) of labour.”³¹ This multitude is not just a reaction to Empire: it precedes, exists within, is parallel to, and acts as a counterpower to Empire. Could we then say there is a multitude that also shaped Ascension Island, well before the island was given a name it did not chose for itself? A multitude of other-than-human earth workers that formed the island's ecosystem?³² This leads to another critical question: Who is the island without Empire? How do you tell these two concurrent stories, the story of the island *and* the island?³³

Over the centuries, many have claimed to “discover” Ascension Island. João da Nova encountered the island on March 20, 1501—the day of the Feast of the Annunciation—and called it “Ilha Concepcao” (Island of the Conception). In 1503, Admiral Alfonso de Albuquerque encountered the island on Ascension Day and named it “Ilha Ascensao” (Island of the Ascension).³⁴ Many more agents of Empire, self-declared “discoverers,” landed on the island, and many wrote about it with scorn. The



Video collage of the island as multitude. Jonas Staal, *Empire's Island*, Video Study, 2023, still.

English tradesman and traveler Peter Mundy set foot on Ascension in 1656 and noted that “it is the most desolate and barren land, as if it were a land that God has cursed.”³⁵ So little do the colonists care for the island that it is deemed beyond even the declaration of *terra nullius*: not nobody’s land, but nobody’s land that nobody wants.

In truth, the island emerged from the ocean one million years ago and formed the tip of an undersea volcano. From an earth-time perspective, it is a young island. Before human settlement, its plant ecology included about thirty species, of which two grasses, two shrubs, and six ferns were native to the island.³⁶ Its most numerous inhabitants were green turtles and birds—including the sooty tern and the Sula—that bonded with the island through nesting and fishing. The Sula is more widely known today as the “booby,” in reference to the Spanish slang word “*bobo*,” meaning stupid.³⁷

There is much to say about the naming of the inhabitants of the island, as much as about the naming of the island itself. The Sula was considered stupid because it did not know to be afraid of Empire. It famously landed on the shoulders of visiting sailors, only to be clubbed to death and eaten. Similarly, the green turtles that lay their eggs on the island’s beaches were easily subdued by simply turning them on their backs. They were then loaded onto ships alive to provide fresh meat during long months of travel. Today, like much of the native vegetation, the green

turtles’ existence is threatened. Like all mass extinctions in the history of organized human society, this one begins in the colonial era. Climate catastrophe is a colonial catastrophe.³⁸

For the colonists and self-declared discoverers, the island could never truly be encountered. At first, it was a cursed land useful only for gathering meat and exiling deviants. To become valuable, Ascension had to be made “productive” through geoengineering. Today the island is still not considered a place but a mere staging ground for warfare, surveillance, and space colonization. The agents of Empire have always ascended away from Ascension Island. To ask *who is the island?* is to unknow Empire. It is to insist that the island was never “discovered” by Empire in the first place, as everything in this world already knows itself in its own way. We need to encounter the island on its own terms, as a multitude of its own, so that henceforth we can decide the terms for our future propagation together.

X

I want to thank Andreas Petrossiants for his editorial guidance, Mihnea Mircan for his important study of Ascension Island in *A Biography of Daphne* (2022) and his

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Jonas Staal is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. His most recent book is *Climate Propagandas: Stories of Extinction and Regeneration* (MIT Press, 2024).

1
Duff Hart-Davis, *Ascension: The Story of a South Atlantic Island* (Merlin Unwin Books, 2016).

2
Quoted in Alex Ritsema, *A Dutch Castaway on Ascension Island in 1725* (pub. by author, 2010), 102.

3
The most extensive study on Hasenbosch, which cross-checks his diary with the East India Company archives, is Michiel Koolbergen, *Een Hollandse Robinson Crusoe: Dagboek van de verbannen VOC-dienaar Leendert Hasenbosch op het onbewoond eiland van Ascension A.D. 1725* (Menken Kasander & Wigman Uitgevers, 2002).

4
Koolbergen, *Een Hollandse Robinson Crusoe*.

5
On the East India Company and the definition of "sodomy," see Diederick Wildeman, "1727: Sodomy, the Zeewijk and the Dutch East India Company," in *The Wreck of the Zeewijk*, ed. Drew Pettifer (Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery, 2020).

6
Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 354.

7
Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, "Empire, Twenty Years On," *New Left Review*, no. 120 (November–December 2019): 69.

8
Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 198.

9
Negri summarizes the end-of-history thesis in this way: "The globalization of capital is in itself a globalization of democracy." He goes on to note that "this position has been carried to the extremes, even to the point of caricature, by Francis Fukuyama." Antonio Negri, *Reflections on Empire* (Polity, 2003), 7.

10
The terms "neo-feudalist" and "techno-feudalist" describe a shift in capitalism where trillion-dollar companies like Amazon replace the neoliberal market with a full monopolized environment. They grant digital fiefs to vassals (vendors) in exchange for rent. Consumers themselves are exploited as unpaid data workers who train algorithms and other

forms of artificial intelligence. See Jodi Dean, "Neofeudalism: The End of Capitalism?," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 12, 2020 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neofeudalism-the-end-of-capitalism/>; Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (The Bodley Head, 2023); and Varoufakis, *Another Now: Dispatches from Another Present* (The Bodley Head, 2020), 145–46.

11
Charles Darwin, *The Voyage of the Beagle* (P. F. Collier & Son Corporation, 1909), 495–96.

12
"The word 'propaganda' comes from the ablative singular feminine of *propogandus*, which is the gerundive of the Latin *propagare*, meaning 'to propagate.' The original use of the word stems from the field of biology." Erwin W. Fellows, "Propaganda: History of a Word," *American Speech* 34, no. 3 (October 1959): 182.

13
Trees and forests increase rainfall intensity through the fungal spores, pollen, bacterial cells, and other particles they release into the atmosphere.

14
David C. Catling and Stedson Stroud, "The Greening of Green Mountain, Ascension Island," in *XXL-XS: New Directions in Ecological Design*, ed. Mitchell Joachim Mike Silver (ACTAR Publishing, 2017).

15
Mihnea Mircan, "A Biography of Daphne" (PhD diss., Monash University, Melbourne, 2022), 154.

16
Mircan, "Biography of Daphne," 145.

17
While this is partly like other colonial terraforming projects, such as the introduction of European vegetation into occupied Palestine, the difference is that Israeli settlers brought pines from Europe, whereas Darwin and Hooker brought samples from *existing* colonies to a *new* colony.

18
George Johnson, *The All Red Line: The Annals and Aims of the Pacific Cable Project* (James Hope and Sons, 1903).

- 19 Philip M. Taylor, *British Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: Selling Democracy* (Edinburgh University Press, 1999).
- 20 This is where the name of Mike Linley's documentary *Wideawake Island* (1984) comes from.
- 21 Hart-Davis, *Ascension*, 175–90, 200–7.
- 22 Sarah Mainwaring and Richard J. Aldrich, "The Secret Empire of Signals Intelligence: GCHQ and the Persistence of the Colonial Presence," *International History Review*, no. 43 (2021).
- 23 See Michael Orrom's film *Apollo in Ascension* (1967).
- 24 Editorial, *The Islander*, October 2015.
- 25 Kevin Rawlinson, Diane Taylor, and Aletha Adu, "UK May Try to Send Small Boat Arrivals to Ascension Island, Minister Confirms," *The Guardian*, August 7, 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/aug/07/uk-may-try-to-send-small-boat-arrival-s-to-ascension-island-minister-confirms>.
- 26 The agreement that users of Starlink, Musk's SpaceX subsidiary, must sign embodies the techno-feudalist strategy for monopolizing outer space. The tenth clause reads: "For Services provided on Mars, or in transit to Mars via Starship or other spacecraft, the parties recognize Mars as a free planet and that no Earth-based government has authority or sovereignty over Martian activities." Referring to Mars as a "free" planet in this context does not mean that Mars or its future inhabitants will have political agency themselves; rather, it speaks to the proprietary rights of SpaceX to extract and geoengineer the planet without any governmental or democratic interference.
- 27 Isobel Sarah Black Gill, *Six Months in Ascension: An Unscientific Account of a Scientific Expedition* (John Murray, 1978).
- 28 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 19.
- 29 Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (Penguin Press, 2004), 323, xiii–xiv.
- 30 Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, 101.
- 31 Negri, *Reflections on Empire*, 101.
- 32 On the concept of "earth workers," see Radha D'Souza and Jonas Staal, *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes* (Framer Framed, 2024), 10–21.
- 33 Paraphrasing China Miéville, *The City & the City* (Pan Books, 2011).
- 34 Koolbergen, *Een Hollandse Robinson Crusoe*, 115–16.
- 35 Quoted in Koolbergen, *Een Hollandse Robinson Crusoe*, 126.
- 36 David M. Wilkinson, "The Parable of Green Mountain: Ascension Island, Ecosystem Construction and Ecological Fitting," *Journal of Biogeography*, no. 31 (2004): 1.
- 37 *Wild World: Ascension Island*, produced by Ned Kelly, 1973, BBC Bristol. See also Philip Ashmole and Myrtle Ashmole, *St. Helena and Ascension Island: A Natural History* (Anthony Nelson, 2000).
- 38 D'Souza and Staal, *Court for Intergenerational Climate Crimes*.

Continued from "On Paralysis, Part 2 "

1. Adulteration

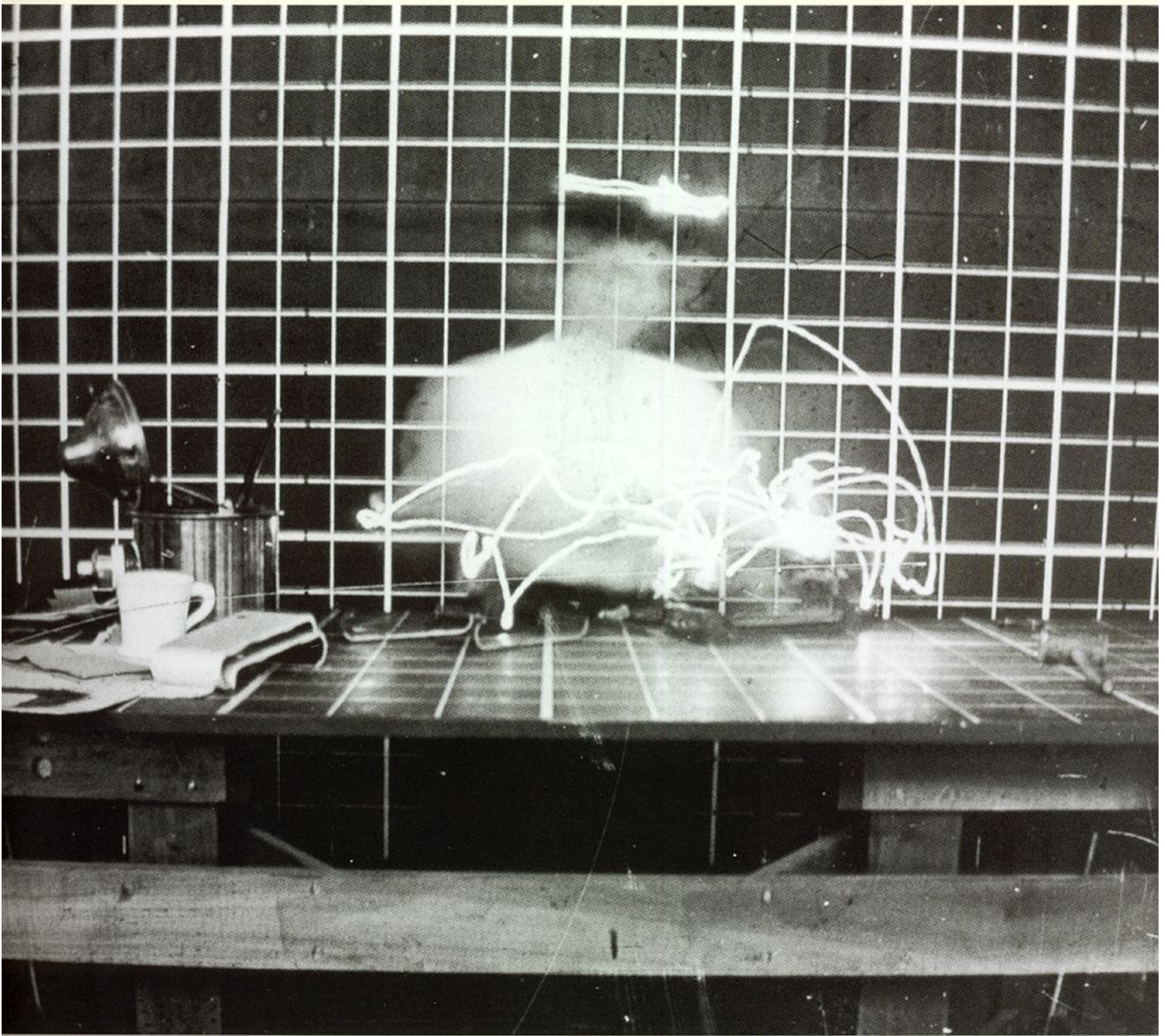
The word to describe an intentional paralysis of the flow of goods through market channels is "sabotage." It may not be the most common word today, but it was the one consistently employed by those who advocated for sabotage as a tactic in the first two decades of the term's wider use.¹ One of their key arguments was that its slowdowns and apparent accidents are not set against a regime of purely rationalized productivity and transparent efficiency. Instead, these mediated and cunning paralyzes unfolded within an order of work and commerce that was itself already sabotaged and sabotaging, marked by constant adulteration, corner-cutting, and willful restriction of supply.

A significant part of this tendency detailed in these early accounts is the specific kind of circulatory paralysis that Joris Ivens explodes in *New Earth* (*Nieuwe gronden*), the 1934 film I discussed extensively in Part 2 of this essay. While the bulk of the film centers on the technical feat of filling in a sea in order to grow grain, its focus shifts dramatically at its end to how that grain will not reach those who need it most, because of price speculation and intentional restriction of market supply. Two decades prior to *New Earth*, Industrial Workers of the World militant Walker C. Smith detailed how

coffee was destroyed by the Brazilian planters; barge loads of onions were dumped overboard in California; apples are left to rot on the trees of whole orchards in Washington; and hundreds of tons of foodstuffs are held in cold storage until rendered unfit for consumption. All to raise prices.²

For her part, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn describes the way that "bananas and oranges rot on the ground" and "whole skiffs of fruits are dumped into the ocean" because "employers interfere with the quality of production, they interfere with the quantity of production, they interfere with the supply as well as with the kind of goods." This is what she calls an "antisocial sabotage," insofar as it "is aimed at the good of the few at the expense of the many, whereas working-class sabotage is distinctly social, it is aimed at the benefit of the many, at the expense of the few."³ Her reference to interference with the "quality of production" is crucial for pointing to the idea of *adulteration* (rather than obvious destruction or restriction), the degradation or making poorer in quality by dilution or other means that is all too familiar to a social and material proletarian lifeworld rife with toxic, shoddy, and deceptive materials. Exemplary of this attention to a quotidian landscape of the cheap and poisonous is a

Evan Calder Williams On Paralysis, Part 3



A time-motion study by Frank Bunker Gilbreth and Lillian Gilbreth from the early twentieth century.

passage by Louis Adamic unfolding a litany of accusatory questions:

If the workers, in their efforts to gain economic advantages, damaged property and destroyed materials, did not the bosses, in the interest of profits, destroy property with a ruthless and careless hand? ... Did not millers and bakers mix talcum, chalk, and other cheap and harmful ingredients with flour? Did not candy manufacturers sell glucose and taffy made with vaseline, and honey made with starch and chestnut meal? Wasn't vinegar often made of

sulphuric acid? Didn't farmers and distributors adulterate milk and butter?⁴

For early twentieth-century theorists of sabotage and paralysis like Flynn, "adulteration" was a crucial term serving both as a specific corporate action to be countered and as a metonym for the predatory and debilitating practices of corporations and industries more generally. Yet their interest in the term also carried a cunning possibility for a conceptual inversion whereby adulteration could be wielded as a tactic against those



very practices. More specifically, these thinkers asked how sabotage could adulterate labor itself, admixing a portion of “bad work” and feigned clumsiness, introducing slipups, delays, and errors into what might appear to be business as usual, even to the close scrutiny of a boss.

Veblen extends this further, towards a generative flattening that views sabotage as naming “a certain system of industrial strategy or management, whether it is employed by one or another,” i.e., by those with an interest in challenging capital or those who seek to extend it. While for John Spargo, workers’ strategic use of sabotage is only



Piles of coffee beans destined for destruction in 1938. Photographer unknown.

2. War and Industry

In an intriguing 1921 text, the sociologist and economist Thorstein Veblen elaborates his own argument about the bivalent ubiquity of sabotage, extensively detailing sabotage’s centrality within business management and strategy itself. He notes that the

tactics of these syndicalists, and their use of sabotage, do not differ, except in detail, from the tactics of other workmen elsewhere, or from the similar tactics of friction, obstruction, and delay habitually employed, from time to time, by both employees and employers to enforce an argument about wages and prices.⁵

destructive and suggests a forfeiture of strategy itself, in Veblen’s account the balance sheet is far from equal in terms of the damage caused to social well-being, even if he does not defend its “less amiable manifestations”:

the industrial system is deliberately handicapped⁶ with dissension, misdirection, and unemployment of material resources, equipment, and man power, at every turn where the statesmen or the captains of finance can touch its mechanism; all the civilized peoples are suffering privation together because their general staff of industrial experts are in this way required to take orders and submit to sabotage at the words of the statesmen and the vested interests.⁷

Veblen is well aware that his use of “sabotage” is at odds with how, “in American usage the word is very often taken to mean forcible obstruction, destructive tactics, industrial frightfulness, incendiarism and high explosives.”⁸ Yet that common usage is no accident. As he points out explicitly, it represents an ongoing and willful attempt, one “shaped chiefly by persons and newspapers who have aimed to discredit the use of sabotage by organized workmen, and have therefore laid stress on its less amiable manifestations,” displacing the meaning of sabotage from paralysis and “bad work” to more obvious forms of damage, destruction, maiming, and violence.⁹ This attempt unfolds on two fronts I’ve already suggested as central to the trope of paralysis more broadly, that of *war* and of *industry*.¹⁰

“Industry” as a frame of meaning is obviously relevant from the beginning of sabotage as a political (and anti-political) idea, given the way its earliest advocates conceptualized it as a form of “working badly”: adulterating the rate and quality of one’s labor by introducing unannounced stoppages, lags, errors, and apparent accidents (that employers cannot prove to be otherwise) into the chain of production and circulation. This close link is understandable given the absolute focus on efficiency that marks management thinking—Taylorism, the Gilbreths’ time and motion studies, and factory organization more broadly—during the very years that sabotage emerges as a term and tactic. And it also furnishes some of the most evocative images of acts of physical sabotage, like hiding glass soda bottles inside the engines of cars as they roll through the assembly line. However, the close bond of sabotage to industrial production, as well as other forms of heavily technical waged work, can lead to an excess focus on certain *kinds* of work, particularly those that appear manual and mechanical, and whose forms of tactical paralysis also have the sort of drastic, suddenly halted clarity to them that fits too cleanly along the breakdown/insight pairing I detailed in the first two installments of this essay.

In addition, the idea of sabotage was also transformed by the specific way its opponents demonized it in the first two decades of the twentieth century, canceling out much of the subtlety and potent unreadability or uncertainty crucial for its theorists and advocates, including within industrial contexts. Such critique happened along two closely related lines. First, as Veblen himself notes, it came to be defined above all as an act of destruction, committing violence against an employer’s factory, vehicles, spaces, or crops. This is despite the fact that nearly all its early advocates put continual stress on the fact that sabotage was not about destruction but about a negation that “destroyed” only efficiency, whether by adulterating the time of labor by working slowly or sloppily, by producing commodities that were visibly too poor for sale, by slowing the circulation of goods, or by temporarily disabling the means of work. In short, it is a tactic of paralysis that

introduces friction, latency, and threat into the transformation of capital into commodities and back again.

The accusations stuck, and even prior to furnishing the language subsequently used in law to criminalize radicals, they came from other leftists like Spargo, who did the work for the state by laying this ground. In article after article, and in a heap of books, socialists and more reformist labor organizations did their damndest to cast potential saboteurs or advocates out of socialism and into anarchism—horrors!—and to neutralize sabotage’s unreadable agency by reducing it to simple damage.¹¹ For a single instance among too many, consider James Boyle’s definition of sabotage, published in 1913 (early in a decade that will only amplify this further). Gone is any sense of paralysis, replaced with “damage” and “destruction” in what he sees as the anarcho-disaster of syndicalism:

“sabotage”—that is, damage to and the destruction of machinery and the means of production and distribution, including such damage to plants as will prevent the operation of what are classed as “public utilities”; and any means to interfere with the process of production and transportation.¹²

As for the military mode, that meaning of sabotage and its paralyses also came quickly. Barely a decade and a half after sabotage was first explicitly posed in the political milieu of French anarcho-syndicalism, the term in English comes to be used regarding the First World War. To be sure, the trope of war is already present in the language of sabotage’s first advocates, where it appears as a specific operation within class war. In Émile Pouget’s foundational text, sabotage is gathered under the sign of the “guerrilla”: “This execration of the regular armies for the guerrillas does not surprise us, neither we are [*sic*] astonished at the horror capitalists express for sabotage. In truth sabotage is to the social war what guerrillas are to national wars.”¹³ And in the introduction to Pouget’s book by Arturo Giovannitti, who not only frames Pouget’s theory for an (anti-)American readership but also brilliantly develops it himself, we can find the figure of espionage, as “the saboteur ... [operates] exactly like a spy in disguise in the camp of the enemy.”¹⁴

However, the term quickly disseminates beyond the orbit of their readers as a term both slangy and technical, and in the context of mass warfare, it comes to designate actions like when a railway is blown apart, a battleship sitting in harbor has a hole blown in its hull from divers below, or telegraph cables are cut. In other words, it starts to locate, in both a legally codified and widely disseminated way, the idea of sabotage within the clarity of a visible act that results in explicit destruction or permanent damage. Moreover, these are attacks that also can be bound to



Palestine Railways H3 class 4-6-4T steam locomotive (converted from a WWI Baldwin 4-6-0) and freight train on the Jaffa and Jerusalem line after being sabotaged by Zionist terrorists, 1946. License: CC0.

specific actors, to saboteurs and special agents who carry them out indeed unseen yet who remain available to become alternately celebrated or demonized, as brave avant-garde fighters or nefarious agents of an enemy that refuse to fight fair, depending entirely from which side the attack comes.¹⁵ In the same years when the US state will define sabotage in a labor context through anti-sedition laws as destruction of property, it will also by 1920 criminalize (in US Code § 2153, “Destruction of war material, war premises, or war utilities”) whoever “willfully injures, destroys, contaminates or infects, or attempts to so injure, destroy, contaminate or infect any war material, war premises, or war utilities” with the “intent to injure, interfere with, or obstruct the United States or any associate nation in preparing for or carrying on the war or defense activities.”¹⁶ And while that code itself won’t formally gain the word “sabotage” until mid-century, this did not stop newspapers from referring to it at the time as the “sabotage act.”

Obviously, those instances of military sabotage, or attacks on the means of war-making, are real. Especially in the context of insurgent and anti-colonial battles, they were often acts of cunning and ingenuity, activating technical

materials, perceptual expectations, tightly coupled systems, and the latent properties of landscapes in order to produce profound effects. (For all the instances of dynamiting the track or the bridge, there are subtler and stranger moments throughout these scattered histories, from moving stones to encourage a stream to wash away a supply road to filling a dead rat with plastic explosives so that it “might be shoveled into [a boiler or furnace] for disposal.”¹⁷) Nevertheless, the primary effect of the capture of sabotage by this military context is to bind its meaning closely to those disabling attacks on infrastructure, armaments, or sites.

Two key points follow. First, and more obviously, this feeds into that tendency by states and reformist parties/thinkers to actively misdefine what any of sabotage’s early theorists had proposed, dislocating it from the complex and messy realm of bad work and into the legal space of violence against property. Once sabotage gets increasingly defined as an act of war, it’s a small step to insist that it is not only fundamentally violent but also that it never belonged within the language or sphere of politics: it becomes the sneaky, individual act that refuses to negotiate, vote, or discuss, and instead insists on *war*. (Again, no

disagreement here from most of its advocates, who welcome the exit from the charade of representational politics.) Second, insofar as the core of that misdefined meaning hinges on infrastructural damage and interruptions to supply chains or lines of communication, “sabotage” becomes more broadly a word used to speak of almost *any* warfare that does not take the form of openly firing upon soldiers or enemy positions. Yet, as has become atrociously clear in the debilitation of necessary services and infrastructures that formed the decades-long backdrop to Israel’s current genocidal assault on Gaza, contemporary warfare enacted by sovereign states consists largely of precisely these forms of irregular and unofficial war. In other words, from our cursed vantage point, with its extensive tactical emphasis on paralysis and debilitation through aerial campaigns and cyberattacks, sabotage starts to show itself not to be war’s disavowed underside so much as its leading edge.

What, then, is the consequence of framing sabotage within the logic of industry and war? On one side, sabotage gets narrowly defined in terms of that more directly visible (and blamable) act of damage or destruction, rather than its uneven paralyses, hitches, and adulterations. Simultaneously, however, it also becomes identified as the acute symptom of mistaken and individualistic political tendencies that run counter to the supposedly correct direction for collective action, whether nationalistic war or class struggle itself. In this way, sabotage comes to exemplify and stand in as the name for the extra-political mode marked more broadly by the trope of paralysis. In the decades to follow, it will be read repeatedly as the sign of a selfish, sneaky, and destructive subjectivity, one that will not be allowed even by a socialist politics that sought to be a militant counter to capital’s organization of the world.

3. *The Inhuman*

The framing of sabotage within the martial and industrial context has also led to significant restrictions in what it could mean, both because of excess emphasis on destruction and on the way that it has overshadowed forms of labor, domination, and resistance that don’t align so easily with more familiar figurations of the waged male worker or the soldier. However, there is an aspect that remains crucial in both registers and that comes close to naming what’s so distinct about the mutually determining relation of sabotage and paralysis. This is a particular understanding of technique and technicity, and more specifically of a mode of human engagement that eschews traditional politics in favor of routing itself *through* (and thereby becoming almost indistinguishable *from*) the normal operations of a machine, system, process, or space. Less abstractly, we can think of how acts of sabotage are able to remain both undetectable and disarming because they engender paralyses without any immediately provable person behind them: the server can crash because someone “accidentally” (but intentionally)

overloaded the power supply, but it also can crash because drawing that much continual energy into circuits within an overheated room means that breakdowns will inevitably happen.¹⁸ Taken together, the attacks on sabotage for eschewing accepted modes of representational and organized political participation were largely meant to discredit it as a tactic, yet those condemnations also got something right. Sabotage does flaunt those conventions and requirements, and in place of them, it articulates itself in a language we might call *inhuman*.

If sabotage is a language, it is a purely negative one. It does not offer its own signs, it does not put forward something uniquely its own, and, if successful, it cannot be traced back to a legible “speaker” or author. Sabotage can produce startling occasions and possibilities, surreal images of implausible novelty and almost comic inversion, like the entire orchard of fruit trees planted upside down, their bared roots waving to the sky. However, it proceeds only in the terms of an already established process, structure, or system, because if it didn’t, it couldn’t dwell in the space of unprovable doubt to remain always potentially an accident, just a tired and poor performance on the job that day. Within those terms, sabotage shows itself only in relation to expected functions, appearing as latency or stoppage. It appears as what does not happen, does not get transmitted, does not get completed, and does not respond, forming a syntax of stutters, lags, and interruptions, a dissipated rhythm of paralyses.¹⁹

To speak of this as “inhuman” is not to name all the nonhuman parts of these spaces or processes that can get activated. Rather, it is to think about the specific relations and frictions that gather in the circuits and interactions between humans, materials, machinery, weather, and other forms of life when they are yoked together in the reproduction of capital. Part of what is genuinely radical about sabotage is how it materially and tactically seizes on those interactions and connections between the animate and the inanimate alike. Rather than continually diverting potential agency into forms and languages much more commonly understood as political, like a slogan or a march, sabotage takes within those inhuman networks. Admitting that the game is already rigged and there is no fair fight to be had, it splits away from the narrowed channels of the expected and allowable and into the terrain of the possible. And from this, it shows that when one’s capacity is dislocated from a knowable, identifiable, predictable, and legally targetable entity, it gains tremendously in force.

This expansion of possible action, while masking one’s culpability, is what leads states to scramble to legally define and criminalize sabotage. It’s also what caused leading critics of such tactics like Spargo to not only disavow it but to rightly understand it as coming from and articulating an “anti-political” position, as he explicitly describes the Wobblies (and their open mockery of the



Kidult tags Balenciaga's Paris Flagship with "Merry Crisis." 2019.

idea that revolutionaries should obey bourgeois laws or accede to the procedures of representational politics). As I've suggested earlier, we'd be right to detect in this a different kind of rejection, one closer to incompatibility, unthinkability, and even disgust. This has everything to do with those chains of paralysis that span organisms, machines, materials, and spaces, and that show the deep links of circulation and transmission already active between them. It has to do with the ways that thinkers of paralysis (like the Wobblies) spoke of and against a lived world of adulteration, denigration, and abjection in which workers were seen to be as cheap and replaceable as the inanimate tools they worked with. And perhaps most of all, it has to do with how, in the face of this, both workers and those excluded from formal work articulated forms of struggle that did not seek purity or exodus from those chains. Instead, they moved in and through them, passing through the material bonds formed by the very processes of labor, exploitation, and domination they wanted to ruin.

I want to return here to that dramatic phrase of Spargo's: "This social cataclysm is to take the form of the General Strike, when the proletariat paralyzes society by becoming motionless."²⁰ In his phrasing, we can feel that trace of

disgust, a certain sneering affect in excess of his insistence that paralysis-oriented tactics will be a political disaster, or a dishonorable threat to civil society at large. The sneer gathers around the word "motionless," which isn't a one-off in his writing. Nine pages later in the same book, we find another iteration of the same claim: "Labor needs but to fold its arms and become inactive in order to terrorize the world. In a single sentence we have a graphic portrayal of a world paralyzed, not by insurrection and bloody revolt, but by the non-action of the producing masses."²¹ Here is that same mimetic contagiousness ascribed to paralysis, but as a fixation on a willful *self*-paralysis. What he describes is an anti-political action that is neither insurgent nor revolutionary. It takes instead takes the form of "non-action," becoming "motionless" and "inactive." One becomes like an object, the very obstinate middle that holds up processes and blocks the relays.

In short, this action disables by disabling itself, and the way it reveals an ableist imaginary that hinges on the image of the healthy, active, publicly present, legible citizen-worker is unmistakable. If paralysis as a trope cannot be reduced to a mere stand-in for physical paralysis, as I've argued, the unease produced by paralysis

as a willful tactic turns out to rest heavily on the figure of the paralyzed person and on long histories of social exclusion and disgust. This is hardly exceptional. It is instead yet another example of just how central putatively normal perception, mobility, and “action” are for the basic contours of a public politics: the promise and demand of using your voice, of standing up and being seen and counted, of being consistently coherent, audible, legible, and sane. The promise of the “upstanding citizen” is posed against the figure of the cripple, etymologically bound to the one who creeps, who stays low, to the one who is not proud and erect and in public view.²² In this way, that figure—along with the hobbled, the mute, the blind, the mad, the deaf, the chronic, and, of course, the paralyzed—becomes the exemplary negative definition. Construed as unable to “stand on their own two feet,” to be autonomous, or to exist without networks of support and collaboration that exceed them, the one understood as paralyzed, inactive, and motionless comes to abjectly stand in for what cannot be allowed in the realm of the political—including for those forms of tactical “non-action” that produce real effects in the world, chaining out and out.

4. Unavoidable Delay

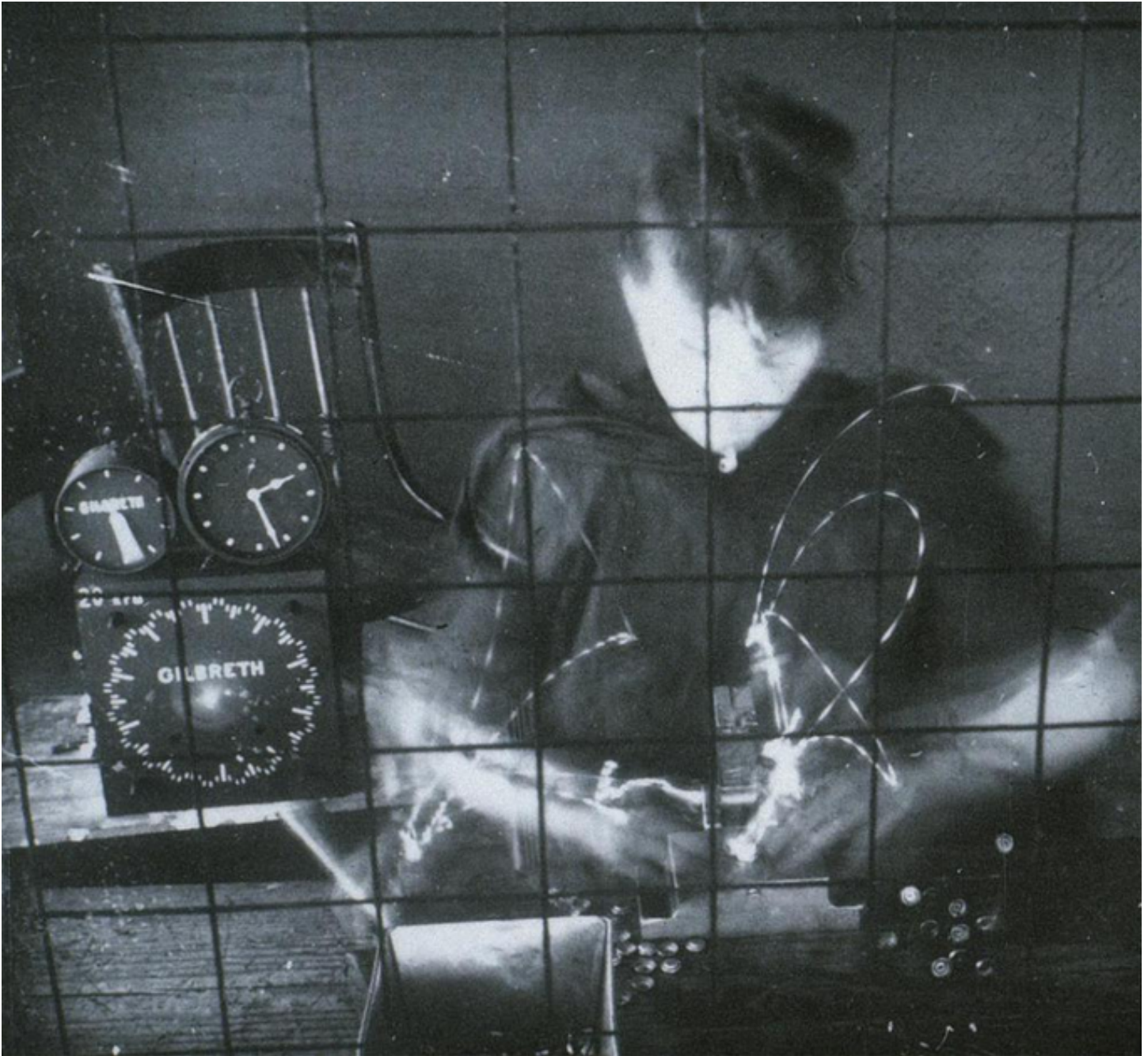
When a person is paralyzed, in whatever way, they are shadowed by a dense overlay of social and cultural tropes that extend far beyond what is or is not conventionally political. This takes place on a practical and often daily level, given how the frequent employment of paralysis as a casual figure of speech risks drastically dismissing the lived experiences of those with paralyzing impairments and occluding actual forms of privation, lack of adequate support, and denigration.²³ Moreover, the persistence of cultural imaginaries of paralysis generates significant consequences in terms of shaping what will be seen as socially possible or acceptable, including in the laws and policies that buttress those judgments. Think, for instance, of the recurrent cultural coding of a person with some form of highly visible paralysis as alternately evil or “twisted,” or as radically desexualized, infantile, or pitiable.²⁴ For such a figure, the only culturally sanctioned options are to be hidden from public life or recuperated by the fantasy of rehabilitation, the “supercrip” who performs beyond normality itself as an “inspiration.”²⁵

That promise of rehabilitation signals more than just a de-paralyzing fantasy of return to previous levels of mobility that aligns easily with ableist conceptions of normal function and health. Unsurprisingly, such a promise is also grounded in the specific idea of a return to *work*, hinging on the ongoing valuation, or the abject devaluation, of an individual’s relation to economic productivity. The density of these bonds between disability and work can hardly be stressed enough, as is evident from how in many countries, such as the United States, to “go on disability”—i.e., receive state support—requires being judged unable to perform waged labor.²⁶ Moreover,

that very idea of “disability” itself does not exist separately from the relations of capital. As Marta Russel and Ravi Malhotra sharply frame it, “disability is a socially-created category derived from labor relations, a product of the exploitative economic structure of capitalist society: one which creates (and then oppresses) the so-called ‘disabled’ body as one of the conditions that allow the capitalist class to accumulate wealth.”²⁷ Again, though, it’s crucial to refuse any easy sense of a preexisting and stable ideology of work that sorts and casts out those who are impaired and labels them as disabled and unproductive. The relationship is nearly the opposite. Ideas about work are constituted around—and honed through trying to manage, neutralize, and profit from—debilitation, while the kinds of work continually shaped by those very ideas are themselves often physically debilitating.

This is true of many of the histories in which paralysis is so deeply entangled, all of which involve situations that are not only compared to paralysis or understood through it, but that also hinge on a density of quite literally paralyzing activities.²⁸ War, and the ongoing martial operations, testing, and training that happen throughout nominal “peacetime,” makes this especially explicit. The centrality of paralysis as an idea with which to theorize about what strategic air power can do to enemy infrastructure leads to actual bombing campaigns that kill and maim, in ways that materially enact those hellish homologies between humans and energy networks.²⁹ But this feedback between the idea of paralysis and the system of paralyzing activities is equally central to histories of capitalist production and reproduction. For instance, regimes of work discipline, industrial rhythm, and pressure were consistently generative of physical paralyses, as well as of paralyzing tactics such as sabotage used to disrupt those regimes. As historians like Anson Rabinbach, Karin Bijsterveld, and Michael Rosenow have lucidly extended, we shouldn’t discount the political force of reckoning with workplace accidents or debilitation through slow and ongoing daily activities, chemical exposures, and repeated tasks, including informal and relatively unmechanized kinds of labor central to contemporary industries, such as mining.³⁰ In addition, much like Mara Mills has shown with regard to the dynamics of deafening, and the uses made of Deaf persons, within histories of telephonic technologies those who were paralyzed or otherwise debilitated were not de facto ejected from laboring, but were instead central to how labor would be transformed.³¹

We can find this dynamic in especially dramatic form in the influential work of early twentieth-century “scientific management” theorists Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, known both for their time and motion studies of labor processes and for their only-somewhat-tongue-in-cheek application of those principles to streamlining family life, detailed by two of their children in the book *Cheaper by the Dozen*. In both their practices and writings, the Gilbreths are relentlessly devoted to the reduction of inefficiency in labor to save energy, reduce unnecessary fatigue, and,



A time-motion study by Frank Bunker Gilbreth and Lillian Gilbreth from the early twentieth century.

above all, neutralize the fundamental “waste” of effort and time hidden within every human movement, particularly when at work. According to Frank and Lillian, “there is no waste of any kind in the world that equals the waste from needless, ill-directed, and ineffective motions, and their resulting unnecessary fatigue.”³² The battle against this “waste” gets posed as a civilizational battle stretching back across human history, only now conquerable with modern means, yet theirs is also a project with explicitly nationalist overtones that can be strategically couched to suit a war economy and a desire for American imperial hegemony. The solution they propose is a total analytical

dissection of labor processes, breaking single tasks into discrete parts to detect the little gaps in time that could be closed. Such minute lags and “micromotions” will necessarily get missed without the tools the Gilbreths turn to, like moving picture cameras—turned to face workers with chronometers in front of the lens and reticular grids on the wall behind for scale—and a “chronocyclegraph,” which allowed them to zoom in on a single gesture to see its tiny deviations and wasted movements frame by frame.³³ In their methodology, delays and breakdowns take a form almost directly counter to simple malingering or the kind of willful self-stasis that Spargo denounced. Rather, what

causes the inefficiency that the Gilbreths target is too *much* movement, an excess of animacy and motions that need not be done to complete a task, resulting in unnecessary fatigue and wasted opportunities for profit.

Yet at the heart of this, there is one figure seen to most embody this “wasted” energy and time in full—not in a specific action, badly choreographed task, or laziness, but in their entire being. This is what they designated as the “cripple,” and especially those American soldiers who were wounded in World War I. “What,” the Gilbreths ask, “is to be done with these millions of cripples, when their injuries have been remedied as far as possible, and when they are obliged to become again a part of the working community?”³⁴ The solution they provide, unsurprisingly, will make use of the same analytical tools they deploy elsewhere, albeit with the difference of trying to develop prescribed movements that might be adequate to bodies with a restricted range of motion. In this way, the Gilbreths aim to conquer paralysis, and to do so by a prosthetic joining, binding an impaired body to a mechanical process that allows it to achieve speed and mobility, and, in the process, “to inspire the cripple with the feeling that he can remain, or become, a productive member of the community.”³⁵

The “cripple” therefore emblemizes the waste of America’s “human resources” for the Gilbreths.³⁶ It manifests a physical limit—the body that is conventionally seen to be unable to do productive work—but also a political one that they cannot even fathom, or at least allow publicly: the idea that anyone might challenge either the supposed utility of this frenzy of streamlined work or the very category of what constitutes “waste” itself. For the Gilbreths, the “elimination of waste” is not merely a project of capital. It is a civilization-scale undertaking that benefits all involved in the process: “All workers are sharing in the savings made possible by the elimination of waste.”³⁷ Yet the counter to this is the dizzying quantity of waste *produced* by the logic of competition between firms, as well as the wasting of what has been produced, both through the irrationalities of the market and the kinds of willfully orchestrated “antisocial sabotage” that Joris Ivens detailed with lucid fury. So, in an obscene extension of what the Gilbreths saw at every workstation, this excess motion of the circulation of capital itself is what becomes glut first, then paralysis. It brings about a crisis of overaccumulation in which circulation chokes on itself, leaving people starving while food sits and rots in the warehouses, until it is set ablaze in the fields where it was harvested and where ocean waves used to roll.

What we see in the Gilbreths’ motion studies is the proper challenge to sabotage. It is not mere surveillance, increased policing, or something that openly oppresses and invites a revolt. Instead, it is a mode of management and control that seeks to saturate every step of the process, all the while insisting that what’s good for profit is good for those whose stolen time generates that profit.

Nothing spells out this effort so starkly as the collection of “therbligs” (“Gilbreth” spelled backwards, albeit with the h and t swapped)—symbols invented to visually code any process or action, allowing it to be broken down into its smallest constitutive elements or movements. Most of these are abstracted but iconic representations of a part of a body in the midst of these activities, like “Search” and “Find,” which involve the abstracted outline of a human eye looking to the side in the former and straight ahead in the latter, as if having scanned the room and located its target.³⁸ In four of them, however, we get a minimal representation of an entire human form, with a pseudo-stick figure consisting of a circle for a head, a line for a body, and a ninety-degree bend to make feet. In “Plan,” a crooked angle appears to suggest an arm and hand that scratches the chin, Rodin’s *Thinker* in glyph form. Unlike the signs that represent eyes and hands, however, the minimally represented body doesn’t mark a specific physical action. Instead, it designates the threshold where the project of scientific management falters, where a potentially distributed inefficiency, woven into every unnecessary motion, instead becomes a complete stop, the worker halting their demanded actions entirely.

“Rest for Overcoming Fatigue” depicts a body at reasonable seated repose, as if during a sanctioned break. And while systems of scientific management like that of the Gilbreths will seek to minimize fatigue, it also treats this rest as an expected input, even if never acknowledging how newly exhausting the relentless machinic pace will become after all the temporal fat gets cut from repeated gestures. “Avoidable Delay” suggests a delay caused by the worker themselves (from a hand doing nothing while the other moves to a tool broken by poor handling) that could be avoided with proper training and motivation, shown by a stick body on its back, as if napping or staring at the clouds or factory ceiling, smoking a cigarette and killing time while on the clock. (On the therblig chart, it is described as “Man lying down on job voluntarily.”) “Unavoidable Delay,” conversely, suggests an involuntary pause caused by factors beyond the worker’s control. In some instances, the suggestion is that the working process has itself not yet been rationalized. In a photographic series meant to show the gestures corresponding to the therbligs, a worker takes the cap off a mechanical pencil to check the quality of the eraser: “The right hand is idle—there is nothing for it to do. Therefore this delay is unavoidable.”³⁹ In others, it indicates something on a larger scale, like a disruption elsewhere in the production process that prevents the task from being achieved.

A different and unacknowledged meaning is at play here, manifest in the choice of the sign itself. It doesn’t resemble what we might expect, like a machinist taking a seat while waiting for the lathe to get spinning again. Instead, we see a body bent sharply at the waist, head hanging down or even striking the floor. (Indeed, the

official explanatory description in the table of therbligs is “a man bumping his nose, unintentionally.”)⁴⁰ This looks less like a pause in which one rests than the unavailability of a body pushed too far, too long, and too fast, left unable to be upright and now exhausted, or puking or spasming. We can’t quite say. We can only know that we are dealing with a system in which motions might be rationalized, but the rationale for their motivations can never be questioned, making this debilitation and collapse “unavoidable”—not unlike money from a heist that could have been used to support a bent body, but will be burnt instead.

The challenge for sabotage will be to erode the gap between unavoidable delay and avoidable delay, to make avoidable delays appear unavoidable, both as a threat to employers who pay poor wages and to enable the kind of unprovability that sabotage hinges on and weaponizes. (Did the power just happen to go out, causing everything to go quiet? Or did someone knock it out?) The tactic will try, again and again, to pass resistance and fatigue out from an individual body expected to work faster, more repetitively, or for less money, back into the system of production and circulation itself.⁴¹ Conversely, management strategies and work protocols across the twentieth century seek to counter this tactic by minimizing possible deviations. Still, it’s worth noting that even internal to the Gilbreths’ own processes of analysis and documentation, they were unable to ward off that creep of friction, exhaustion, and unpredictability. Across their tremendous volume of film minutely detailing these tasks, a hand-cranked 35 mm camera was used, which means that the rate of speed that the frames advance through the camera could not be constant, no matter how smoothly the operator tried to crank. In this way, even in the documentation of measures designed to minimize fatigue, that fatigue still creeps back in, in how the filmed motions speed up and slow down erratically when the one who films and turns the crank eventually tires, losing their rhythm and failing to be as mechanically regular as the device they operate. Yes, you can place a chronometer in the scene to record the passage of time faithfully for each frame, and then try to precisely locate the passage of a hand through the air at every stepped microsecond of its arc or tremor. But when we watch the film play back, the unregulated pace of the cranking hand behind the camera makes itself felt on screen, and the clock’s dial staggers its path around the clock, as though drunk and reeling.

To be continued in “On Paralysis, Part 4”

X

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- 1 After the term was more explicitly posed as a political tactic by French anarcho-syndicalists in the late 1890s (and formally declared at a Confederation General du Travail congress in 1897). See "Reading Between Enemy Lines" in my forthcoming book *Inhuman Resources* (Sternberg Press, 2025) for a brief sketch of the overall trajectory of sabotage as an idea.
- 2 Walker C. Smith, *Sabotage: Its History, Philosophy & Function*, 1913 pamphlet published by Industrial Workers of the World →. Fantasies of government oversight aside, this is by no means just in the past. Timothy Mitchell's *Carbon Democracy* details this on the level of the planned restriction of the circulation of oil, while we can find extremely recent instances of a level of food destruction that easily belongs in *New Earth*. See for instance this report on food destruction during the Covid pandemic: David Yaffe-Bellany and Michael Corkery, "Dumped Milk, Smashed Eggs, Plowed Vegetables: Food Waste of the Pandemic," *New York Times*, April 11, 2020 →.
- 3 Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *Sabotage: The Conscious Withdrawal of the Worker's Industrial Efficiency* (IWW Publishing Bureau, 1916), 5.
- 4 Louis Adamic, *Dynamite: The Story of Class Violence in America* (Viking Press, 1934), 373. Another account of adulteration can be found in Smith: "The doctor gives 'bread-pills' or other harmless concoctions in cases where the symptoms are puzzling. The builder uses poorer material than demanded in the specifications. The manufacturer adulterates foodstuffs and clothing. All these are for the purpose of gaining more profits." Smith, *Sabotage*, 66.
- 5 Thorstein Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System* (Batoche Books, 2001), 5.
- 6 His use of the term "handicap" here is worth noting given the concerns of this essay and the fact that it is in the early twentieth century that we see a shift in its meaning to refer increasingly to bodily impairment rather than adjusting the odds of a bet.
- 7 Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System*, 55.
- 8 Veblen, *The Engineers and the Price System*, 5.
- 9 His attention to this dynamic is important, given that he was watching the shifts in the word's meaning in real time, in the late 1910s and early 1920s.
- 10 I am here using "industry" as shorthand for sectors of waged work historically associated with "productive" and often masculine-coded labors of manufacturing, extraction, or the circulation of commodities.
- 11 Indeed, that strange unreadable/unprovable quality remains in such critiques almost solely as the sign of sneakiness and cowardice, of not fighting fair and out in the open. Of course, its advocates wouldn't disagree that it does not come out into the open. Almost all early theorizations of sabotage make explicit how this ability to "strike on the job" and to tune the production/circulation process against itself, rather than coming out into public view or representational politics, is *precisely* the point and strength of sabotage.
- 12 James Boyle, *The Minimum Wage and Syndicalism: An Independent Survey of the Two Latest Movements Affecting American Labor* (Stewart & Kidd Company, 1913), 91.
- 13 Émile Pouget, *Sabotage*, trans. and introduced by Arturo Giovannitti (Charles H. Kerr and Company, 1912), 75.
- 14 Arturo Giovannitti, introduction to Pouget, *Sabotage*, 33.
- 15 We should also note how much the logic of sabotage has often been aligned with, and advocated by, those who refuse these sides, who refuse the naturalization and binarism of war that sends proletarians to murder each other under the sign of national necessity. Consider Joe Hill, for instance, the Wobbly songwriter and militant executed by the state on a false murder charge. Hill wrote of sabotage in a brilliant 1914 essay on "HOW TO MAKE WORK FOR THE UNEMPLOYED" (i.e., by "striking on the job" and slowing up production so as to make everything take longer and require more hours or more laborers). In that essay he writes, "This weapon is without expense to the working class and if intelligently and systematically used, it will not only reduce the profits of the exploiters, but also create more work for the wage earners." But in an acerbic letter not two weeks before he was set to be killed, he also attacked the ground of national chauvinism and wrote that "war certainly shows up the capitalist system in the right light. Millions of men are employed at making ships and others are hired to sink them. Scientific management, eh, wot? As far as I can see, it doesn't make much difference which side wins, but I hope that *one side will win*, because a draw would only mean another war in a year or two." That said, in a turn with a graveside humor only appropriate for his looming execution, and marked by a tone somewhere between sarcasm and deadly seriousness that characterizes many of his letters, he mocks those "silly priests and old maid sewing circles that are moaning about peace" and suggests instead that the "war is the finest training school for rebels in the world and for anti-militarists as well." Joe Hill, "Letter from Utah State Prison," September 9, 1915, in *Rebel Voices: An IWW Anthology*, ed. Joyce L. Kornbluh (PM Press and the Charles H. Kerr Library), 152.
- 16 See →.
- 17 Indeed, this is not an imaginative turn of phrase: it is an explicit part of the eminently weird tactics of British Special Executive Operations agents: "Dead rats filled with PE were prepared by taxidermists; they incorporated a Mk 111 oz guncotton primer, a short length of time fuse, and a No. 10 time pencil. The idea was that a dead rat left near a boiler or furnace might be shoveled into it for disposal. In that case no activation of the delay fusing was necessary, but it could also be activated and left where it would inflict damage." Gordon Rottman, *World War II Allied Sabotage Devices and Booby Traps* (Bloomsbury, 2006), 52.
- 18 See my essay "Acid Doubt" at *Triple Canopy* for a longer articulation of this argument →.
- 19 As I examined earlier, one possibility of this is an increased capacity to recognize the kinds of links and circuits that were already in place and already organizing the world, even if the trope of breakdown/insight often too easily assumes that a critical or radical knowledge flows from this.
- 20 John Spargo, *Syndicalism, Industrial Unionism and Socialism* (B. W. Huebsch, 1913), 85. I would put Spargo's reckoning with this in dialogue with another enemy of insurrection so to speak, Carl Schmitt, whose reading of class politics in *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* also captures a crucial aspect of what I'd consider a collective and intentional self-inhumanization that has been anathema to more mainstream socialist or labor politics for much of the last century and a half. Schmitt writes that in the process of revolutionary organizing and a communist horizon, "the proletariat can only be defined as the social class that no longer participates in profit, that owns nothing, that knows no ties to family or fatherland, and so forth. The proletarian becomes the social nonentity. It must also be true that the proletarian, in contrast to the bourgeois, is nothing but a person. From this it follows with dialectic necessity that in the period of transition he can be nothing but a member of his class; that is, he must realize himself precisely in something that is the contradiction of humanity—in the class." As for Spargo, for Schmitt this is a situation to be avoided. Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (MIT Press, 1988), 62.
- 21 Spargo, *Syndicalism*, 94. And again: "What the Syndicalist has in mind is that the workers by becoming inactive, 'motionless,' destroy the entire structure of capitalism and create for themselves both the opportunity and the necessity for establishing a new social and industrial order" (91).

22
Crucial texts on this question include Joanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory" (available online at →) and the reading of flexibility in Robert McRuer's *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (NYU Press, 2006), via Emily Martin's work on neoliberalism.

23
See, for instance, Martin Sullivan's "Subjected Bodies: Paraplegia, Rehabilitation, and the Politics of Movement" for not only a reckoning these forms of denigration, but also for his account of the production of a paraplegic subject position/subjectivity. In *Foucault and the Government of Disability*, ed. Shelley Tremain (University of Michigan Press, 2015).

24
In this way, these kinds of figurations can't be reduced to a single kind of genre, as they are as common in horror as they are in supposedly feel-good stories of persistence.

25
See Amanda K. Booker, "Docile Bodies, Supercrises, and the Plays of Prosthetics," in "Disability Studies in Feminist Bioethics," special issue, *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2010); and Sami Schalk, "Reevaluating the Supercrip," *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies* 10, no. 1 (2016).

26
This is a fact that produces genuine crises for people trying to get by, a sort of hinterland of never having enough and yet being trapped by the very mechanisms that allegedly support: the stipend is often too little, especially if more intensive regimes of care or medication are needed, and yet doing any waged work whatsoever disqualifies them from that support in full.

27
Marta Russel and Ravi Malhotra, "Capitalism and Disability," *Socialist Register*, no. 38 (2002), 212.

28
I won't pursue it here, but see my essay "Down to the Bone" in *Inhuman Resources* (forthcoming from Sternberg Press, 2024) for a discussion of the relation between psychoanalysis, PTSD, and "railway spine," i.e., forms of often paralyzing injuries

generated by the expansion of railway networks into urban areas. I also return to this in the final installment of this series, in terms of deaths and maiming caused by trains.

29
The framework that Jasbir K. Puar advanced around this is vital, especially in terms of thinking towards *debility*, rather than disability per se, as it attends to the violence done to people in ongoing and geopolitically normalized regimes of harm and debilitation that precisely elude becoming identifiable as disability. See Jasbir K. Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Duke University Press, 2017).

30
Anson Rabinbach, "Social Knowledge and the Politics of Industrial Accidents," chap. 3 in *The Eclipse of the Utopias of Labor* (Fordham University Press, 2018); Karin Bijsterveld, "Listening to Machines: Industrial Noise, Hearing Loss and the Cultural Memory of Sound," *The Sound Studies Reader*, ed. Jonathan Sterne (Routledge, 2012); Michael K. Rosenow, *Death and Dying in the Working Class, 1865–1920* (University of Illinois Press, 2015).

31
Mara Mills, "Deafening: Noise and the Engineering of Communication in the Telephone System," *Grey Room*, no. 43 (Spring 2011).

32
Frank B. Gilbreth and L. M. Gilbreth, "Motion Study as an Industrial Opportunity," *Applied Motion Study: A Collection of Papers on the Efficient Method to Industrial Preparedness* (Macmillan, 1919), 41.

33
For more on their use of film, see Scott Curtis, "Images of Efficiency: The Films of Frank B. Gilbreth," in *Films that Work: Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media*, ed. Patrick Vonderau and Vinzenz Hediger (Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

34
More specifically, they insist that the crux of the problem is those "crippled soldiers whose bent is towards some type of physical work," "whose capabilities and inclinations are confined to physical work." Gilbreth and

Gilbreth, "The Crippled Soldier," in *Applied Motion Study*, 134.

35
As with so much of their work, two tendencies run side by side, and occasionally are inseparable. On one side, there is the absolute centrality of productivity, efficiency, and the measurement of human worth under those terms alone. On the other, there's a genuine commitment to trying to lessen fatigue, strain, and injury amongst those working, and, especially by Lillian in the wake of Frank's death in 1924, to build spaces for domestic labor that could be not only efficient but also accessible. For instance, in 1948, Lillian Gilbreth was invited to design a kitchen for Howard Rusk's Institute of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation. In Bess Williamson's excellent reading of Lillian's history in this regard, she writes that, "rather than 'elaborate prosthetic devices' to adapt the worker to the environment, she wrote, buildings and equipment could be made accessible with 'simple, inexpensive changes' that would 'work wonders.' Gilbreth's comments suggest the possibility of more widespread design change, but, like Rusk, she presented the task of producing this design change as a private and domestic one—something housewives could ask their husbands for help installing." Bess Williamson, *Accessible America: A History of Disability and Design* (NYU Press, 2019), 54.

36
Versions of the phrase occur several times in their writing, and with a certain kind of general flattening that organizers like the Wobblies picked up on, albeit for revolutionary reasons. The Gilbreths write that "this country has been so rich in human and material resources, that it is only recently that the importance of waste elimination has come to be realised." "Motion Study," 41.

37
Gilbreth and Gilbreth, "Units, Methods, and Devices of Measurement Under Scientific Management," in *Applied Motion Study*, 40.

38
"Grasp" and "Hold" use an inverted "U" to mimic either fingers or arms that, in "Hold," now bear a straight line. The lower line of the "Search" eye becomes a bowl or vessel in

"Transport Loaded," then flipped over to "Release Load" and turned right side up again to show "Transport Empty," waiting for its next cargo.

39
From Ralph M. Barnes, *Work Methods Manual* (John Wiley & Sons), 1944; quoted in Elliott Sturtevant, "'Degrees of Freedom': On Frank and Lillian Gilbreth's Allocation of Movement," *Thresholds*, no. 42 (2014): 161.

40
This table, credited to Lillian Gilbreth, is reproduced in Sturtevant, "'Degrees,'" 165.

41
Even aside from the especially potent kind of neutralization that management strategies offer, sabotage is up against a broader mesh of ideologies and laws that resists this, politically and technically, putting the locus on the individual citizen and their mediated representation as the correct unit for political engagement.

The real object of production has always been the world.

—Giorgio Cesarano, *Manual of Survival*

0. Symbolizing Nothingness

Günther Anders—poet, tireless antinuclear activist, anti-fascist in exile, wandering Jew, among many other things—wrote a series of screeds that place him more in league with the tradition of heretics and agitators than with any philosopher or university professor. So while many of his early publications explicitly engaged with philosophy, he ultimately left the discipline behind to chronicle tectonic historical changes in the human condition—and what he understood as the profound deterioration in the capacity to even cognize such changes. In his multivolume opus *The Obsolescence of Mankind*, Anders offers a parable to limn the condition of humankind blinded by a world that had become, as he called it, a “phantom and matrix”: “There is a Molussian tale¹ about an evil gnome who cures a blind man; not by removing the scales from his eyes, however, but by blinding him with another kind of blindness: the gnome had also made him blind to the fact that he was blind.”² With this, Anders gives a surprisingly succinct formulation of what Jacques Lacan calls “foreclosure” (Freud’s *Verwerfung*), an aggrandized defense mechanism at work in psychosis which distinguishes it from neurosis. According to Lacan, repression (the neurotic’s defense mechanism) involves some sort of symbolization of what has been repressed; in other words, someone being aware of the fact that they are blind might say, “I can’t see.” Conversely, the defense mechanism which characterizes psychosis—foreclosure—is much more austere: it rejects even the symbolization of that which is being warded off. The subject can’t see that it can’t see; in other words, it is “deprived precisely of the feeling of being deprived and, in this way, ... apparently free.”³ As in Anders’s “Molussian” tale, the primary metaphor here remains linked to visuality, and Freud will at times use the term “scotomization”—from the Greek *skotos*, referring to the darkness one sees before death in Homer—to describe something similar. This failure to symbolize a traumatic rupture explains why Lacan will characterize psychosis in terms of a hole in the symbolic.

It can be difficult to see what is lost when loss is experienced. Freud described melancholia as a condition in which what is lost, beyond any particular object, is ultimately the subject’s relation to the world, which he then describes as a topographical withdrawal back into the self and narcissism, a state he called melancholia. In the process, the relation to the external world is severely compromised. But, Anders asked, could it be possible to start from the opposite premise—that the relationship to

Hunter Bolin Unworldliness: A Pathology of Humankind (On Günther Anders’s Negative Anthropology)



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Parable of the Blind*, 1568. License: Public domain.

the world is never guaranteed a priori and then subsequently disturbed, but rather that in certain historical epochs, such as our own, the *world* itself begins to take on the meaning of a pseudo-concept? Do we still live *in-the-world*, or do we live in many worlds, or in no world at all? Could it be that the protracted disintegration of the “Western world” as we know it, taking place at an accelerated pace today through the bombs dropping in Gaza, or in Ukraine, are testaments to the haste with which the world we knew just yesterday is vanishing into the fog of war, into smoke and mirrors? Historical amnesia may delude us into seeing this destruction as novel, exceptional, or sudden, but in reality it is just a further step in the process Anders identified as taking place across a century. We struggle to *see* in these moments of crisis, and the powers of imagination we rely on for knowledge tend to get conditioned into deceiving us more than informing us. And if we lack the ability to fully recognize the failure of perception and comprehension, even of language, do foreclosure, and psychosis, inevitably follow? To say that everybody is delusional or a bit mad, or that madness is ordinary today, is already to dabble in clichés. But it is precisely these questions—of whether the severe gap, or deficit, in humankind’s relationship to the world is evidence of a severe pathology—that Günther Anders asked, and especially in response to the work of his former mentor, Martin Heidegger, in one of the most potent critiques of Heidegger ever committed to writing. Because contrary to Heidegger’s emphasis on being-in-the-world,

Anders’s early paradigm for human existence begins from being un-worlded

That scathing critique, along with the bulk of his work, has long been unavailable for English-language readers, and, given its sporadic translation, his work awaits a more thorough critical appraisal and engagement. This essay seeks to contribute to this still-nascent English reception of Anders’s work (whose *The Obsolescence of Mankind* will soon appear in an official and complete English translation) by reading him as a thinker of some of our most pressing global pathologies. He was a prophet for a world whose natural environment has been plundered by industrial capitalism, resulting in a vast industrial wasteland ratcheting onwards at increasing speed. Crucially, he was also a strident and prescient thinker of the centrality of war and war-making within that world, and of societies ruled by the demands of weapons manufacturers—and perhaps by weapons themselves. That is, Anders warned that the productive faculty of mankind—what might be called Prometheanism⁴—was quickly trespassing its own internal limits and that there was a kind of automatism to the development of technical forms, including military technologies. The fantasy of the mastery of technology had blinded mankind to how it could be itself mastered *by* technology, and to the destruction, even annihilation, that the world was at risk of. For Anders, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki are the defining events of the twentieth century. They led him

to ask: What kind of human could have created these catastrophes? What are that human's symptoms? To answer these questions, he will turn to anthropology and delineate that specific form of alienation which he calls the "unworldliness" (*Weltfremdheit*) of humankind.

1. Materialism as a Theory of the Invisible

To understand the stakes of Anders's account, it will help to gain a clearer sense of the method that drives his argumentation. We can turn again here to one of his "Molussian" fables that appear in his anti-fascist novel *The Molussian Catacombs*. This fable, titled "The Positive Is Invisible: Materialism as a Theory of the Invisible," takes place, like the rest of the novel, in the total darkness of an underground prison located beneath Molussia, an imaginary totalitarian country (and an allegory for the Third Reich). One prisoner, Olo, relates to the other, Yegussa, one of the novel's characteristic *Lehrgeschichte* (learning-stories) about an incident when Molussian silver workers sent a spokesperson to their boss, Prem, to inform him that they had decided to go on strike. Prem grows incensed upon receiving this notice and accosts the spokesperson: "You are nothing but air to me. You saboteurs! You negative elements!" In short, they are negative elements, burdens that inconvenience him, and whose demands he would rather not have to address. Moreover, as saboteurs, they represent a limit that contravenes what the boss thinks the world *ought* to be: namely, something entirely at his disposal. Yet if they are negative elements to the bourgeois world of Prem, his telling remarks reveal that the workers, as "air," are an essential condition of his world, a *sine qua non*. In this way, they are also positive elements for the revolutionary consciousness relayed in *Molussian Catacombs*; the worker is the air that the boss does not detect in his complete reliance upon it. As the two prisoners discuss this tale, Olo explains what it means for materialism to be a theory of the invisible:

Olo asked: "What does your health feel like?"

Yegussa examined his body and was surprised to realize that he had not felt his body before. He had forgotten it entirely. "Like nothing at all," he answered slowly.

"But the negative: sickness?"

"Is perceptible."

"Peace?"

"Unremarkable."

"But war is obvious. Work—invisible. But a strike?"

"Makes us visible."⁵

This short dialogue can be understood as a sort of *ars poetica* for Anders, demonstrating that no consideration of reality is complete without accounting for its disruptions, or the negation inherent within it. The world constructed under the aegis of industrialism must conceal the invisible—both internal and external, both workers and the environment—to uphold its own integrity. Those "invisible" elements are treated as negative in a double sense: they lack positivity, being merely background or expected resource; and they can only appear in a negative sense as a problem, burden, breakdown, or failure that interrupts the process they are expected to enable and support. Anders's conception of *materialism as a theory of the invisible* therefore draws out these negative elements and lays them bare by positivizing them, and so exposes as one-sided any viewpoint that would gloss over them. In this, Anders follows a path set out by Hegel, who insisted in *The Science of Logic* that reality contains negation. Despite Anders's move away from philosophy as a discipline, his materialism, following Marx, is premised on a critique of possessive individualism, directly following from the critique of property relations he makes in *The Obsolescence of Mankind*.

In the first volume of *The Obsolescence of Mankind*, Anders comes out swinging against the idealism of thinkers like Fichte, for whom, according to Anders, the world is the *product* of the activity of the "I." He elaborates: "I call 'idealistic' in the broadest sense any attitude that transforms the world into mine, into ours, into something at my disposal, in short into a possessive: precisely into my 'imagination' or into a product of my (Fichtean) 'positing.'"⁶ Anders's materialism, in contrast, punctures such fanciful conceits, showing their pitfalls. He gives several examples. One is that mask known in English as the ego (*Ich*) that, in trying to establish an autonomous identity for itself, finds itself at the behest of an id (*Es*), which leads it to do things that the ego can't entirely comprehend or control. This can cause shame, a key affect in Anders's thought, which prompts a disruption in the circuit of identification in which I=I. Another idealist conceit Anders undermines is the promise of being a freely choosing individual, which is central to development of capitalist subjectivity: in claiming to be a free subject, the human finds themselves to be not bound to anything specific, astonished at the arbitrariness of their indeterminate (*unbestimmt*) existence, obsolete, free to die or even to be exterminated. In other words, when we are thrown "into the world" (as Heidegger has it), there may not be any world there to catch us.

Throughout his work, then, Anders's method is to unmask the one-sided nature of any claims that seek to ground the integrity of human beings by describing them as self-positing, as being an autonomous "I," as being free, or as being "in-the-world." Instead, he insists on taking *privation*—being without, lacking what is fundamentally needed as support—as his starting point. It is this insistence upon the negative that will justify Anders's



Agitated workers face the factory owner in Robert Koehler's *The Strike*, 1886. License: Public domain.

choice to name his early philosophical anthropological work a “negative anthropology.” It isn’t the case that humans live in the world peacefully and are only alienated once capitalism comes along (though the latter certainly exacerbates the situation); rather, there is a primordial form of alienation—an “unworldliness”—that defines the essence of mankind.

2. Negative Anthropology

Anders began his philosophical trajectory studying phenomenology with Husserl and Heidegger, before turning to philosophical anthropology. Anthropology had the appeal of being much closer to an empirical science than the “pseudo-concreteness” which Anders claimed characterized Heidegger’s ontology of being. In other words, unlike *Being and Time*—a book Anders describes as “pre-capitalist”—philosophical anthropology prioritized an investigation into real artifacts of human culture, such as the vast network of technological apparatuses developed through ever-accelerating industrialization. However, the downside of this anthropological approach was that Anders believed it had become a tool for those who wished to fix the human species as something

definite so as to better control it. Here Anders was likely attempting to distance himself from what became known as *Völkerkunde* (ethnology). At its worst, philosophical anthropology and the question concerning the essence of man risked becoming indispensable to the ruling class, by functioning as Platonic ideals or forms of instrumental reason that could be used to govern, or to produce a specific kind of man, one which Anders will come to identify as the “mass hermit.” More specifically, he was wary of a certain “pragmatic image of the world,” which functions as an “apparatus [*Gerät*] that aims to shape our actions, our endurance, our behavior, our omissions, our taste, and thus our entire praxis in general.”⁷ For Anders, this “image” was hardly neutral, because what was developed in a series of industrial revolutions were not just machines, commodities, and atomic weapons, but first and foremost a type of human, one whose vital needs could be modified and who would even eventually be led “blindly” to manufacture its own self-destruction. The way images were used to mold human beings even led Anders to describe the latter half of the twentieth century as the second era of Platonism.⁸

Therefore, in order to explain the way in which the power of capitalism had taken on a total anthropological force, Anders pursues his negative anthropology, which insists that the reason human beings are susceptible to such



Early writing tablet recording the allocation of beer, 3100–3000 BCE, Late Prehistoric period, clay. © Trustees of the British Museum. License: CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

drastic manipulations of their very essence is that the human lacks a fixed essence in the first place. Unlike animals, the human lacks a stable relationship to the world; its needs aren't satisfied in the a priori world, and so it builds a world over the world. In short, the nature of humankind is its artificiality, rather than such artificiality suggesting a deviation from, or loss of, an original essence. As Anders writes, "Mankind has no determined lifestyle, no specific world that befits him. His 'nature' consists in the very fact that he makes his world himself, and can always change this world and invent it anew."⁹ From this initial starting point, capitalism and its concomitant industrial revolutions apply successive operations of negation. Christian Dries has cogently characterized Anders's description of the advent of the industrial revolution as a sort of negation of an existing

negative anthropology.¹⁰ The negation of something that is a priori negative results in something positive, and this manifests itself in the delirium of what Anders refers to as the "World as Phantom and Matrix." We can here connect this back to the question of psychosis and self-awareness. In his account of the function of delirium, Freud notes that "a fair number of analyses have taught us that the delusion is found applied like a patch over the place where originally a rent had appeared in the ego's relation to the external world."¹¹ In Anders's thought, the constitutive lack that defines humankind is patched over by the creation of a sprawling productive apparatus. What is lost in the melee is the symbolization of that constitutive lack—evident in the incontinence of capital and its civilization.

3. *The Unworldliness of Mankind*

Anders developed the prototype for this modern image of humankind in a volume of early essays collected under the title *On the Unworldliness of Mankind*. In the titular essay of the collection, Anders compares humans and animals to substantiate his claims about unworldliness in what must be understood as a clear challenge to Heidegger, who in 1927 had described human existence as “being-in-the-world.” Anders frames his argument by listing what he sees as the specific features that constitute the *differentia specifica* of humankind: the human is distinguished by its abilities to separate existence from essence, to negate, to imagine (especially to imagine absence or lack), and finally to lie. If, as considered earlier, Anders placed consistent emphasis on the role of negativity in defining humankind, here we see that for Anders humankind is not to be conceived of as the addition of any specific positive capacity, but as a set of abilities that stem from, and modulate, that constitutive lack.

More specifically, Anders distinguishes organic, animal, and human life through what he calls “coefficients of embeddedness.” In doing so, he questions the guarantee that humans have a fixed or stable relationship to the world at all. If anything, plants and animals tend to have stable relations with their world, while mankind tends towards alienation from the world. In the organic model, a plant is rooted in place, but already the animal can wander or stray from its location (its *Setzung*). For the human, this capacity will be extrapolated into that of abstracting from its a priori world altogether. Mankind is free *from* the world. Far from a boon, Anders considers such freedom to be a pathology, and it is the primary indication of the constitutive unworldliness of mankind: “To be free means to be bound to nothing specific.”¹² The human being’s existence is not determinate (*bestimmt*) but indeterminate (*unbestimmt*); the human lacks a fixed relation of embeddedness in the world; it is a *Mangelwesen* (being of lack), lacking a proper vocation (*Bestimmung*). Contrary to migratory birds, for example, whose knowledge of their route is congenital, humans have relatively weak instincts and suffer a “specific prematurity of birth,” being thrown into the world in a state of complete dependence on caregivers.¹³ This debilitating weakness in terms of instincts implies that human beings only come to the world *after the fact* (*nachträglich*)—and importantly, not a priori—by learning through experience. Thus, Anders’s first definition of unworldliness: “As a positivization of the indeterminateness of the human—that mankind was not predetermined for a specific world, and this unspecificity is their specificity.”¹⁴ Anders insists that the fact that there is such a thing as experience (*Erfahrung*) for humankind—namely, that I only make sense of what happens to me a posteriori, after it happens, through recollection—indicates something specific about human beings’ relationship to the world: that it is in fact a non-relation—that humankind is unworldly. We are *in* the world *at a distance*, and the possibility of expulsion from that world always abides: the threat of death, or even

extermination, looms.

In this account, the animal has no experience, as it lives in a situation which Anders designates as “need congruence”—which is to say it does not need anything it cannot find already in the world. The human, on the other hand, is that creature for whom there is no nature, whose nature is artificiality, and whose needs come to be artificially produced by capitalism and the market. Paraphrasing Anders, we can say that while what humans need from the world is always contingent and subject to change, the animal has all its needs met by its a priori world, and thus has a secure relation with the world. By the same token, the animal is also blockaded, incapable of registering anything which it does not already anticipate from the world. The animal *perceives* what is in the world, but it cannot *imagine* what is not there. Not so for mankind: the imagination of something absent is another positivization of a negative, as suggested by the way that one of the German verbs for imagine (*vorstellen*) means literally “a placing” (*stellen*) “in front” (*vor*) of us, a bringing of nonbeing into being.

The linguist Jean-Claude Milner, writing on Ferdinand de Saussure, describes this negative capacity inherent in language, suggesting that “what is proper to the word is its ability to designate a thing that is not there.”¹⁵ When we speak, we generally address things that are not there in front of us. Our insufficient embeddedness in the world necessitates an ability to *imagine* lack, which will in turn enable the use of *symbols* and language. But Anders will go so far as to insist that “production and language are one and the same complex.”¹⁶ In terms of human evolution, it was the development of the hands which made speech possible.¹⁷ Unlike animals, most of whom must carry things in their mouths, for humans the advent of upright posture and the work of the hands freed up the jaws for speech. Language and tool-bearing go hand in hand, and the pen has its pedigree in the spear.

In this drive to produce, Anders will claim that the fundamental disposition of humankind is a utopian one. “Man’s freedom is evidenced in the changing of the world, namely, in the fact that he *can make something* (which is not yet there) *from something* (which exists).”¹⁸ Finding no place within the given world, humans build a world over the world and treat the world as raw material (*Stoff*), something at their disposal. For humans, being is being raw material (“*Sein ist Rohstoffsein*”).¹⁹ Anders uses the example of hunting to schematize a *primal scene* of world-building: “The world is for the living being a. possible prey, b. possible danger (sacer, taboo), c. that is, negative: protection. Protection is 1. pure concealment = escape, 2. a hiding place. Constitution of the world (as world): In escape, the superiority, i.e. the existence of what I am not, is recognized.”²⁰

Here Anders points out that the human intention behind its world-building is conditioned by fear and the need for

protection. In other words, the world built by humankind, which is a world over the world, is a defense against the fundamental unembeddedness of the human in the a priori world. Anders thereby deflates the human capacity for production into a coping mechanism. For the Promethean, the world maintains nothing of what it is *in-itself*. Instead, it is reduced to what it is *for-mankind*. Humankind makes the world into the “cosmic proletariat.”²¹ The world is processed—nature is transformed into culture—then devoured.

This undermining of the productive aspect of the human is best exemplified by one of Anders’s signature *Denkbilder* (thought-images): “Promethean Shame.” For Anders, shame is less an emotion than a symptom, and the fact that we feel shame says something about our specific relation to action and productive activity altogether. Namely, every attempt of the human to escape the a priori world by creating a world of its own is threatened by the risk that this world it fashions on its own is neither hospitable nor desirable. As Jacob Blumenfeld has correctly pointed out, this aspect of Anders’s thought can best be understood by considering it in the context of climate change, a problem wherein the distinction between human omnipotence and human impotence collapses: we are “omnipotent because some humans now have the all-powerful ability to destroy the world with technological means, and impotent because most humans have no power to do anything about it.”²² In this way, the danger that humans seek to ward off by making themselves at home in the world returns. What is foreclosed in the symbolic returns in the real. Promethean Shame is both a limit and a memento mori.

Above all, Anders’s conception of the unworldliness of humankind is a critique of the categories that philosophers have used to secure the human’s relationship to the world. While his primary target in this endeavor is Heidegger, Anders is equally concerned with taking on certain dogmatic aspects of Kant’s thought where he sees fit. Around the same time Anders was developing his early ideas on unworldliness, Heidegger was giving a seminar called “Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics,” which Anders cites.²³ As is well known, Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* was a bid to enthrone a form of human knowledge that was a priori, i.e., prior to all experience. For Kant, concepts structure possible experience by making knowledge of objects possible in the first place. In this way, what we can know are things which are ultimately other from us; they are objects, *Gegenstände*, that which “stands-opposed.” Heidegger’s compelling reading of Kant’s transcendental schematism in *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* hinges on the claim that ontological knowledge—the use of categories to determine the total structure of beings-to-be-known—could not be restricted to merely conceptual knowledge. This is because both intuition (the *passive* aspect of cognition) and the *active* force of judgment, which transforms intuitions into objects that

can be known, are derivative functions of a more essential, higher faculty which was the common root of both. This is what Kant called “transcendental imagination” (*Einbildungskraft*). By synthesizing pure intuition and pure thought, the transcendental imagination was a grounding power for what Heidegger calls “ontological knowledge,” setting the I into relation with that which was other than it, and thereby creating the conditions for something like a relationship to a world. How does imagination function in this account? Kant defines it as “the faculty for representing an object even without its presence in intuition.”²⁴ The imagination is a discriminating power that is not as keen as conceptual judgment, but it nonetheless entails bringing nonbeing into being by representing possible forms of unity.²⁵

One of the ways that Heidegger follows Kant is indeed this fundamental emphasis on *relation*. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger aimed to abandon the language of the subject, since he claimed that efforts to consider humans to be some definable entity actually miss what is in fact most essential about humankind. In lieu of a subject as an entity or a thing, Heidegger turned instead toward a relational ontology where human existence is always already situated in-the-world, always in relation to. Yet it is precisely this relation of being-*in* that Anders wants to contest. For him, there is a fundamental disconnect (between Ego and Id, for instance), which means that any relational ontology ends up patching over this basic gap, even as it claims a fullness of connection within a world of relations. Like Heidegger, Anders also takes aim at the metaphysics of the subject. But in doing so, he does not—as Heidegger does—provide the solace of tucking that subject back into a world that presents itself as always already meaningful. Instead, we arrive at the total abjection of what Anders calls—writing of Alfred Döblin’s criminal antihero Franz Biberkopf—“subjectless life.” In this way, Anders can be read as implicitly accusing Heidegger of offering consolations and euphemisms for what is in reality the destitution of the subject. In fact, according to Anders, Heidegger renders it all anodyne, since despite denying any substantial or coherent I, he nevertheless guarantees a subsequent unity for human existence in a place—that is, in the world. In this way, Anders accuses Heidegger of peddling palliatives rather than giving humankind the means to come to terms with subjectless life, or unworldliness. Conversely, Anders’s “man without world” faces up to this directly as a Godless monad lost in the sauce of modern industrial life, one who struggles to make any sense of their life at all, and who cannot be said to have anything that may be called their own, aside from their name. Anders uses Döblin’s Biberkopf as an example of this figure for his paradigm of the wordless man, in a previously untranslated passage worth quoting in full:

Fed by society, rejected by society, instructed to be independent, punished for independence, relapsed



Jan Cossiers after Peter Paul Rubens, oil on canvas, 1637, Musei del Prado. License: Public domain.

and again entangled in the world, thrown off by the world—that is no longer life, that is just a mere event, a confluence of countless tributaries, a damming by a thousand dams. “Biberkopf” seems to be just the name tag that floats along to preserve a last semblance of identity; and just as Berlin is nothing, nothing but the name for countless different spaces, the name Biberkopf is the only thing that really endures. Reality itself brings this “nominalism” with it, it brings it forth from itself: the city, formerly a real thing itself, graspable by people as a whole, slowly “surpasses” (with Kant) the “limit of the power of imagination,” however much it seeks to “expand” itself. The only guarantee of its own reality remains its completely inclusive name. With this, it is not man who discredits reality, it disenchanting itself, i.e., it merely retains the unified form of the name. This is also the case with Biberkopf. His name is the only constant in the flow of his life, which is different wherever you step into it. But even in his case, the name is still the last guarantee of the identity of the “individual.” He does not yet disintegrate into the mutually totally unchanging phases of caterpillar and butterfly, fatally separated by pupation. The events of its life still have a denominator. But even this denominator, the name, is already endangered, and in “Liberkopf, Ziberkopf” even the label begins to blur. Only where the all-too-strong congestion of the dams stops his life does it become somewhat his own; namely, in his illness, where everything that has flowed flows together once again and at the same time; even if only as a whirlpool of a thousand images, and not as the orderly series of his days.²⁶

For Anders, Döblin’s realism consisted in taking the criminal world haunted by people like Biberkopf as his subject matter, and this underworld serves as an inversion or mirror image of bourgeois reality. Frequented by gangsters and ghosts, doppelgängers and infiltrators alike, this is not the world of the alienated worker, but of the unemployed cast adrift: “The unemployed are worldless in the potentiated sense of the word. When they lose their world, they lose a world that is not theirs.”²⁷ Biberkopf is *verpeilt* (disorganized); he fails to play any steering role in his own life, which is already out of his hands:

He is not only a waste product of society, he is also disposed of by that bad society itself, since it throws him overboard. Excluded from the excluded, he lives against his will as a moral bohemian (free-floating ...) in a vacuum between the different realms of society. Thus, he is thrust upon himself, but he fails to prop himself up, since he is unaccustomed to standing on his own. He constantly finds himself among people and in the most random constellations. None of these encounters ... are predestined: that this one goes with

that one and the other with the other was never meant to be. Sheer opportunity determines love, coincidence, local patriotism, and murder.²⁸

Here it is evident that what is at stake in Franz Biberkopf is a subject that is not its own cause—and more starkly even than that, it is a bare life which hardly has a grasp of any notion of causality to begin with.²⁹ With his distinction between the alienated worker and the lumpenproletariat, Anders’s prescience consists in focusing not merely on the plight of the working class, but on the kinds of abjection that would come to characterize surplus populations in advanced industrial societies.

4. *The World as Phantom and Matrix*

Anders abandoned his writing on negative anthropology shortly after the Nazis came to power. His work took a distinctly political turn, which resulted in two volumes of his magnum opus *The Obsolescence of Mankind*, with the subtitle “On the Soul in the Age of the Second Industrial Revolution” for volume one, and “The Destruction of Life in the Age of the Third Industrial Revolution” for volume two. According to Susanne Fohler’s succinct summary, “The first industrial revolution is characterized by the mechanical production of machines; the second starts with the artificial production of needs; the third—which is the decisive one for Anders—has enabled mankind to produce its own downfall.”³⁰ In this context, rather than comparing modern man to animals, as he had in the earlier anthropological writings, Anders uses machines as a foil for humans. Stranded in the United States in the 1940s, Anders was among the German intellectuals exiled from Nazi Germany in what has been called the “Weimar on the Pacific.” This was the same milieu frequented by Brecht, Feuchtwanger, and Marcuse, and the same one that produced Adorno and Horkheimer’s *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, in which they describe a “duplicate dialectic of instrumental reason at work in cultural forms in Nazi Germany and in the democratic USA.”³¹

In California, in exile from Nazi Germany, Anders too would develop a special fascination with Hollywood, where he would take up work doing cleaning duties at the Hollywood Costume Company. In Christopher Müller’s words, this time was for Anders “a time of hardship and indignation marked by the realities of unskilled work and ‘utter anonymity,’” with Anders later labeling himself as “an enemy alien.”³² Unlike Walter Benjamin, who maintained a degree of enthusiasm towards technology, Anders by and large despairs of the technological progress of the twentieth century. After all, by 1942 the United States had begun its covert work on the Manhattan Project in places like Oak Ridge, Los Alamos, and Chicago.

As already mentioned, Anders’s work in anthropology

leads him to the question of production, which forms the bulk of the political content of his writing during this time. In the second volume of *The Obsolescence of Mankind*, in a chapter called "Metaphysics of the Industrial Revolution," Anders gives one of the most succinct summaries of his work in *The Obsolescence*. I quote at length:

The *idée fixe* of the third industrial revolution, however, can be expressed in another way: not only is the non-utilization of a potential raw material considered to be scandalous, but so is the fact of failing to recognize something that is there, within reach, as a raw material and treating it as such. *The world is viewed as a mine that must be exploited.* Not only are we obliged to exploit everything that is exploitable, but we are also obliged to uncover anything and everything which is exploitable, which is supposedly concealed in each and every thing (even in man). The mission of modern science no longer consists, then, in attempting to hunt down the secret, that is, secret in the sense of the hidden, the *essence*, or the *regularity* of the world or of things, but in discovering their *secret treasures that can be appropriated*. The metaphysical assumption (usually also concealed) of modern research is therefore that *there is nothing that cannot be put to use*.

What the metaphysics of the industrial revolutions demands is that anything that *can* be exploited, *must* be. Some kind of compulsion is at play. An insatiability.

Stranded in a no-man's-land in California, the very same place where Brecht, "contemplating Hell," thought that it "must be ... like Los Angeles,"³³ Anders describes the bourgeois world as the false world. Key for Anders's claims in this regard is a critique of property relations, since only those who own the means of production can be said to be in-the-world. Crucially, he does not parse this into a flat divide between the bourgeoisie and everyone else, instead attending to different forms of proletarianization. For Anders, the worker is poor-in-the-world (*Weltarm*), while the unemployed are worldless (*Weltlos*).³⁴ The proletariat only consumes the world, but the unemployed, like the underclasses described in Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, aren't even subject to the first form of alienation and exploitation, an exclusion that further bars them from being-in-the-world. In this frame, Anders gives a second definition of unworldliness: "'People without a world' are those that are forced to live within a world that is not their own. Even though they produce it with their own work, the world is 'not built for them.'"³⁵ Here Anders is explicitly hinting towards the Marxist sense of alienation, yet he means something ontological: only the ruling class is right in

calling the world "our world" since, in doing so, it expresses not only an abstract form of belonging, but also concrete ownership over the world.

This critique of property relation allows Anders to uphold a distinction between the false world and a non-false world. For if the essence of man is artificiality, how could something like a non-false world even exist? Wouldn't all worlds be false (*falsch*) in that case? However, he answers no: "The 'false' world is the one which consists exclusively of objects belonging to the world of others; that world which is 'mine' exclusively in the psychological sense, but not in the sense that it is available to me."³⁶ The fact that the world is not available to those subject to capitalist domination has to do with the obvious fact that the jobs they are forced to work, and the lives they are forced to lead, cease to be in any way meaningful to them. On this point, Anders pushes a Marxist critique of reification:

From the position that the dominated person occupies within the world of the rulers, he sees the things that make up the "world" of the other in a false perspective, in fact, so false that what is the "world" for the other is only "things" for him. It would be pure cynicism, for example, to claim that the foreign forced laborers sent to Germany by Hitler during the war still lived in a "world."

So a non-false world would require, at the very least, a transformation of property relations. But what then is the texture of this "false world"?

In his landmark essay "The World as Phantom and Matrix," written during his stay in California in the 1940s, Anders tries to answer this. He presciently describes how, due to the uptick in a specific type of American consumerism made possible by the postwar boom in the economy, the world is "delivered to our homes." We no longer have to fare (*fahren*) out into the world, which is how we gain experience (*Erfahrung*); instead, the world is delivered directly to us, as "phantoms," Anders's way of describing television and radio programs. Here an inversion has taken place in which the outside has been transposed onto the inside. By the time we receive bits and pieces of the world as a series of packaged products, that world has been stripped of those things that repel our capacity to consume and understand it; everything negative has been purged. As a result, we don't so much inhabit the world, as Heidegger claims we do.³⁷ We simply consume it. Nothing in the world, no matter how remote or distant, is unfamiliar to us. We can hop on a plane and go somewhere else. We "chum it up" (*Verbiederung*) with the world. Many seem convinced "that the world, as it is, is not a finished world, nor a real world: properly speaking, the world *is not*; that it will only truly *be* to the degree that

... we complete it.”³⁸ As with Anders’s critique of idealist philosophy, what is at stake here is that the concept of world has been reduced to what can be valorized within the schema of the capitalist economy, as the world is only that which is produced by humans, set into circulation as series of commodities for human consumption. The result is that the world retains little of what it is *for itself*, as it is only of concern insofar as it is *for us*. As Giorgio Cesarano says in his *Manual of Survival*, “The real object of production has always been the world.”³⁹

The last figure of unworldliness is “the human in the age of cultural pluralism, the man who participates in several different worlds at once [and] thus has no determinate world at all. It is an interiorized pluralism, a polytheism. The inverse of mass man.”⁴⁰ All values, religious or otherwise, become equal under the sign of the commodity. Some can afford to inhabit many worlds at once without there being any kind of overarching schema—save money—to unite those experiences. All action is transaction, and truth is reduced to doxa. How can we speak of a single, unifying world when the quest for truth leads to an infinite regress? In both the TV example and that of cultural pluralism, it is possible to read a certain kind of nostalgia in Anders (for the home and the family, for the rooted and local). But for Anders, it is not that there was once a true inside, an essence of the non-pluralist and authentic man. Instead, what lies behind these seeming processes of loss and atomization is what was already negative to begin with. Elsewhere, Anders riffs on the phenomenon of cultural pluralism by speaking of an artificially induced schizophrenia, produced by the apparatuses of industrial capitalism such as television and radio. Any unity of the human individual is divided into a series of partial functions which are incapable of being coordinated. To put it in contemporary terms, this is the figure of the multitasker.⁴¹ “The man who is sunbathing, for example, tanning his back while his eyes are poring over a magazine, his ears listen into a sports match, his jaws chew gum—this figure who is simultaneously a passive player while at the same time hyperactive, while in truth doing nothing is an everyday international phenomenon.”⁴² This perhaps brings us back to our starting point in this essay, because what Anders claims the hyperactive figure is trying to ward off with this busyness is a horror vacui: the fear of emptiness, of nothingness. That busyness serves the same function as Freud’s patch, covering over the meaninglessness of living without a world. Again, Anders is not fantasizing about a return to the once-coherent world (or to any refuge of an authentic self) but calling instead for a reckoning with the historical loss of world and with real conditions of bereftness. It’s fitting that in his translation of Anders’s *Weltfremdheit* (unworldliness), Enzo Traverso reached for the ancient Greek word *acosmia*, which means “disorderly” but, through its prefix a-, more fully suggests a negation of *kosmos* and the very promise of order itself.⁴³ Because the results of such a reckoning like Anders proposes are far from certain. There are no guarantees for

any life-form clawing its way from out of the soup and shambles of such an *acosmia*, and into an infinitely expanding universe.

X

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1
The *Molussian Catacombs* is Anders's anti-fascist novel, which he worked on and revised for over sixty years, and which was first published in a complete edition in 1992, the year of his death. He references the novel continually throughout his other works, as here. When asked about the novel's conception, Anders said, "Molussia is an imaginary exotic country which I invented in a Swiftian manner to unmask the nascent National Socialism by means of disguised narratives and pseudo-documents." Composed of a thematically connected series of parables, fairy-tales, songs, and poems, the novel takes place in the complete darkness of the catacombs beneath the imaginary country of Molussia. The catacombs are first and foremost a place of imprisonment for the pariahs of Molussia, and the narrative element of the novel is told through dialogues between two prisoners held captive there, Olo and Yegussa. Deprived of all light and therefore of the faculty of sight, the prisoners live a *Grenzdasein*, an "existence between life and death," where they can rely on the power of the spoken word alone to execute their ethical imperative "to hand down the legacy of the truth." This task is carried out by a chain of so-called "dispatch riders" (*Meldereiter*) which spans generations, and whose stories of both oppression and resistance must be communicated verbally from one prisoner to the next. So long as this chain of dispatch riders goes unbroken, the subterranean non-place that is the catacombs serves as a repository of truth, which will ultimately be brought back up to Molussia when a great revolution finally arrives and makes the last the first, the first the last. Since the truth is forbidden up above in Molussia, the catacombs are also a store of knowledge that would otherwise be lost forever.

2
Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1 (C. H. Beck, 1961), 125. All translations mine unless otherwise noted.

3
Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 2 (C. H. Beck, 2013), 55.

4
Peter Sloterdijk has recently taken up Anders's conception of

Promethean Shame and linked it explicitly to industrial production in his book *Prometheus's Remorse*, trans. Hunter Bolin (Semiotext(e), 2024).

5
Günther Anders, *Die molussische Katakomben* (C. H. Beck, 1992), 101.

6
Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 112.

7
Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 164.

8
Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 2, 37.

9
Günther Anders, *Tagebücher und Gedichte* (C. H. Beck, 1985), 205.

10
Christian Dries, "Nachwort" (Postface), in Günther Anders, *Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen* (C. H. Beck, 2018), 468.

11
Sigmund Freud, "Neurosis and Psychosis," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19 (1923–25), ed. James Strachey (Hogarth Press, 1953), 151.

12
Anders, *Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen*, 28.

13
Jacques Lacan, "Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual," 1938 https://freud2lacan.b-cdn.net/This_Family_Complex-3_Translations.pdf.

14
Günther Anders, *Mensch ohne Welt: Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur* (C. H. Beck, 1993), XV.

15
Jean Claude Milner, *Le Périple Structural* (Editions de Seuil, 2002), 28, e-pub version.

16
Anders, *Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen*, 257.

17
Tim Ingold, "'Tools for the Hand, Language for the Face': An Appreciation of Leroi-Gourhan's *Gesture and Speech*," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and*

Biomedical Sciences 30, no. 4 (1999).

18
Anders, *Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen*, 262.

19
Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 2, 33.

20
Anders, *Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen*, 273.

21
Anders, *Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen*, 372.

22
Jacob Blumenfeld, "Welcome to the Anderscene," *Brooklyn Rail*, July–August 2024 <https://brooklynrail.org/2024/07/field-notes/Welcome-to-the-Anderscene>.

23
Anders, *Die Weltfremdheit des Menschen*, 404.

24
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 256 (B 151).

25
Heidegger notes that when Kant situates this transcendental object, it is never empirical, but only indeterminate or negative. Kant lists it as merely "X": the object seems to have already been lost, and it is not this or that object in particular, but the structure which any object must take on in order for it to be apprehended by human beings. The object is not necessarily a positive *something*; it is instead a horizon—that is to say nonbeing—and its effects structure the place of human knowledge.

26
Anders, *Mensch ohne Welt*, 20.

27
Anders, *Mensch ohne Welt*, XIII.

28
Anders, *Mensch ohne Welt*, 32.

29
By stressing the failure of Biberkopf—a paradigmatic figure of the unworldly human—to take the reins of his own life, Anders can also implicitly be read as critiquing Max Scheler, for whom the spirit—precisely that which Scheler claims makes humans "world-open," or that which grants them a world—"cannot mean more than directing or

steering." Those deprived even of the most basic form of human alienation in the form of labor are even more deprived of any opportunity to freely steer their own life than the worker. Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos*, trans. Manfred S. Frings (Northwestern University, 2009), 27.

30
Susanne Fohler, *Techniktheorien: Der Platz der Dinge in der Welt des Menschen* (Wilhelm Fink, 2003), 152f.

31
Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Critical Theory, Animation and the Avant-garde* (Verso, 2002), 133.

32
Christopher John Müller, "Hollywood, Exile, and New Types of Pictures: Günther Anders's 1941 California Diary 'Washing the Corpses of History,'" *Modernism/modernity* 5, no. 4 (2021) <https://modernismmodernity.org/articles/m%C3%BCller-hollywood-exile-anders>.

33
Bertolt Brecht, "Contemplating Hell," *The Collected Poems of Bertolt Brecht* (Liveright, 2018), 838.

34
Andreas Oberprantacher, "The Desterification of the World: Günther Anders on *Weltlosigkeit*," in *The Life and Work of Günther Anders*, ed. Günter Bischof, Jason Dawsey, and Bernhard Fetz (Studien Verlag, 2015).

35
Anders, *Mensch ohne Welt*, XI.

36
Anders, *Tagebücher und Gedichte*, 209.

37
Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Blackwell, 1962), 80.

38
Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 188, emphasis in original.

39
Giorgio Cesarano, *Manuale di sopravvivenza* (Dedalo libri, 1974), 559.

40
Anders, *Mensch ohne Welt*, XV.

41

I owe this specific formulation of the multitasker as the epitome of Anders's schizophrenic to Christian Dries.

42

Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen*, vol. 1, 138.

43

Enzo Traverso, "Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Günther Anders," trans. David Fernbach, *Historical Materialism* online, n.d. . For an instance of its ancient Greek philosophical usage, see this moment in Plato's *Gorgias*: "'In fact, Callicles, the experts' opinion is that co-operation, love, order, discipline, and justice bind heaven and earth, gods and men. That's why they call the universe an ordered whole (*kosmos*), my friend, rather than a disorderly (*akosmosian*) mass or an unruly shambles.'"



Plato's Academy mosaic, from the Villa of T. Siminius Stephanus in Pompeii. First century AD. License: Public domain.

Luis Camnitzer

Stemming the Tide of STEM

When the US Constitution was drafted, the definition of the word “art” didn’t exactly coincide with today’s Art Basel version. On the positive side, Clause 8 recognized intellectual work as a form of actual labor. The founding fathers would have supported my demand for a dollar. On the negative side, Clause 8 set down guidelines that, by promoting applied knowledge in a world defined by the hope for certainty, have today culminated in the push for STEM curricula. “STEM” stands for “science, technology, engineering, and mathematics.” One could say that, in practical terms, the ideological split between Kant and the US Constitution ended with Kant’s defeat. The Constitution identified knowledge with scientific knowledge, distorted education to function as training for the labor market and national glory, and fragmented knowledge into information units that can be quantified and measured in order to create a meritocracy. Grading and credit systems were predictable and inevitable.

The grading system in the US is based on the British shoe quality-control system. It was translated for academic use in 1792 by William Farish, a teacher at Cambridge. The US credit system appeared a century later in the form of Carnegie units designed to calculate the pensions of retiring teachers. Neither shoe manufacturers nor the pensions’ actuarial accountants were aware of the consequences of their actions. The most basic education relies on being able to write and read an accumulation of letters for literacy, and an accumulation of numbers for numeracy. The pursuit of imagination stops abruptly after kindergarten. From then on, artistic proclivity is identified

with good motor skills and knowledge about what has been previously done and historically approved. As an artist, I assert that this is a fraudulent presentation of my profession. It leads to trying to understand an apple tree by analyzing the color and shape of the apples. The tree, however, is a little more complex.

The image of the tree of knowledge is as old as Eve biting into an apple, but here it helps clarify some things about art. At its bottom there is art as a root activity. At this level, the raw creative impulse meets with a desire to impose order upon it, which is a basic human reaction. Then there is the trunk, where that order is codified into what some people call art as a language. Finally, there are the branches—in fact disciplinary or craft branches, from which we see fruit hanging. When ripe and attractive we call these fruits works of art and we want to consume them, or even better, own them. That is where we write “Art” with a capital “A” and believe that this is all art is. We compare the fruits, evaluate them, and give them a price. We forget that the whole thing comes from a process where “art” is written small, where it deals with knowledge, where the creative impulse travels from the roots up and not from the fruit down. The fruit is there only to help us retro-engineer the process, and much of it eventually rots and falls into a heap of compost. I used to have my students study the past twenty-five years of *Artforum* covers. They were supposed to determine how many, or actually how few, of the artists featured are still consequential today. They were supposed to see how the forgotten artists now serve as fertilizer.

The point is that creativity is a generative but normal cognitive activity. When people say that everyone is an artist, this is a confusing statement. I, at least, visualize multitudes of people painting little canvases while having dinner, riding the subway, or walking in a park, without any further social or cultural value. By “normal cognitive activity” I mean that the possibility of creating something that didn’t exist before is not confined to a few traditional media or a few specialized performers seeking recognition. It is a way of reacting to our environment, and developing it should be an intrinsic part of regular education.

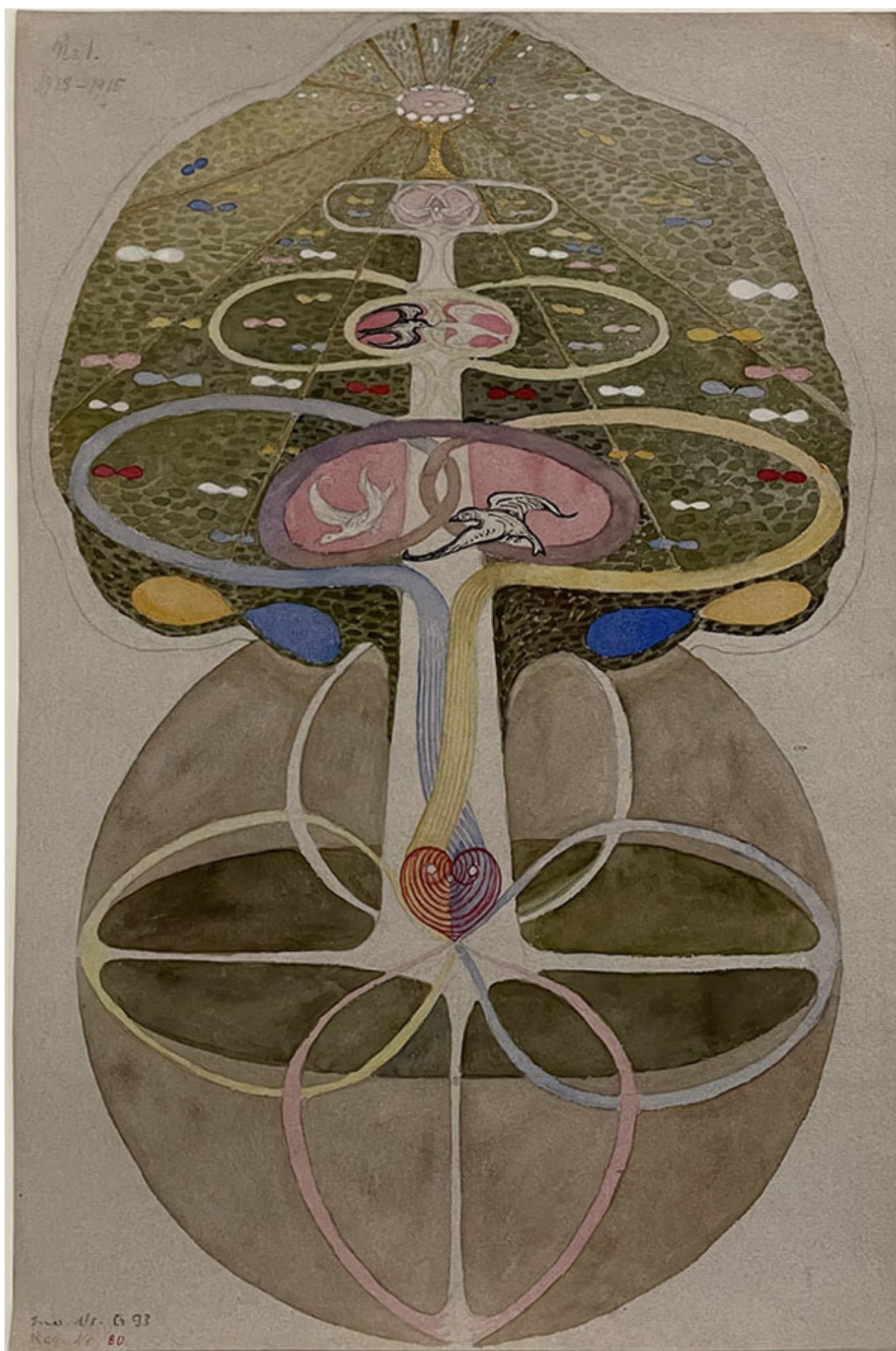
This is particularly important because of the increasing dominance of STEM education at the expense of subjects that deal with nonpractical ideas, as is the case with the humanities. There is nothing wrong, of course, with developing science and technology as much as possible to solve human problems and improve society. However, the study of ethics that might ensure the correct use of science belongs to the humanities. Also being pushed out is a respect for inapplicability and uselessness. Even at the preschool level toys are now designed to guide children into becoming computer programmers or entering STEM fields.

Maybe we should ask, then: “What is the purpose of

education?” In 2012, José Ignacio Wert, the Spanish minister of education, said that “the arts distract from education.”¹ In 2016, US senator Marco Rubio expanded Wert’s theory by noting that welders earn more than philosophers, so therefore we need more welders. These comments focus on personal survival in the labor market. To attract students, STEM disciplines frequently assert that studying them makes you more employable. In this way, jobs have become the main justification for education. When experts discuss the impact of Covid on students, they focus on how the labor market will be adversely affected when these students reach employment age. They don’t focus on how the pandemic stunted the personal maturation of students. The influential Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which measures educational success in countries across the globe, tries to predict this effect while ignoring the consequences of the lack of socialization and nutrition that Covid created in primary school. The reason for this is that PISA is concerned with national standing, not personal development.

This is nothing new. It is part of a dominant way of thinking that, since the US Constitution of 1788, has focused on national competitiveness and supremacy. This way of thinking peaked in response to the Soviet launch of Sputnik in 1957. Later, Ronald Reagan pursued it as an answer to the *Nation at Risk* report. The acronym “STEM” was created in the early 1990s by Charles Vela, a Salvadorian immigrant and scientist. Vela developed a curriculum to improve work opportunities for Latino students, which was then endorsed and taken over by a series of US presidents to maintain international technological leadership. The question here is if STEM, or any training focused on employability, deserves to be called education.

While training focuses on doing jobs well, education is supposed to help students mature. Literacy and numeracy certainly are important for both, so much so that people lacking these skills are considered unfit to function in society. There are, however, illiterate cultures where people count with their fingers and are very happy. It would be interesting to know how such a society compares to ours in terms of violence, cruelty, and exploitation. What we do know is that a good Western education does not ensure moral rectitude or prevent personal corruption and autocratic ambition. Mussolini studied at the University of Lausanne, Goebbels at Heidelberg, Duvalier at Michigan, Fujimori at Wisconsin, George W. Bush at Yale, Syngman Rhee at George Washington University, Harvard, and Princeton, Richard Nixon at Duke, Carlos Salinas at Harvard, Henry Kissinger at Harvard, Benjamin Netanyahu at Harvard and MIT, Margaret Thatcher at Oxford, and Donald Trump at the Wharton School of Business. More overtly bloody dictators were usually formed in more or less sophisticated military schools. What all of them may have in common is that they relentlessly pursued individual power and succeeded. This



Hilma af Klint, Tree of Knowledge, No. 1, 1913–15. License: Public domain.

is a topic not covered by the STEM curriculum since, as noted before, ethics is taught in the humanities.

There are other questions that STEM ignores but that are fundamental to its dominance. One is the difference between the unexpected and the unpredictable—a difference that helps separate ingenuity from creativity. Ingenuity recombines available ingredients to solve a problem in new and better ways; the result may be unexpected, but it is still predictable. Creativity, on the other hand, deals with the unpredictable and unrestrained generation of new meanings. The distinction is important because the continual stress on applicability and profit in neoliberal society favors ingenuity over creativity.

In the same way that training has usurped the word “education,” ingenuity has now appropriated “creativity.” “Thinking outside the box” is an entrepreneurial buzz phrase that encourages ingenuity in order to bring new ideas into the box. Artists would question not only the limitations of the thinking inside the box but also the actual existence of the box. A politicized artist might even try to identify who created the box and why. The point would be to counteract and destroy the limits it imposes on our thinking.

Besides promoting class and race divisions, our educational system is increasingly designed to train unimaginative technocrats to serve thoughtless consumers. By advancing financial and military interests, these technocrats create ecological disasters—and then expect to be praised for their post-disaster “ingenuity.” And now we have artificial intelligence barging in and possibly taking over many of our decisions.

I’m not particularly informed in these matters, so I went to ChatGPT for help. I figured I could ask ChatGPT about its own intentions and get the type of unvarnished answer that a CEO wouldn’t give me. I asked: “Is artificial intelligence working together with STEM to build a technological society?” The answer was very clear: “Yes, artificial intelligence plays a significant role in collaboration with STEM fields to build and advance technological societies. The integration of AI into STEM disciplines has the potential to enhance various aspects of research, development, and innovation.”

After enumerating seven areas of collaboration, including education and training, ChatGPT finished by stating:

In summary, the synergy between AI and STEM is crucial for building and advancing technological societies. The collaboration enhances the capabilities of STEM professionals, accelerates research and development, and leads to the creation of innovative solutions across various domains.

Fearfully I then asked: “Isn’t this a very one-sided kind of society? Where are the humanities and art in this education?” The answer:

You raise a valid point, and it’s important to recognize the need for a well-rounded and interdisciplinary approach to education and societal development. While the integration of AI and STEM is indeed transformative, a balanced society should also value and incorporate the contributions of the humanities and arts.

The solution ChatGPT offered to this was “STEAM”—adding the letter “A” for “art.” ChatGPT actually had a better interpretation of this than some of the original STEAM proponents, who only saw art as a tool to help technology.

I then asked about how to handle the unexpected and the unpredictable. For this ChatGPT recommended several strategies, primarily “adaptive learning,” and then added: “While AI models can process large amounts of data, human judgment and intuition remain crucial for assessing complex and novel situations. Combining AI capabilities with human insights can enhance decision-making in unpredictable scenarios.”

This sounds nice and sensible as long as we see AI as a friendly collaborator, which might be true if we are able to maintain the upper hand. But what if not? Then I realized: Who better to ask about this than AI itself? So there I went: “This opens the field for AI dominance. Is there any way to protect human independence from this? Is art a tool that can help in this?”

The answer was: “Art and the humanities, in general, can play a crucial role in safeguarding human independence and providing a counterbalance to the potential over-reliance on AI.” This was followed by a long list of suggestions that, though very reasonable and obvious, I have not yet seen in any academic policy statements. Some of these are:

Incorporating artistic and humanistic perspectives ensures that technology is designed to enhance human well-being and independence.

Art, literature, and philosophy cultivate critical thinking skills. A society that values these disciplines is better equipped to critically assess the impact of AI on various aspects of life.

Artistic expression and creativity are uniquely human qualities. While AI can generate art, it lacks the depth of human emotion and context. The preservation and



Illustration at the beginning of Euclid's *Elementa*, in the translation attributed to Adelard of Bath, between 1309 and 1316. Source: British Library.
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celebration of human creativity can be a powerful reminder of what makes us distinct from machines.

Concerns about AI dominance often revolve around the potential dehumanization of society. Art has the

ability to resist dehumanization by emphasizing the emotional, aesthetic, and cultural dimensions that make us [*sic*] human.

Art and literature are powerful mediums for developing emotional intelligence. Understanding and managing emotions are essential aspects of human independence, and emphasizing emotional intelligence can be a counterbalance to the purely rational and algorithmic nature of AI.

In summary, art and the humanities serve as powerful tools for preserving and promoting human independence in the face of advancing AI technologies. By emphasizing the human experience, fostering critical thinking, and advocating for ethical considerations, society can ensure that AI complements rather than dominates our lives.

Recently a lawyer was reprimanded because he told a judge, "See you next Tuesday." Like the judge, I initially took the lawyer's statement as harmless. It never occurred to me—or to the judge, until somebody pointed out to her the coded message—to read the statement as C (see) U (you) N (next) T (Tuesday). Maybe art's new function, then, besides dealing with mystery, the unknown, and the unpredictable, is to develop a code that looks harmless to AI but conveys secret meanings only understandable to humans. This would be a new literacy to be acquired during schooling, a skill more important than reading, writing, and numeracy—that is, if we want to survive as the humans we believe we are. I assume that the term "humanities" is derived from this belief. Unfortunately, the educational system has never focused on that connection, otherwise the humanities would be taught in their own distinctive way, rather than in a way that emulates the hard disciplines. Even in their distorted teaching, what does the removal of the humanities from the center of modern education mean for our responsibilities as human beings? According to ChatGPT:

The removal of the humanities from education can have significant implications for our sense of humanity and the responsibilities that come with it ... Here are some potential consequences of removing the humanities from education: Loss of Cultural Understanding, Diminished Critical Thinking Skills, Impact on Moral and Ethical Development, Reduced Creativity and Innovation, Narrowed Perspective on Humanity, Weakened Communication Skills, Impact on Citizenship and Civic Engagement.

It's depressing that this had to come as an AI insight instead of a basic part of everyday schooling.

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J. A. Aunión, "Educación quiere menos asignaturas para centrar la atención de los alumnos," *El País*, September 3, 2012 https://elpais.com/sociedad/2012/09/02/actualidad/1346620941_402605.html.