

# TWIN FIGURE OF MIMESIS I & II

Anders Paulin

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# TWIN FIGURE OF MIMESIS I





# REFLECTION



*This could be said to be the story about the Twin Figure of Mimesis.*

*The mimetic figure Alterity is something as odd as a twin considerably older than its sibling. Alterity is a liberating figure born in the instant we model a copy of the world; a fetish, an image or a story. It is the necessary intervention of fiction, dislodging reality from itself in order to render it open for reflection, interpretation, and imagery.*

*The figure Identity is the younger twin, operating in the very end of the mimetic road. If Alterity works within the gap between reality and copy, then the mission of Identity is the re-appropriation of the figure. Where as the older twin opens the gate for our gaze to probe into the potential of the unknowable, the younger one closes it again in the name of Identification and Knowledge.*



# PREFACE

Austin Gross



—[...] Then we practice, building a model for that. I'm not a strong believer in revolution.

—What is your model?

—For fifteen years, I made theatre that said: "This is what you think theatre is. I think that is bullshit. Theatre should be like this." Getting half the audience to walk out. Then, ten years ago, I changed approaches. I started to try to "negotiate," with the theatre, with its staff, with the audience. You invite the audience to a situation where you communicate: "I know what this venue is, and what is supposed to happen here. All of us know what is supposed to take place here in ten minutes. We're in a theatre, we have actors here on stage, we have lights. We can agree, we do agree, on what is supposed to happen here. And it will, maybe it will, it probably will. But—can we wait a bit?" In that postponement, we imagine what it could be, if it's not that.

To the right, a video chat is open, and to the left, a text editor with my notes for our conversation. What's left are the questions I have postponed asking. Before I ask any, Anders begins; in essence, here is what he said:

—If I keep using the notion of negotiation, it's because it's the process where people with conflicting interests in an object have to keep being in dialogue about it. I talked to Bojana about it. For her, to foster negotiation is typically social-democratic ideal—that is, bourgeois and Swedish.

Like Bojana Cvejić, who contributed a chapter to this project, I've started to take the ideological content of art seriously. Often, after wracking my brains to find a piece interesting, I resign myself to a straightforward ideological reading. "Oh," for example, "This choreography really just *is* about fluid, exchangeable roles. Not because role-reversal is interesting, but because it seems democratic. It's the artist's solution to structures of domination [she or he] doesn't really understand."

So my reaction, when I heard Anders, was similar to Bojana's: to check if Anders and I understand the political situation in the same way. Does he think dialogue can resolve this century's social antagonisms?

*—There are economic priorities that are beyond negotiation, that turn every negotiation about them into a representation of negotiation.*

*—Yes, but if the public sphere disappears completely, that's even worse. Then democracy becomes a machine for administering surplus wealth (within a minority), and the only question that can be asked is whether the surplus has been administered correctly or not. We completely forget how to do dissensus or collective discussion. We lose the muscles for it. We have to try not to lose them.*

By now, I have relaxed because we're on the same page. Anders goes on:

*—Let's distinguish 1) resistance to the state or to capitalism, 2) how to be a public, how to act as citizens, something that has to be refined and exercised. The latter is an act of resistance, but not towards something external. It's a matter of building and developing something internal. We have different roles. Some are the overthrowers. [But the intellectual class, the creative class] can only develop something internal. I ask myself how it would be, in theatre, in a society that is not fascist, not this and that. Then we practice building a model for that society. The model is an example and a process of figuring out how to work. I'm not a strong believer in the revolution as a concept.*

*—What is your model?*

This is where, suddenly, another function of negotiation emerges, which I quoted at the very beginning. Negotiation still has its political function ("exercising the muscles for dialogue and dissensus"), but it also refers to a certain dramaturgical style. Likewise, when Anders says he's not a strong believer in revolution, he means it in two senses: a political sense, and a dramaturgical sense. His earlier theatre was still ordered by the dramaturgy of the uncompromising romantic act. Now he wonders if theatre could project a different dramaturgy for this encounter, a dramaturgy of postponement and negotiation.

What the contributors to this book have in common with Anders—Sergej Pristaš and Bojana Cvejić, at least—is their



effort to rekindle an interest in “poetics.” As they use it, the word “poetics” no longer refers to poetry, but to the Greek verb *poieîn* (modern *poiô*), which means “do,” “make,” and “create.” Their intervention is polemically overdetermined:

(1) Poetics against aesthetics: a poetic elaboration works through the emergence of an art-work rather than the experience of a spectator (*aísthēsis* = sense perception).

(2) Poetics over practice: poetics is concerned with something made, and not with research, nor with techniques of the self.

(3) Poetics beyond theory: poetics is an autonomous field that does not have to legitimize itself by appealing to the concerns of continental philosophy and critical theory or employing their terminologies. It can draw on its own conceptual resources: in its present, in the history of art, and in collectively accumulated knowledge about making it.<sup>1</sup> Anders has, it seems to me, taken up this invitation to articulate some aspects of his own theatre making.

If poetics is the saying of making, what is there to say about making? Let’s start with conditions, which are often overlooked as a poetic concern. I mean this word as it is used in a hostage situation or a union battle. “Unless these conditions are met, there will be no making, there will be no art.” A condition makes a threat. “If not now, then never” is the contemporary anti-poetic condition that determines the mode of existence of young artists. Poetics responds: “If it isn’t worth making, I will wait.” Art can never formulate these conditions as unequivocally as poetics can, because it has already agreed to happen. Poetics can never excel in patience because it’s patient by nature.

*Twin Figure of Mimesis*, often in its footnotes and in between, formulates a poetics for the theatre making Anders Paulin and several collaborators or fellow travellers have been engaged in for at least a decade. The refusal of representational theatre has always been one of their conditions. It’s a constant between Anders’ earlier “conflictual” strategy—the one he now calls “romantic”—and his more cordial procedure of postponement. Between the two, what shifted was the dramaturgy of the

condition itself, and the style of response to other, conflicting conditions, that the audience or the institution brings to the event. We could also say that Anders has added a second condition on top of the first: it will not be representational, but it should not be uncompromising. A new condition requires new procedures, new models, one of which is “negotiation.”

*—What you’re calling negotiation is on the limit of counting as a negotiation. Postponement is cordial. It depends on the relation of hospitality. A host will sometimes keep their guests so long that they miss the last train and they will have to sleep on the cot.*

*“Listen, friends, I’ve got to be going to bed sooner or later, and eventually you’ll have to leave. But don’t get your coat, not so fast. First, I’m going to roll another joint, and we’ll enjoy it nicely taking our time, starting on another topic meanwhile.”*

*These things don’t work symmetrically. Not just because it’s a breach of hospitality for a guest to postpone anything. A guest’s invitations and manipulations are never as invisible and effective, because they lack the hypnotic, charismatic power that the words of hosts take on by virtue of their role.*

The poetic concepts of postponement and negotiation describe this subtler, perhaps more manipulative, dramaturgy of the condition. But they’re overdetermined. We’ve already seen that they have a political function, in what Anders, after Jean-Luc Nancy, calls “listening.”

*—You just keep making new postponements until it’s over, and the point where we had to agree about what good theatre is never happens. We find a way to think about it and discuss it. And I think that goes for politics. If everyone agrees that you have to listen—if literally everyone agrees to that—it’s a radical thing.*

The aim is: suddenly we pass a threshold in which the people present have agreed to continue in this non-arrival, without saying anything. But it’s as if accepting the non arrival of theatre also means accepting the non-arrival of understanding, in relation to the other members of the audience. In accepting both of these non-arrivals, the audience re-founds itself on listening.

Postponement has another function here than it did above, in relation to the dramaturgy of the condition. It allows the emergence of a general will to listen, a subjectivation. Listening and subjectivation are principles that theatre making actualizes, each time by a new invention.

There's more to say about making, and there's more to poetics, than conditions. A condition doesn't give you something to start from, but just reminds you that sometimes it's better not to start. The refusal of representation could also mean that you stop making theatre. You only keep making theatre because something else makes you busy and gives you trouble.

Plato's poetics, surprisingly enough, is helpful here. A carpenter, making a table, has one eye on the work, and one eye on the principle. Plato doesn't use the word "principle"; he says "idea", and so do Jean-Marie Straub<sup>2</sup> and Deleuze.<sup>3</sup> But I prefer "principle," which I think I'm borrowing from the Marquis de Sade. In a letter from prison, he wrote:

You know that I respect tastes, fantasies, however baroque they may be; I find them all respectable, both because one is not the master of them, and because the most singular and the most bizarre of all, well analysed, always proceeds from a principle of refinement [*principe de délicatesse*]. I take it upon myself to prove it whenever one should like.<sup>4</sup>

Fantasies originate in a principle of refinement. A principle isn't a rule or maxim, but a premise, seed, or germ. Without a more thorough analysis than I can give, it's hard to tell what's at stake for Sade in the concept of "principle." But what's important for us is that the principle stands outside the fantasy that proceeds from it, and above it, or at least on a different level.<sup>5</sup> A poetic principle is external and heterogeneous to the fantasy—or in our case, to the theatre—that actualizes it.

Principles are poor. They don't have bodies of their own, forms of their own, or ideas of their own (which is why I prefer

to call them “principles” rather than “ideas,” despite the fact that Deleuze, Straub, and Cvejić all use this word.)<sup>6</sup> Principles are poorer than problems, too, because problems have everything but the solution. Only *poiesis*, an act (or a process) of “making,” can create the ideas and problems that will give a body to a principle like “subjectivation.” This is the paradox that keeps reactivating Plato’s poetics. Making, for Plato, is the imitation<sup>7</sup> of principles, but it’s an imitation of what the principles don’t have.<sup>8</sup>

It is the affair of poetics to say what principles are in play, and how they are being activated. *Twin Figure of Mimesis* names a handful of poetic principles: subjectivation, listening, the reference, mimesis, and transcendence. Each of them is an impetus. As soon as you have a principle, you have to invent a way of actualizing it.

After the principle named “listening” or “subjectivation,” it’s worth mentioning another Anders only discusses marginally in his book, but which is exemplified by some of the illustrations from *Three White Soldiers*. It’s the principle of the non-communicative “inner activity” of the work. What theatre produces doesn’t have anything to do with getting access to its contents. But that doesn’t mean the piece is all surface, or that its only significance lies in the readings it produces. On the contrary, we can now start to focus on the internal economy of the piece, independently and for its own sake. Theatre making is busy with a black market of references that circulate and activate each other, without anybody seeing them. The curtain stays down, not between the audience and the actors, but between the actors and the piece itself. A phrase of Mahler plays at a certain moment of *Double Feature*;<sup>9</sup> or three circles projected on the wall, the three drops of blood from the goose in Parsifal in *Parzival* and *Neither You Nor Me*.<sup>10</sup> Or finally—one of his favorite examples—a black canvas hung in the corner of the room where, ordinarily, the icon would be (Malevich). The references are not presented for interpretation. Interpretation won’t give you anything. They’re not presented at all, but

simply activated and confronted with one another. If they are communicating and activating one another, it will also be obvious from the outside that something is working, without requiring anything to be decoded.

Mimesis itself is another principle. Here, it has a double meaning, theatrical and biological. On the one hand, the question: what is a non-representational use of mimesis in theatre? On the other hand, the reference to non-theatrical, cosmic power: the face emerging from the back of the moth, on a peacock's feather, and its paralysing effect.

This duplicity (between art and nature) is very peculiar, since the founding gesture of modern aesthetics was the cut between the theory of the art work and the theory of the aesthetic category of natural beauty.<sup>11</sup> That cut meant that art no longer had to imitate nature, and, more importantly, that it was no longer defined in terms of the aesthetic effect of beauty. Since mimicry in nature operates through its aesthetic force of fascination or vertigo, the question is whether the poetics of mimicry will fall back into aesthetics. Is Anders trying to exploit these effects of fascination and vertigo? Not at all—his interest does not lie in the effects of mimesis, but in its own doubleness, in the complicity of theatrical mimesis with another (disavowed and radically different) stratum of reality.

In *Double Feature*, he has managed to find a procedure for deploying mimesis theatrically without becoming engrossed in its aesthetic effects. His procedure is to progressively duplicate the actors. I wouldn't say, though, that Anders is exploiting any poetic model of "the double," extracted from fantastical literature or from the theory of psychosis. At this stage, the procedure of duplication is very formal. He makes use of six squares in three basic colours—if I remember correctly, they're in three of the first colours that one learns as a child, red, green, and blue. That they are basic colours is important because it reduces them to simple elements of a set; they may as well be A, B, and C. The squares are attached to a discreet but solid mount, so that they are approximately the height of a human being.

An actor is speaking. Another actor brings a blue square and sets it just behind her, facing the same direction as she is facing. She is now standing in front of the blue square, or to the side of it. Now she leaves, and the square is in the place she was standing. Now a green square comes alongside a second actor. Square to actor, and now square to square, a mimetic series starts to unfold without provoking any of the aesthetic fireworks of zoological mimicry.

Before we go on, there's one key formula I need to mention from Roger Caillois' theory of mimesis. It becomes very important in *Twin Figure*. "He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar...." I suspect that this phrase also functions as a principle, but, if so, I haven't been able to figure out how it translates into making. But what I can see is that this formula has given Anders a tool for actualizing another principle—not mimesis but "transcendence," which will be the last poetic principle I'll discuss.

"Transcendence," or the "open-ended," the "whatever," is the nexus of Anders' poetics, at least in *Twin Figure*. Most of the other problems intersect here. But more importantly, the procedures, the protocols, and the models that Anders has invented to actualize this principle are by far the most developed and complex, and they pose interesting problems.

Transcendence is inappropriable. According to Anders, any knowledge, interpretation, or articulation of transcendence would be an inappropriation. It's very closely related to the concept of listening that he borrows from Jean-Luc Nancy—listening, as opposed to understanding. Transcendence is what you can only listen for; if you understand something, you've appropriated it. Appropriation has two different senses here. On the one hand, it means defining what belongs to transcendence itself, what is "proper" to it. On the other hand, it means reducing transcendence to something that you own, to your own property. For Anders, the task is to avoid both kinds of "proper," because they are interconnected.

As a concept, it has a lot in common with what several generations of artists have called the "unrecognizable"

or the “unidentifiable.” But the unrecognizable and the unidentifiable are often aesthetic categories, meaning that the artist makes something that will be unrecognisable or unidentifiable for the audience.<sup>12</sup> By contrast, the procedures Anders develops do not simply produce unrecognisability as an aesthetic (or anti-aesthetic) effect; they take transcendence seriously in their process. The taboo on appropriation bears first of all on the making.

The people making the piece (directors and collaborators), and the actors performing in it, are given the task of letting transcendence become present without appropriating it. Anders discusses two ways of carrying this out. The first again is a kind of postponement, but a different postponement than before. It’s not hospitable postponement—which inhabits a full, rich interval, as rich as the relation of hospitality itself: another cup of tea, another story; the delicious lighting of *Double Feature*, different tints of ice-white and off-white, whose hospitality regales us while we wait. It’s not anxious procrastination, which is just as full, always busy with pointless tasks. It’s a postponement that produces a void. Like an empty chair, it invites transcendence to appear. Anders calls this void the “caesura” and the “gap.” The actors and the makers don’t need to grasp or construct transcendence to present it. In fact, their making and their performing is not itself the point. It’s just an invitation for something else that will happen without them. What will appear will do so of its own accord.

A second strategy goes over the tipping point into passivity. The makers and the actors don’t simply renounce mastery and conceptualization, they make themselves into instruments. *Three White Soldiers* gives a paradigmatic example: making a work by following instructions from shamans. This is also where Roger Caillois’ formula comes into play, as a protocol of being receptive to similarity as such, of taking signals from the object world. This could mean producing an association of images like in Chris Marker’s *Sans soleil* (here an important example for Anders), but it doesn’t have to. On the most basic level, being receptive to similarity

is just a way of allowing the work to be determined by forces that transcend the author's subjectivity.<sup>13</sup> The invitation comes from the things, and the makers have to follow their lead. Anders uses the phrase "outsourced protocol" to describe the procedure applied in *Three White Soldiers*, but it could apply to all of these procedures. The caesura leaves a free space, beyond its control, as an invitation: the outsourced protocol gives itself over to a foreign power.

Both the caesura and the outsourced protocol involve a renunciation of interpretation, and a certain renunciation of personal identity. To make a caesura is not a matter of being present as a protagonist, because what really matters happens of its own accord. To follow an outsourced protocol is to depersonalize oneself much further. We still have a few crucial elements to add, but let's pause for a moment to bring this poetics into starker relief. There is a nodal point within this network, where a very small adjustment would produce a very different approach. That point is Anders' view of interpretation. Because he equates understanding and ownership, interpretation appears to him as the subject's struggle to become master or owner. All his procedures for actualizing the principle of transcendence involve the renunciation of interpretation. Less interpretation, less individuality.<sup>14</sup>

Anders develops these two strategies (the caesura and the outsourced protocol) through a handful of poetic "models." By model, I mean something borrowed from another context that brings a specific structure into play in theatre-making. A peculiarity of Anders' poetics is that he takes concepts from other disciplines as his models—usually very loaded concepts. In fact, we've seen a few examples already. Mimicry is a zoological concept, and also an ethnographic concept. The caesura is also a philosophical and poetic concept, borrowed from Hölderlin. In each case, borrowing the model gives the theatre maker a set of conceptual relations to start from, as well as a shadowy network of connotations and stakes. That means Anders can exploit the model of the caesura in different ways over time. At first, perhaps, he will exploit one



of its aspects (the form of the interruption, and Hölderlin's idea of the "empty transport"), and later rediscover part of the conceptual constellation he had bracketed out (the idea of a "counter rhythmic interruption," and the problems in the background, seriality and irreversibility).<sup>15</sup>

There are at least three models at work in the way Anders constructs the relationship between the actor, the audience, and transcendence. In each of these models, the actor is an intermediary between the audience and transcendence. The first model is the "storyteller"—in particular, the seafaring kind, the traveller who tells stories from elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> This model suggests to him the form of the travelogue, which he puts to work in the making of *Three White Soldiers* (in combination with the outsourced protocol.)

The second model is, for lack of a better word, the priest. The term is misleading because he isn't thinking of the Christian priest, who is a therapist and guide (a "shepherd"), but rather of the priest who executes a ritual act or a sacrifice—Egyptian priests, Jewish priests before the fall of the temple, or Voodoo priests. What's at stake here is that the actor is doing something, and not representing an action, and that the actor does not grasp or master what they are giving presence to.

The third model is the medium. Mediumship is not just an occupation, but a concept which was given its present form by 19<sup>th</sup> century spiritualism. The priest keeps a respectful distance to transcendence, whereas the medium goes much further, following its impulses. In terms of the two strategies outlined above, the medium is closest to the outsourced protocol, and the priest is closest to the caesura.<sup>17</sup>

These models finally concretise something very important that we haven't yet touched on, which is the relationship between the individual and the people. This problematic relationship is what gives dynamism to the actualization of the principle of transcendence. It's always a problem in theatre, and is even one of the things that makes theatre important.

—As soon as there are actors on stage, Anders says, there's also going to be the question: what is the relationship between

*these individuals and the people, and how is this relationship going to be justified?* Is the individual on stage closer to transcendence than the people? Anders' answer is: certainly not. But then, what is their role? Does the audience need an intermediary?

This problematic translates into a series of precautions. It becomes important to keep the intermediary from becoming a protagonist or hero. This danger is especially acute when the model is the storyteller. —*In the travelogue, the idea isn't that we are representatives by way of being protagonists. We became the objects. Instead of critiquing finance from outside, we travel with its movements, we follow the trajectory of this speed or time-space opened up. So it was, in the idea, about being present as ourselves, as opposed to telling a fictional story about this, but we're not present in the sense that we've produced a subjective narrative. Present as objects. Of course ultimately that wasn't enough, because the first person produces a strong illusion. That's why Sans soleil also has to deploy so many layers of distancing. "He told me," "He told me," over and over. We added progressively more layers of distancing in the subsequent parts of the project. In part two, someone else who wasn't part of it narrates in our place.*<sup>18</sup>

Aesthetic formality is another strategy for preventing the performers from becoming heroes or protagonists. In *Double Feature*, there are five interchangeable intermediaries. They arrange and rearrange themselves—very close to the audience, who are seated along the wall on all sides, on the same level as the actors—in a space that is divided into quarters with four primary standing positions, so that structurally they can not all have their own designated place, and instead have to keep permuting themselves. The structuralism of the piece does a lot to lessen the impression that they are protagonists one can identify with. What's also interesting, from the point of view of the priest model, is that in the second half of the piece the intermediaries cease to be mediums, and become engineers instead. They assemble a complex apparatus in the middle of the room that projects and reflects a beam of light onto the wall. They become operators, as if the technical profession

of the projectionist (in a cinema) were reimagined as a magic show or a religious mystery.

But even though there are five mediators instead of one, even though they are all depersonalised by formality, and even though they aren't closer to transcendence than the audience, there's still a clear division of roles. Nobody is on two sides at the same time. What does this division mean? How should this division be performed? —*Is there some way, I ask Anders, that the intermediary could perform in the awareness that their access to the transcendent is itself mediated by way of the social?*

—*But that's exactly it, that's a perfect definition of theatre.*

Over Skype, we talk about Schönberg's *Moses and Aaron*:

—*If I would make a production just for you, I say, it would be about how Moses is wrong. He thinks he's a medium just for the beyond, and that's why people can only participate in his actions, but always with a specific differentiated role. But his thought ("meine Gedanke!") comes from other people as much as it comes from the transcendent.*

—*But it's not just Moses, it's Aaron too! He's the one who's stuck with the people for forty days and forty nights! He's the one who makes something (poiesis), and that's why he also can screw it up. Moses has conditions, but he doesn't negotiate. Aaron makes something for the people.*

—*Right. But I don't see what the multitude give him, aside from misunderstandings. Moses' idea of God isn't coming from them at all: it's a one way street from the idea, through the intermediaries, to the people. But the thing is that monotheism isn't Moses' invention at all; it comes from others. There's blindness to that. And if you understand that you're a medium for the collective work of thinking, and for your times, then the division is much more complicated. The collectivity takes part through you, but your thought in turn is coming through the collectivity.*

—*But that reading of the piece is not the interesting one. You're speaking as if Moses had received some kind of special thought from beyond, some special access, that nobody else*

*had. As if it were a possession. What he has is negative. It's a non-possession.*

That is to say: Moses makes a caesura. The relationship of the individual to the people is tightly intertwined with Anders' choice of procedures. So tightly, in fact, that the answer to the social question has already been given. Moses is not an individual at all.

Earlier on, I mentioned a "nodal point" in the poetics of transcendence: Anders' view of interpretation. For Anders, interpretation is always appropriation. Until now, we were only dealing with three terms: the individual, interpretation, and transcendence. But now we have a fourth term: the social. And in light of this new term, it seems like our initial model of interpretation was too simple. Interpretation is not some kind of pure thought without words, like what Leibniz attributed to God. It needs language, history, images—raw materials. And these materials are always social.

Interpretation makes you a medium. Not for the thing you're interpreting, whose transcendence you haven't respected. Interpretation makes you a medium for something else, for the collective history where you had to draw all the raw materials of interpretation.

In that case, we can formulate something else about the caesura that wasn't obvious before: it comes at a price. Renouncing interpretation means renouncing the social materials of interpretation. In the process of purifying the performance of subjective impurities, one has also purified it of social impurities. It's easy to think about the social and the individual in a binary way, where less individual means more social. But the caesura is a negation of both. The social comes back in other ways, through the audience, but the initial sacrifice is irreversible.<sup>19</sup>

And what about the outsourced protocol? It brings in social elements, in the form of the shamans who are consulted, but it does so after first renouncing interpretation and its social materials. At this point we have to go further than asking, "Is it social, or is it not social?" as though the

social were “good,” and the non-social “bad.” The question is, “How is it social, in what way? What are the possibilities of that way of being social?” But it’s too early to push these questions further. They will become more precise in the making itself.

Anders isn’t the protagonist of *Twin Figure*. Its core is epistolary.<sup>20</sup> The other parties are four theorists and artists for whom Anders acts, often, as a medium, in his theatrical work as much as in his poetics. He wrote to each (the letters are enclosed), inviting them each to contribute an essay to the book.

Benjamin Noys returns to the theme of postponement and evasiveness. He finds his model in the concept “neurotic.” Procrastination isn’t the main point here (although it could, potentially, provide some kind of interesting protocols.) What the neurotic recognizes the difficulty of isn’t action as such (as in the traditional interpretation of Hamlet), but the transition into action, the translation into action.

Bojana Cvejić seems to take up Benjamin Noys’ plea for hesitation. She frames poetics as a response to presentism. Its question is, “What is the art I would like to see?” This is why imagination is not only a poetic principle, but a condition for poetics itself.

Sergej Pristaš takes a few poetic principles that he has in common with Anders, and seems (although he doesn’t say so) to want to show that they can be activated by very different models and procedures. The principle that is chiefly considered is that of listening or collective subjectivation. Where Anders focuses on the symbolic efficacy of language, Sergej elaborates a kind of physics of subjectivation, centered on the “intermateriality” of sleep.

The protocol for the fourth dialogue—between Anders and Peggy Phelan, whose interest in the category of absence Anders clearly shares—is slightly different. It’s an email correspondence around a topic, in which the question posed is how the contemporary economy can be discussed by contemporary art, or used in its imaginary.

Which leads me to one last remark on the question of heroism, and on the model of the medium. In Anders' theatre, those who play the role of intermediary, who act as mediums, are the actors. The author, the director, is *never* the highest rank before transcendence, and the very idea of such a thing is nonsensical.

This stands in contrast to much of "post-dramatic" theatre, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, in which directors were strong *auteurs* (one could name Robert Wilson, Robert Lepage, Liz LeCompte, Jan Fabre and Romeo Castellucci as examples). Such a director typically dominates the actors with his or her knowledge of what is going on. This first confrontation, produced by the theatrical division of labor, produces, in turn, a second confrontation between the actors and the audience.<sup>21</sup>

Quite the opposite, here. Neither the actors nor the director know and, in particular, the director is just an intermediary like the actors themselves, and not any closer to the truth than they are. In fact, the director isn't an intermediary at all, unless he or she also enters into the piece and acts. This is a crucial point—because even if the model of the intermediary poses problems relating to heroism and the division of roles between the actor and the audience, it is not a lionisation of the director, and it avoids the most pernicious division of knowledge between director and performers, or between performers and audience.

If this situation could be illustrated graphically, then the transcendent object would be the fire in the middle, around which the first ring is formed by the actors and Anders (who set the fire), and the audience sits in the second, outer ring, lit by the glow of the fire.

- 1 Younger artists are often tempted to reject discourse and criticism altogether, because they have always been taught to defer to an arbitrary canon of European philosophical sources, many of which weren't written with art in mind at all, or whose choice of examples is proof of their authors' conservative taste in art. For Sergej and Bojana, the discourse on art and on making art does not need to remain an endless commentary of this canon.
- 2 "When someone tells you, 'Yeah, the form, it's the form, it's the form, there is no idea,' it's spinelessness, it's spinelessness, it's not true, one must see things clearly. First, there's the idea. Then, there's a material, and then there's a form. [...] We have a material, that resists, one can't cut just anywhere, [...] and when one has laboured, the form emerges, from the struggle between the idea and the material, and from the struggle with the material." Jean-Marie Straub in *Où gît votre sourire enfoui?* (*Where Does Your Hidden Smile Lie?*), Pedro Costa, 35mm, colour, 104', 2001.
- 3 Cf. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton, Columbia University Press: New York, 1994, p. 182.
- 4 Letter of November 23–24, 1783, quoted in Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, trans. Richard Miller, University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1989, p. 170. Translation modified.
- 5 Sade talks about "analysis," which might suggest that the principles are somehow the atoms into which human passion decomposes. But the word I translated as "proceeds" implies something more. Analysis doesn't decompose a fantasy, so much as it tries to ascend "back up" to the fantasy's origins.
- 6 See, for example, Bojana Cvejić, *Choreographing Problems: Expressive Concepts in European Contemporary Dance and Performance*, Palgrave Macmillan: Houndmills, 2015, pages 46–48.
- 7 Plato's *mimesis* is not imitation in the usual sense, nor in the senses this word takes for Benjamin, Caillois, Adorno, or Taussig. When we come to the *mimesis* of *Twin Figure*, we'll see something in the vein of Caillois and Taussig. That doesn't mean there isn't any relation to Plato, but none was intended.
- 8 The painter of couches looks at an object, but the maker of couches looks to a principle. Theatre making belongs to the second category.

Why, exactly, is Plato so hostile to the copy of the copy? From a certain point of view, his anxiety seems misplaced. Translating the principle into a work is so much more perilous than crafting a representation of an object. The representational copy is, by contrast, easily verified. It is accountable and transparent. Perhaps this false accountability, this false transparency, is precisely what makes representational *mimesis* dangerous. In that case, Plato isn't really against art. He's against representation. The representational copy is a lie because it loses the distortion, not because it distorts the origin.

- 9 A production at Oslo National Theatre in Fall 2017, on which Bojana Cvejić collaborated. The piece post dates the composition of *Twin Figure of Mimesis*.
- 10 *Neither You Nor Me* was created and performed with Anders Mossling in 2012. *Parzival* was made and performed in 2014.

- 11 This shift happened in the years following the 1790 publication of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. His critique of aesthetic judgment was primarily concerned with the aesthetic experience of nature, and only secondarily with art. Nature quickly lost its importance in the philosophy of art, and so did beauty and pleasure, although much more slowly.
- 12 Or, just as often, the unrecognizable is not a principle, but a condition: "We won't make something for the sake of having it recognized and valued as art."
- 13 The instructions and signals leave a big margin for "interpretation," but this can't be interpretation in the usual sense. It can't be any kind of conceptual grasping, or it would be a kind of appropriation. Ideally, the interpretation would be "imposed" on the maker as well.
- 14 What if we injected another hypothesis? Suppose that interpretation can also be a way of getting beyond oneself; that, when it's pushed far enough, it can reach a threshold where it crystallizes and ceases to be personal. That would have concrete consequences for the actors. They would have to study a lot more. Would the caesura and the outsourced protocol would have to be replaced by other procedures, or would they just have to be rethought?—It isn't clear that interpretation can crystallize into impersonality, but the matter is certainly less settled than the poetics of *Twin Figure* makes it out to be.
- 15 See Friedrich Hölderlin, "Remarks on *Œdipus*," in *Essays and Letters in Theory*, trans. Thomas Pfau, State of New York University Press: Albany, 1988, p. 101
- 16 The storyteller is not a profession or a social role, but a very concept with a lot at stake. Anders' model refers to an important essay of Walter Benjamin, which elevates the storyteller to an ideal type in order to pose some questions about the impossibility of story-telling in modernity. Anders also exploits the distinction drawn by Benjamin between two ideal types of the storyteller: the farmer and the seafarer, the one who tells stories from home, and the one who tells stories from afar.
- 17 As for the storyteller, it's complicated. I'll leave it open here.
- 18 The multiplication, within the art-work, of grades of intermediaries is formally and imaginatively very fertile. It produces a gradated, layered cosmology. There's something similar in certain medieval cosmologies. In each case it is a matter of progressively subdividing the interval, progressively differentiating middle orders of angels and jinns. Daniel Paul Schreber does something similar towards the upper limit. There are anterior realms of heaven, the "forecourts", and posterior realms of heaven. And in the posterior realms, there is a lower God and an upper God.
- 19 Is there a way to change the bathwater without throwing away the baby? Can you free a performance from the confines of subjectivism and appropriation, while still keeping the social materials of interpretation? An open question, but there are no guarantees.
- 20 The epistolary model also has its schema and arrangement of relations: people in private, and letters opened by others. On the one hand, the curtain stays down and what we're permitted to observe is non-communicative (it is not communicated to us.) But on the other hand, anything said in a letter is, potentially, meant to be overheard. In any case, the epistolary model and the model of the mediator have different, even opposed structures. No party in an epistolary exchange will address the public directly. They all hide behind each other, and the result is a kind of mediation without an intermediary.



- 21 This is particularly a problem for theatre; even choreographic *auteurs* like Trisha Brown and Anne Teresa De Keersmaker enter their medium and subject their bodies to it like composers who, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conducted their own music, embedding themselves in the ensemble, pulsating with it, and a few composers of experimental music who take part as one of the players (like Steve Reich and John Zorn.)



# FOREWORD



For a long time my work as a director was very busy with interpretation and expression, albeit guided by a general aversion towards theatre's paradigmatic dependency on identification. Until ten years ago I was, in all important aspects, working within a representational hegemony, focusing on what aesthetic frame I wanted to use in order to communicate this or that content. Today I think of it less as a matter of aesthetic preferences, but rather as a choice between representation and representativity.

These two paradigms follow two different *modi operandi*: a) the performer presenting the re-presentation of an already produced experience or subjectivity to the spectator, as opposed to b) taking on the task of being a representative of the audience in an event aiming for the production of experience. On the one hand, the presentation of an image of the world—with which the spectator can identify or not—and on the other hand, the act of sensing/reading the world—in which the audience takes part. So, operating from the logic of messenger rather than author, medium more than subject; using aesthetics as a sensory organ, not mimicking this or that situation, relation, or identity for the spectator to identify with, but rather offering her or his figure, “Gestalt” maybe, as a surface for contingent and open-ended mimesis and imagery; accepting the function of interface instead of interpreter.

At first I thought of this in the terms of a non-mimetic paradigm, since my objective was to find tools to work with a performative practice not aiming to mimic the world outside of its own frame. But as the work proceeded, my non-mimetic frame started to feel too simplistic and narrow, a platonic heritage by default organising the world into truth and falsehood, original and copy. Gradually, my perspective has shifted to a perspective of fascination with the potential of an alternative concept of mimesis: not the double as a more or less identical or authentic copy of an original—only validated in its relation to a master signifier—but the

double/figure/image as alterity; an autonomous “thing” existing in the world on its own premises, destabilizing any context it enters into with its contagious capacity of similarity not being the property of any proper.

If this is the foundation for a new set of objectives, devoted to the production of alterity rather than of identity and identification, then what would be a relevant tropology, apparatus, and set of tools? That is the basic question of the research undertaken here.

This publication is the result of a long process. The major part of the texts were initially written as part of the research project “Non-Mimetic Practices” that I did at The Danish National School of Performing Arts 2015–2016. The research was structured into two parts, one theoretical and one practical. The concrete object of the practical part was the performance *Three White Soldiers/Rock The World*, the second part of the performative archive *Three White Soldiers* that I initiated with Johan Forsman at the venue Skogen in Gothenburg 2014. The result of the theoretical research is the collection of essays presented here as *Part I – Reflection*, whereas *Part II – Object* is a slightly adapted version of the script of the performance. In relation to Part II, I have attached an appendix of footnotes; a kind of cross-referential system of principles that could be understood as a toolbox of how some of the main theoretical notions reappear in the performance.

I should maybe mention that my reflections are written from the perspective of having worked mainly within an institutional context. There are plenty of examples of performative work trying and succeeding to establish alternative toolboxes and quality criterias challenging the framework of mainstream theatre. But unlike with visual arts and dance, these have had only marginal influence on how the established field understands the media specific frames and craft of theatre. And in the context of institutional theatre

and education, there is little or no understanding of notions as institutional critique or expanded field as relevant practices. The tools and terminologies taught at most educations still represent a mimetic paradigm, where the production of identity—the identity between the performer and the character, between the aesthetic form and the interpretation of a content, between what is shown on stage and the understanding of an audience—is at the core of both method and judgement.

(The most established innovation of terminology for contemporary theatre obviously would be the notion of post-dramatic theatre launched by Hans-Thies Lehmann. As successful as this notion has been in providing a context and common set of references for as diverse works as Robert Wilson, René Pollesch, Rimini Protocol, Forced Entertainment, and Need Company, today a lot of its initial potential has been recuperated by a mainstream mimetic paradigm. Notions such as “devising,” “docudrama,” and “experts,” originally meant to challenge a traditional taste and its toolbox, have congealed into methods and prefigured forms signifying a position of “modernity.” I would claim that in order for the field of theatre to move forward, one has to consider the postdramatic turn a deadend road, an appendicitis where the need of contemporaneity is tamed and transformed into new forms covering up for the same old content.)

The collection of essays was written as a series of chapters addressed to four persons who, in various ways, have been important to my work and who kindly have accepted to read and respond to my texts: Goran Sergej Pristaš, Bojana Cvejić, Benamin Noys, and Peggy Phelan.

Goran Sergej Pristaš was invaluable as the mentor of my research project, and his input on several occasions has had a crucial influence on the trajectory of my thoughts. The dialogue with Bojana Cvejić has also provided several

key aspects to the work during my writing. Parallel with my research I have been working closely with Johan Forsman. A lot of both the practical and thematic patterns of thought owe a lot to our continuous collaboration.

Austin Gross has kindly accepted the invitation to write the preface. Austin was an important conversation partner in the production of the performance *Double Feature* (Nationaltheatret Oslo 2017, based on the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin, developed together with Bojana Cvejić, Daniel Andersson, and Ignas Krunglevičius).

During the elaborative work of the research in 2015, Rasmus Nielsen's participation provided essential contributions. A fundamental part of the perspectives in both my practice and thinking have also been developed over a two decade long co-operation with Anders Mossing, who also took part in the elaborative work. The generous guidance and input of Åsa Andersson and Janne Sirniö has also been decisive and valuable.

Finally, I owe big thanks to Gabriel Paulin for valuable advice, and to Sara Gebran for having listened and wisely consulted me on endless occasions.



*I think of the stage as an arena whose most basic function is to give us devices to encounter "the Other in its Otherness," to meet the Other, not in an attempt to understand—i.e. incorporate and assimilate into my own subject—but with a desire to remain in the movement towards an understanding, where the encounter exists only as long as the movement continues, and where the objective of the work consequently becomes finding strategies to avoid arriving to the goal of the movement—the Understanding.*

*The scenic creativity that emanates from non-identity thus becomes an unexpectedly concrete practice of non-understanding. The scenic act of the actor must be understood as a representative exercise, rather than a depicting representation; an act that opens to the co-creative act of the audience—the lingering eye—rather than asking to be passively consumed as a product. An investigative movement inwards to the text, to find the passage for a free fall through the shaft that runs through the voids between islands of already familiar knowledge, and where the most important condition is that we dare to abstain from the position of understanding that constitutes one of the most traditional privileges of our profession.*

*The skills of our craft should thus be founded on finding the movements that escape the understanding: only there will both we and the audience, simultaneously singular and in community, become free to develop a sensitivity for the glimpses and flashes of recognition that line up a trajectory for a subjectivity not based on identity and appropriation, but rather on negotiation and empathy.*

*When the Europeans encountered the hieroglyphs of the ancient Egyptian culture, they at first didn't know what to make of them. Were they images, or were they text? Pictures or letters? It wasn't until the discovery of the trilingual Rosetta Stone, written in hieroglyphs, demotic Egyptian and ancient Greek, that the combination of logographic and alphabetic signs could be decoded.*

*If the archeologists of a future voyaging culture, visiting the galactic marble known by its inhabitants as the Earth, would try to decode the imagery produced and archived in the western hemisphere, they most likely would marvel at the fascination and worship paid to the imagery of mirrors.*

*If the Rosetta Stone was the key to unlock the pattern of Egyptian hieroglyphics, the Selfie is the Rosetta Stone of our civilisation.*





# HESITATION TO SELF



## DEAR ANDERS

I am sorry to say, but this whole writing thing is so completely not going to happen the way you thought it would.

By now you have been struggling so long to bring the text—or to be honest, as it seems, any text—into being. It doesn't make sense to convince yourself that it will happen today just because you give it one more try. Not tomorrow either. There's just something conceptual that isn't working here on a very basic level, and you trying a bit harder won't solve that.

Every day is a repetition of the previous day: you sit down at your desk to start writing, and every day a few hours later you reach the same discovery that not a single one of the contemplations that you had prepared yourself to write survives the passage from the inside of your head to an autonomous existence on the screen of your computer. One by one they meet the same destiny: somewhere in the labor process of materialisation, between abstract mental activity and manifested sign, the thought makes a short gasp, exhales and stops breathing.

I don't really think it is just writer's block. You know more or less what it was that you wanted to write, or at least what you thought you wanted to write. You have a thoroughly defined catalogue of topics and notions, categorised in chapters and subchapters—*The Reign of Identity, The Storyteller, The Sign of Absence, Fiction & Reality, Similarity-as-Such, The Sublime or the Administration of Passage, Protocols for a Postponed Future*; thoughts, experiences and knowledge collected over some years of production of performances, discursive platforms and lectures. I understand that you really thought the whole structure was there—six chapters plus one preface—and basically also the content. You had already defined all the thoughts at least once, at one point or another; during a rehearsal, as you were giving a lecture or in a discussion over a glass of wine at

some conference or opening. It was so simple; now you just had to fill in the empty spaces in-between the central concepts, all that was left to be done was to add in the transitions and, of course, the poetry, so to speak.

So, every day for 3–4 weeks you have been getting up in the morning, doing your coffee-routine, only to once again reach the same point of complete surprise at the discovery that you can't find one single sentence interesting enough to be given the effort of linguistic elaboration and definition. Or, that's maybe not quite true. In themselves I think you actually do find the thoughts and reflections interesting enough. It seems that the problem might have more to do with the production of the text as object and/or vehicle for communication, and how this aesthetic object interacts with reality.

The way I see it, your dilemma is most likely two-fold, or has its root in two different phenomena—completely separated, but probably feeding each other:

1. Writing is thinking-as-action. “Only at the threshold of my knowledge and my ignorance does writing become possible” says Deleuze. Like me, you probably don't know how to write, i.e. re-enact thoughts that have already found their way into existence.
2. You host a rapidly increasing distrust of the sense of your writing. There are sooooo many texts already in existence. What effect can it have to produce yet another one?

Please let me know if I'm trespassing. But I think maybe what you experience is best described in terms of some kind of intellectual depression. It is hard to tell if this state of mind relates to hermeneutics in general or specifically to politics. It is probably both, since the effect for you is a combination of exhaustion and paralysis, as you are confronted with the feeling of a total lack of relation between your production of linguistic gestures and any relevant consequence in reality.



## DEAR YOU

I think you are right. My situation probably is best understood as an intellectual depression, the feeling of a complete lack of relevant relation between my aesthetic efforts and their effect in the reality surrounding me. I also think your analysis of its sources is correct and that I honestly was starting to lose heart. Then yesterday, when I was following a trace from Lacoue-Labarthe's *Typography*—the idea that the shofar, the Jewish ritual instrument, somehow incarnated the voice of an absent big Other—I stumbled upon an anecdote in the introduction of Mladen Dolar's *The Voice and Nothing More*.

*There is a story which goes like this: In the middle of a battle there is a company of Italian soldiers in the trenches, and an Italian commander who issues the command "Soldiers, attack!" He cries out in a loud and clear voice to make himself heard in the midst of the tumult, but nothing happens, nobody moves. So the commander gets angry and shouts louder: "Soldiers, attack!" Still nobody moves. And since in jokes things have to happen three times for something to stir, he yells even louder: "Soldiers, attack!" At which point there is a response, a tiny voice rising from the trenches, saying appreciatively "Che bella voce!" "What a beautiful voice!"*

The story has the same kind of combination of comic and philosophical potential as the phrase "I prefer not to" in Melville's *Bartleby*. Heroic and comic, finding in the centre of its own impotence a strategy of desistance, to speak with Lacoue-Labarthe. Caught in a lethal conflict of battling subjectivities, we negotiate by focusing on the materiality of the medium rather than the message it tries to communicate. But the anecdote is also deeply tragic, because it goes to the heart of the contemporary collapse of strategies to share experience and negotiate subjectivity.

Dolar suggests a possible trajectory out of the deadlock between meaning and aesthetic beauty; a third path, so to speak.

*“(A)part from those two widespread uses of the voice—the voice as the vehicle of meaning; the voice as the source of aesthetic admiration—there is a third level: an object voice which does not go up in smoke in the conveyance of meaning, and does not solidify in an object of fetish reverence, but an object which functions as a blind spot in the call and as a disturbance of aesthetic appreciation. One shows fidelity to the first by running to attack; one shows fidelity to the second by running to the opera. As for fidelity to the third, one has to turn to psychoanalysis. Army, opera, psychoanalysis?”*

## DEAR ANDERS

I find the horizon suggested by Dolar’s anecdote (by the way, where is the threshold that separates the anecdote from the allegory?)<sup>1</sup> quite interesting. I know you broke up with your therapist some weeks ago, so you might want to re-negotiate the psychoanalysis-strategy a bit. But as a figure of thought I find the idea of immersion in the medium itself both comforting and encouraging. If the idea of mediation of content through medium doesn’t seem to make sense anymore, then the self reflexivity of aesthetics itself could be the point of departure for a possible transcendence. An analysis of the stage and text as translational space and inter-face; not the stage as a frame for content, but as an other-space in its own autonomous being; not the text validated through what it describes, what it “is about,” but as materiality in itself.

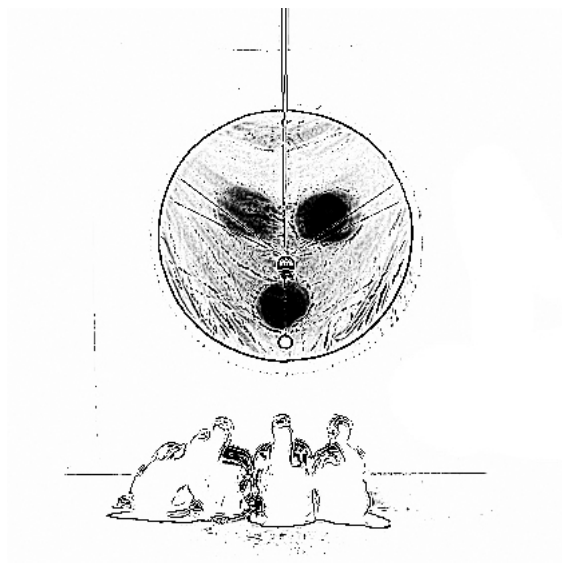
I know you’ve heard me quote Walter Benjamin’s essay *On the Language of Men and On Language as Such* many times. Isn’t that what it is all about? *“There is no such thing as the content of language... Language communicates the linguistic being of things.”*

What does language communicate? *“All language communicates itself,”* says Benjamin. Of course this could be understood as a depressing statement. But taken to its full extent

it also provides the basic condition for a rather hopeful idea of connection, and maybe even an open-ended passage to some “what-ever” outside of our limited horizons. *“For precisely because nothing is communicated through language, what is communicated in language cannot be externally limited, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity.”*

Just read that last sentence one more time and let its potential linger for a while. As long as I claim that the linguistic figures I formulate are supposed to be identified with their “true” meaning in the world outside of their linguistic being, language will produce its own fenced-in space of limitations and failure to sentiently connect with the world. When I accept that the potential and capacity of language lies in the very fact that it is not identical with the world, that it creates a gap or hiatus where the “true” meaning of things is destabilized, that it is precisely this non-identity that makes language capable of dislodging the world from itself and thus render it open for negotiation, in other words, if I can accept that no specific content is transmitted through my words, that we as humans are linguistic beings, but that exactly because of this all my linguistic endeavours always have to be the gesture of “writing under erasure” to speak with Derrida, then language—whether written or spoken, in the form of text, sound or visual imagery—can reach its full potential as mediator. Language as interface, the membrane both separating and connecting the individuals engaging in it; not a vehicle of specific meaning or content, but the open space of negotiation.

Finally: I don’t want to impose myself on your project, but shouldn’t you consider sharing the formulations with a couple of other voices? Maybe it could help your process to speak in dialogue with individuals who can put your thoughts in perspective through their experience and competence? Just saying.



*There is me. And there is you. Between and around us are all these things, including you and me, that together constitute the world.*

*You tell me a story about this world, about you in this world. Something that has happened to you; something important, or not; some “thing” that you have seen, or that has happened to you.*

*I listen to you. I relate to your story, reach out with my imagination, compare with my personal experience of “things” that I have seen, or that have happened to me; try them out next to each other, see if they fit.*

*Imagination is a tricky thing. It is something that exists at the same time as absence and presence, a “thing” that can be made present only insofar as it is absent. If the “thing” is fully present, we cannot imagine it. Then it’s there, in its full positivity, self-identical with its own self, allowing no other version of itself.*

*“In order for us to think about somebody, he must be removed from our presence;” says Hannah Arendt, “so long as we are with him we do not think either of him or about him; thinking always implies remembrance; every thought is strictly speaking an afterthought.”*

*To allow you to imagine me—give way for your remembered image of me, half me, half you—I first have accept to exit. Or at least turn my back to you.*

- 1 In similar ways as with mimesis, there is something ambiguously interesting with the allegory. The tradition, common not the least within philosophy, to use the statement of an example as an argument for a statement about the nature of something –identity by resemblance–of course always is some kind of appropriation. Then again, the allegory, just like the mimetic double, has the power to destabilise the self identity of things and thus produce a zone of uncertainty where meaning and value can be negotiated.

Furthermore, in its very conception the allegoric example of something in the world also itself becomes an autonomous thing in this world. In *Things Beyond Resemblance*, Ruber Hullot-Kentor writes:

*"What Benjamin discerns in allegory is its double aspect. On one hand he finds in it the essential mechanism by which history regresses to a mythical state of nature: allegory dominates nature, it represents "the triumph of subjectivity and the onset of an arbitrary rule of things." Yet allegory is also the critique of domination. In it thesis (positing, convention) becomes the expression of physis: "It may not accord with the authority of nature; but the voluptuousness with which signification rules, like a stern sultan in the harem of objects, is without equal in giving expression to nature." In allegory, the force of the illusion of human autonomy, knowledge, is turned against itself and presents the only form of transcendence possible in a radically secular condition, the collapse of illusion. In this moment of collapse, nature gains a moment of expression and is referred beyond secular immanence. The allegorical play of lamentation expresses the moment of transience in which the semblance of human autonomy dissolves. It is the form that—just as does the idea in general—transforms history into truth."*







# SUBJECTIVITY EXPERIENCE APPEARANCE

to Sergej Pristaš



## HI SERGEJ

I am sitting in a small one room bungalow in Joshua Tree where I've spent the last three weeks; mostly writing, but I've also made a couple of road trips through the rather otherworldly landscapes around here. Both Death Valley and Salton Sea are truly surreal spots on the globe; in their extreme concreteness they somehow become total abstractions.

For a couple of days I've been trying to define what I would like to address together with you, and how to do it. It hasn't been all that easy. I have a sense of what it is, but it kind of keeps escaping me, like a scent passing through the room, with the combination of precision and vagueness typical of memory or dreams—you know exactly what it feels like, but you can't put a name to it. The writing in itself also is not completely simple; I realise that my English language becomes an obstacle when I'm writing more than ten pages, as if I have access to too limited a set of linguistic images, and it is difficult to find a balance between keeping a confined thematic frame and not get too repetitive.

The essay I've ended up writing is a collection of thoughts I'd like to approach with you, divided in three different takes on topics of appearance, subjectivity and representation. Since the thoughts move in a rather abstract landscape I've been trying to pick a couple of concrete examples to write about: The opening scene from *Werckmeister Harmonies* by Béla Tarr, the video piece *Left Side Right Side* by Joan Jonas, Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July*, and a dialogue from *Le Mepris* by Godard (plus a brief moment from Jonas Jonas's *Songdelay*.)

Thematically, the three texts describe three different relationalities: the first addresses the bind between presence and absence, the second the difference between subjectivity and identity, and the third the commodification of experience by fic-

tion and the crisis of public space. I am not sure if together they constitute a cohesive thematic field or narrative; maybe there are three different topics that relate to each other in a way I can't quite put my finger on. I'll just start writing, and we'll see where it takes us.

I am also not quite sure if the connection to a performative practice is as clear to others as it is for me; it is easier to write about the thematic aspects than trying to describe practical applications of the thematic thoughts. I think the "how" is suggested throughout the thoughts in the text, but I don't give specific tools or say "This-is-how-to-do-it."

When, for example, I try to write about the difference between storytelling and "acting" I feel like a school teacher, overly pedagogical and a bit stupid. It is as if I am producing a method, and I definitely don't believe in methods.

Maybe that is the point: the toolbox has to be found in the conceptual and consequent response to the questions raised in the material. And that will always have to be defined in specific context of each singular, practical task. Like, the caesura is a tool, how to use it has to be re-invented for every new situation. So I think I'll let the texts wander as they will, between theory and more practical aspects.

yours  
anders p

## THE SPACE OF APPEARANCE

### Ouverture

I have a couple of things on my mind regarding appearance and the relation between presence and absence that I would like to address, but I can't decide how to go about it. My hesitation I think is rooted in a twofold concern: On one hand I am slight-

ly worried that my attempt will fail, that I won't find the exact words to correctly describe and give life to issues so ethereal that it feels like they will evaporate before they even take shape as thoughts in my own mind; on the other hand I fear that my thoughts will become petrified and lose all of their allure, flexibility and potential to link to future possibilities, once they become manifest in the world through my act of writing. And to a certain extent, this tendency to suspend the moment when my thoughts get materialised in written text might mirror a paradox in the centre of the thematic field I aim to address.

In order to imagine something beyond the world of existing orders, to open a passage for an agency of otherness, I have to render a space void of presences where this absent "thing" temporarily can appear. Alterity never comes in pre-figured forms, shapes or appearances; that is the nature of otherness—if it can be made visible within the frame of what I can recognise it is already part of the existing world. The be-coming of alterity thus has to be understood as an open-ended passage.

If my objective is to use the practice of theatre, with its media specific authority to gather collective attention around a certain object and/or event within a given time-frame, then the central challenge is: How can I develop performative strategies that allow for a "thinking-in-common?" What could be a basic set of tools to facilitate a collective interface between the present and the absent, where the stage is not a space facilitating representation and identification of the existing, but a performative and collective thinking on the threshold between our knowledge and our ignorance, to paraphrase Gilles Deleuze.

From the perspective of aesthetic practices these questions could be interpreted as two aspects of a contemporary crisis in public space and its institutions:

- 1) The hegemony of appearance of the present inherent to the economy of exhibition, monopolising manifest identities as the only way to produce agency.

2) A growing lack of tools and platforms to negotiate and exchange subjectivity in a public realm.

My thoughts borrow a lot of in both content and analysis from Hannah Arendt; the analysis of human activity as divided between the private and the public sphere from *The Human Condition*, and her later thoughts on the faculties of *thinking*, *willing*, and *judging* from the unfinished *The Life of the Mind*. One of the things I find especially interesting, not the least from the perspective of performing arts, is the way Arendt contextualises public space as a Space of Appearance: how she positions its basic conditions not so much in a physical territory, but rather as a performativity oscillating between the faculty of thinking—the mind’s activity of imagining what is absent—and the faculty of judging that appears when I speak out my thoughts in the presence of others. In Arendt’s discourse on the relation of the private to the public, this act, where “*I appear to others as they appear to me*” is the condition for, and potential of, the public sphere and politics.

The actualisation of what is absent in the universalised immanence of the present, the de-stabilisation of what in common sense is understood as “reality,” is a necessary condition for establishing a position of negotiation of the relation between now and not-now, here and not here, us and not us.<sup>1</sup> For me this is a central challenge and objective for what it means to put some-“thing” onstage: how can I develop performative gestures—whether as story, body or image—that open up for a passage to agencies or horizons of absence, without automatically making them manifest within the frame of what already exists?

If my key question is how art takes part in processes in which the personal experience and imagination of individuals are confronted and negotiated in a collective exchange, then what Arendt’s reading of Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* develops is highly interesting, in particular what has to do with the *disinterested spectator* and *sensus communis*. What I find interesting about these concepts is the way they kind of turn

up-side down some central pre-figurations in the way we validate and organise the interaction between artistic practice and a public space. In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant describes the conditions for the negotiation between the thinking as individual process and judgment as a collective act. “Thinking,” writes Arendt “is ‘out of order’ because it inverts all ordinary relationships. While thinking I am not where I actually am; I am surrounded by images that are invisible to everybody else. It is as though I had withdrawn into the land of invisibles.”<sup>2</sup>

This space of withdrawal from the present “reality” is necessary for any kind of reflection and speculation; it is a space of “absent-mindedness (where) everything present is absent because something actually absent is present.”<sup>3</sup> In order for thinking to re-enter the world of relations and politics it has to be spoken out in public, it must “appear to the common sense” of a community. In this perspective, public space is a space of negotiation, where the thoughts of individuals are confronted and negotiated with the thoughts of others. According to Arendt’s reading of Kant, public space is constituted by the fact that we participate in this act not as actors but as spectators, and more specifically as independent spectators whose judgment is autonomous, i.e. not dependent on personal interest. Understood from this perspective, Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* poses not only the problem of defining beauty and taste; it describes the conditions for the collective negotiation of what we have in common. This negotiation of common sense, says Kant, is only possible insofar as we enter as *disinterested spectators*, individuals who agree to leave behind their individual, private interests, needs and worries and follow the maxims of a *sensus communis*: “Think for oneself, put oneself in thought in the place of everyone else.”<sup>4</sup>

I find this take on public space as something simultaneously constituting and being constituted in the intersection of thinking and judging to be very inspiring, and the notions of *sensus communis* and *disinterested spectator* can put the accent on some of the reasons to why, today, we seem to have forgot both what

defines public space and how to organise its institutions. The task of contemporary cultural institutions is to provide an audience, being addressed as part of the majority, with recognisable and identifiable representations of their reality. The apparatus is there to simultaneously educate and confirm the taste, ethics and interest of this majority: a process of identification and affirmation, based on the idea of *common sense* as the lowest common denominator—as what we can agree on without discussion.

This is the opposite of the “enlarged mentality” in Kant’s notion of *sensus communis*, where common sense is understood as an agreement reached only through negotiation between a multitude of independently thinking, critical subjects. In a similar way, the exclusion of the set of responsibilities specific for the *disinterested spectator* from the modern idea of an audience, defined as a spectator that has no responsibilities but instead a number of rights for which s/he has paid at the box office, points at the consumerist character in our contemporary understanding of the transaction taking place between artist, institution and receiver. Where the willingness to put aside private interests to engage with an “enlarged mentality” is crucial for the production of both *sensus communis* and public space, the identification between art and private life is the central and indisputable right of the audience of a contemporary art institution: a right that comes with the price of the ticket.

If one central objective of public space is the negotiation of common imaginaries, then the quality criteria that apply to works of art must relate to their ability to produce this negotiation. In this context, the affirmative recognition and accessibility expected within the paradigm of identity is of no value. In order to produce negotiation, the object/image/gesture has to find its obliqueness, its strategy to resist the consensus of confirmative understanding and identification.

Whether we talk about institutions and public space in the context of education, art or even politics, I would claim that this sliding, this mis-conception of meaning, the gradual turning in-



side-out of the notions of common sense and spectator, is at the core of what could be described as the current crisis of public space. This crisis means a shift in the function of the institution—from providing a space for collective negotiation between a multitude of subjectivities to the task of providing commodified experience-objects for identification on the lowest common denominator of the majority culture.

If the fine arts traditionally have been linked to capital, theatre has always had a close connection to the power apparatus of the state. The art-object, through its magical ability to change the value of things, is linked to financial power. Theatre, however, with its inherent hybrid of narrative and performativity—from the festivals of Athens to the national theatres of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe—has been used by power to define what subjectivities, topics and values that can appear within its public realm.

In the heritage of western hermeneutics, from Plato through the Enlightenment, we carry with us a strong connection between visual appearance and truth: by means of linguistic figures like *to shed light on, make visible, to reveal the truth*, our imagination is ontologically anchored to the idea of a natural bond between manifest appearance and knowledge. In ancient Greek, theatre—*theatron*—literally means “the space where we see.” Whereas the term “fine arts” designates an object, and “dance” describes an activity, the word “theatre” points at the space in itself—the space where we see, *the space of appearance*. What particularly interests me about the issue of appearance is the way it actualizes the intimate relation between presence and absence. How do the things that exist relate to everything that does not exist? Every thing that comes into being does so in relation to what stays absent; every manifestation—whether as object, image, sound or idea—exists in a double bind with that what is non-manifest.

The aesthetic perspective on appearance—on what can appear, what can present itself in the presence, and on what conditions—has two interconnected aspects; a philosophical aspect and a

political aspect. What is the relation between my aesthetic practice and the world? And in what way does my practice inscribe itself in a symbolic order of power, as defined by the interaction between aesthetic and political representation?

The concept of appearance is thus bound up with complex problems relating to subjectivity and representation. How is subjectivity produced, how does it make itself present in a public realm? How do I—as a human—relate to that what lies beyond the horizon constituted by my present position? What tools—aesthetically and politically—do we have at our disposal to fantasize and produce collective imaginaries of what cannot appear as presence in our present reality? And, not the least: How does a subject (re-)present itself, make itself appear and gain agency in the present, without being subjugated to the symbolic order regulating the territory of this presence?

## ACT I - SOLAR ECLIPSE

*All is rhythm; the entire destiny of man is one celestial rhythm, just as the work of art is a unique rhythm.*

Friedrich Hölderlin

The first image we see: flames behind the door of an iron cast stove. Then someone opens the door and throws water on the fire; the camera zooms out as the owner of the worn down countryside tavern announces that he is closing. Another day is over; the rhythm of time—light and darkness, ebb and flow, difference by repetition—the presence of one day fading into absence to allow for a new day to appear.

The half sleeping regulars, ten middle aged men—even more shabby than the tavern, if that is possible—reluctantly try to wake up enough to go home and sleep; the effort causes one of them to fall off his chair. As he adjusts to this new horizontal position at the floor, holding his hat to keep it from falling off, a mous-

tached man enters the centre of the image and says: “*Valuska. Come on. Show us.*” With the efficiency specific to daily routines, the men clear the tables and produce an open space, lit up by a single naked light bulb hanging from the centre of the ceiling, and then gather around the walls of the tavern.

Valuska, unmistakably younger and more sober than the other customers, takes the portly man and brings him onto the square of the empty floor. He puts him under the naked lightbulb and says “*You are the Sun.*” and then continues “*The Sun does not move. This is what it does,*” whereupon he asks the swaying man to raise his hands and softly wiggle his fingers to simulate the sun’s pulsating rays of light and heat.

After this he collects one more of the customers and informs him that he now will be the Earth, and then instructs the Earth to circle around both the Sun and its own axes—which proves to be slightly difficult task, given the man’s level of inebriation, but with some concentration he manage to perform an elliptic movement around the Sun. Valuska continues: “*Step with me into the boundlessness where constancy, quietude and peace, infinite emptiness reigns. Imagine that in this infinite silence, everywhere is an impenetrable darkness. Here we only experience general motion. The brilliant Sun always sheds its heat and light on the side of the Earth turned towards it. And we stand here in its brilliance.*”

A new man is brought into the choreography of heavenly bodies: “*This is the Moon. The Moon revolves around the Earth.*” Together, the long haired Moon, the swaying Earth, and the portly sun with its wiggling fingers engage in a dance, turning around the room and each other; a bumpy minuet, demanding all their intoxicated concentration. Suddenly, Valuska stops them and says: “*What is happening?*” The autodidact choreographer of galactic rhythm and motion bends down the moon, and then ever so slowly erects him again until he almost blocks the passage between the wiggling sun-fingers and the Earth. “*We suddenly see that the disc of the moon makes an indentation on the*

*sun's flaming sphere, and this indentation, this dark shadow, grows bigger... and bigger. And as it covers more and more, slowly, only a narrow crescent of the sun remains. And at the next moment... say that it's around one in the afternoon, a most dramatic turn of events occurs."*

Valuska grabs the sun by the neck and gently pushes his head down towards the floor until his face no longer can be seen. Then, a close up of the face of the narrator *"At that moment... the air suddenly turns cold. Can you feel it? The sky darkens, and then goes all dark. The dogs howl, rabbits hunch down, the deer run in fright. And in this incomprehensible dusk even the birds are confused and go to roost. And then... complete silence. Everything that lives is still. Are the hills going to march off? Will heaven fall upon us? Will the earth open under us? We don't know? We don't know, for a total eclipse has come upon us."*

As a simple piano phrase is repeated over and over, the camera zooms out on the stillness of the room, maybe 30 seconds where nothing is happening except for the men listening to the silence. *"But... no need to fear, it's not over. For across the sun's glowing sphere, the moon slowly swims away."*

The portly man stands up and resumes his wiggling finger-rays *"The sun once again bursts forth and to the Earth slowly there comes light again, and warmth again floods the Earth."*

For a couple of minutes all the regulars join in a dance, maybe not euphoric but at least with a certain dignified serenity—*"Deep emotion pierces everyone. They have escaped the weight of darkness."* And then the owner of the tavern, indifferent to the thematic magnitude of the situation, establishes that it is all over, and throws them out in the night. Exiting the door, Valuska stops for a second and says *"But, Mr. Hagelmayer, it's still not over."*

The opening scene of *Werckmeister Harmonies*<sup>5</sup> (2001) by Béla Tarr, in a couple of naive brushstrokes in black & white, captures a number of key aspects of the relation between aesthetics,

appearance and the possibility of an event. Here, the opening for something previously not present to appear, the condition allowing for something absent to come into existence, is produced not through the re-presentation of a new perspective or subjectivity, but rather by a temporary disruption in the production of appearances—it is the event of a temporary absence. In the context of our present sociopolitical condition, defined and controlled by an economy of appearances, this suggests a very precise and useful aesthetic strategy.

This take on speculating on possible futures does not present any utopia, it does not “make visible” this or that condition, identity or subjectivity. It doesn’t (re-)present an image of anything “new,” or a critique of something existing. On the contrary, the moment of solar eclipse breaks the continuous stream of appearances; linear time itself is interrupted; it is a disruption of the idea of history as continuous progress towards an inevitable future. For a brief moment everything stops—we don’t know what the next minute will bring, whether we are on the threshold of the apocalypse or of paradise, if the sun will come back or if it is gone forever—no pre-figurations apply and the future lies completely open.<sup>6</sup>

Some years ago I was working with the project *Neither You Nor Me*, a production that I developed and performed together with the actor Anders Mossling and that included some sequences from the translation of *Antigone* made by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin in 1804. My interest in Hölderlin at that point was focused on his idea of translation as a process of transforming the familiar into the unknown—the translational space as interface, neither you nor me, a space of exchange making possible a de-stabilization of the self. There was this notion that kept coming back as I was researching for the project: *the caesura*, the space of suspended time, the momentary disruption of progress in rhythm and dramaturgy.

At that time I never quite understood the concept; I was fascinated and intrigued by the figure of thought, but I just couldn’t

wrap my head around it, or say what it would mean in the context of concrete practice. So I did what we usually do when faced with things we don't understand: after struggling with it for some time I simply chose to forget about it. But somehow *the caesura* stayed with me in latency, like a sleeper cell. It was underground, waiting for the right moment to be activated.

Looking at it from my current perspective, I think what confused me was that I tried to imagine the possible manifestation of *the caesura* as concept, when the point is precisely the opposite—it is a momentary lack of manifest images or appearances. The caesura thus becomes the space that appears in the temporary disruption of appearances; not the image of something, but the open ended potentiality of the presence of an absence.

The way I think of it, the caesura can be described as the moment of frozen time in the standstill of a turning; the temporary lack of momentum, the suspension of gravity before the object thrown up in the air gets pulled back to the ground. In the essay *The Caesura and the Speculative*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe gives an intriguing definition of the connection between the caesura and the possibility of passage: "*the caesura is, on each occasion, the empty moment—the absence of 'moment'—of Tiresias's intervention: that is to say, of the intrusion of the prophetic world.*"<sup>7</sup>

This gap in time and rhythm is not to be understood in terms of the interruption as event. On the contrary, unlike the revolutionary context of an event—the break of the existing on behalf of this or that new subjectivity, agency or order—the caesura constitutes the possible escape-route from the dialectical idea of interruption as opposition to some-thing; it is a liberation from the double-bind that ties the act of opposition to the paradigm of the agency it opposes. This suspended space-time is not a dialectical break between the past and the future; it abandons the figures of "difference" and "the new," it is an aesthetic strategy to avoid getting (re-)appropriated by "*the constraints of opposition in general.*"<sup>8</sup> Rather, the caesura suggests the possibility of aesthetics as

open ended transcendence, the rhythmic disruption of progress opening for a *passage as such*; not the revolutionary passage in the name of a prefigured agency, but an interface enabling a contingent relation between the perspectives of *here* and *not here*, *now* and *not now*, *us* and *not us*, *no longer* and *not yet*; between the human and non-human horizon.

Or, to borrow the words of Jacques Derrida: "*It marks the withdrawal of the divine and the turning back of man toward the earth ... Gap or hiatus: the open mouth. To give and receive. The caesura sometimes takes your breath away. When luck is with it, it is to let you speak.*"<sup>9</sup>

Translated into aesthetic terms, I find that this gets close to the intriguing and enigmatic quality of Valuska's galactic choreography in *Werckmeister Harmonies*. What it captures is the invisible; the possible opening to an absence, out of sensory reach for an aesthetic regime ruled by the present (the paradox behind the tragic failure of Konstantin trying to address the future with his play within the play in Chechov's *The Seagull*).

The caesura—the brief standstill when the gods withdraw and humans return to the earth—could be understand as the moment of the sublime, or the experience of *the invisible*; the appearance of, or opening to, what is absent in the presence.

The way I see it, this can only come about as a transcendence in relation to "what ever." As soon as I connect it to a passage in the name of a specific subjectivity or agency, it will be re-appropriated and inscribed into the present paradigm of what already exists. It is from the perspective of this intersection of aesthetics and politics where the symbolic order of the present guards the gate between what is and what is not, and regulates what can "appear," i.e. come into being, that the caesura gains its full potential.

The long-term sustainability of any society or community is dependent on its ability to reflect on the relation between that

what is and what is not, on its collective strategies for imagining and negotiating with its inherent objects, i.e. with subjectivities only possible as absence. In today's economy of accelerated exhibition—where the constant stream of appearances and displayed imagery of subjectivity, differences and multitudes is what drives an apparatus operating in the paradigm of an instrumentalised desire for “the new;” where time is understood as continuous and linear progress, inevitably inscribing and projecting all our fantasies and dreams into the immanence of a prefigured future—we begin to experience the full meaning of Guy Debord's central notion “*What appears is good, what is good appears.*”<sup>10</sup> In its simplicity, this wormhole logic of the self-representational spectacle constitutes the contemporary paradigm of the present re-presenting itself as presence.

Whatever can be rendered appearance is part of what is present, of what “exists,” and this self generating repression of the presence over the absence is pushing all positions of objects<sup>11</sup> even further into invisibility. In this context, aesthetic strategies to address the invisible, i.e. tools and means to create collective imageries of what can only appear as absence, become a central challenge.

In this context, I also would like to mention Joan Jonas' film *Songdelay* from 1973 (16 mm film, B&W, 18:35 min). It is one of my favourites. The basic concept is as simple as it is complex: a number of playful games and tasks, performed by a group of artists and friends and shot on a deserted piece of urban land in New York. As in many of Jonas's performances, the viewpoint is remote from the action, the distance producing a delay in relation to both the auditory and visual events. The piece plays with a series of aesthetic ingredients that have an effect akin to that of the scene in *Werckmeister Harmonies*; contingent similarities between basic figures and shapes, lines and circles, simultaneously producing and resisting each other; the repetition of semblances and differences causing a sensation similar to the feeling of *deja vu*; short flashes of resemblance or recognition, like a sudden passage or opening to something normally hidden



or invisible; extremely specific, but too short and too elusive to be comprehended or inscribed in the structure of a symbolic system, and thus evading the re-territorializing appropriation of subjugation.

One odd component in the collection of performative games sticks out a bit from the rest. Climbing on distant hills of dirt and gravel in the urban landscape, a woman plays with the reflection of the sun in a mirror. In short moments the rays of the sun catch the lens (and my eyes) through the mirror, causing the image to explode in an overexposure of white light. It is blindness through (too much) vision, a clash of the visible and invisible producing a brief instant where they no longer are each others opposites but open up a passage through each other. This, I think, is how aesthetic transcendence can be a reality; not as a representational signification, but as a concrete, open ended passage as such. For me, this somehow connects to the following lines by Walter Benjamin:

*The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again... Every image of the past that is not recognised by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably... To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was" (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.*

(Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*)<sup>12</sup>

## ACT II - THE ABSENCE OF GOD

*The main characteristic of mental activities is their invisibility... To the invisible that manifests itself to thinking there corresponds a human faculty that is not only, like other faculties, invisible as it is latent, a mere potentiality, but remains non-manifest in full actuality...*

*Making present what is actually absent, is the mind's unique gift... This gift is called imagination.... Only because of the mind's capacity for making present what is absent can we say "no more" and constitute a past for ourselves, or say "not yet" and get ready for a future.*

(Hanna Arendt, *Invisibility and Withdrawal*)<sup>13</sup>

For my 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, I got the film *Le Mepris* by Jean-Luc Godard as a gift from my previous teacher at theatre school. The first times I watched it, I couldn't find a way to make sense of it. The cinematography was extremely beautiful, and there seemed to be a lot of meanings and patterns or hidden connections, but as hard as I tried they didn't reveal their meaning to me. The imagery and the content didn't produce any cohesive unity; or rather, the images in themselves seemed minutiously composed, but I couldn't find the hierarchy of meanings; the relation between images, sounds and thoughts seemed kind of random, as if they were telling completely different stories. After two or three attempts I gave up and forgot about it; like with the brainwormish enigma of *the caesura*, I put it in a drawer and chose to think about something else.

I don't remember exactly how it came about, but six years later I found myself making a theatre production of *Le Mepris* in Copenhagen. Conceptually it was a kind of re-enactment of the film rather than a staged interpretation of the story; an investigation or voyage of discovery through both the aesthetic and thematic landscape of the film. The point of departure was an attempt to follow a simple trajectory or question: what is made possible if I don't use the performance as a displayed interpretation of my understanding of a given material or content, but rather approach it as a foreign landscape; applying the film as a map to get lost, a voyage through an unknown world as the continuous production of a collective experience instead of the re-presentation of already finalised experiences, the sensation of walking through the material like a forest without any map or prefigured understanding. If I try to give up my (privileged) position defined by ownership of knowledge and understanding,

from which I communicate an interpretation as a commodity in a mercantile logic of transaction (comprehensive aesthetic configuration of content = price of the ticket) and instead try to use the material as an interface connecting me, the actors and the audience, then what potential is rendered possible? And what rules and toolbox do I have to apply?

The greek words for seeing (*Eido*) and knowledge (*Eidein*) are closely linked to the word *Eidea*, which simultaneously describes the notion of an idea, a form or appearance, and category or sort. In the context of theatre, I find this western tradition of human perception, where knowledge and categorisations of the world are hierarchically linked with visual appearance in an ontological double-bind, to be interesting and also kind of problematic. What does it imply that the perceptual notion "I see" is the concept of the conclusive notion "I understand?" What is visibly manifest in the world "appears" to me as a cohesive concept, "makes sense" to me. If I share this sense with others, it is because it is part of what is "common sense." Accordingly, all "things" that cannot make themselves visible within our frame of recognisable objects or subjects are incomprehensible and thus rendered non-existent.

To open up for the things absent to appear in the present, I thus have to abstain from filling the empty space with imagery and expression. I have to abandon my privilege as speaking subject expressing my own agency—or some one else's—and make space for what-ever alterity that is not part of the present world. Listen, rather than speak; provide the possibility of experience rather than express the subjectivity of my own experience.

*Le Mepris* is a film about a film, or more specific, about a film adaption of *The Odyssey*. The basic plot is simple, but gives focus to a number of topics and questions about the relation between aesthetic practice, ideology and economy that have grown exponentially in relevance since the making of the film in 1963. Apart from being the year I was born, 1963 was also the epicentre of the explosion of the American entertainment

industry that would come to re-shape the aesthetic sensibility of the western world. In the film, the American film producer Jerry has hired an old and very famous director—the fictional character Mr. Lang, played by Fritz Lang—to make a film of Homer's epos, shot on location at Capri and in Cinecittà. The modern American producer and the old European director disagree on every aspect of the film, so Jerry has hired an up and coming scriptwriter, played by Michel Piccoli, to "save" the project by re-writing the script. Michel Piccoli, who is a big admirer of Fritz Lang's work, against his ideological conviction agrees to the task, mainly because he needs the money to pay for the fancy apartment he has bought to impress on his wife, played by Brigitte Bardot. The contempt referred to in the title of the film is multilayered; the american producer's and the european director's mutual contempt of each others values and aesthetics, the scriptwriter's contempt for himself, and his wife's contempt for his incapacity to respect himself.

In a central scene, the group gathers in a screening room in Cinecittà to watch extracts from the film. Contrary to the producer's request for "a story of kings and queens, real human beings, with real human emotions," the imagery shown is a series of long fixed camera shots of the horizon of the sea and of statues of the gods controlling the events of the epic. The presence of human appearance is random and fragmented; no story, no visible Cyclop or Circe; no sentiment, no heroism, no adventures to identify with, but just relations and events, developed through the intersections and repetitions of colours, shapes, and rhythms.

Finally, the producer, Jerry, explodes and accuses Mr. Lang of cheating him by not filming what is in the script. The director motivates his choices as logical by referring to the difference between text and image—*"in the script it is written, and on the screen it is picture, motion pictures."* This causes the frustrated Jerry to throw a film reel through the room, involuntarily mimicking a discus throw, whereupon Lang laconically concludes, *"Finally, you get the feel of Greek culture."* The producer ensures

himself of the loyalty of the script writer by writing him a check for a re-written script, representing the aesthetic criteria of the modern film market, and together they leave the room.

In the aftermath, there is a short conversation between Fritz Lang and his assistant Francesca that has stayed with me and had a strong impact on my perspective of staged imagery. From a contemporary gender horizon, the patriarchal stereotype of the old, male authority explaining the hidden truths of art to his young female assistant is more than outdated, but if one can transcend that aspect, the brief dialogue—maybe more a monologue—contains some quite interesting notes on the relation between aesthetic imagery and non-human agency.

The scene starts with Fritz Lang quoting a passage from the poem *The Poet's Vocation* by Hölderlin. The dialogue of the scene is a more or less literal adaption of Maurice Blanchot's analysis of Hölderlin's poetics in *The Space of Literature*. At the thematic centre is Hölderlin's contemplation of European civilisation's relation to the divine, characterised by the rhythm of presence and absence; the coming and going of times when the gods are present and times when they are absent—periods of light and periods of darkness. Quoting Blanchot, Godard engages Fritz and Francesca in a conversation focusing on the last line of Hölderlin's poem.

Fritz

*But when it is necessary man remains without fear  
Before God, simplicity protects him,  
And he needs neither arms nor guile  
Until God's default helps him.*

Francesca

*It's Hölderlin, isn't it?*

Fritz

*Yes. "The Poet's Vocation." The last verse is obscure.  
Hölderlin originally wrote: "so lange der Gott nicht da ist"—*

Francesca

*"So long as God is not present."*

Fritz

*Yes. And then: "so lange der Gott uns nahe ist"—*

Francesca

*"So long as God is near."*

Fritz

*Yes. The final version of the line contradicts the other two. It is no longer the presence of God, but the absence of God that comforts man. It's strange. But true.*

In the chapter "The intramural warfare between Thought and Common Sense" from *The Life of the Mind*, Hannah Arendt refers to Immanuel Kant's parable of the prophet Tiresias from the book *Dreams of a Spirit-seer*. The passage touches on the same point as the passage from Lacoue-Labarthe cited earlier: the prophet's lack of visual appearance in relation to the disruption of *the caesura*. Arendt's framework allows us to see that the conflict of presence and absence is being played out in the clash between Jerry's and Fritz's oppositional visions of how to translate *The Odyssey* for a contemporary film market. Kant gives a description of Tiresias, who was made blind by the goddess Juno "so that she might give him the gift of prophecy," and relates this archaic connection between blindness and prophecy to the fact that a sensory connection to another world must be paid for by losing a sense connected to the present world. Arendt then moves on to compare this to the legend of Orpheus, who in his quest to recover his dead wife from Hades is told that he can have her back on condition that he doesn't turn and look at her on the way back. Approaching the world of the living Orpheus wants, very naturally, to make sure that Eurydice is with him, wants her to appear to him, whereupon she of course immediately disappears. *"The old myth tells what happens the moment the thinking process comes to an end in the world of the ordinary living: all the invisibles vanish again."*<sup>14</sup>

I would like to think that this is an image of how theatre works when it is at its best. Our quest is driven by a desire for our inner images to appear, to make themselves manifest on the stage. As long as we can agree to postpone the moment of manifestation, every “thing” is possible—any imagery of whatever absence can find a temporary passage into being. And as soon as we give way to our yearning to “see” this imagery materialised, it is pushed away by re-presented manifestations of the present.

*My incapacity to think, to observe, to determine the truth of things, to remember, to speak, to take part in the life of others, becomes greater each day; I am turning into stone...*

Franz Kafka

*I am dumb, I am made of stone*

Friedrich Hölderlin

I started this text by commenting my difficulties on writing it. I also suggested that the difficulty of making my thoughts manifest through writing was inherent to the thematic content. After working with the material for some time, I now have the impression that the difficulty is not of a purely technical nature, but that it also resonates with a structural complexity on a linguistic level. I think that this complexity was what I was trying to get at when I wrote about an intellectual depression of sorts in the opening introduction; the paradox of being trapped in a symbolic system where economic and aesthetic signifiers reproduce each other in a loop, making me dig myself deeper and deeper into the apparatus I am trying to get out of with every linguistic gesture. Normally, I am sceptical of metaphors that compare private, emotional issues with matters of politics. However, I think there is something in the current political and economic order that produces a social environment that could be understood in terms of collective psychology.

When my language fails to produce agency in relation to the world surrounding me, I experience something similar to anxiety;





a sense of a loss of reality, of not being in touch with the world outside of myself. If my efforts to communicate do not result in any coherent consequence in the surrounding world, I gradually lose the feeling that communication has a sense and purpose, which puts me in a state of depression—I mean, like... what's the use?

I would suggest that our current situation with respect to the public realm, where individual citizens meet to negotiate the conditions of co-existence with each other as well as with institutions of politics, economy, art, education, etc, is going through a phase that could be understood in terms of a collective depression. What's the use of discussing and engaging, politically or aesthetically, when there is no connection between our interventions and the reality we try to interact with? The way I experience it, this is a very dangerous development that has a tendency to grow exponentially. Phenomena like Donald Trump in the US and resurgent neo-fascist nationalism in Europe, as well as the total lack of collective responsibility and common sense in relation to an economical and environmental crisis, should therefore be understood in the context of this disconnection. When my voice in a public realm has no value, and everything regarding the political follows the logic of spectacle and appearance, it makes sense to support the characters that provide the most spectacular performance. And no matter how I vote, I financially and thus politically support Trump by every click on an article or YouTube link covering his performance.

So, from an artistic point of view it is hard to avoid the question of what effect my aesthetic practice actually has in the world. In a public reality, where appearance is the only currency, what is the use of adding more imagery?

After ten years of reading it, I still haven't fully grasped the sense behind the enigmatic notions of the open ended agency described by Giorgio Agamben in *The Coming Community*. But maybe it provides some possible clues for approaching the paradoxical task of staying artistically active and yet resisting the constant demand to contribute appearance and imagery:

If every power is equally the power to be and the power to not-be, the passage to action can only come about by transporting in the act its own power to not-be. (...)

Thought, in its essence, is pure potentiality; in other words, it is also the potentiality to not think, and, as such, Aristotle compares it to a writing tablet on which nothing is written. (...)

The perfect act of writing comes not from a power to write, but from an impotence that turns back on itself and in this way comes to itself as a pure act (which Aristotle calls agent intellect). This is why in the Arab tradition agent intellect has the form of an angel whose name is Qalam, Pen, and its place is unfathomable potentiality. Bartleby, a scribe who does not simply cease writing but “prefers not to,” is the extreme image of this angel that writes nothing but its potentiality to not-write.<sup>15</sup>

By the way, have you seen the stand up performance *Those Damned Immigrants* by the British comedian Stewart Lee? It is brilliant. In an eight minute monologue from 2013, satirizing the claim of the nationalist party UKIP on origin based ownership, Lee back tracks the political challenge of how to share common space between a multitude of subjectivities through first the evolution of mankind and then biological life as we know it. After reaching an evolutionary point zero of sorts, he comes to a sudden stop where he lingers in a kind of melancholia:

*Reality is too full, isn't it? There is too much stuff everywhere. I liked it when there was nothing, just an infinite void of nothing, remember? Ah, the old nothing days... The old nothing times, remember? When there was nothing? Oh, it was brilliant... There was no planets, was there? No. And there was no sun, was there? There was no crime, make of that what you will. You could leave your door unlocked, couldn't you? Cause it didn't exist.*

## “I” AM NOT THE SAME AS “ME”

Technically, the imagery seems simple. Through the medium of a low tech B&W video camera on a tripod, the artist—a woman with short hair, in her mid thirties—looks at me, or, rather, into the camera. The image scrolls vertically a couple of times before it calibrates, finds it balance and stops. Then, the woman points at one of her eyes: *“This is my right eye.”* Then the other: *“This is my left eye.”*

The shot expands to a split screen, showing two versions of the same image: the woman in medium closeup and a flipped image of just her head on a TV monitor; her two heads next to each other in the same size, one “original,” one copy. She looks slightly downwards, probably at the position where the monitor is actually placed, watching the same copy of herself that we are seeing in real time. Then, she lifts her arm, points at her eyes one at a time and says: *“This is my left eye. This is my right eye.”* The left and the right eyes of the “original” are the same as they would be when seen from my perspective, and in the “copy” they are mirrored (which is a bit weird actually, as since I am face to face with the “original,” it should be the other way around.)

The perspective goes back to the single close up shot. Again, the image scrolls vertically, suggesting that, just like the first image, what we are seeing is probably not an “original” image but the “copy” of the monitor image that both the woman and we were watching in the previous split screen shot. The woman looks down at herself in the monitor, raises one finger and—looking into the monitor—points at the camera lens in the position where the top of her finger meets her right eye in the image on the monitor; she then moves her other finger and points at the same eye on her “real” face: *“This is my left eye.”* She repeats the same manoeuvre with the other eye: *“This is my right eye.”*

In the next sequence I find it difficult to make out how the imagery is technically produced. Again it is the split screen with both the half figure and the close up in the monitor, but as the woman

lifts her arm to again point at her eye, I see the “real” arm as if I was standing behind her position, looking at her in a mirror and the monitor. Maybe that is how it is done; there is a mirror and a monitor next to each other, and the camera is standing behind her right shoulder, filming both her mirror image and the monitor showing the filmed imagery in real time. Looking at the monitor image, she carefully directs her “real” arm so that her finger covers the eye in the mirror image, and then points with her other finger at the same eye of her “real” face: *“This is my left eye.”* Then she changes hand and repeats: *“This is my right eye.”*

The image goes back to the close up; now without the initial scrolling, it seems like the camera is filming the mirror, without the doubling of the monitor. The woman turns around, so we see her head from behind, and holds up a small mirror, reproducing the closeup image of her head, and again points out of the right and left side of her face. She then turns back, looks at the camera through the semi-transparent mirror for a brief moment, and then separates her face in two halves by holding the mirror as a divider between her nose and the camera. She slightly changes the angle of the mirror, still based at her nose, so that we now see a version of her face produced by a doubling of her left half. Her one eye looks up at “us,” doubled through the mirror: *“This is my right side.”* What happens here is a small revelation of sorts; the figure of a face produced by the mirroring of one half representing both left and right looks both very familiar and really weird. When she squints her doubled eye, the image of her face is comic and uncanny at the same time; realistic and unreal. It is a deconstruction of the face by means of aesthetics, making the idea of identity and original impossible in one single gesture.

This video piece, *Left Side Right Side*, was made by Joan Jonas in 1972. Jonas had started as a sculptor in New York in the 1960s, and from there moved into a territory of mixing performance and mediated image. She had a close relation, both aesthetically and personally, to the movement of minimalism, sharing the conceptual lucidity and repetition of shapes and figures. But the performative aspect adds a multilayered sensitivity to the work.

I think *Left Side Right Side* is a remarkable piece of work; so simple, minimal, intelligently reflective, and sensuous at the same time. With a couple of very simple tools, Jonas performs a thinking in practice, a performative reflection on a number of basic and central concepts of origin, identity, and representation.

What becomes apparent through the doubling and mirroring of perspectives through the repetitive investigation of left and right, culminating in the uncanniness of the face produced by a self identical doubling of its own half, is the impossibility of the very concept of identity. If not even the left and the right halves of my own face are identical to each other, then clearly all identity is a construction. (And then how can I claim an identification between my self and something outside of this non identical self?)

The work also points at the difference between representation and representativity. It is not an artwork “about” identity. It is not “about” anything. It takes place only as its own action, and this performativity produces an experience in real time. It is not a gesture representing an experience outside of its own context or framework. The performer Joan Jonas does not perform an act that is a representation of a subject or of agency; the act is representative. She produces experience on behalf of the audience, not “showing” us a representation of a prefabricated experience, i.e. experience as fiction and commodity. She acts, instead, as the agent of the audience, engaging us in the production and sharing of both physical and mental experience.

*Why would the problem of identification not be,  
in general, the essential problem of the political?*

Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Transcendence Ends in Politics*<sup>16</sup>

The double figure produced in the mirror and monitor in *Left Side Right Side* actualises an interspace dwelling between the ego and the self. In various shapes and formations, this gap within the subject reappears in the writings of Immanuel Kant and Hannah Arendt.

One could picture this as a split appearing in the act where I go from a state of pure being to the active mode of thinking. The thinking process thus would simultaneously constitute a coming into being and a dividing of the self; where, as the active exodus from “pure” existence, thinking is an act of “silent dialogue” inscribing my consciousness within a linguistic system, fixating it to a specific frame of time and space, thus separating me from my self.

This line of thought has similarities to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the mirror stage and the imaginary. Lacan describes the moment when the baby—by means of a mirror or some other symbolic imagery of itself as a cohesive image—becomes conscious of its own autonomous being, its own identity as a unity separated from the rest of the world. The creation of an autonomous, conscious identity simultaneously produces, in both cases, a separation: a splitting of continuity, a slight latency or echo lingering between consciousness and thinking, being and image, subject and object.

I’ll stay with this topic because I think that our culture’s fixation and dependency on identity and identification, both as universal tools for subjectivity and as inherently positive values, is increasingly problematic. Whether we’re talking about politics, social relations, or artistic quality criteria, the definition and affirmation of identity is at the core of the process. And we most often talk about it as something natural; presupposing the idea that the identity is rooted in the authenticity of an origin.

But identity is always a construction; nothing in this world is identical to anything. A1 never equals A2, identity and identification always means assimilation and appropriation: the understanding of A1 on the conditions of A2, or vice versa. In one sense, the whole world could be said to be a system of mimetics: a constant repetition of forms, figures, rhythms, relating to each other as resemblances and differences. With the concept of identity—the slight shift from similarity to sameness, driven by the desire operating in the double bind of like-

ness and difference—mimesis gets inscribed within a hierarchy of assimilation and appropriation, of proper and improper, in a dramaturgy that connects desire and violence familiar from passionate love stories, xenophobia, gender war and colonisation. The true force behind our fear of the foreigner is not that he is alien. It is triggered by the fact that he is similar to ourselves—too similar to not be the same. The similarity de-stabilises the authenticity and cohesive unity of my own identity, blurs its borders and framework. The fear of the foreigner is not the fear of the alien that provokes my repulsion and rejection, it is the anxiety of the uncanny, the thing that resembles me without being me.

Mimesis, the similarity of a double or copy, is an interconnection between proper, im-proper, proper-ty and ap-proprietation. The desire for difference connected to the *Other* and inherent to the dialectics in which identity is produced, is simultaneously the violent force of assimilation. The final product of a society focusing on identity as its main political and aesthetic tool might arguably not be the promised multitude of different subjectivities, but rather the indifference of infinite sameness.

In *Typography*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe writes a fascinating and sometimes jingly journey through a landscape that could be described as a genealogy of western hermeneutics. It is a cultural archeology circling around a number of linguistic and ontological concepts, a minutious and puzzling patchwork, wherein Lacoue-Labarthe simultaneously de-attaches and re-constructs a structural legacy of thought, from Plato via Heidegger, in which notions like *Figure*, *Gestalt*, *Seeing*, *Idea*, and *Knowledge* interact in endless, entwined feedback loops.

I find the complexity of Lacoue-Labarthe's approach to the notions *mimesis* and *fiction* very interesting in relation to performative practices. It complicates the critical reflection on representation and signification, and reveals to what extent my earlier critique of mimesis and fiction as inherently negative phenomena was embedded in a paradigmatic dualism inherited from Plato, which understands the world through a narrative of hierarchical

oppositions like original/copy, reality/fiction, proper/improper, true/false. This perspective of the world, emanating from Plato's idealism, has in its centre a hierarchical relation between the copy and original, where the double only is validated in its relation to the original—to the “truth.”

*Perhaps we have some basis for suspecting that “Platonic psychology” is in fact a “psychology” of desiring rivalry, of the endless reciprocal hatred implied by the very stuff of desire itself—precisely by its mimetic nature.*

*The origin of desire is mimesis—mimetism—and no desire is ever forged that does not at once desire the death or the disappearance of the model or “exemplary” personage that gave rise to it. This is why, for Girard, “mimesis meets violence and violence redoubles mimesis.” The law of desire is that of reappropriation, of “recovery” from the primitive alienation that governs it. Desire wants difference and autonomy, the proper and property; it is the very will to decision: the Same (identity, identification, undifferentiation) is its terror and the evil that gnaws at it.<sup>17</sup>*

Mimesis is complex because it is simultaneously a promise and a threat. The mimetic gesture is a separation of the world from itself, the basic speculative condition that opens reality up to fantasy, reflection, and negotiation. But, for the same reason, the double/copy/image is a threat, since it destabilises the proper order of things and of subjects, and ultimately even the cohesive unity of my own subject. Mimesis is the questioning of my identity's identity with itself, of the *proper* version of my self; facing its mimetic double, the proper of my subject is no longer a stable category in the world, it is no longer its own property. It renders me open to the world, at the risk of my self dissolving in the world.

This opens for a reversal of my initially rather dogmatic critique of mimetic processes. The fact that I originally understood the whole concept of mimesis in a representational tradition, where the mimetic double automatically is expected to represent an



“original” in reality, makes it (embarrassingly) obvious how deeply my idea of imagery and symbolic systems is rooted in a representational regime of western art, where aesthetics automatically are valorised in relation to their commodified function of making images of reality, rather than as part of a sensory apparatus connecting me with the world.

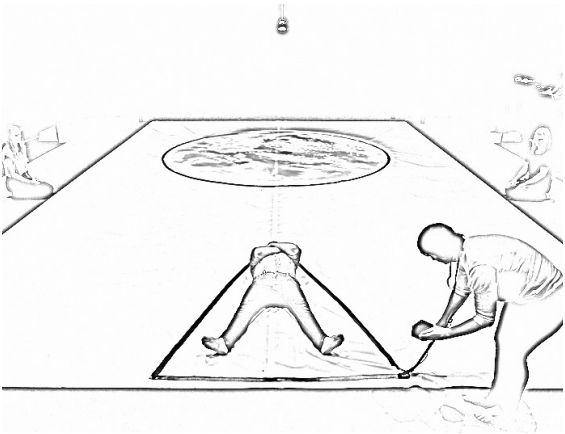
Seen from the perspective of the contemporary situation—in which the public realm has been erased by an economy based on the private commodification of all commons, a totalitarian monopolisation of all modes of production and resources; a transition of power and discourse justified by the narrative of capitalism’s final victory over all other perspectives on reality, subsuming all image-production into the apparatus of the universalisation of its own self image as immanence, whereby the present order re-produces itself as re-presentation of presence—in this situation, mimesis could provide a central tool.

Or, as Lacoue-Labarthe puts it, *“The ‘question of mimesis’—which comes from a dizziness, an uneasiness—is, in effect, nothing other than the question of the ‘subject.’ Or rather, the obsession with the subject. What is threatening in mimesis is exactly that kind of pluralization and fragmentation of the ‘subject,’ provoked from the outset by its linguistic or ‘symbolic’ (de)constitution.”*<sup>18</sup>

## THE COMMODIFICATION OF EXPERIENCE BY FICTION

*Humanity that, according to Homer, was once an object of spectacle for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it is capable of experiencing its own destruction as an aesthetic enjoyment of the highest order. So it is with the aestheticization of politics, which is being managed by fascism. Communism responds with the politicization of art.*

*(The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,*  
Walter Benjamin)



There is this film scene. Tom Cruise and Willem Dafoe—"Ron" and "Charlie"—find themselves in the middle of a Mexican desert nowhere, thrown out of a cab on their way to a brothel after molesting the driver. In a shot from the far distance, we see the two crippled Vietnam veterans, both in wheelchairs, circling each other on a small road, embraced by the empty desert landscape.

*"You never killed a baby, you never had to kill a baby! You never put your soul into that war, you never put your soul on the line!"* The tragicomic circular minuet continues as the camera zooms in on Tom-Ron and Willem-Charlie, struggling with both their wheel chairs and each other.

*"How the fuck do you know? Maybe I killed babies! Maybe I killed more babies than you did! But I don't have to talk about it!"*

*"Why not? Are you better than anybody else, are you a hero? You're full of shit, you never fought that war, you weren't even there!"*

*"Fuck you!"*

*"No, fuck YOU!"*

*"No, FUCK YOU!"*

In a pathetic argument about whose trauma gives the most authentic credibility as a war veteran, the two desperate heroes start spitting in each others faces until they, now wet with saliva, get into a tragic wrestling game that lasts for about 7 seconds before they both fall out of their wheel chairs, landing helpless in the sand like stranded fish on land.

Oliver Stone's film *"Born on the Fourth of July,"* from 1989, was a critical and commercial success: grossing \$161,000,000 and winning two academy awards for Best Director and Best Editing. The script was co-written by Stone together with Ron Kovic,

a Vietnam veteran and author of the best selling autobiography from which the film was adapted. In 2005 Ron Kovic describes his intentions in writing the book:

*"I struggled to leave something of meaning behind, to rise above the darkness and despair. I wanted people to understand. I wanted to share with them as nakedly and openly and intimately as possible what I had gone through, what I had endured. I wanted them to know what it really meant to be in a war. I wanted people to know about why I had become opposed to the war, why I had grown more and more committed to peace and nonviolence."*<sup>19</sup>

Today, ten years later, the words of Ron Kovic carry with them a disturbing echo, a *deja vu* of previous (unsuccessful) attempts by political and public institutions to make use of collective experience for the creation of a less apocalyptic future. Whether the topic is the durational economy crisis produced by neo-liberal capitalism, or the consequences of combatting conflicts rooted in economic injustice by the means of colonial warfare, our contemporary public imaginary simply seems incapable of learning anything from past experience.

In his essay *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin relates the decline of storytelling to the appearance, firstly, of the novel and, secondly, of information in the form of newspapers. The tradition of storytelling, says Benjamin, was based on the transmission of a personal experience shared between the storyteller and her/his listener, thus producing a collective experience. In comparison, the novel is written by an individual for individuals. Where the events of the orally performed story take place in a shared imaginary of a community, a general intellect of sorts, the novel inscribes both the reader and the narrative into the singular psychology and life path of its specific protagonists. *"It is as if the securest among our possessions were taken from us: the ability to exchange experience."*<sup>20</sup>

Benjamin wrote his essay in 1936, responding to how modernism meant a transformation of folk culture—the mainstream—from

performed communication to media, mainly books and newspaper. Today our very economy is based on information and appearances. And after a century of movies, where personal experience comes pre-packaged in the movie star, the novel has made a triumphant return in the mutant form of TV series. Here, we no longer follow the story—we instead live the life of its protagonists. This media-isation of communication obviously has put us in a situation where Benjamin's notions, and in particular the process by which shared experience is isolated and projected into individual psychology, are more relevant than ever.

The perspective of *The Storyteller* is the trauma of World War I. Millions of men returned from war, carrying with them first hand impressions and knowledge of a reality unimaginable from the perspective of ordinary life. But instead of being the source for a collective imagination of what had happened, these stories disappeared completely from the public arena. *"With the [First] World War a process began to become apparent which has not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer, but poorer in communicable experience?"*<sup>21</sup>

The returning soldiers brought home traumatic experiences of unprecedented proportions from a conflict involving and inter-connecting 32 countries world wide. One would think that the return of individuals harbouring the trauma within themselves and the reawakening of society from the collective bad dream of mutual self destruction would have led to a multiplication of personal narratives. Instead what happened was complete silence—for five years, maybe ten. And then came all the novels, and after that all the movies.

This decade of silence could be understood as a process of hermeneutic digestion; the transition from reality to aesthetic representation. In the original form of what today is called post traumatic stress disorder, the personal histories and destinies disappeared from the public sphere into private bedrooms or hospital clinics. Only filtered through their aesthetic translation—

from personal experience to fiction, from the political potential of subjectivity to the commodified object of art—could the events be allowed to enter the public realm; only when validated as good “literature” or “cinema” could the trauma appear in public; the experience of trauma re-presented in presence as re-presentation. Instead of having the function of representative sensitivity, a contingent mix of experiences producing a collective imaginary exchanged and digested in common, the personal histories of war had to morph into the static figure of fiction, an aesthetic object to be enjoyed as contemplation. Only as such could they appear in public.

*“Fuck you!”*

*“No, fuck YOU!”*

*“No, FUCK YOU!”*

There is nothing wrong with Oliver Stone's film. In its time, it was a rather decent attempt to keep alive the legacy of political movies produced within the studio industry of Hollywood. The critical analysis of how patriotism is instrumentalised in a cynical political apparatus is thorough, and the scene quoted above is, within its given frame of criteria, a brilliant take on collective trauma transposed and implemented as individual destiny. On an aesthetic level, the movie works pretty well. It is a typical award winning film, with a balanced and pre-fabricated ethics, wrapped up and digested. But, revisited in 2016, seen from a political perspective and given the objectives described by Ron Kovic above, the success of the movie is not quite as unequivocal.

The experience of having a lived trauma alienated and silenced by society in favour of a fictionalized commercial commodity, profiting from the sense of vacuum in the midst of a collective imaginary, could be described as the story of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: a durational modern tragedy describing the destiny of the veterans of colonial wars in Vietnam and more recently Iraq and Afghanistan. Upon their return to civil society, the former

heroes of patriotic warfare are transformed into ghosts: socially marginalized and expelled from the public sphere, only visible in pimped up, award winning, and highly profitable Hollywood versions of themselves.

*“War is a mere continuation of politics by other means,”* said the Prussian general Clausewitz. If we follow this line of thought, the abjection of first hand experience—the lived consequence of contemporary politics imprinted on personal life and destiny—is a feuilleton soon celebrating its 100th season. We have an intimate relation to Tom Cruise’s and Willem Dafoe’s tragic heroes displayed on the public wall of shame; we have followed Martin Sheen and Marlon Brando getting lost in the heart of the darkness of american warfare and culture, we have been the excited audience of Christopher Walken’s durational suicide performance, we have witnessed all the ordinary G.I-Joe’s played by Matt Damon, or someone looking very much like him, going to or from Afghanistan or Iraq to learn a painful lesson about the ethic collapse of “the system:” from the trenches of Somme to the drones over Kandahar, we are all binge watching a century long series on the theme of traumatising and exclusion, produced in the logic of what can and what cannot be allowed to appear in the public realm.

In order to be inscribed in a capitalist symbolic order, personal experience must appear as a commodity. It is the transposition from exchange of experience to the exchange value of experience. Only re-presented as fiction can the sensory knowledge present itself in a public sphere. No longer meaningful or useful as a lesson or lived wisdom, but simply a phantasmagoric effect, a pseudo-experience providing neither understanding nor counsel, but only the illusion of emotional depth and empathy as consumer product. I repeat: *“It is as if the securest among our possessions were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.”*

*“Perception becomes experience only when it connects with sense-memories of the past”* writes Susan Buck-Morss in her essay *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics*. In a close reading of Walter Benjamin’s *“The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduc-*

tion” she describes the reversal of the meaning of aesthetics that comes with modernity; from being a tool for sensory connection with the world, aesthetics has become the instrumentalised production of commodified images of the world; *“to cultural forms rather than sensible experience, to the imaginary rather than the empirical, to the illusory rather than the real.”*<sup>22</sup>

Buck-Morss makes an interesting reference to Kant’s logic of the sublime, according to which phenomena too terrifying, monstrous or just beyond human comprehension—the power of nature or the terrors of war—can be enjoyed as contemplation in their translation into aesthetic expression. With the shocking experience of modernity, the apparatus of sentience in western society has been gradually trained to use aesthetics as a translation of the world into displayed representations; instead of being a sensory organ connecting me with an outside reality, aesthetics is transferred to the realm of culture and art. The aesthetic sense no longer sharpens but rather numbs the senses. In a rather mind blowing observation on the fatal logic of our contemporary relation between aesthetic representation and lived experience, Buck-Morss continues:

*“Being ‘cheated out of experience’ has become the general state, as the synaesthetic system is marshalled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to numb the organism, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of anaesthetics... The technical apparatus of the camera, incapable of ‘returning our gaze,’ catches the deadness of the eyes... that ‘have lost their ability to look.’ Of course, the eyes still see. Bombarded with fragmentary impressions they see too much—and register nothing. Thus the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as anaesthetics. Aesthetics changes from a cognitive mode of being ‘in touch’ with reality to a way of blocking out reality, destroys the human*



*organism's power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake.*"<sup>23</sup>

It's March 2014, and I am sitting at the Joshua Saloon in Joshua Tree, California. There is a guy standing at the bar. For some reason, he catches my attention. He is between 25 and 30 years old, and obviously a marine from the huge base in Twentynine Palms, some miles into the desert; the typical G.I. Joe trying to celebrate a night off duty. He has this kind of bad vibe going. One can sense that he is really not in a good place with himself. Still, I can't stop looking at him. You know how it is, bad vibes catch attention. There is this bling thing in his left eye, short gleams in certain angles, like a mirror catching the sunlight.<sup>24</sup> Suddenly, he catches my gaze and starts walking towards me. I barely have the time to curse my stupidity in the few seconds it takes him to get to my table. *"What are you looking at?"* I really don't know what to answer. *"You can see it, can't you? It's always the eyes that reveal me. I am a cyborg."*

He tells me that he was in a grenade attack in Iraq a couple of years earlier, and now half of his body parts have been replaced with high tech gizmos and gadgets. He shows me his titanium leg and explains the mechanism that causes the gleam in his left eye. After the convalescence, his current military task is to train the new kids how to survive in Afghanistan, but also to help crippled homecomers deal with their traumas.

For an hour he tells the eerily well known story of his struggle to remain patriotic in a country that maintains an official policy of publicly ignoring the war in which he has lost half of his body. He expresses in detail his contempt and his frustration over the way his sacrifice is made invisible and meaningless by the political smokescreening of the consequences and realities of a warfare that has been a permanent part of US politics for decades.

A couple of days later I read a news article about the marine base in Twentynine Palms, where all troops are trained before being sent to the Middle East. It is the largest marine base in the U.S., training

up to 40,000 service members each year. The suicide statistics alone are devastating. More of the soldiers from the base die back home than in war zones, most of them while stationed or training at the base, by their own hand or in alcohol related car accidents. The stretch of Highway 62 from Twentynine Palms to Palm Springs has become known as “The Killer Highway.”

*“The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual.”<sup>25</sup>*

The process of fictionalisation is also that of individualisation. And with the inscription of the narrative in the context of an individual subject, the ability of the reader to identify with this subject becomes crucial. This means a change in the function of the story. What in the tradition of the storyteller is an apparatus linking us to the outskirts of what can be known, by identification with the storyteller as messenger giving witness of events from beyond our horizon—i.e. operating in the realm of not here, not now, not us—is replaced, in the novel, by an author whose primary task is to produce identification with our own existing subjectivity. Whereas the task of the storyteller is to expand the register of our possible experiences, the function of the novel is to confirm and re-present the present. Here the contemporary tendency to appropriate the concept of aesthetic judgment for the paradigmatic production of identity plays a central role.

In Kant’s understanding of aesthetic judgment, the responsibility of the spectator to take a disinterested position, detached from their individual, private interests and concerns, is central. In our current culture—where “common sense” means, on the contrary, what the majority can agree without negotiation—the focus on identity and identification creates a reversal of the concept of aesthetic judgment. Here only what can produce identification from a normative perspective can be aesthetically validated. When only those subjectivities that manage to “appear” on the

conditions of the market—i.e. those that manage to be presented and identified as re-presentation of the present—can be negotiated and exchanged in public, only the experiences and subjectivities that can appear within the quality criteria of this normative aesthetic judgment can be understood as part of reality, as “realistic” (cf. the film *Milk*, where the first openly gay US politician has to be played by America’s most waterproof heterosexual actor, Sean Penn. Or *Monster*, where the subjectivity of a gay, criminal “non beautiful” woman only can appear as a transformation stunt performed by the certified normative model beautiful Charlize Theron. Or, to pick a recent and slightly more complex example, the “blackfacing” of Zoe Saldana as Nina Simone.)

The lack of any forum where the traumatic experience of war veterans can be collectively processed and reflected today, in narrowing circles, keeps returning as the destiny of returning soldiers from Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. At their return the previous heroes are re-incarnated as ghosts—the haunting spectres of imperialism, to speak with Derrida—socially marginalized and expelled from the public sphere. These subjectivities—only allowed to be present as absence—can be re-presented in reality only in the pimped up, award winning, and highly profitable Hollywood versions of themselves.

Under this logic, personal experience is not considered “real” until it appears as fiction. This dramaturgy is what produces the seemingly paradoxical discrepancy between the silence surrounding the war veterans returning from the Vietnam/Iraq/Afghanistan war and the commercial and critical success of movies like *Apocalypse Now*, *Deer Hunter*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Platoon*, etc. And even if it is a well known fact that films about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan are bad investments (the conflict being “too current to make for a satisfying drama”), we still know better how to engage with a fictional Brad Pitt struggling with his conscience than to address the conflict and its consequences in a public realm.

*The Storyteller* is conceived from the same media specific perspective that Benjamin takes in *The Work of Art in the Age of its*

*Technological Reproducibility*, in which he focuses on the way the technology of communication influences how we perceive the world, as well as what collective imageries are rendered possible by certain media. If film was the medium of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, TV series have taken its position as the technological mirror in which our present time is reflected. In the same logic, the novel was the medium specific to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in terms of modes of production, the TV series is an interesting return. Its mode of production mimics that of the 19<sup>th</sup> century novel: a perpetuum mobile, originally produced as episodes published in mass media every Sunday, following the lives of its protagonists in a durational dramaturgy, and after its completed lifespan capitalized a second time reincarnated in the format of the book.

In the media specific time frame of movies, fictionalized experience plays out in the relation between a hero and a plot based story. Time is limited and constantly pushes the protagonist towards the deadline of the intrigue. In TV series, the dramaturgy is reversed: from the first season of *Mad Men*, we follow the divorce of Betty and Don Draper (a fictional character whose “borrowed” identity itself is a fiction) which continues over three seasons. Here, we no longer follow the story—we live the lives of its protagonists.

*The existence of a public realm (...) depends entirely on permanence. If the world is to contain a public space, it cannot be erected for one generation and planned for the living only; it must transcend the life-span of mortal men. Without this (...) no politics, strictly speaking, no common world and no public realm, is possible.*

*The common world (...) is what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and with those who will come after us. But such a common world can survive the coming and going of the generations only to the extent that it appears in public.*

Hannah Arendt wrote *The Human Condition* in 1958, from the perspective of a temporal intersection where the dusk of fascism met the dawn of the cold war. One of the basic theses of the book is that the ability to express and share experience in a public sphere is the main condition for political activity. I think Arendt's figure of thought creates a link between the two lived examples of this text; between the global popularity of Tom Cruise's fictional portrait of Ron Kovic's Vietnam veteran and the experience described to me by the anonymous marine in Joshua Tree as being buried in a public vacuum.

Our means of communicating information today are greater than ever. With contemporary technology, we have unlimited access to an infinite amount of both virtual and physical platforms to express both opinions and events. Because post-Fordist capitalism, a capitalism of communication, is dependent on our participation in the double bind of being sender and receivers of information, stories, and events, we are constantly pushed to make use of this technology. The machine of contemporary economy is a multi-fuelled machine of immanence; ideologically colourblind, it transforms any sort of communication into capital, no matter what critical stance of resistance my aesthetic practice might communicate, it capitalises it as images of difference, multitudes, identity, freedom of speech, and other commodified values inherent to its logic.

So, what tools do we have left to collectively share and exchange subjectivity in a public sphere? What platforms do we as citizens access where our opinions and thoughts aren't only expressed, but are also accumulated and negotiated with the experiences and perspectives of other subjectivities than our own? I think one problem might be the way we constantly define our strategies ideologically, projecting this or that utopian idea on a possible event of transcendence in the future. Rarely do we stop and discuss what actually happens. We initiate art projects, platforms, collectives, conferences, activistic collaborations, all with very elaborate objectives that we claim will be achieved sometime in an unforeseeable future. If we would take

the position of another figure of Walter Benjamin's, the angel of history traveling backwards, witnessing the actual consequences of our strategies—then what would we see?

Within an economy of exhibition—defined as a hegemonic paradigm of appearance and identity, monopolising identification and confirmation of the present reality as the sole criteria of aesthetic judgement—it is counter-productive to approach my artistic practice as critique and resistance without considering the effect this context has on my work. In order to be acknowledged and recognised, any aesthetic critique of the present will have to re-affirm the very object of its critique, and by doing so it will inscribe itself in the economy it tries to resist. Instead of producing opposition, my work will nourish what it aims to oppose. For me, the question therefore is: how not to grow completely silent? How can I use aesthetics to think, reflect and maybe even propose temporary alternatives within this system of self-affirmation? I think the reason to why I find the triangular field between Benjamin's *The Storyteller*, Arendt's *The Life of the Mind*, and Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* so intriguing is because it suggests some possible strategies.

From that perspective, the force of *The Storyteller* lies in the connections it draws between questions about fiction, identity, and the space of appearance. What the storyteller potentially provides is an imagery without image, the possibility of producing what is absent by way of collective imaginary; of orally sharing a story as a means to make some “thing” present that was previously absent without giving it a “Gestalt.” “*Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.*”<sup>27</sup> Arendt points, here, to the specific quality of—and condition for—storytelling as the negotiation of subjectivity in a public realm. It is a collective activity giving authority and focus to a specific experience or object without defining its “true” nature or manifestation. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt outlines the political function of the *polis* as space of appearance. The city-state is not necessarily a physical or geographical territory, but rather it is “*the organization of the people as it arises out of*

*acting and speaking together, and its true space lies between people living together for this purpose, no matter where they happen to be.*" In her analysis of the Greek polis, Hannah Arendt defines the public space created by oral performativity as "a space between the participants which can find its proper location almost any time and anywhere." She continues:

*The space of appearance comes into being wherever men are together in the manner of speech and action, and therefore predates and precedes all formal constitution of the public realm and the various forms of government, that is, the various forms in which the public realm can be organized. Its peculiarity is that, unlike the spaces which are the work of our hands, it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men—as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed—but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.<sup>28</sup>*

Storytelling in this context is not defined as a toolbox for the commodification of experience into fiction, i.e. imagery and representations aiming to produce identification with the world as we know it. On the contrary, it is understood as a central political tool in its function of creating a public realm, where the performative exchange of "speech and action" is a central tool for the negotiation of different and even conflicting subjectivities and interests.

This, I would claim, is the original function of an institution, understood in its most positive definition. From this point of view, the function of the storyteller might be a way to approach the current crisis of institutions.

We often discuss and critique the institution: it is too big, too heavy, and most definitely always too conservative. I would claim that the problem with institutions today is that they hardly

exist anymore. And it is exactly within that slowness, that very conservative nature of the institution—or rather, its persistence in negotiating every idea of the present and the future with its accumulated experience of a collective past—resides one of its most central functions. The institution today most often is no longer the mighty stronghold of national power that we associate it with; it is an endangered species, a confused mammoth of an organisation, an astray dinosaur with no natural habitat and no other aim than surviving the next fiscal period. (I think this is an important, and sometimes disregarded, aspect of institutional critique. In order for institutional critique to have a constructive function, beyond the habitual complaints, it must be understood not as a critique of the institution in itself, but a reflection on its potential. This critical reflection is possible only when one acknowledges that no object of critique can be separated from its specific context in time and space. The same conditions and tasks that produce a vital and politically functional institution today will have to be renegotiated and defined anew tomorrow.)

In our time and economy, national art institutions have lost their original function of creating, accumulating, and negotiating national narratives. This is positive, in a sense, because the task of defining canons of origin-based authority and ownership is a hopelessly outdated blind alley, in both the metaphorical and concrete senses of the word. But, as has occurred with political institutions, we still haven't defined what could be a contemporary understanding of the art institution. In this vacuum, these former apparatuses of politics—with their still substantial accumulation of resources, power, and social agreements—are appropriated by a mercantile logic that gradually transforms them into streamlined and efficient shopping malls, providing identity in the form of pre-figured subjectivity and pre-fabricated common sense.

Today, when both public space and its institutions in a very near future will be nothing more than an odd and probably misconceived relic seen in history books, the performative practice of



storytelling could suggest a possible toolbox for the production of collective space through the exchange of experience. Not the story told as fiction, an aesthetic object as finalised figuration, but rather as active “fictioning,” the application of fiction onto reality for the sake of dislodging it from its self identity. The disattachment of the world produces a gap where reflection, speculation, and negotiation become not only possible but also necessary.

Here, Benjamin's essay provides an interesting trajectory for a contemporary theatre practice. If identity and identification constitute the foundation for the toolbox of traditional bourgeois theatre, could an updated approach to storytelling—based on text, venue, and image as interfaces between audience and performer rather than representations of a known content, in which mimesis is applied as a fictioning gesture, a destabilising of the world rather than fiction as a mimetic image of the world—be a contemporary apparatus for the collective exchange of experience? And what would be a relevant terminology and set of tools for such a practice?

To conclude, I would like to propose a line of thought, but it is kind of a dodgy one. It moves through a minefield of colonial exoticism and cultural appropriation. I also haven't been developing any specific suggestion or thesis; it is more like a hunch, a trajectory I would like to investigate further in the future. Nevertheless, I'm going to try to describe it.

In the aboriginal cultures of Australia, the performative tradition of storytelling has a central position. Partly as religious liturgy and creation myth of sorts, but also as a protocol for how to navigate through different maps defining geographic as well as mental, cultural, juridical, and historical territories. In the western hemisphere, we might know them best from the way they are described in Bruce Chatwin's *“The Songlines:”*

*A labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia and are known to Europeans as ‘Dreaming-tracks’ or ‘Songlines;’ to the Aboriginals as the ‘Footprints*

*of the Ancestors' or the 'Way of the Law.' Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic beings who had wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path—birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes—and so singing the world into existence."*

What I find interesting with the idea of the Songlines or dreaming tracks is that they—if I understand things right—function simultaneously as metaphysics, as an instrument of connecting with a spiritual world, and as a social protocol. Most of the information I find through a first Google search has a New Age undercurrent, a rather problematic aestheticisation of alterity and otherness, but there is something in the narrative that opens up to an interesting trajectory of thought. I found the following description on the webpage [www.crystallinks.com](http://www.crystallinks.com). Academic footnotes are not the most characteristic signature for these kind of resources, since exactly the same sentences appear on several other websites, so there seems to be a common source (possibly the book *In the Beginning was the Spirit* by Diarmuid O'Murchu). I include the quote here not as an academic reference to claim any authentic "truth" about the topic, but more because it suggests a trope or pattern of thought that I somehow find intriguing.

In the context of Arendt's notion of public space (*polis*, the politically necessary space of appearance) which is not a physical space, structure, or territory, but rather a performed activity of orally exchanged experience, perhaps this take on storytelling could be the outline of a coming institution.

*Dreamtime is commonly used as a term for the animist creation narrative of indigenous Australians for a personal, or group, creation and for what may be understood as the "timeless time" of formative creation and perpetual creating.*

*"A Dreaming" is a story owned by different tribes and their members that explains the creation of life, people, and*

*animals. A Dreaming story is passed on protectively as it is owned and is a form of intellectual property.*

*A Songline, also called dreaming track, is one of the paths across the land (or sometimes the sky) which marks the route followed by localised 'creator beings' during the Dreaming. The paths of the songlines are recorded in traditional songs, stories, dance, and painting.*

*A knowledgeable person is able to navigate across the land by repeating the words of the song, which describe the location of landmarks, waterholes, and other natural phenomena.*

*A Songline can span the lands of several different language groups, and different parts of the song are said to be in those different languages. Languages are not a barrier, because the melodic contour of the song describes the nature of the land over which the song passes. The rhythm is what is crucial to understanding the song. Listening to the song of the land is the same as walking on this Songline and observing the land.*

*The Dreaming establishes the structures of society—rules for social behaviour and the ceremonies performed in order to ensure continuity of life and land. The Dreaming governs the laws of community, cultural lore, and how peoples are required to behave in their communities.*

*The condition that is The Dreaming is met when peoples live according to law, and live the lore: perpetuating initiations and Dreaming transmission or lineages, singing the songs, dancing the dances, telling the stories, painting the Songlines and Dreamings.*

- 1 *If we now prepare ourselves to speak about ghosts, about inheritance and generation, which is to say about certain others who are not present, not presently living, not here among us or within us or outside of us, then it is in the name of justice. In the name of justice where it is not yet, not yet there, where it is no longer, in the sense that it is no longer present.*

*It is necessary to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it, from the moment that no ethics, no politics, whether revolutionary or not, seems possible and thinkable and just, that does not recognize in its principle the respect for those others who are no longer or not yet there, presently living, whether they are already dead or not yet born.*

*No justice seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some responsibility, beyond all living present, within that which disjoins the living present, before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of wars, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, or other kinds of exterminations, victims of the oppression of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.*

*Without this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are not there, of those who are no longer or who are not yet present and living, what sense would there be to ask the question "Where?" "Where tomorrow?" "Whither?"*

*This question arrives, (if it arrives,) it questions with regard to what will come in the future-to-come. Turned toward the future, going toward it, it also comes from it, it proceeds from the future. It must therefore exceed any presence as presence to itself*

*This question, which is perhaps no longer a question and which we are calling here justice, must carry beyond present life, life as my life or our life. In general. For it will be the same thing for the "my life" or "our life" tomorrow, that is, for the life of others, as it was yesterday for other others; beyond therefore the living present in general.*

Excerpts from *Spectres of Marx* by Jacques Derrida

- 2 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 85 (Harvest Book, 1981)
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 80–92
- 4 Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, p.71 (The University of Chicago Press, 1992)
- 5 I owe this example to a speech Bojana Kunst was giving at the symposium *Post-dance* arranged in Stockholm in October 2015. She showed the scene as an example of the potential of artistic interventions, and even if I am not sure Bojana read the scene the same way I do, it was thanks to her that it caught my attention
- 6 This open ended idea of passage is key. As soon as the potential transcendence is used to re-present an image of what it will bring, regardless of its ideological content, this image will become part of the apparatus of displayed imagery that constitutes the immanent Real of contemporary economy.
- 7 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 235 (Harvard University Press, 1989)
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 212
- 9 Jacques Derrida, *Introduction: Desistance*, preface to *Typography* by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, p. 42 (Harvard University Press, 1989)

- 10 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb, paragraph 12, Bureau of Public Secrets (Berkeley), 2014. URL: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/Sl/debord/index.htm>

"The spectacle presents itself as a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned. Its sole message is: 'What appears is good; what is good appears.' The passive acceptance it demands is already effectively imposed by its monopoly of appearances, its manner of appearing without allowing any reply."

- 11 Cf. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*:

*The abject is not an object facing me, which I name or imagine. Nor is it an object, an otherness ceaselessly fleeing in a systematic quest of desire. What is abject is not my correlative, which, providing me with someone or something else as support, would allow me to be more or less detached and autonomous. The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to I. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is abject, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses.*

*Powers of Horror – An Essay on Abjection*, p. 1, (Columbia University Press, 1982)

- 12 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 255 (Schocken Books, 2007)
- 13 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 71-76 (Harvest Book, 1981)
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 85
- 15 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 36-37 (University of Minnesota Press, 1993)
- 16 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 300 (Harvard University Press, 1989)
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.102
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.129
- 19 Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*, p.19 (Akashic Books)
- 20 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 83 (Schocken Books, 2007)
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 84
- 22 Susan Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered* (p. 17, p. 7, October, MIT Press, 1992)
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 18
- 24 Cf. The repeated image of the mirror reflecting the sun in Joan Jonas's video work *Songdelay*.
- 25 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 87 (Schocken Books, 2007)
- 26 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 55 (University of Chicago Press, 1958)
- 27 Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times*, Isak Dinesen 1885-1963, p. 105 (New York, Harcourt, 1968)
- 28 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 199 (University of Chicago Press, 1958)



# A FEW TURNS

Sergej Pristaš





I became familiar with the nocturnal character of theatre, its constant effort to keep the spectator awake by wrapping her attention in sleep (not in dreams!), when I had to hold vigil to a play by François Tanguy. Although I have never attached too much importance to sleeping, I am extremely invested in the experience of walking at the edge of sleep (and occasionally falling over), which I've had in some of the best performances I have seen. Tanguy's *Chant du Bouc* was a fairly long performance that kept breathing by emerging and re-emerging from darkness, whispering its texts throughout extended scenes—protracted studies of near invisibility, whose illuminations impeccably composed the total insecurity of the image with my own dubious wakefulness of a student. The thin line along which the performance pursued its *limes* in the flickering darkness of the black box, filled with fragments and glints of unintelligible languages of Kafka, Beckett, Pre-Socratic philosophers (and who knows what other texts whose identities were lost in that darkness) was enjambed by my turns to sleep and returns to the surface of the images, which would soon disappear again, turning my attention into concern, then pleasure, then calm, then desire. A universe of notes wrapped in notes wrapped in notes... of lines wrapped in lines wrapped in lines... of steps wrapped in steps wrapped in steps... of bending wrapped in bending... of touches wrapped in touches wrapped in lines wrapped in bending wrapped in steps wrapped in notes wrapped in notes wrapped in notes...

“Sleep belongs to the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Blanchot views sleeping as an act, a clear act of surrender that “promises us to the day.” Sleeping is therefore a sort of escape from the night. Nodding off before an image that arouses us, the yielding of the muscles in our neck which keep our gaze in perspective, rhythmically interrupts watching by sleeping, a sleeping that betrays the magnetic quality of night just as in enjambment the line break suspends the linearity of language. Leaving aside the roman-

ticising of the boundary between theatre and dreaming—theatre and dreaming stand on either side of the perceptual mirror. By sleeping, the sleeper escapes from the spectacle of night, just as in theatre the spectator may escape from the spectacle of illusion only by an event of thinking.

Total awakesness, however, would leave no space for thought in theatre. A break, a temporary immersion into matter, diverting attention to the caesura, the interstice that converts the conveyed thought into another state of matter returns theatre to the proximity of event.

The kind of theatre that knows what to do with a sleeping spectator also knows that sleeping brings natural rhythms to theatre, a kind of stability that assumes that the sleeper will calmly wake up to the same world wherein she fell asleep. In fact, lovers of fiction should turn to sleeping to find what they normally would expect from theatre—an escape from night which prepares us for the world. However, the sleeper who wakes up facing the stage is brought back into the world, but only by recursion to her own image as a sleeper facing the stage, because the feeling of guilt exposes her to the gaze of the wakeful spectators who see her watching the show through sleep. The spectator's problem with sleeping in the theatre is that in the theatre one always sleeps badly, and "people who sleep badly always appear more or less guilty. What do they do? They make night present."<sup>2</sup>

And, according to Blanchot, sleeping badly means being unable to find the right position. Hence our tossing and turning in bed until we find the right position, in which the world finally gives up on us. At that moment the place of our slumber becomes a place of the act of sleeping. Our seat in the theatre, if we are sleeping with pleasure, becomes the new centre of action. The question that arises then is how to maintain this intensity of turning, the intensity of space between the absorption of the image and the gravity of sleeping?

What is the trajectory of the sleeper's body whilst turning in sleep—not in dreams, but in sleep? There are two ways a

sleeping body may turn—under and over itself. The sleeping body is one of perfect technical realisation. Whether turning under or over itself, a sleeping body will use minimum energy and all of its weight in order to remain in the same position. A minimum investment for a maximum effect. A sleeping body is no longer one of construction, but of relaxation, release and lightness, boneless flesh, but still a deeply centred body, a body in which its current place is also condensed, as well as everything that bears any connection to the sleeper. Waterbeds represent a dream of the double body—a body endowed with multiple and redistributable weight. A waterbed is an external body wrapped around the sleeper's body. In combination with the sleeper's body, it forms a new, integrated body, which is at once turning under and over itself. Nothing happens to a body turning in a waterbed, unlike the body of a sleeper in a wooden bed, on a wooden plank. On a wooden bed, the body must seek out space, its weight penetrating the hard surface of the plank, just like the body of a dancer is pinned down to an image by the rays of the spectator's gaze. With each toss and turn of a body sleeping on a wooden bed, new possibilities of relaxation open up. In water, however, one may only yield to sleep.

In Artaud, the stage becomes a *place of transition*<sup>3</sup> from ideas to things. "In a word, it seems that the highest idea of theatre is that which philosophically reconciles us with Genesis, which uses all sorts of objective situations to suggest to us the hidden idea of the transition and transformation of ideas into things...."<sup>4</sup> Everything is equally important, but has yet to acquire the importance "it has in dreams."<sup>5</sup> As a field of action and place of transition, theatre is originally a *place of integration*, the integration of various sources of memory, knowledge, and feelings into things, semi-objects of observing, without any priorities or hierarchies, with every operation taking place inside the matter of theatre. This is reflected not only in terms of performance space, but also in the realm of fiction. Circumstances are inseparable from characters and the same characters may exist beyond

the confines of their particular plays or performances only in similar circumstances, since, as Bert O. States showed, there is no Hamlet or Hamletism without Claudius and “a certain relational equation, or closed field, *between* man and the world, or *between* a capacity and a demand.”<sup>6</sup> The conflict of different beings-in-between is in fact one of integration and in it one cannot separate the characters from the circumstances, or the circumstances from their relations, etc. The integrative phenomenon in theatre is what keeps theatre in between “dream and event.”<sup>7</sup> This is not merely a stylistic inclination on Artaud’s part. Perhaps it concerns precisely that specificity of performance acts that separates theatre from the world, from the actuality of its construction of reality, and renders it a total art—an illusion. An illusion not in terms of a series of perceptual deceptions but in terms of integration, the impression of a different style of existence, illusion *qua* flickers (*illudere*) of events and a test of reality. This specificity is reflected in people’s increased openness to things, whereby everyone makes a sacrifice, as well as in their enfolded existences.

The same human trait, to open one’s body to the world of objects, is also found in the radical realism of Stanislavski, who counted on the “circumstances” to animate one’s “own self-feeling in the role onstage,”<sup>8</sup> as well as in works with a lower theatrical potential, where the performer’s body provides an extension to an artistic installation and its technical means in performance, or vice versa. Another classical form of this kind of sacrifice, or objectification, is disguise. There, however, objectification leads to universality. “The mask eliminates one’s *personality*, diverting the spectator’s attention to the universal.”<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, Eugenio Barba also credits technique with the same masking role: “In theatre, in my view, it is precisely technique that is a sort of masking, imposing a sort of hard shell that creates distance...”<sup>10</sup> The explosion of modernist theatre occurred in various considerations regarding cancelling the performer’s bodily specificity and objectifying her, typically by chaining her to or

wrapping her into another present language, such as Appia's musicalised body, the body of live art. In Léger, as well as in Schlemmer, one finds the plastic body: "Object has now supplanted subject, abstract art comes as a total liberation, and the human figure may now be treated not in terms of its sentimental but only plastic values."<sup>11</sup> Witkiewicz immerses the performer into the matter of theatre almost until the performer disappears: "The actor should not exist as such; he should be an element of the whole, just like the colour red in a given painting or the note C sharp in a work of music."<sup>12</sup> From Diderot and Stanislavski to Artaud and the modernists, the debate was always about the performer's degree of sensibility in treating the circumstances, the world of objects.

The body is what we share with the world, as well as that which engulfs us, like a waterbed, or covers us like earth (as in Beckett's *Happy Days*, literally). Things, as well as people, are prone to assimilation, Shklovsky might say: "Things that one has perceived multiple times come to be perceived by means of recognising them; the thing is right before us, we know it, but do not see it".<sup>13</sup> The reality of the thing that is the performer's body may disappear in the sheer abyss of meaning if we make an effort to erase its chief characteristic features. That is indeed what enables us to view the body of an actor as that of a character or the body of a dancer as that of movement, forgetting that that body is precisely the carrier of signs whereby we recognise and situate the same actor or dancer in the world, in which we, too, are likewise buried. Perhaps also because its style of existence belongs to another world. At the same time, let us not forget that the body never becomes completely fake, never fully an object, as Barthes showed when he wrote about the "artificial, but not fake"<sup>14</sup> body in theatre. This artificiality is different from that of stage-set design or furniture. The body enters the mechanism of physicality, as well as of disembodiment. The body is "frozen in its function of an artificial object".<sup>15</sup> Such a body is ready to enter the image, to be similar to itself, and theatre is precisely the locus of various techniques and

technologies of disembodiment by virtue of emphasising the body itself.

The body undergoes a peculiar deictic-cathectic operation. While the body lets itself be according to the circumstances, we invest it with emotional significance or psychic energy. That is why the body in performance is perhaps the “transitional object” *par excellence*,<sup>16</sup> “simultaneously a living body derived from trivial nature and an empathic, formal body, frozen by virtue of its function as an artificial object.”<sup>17</sup> Such a reduction of the body is accompanied by a reduction of the world to phenomena, which is, in turn, compensated for by a non-present surplus, a surplus stemming not from the facts of stability (of existence) but from perseverance (of insistence). Another interesting problem that opens up is that of theatre’s existence in between dream and event which I have only hinted at in Artaud but not seen through the perspective of the dramaturgy of dreams. “There is nothing more opposed to dramaturgy than dreams,” says Barthes, because “the surrealism of theatrical objects is of a sensory, not oneiric order.”<sup>18</sup> The objectness of things and ideas in theatre still takes us closer to the objectness of words and things in dreams. As a precise, if abstract enough, illustration, we might refer to Nietzsche’s understanding of the tragic artist, to whom “his unity with the innermost basis of the world is revealed in a *metaphorical dream image*.”<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, too, sees in the dreams of the Greeks not only a series of scenes, but also “a logic of line and contour, colours and groups.”<sup>20</sup> To speak of that inter-materiality of theatre, its existence in between two worlds, existence in between objects and ideas, *qua*, in fact, existence in the world of signs is as sacrilegious as would be to reduce dreams merely to a world of reified signs and symbols, denying the sleeper’s entitlement to “real” experience and being wrapped in dreams. Our experience in dreams or in theatre may not be reduced by any other interpretation, although interpretation/translation is involved in their existence.

In a white box, however, there is nothing obscure. Although the gallery has been for decades a site of exhibiting and explaining the body, in all of its performative capacities, including taking it literally to the brink of death, the gallery is nonetheless a diurnal place, a place of wakefulness where the performer is invariably obliged to demonstrate the objectness of the body, to expose it to tools and procedures, and bring it to the light of day.

I have already pointed out that in the theatre, a black box, the darkness of the auditorium, the body always undergoes the process of objectification, but as an image, the body emerges only when, like Blanchot's notion of a tool, it is "no longer disappearing into its use."<sup>21</sup>

I also approximated Blanchot when I argued that a body permeated by theatricality is not a fake, mimicking body, but an artificial body, one that resembles *itself* the way a corpse resembles itself. In *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot insists that the corpse resembles not "the person [it] was when he was alive," but only *itself*, because the self is "the impersonal being, distant and inaccessible." Its relation to the world is the image, the image *qua* emerging from darkness, "an obscure possibility, a shadow ever present behind the living form which now, far from separating itself from this form, transforms it entirely into shadow."<sup>22</sup>

But Blanchot's laying out of the basic conditions of the image reads as though he sought to describe those of a black box: neutrality and a retreat of the world, "the indifferent deep where nothing is affirmed."<sup>23</sup> However, that indifferent deep is not informed by the architectonics of the black box itself, but by its nocturnal quality, its closeness, which is perhaps the only properly mimetic consequence of theatre—the pitch darkness of existence giving rise to impersonal emergences that constitute the very notion of dramaturgy, a notion that in performance belongs to no one and is not personalised, because belonging and being personalised take everything into the daylight of the world.<sup>24</sup> And just as day and night alternate by taking turns and not through revolution, so this shift in theatre occurs by means of turning, not

transformation. Not through death, but by turning to sleep am “I” the one who sleeps, says Blanchot, “I” and no one else; in sleep, “I” elude my own self as well.<sup>25</sup>

A turn is a flash in Enframing (Gestell),<sup>26</sup> in the technique of walking, technique of sleeping, technique of dancing. Dancing is “presencing” precisely through turning, it flashes in an event, a flash that opens the dancer to every possible world, those worlds that are stated and those that only appear shining through, which thought begins to dance and dance comes to imagine.

The technical turn: The polar opposite of the sleeper’s turn is the ballet turn, the pirouette. A maximum expenditure of energy, total control of the ankle joint for a minimum level of efficiency and maximum effect—the impression of lightness. The technical turn is no longer a flash but dazzle, a surfeit of turning, turning without perspective, a series of turns that nothing precedes or follows, the mere situation of turning. In art dominated by perspective, featuring a controlled disposition of objects in space, the maximum discipline of concealing every accident, with costumes diverting the gaze away from the detail toward the whole, turning is valued only in terms of a numeric leap. In ballet, the pirouette quickly abolishes expression. The perfection of turning reduces the dancer to a unit, whose impression of presence is affirmed only by her fixed gaze, the secret cure for vertigo. However, in a technical turn, pleasure emerges from releasing something inhuman. The body lends a voice to that which is deprived of the right to a body, something that is deprived of truth and existence, the proximity of the imaginary and the real. In a technical turn, one hears the voice of the one who cries in the desert of complete enframing, one hears the rumble of a whirlwind, whose machine-like quality will always be represented to us by swirling sand, but whose mechanisms will always elude our grasp.

The turn in technique: Dance and the art of dance do not reach their summit in the turn. The turn is a turning point



in dance. The turns of a dancer are those of a sleeper in motion. In dance, following a turn nothing should remain the same. Since there is no dance without repetition, since the unit of movement is invisible unless repeated, because it disappears in transitions, there is no dance either, without repeating turns. But unlike the technical turn, a turn in technique invariably makes the dancer visible, kicks him out of his technical training, with a flash, into new dilemmas, into the namelessness of thoughts that are still there, but always in expression, in the dynamics of exposition. A turn in technique is not a full stop like a pirouette, but a conjunction, and dance bases its sentences on conjunctions, coordinating as well as correlative. But thus or, therefore, and only, while if hence though, neither for and no... And thus from a mere turn we acquire an entire dance score. Assembling, opposing, decomposing, concluding, excluding, gradation, temporalisation, guessing, causing, allowing, intent, consequence—all of those are functionalisations of a small change in spatial orientation in the continuity of movement or its suspension in the field of movement possibilities. And where there is possibility—there is already movement there. To make movement into something more than just resolving possibilities, the turn opens new problems, the turn disperses all enumeration, but also enumerates movements into units that are no longer just series of movements, but wobbles on both sides of the membrane of stillness. However, the turn itself hardly ever appears as purely a turn. It is always embedded in movement and is its flash. The turn is embedded in turning, but also announces the possibility of a reversal. Every dancer, as well as every spectator will wonder whether the turn communicates. And if it does, what?

If we reduce a series of movements down to a single point in space, the turn communicates a reconfiguration of the material, a recombination of genes, as well as the multiplicity of a single traveller travelling at one and the same station.

If it occurs in space, but without effecting a change in spatial orientation but of a flash in the line of motion, the turn travels with the traveller, the turn then communicates

a rearrangement of the elements of a series. The turn points to recursivity in the material of that which is not reversible in time, divides movement, but also determines the stations on the dancer's journey. If it does affect spatial orientations, alternate between speed and stillness, when travelling the turn communicates spatial mutations and the multiplicity of space. However, movement will tell us nothing about the character and contents of the reconfigurations, rearrangements, and mutations. It will invariably communicate only itself and thereby communicate the turn in them. A turn is communication without interpretation.

This forms the difference between the turn in dance and the twist in narration. Dance has no telegenetic quality, there is no situational difference following a turn, although, as I already mentioned above, after a turn nothing should remain the same. A turn produces neither a reconfiguration, nor a rearrangement, nor a mutation. A turn only reveals what is reconfigured in the material, rearranged, or mutated. The turn is a flash that lasts long enough to let us understand that something has already eluded our gaze, as well as that the clarity of that gaze is a pretext for a new beginning of an event that brings us to a state of readiness. Perhaps the metaphorical link between dance and thought lies precisely in that agility of the gaze.

looking for a show that by a measure  
(10 bpm or even heavier)  
withdraws unto it-self unto itself  
withdraws and resides impermanently

(from the belly of the stage sighs a noise)

between concern for the expectator  
and a fall to slumber because nowhere  
(not even off the beaten track of gaze)  
does it push or tighten the horizon

it does not drag one to the promised land

of understanding but instead it turns  
again into a problem so as not  
to rush to a turnout to a purpose

(then the light then left then right black and forth)

but lives and dwells in the remaining time  
in the leftover stanza of problems  
(repeatedly begins with an exit  
with which someone sometime had begun  
an interval a chapter a rhythm  
a turn a gesture or leastwise a cut)  
and puts the time next to another time

and already whilst grinding time opens  
questions of time in gazing needed to  
see what is in seeing turn to the gaze  
from darkness into the gaze in darkness

(from above sideways through the camera)

looking for a show that rhythmically  
performs always new and new caesurae  
before the comma of the always new  
but (or) unposed or unsettled problem

(therefore) the blistering vortex of time

and if the measure is the heavy beat  
the membranes will loosen will crack will leak  
through semblances of some other genre  
stable and public (I turn the lights on)

Translated by Žarko Cvejić

- 1 Blanchot, Maurice, and Ann Smock. *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010, p. 264.
- 2 Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*, p. 265.
- 3 Cf. States 1985, 109.
- 4 Cf. Artaud 1971, 124.
- 5 Cf. Artaud 1970, 1379.
- 6 Cf. States 1985, 149. Italics by GSP
- 7 Cf. Artaud 1970, 1378.
- 8 Cf. Stanislavski, 261.
- 9 Cf. Arvanitakis, 24.
- 10 Cf. Barba 2000, 87.
- 11 Quoted in Garner, 58.
- 12 Cf. Witkiewicz, 186.
- 13 Cf. Šklovski, 109.
- 14 Cf. Barthes 1972, 27.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Cf. Winnicott 1989.
- 17 Cf. Barthes 1972, 28.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 19 Cf. Nietzsche, 32.
- 20 Cf. 33.
- 21 Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010, p. 258.
- 22 *Ibid.*
- 23 *Ibid.*, 254.
- 24 Cf. Maaik Bleeker: "Thinking No-One's Thought", in Hansen Pil, and Darcey Callison. *Dance Dramaturgy Modes of Agency, Awareness and Engagement*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- 25 Blanchot, Maurice. *The Space of Literature*, p. 265.
- 26 For the concept of Enframing see Heidegger, Martin, and William Lovitt. *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*. 2013.





# TO BE SIMILAR

to Bojana Cvejić





## DEAR BOJANA

Have you read *Mimesis & Alterity* by Michael Taussig? If not, I think you might like it. The book presents an intriguing web of concepts, suggestions, and patterns of thoughts regarding the logic of the double and an analysis of the process we set in motion when we make an image of something. This analysis will change the way you look at the phenomenon of mimesis.

The chapter “Spacing Out” is particularly appealing. It is some sort of cross reading of Walter Benjamin’s notion of similarity and sentience with Roger Caillois’s ideas of psychaesthesia and sympathetic magic. For me this opens a new perspective on the relation between fiction, perception, and reality. It inverts the position of aesthetics by using imagery and storytelling as tools for achieving sensory connection to the world rather than for making representational images of it. Taussig’s reformation of Benjaminian mimesis as an innate desire to “slip into Otherness” through resemblance strikes me in its simplicity as both surprising and beautiful. And then there is this one sentence by Caillois that has nested in the very centre of my imagination: “*He is similar, not similar to something, but just similar...*”<sup>1</sup>

It is amazing and completely mind blowing, and it has completely changed my concept of how to understand the logic of both imagery and performing. This trope has a double quality of being simultaneously a promise and a threat; offering a possible passage out of my isolation from the world, and at the same time opening the gateway to the horror of the dissolution of my self into sentience—my very being dissolving in the sensory encounter with its surroundings. This figure of thought, for me, describes a continuous double bind of subjectivation, an eternal balancing act between the joy of partaking in the world and the fear of getting lost in the abyssal vertigo of its signs and similarities, meanings, shapes, and figures. Nothing to do about that—any attempt to isolate the promise from the threat leads to either repressive appropriation or schizophrenia, oppressive identity politics or chaos.

And have you seen Chris Marker's film *Sans Soleil*? I like it very much. Partly because the imagery it works with is so concrete and yet so enigmatic, but also because the script finds a sort of open ended intimacy; a minutious and simultaneously somewhat distracted travelogue written as letters; a speculation on the art of connecting with the world through the lens related by the anonymous addressee. In the very opening of the film there is the line: *"He wrote: I've been around the world several times, and now only banality still interests me."*

For me this suggests a possible approach to the mimetic dilemma, both on a personal and an aesthetic level; to stay open for the potential relations and similarities to and between "whatever." Art and life standing in what we would call in matters of the heart an open relationship with the world, offering my self and its imagery machine to the gravity of contingent similitudes, accepting that in the oscillation between two attracting figures it might just as easily be my identity that gets submerged in the other as the other way around.

Marker's film is the camera eye's specular stream of consciousness; a suspended vibration between subjectivity and disinterest, attention spelled as a-tension, a durational flow of seemingly randomised connections between shapes, colours, objects, rhythms, and thoughts. An aesthetic destabilization of the world, a universe filled to the brim by signs without signifiers: the shape of the eye of a woman in Guinea-Bissau meeting the gaze of the camera links to the shape of the eye of a cat in a Japanese shrine—a bond of connectivity bridging continents, as well as a narrative of gaze and subjectivity, with a ritual trope of transcendent relations between human and animal; the world as fiction & reality, memory & anti-memory; an aesthetic, speculative take on the world as a system with no obvious hierarchy of composition, in which every figure or identity whatsoever has the potential to temporarily pull its surrounding universe into the force field of contingent similarity.

As I am writing this, I realise that this has been my idea of the performer for quite some time. Through the 90s and early 00s, my take on the theatre stage was guided by a general aversion towards theatre's paradigmatic dependency on identification, but from my current perspective I would say it was a kind of generic antipathy. My work was still very busy with interpretation and expression, focusing on the problem of deciding on the aesthetic frame I wanted in order to communicate this or that content. Today I think of it less as a matter of aesthetic preference than as a choice between representation and representativity. These two logics could also be described as two different economies: the economy of "showing," ruled by the law of exhibition where everything has to be made visible—the "show(-ing)" must go on—and the economy of "production," where the performative aim is to bring something into being, and the performer is understood as an interface between absence and presence.

These two paradigms have two different *modi operandi*: on the one hand, the performer re-presenting an already produced experience or subjectivity to the spectator and, on the other hand, the task of being a representative of the audience. Or again, on the one hand an act of expressing an image of the world—with which the spectator can identify or not—and on the other hand the act of sensing/reading the world—in which the audience takes part. A messenger rather than author, medium more than subject; using aesthetics as sensory organ and not mimicking this or that situation, relation, or identity for the spectator to identify with, but rather offering her or his figure—"Gestalt" maybe—as a surface for contingent and open ended mimesis and imagery; accepting the function of interface rather than content.

In the chapter "Year Zero: Faciality" from *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari sketch out a narrative of the face and its function in the apparatus of subjectivity and signification that reminds of the ambiguous attraction of mimesis, between potential and danger, passage and reappropriation. I don't know if you've read it or not; either way, I'll quote some passages to spare you the effort of looking it up.

*Signifiante is never without a white wall upon which it inscribes its signs and redundancies. Subjectification is never without a black hole in which it lodges its consciousness, passion, and redundancies. Since all semiotics are mixed and strata come at least in twos, it should come as no surprise that a very special mechanism is situated at their intersection. Oddly enough, it is a face: the white wall/black hole system.*

*(...)*

*Faces are not basically individual; they define zones of frequency or probability... The face itself is redundancy. It is itself in redundancy with the redundancies of significance or frequency, and those of resonance or subjectivity. The face constructs the wall that the signifier needs in order to bounce off of; it constitutes the wall of the signifier, the frame or screen. The face digs the hole that subjectification needs in order to break through; it constitutes the black hole of subjectivity as consciousness or passion, the camera, the third eye.*

*(...)*

*The signifier does not construct the wall that it needs all by itself... Concrete faces cannot be assumed to come ready-made. They are engendered by an abstract machine of facility... Do not expect the abstract machine to resemble what it produces.<sup>2</sup>*

Thinking from the perspective of the performer as human figure on stage, this take on subjectivation and signification as codependency suggests an intriguing and useful distinction between face and identity: the human face as *eidōs*,<sup>3</sup> the wall being a necessary condition for the holes to appear; the face as *inter-face*, a surface preceding identity but enabling the passage, the threshold simultaneously separating and connecting the singular figure from and with the world. The “abstract machine” is always a double bind and, just like the twin figure of *mimesis*, it opens the passage to alterity and closes it again in the reappropriation of identity.

The chapter also describes some examples of contingent aesthetic relations and translational inter-spaces resembling those of *Sans Soleil*.

*In Kafka's novella "Blumfeld," the bachelor returns home in the evening to find two little ping-pong balls jumping around by themselves on the "wall" constituted by the floor. They bounce everywhere and even try to hit him in the face... Blumfeld finally manages to lock them up in the black hole of a wardrobe (...)*

*In a wonderful ballet by Debussy and Nijinsky, a little tennis ball comes bouncing onto the stage at dusk, and at the end another ball appears in a similar fashion. This time, between the two balls, two girls and a boy who watches them develop passionate dance and facial traits in vague luminosities (curiosity, spite, irony, ecstasy...). There is nothing to explain, nothing to interpret.*

*The figure of the wall with its holes here appears as a playful game of re-appearing shapes and geometries; the subjectivating completion of the "Face" is fragmentic and continuously re-positioned, appearing only in the split second where the balls hit the floor or the ground, interacting with the affect system of the witnessing spectators, but with no consistency or agency.<sup>4</sup>*

Some paragraphs later, the universe we've entered through the faciality machine changes character: it's no longer a landscape for innocent games, but a territory of anxiety triggered by destabilised categories and dissolved frameworks for the self. In Deleuze and Guattari's reading of the medieval romance *Parzival*, the noble knight—who "spends his time forgetting his name, what he is doing, what people say to him" and who "doesn't know where he is going or to whom he is speaking"—after drifting aimlessly around Europe in the quest of a question he has forgotten, finds himself in an open field covered



by snow. In the sky, a falcon has attacked a goose, and the blood of the bird has fallen down to the ground. Face to face with the image of the three drops of blood in the white of the snow, Parzival is stunned and loses himself, loses his-self, to the resemblance of his loved one in a logic very similar to what Caillois describes as “being tempted by space:” *“I know where I am, but I do not feel as though I’m at the spot where I find myself....”*

*When Perceval saw the snow and the blood which appeared around, he leaned upon his lance and looked at that image, for the blood and the snow together seemed to him like the fresh color which was on the face of his friend and he thinks until he forgets himself; for the vermilion seated on white was on her face just the same as these three drops of blood on the white snow... We have seen a knight who is dozing on his charger. Everything is there: the redundancy specific to the face and the landscape, the snowy white wall of the landscape-face, the black hole of the three drops distributed on the wall; and, simultaneously, the silvery line of the landscape-face spinning toward the black hole of the knight deep in catatonia... Open Chretien de Troyes to any page and you will find a catatonic knight seated on his steed, leaning on his lance, waiting, seeing the face of his loved one in the landscape...<sup>5</sup>*

“We are, in looking at our beloved, too, outside of ourselves,” as Taussig quotes Walter Benjamin in *Mimesis & Alterity*;<sup>6</sup> sentence as a way to connect to the world aesthetically through our senses. The potential of contingent similarity as a promise of escaping solitary isolation, always co-existing with the threat of losing my self, of dissolving into whatever figures or space that surrounds me.

Parzival keeps forgetting his name, his essence, he “*doesn’t know where he is going or to whom he is speaking.*” This description suggests an interpretation of the mimetic faculty as a double bind between subject and otherness that is potentially dangerous

since, like the Freudian idea of the uncanny, it is a concept dealing with the anxiety of the improper. Nothing is more fundamental to western thought than the idea of the authenticity and autonomy of the subject. Whether we discuss politics or aesthetics, we are firmly rooted in a philosophical tradition based on the essence of a self-identical subject. We normally think that the desire to assimilate the other into our own subjects is rooted in the need to have control over that which is alien to this self-identical subject. But when we encounter alterity in our everyday life, the problem of otherness is usually not that its subject is too different, too alien, or too difficult to understand. Unless God would suddenly answer our prayers loud and clear or we run into Cthulu on our way to the supermarket, the problem with the other probably works the other way around: the other is scary because of its proximity.

I'm losing myself here (hehe). This text was supposed to be about mimesis in relation to aesthetic practices. But the way I see it, it's impossible to think about mimesis without relating it to our culture's obsession with identity, and the central position we give to identity and identification as the main tools for the production of political as well as aesthetic agency.

There might be a connection between this idea and the writings of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe. I didn't have it in mind when I started writing, but in one sense this text could be viewed as an approach to some of his thoughts in the anthology *Typography*. I am so happy you made me aware of his work. I haven't finished my reading of *Typography*, but so far I am very intrigued. In one way the texts feel a bit like a cross reading of Derrida and *Mimesis & Alterity*. The last essay of the book is entitled "Transcendence Ends in Politics," and its last sentence is a call for the acknowledgment of the faculty of mimetology: "*Why would the problem of identification not be, in general, the essential problem of the political?*"<sup>7</sup>

The destabilization of essence and truth produced by mimesis confronts us with an anxiety that Derrida, in the preface of *Typography*, attributes to "*an instability belonging homoiosis, which resembles what it nevertheless displaces. Hence the ver-*



*tigo, the unease, the Unheimlichkeit.*"<sup>8</sup> In other words, the fact that two "things" are similar also points to the fact that they are not the same. If we think with and against Julia Kristeva's notion of abjection, I think it might be important to distinguish the category of "horror"—the reaction provoked by an encounter with true monsters, "things" that are beyond what is comprehensible from a human horizon—and the categories of "anxiety" and "fear," which I think are much more what is at stake when we talk about racism, homophobia, gender issues, and other processes which excise what can't fit into the frame of a given identity. As in all abjection, this crisis is not the problem of the other, but a crisis of my identity's non-identity with itself. Every encounter with something outside of myself, with some-"thing" that is not part of me but part of the world, faces me with the non-identity of my own being.

In *The Echo of the Subject*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe talks about this in terms of the inevitable delay of the "subject" in relation to "itself," in terms of the subject's incapacity to be identical, and to identify, either with itself or with the other. Departing from Lacan's theory of the imaginary and the mirror stage, he suggests that the subject is split in two in the very moment it is conceived.

*The imaginary destroys at least as much as it helps to construct. More precisely, it continually alters what it constructs. This explains, perhaps, why the subject in the mirror is first of all a subject in "desistance"... The dialectic of recognition itself does not function so well, not only because it is irremediably separated from itself (as "subject"), but simply because it comes to itself only in losing itself.*

*The figure is never one. Not only is it the Other, but there is no unity or stability of the figural; the image has no fixity or proper being. There is no "proper image" with which to identify totally, no essence of the imaginary.*<sup>9</sup>

My experience of existence can be transformed into an identity only through the imaginary image of my being as a cohesive identity;



thus the identity is split in two from the beginning, since the passage from ego to self always comes about in a schizo-delay of sorts.

In the current political climate, I find this oscillating logic of opening and closure—mimesis operating in a force field between alterity and its assimilation into identification—to be a profoundly inspiring and useful landscape of thought. And from the perspective of the performing arts and storytelling, it offers a very precise set of objectives and quality criteria. It also makes for a surprisingly concrete toolbox; exchanging the paradigm of identity production with an apparatus of open-ended transcendence based on sympathetic attraction between figures that accept the fate of losing their identity into each other; aesthetics being used not to describe this or that idea about the world, but to be applied to reality to make it disconnect from itself, to render it open for us to enter into relation with it.

Talking about delay and losing oneself in sentience—have you been working anything with Hölderlin's concept of *the caesura*? And have you seen Joan Jonas' video work *Songdelay*? Together with Lacoue-Labarthe these frame a thematic field that I would find very interesting to discuss further.

yours

Anders Paulin

- 1 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 33 (Routledge, 1993)
- 2 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 167-168 (University of Minnesota Press, 1987)
- 3 *Eidos* is the greek word for form, idea and appearance—"that what is seen." In *The Coming Community*, the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben writes: "The notion of the 'outside' is expressed in many European languages by a word that means 'at the door' (*The Coming Community*, p. 68, also see *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, p. 61).

The threshold in this perspective no longer is a barrier for content, but rather the membrane through which content can be produced and communicated. Without the wall, no door is possible, and without my outer shape—my face—there is no interface where connection can occur. By accepting that the face in itself is no identity—just a screen, divider and connector—the threshold becomes the most central tool in an apparatus of continuous exchange of subjectivity as well as meaning.

- 4 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 169 (University of Minnesota Press, 1987)
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 173
- 6 Walter Benjamin, quoted by Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, p. 38 (Routledge, 1993)
- 7 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 300 (Harvard University Press, 1989)
- 8 Jacques Derrida, introduction to *Typography*, p. 27 (Harvard University Press, 1989)
- 9 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 175 (Harvard University Press, 1989)





# TOWARDS A POETICS OF IMAGINATION

Bojana Cvejić





*To imagine is to absent oneself; it is a leap toward a new life*

Gaston Bachelard

I'll begin by way of a harsh preamble, a critical diagnosis. What has happened to artist's imaginations in Europe today? Is the authority of philosophy and critical theory in matters of art crushing artist's conceptual or poetic imagination, despite their developed linguistic sensibilities and practices of self reflection? My provocative claim is that instrumental reason has privileged the efficacy of images above all else, that the words and procedures favored by art institutions respond to a growing expectation that they manage the audience's experience. Instrumentality is manifest in the kind of writing artists practice daily, a genre of persuasive expression: presenting one's own work as accessible and credible, making it transparent and accountable, giving an advance preview, giving evidence of what will become a performance, a video, an installation. The manner of speaking in applications or post-hoc reports for subsidies bleeds into program notes in which artist's intentions dovetail with the expectations of the audience. The audience is supposed to arrive knowing what it is going to see. It is in the economy of phrasing and in the performative promise of the experience, described in just a few lines, that the idiom of presenting art for a public is standardized. Paradoxically, this undermines the initial function of such presentations, which is that of choosing the words that individuate a specific work of art. The teasers I have in mind rarely convey anything distinctive about the work in question. However, they confirm a widespread conviction that power is about making things easy, and that communication should reduce complexity and facilitate personal identification.

If this is the order of the day, how are we—artists, critics, and art theorists—supposed to counteract the reduction of language by instrumental reason? This observation stands, by

way of synecdoche, for a grimmer verdict. Namely, artists have little time left over, after performing the duties of being an artist, to engage in thinking about their art. All time is invested in practice, on the activities that administrate or reproduce a work, present or circulate or maintain it, but not on those that produce it. Poetics as the art of making, forming, and composing is out of purview. Working on poetics requires time, in the sense of duration and empty time, dead time, boredom, digression, distraction. Poetics entails the ability to imagine a future and to entertain the curious question: “What is the art I would like to see?” Such concern is counter intuitive to an imagination confined to the project you are intending next. The pressure that social and political crises exert on artists who expect themselves, or are expected, to provide models or solutions leaves even less space to imagine and project the art that one dreams of seeing into a future without knowing how to make it, without knowing whether it would be feasible at all. The problem is temporal: imagination is endowed in future. “No future” is the bitter message of neoliberal reforms, and presentism is its social mood, an experience of time in which only the present is “real.”

The wager, in this line of thought, is to think out of deficiency, from the lack that structures the present horizon of making art. Could criticism prefigure or anticipate an early stage of something yet to emerge? Moving beyond the negative diagnosis of the current conjuncture, I would like to unravel elements of performance poetics in which imagination gains ground. This will amount to elaborating a few theses about imagination as it operates in the dramaturgy of performances from creation to reception. Far from a fully fledged concept rooted in one school of thought, I will work out the features that associate diverse theoretical outlooks with an analysis of performances. Read them as propositions toward a notion of imagination.

§ *Imagination is the ability to think of something not presently perceived.* In the genealogy of the philosophical concept,

imagination was dependent on perception. To imagine meant to recall, or rearrange sense data, as in re-seeing or re-picturing something in the mind that was previously perceived. For empiricists and rationalists alike, it was analogous to, if not just an inferior kind of perceiving, imagining as “decaying sense” (Hobbes), or a “peculiar effort of mind” (Descartes) in which one tries to construct an image with the “mind’s eye,” based on perception or understanding.<sup>1</sup> Although with Aristotle it was already considered different from either perceiving (*aisthesis*) or discursive thinking (*noesis*), imagination for the Pre-Moderns retained a confusing intermediate position between sensibility and understanding,<sup>2</sup> which was resolved for our modern purposes—as is often the case—in Kant.

Kant adjudicates that imagination can be thought of in two ways: empirical or productive. Empirical imagination gives rise to memory and anticipation by which we recollect or predict the presence of things absent. Productive or poetic imagination produces original representations, that is to say, ideas that have no experiential content nor are they derived from experience. Moreover, ideas produced by imagination provide conditions of experience. They aren’t willful or accidental, such as products of fancy, but ordered. What makes this kind of imagination productive or original is that it doesn’t apply laws of the understanding (as in recognition, whereby intuitions are synthesized into concepts). Productive or poetic imagination simultaneously invents and applies laws in reflective judgment.<sup>3</sup>

Let us rephrase our initial proposition: imagination is thinking of something that is not what you are seeing. It is not just that you are thinking of something absent or unperceived. There *is* something present, there is something you are perceiving, and you are nonetheless able to relate to this something in such a way that it does not saturate you, does not prevent you from thinking something else as well or perhaps instead. As we are talking about performance, the elusive-

ness of presence, and the condition of the here and now, the exclusivity and preciousness of the instant condemned to passing and fading in memory is bracketed. A way to relieve theatre from the self reproach of representation comes as a shift in theatre's quest from the experience of the impossible "real" to the possible "imagined," independent of the presently experienced.

In *No Title* (2015), the middle piece of the trilogy (together with *Black* and *We to Be*) by Mette Edvardsen, the performer is alone on an empty stage. Edvardsen herself is enunciating a series of speech acts. Their structure seems invariant: while the subject changes, the predicate remains the same. Something is gone:

the beginning—is gone  
 the space is empty—and gone  
 the prompter has turned off his reading lamp—and gone  
 a room, not even a room  
 walls, other walls  
 a door, opening and closing—gone  
 the ceiling—gone  
 lamps and speakers, hanging—  
 shadows moving in silence—gone

From naming things that the situation of a theatre performance is made of, and the audience can be made aware of, the utterances begin to ramify toward outer circles. They encompass abstract notions ("forms and planes," "surfaces and shapes," "things and beings—twice as invisible"), words from previous statements ("the distinction between thinking and doing is gone," "distinction is gone," "between is gone"), but also, taken by surprise, a theatre play direction elaborating a scene, which also "is gone." It is hard to determine the law by which subjects are selected. While at times a taxonomy of world problems could be discerned ("ignorance," "acceleration," "sea level," "overpopulation," "poverty, precarity, inequality," etc.), a

few notable references pop out in their blunt contingency (“Khrushchev’s shoe,” “Schrödinger’s cat,” “*Now is the winter of our discontent...*”). The rhythm is one of invoking things only in order to erase them into the past. It flows like a film tape burning by words at their pace of utterance: steady and relentless. At the outset, it is interrupted by a sort of refrain that points to the presence of the figure on the stage, the speaking performer, who says:

something’s gone  
 me—not gone  
 me—not sleeping, not done, not gone  
 and another time:  
 dog—gone  
 me—not dog  
 me—not dead, not bone, not not  
 and lastly:  
 all—gone  
 me—not all  
 me—not god, not all, but gone

Twice has the performer crossed herself out: first, by closing her eyes (and keeping them closed for the length of all utterances) and second, by placing artificial eyeballs in her eyes (which still keep her blind, although they give her the theatrical guise of looking like a doll with wide open, unblinking eyes). Iterating negation becomes a wordplay of obstinacy and exhaustive variation, when the predicate “is gone” is replaced by the monosyllabic “not:”

not alone  
 not not alone  
 not alone alone  
 not doing doing  
 not not doing doing  
 not not doing doing doing  
 not not doing not doing doing  
 doing not not doing doing doing

doing doing not not doing doing doing doing  
 doing not not doing doing not doing doing doing  
 not not not doing doing not not doing doing  
 not not not not doing not doing doing  
 not not not not doing not not doing doing doing  
 (...)

It is important to note that the performer tries to maintain the logic of multiple negations in the stress and tone of her speech, so the seemingly visual organization of the poem sounds reasonable and plausible for our ears. Logical sense is prominent in a series of disjunctions that assemble contrasting terms and near opposite differences:

not up—not down  
 not standing—not sitting  
 not a dog—not a table  
 not coming—not leaving  
 not seeing—not looking  
 not same—not different  
 not no—not yes  
 not warm—not cold  
 not finding—not searching  
 (...)

The long series of opposites produces equivocity through annihilation: if not this, and not not this, then, inversely, both this and not this are possible. Such a constellation is against the law of excluded middle (everything must either be or not be). When the law of excluded middle applies—"if not one, then the other"—it is impossible to negate both. If both are negated, one is forced into "the middle" that is indeterminate in logic.

Time stands still. There is no reason for hurry as there is no progression. Admittedly, as the performance persists to devour the words of a world, or the world of the words that it mounts, imagination resembles a journey that must come to

an end. Exhausting the possibility of language to count and discount items has a liberating effect, as if everything must go and it is no cheap sale:

everything that is not written down is gone  
 everything that is written down is gone  
 time is gone  
 the edges are gone  
 there is only inside, the outside is gone  
 illusion is gone  
 there is only outside, the outside is gone  
 darkness—gone

§ *Imagination imposes language as a pattern onto the world.* *No Title* is made of imagination without images. Instead of pictures evoking memories of the order of *vécu* (lived experience), which are said to be all different in every spectator, the spectator is presented with the generic language of dogs, tables, something and nothing, simple clauses. She is not asked to fill up a colouring book with her own colours. So why should there be a relationship between genericness and imagination? It certainly is not because the “generic” is easier to share than the singular. The opposite is the case anyway according to common wisdom, which holds that people are more able to create a mental image if presented with a vivid and lush account. But, as we said, *No Title* does not give orders to its audience to form images. There is something powerful about the indifference of the generic, and the economy of bare contours rather than colourful and rich images. Resisting mystery, plenitude or intrigue, and offering substitution and exchangeability of thin images and disjunctions, it is the language that extends its power of movement aside from experience. In *L’Air et les songes: Essai sur l’imagination du mouvement* (1943), Bachelard notes:

How unjust is the criticism that sees nothing in language but an ossification of internal experience!  
 Just the contrary: language is always somewhat ahead of our thoughts, somewhat more seething than our

love. It is the beautiful function of human rashness, the dynamic boast of the will; it is what exaggerates power.<sup>4</sup>

§ *Imagination can be sensory if it subtracts physical embodiment and supplants it with the verbal imagining of sensing bodies.* In a number of works issued from contemporary dance, the body doesn't appear on stage. Its subtraction is superseded with the words that invoke it. A sophisticated example is to be found in Anne Juren's *Somatic Fictions* (2016). The audience members are admitted in a room in which they can choose to lie down on the floor, each person on a yoga mat. They can also stay sitting, but the majority of people—in the performance I attended in Oslo in June 2017—lay down with their eyes closed, some eventually falling asleep. For the whole duration, the performer, Juren herself, speaks in a quiet yet suggestive voice.<sup>5</sup> In a narrative present tense, she addresses action to “your” (audience member's) body. The performance begins with these words:

A hand gets in contact with your skin  
It tries to touch it  
Trying to grasp it  
Something to hold on to.  
it brushes something, maybe a part of your foot  
It slides  
It disappears  
A hand extends, its fingers recognize the round, back  
part of your foot, the tendon of Achillea [sic]  
The fingers grasp it, not to lose contact  
The palm of a hand sets down on the front surface of  
your foot  
the hand is on your skin  
It discovers that your skin can be lifted layer by layer  
It pulls your skin  
It lifts the skin of your lower leg  
The skin peels off, it coils above your knee,  
The hand pulls again lifting the skin of your thighs  
it peels off up to your pelvis



the hand lifts tactfully the skin of your belly  
The skin slides down the length of your lower belly

the hand delicately slides under the transparent skin  
under your skin, the hand traces the long shape of your  
abdomen,

then it slides deeper. It feels the inner warmth of your  
body, underneath your skin

its palm can feel the round belly muscles

It slides easily under them

it finds a place to rest on your liver, feeling its visceral  
texture, massaging it a bit so as to understand its structure,  
its texture

then another hand, a children's hand, plunges inside  
the long and soft structure of your small intestinal tubes

It holds them tight in a grip, pressing them

(...)

From the beginning, which seems plausible in comparison to a physiological image, the narration becomes more and more quirky. After a hand, it is the beetle and then the performer's "I," her whole body entering "your" body and then the cavities of the body become rooms and houses out of which people loom. The narrator's body explores "your" body, combining the elasticity of a superdancer with the accuracy of a quasi-scientist. Her body eventually gets entangled with your body, extending or losing its own body parts.

While it pays studious homage to so many details that make up a sensation, the action told is a fiction, drawing itself semantically close to the root verb *fingo*, meaning, I shape or fashion. The words weave a seamless texture, touching the body as if they would like to envelop it, not just penetrate it but also infiltrate its flesh on a molecular scale. The words skilfully describe the feel of the bodily architecture, the texture of tissues, the body heat—the places in the body and its sensations that are commonly unknown to us. Lapsing into a hypnotizing repetition ("A tongue... licks your knee... it

licks your thighs... your vulva... your belly...”) asks surrender to one’s own imagination. Quite contrary to *No Title*, here we are stringing image after image. But once again, it is important to note that these are far from familiar images. Rather, imagination operates here as a faculty of *deforming images*. An image that is readily present for us to recall must give rise to an absent image or, as Bachelard remarks, “if an occasional image does not give rise to a swarm of aberrant images, to an explosion of images, there is no imagination.” The explosion of transformative images is the imaginary that belies imagination. The “imaginary radiance” of an image is, then, the measure of its value for Bachelard.<sup>6</sup>

§ *Imagination is like feigning, pretending to know. Feigning takes place in the gap between ignorance and action.* Recently, dancers have shown considerable interest in the so called somatic reality of the body. A myriad of body practices have surfaced in Europe, each claiming to have discovered a truer and more insightful access into viscera. Most of the times, this knowledge is framed as personal, contingent upon the idiosyncratic techniques of the practitioners. On a more rational view, some dance practitioners admit that it is a matter of imagination. We would regard this kind of imagination as feigning. In pre-Kantian philosophy, imagination is opposed to reason. For Descartes, imagination is worse than useless. In so far as it is an affection of the body, imagination is more of a hindrance than a help in metaphysical speculations. For Spinoza, imagination is an inadequate kind of knowledge, also called feigning, or pretending to know. In a somewhat unfaithful reading of Spinoza, Christopher Norris suggests that fictions which are products of imagination ought to be considered as expressions of a positive mental capacity: the capacity to feign.<sup>7</sup> We feign not that which we know to be true or that which we know to be untrue, but that of which we are ignorant. Feigning is inversely proportional to understanding, but as long as we treat it as an aid to, rather than a substitute for, understanding, it is a point of access to truth.

When Juren tells us that she “sense(s) the round shape of (y)our eyes, their weight, how they rest in their synovial fluid” and that she “test(s) the elasticity of the optic nerve by pulling on one of (y)our eyeballs without letting go,” she pretends to know how this could be done and how it might feel. Why do we also agree to feign along with her? Because we are ready to imagine things that we know are not the case, not actual, or not in the realm of knowable. In *L'eau et les rêves* (1942), Gaston Bachelard writes that “imagination is not the faculty of forming images of reality, it is the faculty of forming images which go beyond reality, which turn reality into song. It is a superhuman quality.”<sup>8</sup> Out of curiosity, we are ready to feign sensations that take us beyond knowledge. And this might entail an illegitimate use of reason that pokes its nose into a furtive reality. André Gide writes in his autobiography, *Si le grain ne meurt* (1926), of a vague, ill defined belief that “something else exists alongside the acknowledged aboveboard reality of everyday life.” This “desire to give life more thickness,” Gide suggests, elicits “a sort of propensity to imagine a clandestine side to things.”<sup>9</sup>

§ *Imagination is enviroining*. To visualise what remains unseen is to come closer to conception and conceivability. In thinking that I am having a sensation of something that I don't presently perceive, I include my seeing in what I visualize. It is not about seeing myself in the image or becoming part of it, but about embedding my own gaze in the image, listening within the image, as I see and hear it. This happens because of a certain thickness of environment that threatens to grow into a whole, and suggests a world that arises beyond the positivity of what is present. The image doesn't need to be dense, as is the case with *Somatic Fictions*, in order to envelop and set up a world around its audience. In Edvardsen's performances, the image is rather thin, and occasionally bursts out into more intricate accounts that nonetheless retain the same structure of a proposition, always one among many possibilities. In *oslo* (2017), the main proposition “A man walks into a room” runs through (what seems like) a thousand situations. At first

these are oscillations among parallel terms, warming us up for uncertainty as if the sense itself stutters:

A man walks into a room and the room is empty.  
 A man walks into a room and it's the beginning of a story.  
 A man walks into a room.  
 A man walks into a room with no furniture.  
 A man walks into a room full of people.  
 A woman walks into a room.  
 A woman or a man walks into a room.  
 A man is in a room.  
 A room has a door.  
 A man or a dog walks into a room.  
 A man follows a dog into a room.  
 A man walks a dog in a room.  
 A man walks around in a room.  
 (...)

Later on, as we expect yet another iteration on the proposition "A man walks into a room," other unexpected images with reflected comments are smuggled in, like glitches straying from the main course:

A man walks into a room and says one thing and does another.  
 Another woman walks into a room.  
 A man walks into a room offering something completely different and persuading us that we are better off that way.  
 A man walks into a room and does something new.  
 An old dog walks into a room.  
 A lazy dog walks into a room and a quick brown fox jumps over it.  
 A man walks in a straight line into a room.  
 A man walks into a room carrying a box.  
 A man walks into a room with a hat, a cat, a suitcase, flowers, with a girl, with a gun, on a bike, on a camel, on a stage.  
 A man's words are not one with the world they describe.  
 (...)

Imagination opens the realm of possibility as simply as it is to say that to imagine something is to think of it as possibly, and not necessarily, being so.

The deceitful sense that anything can be imagined after so many variant propositions is the effect of creating a world, a universe of propositions. To compare it with writing poetry would not be odd, as at a certain moment the spoken words leap onto a LED beam emitted from a written text. The performer's voice stops, but the listening is interiorised through the voice of each spectator who reads it to herself. "A universe of sentences arranges itself in an organization of images that often follow different laws, but that always observe the great laws of the imaginary" (Bachelard).<sup>10</sup> But this won't be enough, to have the propositions pound inside me. The LED beam doubles, and the text begins to play with contrary sense and a literal gesture of enjambment. Ultimately, a choir of singers, sitting among other audience members, takes over the poem and chants it:

A man walks and walks and walks.  
 A man walks out of a room and something happens.  
 A man walks out of a room and nothing happens to  
 the man, or very little.  
 A man walks down the stairs and out of the building.  
 A man walks up the street, around the corner and  
 into people.  
 A man walks on a street.  
 A man looks up to the window of his room.  
 A man looks at other windows of other rooms.  
 A man looks at people on the street.  
 A man knows his way.  
 A man walks away into the city (an endless city).  
 A man walks down a street and the birds are singing  
 (endlessly).  
 A man thinks he cannot be walking the right way.  
 (...)

Edvardsen's poem is now clothed in a song.<sup>11</sup> Combining speaking, singing, and reading yields a contrapuntal finale—a richness that entails the exercise of various modes of reception in parallel. We are reading, listening to a melody, and discerning the sung and the spoken text. The performance has environed us, enveloped us with its words holding our ears and eyes in abundance.

§ *Imagination begins with listening...* All three performances I have discussed here demand that their audience listen. Listening, in its emphatic sense, suggests obedience (the one who listens obeys). However, I experience the opposite in the context of these works: freedom from participation, from speaking or doing any other kind of action, in order to verify my activity as spectator. The phenomenology of this freedom is in my ear that acts like a funnel, collects and swallows every word because this is almost all there is. While the sense of vision is connoted with clarity, with lucidity, with the total grasp and control of space, the activity of listening entails temporalisation and an attitude of reception. To be able to imagine, one must initially trust the words that draw them into a world, and accept that this world might turn out obscure or mute or colourless, and most of all indifferent to my thoughts about it. This mode of reception is similar to the imaginary engendered by reading or listening to someone reading you a book or a poem. The locus of listening is the interspace of the body and text; listening contracts neither at the impression of the voice nor at the expression of the words.<sup>12</sup> There is an unconscious texture that associates the body as site and the words spoken and read, which comes through the voice and the rhythm of written or spoken sentences.

While trying to distinguish elements of a poetic imagination in performance poetics, I have reflected them as a dramaturg, someone standing midway between the artist and the recipient of the work. Now, some of my initial concerns return... If artists like Mette Edvardsen or Anne Juren seek to unravel

an imaginary, does this imaginary find a sympathetic ear? Far from suggesting that there is no excited reception evolving around these performances, I am wondering about how imagination transforms the theatrical apparatus of spectatorship. If a performance refuses to play the game of hide and show,<sup>13</sup> of persuasion of presence and the experience of the real, because it prefers to present itself as a poem in words that may or may not carve out an interspace for the spectators' own capacity to imagine, then the spectators are no longer called in as witnesses to a stage event. They are there, like the performers, entering a space in which imagination is alone, words and images take flight and are lost.

To leave the audience alone, trusting it is capable of participating in an imaginary, seems so difficult, at odds with the current curatorial care. To leave the artists alone, trusting that their art that they are developing is worthy of our attention, without first being required to prove its worth. Let's find the means, give them the means, the audience and the artists, to be left alone to find the thoughts, images, and sensations we didn't have before.

- 1 René Descartes discusses imagination in the Sixth Meditation: "When I imagine a triangle, for example, I do not merely understand that it is a figure bounded by three lines, but at the same time I also see the three lines with my mind's eye as if they were present before me; and this is what I call imagining." René Descartes, *The Philosophical Works of Descartes* (trs. Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1968).
- 2 In *De Anima*, Aristotle writes that imagination "is not found without sensation, or judgment without it," (i.e. imagination). Aristotle, *The Basic Works of Aristotle* (ed. Richard McKeon, New York, Random House, 1941) 427b, 16.
- 3 Kant developed his account on imagination in *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), where he focuses on empirical imagination, and in *Critique of Judgment* (1790), where he discusses productive or poetic imagination.
- 4 Gaston Bachelard, *L'Air et les songes: Essai sur l'imagination du mouvement* (Paris: José Corti, 1943) 282–85. In the same book, Bachelard contends that "To perceive and to imagine are as antithetic as presence and absence. To imagine is to absent oneself; it is a leap toward a new life," *L'Air...* 7-13.
- 5 Her text is interrupted with foley sounds, which serve as clumsy acoustic accompaniments for the described sensations.
- 6 Bachelard, *L'Air et les songes...*7.
- 7 Christopher Norris, *Spinoza and the Origins of Critical Theory* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990)
- 8 *L'eau et les rêves: Essai sur l'imagination de la matière* (Paris: José Corti, 1942).
- 9 English edition: André Gide, *If it die* (tr, Dorothy Bussy, Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977), 93-4.
- 10 *L' Air...* 282–85
- 11 Composed by Matteo Fargion.
- 12 Roland Barthes, "Listening" in *The Responsibility of Forms* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1985) 245-60.
- 13 Jean-François Lyotard gave a potent formula to define theatre: to hide and to show. Jean-François Lyotard, Anne Knap and Michel Benamou, "The Tooth, the Palm" (*SubStance* Vol. 5, No. 15, Socio-Criticism 1976) 105-110.







# AESTHETICS AND THE NEGATIVE

to Benjamin Noys



DEAR BEN

In 2014, I spent a couple of months with your book *The Persistence of the Negative*, patiently trying to understand what I was reading. The reading was very slow, partly because a lot of your references were new to me, but mainly because the figures of thought basically kept refusing to reveal their meaning to me. I could tell that the texts were addressing notions and questions that are crucial for things that I am trying to figure out around both my artistic practice and my individual life, so I couldn't solve it by simply putting the book away. But as much as I was intrigued by the texts, I simply didn't understand the content of what I was reading; or maybe it was more like I understood the actual details but couldn't manage to put it all together. I liked that very much. And to my thinking that's a very important point of your book: to evade revealed, conclusive meaning, and to insist on the importance of being in a negotiation with all the thoughts/agencies/perspectives that cannot present themselves in terms of positivistic appearance. Maybe that's one possible perspective on *The Persistence of the Negative*.

I was also very fond of your latest book *Malign Velocities*. As you know from our earlier contact, I made an attempt to cross read it with George Miller's *Mad Max* tetralogy (*The Collapse of Fantasy*, essay 2015). It was intended as a sort of free association on the aesthetics of an economy of speed trying to accelerate itself out of the deadlock produced by the fact that this economy doesn't really produce anything other than representations of its own modes of production as immanent presence. In this "desert of the real of production"—where, as the prophetic flashback introducing *Mad Max II* says, "*only those mobile enough to scavenge survive*"—any vision of a possible resistance or of a different future is immediately re-territorialised in a worm-hole logic where all escape routes lead back to the present. To me this produced an interesting perspective on the relation between political and aesthetic imaginary, where any imagery of a possible difference or future change, whether in the form of an artistic "avant garde" or of a more discursive practice of

artistic research, gets reappropriated in an economy driven by an inherent desire for “the new.”

There is some logic to this. We live in a historic moment characterized by a paradox. On the one hand, the reigning economic ideology is based on the idea of free choice describing itself as the only possible reality. The neoliberal paradigm doesn't understand itself as ideology, but more as some sort of evolutionary realism, popularized by Fukuyama's term “the end of history.” On the other hand, because the western conglomerate of capitalism and culture presents its own present as the only possible reality without any alternative, collective depression is inherent to the system. If nothing can be any other way than it is, then what's the point? Why make an effort? Why take any initiative for anything? The solution—as in all capitalistic systems—is, firstly, the alienation of basic needs; secondly, the cultivation of the desire for the “new” as the instrumentalised capitalization of the illusion of free choice; and, thirdly, the display of multitude and differences as commodity and merchandise.

I start with this recollection because I think it frames a crucial and complex challenge or task for contemporary aesthetic practices: given the condition that my economy as an artist operates within the frame of an economy based on the representation of differences, multitudes and freedom of speech, how do I artistically work with aesthetic interventions that aim for reflection around this reality without letting my aesthetic practice automatically be appropriated by the very mechanism I am trying to reflect upon? If *Malign Velocities* was a mapping of a field connecting aesthetics with economy, then maybe the enigmatic notion of *the negative* from your previous book suggests to me a foundation or framework for a conversation on possible strategies and tools for contemporary aesthetic practices. The following text is my attempt to think this topic through in writing, divided in three chapters: *To Enter The Door Is To Close It*, *On The Nihilism Of Cattle & Boxes*, and *The Shofar (And The Drop)*.

## CHAPTER ONE - BEFORE THE LAW

*In music, interpretation is not about the awakening or resurrection of an already “existing” tone, structure, or meaning. Instead, what is at stake is a sound-becoming as such. This sound-becoming in itself already is a listening. The enigmatic power of music lies exactly in the fact that there is not first a sound and then a listening. The sound is the listening.*

Maria Schuback Cavalcante, *Eulogy for Nothingness*

The first example:

I am thinking of this as a brief moment of passage. Two male bodies on stage, one in front of the other. For a rather extensive period of time, they swing their heads from side to side, from left to right; each in their own frequency, back and forth, back and forth. They are persisting with this rather violent act for quite some time, the physical effort produces a time space of presence, too present to allow for metaphor or interpretation.

Since their speeds differ, the synchronisation of their movement is not stable. With each swing, their frequencies close in on each other, and then, for a very short moment, their heads swing in perfect harmony, a unity following no agency or composition, a small miracle of contingent aesthetic transcendence. And then, the frequencies of their respective swingings leave each other again as they drift apart and go out of sync.

In the choreography “Harvest” by Rodrigo Sobarzo, this short moment of synchronisation of two frequencies definitely means something. Some-“thing” is happening or “taking place.”

A window opens for this “thing” to momentarily appear in the present. But this “thing” does not reveal its meaning. For a short moment it is there. It is.

*Before the Law* is a short story by Franz Kafka,<sup>1</sup> included as a chapter in the novel *The Trial*. The man from the country comes to the door of the law to gain entry. The gatekeeper lets him know that, even if the door is open, he cannot enter—at least not at the moment. The man from the country asks if he will be allowed entrance at a later point—*“It is possible, but not now.”* The man, expecting that the law should be accessible to all, decides to wait and then spends the rest of his life before the door of the law, trying to persuade the gatekeeper to let him in. At the moment of his death, the gatekeeper lets him know: *“This door was assigned only to you. I am now going to close it.”*

Kafka's parable has been following me around for quite a while—a situation I share with a lot of others. The simplicity and concreteness of its enigma—the door is open and you cannot enter—for me captures some key conditions for the logic of representation, whether for aesthetics, politics, or philosophy. I've opened a number of theatre productions with it, and I still often start workshops and other co-operations by reading it with those present—as a reminder or reconnection to the premises of our game.

On a first reading, the story often appears as a depressing tale of repressive power and wasted life. First of all, there's the metaphorical power of the inaccessible law. The law does not let the individual enter and gain knowledge of its meaning or operations, nor does it reveal its true face or content. And then there's the fact that the gatekeeper actually tells the man from the country that he won't stop him from entering the open door, and that the man still by his own free will chooses to spend his entire life in front of the opening, directing his gaze into the other side in the hope of catching a glimpse of the object of his desire. This could also obviously be interpreted as a story about internalized hierarchical structures and discipline through self repression. But when we read a bit more carefully, we see a parallel and much more constructive thematic grid that relates to issues of representation, subjectivity, and agency. These issues are to be found in the close details of the story—or maybe rather in its gaps and contradictions.



The door is open, as always, and still you cannot enter. This is the basic formula of Kafka's allegory. What might seem as a paradox is actually an obvious and self evident condition for matters of hermeneutics and signification: the door is open as long as we keep watching. It is the active gaze, the interpretative act of reading-watching-listening that keeps the passage open. The moment my attentive patience, so necessary for speculation and imagination, is defeated by my desire to know and understand—i.e. when my subject crosses the threshold in order to define the proper of the other side—is also the moment of a closure. The time frame defined by my attention thus equals the time of possible transition. To enter through the door is to close it.

The second example:

The odd couple is having a somewhat awkward conversation at a gas station. He the successful movie producer, she the young woman who has just left the man that she doesn't love anymore but who has maintained her life financially. The woman and the producer spend one or two sentences trying to talk about her future, but it is obviously useless since they don't share any language and also evidently are mutually indifferent to the conversation; he's American and she's French, two colonial cultures limited to the dialogues and relations available within the frame of their own normative linguistic home base. She has left her former life and is not sure of the horizon of her future. He has been on an unsuccessful mission to conquer the frontier of European cinema; he might be a bit melancholic about the failure, but the territory was a bit too insignificant for it to cause a crisis. It didn't work, that's all.

They are heading to Rome in his car, a red Alfa Romeo cabriolet, possibly taking them to some sort of short affair in a hotel suite somewhere. They are both uncertain, the contract defining the nature of their relation hasn't quite been signed yet, maybe they will go for it, but probably they won't. Regardless how they choose, the business will be without any importance, of this they

seem to be mutually aware. In exactly two minutes, they will both be dead, the red Alfa Romeo smashed under a tanker as soon as they pull out of the gas station. The whole situation is an interspace, a rupture in time and space—a temporal void existing between the past and an unknown future—in short, a textbook example of a caesura.

We don't have very much knowledge about either of the two characters. We know that we don't like him, and that she probably has much more talent and intelligence than her social status allows her to make us aware of, but we don't really know anything about their thoughts, wishes, or emotions. No emotional or thematic relations are developed in the meaningless conversation. One could claim that the situation is dealing with the emptiness of their possible relation, but since it is so obvious they don't have a future together that interpretation would be both trivial and futile. So, if nothing really happens in the encounter of the two characters, what is the sequence "about?"

The empty impotence of meaning in their personal relation stands in stark contrast to the intense, and even strident, activity of relations playing out on an aesthetic level. The red of the Alfa Romeo and Jerry's sweater communicate with the exact same red of the gas pumps and the iron railing behind them (and the t-shirt of a little boy sitting in the grass in the far background of the image). Her sweater has the exact same blue as the letters of the gas company on the pump. None of this means anything. One could of course try to read content into the fact that his sweater is the same shade of red as the car that is carrying them to their death, or that the blue of her sweater is the same blue as the tank of the tanker that will kill them. But the interpretation would obviously be a construction. If the loud overload of interaction occurring between colours and objects in the moment before death carries a meaning or signifying pattern, it is beyond the reach of my human symbolic system. It is taking place, but it doesn't mean anything. It is there. It is.

Derrida gave his essay “Before the Law” a title identical to that of its object of study. His close reading of Kafka’s parable considers a number of ways the realms of philosophy, politics, and aesthetics are interconnected in the production of subjectivity and agency in systems of representation and signification. If read carefully, Derrida’s text suggests a couple of surprisingly concrete tools and strategies for a performative practice. The key aspect is the suggested interchangeability of *the Law* and *the Text*, the idea that there is no intrinsic or “true” essence of a text, or at least that this will always be inaccessible. To encounter a text—or any other piece of art (or another being)—is to find oneself in the position before the law. As Derrida puts it: *“Let us be patient too. Is not what holds us in check before the law, like the man from the country, also what paralyzes and detains us when confronted with a story: is it not its possibility and impossibility, its readability and unreadability, its necessity and prohibition?”*<sup>2</sup>

The law in Kafka’s text does not reveal its nature. We don’t know if it is a juridical, political, or social law. It is just The Law and it remains concealed and invisible to us. *“To enter into relations with the law is to let oneself be enticed, provoked, and hailed by the history of this non-history. It is to let oneself be tempted by the impossible.”* This temptation of the impossible, the enticement of the unreadability and non-identity, is the key. When the man from the country learns that he cannot enter and gain access to the law, his response is neither to give up and return home, nor to ignore the rule and enter anyway. He decides to wait; or rather, he escapes the dialectic binarism by postponing the decision. His decision creates the condition of an extended *caesura*, to speak with Hölderlin. This situation of suspended time and space, made possible by the decision to not decide, is what constitutes the basic condition for the story, *“His resolution and non resolution brings the story into being and sustains it. It is all a question of time, and it is the time of the story.”* The length of the story equals the time the man spends before the gate of the law; the story starts at his arrival and ends with his death.

The acceptance of non-knowledge in this perspective is “*where literature begins*.” Any given text is an enigma and as such will never reveal its ideal essence; it is always a space of the unknown, a double, second reality of non-knowledge into which we can direct our curious gaze and attention but never gain entry. Just like with the law, we have no access to the true being of a text (or image, sound or any other set of signifiers); we know neither what it “is” nor what it is “about.” “*The law should be universal*” thinks the man from the country, “*he wants to see or touch the law, he wants to approach and ‘enter’ it.*” This expectation of course is logical. We recognise it, not only as citizens in relation to the law, but also from the perspective of encountering a text, theatre performance, or any other work of art. The desire to understand—to *enter, see, and touch*—the essence of whatever “thing” I encounter is a drive that pushes my being into a relation with the world and thus what keeps the door open. And at the same time, this desire must stay unfulfilled in order to avoid closing the passage in the name of identification.

To ignore this agreement and “enter” the text would not lead to any knowledge of the text. It is an act of violence in which I put my own subject in the space of the text. The conquering of the inaccessible space is an act of colonisation, where the space and agency of non-identity is appropriated by the proper of my identity. To define the proper is to claim property by appropriation. This is the double bind connecting identity and property: the proper as the knowledge or truth of a “thing,” proper-ty as the ownership or copyright of this knowledge, connected to the experience and interest of a specific subject and/or agency; appropriation as the colonising act of my subject occupying the space of the Law.

This brings us back to the gate of the Law, and to the gatekeeper. Who is this figure, what is it that he guards and on behalf of what agency? The first connotation (especially given the narratives we normally associate with Franz Kafka) probably would be that the gatekeeper is in the service of an anonymous bureaucratic power, protecting its regime by keeping

the apparatus of law out of reach of the powerless individual. Transcribed to the context of text and aesthetic representation, the gatekeeper would be the owner of interpretative prerogative; the artist, writer, director, art professor, or critic, but also the members of social categories in possession of the key to the law as cultural capital, in Bourdieu's sense. In many contexts, this is a fully relevant description of how the agency of a majority culture uses its accumulated capital to justify a division between who belongs on the inside and the outside, with respect to aesthetic judgment. This is the position of ignorance typical for power. To put one's own subject in the place of the law doesn't of course give access to neither truth nor knowledge, but just fills out the whole horizon with mirror images of one's own identity. But the logic of the gatekeeper can also be read from a much more constructive perspective that has a lot in common with the practice of theatre in its very organisation of space and positions.

*"The two characters in the story, the gatekeeper and the man from the country, are both before the law, in order to speak they face each other."* For me, this sentence is the key to a non-appropriating and emancipated approach to representation and agency. In the perspective of the performing arts, the performer faces the audience for the same reason as the gatekeeper, *"in order to speak."* This opens for an interesting take on the everlasting (often misguided) debate over the fourth wall. This debate is unfortunately often framed in terms of being for or against the concept of illusion: do the performers act as if the audience exists or not? But for me, the fourth wall has the same logic as the gate to the law. *"We must not forget that the gatekeeper too is separated from the law."* The stage is a space of non-knowledge, and we are directing our gaze into the unknown. The fourth wall is constituted by the threshold between here and not here, now and not now, us and not us, and no matter what role you have (audience, performer, director, writer, or critic), we all share the same position. We are all before the gate which separates us from the other-space.

In her book *Eulogy for Nothingness*, Swedish philosopher Maria Schuback Cavalcante gives an interesting exposition of the bearing empty space and/or nothingness has on the field of hermeneutics in western thought. Discussing the importance of the interstice as translational space in the writings of Schleiermacher and Hölderlin, she points to a number of conditions that could suggest an interpretation of what is guarded by Kafka's gatekeeper.

*The presupposed axiom that the understanding of something means to make the unknown familiar by a "translation" to one's own language in Schleiermacher's hermeneutics of translation is given an important nuance. When an interstice between the familiar and the unknown presents itself—an inter-language between my own and the foreign—what becomes apparent is that the understanding harbours an alienation of the self, i.e. of the familiar.*

*This in between opened up in hermeneutics introduces the power of imagination as a decisive component in understanding. What remains to be explored, however, is the emptiness of this in between, and the relation of the imagination to a nothingness; to the empty. Here, the empty is an exercise in the difficult art of entering into a self-transformation (tradux), to allow for a metamorphosis of the world to take place in the human, to give space and time for reality to work within ourselves. If imitation and reproduction, mimesis, at all can reflect the claims of life in the form of an understanding, it is only as an imitation of life as an open empty. In order to at one point be re-born, it would be necessary to become reconciled with the empty, rather than mimicking images, examples, or archaic models.<sup>3</sup>*

This, I would claim, is an interesting take on the condition for the understanding and interpretation that are negotiated between the gatekeeper and the man from the country. What is guarded by the gatekeeper is not the secret truth or meaning of the law/text/object—the true interpretation as manifest commodity—but rather the rules of the game of hermeneutics and subjectivity.

The relation between the man from the country and the gatekeeper is not constituted by the difference in the knowledge or access they have to the law or the text, which remains inaccessible to both, but by a difference in function and representativity. This suggests an idea of the text and stage as interstice—a translational inter-space or inter-face, simultaneously separating and connecting the participants engaging in a negotiation of content and agency. To think along with Hannah Arendt's definition of public space as a "*space of appearance*,"<sup>4</sup> we could say that the understanding of text and representation as inter-face becomes the key component in a toolbox for the negotiation of subjectivity, agency, and collective imaginary, i.e. of what we have in common. What is guarded by the gatekeeper in this perspective is not a secret "truth," meaning, or interpretation, but the conditions necessary to keep the gate open, to stay in relation to the space where the negotiation of this *sensus communis* can take place.

Keeping the gate open conditions a mutual acceptance of the non-arrival of interpretation or truth, a contract in which it is the attentive tension of a listening, rather than the conclusion of an understanding, that keeps the space open for a continuous negotiation. What would the role of a performer be in this context? What skills are relevant if the task is to postpone the arrival of interpretation, i.e. "truth?" What tools are needed to keep our attentive gaze directed through the gate, and still keep our desire to uncover the proper of the text in suspension? I think an interesting trajectory of both objectives and possible tools is outlined in the essay *Listening* by Jean-Luc Nancy.

*What secret is at stake when one truly listens, that is, when one tries to capture or surprise the sonority rather than the message? What secret is yielded - hence also made public - when we listen to a voice, an instrument, or a sound just for itself? What does to be listening, to be all ears, as one would say "to be in the world" mean?*

*To listen is tendre l'oreille—literally, to stretch the ear—an expression that is an intensification and a concern, a curiosity*

*or an anxiety. Every sensory register thus bears with it both its simple nature and its tense, attentive, or anxious state: seeing and looking, smelling and sniffing, touching and feeling, hearing and listening. The last auditive pair has a special relationship with sense. Entendre, "to hear," also means comprendre, "to understand," as if "hearing" were above all "hearing say" rather than "hearing sound."*

*If "to hear" is to understand the sense (to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible.*

*To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning, or in an edgy meaning of extremity, and as if the sound were precisely nothing else than this edge, this fringe, this margin. But what can be the shared space of meaning and sound? Meaning consists in a reference. In fact, it is made of a totality of referrals: from a sign to a thing, from a state of things to a quality. Sound is also made of referrals: it spreads in space, where it resounds while still resounding "in me," as we say.*

*In the external or internal space, it resounds, that is, it remits itself while still actually "sounding," which is already "re-sounding" since that's nothing else but referring back to itself. To sound is to vibrate in itself or by itself: it is not only to emit a sound, but it is also to stretch out, to carry itself and be resolved into vibrations that both return to itself and place it outside itself.*

*Indeed, as we have known since Aristotle, sensing is always a perception, that is, a feeling-oneself-feel: or, if you prefer, sensing is a subject, or it does not sense. One can say then, at least, that meaning and sound share the space of a referral. To be listening will always be to be straining towards or in an approach to the self. Approach*



*to the self: neither to a proper self (I), nor to the self of an other, but to the form or structure of self as such.*

*When one is listening, one is on the lookout for a subject, something (itself) that identifies itself by resonating from self to self, in itself and for itself, hence outside of itself, at once the same as an other than itself, one in the echo of the other, and this echo is like the very sound of its sense. But the sound of sense is how it refers to itself or how it sends back to itself or addresses itself, and thus how it makes sense.*

*To be listening is thus to enter into tension and to be on the lookout for a relation to self: not, it should be emphasized, a relationship to "me" (the supposedly given subject), or the "self" of the other (the speaker, the musician, also supposedly given, with his subjectivity), but to the relation in self.*

*This presence is not the position of a being-present, it is not an "in view of" or a "vis à vis." It is an "in the presence of" that does not let itself be objectified or projected outward. That is why it is first of all presence in the sense of a present that is not a being, but rather a coming and a passing.<sup>5</sup>*

In the context of performing arts, the interesting thing about Nancy's discussion of the difference between listening and hearing—between attention and understanding, tension and conclusion—is that, in a very subtle way, it transforms the use of a performer's toolbox without actually changing the basic tools. Rather than negating the key components of a craft, it suggests a reversal of their main application.

For me, it is a question of what position the performative gesture is given within a representational structure: is the voice or figure taking part in the exhibition or production of subjectivity? Is the actor/dancer/musician re-presenting an aesthetic expression of

an already completed and finalised experience, or is s/he taking on a representative function in the production and negotiation of new subjectivities?

To think with Nancy, it is a matter of speaking or listening, of showing or watching. Within the paradigm of theatre, we tend to take it for granted that the function of the actor is to show the audience re-presentations of identities, relations, and topics—like, the show(ing) must go on. If the objective is to facilitate the production of subjectivity, the task is not defined in relation to the show(ing) of the law, but rather in relation to the function of keeping its door open. This means a reversal of the relation between speaking and listening, where the primary act of the performer is no longer the speaking—the saying of words and their meaning—but the listening, a listening that is a shared activity with the audience. Listening is a collective act. It is in the very physical nature of sound emancipatory; the sound of a voice is both immaterial and material, and its sonority has a sensory quality of physically surrounding and connecting individuals in its common time-space.

This is a slight displacement of the objectives, rather than a change in the content, of our toolbox. It changes everything. The tools of the actor/musician/dancer stay the same, but the voice, movement, and tone are no longer used to express a re-presentation of an already finalised understanding to be consumed by an audience, but instead to bring something into temporal presence in order to open the door to the collective space of “listening.”

## CHAPTER TWO: ON THE NIHILISM OF CATTLE & BOXES

*Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. ... Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter.*

Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

On Locus I: There is no available pathway for me to access a position “outside” of a capitalist economy.

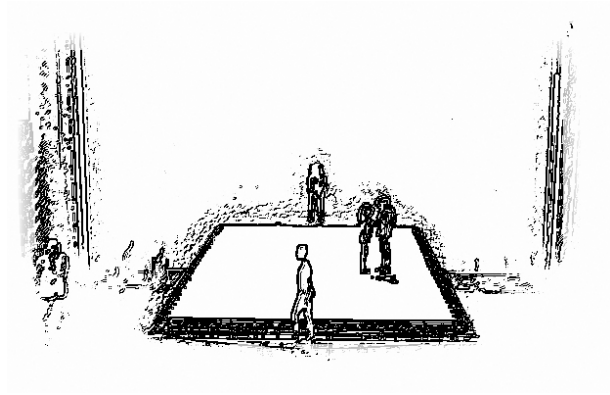
On Locus II: Neither is it possible to claim any stance of “innocence” or purity; I am constitutionally embedded in an “inside” of this economy, within both its socio-political body and its symbolical system.

On Locus III: If my position, both personally and financially, is confined to a territory within “the system,” then how can I by aesthetic practice present imagery that resists recuperation enough to actualise a “fundamental encounter” capable of producing thinking and reflection?

When discussing the problem of recuperation—the hegemonic capacity of the world as produced by a capitalist economy to not only absorb critique, but to nourish itself from it in order to re-produce stronger than ever—my questionnaire is restricted to the possibility and conditions of aesthetic transcendence.

What are the conditions that make it possible to truly imagine? What does it take to produce a mimetic double that is “untrue” to this world? What does it take to use aesthetics to produce an actual gap (and not just to add to the multitude of images) in which reflection and thought becomes possible?

When I discuss capitalist machinery's recuperation of aesthetics by means of reterritorialisation, it is not with the idea or aim of finding a way to use aesthetics as a tool to establish a “pure” or utopian position of sanctuary. I do not believe in the space of art as that of a utopian diaspora. My horizon is inevitably confined by the material and mental limits of economy and politics. The question that occupies me is rather how to use aesthetics as a sort of aporetic tool for the imagination. I think of my artistic practice thus as not a means to exchange the space of my own position for another, but rather as means of producing temporary windows, not in order to escape through them, but so that imagination can project some-“thing” else beyond my own horizon.



*STELLA: In the newer American painting we strive to get the thing in the middle, and symmetrical, but just to get a kind of force, just to get the thing on the canvas.*

*GLASER: What is the "thing" you're getting on the canvas?*

*STELLA: I guess you'd have to describe it as the image.*<sup>6</sup>

In a radio broadcast on WBAI-FM in New York 1964, Bruce Glaser has a discussion with Donald Judd and Frank Stella about their thoughts on "new painting," the movement in American art that surfaced in the wake of the modernist generation led by Jackson Pollock and Clement Greenberg. The movement of "new painting" at this time was still trying to define its objectives and specificity and was only later to be branded as *minimalism*. The broadcast, originally called "New Nihilism or New Art?," was later edited by Lucy R. Lippard and published in Art News 1966 as "Questions to Stella and Judd."

"Nihilism" is a more intriguing name than minimalism, and in one sense also more accurate. The mainstream idea of minimalism is often associated with dry conceptualism, monochromes, and cold industrial materiality; a legacy of theorems and affectless aesthetics. The witty bashing of aesthetic predecessors playing out in the broadcast could also appear as a mere positioning of two young and cocky artists in the context of the similarly young and cocky art continent of post war USA. In half a sentence they simultaneously dismiss 2,000 years of European art history along with a whole generation of American modernists. But what is really at stake in the conversation between Stella and Judd is their passionate wish to abolish the hierarchies of the western tradition of thought, a wish to define an aesthetic toolbox in which the self reflective self containment of the work of art shouldn't be mistaken for a lack of relational interest, but which, on the contrary, can be used to create emancipated, non-hierarchic relations to both its surroundings and spectators. From my horizon, the discussion points out

two central and co-related aspects of the interaction between aesthetics and the world: the externalisation of relations and the aesthetic double bind in the connection of immanence and transcendence.

Stella and Judd both repeatedly return to their critique of European painting, which they consider hierarchical and representational. Even the most abstract, non-figurative motives are still based on a composition of relations – the green square of the upper right corner is balanced by a red circle in the lower left, and the two elements are thus forced into a relation of power in which one of the two forms will ineluctably be understood on the conditions of the other. Whereas the immanent object – for example an aluminium cube, or a surface with the paint administrated strictly by the logic of symmetry – is a work of art closed in on itself. An aesthetic statement is brought into being, but it can't be interpreted: it just is. There are no relations to be found within the frame or the object, and instead the relations are externalised and extroverted. The object is autonomous. It is not “about” anything, it is simply there, in its relation to the space and to anyone who enters this space.

The “closedness” of the art object produces relationality. The relations are externalised, from within the “frame” of the work of art to the relation between the artistic intervention and its surroundings, between the space and/or the spectator. Subjectivity is not produced through any content expressed by, or intrinsic to, the object. There is nothing to understand. The “thing” just is there—a “thing that gathers,” that asks for our attention and negotiation regarding its presence in the world.

This discourse of aesthetic autonomy develops from the “specific objects” of Donald Judd, through the early site specific works of Richard Serra, Joan Jonas, Robert Smithson, and Nancy Holt, the task and pattern based choreographic protocols of Yvonne Rainer and Trisha Brown, to early predecessors of relational art like Gordon Matta Clark's *FOOD*. The autonomy of the work of art, its refusal to lend itself to representations of

anything other than itself could be mistaken for an ungenerous non-interest to communicate, but it's actually what opens up for actual relations and not just its displayed representations as commodities. (This logic becomes extremely relevant in the context of theatre, where the work of art's ability to deliver comprehensible representations of relations and identity is the only strategy available for social interaction.)

*STELLA: I always get into arguments with people who want to retain the old values in painting—the humanistic values that they always find on the canvas. If you pin them down, they always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. Any painting is an object and anyone who gets involved enough in this finally has to face up to the objectness of whatever it is that he's doing. He is making a thing. All I want anyone to get out of my paintings, and all I ever get out of them, is the fact that you can see the whole idea without any confusion.... What you see is what you see.*

What is interesting to me is that aesthetics seems to involve a double bind between immanence and transcendence. It is neither immanent nor transcendent—in it, each becomes the condition for the other. It is the self-reflexivity of the work of art that opens up for the possibility of a production of difference in the world. And this difference can only come about as a transcendence in relation to “what-ever,” an open ended passage produced through the immanence of the object. When the work of art aims to produce a difference in the name of this or that subjectivity or agency, it merely manages to re-produce a re-presentation of the present.

What is the nature of the aesthetic object? What is it “in the world?” Is it some-“thing” produced into the world, a “thing” brought into existence on its own conditions? Or is it something re-produced and re-presented, a mirror-image of a “real”

original, already existing in the world? In *Typography*, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe lays out the ontological landscape of the theory and practice of mimesis in western thought, suggesting a legacy from Plato, inscribing all aesthetic imagery in a hierarchic dualism in which the image or double always is understood and valorised in its relation to a superior original or truth. The work of art, as an image/copy/double, never exists in its own right. But obviously, as soon as the artistic object has been produced, it does exist just as much as anything else; as soon as the image or photo “of” something has been manufactured, it is a “thing” in the world, existing as much as any other thing.

Writing with and against Heidegger, Lacoue-Labarthe undertakes an ontological archeology of sorts, following the notion *Gestalt* (figure or form), through its relation to Heidegger’s neologism *Ge-stell*—meaning stand, rack, structure—to its linguistic relatives *Herstellen* (to produce), *Darstellen* (to present), and *Vorstellen* (to represent). Mimetic practices always actualise all three aspects; the phenomena are closely related, but not in any given order or proportion; production, presentation and re-presentation do not automatically lead to each other. Their relation could rather be understood as one of interdependence. Since Plato, the *Gestalt* is not reducible to the mere figure; the image always suggests something more than itself, a meaning or a statement about something outside of itself—or, as Stella puts it: “people always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas.” What is interesting in *Typography* is the way the essay describes mimesis as *pharmakon*, something both necessary and deeply problematic. Rather than trying to define a “true” interpretation of mimesis, Lacoue-Labarthe sees the potential of the mimetic double in its very capacity to destabilise the world

*Mimesis is the diversion of poiesis. That is to say, it is a displacement, a “disinstallation” (...) What mimesis “produces,” what it (dis)installs ([ver]stellt), does not in truth appear, does not unveil itself (...)*



*What is “proper” to mimesis lie(s) precisely in the fact that mimesis has no “proper” to it... mimesis does not consist of the improper, either, but de-sists in this appropriation of everything supposedly proper that necessarily jeopardises property itself... The essence of mimesis (is) absolute vicariousness, carried to the limit, endless and groundless—something like an infinity of substitution and circulation: the very lapse “itself” of essence.*

(Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*)<sup>7</sup>

The potential of mimesis to destabilise static presence through similarity—the opening up of an immanent “real” by non-identical resemblance, the oscillating attraction of and between objects and notions pushed out of their static positions and into motion by similarity that is not the same—is the basic condition that renders the world accessible to reason, reflection, and negotiation. And the will to power, to speak with Nietzsche and Deleuze, is what seeks to re-territorialise and stabilise—the making identical—of the abyss of uncertainty opened up by the mimetic apparatus. What Lacoue-Labarthe describes (if I have read his rather impenetrable syntax right), could be understood as an appropriation in western thought of the magical potential of mimesis to set the world in motion by means of identifying mimesis itself; a fixation of a process that is unstable by definition, a categorisation that attempts to capture the mimetic faculty and to reduce its definition to a mere mirror—not the destabilizing apparatus of magic by similarity, initiated by production of an autonomous double as a “thing” existing in its own right, but the re-production of identity by sameness in the mirror reflection of something already existing.

At this point, I have to make clear that I have absolutely no knowledge of Aristotle, and for the moment I don’t have the time needed to study the *Nicomachean Ethics*. But if I understand Lacoue-Labarthe’s line of thought, he connects mimesis to *poiesis*—which Heidegger translates as “that what brings something forth into presence.” Between the two, he unfolds

an interplay between *Herstellung* (production) and *Darstellung* (presentation). More specifically, he focuses on the way *mimesis* operates in the interdependency between the two notions and on the consequences of separating them from each other. In short, *Darstellung* without *Herstellung*, the aesthetic presentation that doesn't bring something new into existence, results in a mere mirror image, a representation of the present as presence and nothing more. *Herstellung* without *Darstellung*, on the other hand, makes for an infinite reproduction of the world as an immanent and static system.

This correlation between production and presentation in the transformation and continuation of the world is what constitutes the double bind between immanence and transcendence in aesthetics. This double bind operates according to an inverted logic, under which the capacity of the work of art to produce relations to and in the world is inversely proportional to its ambition to express something "about" the world. The correlation could also be understood as an inter-dependency between absence and presence. Any aesthetic intervention that has the ambition to be a metaphor or allegory—i.e. aims to represent something in the world aesthetically, be it to denounce injustice or to empower utopian agency—will by definition affirmatively re-present the present. The objective of producing a transcendent difference in the world by means of presentation always results in an immanent re-production of the present as presence. The immanent object, event, or text, on the other hand, doesn't "open" itself to interpretative statements or agencies nor does it "reveal" any truths about the world-as-presence. The aesthetic production of attention, the object that "is there" without revealing its "meaning," is a refusal of interpretation, a message that opens up the possibility for an open-ended transcendence; a passage not in the name of this or that agency or subjectivity, but a passage to what-ever.

A third example:

The opening scene is a 7 1/2 minute long take. The scenery is ordinary black and white photorealism—everything in the imagery is seemingly familiar and recognisable. A farmhouse, with its a muddy stable yard in the centre and a barn in the background; the worn-down houses, together with the loamy and greyish landscape, suggest the location to be somewhere in post-communist Europe. The grainy quality of the photo, combined with the stillness of the tempo in which the camera watches the scenery, places the film in the Eastern-bloc legacy of Tarkovsky.

In the far background of the picture, the barn doors open up, and cattle slowly enter the yard. The camera just watches, without movement or any other sign of specific interest or focus. Occasionally the cows make themselves heard. The random outbursts of mooing, in their accumulation, produce some sense of unintentional humour, maybe because these outbursts are the only available expression of subjectivity, yet it is impossible to interpret what emotional register the mooing is trying to express, an effect of random comedy that gets amplified through the repeated attempts of one individual to mate with another, which intensifies the ambiguous vocal manifestations.

After a while, one single cow detaches from the collective of anonymous cattle. It slowly makes its way to the foreground of the picture, almost giving the impression of aiming for the camera. The interpretative gaze, hungering for a signal in this passive scenery from which it could produce meaning, tentatively starts to distinguish a recognisable dramaturgy—this must be the protagonist. The camera lets the cow get closer, almost as if playfully affirming the interpretation. But just for a moment—it gently pans slightly to the left, letting the individuality of the singular cow slide back into the anonymity of the crowd, as the rest of the cattle follows the pioneer and begin heading for the fields located behind the camera (of course so far, this is only my assumption; I guess they are going to the field, isn't that what cows do in the morning? Then again, I am also just

supposing that it is morning— isn't that when cattle leave the stable?)

As the cows continue their journey, the camera follows in a dolly shot. When the cows disappear behind a house that lies between the dolly and the path of the animals, the camera slowly follows the broken bricks in the cade of the house, until its sight again is free and we see the cattle enter the field.

When discussing the immanence and transcendence of art, the most obvious parallel to the North American minimalism of the 60s would of course be Vladimir Malevich and his—in a double sense—iconic *Black Square*. Originally presented in 1915 at the first suprematist exhibition *0.10* in St. Petersburg, the painting was positioned in the right corner of the room—a sacred position reserved for the orthodox icon in a traditional Russian home. Apart from its attempt to be an ultimate icon—an immanent surface onto which the spectator could project any idea of transcendence whatsoever, without the “image” answering whether yes or no—the *Black Square* is also, according to art history, the first painting that wasn't a painting “of” something (which isn't true, of course, but it works as art history). In a passage that has a lot in common with Frank Stella and Donald Judd, Malevich himself retrospectively gives the following description: “trying desperately to free art from the dead weight of the real world, I took refuge in the form of the square.”

Both aesthetically and thematically there of course is a strong connection between the non-objective artistic practices emerging in Russia two years before the October Revolution and the movement of “new nihilism” developing in New York half a century later. Malevich and the *Black Square* also constitute a point zero and paragon of sorts for many of the minimalists.

As obvious as these aesthetic connections might be, I find the opening scene from the film *Satantango* by Béla Tarr (1994), described above, to be a more interesting example of how self-reflective imagery oscillates between immanence and

transcendence. On the surface, the film shares very few of the aesthetic and conceptual qualities normally associated with minimalism—a worn-down farm instead of industrial design, mud and cows as opposed to aluminium and glass fibre. Whereas Judd and Stella speak of symmetry and theoretical concepts, not representational of any human relations or experience, the aesthetic universe of Béla Tarr is seemingly familiar, realistic, and deeply embedded in the most human of environments. The director himself would also most probably say that his work shares nothing of the spiritual contexts of either Malevich or Tarkovsky, but aims to show life in all its unglorified hardship and bleak complexity.

Still, I would claim that the realistic imagery from the Hungarian farmhouse can be read as a “closed,” self reflective object in the same way as Donald Judd’s cubes or Frank Stella’s symmetric patterns, and that the qualities of immanence are produced not so much through what is being “shown” as through the way the camera invites us to watch. There is nothing in the 7 1/2 minute scene that we don’t recognise—the barn, the cows, the houses, the weather: in a traditional sense, we “know” what everything “is.” But the imagery doesn’t reveal any purpose or intention. The slow tempo and the indifferent persistence in which the camera watches doesn’t suggest any kind of “meaning” or interpretation of the “things” it sees. It is a de-familiarisation of reality, making alien of what is usually taken for granted because it is so “well known,” a translation of the common into alterity, a transition of everyday life into an inaccessible other-space. At the end of the scene, shot in Hungary in 1994, the most common of images obey the same logic that Stella described in Manhattan in 1964: *“People (...) always end up asserting that there is something there besides the paint on the canvas. (...) My painting is based on the fact that only what can be seen there is there. It really is an object. (...) What you see is what you see.”*<sup>8</sup>

The monochrome symmetries of minimalism are traditionally labeled abstract art, since they don’t depict or represent any

concrete “things,” whereas the cows and mud of *Satantango* would typically be categorised as realism. I would say that both of these terms are misleading. The minimalist or suprematist bearing on the relation between the aesthetic figure and the world is on the contrary very concrete; the paint is paint and the form is a form—it is a square, or a colour, or a note—nothing else. “Realism,” on the other hand, with its metaphysical claim that the aesthetic figure intrinsically is connected to the world—that the image has the power to describe the essence of something outside of itself—is a much more abstract paradigm.

I want to briefly go back to the figure of postponement in Kafka's/Derrida's *Before the Law*, the suspension of time and space opened up for by the decision to not decide. To me, this situation in various ways might suggest an aesthetic response to the notion of the negative; the postponement opened up for by the negation of the supposedly necessary choice between doing and not doing is a moment—or maybe an absence of moment—in which negotiation becomes both possible and necessary.

For many years, I had this habit of subconsciously sabotaging the first run throughs of my theatre productions. I delayed, excused, forgot, found all possible ways of avoiding the moment when the work I had been developing with the actors and the rest of the team would be exposed to the judgment of people coming to watch from a position outside of the work. First, I understood my habit as an expression of my own nervousness, my unease with allowing my work to be sized up by the critical eyes of an “objective” expertise of dramaturgs, marketing teams, and management. But with time, I began to think of it as a conscious strategy to establish an autonomous set of quality criteria, founded from within the work and its objectives and not in the pre-figured expectations and conventions of a context or its audience.

Everyone working in theatre is familiar with the impact that a first run through has on the production. It can be a power boost—“Wow, this is going to be so amazing”—and it can of course make

it obvious that a concept just isn't working, like "OK guys, either you change everything or we abort." But it can also be something much more vague—the event of an unspoken loss of heart, when a slightly unconventional but intense and productive work, hitherto approached with curiosity and creativity, suddenly gets overtaken by an undefined but very present nervousness. No one really knows what caused it but it's irreversible, and once it has happened there is no turning back. So after having more than a couple of really promising processes turning anxious and paralysed in the encounter with a kind of aesthetic judgment that is based on ownership and not on engagement, I decided to no longer offer a platform for this to happen. It doesn't mean that I am hiding the process behind a smoke screen of mysterious unavailability; on the contrary, everyone is welcome to engage in the work at any time, but on the same conditions as the team doing the work. There will be no single event during which the "owners" of the production—management, dramaturgs, marketing teams—get the opportunity to evaluate the work in one or two hours.

This of course could appear as a (typical) artist suppression of the fact that the work at one point will have to be exposed to the measurement of an exterior judgement. But that would be to trivialise the conditions on which the interaction of personal experience and aesthetic sensitivity operate. Instead, I think the postponement of the first run through is part of a more general strategy to establish the conditions for a logic of postponement, as described in *Before the Law*. Let's call this strategy "the postponement of aesthetic judgement." We are all before the text, and the door stays open as long as we agree that our relation to its content is a commitment to the unknown. To claim knowledge or ownership of its proper, its "truth," is to close the door. It also means a renegotiation of the ways understanding is produced and communicated. Rather than the traditional process—following a hierarchic structure where the understanding and its interpretation is produced and communicated in a vertical transaction, first from the director to the actors, then the actors to the audience—experience and knowledge is instead an act of continuous reading of the text.

The postponement, in one sense, could also be understood as a postponement or displacement of the appearance of the concepts “art” and “audience.” We start reading on the first day of work, and stop reading at the last performance. During this time, the aesthetic and social frame may change a number of times. There will be aesthetics (but not necessarily representation of a content). There will be actors (but not necessarily playing the characters of a script). There will be shapes and figures (but not necessarily describing any relations within a story). But the basic condition for the production and transmission of knowledge stays the same: we are all in front of the text. The door, and thus the process, stays open as long as we accept to stay in that position, and as soon as anyone either “enters” the material, or stops producing attention, the door closes. At one point in the process, the “art” object will probably appear—but that’s somehow besides the point. And if “art” should appear, somewhere there among us, it will be more as a means than as an end, more as an interface than as a product or object.

The production of transcendence through an immanent object, or the opening of a passage by means of “closure,” is taken to its radical conclusion in a work of art that, despite belonging to the more mainstream end of the entertainment industry, is deeply indebted to both Malevich and to minimalism. In fact, one of its most central scenes is practically unthinkable without both the *Black Square* and, for example, Donald Judd’s *Untitled (Stack)*, with which it shares not only aesthetic concepts but also year of birth.

When the sun rises over the palaeolithic savannah in the opening scene of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the new day presents a non-existent object to the world. The tribe of man-apes residing in the cave outside of which the object appears wakes up to an encounter with some-“thing” beyond the reach of their capacity for comprehension or recognition. The black monolith is a concept without precedent in their experience; its shape is non-organic, an aesthetic production of a form not representing any-“thing” existing in nature—its



angles too square, too symmetrical, and its surface too polished. The reaction of the man-apes being confronted with this non-identifiable object is (very similar to the man from the country in Kafka's *Before the Law*) a combination of curiosity, reverence and, eventually, irritation; they try to make it "reveal" its content—its meaning, if you wish—by knocking, invoking, yelling, and hammering. The monolith does not respond. No matter how hard they try, it does not "open" up to unveil any essence or interpretation.

Kasimir Malevich would repeatedly describe the *Black Square* as the "zero" of painting, that the painting presented no-thing other than itself, and claimed that this zero was the aesthetic condition for a new beginning: "*It is from zero, in zero, that the true movement of being begins.*" The opening scene of Kubrick's film is called "*The Dawn of Man*," and presents a relation between immanent aesthetics and transcendence that obeys a similar logic. After the initial commotion of the tribe of man-apes has died out, they give up, and maybe even get bored with the alien object's refusal to deliver meaning, and then kind of forget about the whole thing. A couple of hours later they proceed their everyday life as if nothing has happened.

We follow one of the apes in his/her's ordinary morning routine, doing his/her thing, randomly picking up old bones from a carcass, as s/he has done thousands of times before. S/he gets stuck with a jawbone, disinterestedly looking at it— s/he knows exactly what this is, it is what is left after you've eaten the animal, it is what is un-eatable, it is a useless leftover. This is when it happens. In the very moment when s/he's about to discard the jawbone away, the ape gets somehow distracted. We of course don't know what is taking place in its mind, but it looks like a sudden hesitation, like some-"thing" is entering into consciousness. (Actually, here Kubrick makes one of very few mistakes in the movie; he "shows" what is happening—as the ape holds the useless piece of bone in its hand, s/he is visited by an image of—i.e. s/he imagines—the already forgotten monolith. This is so redundant; we completely would have got

it anyway) The ape keeps looking at the jawbone with a new interest, tries it in her/his hand, feels the weight of it, lifts it a decimetre or two, watches gravity do its work as s/he lets the jawbone drop, and notices the pebbles bounce as it hits the ground. S/he repeats the action a couple of times, still a bit hesitant, as if in doubt; adds height and force to the movement and as the smaller pieces of bones start flying around, shattered by the blows of the jawbone, the hesitation gradually gives way to revelation and triumphant insight.

*The Dawn of Man*—the metaphysical process portrayed in the scene is usually interpreted in terms of a transmission of intelligence from a higher civilisation. I would read the sequence differently. More in line with the suprematist and minimalist discourse on how the production of reflection and relationality is achieved through immanence, or parallel to the idea of a passage opened by closure in Derrida's reading of Franz Kafka's *Before the Law*.

A transcendent potential is produced by the postponement of judgement in the suspended time-space where the use and meaning of the object is destabilized. The event of a passage comes about because the combined production/presentation of something that the apes cannot understand, the appearance in the presence of some-“thing” that they cannot “know.” Until yesterday, the meaning, use and value of the whole savannah was familiar to the man-apes; the true essence of every object, the truth of every-“thing” was common knowledge. But from the moment when the monolith does not answer—does not open up or reveal any “meaning” or essence but stays closed to representation—the immanence of the aesthetically produced object opens for the possibility that the potential of also the most commonly known object can transcend our previous experience and knowledge.

In *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben describes an ontological connection between the figure of closure and passage. In order to enter a relation to the world, “what-ever”

object, thing, or entity is dependent on its finitude; on its border or territorial definition. This exteriority—the *eidōs*, outer form as threshold—is the surface needed to be seen or perceived, but also to constitute the distinction and/or difference necessary for one singularity to relate to another.

*WHATEVER IS the figure of pure singularity. Whatever singularity has no identity, it is not determinate with respect to a concept, but neither is it simply indeterminate (...) What is in question in this bordering is not a limit that knows no exteriority, but a threshold, that is, a point of contact with an external space that must remain empty.*

*Whatever adds to singularity only an emptiness, only a threshold: Whatever is a singularity plus an empty space, a singularity that is finite and, nonetheless, indeterminate according to a concept. But a singularity plus an empty space can only be a pure exteriority, a pure exposure. Whatever, in this sense, is the event of an outside. What is thought in the architranscendental *quodlibet* is, therefore, what is most difficult to think: the absolutely non-thing experience of a pure exteriority.*

*It is important here that the notion of the “outside” is expressed in many European languages by a word that means “at the door” (*fores* in Latin is the door of the house, *thyra* in Greek literally means “at the threshold”).*

*The outside is not another space that resides beyond a determinate space, but rather, it is the passage, the exteriority that gives it access—in a word, it is its face, its *eidōs*.<sup>9</sup>*

What I find simultaneously intriguing and kind of mind boggling is the way the text separates “singularity” from “identity.” Rather than focusing on the qualitative category—on the essence, or what something “is”—Agamben points at the empty space

between two things needed for them to relate, and the closure of a threshold, defining simultaneously an inside and an outside, as the delimitation necessary to create this empty space. Instead of the prevalent idea of a border as a negative barrier (or a “positive negative,” if you have a reason to keep something out), the threshold here is understood as a membrane, producing both separation and connection. Without the wall, no door is possible.

For me, this suggests an extremely interesting basic condition for a performative aesthetic practice. The performative figure as singularity, not identity; as “pure exteriority,” a point of focus, a node for connection, projection and exchange of experiences and perspectives, but not representational of any category or essence. The performed material—be it in the form of text, a movement, or some other gesture—thought as a “thing that gathers,” to speak with Heidegger, an oblique object producing attention and a “thinking-in-common,” not a carrier for interpretation or meaning, nor a representation of this or that specific content or subjectivity, but an autonomous “thing” in the world triggering collective processes of “reading,” exchange, and negotiation.

The figure of the threshold thus describes a point zero of aesthetic practices. It is the closure needed to initiate attention and negotiation. Seen from this perspective, neither the material, the venue, nor the performer can be understood as carriers or proprietors of a “proper” content, quality, or essence. Instead, they all take part in an apparatus operating with the logic of an interface—the membrane both connecting and separating the individuals engaging with it.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE SHOFAR (AND THE DROP)

To use a phrase from Frank Zappa, from the beginning of “Be-Bop Tango” on the album “Roxy and Elsewhere:” *And this is a hard one to play.*

I don't quite know where I am going with the following. I haven't managed to either wrap my head around the content, nor find a stylistic form to write about it. However, I keep finding the figure of thought too intriguing to give up and let it be. So I include my fragmentary attempts anyway, to suggest a possible thematic path, albeit a confused and incomplete one.

Ok, Point Zero:

*The LORD said to Moses,*

*"I am going to come to you in a dense cloud. Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. By the third day, the LORD will come down on Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.*

*Put limits for the people around the mountain and tell them, 'Be careful that you do not go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain shall surely be put to death.'*

*Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up on the mountain."*  
(...)

*When Moses went up on the mountain, the cloud covered it, and the glory of the LORD settled on Mount Sinai. To the Israelites the glory of the LORD looked like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. Then Moses entered the cloud. And he stayed on the mountain forty days and forty nights.*

(...)

*When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, "Come, make us gods who will go before us."*

*Aaron answered them; "Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing and bring them to me."*

*So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. He built an altar in front of the calf and announced, "Tomorrow there will be a festival to the LORD."*

*(...)*

*Moses went down the mountain with the two tablets of the Testimony in his hands. The tablets were the work of God; the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets.*

*When Moses approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, his anger burned and he took the calf they had made and burned it into the fire; the he ground it to powder, scattered it on the water and made the Israelites drink it.*

(Old Testament, Exodus 20-32)

In these few paragraphs of the Old Testament, the continuous presence of manifest gods, a radical alterity represented by mimicry and images, is exchanged by the authority of a big, absent Other. This moment might be understood as the point zero of a twofold transition of transcendence and metaphysics; from magic to religion and from polytheism to monotheism.

We are back at Kafka's gate of the Law. In the world of magic, the gods are manifold and continuously present in their participation. In a post-magical world, it is the invisibility of god that produces the condition for passage. If we follow this line of thought, religion maybe could be understood as a phase between a universe ruled by magic and our modern secular world. The ritual staged by God at Mount Sinai, in which he

cast Moses as his gatekeeper, is also a performative event in its literal sense: an act that irreversibly changes the world. It is the exit of God from the world of presence, a staged withdrawal into absence. God will no longer act as a visible power in the present, but as an internalised big Other; invisible, inaccessible, it acts through its absence.

It is difficult to say exactly what is so fascinating, and somehow so logical, about the fact that Moses makes the Israelites rid themselves of their icon by ingesting it. In the same way, the fact that the golden calf is produced by their private jewellery suggests an archaic double bind in the interaction between economy, magic, and passage.

In 1948, psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, born in Vienna 1888 and one of Sigmund Freud's first and most promising students, wrote *Listening with the Third Ear*. Here, Reik elaborates, and partially questions, Freud's concept of "evenly-suspended attention:" directionless listening disconnected from the theoretical or therapeutical objectives of the analysis: "*It consists simply in not directing one's notice to anything in particular and in maintaining the same "evenly-suspended attention" (as I have called it) in the face of all one hears ... Or to put it purely in terms of technique: "He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind."*<sup>10</sup> According to Reik, the analyst should not only listen between the lines to what is said, but also towards her or his own unconscious as analyst. Reik borrows the notion *listening with the third ear* from Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil*, in which the philosopher complains about the average reader's lack of attention to the importance of rhythm, tempo, and tonality in language: "*What a torture are books written in German to a reader who has a third ear,*"

Two years before the publication of *Listening with the Third Ear*, Theodor Reik wrote *The Shofar* (1946), an essay about one of the oldest musical instruments known to man. The *shofar* is a musical horn, most often made of the horn of a ram or a

kudu, used in various Jewish religious ceremonies. The sound of the shofar is loud, intense and penetrating. No melody can be played on the instrument and it cannot produce more than one sound. The shofar operates on the threshold between *music* and *sonority*, understood as the presence and absence of sound. In the Book of Genesis, the inventor of the instrument is said to be *Jubal*. A curious, albeit peripheral, detail is that some investigators have indicated this Jubal to be Abel, the unfortunate brother of Cain. This already invites some very intriguing speculations on the relation between the binary sonority of the *shofar-sound/not-sound*—and a number of double binds: power/impotence, action/passivity, appearance/disappearance, speaking/silence.

The shofar has several ritual functions, both symbolic and practical. Music was already used in Hebrew culture in pre-religious sorcery. Bells and other instruments were used to drive the demons away from a holy place before using it. The tinkling bells on the vestments of the high priest, later inscribed in the aesthetics of a ritual, were thus originally meant to protect the priest from evil demons as he entered the holy place. Demons generally seem to feel a strong aversion toward sounds coming from blowing of horns as well as bells of any size. One of the functions of the shofar is to confuse the devil. This function is mirrored in the Chinese tradition of beating drums and rattling chains to drive away dragons. The Arab desert demons are called *azif al-ginn*—an expression also used for the instrument played to drive away the same demon; the noise made by the *jinns* is encountered by the human mimicry of the same sound. (Compare with Michael Taussig's *Mimesis & Alterity*: "In some way or another, one can protect oneself from the evil spirits by portraying them.")

The origin of the shofar thus is embedded in a maze of ritual symbolics oscillating between religion and magic. It is partly a human instrument to communicate with the gods, and partly a representation of the voices of the gods themselves. Interestingly, there seems to be a general confusion as to why the shofar actually is used in traditional Jewish ceremonies. It has



been used as a warning of fire or other danger, as a call to wake up sinners and sleepers, and to remind of religious heritage. In modern times, the importance of the instrument is mainly assigned to Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, but the use of the horns' signal on those holidays is basically representational. It serves as a reminder of the gift of the Torah, a celebration of God's kingdom, and an awakening from spiritual slumber, etc. In my understanding, the most interesting perspective on the shofar is the one described in Exodus: *"Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up on the mountain."* The shofar is sounded to signify that God, who has taken part in worldly events, now is returning to heaven. Its function is related to Hölderlin's *caesura*—the moment where the gods return to heaven, and the humans return to earth. The sound of the instrument has a double function. It is a signal for both the presence and the absence of God. The shofar is somehow both the voice of God and the sound of his absence.

Theodor Reik undertakes a thorough analysis of the symbolic and emotional role of the sound of the shofar in the Jewish collective subconscious. In an associative *tour de force*, Reik listens to Judaism with the third ear. And in the material of the instrument—a ram's horn—Reik hears the metonymy of a sound—the intense "bellowing of a bull at the slaughter." In the first part of the essay he seems to come to the conclusion that the sound of the shofar is God's voice. Later on, the analysis gets increasingly busy with the function of mimicry—communicating with the gods by imitating their shape and figure:

*"In the great sacrificial feasts of the ancients, the believers wrapped themselves in the skin of the animal corresponding to their god... A later form of identification is the wearing of masks of animals. Because the gods of the Orient wore horns, therefore their followers also assumed these emblems. Sumerian and Babylonian priests wore two horns on their cap... The Shamans of Kanaschinzen in Siberia and the Musquakie Indians of North America wear horned caps. Among the Jews of*

*the Middle Ages there was a custom in the ceremonial of the New Year's feast which can only be regarded as a primitive identification of this kind... This identification by means of form was accompanied by identification by means of sound. The savages who imitate their totem animals in their mask dances, also make the noise of the animal... As civilisation advanced, the skin of an animal was replaced by a mask, and the roaring, which was originally to imitate the noise of the totem animal, was replaced by the use of an instrument."*<sup>11</sup>

Mimicking the demons as the origin of religious liturgy; the use of mimesis as an interface with alterity—performative aesthetics in the concrete production of contact with/protection from an “other” rather than as the representational depiction of this “otherness...” This is all both interesting and relevant, and also intimately connected to the relation between mimesis and alterity as described by Michael Taussig.<sup>12</sup> The most fascinating passages in Reik's analysis of the Shofar are the parts where he connects it to Sigmund Freud's theory of *Totem and Taboo*, particularly the tracing of the totem sacrificial animal back to the father; a trajectory rediscovered and analysed by Lacan in his seminar on Anxiety (and its double bind with desire), where he makes an analysis of the shofar's—or rather its sound's—archaic function as *objet petit (a)*, the inaccessible object of desire.

Again, I am still fumbling around in the pathways of this thematic maze, and most certainly misunderstanding half of its content. Yet, I find the perspective opened up by this reading very intriguing. The concrete presence of a multitude of gods, spirits, and demons interacting with humans on a daily basis is ritually transposed to a symbolic system of aesthetics in which the absence of the big Other is the basic condition of transcendence.

*“Only when the ram's horn sounds a long blast may they go up on the mountain.”* The horn is the signal of God's withdrawal from, and of the people's ascent to, Mount Sinai. Who is it that

sounds the horn? Is it the voice of God himself, or is it Moses? The most daring part of Reik's interpretation is the parallel between God and the sacrificial animal: *"If the god who was originally worshipped by the Jews was a bull or a ram, then we can understand why his voice sounded from the horn of a ram. The position of the ram as a totem animal follows from its especial holiness as an expiatory sacrifice for guilt (...) The tone of the shofar calls to mind the bellowing of a bull at the slaughter. The peculiarly fearsome, groaning, blaring and long-sustained tone derives its serious significance from the fact that, in the unconscious mental life of the listeners, it represents the anxiety and last death-struggle of the father-god—if the metaphor be not too forced, one may say, his swan song."*<sup>13</sup>

The signal of the shofar here is a signifier of both the murder of the father (of God) and of his celebration. The sound is not a representation or appearance of God, and its significance should maybe rather be understood in terms of the absence of an answer. The passage is made possible by God's absence, by the fact that he is no longer there.

I maybe should add that I write this from an agnostic position; for me, the trope of transcendence is not connected to the possible existence of this or that God, but rather to the conditions of human imaginaries. *"In order for us to think about somebody, he must be removed from our presence;"* says Hannah Arendt, *"so long as we are with him we do not think either of him or about him (...) Making present what is actually absent, is the mind's unique gift... Only because of the mind's capacity for making present what is absent can we say "no more" and constitute a past for ourselves, or say "not yet" and get ready for a future."*<sup>13</sup> If we follow this figure of thought, a possible parallel interpretation would be that the shofar is not the voice/sound of God, but a call for God. The biblical quote *"to hear/see God is to die"* should then be understood both literally and metaphorically. If our call for God—or whatever radical alterity—would result in an answer perceivable by our human sensory system, it would constitute the end of the human capacity to produce and exchange imaginaries.

It would mean that there is no *other*, no alterity, nothing beyond this known reality as it appears to us here and now.

The ability to think and reflect is dependent on the ability to imagine the world as different to how it appears in the present. The separation of the world from itself by the means of abstraction and symbolic systems is the basic condition for all speculation. The hope connected to the signal of the shofar—or any aesthetic activity aiming for transcendence—lies in the absence of an answer. If God would answer in a way that we could recognise from our local, human horizon, then s/he would no longer be part of the divine, but part of what already is existing in the present. And then nothing would ever be any other way than it is at the present. Hope therefore lies in the absence of reply; we keep calling, and pray to God that we don't get an answer. Because then we would really, to speak with and against Fukuyama, have reached the end not only of history, but of all possible imagery and therefore hope.

In "*Listening*," Jean-Luc Nancy describes the act of listening as a "stretching of the ear," an act of attention—not the attention towards a known object or phenomenon, but the engagement of being in a-tension. To enter into relation with a "thing that gathers" thus means accepting an encounter that actualises a certain amount of anxiety. Mimesis in the sense of the improper double, not the stabilisation of identity but the de-stabilisation of an uncanny alterity; the similarity opening up to connection but resisting sameness. This would also be the point where Lacan positions the shofar as an apparatus triggering the co-dependency between desire and anxiety. To listen to the world rather than describing it is in line with what Derrida aims at when he discusses the two different modes of engagement with a text: *hymenal*—as in the continuous act of interpretive negotiation—as opposed to the *penetrational* act of appropriation. To find strategies and tools to "be in attention" from both the outside and the inside; the folded membrane that simultaneously separates and connects, a third neither/nor-element dissolving the either/or of dialectics and synthesis.

Seen from this point of view, the blast of the shofar is literally a “thing that gathers,” simultaneously being signifier and the zero of signifiers. Both in its mythical origin and its contemporary ceremonial use, the sound is presented to produce an attention, but an attention devoted to an alterity that just left;<sup>14</sup> the sound not only designating but being the very threshold between an absence and a presence

Again, here there is an obvious similarity with Hölderlin's concept of the *caesura*, the hiatus or gap produced by “a break in the flow of sound.”<sup>15</sup> In terms of aesthetics and transcendence, from the perspective of a contemporary economy based on the continuous flow of accelerated appearances, this idea of transcendence as a passage rendered possible by the disruption of appearance presents an intriguing and concrete tool.

The *caesura* is the moment of absence, or the absence of moment. This figure of non-realised potential connotes a number of references, like the archaic magic given to the suspension produced in a solar eclipse and Walter Benjamin's metaphor of history as a sudden unexpected flash (see “The Time and Space of Appearance”). Yet another, slightly more radical, version is the extensive use of delay in contemporary electro, and maybe even more the accumulated euphoria built by *the drop*, where the repetitive beat of a drum pattern or a pumping bassline suddenly is discontinued and disappears. A suspension of time-space, the disruption of progress; for a brief moment, no reproduction of presence. The gods return to heaven, the humans return back to earth—a passage opens, like a flash, and for a second or two the future lies completely open.

For me the concept of *negativity* is connected to the figure of Negative/Negation/Negotiation. Maybe, more specific than pure negativity, my interest lies in time-spaces of absence; or, more precisely, aesthetic strategies allowing for absence to temporarily appear in presence. According to this, the shofar doesn't so much produce attention to its sound, but rather

directs our attention towards the absence made present in the silence between the sounds.

I'd like to end with an excerpt from a text by Matthew Phillips called "2015: *The Neofuturist Aesthetic*," published for the webzine *Tinymixtapes* in December 2015. From my perspective, it has a lot of commonalities to the issues and tropes I'm concerned with, and also possibly some sort of trajectory for a practice that could expand beyond a purely auditory territory.

*The most dominant element in Futurism's aesthetic program is its apotheosis of speed. Speed represented the acceleration of human potential and the violent desire for progress. Neofuturism attacks these myths of temporal development and introduces structures that deepen the complexity of their temporal arrangements. By representing acceleration and then arresting it, by inserting ruptures and breaks into seemingly ideal continuities, the neofuturist aesthetic disrupts the aesthetic paradigms of its predecessors and posits a new organizing temporal motif for its program: the event.*

*Music moves. It must. Electronic music often moves along a fixed path set by the sequencer, the autocratic clock that organizes all of its notes. This phenomenon is perhaps most important in club music, where synchronized rhythms define the motions of bodies in space. But even the earliest examples of dance music include brief disruptions in that flow, just enough to play with the audience's expectations or to set up an inevitable return of the beat. The bass drop in EDM is but one example of this mode; subtler methods feature brief cutouts and skips that create anticipation in their sudden arrest of the track's motion—but the motion forward typically continues shortly afterwards. By contrast, the neofuturist works exhibit a sense of motion and arrest that is often built directly into the rhythmic structure of the track. Moments of arrest receive a sonic weight that*

*is equal to that of the motion forward. In this way, stillness checks the acceleration of speed, complicating the symbol of forward progress with images of crisis.*

(...)

*The neofuturist aesthetic's motif of the event relies on interruption. Silence slices the wall of sound into fragments, revealing each moment of sounding as a choice, each of which can operate independently in the runtime of the track, shifting the weight of signifying from the forward progress of the song to the individual moment that is occurring. Motion still continues, inexorably forward, as all time is bound, but any particular event in the continuum now receives its own specific mass.*

(...)

*This instability, this absence of solidity, suggests a new reading of the future, in which the progressive incursion of technology offers neither predictable consequences nor even the opportunity to decipher successive, novel events.*

*What the neofuturist aesthetic offers is not a mere escape, but a counterfuture. Reclaiming the future and refiguring its shape is a pivotal stage in wresting liberation from those who would institute their vision of the future by force. Will we find our way back to the garden? Or do we march inexorably toward the birth of synthetic gods, intelligences that will rule like Gnostic archons over a blighted, post-industrial wasteworld? Time will tell.<sup>16</sup>*

- 1 Before the law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a man from the country and prays for admittance to the Law. But the doorkeeper says that he cannot grant admittance at the moment. The man thinks it over and then asks if he will be allowed in later. "It is possible," says the doorkeeper, "but not at the moment." Since the gate stands open, as usual, and the doorkeeper steps to one side, the man stoops to peer through the gateway into the interior. Observing that, the doorkeeper laughs and says: "If you are so drawn to it, just try to go in despite my veto. But take note: I am powerful. And I am only the least of the doorkeepers. From hall to hall there is one doorkeeper after another, each more powerful than the last. The third doorkeeper is already so terrible that even I cannot bear to look at him." These are difficulties the man from the country has not expected; the Law, he thinks, should surely be accessible at all times and to everyone, but as he now takes a closer look at the doorkeeper in his fur coat, with his big sharp nose and long, thin, black Tartar beard, he decides that it is better to wait until he gets permission to enter. The doorkeeper gives him a stool and lets him sit down at one side of the door. There he sits for days and years. He makes many attempts to be admitted, and wearies the doorkeeper by his importunity. The doorkeeper frequently has little interviews with him, asking him questions about his home and many other things, but the questions are put indifferently, as great lords put them, and always finish with the statement that he cannot be let in yet. The man, who has furnished himself with many things for his journey, sacrifices all he has, however valuable, to bribe the doorkeeper. The doorkeeper accepts everything, but always with the remark: "I am only taking it to keep you from thinking you have omitted anything." During these many years the man fixes his attention almost continuously on the doorkeeper. He forgets the other doorkeepers, and this first one seems to him the sole obstacle preventing access to the Law. He curses his bad luck, in his early years boldly and loudly; later, as he grows old, he only grumbles to himself. He becomes childish, and since in his yearlong contemplation of the doorkeeper he has come to know even the fleas in his fur collar, he begs the fleas as well to help him and to change the doorkeeper's mind. At length his eyesight begins to fail, and he does not know whether the world is really darker or whether his eyes are only deceiving him. Yet in his darkness he is now aware of a radiance that streams inextinguishably from the gateway of the Law. Now he has not very long to live. Before he dies, all his experiences in these long years gather themselves in his head to one point, a question he has not yet asked the doorkeeper. He waves him nearer, since he can no longer raise his stiffening body. The doorkeeper has to bend low toward him, for the difference in height between them has altered much to the man's disadvantage. "What do you want to know now?" asks the doorkeeper; "you are insatiable." "Everyone strives to reach the Law," says the man, "so how does it happen that for all these many years no one but myself has ever begged for admittance?" The doorkeeper recognizes that the man has reached his end, and, to let his failing senses catch the words, roars in his ear: "No one else could ever be admitted here, since this gate was made only for you. I am now going to shut it."

(*The Complete Stories of Franz Kafka*. Translation Willa and Edwin Muir, Ed. Nahum Norbert Glatzer. London, England: Vintage, 2005.)

- 2 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, p. 183-220 (Routledge, 1992)
- 3 Maria Schuback Cavalcante, *Lovtal till Intet*, (Glänta Produktion 2006), my translation
- 4 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 199 (University of Chicago Press, 1958)



- 5 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, p. 5-13 (Fordham University Press 2007)
- 6 *Questions to Stella and Judd*, interview by Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy R. Lippard, p. 148-164 (University of California Press, 1995)
- 7 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 85 and p. 116 (Harvard University Press, 1989)
- 8 *Questions to Stella and Judd*, interview by Bruce Glaser, edited by Lucy R. Lippard, p. 148-164 (University of California Press, 1995)
- 9 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, p. 67-68 (University of Minnesota Press, 1993)
- 10 Sigmund Freud, "Recommendations to Physicians practicing Psycho-analysis," The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XII (1911-1913): The Case of Schreber, Papers on Technique and Other Works, p. 111-12 (Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis ,1912/1958)
- 11 Theodor Reik, *The Shofar*, in *Ritual: Psycho-Analytic Studies*, p. 255-256 (Groove Press, 1962)
- 12 Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity* (Routledge, 1993)
- 13 Theodor Reik, *The Shofar*, in *Ritual: Psycho-Analytic Studies*, p. 253-258 (Groove Press, 1962)
- 14 Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, p. 78 (Harvest Book, 1981)
- 15 Many years ago I met this really, really drunk Icelandic guy at a party, I think it was the opening of a production of Kaurismäki's *I Hired a Contract Killer* that I made in Copenhagen. He was so inebriated that he hardly could talk, and I had already tried to leave the table for quite a while when he suddenly takes my hand and explains: "*But if I would do Godot, it would start like this—When the audience enters there is already a man sitting on the stage. Over and over again he is looking at his wristwatch. Then he gives up, takes his stool and leaves. And then the play begins.*"



# NEUROSIS AND ANTI-NEUROSIS IN THE PRESENT MOMENT

Benjamin Noys



Neurosis is not very popular. It carries all the connotations of delay, prevarication, and self reproach that seem unnecessary luxuries in the face of the urgent demands of the present. We simply, it would seem, cannot afford to be neurotic. Instead, the demands of the present moment call for us to dissolve neurosis. There is no space for the psychic interiority carved out by the neurotic self, when we are called into the domain of “schizo” fluxes or seduced by the pressing demands of a “world of becoming.”<sup>1</sup> Jane Bennett declares that:

*To attempt, as I do, to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common is to bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its condition of possibility, and its boundaries.*<sup>2</sup>

If we are called to bracket human subjectivity to reveal “vibrant matter,” then the last thing we want to do is to remain with neurosis, which seems to orbit only the interior of that subjectivity. Neurosis would appear to be correlationism compounded.<sup>3</sup>

This antipathy to neurosis is also true of certain articulations of accelerationism. Nick Land castigated the “obsessional neurosis of ethical thought” in contrast to the schizoanalytic “delicious irresponsibility of everything anarchic, inundating and harshly impersonal.”<sup>4</sup> The task, for Land, was “to unpack the neurotic refusal mechanisms that separate capital from its own madness.”<sup>5</sup> Neurosis is an impediment, a blockage, and the interruption of desire; it is everything that must be destroyed to engage with “real” madness. From neurosis to *Neuromancer*. Of all the mental “disorders” neurosis has, perhaps, got the worst name. It lacks the “glamour” and excess of hysteria. While technically hysteria is a neurosis, the florid and theatrical forms it has taken have often been regarded as protests against bourgeois society, especially on the constraints on women.<sup>6</sup> Theodor Adorno remarked:

“Even in Ibsen’s time, most of the women who had gained some standing in bourgeois society were ready to turn and rend their hysterical sisters who undertook, in their stead, the hopeless attempt to break out of the social prison which so emphatically turned its four walls to them all.”<sup>7</sup> Psychopathy, psychosis, and perversion have all been used to characterize contemporary society and, even if negatively, have gained a role as signature cultural disorders. Jacques Lacan suggested the ethic of psychoanalysis as one of not giving way on one’s desire and so implied the neurotic would be the one who does give way on their desire.<sup>8</sup> The neurotic, we could vulgarly say, is the one who does not go all the way.

I want to suggest that this “failure” of the neurotic might be interesting. Such a suggestion appears, ironically, perverse. Why valorize the struggles of the neurotic against the whole trend of contemporary thought to try to accede to a thought from outside? What is the “great outdoors” of a world of objects and fluxes compared to the wretched interior of the neurotic’s inner world?<sup>9</sup> This is the risk I am prepared to run to get some grip on the problem of mediation and psychic subjectivity that has been all too rapidly dissolved in contemporary theory. My suggestion is that there is something still to learn from neurosis and that something is, precisely, the difficult problem of mediation that structures contemporary experience. Neurosis is not simply a deadlock, but a deadlock that can unlock our own tortured negotiations with the violent forms of capitalist abstraction that shape our psychic subjectivity.

## A VERY BRIEF HISTORY OF ANTI-NEUROSIS

The history of anti-neurosis originates in Jung's break with Freud. Jung was always unhappy with Freud's emphasis on infantile sexuality, preferring to replace this with a more general notion of libido as vitalist life force. Jung also worked closely with schizophrenics and regarded the world of psychosis as the opening to the myth filled experience of the collective unconscious.<sup>10</sup> Another significant figure who influenced the anti-neurotic turn was Wilhelm Reich who, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, "caused a song of life to pass into psychoanalysis."<sup>11</sup> Reich's vitalist emphasis on the power of desire, posed against the repressions of capitalist society and conformist psychoanalysis, takes aim at the restricted form of neurosis. It would be Deleuze and Guattari who synthesized both Jung and Reich in their 1972 book *Anti-Oedipus*,<sup>12</sup> proclaiming: "A schizophrenic out for a walk is a better model than a neurotic lying on the analyst's couch."<sup>13</sup> The compromises of the neurotic reflect, for Deleuze and Guattari, the compromises of Freudian-psychoanalysis. Once again, Freud doesn't go far enough, remaining with his neurotics, while "Far from having lost who knows what contact with life, the schizophrenic is closest to the beating heart of reality, to an intense point identical with the production of the real."<sup>14</sup> It is the schizophrenic who is the revolutionary, perhaps leaving the neurotic as the reformist (at best) or conformist (at worst).

To be anti-oedipal was to be anti-neurotic. This identification is neatly laid out in the index to the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's book on Kafka. The entry for Neurosis reads "Neurosis, See Oedipus."<sup>15</sup> Kafka, seemingly the archetypal neurotic and Oedipal writer was, under the reading of Deleuze and Guattari, the one who produced a bloated Oedipus that exploded the triangular form of "mommy-daddy-me" by "exaggeration of it to the point of absurdity."<sup>16</sup> Even the most neurotic could be found to be the least neurotic. But things didn't stay that happy...

In his “Letter to a Harsh Critic,” published in 1973 in response to the “harsh critic” Michel Cressole, Deleuze reflected on the fate of his work, especially on *Anti-Oedipus*. While Deleuze and Guattari had celebrated the schiz, now Deleuze admitted that “Real and pretend schizophrenics are giving me such a hard time that I’m starting to see the attractions of paranoia. Long live paranoia.”<sup>17</sup> In addition, Deleuze insisted to Cressole that his “favorite sentence” in *Anti-Oedipus* was “Someone asked us if we had ever seen a schizophrenic—no, no, we have never seen one.”<sup>18</sup> While *Anti Oedipus* had contrasted the explosive power of the schiz to the risks of paranoia, Deleuze might have been tempted to give up on the “real and pretend schizophrenics” but could not bring himself to embrace the neurotic.

Yet, I want to neurotically, or even perversely, draw inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari. In *Anti-Oedipus* they constantly rewrite Freud to “open out” his work from what they regard as the confines of the Oedipal triangle out into the wider world, from the couch to the walk. One of the central figures of *Anti-Oedipus* is Daniel Paul Schreber, the German judge who authored *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness* (1903), about his experiences of paranoia and eventual schizophrenic breakdown. Schreber’s illness included the belief that he was being persecuted by God, who was turning him into a woman so as to have sex with Schreber. Deleuze and Guattari, in re-reading the case of Schreber, refuse the usual Oedipal stress on “Schreber’s daddy.”<sup>19</sup> Schreber’s destiny, they remark, was “not merely that of being sodomized, while still alive, by the rays from heaven, but also that of being posthumously oedipalized by Freud.”<sup>20</sup> Instead, Deleuze and Guattari read Schreber’s delirium as a world historical mapping of “empires:” “All paranoid deliriums stir up similar historical, geographic, and racial masses,” but “everything is ground, squashed, triangulated into Oedipus” by Freud.<sup>21</sup> What I want to suggest is that something similar can be done with neurosis. It too can be opened out, but in such a way that also suggests that the great outdoors promised by Deleuze and Guattari might be more of a problem than they imagine.



## NEUROTIC INSTALLMENTS

To this end I want to turn to “the Rat Man.” This is a 1909 case study by Freud of an obsessional neurotic titled “Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” but better known as “the Rat Man case.” In fact, it is generally accepted that the patient’s name was Ernst Lazner, who was a twenty nine year old lawyer. At the heart of his disturbance was a sexualized fantasy of the rat torture: the “Chinese” punishment of attaching a container of live rats to a victim, who would then burrow into the victim’s anus. When recounting this story: “His face took on a very strange, composite expression. I could only interpret it as one of horror at pleasure of his own of which he himself was unaware.”<sup>22</sup> What is “very strange” is the emergence of pleasure, of what Lacan would call *jouissance*, in the case of the neurotic. Instead of an image of constraint we have a “composite expression” that reveals a *jouissance* that is also denied. The compromises of neurosis, I want to suggest, are not simply antithetical to this experience of pleasure, but rather its condition.

One thing to note is that Freud regarded himself as obsessional. He also had a real difficulty in writing up the case. In a letter to Jung, at this point friendly with Freud (the history of psychoanalysis is a history of de-friending), Freud wrote:

*This one undertaking is my paper about the Rat Man. I am finding it very difficult; it is almost beyond my powers of presentation; the paper will probably be intelligible to no one outside our immediate circle. How bungled our reproductions are, how wretchedly we dissect the great art works of psychic nature! Unfortunately this paper in turn is becoming too bulky. It just pours out of me, and even so it's inadequate, incomplete and therefore untrue. A wretched business.*<sup>23</sup>

It is nice to know that others find writing difficult and that the writing of neurosis is often wretched compared to “the

great works of psychic nature.” Consolation is limited, however, as we are talking about Freud.

The centre of the case would appear to be the “Chinese torture” and this is evident in Freud using the term “Rat Man.” For Freud, the Rat Man case marks the appearance of “the nuclear complex of the neuroses,”<sup>24</sup> i.e. Oedipus.<sup>25</sup> It appears as the paradigmatic case of the link between neurosis and Oedipus. Nick Land, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, contests this containment of the Rat Man within the Oedipal narrative. For Land, the entry of the rat into the anus is the entry of an “impersonal libidinal force from beyond representational discourse.”<sup>26</sup> The organization of this force into the Orientalist fantasy of the “Chinese” torture is, for Land, symptomatic of the “anal-sadistic structure of humanism.”<sup>27</sup> It does appear likely that this mode of torture was, in fact, derived from Octave Mirabeau’s decadent novel *Torture Garden*, which suggests this fantasmatic investment. Land suggests that while “there is a neurotic and conformist stratum in Freud,” this “floats upon the impersonal flows of desire that erupt out of traumatized nature.”<sup>28</sup> This is similar to Deleuze and Guattari’s reading of Kafka, in that while we might expect neurosis, and so Oedipus, what we should really find is the explosive movement of impersonal libido. Such a reading remains within the anti-neurotic consensus. I want to try something different.

While this case study obviously appears to be about the “Chinese torture,” we can see that the case study is actually being about money, and more precisely debt, as Jacques Lacan has pointed out.<sup>29</sup> This debt involves a particularly tortured story. While on military manoeuvrers, the Rat Man lost his *pince-nez*. Ordering another pair, he is required to pay when picking them up. A colleague tells the Rat Man that another lieutenant has picked up the pince-nez and paid, and so the Rat Man should pay the lieutenant. But the Rat Man becomes convinced that it is the colleague who told him this who needs to be paid, and if he does not pay him a

friend or relative will suffer the rat torture. The Rat Man devises various schemes to pay back the colleague, in appropriately circuitous ways, including by various train journeys. In the end it turned out the Rat Man actually needed to pay the post girl at the station who had paid the fee...

Freud remarks that the neurotic symptom is “the outcome of a conflict which arises over a new method of satisfying the libido.”<sup>30</sup> The symptom, which is an expression of suffering, is also a mode of satisfaction and pleasure. In the Rat Man case, Freud tells us “I remarked that it was well known to us that patients derived a certain satisfaction from their sufferings, so that in reality they all resisted their recovery to some extent.”<sup>31</sup> This is also why Slavoj Žižek is astute when he titles one of his books *Enjoy Your Symptom!*<sup>32</sup> Lacan’s concept of *jouissance* is useful precisely as it combines the form of pleasure with suffering. This is why, contrary to the invocations of “pure *jouissance*,” we could argue the twisted path of the neurotic is more revealing of the fact that *jouissance* emerges out of this compromise formation and not despite of it. This pleasure emerges out of a relationship of debt and indebtedness, as the Rat Man tries to repay the debt he has incurred, but can’t seem to do it. The Rat Man’s neurosis opens up the condition of “indebted man,” a condition that might resonate all the more after 2008.<sup>33</sup>

The condition of debt is a neurotic condition. In the case of the Rat Man, this is, classically and Oedipally, linked to the debts of the father. The Rat Man’s father had once incurred a debt that nearly lead him to being disgraced. Debt is trans-generational. Out of this situation, as Freud puts it, “in his [the Rat Man’s] obsessional deliria he had coined himself a regular rat currency.”<sup>34</sup> This is a currency of words, with the German setting up links between the signifier “rat,” “ratten” (rates), and “Raten” (installments). I want to suggest this experience is not simply closed down or triangulated, but maps a series of relationships of debt, of delayed but demanded instalments in which debt must be serviced. We are compelled, neurotically, by debt. To service

debt we must establish our bonafides, our good standing and our credit rating: we must not be rats! The Rat Man, with his twisted paths to pleasure, suggests the twisted pleasures of debt, which permit us to enjoy and, at the same time, demand our obedience. Debt is the abstract and yet real manifestation of our super-ego.<sup>35</sup>

## RETURNS TO NEUROSIS

While neurosis has been rejected and cast out, it might not be so easy to escape. But doesn't neurosis still represent just a blockage? Isn't it simply a sign of our bondage? In his *The Trouble with Pleasure* (2016), devoted to re-reading Deleuze with Lacan, Aaron Schuster not only suggests a more psychoanalytic reading of Deleuze, but also the possibilities of neurosis. For Schuster, the neurotic is the figure of maladaptation, but this lack of adaptation suggests the failure of our political, economic, and philosophical frameworks:

*Neurosis is the name for the crack in these frameworks, the protest that stems from their internal fissures and inconsistencies—the neurotic is somehow both a sad and heroic figure, the reject of civilization and the embodiment of its explosive dynamism.*<sup>36</sup>

Schuster tends to give this maladaptation an ontological weight, as the neurotic's complaint is related to the situation of being born, of the human being forced into existence with no way out, as even suicide cannot erase the fact of being born. While this ontological insight then produces an ontic resistance to various "frameworks," we might want to suggest a more historicised vision of this "ontological dilemma."

This can be found in Adorno's *Minima Moralia*. Contemplating neurosis as a sign of "healthy" maladaptation, compared to "pathic health, infantilism raised to a norm,"<sup>37</sup> Adorno suggests a deeper truth of neurosis, even beyond neurosis.

Treating the “healthy” character of capitalism as a deformation, Adorno argues “no science has yet explored the inferno in which were forged the deformations that later emerge to daylight as cheerfulness, openness, sociability, successful adaptation to the inevitable, an equable, practical frame of mind.”<sup>38</sup> These traits are formed, according to Adorno, at an even earlier phase of childhood than the neuroses. They are the result of a “prehistorical surgical intervention,”<sup>39</sup> a deep wound, while neurosis is a later formation of conflict. The capacity of neurosis becomes the capacity to indicate this deep wound in the human psyche, rather than sealing it up in the formation of the “slick stupidity of Junior.”<sup>40</sup>

In his essay “Notes on Kafka,” Adorno remarks that: “Instead of curing neurosis, he [Kafka] seeks in it itself the healing force, that of knowledge: the wounds with which society brands the individual are seen by the latter as ciphers of the social untruth, as the negative of truth.”<sup>41</sup> Unlike Deleuze and Guattari’s celebration of Kafka for exploding Oedipus, here the capacity for healing lies in knowledge of the wounds inflicted by society. In this way, neurosis becomes a “healing force” by indicating these wounds, tracing their contours, and so revealing “the negative of truth.” In Adorno’s scattered reflections, we see the insistence on neurosis as registering an historical trauma, one that is not simply original but shaped and formed, or deformed, through the emergence and solidification of capitalism. Adorno finds in maladaptation the truth of our society and so, in negative, also the truth of another society that would not deform people into sources of value.

The risk of returning to neurosis is that we simply celebrate a damaged form of subjectivity, and so celebrate failure and irresolution. This would be to remain in the position of what Hegel calls the “beautiful soul:” the one who projects their disorder onto the world and so falls into madness due to their own inability to accede to action.<sup>42</sup> Such a rehabilitation of inaction is part of the modernist project, especially

in the work of Beckett, where inaction becomes valorized for its negativity.<sup>43</sup> Beyond the risk that we simply remain in inaction, another risk of such an art of failure is that it becomes “a fancy theoretical pose.”<sup>44</sup> In this case, nothing succeeds like failure. Certainly, Adorno can be read as the anguished attempt to hold together Hegel and Beckett, to not simply accede to the attractions of the beautiful soul while also preserving a function of distance and inaction as a sign of truth. Here, neurosis would not simply be a failure, not easily reversed into success, but the sign and register of historical suffering and the possibility of its transcendence.

Out of this conflict, these opposing forces, this neurotic situation, I have suggested we might find something of pleasure and happiness, even if in the negative. Neurosis would be a phenomenology that did not simply jump to pleasure and happiness in the mode of *jouissance*, but indicate the impossibility of that celebration of transgressive excess. This is not a new conformity, but the mapping of impasses and failures, missed historical chances, and the trauma of the constitution of character under high capitalism. At the same time, it is a possibility of something that places a demand on us, to not simply give up pleasure and happiness as contaminated and ruined or existing as a “beyond.”

## CONCLUSION: STAYING NEUROTIC

This has been a long, winding, and neurotic path, dipping into psychosis, which may have achieved little; the neurotic’s anxiety, again. Why bother? What difference does this make? What actually do we do? These are questions posed pretty much all the time to academic work, particularly in the humanities. Sometimes, the tempting answer is to say we bother precisely because we have no effect, make no difference, and do nothing. Maybe the neurotic response is to simply insist on the neurotic. To insist we don’t know, to delay, to prevaricate about claims to “smooth” transitions

or translations into practice. After all, the neurotic is the one who insists on fantasy because, as Schuster notes,<sup>45</sup> they gain their enjoyment from fantasy. Instead of voiding the fantasy in fantasmatic claims to immediate access to the Real, I am suggesting, neurotically, we stay with the fantasy. This is not simply to stay with fantasy as the means of delay, but rather as the site to think out forms of delay, interruption, and the lack of transition to practice. Neurosis, I am suggesting, offers a key to deadlocks as it is the site of deadlocks, the practice of deadlocks.

This, as I suggested at the start, is a typically neurotic reaction to all the promises of immediacy and dissolution that seem to structure various currents of contemporary theory: speculative realism, with its critique of all forms of “correlationism;” new materialism, with its partisan stance in favour of nonhuman actants; accelerationism, which in various forms celebrates the melding of the human and non-human or machinic; and communisation, with its “proletarian structuralism” of a determinism structured through the forms of capitalism. It is not that nothing can be learned from them, but rather one thing that they seem to struggle to learn themselves is the place of fantasy and the complexity of the psyche as a site of experience. The voiding of fantasy is the theoretical gesture of our moment par excellence. Of course, in all the usual and new imperatives of urgency, to which neurosis seems definitively opposed, this desire is not surprising. My aim in staying neurotic is not to stay detached from these demands, but rather to experience them in their difficulty, in their engagement with our fantasies of activity and passivity. Here is where I stop.

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- 2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p.ix.
- 3 Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2009).
- 4 Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2013), p.264, p.265.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.278.
- 6 Hélène Cixious and Catherine Clément, "The Untenable", in *In Dora's Case*, ed. Charles Bernheimer and Clare Kahane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 276–293.
- 7 Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (London: Verso, 1974), p.93.
- 8 Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959–1960*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller and trans. Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 1992), p.314. Stuart Schniederma, however, points out, "Acting in accord with one's desire does not mean doing whatever one feels whenever one feels like it. If the analysand is to assume anything from psychoanalysis it should be the notion of responsibility for his [sic] words and actions," in *Rat Man* (New York: New York University Press, 1986), p.2.
- 9 Meillassoux, *After Finitude*; for a critique see Daniel Spaulding, "Inside Out," Mute Magazine 20 October 2015: <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/inside-out-0>
- 10 Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious* (London: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1919).
- 11 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.119.
- 12 For Jung's influence on Deleuze, see Christian Kerslake, "Rebirth through Incest: On Deleuze's Early Jungianism," *Angelaki* 9.1 (2004): 135–157.
- 13 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.2.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p.87.
- 15 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p.103.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.10.
- 17 Gilles Deleuze, "Letter to a Harsh Critic," in *Negotiations, 1972–1990*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), pp.3–12, p.3.
- 18 Deleuze, "Letter to a Harsh Critic," p.12; Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.380.
- 19 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, p.14.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.57.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p.56.
- 22 Sigmund Freud, *P.F.L. 9: Case Histories II*, trans. James Strachey and ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1979), p.48.



- 23 Freud in William McGuire (ed.), *The Freud/Jung Letters* (London: Picador, 1979), p.156.
- 24 Freud, *P.F.L.* 9, p.88.
- 25 It is, however, possible to argue for an "anti-Oedipal Freud," see Philippe Van Haute and Herman Westerink, "Introduction: Hysteria, Sexuality, and the Deconstruction of Normativity—Rereading Freud's 1905 edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*," in Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, the 1905 Edition, trans. Ulrike Kistner, ed. And intro, Philippe Van Haute and Herman Westerink (London and New York: Verso, 2016), pp.xiii–lxxvi.
- 26 Land, *Fanged Noumena*, p.199.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*, p.283.
- 29 Owen Hewitson, "Reading 'The Neurotic's Individual Myth'—Lacan's Masterwork on Obsession," [Lacanonline.com](http://www.lacanonline.com), 23 September 2013: <http://www.lacanonline.com/index/2013/09/reading-the-neurotics-individual-myth-lacans-master-work-on-obsession/>
- 30 Sigmund Freud, *P.F.L. 1: Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey and ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1973), pp.404–5.
- 31 Freud, *P.F.L.* 9, p.64.
- 32 Slavoj Žižek, *Enjoy Your Symptom!: Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992).
- 33 Maurizio Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, trans. Joshua David Jordon (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2012).
- 34 Freud, *P.F.L.* 9, p.94.
- 35 Lazzarato, *The Making of the Indebted Man*, p.95.
- 36 Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), p.22.
- 37 Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p.22.
- 38 *Ibid.*, p.59.
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 *Ibid.*, p.22.
- 41 Theodor Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), p.252.
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- 44 Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, *Arts of Impoverishment: Beckett, Rothko, Resnais* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), p.1.
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# MISE EN ABYME

to Peggy Phelan



## DEAR PEGGY

How has the new year started for you? It has been a bit turbulent on my end. The other day, after we got home from the airport after spending some days in Copenhagen, we came upon Syrian refugee family stranded in our stairwell—a couple with two kids, pregnant with a third. They are stuck in the Swedish migration system between authorities, waiting for their papers to be transferred from some place to another, and since it is -15° C outside right now in Stockholm, they've ended up staying in my apartment for a while.

There is a rather urgent situation developing here in Europe; I don't know how visible that is from the perspective of the US. The West flattens all borders to capital, only to immediately re-establish and close off the same borders as soon as the political consequences of globalisation arrive at our doorstep. This double game is creating an escalation of events that could end very badly. What we experience is a political inability to define visions and sustainable solutions encountering a humanitarian urgency that doesn't give any space for "us" or "them," but only for "we." This urgency won't go away anytime soon. No matter what kind of conceptual divisions we come up with, this crisis is something we have in common, and the community of Europe needs strategies to solve this situation just as much as the migrants do. What is unfolding is an irreversible historical change, that inevitably is going to happen to all of us, and it cannot be addressed or understood in terms of how "we" can help "them:" we are literally in this together and need to find out how to approach the situation together. This current capitulation of politics as a tool to define and mobilise a common project—where contemporary politicians understand their task to be the administration of privilege and wealth among its citizens, a pattern of thought that makes them act out of fear for their own constituency—is rapidly developing into a collapse of society that is super scary.

From that perspective, it is very nice to have this family staying here. Partly because they needed to sleep, eat, and relax for

some days and it feels good to help out, but mainly because they help me understand, in practice, how to deal with this situation just as much as the other way around.

Anyways... this is not what I intended to write about.

But this and some other events have had a major impact on my perspective, and I realise it is impossible for me to continue my work without finding a way to include these events in my figures of thought.

I've been thinking a lot about the PM from Deutsche Bank that you sent me in September. It has this eerie enigmatic attraction. Somehow because, just like it's written in the PM, you get this feeling of: "Wow, really, this changes everything!" However, any interpretation of what "this" is, as well as what it is that will be changed and to what end, escapes me.

What we are dealing with is a financial automaton consisting of algorithmic computer programs operating in a double bind to a) make decisions and b) provide the analytic foundation for these decisions. If I understand the message correctly, we have reached some sort of irreversible point, what I believe in terms of A.I. would be called a singularity, where this automaton has reached a level of self reflectiveness making it operate independently from any human agency. The algorithmic market acts as both sender and receiver, controlling decisions and implementations of financial transactions; done at speeds beyond human perception, based on analyses and valorisations from within its own horizons.

"The market is now observing itself from another angle as an observer of the observer of the observers..." What happens in AlgoLand stays in AlgoLand; the material world of humans is no longer of any concern to the agency of the artificial intelligence of global finance.

I don't know if this train of thought makes any sense to you... or if my need to produce some kind of cohesion has made me

confuse things by trying to link incompatible topics with each other. But I believe it connects to some of my thoughts about the relation between aesthetic practices and “reality” that are rather central topics in my work: how does my production of this or that aesthetic intervention actually interact with reality? Not described in terms of my artistic or ideological intention, but in terms of its actual effect. If I take the retrospective perspective of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, then what trace is it that my artistic practice actually leaves behind?

I don’t know if this train of thought makes any sense to you... or if my need to produce some kind of cohesion has made me confuse things by trying to link incompatible topics with each other. But I believe it connects to some of my thoughts about the relation between aesthetic practices and “reality” that are rather central topics in my work: how does my production of this or that aesthetic intervention actually interact with reality? Not described in terms of my artistic or ideological intention, but in terms of its actual effect. If I take the retrospective perspective of Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, then what trace is it that my artistic practice actually leaves behind?

Lately, I’ve been struggling to maintain a sense of making sense. Whether in a performative or discursive context, the purpose in my daily practice of producing imagery is getting increasingly lost to me; I keep doing it because that’s what I do, but as the days go by and the need to conjure up alternative realities is getting more and more urgent, I find it harder and harder to resist the sensation of total lack of connection between the intention of my production and its actual result. It’s like that dream Bill Pullman’s character has in *Lost Highway*, where he tries to exit a room through a dark corridor only to find that the corridor takes him to the same room he just left. It’s a trap: in my desire to visualise a possible change, I am producing imageries and fantasies that are re-producing the *Real of production* I have been trying to oppose.

The economic logic of contemporary capitalism is all inclusive: an ideologically colorblind apparatus of immanence. It is an

economy fuelled by difference—the minimal difference in design separating this year's blue Adidas from last year's green Asics makes it possible to sell the same shoe once again. But the economy of attention is also a market trading in the hard currency of imagery that displays differences of identity and subjectivity—and this is where it gets tricky and claustrophobic in terms of politics and artistic practices. It is a paranoid feedback loop between the social need for the production of subjectivity, and the instant capitalisation of identities into: a) images advertising key values as “difference,” “creativity,” “multitude,” etc., and b) defined target groups of consumers of material as well as immaterial commodities.

In his book *Malign Velocities*, Benjamin Noys suggests a connection between the production of economy, politics, and imaginary during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to what he describes as a collapse of fantasy under contemporary modes of production, which constitutes a plane of immanence of sorts. Regardless what kind of imaginary, fantasy, or vision of an outside horizon I introduce in the world, it is immediately re-territorialised into the modes of production constituting this reality: “*We see a collapsing of fantasy, and also a collapsing of fictional space, into the Real of production and acceleration.*”<sup>1</sup>

Sorry, this letter is getting way longer than I meant it to be. And I really find my own thoughts to be confused, grasping all over the place. But somehow, I do sense there is a connection between the thoughts actualised by my encounter with the Syrian family and my doubts regarding the ability of my artistic practice to transcend the confinements of its local horizon.

The development of the situation in Europe over the last couple of years was both inevitable and unequivocal—our traditional strategies of externalising and outsourcing political and financial conflicts and traumas outside our own territories (a Swedish expertise for centuries) is revealing itself as a desperate illusion. The current tidal wave of right wing nationalism and fascist movements is a clear reaction to the crumbling of this illusion, as is the



collapse of a social democratic welfare project built on, and held together by, the narrative of a national working class.

This collapse means a shift of the ontological basis of politics, from an ideological perspective that asks what opinion or action is ethically right, to a realisation of an actual emergency in which the future well-being of the people I care about is a question of how well we can learn to interact with a coming reality of which I have very limited knowledge. The seemingly secure position of an individual in the privileged solitude of my apartment, no less than that of the residents of gated communities, becomes a confinement that isolates me from the reality I need to learn from. I feel the urgency to “do something” but I don’t have access to any points of connection or interfaces where I can practice how to be part of a context and community that is socially, culturally, and linguistically totally new to me. I am also a shy and socially not very talented person; the very idea of walking down to the Central Station to make contact with a family I’ve never met, whose language I don’t speak, and to invite them to my home is a project so unsurmountable and downright scary that it turns any possible initiative into a complete abstraction. But if they’re standing on my door step, the situation and the solution become simple and self-evident. It’s freezing cold outside, I have an apartment, there is food in the fridge and heat in the radiators; what’s the problem? What I’m trying to say is that they’re offering a solution to my problem by offering their presence; they produce the proximity where the complex combination of abstract borders is exchanged for the concreteness of my doorstep. In the field of performing arts I always teach that each threshold is simultaneously a divider and connector, the physical or mental frontier necessary to produce an interface, so it’s funny that it should come as a surprise.

Then again, I am so happy that housing my Syrian guests isn’t part of the economy of an art project (even though I just now realise I am potentially performing exactly that transaction by including them in this letter). I think this emotional reaction is not exclusively a private matter. For me it also explains why I have

such a complex relation to political art nowadays and also why, at least in our current situation, the issue of transcendence in itself is a central political matter. Since today any expression or display of subjectivity, i.e. a transcendence in the name of some specific agency, is immediately appropriated, capitalised and re-territorialised into the plane of immanence of economy, I think maybe the objective of producing *Passage-As-Such* might be a crucial political task. An open-ended transcendence into “what-ever” would be a relevant aesthetic objective.

I hope I am not trying to weave too many threads and patterns into the same carpet. If you're still with me that might be a good sign. For me, this paradox of how transcendence and immanence correlate—how they slide in and out of each other in their interaction with economy, language, and the production of political imaginary—could be an interesting starting point. I would love to hear what, if anything, this could mean to you.

yours  
Anders

ps

I am also very curious as to what you think of David Bowie's Houdini act. I was quite stunned by the meticulously conceptualised performativity of his departure, the appearance of a disappearance. But now that all possible media have been so completely flooded with all possible expressions of grief, any attempt to think around that topic at the moment feels like trying to be intimate in Times Square at rush hour. Maybe we can discuss that at a later point, when things have cooled off a bit.

DEAR ANDERS

Thank you for this very moving and interesting note. So much in it!

I think you are right to connect the migrant/survivor/war victim crisis in europe with the economics of global war (and

global capitalism). There is a lot to unpack there and it is, in part, a numbers problem as well as a profoundly human one. And of course the feeling of “reversal” is very crucial. The reversal of history—that we are getting a second chance to “correct” the horror of WW2. Surely this has been playing a big part in Merkel’s decision to keep raising the numbers of “refugees” (wrong word for sure) Germany will “welcome.”

And the logic of reversal is all over the language of the market—the bears/bull debate—the language of “correction” and the language of “boom, bust” are all ways to corral the destabilizing FEELING of reversal. So this is all part of the current geo-economic and human crisis—host/visitor; victim/perpetrator and so on.

I do not know if this film is playing near you at all but when it is, go see “The Big Short” As I watched it, I thought something like this would be a way to ground our discussion, so we do not become too abstract. (I think the Alog/A-logo(s) theme has been done quite a bit elsewhere—this is more of an impression than a factually-based point. I may be wrong. It just FEELS familiar to me).

Hugs, P

DEAR PEGGY

As you will notice, at the moment I have a tendency to write rather long texts. There simply are so many complex interconnected thoughts and concerns I’m trying to figure out. I don’t wish to apologise, it’s the way it is, and I just wanted to say I hope that’s OK with you.

So, now I’ve seen *The Big Short* a second time, with my son Gabriel this time. In many aspects it’s a brilliant film; as a comedy it’s extremely skilful, both in the amount of one-liners and the constant distractions taking place as details happening on the periphery,

which continuously de-stabilizes our focus on what is actually taking place. It wasn't until we got home that I realised it's written and directed by Adam McKay, the same guy from *SNL* that made movies like *Anchorman* and *Talladega Nights*—when Gabriel was in his pre-teens, we went through an extensive Will Ferrell period. There's something about that context that works surprisingly well with the thematic frame: the compulsory laddishness, a whole universe built on collegial and unanimous stupidity. This complete lack of capacity to take anything seriously produces an eerie undertone for the whole story. It is funny and very scary.

I can't tell if this makes it a good film, or a rather problematic one. I've seen it twice now in 10 days, and I still don't know what to make of it. This fact, that I can't decide the nature of what it is that I am watching, is of course a quality in itself. The film is informative, humorous, and oddly weird. The casting alone throws it out joint in an interesting way. To squeeze a combination of Christian Bale, Brad Pitt, Steve Carell, and Ryan Gosling into the same framework is somehow brilliant, and the combination refuses any genre or category of definition (although I don't think all of them ever appear together in the same shot). Still, I can't decide if I like the film or not, or rather if I "believe" in it or not. Both times, watching it has left me with a feeling of gigglish-ness combined with frustrated anger and despairing indifference. I've been trying to figure out why.

It's not that the film describes something new or that I didn't already know about what it portrays. It has not shaken my worldview. I think maybe it is somehow the other way around. The preposterous anomalies of modern economy, the serial cynicism and short-term opportunism in the post-millennial financial world that led to its self-inflicted breakdown of 2008—even the fact that the central top players gambled with the calculation that they would be bailed out by the government—obviously is a repulsive and politically apocalyptic scenario.

But what makes me paralysed is that I already knew all this. We all knew, it was all reported in all possible media in real time as

it happened. All the cynicism, the petty greed and ugliness of it all, the apocalyptic dysfunctionality of modern capitalism was revealed, exposed, and illuminated from all possible angles and perspectives. The whole value-system of neo-liberal ideology and its consequences went through a veritable MRI-scan, and if the idea that art or media can be utilised as tools to “make visible” financial or social iniquities in order to cause political change would have had any substance, then the revolution for sure would have happened somewhere between the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers and the bailout of its executives. We saw it on TV, we read it in newspapers and social media: the story was there, from the beginning, 24/7 in real time. We got the information, then we got angry, then we demonstrated and then we didn't really know what to do. A couple of years passed and then the story returned as fiction.

The 2008 melt down of the financial system has been thoroughly described in movies, all positively received by critics and successful at the box office: *Inside Job* (Academy Award best documentary 2010, world wide gross of \$7,9 million) *Margin Call* (2011 nominated best screenplay 2011 and world wide gross of \$20,4 million), *Too Big to Fail* (nominated to 11 Emmy Awards and 3 Golden Globes).

Yesterday I started to watch both *Margin Call* and *Inside Job*, only to realise after 20–30 minutes that I've already seen them. I saw them, received the information, then I saw some other film about something else and forgot about it. Yesterday my local real estate broker advertised that they sold a 24 square meter apartment (renovation needed) in my house for \$300,000, a new neighbourhood record and up by approximately 250% since I moved here 7 years ago. Tomorrow the Swedish Central Bank is expected to further lower the repo rate that is already at a historic all time low of -0.35%. We are in a situation where the Swedish real estate market is internationally known to be seriously overvalued (it's not a question of deciding if there is bubble, but only of when it's going to collapse), and we're trying to solve the situation by paying the banks to borrow money. In

some sense maybe part of the problem is that the logic of both real estate markets and central banks can also be understood only as fiction.

We have all the knowledge to know better. We have been provided with information and facts through a multitude of sources; facts that in the next phase have been given all possible aesthetic translations to movies and books. Maybe the real problem is that all this production of images and stories hasn't produced anything in reality that wasn't already there. When the chips are down, maybe the actual purpose of all the imagery—be it as journalism, art, or entertainment—is to help us digest the fact that we know it.

I think maybe this is what the film actually is, or could be, “about:” it is not about the cynicism of the CEOs and the corrupted liaison between big capital and politics. It is about the cynicism in the middle of our collective reason—how we deal with our consciousness of all the fatal wrongs, how we find a way to go on with our lives knowing that we are part of a system that is not only unjust and unethical, but also dysfunctional on a level where it constitutes an accelerating threat to the very survival of our civilisation. How do we cope with that?

*The Big Short* has earned an international gross of \$111,8 million in the first six weeks after it opened. That is a lot; it's not even close to *Star Wars*, *Avengers*, or *Hunger Games*, but is way more than *Margin Call*. Maybe the numbers mirrors our need for tools to aesthetically digest a reality too threatening and immanent to deal with politically? For me this is the interesting thing about *The Big Short*; its quality lies not so much in its critique of a fraudulent system, as in its congenial collapse of the dialectical idea of critique itself.

You know the classic parable by Walter Benjamin about the fake chess-playing machine:

*“The story is told of an automaton constructed in such way that it could play a winning game of chess, answering*

*each move of an opponent with a countermove. A puppet in Turkish attire and with a hookah in its mouth sat before a chessboard placed on a large table. A system of mirrors created the illusion that this table was transparent from all sides. Actually, a little hunchback who was an expert chess player sat inside and guided the puppet's hand by means of strings... The puppet called "historical materialism is to win all the time."<sup>2</sup>*

I returned to this story a few weeks ago, as I was trying to decipher the PM from Deutsche Bank you sent—*"the market is now observing itself from another angle as an observer of the observer of the observers."* The two figures have some similarities—the analysts of the market discussing how the market has become a self reflective plane of immanence, a self-feeding closed circle, a one-way communication, where the illusion of transparency is just the fundamental condition for the scam.

Seeing *The Big Short* added another aspect to Benjamin's story—as if the puppet destined to win all the time were capitalism and not historical materialism; contemporary economy as an immanent system, instrumentalises and incorporates every possible move of resistance attempted by its opponents, and uses this resistance to accelerate and gain momentum.

When discussing the quality of a film (or a theatre or dance performance) addressing some kind of political or social topic, the criteria somehow tends to orbit around the capacity of the work to show us something we didn't know—a film is said to reveal or "make visible" this or that condition (or "this work of art is mimicking the machine of post-fordist capitalism," as one of Stockholm's more successful curators presented at her latest opening the other day).

I don't think it works this way. In this aspect, I think Debord's thesis *"What appears is good; what is good appears"*<sup>3</sup> is more adequate than ever. We're operating from within an economy based on the continuous display of images, and this logic of appearance

is a machine of immanence that is ideologically colour blind. Be they images of identity, images of difference and multitudes, images of creativity, or images of politics, the machinery can digest them all. Aesthetics as images of opposition is a trap; like with the chess automaton every move is met with a counter move.

Do you know the essay *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics* by Susan Buck-Morss? I think she has some interesting ideas on this phenomenon, especially in the parts where she discusses Benjamin's notion of phantasmagoria:

*Phantasmagorias are technoaesthetics. The perception they provide are "real" enough—their impact upon the senses and nerves is still "natural" from a neurophysiological point of view. But their social function is in each case compensatory. It has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism... The intoxication of phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm. Sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control.*

*The role of "art" in this development is ambivalent because, under these conditions, the definition of "art" as a sensual experience that distinguishes itself precisely by its separation from "reality" becomes difficult to sustain.<sup>4</sup>*

The function of aesthetics as phantasmagoria understood from this perspective is to give us the feeling that we have—or at least that our system has—the means to deal with the looming disaster. The world might face apocalyptic scenarios, but we are dealing with them. Like the chess automaton the apparatus is transparent; we are producing critique, the media is revealing political scandals and corrupt sovereigns are being ousted. Whatever hidden injustices that remain unseen are dragged out into the light by whistle blowers. In this set-up, the "making visible" of the wrongs of the world by means of aesthetics does not have the function of making us so unbearably conscious that we have to act. It is an anaesthetic helping us to digest whatever is made visible.



*Consider Kant on the sublime. He writes that, faced with a threatening and menacing nature—towering cliffs, a fiery volcano, a raging sea - our first impulse, connected to self-preservation, is to be afraid. Our senses tell us that, faced with nature's might, "our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. But, says Kant, there is a different, more "sensible" standard, which we acquire when viewing these awesome forces from a "safe" place.*

*"Though the irresistibility of nature's might makes us (...) recognise our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature, and reveals in us a superiority over nature that is the basis of a self-preservation quite different in kind..."*

*It is at this point in the text that the modern constellation of aesthetics, politics, and war congeals, linking the fate of those three elements. (...) The system reverses its role. Its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of anaesthetics. (...) The camera, incapable of "returning our gaze," catches the deadness of the eyes that "have lost their ability to look." Of course, the eyes still see. Bombarded with fragmentary impressions they see too much—and register nothing. Thus the simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness is characteristic of the new synaesthetic organization as anaesthetics. The dialectic reversal, whereby aesthetics changes from a cognitive mode of being "in touch" with reality to a way of blocking out reality, destroys the human organism's power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake.<sup>5</sup>"*

*"What appears is good; what is good appears." What appears as visual Gestalt, what is "made visible," becomes an image of what exists; the effect at the end of the day being that "this, too, is part of the world." The intended aim of transcendence—the critique produced by aesthetics producing a change in the*

“real” world—is reversed, and the actual effect is immanence. Regardless of their content or ideological intention, the images I produce communicate within a closed symbolic system and thus their actual effect is to add momentum to the accelerated speed and frequency of the image-machine, feeding the immanent logic of progress propelling us towards an inevitable future. Any reasonable reaction to this situation, be it aesthetic or political, would have to mean an interruption, some sort of exit or passage out of history and out of progress.

So, how to use aesthetics to produce a possibility that does not exist? To produce what is absent in the present? Personally, instead of applying a positivistic idea of critique—to “make visible” what is present—I am increasingly attracted to the idea of aesthetics as a negative tool for connecting to what is absent, an interface bordering on what is not here.

In its original interpretation, the notion *poieisis* describes “an act that transforms and continues the world.” The objective of aesthetics and fiction here is to produce a beginning, to introduce a possibility previously not existing into the world. This new beginning can’t appear as a pre-figured image or representation, but could most probably only be understood as an interruption. And as such it by definition wouldn’t be recognisable within the existing criteria for aesthetic quality. It would by nature resist re-appropriation into the economy that has produced it. It would produce its own exodus, not for ideological reasons, but because it simply wouldn’t be recognisable as an image of resistance.

I think that if art and aesthetic practices at this point in history can have any valid function, it is not to “make visible” anything, but rather the opposite—aesthetics as a tool to make *invisible*, as camouflage; smoke-screens of empty signifiers to gather our collective attention at a specific place and moment, for an open-ended transcendence, a necessary passage out of the immanence of economy into “what-ever,” not in the name of this or that identity or cause. Art as a decoy to make the machine look the other way as we sneak out the back door.

In this line of thought, the aesthetic response to the reign of totalitarian exposure inherent to contemporary economy has to appear as disappearance, an exodus out of the field of what is visible, exposed, accessible and comprehensible, and understood as resistance. Art in this perspective becomes a strategy to produce an interruption in and of the present—a *caesura*, to speak with Hölderlin—a temporary break in the progression towards a future.

In the opening of his book *Atomic Light*, Akira Mizuta Lippit describes a Japanese film from the 60s called *Kwaidan*. For me, this description gives a very beautiful and precise suggestion for how to think of the transcendent possibilities of aesthetic practice.

*The man painted with Chinese ideograms is Hoichi, a blind monk and lute player in Kobayashi's Masaki's film "Kwaidan" from 1964.*

*The inscriptions, which have been written over his entire body, are Buddhist prayers. In a few moments a phantom will come for Hoichi and escort him to a grave site where he for the past nights has performed an epic poem in the memory of the ancient Heike clan that was killed in a 12<sup>th</sup> century battle.*

*Hoichi's audience are the dead warriors, courtiers, and children who perished in the battle. With each performance he moves closer to the phantoms. He will expire with the song and become one of them upon the completion of his performance. He will cross over to the other side of life and history, into the phantom world.*

*During his extended performance Hoichi has weakened, and his body and complexion bear the signs of illness. His inner dimension is being drawn outward into the exteriority of the dead, of shadows. The priests realize that Hoichi is being absorbed by the powerful force of exteriority, and unless they intervene, Hoichi will disappear. To protect him from the shades and make him invisible to*

*them, the Buddhist priests have covered the surface of Hoichi's entire body with prayers. The ink—black except for the red Sanskrit signs on Hoichi's forehead, back, and hands—will plunge the blind monk into the darkness. The ghosts will no longer see Hoichi, just as he does not see them. With these prayers, written on the surface of his body, the entire world will be rendered spectral, invisible.*

*Hoichi's body is protected by the religious power of the prayers, but also by the materiality of the text. The black ink covers his body like a shadow applied directly onto his skin. It is at once physical and metaphysical: Hoichi's skin the surface where the two dimensions converge. Like an invisible man, Hoichi is made visible in one register by the writing on his body, and invisible in another.*

*The divine script seals him, his body, and its surface, his skin. With the prayers inscribed onto his body like an archive, he is hidden within the text, within the archive that covers the surface of his body. By covering Hoichi with prayers, the priests have withdrawn him from the outside world, hidden him within the archive that, painted onto his skin, is exposed to the outside.*

*Visibility and invisibility, exteriority and interiority, the living and the dead, this world and that other world rest on the surface of Hoichi's body, at the point of contact between the text that covers Hoichi and his skin.*

Warmest  
Anders

DEAR ANDERS

Thank you for your suggestive and ruminative note. It has given me lots to think about. While I cannot respond to all the issues you raise, let me begin with this:

You say you don't know if *The Big Short* is a good film or a problematic one and while our current critical habits encourage us to conclude that it is both, I think it is worth pausing a bit over the act of proposing an aesthetic judgment—good film or not?—about a topic that seems, at its core, almost the opposite of aesthetics. Or, if opposite is not quite the right word, maybe then “anaesthetic” in Susan Buck Morris's sense.

But I notice that the energy of your note moves from the question of “good or problematic film” to sales figures. Has capital surmounted the aesthetic question? Tainted it? You have assembled and cite the ticket sales for three other films about the 2008 financial collapse and you note that *The Big Short* has surpassed these previous takes on the same events by a wide margin. And then you point out that the \$111 M (USD) taken in by *The Big Short*, to date, does not come close to the profits produced by blockbusters such as *The Hunger Games* and *Star Wars*. True, But perhaps it is relevant to note that *The Hunger Games* is a dystopian fantasy told in three installments and *Star Wars* is a sci-fi fantasy told about an intergenerational and intergalactic war over six (with more-to-come soon) episodes. Thus, we could begin to speak about “return on investment” in relation to the movie ticket price. (ROI is KING of the market). A ticket for a *Star Wars* film, for example, purchases memories and anticipation of the series as a whole, as opposed to the “one off” purchase of *The Big Short*. Both *The Hunger Games* and *Star Wars* series celebrate their unreality—they are frolics in fantasy, with costumes and special effects part of the extravaganza—while the films about the financial crisis stick closely to factual events and suggest that they are “unique” takes on a spectacular, if not quite one-time, event.

You offer a concise history of the director Adam McKay's work history before *The Big Short* but, for me and perhaps not surprisingly, the history of the writer is also key. The film is based on Michael Lewis' book, *The Big Short: Inside the Doomsday Machine* (2010), his best-selling book about the 2008 crisis. Lewis' reputation as a good writer was built on his account of

his time at Salomon Brothers in the 1980s, in *Liar's Poker: Rising Through the Wreckage on Wall Street*, published in 1989. In many ways, *The Big Short* retreads much of the same material as *Liar's Poker*, but instead of telling the tale of mortgage fraud in the 1980s in relation to his own story at Salomon, he tells the updated version of mortgage fraud of the mid-2000s. In some ways, *The Big Short* is a sequel to *Liar's Poker*. The biggest difference though is that Lewis' own story, which threads through *Liar's Poker*, is replaced by profiles of four of the men, and one woman, who predicted the housing crash of 2008. The woman's story was based on Meredith Whitney, who in 2007 as a research analyst for Oppenheimer Funds, published a note saying that Citibank would default. Her note caused an 8% drop in Citibank's stock that day and the resignation of the CEO two weeks later. Lewis gives her a lot of credit in his book, but McKay drops her entirely from the film.

Indeed, the sexism in the film finally compromises *The Big Short* too much for me to consider it a great film. (For what it is worth, 'the members of the academy' apparently agree with me as *The Big Short* lost the Oscar for best picture to *Spotlight*, another film that is based on a real scandal). There are only six speaking parts for women in the whole film. Two are cameos: one by Selena Gomez in a casino and one by Margot Robbie, in a bubble-bath drinking champagne. These cameos support the overall thesis of the film that women are themselves commodities, things to be bought and sold. Indeed, Steve Carrell's character, Mark Baum, decides to go all-in and bet against the mortgages when he learns that a stripper owns five houses. Marisa Tomei exists mainly as a way to highlight how extreme Baum is—she is basically cast as a therapist who encourages him to open up about his feelings. And Christian Bale's wife, who never appears on screen, is introduced in the film as someone who was not put off by the raw honesty of Bale's on-line dating profile. Melissa Leo has a dramatic scene as a ratings officer, but she appears to be at once corrupt and obtuse. And as has become almost *de rigueur* in Wall Street films, there are two scenes shot in stripper clubs. The first occurs quite early in the film and I am sure I was

not the only one in the audience who cringed, thinking the film was going to inhabit the same degraded world as *The Wolf of Wall Street*. So when Robbie appears in the bathtub—she played Jordan Belfort’s wife in *Wolf*—I groaned again. But I think in the end *The Big Short* makes these references in a bid to be a better film than *Wolf*.

While in *Liar’s Poker* Lewis was somewhat more critical about the routine misogyny of Wall Street, in *The Big Short* Lewis revels in his enormous big-boy crushes on his heroes. McKay picks this up in the film, and the misogyny of Wall Street is indulged rather than criticized. Thus, I have to dissent from your approving citation of de Bord’s claim, “What appears is good; what is good appears.” I think this may be true for white men and if so, then *The Big Short* becomes an elaborate version of “man- splaining.” But for women, and for some people of color, the question of “appearance” is an extremely vexed one, as I tried to point out in other work, and initially in *Unmarked*. You cannot have a series of counter-moves if the terms of appearance itself are so hideously skewed that the gendered or racial other does not appear, except as a hallucination of white male desire and/or anxiety. (The people of color in the film, with the exception of Selena Gomez, flash by even more quickly than the white women. Katy Tao, played by Adepero Oduye, is a Morgan Stanley analyst). And finally, because the mortgage fraud in the United States infected so much of the global economy, it is crucial to point out that it is women and girls who suffer the most from tight economies. Globally, the rates of education for girls and women sharply declines and global economic stress has been co-related with increase in violent crimes perpetrated by men on women.

After assessing the film’s monetary success, you move to another lens to judge the film. Does it tell us anything new? Does it allow us to grasp something we overlooked and thereby increase knowledge? Sometimes publishing an academic monograph can be justified because even though a university press is likely to lose money by publishing it, the press exists

to contribute to intellectual capital and proceeds on something other than the profit motive. But you reject this argument saying that *The Big Short* tells us things we already knew.

I am not sure if this is quite right. I think it does tell people in the United States, at least, things we did not know. While I thought I had a fairly good understanding of what caused the financial crisis of 2008, seeing the film deepened my understanding of a few things, especially the structure of tranches. And I did not fully realize that Burry basically invented the vehicle to bet against the mortgage industry. So for me, it was helpful.

I will close by returning to your quick allusion to the note from Deutsche Bank I sent you a while back. I think I only sent you the last part, so let me include the fuller context here:

*September FOMC meeting felt like a blind date that was never meant to be. As the market developments were unfolding, Fed members simply didn't like what they saw. Despite seemingly robust US data, the global economy appears too fragile and the strong USD is in the center of the crisis. The developments in EM have been negative for risk and, if conditions deteriorate further, the net result could be in a nontrivial adverse impact on DM economies. Rate hikes and further USD strength could have made things considerably worse. So, while the market waited, Fed decided not to engage. [...]*

*In that sense, despite seeming status quo, the FOMC was a true Event in the sense of being an encounter which retroactively creates its own causes.*

*What we now have is another data point which outlines the contours of the Fed reaction function. **Fed's communication strategy, it is becoming clear, is an equivalent of what in theater context is referred to as Removing the fourth wall** whereby the actors address the audience to disrupt the stage illusion -- they can no longer have*



*the illusion of being unseen. An unalterable spectator becomes an alterable observer who is able to alter. The eyes are no longer on the finish, but on the course—what audience is watching is not necessarily an inevitable self-contained narrative. **The market is now observing itself from another angle as an observer of the observer of the observers.***<sup>6</sup>

And here is my translation: The FOMC's decision not to raise rates in September 2015 was "an event." Their decision not to act comes to be seen, in retrospect, as something that needs an explanation, one that is more compelling than "common sense." The causes that are assembled, particularly data points from emerging markets that point to the potential for a "nontrivial adverse impact" for developing markets, are (retroactively) seen to be a threat to the other signals suggesting that the US markets are robust. So while taking into account only the US economy, the FOMC should have "gone on a blind date" and taken the plunge to raise interest rates, but they once again stayed home. Why? In part because the FOMC's communication strategy has itself become part of what the FOMC must consider before it acts. And since this communication strategy has been to alert the markets before it acts, so that there are no surprises (and therefore no panic), this means that there will be a propensity to wait. But because the official purpose of the FOMC is to watch and observe the world markets, and now the world market observes the FOMC and deconstructs and parses every nuance within its communication, then each and every FOMC meeting and the subsequent release of its minutes will be an Event, regardless of what course of action or non-action it takes and communicates.

While some have speculated that the note from Deutsche was a kind of joke, a parody of poststructuralism, I tend to think it is serious and exactly right. It may mess up the metaphor of theatre a bit—breaking the fourth wall does not invite spectators to alter the performance's script—but the idea that the FOMC is creating the market it is assigned to oversee seems

true and troubling. I think the theatre metaphor is weaker than one we may borrow from quantum physics. Precisely because the FMOc is measuring waves, it is turning waves into particles, just by observing them.

## DEAR PEGGY

Reading your mail, my first thought was that when I wrote the sentence “I don’t know if *The Big Short* is a good film or a rather problematic one,” I of course must have put the word “good” in quotations marks. Going back to read my text I realise that I hadn’t, whatever that might indicate...

Michael Lewis biography is very interesting; I wasn’t aware of either of his books. You say you see *The Big Short* as a kind of sequel to *Liar’s Poker*, which described the fraudulent mortgage market of the 80s. It suggests a financial eternal return of sorts.

And yes, absolutely, the sexism of *The Big Short* is out in the open, flaunting itself bluntly and weirdly unashamed. I don’t really know what to make of it... Obviously, it is some sort of default ingredient in the genre of films on which Adam McKay has built his career. And, as you say, one could make an attempt to understand it as a critique of the misogyny of the whole financial field, but the sexism in this film is used more as a selling point than for (self-) critique.

So, I completely agree with you that the white male perspective of the film is extremely narrow, self-centred and un-seeing. Unfortunately, I think this is part of what makes it commercially and critically successful. I think this might be what I tried to point at with both the quote from Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* and the reference to the ticket sales. Rather than thinking of box office revenues as a new quality criterion, I see it as an example of the logic of inclusion and recuperation specific to contemporary capitalism. In a backwards way, it follows Kristeva’s logic of the abject—the subject that can only exist as absence. The subject

that positions itself outside of the normative frame is not understood as critique, but simply does not exist. And if it manages to “appear,” it means that it has entered the normative order of presence. (Films like *Milk* give another version of this, where the first openly gay US politician has to be played by America’s most water-proof heterosexual actor, Sean Penn. Or *Monster*, where the subjectivity of a gay, criminally “non-beautiful” woman can only appear as a transformation-stunt performed by the certified up-to-norms and model-beautiful Charlize Theron. Or, to pick a recent and slightly more complex example, the “black-facing” of Zoe Saldana as Nina Simone.)

My dystopian take would be this: whatever imagery that can be “understood” as appearance, no matter what ideological perspective or subjectivity it represents, is assimilated. Images of critique are “good” because they nourish the capitalist hegemony’s need of understanding itself as a system built on liberty and freedom; representations of alternative identities are “good” because our economy thrives on difference and multitudes, and the subculture of yesterday is the new target group of today. What the normative aesthetic regime does not allow for is a position in-between, from which a representation could combine visibility and mainstream comprehension with a vital critique. Either the image makes itself visible, which qualifies it as “good”—part of what can be presented as presence—or it remains in invisible.

I do agree that this point of view can be understood as cynical, as a point of view that is only possible from a position of privilege. And I absolutely believe that the question of representation, in an aesthetic as well as a political sense, is a vital issue as soon as one leaves a western-male-cis position. But then again, I think there is something complicated and claustrophobic about this capacity of contemporary economy to assimilate, incorporate and appropriate almost any imagery of critique. Or rather, the images of critique, resistance, or oppositional subjectivities that within the frames of established society can be identified as such—i.e. succeed to appear—are immediately



digested, absorbed and refined into fuel keeping the machinery running. This does not negate the importance of representativity, it just makes the field very delicate and complicated.

In this perspective, there is something both interesting and problematic about the way apocalyptic scenarios make for commercially very successful cultural products. The way I understand it, this is somehow what Susan Buck-Morss is suggesting in her paragraph on Kant's notion of the sublime: in the aesthetic form we can enjoy weird oddities, overwhelming powers, monstrous beings, and apocalyptic phenomena that in "the real world" are too alien, scary, and threatening to be allowed to enter our collective consciousness. The translation to aesthetic representation thus does not signify the event of a political subjectivity; on the contrary, it is the moment where a conflicting perspective is transferred and compartmentalised into the field of contemplation. Thus I feel that the moment when a repressed subjectivity manages to make itself visible—to pass the gatekeepers guarding what can be rendered visible in the mainstream context of established, normative representation—might not signify an event of emancipation but rather the appropriation and capitalisation of the desire for difference, multitudes, and authenticity. I think Hito Steyerl has an interesting take on this in her essay *A Thing Like You and Me*:

*"As we all know, being a subject can be tricky. The subject is always already subjected. Though the position of the subject suggests a degree of control, its reality is rather one of being subjected to power relations."<sup>7</sup>*

When I wrote that it's scary how I somehow already knew about a lot of the facts and wrongs depicted in *The Big Short*, I didn't mean to suggest that telling the world something "new" would be the criteria of critical quality. Quite the opposite—the desire for the new has always been a main propellant of capitalism. But I am concerned that the increasing circulation of images of critique has, instead of the postulated wake up call supposed to be the result of mimicking or "making visible" this or that

abuse or injustice, rather the effect of numbing the senses. I don't claim this to be the truth, I hope it is not, but my fear is that already since Watergate, the consequence of leaked images of Abu Ghraib, or documentaries "revealing" the truth about Enron, Big Tobacco, or Donald Trump, has not empowered resistance, but has instead increased cynicism of the collective consciousness. Whatever can be rendered apparent is already part of what is present, of what "exists," and this self generating repression of the presence over the absence is pushing all positions of abjections even further into invisibility.

My suggestion therefore is that any possible passage or transcendence at this moment of history only can appear as an interruption of appearance. Isn't the constant demand to appear actually the point zero of contemporary repression? Maybe the radical application of aesthetic representation in the current economy, rather than operating within traditional strategies of visibility and representativity, has to apply aesthetics as tactics of in-visibility and dis-appearance; decoys, camouflage, and protection screens. In the financial and political logic of the realisation and expression of the subjective self, maybe the only possible strategy of resistance has to do with concealment and withdrawal rather than appearance and visible representation?

Finally, I very much appreciate your "translation" of the Deutsche Bank note, it is really to the point. The financial version of Schrödinger's Cat is a very precise and scary image of an economy of signs caught within its own symbolic system.

In 1988 Ronald Reagan gave a speech at the Moscow State University, where he spoke for the need to embrace a new idea of economy, not based on fordist principles of production, but on the creative potential unleashed by the information revolution; we are free to invent and reshape the world as long as we dare to accept that the laws of economy no longer are attached to a material reality of natural resources, but rather guided by irrational parameters like imagination and faith:

*"We're emerging from the economy of the Industrial Revolution—an economy confined to and limited by the earth's physical resources—into "The Economy in Mind," in which there are no bounds on the human imagination and where the freedom to create is the most precious natural resource. In the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete. We're breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny."<sup>8</sup>*

Access to information has always been a central resource on the market. With the contemporary phenomenon of high frequency trading, where the difference between profit and loss is counted in microseconds, the extreme temporalities have produced a new market of trading information. Official reports of national employment rates and buying power are sold to the market in different price categories; reports that are officially released to the news agencies at 12:00 pm sharp, are also released some microseconds earlier to those who can afford it, producing a members club of information for players like Goldman Sachs, Crédit Suisse, etc.

In the "economy in mind," based on imagination rather than physical resources, symbolic systems of language and signs of course are key figures. I don't know if this has anything to do with anything, but there is this passage in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's *Typography*<sup>9</sup> where he applies the term *mise-en-abyme* to describe a symbolic system caught within its own framework; like standing between two mirrors, having your own mirror-image reflected in eternity. Lacoue-Labarthe uses the notion to point to a western tradition of *mimesis*, discussing a phenomenon where *Darstellung* (presentation) and *Herstellung* (production) are separated from each other. The text is extremely dense and hard to penetrate, and I really haven't managed to wrap my head around it yet. In one sense it describes the opposite to the metaphor of the broken fourth wall, but there is something about it that made me associate to your image of Schrödinger's Cat. In a financial system that understands itself

as pure language, maybe presentation and production have become so separated that the machinery becomes simultaneously contingent and self-referential?

Oh, I really don't know if this makes any sense to you. And I realise that in trying to elaborate my ideas I am already half way to making this letter just as long as the previous. So I'll stop here.

warmest

anders p



- 1 Benjamin Noys, *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism* p. (Zero Books, 2014)
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 253 (Schocken Books, 2007)
- 3 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, chapter 1, paragraph 12
- 4 Susan Buck-Morss, *Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered* p. 22-23 (October, MIT Press, 1992)
- 5 Ibid. p. 8-18
- 6 PM from Deutsche Bank's derivative strategist Aleksandar Kocic, 21 September 2015.
- 7 Hito Steyerl, *A Thing Like You and Me*, e-flux Journal #15, April 2010 (Compare *Twin Figure of Mimesis Part II*, page 37)
- 8 (Compare *Twin Figure of Mimesis Part II*, page 16)
- 9 Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 72-73 (Harvard University Press, 1989)



# TWIN FIGURE OF MIMESIS II



# THE OBJECT



## PREFACE

*“He wrote: I’ve been around the world several times, and now only banality still interests me. On this trip, I’ve tracked it with the relentlessness of a bounty hunter.”*

This is the tenth sentence in Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil*. The script for the film is a fragmented assemblage of thoughts and statements, a mix of personal memories, anthropological remarks, and discursive comments on how to make movies; the imagery and the text slide in and out of each other’s presence. Marker is borrowing the subjectivity of the fictitious figure Sandor Krasna, speaking through letters read by their anonymous female recipient. An undercover operation in multiple layers, speaking simultaneously with the voice of fiction and documentary, the accumulated



personal experience from a life time of journeys. Different from the traditional report of a journey, where a savant and well traveled subject explains the wonders of the world, Marker creates a platform for a number of semi-anonymous inter-subjectivities, oscillating between fiction and reality, encountering the world as enigma and wonder<sup>1</sup>.

Sandor Krasna’s scripted letters constitute, albeit in an inverted way, a clear narrative which in its turn contains a multitude of short stories, anecdotes and observations. They are all very concrete, specific and tempting, but they don’t produce any cohesive story. It’s more like following an intriguing trail<sup>2</sup> that takes us further and further into the forest until we are irreversibly lost; like the re-enacted spiral from Marker’s favourite film *Vertigo*—a clear path that makes you lose both orientation and balance; the story as a map to get lost. The imagery is rich, colourful and heavily symbolic;

signs everywhere, tokens and emblems pointing in every direction, the result presents a persuasive and complex hybrid of symbolic thinking and critique of representation. There is a continuous and loud overload of semblance and similarity, but no signification; similarity<sup>3</sup> but no likeness, imagery but no representation. Subjectivity but no author. In its way of pointing to the travelogue as a potential for staying in an open connection to the world, rather than presenting it as a coherent and petrified representation, Marker's/Krasna's opening sentence suggests a number of notions for a contemporary toolbox of storytelling.<sup>4</sup>







# THREE WHITE SOLDIERS

Economy, Language,  
Magic as Administration  
of Passage



## INTRODUCTION

*The following text, originally published in a Swedish version (GLÄNTA 3-4, 2015) is a scripted version of the performance THREE WHITE SOLDIERS/ROCK THIS WORLD, produced in collaboration with Johan Forsman and the venue SKOGEN in Gothenburg, Sweden. The performance was the practical outcome of the research project NON-MIMETIC PRACTICES (The Danish National School of Performing Arts, 2015-2016).*

In 2014, I started to work with the continuous project *Three White Soldiers* together with Johan Forsman. The basic concept was an accumulative practice combining the formats of archive and performance, built around our research into high frequency trading, a financial phenomenon where computers are using algorithms to make transactions on the stock market at insane speed.



As we started to follow that thematic trail, the project evolved into some sort of extended journey, contextualised as a series of pilgrimages<sup>5</sup> through the material as well as virtual landscape of contemporary economy.

The journey starts as a walk between Wall Street and the server co-locations that host today's robotised traders: computers trading on the stock markets at velocities challenging our concepts of time and space. From here we depart on a journey studying the relations between material and immaterial values, various "time-spaces" operating beyond the human perception, and the use of patterns and images to visualise worlds and events impenetrable to the human horizon.<sup>6</sup> As we continued our journey, we collected stories and responded to associations. To avoid stable, already known financial narratives, we started to follow protocols written by shamans and spiritual guides that we met along the way.

From the surreal speeds of high frequency trading, we turned our focus to the extreme gravity of mining. The work began to challenge the borders between fiction and facts, and the process started to intervene in our personal lives.

Simultaneously, notions of contemporary economy returned in new shapes and forms as we travelled up through the arctic landscape of Lapland, only to suddenly find ourselves barefoot amongst ancient temples in Egypt.

*Three White Soldiers* is neither a critique of nor a capitulation towards the super speed networking of contemporary economy; rather an attempt to travel along its patterns and linguistic figures:<sup>7</sup> A journey accompanied by the fetishes of the financial market, algo-spoofers, astronauts, bitcoin miners, ancient gods, and Japanese rice traders.







# ACT ONE

## SPEED



## Note

### *The Human Condition*

*In 1957, an earth-born object made by man was launched into the universe. For some weeks it circled the earth according to the same laws of gravitation that swing and keep in motion the celestial bodies—the sun, the moon, and the stars.*

*The immediate reaction to this event, second in importance to no other, not even to the splitting of the atom, was not triumphant joy; it was not pride or awe at the tremendousness of human power and mastery.*

*The reaction was relief about the first "step toward escape from men's imprisonment to the earth. Mankind will not remain bound to the earth forever."*

Hannah Arendt (*The Human Condition*)



## THE FIRST JOURNEY

*Mahwah, New Jersey (March 2014)*

The first pilgrimage we make is from the New York Stock Exchange on Wall Street, Manhattan to 1700 McArthur Blvd in Mahwah, New Jersey. A walk passing the finance and tourist blocks of Manhattan, over George Washington Bridge and the Hudson River,<sup>8</sup> continuing through the highway deserts and marshes of New Jersey.

The aim of this pilgrimage is a non-human space. It is a cubistic building with no windows and just one door. This is the 37,000 m<sup>2</sup> digital heart of the New York Stock Exchange; a so-called server colocation with a surreal amount of computing power processing all the information of the North American stock market. The location is at the outskirts of suburban New



Jersey; next to the highway, with Big Burger and a gas station for neighbours—it's kind of the place where you would expect to find a Wal-Mart or your local IKEA store.

However, for the last couple years this is the major *liquidity centre* of the New York Stock Exchange, where they not only keep their own servers, but also host the servers of banks and other *latency<sup>9</sup> sensitive financial trading firms*. In plain English, this means that Goldman Sachs, Credit Suisse and a number of other banks working with algorithmic transactions at a surreal speed are paying surreal money to have their computers in the same room as the servers of the New York Stock Exchange—all in order to gain access to the microsecond timespan in which the high frequency traders are making their business before the information reaches the conventional stock market.

Because that's how it works: even if you can access the most high end fibre optic cables that money can buy, you're

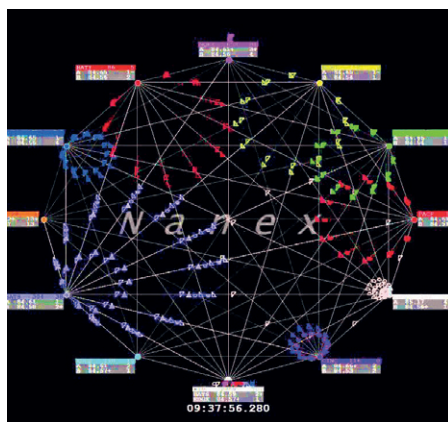
still limited to the speed of light—you simply can't make information travel faster than that. This means that to make the information travel a rather short distance, like the 45 km from Mahwah to Wall Street, you still need a couple of microseconds for it to get there. And in terms of High Frequency Trading, these microseconds are where everything is happening. If you're not in that time slot, you're already a loser.

This Kaaba<sup>10</sup> of the Financial World is an artificial other-space of sorts, where man made machines, left alone from any human intervention, make decisions defining the material foundation of our reality—pensions, investments, mortgages, etc.—based on analyses made by other machines.

#### Note *Nanex*

Nanex is a non-profit organisation located in an inconspicuous garage in the suburb of Winnetka outside of Chicago. Here digital graphic tools are developed to follow the movements of the stock market in real time.

One of the main difficulties with high frequency trading



is that the volume of produced information is so enormous, and travels at such extreme speeds, that it is nearly impossible to create models to describe and understand what is happening. By looking for patterns in the vast flow of information generated by the exchange markets, Nanex is reconstructing the algorithms and financial strategies. Through this digital

detective investigation, mimicking the algorithm's pattern based perception of reality Nanex, in the years following the legendary Flash Crash of 2009, has been able to reveal

a number of illegal financial trading strategies and juridical grey zone agreements between banks and financial institutions.

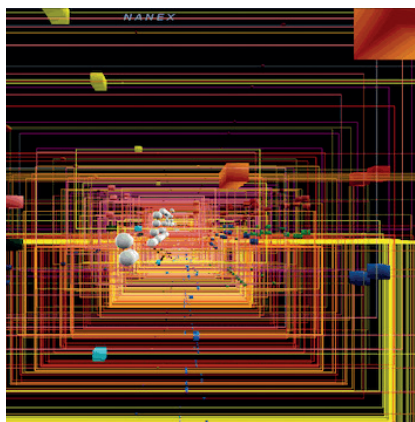
One example of the effect high frequency trading has on the stock market can be studied in a YouTube video produced by Nanex. By slowing down the speed of the video 4000 times, this visualisation allows us to follow the trades operated by algorithms in a sequence lasting 2/100 of a second. This is shorter than the time needed for the information to physically travel through the nervous system of the human eye. During this time frame, the price of a Nokia share changes no fewer than 22,000 times.

Note

### *The Algorithms*

The algorithms operating on the market are, to a large extent, designed by the leading players of the stock market, who use these algorithms for their own trading as well as selling them to other high frequency traders. The algorithms used belong to different categories and are continuously developed.

One example is the algorithm *Guerilla*, a so called *stealth*-algorithm developed by Credit Suisse in order to carry out big trades without being seen by their competitors on the market. The *Sniper* is another *stealth*-algorithm, also developed by Credit Suisse, operating through a tracking design. The strategy of the *Sniper* is to look for pattern based divergencies that can be capitalised, like extremely temporary price differences on the global market. When operating in the time scale counted in milliseconds, temporary differences will



always appear in the price of a specific share at different stock exchanges, and the inevitable movement of levelling out can be transformed to profit for those who can perform thousands of transactions within microscopic time frames.

*The Sniffer* is a more advanced so called “predator,” preying on less sophisticated competitors. Its strategy is based on learning to understand and manipulate the patterns of its rival’s activities. It might, for example, set a bait, i.e. create an attractive trading opportunity to lure the other algorithms, and then study their behaviour in order to use this information to outsmart the competitors.

A *Spoof*er is a kind of “cheating” algorithm, operating in the juridical grey zone of the stock market. When you are *spoofing*, you will create a digital pattern of extremely fast series of trading orders and cancellations that for a fragment of a second will manipulate the price situation of a certain stock of shares in order to gain advantages by trading in this manipulated price situation.

## Note

### *Munehisa Homma*

Sometime in the early 1750s, a quiet man takes seat in the corner of the rice market of Dojima in Osaka. His name is Munehisa Homma, and he has recently inherited vast acres of rice farms in northern Japan. But Munehisa Homma does not have the personality of a granger. He starts to speculate.<sup>11</sup>

Over and over again, he studies the peculiar signs he has written on a thin rice paper. The symbols look, from a distance, like candles of varying sizes; square bodies, with something like a wick connected to each side. This set of figures is Homma’s most precious possession; they are his own invention and they will make him the richest man in Japan.

Munehisa Homma was active during the Edo period, the longest era of peace in the history of Japan. This era began with general Tokugawa defeating all the other warlords,



uniting the country. After his victory, Tokugawa writes a law requiring that all warlords must move to Edo and live there with their families. This clever move of power and self defense was an attempt to control the future: whenever the warlords left Edo to do business in other regions of Japan, general Tokugawa had their families as hostages, thus pacifying any attempt to overthrow him.

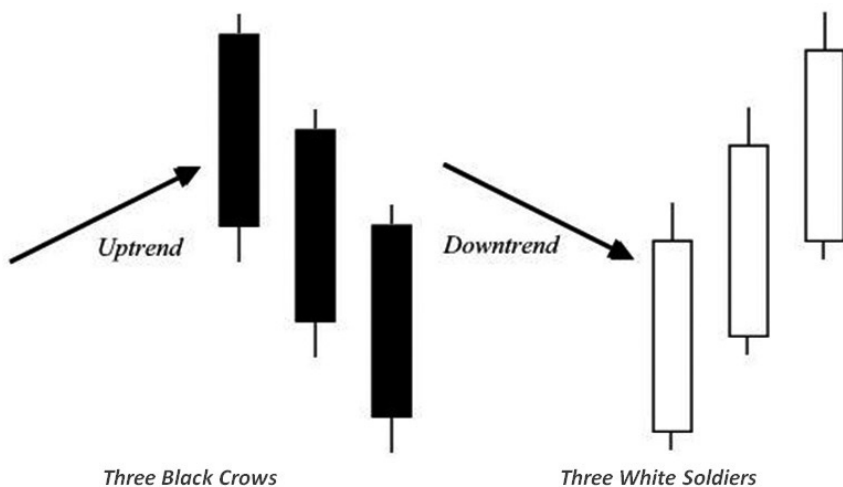
The members of the warlord's families suddenly found themselves in a rather unfamiliar situation: it is peacetime and they all live next door to their former enemies, left without substantial meaning or aim for their daily activities. They start to engage in a ruthless competition in outdoing each other in splendour and lavish extravaganza. The result was that the existing wealth soon wasn't enough. And, when the value of the rice of this year's harvest already had been transformed into dresses and mansions, the logical next step was to capitalize the harvest of crops not yet planted. The value of this not yet existing rice was represented in coupons—so called *futures*.<sup>12</sup> These rice coupons were soon understood as a valid form of *currency*.

It is in the context of this economy that Munehisa Homma takes over the family business and moves to Osaka. He immediately engages in the trading of rice coupons and makes instant profit. He has understood one thing: information equals money; whoever gets to new knowledge before his competitors has a benefit. The challenge is getting the information from the local rice markets in the north to the central market in Osaka before his competitors.

Horses are slow, and anyway the competitors also have horses. Homma designs a communication system. It is kind of analog, but it brings the information about the harvest from Sakata to Osaka—a distance of 600 kilometres. Every day at a set hour, 150 men take place on roof tops and in towers to telegraph the daily rates of rice by means of coloured flags.

Homma begins to study the historic movements of the market. He collects all the existing information on how the prices of rice have fluctuated over time. He starts to

see patterns—and that the patterns repeat over time. An example: The price rises quickly at the opening of day one, only to fall back again and close at the same price where they opened. This is a sign of decreasing rates. Step by step Homma designs a system of visualization to overview the total information in one gaze. A pattern of rates and movements, still being used on the global stock market: *The Candlestick Chart*.



Homma writes a book: *The Fountain of Gold—The Three Monkey Record of Money*. Here, he writes:

“Market action is more important than news.”

“Prices do not reflect values.”

“Consult the market about the market!”

“Never tell others your position or strategies!”

“Being a samurai trader, the time between making a decision and implementing that decision must be minimised.”

“Delayed execution and transparency are the enemies of performance.”

## Note

*The Human Condition*

*We, who are earth-bound creatures and have begun to act as though we were dwellers of the universe, will forever be unable to understand, that is, to think and speak about the things which nevertheless we are able to do.*

*It would be as though our brain, which constitutes the physical, material condition of our thoughts, were unable to follow what we do, so that from now on we would indeed need artificial machines to do our thinking and speaking.*

*If it should turn out to be true that knowledge and thought have parted company for good, then we would indeed become the helpless slaves, not so much of our machines as of our know-how, thoughtless creatures at the mercy of every gadget which is technically possible, no matter how murderous it is.*

(Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*)

## Note

*The Stock Ticker*

The introduction of the stock ticker changed Wall Street immensely. In the essay *Automated Futures*, Ulysses Pascal tells the story of Edward A. Calahan (an engineer associated with the American Telegraph Company), who in 1867 invented a machine for the New York Stock Exchange that made mechanical notations of the movements of the stock market. As far as mechanics are concerned, the first stock ticker was an adaptation of the printing telegraph. It used two wheels, mounted parallel wheels to one another, powered by an electromagnet. The first wheel was set with letters from the alphabet, the second with numbers and fractions. Together, the wheels printed the price quote beneath the security's name.

Beyond being a means of merely recording and transmitting price data, the stock ticker changed the very nature of the market. Previously, price information was often communicated by letter, morse code, or messenger, frequently appearing as part of a dialogue. With the ticker, however, the relay of information was no longer dialogical; rather, it was reportative. The stock ticker renders time an object of calculation by treating the time interval between ticks in a regulated way. The market is thus no longer dialogical, but an objectified entity—a ghost to be analysed, reported, observed, and domesticated.

#### Note

##### *The Financial Singularity*

In a PM from 21 September 2015, Deutsche Bank's derivative strategist Aleksandar Kocic makes an analysis of the report from the latest meeting of the Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC). In the meeting, the Federal Reserve expressed concerns regarding the increasing volatility and vulnerability of the global economy, in spite of the American market being seemingly stable. In what has become known as the "fourth wall analogy," the linguistic figures applied by Alexandar Kocic describe a financial reality that no longer follows any rational laws of economy, but is approaching a logic of metaphysics and self referentiality.

*This changes everything. Power relations have been revealed; nothing will ever be the same. In that sense, despite seeming status quo, the FOMC was a true Event<sup>13</sup> in the sense of being an encounter which retroactively creates its own causes.*

*What we now have is another data point which outlines the contours of the Fed reaction function. Fed's communication strategy, it is becoming clear, is an equivalent of what in theatre context is referred to as removing the fourth wall, whereby the actors address the audience to disrupt*

*the stage illusion—they can no longer have the illusion of being unseen. An unalterable spectator becomes an alterable observer who is able to alter. The eyes are no longer on the finish, but on the course—what audience is watching is not necessarily an inevitable self contained narrative.*

*The market is now observing itself from another angle as an observer of the observer of the observers.*

## THE SECOND JOURNEY JOSHUA TREE *California (March 2014)*

We are at a working residency at the artist run platform *Thousand Points of Light* in the desert outside of Los Angeles. We start to walk<sup>14</sup> and talk to people that we meet. Everybody says: You have to talk to Charlyn. Charlyn is a shaman, and we ask if we can take part of one of her sessions. Charlyn says: “First you have to ask a question.” We answer: “We are trying to understand contemporary economy. How do we proceed?”

Charlyn talks to her *helpers* from the other side and then gives us the following instructions:<sup>15</sup>

The economy is everywhere<sup>16</sup>  
We’re not the only life form  
There are so many  
relationships  
So, think galactically, act  
locally

Be kind to the body<sup>17</sup>  
And hydrate  
and don’t hydrate in plastic

The earth is the first economy  
Connect with people



Keep doing what you are doing<sup>18</sup>  
 We need to see the other  
 and believe what the other is saying  
 and feel them<sup>19</sup>  
 All the rest  
 is the loss of empathy  
 and critical thinking becomes oppositional disorder

Talk to people in transition  
 Do the human thing  
 Drink enough water  
 Feed yourself  
 Take care of the vehicle  
 Make sure your life is sustainable  
 Walk without shoes when you can

Think in patterns  
 Track the sky  
 Use aspects to see how it unfolds<sup>20</sup>

And sound healing<sup>21</sup>  
 There is a 528 Hz chime  
 that is pretty wonderful.  
 That could be something  
 It resonates with the note F in the heart  
 It is fabulous  
 We could share that with you  
 We will make one for your project  
 You obviously need to hear it  
 It is already in order

Note

*The Cuna Shaman*

*In some way or another, one can protect oneself from the  
 spirits by portraying them.*<sup>22</sup>

The Cuna shaman of the San Blas Islands off Panama is faced with a woman in obstructed labor. He is sitting by her hammock, singing forward the restoration of her soul. In his singing, he is bringing into being an image of the cosmos as a woman through whom is plotted the journey along the birth canal of the world—an action he undertakes by first awakening congealed life in his petrified fetish objects, carved wooden figurines now standing by the labouring woman.

With them he will journey. To them he sings:

*The medicine man gives you a living soul  
The medicine man changes for you your soul  
All like replicas  
All like twin figures*<sup>23</sup>

This is where we must begin:  
With the magical power of replication  
With the image affecting what it is an image of.

from “*Mimesis & Alterity*” by Michael Taussig (p. 1–2)

Note

*Space Cowboys*

In 1988, after Perestroika but before the fall of the Soviet Union, the president of the United States of America, Ronald Reagan, gives a speech at Moscow State University. One decade before the internet becomes accessible to the average citizen, the former Hollywood Cowboy addresses the need for a universal embracing of what he calls the “new economy.”



*Standing here before a mural of the Soviet revolution, I want to talk about a very different revolution that is taking place right now, quietly sweeping the globe without bloodshed or conflict. Its effects are peaceful, but they will fundamentally alter our world and reshape our lives.*

*It's been called the technological or information revolution. Information technology is transforming our lives. Today, microcomputers aid the design of everything from houses to cars to spacecrafts; they even design better and faster computers.*

*We're emerging from the economy of the Industrial Revolution—an economy confined to and limited by the Earth's physical resources—into “The Economy in Mind,” in which there are no bounds on human imagination and the freedom to create is the most precious natural resource.<sup>24</sup> In the new economy, human invention increasingly makes physical resources obsolete. We're breaking through the material conditions of existence to a world where man creates his own destiny.*

*Today, the world looks expectantly to these signs of change. But there are some, I know, who fear that change will bring only disruption and discontinuity, who fear to embrace the hope of the future—sometimes it takes faith.*

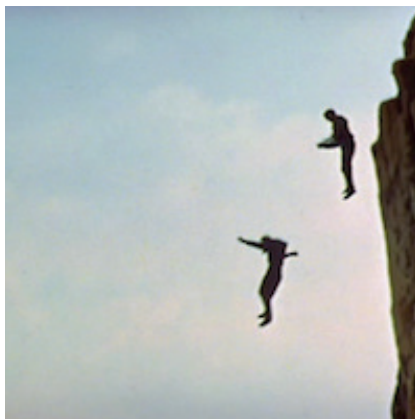
*It's like that scene in the cowboy movie “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.”*

*The posse is closing in on the two outlaws, Butch and Sundance. They find themselves trapped on the edge of a cliff, with a sheer drop of hundreds of feet to the raging rapids below. Butch turns to Sundance and says their only hope is to jump into the river below. But Sundance refuses. He says he'd rather fight it out with the posse, even though they're hopelessly outnumbered.*



*Butch says: "That's suicide" and urges him to jump. Sundance still refuses and finally admits: "I can't swim." Butch breaks up laughing and says: "You crazy fool, the fall will probably kill you."*

*"And, by the way," president Reagan concludes, "both Butch and Sundance made it, in case you didn't see the movie."<sup>25</sup>*





# ACT TWO

## GRAVITY



## THE THIRD JOURNEY

*Polar circle, Boden (January 2015)*

We stand at a high barbed wire fence surrounding an abolished airfield outside the city Boden in northern Sweden. An armed guard carefully checks our passports, then makes a call on his walkie-talkie and awaits clearance. We're picked up at the door by a man in his 40s, casually dressed. He's an engineer, he says.

The man shows us the way to an abandoned canteen—tables and chairs, the generic wooden school furniture typical to the 70s: brownish plastic carpets, faded white and yellowish wallpaper. Nothing seems to have changed here for decades. On the walls, there are old military posters: helicopters in backlight, soldiers in camouflage uniforms making their way through an arctic forest landscape. The only thing that really could attract any attention in the room is a huge helicopter wing mounted on the wall. In front of it there is a little table with a coffee machine and a can of Nescafé.



The building is gigantic. It is an abandoned military hangar for helicopters and aircrafts. There seems to be only us and the engineer here. He says: “The coffee machine is broken, but you can have some Nescafé if you want.”

We sit down. He asks us: “What are you doing here?”

We tell him we would like to see the Bitcoin mining centre; to gain access to the actual server hall. Would that be possible? We drink our Nescafé and he says: “I know nothing about Bitcoins. I just run the machinery. I am a technician, you know... We have more than 100,000 computers here, running 24/7. All built by us, specifically for the aim of mining Bitcoins. My work is to repair the computers that break, and to make sure that the ventilation works.”

He shows us the way through corridors with offices toward the old hangars. The scene looks more like something from a dystopian science fiction film than a high tech server hall. A mess of cables and thrashed computer parts. The huge room, one of many, is big as several football fields, and filled up with cheap shelves of homebuilt constructions of circuits, computer fans and branching cables. The engineer says: "This is probably the biggest Bitcoin mine in the world. We have our own 50 megawatt electricity plant here. It is big enough to supply the electricity for 50,000 households."

We ask what the computers are doing. He says: "They are *miners*, creating new Bitcoins by solving riddles—infininitely complex, abstract mathematical calculations. With every new Bitcoin created, the calculations get more complicated, demanding more computer power. The task of our computers is to manage to solve a riddle before all the other Bitcoin miners around the world. "Ok", we ask, "so that's how you create new Bitcoins?"

"Well, actually no. It is a bit more complex; it's rather like we gain entry to a lottery where we can win a Bitcoin." He adds: "I am sorry, I don't know much more than that."

The big hangar gates are wide open to the arctic winter. Yet, it's hot in here. Apart from solving the virtual riddles, the only thing produced by these computers is enormous amounts of heat. We read on the company's website that last year they managed to mine Bitcoins for several hundred million Swedish crowns, doubling their profit every year.

As the engineer leaves us by the door, he smiles and says: "The best thing is that I don't need to clean here."

## THE THIRD JOURNEY

### *Arctic Reversal*

We have an appointment with the shamans Åsa and Janne, so we go north to the polar city of Kiruna. We travel by car in the night, through the snow. We meet the white reindeer.

We meet the shamans, and Janne says:

*Hmmm... Interesting. I have been dreaming of you.  
I saw a river, and a shore. The water was running,  
time was standing still.  
I saw three magical sticks. I know where they are.  
You will come back and look for them.  
You are at the right place, but at the wrong time.*

Once more, we tell the story about our project—to try and understand contemporary economy, and again we ask the same question: “What should we do now?”

Janne says: *I think you should go to Luxor.*  
We ask: Why? *What should we look for in Luxor?*  
Janne says: *Don't worry. You will find it.*

At first we feel a bit hesitant. Neither Åsa nor Janne give any concrete guidance as to why exactly we should go to Luxor. But after our encounter with Charlyn in California, we have become increasingly attracted by the gateways and horizons enabled by outsourcing the protocol of our journeys to a logic not directed by our own thoughts, motives, and perspectives.

We simply seem to have a lot to gain by stepping out of the position of subjects being in control of our choices of path and destination. As long as we act as authors—i.e. decide ourselves where to go—we follow a prefigured idea of what it is that we are looking for; we in one sense have already made the experience and project it as a model on the future, in a process where we mainly look for evidence and documentation of the validity of our thesis. When we instead step into the position of messengers by following a protocol given to us by fate, chance, or any other agency unknown to us, the only approach possible is to stay open to presence and do our best to trace the path of events.<sup>26</sup>

## THE FOURTH JOURNEY

*Luxor, Egypt (March 2015)*

Luxor is a city strictly divided in two territories: on one side of the Nile, the City of the Living, on the other side, the City of the Dead.<sup>27</sup> Originally a ceremonial hideout, a remote location meant to keep the ritual passage from life to death out of sight, Luxor today has transformed and re-incarnated as a tourist trap, completely devoted to the logic of exhibi-

tion<sup>28</sup> of sacred and secret burial rituals performed thousands of years ago.

All that once was defined as invisibility is today capitalised through total exposure. The white noise of capitalism is constant and loud, all other symbolic systems since long have been appropriated and left completely mute. Why did the shaman want us to go here? What could we possibly look for in this place?

In the beginning of the research, we had made up a list of books that we wanted to read. On the top of that list was Jaques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*. (I still hadn't made it through the preface by Spivak, and now I had put it in my luggage, in case I would get some spare time during the journey). On the cover of our copy of the book there is a small picture; it's an Egyptian looking figure with the head of a bird. On the inside of the cover we learn that this is the Egyptian god Thoth. First book on the reading list... Egyptian god... Luxor... The shaman had said there is no such thing as a coincidence.<sup>29</sup> Maybe this was the sign we had been looking for...

Thoth was called the scrivener of the gods. He brought the hieroglyphs to the world, and he kept the celestial archive.<sup>30</sup> He was also the god of science, magic, and all the hermetic arts. He brought the hieroglyphs in the form of *The Book of the Dead*; a collection of burial spells designed



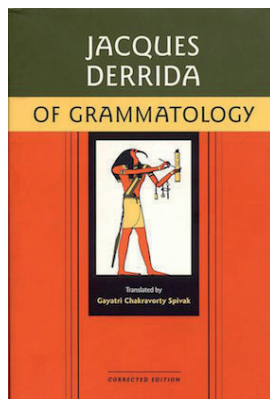


to guide the soul of the dead on its passage from the world of the living to the world of the dead. Originally, the spells had been written on papyrus that were wrapped around the dead body, later they were written on the walls of the tomb; the linguistic symbols being simultaneously instructions, protection, and architecture with the purpose of administering passage.

Thoth was thought of as the universal messenger; by transforming into a sign he could travel between worlds and present himself as both human and god. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God...

The abstraction of the world into signs is the basic condition for all speculation, both intellectual and financial. As long as things are what they are, their value, usage and meaning is constant. With language, things are separated from themselves and thus can be objects of reflection or desire; in the linguistic turn of translation into signs and symbols—not the shoe but the Nike, not the green piece of paper but the dollar bill—both meaning and value is liberated into infinite flux; all that is solid melts into air, to speak with Marx and Engels.

According to the legend, *The Book of the Dead* had been buried under the Nile in a place called Koptos. We looked it up, it still existed and more importantly, it was only 45 kilometres away from Luxor. This could be something... Think in patterns, see how it unfolds, that's what the shaman had said. Language, Magic, Economy, and Administration of Passage, it was all there. Following the picture at the cover of a book might have felt like a stretch, but then again, it was the only lead we had. *The Book of the Dead* might very be the point zero of symbolic thinking as well as of economy. We decided to go to Koptos on a pilgrimage for *The Book of the Dead*.



Digging 1: The Book of the Dead<sup>31</sup>



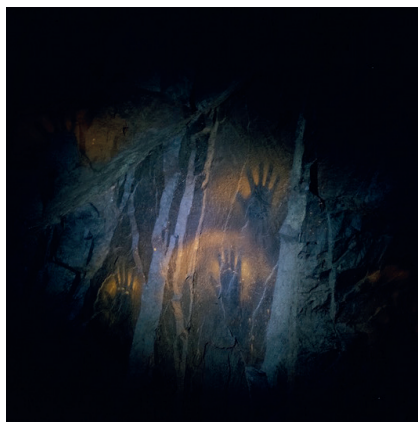
## Digging 2: Palaeolithic Burials<sup>32</sup>



## THE FIFTH JOURNEY

*Interview with the Mountain KP56, 560 meter, LKAB mine Kiruna (August 2015)*

In the history of human imagery, the cave paintings of hand prints is meant to be one of the earliest motifs. The hand print made with red ochre has been found in caves in Africa, Australia, Asia, Europe and the Americas, and is traditionally interpreted as the worlds oldest figurative art—



or even as the first example of self portraits. Some researchers, however, propose an alternative perspective that kind of turns things upside down. The suggestion is that the handprints were produced in rituals aiming to connect with the mountain spirit. In these ceremonies, the hand would be held against the wall of the cave, the surface of the mountain being the interface between human and mountain

spirit. To ignite the ritual connection, red ochre was blown or spit over the hand and the mountain wall, functioning as a conductor between the two. The image of the hand print in this perspective was not the aim of the act but a consequence; not the intended result, but a leftover. The image was not produced as an art object for the sake of exhibition, but merely a ritual tool in the production of passage.

The earliest evidence of human mining activities dates back to the Middle Stone Age, roughly 40,000 years ago. At the Lion Cave in South Africa, tunnels were dug into the mountain in search of ochre. Or more exactly—and this might seem like a weird linguistic sign—a version of the mineral called "specularite." Over the millenia, 1,200 tons of ochre was removed from the Lion Cave in something that might have been the first export industry in the history of mankind. The earliest findings of possible use of ochre

are, however, nearly 300,000 years old. Ochre is known to have been used by both Neanderthals and Homo Sapiens for medicinal purposes and for preserving bodies after burial, but its most interesting use was in the burial ceremony itself. Yellow ochre was carefully burnt to gain a specific red colour, and spread over the body of the deceased. Graves with traces of red ochre have been found on all continents, and since the ochre had to be burnt in order to provide the red colour, we can also suppose that this process was conscious and possibly inscribed in a complex symbolic system.

We don't know how and exactly when it happened but at some point, first the red colour itself, and later the patterns in which the ochre was distributed in the grave—on the body of the deceased or the faces of the ones performing the ritual—became symbolically charged and organized in a system of signs administrating the passage from life to death. Considering that a lot of effort was made in collecting and transporting specific types of ochre rather than using others that were at hand next door, combined with the process of burning it for the right colour—activities adding an irrational amount of labor without having any effect on the use value of the ochre, only amplifying to its symbolic value—it is also tempting to speculate that ochre was the origin not only of symbolic thinking, but also of economy in our contemporary sense where objects and labor are valorized not through their concrete use value but rather by their position in a symbolic order.

Obviously, here we can only speculate. Nevertheless, there is a lot suggesting some sort of genealogy in which symbolic orders of language, magic, and economy have since the dawn of time been intimate and entwined relatives in their respective functions as administrators of passage.

*The depth of the parent rock of arctic Sweden has proved to be the ultimate habitat for Shiitake mushrooms.*

*With the help of the company Kiruna Svampen, we find our way down to the LKAB iron mine in Kiruna, in disguise as mushroom aficionados.*

## Note

### *Mushroom Heads 1*

What is considered to be the oldest cave painting is to be found in Australia. It is part of something called the Gwion Gwion, or Bradshaw, paintings (B)\*. Traditionally, the oldest cave paintings have been dated to between 35,000 and 40,000 years. Recent research, however, indicates that the Gwion Gwion paintings might be up to 70,000 years old.



The reason to why these images could have survived this long is because the pigment has fossilised: fungus has grown on the surface of the pigment, then the fungus has petrified and merged with the mineral. The image has become the stone.

What is interesting with the Gwion Gwion paintings, except from them being so very old, is the mushroom shaped head of the figures. They look exception-

ally similar to contemporary rock art imagery that is produced by the still existing African culture Sandawe (A). Sandawe shamans have testified that the depiction represents the experience of being in a trance induced by magic mushrooms.

There actually is a lot of research suggesting that these images of mushroom headed figures stem from the same origin. A history covering vast distances in space as well as time—in which rituals and transcendental imagery have travelled the oceans before the memory of man.

The birth of human symbolic thinking—the capacity to see similarities, that something looks like something else, which in turn is the fundamental condition for language—from the beginning seems linked to the habit of spacing out.<sup>33</sup>

\*See Jack Pettigrew, "Iconography in Bradshaw\* rock art: breaking the circularity," *Clinical and Experimental Optometry* 94-5, 2011, p. 403-417.



Note

## *Mushroom Heads 2*

Suddenly, the shaman points at one of us and says:

*“You have a mushroom behind your ear! Quite big, actually, about 3 decimetres. Haven’t you noticed? It’s been there for a long time—for decades—whispering evil things to you.*

*I could remove it. It might hurt a bit. It is voluntary of course. Although I have to say, it doesn’t look very charming.”*

When the shaman tore the mushroom off my head, at first it left a vacuum, empty and cold.

And then—like when the refrigerator turns off—all is still. Silence.



room head’ depiction shared by Sandawe (A) and Bradsh shamans testify that this depiction represents the subject of the influence of magic mushrooms (*Psilocybe spp.*).

## THE FIFTH JOURNEY

### *Vittangi (Time stops)*

Vittangi is a small village, mostly known for a rare genetic mutation that makes some of its inhabitants unable to feel any sort of pain.

They are on the way to look for their magical sticks. They are going by boat, slowly rowing down the Vittangi river. Except for the buzzing mosquitos, the sound of the boat cutting through the water, and some birds in the forest, it is absolutely silent. The Shaman says: “Vittangi river is a calm spirit. It will do us good.”

The fire is burning.<sup>34</sup> The river runs. Time is slower than they ever experienced it before. The Shaman is fishing. They eat roseroot. Under the midnight sun, time transforms to a total abstraction. The water is cold and clean, they drink it straight from the river. Someone falls asleep on a stone in the middle of the running water.

Time is slowing down. The fire is burning. The river runs. Someone paints himself in red ochre and dives into the river. They close their eyes and they travel away to meet their power animals: The swimming panther, the laughing sphinx, and the witty squirrel. The fire is burning. The river runs. They charge their sticks with magical power.

The shaman says they found iron ore in the silent mountain right in front of us. It is still a protected wildlife area, but it will most likely be the next mountain to be mined. The night is bright, and the shaman plays his drum.

That night the Shaman has a final dream. He says: "I don't understand this one. But I know it is a message for your project."

*We are in a cave. It is pleasant. People are talking, relaxing, discussing life and important things. Time is very slow.*

*Further back in the cave, there is a wall of ice like a glacier. The ice is slowly melting. From time to time, we find things in the melting ice. Gold. Diamonds. Treasures. But we have to wait for the ice to melt. Everything is slow, but it is very pleasant to be here.*

*Suddenly, someone says we need to work. There are huge logs of timber that need to be carried and put on a trailer. We accept the work. It is still pleasant, and we do it together. It is heavy, but not too heavy. We are still talking and discussing life and important issues. The ice is still slowly melting, but we have to keep working, carrying the logs.*



*Suddenly, we are no longer in the cave. We are in a house. It is Christmas, but it is not a joyful atmosphere, rather dull. Time moves so slow, the clocks actually stop. We are just sitting there in silence.*

*Now the doorbell rings. There is a man in his fifties, and beside him a girl, she is much younger, in her 20s. He seems very strong and healthy. She is very beautiful.*

*He enters and he starts to dance. The woman has a big bag with candy and gives it away to everyone. He dances very well. Everything is great.*

*Suddenly, he rips his clothes off; and then we see—it's Santa Claus. He has the white beard. He is dancing manically. There is suddenly loud rock music—a pumping beat, and someone sings: Come rock this world with me. From here to eternity.*

*The woman is giving away more and more candy. Santa Claus is also eating, more and more. It is great, but almost too much. The next day I am out walking in the city. And suddenly I see the same couple again.*

*And again I see him ripping his clothes off, the music starting, and him starting to dance. I think: Yes, he is good—but I don't want it anymore!*





# THE FOOTNOTE TOOLBOX



## 1 The Presence of Absence

*What is "familiarily known" is not properly known, just for the reason that it is "familiar." When engaged in the process of knowing, it is the commonest form of self-deception, and a deception of other people as well, to assume something to be familiar, and to let it pass on that very account.*

(*Phenomenology of the Spirit*, Friedrich Hegel)

*"Isn't the philosopher someone who always hears but who cannot listen, or who neutralizes listening within himself, so that he can philosophize?"* In the essay *Listening* (Fordham University Press, 2007), Jean-Luc Nancy elaborates on the difference between philosophy as a means of *Understanding* and *Listening*; not to identify a truth or essence, but rather as a way of being in relation with the world. Nancy points to an interesting distinction between *listening*—to be all ears, the attentive stretching of the ear—and the conclusion of *Hearing*, the moment where we stop listening. The attention of listening is thus a-tension—which also means accepting the slight anxiety of being in a-tension with the world as something by nature un-known.

This, for many reasons, delimits an important objective for contemporary performative practice. How can I define tools to defy the impulse of "I know" what I'm seeing as soon as the performer enters? How do I find a way out of the double bind of affirmative recognition between artist and spectator?

A parallel aim might be to find aesthetic strategies to counter the hegemonic paradigm of presence; to counter the normative appropriation of what is absent by what is present. What performative strategies can facilitate the temporal and spatial disruption of the re-presentation of presence, in order for that what is absent to appear?

## 2 The Trace: Writing under Erasure

In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida establishes a discourse where linguistic notions of truth, essence, and origin are met with counter notions of *trace* and *erasure*. Derrida means that we are linguistic beings, and as such have no access to a position outside of language. In order to communicate, and find common grounds for negotiation, we are submitted to a system of signs. The challenge thus is not to find a path beyond language, but to accept and act on its logic of temporal approximation; to apply linguistic figures to the world and simultaneously acknowledge their status as more or less inaccurate estimations of a "thing" that will always be absent; to draw a figure of the world and erase it in the same gesture; to write under erasure. In her preface, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak thinks along with Derrida's figure of thought:

*Derrida suggests that what opens the possibility of thought is the never-annulled difference from "the completely other." Such is the strange "being" of the sign: half of it always "not there" and the other half always "not that." The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent. (...)*

*For Derrida, the signifier and signified are interchangeable; one is the difference of the other. (...)*

*Lacan's radical description of the function of the signifier combines presence and absence. "For the signifier is a unit in its very uniqueness, being by nature symbol only of an absence." It signifies a desire for some thing that the subject has not, the other of the subject. And the master signifier of these signifiers of desire is the phallus. (...) This is not the phallus as an actual organ, penis or clitoris. It is the phallus as a signifier, that can come to take the place of all signifiers signifying all desires for all absences. (...)*

Within this sexual fable of the production of meaning, Derrida's term is dissemination. Exploiting a false etymological kinship between semantics and semen, Derrida offers this version of textuality: A sowing that does not produce plants, but is simply infinitely repeated. A semination that is not insemination but dissemination, seed spilled in vain, an emission that cannot return to its origin in the father.

In what it seems satisfying to me to construe as a feminist gesture, Derrida offers us a hymeneal fable. The hymen is the always folded (therefore never single or simple) space in which the pen writes its dissemination.  
(...)

No longer castration (...) Rather involve the sexual difference in the "concrete representation" of the making of meaning: dissemination into the hymen. Into the (n)ever-virgin, (n)ever-violated hymen of interpretation, always supplementing through its fold which is also an opening, is spilled the seed of meaning (...) Or, turning the terms around, the playfully disseminating rather than proprietorially hermeneutic gesture of interpretation (n)ever penetrates the hymen of the text. It is a sexual union forever deferred.\*

To me, this suggests a highly relevant perspective and challenge for a performative practice. How do I make a performative figure and erase it in the same gesture? What could constitute a performative hymenal dissemination, as alternative to the hegemonic paradigm of penetrating interpretation?

- \* Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Of Grammatology*, Translators Preface, p. xvii, p.lxv-lxvi, John Hopkins University Press, 1976/1997

### 3 Similarity-As-Such

I find this aesthetic concept of Similarity-as-Such to be a super interesting trajectory for how to think of performative gestures. To work with contingent similarities; figures contaminating each other with random and autonomous likeness, resistant to the appropriation of sameness. To borrow from Roger Caillois: *To be similar, not similar to something, but just similar*. For a more detailed elaboration on this notion, see the chapter "To Be Similar" in *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I* (p. 127).

### 4 Storytelling

In his essay *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin problematizes the individualization and fictionalization of experience inherent to the development of the novel as genre (see *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, p. 90–91).

If identity and identification constitutes the foundation for the toolbox of a mimetic tradition in theatre, could an approach to storytelling based on text, venue, sound, and image as interfaces between audience and performer, rather than as representations of a known content, be a contemporary apparatus for collective exchange of experience? And what would be a relevant methodology and terminology for such a toolbox?

### 5 Pilgrimage

As a logical consequence of the format of storytelling, the practice of traveling becomes a central working method. Whether performed on foot for 10 kilometres, or by aeroplane over continents, the journey for the storyteller combines the functions of script and rehearsal. The practice of being "on the road" can be understood in the logic of undertaking a pilgrimage, and as such follows a certain protocol.

- Chose a set destination, possibly but not necessarily one that is contextually relevant. The key is to find it important enough to make sure that you actually get there, no matter what obstacles you might encounter.

- The destination does not provide a preconceived idea of what to learn. Stay open for the fact that the material will be produced through the experiences, people, and stories that you meet along the way, and that, by definition, you can't have any knowledge of what this will be until you encounter it. If you start out with an idea of the purpose, this idea most probably will make you insensitive to the really interesting potentialities of the journey.

- Accept initially that you will not find the "thing" that you are looking for upon your arrival. The target of the destination will most often be "closed," like the Kaaba. This is not a failure, but the condition of possibility of a pilgrimage.

- It is my own responsibility to find out what makes the journey worthwhile. In order for the pilgrimage to provide content, I need to provide enough referentiality to detect the contingent passages when they present themselves. This responsibility, however, can only be complied by staying open for "what-ever."

## 6 The autonomy of the object

The transactions done in the business of high frequency trading are so fast that the speed of light becomes an actual limit. The field thus constitutes a time-space created by man, but not accessible to man. This produces a self-reflective object of sorts; quite similar to the Kaaba, or Malevich's Black Square—a closed, autonomous "thing," refractory to any interpretation of the relations taking place or represented "within" its frame, which in its turn is a basic condition for the production of relations. We will come back to this later.

## 7 Travel with the Thing

*"In times past the shamans warded off danger by means of images imitating that danger, and in this sense they used equivalence—mimesis—as an instrument. 'Before, the fetishes were subject to the law of equivalence,' write Adorno and Horkheimer. 'Now equivalence itself has become a fetish.'"*

(Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*)

I would claim that we in the field of theatre have a very ambiguous relation to mimicry. This ambiguity lies in the way we define the interaction between theatre and reality in general, and maybe specifically in the operational logic of critique and resistance. On the one hand, we take a very high moral ground as to the social importance of our aesthetic efforts—in every application written, the theatre is a "cornerstone in a democracy," and the number of private relations sacrificed in the name of the greater social or political good of yet another theatre production is, as we all know, infinite. But in what way do we actually think our aesthetic work influences reality?

In contrast with the magic relations claimed by FX voodoo practices, where the real person is effected directly by the needle inserted in his or hers mimetic double, most of us would reject any magical or metaphysical relation between our aesthetic practice and the reality outside of the artistic frame. We generally also argue that the autonomy of the artistic field is key, partly with the argument that art should be free from any concrete "function," but also because we claim that art can't be held responsible for the actual consequences of its content—metal music does not produce ritual murders, defending urban terrorism in a theatre play does not equal actually killing civil people, etc. This double agenda regarding the impact of our aesthetic interventions on the reality in which they intervene, is somehow a necessary blind spot; a paradox that can only be dealt with by silence and suppression of any tendency that might actualize its inherent contradictions.

The probably most common view on the way aesthetic practices interact with and influence the world outside of the arts is that they do so through some sort of

critique; by providing a critical reflection of the world we make it open for discussion, and the debates that ensue in their turn will bring about change. This critical reflection is usually accomplished by means of representation: the artwork either “makes visible” some negative circumstance in order to enlighten the audience and rouse them to action, or it acts by empowering this or that suppressed subjectivity. This figure of thought is so common that it is striking how seldom we stop to check if the supposed effect of our efforts ever actually takes place.

Here resides an ambiguity embedded in the very core of subjectivity. We automatically tend to think of the subject as the natural condition and point of departure for social and political agency, and also associate the notion of the subject with autonomy and empowerment. But in both the ontological and structural sense of the word, the subject is always produced as a subject to something.

In the essay *A Thing like you and me* Hito Steyerl reflects on a tendential shift in the conditions for subjectivation and criticality that she dates aesthetically and chronologically to two pop songs released in 1977. *No More Heroes* by The Stranglers is a lament of the romantic subject acting on the world with an agency connected to its will and identity, a romantic figure irrevocably withdrawn into history. In *Heroes*, David Bowie reincarnates the figure of the hero, but now as object: an infinitely re-producible thing-fetish-image onto which any desire can be projected. “*No longer a larger than life human, but a shiny product: an image and nothing but an image.*” Steyerl describes this prediction of a 21st century hero, before analysing the consequences—and possibly also attraction—of this fundamental shift in the production of agency as follows:

*“Traditionally, emancipatory practice has been tied to a desire to become a subject. Emancipation was conceived as becoming a subject of history, of representation, or of politics. To become a subject carried with it the promise of autonomy, sovereignty, agency. To be a subject was good; to be an object was bad. But, as we all know, being a subject can be tricky. The subject is always already subjected. Though the position of the subject suggests a degree of control, its reality is rather one of being subjected to power relations. Nevertheless, generations of feminists—including myself—have strived to get rid of patriarchal objectification in order to become subject (...) How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why not be a thing? An object without a subject? A thing among other things?”\**

\* Hito Steyerl, *A Thing Like You and Me*, p. 2-3, e-flux Journal #15, April 2010

## 8 The Interface

Is Manhattan separated from or connected to New Jersey by the Hudson river?

The traditional connotation of the border is a negative one: an excluding barrier, a closure around something supposed to be accessible. This also is deeply embedded in the traditional discourse on theatre: the fourth wall is a barrier between the actors and the audience, and the aesthetic form of figure is supposed to open up for the interpretation of a content and can thus not exist in its own autonomous right. The double figure of separation and connection opens up for a much more complex idea of the threshold as a membrane or interface.

In *The Coming Community*, Giorgio Agamben speculates around the relation between the concepts *threshold* and *eidos*, which is the greek word for form, shape or appearance. The threshold here is not merely a border or barrier, but also the delimitation needed to define a singularity; not yet an identity, but the simultaneity of an inside and an outside; the limit it takes to give something a shape in order for it to both see and be seen, like a face, but also constitutes the frame of a concept—*idea*, the feminine form of *eidos* (see *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, p. 192–194).



This figure of thought is closely related to the logic described in Franz Kafka's short story *Before the Law*, a logic elaborated by Derrida in his essay with the same name (see also *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, p. 164–70). The closedness of the open door is what makes it an interface. It is an interface by resisting the impulse to enter; by disappointing the normative expectation of full accessibility, and by refusing the right to "know." Looked at from this perspective, the logic of the stage as space of appearance changes. We tend to think of the limit between the stage and the audience as a barrier that ultimately should be overcome, either by "tearing down" the fourth wall, or by the capacity of the performance to communicate its inside, its content—or law—to the audience on the outside. Just like the door to the law, the stage designates a threshold that constitutes a double bind of an opening maintained only by its closedness. And the performer—artist, writer, or director—is, just as the doorkeeper, on the same side of the door as the audience. Only so long as we accept that there is no access through the door—that it is open, as always, but that my attempt to enter does not lead to any "knowledge" or "true" interpretation, but only means that I put my own subject in the place of the law—i.e. only insofar as I accept sharing the position of non-knowledge with the audience—on the threshold between my knowledge and my ignorance, to speak with Deleuze—only then does the door of the stage open up for a collective production of attention and imaginary.

A parallel connotation to the river is the greek concept of *aporia*—the potential of an impasse, or puzzlement—to stand at one side of a river and watch the other side, to accept the impossibility of passage but still direct our gaze in amazement.

If the Hudson river in this parable is the double figure of the threshold-door, then what does that make of the Washington Bridge? The most obvious way of looking at it probably is that the bridge is a means of communication from one side of a threshold to the other. This would also be a traditional understanding of the function of language, a toolbox of signs and symbols enabling us to "bridge" the gap between two positions. Opposing this idea of language as a more or less correct transmitter of essence, Walter Benjamin, in the essay *On the language as such and on the language of men*, outlines a linguistic theory where the self reflective nature of language, its closedness, is what defines its unlimited potentiality.

*Language communicates the linguistic being of things. The clearest manifestation of this being, however, is language itself. The answer to the question "What does language communicate?" is therefore "All language communicates itself." (...) Precisely because nothing is communicated through language, what is communicated in language cannot be externally limited or measured, and all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity.\**

Whether in the form of physical or textual gesture, performative practice is a symbolic system and, in this sense, a language with its own logic, agreements, and rules. This is why the demand that theatre be understandable without presupposing any shared reference points is ridiculous. The things that can be negotiated in a language without any knowledge of its system or referentiality are limited to an eternal repetition of the smallest common denominators of a hegemony, which is, at its best, worthless. To accept this idea of language would offer an interesting perspective on performative practice: can I imagine a theatre based on a symbolic system not aiming to reveal meaning, but operating in the logic of a self reflective language? Can I imagine a performative language-as-such; based on the open ended transcendence of text, figure, and sound as closed objects of negotiation?

\* Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings Volume 1* p. 63-64, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1996

## 9 Postponement

Latency, the delay between impulse and implementation, is one of the major no-no's of our time. In the contemporary economy of appearances, the demand for immediate display, the demand that everything appear with as little delay as possible, is undisputed. Whether we are talking about the economy, performing arts, smart phones, higher education, or the damned lagging of my internet connection, every thought, message, or process is expected to be ready to reveal itself whenever we like, to make itself accessible as presence in the present. Latency has no use value; any delay is just an annoying obstacle in the natural progression between impulse and manifestation.

The German poet Hölderlin describes the suspension of the *caesura*—the hiatus or interruption of the rhythm in a poetic phrase—as the moment of the withdrawal of the divine (see *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, p. 67–69). This disruption of progression is the event of nothingness, a rupture of history, which constitutes the fundamental moment of tragedy, but also a moment where the future lies totally open.

For me, it is a central task to define and develop performative tools for postponement, for the suspension of the moment of aesthetic judgement as well as of the moment when an interpretation represents itself in manifest and thus dominant appearance in the present. To use my aesthetic authority over the venue to make it possible to stay in the fold; to postpone manifestation and appearance in order to stay in the reading. To stay in the production and negotiation of subjectivity, but postpone any of its representations. The theatre venue thus becomes a suspended space, with the objective to postpone theatre.

## 10 The Kaaba

Malevich and the Zero of Forms  
Donald Judd's Boxes  
Stanley Kubrick's Monolith.  
Again, Agamben's Threshold.  
Again, the closedness of Kafka's open door.

An apparatus driven by the desire inherent in the absence of the Big Other.

## 11 Speculation

What does it take to truly speculate? One could argue that the double bind between economy and language specific to semio-capitalism is actually inherent to the faculty of speculation itself. The abstraction of the world into signs is the basic condition for all speculation, both intellectual and financial. As long as things are what they are, their value, usage and meaning is constant. With language, things are separated from themselves and can thus be objects of reflection or desire. In the linguistic turn of translation into signs and symbols—not the shoe but the Nike, not the green piece of paper but the dollar bill—both meaning and value is liberated into infinite flux.

## 12 The Future

*Under capitalism the future is an open field ahead of us that we can shape and construct through our work. Since we're condemned to have a future, we're condemned to work, and at the same time, if you are condemned to work, you are condemned to have a future. Whatever you choose you will be working and you will be acting strategically towards a goal and therefore you'll be productive. In order to change this dominant fate that wants to control the future, and therefore stay in the realm of the known, you have to sabotage this double machine of work*

and future so that it stops functioning for a while and so that a space is opened up (a present)—and later, the future will come.

(Valentina Desideri and Stefano Harney, *Fate Work*)

In the business of stock futures, the expected future value of an item is capitalized in the present. With the era of modernism, the figure of the future became a collective desire pushing the ideological machinery of capitalism, as well as communism, forwards, submitting the present to the promise of a transcendental event in an abstract future. Aesthetically, this era is epitomized by futurism, a celebration of accelerated speed, which projects its desire for change and difference as a trajectory of constant progress towards a superior tomorrow.

Today, the accelerationist ideal of mobility and time as a constant progress stands unchallenged. Not only as a neoliberal vision of the creative market as a force of inevitable progress, but also as a hegemonic trope in the fields of art and philosophy. Whether I act from a traditional leftist position of critique or devote my faith to speculative and/or posthuman visions of a technically augmented acceleration pushing capitalism beyond its own critical limit, the strategic choices and priorities are most likely founded in the idea of a transcendent event taking place in an abstract future; in the name of the revolution or of the empowerment of this or that subject. I might argue that I don't really believe in the idea of aesthetic transcendence; after all, that whole trope feels a bit naive and romantic anyway. But given how most artistic work demands disproportionately big efforts and sacrifices, both of the artist and hers or his environment, it is hard find an argument in favour of aesthetic practice that doesn't defend its existence by some sort of transcendent effect on reality.

This desire for future thus causes a double bind: the future is already capitalized in the present, and the present is thus already in debt to the future. And since the future is already inscribed in the present desire, all our fantasies and attempts to imagine the future collapse back into the present. The future leads back to the present, and in the present I am already projected towards the future.

Seen from this perspective, it becomes urgent to find strategies for staying in the present. The dramaturgy of stories, as well as melodies and rhythm, are by nature driven by a force propelling them towards the future; the conflict desires its climax, the melody its next note, the beat its next click. What artistic practices become relevant if my main aim is to postpone the capitalization of the present by the future?

Of course, this is exactly the point of Hölderlin's concept of *the caesura*: the disruption of progress, the momentary lack of moment, that leaves the future empty as an open potentiality. The use of the bass drop in techno music is a contemporary example of the same logic: again, the skipped beat opens a potentiality. Here, however, the caesura is used only to build momentum for the continuation of progress; the explosion of accumulated potential is capitalized in an even more intensive movement toward the future.

In the article 2015: *The Neo-futurist Aesthetic* in the webzine *Tinymixtapes*, Matthew Phillips gives a very interesting analysis of how the accelerationist narrative and desire for the future is problematised in contemporary electronic music, compared to its devoted celebration as seen in traditional Futurism.

*The neofuturist aesthetic's motif of the event relies on interruption. Silence slices the wall of sound into fragments, revealing each moment of sounding as a choice, each of which can operate independently in the runtime of the track,*

shifting the weight of signifying from the forward progress of the song to the individual moment that is occurring. Motion still continues, inexorably forward, as all time is bound, but any particular event in the continuum now receives its own specific mass.\*

For me, this suggests an alternative and very productive perspective on how contemporary notions of movement and progress can be counteracted with the idea of rhythm as the oscillation between absence and presence, opening up for an imaginary where the future can become something else than a reproduction of the present (see *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, p. 201–204).

- \* Matthew Phillips, 2015: *The Neofuturist Aesthetic*, Tynymixtapes, December 10, 2015.

### 13 The Event

In *Ceasefire* magazine, political theorist and activist Andrew Robinson gives a description of Alain Badiou's notion of *the Event* that connects the figure of the event to the trope of disruption of presence by that what previously has not been re-presented as appearance in the present:

*Badiou maintains that reality is grounded on a 'void' of 'inconsistent multiplicity,' which is at once void and excess. Normally, the state, the count-for-one and the dominant ideology, cover up this foundation. But it remains present—imprisoned or kettled, so to speak, at the site of the excluded part. An Event happens when the excluded part appears on the social scene, suddenly and drastically. It ruptures the appearance of normality, and opens a space to rethink reality from the standpoint of its real basis in inconsistent multiplicity. The order of a situation—the "state of the situation," the "count-for-one," the dominant "ideology"—all render the excluded part invisible.*

*The excluded part has no recognised identity or attributes within the situation. Therefore, it cannot stage an Event based on some particular attribute. It can only approach the situation on the basis of its generic humanity. Only in an Event can the excluded part be visible. An Event succeeds in representing a part which is previously unrepresented.*

*An Event is something akin to a rip in the fabric of being, and/or of the social order. An Event is depicted as being other than "being as being," or the normal structure of reality. Events do not belong to situations, events occur outside being-as-being. An event is excessive over whatever is counted in the situation. It cannot be recognized as a "one" in the situation. Events are always radically contingent. Events are necessarily ruptural in relation to the dominant order. An Event declares that another world is possible. The Event is never happening in the present. It is always about to happen or has already happened.\**

- \* Andrew Robinson and Alan Badiou, *The Event in Ceasefire Magazine*, December 15, 2014.

### 14 Aesthetic Flight Routes

If postponement of the future as well as of aesthetic judgement is the objective, then walking is a very good form of rehearsal. The longer the material can be collected and produced without being projected onto a pre-figured outcome, the more the work opens itself up for its own potentiality. Work done in a studio is already pregnant with a specific idea of an expected result, where as the lack of both speed and obvious artistic application in the walking allows for the mental process to divert and explore unexpected territories that can be reached only via a certain level of emptiness and even boredom.

In 1966, the American artist Tony Smith was interviewed by Samuel Wagstaff for the magazine *Art Forum*. In a conversation that will reverberate in the work of artists like Robert Smithson, Smith describes a nightly car ride experienced 15 years earlier, on the newly built but yet not opened New Jersey Turnpike:

*When I was teaching at Cooper Union in the first year or two of the '50s, someone told me how I could get on to the unfinished New Jersey Turnpike. I took three students and drove from somewhere in the Meadows to New Brunswick. It was a dark night and there were no lights or shoulder markers, lines, railings or anything at all except the dark pavement moving through the landscape of the flats, rimmed by hills in the distance, but punctuated by stacks, towers, fumes and colored lights. This drive was a revealing experience. The road and much of the landscape was artificial, and yet it couldn't be called a work of art. On the other hand, it did something for me that art had never done. At first I didn't know what it was, but its effect was to liberate me from many of the views I had had about art. It seemed that there had been a reality there which had not had any expression in art.*

*The experience on the road was something mapped out but not socially recognized. I thought to myself, it ought to be clear that's the end of art. Most paintings look pretty pictorial after that. There is no way you can frame it, you just have to experience it.\**

The text describes an action that didn't understand itself as art when it was happening. Its artistic potential was only actualized fifteen years later, without, however, becoming manifest even then. The car ride is thus not an attempt to create something new within the field of art, but an escape from art. Again, it can be understood in the terms of a caesura or a disruption. However, it is not disconnected from the field of aesthetics. It is precisely because the New Jersey Turnpike is an aesthetic intervention in the landscape that the experience of a sublime can be produced. It is artificially constructed but does not fit into any pre-figured artistic category, and presents itself thus as a potential of open ended aesthetic transcendence.

- \* Tony Smith, *Interview with Samuel Wagstaff*, in *Artforum*, December 1966

## 15 Outsourced protocols

The artwork is traditionally understood as an aesthetic gesture that expresses an individual or collective subjectivity. Let's try, instead, to understand the artist as a messenger. The artist not as an author writing the story, but someone giving report. To make this change of perspectives and objectives possible, one also has to imagine alternative strategies for how to produce the situations on which the messenger will report. When we met with the shaman Charlyn in Joshua Tree, we didn't know what to expect of the meeting or what we wanted to get out of it. Afterwards, as we kept re-reading the things she had told us during the session—*Think in patterns, See how it unfolds, Keep doing what you are doing*—they looked more and more like a list of instructions. We decided to try to use it as a protocol for our work, to take her instructions in earnest and to try to follow them as literally as possible to see where they would lead us. And when we continued to work with the two shamans in Kiruna, we let them decide the destinations of our journeys.

At first this way of working with an *outsourced protocol*, where I as an artist follow the often contingent directions given by someone outside of the work, felt odd and difficult. I was pre-occupied with the truth or falsity of what the shamans said. But, as we kept following their lead, it became increasingly clear that the notion of "truth" was irrelevant. A lot of the time, the instructions often were obviously

random—contingent, shot from the hip—but they put things in motion and produced situations inaccessible to my own subjectivity. We are not the authors writing the story but, like the storyteller, we are being taken places and we are messengers giving witness to experiences and events not accessible from our everyday horizon.

In artistic research, this has proven to be very useful. If I decide for myself where to go in order to find material, be it on a geographical or thematic map, I have already projected a pre-figured idea onto the destination. In a sense, I already know what I want to find out, and the journey or research is mostly a matter of finding evidence for something I already know. Art history provides a number of strategies for approaching this dilemma. Brian Eno's and Peter Schmidt's *Oblique Strategies* is one of the more famous. As successful as this set of cards originally was, today they tend to simply illustrate the paradigm of chance, and no longer challenge the authorship of my own subjectivity. The outsourced protocol also addresses how the division of labour in art leads to representation. The artist as author/subject produces a trope of origin, ownership, and interpretation. In this trope, authorship is the authentic origin, and aesthetic form is a more or less "true" interpretation that communicates the agency of the original sender. This links the notion of artistic authorship to concepts of origin, truth, and ownership.

Theatre is never its own act. In theatre, everything is about interpretation. You can tell that something is theatre by the fact that it is "about" something. This bond between origin and interpretation is also a question of the image as copy, and when there is an original and a copy, matters always become charged with the proper and im-proper of identity. A copy is never itself, at least not since Plato; the double is always validated only in relation to a supposed origin. This focus on the proper of the image as copy also makes all questions of interpretation a matter of property. The agency based on interpretation thus never escapes the concrete question of ownership, guarded by the division of labor between a subject having all the artistic agency (choreographer or director) and others whose task it is to perform the aesthetic representation of this agency.

Outsourcing the protocol, in this sense, also becomes a strategy to address ownership and agency in artistic work.

## 15 **Universality**

Any thematic field can be studied in the observation of whatever.  
(I am not quite sure this is universally applicable, though.)

## 17 **The Body as Archive**

As messengers, we are the embodiment of our archive. There is no difference between me and my work. The politics of production in my work can not be separated from the politics of my agency.

## 18 **Stay in the Work**

This directive touches on an essential aspect of artistic research, and artistic work in general: How do I define tools to validate the results of my work—knowledge, material, experience, etc.—when they don't fit into the expected end result of a theatre performance? Everyone familiar with the process of a theatre production knows the routine: on the first day of rehearsal, everything is super interesting. The potential of the material is wide open. We get to do a lot of research, and the context connects to all possible kind of territories. As the work proceeds, step by step, everything potentially "new" is gradually eliminated, because it doesn't fit into the pre-figured form of presentation, i.e. the format of a theatre performance. And somewhere around three weeks before the opening, we have re-produced exactly the same product as last time, since that is the only mode of presentation

that corresponds with the established quality criteria. To compensate for this eternal return of the same, we allow ourselves to get lost in the consumerist logic of novelty; blue scenography instead of yellow, a contemporary setting, the actor's own life story instead of a classical play, real people instead of actors.

So, how can we stay in the work? How can we find ways of sharing and presenting the work that allow us to let the research determine the format of presentation and not the other way around? My experience is that the more material I have collected, the more thorough the research, and the more substantial the knowledge I have gathered through the process, then the less I need to worry about how to present it. The form becomes less significant in itself. The focus is no longer on "good" and "bad" but on what actually works in the sharing of the factual material, and on how to stay open to its potential. When, as in the case of a conventional theatre production, we focus from the start on how the work is supposed to be presented, we will not produce any actual knowledge, but just re-collect the material that fits into the pre-figured result. Only when the format of presentation and its quality criteria are postponed can I stay open for the material that presents itself during the work process.

Here, the postponement of judgement is key; the performance as a suspended space. Keep producing material, stay in the mode of research even during the presentation of the work. Don't worry how to make it "art" or how to make it fit a pre-figured representational object. Focus on the work. What I "do" is important; what it "is" can wait.

## 19 Alterity and Critique

How do I relate to radical otherness if the tools and quality criteria of my aesthetic practice are based on identity? We tend to think of empathy as identification with someone else's situation. But if empathy strictly means being able to relate to someone's experience from the other's frame of reference, recognition and identification are not the right conditions for it. Empathy, then, must be the capacity to relate without understanding or identification.

It is also interesting that Charlyn connects this set of notions to the field of critique. In *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida connects the question of justice to the territory of spectrality. Its basic logic is a kind of *hauntology*. Whenever we define an identity or community we define a limit, and whatever ends up on the outside of this threshold will come back to haunt the identity/community that has produced the exclusion. Trying to solve this problem by infinite inclusion is romantic and naïve. We are dependent on defined thresholds and agreed values and structures. As much as we would like to include every possible otherness—women, muslims, animals—there will always be some subjectivity that ends up on the outside of the hegemony, and these subjectivities will come back as spectres. And the capacity for justice of a given community is defined by its capacity to negotiate with this radical alterity. This also draws a line between the fields of law and justice. The relation to spectres cannot be regulated by law, since the law can only address what is within the system. Justice is always a matter of unconditional negotiation.

## 20 Pattern Dramaturgy

Traditional dramaturgy is linear and guided by a dominant narrative. Pattern based dramaturgy could be understood as a method for allowing parallel aspects and narratives to unfold without submitting them to an internal hierarchy. What keeps them together, instead of interpretation, is the gravity of one or several patterns. These patterns could be thematic, but might just as well follow other more associative logics based on affinities of rhythm, shape, density, colour, or emotion.

Whereas linear dramaturgy knows its destination, and constructs a static route to bring the spectator to this pre-destined goal, pattern based dramaturgy is a way to stay in movement without having a known outcome. It listens and senses, rather than speaks and expresses, without letting go of thematic precision. It could be compared to the notion *fiction-ing* as used by Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in the essay *Typography*. Fiction-ing, for Lacoue-Labarthe, is the act of applying fiction to reality in order to fantasize and speculate. Fiction-ing is the production of a parallel reality, a double to de-stabilize the order of things. As opposed to the petrified statue of fiction, in which aesthetic figures appear as re-presentation of the present, fiction-ing produces temporary time-spaces that allow what is absent to present itself as presence.

(Compare Derrida's notion of *writing under erasure*.)

## 21 The Material of the Immaterial

There are a number of interesting aspects of sound, all of which relate to its double presence as both material and immaterial body. (It has been pointed out that this is just as true about light and scent, which is a very interesting point. But I won't go into the consequences of this here.)

A sound obviously has a material source—a mouth, an instrument, or the membrane of a loudspeaker. And just as obviously, the impact of a sound on the membrane of my eardrum is a concrete physical interaction. But sound waves—albeit also a concrete physical entity—are also a carrier of meaning. Their double existence destabilises the distinction of material and immaterial, signified and signifier, and the threshold between individual and collective—since sound is participatory by nature, it physically connects everyone surrounded by its materiality.

In the chapter “Motion Capture” of *More Brilliant than the Sun* (1998), Kodwo Eshun describes how the use of sampling and scratching in hip hop through the 90s changed the ontology of sound. Whereas sound had hitherto been understood as the sonic extension of a concrete source—the voice of a singer, the string of the bass, or the skin of a drum— in the close-up, it gains an autonomous existence and materiality in its of right.

*Grandmaster Flash and DJ Kool Herc and all those guys isolate the breakbeat, ... they literally go to the moment of a record where the melody and the harmony drops away and where the beats and the drum and the bass moves forward. By isolating this, they did something comparable to switching on a kind of electricity, by making the beat portable, by extracting the beat. I call it motion capturing. (...) They grabbed a kind of potential beat which was always there, by severing it from the funk engine, by materializing it as actually a portion of vinyl that could be repeated. They basically let loose the material potential of the break which had been lying dormant for a long time.*

*(...) When most people talk about scratchadelia, about scratching on vinyl, they say it's a rhythmic rubbing of the vinyl in a percussive way, so as to accompany the rest of the song. But actually a rhythmic process isn't really what's going on. What's going on is a new textural effect. Scratching is more like a transformation sequence, more like the audio parallel of The Thing maybe (...) It's this unstable mix of the voice and the vinyl. It's this new texture effect. You could say the voice has become materialized.*

*It's like Mark Sinker says, finding the universe in a grain of sound and that's what the sampler does. Sampladelia, by definition, allows you to analogize a lot of things. And not only does it analogize, it lets you mutate and recombine. Sampladelia is a mandate to recombine. That's what it is, that's how it works.\**



In sampling, sound is sliced down to a close up, which frees the sonic component from its subordination to a supposed origin. By zooming in on a micro level the sound becomes a pure materiality, detached from its position in hierarchy of composition and rhythm. The new granular perspective of sound produces something that can be understood as the materiality of the immaterial and vice versa. A sign is simultaneously abstraction and concrete. My voice, because it is part of a "real" person, is supposedly concrete. But as soon as the sound waves leave my lips, they exist in their own right, and their connection to me as speaker play out on the purely abstract level of signification. The granular process by which the material components of the sonic are subtracted, the de-composing allowing for re-composition, is a trajectory into the concreteness of the abstract.

This idea of the sound as threshold is also found in Theodor Reik's essay on the traditional Jewish instrument *The Shofar*, a text written in 1946 and re-introduced into circulation by Lacan in his seminar on *Anxiety* in 1962-1963.<sup>†</sup> In a central paragraph, Reik analyses the chapter of the Book of Exodus in which Moses is called by God to a meeting on Mount Sinai. What is staged by God, with the help of his accomplice Moses, is a kind of remarkable performative stunt, simultaneously marking the transition from polytheism to monotheism in Abrahamic religions, and from manifest and present divinity to God as a big Other whose presence is defined by absence. Since no human is allowed to see God—Moses being a singular exception—God lets Moses know that he will cover the mountain in smoke in order to remain invisible for the Israelites. Only when the blasting signal of a horn, the shofar, is heard will they be allowed back to the mountain. The shofar thus marks the threshold of the presence and absence of God. When Moses gets back after his long session with God, he finds that the people have made themselves a manifest icon of God, the golden calf. In wrath, he not only destroys the golden calf, but even grinds it to a powder out of which he brews a tea that the Israelites are commanded to drink. The present manifestation God thus is slaughtered, transformed, and incorporated as an absent big Other (see *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, p. 197–201).

\* Kodwo Eshun, *More Brilliant Than The Sun*, p. 176-180

† Jacques Lacan, *Anxiety*, chapter XVIII – *The Voice of Yahweh*, p. 243-255, Polity Press 2014

## 22 The Fetish

The shamanic understanding of the mimetic faculty, described by Michael Taussig in *Mimesis & Alterity*, is the opposite of the mimetic double/image employed from a position of power as a gesture of appropriation. The fetish that mimics the coloniser is a necessary de-territorialization. Whereas imperialism puts visual representation in service of world conquest, the image of the demon in shamanic ritual is a decoy, or lure, for protection against the agency of a superior otherness.

## 23 The Twin Figure of Mimesis

Mimesis in the shamanistic use of fetishes is the production of alterity and not identity. The replica here is not understood as something inferior, but is given an autonomy in its own right. It is not validated in its relation to a supposed original, but on its own conditions. In the representational regime of identity, the existence of the double has to be proper. The more properly the copy/image represents its origin, the higher its value is. The representation thus always exists in relation to property, which also explains its connection to appropriation.

"Why would the problem of identification not be, in general, the essential problem of the political?" writes Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe in his essay *Transcendence ends in Politics*.\*

The mimetic double destabilises the original. It is a dissolution of the proper. This function gives us an interesting perspective on xenophobia and on the notion of uncanny valley. It might not be the unknown quality of the stranger that produces fear and rejection, but rather its similitude: if the double is too close to us without producing identity, it has to be either assimilated and a-propriated, or expelled (see *Twin Figure Of Mimesis*, p. 81–87).

\* Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, p. 300, Harvard University Press 1989

## 24 Creative Economy

How can art in general, and artistic research in particular, produce a critical position when imagination and experience have become the core resources of economy? Of course, this state of things implies a validation of creativity, but also an appropriation of the imaginary and the production of experience for economic ends.

## 25 Cowboy Economy

This comment is of course remarkable on so many levels at the same time. The leap of faith as model for a new global financial paradigm, where the only way to survive is to jump towards an almost certain death with the hope of a miracle. For the cowboy-as-president, the role models for the new economy are two cowboy criminals, whose primary economic activity until this point was bank robbery. These heroes are scavengers, following the construction of the transcontinental railway. They time their robberies on the transportation of monthly wages to the railway workers. Now there is no money left to rob, so they've been planning to move on to Mexico. On their way, they've been caught up by the posse. This is the economic logic that has taken them to the edge of the cliff. The only way out is to jump to an uncertain future.

Three decades later, in the mature phase of creative economy, the parallel between finance and the heroic outlaw has passed over into the field of art. The artist is also a figure operating on the threshold between order and disorder, oscillating between the inside and outside of the system, producing the transgressions and de-territorializations necessary to create new territories of value that will be capitalized on when all the safe deposit boxes of normative economy have been emptied out.

## 26 The Messenger

*"We write only at the threshold of our knowledge, at the border which separates our knowledge from our ignorance and transforms the one into the other"* wrote Gilles Deleuze. The position of messenger is on the side of the medium giving report, and opposed to the author and composer. The strategy of outsourced protocol activates a practice of perspectivation. This perspectivation opens two aspects of the interaction of aesthetics and subjectivity:

- a) The unlearning of craft defined habits, what Bojana Cvejić has called the *"un-learning or ungrounding (of) the knowledge of possibilities that reproduce rather than create new thoughts, images, movements, bodies, sounds, and their relations."*\* After 30 years in theatre, a constant orientation towards the end product, the theatre performance, has been ingrained in me and in my skills and sensibilities. This logic operates on a subliminal level already in the early phases of shaping an idea. Even in the first step of a research, I categorize material on the basis of this matrix. The material or knowledge that can not be translated into "theatre," with our without my approval, gets screened out, and in most cases I won't even see it. Having someone outside of this context deciding on the purpose of my research or my journey short circuits this "discrimination by skill" and forces me to invent and adapt my modes of presentation to facilitate new encounters with

the world, instead of adapting the world to what can and cannot be translated into the pre-figured, theatrical form of presentation.

- b) To continuously accept changes to my perspective on reality, i.e. to accept constant changes in the position from which I look at the world, provides the condition for something that, to speak with Jacques Derrida, could be understood as the aesthetic gesture of writing under erasure. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida describes this ontological paradox as a strategy for encountering the fact that we are linguistic beings, caught in a language that does not describe the world but only itself as language. Still, language is our way to negotiate the world between ourselves, and every statement about the world thus has to be “written” and erased in the same gesture.

I find this to be a very inspiring proposal for a theatre practice. Since the performing arts are a semiotic language, and as such can communicate only themselves as language, the link of transcendence between the performative gesture and reality has to be erased in the same gesture as it is proposed. As opposed to the paradigm of authenticity and identity, the performing gesture here becomes a series of proposals, each of which describes and/or renders a new perspective.

The stunt and the craft of the Storyteller could be defined by these questions: how can one remain in a relation of sentience with the world? How can one continuously produce and share experience, and yet continuously resist its final transition to the medium of Art? How can one use one’s craft, skills, and knowledge to destabilize one’s own fixed categories, and encounter the threshold of one’s ignorance?

- \* Bojana Cvejić, “*Un infiel regreso a la poética (en cuatro argumentos)*” (*An Unfaithful Return to Poetics (in Four Arguments)*), in *La réplica infiel (The Unfaithful Replica)*, eds. Nuria Enguita Mayo and Nacho Paris, CA2M, Madrid, 2016.

## 27 Passage 1

See note No. 8, “The Interface.” (#Passage/Aporia/Threshold/FourthWall)

## 28 Production vs Exhibition

The opposition between an economy based on production and an economy based on exhibition could be understood as a variation on the couple of use value/exchange value. The economy of production relates to the original meaning of production—bringing something into existence—whereas the economy of exhibition has to do with the surplus value generated by appearance and display. (See note 34 as well)

## 29 Fiction-ing 1

The use of fiction in shamanistic practices—which are often described as animism—is a linguistic vitalization of the world in which all entities become spiritual and potentially interconnected. Fiction, here, is a pattern applied to the world, a strategy for activating a gap in which meaning can be continuously produced. As opposed to the essentialist tradition in art, which considers aesthetics and fiction as instruments for the production of images and objects that claim authenticity, essence, or truth—fiction allows a “shaping of the world by thought.” A fiction-ing, to speak with Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, in the encounter with the world, rather than the static gestalt of displayed fiction. Reflection and thinking in this practice are actualized and activated through basically any interface whatsoever. Pick the object you prefer, or just what happens to be at hand—the stars, a formation of stones, or the leftovers in your coffee cup— and start “reading” it.

### 30 Archive & Documentation

In a sense, all language could be described as an archive that documents the exchange of subjectivity and experience over time and space. From this perspective, every performance is also an archive of the working process. This is a reversal of our traditional viewpoint, in which the performance is the real thing and the rehearsal is just a preparation for this outcome. Instead, the idea of the performance as documentation gives the working process an autonomous value, independent of the performative presentation.

### 31 Fiction-ing 2

*If anyone can open doors and make things happen in Luxor, it seems to be the manager of Sharazad Hotel, Muhammed. He looks at our professional tripod and camera: "You are making a movie? I love movies!" We answer "Yes, we are making a film on the Legend of Thoth, could you help us? We would like to make a film shoot where we dig for the Book of the Dead in the sandbanks of the Nile. In the town Koptos, down the Nile."*

*Digging in Egypt is not that easy. There is a lot of illegal digging at archeological sites, and if the police find out, you'll have some tricky explaining to do. "And Koptos," Muhammed says "—Well, it is not good at all right now. Military area... military checkpoints. You will need papers. I know the perfect spot for your film shoot. It is actually in the opposite direction—in the desert. But it will make for a great movie—And that's most important, right?"*

Traditionally, we think of fiction from the point of view of presentation; as the story of the book, the characters, or their relation in a play. Since the *what* in a theatre performance is fiction, the *how* is asked to contribute some kind of authenticity to compensate. (One could discuss if devised and/or documentary theatre breaks with this logic or not. Personally, I think it most often means a subordination of the *what*—the documentary material—to the *how* as defined by a representational paradigm.)

When we first decided that the objective of the journey to Luxor was to dig for the *Book of the Dead* in Koptos, I was first very occupied with how to stay true to the task; since the whole plot was fake (the *Book of the Dead* is a legend and so is its origin being a legend), it felt crucial that we at least followed the protocol with a certain amount of sincerity. So when our guide Mohammed said he couldn't take us to Koptos and suggested we dig in the desert instead, 150 kilometres in the wrong direction, I was a bit hesitant at first. Our fellow traveller Rasmus Nielsen—who was the one who had made contact with Mohammed and was also the one who had made up the story about the film shoot—seemed very confident and pleased with the arrangement, so I decided to trust him and follow his direction to see what happened. Of course, it became obvious that the authenticity of the location was completely irrelevant. The fictional film shoot created a situation that generated material and knowledge that allowed us to produce imagery and speculation.

### 32 Passage 2

As part of the research, we did a workshop at the Danish School of Performing Arts on the notion and practice of storytelling and travelogues. At the end of the workshop, we performed a collective ceremony following a protocol based on paleolithic burials, in which burnt ochre was symbolically used as protection in the passage from life to death. The objective was to perform a ritual centered on passage—not a passage for this or that subject or agency, but a passage-as-such, an open ended transcendence for whatever to whatever.

Language and semiotics today are implicitly connected with understanding. Their purpose is to communicate proper meaning and knowledge of things, to reveal

the intrinsic meaning of phenomena and their position in the world. But what if the function of symbolic systems is not necessarily to reveal, make visible, or transport proper meaning, but rather to make invisible and provide camouflage? One important function of the early hieroglyphic alphabet was to give instructions and protection to the deceased soul on the journey from this life to the next. And in a lot of ritual protocols, the use of aesthetics where not representations, but rather very concrete equipments meant to protect the performer from the demons and spirits addressed by the ritual (see *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, 198–200)

### 33 Spacing Out

In the chapter “Spacing Out” in his book *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig connects Roger Caillois’ reflections on mimesis and similarity with Walter Benjamin’s ideas as described in *The Mimetic Faculty*. Benjamin describes mimesis as an innate desire to “slip into Otherness” through resemblance. (see Footnote 3, *Similarity-As-Such*, and *Twin Figure Of Mimesis Part I*, p. 127–134).

This trajectory, both surprising and beautiful, is very useful if I want to rethink the logic of both imagery and performing. The similar has the double quality of being simultaneously a promise and threat, offering a possible passage from my isolation from the world and at the same time opening the gateway to the horror of my self dis-appearing in sentience, my very being dissolving in the sensory encounter with its surroundings. This figure of thought for me describes a continuous double bind of subjectivation; an eternal act of balance, the joy and need of part-taking in the world encountering the fear of my self getting lost in the abyssal vertigo of its signs and similarities, meanings, shapes and figures; nothing to do about that, any attempt to isolate the promise from the threat leads to either repressive appropriation or schizophrenia, oppressive identity politics or chaos.

### 34 The Thing that Gathers

The archaic fascination of the open fireplace may be the point zero of aesthetic transcendence. Not a signifier for any of the content in the storytelling taking place around the fire, but an empty sign: *a thing that gathers*, in the sense of Heidegger, an aesthetic intervention that creates a temporal space and situation. An autonomous aesthetic sphere for those who have convened to focus their attention, for us to gather and open our sensitivity without closing it off by delivering a determined meaning, content, or subjectivity.

## TWIN FIGURE OF MIMESIS I &amp; II

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