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# **Conflicts: Aesthetics and Politics**

Edited by Noit Banai and Marina Gržinić





Noit Banai and Marina Gržinić Mauhler

## Introduction

The conflicts of today cannot be understood in isolation from their historical precursors. The contestation of memories and the search for justice and reconciliation are ongoing processes that reflect both local and global dynamics. The geopolitical organization of empires during the *longue durée* of modernity has had a profound impact on current conflicts. Many of today's struggles can be traced back to the colonial legacy, where arbitrary borders, imposed governance structures, and extractivist economic policies have created divisions that continue to inflame tensions. In the Middle East, for example, the consequences of colonial-era decisions still linger in the form of sectarian divisions and national identities. These histories implicate a wide spectrum of modern disciplines, techniques, mechanisms, and epistemologies through which populations are represented, counted, classified, or otherwise enumerated.

The ideal of the nation-state often postulates a homogenous identity that unites its citizens. This notion creates pressure to conform that marginalizes those who do not fit or willingly assimilate into the national narrative. Beneath the surface of this fictive unity lies a pervasive fear of difference—be it ethnic, cultural, or ideological. This fear leads to violent processes of othering, resulting in social fragmentation and conflict. These identities emerge when groups set themselves apart from others, which often instigates the justification of violence and exclusion.

At the crux of the nation-state model is both a fantasy of wholeness and anxiety about minor differences, which together produce predatory identities ready for conflict. The dynamics of belonging become predatory (necropower) when the safety of one group is perceived as a threat to another. As we witness the carnage inflicted on civilian populations in the wars being waged in Ukraine/Russia and Israel/Palestine, it is probably unnecessary to list the countless episodes

of violence, ethnic cleansing, and genocide that have occurred on national soil and extra-territorial colonial dependencies as a result of “the fear of small numbers.”<sup>1</sup> In the twentieth century alone, under both capitalist and communist regimes, the ideology of the sovereign nation-state as the basis for governmentality, citizenship, and representations of the “people” has gone hand in hand with large-scale efforts to protect the national ethnos and its singularity against any perceived contaminations.

Addressing these issues requires a nuanced understanding of the past and a commitment to fostering dialog and empathy among those whose narratives are marked by violence and trauma. In this way, it may become possible to find pathways to a more just and reconciled future that honors the complexity of collective memory while acknowledging the wounds of the past.

Although it is still unclear what this future epistemology of belonging might look like, we propose case studies that investigate a heterogeneous constellation of discursive objects, material and technological practices, and representational and symbolic artifacts across various geographic territories and historical temporalities in which conflicts have taken shape in a bid to constitute a “people.”

What emerges in this special issue is the conjunction between nation-state formation and the ongoing production and enactment of violence towards individuals and communities via ethnic, racialized, gendered, and antisemitic discrimination, the brutal deployment of military power, and the intensification of technological exploitation. In addition, it demonstrates that the conflicts surrounding us are an outcome of an age marked by post-socialist transitions to neoliberal global capitalism; the legacies of colonialism, the Cold War, and the Holocaust, and the emergence of new paradigms of governmentality.

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The concerns examined in this special issue intersect and are mutually constitutive; we have organized them around four topoi: Ideology, Aesthetics/Politics, Language, and Conflict(s)/War(s).

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

**Ideology:** considers both the macro articulation of ideologies in the production of historical realities and their micro interpellations, negotiations, and reiterations within specific local contexts. It includes a new interview with the German sociologist Klaus Theweleit, who revisits his seminal book *Male Fantasies* (1977), a psychoanalytic study of the psyche of male soldiers, specifically the paramilitary groups in post-World War One Germany, in the context of contemporary modalities of violence and authoritarianism; the curator and cultural theorist Joshua Simon delves into the ways that the current neoliberal digital regime organizes every aspect of everyday experience by making life available as both labor and debt for capital in real life and online; the political scientist Sophie Uitz researches multidirectional memory and transnationality in recent examples of counter-monument practices in Austria's capital city of Vienna, specifically with regard to the struggle against antisemitism, racist discrimination, and anti-Romatism.

**Aesthetics/Politics:** grapples with the effects of biopolitics, necropolitics, and racialization in the constitution of national publics and the possibilities of imagining alternative futures. The art historian Noit Banai analyzes contemporary aesthetic strategies through which muted archives of memory have been activated in Israel/Palestine and builds upon them to articulate the concept of “trans-national specularity,” through which a comparison across and beyond national borders can be forged; the interdisciplinary scholar Jelena Petrović, meanwhile, focuses on the war history of the present, the aesthetics of resistance, and the politics of affect in the context of the post-Yugoslav space and points to a common ground of politics and art that uncompromisingly counters the governing (post-)Yugoslav discourses of never-ending wars; finally, the curator and exhibition organizer Elisa R. Linn traces the legal, representative, and societal status of migrant Others in the “closed society” of the GDR as an example of how Germany has been profiting from labor migration on both sides of the Wall. Linn lays out how migration from German reunification onwards until today is represented as a sudden and temporary issue, camouflaging a colonial and racist past and necropolitical present.

**Language:** investigates the constituent role played by discourses in the articulation of identities and begins with the anthropologist and media theorist Lia Lola Vlado Kotnik's defense of Judith Butler's theoretical contributions in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) for a contemporary analysis of the discontent and

fear elicited by transgender people; the linguists Kern and Vičar draw on the perspective of queer linguistics, which presents a fundamental challenge to the assumption that binary systems for categorizing gender and sexuality are natural, universal, and indisputable, and explore the extent to which grammatical gender both constrains and facilitates the realization of transgender and non-binary identities among speakers of Slovene. The translator and writer Miha Marek compares the language used in the original publication of *Autoemancipation!* (1882), a seminal text of early Jewish nationalism, which arguably established Zionism as a movement functioning in the German language, with its translation into Yiddish (1884) and asks whether different notions of nationalism appear in each version.

**Conflict(s)/War(s):** delves into the mechanisms, techniques, and representations of military disputes within modernity/coloniality. The theorist Vesna Liponik presents a close reading of the novellas *Godzilla* (1955) and *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955) by Shigeru Kayama in order to investigate the relationship between animal victimhood and resistance, and to identify the novel phenomenon of animals as saviors. The philosopher Nina Cvar posits the process of erasure as a structural element of modernity that appears uncompromisingly in its histories and, in particular, in contemporary politics via global necrocapitalism; the theorist and artist Marina Gržinić foregrounds the geopolitical struggles in Ukraine/Russia and Israel/Palestine as a field in which interconnected issues have come to the fore, among them the decoupling of sovereignty from territoriality and hence the emergence of the “war state.”

The understanding that contemporary conflicts are deeply rooted in the complex interplay of post-socialist transitions, neoliberal global capitalism, and historical legacies is crucial for analyzing the dynamics of violence and discrimination today. Comprehending these interconnected factors is essential for analyzing the multifaceted nature of the current conflicts. By recognizing the historical and structural roots of violence and discrimination, we can better address the ongoing challenges and work toward more equitable and just societies. Engaging with these themes allows for a critical analysis of how past injustices inform present struggles and shape future possibilities.

The transition from a state-controlled economy to neoliberal policies led to widespread privatization, resulting in economic instability, increased unemploy-

ment, and social dislocation. These changes have exacerbated inequalities and fueled resentment and conflict. With the transition of states, issues of national identity also became increasingly apparent. Neoliberalism prioritizes market mechanisms over social welfare, which can undermine community solidarity and exacerbate divisions. This economic framework often favors certain groups over others, further entrenching existing social hierarchies.

Almost all post-colonial nations face persistent economic exploitation that has its roots in colonial practices. The exploitation of resources and labor is still manifest today in inequalities and conflicts in which former colonial powers often play a role. The colonial history has left deep scars, including the erasure of indigenous cultures, traditions, and identities. Contemporary movements often emerge as forms of resistance to this legacy and lead to conflicts over land, resources, and cultural and political recognition.

During the Cold War era, many nations became battlegrounds for ideological struggles between the superpowers. The remnants of these conflicts continue to influence geopolitics, often leading to militarization and violence that spills over into civil conflicts. The ideological divisions of the Cold War have not yet fully dissipated. They are still operative in today's political landscape, where factions vie for power, often resorting to brute force to achieve their goals.

The advent of modern technology has changed the way states govern the population. This often leads to increased surveillance and control mechanisms that disproportionately affect marginalized populations. New forms of governance focus on managing populations through policies that favor certain identities over others, leading to systemic violence and discrimination against those deemed "undesirable," or even superfluous.

Furthermore, the intertwining of different historical struggles often complicates today's conflicts. For example, the stories surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are closely intertwined with broader global dynamics, which include colonialism, nationalism, and the Cold War. The legacies of past empires and conflicts thus continue to shape today's reality as communities grapple with their histories in the global context. These wars without end have been accompanied by various and disparate attempts at transnational justice and reconciliation. These include the contestation of histories and memories by victims and

perpetrators who once shared territories preceding nation-states, who lived together in the same nation-state, and/or who seek to build new state structures after conflict and genocide. In these instances, the victims seek recognition and justice for their suffering, while the perpetrators or their supporters often resist this recognition by framing their actions in the context of survival, defense, or national interest. This struggle for the supremacy of the narratives complicates efforts at reconciliation, as each side interprets history through a lens shaped by trauma and ideology. Their competing narratives, interpretations, and understandings are often also entangled in other histories of struggle related to the geopolitical organization of empires during the *longue durée* of modernity.

In regions where wars persist, the quest for transnational justice and reconciliation is intertwined with broader historical contexts and political aspirations. Transnational justice mechanisms, such as the International Criminal Court (ICC) or truth and reconciliation commissions, attempt to redress these historical grievances. However, their effectiveness varies greatly depending on the local context. In Rwanda, for example, the courts attempted to address crimes and facilitate healing after the genocide. However, they have been criticized for not sufficiently taking into account the complexity of ethnic identity and historical injustices. In Syria, on the other hand, the lack of a unified mechanism for justice has led to fragmented approaches, with local courts often operating without sufficient support or recognition from the international community.

The consequences of this process show that the nation-state model is unable to adequately resolve the structural violence and systemic inequalities that fuel antagonisms. The current conflicts, which are often characterized by ethnic cleansing, displacement, and state-sanctioned violence, show the limits of this model. The nation-state, with its rigid borders and exclusionary policies, continues to maintain and reproduce systems of power that perpetuate the colonial legacy and reinforce the cycle of violence, marginalization, and dispossession.

The traditional framework of modern/colonial epistemology, epitomized by the Westphalian nation-state, is no longer sufficient to deal with the complexity and horror of today's conflict zones.

In the global South and in post-colonial spaces, the nation-state has often become a site of contestation where the aftermath of colonialism merges with

modern forms of imperialism, leading to ongoing instability. In many conflict zones, state actors fail to protect their populations. Instead, they contribute to violence through authoritarian governance, militarization, and the suppression of dissent.

The horrors of the current conflicts—whether in Israel/Palestine, Syria, Myanmar, or Ukraine—make it clear that the current international framework is not sufficient to intervene effectively. These conflicts show how the nation-state’s inherent desire to place its sovereignty above human rights exacerbates suffering. Meanwhile, non-state actors, such as insurgent groups and transnational corporations, exploit the chaos and further destabilize regions.

In the face of these challenges, the need for a new model of belonging that goes beyond the violent legacy of the Westphalian order becomes clear. This model must embrace transnational solidarities and rethink political organization beyond the nation-state in order to create spaces for justice, inclusion, and collective healing that address the root causes of violence and exploitation.

**Ideology**



Marina Gržinić\*

## **Male Fantasies, Violence, Representation: Interview with Professor Klaus Theweleit\*\***

### **Keywords**

*Male Fantasies*, Freikorps, Abu Ghraib, historical violence, socio-political currents, contemporary society

### **Abstract**

In the interview with Klaus Theweleit, Marina Gržinić focuses on two distinctive lines of discussion. The first is on the book *Male Fantasies*. The 50th anniversary of this influential psychoanalytic study on the psyche of male soldiers, specifically the Freikorps, who were paramilitary groups in post-World War One Germany, is approaching in 2027. The second is about violence in general, particularly in the context of historical violence, of which the events at Abu Ghraib in 2004 are an example. Theweleit's analysis of violence, especially through the lens of his critical theory, provides a framework for understanding these events not just as isolated incidents but as manifestations of deeper socio-political and psychological currents. The interview examines many levels of Theweleit's work and thinking from that moment until today, reflecting on and returning to instances of historical violence and their bearing on contemporary society.

## **Moške fantazije, nasilje, reprezentacija: intervju s profesorjem Klausom Theweleitom**

### **Ključne besede**

*Moške fantazije*, Freikorps, Abu Ghraib, zgodovinsko nasilje, družbeno-politični tokovi, sodobna družba

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## Povzetek

Marina Gržinić se v intervjuju s Klausom Theweleitom osredotoča na dve različni smeri razprave. Prva se nanaša na knjigo *Moške fantazije*. Leta 2027 se bliža 50. obletnica te vplivne psihoanalitične študije o psihi moških vojakov, natančneje pripadnikov Freikorps, ki so bile paravojaške skupine v Nemčiji po prvi svetovni vojni. Druga smer govori o nasilju na splošno, zlasti v kontekstu zgodovinskega nasilja, primer tega pa so dogodki v Abu Ghraibu leta 2004. Theweleitova analiza nasilja, predvsem skozi optiko njegove kritične teorije, ponuja okvir za razumevanje teh dogodkov ne le kot osamljenih incidentov, temveč kot manifestacij globljih družbenopolitičnih in psiholoških tokov. Intervju preučuje številne ravni Theweleitovega dela in razmišljanja vse do danes ter se vrača k primerom zgodovinskega nasilja in njegovemu vplivu na sodobno družbo.



On May 18, 2024, I conducted a long, thought-provoking interview with Professor Klaus Theweleit at A.K.T; delving into the impact of his book *Männerphantasien* (*Male Fantasies*).<sup>1</sup>

*Männerphantasien* is a seminal two-volume work by German cultural theorist Klaus Theweleit, first published in 1977. The book was later translated into Serbo-Croatian in 1983. *Muške fantazije* was published in former Yugoslavia (a state in which we lived at the time and that does not exist anymore) as four separate volumes. It deeply resonated with the punk and subculture scenes in Ljubljana. *Muške fantazije* had an important impact on theorization inside the Slovenian intellectual scene that promulgated out of the punk music scene, LGBT scene, new media, and influenced writings on visual theories as well as on art and culture production in that period. The English translation of the book, *Male Fantasies*, was published in 1987.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The interview was organized through A.K.T; Pforzheim, and upon the invitation of Janusz Czech, program director of A.K.T; Pforzheim. Thanks to Prof. Klaus Theweleit, Janusz Czech, and Jovita Pristovšek.

<sup>2</sup> Most important editions of Klaus Theweleit's seminal book are *Männerphantasien*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt: Stroemfeld/Roter Stern, 1977–78); licenced paperback editions by Rowohlt (1983/1994); Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag (1995); Piper (2000), new edition by Matthes & Seitz (2019); *Muške fantazije*, 4 vols. (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1983); *Male Fantasies*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987–89); Polity Press (1987).

We are approaching the 50th anniversary of this influential psychoanalytic study of the psyche of male soldiers, specifically the Freikorps, who were paramilitary groups in post-World War One Germany. In *Male Fantasies* Theweleit explores how their experiences and psychological makeup contributed to the development of fascist ideologies and practices. Theweleit delves into the inner lives of these men, lives which were often characterized by brutal violence and extreme nationalism. He examines their fantasies, fears, and desires, using psychoanalytic theory to understand how these factors shaped their behavior and attitudes. The work places the Freikorps within the historical context of post-World War One Germany, a period of political and social upheaval. Theweleit examines how the trauma of war and the instability of the Weimar Republic influenced the psychological development of these men and their turn towards extremist violence.

The interview examines many levels of Theweleit's work and thinking from that moment until today, reflecting on and returning to instances of historical violence and their bearing on contemporary society. Theweleit's analysis of violence, especially through the lens of his critical theory, provides a framework for understanding these events not just as isolated incidents but as manifestations of deeper socio-political and psychological currents.

\* \* \*

**Marina Gržinić:** Professor Theweleit, thank you very much for participating in this interview and for being willing to answer some questions related to your seminal work, *Male Fantasies*. This will be one line of questioning. Another line of questions I would like to explore is about violence in general, particularly in relation to the historical violence exemplified by the events at Abu Ghraib in 2004.

Why this interest? In 1977, the German version of your remarkable work was published, and in 1983, the Serbo-Croatian translation was released in Zagreb. That translation had a profound impact on all of us involved in the subculture or punk scene in Ljubljana. We engaged extensively with your thesis, as presented in the four volumes of the book published in Serbo-Croatian in 1983.

**Klaus Theweleit:** Yes, originally there are two volumes in the German publication.

**Gržinić:** Yes.

**Theweleit:** Serbo-Croatian. It is every chapter one book.

**Gržinić:** It's very interesting. Then in 1987, the English translation was published.

**Theweleit:** Yes, a translation in two volumes.

**Gržinić:** I would like you to reflect on when you started researching the specific topic that would later be published as *Male Fantasies*. What was the time period? What motivated you to delve into the discussion of Germany, fascism, and the Weimar Republic with such a unique research methodology? Was it something personal, or was it the state of affairs in West Germany that influenced how you developed your methodology, research, and the questions you posed?

**Theweleit:** No, it was not at all the state of things in Germany. There are several sources for the beginning of this work. One is that I joined the SDS, *Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*, in 1967 after the murder of a student named Benno Ohnesorg by a policeman. He was wounded in Berlin during the visit of Shah Reza Pahlevi from Iran. I was politically interested before, but not active in any way. I was only involved in artist groups, student theater, music, and similar activities. However, that moment made me realize that something had to be done to prevent Germany from becoming a police state again, a development that reminded many older people of the Weimar era and fascism in Germany.

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I looked around the university and found this group, which I saw as the clearest and most radical. I had read leftist authors like Hans Magnus Enzensberger and literature from people who had fled Germany and survived what we now know as the Holocaust, though we didn't use that term then; we just spoke about the Jewish people. From around the age of 14, I had been aware of what the Germans had done during World War Two, especially in Eastern Europe, Poland, Ukraine, and Russia, thanks to some rare, good teachers.

My parents grew up with a deep-seated hatred, and they were taught to hate the Soviet Union, which they equated with the Russian people. I was born near the Russian border in East Prussia, north of Ukraine, south of Lithuania. After the war, I realized through overhearing their conversations with friends that they harbored this intense animosity toward Russia. They resented having to flee, feeling that they had been forcibly expelled from their homeland.

I absorbed much of this bitterness, and it took me some time to fully understand what they were talking about. Eventually, I learned about the atrocities committed by the fascists and the Nazi army, not only against working-class people but also against Russians and Jews during World War Two. I discovered that more Russians were killed in the war than any other group and that Jews were exterminated not only in concentration camps but also through the destruction of their villages and mass shootings.

When the Nazis conquered a city, they often targeted Bolsheviks and Jews, sometimes massacring tens of thousands in a single day, either by shooting them or burning them alive. This was a horrifying revelation that shaped my understanding of the past; and my objection to the parents' hatred.

When I was 14, I had heard enough to talk to my father about it. I said, "You wanted to invade Russia, and now you complain that they come for you in East Prussia?" He looked like he wanted to kill me. Eventually, I realized it was futile to continue those conversations. He would always say, "You didn't live then, so you don't understand."

My parents were young, married, and had six children. Life was good for them in the 1930s, with trade flourishing in Germany and East Prussia. There were nearly no Jews in northern East Prussia where we lived.

We had to flee East Prussia when in 1944–45 the Red Army advanced. My father, who worked in the railway service, wasn't there, so my mother had to escape with six children. I was three years old, my younger sister was just one, and my eldest brother, who was 13 years older than me, was 16. We fled from East Prussia to northern Germany. My father was one of the last people to leave East Prussia, from a town that is now known as Kaliningrad.

My father was the illegitimate son of an East Prussian estate holder and was raised by an aunt. My parents cared deeply for their children; that was their primary focus in life. However, my father considered himself primarily a railroad man, body and soul, as he put it, and only secondarily a family man. He was a man of responsibility for the family, but he was also a staunch fascist.

From an early age, I began to question how someone could care for six children while being indifferent to the murder of six million Jews. They showed no empathy when discussing the dead Russians, but when talking about Russian partisans killing German soldiers, my father would start crying.

How does that work? My father was a completely authoritarian figure, typical of German fathers of that era, who believed in disciplining children harshly. He wasn't religious, but he would cite the Bible to justify beating his children, saying it was necessary. The brutal beatings he administered as a matter of course, supposedly for my own good, were my first lessons in understanding fascism. My mother's ambivalence—believing the beatings were necessary but trying to temper them—provided my second lesson.

I didn't fully realize at the time what I realized later: that my parents really were sort of nuts, as well as their friends; as well as really most of the adult persons; people with "split minds." He was violent, even towards his own children, yet they also supported us. My father, who struggled due to being an illegitimate son, was determined that all of us should attend university and achieve more than he did. Only two out of six of us reached that level; the others left home early to pursue professions. I, growing up among them, had to find out in a way how this "contradiction" worked: being caring and "killing" persons at the same time. To talk with them about it was impossible. The beauty of life only was to be found among my group of friends. From the age of 14, I rarely spoke to any adults, up to the age of 25. Later I said, all people of my generation should have felt the necessity to become psychoanalysts having grown up with parents like that.

When I got to university, I quickly noticed that the professors were not on the same intellectual level as the students. We grew up with rock-and-roll, jazz, American cinema from 1956 on, Elvis Presley, James Dean. These influences were central to our lives. We read American literature, including Henry Miller, whose works were officially forbidden in Germany at the time.

When I started studying languages—English and German—I was deeply disappointed by our professors, who were completely out of touch with what we had grown up with. They didn't know the movies, comics, literature, music, which were the elements of life in which we lived.

**Gržinić:** It's very precise what you are saying, all these kinds of different stories, as an input.

**Theweleit:** Thanks. So—you couldn't learn much from the professors; they were from a different world. I was just 21, and knew so much more than all these adults from the world, who didn't want to know; and even the professors at the university who taught methods on how to read literature. Okay, we didn't need methods. We knew how to read.

There was one professor who knew Kafka, other ones focused on baroque lyrics, classics, and such. That was not our thing. I was totally Americanized through films, jazz, Black literature. From the European things we only took the so-called "French theater of absurdity": Ionesco, Tardieu, Vian, things like that. After some years, in '65, I began to think about what to do with my studies. I wanted to become a teacher, just a school teacher. You needed some papers from seminars and so on, an exam in the end. I realized I couldn't do that in the city of Kiel, because I knew so many people. I was involved in what you might now call the underground or Bohemian scene. I couldn't take a step in that city without meeting someone who would drag me into a café, a cinema, a pinball hall, or a nightclub until 3 or 4 in the morning. I realized I would never finish my studies if I stayed. I had to leave.

Fortunately, I also was a football player; my weak knees, more intelligent than me, helped with that; one got heavily damaged. I had to undergo an operation, which left me in the hospital for six weeks. That gave me a lot of time to think.

**Gržinić:** You made your decision to leave Kiel.

**Theweleit:** I had to leave. Yes. My girlfriend had to stay longer for some exams. She followed me a year later. During that year in Freiburg, I completed all the necessary papers. Being alone there allowed me to focus and finish my conditions for getting into the final *Staatsexamen*.

Then, that tragic event happened, I mentioned initially, and I decided I had to act politically in response. This decision turned me into a political activist for the next three years at the university, involved with SDS (Socialist German Student Union). As a result, everything we did against the authorities led to court cases. There were about twenty on the desks of the “District attorney” and a big file of “records” on me within *Verfassungsschutz*; the West thing of what in the East was “*Stasi*,” *Staatssicherheit*.

After those three years, it was clear to me, I couldn’t pursue my dream of becoming a teacher. They wouldn’t let me. The term *Berufsverbote* wasn’t yet coined, but soon it became officially impossible for people like me to get into the state’s service: *Beamter*. So, with the help of a friend, I transitioned to working in radio. My friend was a singer, well-known not only locally. Through this connection, I worked at the station for three years.

**Gržinić:** As a journalist.

**Theweleit:** As a freelancing journalist, I had to use a pseudonym because I was a well-known political figure in Freiburg and couldn’t publish under my real name (after one year I was allowed). The SDS had dissolved in the meantime. Monika Kubale, my lover, who had come to Freiburg, lived together with me. In 1972, we decided we wanted a child, and she gave birth to our son, Daniel. Monika had finished her studies as a psychologist and had found a job at the university’s youth psychiatry clinic.

We faced the dilemma of who would care for the child. Since I was considering leaving my job at the radio station due to internal intrigues and job insecurity caused by station consolidations, we decided that I would stay home to care for Daniel. This arrangement allowed Monika to keep her half-day employment in the clinic, and I was quite happy to leave the radio job to start work on my dissertation. We shared the care-job also for our second son, Max, for the next twenty years.

Monika and Dr. Margret Berger, pioneers of clinical psychoanalytical work with children, were the ones who gave me the most support whenever I, a person with no clinical experience, ventured to reformulate accepted psychoanalytic views on the fascistic type. I was working with nothing but patients’ reports—



male soldiers wrote their memoirs in that form without realizing it—and with the terror enacted by these men. I am especially indebted to Margret Berger and Monika for their generally positive reaction to my thoughts on the ego-structure of the not-yet-fully-born (vol. 2), as well as for their references to new psychoanalytic literature.

From time to time, I would find a manila envelope in my mailbox. The envelope held one, sometimes two, steno pads in which Erhard Lucas had relayed his reactions—concise and friendly, or sharp when he found something he didn't like—to portions of the manuscript I had shipped off to him in Oldenburg. *Male Fantasies* began as a chapter on “White Terror” for Lucas's three-volume book *Märzrevolution 1920*.<sup>3</sup> He was a friend from the vanished SDS-group and had been working as a historian on the German Revolution of 1918–19—Liebknechts and Rosa Luxemburg's attempt to turn the German monarchy into a socialist republic—and had become a history professor in Oldenburg, northern Germany. As he continued his work about the Kapp Putsch affair of 1920, an attempt of German right wing officers to gain political power in Berlin, which resulted in a counterblast, the proletarian March Revolution mainly in the Ruhr Valley, he delved into the brutal actions of the Freikorps against the proletariat, especially their violent acts against women.

He would describe scenes of unimaginable cruelty, asking why these men would commit such horrendous acts, such as using bayonets to stab pregnant women and then laughing and celebrating the bloody mess they created.

When the project grew beyond its initial scope—it was clear after a while that I was going to produce much more than a chapter to his book—he followed its progress in the way I would have wanted a trusted critic and colleague to do. This book, *Male Fantasies*, is dedicated to Erhard Lucas, without whom it would never have been written.

**Gržinić:** Your thesis is particularly strong because of your approach to depicting violence. You make the violence palpably clear, not merely symbolic or representational. You argue that this violence is not driven solely by hatred of Jewish people but stems significantly from violence against women.

<sup>3</sup> Lucas Erhard, *Märzrevolution 1920*, 3 vols. (Frankfurt: Rotern Stern, 1973–78).

**Theweleit:** Erhard Lucas was unable to deal with the descriptions of such cruelties. He knew my wife was a clinical psychologist, and he knew I was involved with psychoanalysis. At that time, the Bohemian groups I belonged to were heavily into psychoanalysis, analyzing each other late into the night, talking, drinking, and so on. It was a common, albeit dubious, practice. I was accustomed to psychoanalytic thinking also through my wife's work with children in the hospital clinic.

Erhard had gathered these texts and asked someone to write about them, but he was not satisfied with the results. As incorporating Freud and other analysts, but they had never dealt with such cruelties among their patients, their analyses felt distant and irrelevant. When we read those analytical texts, we felt they had nothing to do with the cruelties described—they explained nothing.

If you want to understand what is truly in the bodies, you need to consider the connection between the body and the brain. This idea was echoed in public intellectual discussions in film, music, and theater. The prevailing traditional thought was that our brain directs us, but I knew—god knows from where—that in reality, our ideas and actions emerge from our bodily experiences. The brain maps this and reacts to reality, but it all starts with the body, and that's where the focus should be when discussing these matters.

I told my friend that I needed more material; the descriptions of the deeds alone were not enough. He agreed and pointed out that there were lots of things written down in the papers, autobiographies, and descriptions of their fights. He provided me with titles and other relevant information.

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As I read them, I realized I needed to construct a completely different set of thoughts. They weren't just writing about what happened; there was something deeper. What did the term "red flood" mean to them when they named Communism and Bolshevism with terms like that; also "swamps" or "mud," when describing a group of protesters? How did they come to talk about the "bloody mess" they saw in the bodies of women?

Their language was revealing—when they spoke about proletarian wives, who had no weapons at all, as *Flintenweiber* with guns hidden between their legs; or about Jewish individuals as "poisoning the German blood," even though there

were nearly no Jewish people among the Ruhr valley workers. It showed something significant about their perceptions and prejudices, mostly just “projections.” It became clear that to understand these men and their actions, I had to delve into how their words revealed their deeper fears and beliefs.

I realized that to make sense of it, I had to write about the genesis of their thinking, their actions, and their identities, and that required examining those materials closely. As I delved into them, I at first noticed the peculiar ways of talking about women. They described their own women as clean, white, angelic figures, but never giving their names. Why? It became a sort of detective’s search to find a way for the solution of many secrets and hidden crimes. This intrigued me, and I became passionate about writing.

On the other hand, they depicted Jewish women, Communist women, and later Black women, especially during the occupation of Germany by French Moroccans after World War Two, in a very negative light. I realized that this was driven by fears rising in them. They were afraid of death, sure; but why all this dehumanizing language to express that fear; and from where this really high amount of hatred against people, socially below them? When there were strikes they didn’t simply refer to groups of workers as blue-collar laborers but used terms like “Republican slime” to describe them.

It became clear that their language about “slime” and “mucus” was a projection of their own fears and anxieties. I realized they were talking about themselves—their own internal mess and bloody horror. These insights made everything make sense after a while.

**Gržinić:** Barbara Ehrenreich, when writing the introduction to the English translation of the first volume of *Male Fantasies: Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (1987), noted that this book would resonate with a lot of the American public. Ehrenreich considered how to present the Freikorps (“Free Corps” or “Volunteer Corps,” irregular German paramilitary volunteer units, in the early 20th century) to American readers and how to explain who they were. The dictionary definition may not capture the essence of what the Freikorps represented at the time. This is a question I pose to you: how would you describe them in that time? Secondly, your recent thoughts suggest that the fascism we see today exists in similar societal segments.

**Theweleit:** Yes, many of those people later became members of Nazi movements. However, I decided early on not to use the term “fascists” because the various forms of fascism around the world differ from each other. Even Italian fascism is distinct.

I found the term “soldier,” specifically “the soldierly man,” to be more fitting. What does this mean? That there is a certain male body structure and certain ways of feeling and talking associated with it. I followed this line of thought, and the first clear exploration of it appears in the first part of *Male Fantasies*. This part examines how these men dealt with women, how they talked about women, and the way they honored their wives. Often, these wives remained nameless and also lifeless in their writings. They are the *good* women—the “white” women, I named them—often in the shape of “caring” sisters in hospitals.

Their feelings toward all other women were conflicted by their heavy fear of sexuality. These men were disturbed by women who did not adhere to traditional roles, such as having children out of wedlock, a trait they also saw in peasant women. Still, they don’t keep their own rules. They get children without being married. They revered their wives but harbored fear and resentment towards “red women” (communist or revolutionary women) and their perceived sexual freedom. To counteract their fears, these men clung to symbols of masculinity and authority—everything that stood erect, like flags, rifles, and guns. Their language was filled with metaphors of uprightness and rigidity, reflecting their desire to impose order and division in response to their anxieties.

Psychoanalysts call this the castration complex, but I realized it was much more than that after closely reading their texts. It’s not just the fear of being castrated; it’s the fear of bodily dissolution. In situations like strikes or other conflicts, these men felt their bodies were threatened with being dissolved into a mesh or swamp—something fluid. This fear of fluidity, expressed in terms like “red flood” (communism), permeated their thinking.

But there was more to say about their fears (and their sort of joy). Through examining their writings, I noticed they only expressed happiness and enjoyment when describing acts of violence—killing not only women but also enemies like leftists, Communists, and Jews. This revealed a deeper psychophysical pattern. One significant insight was their response to empty spaces or places after com-

bat. This feeling of “empty space,” I discovered as one of the central ways of acknowledging their world. When they fired their guns into a group of workers or protesters and they disappeared within seconds, running away, hiding themselves, and only a few scattered bodies remained on the ground, they would burst into laughter. This momentary release represented a fleeting sense of freedom, of being freed for a moment, which equals—in psychoanalytical terms—the feeling of a body wholeness, which they longed for but were not able to achieve in “normal” civil situations.

This observation led me to integrate concepts from female psychoanalysts, poets, and psychoanalysts working particularly with the treatment of children. Understanding these men’s fears and behaviors through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, developed by female analysts’ treatment of children, provided deeper insights into their inclination to destructive actions and the underlying psychological mechanisms.

Melanie Klein and Margaret Mahler were pioneers in the field of infant and young child research, unlike Freud and the first generation of analysts who didn’t deal much with small children. I learned a great deal from my wife, Monika, who worked in the hospital. Margaret Mahler’s book, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation*, published in 1975, I got to know by Monika, was particularly important.<sup>4</sup> Mahler developed a deep interest in the pre-oedipal era, focusing on motility and affective-motoric communication between mother and child. Her psychoanalytic work in New York—she was a Hungarian immigrant—became groundbreaking. Mahler treated several children suffering from childhood psychosis; some of them only able to express their bodily states in acts of violence; often self-destructing actions. She also explored how normal infants attain a sense of separate identity in the presence of their mothers. Mahler’s work resonated with psychoanalysts I knew, especially those at the hospital where my wife worked. They read it, and Monika noticed similarities between Mahler’s descriptions of disturbed, destructive children and the soldiers I was writing about. She encouraged me to read Mahler’s work, pointing out that the behaviors and fears I was describing in the soldiers were akin to those in the children Mahler studied.

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret S. Mahler, Fred Pine, and Anni Bergman, *The Psychological Birth of the Human Infant: Symbiosis and Individuation* (London: Hutchinson, 1975).

This insight was crucial. It bridged my observations with psychoanalytic theory, particularly concerning the concept of the fragmented body. Mahler's work provided a framework for understanding the deep-seated fears and behaviors of these soldiers. Their fear of bodily dissolution and the violent reactions it provoked mirrored the developmental struggles Mahler described in those children. This connection became the foundation for my analysis and the writing of volume two, allowing me to delve deeper into the psychophysical roots of their actions, and human behavior in general.

**Gržinić:** This comparison is important because it highlights a significant point.

**Theweleit:** It leads to the notion of the “fragmented body.” Understanding and describing this concept is a central focus of the second volume.

Today, it is evident that the primary emotion of right-wing extremists is fear. Their entire ideology is constructed around central fears. One might ask where this fear originates. It stems from different ways of a traumatic upbringing; there can be many ways. How the military deals with it you can see—for American soldiers—in films like *Full Metal Jacket* by Stanley Kubrick. Soldiers face extreme drills and suppression; you can really call it a sort of torture, which is thought to enable them to develop a sort of bodily armor, which makes them strong warriors against outer enemies, but also—which is even more important—gives them shelter against their inner fears. Akin to the psychological structure of children who come from abusive backgrounds.

These children may have been beaten by parents, uncles, or teachers, or sexually abused—not just women, but boys as well, and not only within the church. Such experiences prevent individuals from developing the foundational abilities necessary to cope with the world.

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Psychoanalysts argue that for a person to function well, they must appropriately channel their energies from birth onwards. This development depends on nurturing interactions, primarily from mothers, sometimes from siblings, and rarely from fathers in previous generations. Without this nurturing, a *libidinal cathexis of the infant's skin*, as psychoanalysts call this, will not happen, or only very insufficiently. By this cathexis individuals learn to extend their sense of

self beyond their physical boundaries, enabling them to interact effectively with others.

Melanie Klein and others have noted that the building of a psychic balance involves internalizing the people with whom you interact. You must take these people inside you in a caring and empathetic way. This internalization process helps you develop your feelings and thoughts. However, this process is disrupted in individuals who were tortured, beaten, mistreated, not taken seriously, or laughed at during childhood.

Today, such trauma does not necessarily come from the military or physical beatings. There are many ways to disrupt a person's sense of self, leaving them feeling fragmented and not at home within their own bodies. These fragmented individuals often project their inner turmoil onto others, seeing them as enemies. They inflict their inner chaos onto these perceived enemies, creating a cycle of destruction.

The concept of a "fragmented body" refers to this inner chaos—a disorganized and painful mix of emotions and bodily sensations, without clear distinctions between different parts of the self; without clear distinctions between what is outside and what is inside of the body. This internal turmoil tends to leave individuals in a sort of trance, disconnected from their bodies and unable to live cohesively.

**Gržinić:** Is there a specific difference in the fragmentation of the body from that period to today? I think it's worth explaining. Do you see any major differences between the past and the present? There is a lot of discussion about how we now live in a democracy and a neoliberal system, which is not as harsh or authoritarian as in the past. Is it possible to disentangle these fragmented bodies and provide a new interpretation?

**Theweleit:** Yes, that's the main point. In my perception, it's essentially the same: a centrally fragmented body and a fear of one's own inner self. This is evident in contemporary fascist writing, whether it's from American groups, the

Incel people,<sup>5</sup> or right-wing German politicians, African warlords who command child soldiers in Congo, the Indonesian males who killed nearly one million so-called “communists” in the 1990s. They all speak (and laugh) in a similar way.

After having been Americanized (and as I felt: civilized) through music and films, I was quite sure that the hatred and fear of women among men would diminish; that the sticker “Make Love Not War” would have had a real impact on people all over the world. Like many others in 1968, I believed, for example, that religions would vanish in the run of the next 20 years, etc.; that such issues would no longer exist. That was a complete error. Right-wing extremists have not much changed and their use of language is nearly the same everywhere.

I don’t engage in detailed personal analyses with them today, but I observe their writings and see the same irrational fear of women who have done nothing to them. The perception that women are closer to emotional behavior is enough to instill fear in these men. They view women as part of a dissolving world, and this fear of being physically and mentally dissolved is the same as it was 100, 500, or even 5000 years ago. They are driven by fear and the need to assert themselves, often resorting to violence when faced with emotions or situations they can’t handle. This inability to cope without violence is the brink where you can identify fascists or rapists. They can’t deal with reality non-violently, and this is evident in their speech and actions. Historical examples like Hitler and the German people in the 1930s show that it’s not just rhetoric—if these people gain power, they act on these impulses. It’s no use dismissing their words as mere talk; we know they will act on them if given the chance.

**Gržinić:** They will do the things we are talking about because they need this behavior to feel alive.

**Theweleit:** You can feel pity with that, but that doesn’t help you from being killed. Today we have groups, or people committing violence in Germany, like the 27-year-old German man who went on a shooting in the city of Halle in Saxony, who scarcely can speak in an understandable way; his deranged speech

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<sup>5</sup> The term “incels” is a portmanteau for “involuntary celibates.” It emerged from a Reddit group in which tens of thousands of users, most of them young men, commiserate about their lack of sexual activity, many of them placing the blame on women.



contains the words “feminists” and “Jews.” He tried to enter the synagogue of Halle, failed, and killed some random people: one woman, one man, making a video of it, to be seen live on the Internet, similar to the New Zealand shooter and several others. He cursed himself for being so unsuccessful in his killing action, murmured something into the camera to accuse “feminists” and “Jews,” and cursed himself for his failure, having been unable to complete his action.

**Gržinić:** What do women, what do “feminists” have to do with it?

**Theweleit:** Nothing. The language of certain men, disturbed like that, obviously is not able to have any real perception of a real woman’s body. It’s a more-than-thousands-of-years old male structure of bringing women into their speech as creatures who have nothing in mind than the wish of dissolving the pure beautiful bodies of “poor boys like me.” Such men—like the American incels—often claim that women aren’t *good enough* for them. As a matter of fact, they don’t know any women. They are terrified of emotional and physical intimacy, which they can’t handle; their way to love is violence.

**Gržinić:** Which groups of women could be considered the most targeted with hatred in contemporary neoliberal societies, akin to the “red women” who were central for exercising maximum violence by the historical Freikorps? Today, the biggest violence seems to be directed at migrants and transwomen. Women whose roles and rights are so disregarded that they are almost nonexistent in society and demonized by laws and norms, effectively making them “invisible.” Despite their “invisibility,” these women face significant violence and discrimination. So, from today’s perspective in contemporary multicultural, neoliberal, global capitalist societies, who could be these women? How can we identify those who are the primary targets of extreme violence and hate?

**Theweleit:** I think we have some new developments in this. Those you call “invisible” queer women, migrants, etc., they often show up in public, at least in societies where it is possible to do that without being killed on the spot. They talk openly, organize demonstrations, ritualize Christopher Street Day [annual European LGBTQ+ celebrations against discrimination], etc: the pubs where they meet are no longer secret places, they are open for others, etc. I feel this to be extremely important. Not only for those people (of all sexes) who get into a visible existence but for all of us. Because it helps to leave the common positions

of “binarity” which till now are structuring nearly every conflict, ethnically; in religions; in the military, and the civil life. But realities are *not* binary; they are diverse. They are without borders—when you don’t fence them in—in endless surprising ways.

**Gržinić:** Why always “the Jews”?

**Theweleit:** One thing is clear: the roots of anti-Jewish sentiment in Christian culture began developing around the fourth or fifth century *Anno Domini*. Before that time there wasn’t such widespread antisemitism. When people of today express antisemitic views, wherever in the world, it mostly appears unjustified and unfounded. (I don’t speak of the Hamas/Gaza-situation of the moment.) But there is sharp evidence that Hitler’s mission and the actions of the Germans during the Shoah have left a lasting impact. Now, whenever right-wing American groups or individuals express hatred towards Jews or other groups, it necessarily echoes Hitler’s antisemitism. Essentially, any ideology or action in the world that calls for the eradication of a special group of people or of a “nation” I would see as a form of “antisemitism.” It includes all. Hitler’s legacy has broadened the term to encompass such extreme prejudice and hatred. “Jews” remains to be a primary target for expressing the demand for elimination.

**Gržinić:** I want to ask you about the references you mentioned. For example, in your analysis, how significant was the influence of the Frankfurt School, and how much did Deleuze and Guattari contribute? You use the concept of the production of desire, but you conceptualize the production of death instead. This is a one-to-one correlation, and it’s not just symbolic; it’s very real.

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**Theweleit:** For the writing of *Male Fantasies* Deleuze and Guattari were more important, especially for volume two. There were new views on the construction of the Ego and the drives, *desire*. Adorno and Horkheimer’s New York-study on the “authoritarian character” was more a sort of background [text], which I wanted to give a shift in the direction of “psychoanalysis of the child,” broadening their mainly sociological frame.

**Gržinić:** Could you elaborate on how you used these references to present the brutalities that were occurring, the violences against women then and now?

**Theweleit:** For this a deeper or wider look into the man/women-relation in European history was/is necessary. My second book, *Buch der Könige* (Book of Kings),<sup>6</sup> was trying to go in that direction. I didn't have in mind to stick to the Nazi-stuff "for the next twenty years" (as my publisher's prophetic view read the future). Another form of violence had come to the center of my perceptions; a sort of violence, appearing in the disguise of "Love"; the subtitle of the book was "Orpheus and Eurydice," with the word "and" crossed out. Through a poem by Gottfried Benn, "Orpheus Tod," and Claudio Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo* (it's the very first opera ever composed in Europe, Mantua, Italy in 1607). I realized, that Orfeo's well known turnaround on the "stairs" on the way up from Hades to the living, Eurydice walking behind him—and now losing her again—was not directed by his overflowing "love," but by the (hidden) motive of leaving her in Hades, in the underworld. Monteverdi makes it completely clear that the "love" of his Orfeo is in the connection to his instrument; his medium of expression, the lyre. He names it *mia cetra omnipotente*, my omnipotent lyre, getting a high position at the court of the ruler, the Duke of Mantua. He is able to give birth to "new worlds," taming wild animals, and so on. Politically, it's always in the power of rulers to grant access to historically new media.

I discovered, there were hundreds of couples like that in European (as well in American) art history; couples with women in the Eurydice-position. These women—in the couples of writers often typists—would transcribe handwritten or spoken materials overnight for the next day's production. They were intelligent and clever, often raising one child from these relationships. Then after five to seven years, the men would typically leave these women and find another one to take their place, when "her work" had been done, and the production of the man changed its direction; with a new woman then repeating the cycle. Very few of those women in the "Eurydice-position" have a sort of escape with other women or men. Several of them committed suicide, some died in psychiatrics, or got mad. The model is: the European artist "loves" his medium of expression more than his partner. He loves his camera, his guitar(s) or her typewriter; his wife becomes a tool. Art history calls them "muses," having "inspired" the artist. I called them *mediale Frauen*, medial women. Once he has gotten what he

<sup>6</sup> Klaus Theweleit, *Buch der Könige I: Orpheus und Euridike* (Basel and Frankfurt: Stroemfeld and Roter Stern, 1988).

needs from her, he moves on, which is a form of killing, too. A model that is valid until 1945 (at least), I think.

**Gržinić:** It is actually a horrifying circularity. You take all the life from someone else—in this case, the women—to build your career. It’s a terrible cycle.

**Theweleit:** The mathematics of relationships conceals an imbalance. One plus one here never results in equality, especially between men and women. One grows, the man often, while the other part stagnates or grows down. When the woman is replaced, there’s a fleeting moment of balance, but the cycle repeats itself.

**Gržinić:** It’s fascinating how you predominantly explore the passionate commitment of female researchers, contrasting with the dismissive attitude of men who say, “It’s not my concern, it’s yours.” I appreciate how you frame this issue. One could argue that from this interpretation of data, we uncover a portrayal of masculinity. This portrayal reveals a toxic pathology, a consequence of these relationships.

**Theweleit:** There are certain implications that stem from it, beginning with the writing of *Male Fantasies*. I wasn’t just “connected” with my partner loosely; we choose to continue our journey together; and we still do. In those discussions of the 70s, caused by the growing feminist movement, the focus shifted from more “political” issues to personal ones. It was a moment where personal development seemed impossible without meaningful relationships. The traditional position of the male artist has always revolved around the concept of genius. They see themselves as the creators of the world, shaping the future of mankind. This mindset, propagated by artists like Gottfried Benn, Thomas Mann, Ezra Pound, Knut Hamsun, Picasso, hundreds more of that kind, is one of the foundations of toxic masculinity. The only way to counter this is by developing equality in relationships—not just in rights and responsibilities, but in every day life; nurturing children, cleaning the dishes, and so on. Only then can we truly evolve as a society, allowing for the birth of new perspectives without marginalizing anyone.

**Gržinić:** Is it possible to apply your analysis to the current times? I agree with this, but my concern is how we address the reluctance to acknowledge the growing signs of fascism in our present reality. These developments are evident and

cannot be dismissed lightly. Let's revisit this moment where it's often said that in democracy, historical facts like fascism cannot be ignored. In your case, I've noticed some hesitation. Do you believe we should use the same terms because it's necessary? I'm interested in your perspective on this dilemma, which is posed by the media, science, and other fields.

**Theweleit:** We face an absolute dilemma. You see, one thing is, you never truly know enough about the world around you and the world elsewhere. Different societies have varied perspectives. These insights come from different times and levels of understanding. Over the past 30 years, globalization has reshaped our world. Many developments since then have become more visible due to the widespread use of electronic devices. Informations dealing with our lives are broadcasted and shared globally. Technological advancements in Africa and parts of Asia, like India, have propelled societies forward by centuries. People from diverse backgrounds can access information about global events, big and small ones, about democracies or things happening in China. Family structures, too, exhibit similarities, with male dominance prevalent in many societies. However, it's crucial to note that this dominance isn't necessarily patriarchal. I often stress the fact that in male-dominated societies, it's often middle-aged men who hold sway, while the elderly are often sidelined, except for special occasions. Notably, many of the most famous killing figures in world history, Julius Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler, or Lenin, weren't successful in living up to the mark of 60.

The issue lies with young—like Alexander—and middle-aged men, revolting and then dominating their societies, then colonizing and suppressing the rest of the world. The average age of the most violent and raging Nazi killers was below 40. This type of guy more or less had become isolated in the civil and military conditions of life after World War Two. That situation has changed since the 1990s due to the electronic revolution. Without the Internet, such individuals wouldn't have been aware of each other's existence and actions. They lacked insight into each other's lives, confined to their own spheres, often ruminating on personal vendettas, a habit that persists in some individuals today. However, now they possess a potential audience of billions when they communicate their ideas, or whatever you would like to call it. That's a substantial influence. I hear the journalistic world talking about *virtual reality*. Are they crazy, altogether? In the reality of the real world it's not *virtual* at all; it's as real as every other reality is; it's

our everyday reality. “Virtuality” doesn’t exist at all. It’s perplexing how people cling to the “virtual” façade . . . perhaps to deceive themselves.

**Gržinić:** Recognizing the growing polarization in many societies, with ideologies veering left or right, fostering extremism, suggests that half the populations live in a perpetual state of inner turmoil. This isn’t necessarily due to physical abuse, but rather a manifestation of societal pressures.

**Theweleit:** Yes. That became in a sharp way clear to me, when reading the results of recent research among young men in various [Arabophone] nations. They didn’t feel just “down” and “unhappy” when they got into the situation of unemployment, when they had no jobs. They experienced this as a sort of emasculation, using the term “castrated” to describe their plight. They were not “men” any longer when not able to provide financially for their families. Moreover, gender dynamics further exacerbate these tensions, perpetuating discord and offering violent outlets, be it through militarization or civil conflict. The young Swiss director Milo Rau—momentarily the most famous theater man in Europe—gathered his first three theater plays, dealing with violence in our societies, under the headline “Civil Wars.”

**Gržinić:** You guess, we are in situations of something like permanent ideologic “civil wars”—not fought with guns, but “civil” deadly weapons.

**Theweleit:** It looks like that. Populations of many countries—not only the US—seem to be split into two distinct factions. One group exudes optimism, foreseeing upward trajectories, while the other languishes in despondency, besieged by the specter of Nazism—a resurgence previously deemed improbable, yet attempted. Post-World War Two, democratic educators dismissed Nazis as mere imbeciles spouting incoherent rhetoric. However, their lingering influence belies such simplistic characterization. These people aren’t merely dim-witted; they’re driven by unacknowledged or unaddressed fears, fixated on attaining power rather than confronting their anxieties. Dialogue seldom penetrates their ideological fortresses; attempts to reason with them are futile. So it’s absolutely idiotic to invite them to talk shows and hope you can unmask them. That doesn’t work, hoping of unmasking their extremism is a fruitless endeavor, akin to reasoning with a neighbor who trivializes asthma. Instead, fostering open discussions in schools, clubs, and community groups offers a more constructive ap-

proach. Engaging with individuals, irrespective of political affiliations, through avenues like sports, music, public city places, dance halls can dismantle ideological barriers and nurture empathy—a strategy particularly effective with adolescents from the younger generations.

**Gržinić:** I want to address 2004, specifically the Abu Ghraib case, which is deeply connected not only with technology but also with unbelievable violence. This case exemplifies similar processes that you described: laughing and having fun by torturing others. During an interview with you, in 2004 you stated that the torturer derives the most satisfaction from the amount of pain they can inflict. The more pain they provoke, the more they extract from it a sense of life. The torturer’s inflicting of pain as a revenge, retaliation, gives to him an extra sense of vitality because this act of revenge revitalizes the torturer’s own sense of power. This is not about the biopolitics of Foucault, where life is central and the state intervenes. Rather, it is about death and pain that we can frame with Mbembe’s necropolitics.<sup>7</sup> You articulated precisely how this pain empowers perpetrators. I would like you to revisit this because it remains a significant phenomenon today. While the events of 2004 were shocking, such horrors have since become normalized. We now witness similar atrocities both in civil society with psychotic killings and on a much broader scale. How can we understand that pain and destruction continue to empower these torturous perpetrators?

**Theweleit:** Revenge. Retaliation is the crucial word. Especially two terms were central for Margret Mahler’s analysis: dedifferentiation, and deanimation. She says, in the so-called psychotic state, this is what those persons would try to attempt: the soldiers’ work. They devivify others, deanimate them, especially by dedifferentiation, which states, all “the rest” of human people, especially all women, are just the same; the *same shit*. This obviously is going on all the time. I was shocked, and scared, when realizing this. Then, in the 1970s, I thought, this was over. It was not.

In the 90s I was reminded, through Abu Ghraib and similar horror scenes that torture is a material process. It is not merely the act of torturing another but an exchange of life force. The torturer extracts life from the victim until death;

<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

that's a point, Elaine Scarry added: the torturers continue to live on by taking life from their victims. At the climax of that installation they reach a point of becoming real. They can't feel any empathy with the victim, because, in a way, they gain a sense of life out of that procedure; which, although fleeting, gives them a temporary illusion of being alive; a sort of life which they cannot find without violence. This sort of becoming alive, gained in this violent way, does not hold long. This state doesn't last long. The torturing of others cries for permanent repetition. The fragmented body is directing the process. If you examine the nature of torture closely, you can absolutely see this. Which can make you "understand," why one might find laughter (of relief) at the bottom of such a grim context.

**Gržinić:** Symptoms of horrible bodily states.

**Theweleit:** Which keep them from getting into any empathic feeling with the tortured ones. Torturers of this kind are completely overwhelmed by the power of their actions. They give shelter. A *bad conscience*? Maybe when they are alone, or having bad dreams after the war is over, or when they are not able to sleep at night. Some of that happens. In the moment of torture, many people have to focus on the immediate situation to realize that the process involves an exchange of life; the torturer gains a sense of power or life by taking it from the tortured.

**Gržinić:** Before I move to the last part, I want to ask what is to be done? Is it possible to change this? This question arises from the deep rethinking you've offered us. These fragmented bodies are becoming more prevalent, partly because of technology. You are right—those far distant recognize each other.

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**Theweleit:** That's very hard to tell—what we can do. You can take the rather clear view of Ruth Klüger who said: Cats scratch, dogs bite. Humans kill. Means, you can't do anything about this state of humans and their actions. There are good reasons to speak like that, especially for a woman who survived Nazi concentration camps. Hasn't it been like that all the times? Look at the Greeks in Athens, killing slaves for fun. Young people of the Renaissance nobility were allowed to kill unarmored people just to get used to the process of becoming dominators. To become grown-ups. Those in power always had "the license" to kill. The legal right of having fun with it.



Is it really part of “human nature” to have to kill? I prefer to think it absolutely depends on their relationships. If they don’t have the chance to develop relationships within a civil society, caring for one another, then it’s very difficult to change their behavior. For example, the neo-Nazis who change sides, exit their group: they did it, as far as I know, because of personal relationships. As long as the power of their group encloses them, gives them a false sense of identity and security, it’s very hard to escape from that. So, we have to work at constructing a sort of society where people can grow, which is a challenging task when half the population is on the brink of poverty. You can counteract this economically and by building institutions—schools, by a proper police, administration—but this necessary work in the institutions, to make them as democratic as possible, cannot be done without providing people with “enough money” for such tasks. We see the contrary: necessary materials are kept [in short supply], and billions are being spent on the military.

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## Fascism and the Tiny Hands of the Market

### Keywords

fascism, market, hybrid, labor, debt, finance

### Abstract

In this essay, digital hybridity stands for the perpetual availability of life as both labour and debt for capital, both in real life and online. At the heart of these reflections is the realization that the digital is a regime in which finance capital believes it is finally free from any dependency on social reproduction. With the move from value to price, from labor to debt, from revolution to disruption, and from avant-garde to speculation, the digital evolved as the material of capital and the totality of the social has been replaced by the tidal liquidity of finance; immaterial labor, touching images on the screen, the rhizomatic panopticon of the Internet, shock-work on social media, and cryptocurrencies are all examples of the ways in which the digital and financial shadow each other. This new regime entails a series of conversions that change the ways in which meaning is organized—from the point of production to the point of realization, from strikes to riots, from working class to surplus populations, from solidarity to conspiracy, and from organization to petty sovereignty.

### Fašizem in drobne roke trga

#### Ključne besede

fašizem, trg, hibrid, delo, dolg, finance

#### Povzetek

V tem eseju digitalna hibridnost pomeni večno razpoložljivost življenja kot dela in dolga, za kapital, tako v resničnem življenju kot na spletu. V središču teh razmišljanj je spoznanje, da je digitalno tisti režim, v katerem finančni kapital verjame, da je končno

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osvobojen kakršne koli odvisnosti od družbene reprodukcije. S prehodom od vrednosti k ceni, od dela k dolgu, od revolucije k razdoru in od avantgarde k špekulacijam, se je digitalno razvilo kot materialno kapitala, na mesto totalnosti družbenega pa je stopila totalnosti družbenega pa je stopila plimska likvidnost financ: nematerialno delo, dotikanje podob na zaslonu, rizomatski panoptikum interneta, šok-delo na družbenih medijih, kriptovalute, vse to so primeri načinov vzajemnega prikrivanja finančnega in digitalnega. Ta novi režim vključuje vrsto pretvorb, ki spreminjajo načine organiziranja pomena – od točke proizvodnje do točke realizacije, od stavk do nemirov, od delavskega razreda do presežnega prebivalstva, od solidarnosti do zarote in od organizacije do drobne suverenosti.



*If you don't want to talk about capitalism, then you should  
keep silent about fascism.*

—Max Horkheimer, “Die Juden und Europa”<sup>1</sup>

*The worker was indeed becoming an appendage to the  
machine, not because machines had been invented, but  
because these machines served the interest of the class that  
owned the means of production.*

—Boris Hessen, Director of the Moscow Institute of  
Physics, “The Social and Economic Roots of Newton’s  
*Principia*,” The Second International Congress of  
the History of Science in London, 1931<sup>2</sup>

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The manuscript for this text was over the character limit by a few thousand letters. A friend told me I should try to run it through online AI text software such as Claude.ai or Perplexity.ai, to reach the desired word count. And so I did. From what I gather, based on my prompt, it basically sampled some full paragraphs

<sup>1</sup> “Wer aber vom Kapitalismus nicht reden will, sollte auch vom Faschismus schweigen.” Max Horkheimer, “Die Juden und Europa,” *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 8, no. 1/2 (1939): 115, <https://doi.org/10.5840/zfs193981/24>; my translation.

<sup>2</sup> Boris Hessen, “The Social and Economic Roots of Newton’s *Principia*,” in *The Social and Economic Roots of the Scientific Revolution: Texts by Boris Hessen and Henryk Grossmann*, ed. Gideon Freudenthal and Peter McLaughlin (New York: Springer, 2009), 85.

to make a concise text that summarizes certain themes. Of course, this was not what I was looking for, but it was nice to see. I left it at that and went back to writing and editing on my own word processor. I don't know what the moral of this story is, but as you read this, you might not believe me that it is my own writing, as I have just suggested that some large language model was involved in scanning, sampling, and organizing words according to some kind of proper English grammar and syntax.<sup>3</sup>

With this in mind, this text you are reading now, like any other text these days, is a parable, both on the collapse of intent and meaning and the supremacy of the a-signifying semiotics of pulses and intensities. The bot stands for the conversion of the self-proclaimed patriot resenting the enemies he finds everywhere (feminists, courts, trans people, Jews, Muslims, people of color, etc.), and the enemy who is interfering and amplifying internal social and political antagonisms through influence campaigns (Russia, Turkey, Israel, the USA, China, Iran)—authentic resentment, and authentic avatars. We experience these discrepancies of meaning, for example, with the unique form of writing on social media which is a kind of a speech-to-text operation (inviting us to re-read Jacques Derrida's differentiation between speech and writing),<sup>4</sup> or in the collapse of meaning in the form of infrastructure collapse—when, to use Ferdinand de Saussure's example of *la langue* and *parole* for our context, the 08:25 Geneva-to-Paris train is not only late, but is taken off the schedule display, and then its existence is denied as if it never existed (which happens these days for reasons of privatized and semi-privatized operators unwilling to reimburse clients).<sup>5</sup> The collapse of meaning, on both accounts, is the birthplace of fascist politics.

<sup>3</sup> Alix Rule and David Levine's by now infamous text "International Art English" comes to mind here. See Alix Rule and David Levine, "International Art English: On the Rise—and the Space—of the Art-World Press Release," *Triple Canopy*, no. 16 (July 2012), [https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international\\_art\\_english](https://canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/international_art_english).

<sup>4</sup> See Noam Yuran, "Being Online," *Social Research* 90, no. 3 (Fall 2023): 515, <https://doi.org/10.1353/sor.2023.a907787>.

<sup>5</sup> Here, Boris Groys's explanation that the economy works with money and is operated by numbers, while politics works with language and is operated by words, comes to mind. Groys goes on to claim that basically there cannot be any real politics under capitalism: "Another common misconception exists nowadays in which participation in language is understood as access to networks of communication where linguistic commodities circulate under the general conditions of the market." Boris Groys, *The Communist Postscript*, trans. Thomas Ford (London: Verso, 2009), 67.

This essay involves the initial thoughts and afterthoughts that led to and followed the hybrid exhibition *Slime*, which I curated at Secession in Vienna (online and on-site, February–June 2024).<sup>6</sup> In its structure, the exhibition performed the logic of digital hybridity, having a full program of events at Secession, with an exhibition in the main gallery that dealt with the digital without any screens (as we already bring the digital with us wherever we go), and an online platform that included films and video works along with the documentation of the program that took place on site. Here, digital hybridity stands for the perpetual availability of life as both labour and debt, for capital, both in real life and online. At the heart of these reflections is the realization that the digital is a regime in which finance capital believes it is finally free from any dependency on social reproduction. With the move from value to price, from labor to debt, from revolution to disruption, and from avant-garde to speculation,<sup>7</sup> the digital evolved as the material of capital, and the totality of the social has been replaced by the tidal liquidity of finance; immaterial labor, touching images on a screen, the rhizomatic panopticon of the Internet, a shock-work on social media, and cryptocurrencies are all examples of the ways in which the digital and financial shadow each other.<sup>8</sup> This new regime entails a series of conversions that change the

<sup>6</sup> For more on the exhibition *Slime* (Secession, Vienna, Austria, February 16–June 30, 2024), see the website at <https://slime.secession.at>.

<sup>7</sup> See Joshua Simon, “Speculation and Counter-Speculation,” *Springerin*, no. 3 (2016), <https://www.springerin.at/en/2016/3/spekulation-und-gegenspekulation>.

<sup>8</sup> See Seb Franklin, *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2021). Franklin’s point, around a commodity as congealed/computed labor in translations of Marx is accompanied by a presentation of cybernetics and the underlying logic of both finance and the digital. Yanis Varoufakis makes the claim that in China the financial and digital have already converged with WeChat. See Yanis Varoufakis, *Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism* (London: Penguin Random House, 2023), 152. For a debate on the validity of the term “technofeudalism,” see Evgeny Morozov, “Critique of Techno-Feudal Reason,” *New Left Review*, no. 133–34 (January/April 2022): 89–126. While feudalism involves a sense of duty and admitting having forms of inter-dependency, west-coast meritocracy does not have any of it, while monopolizing parts of daily life to make the big platforms rentiers. See also Carlo Vercellone, “The Crisis of the Law of Value and the Becoming-Rent of Profit: Notes on the Systemic Crisis of Cognitive Capitalism,” in *Crisis in the Global Economy: Financial Markets, Social Struggles and New Political Scenarios*, ed. Andrea Fumagalli and Sandro Mezzadra (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 85–118; and Mark Andrejevic, *Automated Media* (London: Routledge, 2019). For a description of the political realities of this form of post-industrial order, see David Golumbia, *The Politics of Bitcoin: Software as Right-Wing Extremism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016); Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London:

ways in which meaning is organized—from the point of production to the point of realization, from strikes to riots, from working class to surplus populations, from solidarity to conspiracy, and from organization to petty sovereignty.

## Metabolic Synchronization

Hybridity is the phenomena of the digital and the financial converging in time and space, committing things and bodies to constant territorialization that is both monetized and synchronized. From meta-data to Google Street View, surveillance and navigation are but two of many instances of metabolic synchronization that bring together body, location, and device. With the convergence of financialization and the digital, metabolic synchronization emerges in the form of Instagram foodies and Airbnb, marathons and gyms, dating apps and food delivery apps, joggers and food trucks, deep-fake and Sora videos, touchscreens and wellness, flash-mobs and pop-up exhibitions in non-art-spaces, and many other hallmarks of gentrification. Marx writes in the third volume of *Capital* of the “irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism,”<sup>9</sup> by which human economic activity generates an intervention in metabolic patterns, i.e. environmental collapse by the hands of capitalist industrialization. Metabolic synchronization emerges in the monitoring of heartbeats by apps, the administration and classification of bodies into registered and undocumented, customized ready-to-deliver services and goods, the design of the built space as a simulation for online extraction, etc. Combining the biopolitical and necropolitical, metabolic synchronization emerges as the form by which the digital totalizes all forms of human activity, constantly making them subject to financialization.

## Compact Mass

Brought together by an algorithm, through psychographic segmentation, the chopped-up personalities that are bundled together for predictive targeting make up the constituency of our fascisms. The “selfie coup” in the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, provided an example of the fascist sense of digi-

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Verso, 2019); and Alberto Toscano, *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2023).

<sup>9</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Three*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1981), 949.

tal aggregation. When the intruders arrived at the US Senate, they screamed “Where the f\*\*k are they?” But they were eventually left alone to take selfies of themselves in different parts of the building. Walter Benjamin’s observation that “parliaments, like theatres, are empty” was echoed in this streamed event. In his essay on mechanical reproduction (second version), Benjamin uses the term “compact mass” to describe a grouping of people that has the potential to either organize for communism or be managed by fascism.<sup>10</sup> Watching it unfold, the “selfie coup” felt brief and repetitive—streamed rather than broadcast. The duration was stretched but not even. The pulses of violence and irritation that were the characteristics of the attack on the US Capitol are those of buffering and parceling—on the algorithmic platforms of Parler and Zello as much as on the Senate floor. With the ceremonial torching of TV equipment (Antenna) in the Capitol, the wave was replaced by the data package—literally a compact mass. The pulses of information travelling over fiber optic cables and satellite triangulations are a compact mass—parcels of data that are shot at intervals (their lags or condensation appear as what we call buffering).<sup>11</sup> The events of January 6 were broadcast live on TV, without much documentation from inside the building, and then emerged as short videos from inside. The financial reality that this media structure emulates is that of flow and capture at the point of realization.

When it was all over, the ratification of the presidential elections resumed and re-appeared on TV as a reassuring form of “order restored,” with the Senate majority leader at the time, Mitch McConnell, declaring that the United States Sen-

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version,” trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 19–55. Theodor Adorno compliments Benjamin in a letter from March 18, 1936, from New York, on the formulation of “compact mass”: “I cannot conclude, however, without telling you that your few sentences about the disintegration of the proletariat as ‘masses’ through revolution are among the profoundest and most powerful statements of political theory I have encountered since I read *State and Revolution*.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Letters to Walter Benjamin,” trans. Harry Zohn, in Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980), 126. I wish to thank Zachary Formwalt for this reference.

<sup>11</sup> Neta Alexander, “Rage against the Machine: Buffering, Noise, and Perpetual Anxiety in the Age of Connected Viewing,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (Winter 2017): 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0000>.



ate “will not be intimidated.”<sup>12</sup> But by then that sequence of images and gestures had already been hollowed.

## Conspiracy

What brought these people together on January 6, 2021, is conspiracy, not as a plot against the formal democratic procedures of the USA, but conspiracy as a mode of being in the world with other—a metabolic synchronization. The proliferation of the phenomenon of conspiracy theories expresses the hyperactivity of political passivity; conspiracy theories should be read as models of spectatorship as citizenship—being politically passive through the mechanism of representatives, we are hyperactive when decoding representations of politics.<sup>13</sup>

With conspiracy theories, being paranoid is less of a critical position vis-à-vis power today than it might have been in the age of cinema, let’s say (think of *The Three Days of the Condor* or *The Manchurian Candidate*). By now, conspiracy is a form of identification with power—after all, after the “War on Terror,”<sup>14</sup> the state itself is designed as a paranoid entity with civil liberties being constantly repressed for the sake of national security (some world leaders today personify

<sup>12</sup> The C-Span TV broadcast, with multiple static cameras on the US Senate floor, returned at 8 p.m., and provided the aesthetic stability that encapsulates order under capitalist republics: white men in suits reading from paper. See “Senate Leaders on Security Breach at U.S. Capitol,” C-Span, January 6, 2021, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?507698-6/senate-leaders-security-breach-us-capitol>.

<sup>13</sup> See Siri Peyer and Joshua Simon, *ReCoCo: Life under Representational Regimes*, ed. Orit Gat (Bat Yam: Museums of Bat Yam, 2013), 13. The exhibition catalog was published on the occasion of the exhibition *ReCoCo: Life Under Representational Regimes*, curated by Siri Peyer and Joshua Simon, White Space, Zurich, Switzerland, February 2011; Kunsthalle Exnergasse, Vienna, Austria, May 2011; Museums of Bat Yam, Israel, May 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Between September 12, 2001, and October 6, 2023, a certain doctrine of governance prevailed—managing inequality and maintaining disproportionate power relations by containing them with technological means that are delineated around an inside and an outside. The formula that technology can produce control proliferated from the EU’s policies in the Mediterranean with Fortress Europe, to the favelas in Brazil, from the separation wall erected in Palestine, the disengagement plan in Gaza, and the Iron Dome in Israel, to the San Diego-Tijuana border, and “build that wall.” For an analysis of this doctrine in the Israeli military and its collapse on October 7, 2023, see Ran Heilbrunn, “תשורח תיב, תשורח תיב” [A Factory of Blindspots], Telem, March 30, 2024, <https://telem.berl.org.il/9646/>.

the logic of conspiracy—from Putin to Trump to Netanyahu).<sup>15</sup> This mechanism allows for the contemporary conspiracy believer to enjoy a certain sense of power—where it is one’s subjective compulsion that makes for objective reality: “In both paranoia and metanoia, one is delivered beyond their own mind—the paranoid supposedly loses their mind, and the metanoid goes through a conversion that changes their mind.”<sup>16</sup> By now, the state is hollowed of any of its welfare functions—the digital replaced these with metabolic synchronization. In a sense, as it not longer supports social reproduction, it begs the question—when it comes to the nation state, without belief in a deep-state, or some cabal that predetermines the outcomes, what else do we have?<sup>17</sup>

### A-signifying Semiotics

The belief in the digital as an unmediated mode of operation generates sensory and political frontiers that embody this logic—be it ASMR or extreme right-wing politics. These compensate and stand in for any agency in the world—think of Donald Trump tweeting as US President in the middle of the night some incoherent gibberish such as “covfefe”—the ultimate form of policy or the tingling effect one gets from gestures and sounds on the screen that rely on tactile sensory deprivation. This supposed unmediated experience stands in for any agency we might have had, as it compensates for our lack of collective access to the point of production. The failure of circulation to provide stability and prosperity and the defeat of labor at the point of production bring these frictions to the point of realization—NIMBY and consumer boycotts. At this stage, organizing at the point of production through collective bargaining is a memory half a century old. We now congeal around the point of realization—as tenants (with rent strikes and anti-gentrification campaigns, but also anti-migrant riots), as consumers (with boycotts, shaming campaigns, and petitions), as parents, as members of a gen-

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<sup>15</sup> In a sad and brilliant text, Noam Yuran has summarized the impotent nature at the core of contemporary extreme right-wing populist governance. See Noam Yuran, “War Diary,” *Philosophy World Democracy*, November 28, 2023, <https://www.philosophy-world-democracy.org/articles-1/war-diary>.

<sup>16</sup> Groys explains that “the term metanoia can be used to describe the transition from an individual subjective perspective to a general perspective, to a metaposition.” Groys, *Communist Postscript*, 26.

<sup>17</sup> See Joshua Simon, “Putin was Right: The Paranoia and Metanoia of Maxim Komar-Myshkin,” e-flux Film, January 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/video/441729/the-buried-alive-videos-nbsp-2004-2010/>.

der group, and as enraged professionals (how many open letters did you sign this past decade—to keep someone in office, to get someone out of office, etc.?)—in ad-hoc eruptions (algorithmically enhanced) that are orchestrated by connectivity demands that compensate for our inability to collectively meet at the point of production. In this sense, buffering can stand as a metaphor for our predicament—both the inability to sustain an unmediated imagination of technology and the resentment and frustration generated at the point of realization—at this point, all these tensions are articulated by the extreme right, which has been part of the matrix of power in the industrial world for the past two decades.

Maurizio Lazzarato defines as “machinic enslavement” not only our submission to manipulation by another agent driven by a meaning (in this case, a conspiracy theory), but systemic activation that operates at an a-signifying semiotic level—through impulse, tempo, tone, and the like. This double submission to signifying and a-signifying semiotics defines the realm of meaning itself. Lazzarato, following Félix Guattari, explains machinic enslavement as “sign production machines, which have a direct, unmediated impact on the real and on the body without being routed through a signification or a representation.”<sup>18</sup> He describes how a-signifying transmissions that go beyond language—voice, rhythm, frequency, pitch, tone, appearance, resemblance, accent, etc.—are all directly related to the techniques of politics, as they involve not only live performance with direct and immediate effect, but all kinds of mediated apparatus:

A-signifying semiotics (stock listings, currencies, corporate accounting, national budgets, computer languages, mathematics, scientific functions and equations, as well as the a-signifying semiotics of music, art, etc.) are not beholden to significations and the individuated subjects who convey them. They slip past rather than produce significations or representations.<sup>19</sup>

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## The Tiny Hands of the Market

Our fascisms are created at a moment of antebellum, imperial-age-scale inequality, where the documented levels of inequality resemble those of the

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<sup>18</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 55–94.

<sup>19</sup> Lazzarato, 80.

pre-Bolshevik revolution era. Ruth Wilson Gilmore describes the prison-industrial complex and the carceral state as a form of time-capturing machine.<sup>20</sup> Creating a reserve army of surplus population that can only work odd jobs as day laborers generates masses of racialized populations ripe for apps as a marketplace as they are captured into micro-task online platforms (Uber Eats, TaskRabbit, and the like).<sup>21</sup> The tiny hands of the market (named after Donald Trump's physique) stand for the enormous consolidation of wealth through engineered financial tides of low interest rates combined with unregulated extractive platform capitalism freed from responsibility for social reproduction. At the heart of it is the dumping of costs onto workers, further entangling their dispossession. In Marxist terms, this is exercised in the circuit of money capital. Marx writes in volume two of *Capital*: "If we call labour-power  $L$ , the means of production  $mp$ , and the sum of commodities to be purchased  $C$ , then we have  $C = L + mp$ . To abbreviate,  $C < Lmp$ ."<sup>22</sup> Thus, the whole circuit of money capital according to Marx operates along the lines of this equation:  $M - C < Lmp \dots P \dots C' - M'$ . Money buys the means of production ( $mp$ ) and labor power ( $L$ )—these two markets converge in  $C$ . This stage stands for acquiring machinery, hiring, training, and a whole set of relations that we have learned to identify with direct employment. The intervention of the tiny hands of the market in the form of platform accumulation is exactly here, where the worker brings with her what we used to call the means of production. Directly, this happens with the Amazon delivery person or Uber driver bringing to work their own car, filled up with gasoline, with insurance and a driver's license all taken care of, or the teacher accruing the costs of broadband and a laptop at home in order to teach on Zoom during COVID. Thus,

<sup>20</sup> See Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> On the day of the US presidential elections in 2020, Californians were asked to vote on "Proposition 22," which was intended to confirm the status of delivery workers and other forms of employment on apps as independent contractors, rather than as employees. This became the most expensive proposal in the history of California when companies such as Lyft, Door-Dash, Instacart, Postmates, and Uber joined to finance campaigns in favor of their position with \$205,000,000. The person who managed the campaign in favor of Uber and its ilk was Tony West, a lawyer who is also married to the sister of Kamala Harris, who was elected Vice President of the United States on behalf of the Democratic Party that day. Harris's brother-in-law helped Uber and the like to buy a law that allows them to deny direct employment relations, despite being a monopoly or the market itself in this case.

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume Two*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1992), 109–18.

the ability of app companies to operate as marketplaces for the gig jobs of mechanical-Turks, gypsy cars, etc. (formerly known as the sharing economy) cannot be reduced to some lines of code, but should be recognized as the ability to shift all those various costs of *mp* onto workers.<sup>23</sup>

Simply put, there can be no capitalism without the pollution and extinction of the biosphere, without racism, without misogyny, without exploitation, without extreme inequality, without fascism. I just put the Horkheimer quote that opens this essay into perplexity.ai and it gave a good explanation: “By stating that one should remain silent about fascism if unwilling to engage with capitalism, Horkheimer implies that fascism cannot be fully understood or confronted without critically analyzing the capitalist system from which it arises.”

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<sup>23</sup> See Joshua Simon, “The Tiny Hands of the Market: Social Distancing Without Society,” *Social Text*, June 16, 2020, [https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/the-sign-language-of-the-tiny-hands-of-the-market](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the-sign-language-of-the-tiny-hands-of-the-market).

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## Counter-Monument Practices in Vienna, Austria: Multidirectional Memory and Transnationality in Contemporary Struggles Against Antisemitism, Racism and Anti-Romaism

### Keywords

multidirectional memory, transnationality, counter-memory, monuments, antiracism, anti-Romaism, antisemitism

### Abstract

This article researches multidirectional memory and transnationality in recent examples of counter-monument practices in Austria's capital city, Vienna, specifically in regard to fights against antisemitism, racist discrimination and anti-Romaism. How have multidirectional strategies shaped counter-mnemonic struggle? Additionally, to what extent are they influenced by transnationality? Three examples of counter-monument practices are discussed in parallel: (1) The protests against the "Lueger monument," commemorating an antisemitic former mayor of Vienna; (2) the illegally installed Marcus Omofuma Stone, commemorating the racist police murder of a Nigerian asylum seeker in 1999; and, (3) the ongoing struggle to commemorate the Porajmos, the genocide of the Roma under Nazi rule, with a monument in Vienna. Seemingly unrelated to one another, each case constitutes a struggle between national, hegemonic, commemorative narratives, on the one hand, and agents of civil society that challenge these narratives, on the other. While none of the three examples constitutes an obvious case of multidirectional memory making, each of these struggles to counter racist, discriminatory pasts did generate a platform to speak about more than just one memory, also such that transcend national boundaries.

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## Prakse protispomenikov na Dunaju v Avstriji: večsmerni spomin in transnacionalnost v sodobnih bojih proti antisemitizmu, rasizmu in antiromstvu

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## Ključne besede

večsmerni spomin, transnacionalnost, protispomin, spomeniki, antirasizem, antiromstvo, antisemitizem

## Povzetek

Članek raziskuje večsmerni spomin in transnacionalnost v nedavnih primerih praks protispomenikov v avstrijski prestolnici Dunaj, predvsem v zvezi z boji proti antisemitizmu, rasistični diskriminaciji in antiromstvu. Kako so večsmerne strategije oblikovale protimnemonični boj? In v kolikšni meri nanje vpliva transnacionalnost? Vzporedno so obravnavani trije primeri praks protispomenikov: (1) protesti proti »Luegerjevemu spomeniku«, postavljenemu v spomin na nekdanjega antisemitskega dunajskega župana; (2) nezakonito postavljeno spominsko obeležje Marcusu Omofumi tj. rasističnemu policijskemu umoru nigerijskega prosilca za azil leta 1999; in (3) nenehni boj za prvo obeležje na Dunaju v spomin na Porajmos, genocid nad Romi med nacističnim režimom. Čeprav se trije primeri na prvi pogled razlikujejo, vsak od njih predstavlja boj med nacionalnimi, hegemonističnimi komemorativnimi pripovedmi in akterji civilne družbe, ki se tej hegemoniji zoperstavljajo. Medtem ko nobeden od teh primerov ne predstavlja očitnega primera ustvarjanja večsmerne spomina, pa je vsak od teh bojev proti rasistični, diskriminatorni preteklosti ustvaril platformo za razpravo o več kot le enem spominu, vsak od treh bojev pa tudi presega nacionalne meje.



This article researches the extent to which a multidirectional thinking of memory is shaping contemporary counter-monument struggles in Austria's capital city, Vienna, and to what extent those struggles and their practices connect to transnational events and movements in solidarity with their cause. I will discuss three contemporary examples that are either critiquing an existing monument, clandestinely making a new monument, or advocating for the establishment of new ones: (1) The protests against the "Lueger monument" (1926) at Vienna's Stubenring, commemorating an openly antisemitic former mayor of Vienna; (2) the illegally installed Marcus Omofuma Stone (2003) at Vienna's Opernring, now located at the Square of Human Rights, commemorating the racist police murder of a Nigerian asylum seeker in 1999; and, (3) the ongoing struggle to commemorate the Porajmos, the genocide of the Roma under Nazi rule, with a monument in Vienna. Seemingly unrelated to one another, each case constitutes in its own right a struggle between national, hegemonic, commemorative

narratives, on the one hand, and agents of civil society that challenge these narratives, on the other. The former act to materialize specific memorial sites and prevent the erection of others, while the latter are activists, artists, as well as marginalized and structurally excluded individuals and collectives. Each of these contemporary struggles, as I will show, has been marked both by traces of thinking memory in multidirectional terms, and by transnational efforts that in some cases reformulated national strategies and practices.

After a brief introduction to the terminology, I will discuss the genealogy of the three counter-monument struggles and their multidirectional qualities. That genealogy proffers the necessary contextualization that brings to light their parallel, transnational aspects, of which I dwell on in the concluding section.

### Multidirectional Memory and Counter-Monument Practices

When speaking of multidirectional memory, I follow the seminal work of Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, in which he defines a broad notion of memory as a term that “captures [. . .] the individual, embodied, and lived side *and* the collective, social, and constructed side of our relations to the past.”<sup>1</sup> I am limiting the focus of this article to collective memory practices, which existing literature often frames in a competitive way, as a “zero-sum struggle over scarce resources,”<sup>2</sup> leading to seemingly clashing histories and memories that compete over what is understood as limited space in public memory culture. Rothberg advocates against such a competitive thinking and proposes a notion of collective memory that is multidirectional instead, “subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative.”<sup>3</sup> Rather than thinking different memories in competition and comparison to one another—his central focus being the memory of the Holocaust—this approach seeks to understand collective memory as a platform to speak about many memories, in a productive and intercultural manner. Approaching memory productively creates a dynamic through which people start to connect different memories to one another. Rothberg calls this multidirectional memory:

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Rothberg, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Rothberg, 2.

*Multidirectional Memory* considers a series of interventions through which social actors bring multiple traumatic pasts into a heterogeneous and changing post-World War II present.<sup>4</sup>

The Lueger Monument, the Marcus Omofuma Stone and the claimed monument for the Porajmos each constitute an example for counter-memory practices that provide—to different extends—such a platform to speak about heterogeneous memories. The counter-mnemonic practices connected to them are shaped by acts of collective, public and social composure that derived their urgency amongst others from connecting past violence with the presence. This leads to a second key defining feature of the term of memory, as I am applying it here: Borrowing from Richard Terdiman, Rothberg has highlighted that “memory is the past made present.”<sup>5</sup> As much as the material monument in itself, it is also the making of it—which includes the struggles that precede its conceptualization, creation or transformation—as well as the later use of it as a public space, and the meanings attributed to it by visitors and spectators, that contribute to this process of “making the past present.” And, as James Young pointed out in regards to state-built monuments specifically, “memorials take on lives of their own, often stubbornly resistant to the state’s original intentions. [. . .] New generations visit memorials under new circumstances and invest them with new meanings.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, materialized remembrance in the form of a historical monument does not remain static, but becomes subject to forms of destabilization and rethinking, critiquing or altering a site and what it serves to commemorate. This is what Michel Foucault encapsulated with the notion of counter-memory, which is constructed by a use of history that “severs its connection to memory, its metaphysical and anthropological model.”<sup>7</sup> Such a “destabilizing and productive energy of counter-memory,”<sup>8</sup> as Verónica Tello writes in reference to Foucault, can also be part of practices that take place around a monument, and of what viewers attribute to it. Following Tello, counter-memory “resists the repression of [. . .] history

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<sup>4</sup> Rothberg, 4.

<sup>5</sup> Rothberg, 3.

<sup>6</sup> James Edward Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 160.

<sup>8</sup> Verónica Tello, *Counter-Memorial Aesthetics: Refugee Histories and the Politics of Contemporary Art* (London: Bloomsbury Academic), 23.

in dominant discourse.”<sup>9</sup> Tello adds, in regard to the “counter-monument” that “counter-memory fissures the singular and the homogenous, allowing for the excess of the heterogenous so that it may become a site of disagreement. To a certain degree, the same can be said of the counter-monument.”<sup>10</sup>

In this sense, I regard the contested Lueger Monument, the clandestinely built Marcus Omofuma Stone, and the ongoing fight for the commemoration of the Porajmos as counter-monument struggles with multidirectional qualities, qualities that I elucidate in the next section as I consider the genealogies of these particular struggles.

### Countering a Monument: The Lueger Monument

The Lueger monument, standing at twenty-seven meters, was built in 1926 at the Stubentor, a central location in Vienna. The monument honors the former mayor of the city (1897–1910), Karl Lueger, who was also a noted racist and antisemite. Widely regarded as a predecessor to modern day political populism<sup>11</sup> as well as a role-model to Adolf Hitler,<sup>12</sup> the openly racist mayor has gone down in Vienna’s official history with accolades, having been in charge of numerous groundbreaking infrastructure and public welfare programs. Only since the early 2000s has the monument become the object of public criticism, spanning from proposals to leave the historic site untouched, contextualizing it, altering it, or tearing it down altogether.

The monument is the largest amongst several sites dedicated to Lueger and depicts him in the form of an upright, bronze figure measuring four-and-half meters, placed on three stepped wreaths, with the lowest wreath measuring over ten meters in diameter. On top of the wreaths stands a three-tiered pedestal with four scenic reliefs of achievements during his time in office. An octagonal

<sup>9</sup> Tello, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Tello, 16.

<sup>11</sup> See Ljubomir Bratić, “On Past and Present Populism,” in *Open Call: Handbuch zur Umgestaltung des Lueger-Denkmal*, ed. Jasmina Hirschl and Lilly Panholze (Vienna: Arbeitskreis zur Umgestaltung des Lueger-Denkmal in ein Mahnmal gegen Antisemitismus und Rassismus, 2011), 127.

<sup>12</sup> See Brigitte Hamann, *Hitler’s Vienna: A Dictator’s Apprenticeship* (London: Tauris Parke Paperbacks), 165.

center-piece underneath the statue shows four allegorical figures, also dedicated to his work as mayor.

Lueger's antisemitism and vital role in the spread of German nationalism were always well known and documented. The monument itself was designed by a sculptor who was an active supporter of the Nazis from 1938 to 1945. Despite all that, the monument remained untouched until the early 2000s, when the Austrian right-wing politician Jörg Haider led the far-right freedom party FPÖ into federal government for the first time, resulting in international outcries over Austria's political move to the right. Back then, it was voices from outside of Austria that pointed out the similarities between Haider and Lueger, and the influential roles each of them had in the rise or return of fascism.<sup>13</sup> This sparked a vocal public debate on the monument and its problematic existence. In response to a growing public dispute, academic staff and students of the University of Applied Arts Vienna issued a call in 2009 for proposals to redesign the monument, and two-hundred submissions were received.<sup>14</sup> Several critics—many of them from outside of Austria—did not agree with the idea of changing or contextualizing the monument, but advocated for the removal of it. In 2020, a petition to tear it down was launched by the Jewish Student Union of Vienna. The claim was repeated in an open letter from Holocaust survivors who fled Austria during the Nazi era. They issued a joint statement to the mayor of Vienna in June 2022, pledging for the removal of the monument and the renaming of the square. They stated:

It pains us that Karl Lueger, one of the most pronounced antisemites of the 19th and early 20th centuries, is still honoured in the heart of Vienna. We believe that the square must be renamed and the memorial removed. The city's inaction in this matter—despite long public debate—is shameful.<sup>15</sup>

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The city of Vienna argued against both renaming the square and removing the statue. The city government instead opted for a strategy of contextualization. In 2016, after mounting public pressure, a small plaque was added to the site,

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Rolf Schneider, "Die Furcht vor Haider ist berechtigt," *Die Welt*, February 4, 2000, <https://www.welt.de/103582524>.

<sup>14</sup> Jasmina Hirschl and Lilly Panholze, eds., *Open Call*.

<sup>15</sup> Evelyn Torton Beck et al., "Offener Brief an Bürgermeister Ludwig," Internationale Liga gegen Rassismus und Antisemitismus in Österreich, June 27, 2022, <https://lueger.licra.at/>. Paragraph translated by S. Uitz.

calling Lueger a “legend” and a “controversial figure” at the same time, demonstrating the city government’s unwillingness to distance itself from Lueger entirely.<sup>16</sup> Increasingly, academic discourses started to inform the debate, such as a November 2021 Colloquium called *Marmor. Bronze. Verantwortung*, organized by the *Ligue internationale contre le racisme et l’antisémitisme en Autriche* and the Museum of Modern Art Vienna mumok.

In 2022, a temporary art installation called *Lueger temporär* was commissioned by the city and installed from October 2022 to September 2023. Designed by Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch, the installation consisted of a wood-frame edifice, thirty-nine meters long, five meters wide, and eleven meters tall. The designers placed *Lueger temporär* across the square, facing the monument to Lueger. It featured “true-to-scale, fragmentary contours of all the memorials or monuments we are currently aware of” dedicated to Lueger in Vienna, a total of sixteen.<sup>17</sup> The installation marked the intent and need for altering the monument, playing into the aesthetics of construction scaffolding, yet it was criticized specifically by members of the Viennese Jewish community for not confronting antisemitism explicitly.<sup>18</sup>

Parallel to the initiatives taken by the city, public letters, and academic work, anonymous protestors took to clandestine action. In contrast to the institutional approaches, they unleashed an immediate, public effect: In July 2020, the word *Schande* (shame) was graffitied multiple times in large red letters on the foundation of the monument and in other colors around the monument. The graffiti made the indeed shameful presence of this monument immediately visible to everyone. When the city decided to remove the graffiti, in October the same year, in another clandestine action, the word “shame” was placed in concrete letters onto the monument. A group of activists then organized a *Schandwache*, a protest against the planned removal of the letters and graffiti, in front of the monument. The protest was supported by the Jewish Student Union, the Socialist

<sup>16</sup> Contextualizing plaque “Wienkl” at the Lueger-Monument, Stubenring, Vienna. Written by Oliver Rathkolb in cooperation with the Cultural Commission of Vienna’s first district.

<sup>17</sup> Nicole Six and Paul Petritsch, “Lueger Temporary,” accessed March 23, 2023, <https://www.luegertemporär.at/en/>.

<sup>18</sup> Liam Hoare, “New Art Installation Inflames Row over Vienna’s Statue of Antisemite,” *The Jewish Chronicle*, October 27, 2022, <https://www.thejc.com/news/world/new-art-installation-inflames-row-over-viennas-statue-of-antisemite-yumqyb7m>.

Youth, the Muslim Youth Austria, the KZ Verband<sup>19</sup> and activists and artist campaign Sodom Vienna, marking the multidirectional dimension of this grassroots engagement. In the course of these protests, racist violence was addressed as a threat in the present, and not reduced to the particular history of antisemitism, that concerns the Lueger monument and its past. This broader political meaning became evident through the events immediately after the application of the concrete graffiti, when a group of right-wing activists (“Identitarians”) forcefully removed the concrete writing. Police forces, that were present, did not intervene in the removal, even though the *Schandwache* at the monument had been declared officially as a political rally in order to protect the monument against the removal of the so-called shame-writings.

In June 2023, the city decided to realize a proposal by artist Klemens Wihldal, who suggested to leave the monument mostly intact, but to tilt the statue by three-and-a-half degrees. This proposal received criticism, as Austrian art historian Tanja Schult voiced in a newspaper commentary: “We do not have to subscribe for all time to the logic of a vain man who skillfully knew how to inscribe himself in the city.”<sup>20</sup> Such an intervention, she added, marks in no way the very reason for which this monument is so disputed, i.e. the racism and antisemitism of Karl Lueger. Despite the persistent criticism, the reconstruction will begin in 2024 and it remains to be seen whether protests will subside or reemerge even stronger.

### **Making a Counter-Monument: The Marcus Omofuma Stone**

The second case concerns the Marcus Omofuma Stone, illegally placed in 2003 in the city center of Vienna. It commemorates the violent police-murder of Marcus Omofuma on May 1, 1999, and is to-date the only monument in Austria dedicated to the racist violence of the Austrian asylum and migration regime. Migrants’ experiences and memories rarely ever enter the collective memory of a majority society, and migration history in Austria, too, is marked by its chronic neglect of memories of migrants in public spaces and discourses.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Association of Concentration Camp Survivors.

<sup>20</sup> Tanja Schult, “Wien braucht dieses Lueger-Denkmal nicht!,” *Der Standard*, June 20, 2023, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/3000000175312/und-ewig-gr252223t-der-lueger>.

<sup>21</sup> See Christiane Hintermann, “Migrationsgeschichte im öffentlichen Raum: Die Konstruktion eines Gedächtnisortes am Beispiel des Marcus Omofuma-Steins in Wien,” in



The memorial is a three-meter tall and five-ton heavy, abstract, granite sculpture that was modeled by Ulrike Truger with cutting disks, perched on a concrete base with a metal plaque and the German inscription:

Marcus Omofuna Stone

African Granite 2003

Ulrike Truger

In memory of the Nigerian Marcus Omofuma who died during deportation due to shackling and suffocation.<sup>22</sup>

Marcus Omofuma was murdered by three Austrian police officers tasked with his forced deportation on a flight from Austria to Nigeria via Sofia, Bulgaria. Omofuma had protested against his deportation, in response to which the officers tied him with tape to his airplane seat, taping his entire torso, head, mouth, and parts of his nose. Despite obvious signs of breathing difficulties and vocal concerns raised by other passengers on the civil aircraft, the police officers kept Omofuma tied up and gagged, letting him suffocate to death. Upon arrival, Omofuma was pronounced dead by a doctor who had been called.

The news of Omofuma's death had led to immediate and broad anti-racist and anti-police protests in Austria. During multiple rallies and political events, protestors demanded the three police officers to be tried for murder, as well as the immediate resignation of their superiors and the politicians in charge, including the Austrian interior minister, the general director of public security, and the head of the responsible section in the interior ministry. A broad, collective, grassroots alliance coalesced, consisting of Viennese migrant communities hailing from several African nations as well as migrant activists of other nationalities. This alliance was further supported by leftist political organizations and human rights campaigners.<sup>23</sup> From the outset, political responses in Austria car-

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*Migration und Integration: Wissenschaftliche Perspektiven aus Österreich*, ed. Jennifer Carvill Schellenbacher et al. (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2016), 241n.

<sup>22</sup> Patrick Edore, "The Marcus Omofuma Memorial in Vienna (2003)," Black Central Europe, accessed June 23, 2023, <https://blackcentraleurope.com/sources/1989-today/the-marcus-omofuma-memorial-in-vienna-2003/>.

<sup>23</sup> See Gesellschaft für Menschenrechte von Marginalisierten und MigrantInnen, *1000 Jahre Haft: Operation Spring und institutioneller Rassismus; Resümees einer antirassistischen Gruppe* (Vienna: Verein für Antirassistische Öffentlichkeitsarbeit, 2005), 12.

ried the marks of the very racism that had led to Omofuma's murder: the three acting police officers were allowed to stay on-duty and were suspended only after weeks of mounting public pressure. Three years later, they were found guilty for "negligent manslaughter in particularly dangerous circumstances" and were sentenced to eight months suspended prison terms in March 2002, a very mild sentence, given the evidence and circumstances of Omofuma's death; they were permitted to remain employed by the police force despite being found guilty.<sup>24</sup> Concomitantly, the yellow press launched a smear campaign against Omofuma himself, Nigerian refugees, and asylum seekers in general.

Parliamentary hearings, witness reports, and court records exposed a deeply rooted regime of racism<sup>25</sup> embedded in the Austrian police and ministry of interior, openly justifying forms of torture like gagging and binding of people of African descent during pre-deportation detention or the deportation itself.<sup>26</sup> Acting politicians failed to recognize their responsibility for, or knowledge of, the repeated use of torture methods in deportation processes. In this environment of mounting anti-racist resistance, only four weeks after Omofuma's murder the Austrian police launched on May 27, 1999 what they called "Operation Spring": the largest organized police action of Austria's recent past, during which 104 people—almost all of them of African origin—were arrested in the course of multiple, simultaneous police raids involving 850 police officers. The raids were followed by years of trials, marked by racist prejudice and profiling, criminalizing politically active members of the Black Community in Austria, including those involved in the protests against the murder of Omofuma.

<sup>24</sup> Amnesty International, "Amnesty International Report 2003 – Austria," Refworld, May 28, 2003, <https://www.refworld.org/reference/annualreport/amnesty/2003/en/57229>.

<sup>25</sup> See the Amnesty International report on police brutality in Austria from 2000: "The image of a brutal and sometimes racist police force is an ugly one. The Austrian government faces major embarrassment in Europe and abroad if it allows rogue police officers to beat people up and get away with it." "Austria: Incidents of Police Brutality Continue," Amnesty International, March 24, 2000, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur13/007/2000/en/>.

<sup>26</sup> See opening statement by Alexander van der Bellen (Green party) during parliamentary hearing concerning the death of refugee Marcus Omofuma (6217/J): "168. Sitzung des Nationalrates der Republik Österreich: XX. Gesetzgebungsperiode Montag, 10. Mai 1999," Parlament Österreich, accessed July 3, 2023, [https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XX/NRSITZ/168/fnameorig\\_114325.html](https://www.parlament.gv.at/dokument/XX/NRSITZ/168/fnameorig_114325.html).

It was in this historic conjuncture of culminating racism and the surge of far-right politics—with the far-right Freedom Party (FPÖ) entering the halls of federal government in early 2000—that the Marcus Omofuma Stone was clandestinely placed in the city center of Vienna. The monument was created upon the private initiative of the artist Truger, after having been approached with the idea by human rights activist Ingrid Popper in 2002.<sup>27</sup> Truger tried to receive public approval for the memorial, but her applications for public funding and permission were all rejected. The artist then decided to fund it privately and placed it without permission next to the Vienna Opera house on October 10, 2003.<sup>28</sup>

With the monument in place, Truger appealed in an open letter to Vienna’s mayor, after which the city authorities decided not to remove the illegally installed monument entirely, but to relocate it to another central location, a so far unnamed square near another central and well-frequented location, Vienna’s Museum Quarter. The square was later renamed in 2014 to “Human Rights Square.”

In 2022, the Austrian Federal Monuments Office officially placed the Omofuma Stone under monument protection. In the Office’s written justification, the authors emphasized the fact that it is the only monument in Austria of its kind. While there are many memorials against war and fascism, all of which dedicated to the terror of the National Socialists, there is not a single other monument in Austria dealing with the recent history of violence against migrants and asylum seekers, or of structural racism and racial discrimination.<sup>29</sup>

While the Omofuma memorial itself was placed by the initiative of a few private individuals, the monument and its site provide a rare example of successfully inscribing the remembrance of a migrant’s story into a public discourse and space, particularly the racism and police brutality that had led to the murder of Marcus Omofuma. As a monument, it also reminds of the anti-racist protests that were sparked by Omofuma’s murder, that were directed more broadly

<sup>27</sup> Ulrike Truger, “Omofuma Stein,” Bildhauerin Ulrike Truger, accessed March 10, 2023, <https://www.ulriketruger.at/omofuma-stein>.

<sup>28</sup> “Gedenkstein für Marcus Omofuma,” *Der Standard*, October 13, 2003, <https://www.derstandard.at/story/1446536/gedenkstein-fuer-marcus-omofuma>.

<sup>29</sup> Ulrike Truger, “Denkmalschutz für Marcus Omofuma Stein,” Bildhauerin Ulrike Truger, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://www.ulriketruger.at/denkmalschutz-f%C3%BCr-marcus-omofuma-stein>.

against racism, fascism and xenophobia in Austrian politics, society and media. Moreover, the Omofuma Stone has also become a site of exposure of the persisting and ongoing racist and fascist currents in Austria. For many years it was the target of repeated attacks from racists and fascists. These racists and fascists vandalized the monument several times, sometimes with color, sometimes with inscriptions. The plaque was stolen and replaced. By being attacked openly, the memorial exposed the strong racist and fascist sentiments present in Austria's society, bearing again the marks of a "counter-memorial" that destabilizes established, historical narratives that, left unchallenged, obfuscate the persistent racist, fascist sentiments and violence in Austria.

### Claiming a Missing Monument: Remembering the Porajmos

My third and final example concerns a memorial site that does not yet exist: a monument in Vienna to commemorate the Porajmos, also referred to as Samudaripen or Roma Holocaust, the genocide of the Roma and Romnja during the Holocaust by the Nazis and their collaborators from 1939 to 1945. Before 1938, Austria had a population of around 12,000 Roma. Anti-Roma racism long predated the Racial Laws of Nazi-Germany of 1938, stripping Roma and Sinti of their civic rights. Relative to their population, the Roma became the most persecuted minority in Austria under the Nazis.<sup>30</sup>

Today, only a handful of small memorial sites have been established in Austria, such as the Porajmos memorial in Weiz (Styria), initiated by Holocaust-survivor Ceija Stojka. Vienna, from which most deportations were organized, has no dedicated memorial site, and for many years now Roma communities have pointed this out. In 2022, the creation of such a memorial site was positively commented on by members of the Austrian parliament and government spokespeople, yet a concrete commitment never materializes.<sup>31</sup>

Based on a Council of Europe estimate from 2012, about 10–12 million Roma live in Europe today, of which Austria's Roma population totals 50,000 people.

<sup>30</sup> See Roman Urbaner, "Der blinde Fleck: O koro than," *dROMa* 56, no. 2–3 (Summer/Fall 2019): 10.

<sup>31</sup> "Zentrales Mahnmahl in Wien: Bald ein Denkmal für die Roma und Sinti in Wien?," *Roma\_2020*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.burgenland-roma.at/index.php/politik-und-gesellschaft/zentrales-mahnmal-in-wien>.

In 2008, the European Parliament finally addressed both the past and present violence committed against Roma communities, issuing a resolution for a European strategy on the situation of European Roma. This resolution included the statement that “the Romani Holocaust (Porajmos) deserves full recognition commensurate with the gravity of Nazi crimes designed to physically eliminate the Roma/Romnja of Europe as well as the Jews and other targeted groups.”<sup>32</sup> Today, a European Union Roma Strategic Framework for equality, inclusion and participation exists, promoting Roma equal rights and inclusion and participation, and the European Council’s Recommendation on Roma inclusion, equality and participation has been adopted by all European member states on March 12, 2021. Still, anti-Roma discrimination persists, and Roma continue to face structural racist discrimination and marginalization.<sup>33</sup> It is well researched that Roma face socioeconomic exclusion in their daily lives, and despite the official intent of the European Union to “place Roma inclusion high on EU and national agendas and mobilizing EU policy, legal and funding instruments,”<sup>34</sup> the discrimination and structural poverty is severe.

Against the backdrop of (historical) structural discrimination, the Porajmos has been long ignored and rendered invisible not only by European politics of remembrance, but also by scientific research concerning the victims of the Nazis. Akim Jah notes in the introduction of a recent volume on deportations in the Nazi Era, that “for a long time little attention has been paid to the deportation of Roma/Romnja as a subject of research,” and that until today the topic remains “much less differentiated within research than the deportation of Jews.”<sup>35</sup> The neglect of their persecution continued for decades after the end of the war, and this neglect is belied by a racist anti-Romaism that preceded and endured

<sup>32</sup> European Parliament resolution of January 31, 2008, on a European strategy on the Roma.

<sup>33</sup> Jasmina Tumbas, “Countering Persecution, Misconceptions, and Nationalism: Roma Identity and Contemporary Activist Art,” in *Shifting Corporealities in Contemporary Performance: Danger, Im/mobility and Politics*, ed. Marina Gržinić and Aneta Stojnić (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 103.

<sup>34</sup> “A Union of Equality: EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation; Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council,” European Union, October 7, 2020, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52020DC0620>, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Henning Borggräfe and Akim Jah, eds., *Deportations in the Nazi Era: Sources and Research* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 6.

the Nazi era until today.<sup>36</sup> Outside of Roma communities, the Roma genocide started to be researched more systematically and was officially recognized by European nation-states and the European Union only in the late 20th century and early 2000s. This was very much enforced by Roma activists, families and communities of Roma victims themselves, claiming recognition for the genocide committed against them, along with transnational Roma entities that pursued the aim of recognition, documentation and commemoration, and started to organize Europe-wide.<sup>37</sup> One recent example of Roma genocide research and documentation is the *RomArchive: The Digital Archive of the Roma*. This archive was launched in January 2019 and is an international, digital archive for Romani arts and culture, predominately run by Roma.<sup>38</sup>

In Austria, parallel to the transnational efforts by Roma communities to move against anti-Romaism on a European level, local Roma organizations and communities formed initiatives for the recognition of Roma histories and for the creation of cultural spaces. This led to a growing public visibility and artistic interventions such as an art installation in front of the parliament, titled *Dikh he na bister!* (“Watch and don’t forget!”), a temporary “Memorial to Romn\*ja and Sinti\*ze who were killed during Nazi time,” designed by Natali Tomenko in 2019. The personal initiative of individuals like Ceija Stojka, who was the first Romni to publicly thematize the “Porajmos” (with her 1988 published book *Wir leben im Verborgenen*), also supported the claim for a public memorial site.

In 2022, a newly established collaboration platform between autochthon and migrant Roma communities in Austria, was able to jointly formalize a petition for a proper memorial to the federal government. The initiative for this broad coalition was supported by the work of an inter-regional and transnational project called “Dream Road: Danube REgion for improved Access and eMpower of ROMa Development” (2020–2022), funded by the European Union, and part of the recent efforts taken on a European level to combat anti-Roma discrimination. The chairman of the Austrian advisory board of the Roma handed the pe-

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<sup>36</sup> *Deportations in the Nazi Era* provides a multidirectional perspective on Nazi crimes, researching specifically the deportations of Jews, Sinti and Roma.

<sup>37</sup> György Majtényi, “The Memory and Historiography of Porrajmos: Making a Transnational National Site of Memory,” *Shoah: Intervention, Methods, Documentation* 8, no. 1 (2021): 86–103. [https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121/ART\\_GMAJ01](https://doi.org/10.23777/SN.0121/ART_GMAJ01).

<sup>38</sup> RomArchive is available at <https://www.romarchive.eu/en>.

tion to representatives of the Austrian parliament in April 2022, where it was met by broad approval.<sup>39</sup> The drafting of this joint document is significant insofar as the formation of such an alliance transcended the legal distinction between autochthon and allochthon Roma groups in Austria. The protection of ethnic groups in Austria consists of a historically instituted and fragmented set of laws and regulations,<sup>40</sup> with some norms pre-dating the Austrian Republic, as far back as minority protection laws instituted during the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The legal recognition of Roma as an ethnic group dates back to 1993, and distinguishes between those Roma that are seen as autochthon by the law—meaning that they migrated to Austria before the 20th century—as legally protected under the constitution (which includes the Burgenland-Roma, Sinti and Lovara), and those who migrated to Austria more recently (e.g. Kalderas, Gurbet and Arlije). The latter groups are not officially recognized and therefore not represented by the council of ethnic minorities (*Volksgruppenbeirat*).

While concrete plans and ideas for the creation of the Porajmos memorial exist, it is yet to be seen, whether and when they will be implemented. At the moment, the debate around its creation has quieted down again, and the struggle for a memorial site commemorating the Roma genocide continues.

As a tangent to struggle for a Porajmos memorial site, it is worth noting that one of Vienna's latest monuments incorporates what can be called a multidirectional gesture: At the Shoah Wall of Names Memorial, completed in 2021, dedicated to the 65,000 Austrian Jewish victims of the Shoah, the persecution of the Roma and other groups under the Nazi regime is made visible as well. At the entrance to the oval sphere, an additional memorial stone was added, with an inscription dedicated to the non-Jewish victims, amongst them the "Roma and Sinti communities of all ages, children and adults who were deemed to have mental or physical disabilities, people who were ostracized as 'asocial' or were persecuted for their sexual orientation, and Carinthian Slovenes."

<sup>39</sup> Dream Road project description can be found at <https://www.interreg-danube.eu/approved-projects/dream-road>.

<sup>40</sup> See Mirjam Polzer-Srienz, "The Representation of Small Ethnic Groups by State Bodies: The Case of Austria and Slovenia," in *(Hidden) Minorities: Language and Ethnic Identity between Central Europe and the Balkans*, ed. Christian Promitzer, Klaus-Jurgen Hermanik, and Eduard Staudinger (Vienna: Lit, 2009), 64.

## Transnationality in Contemporary Counter-Monument Practices in Vienna

As observed in an earlier study on transnational memory spaces in Vienna, conducted by Priker, Kramer, and Lichtenwagner, “transnationality has rarely been an explicit objective of mnemonic actors.”<sup>41</sup> This is also true for the three examples given in this article. Still, transnational events that were related to the respective causes did provide an important frame, that did influence the national debates in all cases.

The fight for a Porajmos memorial has been taking place against a transnational background from the beginning. As György Majtényi put it, the Porajmos calls for a “transnational national site of memory,”<sup>42</sup> as it is a “‘site of memory’ within Roma minority communities living in different nation states.”<sup>43</sup> Roma have never been attached to one nation state alone and have therefore always had to fight a transnational struggle,<sup>44</sup> often acting from positions of non-citizenship. The recent successes on EU level towards formal recognition of the crimes committed against them, have likely been helpful in making state institutions in Austria formerly acknowledge the Porajmos as well. This, albeit slow, progress towards more visible commemoration can furthermore be attributed to the formation of a national alliance of Roma communities beyond the legally constructed differentiation between recognized and non-recognized ethnic minorities. In part, this cooperation is the result of a transnational initiative at the European level.

The debates about the Lueger Monument have been impacted by transnationality in different ways. Initially, when the monument reentered public discourse in the early 2000s, it was not a singular, national occurrence of an old monument under examination. I understand the timeliness of the debate to be one of many

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<sup>41</sup> Peter Pirker, Johannes Kramer, and Mathias Lichtenwagner, “Transnational Memory Spaces in the Making: World War II and Holocaust Remembrance in Vienna,” *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 32, no. 4 (December 2019): 456, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10767-019-09331-w>.

<sup>42</sup> Majtényi, “Memory and Historiography of Porrajmos.”

<sup>43</sup> Majtényi, 86.

<sup>44</sup> On Roma transnational struggles see Thomas Acton, “Beginnings and Growth of Transnational Movements of Roma to Achieve Civil Rights after the Holocaust,” RomArchive, accessed August 12, 2023, <https://www.romarchive.eu/en/roma-civil-rights-movement/beginnings-and-growth-transnational-movements-roma/>.



manifestations of a general shift in public awareness of and interest in memorial culture in Austria and in other European countries similar to Austria. Austrian historian Heidemarie Uhl speaks in this regard of a “resurgence of interest in monuments in public discourse as well as in contemporary art.”<sup>45</sup> After monuments had been discarded as having lost all relevance to the present, “the amnesia of a future-oriented modernity was replaced by a new historicism, an ‘obsession with the past,’ which once again shifted the focus of social and scientific interest onto the dimension of history, though now under the sign of postmodernity.”<sup>46</sup> The past, and what we remember of it, is to be understood as a dynamic process, shaping the present.<sup>47</sup> From early on, critics of the monument pointed at precisely this connection between Lueger’s antisemitism of the past and the political conjuncture of Austria in the present, yet again confronted with a rise of racism and fascist currents.

After over a decade of critical debate about the future of the Lueger monument, the transnational paradigm shift in monument culture, set off by the Black Lives Matter protests, caused a significant shift in the discourse. When protests ignited, in the aftermath of the racist police murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, they quickly led to the toppling and removal of monuments related to colonialism and racist histories across the United States, the United Kingdom, and Belgium. The position of the Viennese municipal government, but also of known art historians, artists and intellectuals, had generally been opposed to the removal of the monument. Many argued about the dangers of erasing the past, claiming that retaining the monument would keep a critical awareness alive.<sup>48</sup> Yet, the Black Lives Matter protests demonstrated in a powerful manner the emancipatory potential of taking a racist monument down, of vandalizing or dismantling it, instead of contextualizing and preserving it. It seems likely that the vandalization of the Lueger monument in July 2020, shortly after the Black Lives Matter protests had erupted, were inspired and encouraged by the decisiveness of these anti-monument actions. In hindsight, the “shame” graffiti can be considered as the most noticed and talked about intervention, both for

<sup>45</sup> Heidemarie Uhl, “Out of True: Monuments and Reflective Memorial Culture,” in *Open Call*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Uhl, 46.

<sup>47</sup> See Uhl, 46n.

<sup>48</sup> See, for example, Aleida Assmann, “A Wake-up Call in the Heart of the City: Interventions Concerning the Karl Lueger Monument in Vienna,” in *Open Call*, 61–65.

its clear and intelligible messaging and for the multidirectional connections the activists drew with all forms of present-day discrimination and racism.

Black Lives Matter has also inscribed itself into the history and meaning of the Omofuma Stone, which did also not set out as a transnational site of memory, but was turned into one later on. Since its placement in 2003, the memorial has kept its function as a counter-monument. Despite its official recognition by state institutions, it continues to resist national discourses that tried to deny Omofuma's murder a place in Austrian hegemonic history at first.<sup>49</sup> The recurrent usage of the space has connected heterogenous memories of traumatic pasts and presents in a multidirectional fashion, and ties the memorial to transnational movements: The "Square of Human Rights" serves today as a gathering place for various protests with anti-racist, anti-fascist and other anti-discriminatory agendas, for causes in and outside of Austria, such as protests in solidarity with women in Iran, or in Palestine. One of the largest of such gatherings at the Omofuma Stone was the Black Lives Matter rally on June 4, 2020.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

I set out to ask how multidirectional strategies have influenced and shaped recent counter-mnemonic struggles in Austria, and how these were impacted by transnationality. Strictly speaking, neither of the three examples constitutes an obvious case of multidirectional memory. There is no clear cross-referencing or negotiation between heterogenous histories at stake in any of the counter-monument practices discussed. Still, each of these counter-hegemonic narratives did generate to an extent what Rothberg calls a platform to speak about more than just one memory. Thus, there is a multidirectional element in all three cases: (1) the activism against the Lueger Monument that combined his antisemitism of the past with the racist threats of the present; this became particularly clear when activists from different political backgrounds—Jewish, Muslim, Holocaust survivors and others—joined forces to resist the right-wing attacks of the "shame" graffiti intervention; (2) the collaboration between legally recognized Roma groups and those who are not considered an ethnic minority in Austria;

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<sup>49</sup> Tello, *Counter-Memorial Aesthetics*, 16.

<sup>50</sup> "50.000 bei 'Black Lives Matter'-Demo," Wien ORF, June 4, 2020, <https://wien.orf.at/stories/3051825/>.

(3) and the multiple ways in which the Omofuma Stone has become a place of remembrance of new and heterogeneous memories of racist violence. These new acts of remembrance are linked to the history of anti-racist protests after Omofuma's death but also tie in with new ones.

While transnationality was not the target of any of the provided examples, it did impact each of them in different ways. In the case of the Lueger Monument, the transnational movement of Black Lives Matter empowered activists to challenge the disputed monument in ways that radically questioned the dominant, national claims for preservation and contextualization; the transnational efforts of Roma communities all over Europe have vested the claim for a Porajmos memorial in Austria with additional leverage in the efforts of intervening in state policies. In the case of the Omofuma Stone, due to its clandestine, anti-hegemonic nature in its making, a site for the materialization of transnational solidarity in the context of anti-discriminatory fights for justice has been created.

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**Politics/Aesthetics**

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## The Dialogical Imperative in The Digital Age: From Trans-National Specularity to Post-National Imaginary in Israel/Palestine

### Keywords

multidirectional memory, dialogical imaginations, trans-national specularity, post-national imaginary, Israel/Palestine, biopolitics, necropolitics

### Abstract

This article argues for the urgency of positing visual forms as sites through which to further develop the framework of dialogical and multi-directional memory in narrating the histories of Israel/Palestine as well as other spaces where a contest for a national homeland has been circumscribed within limited notions of identity. First, it revisits the writings of scholars who have laid the theoretical groundwork through which to challenge the orthodoxy of the nation-centric positions in Israel/Palestine and who embed them within the larger project of decolonization. Second, it points to the necessity of incorporating the theories of biopolitics and necropolitics to understand how power operates in producing the archive of memory. Third, it analyzes contemporary aesthetic strategies through which muted archives of memory have been activated and builds upon them to articulate the concept of “trans-national specularity,” forging comparisons across national borders and potentially beyond national imaginaries.

## Dialoški imperativ v digitalni dobi: od nadnacionalne spekularnosti do postnacionalnega imaginarija v Izraelu/ Palestini

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### Ključne besede

večsmerni spomin, dialoške imaginacije, nadnacionalna spekularnost, postnacionalni imaginarij, Izrael/Palestina, biopolitika, nekropolitika

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## Povzetek

Članek zagovarja nujnost postavitve vizualnih oblik kot mest, s katerimi je mogoče nadalje razvijati okvir dialoškega in večsmernega spomina v pripovedovanju zgodovine Izraela/Palestine kot tudi drugih prostorov, kjer je bil boj za nacionalno domovino opredeljen v okviru omejenega števila pojmov identitete. Prvič, članek ponovno obravnava spise avtorjev, ki so postavili teoretično osnovo za izpodbijanje ortodoksnih, na nacijo osredotočenih stališč v Izraelu/Palestini, in so te spise vgradili v širši projekt dekolonizacije. Drugič, članek izpostavlja nujnost vključevanja teorij biopolitike in nekropolitike za razumevanje delovanja oblasti pri ustvarjanju arhiva spomina. Tretjič, članek analizira sodobne estetske strategije, s pomočjo katerih so bili aktivirani utišani arhivi spomina, in jih nadgrajuje v smeri artikulacije koncepta »nacionalne spekularnosti«, s pomočjo katerega je mogoče skovati primerjavo, ki bo segala čez nacionalne meje in, potencialno, onkraj nacionalnih imaginarijev.



## Introduction

In the current public sphere, which has made it ever more difficult to think, write, and speak about Israel/Palestine without succumbing to polarized identitarian claims or fears of being “cancelled,” *this article argues for the urgency of positing visual forms as sites through which to further develop the framework of dialogical and multi-directional memory in narrating the histories of Israel/Palestine as well as other spaces where a contest for a national homeland has been circumscribed within limited notions of identity.*

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Indeed, faced with the increasing ideological contraction of the epistemological bandwidth, which reduces and essentializes entangled bodies of knowledge, this article elaborates on current theories and proposes the concept of “trans-national specularity” as a pathway toward a post-national imaginary.

As the scholarship on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is extensive, this article solely focuses on selected theories and case studies that engage with the competition for a national homeland in Israel/Palestine and the current memory debates that surround them. To develop my argument, the first part of this article revisits the writings of Ella Shohat, Michael Rothberg, and Ariella Aïsha



Azoulay, scholars who have laid the theoretical groundwork for challenges to nation-centric orthodoxies in discourses in and surrounding Palestine/Israel; they moreover embed these challenges in the larger project of decolonization.

With Shohat, Rothberg, and Azoulay, I suggest that contemporary art and visual culture can expand the dialogical spectrum of multi-directionality beyond the two main protagonists to a trans-national constellation of actors in the *longue durée*. Building on their seminal contributions, the second part of the article points to the necessity of incorporating the theories of biopolitics and necropolitics, as conceived by Michel Foucault and Achille Mbembe, to understand how power operates in producing the archive of memory. In this section, I demonstrate that biopolitical/necropolitical conditions, structures, and techniques not only manufacture racialized differences as the basis for modern governmentality and the nation state but are also implicated with animating or silencing the genealogies of memory that are crucial to the constitution of entangled multidirectional communities; In the third part, I analyze recent examples of artistic and cultural practices that confront the conflict in Israel/Palestine and evaluate the ways in which they have tried to restore memories that have been erased or muted through nation-state formation. Finally, by reflecting on how global media systems and networked technologies in the digital age might fabricate new sensorial iterations of multidirectional memory, I offer a concept that I have termed trans-national specularity. It describes aesthetic strategies in and through which dialogical histories and memories could be made visible and open to comparison across national borders. With trans-national specularity as a conceptual foundation, I argue for the necessity of developing a theory of a post-national imaginary, one that moves beyond the orthodoxies of any nation-state and supports communities of belonging that organize themselves through other types of bonds.

### **A Lexicon of “Dialogical Imaginations” and “Multidirectional Memory”**

Many scholars have argued for the urgency of expanding the range of protagonists, chronologies, and geographies that shape the narratives of history and memory in conditions of globalization and counter-globalization and countless others who have analyzed the complex underpinnings and iterations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This section, however, limits itself to the writings of Shohat, Rothberg, and Azoulay, three of the most prominent thinkers to posit memory cultures as a bulwark against monolithic essentialism. Since the 1980s,

Shohat has combined her personal and intellectual biography as an Arab Jew of Baghdadi origin with the close-reading of diverse cultural artifacts to advance the debates on the plurality and intersectionality of Muslim-Jewish histories and memories. Situating her analyses within “a relational network” that considers “imperial history, partition, remapping, and post/colonial dislocations,”<sup>1</sup> Shohat has been among the first to dispute the teleological narrative that traces the Arab-Jewish experience directly to the Zionist construction of the State of Israel and, in her analysis, imposes a Eurocentric representation of the region and, specifically, a European paradigm of antisemitism onto the Muslim world. A master narrative of perpetual victimhood, oppression, and displacement was ideologically grafted onto the history of Arab Jews despite millennia of relatively untroubled co-habitation and dialogical entanglement within Islamic societies. “Sephardi Jews,” she writes, “experienced an utterly different history within the Arab world than that which haunts the European memories of Ashkenazi Jews; the conflation of the Muslim-Arab with the archetypal European oppressors of Jews strategically understates Israel’s colonial-settler dispossession of Palestinian people.”<sup>2</sup> Importantly, the schism between the constructed categories of “Arab,” “Jew,” and “Arab-Jew,” occurred “even prior to the emergence of Zionism, in the wake of colonial modernity, with its discursive correlatives in the form of racialized tropes, Orientalist fantasies, and Eurocentric epistemologies.”<sup>3</sup> Already under severe duress with the Balfour Declaration of 1917 and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1922, there was an irrevocable fissure in the post-World War Two/post-Holocaust context with the U.N. resolution to partition Palestine in 1947 and establish the State of Israel in 1948 and, simultaneously, the *Nakba* (Arabic for “catastrophe” or “disaster”), a term used to describe the eviction and mass displacement of Palestinians between 1947 and 1949 by Zionist paramilitaries and, after the official establishment of the State of Israel, the Israeli military. In a moment marked by the dissolution of empires, geopolitical reconfigurations, and insurgent processes of decolonization, which included the creation of new nation states such as India and Pakistan and the independence of Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria, a “novel nationalist lexicon of Jews and Arabs” came to the fore. Merged into a new nationhood with Ashkena-

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<sup>1</sup> Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements* (London: Pluto Press, 2017), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ella Shohat, “Rethinking Jews and Muslims: Quincentennial Reflections,” *Middle East Report* 178 (September–October 1992): 28, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3012984>.

<sup>3</sup> Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew*, 2.

zi Jews, “Arab Jews woke up to a new world order that could not accommodate their simultaneous Jewishness and Arabness”<sup>4</sup> while, concurrently, approximately 750,000 Palestinians from a population of 1.9 million became refugees.<sup>5</sup>

Shohat’s scholarship is constitutive because it has presciently argued for understanding cultural practices and collective identities within complex interconnected histories and geographies that extend within a *longue durée*—even as single, univocal national narratives have become the ideological norm—and for identifying the nationalization and racialization processes that have been instrumental in creating the narrow identitarian, ethno-nationalist typologies of the post-war. This framework has informed her analyses of shared sites of self-representation and memory, i.e., films, food, music, languages, syntaxes, accents, etc., and networks of “dialogical imagination” that affectively connected populations of various denominations living in the Middle East and North Africa before the emergence of modern, racialized nation states violently bifurcated their coextensive genealogy. It has also shaped her approach to trans-national analysis of the experience of departure, dispossession, and articulations of homeland of both “Arab-Jews” and “Palestinians” as the consequence of colonial and national practices. Crucially, according to Shohat, “the two displacements are not equivalent or symmetrical or identical, yet they are closely related.”<sup>6</sup> Since these two forms of exodus occurred in a temporal and spatial proximity, the challenge “has been to relationalize and transnationalize the comparison itself.”<sup>7</sup> As Shohat writes,

“the Arab-Jew” and “Palestine” function as tropes not only for loss of time/place and the absence left in their wake, but also for struggles to persist and remain amidst the absurdities of disappearing, or disappeared, worlds. Both the “Arab-Jew” and “Palestine” come to form tropes of displacement. The respective exiling of both communities gave way to the shock of arrival. And the black and white photos of dislocated Arab Jews in tents echo images of Palestinian refugees in a kind of a haunting specularity . . .<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Shohat, 3.

<sup>5</sup> “The *Nakba* did not start or end in 1948.”

<sup>6</sup> Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew*, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Shohat, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Shohat, 8.

Though the world-picturing of “Jew-versus-Arab” is a greatly impoverished one, its hegemonic grammar continues to be reproduced by the various stakeholders of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict via an aggressive erasure and policing of entangled histories, memories, and identities. What this fracturing has achieved is a “competition for victim-status, with winners and losers, rather than [a] compassionate narrative for many groups: for Jews enduring Judeo-phobia in Europe, for dispossessed Palestinians, for dislocated Arab Jews, for Muslims suffering Islamophobia, and for the victims of the ongoing devastation in the Middle East.”<sup>9</sup> Without the dialogical imaginary or an empathetic disposition towards its (re)construction, the “facts on the ground” point to wars without end.

In parallel, Rothberg’s examination of the rift between contemporary memories of the Nazi genocide of Jews in the Holocaust and traumas linked to colonial conflicts marks an attempt to also move beyond the competition for victim status. Developing the term “multidirectional memory,” Rothberg’s writings have become significant as the “memory industry” has grown in amplitude and the historical traumas of diverse ethnic and religious communities have become increasingly politicized in the present. Rothberg’s contribution to the conceptualization of collective remembrance is hinged on the claim that

multidirectional memory encourages us to think of the public sphere as a malleable discursive space in which groups do not simply articulate established positions but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others; both the subjects and spaces of the public are open to continual reconstruction.<sup>10</sup>

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By underscoring the dialogical dynamic of memory production against models of competitive memory, Rothberg moves the conversation away from the notion that memory is singular or static and lays the foundation for “remembrance [that] both cuts across and binds together diverse spatial, temporal, and culture sites.”<sup>11</sup> In Rothberg’s constellation of dialogical encounters, the memory of the Holocaust is interwoven with cultural histories that span Europe, North

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<sup>9</sup> Shohat, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Rothberg, 11.

America, the Caribbean, and North Africa. The Nazi genocide and writings on totalitarianism by European Jewish philosophers such as Hannah Arendt, he shows, became a central preoccupation for intellectuals such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Aimé Césaire who were active in anti-racist, anti-imperialist struggles. Later, the centrality of Holocaust testimony entered into dialogue with decolonial struggles in Algeria and Vietnam, for example, as victims of torture and massacre began to share their experiences in public. Rothberg traces such conjunctions as they became articulated in diverse material artifacts to support his claim that “the experience of Jewish difference within modern Europe [. . .] foreshadows many of the debates and problems faced by postcolonial societies and postcolonial migrants in contemporary Europe.”<sup>12</sup> Maintaining the exclusivity of memory, he claims, blocks the recognition of the shared struggles that persist in the post-Holocaust and post-colonial worlds. Indeed, like Shohat, Rothberg multiplies the agents and protagonists who are implicated in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by reconstituting the plural historical intersections between the memories of the Holocaust and colonialism. Concurring with Shohat, Rothberg identifies a fundamental violence that has been enacted on diverse populations through what Anibal Quijano<sup>13</sup> and Walter D. Mignolo have termed the concept of modernity/coloniality.<sup>14</sup>

To advance their capitalist ambitions and complete their colonial occupations, Quijano argues that European powers classified hierarchies of human life—and differentiated between conquerors and conquered—around a “racial axis” of power.<sup>15</sup> The colonization of America by the Spanish and Portuguese crowns served as the primary testing ground, but the concept of racial difference, articulated as a fundamental biological difference, also became the fundamental tool through which Europe distributed labor and organized exploitation within capitalist modernity. Rothberg frames his call for multidirectional memory as “a polemical thrust [. . .] to reject the reductionism of the nation-centered

<sup>12</sup> Rothberg, 22–23.

<sup>13</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 168–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>.

<sup>14</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2007): 449–514, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647>.

<sup>15</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/23906>.

[. . .] model in favor of a more open-ended sense of the possibilities of memory and counter-memory that might allow the ‘revisiting’ and rewriting of hegemonic sites of memory.”<sup>16</sup> Moving from a hegemony to a plurality of identifications and sites for their (re)imaginings, multidirectional memory supports an amplified public sphere in which diverse actors not only have the right to enter the frame of historical and political representation but make visible the nation-state-based rules that manage those rights in the first place.

Azoulay, meanwhile, offers a pathway towards “unlearning imperialism” *not* by writing a counter-history to the present but, rather, by acknowledging the imperial temporality of progress that has brought us to this moment, excavating the “pre-imperial” temporalities that preceded it, and asserting their potentiality in the present.<sup>17</sup> Enacting a methodology of unlearning, Azoulay examines the vocabulary that guides contemporary identifications of people, ie, “refugee,” “infiltrator,” “undocumented,” “citizen,” “illegal worker,” and suggests that they are the outcome of imperial archives and the frameworks of history, memory, citizenship, and human rights that they support. She also foregrounds the role of museums and other cultural institutions as a constitutive part of the imperial structure and argues that they must first acknowledge this reality in order to be transformed. Most important for my argument, Azoulay claims that the photographic document has played a fundamental role in enacting violence within the apparatus of the imperial archive. In the simple click of the shutter, photography frames, illuminates, collects, and reproduces only what is necessary for those who are in power. In keeping with the logic of imperialism, it thus performs “dividing lines” that have subsequently become naturalized. There was, however, a shared world that preceded the conceptual conversion of human beings into raw materials and resources for colonization and imperial domination. She writes, “potential history is a form of being with others, both living and dead, across time, against the separation of the past from the present, colonized peoples from their worlds and possessions, and history from politics.”<sup>18</sup> Every image, then, offers the possibility for new encounters among civilians—who may or may not hold the right to citizenship within a nation state—and who

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<sup>16</sup> Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory*, 310.

<sup>17</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Azoulay, 43.

enter the spectatorial encounter from within different constellations of power.<sup>19</sup> For Azoulay, the “civil discourse” that can emerge from encounters with borderless images is precisely one that “suspends the point of view of governmental power and the nationalist characteristics that enable it to divide the governed from one another and to set its factions against one another.”<sup>20</sup> A shared imaginary emanating from the civil realm, she claims, is the basis for a new political imagination. Yet, as I elucidate in the next section, contemporary techniques of biopower and necropower also impede the emergence of a multidimensional archive of memory that could articulate a shared imaginary.

### Biopower / Necropower and the Regulation of Memory

Shohat, Rothberg, and Azoulay situate their essays within postcolonial and decolonial frameworks and methods that challenge the primacy of Eurocentric paradigms and mine the historical archives to uncover moments of dialogical, relational, and multidirectional memories that foster cultural heterogeneity. Moreover, these scholars identify processes of racialization as constitutive to the formulation of identity and its hierarchies within modernity/coloniality and recognize the racial axis of power that underpins traumatic violence and its transformation into history and memory. Yet a thorny issue remains unexplored, namely: *How does biopower/necropower organize the production of the archive of memory?*

### Michel Foucault: The Archive as a Biopolitical Apparatus

As Foucault makes clear in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*, our cultural memory, which is related to the consolidation of history, is not simply produced by an unmediated accumulation of events, texts, objects, and images, but is organized and accessed by the rules of a discursive regime that regulates what can be thought and said at any given historical moment. In other words, our contemporary archive—or what Foucault termed the *dispositif*—is an apparatus or a historical “system of functioning” makes certain ideas and enunciations “thinkable” and “sayable” while other orders and genealogies of knowl-

<sup>19</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*, trans. Louise Bethlehem (London: Verso, 2015), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Azoulay, 2.

edge may be repressed, only survive in parts or, in fact, entirely disappear. If we agree that history and memory are the products of an archive with a particular historicity, our aim is thus to understand the forms of power that impede certain aspects of knowledge from becoming thinkable or sayable and, simultaneously, to reposition the silences as enunciating specific power structures. This additional dimension of analysis is vital if we are to assess how the contemporary, globally entwined, media-fused nation states—which are still epistemologically entrenched in a Euro-centric Westphalian model—diminish or willfully excise the possibilities of imagining and telling conjoined, multidirectional narratives while visual practitioners and other advocates try to articulate or bolster them.

As is well established, Foucault also offers us the concept of biopolitics, which he formulated while studying the forms of governmentality in liberal and neo-liberal nation states as they developed from the eighteenth century onwards. Biopolitics, according to Foucault, is the way in which the state manages “the living beings forming a population” via specific practices and, in so doing, articulates the limits of civil society and maintains control over it.<sup>21</sup> Biopolitics is activated via biopower, which Foucault describes as “a power that exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavors to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations.”<sup>22</sup> Ordering life through biopower extends to all aspects of civil society, again through what Foucault calls a *dispositif*—a network of power “that presupposed a closely meshed grid of material coercions rather than the physical existence of a sovereign.”<sup>23</sup> The replacement of the sovereign by biopower, which supports the governmentality of the liberal and neoliberal nation state, goes hand-in-hand with a shift from the sovereign’s right to “decide life and death”<sup>24</sup> to the nation state’s power to “foster life or disallow it to the point of death.”<sup>25</sup> With this turning point, it is no longer the sovereign who is defended but the state and its population. And

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 317.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1; An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 137.

<sup>23</sup> Michel Foucault, “*Society Must be Defended*”: *Lecture Series at the Collège de France, 1975–76*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003), 36.

<sup>24</sup> Foucault, *Will to Knowledge*, 135.

<sup>25</sup> Foucault, 138.



it is racialization and racism that become the key processes through which the state defines the norm of inclusion within exclusion from its protection. Racism, moreover, is not only projected outward, i.e., between races, but is also internally divided, i.e., within races. This is an important qualification as biopower creates divisions between populations but also fosters hierarchies and differentiations within them to justify the state's disciplinary behavior. Racism, Foucault writes, is "primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die."<sup>26</sup>

### **Achille Mbembe: The Necropolitical Archive and the Proliferation of Death Worlds**

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe developed Foucault's concept by pointing to the latter's failure in analyzing the role of biopolitics in the management of systems of violence, dispossession, and death. Necropolitics, the concept he coined in 2003, helps us analyze how "contemporary forms of subjugation of life" are managed in relation "to the power of death" within neoliberal global capitalism and its new state and para-state model of the "war machine."<sup>27</sup> With a "state of exception" and a "state of siege," concepts that Mbembe develops from the German political theorist Carl Schmitt, constantly operating to create crises, enemies, and fear, necropolitical governmentality is reproduced within civil society.<sup>28</sup> "Necropolitics and necropower," he writes, "account for the various ways in which [. . .] weapons are deployed in the interest of maximum destruction of persons and the creation of death-worlds, new and unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead."<sup>29</sup> These living dead, who exist in a state of "permanent condition of 'being in pain,'"<sup>30</sup> inhabit paradigmatic spaces i.e., plantations, colonies, occupied territories, and camps, in which racial distinctions reinforce necropower that is exercised through a social, economic, and cultural apparatus. Yet, with necropower replacing biopower as the dominant form of contemporary gov-

<sup>26</sup> Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended," 257.

<sup>27</sup> Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 39, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

<sup>28</sup> Mbembe, 16.

<sup>29</sup> Mbembe, 40.

<sup>30</sup> Mbembe, 39.

ernmentality within neoliberal global capitalism, Mbembe claims that we are faced with both vast “necro-death-scapes” of physical impoverishment as well as symbolic death through the near-total privatization and atomization of contemporary life.

Taken together, Foucault’s and Mbembe’s theories help elucidate the contemporary archival regime and its maintenance of the nation state as a model of governmentality organized around racialized hierarchies of life. Yet, beyond the management of populations and their social existence, I argue that biopolitics/necropolitics also sanctions which memories might live and which are made to die. From these theoretical underpinnings, the next section examines a selection of contemporary image-based practices that intervene in the archival apparatus in various ways.

### **Artistic, Cultural and Visual Interventions: Making Archives Speak**

Writing an article on “The Dialogical Imperative” between the summers of 2023 and of 2024 may seem like a romantically futile or escapist endeavor in the face of current situation in Israel/Palestine: the “attack on democracy”<sup>31</sup> precipitated by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s far-right government, the Israel-Gaza war triggered by the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israeli civilians on October 7, and an ongoing occupation of Palestinian territory and terrorization of Palestinian civilians in the West Bank and Gaza. As I began drafting these reflections in July 2023, the coalition of religious and nationalist parties, the most hardline in Israel’s seventy-five-year history, set in motion the overhaul of the judiciary system in a country that is typically referred to by Israel and its allies as “the only democracy in the Middle East.”<sup>32</sup> While the Supreme Court struck down this bill in January 2024, those who have been watching Israeli-Palestinian relations unfold since the country’s establishment in 1948, understand that the “democracy” in question is only the purview of the Jewish majority and, according to the scholar of human rights law, Neve Gordon, those that “criticize the new

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<sup>31</sup> Emily Bazelon, “How Israel’s Supreme Court Might React to the Challenge to Its Power,” *New York Times*, July 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/25/world/middleeast/israel-supreme-court-judicial-overhaul-netanyahu.html>.

<sup>32</sup> Shibley Telhami, “Is Israel a Democracy? Here’s What Americans Think,” Brookings, April 25, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/is-israel-a-democracy-heres-what-americans-think/>.

Netanyahu government as ‘undemocratic’ are actually serving to whitewash the inherently undemocratic nature of Israel and its leading institutions, including its Supreme Court.”<sup>33</sup> For Israelis, Netanyahu’s latest mandate became an existential crisis that prompted mass-demonstrations and analyses of the country’s internal conflicts, namely between Jews of diverse political, religious, and ethnic identifications; yet the unprecedented attacks of October 7, 2023 and the ensuing Israel-Gaza war that has now cost thousands of lives in an asymmetrical deployment of military power rendered those judicial concerns peripheral and bolstered national unity. For the Palestinians, who have been dispersed in the West Bank, Gaza, Israel, and a global diaspora since the *Nakba*, the heavy price of this latest military salvo is another episode of the enduring Israeli occupation; paradoxically, the death, suffering, and displacement of Gaza’s civilians as well as the near-total destruction of its infrastructure has only strengthened the Palestinian narrative on the world stage. To echo historian Rashid Khalidi’s analysis of the transformations in global discourse surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since the Second Intifada (2002), we have entered a new phase in which Palestinian claims to peoplehood, nationhood, and self-governance have been increasingly amplified and legitimated.<sup>34</sup>

In this moment of ultra-violence, as both Israel’s right-wing government and Hamas vie for a unilateral military victory and dominance of the global narrative, the necropolitical operations of silencing accomplish their task in plain sight and make it ever more difficult to consider the intertwined memory cultures of Israel/Palestine. How might we make muted dialogical archives speak through the analysis of cultural and visual production? In the last twenty years, several scholars and practitioners have engaged with this task. For example, Eyal Weizman, founder and director of the research agency Forensic Architecture (FA), an interdisciplinary collective based at Goldsmiths, University of London, who has been employing various investigative tools to reveal the abuses of various nation states, including Israel. FA uses physical as well as digital modeling to

<sup>33</sup> Neve Gordon, “The Problem with Israel’s So-Called ‘Crisis of Democracy,’” Al Jazeera, February 22, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/2/22/the-problem-with-israels-so-called-crisis-of-democracy>.

<sup>34</sup> Rashid I. Khalidi, “The *Journal of Palestine Studies* in the Twenty-First Century: An Editor’s Reflections,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 50, no. 3 (2021): 5–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0377919X.2021.1933101>.

study the violence enacted upon the built environment, the people who inhabit it, and their representation/erasure. “The agency,” Weizman writes,

produces evidence files that include building survey, models, animations, video analyses, and interactive cartographies, and presents them in forums such as international courts, truth commissions, citizen tribunals, human rights and environmental reports . . . We use the term “forensics,” but we seek, in fact, to reverse the forensic gaze and to investigate the same state agencies—such as the police or the military—that usually monopolize it.”<sup>35</sup>

In their investigations, FA highlight the way in which the Israeli nation state—via its army, police, and government—has systematically destroyed the infrastructure, agricultural land, built environment, and human life of Palestinians and Bedouins. FA makes evident that architecture, media, and violence are all part of broader constellation of governmentality through which the Israeli state maintains its hegemony over both people and archives of knowledge. Crucially, because of the FA’s goal of destroying “the monopoly of the state over the narrative and [composing], using multiple sources a new picture,”<sup>36</sup> it has not investigated acts of violence performed by individual actors or military militias who are not representatives of the (Israeli) nation-state. In serving a specific agenda, namely creating the possibilities of aesthetic and judicial representation to those who have been racialized as “other” and, thus excluded, dispossessed, or suppressed, FA act from *within* what Azoulay has termed the “dividing lines” of Imperialism. At the same time, they expand our understanding of visibility/aesthetics to include two mutually constitutive notions of sensing, namely “as the capacity to register or be affected by material, and sense-making, the synthesis of sense-perceptions into knowledge.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, while they only explicitly engage on behalf of a single stakeholder in their forensic analysis of asymmetrical power relations, they nevertheless multiply the potential communities and collec-

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<sup>35</sup> Eyal Weizman, *Forensic Architecture: Violence at the Threshold of Detectability* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 9.

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Fahim, “‘A Gunshot, a Speech, a Whisper’: The Art Detectives Exposing Middle East Crimes,” *Middle East Eye*, January 6, 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/gunshot-speech-whisper-art-detectives-exposing-middle-east-crimes>.

<sup>37</sup> Michael Eby, “Mapping the Social in Theory and Practice,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 3, 2021, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/mapping-the-social-in-theory-and-practice/>.

tive forms of knowledge by extending the purview of the sensorial in the combination of the physical and digital realms under neoliberal digital conditions. As Jacques Rancière reminds us, the political division of the sensible may be historically organized,<sup>38</sup> yet sensing and sense-making are relational and contingent and can thus exceed essentialist identitarian positions or finite models of community. Here, it is useful to reiterate Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of sense, one that is not owned or possessed by any one group but is always shared, plural, and in perpetual process of *undoing* an idealized common ground.<sup>39</sup> If we reframe the sensorial as constituted by internal difference and intersubjective multiplicity, it becomes a field of possibility for multidirectional and dialogical communities of sense.

The art historian T. J. Demos also contributes to the contemporary debates about the structures and systems representations of Israel/Palestine in "Disappearance and Precarity: On the Photographs of Ahlam Shibli." In this essay, he foregrounds the series *Death* (2011–2012), sixty-eight photographs in which Shibli documents the culture of Palestinian martyrdom in and around the West Bank city of Nablus, while also broaching an extensive *œuvre* dedicated to the material and social conditions of Palestinians living elsewhere. Her "photographic practice," Demos argues, "pledged to recognize the unrecognized, challenging the visual regimes that would otherwise consign those subjects to erasure."<sup>40</sup> Like Forensic Architecture, Shibli has dedicated herself to representing those who are unrecognized or marginalized by the Israeli nation state and whose culture—and archive of cultural memory—has been devastated by it. Shibli's photographic project functions as a counter-archive by making that which is invisible visible, yet Demos recognizes that its particularist identification is "complicated by her photography's sensitivity to documentary's aesthetics of indeterminacy."<sup>41</sup> Demos interprets Shibli's relationship to the contingency of the photographic document and its ability to evoke multiple connotations as one that respects that the unrepresentability of human life, especially those of the politically unrepresented, who

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>39</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> T. J. Demos, "Disappearance and Precarity: On the Photographs of Ahlam Shibli," in *Ahlam Shibli: Phantom Home*, ed. Ester Capdevila (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2013), 10.

<sup>41</sup> Demos, 12.

should not be reified. Extending this point further, I suggest that the contingency of Shibli's photographic images also makes it possible for them to function as agents of multidirectional memory in ways that may be unexpected, unintended, and un-enforceable. While her *œuvre* certainly "challenges oppression and dispossession in different geopolitical contexts, by placing the Palestinian struggle in relation to political struggles elsewhere"<sup>42</sup> it may also create complex relational archives of inter-subjective memory between "perpetrators" and "victims" in the Israeli and Palestinian communities and beyond.

Such a reading is made possible if we return to a passage quoted earlier from Shohat in which she describes "the black and white photos of dislocated Arab Jews in tents echo images of Palestinian refugees in a kind of a *haunting specularity*."<sup>43</sup> In this conjunction, Shohat evokes the provisional tents that predominantly housed Arab Jews on their arrival to Israel in the early 1950s, and the refugee camps, which have been an enduring symbol of the Palestinian experience of exile. These historical images carry with them kernels of personal, familial, and cultural remembrance. For both populations, coming home and being displaced are intertwined affective and political experiences that continue to resonate in the present. Indeed, these images do not only point to disappeared worlds or fading pasts but continue to be operative as both Israeli and Gazan populations are being internally displaced by war and their individual and collective pain has been framed as one of competing claims in a zero-sum political rhetoric. What we observe, then, is that such historical photographs enter the civil imaginary in plural ways because the circulation and signification of images cannot be circumscribed by the limits of the nation state or any other form of authority<sup>44</sup> and because subjectivities are not monolithic or predetermined but continuously take shape through a process of negotiating multiple internal divisions.<sup>45</sup> As Rothberg argues, such memories do not "belong" exclusively to Jews or Palestinians—in the same way that memories of the Holocaust or slavery do

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<sup>42</sup> Demos, 20.

<sup>43</sup> Demos, 8.

<sup>44</sup> Azoulay, *Civil Imagination*.

<sup>45</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, "Sharing Voices," in *Transforming the Hermeneutic Context: From Nietzsche to Nancy*, ed. Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. Schrift (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 211–59.

not solely appertain to the descendants of these histories.<sup>46</sup> Rather, if we agree that “the public articulation of collective memory by marginalized and oppositional social groups provides resources for other groups to articulate their own claims for recognition and justice,”<sup>47</sup> then such images become foundational for a non-state-sanctioned community of multidirectional memories.

One step towards this endeavor is provided by the artist Dani Gal, whose visual and sonic production, I have argued, proposes “a *hallucinatory cinema* that raises questions about its own role as an instrument for the production and reproduction of the effects and affects of the real.”<sup>48</sup> In films such as *White City* (2018), *As From Afar* (2013), *Night and Fog* (2011), Gal engages with the apparatus of memory by developing a critical cinema that works “through an idiom of realism and the medium’s own techniques, conventions and histories,” and “transforms the complex zones of indeterminacy between fact and fiction into an unsettling corporal and visual experience.”<sup>49</sup> His cinema complicates (1) the status of the image as an autonomous visual element of film; (2) framing techniques as delineations of what and who merits representation; (3) the screen as an establishing infrastructural element of the medium; and (4) sound as a secondary variable in the cinematic lexicon. Not only contingent, but also dialogical and, thus, mutually entangled with multiple-yet-incomplete subject positions, Gal’s cinema frequently jumbles the public’s sense of temporality and point of view and disrupts the visual and auditory immersion required to preserve a semblance of the real.

In this effort, Gal’s cinema rejects an understanding of mimesis and alterity as two oppositional forces through which the sphere of appearance is constructed. While his cinema “[emerges] from the mimetic order that has long organised the facticity and historicity of the real, [it] makes images and bodies vibrate from within and causes nervous systems to tremble.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, Gal makes visible the modernist epistemology of mimesis *versus* alterity as undergirding the

<sup>46</sup> Michael Rothberg, “From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory,” *Criticism* 53, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 523–48.

<sup>47</sup> Rothberg, 526.

<sup>48</sup> Noit Banai, “Hallucinatory Cinema and The Dialogical Politics of Framing,” in *An Elaborate Gesture of Pastness: Three Films by Dani Gal*, ed. Dani Gal (Berlin: Motto Books, 2021), 13.

<sup>49</sup> Banai, 13.

<sup>50</sup> Banai, 32.

articulation of self *versus* other within the Westphalian model of the nation-state while also sensorially disrupting it. Thus, his films narrate seemingly familiar national histories while, at the same time, creating intersubjective entanglements between different images, discourses, objects, and protagonists etc., in ways that trigger new networks of memory and post-memory. What comes to the fore is what Rancière terms a “repartitioning of the sensible”<sup>51</sup>; Gal’s cinema functions like a biopolitical/necropolitical nervous system that sensorially disrupts the organization of social roles—and hence, collective memories—as they have been configured by the nation state.<sup>52</sup> From these case studies of artistic practices that foreground as-yet-untold and unseen narratives and memories of Israel/Palestine, the next section proposes the concept of trans-national specularity and posits its importance for developing shared imaginaries beyond the nation state.

### Discussion and Conclusion: From Trans-National Specularity to Post-National Imaginary

In this article, I have argued that in the current context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the histories of trauma and oppression that both populations have experienced in the *longue durée* are “subsumed [. . .] under a logic of equation that set victims against each other in an antagonistic logic of competition.”<sup>53</sup> This is primarily achieved through operations of biopolitics and necropolitics, which play a formative role in organizing what is sayable, thinkable, and knowable in the contemporary interpretation of media images around which calls to support opposing social movements are consolidated. These images are parsed around competing claims of greater moral rectitude and victimization that are linked to ever-narrowing paradigms of national identity and essentialized models of collectivity. Through the concept of dialogical imagination and multidirectional memory, developed by Shohat and Rothberg, the foundation of the State of Israel and the *Nakba* as well as their aftermaths and permutations become embedded in much broader and more complex geopolitical configurations of modernity. These include the residues of the Spanish Inquisition, Ottoman Empire and British and French colonial projects; as well as the agendas of the geopolitical

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<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

<sup>52</sup> Banai, “Hallucinatory Cinema and The Dialogical Politics of Framing,” 32.

<sup>53</sup> Rothberg, “From Gaza to Warsaw,” 526.



actors of the Cold War along with the sectarian, religious, and ethnic conflicts, and wars by proxy that have shaped what we now refer to as the Middle East. Undoing the binary opposition in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been presented while also unbinding the mimesis/alterity dyad that produces hardened boundaries between “self” and “other,” we are able to insert its various chapters and episodes into a much longer history of modernity/colonialism and the techniques of nation state formation that accompanied it.

While images from Israel/Palestine have been communicating news and constructing narratives for decades, the new digital technologies and platforms of global connectivity, i.e., social media and artificial intelligence among them, have emerged as both the preeminent instruments for grassroots mobilization and as tools that erode historical contexts and multidirectional solidarity. Due to their connectivity, codependency, and quasi-instantaneous transmission via global media platforms, digital images have the capacity to challenge the narratives propagated by nation states and their administrative mechanisms in real time. As Weizman and Forensic Architecture have shown, anyone linked to mobile devices, television, cable, satellite, or the internet can become a *de facto* member of the community of global post-memory with the regime-made violence of modernity/coloniality shared instantaneously in memes, gifs, jpgs, and other types of “poor images.” The image’s elasticity, speed at which it travels, and variable formats of encounter means that it moves virally beyond (national) territories and is delivered directly to the mobile devices of billions of “networked publics” who play an active role in articulating personal and collective spectatorial encounters and, possibly, using the information for judicial purposes.

Though I concur with Azoulay that the potentiality of shaping a new “public/civil” political space is linked to the potency of images, it is also evident that under current conditions of techno-modernity and algorithmic capitalism, we have lost a collective sense of deep time through which divergent archives of memory can inspire alternative futures. As I have argued, the image’s capacity to enact a trans-national politics under a different ontological and epistemological regime is regulated by the biopolitical and necropolitical disciplining of archives and the prohibitions they create on the production of memory and intercession into the political frame. This has at least two implications:

First, power's capture of the archive of history and memory and the regulation of rules around which subject positions of self/other and normativity/delinquency are consolidated and entwined with the production of a physical space in which living beings negotiate a daily reality. In the case of Israel/Palestine, necropower promotes the death or negation of mutually entangled histories that once coexisted and, if rearticulated, may offer conditions of possibility for a shared future. As Shohat reminds us, the operations of necropower have primarily been enacted by applying a European epistemological paradigm of Zionism and antisemitism to the historical constitution of Israel. Yet these operations are not one sided and have been sustained by the denial tactics of the leaders of the Palestinian people (PLO) and the armed terrorist/radical groups such as Palestine Islamic Jihad and Hamas. Moreover, they have been entrenched through an interpretive approach to the analysis of artworks that accepts the "imperial dividing lines" and, thus paradoxically, tries to rectify the existent power asymmetry between Israel and Palestine by only representing or advocating for one siloed community or by creating a counter-archive based on a monological perspective. Moreover, monological archives are being promoted today, under neoliberal global capitalism, by the many state powers, industries, and cartels that have invested in supporting either Israel or Palestine for financial speculation and gain. The contemporary archive is thus a complex technology of reproduction through which racially constructed communities that have been essentialized, atomized, and emptied of difference and intersubjective relations, pass on effects of belonging/unbelonging to future generations.

Second, the images flowing out of Israel/Palestine, which have been transformed into privatized objects of consumption and corporate data mining; a marketplace of ready-made affects and techniques of self-administration; and a source of propaganda from state and non-state actors, incite a modality of outrage that privileges the temporal present. This is a matrix devoted to the scan, scroll, click, like, hashtag, and repost: it robs images of the multifarious textures and temporalities of history, maintains a scarcity/adversarial model, contributes to the fabrication of disinformation and conspiracy theories, and to quote Jean-Paul Sartre, acts as "an inversion of praxis into practico-inert activity."<sup>54</sup> It is difficult to "make live" the dialogical archives of Israel/Palestine in the *longue*

<sup>54</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume One; Theory of Practical Ensembles*, ed. Jonathan Rée, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 1976), 271.

*durée* when the very condition of encountering images in digital spaces is invested in maintaining an ever-shallower recursive present. In that respect, I argue that it is contemporary artistic practices that habitually make their debut on various art circuits before having a second life on digital storage sites that may be better poised to re-animate dialogical implications. It is such practices that create the latitude to sensorially experience the discomfort that frequently accompanies dialogical experiences of time and space and multidirectional configuration of bodies, feelings and ideas so that they might become the substance of analysis and deliberation rather than being transformed into populist animus or a politics of separation.

From this groundwork, these practices establish the possibility for a *trans-national specularity* that expands a post-national imaginary. With this term, I bring to relief the potency of practices that represent historical events and their (post)memories while making their publics highly conscious of the insecurity of the referent through which their appearance has been consolidated; They also bring to the fore the archival competition for delineating the frame of the real, the right to representation within it, and the experience of belonging and unbelonging that it generates; and—importantly—they impel us to reflect on the poverty of alliances and modes of being-in-common made possible by the nation state's biopolitical/necropolitical model of governmentality. These practices actively generate sensorial disturbances in the armature of the nation state, here conceived as a porous nervous system consisting of layers, sediments, and textures of history, rather than a rigid administrative mechanism. They situate themselves, moreover, vis-à-vis the paradoxes of the twenty-first century, among them, the contingency of the digital condition in a global world, hegemony of temporal presentism, and monologism of identity politics. Such practices, of which there are still too few, open pathways towards relational communities in which the nation state does not determine or regulate the individual's identity by linking it to citizenship, territorial homeland, or a unitary history.

While this has been a study that has foregrounded the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a paradigmatic case, there are implications that extend to other disputes throughout the past two centuries that have crystallized around allegiances to a single national identity, i.e., Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Ukraine just to name a few. For artists who wish to think beyond the current horizon of possibility offered by contracted archives, the challenge is clear. It is to invent artistic practic-

es that are part-and-parcel of the nervous system of our time while reconfiguring the field of the sensible to shape visual forms and subject positions beyond those stipulated by the nation state and its biopolitical/necropolitical archives.

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## How Many Wars?<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

post-Yugoslav space, state of war(s), Women's Antifascist Front, Women in Black, aesthetics of resistance, politics of affect

### Abstract

The article deals with contemporary war history, the aesthetics of resistance, and the politics of affect in the context of the post-Yugoslav space. Looking back at the armed wars of the 1990s, as well as the numerous wars still being waged by other means, it becomes clear that there is still no peace in this exhausted zone of geopolitical discomfort. The politics of (non)belonging to this space has oscillated for decades between conflicting affects, liminal zones, and the (im)possibilities of overcoming the permanent production of war through lasting peace. This ambivalent feeling of (non)belonging has led to various twists and shifts in post-Yugoslav art that have solidarized within the old and new geopolitical zones of discomfort and war(s). Using the post-Yugoslav art-based research of Adela Jušić and Blerta Heziraj, who are now involved with the *Antifašistički front žena—AFŽ* (Women's Antifascist Front), as well as a *long-durée* activist performance by *Žene u crnom* (Women in Black), the text accordingly points to a common ground of politics and art that uncompromisingly resist the governing (post-)Yugoslav discourses of never-ending wars.

### Koliko vojn?

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### Ključne besede

postjugoslovanski prostor, vojno stanje, Antifašistična fronta žensk, Ženske v črnem, estetika odpora, politika afekta

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## Povzetek

Članek se ukvarja s sodobno vojno zgodovino, estetiko upora in politiko afekta v kontekstu postjugoslovanskega prostora. Če pogledamo nazaj na oborožene vojne v devetdesetih letih prejšnjega stoletja, pa tudi na številne vojne, ki se še vedno vodijo z drugimi sredstvi, postane jasno, da v tem izčrpanem območju geopolitičnega nelagodja še vedno ni miru. Politika (ne)pripadnosti temu prostoru je desetletja nihala med konfliktnimi afekti, liminalnimi conami in ne/možnostmi preseganja permanentne produkcije vojne s trajnim mirom. Ta ambivalenten občutek (ne)pripadnosti je povzročil različne zasuke in premike v postjugoslovanski umetnosti, ki so se solidarizirale znotraj starih in novih geopolitičnih območij nelagodja in vojn(e). Na podlagi postjugoslovanskega umetniškega raziskovanja Adele Jušič in Blerte Heziraj, ki se ukvarjata z Antifašistično fronto žensk – AFŽ, ter dolgoletnega aktivističnega performansa skupine Žene u crnom (Ženske v črnem), besedilo torej kaže na stičišče politike in umetnosti, ki se brezkompromisno upirata vladajočim (post)jugoslovanskim diskurzom neskončnih vojn.



Art-based research and practices in the post-Yugoslav context, through their political engagement, have shaped various counter-cartographies of this space. These efforts aim to provide insights into the non-consensual knowledge surrounding the exhausted geographies of peace and war since the 1990s. Determined by the politics of identity and identification, these exhausted geographies “as material manifestations of territorialities and territorial claims that cannot sustain themselves” are mostly the result of political, economic, ecological, wartime or other social crises.<sup>2</sup> As such, the dominant and often conflicting geopolitical narratives of the so-called great powers identify them by default as (semi-)peripheral. Refusing to be mobilised for any territorial or national, ethnic, religious, racial, economic or other geopolitical crises, wars, and conflicts, the politically engaged art practices, theories, exhibitions, and critiques of the post-Yugoslav space give an emancipatory meaning to *exhaustion*, which offers new understandings of today’s geopolitical zones of discomfort through the politics of art, and *vice versa*. The art of this space can therefore serve not only as an aesthetic source but also as an epistemic one, helping to determine the concept of the post-Yugoslav space

<sup>2</sup> Irit Rogoff, “Exhausted Geographies,” keynote lecture at the symposium “Crossing Boundaries,” organized by the Institute of International Visual Art and Royal Geographical Society, London, June 2, 2010.



within the still politically undefined meanings of one war or several mutually intertwined wars. In this regard, the article focuses on the concept of the post-Yugoslav space within politically engaged art and theory, exploring the different dialectical and often irreconcilable meanings this space holds, while relating them to its fragmented transformative wars and post-socialist transition.

### What Does Post-Yugoslav Space Stand For?

The meaning of the post-Yugoslav space emerges from thinking the political forms of positioning these meta-geographies<sup>3</sup> built through the encounter with the false choice between nationalist and neoliberal politics, in the process of wartime transition from a socialist into a capitalist society. This meaning is initially shaped in the context of an engaged theoretical discourse that views Yugoslavia not as an identity but as a revolutionary project.<sup>4</sup> The group of authors associated with the *Journal of Contemporary Art and Theory Prelom—Break* (2001–2009), interpret the post-Yugoslav space as an opportunity to think beyond the binary oppositions of nationalism and neoliberalism, engaging with the dialectic of the former socialist revolution.<sup>5</sup> This theoretical discourse, which rejects post-ideological geopolitical signifiers of global neoliberal democracy, also points out the necessity of breaking away from enduring “political anachronisms.” These in-

<sup>3</sup> Meta-geography refers to the field of production of geographical thinking, imagination, and knowledge, which brings science, art, and philosophy into mutual relationship. It is subsequently interpreted as an ideological construct in a broader sense of the concept, as it refers to the creation of geopolitical determinants and frequently conflicted or hierarchically defined geographic concepts (East-West, North-South, Europe, Asia, etc.). See V. M. Gokhman, B. L. Gurevich, and Yu. G. Saushkin, “Problems of Metageography,” *Soviet Geography* 10, no. 7 (1969): 355–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00385417.1969.10770421>; Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents: A Critique of Metageography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Understanding socialist Yugoslavia as a unique revolutionary project of political subjection, Ozren Pupovac’s article “Project Yugoslavia: The Dialectics of Revolution” (*Prelom—Journal for Images and Politics* 8 [2006]: 9–22) references the Non-Aligned Movement. This movement originated as a modernist project of socialist internationalism, redefining the meaning of the nation-state as a revolutionary (anti-colonial) project of social emancipation within the Third World. According to Marxist historian Vijay Prashad, the Third World was not merely a place but a project of African, Asian, and Latin American countries that “longed for a new world and, above all, for dignity, land, peace, and justice.” Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007), xv.

<sup>5</sup> Pupovac, “Project Yugoslavia,” 9–21.

clude the reactionary nationalist apotheosis of the fatherland, various religious revivals, re-traditionalization, and liberal political and economic dogmas, all of which conceal the brutality of “privatization.”<sup>6</sup> However, breaking from these counter-revolutionary phenomena seems more difficult today than it did in the past. From the perspective of these authors, the reason for this lies in the “contemporary anti-communist consensus of post-socialist neoliberal rationality,” which neutralizes any potential for revolutionary social emancipation and replaces it with the questionable politics of identity:

This kind of break is quite different from the multicultural emancipation conceived as the “basic human right” to assert one’s own specific and irreducible cultural identity—which is, in fact, effectuating nationalist ravages of nation-state building, no matter how a particular “political elite” is inclined to “democratic procedures” and manifestly committed to adopting the “standards” of the European Union. In this perspective, the post-Yugoslav space reveals itself as a symptom of the EU project with its own racisms, nationalisms, exclusions and fear-hatred complex.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, in contrast to this view of the post-Yugoslav space, there are alternative perspectives that introduce and understand Yugoslavism<sup>8</sup> as a unitary national identity. This perspective encompasses, implies, and often marginalizes or erases the diverse array of ethno-national identities within its scope. In this context, the meaning of the post-Yugoslav space is employed to describe the post-war situation aimed at preserving Yugoslavia as an identity. This often reflects discomfort with its geopolitical positioning within the newly formed ethno-national states, as well as with what Yugoslavia represents through its (dis)

<sup>6</sup> Branka Čurčić, editorial introduction to *Prelom—Journal for Images and Politics* 8 (2006): 8.

<sup>7</sup> Čurčić, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Unlike the previous unitary model of the interwar Yugoslav Monarchy, socialist Yugoslavia was organized as a federal state. However, from the 1960s onward, there were tendencies to revert to a unitary nationalist model. This unitary arrangement redefined Yugoslavism as nationalism, thereby suppressing the revolutionary idea of Yugoslavia as a supranational model (Yugoslavhood) that implied the rights, freedoms, and equality of all its citizens, regardless of nationality. This counter-revolutionary unitarist model infiltrated the Communist Party and served as a front for ethno-nationalist supremacy among the peoples of Yugoslavia during the wars of the 1990s. See Jelena Petrović, *Women’s Authorship in Interwar Yugoslavia: The Politics of Love and Struggle* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018): 67–70.

continuity with the revolutionary subjectivation of society in political, materialist, antagonistic, wartime, and other dimensions. As a result, much academic and art-based research on the wars of the 1990s finds the geopolitical signification of the post-Yugoslav space problematic, as it often overlooks the crucial transition from the socialist state to a state of war, characterized by genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other war crimes, as well as neglecting the general ethno-national context of the space. Instead, this vein of research favors a direct critique of the formation of neoliberal economies within the (post-)transitional states to the detriment of a thorough understanding of the (post-)Yugoslavian space and Yugoslav social subjectivity.

In search of the continuity of Yugoslav national identity, instead of Yugoslav social subjectivity, the war crimes of the 1990s are most often neglected. This often happens because the traumatic question of why Yugoslav society, or the peoples of Yugoslavia, ended up in mass graves, facing persecution and genocide, undermines the possibility of maintaining such continuity. Minimizing war crimes in discussions of Yugoslav issues is most evident in Yugonostalgic research, which fosters a sense of structural nostalgia<sup>9</sup> and pacifies the state of war by viewing it through the lens of a nationalist madness from outside Yugoslavia that is seen as something that should not have happened and should be forgotten. Yugonostalgic narratives of the “war without war” make public historical revisionism and the political amnesia of the 1990s war(s) in a manner distinct from that of the still largely present ethno-nationalist narratives, which can be neither erased nor minimized by Yugonostalgia. Translating the socialist past into post-ideological and retro-utopian discourses of neoliberalism, Yugonostalgia is hence publicly accepted in all post-Yugoslav states as a populist *as well as* a commodified product of the post-transitional society, a society in which this populist, commodified product coexists back-to-back with its “enemy” ethno-nationalism.

<sup>9</sup> The term “structural nostalgia,” coined by anthropologist Michael Herzfeld, theoretically illuminates the phenomenon of returning to the past, which erases antagonistic politics and revises historical reality to present it as a golden age. As Herzfeld describes, structural nostalgia is a construct of the “eternal essence [. . .] which pragmatically connects a mythological notion of pure origins with respect for perfect social and cultural form [. . .] this national history, like Levi-Straussian myth, retroactively elides (experiential) time in the name of (generic) time.” Michel Herzfeld, *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 28. Consequently, phenomena once perceived as oppositional are now presented as complementary; within Yugonostalgia, socialist Yugoslavia and the backward vision of the Balkans are conflated into same, idealized narrative.

Accordingly, speaking of the post-Yugoslav space entails entering the geopolitical zone of discomfort sustained by the persistent interplay between nationalist myths and Yugonostalgia. Within this zone, the (im)possibility of producing a shared understanding of Yugoslavia is intertwined with the post-transitional crisis of the present, as efforts are made to socially imagine a post-Yugoslav future. The difficulty in consensually defining a political signifier like “post-Yugoslav” is a symptom of the war still waged in this space, though by different means. In such uncertain processes of creating the “common,” the (post-)Yugoslav space should not be seen as an *étatiste* project. Instead, it should function as a political signifier signalling potential shifts toward a shared understanding of its conflicted meta-geographic meanings, while engaging with the antagonistic politics of (non)belonging within its historical context. A precondition for this shared process is answering the basic question: *Are we discussing a single war against the socialist, anti-fascist state of the Yugoslav peoples and minorities, or a series of successive ethno-nationalist wars driven by transitional, (post-)socialist regimes, where power is determined by those who are more armed, numerous, brutal, and dominant?* This question also encompasses (post-)transitional privatization, criminal accumulation of wealth, state corruption, and other menaces arising from the initial phase of neoliberal capitalism. Ultimately, this phase introduced various *post-* political signifiers that depoliticized the neoliberal transition from socialism to capitalism, even at the cost of war.

In addition, it is important to note that one of these signifiers, “post-Yugoslav,” is often used nowadays without a clear understanding of its (post-)ideological meaning, as evidenced by the titles of numerous recent publications, exhibitions, and projects. To this effect, its meaning is rooted in two basic premises: the ephemerality and the geopolitical disorder of this space, neither of which have yet to be named in ways that contribute to a consensual understanding of recent war history of the (post-)Yugoslavian space. Likewise, other (post-)transitional signifiers, such as the Balkans or South-eastern Europe, are generally unacceptable to those who engage politically with Yugoslav heritage and (post-)Yugoslav society, especially in the context of its wartime geographies. Apart from the haphazard and common-sense prioritising of the “post-Yugoslav” over the aforementioned (post-)transitional signifiers, the reason for their non-acceptance also lies in the recognition of global mechanisms of power that created new geopolitical (semi-)peripheries following the Cold War. Such (post-)transitional regionalization, driven by the neoliberal process of globalization,

has been largely realized through the (re)production of peripheral, unsettled, and “othered” identities. Following the shift that repositioned the West and East into centre and periphery, this still-undomesticated “region” emerged on the semi-periphery of the global world, distinguished from Eastern European transitional regions by the war(s).

The post-socialist efforts to establish post-war relations among the newly established ethno-national states within this “region,” their social and cultural NGO-ization have entailed the deletion of (post-)Yugoslav signifiers in creating (post-)transitional geopolitical identities. Despite the shifting regional designations such as Eastern European, South-eastern, and (Western) Balkans—framed by purported social democratization, economic liberalization, and ethno-national reconciliation—this post-war region has continued to experience war through ongoing crises and by other means. Sites of suffering, destruction and terror, war trauma, crimes and genocide in the 1990s, become the places where Yugoslavia as a revolutionary subject lost its political articulation and social power. Moreover, the identity politics of memory and reconciliation that followed have erased any political subjectivation rooted in Yugoslavia’s revolutionary commitment, as well as the potential for a consensual historicization of the common past and all its wars. It is about a war or wars in which socialist Yugoslavia, as a revolutionary project, failed to overcome the ethno-nationalist signifiers that emerged during the transition to neoliberal world. Under the neoliberal demands of post-socialist capitalism, the emerging post-Yugoslav states have become Balkanized ethno-nationalist entities on the periphery of post-socialist Europe. Today, these states continue to reflect a state of permanent apartheid maintained by the ethno-politics of reconciliation, rather than offering the possibility of social subjectivation through a shared understanding of war and a common past that could enable politics of coexistence beyond ethnic or other historically conflicted divisions.

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This is often the reason why the post-Yugoslav space is used as a (geo)political signifier, especially when it refers to the criticism of global neoliberalism and resistance against the current strategies of neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism from the very particular ideological or revolutionary perspective of the Yugoslav past, especially in art. The spatial dialectics of post-Yugoslav art—resisting war and its state mechanisms that have kept the conflict in a constant state of readiness from the outset—have commonly evolved through participatory practices of distinct positions. Facing difficult questions and problematics, such as the one

of Yugoslavia and genocide, the post-Yugoslav art since the 1990s has engaged with the epistemology of violence, the aesthetics of resistance, and political efforts to reveal subjugated knowledge about the revolution and war in the (post-)Yugoslav context. Different layers of the (post-)Yugoslav past, permeable borders between Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, and the repetitive dark imagination of the Balkans have in parallel been exposed to this (counter-)epistemological process of appropriating art through many turns.<sup>10</sup> Within participatory formats of “exposure,”<sup>11</sup> geopolitical meanings of this “exhausted” space have been politically informed in the attempt to redefine it in the post-historical and post-ideological geography of today’s neoliberal society. The (post-)war transition of socialist cultural politics, which, on the one hand, led to the state institutionalisation of counter-revolutionary, ethno-nationalist, and depoliticised canons of art, and, on the other hand, enabled a new form of artistic (self-)organization and financing tied to foundations, especially foundations and (self-)organization aimed at fostering politically engaged art. Previously unknown forms of project-funded (self-)organization have brought politically engaged art practices, social movements, and subjugated knowledge to light. However, their dependency on external funding has initially led to commodification and, more recently, to the burnout of these efforts. The project-based logic of capital thus compromised, exhausted, and finally altered the politics of engaged art, adjusting it to the already dominant neoliberal discourses within state art institutions. The most radical art practices—which this way of financing made visible in state and international institutional frameworks—acted within institutions as transitory interventions and isolated examples of political emancipation. Rather

<sup>10</sup> Starting from the 1990s onwards, many artistic turns have articulated new demands as regards geopolitical space and social relations within the art system, withdrawing from the emotional (affective), perceptual-representative (aesthetic) into the cognitive (but also educational). See Irit Rogoff, “Turning,” *e-flux Journal*, no. 00 (November 2008): 1–7; Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 1998); etc.

<sup>11</sup> The meaning of exposure is in this context determined as a curatorial strategy of “exposing to a state of radical uncertainty” in the process of political subjectivation and articulation of those who create the field of art not as a material practice but rather a process of “subverting the imperative of spectacularity and representativeness,” being simultaneously exposed to one another. Ivana Bago and Antonia Majača, eds., editorial introduction to *Where Everything Is Yet to Happen: 2nd chapter; Exposures* (Banja Luka, Zagreb: Protok, DeLve, 2010), 16.

than manifest an anticipation of some radical, systemic changes, even the most radical art practices were subsumed into the nascent neoliberal state of affairs.

However, as regards this context, politically engaged practices are still being rearticulated through their own failures and errors, despite all problems when it comes to shared meaning of the post-Yugoslav space, primarily due to the necessary confrontation with the social and material urgency of positioning the (post-)Yugoslav space in opposition to the politics of global changes and, above all, ongoing permanent war.

Finally, considering all the previously mentioned antagonistic frictions, the notion of the (post-)Yugoslav space can function as an ideological, historical, and social battleground for the production of common knowledge about Yugoslavia, particularly concerning the causes and consequences of the war(s) of the 1990s. In confronting the historical reality and its various interpretations, this notion becomes crucial—due to its geopolitical arbitrariness and social antagonism—for understanding the following: *How did Yugoslavia, as a revolutionary supra-national state, become a blurred ethno-nationalist signifier of the genocidal wars against what was originally a revolutionary project for the socialist subjectivation of all national differences in the fight against fascism, patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, racism, and so on? What political concepts are we articulating when we discuss the post-Yugoslav space today, in the age of identity, neoliberal empires<sup>12</sup> and permanent war?*

### What is Yugoslav in Post-Yugoslav Space?

More than three decades have passed since the beginning of the war(s) in Yugoslavia, which marked the end of the revolutionary project born out of the anti-fascist struggle in World War Two. Initiated by the first (1942) and determined by the second (1943) session of AVNOJ (abbreviated from *The Anti-Fascist Coun-*

<sup>12</sup> Wendy Brown argues that the articulation of difference, belonging, marginality, as well as civilization and barbarism stems from the politics of tolerance. While this politics may alleviate certain historical instances of systemic violence or abuse, it does so in the name of hegemonic social or political power, thereby continually renewing empire—especially in the neoliberal age, through the politics of unevenly developed identities. Wendy Brown, *Regulating Aversion: Tolerance in the Age of Identity and Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 10.

*cil for the National Liberation of Yugoslavia*), the creation of the socialist Yugoslavia (1945) primarily entailed social and national equality of all its peoples and minorities under the slogan of *brotherhood and unity*. Thus, the newborn Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was inscribed into the geopolitical map of the world as a state formed on the grounds of anti-fascism, class and national equality, women's emancipation, anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism, social justice, and solidarity that promised peaceful coexistence and development of not only Yugoslav society but also humanity as a whole (the politics of the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War was part of this worldwide, Yugoslavian agenda). However, the fundamental postulates of this socialist state led by the Communist Party of Yugoslavia could not be achieved through its historical reality to a sufficiently effective extent that would enable such a system to operate freely and forever in its projected socialist democracy (through self-management, right to self-determination, etc.).

The revolutionary slogan of *brotherhood and unity* at the very beginning brought into question the basic asset of the new Yugoslav state: gender equality and women's emancipation—and not merely on a linguistic or symbolic level. With rare exceptions, both the Party and all the positions of power within the state were taken by the revolutionary “brothers,” behind whom women remained, still without any considerable influence, regardless of their crucial role in the revolution and building of the new socialist state. These parallel processes of de-traditionalization and re-traditionalization of society, that is, of revolution and counter-revolution, created an illusion of completed social emancipation, especially as regarded the abolition of patriarchy, in which all the major causes of degradation, oppression, exploitation, violence, and so on were located. Due to this, the concept of “re-patriarchalization,” which is often used in the post-Yugoslav context to indicate the successful struggle for women's emancipation and the improvement of women's position during the Yugoslav socialism, does not have its own fundamental meaning because patriarchy has been internalised by socialism on many levels. Although Yugoslavian socialism was an important historical event for the revolutionary struggle against the long history of gender-class violence: the revolution of the Women's Antifascist Front (hereafter WAF) remained unfinished.

In addition to the absence of women from positions of political and social power, the twofold burden placed on working women under socialism further un-



derscores this issue. Women were responsible for household chores and reproductive labour, alongside other phenomena that socialism accommodated despite the freedoms it claimed to offer—such as equality, education, and social and political rights. The paradoxical relationship between the freedoms and oppressions of women in socialist Yugoslavia was deepened by the (self-)abolition of WAF in 1953, under the excuse that in a fully emancipated socialist society, the movement had no reason to exist. This year could historically mark the beginning of the counter-revolution and of all that would come to happen with the ethno-national appropriation of socialism, especially considering the more and more widespread symbolic manipulation of women and women's bodies, which over the decades culminated in the systemic violence and mass crimes against women during the 1990s.

In that period, on the one hand, a brutal appropriation of Yugoslavian determination is committed by Serbian nationalists (with the aim to create the Greater Serbia under the name of Yugoslavia), while, on the other hand, most of the peoples of Yugoslavia were split along national and ethnic lines completely demonising Yugoslavia in the process. As Rada Iveković states, in such wartime machinery of propaganda, “sexual,” cultural, and social stereotypes became dominant within the symbolic order, since the myth of the courageous soldier and threatened mothers and women was the easiest to manipulate within the militarist ideology of ethno-nationalism. In such militant ethno-nationalist divisions, women's bodies symbolically and practically become a weapon and territory to fight over. Being most deeply rooted in the affective consciousness of every patriarchal community these “sexual” stereotypes make war and nationalism virtually anti-women in many disturbing ways.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, in the 1990s, Julie Mostov explained this process of wartime ethnic identification through gender with the following words:

That is, they forge their identities as males, as agents of the nation over the symbolic and physical territory of the feminine homeland which must be secured and protected from transgression and which holds the seeds and blood of past and future warriors, and over and through the actual bodies of women who reproduce

<sup>13</sup> Rada Iveković, “Women, Nationalism and War: ‘Make Love Not War,’” *Hypatia* 8, no. 4 (Fall 1993): 113–26, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1993.tb00280.x>.

the nation, define its physical limits, and preserve its sanctity. Women's body can be seen as providing the battleground for men's wars: over this battleground of women's bodies—borders are transgressed and redrawn.<sup>14</sup>

Besides, those women who were not seduced by the wartime euphoria of ethno-nationalism, propaganda, hatred, false democracy, and/or the neoliberal wealth society, were proclaimed to be witches, whores, bastards, *apatrides*, traitors, and more. Right after the war started, they began to form various alliances to resist the all-encompassing madness of war and violence, mostly through anti-war actions and discourses which spread fast and connected mutually within the thus far common state, although it seemed impossible inside the existing war zones.<sup>15</sup>

The red thread that links women's World War Two antifascist struggle with the activities of women's anti-war movements and their peace actions in the 1990s can hence be described as Yugoslavian in the sense of the emancipatory and peace politics on which the revolutionary project of the Yugoslavian state was founded in the first place. There are two important anti-war/wartime movements: WAF and Women in Black which testify to the revolutionary beginning and war ending of the Yugoslav revolutionary project—precisely through their perspective on the unfinished women's revolution in which Yugoslavia remains the common place of struggle against patriarchy, that is, nationalism, wartime economy, violence, fascism, political amnesia, historical revisionism, etc.

In between these two anti-war/wartime movements, in the historical period of Yugoslav socialism, numerous women's, feminist, and queer groups also appeared, questioning the patriarchal mechanisms of oppression and systemic errors of the state within bureaucratic socialism.<sup>16</sup> In the attempt to create a con-

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<sup>14</sup> Julie Mostov, "Our Women/Their Women: Symbolic Boundaries, Territorial Markers and Violence in the Balkans," *ProFemina, Journal for Women's Literature and Culture* (Belgrade, 1995/3): 213.

<sup>15</sup> See Jelena Petrović, Katja Kobolt, and Tanja Velagić, eds., *Gender Literature and Cultural Memory in the Post-Yugoslav Space* (Ljubljana: City of Women, ZAK, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> See Biljana Kašić, ed., *Critical Feminist Interventions: Thinking Heritage, Decolonizing, Crossing* (Zagreb: Red Athena University Press, 2013); Jelena Petrović and Damir Arsenijević, eds., "Feminism: Politics of Equality for All" and "Yugoslav Feminism(s)," 2 special issues of *ProFemina* (2011) among many others who have addressed these issues since the 1990s.

temporary society, mostly with the idea of raising awareness through art, popular culture, activism, as well as praxis and theory, these groups were present in Yugoslavia simultaneously at several places in large numbers, despite the fact that in the 1970s and 1980s they were repudiated, ridiculed, censored, marginalised, etc. During the belligerent 1990s, women's creativity and feminist activity were rediscovered, in the new post-socialist context of human i.e. women's rights, and often nationally appropriated and (mis)interpreted, while in the last 20 years or so, many of these attempts have often been manipulatively branded as being counter-revolutionary or transitionally liberal, especially because of their non-institutional self-organisation in socialism and their criticism thereof. Additionally, numerous anti-war women's movements and feminist associations established in the 1990s, building on past continuities, prioritized confronting ethno-nationalism, violence, and war crimes over critiquing transition and neoliberalism. At best, they were portrayed as guilty of left-wing liberalism. The repudiation of the left-wing politics of women's movements dealing with the war was a consequence of the ideological rehabilitation process for those leftists who persistently ignored the war in their post-Yugoslavian analyses of neoliberal capitalism and economic transition, considering the fact that their left-wing actions during the 1990s wars were "paused," for different reasons.

Post-Yugoslavian feminism emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s as the third-wave of feminism, and nevertheless succeeded to establish continuity, through its anti-war resistance and post-war solidarity, with the previous, Yugoslavian, antifascist, feminist movements and practices. Over time, this pluriversal<sup>17</sup> field of feminist activity became the basis for building new left-wing, anti-capitalist, queer, anti-colonial, green and other women's discourses, which have recently introduced reductionism, monosemy, divisions, and false choices, starting afresh or from a faraway place of nostalgic discontinuity, especially as regards the selective approach to socialist Yugoslavia. Still, despite ideological repudiation, feminist wanderings and scissions, the unfinished women's revolution in the (post-)Yugoslavian context is the only one that has continuously been opposing all those (post-)Yugoslavian politics that resulted in war, torture, genocide,

<sup>17</sup> Referring to the participatory methodologies of Catherine Walsh, Rolando Vazquez introduced pluriversal genealogies of aesthetics that have the potential to create demanding but necessary knowledge for understanding the meaning of decoloniality. See Rolando Vazquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2021).

ethno-nationalism, turbo-fascism,<sup>18</sup> as well as post-socialist neoliberalism. As a result, the unfinished women's revolution is the only movement that can speak about all these issues without being silent or nostalgic. Examples testifying to this certainly include the already mentioned women's anti-war/wartime movements on which today's art, archive, and theory research and/or practice focus. Dealing with Yugoslavia, such research and practice produces strong knowledge about the (post-)Yugoslav space, which is in the course of creating a continuity of revolutionary left-wing politics inevitably confronted with the question of how genocide and war occurred in a revolutionary socialist "project."

### Politics and Art of Women's Antifascist Front—WAF

The WAF appears today in numerous research and art practices as the place of a lost revolution oscillating between myth and forgetting.<sup>19</sup> Back in the times of socialist Yugoslavia, Lydia Sklevicky wrote that the (self-)abolishment of WAF (1953) did not stand for the progress of socialism but patriarchy. The rapidly increasing number of women in WAF in the wake of World War Two posed a threat to the Communist Party of Yugoslavia, hence this revolutionary women's movement was made systematically weaker and weaker until it was finally transformed into the Conference for the Social Activity of Women in Yugoslavia (1961). In other words, it was turned into a bureaucratic state agency without membership.<sup>20</sup> The danger coming from the socialist patriarchy within the Party was indicated by one of the main organisers and leaders of WAF, a revolutionary and for a brief time also minister of education, Mitra Mitrović. Immediately after

<sup>18</sup> The notion turbo-fascism is introduced by Žarana Papić to conceptualize hegemonic post-socialist nationalisms of 1990s, especially in Serbia (national separatisms, chauvinist and racist exclusion or marginalization of (old and new) minority groups, etc.). Marina Gržinić reintroduced and further developed this notion to point to the post-transitional development of the neoliberalism through the turbo-neoliberal state i.e., war-states with a repulsive postmodern fascist social structure. See Žarana Papić, "Europe after 1989: Ethnic Wars, The Fascisation of Social Life and Body Politics in Serbia," in "The Body/Le corps/ Der Körper," ed. Marina Gržinić Mauhler, special issue, *Filozofski vestnik* 23, no. 2 (2002): 191–204; Marina Gržinić, "What Matters is Revolution at the Historical Moment of Radical Contemporaneity," interview by Raino Isto, *ARTMargins*, May 21, 2017, <https://artmargins.com/what-matters-is-revolution/>.

<sup>19</sup> See Andreja Dugandžić and Tijana Okić, eds., *The Lost Revolution: The Women's Antifascist Front Between Myth and Forgetting* (Sarajevo: Association for Culture and Art Crvena, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> Lydia Sklevicky, *Konji, žene, ratovi*, ed. Dunja Rihtman Auguštin (Zagreb: Druga, 1996).

the abolition of WAF, she stated with resignation that the woman question was closed without justification by the closest ones right at the moment when it was finally beginning to be resolved:

But it seems that in this question, perhaps more than in the case of racial or class issues, the enslavement is less disguised and more complex, because it does not depend solely on those who hold the power, those who are distant and foreign, rich and white, but also on the closest people, individuals such as father and brother, son even, who cannot themselves overcome the prejudice and beliefs that were imposed upon them—a long time ago, yes, but which have nevertheless become constituent parts of life, customs, and house rules.<sup>21</sup>

Vilification, marginalisation and, finally, abolition of WAF erased the significance and credit of all women of the revolution who had first engaged in an organised struggle for a free society, and later on systematically worked on this society's emancipation. By deriding and depreciating women's mass antifascist struggle in the war, this movement was in time entirely erased from the concept of *contemporaneity* in the socialist Yugoslavia, which led to a *black wave* of socialist patriarchy (intellectually shaped both in cinema and in life).<sup>22</sup> Despite this, the revolutionary legacy of WAF persisted to this very day. The politics of resistance to the patriarchal politics of war, ethno-nationalism, violence, and exploitation served as the trigger for re-examination of the role and significance of WAF in the post-Yugoslav spaces, especially after the 1990s. This process of re-establishing continuity with Yugoslav women's movements, involved revisiting traumatic places of the past, which revealed that only the women's side had stayed true to the socialist revolution—either in terms of collective practices or work by individual women.

<sup>21</sup> Mitra Mitrović, *Položaj žene u savremenom svetu* [The Position of Women in Contemporary World] (Belgrade: Narodna knjiga, 1960), 5.

<sup>22</sup> Black wave is the name for the new Yugoslav artistic production, most often literature and film (60s and 70s), in which the propagation of socialist ideology and aesthetics is criticized in order to show the real life of ordinary people under socialism. The Black Wave often included misogynist motives of brutal violence against women, depoliticized, sexualized and passive female roles, etc.

Simultaneously with efforts to systematise the WAF archive,<sup>23</sup> and to curate related exhibitions (*AFŽ Drugarice – WAF Comrades* 2017; *Polet žena – Verve of Women* 2019, etc.), what we have had in recent years are artistic and research practices that deal with darkened spaces of revolutionary women's emancipation in the (post-)Yugoslav context, pointing to Yugonostalgic illusions, as well as to historical failures of the socialist state in relation to this movement. In this retrospective of the people's liberation past, the socialist Yugoslavia is perceived both as a myth and as a revolution lost, once the following question about the last war(s) emerges. In pursuit of an answer to this question, a limited amount of post-Yugoslav art-based research deals with the revolutionary past of women's struggle and socialist emancipation while simultaneously focusing on the 1990s wars, genocide, and violent patriarchy, putting those issues in the same context with the post-socialist transition. Also, attempts to use this difficult approach in establishing continuity with the revolutionary politics of WAF represent stepping out of the artistic and social comfort zone, not only in the post-Yugoslav context of creating radical politics and confronting the history of the present, but also in the global context of resisting the neoliberal politics of permanent war, which has in the meantime become the *modus operandi* for all post-socialist states.

Thus, for example, the artworks of Jušić and Haziraj speak exactly of this shaking ground when it comes to the WAF in the post-Yugoslavian context of the war(s) of the 1990s.<sup>24</sup> Considering the fact that there is no commonly accepted knowledge about what Yugoslavia stands for today, insights into what the revolutionary struggle by WAF brought, in terms of women's solidarity in the (post-)Yugoslavian continuous state of crises and wars, remain still in the zone of discomfort and denial.

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With years of artistic work dedicated to difficult issues including the feminist experience of war, transition, and patriarchal violence, Jušić has created a bitter politics of hope, which, through the history of WAF, still considers and con-

<sup>23</sup> Gordana Stojaković, *AFŽ Vojvodine 1942–1953* (Novi Sad: self-published, 2017); "Archive of Antifascist Struggle of Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia," Association for Culture and Art Crvena, [www.afzarhiv.org](http://www.afzarhiv.org); etc.

<sup>24</sup> Adela Jušić (Sarajevo, 1982) is a visual artist based in Sarajevo. See her website at [www.adelajusic.wordpress.com](http://www.adelajusic.wordpress.com). Blerta Haziraj (Runik, 1994) is an art researcher and filmmaker who lives and works in Prishtina and Prizren. About her recent exhibition and research, see <https://autostradabiennale.org/exhibitions/blerta-haziraj/>.

ceptualises revolution and a better world. Working on the solo exhibition titled *Šta je nama naša borba dala?/What Has Our Struggle Given Us?* (Sarajevo, 2013), and after on the WAF Archive, created in collaboration with Andreja Dugandžić (2015 onwards),<sup>25</sup> within the Sarajevo association of Crvena, Jušić has created politically engaged art based on archival materials on WAF through her own experience of the most recent war. Thereby, her work becomes a part of a radical feminist politics which admits that talking about the revolution and Yugoslavia has not and would not be easy after the genocide, but that it is nevertheless necessary in every politically engaged practice. In artworks such as *Nepoznata partizanka/Unknown Partisan Woman* (2016–17), *Komunista sam i to je sve što ćete od mene saznati/I'm a Communist and That's All I'll Ever Tell You* (2016–), and several art collages about women of WAF and Yugoslav socialism (2013–), Jušić builds a feminist narrative of political struggle in relation to what still surrounds us, after all these wars. The collages, as well as other works that imply a political aesthetics of the image, depict dark, printed contours of ordinary women, as well as of World War Two heroines which emerge as spectres, often smiling, and thus warn and prompt to rebellion, reminding us of what they had already won through their struggle, yet what was afterwards forgotten and lost. With their cyclical repetition of reproduced archival photos of women and their revolutionary slogans, when confronted with the post-Yugoslav reality, these collages oscillate between politically engaged proclamations and (post)war crime reporting, not leaving space for the false sentiment of Yugonostalgia.

Instead of Yugonostalgia, political anxiety is invoked, like in the work titled *Dostojanstvo Prkos Strah Očaj/Dignity Defiance Fear Desperation* (2014), which reminds us of the price of freedom which is often taken for granted, through the

<sup>25</sup> The largest WAF archive was initiated, designed, and digitized by members of the Association for Culture and Art Crvena, based in Sarajevo. The idea behind this archive started in 2010 at Crvena's 8th of March initiative *Živi solidarnost! – Live Solidarity!* and continued through different research and artistic activities, events, and actions. In 2014, artists, researchers, and feminists Dugandžić and Jušić began the work of creating a systematic digital archive of thousands of documents, photographs, secondary sources, and works of art connected to the history of the WAF that had been forgotten and neglected after the collapse of Yugoslav socialism. On the occasion of the 8th of March 2015, the online Archive of Antifascist Struggle of Women of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia (AFŽ archive) was launched by Crvena.

mythical stories of the so-called women heroes of World War Two.<sup>26</sup> These stories of the socialist Yugoslavia's greatest heroines were told by others, not them, as they had been brutally executed, or in other way died very young in the war. Their torture, pain, terror and trials are presented through their superhuman ability to resist war violence, causing their existence to become abstract in time (*Unknown Partisan Woman*, 2016–17), making them unattainable in any way for ordinary mortals of any subsequent historical epoch. Partisan heroines of World War Two, as Jušić suggests, are conjured before us as supernatural beings, not afraid of anything, or anyone:

They are represented as mythical creatures, superheroes that jump in the graves they dug for themselves, before being executed with smiles on their faces. These women sing while bleeding to death for Yugoslavia.<sup>27</sup>

With this work, Jušić returns one of the photographs showing a captive partisan woman from World War Two, taken by the enemy, to the historical reality of the war. In variously cropped fragments of this preserved war photograph, which subsequently received a revolutionary title *The Dignity and Defiance of a Captive Partisan Woman during the Operation Rösselsprung*, her real condition is revealed. The artist thus intervenes in the very description, giving a new name to the cropped and enlarged photographs: *Fear and Desperation of a Captive Partisan Woman during the Operation Rösselsprung*. This work about the anonymous partisan woman, a young girl who was captured and executed during the war, through its title finally integrates all these states of dignity, defiance, fear, and desperation into a current politics of affect—of both reality and revolution. In these affective states, art, ideology, and feminism intertwine with great discomfort to highlight the vigilance and spirit of revolution, aiming to raise our political awareness and re-engage us in the struggle for social change.

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The point of constant departure and return, to and from war, is depicted in the latest work by Jušić, art book *Out there* (2021), through a series of photo-

<sup>26</sup> Inspired by the book Mila Beoković, ed., *Žene heroji* [Women Heroes] (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1967). The book contains life stories of 10 people's heroines of the liberation struggle in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Their life stories were compiled based on the testimonies of the people who had known them.

<sup>27</sup> Adela Jušić, *Dostojanstvo Prkos Strah Očaj*, artist's statement (2014), accessed August 29, 2024 <https://adelajusic.wordpress.com/dignity-defiance-fear-desperation/>



graphs made mostly in Sarajevo during the Covid-19 pandemic, as a response to the PTSD of the war and all the politics that had led to it and occurred in its wake. The deserted streets during the pandemic, graffiti, photos from old family albums, images of some Jušić's artworks, as well as photos of the latest war, and the war's still visible traces on Sarajevo's facades, as well as notes, quotes, memories, and rarely people, return the same sense of wartime devastation and absurdity to one's life:

It was sunny 3rd of April, 1992. I was celebrating my 9th birthday in the nearby park. Even the teenagers joined the party. "What a success," I was telling to myself, when my dad lowered down the music. The song we were listening might not be appropriate anymore. As soon dad was gone, we continued singing loud: "Don't be a FA-FA-FASCIST!" Few days later, we must leave. My parents still do not believe that war is starting, so we take little with us. And our parrot Mickey.<sup>28</sup>

The trauma which started with an "emotional-political" experience of reality, once again returns to the very same place, where the past is experienced "politically-emotionally" within the scope which, in the given moment, becomes much wider than its earlier, wartime (post-)Yugoslavian iteration.

Within this new global scope of turbo-fascism and permanent war, another artistic archive, work, and exhibition is created by younger generation filmmaker and art researcher Haziraj, dealing with the Women's Antifascist Front in Kosovo. According to Áron Rossmann-Kiss, Haziraj's exhibition titled *ATO/Them* (Austrostrada Biennale, 2023) "documents a pursuit which is simultaneously full of hope and doomed"<sup>29</sup>, not only because the archives in questions have been forgotten, destroyed, or vanished, but also due to their meaning in the (post-) Yugoslav context of a radically feminist politics. In pursuit of historical documents, revolutionary narratives, and ways to rearticulate WAF politically in the contemporary context of women's resistance, Haziraj reaches not only for archives and Kosovar WAF magazines of the time (*Buletini* and *Agimi*), but also resorts to field work, political landscapes, and conversations. The film footage of the villages devastated by the war and war crimes and left on the margins of the

<sup>28</sup> Adela Jušić, *Out There*, ed. Ilari Valbonesi (Rome: Balkanology Editions, 2021).

<sup>29</sup> Áron Rossmann-Kiss on the exhibition *ATO* by Blerta Haziraj (Pykë-Presje, 2023), accessed August 29, 2024 <https://autostradabiennale.org/exhibitions/blerta-haziraj/>

transitional capitalism, such as Drenica where Serbian police committed a massacre in 1998, shows women who have heroically persevered in these areas (*'Sytë e duert e jueja duhet të shifen kudo/Your Eyes and Hands Must Be Seen Everywhere*, 2022). During this encounter with an archive of the forgotten WAF magazines and other texts concerning collective women's struggle and the history of their solidarity during and after World War Two, as they read the archive, these women talk about their own lives through political rearticulation of WAF today. In Haziraj's conversations about the history of women's resistance and emancipation with the women of these almost abandoned villages, a new feminist narrative of revolutionary resistance emerges, exactly in these locations where women's struggle and solidarity were the most radical. In this manner, the paths of solidary action by women against patriarchy and fascism are connected through time and wars and into revolutionary maps of common history that resist the continued hegemonic politics, this time under the guise of neoliberalism.

These artistic departures "out there," outside the Yugonostalgic zone of geopolitical comfort in dealing with WAF, are in the vein of the radical feminist politics which can only emerge on this slippery slope between hope and abyss. In this place, through resistance to patriarchal and neoliberal canons of the post-socialist politics of memory, rare feminist, political-theoretical and artistic practices occur, which deal with the socialist revolution through counter-revolutionary errors of the Yugoslav socialism, without compromise with the populist Left or any other falsely radical politics. Without marginalising the 1990s war as a sort of anomaly with no importance for future Left politics in the (post-)Yugoslavian context, these practices emerge from the vortex of social emancipation, critical thinking, and political articulation concerning the meaning of this struggle to this very day, indicating that it is still manipulated by Yugonostalgia. These two artists do so through revolutionary aesthetics of antifascism and antinationalism, transcending today's patriarchal and neoliberal constraints to sustain women's resistance beyond their immediate context, both within and beyond the (post-)Yugoslavian space.

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### **The *Longue Durée* of Resistance: Women in Black**

The anti-war movement of Women in Black was founded in Belgrade in October 1991, that is, immediately after the war(s) in Yugoslavia broke out, in resistance to the warmongering politics of the Serbian regime, and has persisted continuously

in its different waves of activism to this very day. It was established following the peace movement of Women in Black, founded in Israel in 1988 in response to the First Palestinian Intifada<sup>30</sup> and the violent Israeli occupation of Palestinian land.

The political act of publicly mourning all victims of war violence was expressed in the same way by Israeli women activists from the very beginning: “The movement maintained six minimal rules that defined the demonstration anew each week: the time, the site, the silent protest, the black attire, the all-woman format, and the sign ‘Stop the Occupation.’”<sup>31</sup>

In time, many women’s movements with the same name, which followed the same rules, were founded all over the world in response to current wars or violent events, or in the context of commemorating victims and crimes, always with clear and direct messages directed to the governing structures. In other words, women dressed in black, standing in central squares and streets, in front of public institutions, vigil and mourn in silence and thus discontinue, albeit for a short while, the dominant narratives of war that are always essentially the same—patriarchal, militant and hegemonic. With its performative activism, through different forms of local action without clearly established boundaries, this movement opposes war, fascism, militarisation, social injustice, economic inequality, racism, femicide, homophobia, and other types of violence, calling for peace and solidarity. Today, this women’s anti-war movement has around 10,000 activists worldwide.<sup>32</sup>

Women’s private space, which has historically transitioned into a public domain through the ritual of mourning the deceased, now functions as a political act. This transformation symbolically draws upon an anthropological formula from ancient times and generates collective consciousness by invoking feelings of irreplaceable loss, unbearable pain, and profound fear.<sup>33</sup> Resounding

<sup>30</sup> The First Palestinian Intifada (1987–93) was a massive and radical Palestinian uprising against the Israeli military occupation.

<sup>31</sup> Sara Helman, “Peace Movements in Israel,” The Jewish Women’s Archive, October 27, 2022, <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/peace-movements-in-israel>.

<sup>32</sup> “About Women in Black,” Women in Black, accessed August 29, 2024, <https://womenin-black.org/about-women-in-black/>.

<sup>33</sup> Lada Stevanović, *Laughing at the Funeral: Gender and Anthropology in the Greek Funerary Rites* (Belgrade: Institute of Ethnography SASA, 2009).

silence, ominously black clothes, and the uncompromising demand to stop violence: this is essentially how the political aesthetics of an activist performance is shaped, where resistance is generated through *longue durée*<sup>34</sup> forms of women's actions against patriarchy. This is the very reason that today's Women in Black worldwide symbolically use black attire as the expression of ritual mourning, to stop any additional systemic and violent death:

Black is the symbol of the tragedy of Israeli and Palestinian peoples. The black colour for the Women in Black has a double meaning: solidarity with Palestinian people because of the repression they endure, as well as attitude to one's own people: an act of rejecting the death culture which marks the collective identity and always reminds of the Holocaust mass casualties (Women in Black—*Israel*).

Women wear black because of the death of a close person. We wear black for both known and unknown victims. We wear black to protest against irresponsible nationalist leaders that we hold accountable for the victims of this war, as their only arguments are brutal military force and violence (Women in Black—*Belgrade*).

For the women of the South, black is a very important colour. This is the colour of grief, of tears, and it is also their traditional duty to wear black clothes. For Italian women in black, wearing black is not individual and private, but rather collective and public. It is an expression of bitterness and rejection of war in any of its forms. In international women's movement, colour black is recognised today as the strongest way of rejecting any type of violence (Women in Black—*Torino*).

We wear black to protest against the politics and practice of all armies whose arguments are force and violence (Women in Black—*Columbia*).<sup>35</sup>

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In the post-Yugoslavian context of the war(s) of the 1990s, Women in Black have been standing in squares and streets since 1991, protesting against the regime,

<sup>34</sup> The *longue durée* approach to historical research is used by the French *Annales* School to indicate a perspective on history that extends deep into the past, focusing on the long-standing and imperceptibly slowly changing relationships between people and the world which constitute the main aspects of social life (this approach incorporates findings from various human and natural sciences).

<sup>35</sup> Women in Black, "Symbolism—BLACK CLOTHING," accessed August 29, 2024, <https://zenecnom.org/en/17-aktivnosti/stajanje/1413-symbolism-black-clothing>.

ethno-nationalist violence committed then under the auspices of the governing Socialist Party of Serbia (established with the dissolution of the Communist Party), while defending the very principles of Yugoslavian antifascism from the party's appropriation, as well as from all the rightist politics which, in the reactionary process that gave birth to ethno-nationalist myths all over Yugoslavia, strived to rehabilitate war crimes and criminals from World War Two. Due to their perpetual and public presence, Women in Black still remind us of the genocide, ethnic cleansing, and other war crimes committed in the name of this politics in the (post-)Yugoslavian space. On the other hand, they consistently protest each new violence that occurs due to the repressive, ethno-nationalist, and global politics of permanent war. The banners they place in front of their bodies are: "Not in Our Name; Srebrenica—The Name of a Genocide"; "We Will Never Forget Vukovar Crimes"; "Operation Storm 1995: We Remember"; "We See Banished Albanian Population"; "Public Lecture in Antifascism"; "Always Disobedient to Patriarchy"; "Bread not Weapons"; "Stop Killing Women"; "Not One Woman Less"; "Stop the War, Not Refugees"; "Stop the Syrian War"; "Open the Borders"; "Stop Israeli Aggression against Gaza"; "Solidarity Is Our Strength"; "Stop Racism against Roma"; "LGBITQ against Fascism"; "Stop Russian Invasion of Ukraine"; and many others. Addressed to those who, from the position of power, systematically kill, oppress, and exploit in the name of hegemonic, war politics, these banners are messages against the violence that follow the red thread of revolutionary ideas upon which the socialist experiment of Yugoslavia was supposed to be built.

Women in Black have been the target of ethno-nationalist hatred and aggressive intimidation from the very beginning, despite the fact that they and their allies always protest silently and in small groups. Even though they do not possess the power to change the violent structures of warfare and governance that conquered this space even before the 1990s, Women in Black, through the ritual act of silence, vigils, and mourning, paradoxically became, in the social and political sense, the loudest and the most consistent in their antifascist resistance. This is confirmed by the disproportionate ethno-nationalist and rightist hatred for their activism, despite their media exclusion and small numbers as they realise their performative street actions, but also by the frequent paternalistic accusations of "left-liberalism," put forward by the old-new male Left which, faced with ethno-nationalism, failed during the 1990s, unlike anti-war women's movements.

The same gender patterns of anti-war action, especially in the post-socialist context, have been repeating even today, thus being confirmed as a rule, since in wars and repressive regimes, political resistance repeatedly dons woman's face. Anti-war activism, media campaigns against misinformation, help to refugees, psychological aid, strengthening the resistance against the military, police, political regime, etc., are all also organised today by women in Russia, collaborating with other women outside its borders, solidarity in resisting the Russian invasion of Ukraine, war aggression and neo-imperialism. Women in Black in Russia, whose faces are often blurred in publicised photos, with white roses in their hands and their anti-war and antifascist banners, organise vigils and publicly mourn the victims of Russian invasion, just like all the other women belonging to this movement all over the world. Artist Katya Muromtseva makes this resistance visible and present through art with her black-and-white, watercolour portraits of Russian feminists who, dressed in black, have been silently protesting against the Russian invasion of Ukraine in public squares and streets since the beginning of war. Certain that there is always an opportunity for political subjectivity, on the occasion of her exhibition *Women in Black against the War* (2023) held in Pushkin House in London, Muromtseva states:

I created these works to share my belief that it is possible to raise your voice against injustice under any kind of pressure, even if your protest looks like a wake. I stand in solidarity with everyone who has the courage to protest the war in any possible manner.<sup>36</sup>

The symbolic form of Women in Black's protest against violence and for peace, which is based on centuries-long women's collective ritual against patriarchy, points out that the power and strength of resistance largely depend on its political aesthetics, which acts upon social consciousness. Contrary to the political carnival, which simultaneously signifies the negation of the old and affirmation of the new in a cycle of constant changes. In terms of Bakhtin's description of the notion<sup>37</sup>, what the ritual vigil, that is, the political act of mourning

<sup>36</sup> Katya Muromtseva, "Women in Black Against the War," Pushkin House, May 26, 2023, <https://pushkin-house.squarespace.com/katya-muromtseva>.

<sup>37</sup> Related to the Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization which is interpreted as a means of politics of resistance and social movements in the present-day. See Andrew Robinson, "Bakhtin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power," Ceasefire, September 9, 2011, [www.ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/](http://www.ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-2/).

attempts is precisely to break the cyclical infinity of violence, be this violence subjective or objective.<sup>38</sup> By pointing out the fact that social structural violence is generated by constant exploitation of all “the Others” through war, this repetitive act of women’s collective mourning demonstrates over and over again the same thing, which is that violence begins and ends in patriarchy. To this effect, there is a clear difference between women’s politics of mourning and left-wing melancholia, because ultimately the public act of mourning signifies the liminal space between what must not be repeated and what has not yet happened. Unlike left-wing melancholia, which today maintains a state of constant commitment to the ideals of a lost revolution,<sup>39</sup> this ritual public mourning (vigil and grieving) represents a symbolical *momentum* of feminist encounter with the historical reality of that very same revolution, to achieve its ideals in the “new” social context of today—in the post-patriarchal, post-hegemonic, and post-capitalist reality—through solidary action.

### Beyond Yugoslav Utopia/Dystopia

More than 30 years have passed since the 1990s wars that marked the end of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY); however, any consensual knowledge is still lacking about these historical events of the wartime transition from Yugoslavian to post-Yugoslavian society, that is, from the socialist into the post-socialist system. In such a geopolitical space still maladjusted to the post-socialist determinants that emerged after this transition (such as the Balkans, South-eastern Europe, or simply the neutral term “the region”), the politics of war continues by other means. This politics normalizes and celebrates war crimes, and justifies systemic violence through the absence of justice and erasure of memory, whereas the transitional politics of reconciliation determines the bastions of inter-ethnic apartheid. The consequences of the armed conflict are also still present in various forms of PTSD, pain, disappointment, loss, and various other affects which give way to new ones, caused by

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<sup>38</sup> See Étienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

<sup>39</sup> See Walter Benjamin, “Left-Wing Melancholy,” in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kæes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 304–6; Wendy Brown, “Resisting Left Melancholy,” *Boundary 2* 26, no. 3 (Autumn 1999): 19–27; Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (New York: Verso, 2012).

corruption, poverty, migrations, and the impossibility of leaving the vicious circle of neoliberal appropriation of democracy and freedom.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the fact that today there are comprehensive archives, numerous sources, and a plurality of theoretical and practical writings on the war(s) and the transitional situation, and, crucially for the present article, that there are various artistic practices, political, social, and cultural theories that still deal with the (post-)Yugoslavian space there is still no common political articulation of the historical reality. In other words, the politics of knowledge and memory within the (post-)Yugoslavian space and beyond remains to be commonly defined. While counter-public spheres within the (post-)Yugoslavian states still build a common field of knowledge about the historical reality, the official political narratives, either right-wing or neoliberal, create fragmented conflicted zones of geopolitical discomfort, which permeate the governing mechanisms of institutionalised narratives of new and old necropolitics of war-mongering. In addition, lacking courage or urgency to tackle the specific wartime situations and their consequences in the (post-)Yugoslavian context, contemporary political theory has in the intellectual world assumed various banalizing approaches to these questions, be they the politics of identity, the stultifying discourse of human rights, or the dilution of Marxist, historical materialism.

Unlike many political-theoretical discourses that became polarized into pro and contra positions, feminist understandings of the socialist revolution, the wars of the 1990s, and the decolonial pursuit of peaceful planetary coexistence in the post-Yugoslav context rejected the false choices imposed by both sides. For instance, the assertion that one could identify as leftist while treating the wars of the 1990s as an insignificant topic within the left was, for most feminists from this space, a manipulative misconception.

Unlike numerous theoretical discourses which have been publicly polarised and divided into *pro et contra*, the feminist context of dealing with the socialist revolution, war, and peaceful politics of planetary coexistence exhibits a depar-

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<sup>40</sup> See Angela Davis, *The Meaning of Freedom and Other: Difficult Dialogues* (San Francisco: City Light Books, 2012); Jelena Petrović, "What Does the Freedom Stand for Today?," in *Border Thinking: Disassembling Histories of Racialized Violence*, ed. Marina Gržinić (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 108–22.



ture from many imposed false choices (such as those according to which being leftist in the post-Yugoslav space does not entail dealing with the war of the 90s, etc.) although this is not always the case (especially not in the context of gender mainstreaming and the today frequently present biologized transphobic feminism). To this effect, only persistent feminist practices can establish an active emancipatory epistemology through continuous border transgressions of war zones.<sup>41</sup> This also includes transgressing bio(necro)political states<sup>42</sup> and neoliberal politics of wartime aesthetics,<sup>43</sup> while moving beyond the (post-)Yugoslavian reality into a broader space of resistance against global, permanent war.

Regardless of whether it takes the form of theory, art, or practice, any critical examination of the revolutionary project of socialist Yugoslavia—and of the anti-colonial project of the Third World, in which Yugoslavia, along with many other countries, founded the NAM during the Cold War—becomes necessary in the context of genocide, violence, war, migration, reactionary appropriation of revolutionary ideas, and finally patriarchy itself. Otherwise, through the politics of ignoring, forgetting, and nostalgia, the war is merely reinscribed into every new attempt at revolutionary change within the social system, particularly within any future radically imagined geographies, especially within the still unsettled (post-)Yugoslavian space.

*Translated by Tijana Parezanović and Milan Marković*

<sup>41</sup> See Svetlana Slapšak, ed., *War Discourse, Women Discourse: Essays and Case-Studies from Yugoslavia and Russia* (Ljubljana: Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis, 2000); Svetlana Slapšak and Ghislaine Deschaumes, eds., *Balkan Women for Peace: Itineraries of Crossborder Activism* (Paris: Transeuropeans, 2003); Žarana Papić, *Tekstovi 1977–2022*, ed. Adriana Zaharijević, Zorica Ivanović, and Daša Duhaček (Belgrade: Centre for Women's Studies, Reconstruction Women's Fund, and Women in Black, 2012), and many others.

<sup>42</sup> See Marina Gržinić, "From Biopolitics to Necropolitics and the Institution of Contemporary Art," *Pavilion 14* (2010): 9–94; Marina Gržinić "The Body in the Field of Tensions between Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Analyzing the Future of the Prosthetic Body in the 21st Century," in *Filozofski vestnik* 44, no. 2 (2023): 19–52, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.44.2.02>; Gržinić "What Matters is Revolution"; etc.

<sup>43</sup> To name a few: Grupa Spomenik (The Monument Group) undertook intensive work on the 1990s wars from 2002 to 2015, see their website at [www.grupaspomenik.wordpress.com](http://www.grupaspomenik.wordpress.com). Numerous artists gathered around the Crvena association individual and collective projects since 2010, see [www.crvena.ba](http://www.crvena.ba). Information regarding Armina Pilav's collective projects, including *Un-War Lab* and *Toxic Lands*, can be found at [www.toxiclands.eu](http://www.toxiclands.eu).

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## From Emigration to (Non-)Immigration to Postmigration? The Migrant Other and the Constructedness of National Identity in the GDR and Reunified Germany

### Keywords

Guest Worker, Migration, German Reunification, Orientalism, Necropolitics, Postcolonialism, GDR

### Abstract

The essay traces the legal, representative, and societal status of migrant Others in the “closed society” of the GDR (German Democratic Republic or East Germany) as an example of how Germany has been profiting from labor migration on both sides of the Wall. It outlines how, from German reunification to the present day, migration has been presented as a sudden and temporary problem that obscures a colonial and racist past and necropolitical present. The essay examines the process of social de-differentiation in the “state-domineered society” of the GDR and how social techniques of othering and ethnicization in the form of laws for foreigners fostered discrimination and racism against the “stranger” (Georg Simmel), especially the guest worker. Looking at the process of a “double transformation” in the wake of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent reunification, the essay examines how overlapping processes of othering as the modern equivalent of the term “Orientalism” (Edward Said) have shaped and continue to shape reunified Germany. The process of “catching up with modernization” affects not only former migrants, second-generation descendants, refugees, and racialized citizens, but also the social group of East Germans who stood outside a Western-coded paradigm of normalcy. It asks to what extent the Federal Republic of Germany aimed at the integration of majority white East Germans during the reunification process to the detriment of migrant Others and how reunified Germany still fosters integration for the benefit of national economic interests and at the cost of migrant Others in Germany today. The essay reflects on the complicated transition from the notion of an ethnically homogeneous German nation, postulated since 1871 and long prevalent in terms of the

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principle of descent, to the contested self-image of reunified Germany as a country of immigration and its transformation into a post-migration society.

## Od emigracije do (ne)imigracije do postmigracije? Migrantski drugi in konstruiranost nacionalne identitete v Nemški demokratični republiki in združeni Nemčiji

### Ključne besede

gastarbajter, migracije, združitve Nemčije, orientalizem, nekropolitika, postkolonializem, NDR

### Povzetek

Esej poskuša izslediti pravni, reprezentativni in družbeni status migrantskih Drugih v »zaprti družbi« Nemške demokratične republike ali Vzhodne Nemčije (NDR) kot primer, kako je Nemčija imela dobiček od delovnih migracij na obeh straneh zidu. Opisuje, kako so bile od ponovne združitve Nemčije do danes migracije predstavljene kot nenadna in začasna težava, kar zakriva kolonialno in rasistično preteklost ter nekropolitiko sedanjost. Esej preučuje proces družbene dediferenciacije v družbi, ki jo obvladuje država NDR, in kako so družbene tehnike ustvarjanja drugosti in etnizacije v obliki zakonov za tujce spodbujale diskriminacijo in rasizem proti »tujcu« (Simmel), zlasti gastarbajterem. Ob pogledu na proces »dvojne transformacije« po padcu berlinskega zidu in poznejši ponovni združitvi esej preučuje, kako so prekrivajoči se procesi ustvarjanja drugosti kot sodobnega ekvivalenta izraza »orientalizem« (Edward Said) oblikovali in še naprej oblikujejo ponovno združeno Nemčijo.



“Where do you come from?” is a recurring question in Germany that at first might occur more curious than accusatory—only to start over again when having to prove the German compatibility of another facet of one’s otherness.<sup>1</sup> In her book *Undeutsch* (2016), Fatima El-Tayeb describes a suspicion in Germany that is less about the failure of those who have always been made foreign than about the refusal of the majority society to separate itself from the dominant white, Christian, and German image: an image into which “people like me will

<sup>1</sup> Fatima El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016), 9.

never be able to assimilate, no matter how German we are and no matter how ‘post-migrant’ the society now postures itself to be,”<sup>2</sup> as El-Tayeb puts it. This self-observation demonstrates how fragile a non-biological understanding of Germanness shaped by the principle of descent still is 33 years after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification: when the Westphalian sovereignty model disintegrated while new states rapidly increased in the post–Cold War era.<sup>3</sup>

Here, the dominant historical image of Germany as a unity, whose division is considered unnatural and therefore inevitably temporary, aimed at constructing a “European sovereignty”<sup>4</sup> out of decades of an East-West antagonism. Chancellor Helmut Kohl’s 1989 government declaration is symptomatic of this: “We are not an immigration country, and we cannot become one.”<sup>5</sup> What was repressed here is that in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries hardly any country “produced” as many “immigrants” as Germany, which included colonial migration and its promise of surplus value. Consequently, in the wake of reunification, the dogma of Germany as a “non-immigration country” and the revision of German asylum law in 1993 (*Asylkompromiss*) not only denied a history of migration; it actively “de-remembered” the colonial, anti-Semitic, and racist past, contributing to the rise in discussions about asylum seekers, migration, as well as radical right-wing violence. Moreover, it serves as a protectionist strategy to defend and propagate Germany’s national self-understanding when proving itself in Europe’s necrocapitalism<sup>6</sup> of today. Still, the legitimate belonging of newly migrated people and people with attributed migration histories who have lived in Germany for decades is not self-evident what makes Hito Steyerl’s provocative question “Can the Subaltern speak German?” more pressing than ever.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> El-Tayeb, 9; my translation.

<sup>3</sup> See Marina Gržinić, ed., *Border Thinking: Disassembling Histories of Racialized Violence* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Emmanuel Macron, “Sorbonne Speech of Emmanuel Macron,” *Ouest France*, international blog, September 29, 2017, <https://international.blogs.ouest-france.fr/archive/2017/09/29/macron-sorbonne-verbatim-europe-18583.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Horst Möller, “Helmut Kohl,” Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, *Geschichte der CDU*, November 17, 2022, <https://www.kas.de/de/web/geschichte-der-cdu/personen/biogramm-detail/-/content/helmut-kohl-v2>.

<sup>6</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 3.

<sup>7</sup> See Hito Steyerl, “Can the Subaltern Speak German? Postcolonial Critique,” trans. Aileen Dierig, [translate.eipcp.net](http://translate.eipcp.net), May 1, 2002, <http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/03/steyerl->

One reason for this is the fact that both West and East Germany have been shaped by different “immigration cultures” that nonetheless both depend on exploiting the migrant Other. In the following, I will trace how the GDR and reunified Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall have repeatedly questioned the permanent belonging and equal participation of the migrant Other, both socially and politically. What transition did the guest worker, but also the former GDR citizens undergo who turned into “East Germans” in the course of the transformation process of reunification—where former guest workers, Germans with migration backgrounds, asylum seekers, refugees and East Germans faced each other as “strangers” without actually encountering each other?<sup>8</sup>

### The Stranger and the (Migrant) Other in the Closed Society

Simmel already described the precarious role of the “stranger,” which consists of a “synthesis of nearness and remoteness.”<sup>9</sup> In this process, “the one who comes today and stays tomorrow”<sup>10</sup> sparked a broad debate that asks about the social consequences of difference in modern society. For historical research on the GDR, it is not only the supposed “strangeness”<sup>11</sup> that requires examination, but whoever wants to understand the stranger as a stranger must ask about the conditions under which the GDR society considered social structures and processes as familiar.<sup>12</sup>

The “closed society,”<sup>13</sup> as Karl Popper once defined the GDR, implied the linking of social and geographical dimensions of a closed space and zonification with the aim to create a new, politically controlled society—a society in which common differentiations would be abolished, principles of new equality would be

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strandso1en.html.

<sup>8</sup> Naika Foroutan and Jana Hensel, *Die Gesellschaft der Anderen* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 2020), 237.

<sup>9</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Stranger,” trans. Donald N. Levine, in *On Individuality and Social Forms*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 145.

<sup>10</sup> Simmel, 145.

<sup>11</sup> Simmel, 148.

<sup>12</sup> Jan C. Behrends, Thomas Lindenberger, and Patrice G. Poutrus, introduction to *Fremde und Fremd-Sein in der DDR: Zu historischen Ursachen der Fremdenfeindlichkeit in Ostdeutschland* (Berlin: Metropol Verlag, 2003), 9–21.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Popper, *Die offene Gesellschaft und ihre Feinde: Band 1, Der Zauber Platons* (München: Francke Verlag, 1957).



realized, and new kinds of structures, above all, the socialist system would be established. In other words, “a new society with new people.”<sup>14</sup> This new *Menschengemeinschaft* also implied, in part, totalitarian claims to power by the GDR leadership and even sovereignty that extended into the everyday lives of GDR citizens, with social changes being centrally controlled, i.e., not co-determined by civil society. This sort of “domineered society” (*Durchherrschte Gesellschaft*)<sup>15</sup> as Alf Lüdtkke defines it, left no social space unaffected with the aim to prevent the emergence of oppositional centers. In the GDR, therefore, a process of social de-differentiation took place, which deprived the economic, scientific, legal, or cultural subsystems of their autonomy and suspended their specific criteria of rationality or superimposed them politically and ideologically. In this case, it was not the state that perished in the course of the Party’s decades-long rule, but rather a process of a “perishing of society.”<sup>16</sup>

The political attempt to achieve a comprehensive social homogenization, which was primarily intended to stabilize the regime of the *Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands* (SED) in the long term, ultimately led to a disintegration of the GDR’s society. At the same time, the practice of governance and the practice of resistance were always interrelated and mutually dependent. Consequently, a permanent field of tension existed in the GDR between politics and the population, which remained invisible due to the lack of an uncensored public discourse, leading to permanent contradictions, “fault lines,” and a split between an official political leading culture and an unofficial marginal culture.<sup>17</sup> The sociopolitical parameters in the GDR ensured that there were practically no possibilities for any kind of institutionalization of “abnormal” belief systems or forms of life practices. Instead, the description of the “Other” as set out by Gayatri C. Spivak took place in the service of the state’s own supremacy.<sup>18</sup> However, those who were categorized and then perceived as strangers, the Other, in the GDR were not

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Kocka, “Eine durchherrschte Gesellschaft,” in *Sozialgeschichte der DDR*, ed. Hartmut Kaelble, Jürgen Kocka, and Hartmut Zwahr (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1994), 547–53.

<sup>15</sup> Alf Lüdtkke, “Die DDR als Geschichte: Zur Geschichtsschreibung über die DDR,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 36 (1998): 3–16.

<sup>16</sup> Sigrid Meuschel, *Legitimation und Parteiherrschaft in der DDR* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Detlef Pollack, “Die Konstitutive Widersprüchlichkeit Der DDR: Oder, War Die DDR-Gesellschaft Homogen?,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 24, no. 1 (1998): 110–31.

<sup>18</sup> See Gayatri C. Spivak, “The Rani of Simur,” in *Europe and its Others: Vol. 1*, ed. Francis Barker et al. (Colchester: University of Sussex, 1985), 128–51.

exclusively guided by racist preconceptions. The image of the “class enemy,” for example, was not purely a racist construction, but a potentially flexible mechanism for exclusion.<sup>19</sup> The authoritarian impact of a prevailing homogeneous and constant societal system as well as the successful colonization of discourse, excluded the realm of the Other even in the lifeworld of the GDR population: from the realm of the “normal,” “rational,” legitimately sayable and thinkable.

Here in the course of “scandalization” procedures, the GDR used tried-and-tested images of the enemy to distinguish the East German society from the West. In addition to people stigmatized as criminals, prostitutes, drug abusers, or with national-socialist sentiment, these included foremost “foreigners,” homosexuals, and maladjusted youths under “decadent” musical or fashion influences, who were accused of “antisocial behavior” in legal discourse—all linked in a variety of ways and located mostly in the “West” of the class enemy. A not insignificant aspect with regard to the massive policy of closure against the Other was certainly also the fact that there was no public devaluation of nationalism in the self-defined “anti-fascist peace state.” Rather, in the GDR, the German nation remained a central mental reference point for the regime and the population and tended to be imagined as a closed community to whose resources Others (“class enemies,” including “foreigners”) should not have access. Thus, the rituals of friendship orchestrated by the SED were in stark contrast to the population’s most diverse experiences of Otherness. Conflicts between Germans and “strangers” were made taboo, and conflict culture and the development of tolerance were not particularly encouraged. Rather, the SED tried to minimize contacts by quartering Others, in particular migrant Others and non-citizens (e.g. political refugees). This serves an exemplary indication of Spivak’s finding that without the exclusion, stigmatization, and marginalization of the subaltern from the field of the discursive and the performative, the hegemonic project of a dominating group would not be feasible.<sup>20</sup> Through the marking of marginality, the position of the center as a producer of truth and reality can be imagined and constituted. In this context, the state and social techniques of Othering in the form of laws on foreigners and asylum seekers, but also in the form of ethnicization in the discourse on multicultur-

<sup>19</sup> Patrice G. Poutrus, “Fremd Im Bruderland: Vertragsarbeit und das Ende des Goldbroilers,” in *Erinnern stören: Der Mauerfall aus migrantischer und jüdischer Perspektive*, ed. Lydia Lierke and Massimo Perinelli (Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2020), 277–98.

<sup>20</sup> See Gayatri C. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson & L. Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press), 287.

alism and interculturalism played a crucial role as an example of a successfully marginalized heterodoxy in the society of the GDR.

## Migration in the Emigration Country

While the GDR's migration policy was generally shaped by the communist state party's ideas of homogeneity, the worsening of the supply crisis from the late 1980s onward and the accompanying misguided economic development in real-existing state socialism also defined the way migrants were "managed" and treated. However, until the fall of the Berlin Wall, the GDR held a special position in the German-German comparison since the GDR was basically an "emigration country" and not an "immigration country"<sup>21</sup>: a concept that in the case of the FRG was often used as a "societal admission" in the course of acknowledging the immigration of about 14 million "guest workers" who came to Germany until the recruitment stop in 1973 and some of whom stayed.

In addition to guest workers as the largest number of immigrants, the SED government "welcomed" a small amount of political exiles, and academic students which served as representatives for international reputation and diplomatic recognition. Yet, precisely this instrumental relationship had been the reason why the political immigrants could only be integrated into GDR society to a limited extent and thus were not equal members of a socialist society, but only tolerated guests of a transnationally defined community.

Furthermore, there were migrants from the Federal Republic, who wanted to naturalize in the GDR for filial, love-related, and economic reasons or because the right to work was enshrined in the GDR constitution, or even because of their own political convictions. However, these migrants were not always welcomed in one of the reception camps, especially from 1979 onwards in the secret Central Reception Center Röntgental. Instead, the migrants had to surrender most of their foreign currency to the GDR authorities upon arrival, which meant that the GDR's treasury took almost 7.5 million Deutsche Mark between 1981 and

<sup>21</sup> Klaus J. Bade, *Europa in Bewegung: Migration vom späten 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (München: C. H. Beck, 2002), 304.

1985.<sup>22</sup> In the process, the targeted “x-ray examination,” interrogation, and wire-tapping of migrants by the People’s Police and State Security, as well as weeks and months spent in isolation on the grounds, became a test of stamina. Many suffered from camp fever; some took their own lives.<sup>23</sup>

### **Colonial Capitalist Differentiation in Real-Existing Socialism: Migrant Work and Surplus Value**

Here, aspects of what Tony Cliff calls bureaucratic “state capitalism,”<sup>24</sup> coupled with an increasing industrial production for export or armaments against the Marxist postulate “accumulation for accumulation’s sake,”<sup>25</sup> induced a segregation process between the stranger as the migrant Other and the citizen. Thus, this social, political, and economic process collapsed ownership into citizenship and disenfranchisement into foreignness. Here one could say that the stranger was subjected to a process of colonial and capitalist differentiation in “real existing socialism” in the GDR. These processes ultimately resulted in a societal segregation between first-class citizens (heteronormative citizens considered “German” by descent), second-class citizens (e.g. racialized citizens, LG-BTQI+), and non-citizens (migrant Others). The GDR government attempted to minimize the fields of contact with GDR citizens by locking away non-citizens, which included “class enemies” and “foreigners” in particular. The concept of “imperial difference” was decisive in this process, as Miriam Friz Trzeciak and Manuel Peters have applied it to the GDR, with regard to its management of non-citizens. Following Madina Tlostanova’s concept of “imperial difference,” Trzeciak and Peters conclude that imperial aspirations and the “coloniality of power” shaped both capitalist and (real) socialist social-forms. They further argue that the GDR both continued and countered colonial power relations at the socio-economic and symbolic levels.<sup>26</sup> Here colonial and racist thought patterns

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<sup>22</sup> Tobias Wunschik, “Die Aufnahmelager für West-Ost-Migranten: Öffentliche Darstellung und heimliche Überwachung nach dem Mauerbau,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, March 7, 2013, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutschlandarchiv/wunschik20130802/>.

<sup>23</sup> Wunschik.

<sup>24</sup> Tony Cliff, *State Capitalism in Russia* (London: Pluto Press, 1975).

<sup>25</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 742.

<sup>26</sup> See Miriam Friz Trzeciak and Manuel Peters, “Urbane imperiale Differenz: Verflechtungen postkolonialer und post(real) sozialistischer Konfigurationen am Beispiel von Cottbus,”

shaped the proclaimed politics of anti-imperialism and anti-fascism in the GDR, which imagined itself as a homogeneous and white nation. Here the GDR, with its economically justified inclusion of migrant Others as workforce, took up a long-standing tradition in Germany under very different living conditions and political systems. While, for example, enslaved black people in the German colonies had to perform work under maximally unfree conditions and were forcibly deported in the course of enslavement,<sup>27</sup> Polish seasonal workers, for example, were used as “inferior” workers during the time of the German Empire, and people designated as “racially inferior” were exploited through forms of forced labor under National Socialism.

The GDR eventually continued this legacy and benefited from labor migration agreements to recruit “foreign workers” with postcolonial states such as Vietnam, Mozambique, or Angola, while considering itself more developed than other socialist states of the Global South. Thus, the doctrine of friendship among these nations was based on an idea of the GDR’s civilizational superiority.

### The Contract Worker as Stranger and Wanderer

Since the first recruitment agreement in 1955, the guest worker as a stranger embodied the figure of a potential wanderer, who circulated in the world of late industrial modernity to fill temporary gaps in the economic system of the socialist planned economy and in Western European capitalism. Nowhere is the guest worker at home; where he is, he is denied recognition as an equal (citizen) by pretending he is only a guest. Thus the guest worker can be seen today as “a sort of avant-garde figure that stood at the crossroads of the ideologically hybrid and shifting frontiers between capitalism and socialism.”<sup>28</sup> On the one hand, guest workers were needed to ensure that the “economic miracle” continued to flourish, while on the other hand, the building and further expansion of socialism

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<sup>27</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 80.

<sup>28</sup> Boris Buden and Lina Dokuzović, *They’ll Never Walk Alone: The Life and Afterlife of Gastarbeiters* (Vienna: Transversal Texts, 2018), 11.

were to be realized, with guest workers serving as a kind of “fungible reserve army for both governments in East and West.”<sup>29</sup>

The central motivation of the SED government to recruit guest workers was a labor market necessity, just as in capitalist economies. In the GDR, however, as a country of emigration, recruitment was explicitly driven by the shortage of local labor forces. This distinction was mainly related to the fact that the “contract workers” (*Vertragsarbeiter*), as guest workers were officially and deliberately called in the GDR, granted only a short but labor-intensive stay under the ideological guise of “socialist reconstruction” without any possibility of contact with the rest of the population. After their work was done, they were unconditionally sent back to their home countries. In 1963, the GDR signed its first agreement with The Polish People’s Republic, and three years later, the two states regulated the use of Polish workers in the border area in the so-called “Commuter Agreement.”<sup>30</sup> A few years later, the GDR signed bilateral agreements with Algeria, Cuba, Mozambique, Vietnam, and Angola. China, Mongolia and North Korea also sent a small number of workers to the GDR.<sup>31</sup> There was no official data existing on the number of contract workers in the GDR. The first statistics were compiled in 1989, in which, however, specific groups of contract workers were not statistically recorded. For example, there were about 18,000 Algerian workers in the GDR at the end of the 1970s, but they were not included in the statistical data from 1989.<sup>32</sup> This already reveals how guest workers, in Spivak’s sense, were assigned the position of subalterns who had no access to the “abstract structures of civil society” because they were basically not wholly of it and in-

<sup>29</sup> Ulrich Herbert, *Geschichte der Ausländerpolitik in Deutschland* (München: C. H. Beck, 1986), 215.

<sup>30</sup> Ann-Judith Rabenschlag, “Arbeiten im Bruderland: Arbeitsmigranten in der DDR und ihr Zusammenleben mit der deutschen Bevölkerung,” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, September 15, 2016, [www.bpb.de/233678](http://www.bpb.de/233678).

<sup>31</sup> Sandra Gruner-Domić, “Beschäftigung statt Ausbildung: Ausländische Arbeiter und Arbeiterinnen in der DDR,” in *50 Jahre Bundesrepublik—50 Jahre Einwanderung: Nachkriegsgeschichte als Migrationsgeschichte*, ed. Jan Motte, Rainer Ohliger, and Anne von Oswald (Frankfurt: Campus, 1999), 204–30.

<sup>32</sup> Andrzej Stach and Saleh Hussain, *Ausländer in der DDR: Ein Rückblick* (Berlin: Die Ausländerbeauftragte des Senats von Berlin, 1991), 16.

stead remained marginal and invisible.<sup>33</sup> However, this did not mean that guest workers were not also exposed to state surveillance practices, on the contrary.

The bilateral agreements continued to be based on the so-called “rotation principle,”<sup>34</sup> according to which labor migrants were generally sent back to their home country after a maximum of five years and replaced by new arrivals. The right of residence of foreign workers was always linked to an existing employment relationship. If the employment contract ended, the right of residence also expired. Not even marriage to a GDR citizen was a guarantee of the right to stay in the GDR. Moreover, contract workers could be dismissed prematurely at any time and sent back to their home countries if they were accused of violating “socialist labor discipline.” To what extent such a violation had taken place was left to the discretion of the respective employing company.<sup>35</sup>

Just as in the Western industrialized countries, the guest workers in the GDR primarily took on unskilled, monotonous, and unattractive jobs. They worked assembly-lineshifts with outdated equipment in light and heavy industry, as well as in coal mining. At the time of the GDR’s collapse, foreign contract workers were employed in nearly 1,000 so-called state-owned enterprises in the GDR. The foreign workers were not allowed to choose their place of residence independently. Instead, their accommodation was organized by their employer, typically in the form of dormitories reserved for foreign contract workers. The occupancy of the rooms was also organized by the company management: up to four residents were accommodated per room. Men and women lived separately, and even married couples were not entitled to share a room. An admission control registered the presence and absence of the residents and any visitors. Overnight

<sup>33</sup> Gayatri C. Spivak, “Resistance That Cannot be Recognised as Such,” interview by Suzana Milevska, *Identities* 11, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 27–45, quoted by Nikita Dhawan, “Can the Subaltern Speak German? And Other Risky Questions: Migrant Hybridism versus Subalternity,” [translate.eipcp.net](http://translate.eipcp.net), April 25, 2007, <http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/03/dhawan-strands01en.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Dennis Kuck, “Für den sozialistischen Aufbau ihrer Heimat? Ausländische Vertragsarbeitskräfte in der DDR,” in *Fremde und Fremd-Sein in der DDR*, ed. Behrens, Lindenberger, and Poutrus, 271–81.

<sup>35</sup> Heidemarie Beyer, “Entwicklung des Ausländerrechts in der DDR,” in *Zwischen Nationalstaat und multikultureller Gesellschaft: Einwanderung und Fremdenfeindlichkeit in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*, ed. Manfred Heßler (Berlin: Hitit, 1993), 214.

visits had to be requested from the dormitory management, as well as the resident's overnight stay away from home.

Once again, this reflects the mechanisms of the “domineered society” and how the GDR was characterized by totalitarian control of the population by the state apparatus, which fundamentally differed from the situation of guest workers in West Germany. Although guest workers were not officially considered part of the population, The Ministry for State Security observations intruded into almost all areas of public work and private lives. For example, Michael Feige documented the spying on Vietnamese contract workers by the Stasi. In addition, the State Secretariat for Labor and Wages informed the Central Committee of the SED about weekly incidents with “foreigners.”

### **Doublespeak to Distance from the Class Enemy**

Although officials in the GDR tried to distinguish themselves from the so-called “exploitation of foreign workers in the West,” it can be observed that discrimination against foreign workers not only took place in the sociopolitical interaction with them but already manifested itself in the propagandistic theses of “friendship among nations” and “successful integration.” Here Spivak's definition of Othering even manifests in the GDR's public, oblique rhetoric as the active formation of opposition, in which the description of the Other takes place in the service of one's own supremacy.

The fact that foreign workers were employed in the GDR just as West Germany was initially concealed and then classified as qualitatively different. Popular here was the “narrative of the twofold education.” The function of this narrative was not only the positive self-portrayal of the state party and its policies. The narrative also served to distinguish itself from the guest worker policy of the “class enemy” and, in particular, of the Federal Republic, which in the public discourse of the GDR was referred to as the “foreign worker policy” and was seen as being in the immediate vicinity of National Socialist crimes.<sup>36</sup> Eventual-

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<sup>36</sup> Lothar Elsner, “Zum Wesen und zur Kontinuität der Fremdarbeiterpolitik des deutschen Imperialismus,” in *Wesen und Kontinuität der Fremdarbeiterpolitik des deutschen Imperialismus: Materialien einer wissenschaftlichen Konferenz* (Rostock: Universität Rostock, 1974), 2–76.



ly, compared to the guest worker agreements of the FRG, the agreements were formally more egalitarian and contained essential rights and provisions (such as training), which, however, were not put into practice. Furthermore, in most GDR reports, migrant workers were simply referred to as “friends.” This representation corresponded with the GDR’s self-image as an anti-fascist state that had successfully left the “brown German” past behind. Class consciousness, not ethnicity, was to be the decisive criterion for identity formation. According to Erich Honecker in August 1978, “misanthropic racism had been eradicated at the root”<sup>37</sup> in the closed society.

However, when taking a closer look at the linguistic articulation of this aspired ideal image, noticeable contradictions reveal themselves. In the reporting of the GDR press, a power imbalance was established on several levels between GDR citizens and guest workers, portraying the citizens of the GDR as superior and the immigrants as inferior. For example, factory records speak of the “education” of the migrant workers, who are referred to as “boys” and “girls” despite their adult age or addressed consistently by their first names, while German work colleagues were called by their last names.<sup>38</sup> Here, GDR citizens are presented in the role of the teacher and adult, while the immigrants are assigned the role of the destitute, the student, or even the child. Vietnamese guest workers, for example, who worked as seamstresses in a Berlin factory, would “later pass on their knowledge and skills in the industrialization of their homeland.” Hereby, the employment of immigrants was considered to be fruitful for the “development of their personality” while benefiting from “ideological formation” and “education.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, in everyday interaction with their German colleagues, guest workers were supposed to experience real existing socialism and then “export this body of thought to their home countries.”<sup>40</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Erich Honecker at the World Conference for the Fight against Racism and Racial Discrimination in Geneva, August 14, 1978, transcript found in *Gegen Rassismus, Apartheid und Kolonialismus: Dokumente der DDR 1977–1982*, ed. Alfred Babing (Berlin: Staatsverlag der Deutschen Demokratischen Republik, 1983), 158; my translation.

<sup>38</sup> Ann-Judith Rabenschlag, *Völkerfreundschaft nach Bedarf: Ausländische Arbeitskräfte in der Wahrnehmung von Staat und Bevölkerung der DDR* (PhD diss., Stockholm University, 2014), 120, 94–99.

<sup>39</sup> Rabenschlag, 86–88.

<sup>40</sup> Rabenschlag, 88.

Regarding this dynamic, Ann-Judith Rabenschlag sees parallels here with the narrative of the “white man’s burden,” infamously coined by the writer Rudyard Kipling. One might speak of the “GDR citizen’s burden” that explains in a paternalistic tone and with the sense of duty of being a good socialist.<sup>41</sup> Rabenschlag concludes that discrimination, racism, and xenophobic incidents in the GDR cannot be just related to the lack of assertiveness of a state ideology oriented toward equality. Rather, discrimination against non-Germans was already anchored in the linguistic articulation of this ideology itself. Ironically, the central propaganda of the GDR government even shares similarities with “Doublespeak.” Derived from Newspeak from George Orwell’s novel *1984*, it deliberately obfuscates, distorts, or inverts the meaning of words through language manipulation in order to hide facts and camouflage the goals or ideologies of the practitioners.<sup>42</sup>

Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argue that Orwellian Newspeak is an important component of the manipulation of language in the mass media and that it serves as a system-maintaining propaganda function.<sup>43</sup> Here it seems as if the GDR used an “anti-capitalism” news filter that followed the opposite logic of Herman and Chomsky’s so-called “anti-communism” filter developed against the background of the Cold War: Based on polar and binary pairs of opposites, it considers communism as the antithesis of the Western way of life.

### Surveillance, Pogroms, and Repatriations

In the end, the fact that the “brotherhood” rhetoric did not have much in common with reality was ultimately demonstrated by physical racist pogroms against contract workers. One of them was directed against Algerian workers in 1975, which was supported by latent attitudes against “foreigners” in general and Muslims in particular. These pogroms were never covered in the GDR press. Furthermore, the GDR state media withheld the exact circumstances of the death and lynching of two Cuban workers, Andres Garcia Paret and Delf-

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<sup>41</sup> Rabenschlag, 276.

<sup>42</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (New York: Plume, 2003), 210–17.

<sup>43</sup> Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Book, 2002), 134.

in Guerra, in Merseburg in August 1979 and the Mozambican apprentice Carlos Conceicao in Staßfurt in September 1987 from the public.<sup>44</sup>

Racist attacks on dormitories of contract workers occurred in the GDR from 1975 on. In this respect, the statement that the attacks on dormitories of former contract workers and refugees in Hoyerswerda (1991) and Rostock-Lichtenhagen (1992) were the first pogroms in Germany after the Second World War needs to be revised. They already took place in the GDR before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Another particular form of racism in the GDR emerged in the assaults against Arabs, Africans, and Cubans. In September 1987, The Ministry for State Security investigated the violent confrontations and described in their secret documents how a “group of foreigners [Mozambicans] is exposed to provocations by negatively minded, predominantly youthful GDR citizens, which in the end lead to physical confrontations.”<sup>45</sup> Here, although the Ministry noted that “workers from the People’s Republic of Mozambique were often not the instigators of incidents,” the contract workers were eventually victims of deportation (“repatriation”). From the outset, racialized contract workers were made the culprits without a thorough investigation of the causes of outbreaks of violence. For example, a total of approximately 1,000 Cuban workers were forcibly repatriated prematurely in 1986, and at least 730 by August 31, 1987. During the same period, at least 120 workers were forcibly repatriated to Mozambique in 1986 and another 120 by August 31, 1987. In the case of the Vietnamese, only 60 workers were repatriated in 1986 and only 27 by August 31, 1987. However, Vietnamese women, who were the majority of female guest workers, who became pregnant while working in the GDR either had to have an abortion or were forcibly repatriated.<sup>46</sup> The criminalization strategy of the SED propaganda also included defaming the expanding work of Vietnamese contract workers in the shadow economy, which had a stabilizing effect during the escalation of the supply crisis in the GDR at the end of the 1980s. With slogans such as “smuggling” and “buying goods” by “foreign-

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<sup>44</sup> Harry Weibel, “Rassismus in der DDR: Drei charakteristische Fallbeispiele aus den 70er und 80er Jahren,” *Zeitschrift des Forschungsverbundes SED-Staat* 39 (2016): 114.

<sup>45</sup> Stasi Records Archive, Berlin, BStU, MfS, HA XVIII, no. 19422, 13, 126.

<sup>46</sup> Almut Zwengel, *Die Gastarbeiter der DDR: Politischer Kontext und Lebenswelt* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2010), 264.

ers” in the controlled GDR media,<sup>47</sup> the SED propaganda ultimately attempted to distract attention from the failed economic development in real state socialism.<sup>48</sup>

### “Wendeverlierer” after the Fall of the Berlin Wall

The SED government’s rapid loss of power in the light of a mass fleeing of GDR Citizens to the West, a new opposition movement, and the Monday Demonstrations during the Peaceful Revolution catapulted the migrant workers not only into a legal no-man’s-land, but also into existential and xenophobic abysses after the Fall of the Berlin Wall.

While many predominantly white GDR and FRG citizens rejoiced at the fall of the Berlin Wall, on both sides of the border the Wall fell primarily on the bodies of the Other Germans who had been living in Germany for several years and were now once again considered “foreigners” and “migrants”: those with precarious status such as the former contract workers in the GDR, whose bilateral state contracts lost their validity. Angelika Nguyen, director of the documentary *Bruderland ist abgebrannt* (1991), who for the first time, tried to shed light on the situation of the remaining Vietnamese contract workers in her film, but which no German television station was interested in during that time, put this situation as follows: “The Germans had their own worries at the time. What were they supposed to do with migrant stories?”<sup>49</sup>

Patrice Poutrus notes that of the 59,000 Vietnamese and 15,100 Mozambican contract workers registered at the end of 1989, only 21,000 and 2,800, respectively, were still living in East Germany at the time of German unification. Numerous migrants went to West Germany after the fall of the Wall and applied for asylum, but just like the newly arrived Vietnamese who came for family reunification,

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<sup>47</sup> Poutrus, “Fremd Im Bruderland,” 8.

<sup>48</sup> Jonathan R. Zatlin, “Scarcity and Resentment: Economic Sources of Xenophobia in the GDR 1971–1989,” *Central European History* 40, no. 4 (December 2007): 683–720, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938907001082>.

<sup>49</sup> Duc Ngo Ngoc, “‘Wir würden gerne mitfeiern, aber wurden aufgefordert zu gehen’: Eine Filmbesprechung zu ‘Bruderland ist abgebrannt’ und ‘Wir bleiben hier,’” Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, March 5, 2021, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutsche-einheit/migrantische-perspektiven/325138/wir-wuerden-gerne-mitfeiern-aber-wurden-aufgefordert-zu-gehen/>.

the Federal Republic of Germany did not recognize them as politically persecuted and thus did not provide them with a secure residence status. They received only a temporary residence permit, which was based on the original term of their contract with the SED state.<sup>50</sup>

Meanwhile, in the summer of 1990, the freely elected and, at the same time last government of the GDR endeavored to facilitate the targeted repatriation of the former contract workers to their countries of origin instead of securing their residence by means of financial support payments. After the GDR's accession to the Geneva Refugee Convention in 1990, the right of asylum could no longer be applied because of the imminent reunification. The transition to a market economy worsened the economic situation in the GDR, leading to the closure of state-owned companies by the private 'trust agency' ('Treuhandanstalt') due to outdated structures and cost considerations. The contract workers were among the first to be affected by company layoffs and lost their legal work and residence status with the end of the GDR. The Federal Republic's "law on foreigners," which was amended in 1991, also did not provide the contract workers with a secure residence status, as most of them lost their jobs, unlike the very few political refugees who had already been living in the GDR for a long time when the Wall came down and whose residence status was recognized in unified Germany. The guest workers received only a temporary residence title based on the original terms of their contracts that were still concluded with the GDR.

Contract workers who traveled back to their homeland were promised a free return flight and compensation of 3,000 Deutsche Mark during the transitional period, but in many cases, the amount was never paid out. Many former contract workers traveled back home under the pressure of the GDR government, where in the case of the Mozambican guest workers, they were "repatriated" to a civil war that lasted until 1992. These self-called "Madgermanes" count themselves to this day among the biggest *Wendeverlierer* or "losers of the turn-around."<sup>51</sup> They have never received their due remuneration for their performed work in the

<sup>50</sup> Patrice G. Poutrus, "Ausländer in Ostdeutschland," Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, August 24, 2020, <https://www.bpb.de/themen/deutsche-einheit/lange-wege-der-deutschen-einheit/314193/auslaender-in-ostdeutschland/>.

<sup>51</sup> See Stefan Ehlert, "DDR-Gastarbeiter aus Mosambik: 'Bis heute haben wir kein Geld erhalten,'" Deutschlandfunk, November 9, 2019, <https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ddr-gastarbeiter-aus-mosambik-bis-heute-haben-wir-kein-geld-100.html>.

GDR from the Mozambican Ministry of Labor, let alone compensation from the Federal Republic of Germany, which includes unresolved pension claims from payments into the GDR social system.

### Scandalization and Criminalization

In the end, most of the remaining contract workers from the former GDR were among the *Wendeverlierer*. Their only means of subsistence were often jobs on the fringes of legality or self-exploitation in small trades since claiming social benefits under their precarious residency status would have meant immediate deportation.

The most socially and legally marginalized were increasingly stigmatized as supposed “foreigners” even in unified Germany and were most directly confronted with xenophobia and violent murder attacks in East and West. While the 1991 revision of the law on foreigners and a 1993 reform of the Citizenship Act made it easier for former first- and second-generation guest workers in the FRG to acquire German citizenship, nonetheless, they too became targets. The pogroms of Hoyerswerder and Rostock-Lichtenhagen in 1992, as well as in the West German cities Mölln in the same year, followed by another one year later in Solingen, horrifyingly evince this.

As Fatima El-Tayeb notes, “bogus asylum seekers” who allegedly managed to obtain a life of luxury in the German welfare state increasingly became scapegoats for the real neoliberal dismantling of social rights that was setting in at that time.<sup>52</sup> Here social rights were taken away to serve the growing racism in the heated atmosphere and produced overlapping processes of Othering. This included besides former contract workers also Sinti and Roma people from Eastern Europe who were considered “work-shy, lazy, dishonest and unalterably foreign” and whose deliberately miserable circumstances played a subordinate role in the collective memory of the events in Rostock-Lichtenhagen. Their presence now became the symbol of German excessive demands and their deportation thus the highest priority.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>52</sup> El-Tayeb, *Undeutsch*, 121n.

<sup>53</sup> El-Tayeb, 121n.

Sabine am Orde notes that there was a shift from a victimization to a criminalization discourse against migrant Others following the years of the fall of the Berlin Wall: “In the first period after the fall of communism, Vietnamese appear in the press primarily as (former) GDR contract workers and victims of racist violence. It was not until the end of 1992 that media interest in the illegal cigarette trade increased—the tone became harsher. From now on, the now-familiar ‘mafia rhetoric’ appears more frequently.”<sup>54</sup> Migrant workers and asylum seekers who were already criminalized by the GDR media in the course of their activities in the shadow economy were also increasingly criminalized and “scandalized” after reunification.

Hereby, it can be assumed that with the shifting status of the guest workers after the fall of the Berlin Wall, economic and racist contradictions could no longer be functionally related to each other in order to enforce national economic interests in a capitalist logic and to preserve the image of a national descent community that has been linked to racist notions.<sup>55</sup> On the contrary, however, the former guest workers were once again devalued, as they were now perceived as useless “social parasite” among *sans papiers*—a French term for so-called “illegal migrants” that literally translates to “without papers” in English—that, in comparison to “guest workers, [. . .] have never been called for, they simply should not be there.”<sup>56</sup>

### The Making Other of East Germans

Here, the transformation processes after the fall of the Berlin Wall in the course of German reunification represented a special case for migrant Others insofar as the basic social institutions were predetermined with the accession of the GDR to West Germany. Furthermore, the development of East Germany has been

<sup>54</sup> Sabine am Orde, “Zwischen Vertragsarbeit und organisierter Kriminalität: Zur Kriminalisierung der vietnamesischen Minderheit in der Bundesrepublik,” *CILIP*, December 21, 1996, <https://www.cilip.de/1996/12/21/zwischen-vertragsarbeit-und-organisierter-kriminalitaet-zur-kriminalisierung-der-vietnamesischen-minderheit-in-der-bundesrepublik/>.

<sup>55</sup> Veronika Kourabas, *Die Anderen ge-brauchen: Eine rassismustheoretische Analyse von “Gastarbeit” im migrationsgesellschaftlichen Deutschland* (Bielfeld: Transcript Verlag, 2021), 28.

<sup>56</sup> Monika Mokre, “On the Intersections of Globalized Capitalism and National Politics: Gastarbeiters, Refugees, Irregular Migrants,” in *They’ll Never Walk Alone*, ed. Buden and Dokuzković, 35.

embedded itself in the crisis-ridden and rapid modernization thrusts of the old FRG. This led to a “double transformation”<sup>57</sup> and transformation shocks of a “disarmed society,”<sup>58</sup> which the East German population experienced in the 1990s and that have neither been completed nor processed. Besides the contract workers, around 2.3 million former GDR citizens were affected by unemployment and ruptures in their biographies within two years.

Consequently, being made into Others was also one of the most formative East German experiences after reunification: A society stepped out of its own center and was pushed to the periphery. The reunification process can be basically described as the becoming East German of the former GDR citizen.<sup>59</sup> For example, East Germans are still called upon as a collective group when it comes to negative attributions and have been repeatedly exposed to an experience of constant discursive devaluation, which confirmed the feeling of being a “second-class citizen” in reunified Germany.<sup>60</sup> Thomas Ahbe notes how East Germans are ascribed those characteristics that West Germans—if one follows the implications of their self-image—have successfully discarded, namely authoritarianism and docile irresponsibility, xenophobia, racism and indifference to National Socialism, which also legitimizes their own non-questioning of their role in the unification process. This also exemplifies how the “East” and “East Germans” are classified from a Western perspective after the Fall of the Berlin Wall: “East Germans” are said to be backward and not yet fully arrived in modernity but rather are identified with a process of “catching-up modernization.”<sup>61</sup>

Here the concept of Orientalism coined by Said could be applied to the German *contra* German context, where the “West” and the “East” oppose each other as dichotomies. On the one hand, the enlightened, civilized, and democratic “Oc-

<sup>57</sup> Hildegard-Maria Nickel and Sabine Schenk, “Prozesse geschlechtsspezifischer Differenzierung im Erwerbssystem,” in *Erwerbsarbeit und Beschäftigung im Umbruch*, ed. Hildegard-Maria Nickel, Jürgen Kühl, and Sabine Schenk (Berlin: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 1994), 259–82.

<sup>58</sup> See Heinrich Best and Everhard Holtmann, *Aufbruch der entscherten Gesellschaft: Deutschland nach der Wiedervereinigung* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2012), 9n.

<sup>59</sup> See Foroutan and Hensel, *Die Gesellschaft der Anderen*, 143.

<sup>60</sup> See Thomas Ahbe, Rainer Gries, and Wolfgang Schmale, *Die Ostdeutschen in den Medien: Das Bild von den Anderen nach 1990* (Leipzig: Leipziger Universitätsverlag, 2009).

<sup>61</sup> See Rainer Geißler, *Die Sozialstruktur Deutschlands: Zur gesellschaftlichen Entwicklung mit einer Bilanz zur Vereinigung* (Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2008).



cident” of West Germany and the “Orient” (East Germany), which is uncivilized or in need of civilization.<sup>62</sup> In a similar way, this applies to how Western Europe constructed itself in opposition to Eastern Europe without acknowledging the historical processes of evacuation, abstraction, and expropriation.

### East-Migrant Analogies

“Migrants left their country, East Germans were left by their country,”<sup>63</sup> concludes Naika Fourouton with the assumption that the relationship to the lost country set in motion similar processes in East Germans as in migrants, even if it was unloved or intentionally left behind.

In a study, Foroutan and her colleagues examined which strategies minorities develop in order to remain unrecognized, assimilate and attract attention as part of the mainstream society. The study concluded that assimilation and adaptation strategies to the West German norm were not only used by East Germans, but also by subaltern migrants: On the one hand, processes that occurred through migration into the West German codified society, such as arriving in Germany after reunification, learning new social structures, language, or just banal everyday coping. This also applied to experiences of impoverishment, isolation and the non-recognition of school degrees or professional certificates, downgrading in career processes as well as questions of identity loss and identity reconstruction, assimilation, radicalization, and resistance.<sup>64</sup>

In *Die Gesellschaft der Anderen*, Naika Foroutan and Jana Hensel further discuss East Germans in the context of migration research and elaborate on similarities and differences between the groups of East Germans and migrants in regard to stereotypes, feelings of devaluation, and foreignness without aiming at equating different experiences or denying hierarchies since most of the former guest worker migrants in East and West, in contrast to the predominantly majority white East Germans, were already and are still made into Others through racialization. Even though it can be empirically proven that East Germans took away jobs from migrants in the early 1990s, East Germans were complicit in degrad-

<sup>62</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003), 149.

<sup>63</sup> Foroutan and Hensel, *Die Gesellschaft der Anderen*, 98; my translation.

<sup>64</sup> Foroutan and Hensel, 122.

ing migrants in the course of an attempted social-economic climbing in the West German society—according to the motto: “We are both Germans after all!” as Foroutan describes.<sup>65</sup>

By contrast, migrants’ criticism of racism in Germany when it comes to unfair payment or structural discrimination, for example, was never exclusively directed against the group of East Germans but against Germany’s systemic structures. Eventually, a frighteningly high level of everyday racism and everyday violence against migrant Others in the post-transition period make the emotional insecurity of the early years after reunification just as evident as the deeper-seated racist thought structures in East and West.

### Fading Affiliations: “We, Too, Are the People!”

The lack of symbolic reaction to the violent acts of exclusion by the federal government of the time also sent a very clear signal of non-belonging to the group of people of migrant origin, among them former guest workers in West Germany. Those guest workers had risen to the status of “fellow citizens” before the Fall of the Berlin Wall but were categorized as “third-class-citizens” or “foreigners” again after the fall of the Berlin Wall, marking a segment of the population that lives in Germany but is not part of German society:<sup>66</sup>

At the height of our childhood games, the Berlin Wall had fallen, and suddenly the Kotti was teeming with Osis. They had come to collect their welcome money—from our banks. [. . .] As always, we also stood around there. After all, it was our meeting place. The Osis gawked at us, we gawked back. Thirty black heads against hundreds of East Germans.<sup>67</sup>

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Neco Çelik’s words reflect the mistrust among citizens with a migration background toward this new Germany, which in the years to come should be primarily concerned with the “new citizens” of Germany and their integration in order to achieve an effective alliance between East and West. Here the process

<sup>65</sup> Foroutan and Hensel, 122.

<sup>66</sup> See Christine Morgenstern, *Rassismus—Konturen einer Ideologie: Einwanderung im politischen Diskurs der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Hamburg: Argument Verlag, 2002), 252.

<sup>67</sup> Neco Çelik, “Soziale Häutung,” in *Manifest der Vielen: Deutschland erfindet sich neu*, ed. Hilal Sezgin (Berlin: Blumenbar, 2011), 171–74.

of integration, indeed of growing together, was made in disfavor of an effective migrant Other—or in the sense of David Lloyd: The over-represented oppressed individuals excluded from sovereignty along racial lines.<sup>68</sup>

Member of the anti-racist network Kanak Attack, Massimo Perinelli, describes how the capitalist liquidation of the East German infrastructure after reunification was compensated with the evoked image of a homogeneous nation: a supposedly successful reunification process that implied the discursive integration of German citizens and which in Perinelli's view was made possible on the backs of the migrants.<sup>69</sup> This shows how the reunification process was not only a significant rupture when it comes to the expulsion of migrants from the German norm, but moreover, how "East Germans" were involved in cementing migrants as Others—since East Germans themselves were trying to find entrance into the majority society. Instead of the West German promise of individualization, opportunities, or forming alliances, competition prevailed.

Hereby, the aggressive demarcation from the "non-German" allowed the East Germans to project frustrations about their position in the new all-German hierarchy onto those positioned even further down. West Germany remained the idealized norm, while ethno-nationalism as structural to the national understanding of the Federal Republic remained unrecognized. In this regard, Stuart Hall observed the escalating nationalist conflicts in Eastern Europe and the construction of nations of their own shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union as "a passport to the West":

These emergent nationalisms are not simply revivals of the past but reworkings of it in the circumstances of the present—entry tickets to the new Europe. Though they look like a return to a pre-1914 historical agenda, they are functioning as a way of evading the past and making a bid for modernity (i.e., entry to the Euro-club).<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> See David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

<sup>69</sup> See Massimo Perinelli, "Die Obergrenze der Demokratie," *Jungle.world*, April 26, 2018, <https://jungle.world/artikel/2018/17/die-obergrenze-der-demokratie/>.

<sup>70</sup> Stuart Hall, "Europe's Other Self," *Marxism Today* 42, no. 8 (August 1991): 18–19.

## From Welcoming Culture to Staying Culture

Eventually, the denied history of migration and Germany as a traditional “non-immigration country” on the one hand, and an often-superimposed pluralistic diversity in German society on the other, demonstrate an unprecedented challenge to a formerly homogeneous national and continental community. In such a community, the promise of democracy did not and still does not materialize for all. German citizens and non-citizens with the supposedly opening of the borders between East and West in 1989, but rather fosters the installment of new walls in front of the “Euro-club”: fences, detention camps, deportation to civil war zones, reduced social benefits, bans on family reunification, tightened residence requirements, and so on. As in the 1990s in Germany, migration management has become a euphemism for repelling people.

Although Germany became a “de facto immigration country” at the turn of the millennium with the reform of the citizenship law moving away from the law of blood to the law of soil—and although a welcoming culture has increasingly grown since it was brought to life by migrant communities in the wake of Europe’s “migration crisis” in 2015—the notion of an established host society dominates. Such a society unilaterally motivates people with migration biographies to integrate into it, still for the benefit of national economic interests.

Ellen Kollender and Veronika Kourabas describe how the instrumentalization of migrants as “ethnicized integration entrepreneurs of their own” goes hand in hand with refugee and integration management undertaken by the state.<sup>71</sup> For example, the cooperation of the Federal Office for Migration and Refugees (BAMF) with consulting firms such as McKinsey demonstrates how private-sector agencies and consulting firms are commissioned to develop “pragmatic solutions” for migration and integration policy challenges.<sup>72</sup> Here Germany’s suppression of immigration as a structural prerequisite of the “normal” functioning capitalist order recalls the well-known words of Max Frisch in 1965: “We wanted a labor

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<sup>71</sup> Ellen Kollender and Veronika Kourabas, “Zwischen Ein- und Ausschluss der ‘Anderen’: (Dis-)Kontinuitäten rassistischer und ökonomistischer Argumentationen im Diskurs um Migration von der ‘Gastarbeit’ bis heute,” *Wissen schafft Demokratie* 7 (2020): 93, <https://doi.org/10.19222/202007/08>.

<sup>72</sup> Kollender and Kourabas, 93.

force, but human beings came.”<sup>73</sup> Here a step towards overcoming the “dehistorization” of migration, described by Boris Buden and Lina Dokuzović as the “tacit ideological precondition for its populist politicization,”<sup>74</sup> would be to finally stop considering migration as a sudden issue, threat, and state of exception.

In this light, the question arises how a German postmigrant society<sup>75</sup> might look like that is not only “rhetorically” propagated but rather forms alliances between Others: by freeing the German nation from its dependence on migrants, asylum seekers and refugees as a representation of the Other and whose acceptance is not predominantly linked to their economic productivity and performance.

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<sup>73</sup> Original quote: “Wir riefen Arbeitskräfte und es kamen Menschen.” Max Frisch, introduction to *Siamo Italiani: Gespräche mit Italienischen Arbeitern in der Schweiz*, ed. Alexander Seiler (Zurich: EVZ, 1965), 7.

<sup>74</sup> Buden and Dokuzović, eds., *They’ll Never Walk Alone*, 17.

<sup>75</sup> See Naika Foroutan, Juliane Karakayali, and Riem Spielhaus, eds., *Postmigrantische Perspektiven: Ordnungssysteme, Repräsentationen, Kritik* (Frankfurt: Campus, 2018), 10.

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**Language**

Lia Lola Vlado Kotnik\*

## Gender and Its Discontents<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

gender, transgender, gender unease, gender theory, gender practice, gender studies

### Abstract

Gender produces multiple discontents (unease, discomfort, embarrassment, irritation, annoyance) in society. With this straightforward thesis the author addresses the problem of gender—Butlerian “gender trouble”—as a form of cultural discontent or unease. During the ground-breaking and path-paving women’s, feminist, gay and lesbian movements, gender, then female gender, caused cultural irritation for the patriarchy of the then societies and continues to do so to this very day. However, with the recent transgender movement, this cultural unease about gender has taken on entirely new dimensions, including turning gender into an alarming issue, a threatening global specter and annoyingly omnipresent conflict not only in wider society but also in academia. These uneasy issues are here tackled in two ways, through the theory and practice of gender. The way subversive gender theory can trigger collective unease, even if it is falsely imposed, artificially induced, and manipulatively orchestrated, is shown using the example of the abuse of Judith Butler’s gender theory by polemicists in culture war debates surrounding gender and proponents and supporters of the anti-gender movement, clearly betraying their intention of harming communities of gender non-conforming people and those communities’ efforts towards social, political, and legal emancipation. The way transgressive gender practice can trigger relational discomfort in everyday interactions is illustrated through the author’s own “gender story” in the form of a short autoethnography of gender unease, to illustrate the problem of deep sex/gender binarism, essentialism, primordial-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is a translation of the unpublished Slovenian version entitled “Spol in nelagodje,” literally “Gender and Unease,” “Gender and Discontent,” or “Gender and Discomfort,” and appears here as a paraphrase of the English translation of Freud’s book *Civilization and Its Discontents*.

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ism, perennialism, and naturalism permeating, completely spontaneously and unreflexively, all our thoughts, words, actions, relationships, institutions, and collectives.

## Spol in nelagodje

### Ključne besede

spol, transspolnost, nelagodje spola, teorija spola, praksa spola, študiji spolov

### Povzetek

Spol povzroča številna nelagodja (v obliki neugodja, neprijetnosti, zadrege, nerodnosti, vznemirjenja) v družbi. S to preprosto tezo avtorica naslavlja problem spola—butterjevsko “težavo s spolom”—kot obliko kulturnega nelagodja. Že v času prelomnih in pot utirajočih si ženskih, feminističnih, gejevskih in lezbičnih gibanj je spol, takrat prvenstveno ženski spol, povzročil kulturno vznemirjenost patriarhata tedanjih družb in jo povzroča še danes. Toda z nedavnim transspolnim gibanjem je to nelagodje v zvezi s spolom dobilo popolnoma nove razsežnosti, vključno s pretvorbo spola v nekakšno alarmantno družbeno vprašanje, strah vzbujajočo globalno fantazmo in nadležno vseprisoten konflikt ne le v širši družbi, ampak tudi v akademskem svetu. Tovrstnega kulturnega nelagodja spola se tu lotevamo z dveh zornih kotov, skozi teorijo spola in prakso spola. Način, na katerega lahko subverzivna teorija spola sproži kolektivno nelagodje, tudi če je slednje lažno proizvedeno, umetno vsiljeno in manipulativno orkestrirano, je prikazan na primeru zlorabe teorije spola Judith Butler s strani antigenderistov, kar zgovorno izdaja njihov namen, tj. škodovati transspolni, interspolni in spolno nebinarni skupnosti ter zavreti njena prizadevanja za družbeno, politično in pravno priznanje ter temeljno emancipacijo na ravni človekovih pravic. Način, na katerega lahko transgresivna praksa spola sproži odnosno nelagodje v vsakdanjih medčloveških stikih, je ponazorjen z avtoričino lastno življenjsko »zgodbo spola« v obliki kratke avtoetnografije nelagodja spola, ki nakazuje na problem globokega spolnega binarizma, esencializma, primordializma, perenializma in naturalizma, ki povsem spontano in nerefleksivno prežema vse naše misli, besede, dejanja, odnose, institucije in kolektive.



### Gender as Unease

While information, understanding, and knowledge certainly can give rise to discontent or unease, their lack (in its various forms as non-/mis-/dis-/mal-/anti-/

post-information/understanding/knowledge) has the potential to make the discontent or unease even more socially intolerable. This may be a fairly epistemic claim, yet without the sort of epistemological aspirations and investments present in the monograph *Trans(spol)nost* (Trans(gender)ness);<sup>2</sup> here, the question of gender is addressed as a form of cultural discontent or unease (Freud's *Unbehagen*) generated in a number of ways by the theory and practice of gender.<sup>3</sup> The claim may be too strong and too ambitious, considering that it was initially put forth in a low-risk, academic setting.<sup>4</sup> Still, while the occasion suddenly prompting these preliminary thoughts on gender and unease may have been a small one, some of the ideas expressed here are ones the author has been privately mulling over for at least two decades. What follows, then, is neither a complete theoretical analysis of gender unease in all its social, relational and epistemic manifestations nor the final outcome of a program of empirical research, but rather develops a starting point from which to approach the topic, which the author might decide to explore with more academic rigor at some later point.

Discussions of gender seem alarmingly ever-present in our time, a feverish topic triggering a wider unease in society. Whether considered: an unavoidable destiny; a natural given; a fact of biology; an essential entity; a visible body; a sexual difference; an interior identity; a fixed box; a fluid state; an intimate feeling; an imagined community; a relational reality; a categorical apparatus; a scientific episteme; an academic issue; a part of a political agenda; an historical regime; a public matter; a social construct; a legal status; an ideological dogma; a bureaucratic norm; a statistical datum; a piece of viral information; a cultural practice; an everyday attribute; or, a system of oppression, over the recent decades gender—this bio-psycho-social complex, this layered multi-constitution, this deep socialization—has attracted enormous attention by academics and activists as well as by the broader public.<sup>5</sup> The responsibility for gender becoming

<sup>2</sup> See Vlado Kotnik, *Trans(spol)nost: Arheologija trans/vednosti* [Trans(gender)ness: The archaeology of trans/knowledge] (Ljubljana: Krtina, 2022), 69–129, 449–55.

<sup>3</sup> Kotnik, 66, 452.

<sup>4</sup> A fifteen-minute talk at the Roza\_simpozij on June 19, 2024, part of the series of events Roza\_ZRC+ organized by ZRC SAZU (Scientific Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts) as the foremost scientific institution in Slovenia to raise awareness about LGBTQIA+ persons' lives, rights, scientific and artistic achievements, culture and social visibility both in the Slovenian academic community and in the broader society.

<sup>5</sup> The list of relevant literature dealing with different representations of gender is long, so here is only a short selection of works for further reading: Simone de Beauvoir, *The*

a pre-eminent “trouble” of our society, according to the detractors of a reflexive and subversive understanding of gender, lies with one single person: the philosopher, gender theorist, and nonbinary activist Judith Butler. Moreover,

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*Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011); Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Routledge, 1994); R. A. Briggs and B. R. George, *What Even Is Gender?* (New York: Routledge, 2023); Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge 1990), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), and *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Tina Chanter, *Gender: Key Concepts in Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2007); Heath Fogg Davis, *Beyond Trans: Does Gender Matter?* (New York: New York University Press, 2017); Micaela Di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Muriel Dimen and Virginia Goldner, eds., *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space: Between Clinic and Culture* (New York: Other Press, 2010); Anne Fausto-Sterling's *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Men and Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) and *Sex/Gender: Biology in a Social World* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Liberation: A Movement Whose Time Has Come* (New York: World View Forum, 1992); Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler, eds., *Psychoanalysis, Gender, and Sexualities: From Feminism to Trans\** (New York: Routledge, 2022); Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans: A New History of Gender* (New York: Seal Press, 2022); Sally Hines' *TransForming Gender: Transgender Practices of Identity, Intimacy and Care* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2007) and *Is Gender Fluid? A Primer for the 21st Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2020); Mary Holmes, *What Is Gender? Sociological Approaches* (London: Sage, 2007); Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, eds., *Gender: A Sociological Reader* (London: Routledge, 2002); Judith Lorber and Susan Farrell, eds., *The Social Construction of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Rosalind Minsky, *Psychoanalysis and Gender: An Introductory Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2014); Ann Oakley, *The Ann Oakley Reader: Gender, Women & Social Science* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2005); Nina Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega: O nebinarnih spolnih in seksualnih identitetah v Sloveniji* [Expanding the horizons of the possible: On non-binary gender and sexual identities in Slovenia] (Ljubljana: Založba FDV, 2020); Sabrina Ramet, ed., *Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Raka Ray, Jennifer Carlson, and Abigail Andrews, *The Social Life of Gender* (Berkeley: Sage, 2018); Peggy Reeves Sanday and Ruth Gallagher Goodenough, eds., *Beyond the Second Sex: New Directions in the Anthropology of Gender* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Charlotte Chucky Tate, Ella Ben Hagai, and Faye J. Crosby, *Undoing the Gender Binary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); David Valentine, *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007); Valerija Vendramin and Renata Šribar, *Spoli, seksualnost in nasilje skozi nove medije* [Genders, sexuality, and violence through new media] (Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut, 2010).

the trouble can be traced to one single book of theirs: *Gender Trouble*.<sup>6</sup> Herein, Butler offers a true, erudite theory of gender as opposed to the disingenuous “theories” that queerphobes and transphobes evoke and weaponize in their polemics, campaigns, and mobilizations against communities of gender non-conforming people.

### Gender Theory as Collective Unease

*Gender Trouble* struck at the very foundations of how gender had been understood until then, bringing Butler both global fame and grave accusations. A watershed book for a reflexive theory of gender, over the three decades since its publication it has been credited with and blamed for a wide range of ideas. Among the general public, two mistaken readings or else intentional false allegations have recently stood out as particularly incendiary: first, the notion that Butler denies the existence of biological sex, claiming that the biology of sex has nothing to do with reality, hence is something inexistent, made up; and second, that Butler insists that gender is merely and simply a choice, claiming that all people experience and choose gender in the manner of arbitrarily shopping for it in a “supermarket of gender.” These types of simplistic, deceitful and misleading claims, had they actually been made by Butler, would obviously be expected not just to provoke unease in society, but to draw sharp criticism from serious academia. Butler’s theory of gender as performative did attract some justified commentary from academics and activists, yet none was such as to warrant their name triggering cultural unease, moral panic, collective ire, and orchestrated hate and violence in society. So, what were Butler’s theoretical claims that have earned them such aversion and deathly hatred in some social circles, particularly among certain rabble-raising political factions and their adherents and followers, recently manifested in such worrying incidents as labelling Butler’s work as “diabolical” or Butler as the “witch” of gender theory or even as the burning of Butler in effigy by extreme rightists and anti-gender protesters?<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>7</sup> Alexandre Aragão, “Please Watch This Insane Footage of Judith Butler Being Called a Witch in Brazil,” BuzzFeed News, November 8, 2017, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/alexandrearagao/judith-butler-brazil>; Scott Jaschik, “Judith Butler on Being Attacked in Brazil,” Inside Higher Ed, November 12, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/judith-butler-discusses-being-burned-effigy-and-protested-brazil>;

Regarding the first colossal lie, Butler has never claimed that sex does not exist. What they have claimed was that sex—just like gender—is not the sort of biological reality that is given *a priori* but something that is brought about in the manner of representing sex through repetitive acts. Sex, then, is fundamentally a performative reality, not a primordial, biological one, since the biological reality of sex itself is only realized through a developmental reality of sex, hence through a processual performative reality of gender. In other words, the biological/natural and social/cultural determinations of sex/gender are always already performative, since human beings, as carriers and creators of sex/gender information, are in fact sexed/gendered multi-constitutionally and multi-processually. Both sex and gender are something that is imagined, perceived, declared, practiced, polished, drilled, and disciplined, meaning that they are not permanently given but subject to change and *un/doing*. This claim of Butler's called into question the established belief that "true" gender is based in nature and in bodies that are necessarily heteronormative. The self-evident, quasi-natural foundation of biological sex was thereby revealed as something naturalized, reified, always already socially determined as a complex of regulatory, institutional, and collective fictions supporting a hierarchical binary of sex/gender, phallogocentrism, and enforced heterosexism, and as effects disguised as causes. Biological sex, then, cannot be considered as some "pre-discursive"<sup>8</sup> (chromosomal, hormonal, anatomical) fact, given that sex is, by definition, already socially imagined through-and-through. Gender, in turn, does not causally follow from sex, hence it cannot be reduced to a multiple or diverse interpretation of a unified, monolithic, uniform, mono-constituted biological sex. According to Butler, then, both sex and gender are, to various extents, constructs of patriarchy and apparatuses for cultural production of sex/gender. Gender is not a cultural interpretation of sex but rather "a kind of persistent impersonation that pass-

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Ingrid Cyfer, "A bruxa está solta: Os protestos contra a visita de Judith Butler ao Brasil à luz de sua reflexão sobre ética, política e vulnerabilidade" [The witch is loose: Protest against Judith Butler's visit to Brazil in light of her reflections on ethics, politics and vulnerability], *Cadernos Pagu* 53 (2018): e185303, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/18094449201800530003>; Judith Butler, "Why Is the Idea of 'Gender' Provoking Backlash the World Over?" *Guardian*, October 23, 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/commentisfree/2021/oct/23/judith-butler-gender-ideology-backlash>; Finn Mackay, "Who's Afraid of Gender? by Judith Butler Review—the Gender Theorist Goes Mainstream," *Guardian*, March 13, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/mar/13/whos-afraid-of-gender-by-judith-butler-review-the-gender-theorist-goes-mainstream>.

<sup>8</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 7.



es as the real,”<sup>9</sup> that is, a form of perpetual emulation, imitation, simulation, which comes to be considered as the reality of gender. The predominant “gender feels,” to borrow from Briggs and George<sup>10</sup>—that is, male and female, whether these “feels” refer to materiality (associated to the body and its biological sexual characteristics), to expression (associated to gender roles and gendered behaviour), or classification (associated to membership in a gender category, whether legally recognized or not, majority or minority)—are both similarly produced through a stylized repetition of “special effects” of their bio-psycho-social phenomenality, which is always already collectively constructed, wrought, assembled on the basis of thousands of repeated/repeatable gestures, conceived/conceivable attitudes, distributed/distributable positions, performed/performable images, imagined/imaginable scripts. Rather than somehow biologically destined, genders are a matter of cultural matrices and classifications within which gender identities would not even be thinkable nor could they be, in Benedict Anderson’s terminology, *imagined*.<sup>11</sup> Just like identities in general, gender identities, rather than possessing an innate core, are a matter of constant doing<sup>12</sup> and re-doing of *bricolage*: “In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. [. . .] There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results.”<sup>13</sup> According to Butler, the body, understood by gender primordialists, naturalists, essentialists, perennialists, and anti-genderists as a petrified manifestation of sex, is not a prepared surface waiting to be given a meaning, but is first and foremost—to put it in Pierre Bourdieu’s praxeological terms—a set of structured/structuring individual and collective practices that are characterized, designated or marked on multiple levels: physical, psychical, material, spiritual, mental, emotional, economic, cultural, political, symbolical. Sex, then, is no more a body’s “interior truth” than the fact that each sexed body is a “performatively enacted signification,” so that “sex [is], by definition, [. . .] gender all along”;<sup>14</sup> i.e. the fact

<sup>9</sup> Butler, viii.

<sup>10</sup> Briggs and George, *What Even Is Gender?*, particularly chap. 2 “All the Feels: Against ‘Gender Identity.’”

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 6–7.

<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 22–25, 32–34.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, 25.

<sup>14</sup> Butler, 8.

that sex is nothing but gender, or something that is always-already given [*toujours-déjà-donné*] as gender, to put it in impeccably Althusserian terms. As for gender, it is in fact a deeply socialized/socializing set of performative acts people learn and recreate by (re)imagining and (re)presenting them.

Regarding the second colossal lie: Butler never claimed that gender is chosen in the manner of arbitrarily shopping for gender as for a commodity on offer in a “supermarket of gender.” They did claim that our gender happens as its constant performance. We are never naturally in our gender; we are only gendered and un-gendered performatively. The theory of *gender performativity* is regularly misrepresented and misinterpreted as *gender performance*, facilitating accusations that Butler dismisses sex, claiming that sex is in essence gender and gender simply a costume that can be put on, taken off and exchanged for another on a whim, several times per day—a view that actually fits perfectly with the utterly trivialized commodification of gender under turbo-capitalist neoliberalism, but certainly has nothing to do with a truly Butlerian reflexive and subversive theory of gender.<sup>15</sup> What Butler does claim is that gender is *performative* in that it involves the stylized repetition of gestures from whose routine enactment gender comes to emerge. Furthermore, that mechanical enacting of gender, far from being voluntary, far from unconstrained or frivolous, and even further from perfectly free, is collectively, socially expected, desired, prescribed, demanded, controlled, regulated, and sanctioned. The theory of gender performativity argues that the enactment of sex, gender, and sexuality is linked to power in society. From this rather Foucauldian premise, Butler draws the obvious inference that the reason cisgenderness/cisnormativity and heterosexuality/heteronormativity (as we would call them today) are socially constructed as natural is that the opposition of male and female sex is perceived, in the social imaginary, as natural, rather than a result of *doing* and/or *undoing* gender. Their key claim, however, is that sex/gender is always already an imitation, that is, that sex/gender is always enacted in the manner of performing it without a genuine original to base it on. Even more, Butler argues that there never was a “prior,” “primordial,” “initial,” “original,” “ultimate,” or even “perennial” sex in

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<sup>15</sup> For gender as fashion-stylized performative, see Vlado Kotnik and Tadej Praprotnik, *Več kot moda: Onkraj oblačilnih, telesnih, spolnih, odnosnih in komunikacijskih ortodoksij* [More than fashion: Beyond orthodoxies of clothing, body, gender, relationships, and communication] (Koper: Založba Univerze na Primorskem, 2023).

the sense of pre-given and enduring *natural* or *essential sex*<sup>16</sup> later to be socially and culturally shaped, perfected, or reworked, but rather that—as new evidence from gender history suggests—at least since the thirteenth century, sex has been explicitly naturalized. This is followed by its intense essentialization since the late eighteenth century. Both of these claims in themselves were provocative enough, but certainly the case for them required neither the denial of biological sex nor the theorization of a gender supermarket. Both continue to be relevant today and belong to the standard repertory of key findings of gender studies, despite critiques of certain failings in Butler’s interpretation of gender as performative in the emergent academic field of transgender studies.<sup>17</sup>

At the time *Gender Trouble* was first published, the claim that performing gender is always already an imitation, a fabrication, a frivolous game, a makeup, or a masquerade, was no doubt beneficial in putting up a mirror to the naturalized cisgender and heterosexual identities. At the time, these naturalized and essentialized cisgender and heterosexual identities were, and continue to be, well protected through the socially-situated and legally recognized categories of sex and sexuality. Thus, Butler’s theorization certainly continues to challenge the processes thus far identified. However, such a challenge necessarily beneficial to minority sexual and gender identities, such as transgender, intersex, and non-binary, whose attempts to establish for themselves a place and category in society hinge on convincing the hetero- and cisnormativized majority that transgender, intersex, and gender non-binary identities are just as real and therefore in need of social classification and legal recognition of their specific situations, conditions, and feelings of gender; and finally, that non-dominant gender situations, conditions, and feelings are no gender masquerade, let alone supermarket, but on the contrary, legitimate, genuine experiences of gender identity and integrity. Transgender studies, critical in this aspect of Butler’s notion of performing gender performative, tried to overcome the problem in the sense of *deperformancing* (NB: not deperformativizing) gender, in order to draw attention to the fact that it is not just people who perform gender (and if they do so, they can also subvert or non-perform it) but also gender that performs people (in the

<sup>16</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 6–7, 94–106.

<sup>17</sup> See Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Susan Stryker and Aren Aizura, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Kotnik, *Trans(spol)nost*.

sense that gender, as a category possessed with performative force, produces effects on people's genderedness, on how they are gendered and how they gender themselves). In short, transgender studies' criticism of Butler stemmed from the perception that Butler considered gender more in the sense of *performance* rather than of *performativity*.

Butler would later acknowledge and additionally explain that there is a difference between *gender performance* and *gender performativity*. In a 2011 interview, they explain:

It's one thing to say that gender is performed and that is a little different from saying gender is performative. When we say gender is performed we usually mean that we've taken on a role or we're acting in some way and that our acting or our role playing is crucial to the gender that we are and the gender that we present to the world. To say that gender is performative is a little different because for something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk in ways that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman. [. . .] We act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time, so to say gender is performative is to say that nobody really is a gender from the start. I know it's controversial, but that's my claim.<sup>18</sup>

The high-minded or well-informed *Homo academicus* and *Homo ordinarius* of the western world did not have to wait for Butler's *Gender Trouble*; since the late 1960s, they have been able to reimagine gender, drawing on important key insights gradually organized in the inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary scholarly corpus of gender studies.<sup>19</sup> Lest we forget however, this complex and diverse

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<sup>18</sup> Judith Butler, "Your Behavior Creates Your Gender," YouTube video, uploaded by Big Think, June 6, 2011, 3:01, <https://youtu.be/Bo7o2LYATDc>.

<sup>19</sup> See Robert Jesse Stoller, *Sex and Gender: On the Development of Masculinity and Femininity* (New York: Science House, 1968); John Money and Anke Ehrhardt, *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl: The Differentiation and Dimorphism of Gender Identity from Conception to Maturity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972); Ann Oakley, *Sex, Gender and Society: Towards a New Society* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1972); Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, *Gender: An Ethnomethodological Approach* (New York: Wiley, 1978); Sarah Fenstermaker and Candace West, eds., *Doing Gender, Doing Difference Inequality, Power, and Institutional Change* (London: Routledge, 2002); Anne Cranny-Francis et al.,

erudite contribution to the theory and practice of gender—to put it in somewhat Bourdieusian terms—does not encompass all of the reality of recent academic, activist, and general social interest in gender. Parallel to relevant scientific findings, pertinent theoretical contributions, and credible activist investments, the recent decades have seen the rise of conservative, populist, retraditionalizing, and anti-gender movements and campaigns basing the legitimacy of their social interest in gender and their public addressing of gender on conspiracist, moralistic, paternalist, essentialist, naturalist, anti-feminist, sexist, misogynistic, homophobic, queerphobic, and transphobic speech on gender—or rather, against gender. The entire heritage of progressive imagining of sex/gender as a manifestation of the long development of enlightening cultural, intellectual, and scientific insights into sex/gender, when exploited by these movements for instant media appeal, is debased to the level of a “gender lobby,” “gender agenda,” “gender theory,” “gender ideology,” or even “gender revolution.” According to some authors, these pejorative and negative anti-gender labels are empty signifiers distilling a mix of denial of the sex/gender distinction, advocacy of the traditional patriarchal family, opposition to same-sex marriage, incitement of moral panic, promotion of conspiracy theories predicting the impending downfall of the “old world,” demands for a new order and similar non-egalitarian, unjust, and non-inclusive mobilizations.<sup>20</sup> The advocacy of gender equality, equity, diversity, and inclusivity is painted by such hostile movements as some sort of “gender conspiracy” or “dangers of gender” directly threatening the existence of the “natural order” of sex/gender system tasked with imagining sex/gender within the confines of traditional patriarchal values, obviously considered as “natural.”

More than thirty years after *Gender Trouble* was published, Butler is still having to field its misreadings and the manufacturing of collective unease around

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*Gender Studies: Terms and Debates* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan, *Fifty Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (London: Sage, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> See Sabine Hark and Paula-Irene Villa, eds., *Anti-Genderismus: Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen* [Anti-genderism: Sexuality and gender as arenas of current political conflicts] (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2015); Roman Kuhar and David Paternotte, eds., *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017); Agnieszka Graff and Elżbieta Korolczuk, *Anti-Gender Politics in the Populist Moment* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

it. Most recently, their tellingly entitled book *Who's Afraid of Gender?*<sup>21</sup> is an attempt to explain how over the last decade, shameful gender conservatism, populism, and fierce “culture wars” and “gender wars,” particularly in the US and the UK, have turned gender into an “alarming matter,” a fear-inducing global specter that has become a convergence point of all fears and worries around sexuality, bodies, intimacy, sex, and even the future survival of humanity itself. Such worries about an apocalyptic and cataclysmic “collapse” of gender “as we knew it” in the west, *ergo* of Western civilization as such, has been systematically whipped up by populist and conservative political factions as an effective tool against gender and sexual minorities and their social, political, and legal emancipation. All this trouble, supposedly, is entirely Butler’s doing by paving the way for the transgender movement to kick off in the 1990s with the memorable trans-liberating message that “there are more than two sexes/genders.” Suggesting that the book could just as easily be called “Who’s Afraid of Judith Butler?” is not entirely facetious. The fact is that the fears and worries fixated on the anti-genderist notion of “gender” as a weapon against the transgender movement and transgender community, as explored by Butler in this new book, are similarly fixated on its author, viewed among such hateful detractors as an almost diabolical figure.

Having said this much about the unease caused by the Butlerian theory of gender, whether fundamentally misunderstood or subject to nefarious lies about its intentions and contributions, let us now move on to the unease provoked by gender practice.

### Gender Practice as Relational Unease

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While it might seem that discussion of unease is easier and less fraught when it centers on others’ unease rather than the author’s own, I will make an exception here and start with myself as the person I know best. The author, then, has often—in fact regularly—had unknown/unknowing people approach her as a woman and address her as such without reservations, in short, and in Althusserian terms, interpellate her into the subject position of a woman. Seeing her for the first time, or (still) seeing her without “knowing,” she is a woman in their

<sup>21</sup> Judith Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (London: Allen Lane, 2024). The title is presumably punning on Edward Albee’s theater piece *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962).

eyes. Just a woman, no more and no less than a woman. A woman entirely untroubling, unsuspecting, unquestionable, and harmless, in short, a *real woman*, a *natural woman* so to say; nothing to subtract there, nothing to add, nothing to prove. A woman who, to put it in Lévi-Straussian terms, has nature and culture on her side. That, at least, is how she appears in the eyes of the unknown/unknowing—at *first glance*.

But that first glance at the harmonious correspondence between nature and culture in this woman is a short-lived one. The perceived “naturalness,” “normality,” and “regularity” are gone the moment the unknown/unknowing person, on meeting the woman, hears her name, which does not sound like a woman’s; or, even more commonly, the moment another, supposedly “in the know,” whispers to the unknown/unknowing person that who they see is not “really” a woman; or when they find out, one way or another, that she is a special kind of woman, a different woman, a transwoman. This specific circumstance triggers a cascade of dramatic twists whereby that first glance is immediately suspended, repressed, and transformed into a *last look*, which is nothing more than a repeatedly corrected, refused, subverted, and abolished first glance. The last look—one of the *longue durée*—is in fact a perpetual negation of the first glance. More precisely, a negation of its “natural order.” This, then, is a situation where a new piece of information intervenes into the unknown/unknowing person’s first glance as their “natural look”—a cognitive or pseudo-cognitive watershed moment redefining everything past and defining everything to come, reordering things afresh; this moment is the point of emergence of unease in the relationship. The unease unfolds from nothingness, like Michel Chion’s acousmatic sound/voice, permeating the invisible ether of the relationship; sometimes so powerfully unspeakable as to become almost palpable.<sup>22</sup> In other cases, awkward or half-spoken (with backpedaling and apologizing: “I didn’t know you weren’t a woman,” “my bad, you do look like a woman,” “I apologize for mistaking your gender,” “forgive me for misgendering you,” “I’m sorry I didn’t notice before” etc.), almost never spoken appropriately, in such a way as not to produce relational unease, sometimes more in the other person than in herself, sometimes in herself too as the result of the other person’s unease. Most notably, it almost never occurs to these uninformed contacts who supposedly made a

<sup>22</sup> Michel Chion, *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 32, 71–73, 221.

“slip,” a “mistake,” a “misjudgment,” that perhaps there was no mistake at all, that their first glance was, in fact, perfectly correct, while the last look, the one they think is finally correct, absolutely missed the mark.

For many years, others’ unease, which might offer material for an illuminating (auto)ethnographic inquiry into gender unease, was her own. She was uneasy because they were: unease with unease. Recently, she has been systematically working on reducing the frequency and the force of this uneasy transference, telling herself that others’ unease is not hers. It is their unease, and it should stay with them, since it is themselves who produce it in contact with her or rather about her not face to face. Her supposed gender “non-normativity,” “nonconformity,” “incongruity,” “otherness” is, in fact, relationally independent. Even more, in contact with unknown/unknowing people—those not initiated into the “deep truth” about her—she passes perfectly until the moment they “learn” about her. It is only when/if they “learn” that her gender becomes an issue for them, something to be corrected, doubted, undermined, refuted.

It is extremely telling that all the distortions, misrepresentations, censorship, and corrections of her authentic gender (dis)positions by others have led her to prefer to entrust her “deep truth” to clothes rather than people. In her mind, clothes, unlike people, have never betrayed her. They have allowed her to achieve social visibility, legitimacy, credibility, and integrity for what other people had consistently overlooked in her, whether intentionally or not, but certainly systematically blind to it: the fact that she is a woman. Clothes have been an unspoken and relatively conflict-free means of her transformation into a manifest woman. They did for her what others’ gender blindness undid. More precisely: clothes did not make her a woman; they simply confirmed her being a woman. While in some intellectual discourses, fashion is still considered as something banal, trivial, surface-level, non-formative, unintelligible, that is, a more or less anti-intellectual and non-transformative practice, it was the only thing she could turn to unconditionally in her quest for social legitimacy and prosperity:

No one in the outside world—the world outside of my family—truly got used to my appearance, my looks, my being presumably “evidently different.” The early warnings received in the school system would be followed up on in a number of ways. No milieu was exempt: neither the peers, nor the country’s healthcare, nor



Slovenian academia, nor any other formative system. Possibly the only sphere of activity to specifically assist me in my trans difference in society, without reservations, was the sphere of fashion. After twenty years of secondary socializational, institutional, and pseudo-institutional indoctrinating attempts at putting me into “the correct box,” clothes were what effected my unspoken coming out. Without ado. Without words. My clothing served as my silent, yet persistent manifesto of my trans difference.<sup>23</sup>

Fashion, then, is what this woman has been using as a makeshift means of patching up others’ gender unease as she encounters it.

A special chapter in this autoethnography of gender unease is reserved for people who have “known” (about) her for years, who similarly deceive themselves into historicizing their frequent mistakes in addressing her, justifying themselves by appealing to the time they supposedly got to know her as a non-woman. She might tell such (un)knowledgeable acquaintances—as specifically domesticated holders of petrified gender (non-)knowledge—that in truth there never was such an original, supposedly male, for them to really (get to) know, despite their tendency to consider it as some fossilized primordial thing, indisputably anterior to the reality of the woman they see and know now that her “woman-ness” has been made explicitly apparent. Let us leave cracking this unpleasantly tough essentialist nut for another time.

Finally, another special chapter in this autoethnography of gender unease might be dedicated to those “abusive knowledgeable acquaintances” who, informed of this woman’s self-identification, express their ignorance, disrespect, and spite bluntly: violence and abuse, through misaddressing her, which of course is never just a matter of misaddressing but also one of misgendering. Misaddressing produces misgendering and *vice versa*. These are situations that not only give rise to relational unease but transform relational unease into relational violence. As already foreseen by the unfortunate philosopher Althusser, successful interpellation of the subject is not possible without self-interpellation: if the interpellation is to take effect, a subject interpellated into a certain subject position must recognize themselves in the interpellation. Misaddressing and misgendering, then, are rather a matter of forceful, violent interpellation

<sup>23</sup> Kotnik and Praprotnik, *Več kot moda*, 194.

as a form of power mechanism increasing, rather than diminishing unease, violence, and conflict.

What is the source of all this relational unease? Why does gender cause so much burden of unease not only in the general society but also in academia? Why is it that a privileged subject such as a *Homo academicus*,<sup>24</sup> as a Lacanian subject who is supposed to know (*le sujet-supposé-savoir*)—to know better and more—, can be just as spontaneously, radically, and systematically unerringly mistaken as a *homo ordinarius*, who is not usually expected to be initiated into scholarly truths, scientific findings, and reflexive skills and is generally not interpellated into a holder of knowledge, at least not an erudite one, certainly not a Lacanian subject supposed to know? These are questions the author has been asking for decades, given that the story of her life is one of permanent preoccupation with her (trans-/inter-/non-)sex/gender and reactions to it; it is a story of an abundant (lack of) thinking of her distinctive sexedness/genderedness, her gendering by others and her self-gendering. When it comes to *Homo academicus*, the story of his not-thinking of gender is particularly striking. On this subject, this particular woman has thirty years of experience with the specifically constituted and socialized academic agent, the *Homo academicus à la slovène*, whose virtually endemic provincialism, obscurantism, and anti-intellectualism reveal him not only in his Lacanian position of a subject supposed to know, but also that of a subject supposing himself to know. To put it in Lacanian, Foucauldian, and Althusserian terms combined, this particular *Homo academicus*' "gender knowledge" functioned and still functions not only as knowledge of a *subject who is supposed to know*, therefore as knowledge of a *subject whose power is supposed to know* (*un pouvoir supposé savoir*), but as knowledge of a subject who *always-already* (*toujours-déjà*) knows. When it comes to gender, this type of all-knowing, bumbling subject, unprepared for gender reflexivity and unequipped for gender reflection, behaves as if knowing all about gender on the basis that everyone has one anyway, and even more, that it is given to everyone in an unambiguous, i.e. "natural" way as the only possible, thinkable way there is. But let us leave the Slovenian *Homo academicus*' gender trouble aside.

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<sup>24</sup> See Vlado Kotnik, *Homo academicus in mediji: Bourdieujevske meditacije* [Homo academicus and the media: Bourdieusian meditations] (Koper: Univerzitetna založba Annales, 2016), 159–95.

## Gender Unease as *Unbehagen*

While unease seems to lack both a clear definition and unanimous scholarly conceptualization, as at best an indefinably and impalpably unfavorable, unfortunate, unpleasant “mood,” “sensation,” “feeling,” it is rather unmissable that unease functions not only as a(n) (unseen, hidden) psychical formation but also as a (visible, manifest) social structure determining cultural practices. Gender unease, particularly related to the notion of more than two sexes/genders, is neither something necessarily psychological nor biological, nor yet a combination of the two; neither is it something natural, but rather a matter of culture and society. The first to come to mind when attempting to explain such gender unease (*Unbehagen*) is Freud’s 1930 *Civilization and Its Discontents* (*Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*).<sup>25</sup> In this book, our ingenious Viennese psychoanalyst’s approach to the *Unbehagen* in culture is surprisingly non-psychoanalytical, almost sociological, emphasizing the social dimension of unease, which, at first glance, had appeared—including in his clinical and psychoanalytical practice—as a matter of individual psychology. Whether Freud’s “sociologisation”<sup>26</sup> of unease is taken

<sup>25</sup> It was first published in German in 1930 as *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (literally “Unease in Culture,” “Uneasiness in Culture,” or “Discontent in Culture”) and translated into English as *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Crucial insights into Freud’s *Unbehagen* are here based on the Slovenian translation *Nelagodje v kulturi* (trans. Samo Krušič [Ljubljana: Gyrus, 2001]) and with the help of Mladen Dolar’s afterword to the Slovenian translation. In the following note I quote from the English translation by James Strachey in vol. 21 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*.

<sup>26</sup> Recognizable in Freud’s understanding of culture as a regulatory mechanism that produces the fundamental problem of society, that is, that culture demands the renunciation or deprivation of individuals’ instincts (90, 97, 127–29), especially those that cause (excessive) pleasure, aggression, hostility, or self-destruction, and solves its fundamental problem, that is, that culture protects individuals as social agents against their instinctual nature and thus enables coexistence, community (86, 89–90), hence society. The task of culture is therefore to withdraw instinctual satisfactions or gratifications (127) and set limits or restrictions (112) to individuals’ inclination to pleasures and aggressions as their original, self-subsisting instinctual dispositions (95–97, 104–5, 112, 122). According to Freud, culture indeed suppresses pleasures and aggressions, but in doing so it produces a sense of guilt and anxiety (or rather a feeling of possibilities of guilt and anxiety), whereby such senses and/or feelings are no longer a direct reaction to external authority or externally threatening uneasiness, but the result of permanent internal uneasiness (61, 123–25, 127–28). For Freud, such uneasy senses and/or feelings remain largely unconscious or appear as *Unbehagen*, a sort of free-floating dissatisfaction or oceanic irritation without a clearly detectable source, motive, reason, symptom, content, form, or location. Today gen-

as an attempt at including the social dimension of unease in the field of research of individual psychology or as a psychoanalytical contribution to the deciphering of the psychical formation in the form of the society's collective unconscious and hence of the sociability of culture itself, there is no getting around the insight that behind any and all in-gendering, gendering, and self-gendering there is a social structure. In other words, our gender, or better, our genders are social practices and as such entwined in many social relationships. In fact, there is no gender without the social infrastructure of gender enabling and demanding the perception, recognition, linguistic expression, categorization, and value judgements of gender. There is, in short, nothing self-evidently natural about gender as a social practice. All our practices of in-gendering, gendering, and self-gendering, whether inscribed/inscribing, ascribed/ascribing, or self-ascribed/self-ascribing, are products of the ways gender is socially constituted, determined, organized, and socialized, that is, of the sociality of gender as its fundamental formative, informative, performative, and transformative nature.

In various intellectual traditions within scholarly disciplines, unease was long inscribed mostly or predominantly within the psychological. It was considered as an external expression of the internal, a manifestation of the psyche. This psychologization of unease largely prevented a view of unease as a social phenomenon, a social structure, a social fact, rather than just a psychical phenomenon, structure, or fact. Clearly, Freud must have been aware of this, with regard to sexuality in general as well as to his own sexuality and his attitude to sexuality. The subsequent tradition of psychological and psychoanalytical approaches to unease continued to strongly psychologize the phenomenon.

Less clear is Freud's awareness that sex(/gender), as well as sexuality, is such a social structure engendering a culture of unease and triggering cultural unease. Freud seems to have understood that our attitudes to sexuality result from how sexuality is viewed by our society and culture. Why did he not think to include sex(/gender), unlike for instance his Berlin colleague Magnus Hirschfeld? Is it perhaps that for Freud, in his theoretical and therapeutic practice, the possibility of his own non-heterosexual or not-entirely-heterosexual status was much

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der functions as Freudian *Unbehagen*, a sort of free-floating empty signifier of planetary anxiety and irritation triggered by anything that appears to threaten its binary sex/gender system.

more readily imagined than that of his non-cisgender or not-entirely-cisgender status? There is no doubt that in his psychoanalytical theory and therapy, Freud was a strict gender binarist and essentialist, with the distinction between males(/men) and females(/women) inscribed in the very origins of his psychoanalysis, which is based on sex(/gender) difference, faithfully taken into account when he proposed the mechanisms of denial and splitting of self (to the conscious and unconscious) as a consequence of “bodily” differences between men and women. However, his understanding of sex(/gender) difference was narrowly tied to the anatomical difference from which he inferred a sexual difference, rather than to a historically-produced difference. What, then, is that anatomical difference which then becomes a sexual difference (the Oedipus vs. Electra complexes)? Certainly, Freud did not explore the anatomical difference as something bodily multi-constituted, but in a reductionist way, from the angle of external genital morphology. Freud’s insistence on sex(/gender) difference, going so far as introducing little boys and girls (child sexuality) into his account of human sexuality, stemmed entirely from late nineteenth century views of sexual dimorphism, which Freud was obviously unable to conceive of in ways other than binary, essentialist, and therefore cisnormative. Interestingly, when it came to sexuality, he was able to think it in more flexible, dynamic, processual, and plural ways.<sup>27</sup>

In any case, it seems there are two Freudian messages about unease in culture: first, there is no culture without unease; secondly, no one can always feel at ease in culture, since culture will always produce unease. In other words, there are always reasons why people as social agents feel uneasy in culture. For our purposes, this Freudian starting point can be illuminating, even comforting; however, it can also be harmfully misleading. For instance, trans people are often accused of being “too sensitive” to being misgendered by others. Conversely, trans persons themselves are often too quick to attribute unease about their own gender non-normativity or nonconformity to their own internal states or the states of their own bodies. It is therefore not at all surprising that the predominant view of gender dysphoria (a type of distress in persons whose gender assigned at birth does not match their gender as they experience and express it themselves) is based on a psychological rather than sociological understanding of dysphoria. Gender dysphoria tends to be considered as a problem of the

<sup>27</sup> See editorial note on hermaphroditism in Freud, “Civilization and Its Discontents,” 105n3.

mental state of the transgender person. Certainly, there are trans persons who do not feel at ease in culture because of their inner state which appears to be unrelated to external factors. There are also trans persons whose unease in culture does not stem from inside them but from outside, not from the psyche but from society. The reasons for gender dysphoria, then, may sometimes be social rather than psychological, stemming from social relationships rather than from somewhere deep in the soul:

In other words, transgender people are not born with gender dysphoria but acquire it in the course of their socialization. Some transgender persons explicitly report to have no inner gender dysphoria, being perfectly happy with how mother nature made them, but can still be ascribed with dysphoria because society keeps telling them they don't "fit the mold." The distress or unease they feel does not, therefore, stem from them, from their psyche, but is externally generated, generated by others through objecting, in various ways, to their gender incongruity, pushing them to conform etc. In this sense, gender dysphoria is an eminently social phenomenon.<sup>28</sup>

Our limited and incomplete understanding of gender dysphoria is a consequence of our limited and incomplete understanding of sex/gender itself; of our inability to think it as plural, non-binary, and multi-constituted, rather than unrelentingly dual, binary, and mono-constituted.<sup>29</sup> Gender can be neither thought nor practiced separate from its social constitution, organization, classification, regulation, administration etc. But that precisely which socially establishes gender—its social constitution, organization, classification, regulation, administration etc.—is also the point where gender turns into trouble, but a social trouble, a trouble for society. That is because the very point where gender is constituted is also the starting point for its normativization, narrativization, differentiation, and distinction, while the points of deviation from gender norms and sexual difference are also the points of emergence of devaluing, discrediting, marginalization, stigmatization, pathologization, and discrimination.

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Thus we have circled back to the case of this particular woman, the author, and to the question of how she can get those who "know/have learnt" to understand

<sup>28</sup> Kotnik, *Trans(spol)nost*, 111.

<sup>29</sup> For more on the multi-constitution of sex/gender, see Kotnik, 22–26, 457–60.

that their first-glance impression of her was not wrong; that in fact, it was not their first glance that was mistaken, but their last look; that what they should be apologizing for is the “correct” gendering that is not, rather than the “mis-gendering” that actually never was. Unease with transgender, intersex, and gender nonbinary is revelatory not only of individual and collective unconscious of gender, of the fact that people remain unreconciled with gender, unable to truly think the plurality of sex(es)/gender(s), but also, and even more so, of something else: the fact that such (re)producers of unease are truly deep gender binarists, essentialists, primordialists, perennialists, and naturalists. Their gender-binary, essentialist, primordialist, perennialist, or naturalist unconscious is perhaps most obvious precisely in their unease, which is to be understood as a manifest form of distortion, displacement, suppression of their deeply socialized gender unconscious. Thus, the unease people feel and express on coming into contact with (information on) transgender, intersex, or gender nonbinary persons reveals neither those persons’ gender nor their unconscious, but rather the unconscious of the binarists, essentialists, primordialists, perennialists, and naturalists themselves. What sort of knowledge *is* that, genuinely revealing its holders’ unthinking gender binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism? This question can be understood as an eminently epistemological one, but answers should be looked for not only in gender theory but in (one’s own) gender practice. All the more so because transgender persons deserve a practice of gendering where cis-(re-)producers of unease will finally feel uneasy at manifesting their unthinking gender binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism rather than at coming into contact with someone who does not fit with their gender binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism. Even more: trans people finally deserve to see others becoming capable of acknowledging (to themselves) their own problematic inability to let go of their own binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism. An open acknowledgement that when it comes to gender, almost all of us, whether transgender or not, are in fact deep binarists, essentialists, primordialists, perennialists, and naturalists, since we are all, more or less successfully, socialized into a world of gender binarism, essentialism, primordialism, perennialism, and naturalism, may well be the only way for us to finally, at some point in the future, stop becoming just that.

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# Fostering Social Responsibility through Gender-Inclusive Language in Slovenian<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

Queer linguistics, non-normative genders, non-binary gender identities, gender-inclusive language, transgender-inclusive language, Slovenian

## Abstract

In this paper, we explore the role of Slovenian in constituting non-normative genders. The poststructuralist turn in sociolinguistics brought with it new theoretical frameworks that questioned existing assumptions about seemingly natural social categories. Drawing on the perspective of queer linguistics that presents a fundamental challenge to the assumption that binary systems for categorizing gender and sexuality are natural, universal, and indisputable, we explore the extent to which grammatical gender both constrains and facilitates the realization of transgender and non-binary identities among speakers of Slovenian. In order to perform their non-normative genders, non-binary individuals use linguistic practices, such as the underscore, inverse gender markers, or blending feminine and masculine grammatical forms. Their social actions are both interposed by the social structure and can also lead to changes in it by decentring binary genders.

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## Spodbujanje družbene odgovornosti s spolno vključujočim jezikom v slovenščini

### Ključne besede

kvir jezikoslovje, nenormativni spoli, nebinarne spolne identitete, spolno vključujoč jezik, transspolno vključujoč jezik, slovenščina

### Povzetek

V prispevku preučujemo vlogo slovenščine pri konstituiranju spolno nenormativnih subjektov. Poststrukturalistični obrat v sociolingvistiki je prinesel nove teoretične okvire, ki so preizprašali obstoječe predpostavke o navidezno naravnih družbenih kategorijah. Na izhodiščih kvir jezikoslovja, ki predstavlja temeljni izziv predpostavki, da so binarni sistemi spolne in seksualne kategorizacije naravni, univerzalni in nedvomni, raziskujemo, v kolikšni meri slovnični spol omejuje in hkrati omogoča uresničevanje transspolnih in spolno nebinarnih identitet med govorkami\_ci slovenščine. Spolno nebinarne osebe za izražanje svojih nenormativnih spolov uporabljajo jezikovne prakse, kot so podčrtaj, inverzni spolni označevalci ali mešanje ženskih in moških slovničnih oblik. Njihova družbena dejanja so odvisna od družbene strukture, obenem pa lahko z decentralizacijo binarnih spolov vodijo k njenim spremembam.



### Introduction

In the past two decades (in the Slovenian linguistic and cultural space, approximately in the last decade), influenced by the movement for transgender equality, public awareness of gender-nonconforming individuals and the social marginalization they face has increased. The recognition of gender diversity is already reflected to some extent on the socio-institutional level; for example, many universities are implementing transgender policies,<sup>2</sup> identity politics with

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<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., “The University of Oxford’s Transgender Policy,” University of Oxford, last revision 2018, <https://edu.admin.ox.ac.uk/transgender-policy>; “Smernice za zaposlene na UM za podporo raznolikosti spolne identitete,” University of Maribor, accessed September 9, 2024, <https://www.um.si/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Smernice-za-zaposlene-na-UM-za-podporo-raznolikosti-spolne-identitete.pdf>.

a focus on the LGBTIQ+ community are increasingly present at the EU level,<sup>3</sup> and queer perspectives are becoming more prevalent in various fields of the humanities and social sciences, such as anthropology, psychology, literary criticism, art history, and especially in linguistics, since the construction of gender and sexuality and their related categories takes place in the field of discourse.

The proliferation of different gender concepts, which can be observed in Western culture since the 1990s, has also brought new terminology, including the introduction of the term *cisgender*, which refers to a gender identity that aligns with the sex assigned to a person at birth. The promotion of the term is not just about the need to name individuals who are not transgender, but also the need to draw attention to *cisnormativity*, which refers to “the idea that cisgender identities are ‘normal,’ ‘natural,’ and ‘factual,’ while transgender identities are ‘abnormal,’ ‘unnatural,’ and ‘fictional.’”<sup>4</sup> Thus, phrases such as “natural,” “normal,” and “real” gender legitimize the structural dominance of cisgender individuals.<sup>5</sup> Cisnormativity is also contained in the assumption that physiology, gender socialization, experiences, socially perceived gender, and self-identified gender will always align in expected ways.<sup>6</sup> The statement “We women are used to constantly looking for new face creams or choosing new skin rejuvenation treatments at the beautician’s,”<sup>7</sup> for example, refers to individuals who have acquired certain behavioural patterns through socialization. Besides erasing the intersectionality of gender with socioeconomic class, region, age, cultural context, and other identity markers, the statement also equates the category of women with individuals who were assigned female gender roles at birth. Such an equation implies that trans women are not women because they were not socialized as such.

<sup>3</sup> In this context, it is worth mentioning, for example, first-ever strategy on LGBTIQ+ equality in the EU, adopted in 2020 and aiming to integrate LGBTIQ+ equality into EU policies: “LGBTIQ Equality Strategy: 2020–2025,” European Commission, effective November 12, 2020, <https://commission.europa.eu/document/5100c375-87e8-40e3-85b5-1adc5f556d6d>.

<sup>4</sup> Lal Zimman, “Pronouns and Possibilities: Transgender Language Activism and Reform,” in *Language and Social Justice in Practice*, ed. Netta Avineri et al. (New York: Routledge, 2018), 176.

<sup>5</sup> Zimman, 181.

<sup>6</sup> Zimman, 181.

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Fišer, “5 vsakodnevnih navad, ki pospešujejo staranje—jih počnete tudi vi?,” *Lepota & Zdravje*, 2024, <https://revijalz.si/lepota/5-vsakodnevnih-navad-ki-pospesujejo-staranje-jih-pocnete-tudi-vi/>; our translation.

When we choose gendered labels, pronouns, and gendered morphemes, we usually start from our own perception of a person's gender, which is embedded in a binary and cisnormative framework. Referring to transgender and gender-nonbinary individuals thus reveals a specific range of linguistic misrecognition practices, which we understand as a manifestation of the dominant social order burdened with the binary schemes of perception and classification.<sup>8</sup>

Sociolinguistic analysis offers us tools for understanding the linguistic strategies that transgender and gender-nonbinary individuals develop to subvert cisnormativity and the gender binary, and to affirm and validate their own identities.

This article focuses on two linguistic strategies that have been adopted by individuals who do not conform to the binary gender matrix or are situated outside of it to ensure their own discursive existence: the use of the underscore and the use of pronouns and gendered morphemes, along with the complementary use of gender-neutral language. The material used in this article (i.e. excerpts from semi-structured interviews with gender-nonbinary individuals) was collected as part of a larger study conducted in 2017, and in 2019 two in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals with nonbinary gender identities.<sup>9</sup> The article also includes the results of the survey "Use of the Slovenian Language among Transgender Individuals" ("Raba slovenskega jezika pri transspolnih osebah"), conducted in collaboration with the NGO TransAkcija in 2017.

## Queer Linguistics and the Undoing of the Normative Conceptions of Identity

Queer linguistics is a relatively young branch of linguistics that has so far established itself as the most widely spread paradigm within the broader field of language, gender, and sexuality studies. As a poststructuralist linguistic approach, it does not view language in the structuralist sense, i.e. as an abstract prerequisite on which language use would be based, but rather as the result of repeated linguistic practices that have over time led to the discursive materialization of

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<sup>8</sup> Nina Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega: O nebinarnih spolnih in seksualnih identitetah v Sloveniji* (Ljubljana: Založba FDV, 2020), 195.

<sup>9</sup> See Branislava Vičar and Boris Kern, "Možnosti jezikovnega izražanja nebinarnih transspolnih identitet v slovenščini," *Dialogi* 53, no. 11–12 (2017): 223–37; Boris Kern and Branislava Vičar, "Jezik in transspolne identitete," *Slavistična revija* 67, no. 2 (2019): 413–22.

specific structural categories.<sup>10</sup> Queer linguistics fundamentally challenges the assumption that binary systems of gender and sexual categorization are natural, universal, and unquestionable. In this sense, the starting point of queer linguistics is the endeavour to theoretically redefine *a priori* dichotomies such as male/female and heterosexuality/homosexuality.<sup>11</sup>

The potential of queer theory stems from the deconstruction of stable and unchangeable identity (on the axis of gender and sexuality), which is established in relation to *the other* and through its exclusion.<sup>12</sup> The queer subject opposes such identities by positioning itself outside them, i.e. outside the gender and sexual binary<sup>13</sup> (i.e. the cultural system based on the assumption that there are only two genders and two sexual orientations that exist in opposition to each other). In doing so, it does not take any specific position within social identity categories; it is a signifier without a stable signified, its content is filled individually, bypassing (repressive) identity categories, and is based on resisting normative systems<sup>14</sup> and on personal and social commitment to life outside them.<sup>15</sup> The queer subject can, therefore, signify individuals who align with an undefined multitude of gender and sexual practices that are established outside the normative assumptions of dominant social discourses, or, as Bucholtz and Hall state, “at the excluded margins of historically and culturally variable heteronormative systems.”<sup>16</sup> Its meaning is gained precisely in opposition to the norm, establishing itself as the antithesis of what is considered “normal,” legitimate,

<sup>10</sup> Heiko Motschenbacher, *Language, Gender and Sexual Identity: Poststructuralist Perspectives* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010), 61–62.

<sup>11</sup> Jenny L. Davis, Lal Zimman, and Joshua Raclaw, “Opposites Attract: Theorizing Binarity in Sociocultural Linguistics,” in *Queer Excursions: Rethorizing Binaries in Language, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Lal Zimman, Jenny L. Davis, and Joshua Raclaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>12</sup> Nina Perger, “Med queer teorijami, queer politikami in gejevsko-lezbičnimi gibanji,” *Družboslovne razprave* 30, no. 77 (2014): 76.

<sup>13</sup> Perger, 72.

<sup>14</sup> Rusty Barrett, “Is Queer Theory Important for Sociolinguistic Theory?,” in *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*, ed. Kathryn Campbell-Kibler et al. (Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 2002), 27; Perger, “Med queer teorijami,” 77.

<sup>15</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 161.

<sup>16</sup> Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall, “Theorizing Identity in Language and Sexuality Research,” *Language in Society* 33, no. 4 (2004): 490.

and dominant.<sup>17</sup> The “queer moment”<sup>18</sup> is the essential element that distinguishes queer theory from gay and lesbian studies. Although the latter contains queer potential in terms of studying non-heterosexual identities, they do not necessarily presuppose a critical reflection on sexual and gender categories and their normativity, which is characteristic of queer theory.<sup>19</sup>

Queer linguistics does not study the language of a predetermined group of queer subjects, as such a group cannot be defined.<sup>20</sup> Instead, it signifies a shift from traditional approaches to language and identity, which view identity as an inherent trait of an individual, to understanding identity as the result of intersubjective practices and ideologies that do not necessarily operate at the conscious level. Intersubjective practice means that social identification is not merely a property of an individual but is inherently relational: in the process of social identification, the subject is both the agent, the subject *of* social processes, and the patient, subject *to* social processes that determine its subject positioning.<sup>21</sup> Queer linguistics focuses on the ways in which normative assumptions related to identifiable (gender and sexual) identity categories are established as part of the dominant discourse, in which normative reality is perceived as a natural given.<sup>22</sup>

The fundamental mechanism that underpins the linguistic construction of identity is the performativity of linguistic signs.<sup>23</sup> The concept of performativity originates from the philosophy of language, and Butler<sup>24</sup> introduced the concept to poststructuralist feminism and queer theory, applying it to the construc-

<sup>17</sup> Motschenbacher, *Language, Gender, and Sexual Identity*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

<sup>19</sup> Heiko Motschenbacher and Martin Stegu, “Queer Linguistic Approaches to Discourse,” *Discourse & Society* 24, no. 5 (2013): 520, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926513486069>.

<sup>20</sup> Barrett, “Is Queer Theory Important,” 28.

<sup>21</sup> Bucholtz and Hall, “Theorizing Identity,” 493–94.

<sup>22</sup> Vojko Gorjanc, *Nije rečnik za seljaka* (Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 2017), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Anna Livia and Kira Hall, “‘It’s a Girl!’ Bringing Performativity Back to Linguistics,” in *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Anna Livia and Kira Hall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–18.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).



tion of identities. Performative utterances, such as “I bet you 50 euros,” “I appoint the defence committee,” do not merely describe the world but change it; i.e. performatives are linguistic social actions.<sup>25</sup> Among the variety of performative utterances, we can also recognize performatives that refer to identity categories. Statements like “It’s a girl!” or “I am a gay” have an illocutionary performative effect, as they cause a change at the moment of utterance, i.e. they place the subject within a particular identity category. For example, when a person is labelled a *girl* or a *boy*, along with the naming, normative behaviours prototypically associated with these categories are prescribed. The concept of performative utterance nullifies the traditional sociolinguistic understanding of identity as pre-discursively given<sup>26</sup> and introduces the notion that identity is constructed through linguistic and other semiotic practices. Performatives are not one-time acts but operate through continuous repetitions. Through repetitions of performatives that contain identity labels, the referent of a particular identity category is constructed both in the speaker’s mind and in the broader social discourse. As Barrett points out, “identity categories are created through repetitions of the assignment of individuals to particular categories and repetitions of statements attributing particular social attributes or practices to a particular category.”<sup>27</sup> Queer theory recognizes not only the linguistic performatives of identity categories as performative but also other aspects of social practices. From a performative perspective, gender identity is constructed through a system of interconnected repetitions of gender norms. Repetitions not only constitute the identity categories themselves but also limit the cultural acceptability of practices associated with particular identity categories; a subject who coherently repeats performatives that correspond to socially imposed gender norms establishes itself as an identifiable, culturally recognizable, i.e. gender-normative, subject.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Bucholtz and Hall, “Theorizing Identity,” 491.

<sup>26</sup> Kira Hall, “Exceptional Speakers: Contested and Problematized Gender Identities,” in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, ed. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (Malden: Blackwell, 2003), 373.

<sup>27</sup> Barrett, “Is Queer Theory Important,” 29.

<sup>28</sup> Branislava Vičar, “Kvirovsko jezikoslovje v kontekstu poststrukturalističnih jezikoslovnih pristopov,” in *Slavistična prepletanja 5*, ed. Gjoko Nikolovski and Natalija Ulčnik (Maribor: Univerzitetna založba Univerze v Mariboru, 2024), 230.

## Perceptions and Classifications of Gender in the Context of the Binary Social Matrix

Socially dominant schemes of gender perception and classification represent a manifestation of the existing binary social order, which holds the status of being natural, “unquestioned and supposedly unquestionable.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Butler,<sup>30</sup> the classification of human beings into men and women is supported by the heterosexual matrix, which consists of three elements: sex—gender—heterosexual desire. This established matrix is reinforced by the notion of identity as stable, unchangeable, and coherent.<sup>31</sup> The elements of the matrix are actualized through the process of discursive materialization in two combinations: male sex—male sexual practices—woman as the object of sexual desire, and female sex—female sexual practices—man as the object of sexual desire.<sup>32</sup> Subjects who cannot (or do not wish to) fit into the presented pattern or predefined categories are degraded as deviant, and the gender and sexual practices associated with them are considered “unnatural,” illegitimate, and pathological. As Motschenbacher notes, they do not have the status of full subjects,<sup>33</sup> and their experiences in many contexts remain overlooked or pushed into invisibility. That is why, in queer theory, gender and sexual binarism is seen as the “primary symbol of marginalization and stigmatization of non-normative subjects and practices,”<sup>34</sup> as the normative gender system forces individuals to position themselves on one side of the binary divide and marginalizes those who do not meet normative expectations of “gender oppositions.”<sup>35</sup>

Non-conformity to gender norms is an integral part of the existence of queer and gender-nonbinary individuals, but what is considered “normal” behaviour is not given but rather a consequence of the moral order and the set of values

<sup>29</sup> Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega*, 195.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>31</sup> Perger, “Med queer teorijami,” 72.

<sup>32</sup> Motschenbacher, *Language, Gender, and Sexual Identity*, 7.

<sup>33</sup> Motschenbacher, 14.

<sup>34</sup> Davis, Zimman, and Raclaw, “Opposites Attract,” 1.

<sup>35</sup> Rusty Barrett, “The Emergence of the Unmarked,” in *Queer Excursions*, ed. Zimman, Davis, and Raclaw, 210.

established in a given society.<sup>36</sup> The concept of “normal” is maintained through the cultural production of the middle class, its hierarchies, and dynamics of power.<sup>37</sup> Within socially constructed boundaries, conventional schemes of association, belonging, and identification<sup>38</sup> are established, allowing social recognition only to individuals with identities that fit within the conventional frameworks of gender.

As Butler points out, even the attribution of gender at birth occurs within a framework that establishes gender within specific classification schemes. When sex is assigned at birth, the way the body is observed is already structured in accordance with the presumption of one of the binary options, i.e. as male or female.<sup>39</sup> Based on these premises, Butler rejects the socially dominant understanding of the biological nature of gender and convincingly argues that gender is a site of interaction between biological and social reality. The distinction between sex and gender, established in the second wave of feminism, discounts the important interactive and dynamic relationship between them by separating biological and social reality. The biological requires the social to be activated, and the social requires the biological to produce its effects.<sup>40</sup> However, the dominant binary schemes on which the binary typology of bodies is based are so deeply rooted in Western societies that they are perceived as a natural fact. The lives of individuals with gender identities that exist outside the binary matrix are thus pushed into invisibility and subjected to misrecognition.

Perger identifies two types of social misrecognition of the manifestation of gender nonbinary identities: (1) the non-binary identity is recognized as existing but not as legitimate (in the process of social recognition, it is filled and covered with negative inscriptions, e.g. it is recognized only as a phase in the development toward a final binary identity); (2) the non-binary identity is neither recognized as legitimate nor as existing but is overlooked and misrecognized as

<sup>36</sup> Jay Stewart, “Academic Theory,” in *Genderqueer and Non-Binary Genders*, ed. Christina Richards, Walter Pierre Bouman, and Meg-John Barker (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 59.

<sup>37</sup> J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 4–6.

<sup>38</sup> Halberstam, 4.

<sup>39</sup> Butler, *Who's Afraid of Gender?* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2024), 125.

<sup>40</sup> Butler, 116–18.

one of the binary gender categories (male or female)<sup>41</sup> within the binary scheme of perception. Against the backdrop of practices of social misrecognition, the existence of non-binary individuals emerges as an “existence without legitimacy,”<sup>42</sup> which affects both the processes of coming out in various environments and the establishment of different types of relationships.<sup>43</sup>

### Transgender-Inclusive Language as a Resource for Affirming Non-Binary Gender Identities

Socially dominant cisnormative assumptions lead to social misrecognition and direct the attribution of gender based on external appearance. In Slovenian, this is reflected linguistically by referring to gender-nonbinary individuals with the pronoun *on* (he) or *ona* (she) or with male or female morphemes, which “delegitimises linguistic gender diversity.”<sup>44</sup> All the non-binary individuals who participated in the interviews stated that pronouns and gendered morphemes misrepresent them or that their gender identities are not represented in discourse, which reinforces their sense of exclusion. The interviewees also confirmed that there is a dominant social expectation in interactions that they will use gender markers corresponding to the sex assigned at birth.<sup>45</sup>

The results of the survey “Use of the Slovenian language among Transgender Individuals” (“Raba slovenskega jezika pri transspolnih osebah”), which was completed by 35 people, also show that transgender and non-binary individuals perceive Slovenian as exclusionary.<sup>46</sup> When asked, “Do you experience gender dysphoria due to the grammatical gender marking and gender binarism of the Slovenian language?” only 6 people (20%) responded that they do not experi-

<sup>41</sup> Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega*, 78, 195.

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010), 241.

<sup>43</sup> Perger, *Razpiranje horizontov možnega*, 206.

<sup>44</sup> Sebastian Cordoba, *Non-Binary Gender Identities: The Language of Becoming* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 22.

<sup>45</sup> See Branislava Vičar and Boris Kern, “Raba zaimkov pri spolno nebinarnih osebah,” in *Jezik in književnost v spreminjanju*, ed. Jožica Jožef Beg, Mia Hočevar, and Neža Kočnik (Ljubljana: Zveza društev Slavistično društvo Slovenije, 2024), 431–32.

<sup>46</sup> 21 respondents (60%) consider Slovenian to be very inclusive, 8 (23%) consider it to be partially inclusive, 3 (9%) consider it to be moderately inclusive, and only one respondent considers it to be inclusive.

ence gender dysphoria, while all other respondents experience some level of gender dysphoria due to (mis)representation in language.

To legitimize their identity in discourse, non-binary individuals seek alternative modes of expression, including the use of the underscore, alternating use of male and female pronouns and morphemes, and the use of gender-neutral language. These options are used depending on the context and circumstances of the interaction.

### **Underscore**

In Slovenian, the use of the underscore (e.g. *bralke\_ci*, “female readers\_male readers”) proves to be an effective strategy for expressing gender plurality, symbolically replacing all non-existent endings and suffixes for genders that go beyond the binary of either male or female. By being written between the form for feminine and masculine grammatical gender, it symbolically disrupts the hegemonic gender binary and opens up a space for gender plurality. It is recognized as a legitimate means of affirming the authenticity and legitimacy of gender-non-binary individuals or as a dynamic discursive practice that enables these individuals’ social and discursive existence. This practice originates from the “bottom-up,” as it was introduced by nonbinary individuals within the transgender community. From there, the underscore has spread within the LGBTIQ+ community, and in the last eight years it has also entered more general use.<sup>47</sup>

Here are some guidelines for the use of the underscore, which were previously published in several articles in Slovenian and Croatian,<sup>48</sup> but are briefly summarized here for the sake of the completeness of the research.

The underscore is used between forms (nominal, adjectival, or verbal) for feminine and masculine grammatical gender: *študentke\_i* (female and male stu-

<sup>47</sup> See Nina Perger, “Simbolno nasilje spolnega zaznamovanja v jeziku in prakse upora v visokošolskem prostoru,” *Družboslovne razprave* 32, no. 81 (2016): 41–60; Vičar and Kern, “Možnosti jezikovnega izražanja”; Kern and Vičar, “Jezik in transspolne identitete”; Vičar, “Kvirovsko jezikoslovje.”

<sup>48</sup> Kern and Vičar, “Jezik in transspolne identitete”; Vičar and Kern, “Možnosti jezikovnega izražanja”; Branislava Vičar and Boris Kern, “Pozicioniranje nebinarnosti unutar binarnoga sustava: Primjer slovenskoga jezika,” in *Kritička leksikografija*, ed. Vojko Gorjanc (Belgrade: Biblioteka XX vek, 2024).

dents), *predavateljice\_i* (female and male lecturers), *drage\_i* (dear), *sprejele\_i homo* (we will confirm). After the underscore, only the variable part of the form is written (e.g. *zdravnice\_ki*, female and male doctors) to simplify the notation. It is recommended to first mention the feminine grammatical form. This helps to avoid the accumulation of underscores in adjectives and verbs by following the principle of agreement in proximity (the form of the word adapts to the closest form of the other word). Thus, adjectives next to the noun are adapted to the first-mentioned feminine form, while the verb forms that follow are in the masculine: “Redne študentke\_i so obiskovali predavanja ob torkih.” (“The regular female and male students attended lectures on Tuesdays.”)

Exceptions include cases where the masculine form is the word formation base for the feminine form or where the masculine form has a zero ending. In such cases, the following options are proposed: *učitelj\_ica* (male teacher\_female teacher), *dekan\_ja* (male dean\_female dean), *odšel\_a je* (they left), *je kompetent\_en\_a* (they are competent).

It makes sense to mention both the full feminine and masculine forms in cases like *sestra\_brat* (sister\_brother) and in multi-word gendered expressions where different bases are used: *srednja medicinska sestra\_srednji zdravstvenik* (female nurse\_male healthcare worker). The full words are sometimes especially used in addressing: *Drage kolegice\_kolegi* (Dear female colleagues\_male colleagues).

The use of the underscore has been discussed in several places, including the Language Counselling Service of the Fran Ramovš Institute of the Slovenian Language. The answer to a user question about the appropriateness of using the underscore in 2019 legitimized its use. However, the response sparked a lively public debate. Since then, the use of underscores has become even more widespread, especially in various cultural and educational institutions. The broader acceptance in mass media was further influenced by the Eurovision victory of a non-binary person and the performance of another non-binary *artist\_ka* (male artist\_female artist) at the same music event. This led even media houses with a more conservative language policy, which previously did not permit the use of underscores, to adopt them in the context of Eurovision reporting.

Given that the underscore is limited to written communication (reading underscores with pauses in between would hinder understanding), it is recommended

for auditory realization of the underscore to read both words or forms without an intervening conjunction *and*, which would suggest only two genders.<sup>49</sup>

It is worth noting that the transgender community shows some variation in the use of the underscore. Some gender-nonbinary individuals, for example, use the underscore after a noun without adding forms for male or female grammatical gender (e.g. *kolegice\_*, female colleagues). As shown by the results of the survey “Use of the Slovenian Language among Transgender Individuals,” not all transgender individuals are equally favourable toward the use of the underscore. The responses in the survey are very diverse, although the majority are supportive of the underscore; 22 people (63%) believe that the underscore is a good solution. Among them, 9 people (26%) find the use of the underscore simple, 8 people (23%) think it is a good solution, although not the simplest, but necessary. Four people (11%) think it is not a good solution because its use is complex. Nine people gave individual responses: four stated that the underscore is a good solution, but they would like a simplification; among them, two people pointed out the issue of pronunciation, and one person stated they would like a non-binary ending to exist. One person said they do not understand the underscore, and four responses expressed aversion to using the underscore. It should be emphasized, however, that the survey took place in 2017, when the use of the underscore was new and some solutions were not yet fully established, so it would be necessary to repeat the survey on the use of gender-inclusive practices.

### ***Pronouns and Gendered Morphemes***

In Slovenian, all pronouns except for the first- and second-person singular pronouns assign binary gender, thereby contributing to the binary social perception of gender. As Enke notes, “gender-marked pronouns establish binary gender as a systemic and cultural mechanism of social order.”<sup>50</sup> The connection between the

<sup>49</sup> Similar strategies for expressing gender non-binarity are being introduced in other languages with grammatical gender. In German, for example, these include the asterisk (*Lehrer\*in*), the underscore (*Schauspieler\_in*), and the colon (*Studienbewerber:in*), and in French the middle dot (*historien-nes*), which is also being implemented in Croatian (*aktivist-kinje*). Particularly in the German linguistic-cultural environment, these practices are becoming part of the language policy of an increasing number of universities; individual universities have developed internal guidelines for trans-inclusive language use.

<sup>50</sup> A. Finn Enke, “Stick Figures and Little Bites: Toward a Nonbinary Pedagogy,” in *Trans Studies: The Challenge to Hetero/Homo Normatives*, ed. Yolanda Martinez-San Miguel and Sarah Tobias (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 219.

pronominal system and the social gender system was also highlighted by the individuals interviewed. One interviewee, when asked about the role they attribute to pronoun usage in reinforcing the binary social perception of gender, responded: “A very high one, because the entire binary world stands on it.” However, individuals with non-binary gender identities turn the limitations of the Slovenian pronominal system into an advantage and, through subversive use of pronouns, seek ways to express their own gender identities. The linguistic practices of the interviewees include the use of pronouns representing the “opposite” gender category and the mixing of male and female pronouns and gendered morphemes.<sup>51</sup>

Individuals who use morphological gender markers that do not correspond to the sex assigned to them at birth (i.e. individuals assigned female at birth using male morphemes, individuals assigned male at birth using female morphemes) reject membership in the gender category assigned to them at birth through the use of gender-marked morphemes and construct an identity that contradicts expected social perceptions. With this linguistic practice, they simultaneously strive, as one interviewee emphasized, to influence the understanding of the role of the grammatical system in constructing gender identities.

Switching between male and female morphemes—a linguistic practice that Bershtling metaphorically refers to as “gender ‘bilingualism’”<sup>52</sup> in their description of such a practice in Hebrew—does not imply acceptance of the binary gender system but rather points to an identity that exists outside or between binary gender categories. This linguistic practice draws attention to the gender binary, thereby denaturalizing it.<sup>53</sup> The interviewees described this practice as a situational necessity arising from their identity positioning outside binary gender categories, on one hand, and the need to communicate with others, on the other. This linguistic practice can also be used as a means to destabilize the gender binary and the assumption of alignment between the sex assigned at birth and

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<sup>51</sup> See also Vičar and Kern “Raba zaimkov,” 433–36. In languages that express grammatical gender only in personal pronouns, such as English and Swedish, gender-neutral pronouns such as the singular *they* in English and the neologism *hen* in Swedish are used as a means of expressing non-binary gender. Both pronouns are included in a dictionary and have passed into common usage.

<sup>52</sup> Orit Bershtling, “‘Speech Creates a Kind of Commitment’: Queering Hebrew,” in *Queer Excursions*, ed. Zimman, Davis, and Raclaw, 46.

<sup>53</sup> Bershtling, 52.



gender identity.<sup>54</sup> The interviewees stated that switching between male and female morphemes is intentional and simultaneously routinized; it does not follow a fixed sequence and can even occur within a single utterance.

### ***Gender-Neutral Language***

The use of language that genders people is so pervasive that it is often present even when gender is irrelevant to the discourse, and gender-neutral options are available (e.g. “person walking a dog” instead of “woman walking a dog”). For non-binary individuals, the use of gender-neutral language is based on finding neutral options for words that are typically gendered (e.g. using the word *parent* instead of *mother* or *father*). Compared to gender-inclusive language, which acknowledges the gender plurality, gender-neutral language involves choosing linguistic means that avoid gender marking. Since the adoption of gender-neutral language allows non-binary individuals to enter the conversation without having to position themselves or others on one of the marked gender positions, Zimman views gender neutrality as an important “resource for affirming non-binary gender identities.”<sup>55</sup>

Some of the most effective tools of gender-neutral language include the use of gender-neutral words (e.g. *oseba*, *vodja*, *raziskovalna skupnost*, *pedagoško osebje*, *strokovni krogi*, *občinstvo*; “person,” “leader,” or collective names such as “research community,” “teaching staff,” “professional circles,” and “audience”); noun phrases with a left adjectival modifier instead of noun phrases with a right noun modifier (e.g. *študentska skupnost*, “student community”); nominalized forms (e.g. *sestaneč bo v torek*, “the meeting will be held on Tuesday”); impersonal sentences (e.g. *z raziskavo je bilo ugotovljeno*, “the study found”); present tense for expressing the future (e.g. *jutri nadaljujemo*, “we continue tomorrow”); and omitting gendered nouns or pronouns when they are not necessary.

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### **Conclusion**

The emergence of transgender and non-binary individuals on the social map has brought discussions about language to the forefront of transgender issues and expanded the concept of gender-inclusive language with a transgender per-

<sup>54</sup> Bershtling, 51.

<sup>55</sup> Zimman, “Pronouns and Possibilities,” 180.

spective. The linguistic experience of individuals with non-binary gender identities depends on how they are addressed in interaction and which words and morphemes are used to refer to them. In interactions with non-binary individuals, the choice of linguistic means can either affirm and validate their gender identities or delegitimize them. Therefore, understanding identity as an intersubjective phenomenon, meaning that identities are never constructed alone but always in interaction with others, is essential for affirming the identities of non-binary individuals.

Strategies for transgender-inclusive language are often met with reluctance, disapproval, and even outright rejection by professionals and the general public. However, it is important to recognize that the binary normative framework is at the core of shaping the perception of genders and transgender-inclusive strategies. As Zimman notes, a particular linguistic solution may sound “less elegant precisely *because* it challenges social and linguistic norms.”<sup>56</sup>

As transgender and non-binary individuals develop linguistic strategies to affirm their identities, they subvert cisnormativity and the gender binary, while also loosening the socially dominant frameworks of gender perception. As speakers, we can choose pronouns and gendered morphemes in line with the social perception trapped in the binary gender matrix, or we can allow the person we are speaking about to “exert some agency over how they are spoken about.” Expanding our options beyond the gender binary opens up space for our political imagination and allows us “to envision the kinds of changes we need to make life liveable.”<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Zimman, 180.

<sup>57</sup> Paisley Currah, *Sex Is as Sex Does: Governing Transgender Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), 151.

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## Leon Pinsker's Proto-Zionist Pamphlet *Autoemancipation!* in Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's Skeptical Yiddish Reworking

### Keywords

Leon Pinsker, Sh. Y. Abramovitsh, territorialist nationalism, adaptation, German, Yiddish

### Abstract

Leon Pinsker's pamphlet *Autoemancipation!* (1882), a seminal text of early Jewish nationalism, arguably established Zionism as a movement functioning in the German language. Soon after its publication, the renowned Yiddish writer Sh. Y. Abramovitsh produced a Yiddish language version (1884). Abramovitsh's rendering is above all an adaptation of German or Western European political and cultural concepts and vocabulary to the Jewish, Eastern European Yiddish-speaking milieu, with changes in vocabulary, rhetorical strategies, and cultural references. Abramovitsh reworked the pamphlet according to his own thinking on the plight of Jews in the Russian Empire and a possible nationalist solution, as exemplified in his contemporary novels. In the article, I compare the language in which several socio-political concepts are expressed in the two texts in order to determine whether Abramovitsh, in his ideological skepticism, also subtly adapts the content of the nationalist thesis.

## Protosionistični pamflet Leona Pinskerja *Avtoemancipacija!* v skeptični jidiš predelavi Šolema Jankeva Abramoviča

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### Ključne besede

Leon Pinsker, Š. J. Abramovič, teritorialistični nacionalizem, priredba, nemščina, jidiš

### Povzetek

S pamfletom *Avtoemancipacija!* (1882), temeljnim besedilom zgodnjega judovskega nacionalizma, je Leon Pinsker po nekaterih argumentih uveljavil sionizem kot nemško govoreče in pišoče gibanje. Kmalu po izidu pamfleta je priznani jidiš pisatelj Šolem Jankev

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Abramovič objavil njegov prevod v jidiš (1884). V Abramovičevi različici so nemški oziroma zahodnoevropski politični in kulturni koncepti ter besednjak prirejani vzhodnoevropskemu, judovskemu, jidiš govorečemu okolju, kar vključuje spremembe v besedišču, retoričnih strategijah in kulturnih referencah. Abramovič je pamflet predelal v skladu s svojim razmislekom o stiski Judov v Ruskem imperiju in njeni mogoči nacionalistični rešitvi, s čimer se je ukvarjal tudi v svojih sočasnih romanih. V članku primerjam, kako so v obeh besedilih izraženi nekateri družbenopolitični koncepti, da bi ugotovil, ali Abramovič s svojo ideološko skepso prefinjeno priredi tudi vsebino nacionalistične teze.



## Introduction

The pogroms of 1881/1882 in the Ukrainian part of the Russian Empire were a watershed moment in Jewish political history. The pogroms, following on the heels of the assassination of tsar Alexander II., who had introduced reforms in favor of Russian Jewry, surpassed in scope and ferocity the previous outbreaks of anti-Jewish violence in Russia through the nineteenth century, and inaugurated an era of ever bloodier anti-Jewish outbursts in the twentieth century. Besides triggering a massive emigration of Jews from Russia, the 1881 pogroms shattered the hopes of the Russian Jewish intelligentsia of a possible political, social, and cultural assimilation of Jews in the Russian Empire, and boosted alternative ideologies, including Jewish nationalist thought and activism. This included nationalist territorialism, which argued that Jews should renew their national consciousness and seek out a territory that will serve them as a safe haven from persecution.

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Among the intellectuals swept up in these developments was Yehuda Leyb (Leon) Pinsker (1821–91), a Russian Jewish doctor and intellectual working in Odessa and well-versed in the languages, culture and ideologies of Western and Central Europe. After the shock of 1881, he published in Berlin and in German a proto-Zionist pamphlet entitled *Autoemancipation!* (1882), which fired debate on the merits of Jewish nationalism and on the territorial solution, and came to be regarded as a “milestone in the evolution of modern Jewish nationalism.”<sup>1</sup> Pinsk-

<sup>1</sup> Shlomo Avineri, *The Making of Modern Zionism: The Intellectual Origins of the Jewish State* (New York: Basic Books, 2017), 77.

er became a leading figure in the Russian-based *Hibat tsiyon* (Love of Zion) movement, which strove for the settlement of Jews in Ottoman Palestine and preceded the Zionist movement spearheaded from 1897 onwards by Theodor Herzl.

Pinsker's pamphlet was widely read and discussed among the German-reading Jewish intelligentsia in Russia and translated into several languages. In 1884, it was "translated" into Yiddish by one of the founding figures of modern Yiddish literature, Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh (1835–1917), also known as Mendele Moykher Sforim (Mendele the Bookseller), who was by then already established as a masterful satirist and an acerbic critic of the Jewish condition in Eastern Europe as well as a voice for the Jewish economic and political plight in Russia. Abramovitsh's rendering of Pinsker's pamphlet is less a translation and more a linguistical and cultural adaptation or transposition of a German text, aimed at cultured Central and Western European readership, into a Yiddish one, aimed at a Yiddish-speaking and Yiddish-reading Eastern European readership, about whose plight the text is predominantly about.

In the following, I will first present the different intellectual and linguistic origins of the two writers in their historical moment, as well as the ideas, intentions, and readership of Pinsker's seminal pamphlet. In the next step, I will compare the German original and the Yiddish version and examine a few cases where Pinsker's original and Abramovitsh's adaptation diverge, to determine whether Abramovitsh's Yiddish transposition modifies Pinsker's ideas in changing the vocabulary, adopting different rhetorical strategies, as well as rearranging and omitting passages. I will show that in Abramovitsh's rendering, the text gains different emphases that grant the Yiddish version either a diminished nationalist appeal or a skeptical inflection.

### **The Doctor and the Satirist**

Both Pinsker and Abramovitsh were Jews from the Russian Pale of Settlement,<sup>2</sup> and were earlier enthusiastic adherents of the so-called Jewish Enlightenment or Haskalah, a modernizing intellectual movement among Jews in nineteenth century Eastern Europe. Adherents of Haskalah sought the normalization of

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<sup>2</sup> The Pale of Settlement was the name for the only territory in the Russian Empire where Jews were allowed to settle permanently.

Jews' political, economic, and social conditions by way of integration into Gentile (i.e., non-Jewish) society, most importantly through education and economic normalization. While Jewish assimilation was well under way in Western Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, in the Russian Empire it was hindered generally by the economic and political backwardness of the tsarist regime and particularly by tsarist anti-Jewish measures.

Pinsker was from a respected, assimilated family and himself a physician by profession, working in the multicultural city of Odessa. He was a longtime member of a circle for the promotion of the education of Jews in the Russian language and secular subjects.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the majority of Russian Jews, his first language was not Yiddish, but Russian, and he had no Jewish traditional education, but, exceptionally, was educated at Russian schools. He was widely traveled and familiar with modern Western ideologies, including the nationalist movements of nineteenth century Europe. From his youth, Abramovitsh was, on the other hand, steeped in traditional Jewish education and could draw on his familiarity with traditional Jewish life for his complex satirical works that defined his image as the “Grandfather” (Yiddish: *Zeyde*)<sup>4</sup> of Yiddish literature. In his early prose works of the 1860s and 70s (*Dos kleyne mentshele*, 1865, *Dos vintshfingerl*, 1865, *Fishke der krumer*, 1869) Abramovitsh, still committed to enlightenment views, satirized Russian Jewish life based on the ideals of secular education and a modern free-market economy, which were supposed to be the “wishing ring” (*vintshfingerl*) that would uplift Russian Jews to a dignified existence.

Both Pinsker and Abramovitsh were dismayed and terminally disillusioned in their persuasions by the pogroms of 1881–82. Before 1881, anti-Jewish outbursts in the Russian Empire throughout the nineteenth century were limited in scope and gained less public attention; they occurred, notably, in the multicultural city of Odessa.<sup>5</sup> The Odessa riots of 1871, which gained wider public attention, had already sown doubts in a number of Russian Jewish intellectuals about whether education and assimilation would truly succeed in normalizing the sit-

<sup>3</sup> Walter Laqueur, *A History of Zionism: From the French Revolution to the Establishment of the State of Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 70.

<sup>4</sup> Yiddish is written in the Hebrew alphabet. All transcriptions from Yiddish here follow the standard of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, which is prevalently used today.

<sup>5</sup> John Klier, “Pogroms,” *YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, accessed September 10, 2023, <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Pogroms>.



uation of Jews in Russia. The 1881 pogroms were more widespread, were something of a mass movement, and were widely publicized, even outside Russia. Like in 1871, parts of the Russian press excused, supported, or even incited the riots, and the role of the tsarist authorities in allowing the riots or even tacitly supporting them remains a matter of discussion.<sup>6</sup>

Along with other Jewish intellectuals, Pinsker responded to the pogroms by homing in on nationalist ideas and refashioning them in his fiery pamphlet: *Autoemancipation!*. In the pamphlet, he argues that Jew-hatred is an incurable disease, and yet one arising from the objective condition of Jews as a landless nation; assimilation into other nations will always be doomed to failure; therefore, Jews must help themselves by first strengthening their national consciousness and then by self-organizing and forming a political will to acquire a piece of land which will serve as a national refuge for Jews fleeing persecution and hardship. Similar nationalist ideas, based both on traditional Jewish attachment to the Land of Israel and on the new European nationalisms prominent from the beginning of the nineteenth century, had already been current in the developing Jewish press in Europe and Russia (mostly in the Hebrew and Russian languages). While it is debatable how familiar Pinsker was with these debates and with activist groups in Russia before writing *Autoemancipation!*,<sup>7</sup> he co-headed the founding conference of the movement of *Hibat tsiyon* (Love of Zion) in Katowice in 1884, and was elected a leader of the organization.

## The Pamphlet and Its Adaptation

Pinsker wrote his pamphlet in German and published it in Berlin<sup>8</sup> to reach German-reading Jews in Central and Western Europe. According to Marc Volovi-

<sup>6</sup> In his introduction to Pinsker's pamphlet, Arthur Herzberg notes: "It was all the more impossible to believe that these were only lynchings, carried out by an illiterate rabble, because leading newspapers had whipped up the frenzy, men of education and position participated in the attacks, and the government more than tacitly abetted the pogromists." Arthur Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1997), 180.

<sup>7</sup> Laqueur, *History of Zionism*, 75–76.

<sup>8</sup> The full title of the anonymous publication is [Leon Pinsker,] "*Autoemancipation!*" *Mahnruf an seine Stammesgenossen von einem russischen Juden* (Berlin: Commissions-Verlag von W. Issleib [G. Schuhr], 1882). The writer thus identifies himself only as a "Russian Jew" making an appeal to his kinsmen.

ci, he essentially contributed to making German the main language in which Jewish nationalist ideologies, particularly Zionism, developed in the following decades.<sup>9</sup> However, as Walter Lacquer notes, “Pinsker’s appeal received wide notice from Jewish writers in Russia but hardly any attention from the people for whom it had been intended and from whom he expected leadership, namely western, and more particularly German, Jewry.”<sup>10</sup> Similarly, fifteen years later, from 1896 onwards, Herzl’s ideas on a “Jewish state” gained considerably more traction in Russia than in the West.

While discussing translations of his pamphlet to cater to a Russian readership, followers suggested to Pinsker to have the text translated not only into Hebrew, which would limit it to a handful of intellectuals, but also in Yiddish, the first language of the vast majority of Russian Jews at the time. Pinsker may even himself have asked Abramovitsh, with whom he was befriended, to translate the text.<sup>11</sup> For Abramovitsh, the project was a good opportunity to take up writing after several years of crisis and silence. Susanne Klingenstein describes his adaptation of Pinsker’s pamphlet as a “loosening exercise,”<sup>12</sup> undertaken to relaunch his writing. In 1884, on the 25th anniversary of the beginning of his writing career, Abramovitsh published Pinsker’s pamphlet.<sup>13</sup>

Since 1881, Abramovitsh had himself moved ideologically to accommodate ideas about Jewish nationalism. With the novel *Di klyatshe* (*The Nag*) in 1873, according to the critic Shmuel Niger, he recalibrated his satirical perspective. In his previous prose works, he had satirized the internal workings of Jewish communities in Russia and opposed the pauperized Jewish masses (*di mase, der hamoyn*, also: multitude) to their oppressive “benefactors” (*bale-toyves*), the Jewish “big shots” (*tkifim*) that in fact exploit and victimize them. In *The Nag*, however, he started to view the Jewish people as a whole, a *kneses Yisroel*, the

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<sup>9</sup> Marc Volovici, “Leon Pinsker’s *Autoemancipation!* and the Emergence of German as a Language of Jewish Nationalism,” *Central European History* 50, no. 1 (March 2017): 34–58, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0008938917000061>.

<sup>10</sup> Laqueur, *History of Zionism*, 73

<sup>11</sup> Shmuel Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim: Zayn lebn, zayne gezeshaftelekh un literarische oyf-tuungen* (Chicago: L. M. Stein, 1936), 213; Nachman Mayzel, ed., *Dos Mendele-bukh: Briv un oytobyografishe notitsn* (New York: Ikuf, 1959), 479–80.

<sup>12</sup> Susanne Klingenstein, *Mendele der Buchhändler: Leben und Werk des Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014), 357.

<sup>13</sup> Klingenstein, *Mendele der Buchhändler*, 348–56; Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 200–4.

“gathering of Israel,” as a nation being oppressed by other nations, and particularly homed in on Jews as a national community within the Russian Empire. His inner-Jewish class analysis thus started shifting to a critique of Jewish-Gentile relations in a national light: as Niger puts it, he shifted his perspective “from the multitude to the nation.”<sup>14</sup>

Abramovitsh's adaptation was published under the title *A sgule tsu di yidishe tsores* (“A solution to Jewish troubles” or “A remedy to Jewish pains”) in an almanac composed and published by Abramovitsh himself (*Kalendar far di rusishe yidn*, Odessa, 1884) and also as an offprint. It was republished in Lemberg (Lviv) in 1898 and, significantly, taken up in the 1913 “Jubilee edition” of Abramovitsh's collected works, where it was presented less as a translation and more as an original work.<sup>15</sup> Similar to Pinsker's German pamphlet, the Yiddish version was on first publication widely read among Russian Jews, since there was hardly any other material available in Yiddish about contemporary ideas and at that point no Yiddish press in Russia.<sup>16</sup>

### On Modern Jewish Ideologies

In his adaptation, Abramovitsh did not include Pinsker's German preface, but as in his fiction, added his own preface that already sets the tone for the rest. The famous ironical and faux-naïve prefaces in Abramovitsh's fictional works are purportedly written by the book-peddler Mendele, a fictitious persona who is the medium through whom Abramovitsh was empowered to write his mature Yiddish (and later Hebrew) fiction.<sup>17</sup> The preface in the *Sgule tsu di yidishe tsores* at first glance does appear to be written in the signature “Mendele-style” (*nusekh mendele*), with all of the familiar “mendelesque idiosyncrasies,”<sup>18</sup> which already lends it an ironic bend, like with other fictional works introduced, “translated,” or “adapted” by Mendele. However, even if Klingenstein considers this

<sup>14</sup> Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 126.

<sup>15</sup> Niger, 213; Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 474–75.

<sup>16</sup> Mayzel, 479.

<sup>17</sup> For an in-depth discussion of “Mendele the bookseller” as a central conceit of modern Yiddish fiction (but not, notably, Abramovitsh's pseudonym), see Dan Miron, *A Traveler Disguised: The Rise of Modern Yiddish Fiction in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1996), especially 130–68.

<sup>18</sup> Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 475.

introduction to be on par with Mendele's other introductions to Abramovitsh's prose works (*The Wishing Ring*, *The Nag*, *Benjamin the Third*, etc.),<sup>19</sup> the speaker of the preface nowhere names himself "Mendele" and does not depict a scene that would make him recognizable as Mendele. In this case, perhaps Abramovitsh's writerly only persona partially bleeds over into Mendele's character, and not as completely as in his works of fiction.

The writer of the preface affirms to be familiar with the heaps of contemporary literature on the problems of Jewry: "Have you ever seen a Jew fall (God forbid) on his rump or struck by toothache, without having a heap of merciful Jews fall upon him, each one with his old wives' remedies to help? No worries indeed, we Jews have always had, thank God, more than our share of problems, merciful people, benefactors and advisors."<sup>20</sup> Those purported "healers" of the Jewish condition (*yidische lage*) have

talked our ears off with their absurdities. Among them there have been conjurers going off on a tangent, talking gibberish and wanting to heal us by means of the Devil (*durkh dem sitre-akhre*). Others have crawled truly far into holiness and searches a remedy in the holy Will of God, praying *Asher yatsar* a hundred times a day just to enrage our enemies. Further there are those who have written all manner of charms [. . .], odds and ends wonderfully made, in which it's impossible to understand a single word. Also, there are those who have gone off, upon God's bidding, eyes closed, on an empty stomach and with empty pockets, to measure fields at the Cave of the Patriarchs.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, the writer of the preface makes a mockery of a variety of proposed solutions to Jewish plight in the modern era, especially gibing at religious quietism, but also, notably, at emigration to Palestine to work the land ("to measure fields at the Cave of the Patriarchs"), as early proto-Zionist groups had been doing.<sup>22</sup> Abramovitsh seems to have been familiar with the ferment of ideologies in the Jewish public sphere in Russia, and was preemptively parodying these "solu-

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<sup>19</sup> Klingenstein, *Mendele der Buchhändler*, 360.

<sup>20</sup> Sholem Yankev Abramovitsh, "A sgule tsu di yidische tsores," in *Ale verk fun Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, ed. Mayzel Nachman, 10 vols. (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1920), 8: chap. 3, נ. All translations of quotes originally in Yiddish are my own.

<sup>21</sup> Abramovitsh, נ-ג.

<sup>22</sup> See Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 475–76.

tions” in the very preface to a translation of one such source of ideas. This is a satirical self-sabotage similar to other such feats by Mendele, such as in Abramovitch's *Travels of Benjamin the Third* (1878).

Nevertheless, despite the harsh words aimed at the competing ideologies concerning the Jewish condition, the editor and translator of the preface is happy to present to readers a book (*seyfer*), “written in the German language” (in der daytsher shprakhe) and rendered “in our Jewish/Yiddish tongue” (oyf undzer yidishn loshn).<sup>23</sup> The very names are telling: *shprakhe* is a Germanism in Yiddish, the normative Yiddish word is *shprakh* (without the end vowel); while the Jewish/Yiddish “language” is signified with the Hebrew-Aramaic word *loshn*. This already distances Pinsker's German original from the Jewish/Yiddish version—separating a Germanizing linguistic tendency from a Judaizing one. Moreover, the writer calls the pamphlet a *seyfer*, an appellation traditionally reserved for Jewish holy books (a secular book is a *bukh*); thus, ironically uplifting the meaning of this text of modern ideology to a kind of “holiness.”

Already in the preface, there are thus signs both of an ironic bent to the whole text presented, as well as of a distancing from the original “German language” and a preference for “our” language—an announcement of what the “translation” will accomplish. It has been noted that Abramovitch's “translation” of Pinsker's text should rather be considered a “subversive cultural transposition,”<sup>24</sup> or even a Jewish appropriation, a “Judaization” or *faryidishung*<sup>25</sup> of the German text in order to produce a text readable in an Eastern European Jewish mindset and cultural space. The various examples of this *faryidishung* in vocabulary, imagery, metaphors and rhetorical devices have been laid out by Yiddish scholar Max Weinreich,<sup>26</sup> who aims to demonstrate on the one hand Abramovitch's stylistic skill, and on the other the particularity of Yiddish used as a language of a modern literature and publicism. Thus, while Pinsker's intended readers were primarily educated and assimilated Western Jews, Abramovitch's intended au-

<sup>23</sup> Abramovitch, “A sgule,” 2–3. In Yiddish, *yidish* means both Jewish and Yiddish.

<sup>24</sup> Klingenstein, *Mendele der Buchhändler*, 360.

<sup>25</sup> Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 475. In Mayzel's view, Abramovitch set out to “refashion and judaize” (*ibertsamakhn un faryidishn*) the text. Mayzel, 474.

<sup>26</sup> Max Weinreich, “Vos heyst shraybn yidishlekh? Analizirt oyf mendeles an iberzetsung,” *Yidishe shprakh* 2, no. 4 (July–August 1942): 97–112.

dience, according to Max Weinreich, was the “study house intelligentsia,”<sup>27</sup> i.e., not the Jewish masses, but Talmudic students and scholars in the Russian yeshivot (Talmudic schools) or synagogue study rooms, who could grapple with the more abstract ideas of the pamphlet, many of which are expressed, as Weinreich demonstrates, with the devices of Talmudic disputation.

The general message of the two versions does not differ in its essence: in both, the pamphlet offers a pessimistic analysis of the failure of Jewish assimilation, a diagnosis of the disease of Jew-hatred, and a proposed solution in national consciousness-raising. Yet, the two texts differ not only their cultural field of reference, but also in how they express some key concepts. These differences can be traced in vocabulary, rhetoric devices, and the rearrangement and omission of text. Let us take a look at a few examples.

### Naming the Issue

Abramovitsh’s change of the title is already telling. The concept “self-emancipation,” that is, that Jews need to emancipate themselves, not only wait to be emancipated (i.e., given equal rights) by the polity in which they live, is essential to Pinsker’s argument: it is the very title of the German pamphlet. Abramovitsh, however, entirely forgoes the word emancipation—a paradigmatically modern political concept—in line with his very sparing use of vocabulary of Latin-Greek origin, common to many European languages: what in Standard Yiddish linguistics came to be called “internationalisms” (*internatsyonalizmen*). Instead, Abramovitsh titles his piece *A sgule tsu di yidishe tsores*, “A solution/remedy to Jewish problems/pains.” This brings into the very title the medical metaphors that Pinsker, a doctor, uses to analyze the Jewish condition—to diagnose it and offer a remedy to it. It also replaces the modern concept and term of emancipation with two Yiddish words coming from the Hebrew-Aramaic component of the language (*sgule*, *tsores*), thus accentuating traditional Jewishness against modern ideas and vocabulary.

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Both Pinsker and Abramovitsh use a series of medical and psychological terms to designate Jew-hatred, which Pinsker terms “Judeophobia,” as a disease. For

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<sup>27</sup> Weinreich, 102.

Pinsker, this is a hereditary and incurable “psychic aberration” (*Psychose*),<sup>28</sup> while for Abramovitsh it is an “obsession,” an *idée fixe* (*mankolye*).<sup>29</sup> In his preface, Abramovitsh is eager to point out how much the German intellect has contributed to this Jew-hatred in a modern garb. As he says about Germany, where Pinsker’s pamphlet was published, “In that land a few years back, the ugly scabies appeared for the first time under the weird new name ‘antisemitism.’ Which means, in our language (*oyf undzer loshn*): hatred for Jews (*di sine tsu yidn*), who are descended from the line of Shem. As though it had been now evidently proved that Shem kept a locker in Noah’s Arc and was lending money at interest to Yapheth and his cattle.”<sup>30</sup> Scorning this new-fangled term for an old hatred, Abramovitsh elsewhere names the phenomenon simply “Jew-hatred” (*sine tsu yidn*), or, as it is traditionally referred to, *sines yisroel* (“hatred of [the people of] Israel”). In this way, Abramovitsh accurately portrays antisemitism as a modern ideology, one of the -isms of the nineteenth century but refuses to adopt the word and lend it legitimacy.<sup>31</sup> Pinsker also never uses the word “antisemitism” in his text, perhaps for similar reasons; he opts either for his medicalized term “Judeophobia” or the simple “Jew-hatred” (*Judenhass*).

In another case, however, Pinsker does take on an expression arguably coming from enemy territory, namely by invoking the “Jewish question” (*Judenfrage*). Pinker’s text starts off by referring to “the eternal problem presented by the Jewish question.”<sup>32</sup> Abramovitsh never uses such a term (which later came into use in Yiddish as a neologism from German: *yidnfrage*). He uses, in the same passage, the words “a very old riddle/enigma” (*a shtark alte retenish*)<sup>33</sup> concerning Jews, a kind of riddle over which a whole world of (Gentile) thinkers is racking their brains, unable to crack the nut, ironically just like Talmudic scholars’ pore over difficult passages. He also talks about “Respona” (*shayles-tshuves*) about

<sup>28</sup> Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 185. The original German terms in parentheses are taken from the anonymously published first edition of Pinsker’s *Autoemancipation!*”

<sup>29</sup> Abramovitsh, “A sgule,” 6.

<sup>30</sup> Abramovitsh, 2. While Pinsker was trying to appeal to German Jews and could not criticize the contribution of German culture to Jew-hatred too sharply, so Abramovitsh had to forgo, due to Russian censorship, any mention of the recent pogroms in Russia, which Pinsker does address.

<sup>31</sup> The term “antisemitism” was popularized around 1880 by publicist Wilhelm Marr to replace old-fashioned “Jew-hatred” with a modern, respectable, “scientific” ideology.

<sup>32</sup> Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 182.

<sup>33</sup> Abramovitsh, “A sgule,” 3.

Jews:<sup>34</sup> by using a Hebrew term used to name scholarly correspondence on religious law (“Responsa”), he parodies the (Gentile) quibbling over Jews as a vacuous enterprise. All in all, by rejecting the fraught term of “the Jewish question,” Abramovitsh refuses to play on the enemies’ field. He makes it clear that the problem is not Jewish existence, but those questioning it. The “Jewish Question” is being posed by Jews’ enemies.

## Nation and Homeland

An apparent contradiction in Pinsker’s argument is that, having diagnosed Jew-hatred as an immemorial and ineradicable disease among the nations, he then proceeds to explain and even justify it as a natural reaction to the specter of the Jews as a “living dead” people: “After the Jewish people had yielded up its existence as an actual state, as a political entity, it could nevertheless not submit to total destruction—it did not cease to exist as a spiritual nation (*geistig als Nation fortzubestehen*). Thus, the world saw in this people the frightening form of one of the dead walking among the living.”<sup>35</sup> So the Jewish people has no place among the nations because it is something unreal, between worlds, at least from the perspective of nineteenth century nationalism: “No concrete, real attribute of the Jews causes Judeophobia; it is the abnormality of the Jews being somewhere between a national existence and a lack of a real foundation for that existence.”<sup>36</sup> A real foundation would, in Pinsker’s view, mean a piece of land with “spatial continuity” (*räumliche Zusammengehörigkeit*).<sup>37</sup> That land could become a homeland and the basis for a normalization of the Jewish condition. This view on nation and homeland can be analyzed to show how Abramovitsh, in his version, subtly departs from Pinsker’s conceptions.

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Firstly, there is the question of how Pinsker and Abramovitsh conceive of nations, specifically a Jewish people as opposed to other peoples. The two writers use a different set of synonyms for the nation, which demonstrate, once again, how Abramovitsh “judaized” and subtly shifted the perspective laid out by Pinsker. Pinsker uses, more or less interchangeably, both the Germanic *Volk*, “peo-

<sup>34</sup> Abramovitsh, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 184.

<sup>36</sup> Avineri, *Making of Modern Zionism*, 81.

<sup>37</sup> Pinsker, “*Autoemancipation!*”, 2. The English translation renders this less precisely as “a common land.” Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 183.



ple,” and the modern, Latin-descended *Nation*, “nation.” He uses both terms for both the Jews and the Gentile nations. In Yiddish, however, Abramovitsh dispenses with the internationalism *natsye*, using only it once, and prefers the Germanic *folk* (as in *dos yidishe folk*, “the Jewish people”) or the Hebrew-Aramaic *ume*, a more erudite synonym. Moreover, for the Gentile nations, Abramovitsh very frequently uses the traditional name *umes ho-oylem* (“the nations of the world”), an appellation harking back to Jewish religious tradition, where the Gentile nations are often viewed with distrust.

Secondly, there is the way of naming national homelands. Pinsker vacillates between the terms *Vaterland*, “fatherland,” and *Heimat*, “homeland,” sometimes distinguishing between them. Thus, he writes that “the Jewish people has no fatherland (*Vaterland*) of its own, though many motherlands (*Mutterländer*).”<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere he distinguishes a coincidental “homeland” (*Heimat*), where Jews happen to live, and a “fatherland,” which would be their national property, calling for “the auto-emancipation of the Jewish people as a nation, the foundation of a colonial community belonging to the Jews, which is some day to become our inalienable home (*Heimat*), our fatherland (*Vaterland*).”<sup>39</sup> A fatherland is then a homeland which inalienably belongs to a nation; Jews have lost their ancestral fatherland, currently have many homelands, but should strive for only one new homeland, a new fatherland.

Abramovitsh, though he elsewhere follows Pinsker in acknowledging that Jews lost their historical “fatherland” (*foterland*),<sup>40</sup> shortens and makes less pointed the crucial passage cited above. Here is Pinsker’s passage in full:

The Jewish people has no fatherland of its own, though many motherlands; it has no rallying point, no center of gravity, no government of its own, no accredited representatives. It is everywhere a guest [*anwesend*, literally “present”], and nowhere at home.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, 183. This is the only occurrence of the word “motherland” in Pinsker’s text.

<sup>39</sup> Leon Pinsker, *Auto-Emancipation*, trans. David Simon Blondheim (New York: Maccabaeon, 1906), 15. In Herzberg’s edition, this passage is abridged.

<sup>40</sup> Abramovitsh, “A sgule,” 5.

<sup>41</sup> Herzberg, *The Zionist Idea*, 183.

The same passage is much abridged in Abramovitsh's version; the whole first part, with all the modern political terminology, has been stricken. What is left is only this sentence: "[Jews] are scattered, dispersed, are to be found everywhere in the world, but are nowhere at home." (*Zey zenen tsezeyt, tseshpreyt, gefinen zikh umetum in der velt un zenen ergets nisht in der heym.*) Here, Abramovitsh describes Jewish diasporic existence leaving aside Pinsker's modern political terms, as if in resistance to the modern political jargon that Pinsker espouses. But in removing this modern political charge, he also makes the statement less incisive and more diffuse.

Finally, it is important to note that Abramovitsh shortened Pinsker's pamphlet by about a half, leaving out the last part of the text which contains Pinsker's practical ideas on how to organize a Jewish national movement.<sup>42</sup> Pinsker suggests, similarly to Herzl in *The Jewish State* (1896), that Jews should form a representative political body (a "national congress") and an executive body (a "directorate")<sup>43</sup> to further their interests as a nation and to pursue the acquisition of a national territory. Abramovitsh follows Pinsker by briefly invoking the need for a territorial "refuge" (Pinsker: *Zufluchtsstätte*, Abramovitsh: *mokem-miklet*) for Jews in need, but neglects Pinsker's practical political plan, which is essential to the argument. In truncating Pinsker's argument, Abramovitsh's piece eventually becomes repetitive and loses focus. In leaving out the appeal to practical political self-organizing, Abramovitsh neglects the very element that, in a few decades, made Jewish nationalism, especially Zionism, an effective political ideology.

## Conclusion

Apart from these few examples, other aspects of Pinsker's and Abramovitsh's text could be analyzed, such as their perspective on assimilation, traditional religion, Jewish national particularity, or even contemporary, international relations. Hopefully, the above examples suffice to show that the two texts are sometimes patently, but more often subtly, at variance. Abramovitsh's satirical voice, particularly when writing in his "Mendele-style," is often subtle in its ironies and sleights of hand, and this subtlety is alive in this non-fictional text as well.

<sup>42</sup> Mayzel, *Dos Mendele-bukh*, 477.

<sup>43</sup> Herzberg, *Zionist Idea*, 196.

In 1913, the Zionist writer Ben-Ami described Abramovitsh's ideological positions thus:

Reb Mendele is no systematical, strictly logical thinker. He perhaps even holds no fixed and precise worldviews. [. . .] [His ideas] are notions (*aynfaln*), flashes of wit (*blitsn*), and as such they often contradict each other. And it often happens that Reb Mendele destroys one day what he declared the day before. In this, he is a true artist, wholly unconcerned with any particular fixed and determined truth.<sup>44</sup>

As Niger suggests, this may well be an exaggeration.<sup>45</sup> Abramovitsh's views on a number of issues relating to the Jewish situation in his time, as discussed above, seem clear. However, he was indeed skeptical about nationalist solutions to the Jewish plight in Russia. Both Pinsker and Abramovitsh were disillusioned *maskilim*, but each was disillusioned with a different inflection, and each found a way forward in a different direction. Pinsker, from 1881 onwards, opted for a territorial, and eventually Zionist national project, which Abramovitsh never did, at least not in any partisan sense. Abramovitsh in fact described himself as “an enemy of partisanship” (*a soyne fun parteyishkeyt*),<sup>46</sup> just as one would expect from a literary writer, as opposed to an ideologue or activist, who needs a staunch *parteyishkeyt* to get anything done. As for the various ideologies springing up in the Jewish public space, Abramovitsh kept rethinking them by weaving them into his fiction, sometimes by rewriting earlier works. He kept abreast with the times, even if his work could never offer a forward-looking, activist push, such as was attempted in the sentimental Zionist literature he later parodied.

One can even wonder whether territorial nationalism, or Zionism in particular, might not have come to look to Abramovitsh as a way of “healing [us] by means of the Devil” (*heyln durkh dem sitre-akhre*), as he puts it in the preface to the pamphlet. To explore this further, it would be worth researching, apart from his

<sup>44</sup> Ben-Ami, “Reb mendele she-bal-pe,” in *Der Pinkes: Yorbukh far der geshikhte fun der yidisher literatur un shprakh, far folklor, kritik un bibliografye*, ed. Shmuel Niger (Vilnius: Vilner farlag fun B. A. Kletskin, 1913), 173–74.

<sup>45</sup> Niger, *Mendele Moykher-Sforim*, 206–7.

<sup>46</sup> Nadezhda Abramovitsh and Aleksandra Dobrin-Abramovitsh, *Der zeyde tsvishn eygene un fremde: Zikhroynes fun mendeles tekhter* (Warsaw: Kultur-lige, 1928), 27.

positions on national pride,<sup>47</sup> his other literary works of the 1880s and 1890s in which he reacted to the new developments in Jewish nationalism, such as the new version of *The Wishing Ring* (1888–89), the Hebrew version of *Benjamin the Third* (1896; with reference to Herzlian political Zionism). In this way, one might gain a more comprehensive picture of Abramovitsh's socio-political thinking before and after his engagement with Pinsker's pamphlet.

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<sup>47</sup> For example, in the essay "Ahava leumit ve-toldoteyha," published in the Hebrew paper *Hamelits* in 1878. See Dan Miron and Anita Norich, "The Politics of Benjamin III: Intellectual Significance and its Formal Correlatives in Sh. Y. Abramovitsh's *Masoets Benyomin Hashlishi*," in *The Field of Yiddish: Studies in Language, Folklore, and Literature; Fourth Collection*, ed. Marvin I. Herzog et al. (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1980), 105–6.

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**Conflict(s)/War(s)**

Vesna Liponik\*

## Animals as Conflicts<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

*Godzilla*, animal resistance, saviorism, military-animal industrial complex, nuclear weapons

### Abstract

In this article, we utilize two absolute anti-nuclear classics of all time, the novellas *Godzilla* (1955) and *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955) by Shigeru Kayama to focus on the possibilities of thinking not only in the usual way about animals in conflicts but about animals as conflicts. Godzilla is not merely a nuclear allegory, and as such a personification, an embodiment of a conflict, but also an “allegory” of animal resistance, an embodiment of another, more underlying conflict, with all its necessarily (non-)allegorical implications. Our aim is to explore this view of Godzilla in the context of recent discussions in animal philosophy, namely the concept of animal resistance. This article will investigate the relationship between animal victimhood and resistance, thereby identifying a novel phenomenon: animals as saviors.

## Živali kot konflikti

### Ključne besede

*Godzilla*, živalski upor, odrešiteljstvo, vojaško-živalski industrijski kompleks, jedrsko orožje

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### Povzetek

S pomočjo dveh absolutnih protijedrskih klasik vseh časov, novel *Godzilla* (1955) in *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955) avtorja Shigeruja Kayame, skušamo razmišljati ne le, kot je obi-

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čajno, o živalih v konfliktih, ampak se osredotočimo na možnosti, ki jih omogoča razmišljanje o živalih *kot* konfliktih. Godzilla ni le jedrska alegorija in kot taka poosebitev, utelešenje konflikta, temveč tudi »alegorija« živalskega upora, utelešenje drugega, bolj temeljnega konflikta z vsemi njegovimi nujno (ne)alegoričnimi implikacijami. Naš namen je podrobneje raziskati ta vidik Godzille v kontekstu nedavnih razprav v filozofiji živali, ki se nanašajo na koncept živalskega upora in nadalje preučiti odnos med viktimizacijo in uprom živali ter tako osvetliti nov pojav: živali *kot* odrešiteljice.



*Just now, you asked about what we can do to combat  
Godzilla. Unfortunately, there isn't a single thing we can do.  
We can't prevent Godzilla from coming again.  
—Prof. Yamane, Godzilla Raids Again<sup>2</sup>*

## A Few (Anti-)Nuclear Anniversaries

Let us begin with a list of some current, past, and near-future nuclear anniversaries that are essential for a more precise contextualization of what will be the focus of our interest.

On August 6, 1945, at 8:15 a.m., the American Little Boy bomb was dropped on the center of Hiroshima, followed three days later by Fat Man in Nagasaki. As of August 6, 2025, eighty years will have passed since the first use of nuclear weapons in a war.<sup>3</sup>

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On March 1, 1954, at 6:45 a.m., a thermonuclear bomb (codename: Shrimp) was detonated on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands as part of “Operation Castle,” which turned out to be the largest and worst nuclear test in U.S. history. It was 1,000 times more powerful than the Little Boy that destroyed Hiroshima. Operation “Castle Bravo” vaporized ten million tons of sand, coral, and water, leaving

<sup>2</sup> Shigeru Kayama, *Godzilla Raids Again*, in *Godzilla and Godzilla Raids Again*, trans. Jeffrey Angles (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023), 127.

<sup>3</sup> “The Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” National Park Service, last updated April 4, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-atomic-bombings-of-hiroshima-and-nagasaki.htm>.



a huge crater in the ocean floor and a 100-mile-wide fallout cloud that spewed radioactive debris onto the inhabitants of the atolls of the Marshall Islands, US military personnel, and Japanese fishermen aboard the Daigo Fukuryū Maru (Lucky Dragon No. 5). All the fishermen on board fell ill with radiation poisoning and one of them died a few months after the incident. Lucky Dragon forced the USA to reveal at least some of the secrets surrounding the nuclear tests. The incident, also referred to as the third American use of a nuclear bomb against Japan, was far worse than predicted and led to huge changes in anti-nuclear policy, eventually resulting in the 1963 Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty between the US, the UK, and the Soviet Union, which banned nuclear testing in the atmosphere, underwater, and in space.<sup>4</sup> The year 2024 marks the 70th anniversary of the test of the US hydrogen bomb on Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands in 1954.

Moreover, the controversy referred to by Toshihiro Higuchi as the “atomic bomb tuna” was part of the same anti-nuclear knot that further complicated relations between the US and its Asian ally. Tuna caught by Japanese fishermen after Castle Bravo were exposed to radiation from the tests and the radioactive carcasses had to be disposed of. Sales declined due to radioactive fallout<sup>5</sup> and the Japanese tuna market fell into a deep crisis. Lucky Dragon and the subsequent a-bomb tuna led to the establishment of radiological standards between the US and Japan.<sup>6</sup>

As Joseph Masco emphasizes in *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making* (2021), this example shows how “the politics of radioactive fallout were central to the first efforts to regulate the bomb, contributing to a wide-ranging social revolution, linking issues of war and peace to those of the environment and public health in entirely new ways.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Castle Bravo at 70: The Worst Nuclear Test in U.S. History,” National Security Archive, February 29, 2024, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/nuclear-vault/2024-02-29/castle-bravo-70-worst-nuclear-test-us-history>.

<sup>5</sup> Fallout is the term that comes from the atomic age and appeared in the English language precisely after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Joseph Masco, *The Future of Fallout, and Other Episodes in Radioactive World-Making* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 20.

<sup>6</sup> Toshihiro Higuchi, *Political Fallout: Nuclear Weapons Testing and the Making of a Global Environmental Crisis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> Masco, *Future of Fallout*, 24.

On June 13, 1953, Warner Bros. released a nation-wide smash hit rampage monster film, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, directed by Eugène Lourié, with stop motion animation by Ray Harryhausen. The Rhedosaurus, awakened from hibernation in the Arctic Circle by an atomic bomb test, set off on a journey *home* to the Hudson River, where fossils of his species were found.<sup>8</sup>

June 13, 2023, thus marks the 60th anniversary of this now little-known (outside select circles of genre enthusiasts) successor to *King Kong* (1933, re-released in 1952) and, we would say, *Moby Dick* (1851), with its immediate and far more famous successor being the Japanese *Gojira* (1954) or, in English “translation,” *Godzilla*. It is important to note that *Gojira*, as a portmanteau, combines the names of gorillas (*gorira* in Japanese) and whales (*kujira*).<sup>9</sup>

Toho Studios producer Tomoyuki Tanaka came across an article about *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* in a Japanese film magazine on his way back from Indonesia, where the authorities had canceled his planned big-budget film about an ex-soldier love story due to rising domestic tensions, and immediately realized that he could capitalize on the fears of nuclear weapons and radioactivity that had been aroused less than a decade earlier by Little Boy and Fat Man. *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* is not only an immediate predecessor to *Gojira*, tellingly tentatively entitled “The giant monster from 20,000 miles under the sea” (*Kaitei ni-man mairu kara kita dai kaijū*), but also marks the beginning of the explosion of a specific genre that emerged in the 1950s—the giant monster movie, with its subgenre of the nuclear explosion giant monster/beast movie.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note that this genre explosion of nuclear cinema followed a period of intense and radical nuclear testing during the Cold War with its intense nuclear propaganda.<sup>11</sup>

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On October 27, 1954, *Gojira* premiered in Nagoya, Japan. October 27, 2024, marks the 70th anniversary of *Godzilla*’s first official screen appearance, which was

<sup>8</sup> “The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms: Release Info,” IMDb, accessed June 27, 2024, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0045546/releaseinfo/>.

<sup>9</sup> Jeffrey Angles, “Translating an Icon,” in Kayama, *Godzilla and Godzilla Raids Again*, 225.

<sup>10</sup> Angles, 193–97.

<sup>11</sup> Masco, *Future of Fallout*, 20–21.

followed just six months later by *Godzilla Raids Again* (*Gojira no Gyakushū*).<sup>12</sup> In July 1955, after the release of the two films, Shigeru Kayama's novellas *Gojira* and *Gojira no Gyakushū* were published in a single volume in Japan. Kayama, a prolific writer at the time, is the man Tanaka had entrusted with the script for the first two *Godzilla* films.<sup>13</sup>

However, the two novellas written by Kayama differ slightly from the movie. There is an interesting interplay between the films and the novellas. For although the story, characters, and plot remain the same in both, the novellas were published after the release of the two films, so the final form of the novellas was also influenced by the two films. As Jeffrey Angles points out, one of the clearest differences between the film and the novellas is the explicit anti-nuclear message of the novellas, which is still largely, if rather more implicitly, present in the film.<sup>14</sup>

*Godzilla's* anti-nuclear message stems from the three nuclear events already mentioned: Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Castle Bravo with the subsequent "atomic bomb tuna" controversy. A clear allusion to the destruction of two Japanese cities can already be seen in the subtitles of both works: *Godzilla* is subtitled "Godzilla in Tokyo" and *Godzilla Raids Again* is subtitled "Godzilla in Osaka."

The decision to publish the novellas had a lot to do with the fact that Kayama was already aware at the time that *Godzilla* was moving away from the original political mission he had given him in the first part: to convey an anti-nuclear message to the world. For the same reason, Kayama also decided to withdraw from further involvement in *Godzilla*.<sup>15</sup> Both novellas are thus introduced with a short foreword by the author, in which Kayama explains his purpose:

As you readers already know, the main character of this tale, *Godzilla*, is an enormous, imaginary kaiju—a creature that doesn't actually exist anywhere here on the planet. However, atomic and hydrogen bombs, which have taken on the form of *Godzilla* in this story, do exist. They are being produced and could be used for

<sup>12</sup> Steve Ryfle, *Japan's Favorite Mon-Star: The Unauthorized Biography of "The Big G"* (Toronto: ECW Press, 1998), 33.

<sup>13</sup> Angles, "Translating an Icon," 197.

<sup>14</sup> Angles, 200.

<sup>15</sup> Angles, 211.

war at any moment. If that were to happen, it wouldn't just be big metropolises like Tokyo and Osaka that would be destroyed. The entire Earth would likely be laid waste. To prevent something so frightening and tragic from coming to pass, people all over the world are pouring their energy into a new movement opposing the use of atomic and hydrogen bombs. As one small member of that movement, I have tried to do my part by writing a novella—the tale you now hold in your hands.<sup>16</sup>

Despite this bold and unilateral introductory statement, Godzilla is portrayed in a considerably more complex and multifaceted manner within the novellas. First, the novellas offer a view of Godzilla as something or someone that is not entirely imaginary, or rather Godzilla complicates the distinction between real and imaginary. Secondly, as much as Godzilla is a bomb, he is also a victim of the bomb, a resilient resistant victim, and this doubleness of Godzilla amounts to the same thing: the problem of the bomb. Or, to put it another way, it is this double-sidedness that makes Godzilla's anti-nuclear message work. It points to a certain symptomatic positioning of animals, the fundamental impossibility of figurative language fully capturing the animal in an only metaphorical or allegorical way. The same impossibility that makes figurative use possible in the first place.<sup>17</sup> This is at the same time what haunts its use.

When Oxana Timofeeva points out in her book *The History of Animals: A Philosophy* (2018) that “wherever we install a fence to mark a border, the animal will cross it—as the ‘only real outlaw’—illegally,”<sup>18</sup> we suggest a slight reversal of this logic because the fact that we had to “install a fence to mark a border” means that the animal *has already* crossed it. Godzilla is always already on the other side because there is no other side for Godzilla than the other side.

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Godzilla is therefore not only a nuclear allegory, and as such a personification, an embodiment of a conflict, but also an “allegory” of animal resistance, an embodiment of another, more underlying conflict, with all its necessary (non-) allegorical implications. With the help of two absolute anti-nuclear classics of all time, the novellas *Godzilla* (1955) and *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955) by Shige-

<sup>16</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> A similar double-sidedness can be found in Daphne du Maurier's *The Birds* (1952), which was the basis for Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963). The same could be said of *Moby Dick*.

<sup>18</sup> Oxana Timofeeva, *The History of Animals: A Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 181.

ru Kayama, we aim to explore this view of Godzilla in the context of recent discussions in animal philosophy, the concept of animal resistance, and to further examine the relationship between animal victimhood and resistance, thereby bringing to light a new phenomenon: animals *as* saviours. We will focus on the possibilities of thinking not only in the usual way about animals in conflicts but about animals *as* conflicts.

## Godzilla Appears

Godzilla first appears as a strange white light at the bottom of the sea, a loud, gigantic *roar* that hits a ship, a voice, followed by a whirlpool that sucks in the burning ship, which is immersed in the same strange light from the deep. Thus ends first one ship and then another. In the spirit of the Cold War, people wonder if perhaps a new war is brewing, or if it is a Soviet submarine or a mine from World War Two, but none of this fits the description of the catastrophe. Then Godzilla appears when the fishes in the sea become scarce. The fishermen return to Odo Island without a catch and an elderly islander immediately mentions that it is Godzilla, referring to him as the monster that parents on the island used to scare naughty children with. When the fishes ran out, Godzilla was supposed to come ashore and eat people. When the fishermen caught nothing for weeks, they sent Godzilla a young girl in a boat as an offering.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, when Godzilla first appears on land in all his physical splendor, it is on the same small fishing island of Odo, in the midst of a ritual prayer to drive him away. And it is clear that Godzilla appears not to destroy, but to feed. As the fishes in the sea had run out, Godzilla came ashore and in his search for prey, he destroyed a few buildings, unintentionally so to speak, because he has a big body after all, and accidentally killed a few more people in the process. Just as the two ships may have distracted him while he was fishing or whatever he was doing.

After this incident, a research expedition is sent to the island, led by Professor Yamane, a paleontologist who is also the first to identify Godzilla as an animal,

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<sup>19</sup> In this sense, the English translation of *Gojira* in *Godzilla* is appropriate, suggesting his god-like character. This points to a premodern understanding of the relationship between humans and animals, in which animals were closer to the gods.

a dinosaur from the Jurassic period.<sup>20</sup> He reaches this conclusion based on the discovery of a trilobite from the late Jurassic period, an animal that has already been classified taxonomically and which he finds on the island, despite being considered extinct. Godzilla has yet to be taxonomically classified, thus representing the discovery of a new species. It is also of great importance to note that a considerable quantity of radiation was identified in the trilobite and, subsequently, in Godzilla's footprint. This radiation could only have originated from the hydrogen bomb. Based on the information he has gathered, Yamane offers the following explanation:

So why did he appear on the shores of our nation so suddenly? . . . I imagine his kind probably used to live hidden away in underwater grottoes, living out their lives, keeping to themselves, and managing somehow to survive until this day . . . Recent hydrogen bomb tests must have destroyed Godzilla's habitat. Let me be clear. Damage from the H-bomb tests seems to be what drove him from the home where he had been living in relative peace up until now . . .<sup>21</sup>

In this section, Yamane identifies several key elements that are essential for comprehending Godzilla. To begin with, the most apparent point of contention is the fact that the scientific apparatus does not have complete insight into the existence of all living things and beings on this planet. The existence of such a large creature for millions of years without being discovered by humans is indicative of its limitations, as well as the limitations of our epistemologies and technologies. It also reminds us that “nuclear power(s) extract(s) [. . .] from the ‘ghost acres’ or ‘shadow places,’ those marginalized places.”<sup>22</sup> Kylie Crane here borrows the term “ghost acreage”<sup>23</sup> coined by Georg Borgström to point “to the externalized lands (and, by extension, lives) that feed the wealthy”<sup>24</sup> and Val Plumwood's “shadow places,”<sup>25</sup> with a similar meaning, places where there

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<sup>20</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla*, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Kayama, 48.

<sup>22</sup> Kylie Crane, “On Some Absent Presences of Nuclear Extractivism: Retrofuturist Aesthetics and *Fallout 4*,” in *To the Last Drop: Affective Economies of Extraction and Sentimentality*, ed. Axelle Germanaz et al. (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2023), 190.

<sup>23</sup> Georg Borgström, *The Hungry Planet: The Modern World at the Edge of Famine* (New York: MacMillan, 1972).

<sup>24</sup> Crane, “Nuclear Extractivism,” 188.

<sup>25</sup> Val Plumwood, “Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling,” *Australian Humanities Review* 44 (March 2008), <http://australianhumanitiesreview.org/2008/03/01/shadow-plac->

seems to be no one or nothing, or just “uninhabitants,” as Crane emphasizes, following Rob Nixon and Rebecca Solnit.<sup>26</sup> This refers to the places where nuclear tests are carried out, which are of course inhabited, but those who inhabit them do not count as inhabitants for the Western imperial nuclear powers. Here we see the continuing colonial extractivist logic that lies at the heart of US nuclear policy or with Crane: “mapping the testing sites across an (imagined) background of relations of empire then emerges as an extended exercise in mapping colonialism.”<sup>27</sup> Not to mention the acquisition of the elements to make nuclear weapons.

Godzilla shows up as a “surprise factor” (like the unfortunate fishermen from Lucky Dragon No. 5 who were accidentally too close to the Castle Bravo test) where nothing and no one should disturb the existing nuclear state of affairs.

In this sense, we can frame Godzilla as fallout, “an unexpected supplement to an event, [. . .] causing a kind of long-term and unexpected damage: it is the aftermath, the reverberation, the negative side effect.”<sup>28</sup> And Godzilla, after the intrusion into her habitat, again quite literally falls out. As Masco notes, the noun fallout “derives from the verb ‘to fall out,’ which since the sixteenth century has designated a social break or conflict.”<sup>29</sup>

It is important to note here that Godzilla falls out because of nuclear technology. The equation is simple: no nuclear technology, no fallout. If Western nuclear forces had not intervened in Godzilla’s home with nuclear experiments or destroyed it, Godzilla would have continued to live peacefully where he was. At this point, Godzilla is no longer a bomb, as Kayama puts it, but a victim of a bomb, or more specifically, of the military industrial complex. As Yamane goes on to explain, the nuclear tests also make Godzilla resistant to all artillery. This second aspect is particularly evident in the second novella when Godzilla reappears in a fishing context (which we will return to below), as Yamane then claims:

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es-and-the-politics-of-dwelling/.

<sup>26</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011); Rebecca Solnit, *Savage Dreams: A Journey into the Landscape Wars of the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>27</sup> Crane, “Nuclear Extractivism,” 188.

<sup>28</sup> Masco, *Future of Fallout*, 19.

<sup>29</sup> Masco, 19.

When Godzilla came on land in Tokyo, we learned he was extremely sensitive to light. In fact, if anything, bright lights make him burn with intense rage . . . I imagine that's the result of having been burned by hydrogen bomb tests in the past. No doubt he remembers. I imagine he's learned to react to lights in strange ways, so perhaps we can use his reaction to our advantage.<sup>30</sup>

Despite Godzilla's initial portrayal as a villain, he is ultimately a victim of the bomb. His status as a victim highlights the inherent nature of victimization, as he not only suffers but also resists. He is quite literally a victim with a voice of his own; as we have already pointed out above, we do not see Godzilla at first, but we hear his loud *roar*.

Godzilla completely shifts the epistemological framework of what we understand as victimhood, which occupies a privileged place in the entire history of thinking about human-animal relations. As Dinesh Wadiwel points out, this is precisely one of the key advantages of thinking about animal resistance: its epistemological implications, which follow a Foucauldian framework in which epistemology is understood as a regime of truth that conditions the possible and shapes power relations. The conceptualization of animal resistance therefore has serious political effects and epistemological implications. As Wadiwel emphasizes, it “offers a different model for considering political agency”<sup>31</sup> and at the same time transforms the concept of resistance itself.

### “No Doubt He Remembers”<sup>32</sup>

The emphasis on the victimization of animals in animal scholarship (and advocacy) is, as many scholars highlight,<sup>33</sup> a consequence of the particular historical position of animals and the enormous systemic and epistemic violence to which

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<sup>30</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla Raids Again*, 129.

<sup>31</sup> Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), 168.

<sup>32</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla Raids Again*, 129.

<sup>33</sup> See, e.g., Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*; Carlo Salzani and Zipporah Weisberg, “Animals as Victims,” Paris Institute for Critical Thinking, June 18, 2024, <https://parisinstitute.org/animals-as-victims>; Fahim Amir, *Being and Swine: The End of Nature (As We Knew It)*, trans. Geoffrey C. Howes and Corvin Russell (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2020); Cynthia Willet, *Interspecies Ethics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).



they are subjected. As Cynthia Willet points out, this “provided the central philosophical justification for social movements against animal cruelty for the past two centuries.”<sup>34</sup> This began with the most influential and seminal work in animal ethics, *Animal Liberation* (1975), by the utilitarian philosopher Peter Singer.<sup>35</sup> He, like the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham before him, emphasized the capacity of animals to suffer. Throughout this history, animals have largely been seen as passive victims that humans must liberate, with humans being their voice, “the voice of the voiceless.”<sup>36</sup> As Justin Simpson emphasizes, this persistent and widely accepted view of animals has also lurked in environmental ethics.<sup>37</sup>

Zipporah Weisberg and Carlo Salzani delineate two interrelated consequences of the prevailing victimization approach. Firstly, they identify the subsequent silencing of the voices of animals distinct from our own, which they characterize as a form of epistemic violence. Secondly, they highlight the simultaneous application of colonial and ableist saviorism. However, they also emphasize that there has been a significant shift, particularly in recent years, from the suffering and capability approach to the animal voice, resistance, and agency or subjectivity approach. This shift has moved the focus from an ethical to a political view of human-animal relations. The animal resistance approach alters our understanding of power relations while presupposing an animal voice and agency.<sup>38</sup>

The organic connection between victimhood and the resistance approach that we can recognize in Godzilla’s actions is to some extent also emphasized by Wadiwel, who in *Animals and Capital* focuses on the question of fish resistance. Wadiwel recognizes that the approach based on sentience and welfare is institutionally and politically ineffective and therefore replaces the question “Do fish suffer?” with “Do fish resist?” However, Wadiwel points out that this is not so much a replacement as an Althusserian symptomatic approach to reading that

<sup>34</sup> Cynthia Willet, *Interspecies Ethics*, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: HarperCollins, 1975).

<sup>36</sup> Tom Regan, “Giving Voice to Animal Rights,” interview by Kymberlie Adams Matthews, *Satya*, August 2004, <http://www.satyamag.com/augo4/regan.html>.

<sup>37</sup> Justin Simpson, “A Posthumanist Social Epistemology: On the Possibility of Nonhuman Epistemic Injustice,” in “Animal (Dis)entangled or Towards ‘A New Form of Civilization,’” ed. Vesna Laponik, special issue, *Anthropos: Journal of Philosophy & Psychology* 55, no. 2 (2023): 195–214.

<sup>38</sup> Salzani and Weisberg, “Animals as Victims.”

complements the original question “Do fish suffer?”:<sup>39</sup> “what distinguishes this new reading from the old one is the fact that in the new one the second text is articulated with the lapses in the first text. Here [ . . . ] we find the necessity and possibility of a reading on two bearings simultaneously.”<sup>40</sup>

In other words, as Godzilla shows, resistance and victimhood are two sides of the same coin. When we speak of victimhood, we are already speaking of resistance, but what we need in order to understand this is a different epistemological framing. To further substantiate this thesis, we will return to another important point that Professor Yamane raises in the passages quoted above and that we have already briefly touched upon: the connection between Godzilla, technology, and resistance.

Scholars who have extensively addressed the question of animal resistance note a correlation between technology and resistance.<sup>41</sup> The modernization of animal exploitation technology is based precisely on the recognition of animal resistance and the subsequent immediate co-optation to improve production and make animal exploitation more efficient in order to prevent further disruption of “unstoppable valorization”<sup>42</sup> by resistance. The key here is “the law of value” and the position of animals in relation to value.<sup>43</sup>

Agnieszka Kowalczyk begins her article entitled “Mapping Non-human Resistance in the Age of Biocapital,” in which she deals with the possibilities of and obstacles to thinking animal resistance within a Marxist framework,<sup>44</sup> with a

<sup>39</sup> Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*, 174.

<sup>40</sup> Louis Althusser, “From Capital to Marx’s Philosophy,” in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, ed. Louis Althusser et al., trans. Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (London: Verso, 2015), 27.

<sup>41</sup> See, e.g., Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*; Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel, *The War Against Animals* (Leiden: Brill, 2015); Fahim Amir, *Being and Swine*; Jason Hribal, *Fear of the Animal Planet: The Hidden History of Animal Resistance* (Chico: AK Press, 2011); Ron Broglio, “Revolution,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, ed. Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach, and Ron Broglio (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019): 475–87.

<sup>42</sup> Marina Gržinić Mauhler, “Animal (Dis)Entanglement: Value-Form and Animal-Form,” in “Animal (Dis)entangled or Towards ‘A New Form of Civilization,’” ed. Vesna Liponik, special issue, *Anthropos: Journal of Philosophy & Psychology* 55, no. 2 (2023): 170.

<sup>43</sup> Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*; Gržinić Mauhler, “Animal (Dis)Entanglement,” 163.

<sup>44</sup> Agnieszka Kowalczyk, “Mapping Non-human Resistance in the Age of Biocapital,” in *The Rise of Critical Animal Studies: From the Margins to the Centre*, ed. Nik Taylor and Richard

quote from Harry Cleaver, in which he places struggle at the center of value: “The basic commodity form of which value is the expression is the class struggle itself which [ . . . ] is over the imposition of that form.”<sup>45</sup> And this is exactly compatible with the operaist model of resistance that Wadiwel uses, following Fahim Amir and the Italian Marxists.<sup>46</sup> In the operaist model of resistance, “systems of production and exchange, such as capitalism, feed upon the productive capacities and creativity of the bodies that labour within these systems.”<sup>47</sup>

In this context, Wadiwel points out that when we talk about human-animal relations, these relations are most often those between animals and fixed capital (fences, enclosures, machines, instruments etc.).<sup>48</sup>

If animal resistance is the key to improving the technology of animal exploitation, then this fact has significant implications for the epistemological framework for thinking about human-animal relations. It challenges the traditional view that animals have always been passive victims. Instead, it suggests that the victim has always been active and resisted, albeit often unrecognized or suppressed.

As already mentioned, Godzilla does not attack everything, but either targets a potential meal and the destruction is merely a side-effect of his size, or he attacks in response to a traumatic experience. Godzilla acts as an intentional agent who barely notices humans, and if he does, he notices them as prey.<sup>49</sup> Godzilla thus primarily fights with fixed capital.

Jason Hribal in his seminal work *Fear of the Animal Planet: The Hidden History of Animal Resistance* presents the history of animal resistance from below. It focuses on examples of documented acts of resistance in zoos, aquariums, and circuses and shows above all that they are not contingent. When a tiger escapes from a zoo or an orca attacks a trainer, it is an important part of the strategies of circuses and zoos to show that these incidents do not pose a serious threat, that

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Twine (New York: Routledge, 2014), 183–200.

<sup>45</sup> Harry Cleaver, “Internationalisation of Capital and Mode of Production in Agriculture,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 11, no. 13 (1976): 9.

<sup>46</sup> Amir, *Being and Swine*.

<sup>47</sup> Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*, 176.

<sup>48</sup> Wadiwel, 195.

<sup>49</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla and Godzilla Raids Again*, 44.

they do not mean anything, that they are completely rare and unrelated cases that merely show the bestiality of certain animals. Above all, they try to show that animals that flee or attack after escaping can attack anyone, or are even bound to attack. But as the many specific examples Hribal gives in the book show, animals on the run elude random passers-by and attack specific individuals, their immediate captors, or perpetrators. As Hribal foregrounds, “the standard operating procedure is to deny agency. The key words to remember are ‘accident’, ‘wild’, and ‘instinct,’ ”<sup>50</sup> The second step is to improve technologies to contain and prevent such incidents from happening again. But despite fences, machines, bombs, and walls, they happen again. They happen again precisely because of fences, machines, bombs, and walls.

### “Priceless Living Fossil”<sup>51</sup>

Most of the second part of *Godzilla* consists of the intense mobilization of military artillery and technology to destroy the threat of Godzilla, but all military technology is utterly powerless against Godzilla. In other words, it is an attempt to restore the balance of power that has been broken by Godzilla’s resistance. In the end, Godzilla is defeated by a deadly weapon called the Oxygen Destroyer, which the professor’s protégé, the chemist Dr. Serizawa, has secretly developed in his laboratory. But this victory over Godzilla is only temporary (a point we will return to later). To prevent his deadly invention from falling into the wrong hands, Serizawa decides to blow himself up along with Godzilla and the Oxygen Destroyer. A key part of Kayama’s anti-nuclear message was to draw attention to the ethics of science, especially in the case of the creation and use of weapons of mass destruction. And with Kayama’s own withdrawal from further involvement as a screenwriter, also to the ethics of artistic creation. If he were to keep Godzilla alive for the sake of continuing the franchise, it would mean that the bomb survives, since he designed Godzilla as a personified bomb. But Kayama also admits that he has begun to feel affection for Godzilla.<sup>52</sup> Which in turn reveals Godzilla’s inner duality. But Kayama’s emphasis on the ethics of science in the novels has its anthropocentric limitations.

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<sup>50</sup> Hribal, *Fear of the Animal Planet*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla*, 82.

<sup>52</sup> Angles, “Translating an Icon,” 207.

Professor Yamane, the voice of science in the service of the nation state and capital, is the only one who wants Godzilla alive, because as Wadiwel states “it is because animals survive [. . .] [that] value becomes possible.”<sup>53</sup> In a chapter entitled “We Mustn’t Kill,” Professor Yamane makes explicit reference to the nuclear context of Godzilla, Japan’s role in the Second World War, and the consequences of this role:

During the war, the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima blew away an enormous city in a single instant. However, the hydrogen bombs they’re now testing in the South Pacific are many hundreds of times more terrible than the atomic bombs dropped on Japan. They say it’s dangerous for people even to eat the tuna irradiated by the hydrogen bombs, but just think Godzilla was able to take all that radiation. If anything, it was because of the bomb’s influence he’s as strong as he is. When I say that’s not all that makes him so frightening, I’m not exaggerating. He’s survived for millions of years—think about that kind of vitality! [. . .] If humans could have only just a small fraction of that vitality . . . [. . .]. Fortunately, this amazing chance [. . .] has been given to Japan. We Japanese have caused a great deal of trouble to people throughout the world. Carrying out this research is our one and only chance to make reparations for all that.<sup>54</sup>

What Yamane is proposing here is to use Godzilla, the unexpected result of military experiments, for military research. In contrast to the annihilation fantasies that most Japanese have about Godzilla, what Yamane proposes here is scientific extractivism. He wants to taxonomize, measure, and study Godzilla for the benefit of humanity, fully integrating him into the national taxonomic imaginary as a super-commodity. He wants to “put things in order as a precondition for extracting their inner value. It is the compulsion to categorize, to separate, to measure, and to name, to classify and establish equivalences.”<sup>55</sup> He perceives Godzilla, with Neferti X. M. Tadiar, as a “life worth expending” to feed the “good life.”<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*, 160.

<sup>54</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla*, 66.

<sup>55</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 158.

<sup>56</sup> Neferti X. M. Tadiar, “Global Refuse, Planetary Remainder,” in “The Body in the Field of Tensions between Biopolitics and Necropolitics: Analyzing the Future of the Prosthetic Body in the 21st Century,” ed. Marina Gržinić and Jovita Pristovšek, special issue, *Filozofski vestnik* 55, no. 2 (2023): 136, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.44.2.06>.

Marina Gržinić in her article “Animal (Dis)entanglement: Value-Form and Animal-Form,” following Shemon Salam’s proposal to think of the race-form as intrinsic to the value-form,<sup>57</sup> proposes to think of animals under capitalism as animal-forms. If animals as animal-forms are “temporalized forms meaning their value and existence are shaped by the duration of their circulation or life cycles,” it is Godzilla’s temporality that makes him, with Yamane, “a priceless living fossil.”<sup>58</sup>

But to understand even better what Yamane is actually proposing, we need to look closely at the intertwining of the military-industrial complex (or, more precisely, the nuclear-military-industrial complex) and the animal-industrial complex.

The term military-industrial complex (MIC) dates back to the Cold War. It was popularized by US President Dwight Eisenhower, who used the term in his farewell speech in 1961. According to Eisenhower, the key characteristic of the MIC is its ubiquity. It refers to the connection between the government’s military policy, the armed forces, the companies that support the military, and the academic world and scientific knowledge.<sup>59</sup> The military-industrial complex and its omnipresence, which shapes a certain sensibility and normalizes war, is the main reason why militarism and war seem completely natural and inevitable.

Animal-industrial complex was coined by Barbara Noske (1989) and later revived and refined by Richard Twine (2012). Noske used this concept to highlight the role of capitalism in thinking of human-animal relations with an important emphasis on environmental concerns.<sup>60</sup>

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Twine’s article “Revealing the ‘Animal Industrial Complex’—A Concept and Method for Critical Animal Studies?” particularly emphasizes the connection between the various complexes, the MIC and the AIC, as well as the entertain-

<sup>57</sup> Shemon Salam, “Limits of the Black Radical Tradition and the Value-Form” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2019).

<sup>58</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla*, 82.

<sup>59</sup> Richard Twine, “Revealing the ‘Animal Industrial Complex’—A Concept and Method for Critical Animal Studies?,” *Journal for Critical Animal Studies* 10, no. 1 (2012): 16.

<sup>60</sup> Barbara Noske, *Human and Other Animals* (London: Pluto Press, 1989).

ment-industrial and prison-industrial complexes.<sup>61</sup> The latter are also at work in the context of the two novellas. In *Godzilla Raids Again*, prisoners on the run set fire to a gas station and start a fierce fire that attracts Godzilla. Their escape fails and their liberation is short-lived, requiring a reckoning and the restoration of the disrupted order. It is a confirmation of their status, for who else could cause such chaos but criminals? Just as it is necessary to show Godzilla where he belongs: either dead or transformed into a commodity with which we can create value. In terms of the entertainment complex, one can also argue that it is the entertainment complex's co-optation of Godzilla that has kept Kayama from further involvement.

But to return to the two central complexes that are of interest to us at this point, the key is that, as David Nibert states, “by the mid-twentieth century [. . .] the MIC and the AIC became mutually reinforcing systems of domination—continuing the inextricable link between the oppression of other animals and human violence that plagued the history of the world.”<sup>62</sup>

Although it is now well known that the military regularly uses animals for a variety of purposes, the least discussed part of this is the use of animals for military research. The crucial space here is a laboratory, and animals have been constitutive for the creation of this biopolitical,<sup>63</sup> or more precisely, necropolitical space since “the result of these biopolitical efforts is not more life, but a necropower, as pure destruction, suffering, etc.; we cannot speak only of biopower, as non-human animals are used in the processes of calculation to change human life at the expense of their extermination as crude objects of capitalist industry and science.”<sup>64</sup> Yamane's essentially necropolitical proposal could therefore be summed up as no annihilation without extraction or, with Gržinić, “let live and make die.”<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Twine, “Revealing the ‘Animal Industrial Complex.’”

<sup>62</sup> David Nibert, foreword to *Defining Critical Animal Studies: An Intersectional Social Justice Approach for Liberation*, ed. Anthony J. Nocella II et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), x.

<sup>63</sup> Robert W. Kirk, “The Birth of the Laboratory Animal: Biopolitics, Animal Experimentation, and Animal Wellbeing,” in *Foucault and Animals*, ed. Matthew Chrulew and Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 191–221.

<sup>64</sup> Gržinić Mauhler, “Animal (Dis)Entanglement,” 169.

<sup>65</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Capital, Repetition,” *Reartikulacija* 8 (2009): 3.

In this sense, Yamane makes no distinction between Godzilla, tuna, or cod, and the difference is only in the potential value that Godzilla represents as a genetically modified, super-powerful nuclear organism as opposed to tuna or cod. In one crucial respect, Yamane goes further than the tendency to *merely* destroy Godzilla.

It is important to note that only Yamane, and sometimes the military trying to put Godzilla down, refer to Godzilla as an animal, but only Yamane strictly never refers to Godzilla as a monster. In this sense, Godzilla is better off as a monster, or more specifically, a *kaiju*, meaning “scary beast” or “monster,” a word that gained popularity with Godzilla.<sup>66</sup> But if Godzilla is monstrous, he is monstrous above all because he points to the monstrosity of the conditions from which he emerges, the “monstrous biopower”<sup>67</sup> or the monstrosity of the military-animal industrial complex.

### **A-Bomb Tuna and the Threat of the Rogue Animal**

It is no coincidence that both novels begin with fishes, or more specifically, with fishing. In *Godzilla Raids Again*, the image of the marginal fishing island from *Godzilla* is replaced by industrial fishing. Thus, Godzilla attacks a Marine Fisheries plane flying over the sea in search of fishes. In this part of the novella, the ship National Dragon No. 3 is an industrial allusion to Lucky Dragon No. 5. The radiation damages the engine and the plane has to make an emergency landing on a small island, where Godzilla first appears, together with a new dinosaur, Anguirus, an even more violent prehistoric creature (we shall return to this matter subsequently). Godzilla’s attack on Osaka soon follows.

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After Godzilla’s attack on Osaka Marine Fisheries (triggered by a bright explosion caused by escaped prisoners), the industry is temporarily relocated to the north due to the radioactivity of the fishes. When the ex-soldiers, who are now fishermen, celebrate an incredible catch in the north with their ex-military colleagues, they learn that their fishing boat, National Dragon No. 2, has sunk because of Godzilla. Godzilla is then picked up again by the military, this time in collaboration with the fishing industry.

<sup>66</sup> Angles, “Translating an Icon,” 227.

<sup>67</sup> Gržinić Mauhler, “Animal (Dis)Entanglement,” 169.



Both fish suffering and fish resistance in the novella remain completely invisible, we do not even get to the question “Do fish suffer?,” fishes are not even *inhabitants*, they *are even not*, they are *food*, raw material.<sup>68</sup> In the context of animals, fishes show most radically what it means to talk about “unevenly distributed injury.”<sup>69</sup>

From this “fish-eye perspective,” let us now examine some of the pitfalls of Godzilla’s resistance.

The most common representations of animal resistance are depictions of mammals or especially of carnivorous charismatic animals. The decisive factor here is either the size or the number or preferably both, as in *Them!* (1954), the first nuclear big-bug monster movie from the 1950s, which was followed by many other similar movies. The main reason for this is that they offer potential reversibility. While they turn predator into prey, they at least upset the existing balance of power.

If it is a large animal, it is usually an exceptional individual, which is also related to the modern notion of freedom as an individual possession, and often there is a (failed) human intervention (Godzilla’s nuclear resilience), a laboratory experiment gone wrong, and here we can again recall the argument above (the section “No Doubt He Remembers”) that there is thus something that is not innate to animals, something that is only possible under certain conditions and because of human intervention, where the animal becomes human-like, almost human.

Kowalczyk thus highlights the need for a different conception not only of animal resistance but also of animal agency in order to avoid what she terms “‘the male waged worker’ mode of resistance as universal and as having the inherent characteristics of struggle against exploitation. Narrowing the notion of resistance to the conscious actions performed by labourers simply legitimizes the existing system of capitalist power relations rather than undermining it.”<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> This invisibility of fishes, also in the context of animal advocacy and on the other hand paradoxical overfishing with fishes as “the most traded global food commodity,” are precisely the reason why Wadiwel focuses on less examined global industrialized fisheries and subsequently the question of fish resistance. Wadiwel, *Animals and Capital*, 162.

<sup>69</sup> Masco, *Future of Fallout*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Kowalczyk, “Mapping Non-human Resistance,” 193.

Animal resistance, conceptualized as the work of an exceptional individual, as the work of an exception, is linked to another phenomenon, namely “the threat of the rogue animal”<sup>71</sup> Wadiwel mentions in his work *The War against Animals*, in which he conceptualizes human’s general attitude towards animals as comprising a war. The threat of the rogue animal refers to “the animal that no longer fears the human; indeed may actively hunt and attack the human.”<sup>72</sup> What is crucial here is intelligence, since “reason and the force of violence are tied here in the rogue animal, as they are within sovereignty.”<sup>73</sup> Yet, as Wadiwel emphasizes, intelligence comes only after animal force (or resistance) and causes that we cannot overlook their intelligence, their agency.

Neither in “the male waged worker” model of resistance nor in the carnivorous “threat of rogue animal” model can we neglect the role of gender. The gender of Godzilla is also mentioned in the afterword by translator Jeffrey Angles. Since Godzilla is not gender specific in the original Japanese, he had to make a certain decision when translating Godzilla’s gender, turning to his students who understood Godzilla’s violent actions as an angry man well. Yet he makes another point why he, even though fond of queering Godzilla, decided to stay with “he”: “After all, if we accept Kayama’s statement at the beginning of the novellas that Godzilla serves as a stand-in for nuclear weapons, and it was military men who were the main architects of America’s military arsenal.”<sup>74</sup> What Angles recognizes here is the fact that “high-technology is [. . .] rooted in masculine paranoia and aggression, in imperialism and the military industrial complex.”<sup>75</sup> If we understand Godzilla as a resistant agent, then we understand Godzilla as queer in a

<sup>71</sup> Wadiwel, *War against Animals*, 269.

<sup>72</sup> Wadiwel, 269.

<sup>73</sup> Wadiwel, 269. As Yamane points out: “As you can see, Godzilla’s a violent, terrifying creature with radioactive genes. No matter how many weapons we gather, no matter how much knowledge we collect, we can’t stop him. He just does whatever he pleases despite us.” Kayama, *Godzilla Raids Again*, 128.

<sup>74</sup> Angles, “Translating an Icon,” 219.

<sup>75</sup> John Sanbonmatsu, “Hegemony, Animal Liberation, and Gramscian Praxis,” interview by Dinesh Wadiwel, in “Animal (Dis)entangled or Towards ‘A New Form of Civilization,’” ed. Vesna Liponik, special issue, *Anthropos: Journal of Philosophy & Psychology* 55, no. 2 (2023): 260.

sense, with Karen Barad, who conceptualizes queer as “a radical questioning of identity and binaries” that radically disrupts a hetero-patriarchal nuclear order.<sup>76</sup>

## #TeamGodzilla

In his afterword, Jeffrey Angles offers another reading of Godzilla as an agent of resistance, one that he emphasizes is relevant to our contemporary condition: “To put it in extreme terms, one might see Godzilla as an angry environmentalist who engages in guerrilla-style warfare against human society, which through its inertia sits back and passively allows the destruction of the natural world.”<sup>77</sup>

Angles here couples nuclear weapons with climate destruction as “industrially manufactured problems that [. . .] colonize the future.”<sup>78</sup> However, more significantly for our present inquiry, it indicates a notable shift in our conceptualization of animal resistance, wherein we observe the interconnectivity between notions of victimhood and those of saviorism, particularly in its reemergent or reversed forms. The traditional role of the human being as the liberator of the animal or the one who gives the animal a voice has been reversed. The animal is now regarded as the savior, even the savior of all humanity and nature.

Angles’s argument is essentially identical to the prevailing hypotheses regarding the motivation behind the Iberian orcas attacking ships.

In the last three years, more than 300 ships have been damaged by Iberian orcas, a species threatened with extinction. Their target is usually the rudder, and after some ramming, chewing, and stinging, the orcas render the ships inoperable or in some cases even sink them. Since orcas live in a matriarchy, the main

<sup>76</sup> Karen Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” *Kvinder, Køn & Forskning* 1–2 (2012): 29, <https://doi.org/10.7146/kkf.v0i1-2.28067>. For more on a feminist and postcolonial critique of nuclear discourse, see, e.g., Pia Brezavšček and Katja Čičigoj, “Sublimno in mondeno atomske bombe: Prevrčanje dualističnega mišljenja pri feminističnih in postkolonialnih kritikah jedrskega kompleksa,” in “The Unbearable Lightness of the Return of the Nuclear Weapons’ Discourse,” ed. Nina Cvar, special section, *Anthropos: Journal of Philosophy & Psychology* 55, no. 1 (2023): 11–29, <https://doi.org/10.26493/2630-4082.55.11-29>. See also Angles’ “Translating an Icon” and his commentary on the role of gender (and age) politics in post-War Japan influencing the choice for Godzilla’s main characters.

<sup>77</sup> Angles, “Translating an Icon,” 212.

<sup>78</sup> Masco, *Future of Fallout*, 5.

character, Gladis Blanca, who bears the scars of the fishing nets, is one of the first to mess with ships. After the incidents began to spread, the headlines were full of orcas whose intentions were the subject of speculation, “on social media, trends like #TeamOrca portrayed them as anti-capitalist saboteurs and fueled the narrative of an ‘orca uprising,’ ”<sup>79</sup> a narrative that suggests the orcas are doing what we should be doing, ramming capitalists’ yachts and sailboats instead of “sit[ing] back and passively allow[ing] the destruction of the natural world.”<sup>80</sup> Scientists still disagree and speculate about their true intentions. One of the explanations is fishes: due to overfishing, there are fewer fishes for the orcas to eat, which could be the reason for their attacks. The other potential explanation is Gladis Blanca’s traumatic experience. Here again we see a meeting point between Godzilla and the orcas.

Let us now unpack the #TeamOrca or #TeamGodzilla argument.

The saviorist explanation is predicated on a straightforward extractive logic: first, we nearly annihilate them, and then we transfer the burden of planetary salvation to the fifteen that remain. Once again, the animals are serving as our instruments. Godzilla is utilized as a means of facilitating the completion of undesirable tasks. Once more, the “threat of the rogue animal” or “male waged worker” model of resistance emerges as a prominent theme. It is more readily conceivable that orcas or creatures akin to dinosaurs would engage in this struggle than, say, fishes.

On a more positive note, we can understand here animals as knowers and furthermore as teachers or even epistemic authorities.<sup>81</sup> Gržinić quotes Kelsey Dayle John, who “center[s] animals in colonialism to show that settler colonial erasures specifically assault animals, but also that animals resist and show humans how to resist.”<sup>82</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Sarat Colling, “When Orcas Speak: Listen Carefully,” Medium, November 28, 2023, <https://medium.com/@saratcolling/when-orcas-speak-listen-carefully-5c6890935ab3>.

<sup>80</sup> Angles, “Translating an Icon,” 212. Not coincidentally, the incidents evoke *Moby Dick*.

<sup>81</sup> Simpson, “Posthumanist Social Epistemology.”

<sup>82</sup> Kelsey Dayle John, “Animal Colonialism: Illustrating Intersections between Animal Studies and Settler Colonial Studies through Diné Horsemanship,” *Humanimalia* 10, no. 2 (2019): 42–43, <https://doi.org/10.52537/humanimalia.9501>; quoted in Gržinić Mauher, “Animal (Dis)Entanglement.”

Similarly, Plutarch reiterates this viewpoint in his least studied text on animals, *Gryllus or Beasts are Rational*, which is regarded as one of his most peculiar and unparalleled works. Plutarch is regarded as the pioneering figure in the field of animal ethics in the Western tradition. He not only delineated the contours of the contemporary ethical discourse on animal rights but also demonstrated the necessity of conceptualizing the animal question not only as an ethical issue but also as a political or ethico-political one. *Beasts are Rational* is a dialogue between the Odysseus of Book 10 of the *Odyssey* and Gryllus. Gryllus, along with Odysseus's other men, has been transformed into a pig by Circe. He presents a compelling argument for the benefits of remaining in his current form rather than returning to human form. The entire treatise, with its witty theriophilic tendencies, can be read as Gryllus instructing, in a Socratic manner, his stoic-like companion Odysseus on how to live a life well led. In this context, animals serve as exemplars of virtue, providing guidance on how to lead a morally upright life. Animals in this case are man's teachers, *sophists*, and, to extend this Plutarchian perspective even further, a man of outstanding wisdom, eloquence, and courage, a hero of Western civilization, appears to be nothing when compared to a common sow.<sup>83</sup>

Another concept may prove useful in understanding this phenomenon. When discussing the example of the collapse of Silicon Valley Bank (SVB) (2023), which brought back memories of the global financial crisis of 2007–2008 and the absence of a structural analysis which would set things straight, Nina Cvar (2023) evokes Mark Fisher's concept of "reflexive impotence,"<sup>84</sup>

which [. . .] is not so much the result of apathy and cynicism, but springs from a certain kind of reflection. This reflection is not about passively observing the situation that already exists, but rather springs from a unique understanding of the future itself, resulting in a grim realization that "things are bad." A much more important condition for the reflexive powerlessness described, however, is not the recognition of the conditions of reality, but the state of prolonged non-action.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Plutarch, *Bruta animalia ratione uti*.

<sup>84</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Hampshire: Zero Books, 2009), 21.

<sup>85</sup> Nina Cvar, "Emancipating from (Colonial) Genealogies of the Techno-social Networks or Reversing Power Relations by Turning the Predator into Prey in Jordan Peele's *Nope*," in Gržinić and Pristovšek, "Body in the Field of Tensions," 172, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.44.2.07>.

## Godzilla Appears Again

*Godzilla* ends with Godzilla's seemingly successful defeat by a deadly new weapon of mass destruction, but Professor Yamane subsequently expresses doubts about Godzilla's complete annihilation:

But . . . I can't imagine that the Godzilla we saw was the last of his kind . . . What if . . . What if the hydrogen bomb tests were to continue? . . . Who knows? Maybe more of his kind might appear somewhere on earth.<sup>86</sup>

The conclusion of *Godzilla* suggests two key points. If we accept Kayama's intention and read *Godzilla* as an atomic allegory, namely when Japan attempts to vanquish the bomb (Godzilla) with the bomb (the oxygen destroyer), then in the second part of the novella, we encounter not only Godzilla but also Anguirus, an even more violent prehistoric creature.<sup>87</sup> The subsequent confrontation between the two monsters, occurring in the second part, after the successful capitalist co-optation, also becomes the primary theme of the franchise. In this way, we can see that Kayama himself unwittingly paved the way for an apolitical approach to his political project. Conversely, the introduction of the similarly destructive Anguirus also serves to reinforce *Godzilla's* message of peace: bomb on bomb only means more bombs.

However, if we interpret *Godzilla* as an allegory of animal resistance, it suggests that, despite the relentless advancement of technology, "we can't prevent *Godzilla* from coming again."<sup>88</sup> On the contrary, "more of his kind might appear somewhere on earth." Or, in other words, if there were no boats, there would be no damaged or sunk boats.

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Indeed, *Godzilla* reappears in *Godzilla Raids Again*. Subsequently, the military-animal industrial complex, that is to say, the military, with the assistance

<sup>86</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla*, 111.

<sup>87</sup> Despite Yamane's assertion in *Godzilla Raids Again* that the character is a different *Godzilla*, the conclusion of the final installment of the *Godzilla* franchise, *Godzilla Minus One* (2023), which can be interpreted as a prequel to *Godzilla*, indicates that the character is, in fact, the same *Godzilla*. Moreover, *Godzilla Minus One* marks a return to a more politically and anti-militarily oriented version of *Godzilla*.

<sup>88</sup> Kayama, *Godzilla Raids Again*, 127.

of ex-soldiers now fish-spotting pilots, succeeds in burying Godzilla beneath an avalanche. It would be reasonable to posit, however, that this is not the end.

In *Godzilla Raids Again*, an allusion to its predecessor, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, is once again evident. The initial act of Godzilla's arrival in Osaka is marked by the collapse of the lighthouse situated at the entrance to the bay. The confrontation between the lighthouse and the beast is one of the scenes in the film that references Bradbury's short story "The Fog Horn."<sup>89</sup> Moreover, the conclusion of *Godzilla Raids Again* and the immobilization of Godzilla can be interpreted as an allusion to its predecessor. This is because *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* appears precisely upon thawing as a result of nuclear experiments in another shadow place, namely the Arctic Circle. In addition, there is a parallel to be drawn with another Cold War horror classic, *The Blob* (1958). In that film, the creeping red threat of communism from outer space is about to devour an idyllic American suburb, thereby evoking the anticommunist "red scare" times of America in the 1940s and 1950s. The red blob is an unstoppable force. As they are unable to kill it, they decide to transport it to the Arctic. Once more, we are faced with two potential outcomes: extraction or annihilation, with the former leading to the latter. However, the blob seems to indicate a third option: relocation from the center to the periphery, to the shadow place, where it can freeze and, therefore, seemingly be disabled. Given the current context of global warming and the melting ice cap, it seems reasonable to suggest that a variety of such blobs may emerge, begin to thaw, and potentially migrate.

And while at the end of *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* the beast apparently dies because of a brave nuclear scientist and his powerful weapon (the scientist does not die, of course, because he is about to marry a beautiful young paleontologist), it remains entirely unclear what happens to the virus that spread from the blood of the wounded beast and began killing the soldiers who first confronted it. Does the virus now take over as a radically different model of "agency" than "a male waged worker" or "a rogue animal"? Is this the all too familiar story?

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<sup>89</sup> *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* was first entitled *The Monster from Beneath the Sea* but later borrowed a title and partly a story of Ray Bradbury's short story first published in 1951 and later in 1953 in the short story collection *The Golden Apples of the Sun* as "The Fog Horn."

The founding repeatability of capital<sup>90</sup> necessary entails the repeatability of “counter-capital”<sup>91</sup> in whatever most unexpected form.

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<sup>90</sup> Gržinić, “Capital, Repetition,” 3–4.

<sup>91</sup> Gržinić Mauhler, “Animal (Dis)Entanglement,” 154.



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Nina Cvar\*

## Erasure as a Constitutive Mechanism of Global Capitalism: From the Periphery to the Centre

### Keywords

erasure, translation, modernity, capitalism, race, coloniality, global capitalism

### Abstract

Fredrikzon and Haffenden (2023) argue that the so-called notion of erasure has remained largely under-researched. But what does erasure mean—how does it operate and how is it reproduced, particularly in relation to global capitalism? Contrary to the inclination to individualize the repressive character of erasure, this text will aspire to thematize erasure as a constitutive mechanism of global capitalism that permeates its logic. Stemming from distinct disciplinary areas yet which intersect in various ways, this research will therefore investigate erasure as a notion that is not isolated but related to its political, social, cultural, physical, and technological dimensions and processes that give meaning to it within a temporal horizon. Thus, the central thesis of this paper will be that the process of erasure needs to be understood as the essential element of modernity, appearing uncompromisingly in its histories and in particular in contemporary politics.

## Izbris kot konstitutivni mehanizem globalnega nekrokapitalizma: od periferije k centru

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### Ključne besede

izbris, prevod, modernost, kapitalizem, rasa, kolonialnost, globalni kapitalizem

### Povzetek

Fredrikzon in Haffenden (2023) trdita, da je tako imenovani koncept izbrisa ostal v veliki meri neraziskan. Toda kaj pomeni izbris – kako deluje in kako se reproducira, zlasti v

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povezavi z globalnim kapitalizmom? V nasprotju z individualizacijo represivnega značaja izbrisa, si ta tekst prizadeva tematizirati izbris kot konstitutivni mehanizem globalnega kapitalizma, ki prežema njegovo logiko. Izhajajoč iz različnih disciplinarnih področij, bo ta raziskava tematizirala izbris kot pojem, ki ni izoliran, temveč povezan z njegovimi političnimi, družbenimi, kulturnimi, fizičnimi in tehnološkimi dimenzijami ter procesi, ki mu dajejo pomen znotraj časovnega horizonta. Osrednja teza tega prispevka bo torej, da je treba proces izbrisa razumeti kot bistveni element modernosti, ki se neizprosno pojavlja v njeni zgodovini in zlasti v sodobni politiki.



## Introduction

Is erasure a singular act or is it never truly complete—or, to refer to Avery Gordon, with erasure there is always some aftermath, “some reminder of the violence done to make the world look new again.”<sup>1</sup> This dialectic of violence performed to make something look new again should be regarded as the starting point of this research. As erasure can be understood as the process of removing or even obliterating; there is always something violent about it, yet, as argued by Fredrikzon and Haffenden, the notion of erasure has largely remained unaddressed and left to marginalization.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps this can be attributed to the intricate, dual process of erasure, which leaves the subject inadequately conceptualized. Whether it occurs physically—through the destruction of lives, belongings, cultural artifacts—or symbolically—through the omission of certain narratives or identities from history, media, or social consciousness—erasure typically involves a power dynamic in which dominant groups or ideologies, either intentionally or unintentionally, marginalize or suppress others. However, remnants of what has been erased often persist, challenging the totality of the erasure and potentially fostering resistance or resurgence.

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<sup>1</sup> Avery Gordon in Brian Dillon, “The Revelation of Erasure,” *Tate Etc.*, September 1, 2006, <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-8-autumn-2006/revelation-erasure>.

<sup>2</sup> Johan Fredrikzon and Chris Haffenden, “Towards Erasure Studies: Excavating the Material Conditions of Memory and Forgetting,” *Memory, Mind & Media* 2 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1017/mem.2023.2>.

In “Towards Erasure Studies: Excavating the Material Conditions of Memory and Forgetting,” Fredrikzon and Haffenden propose five types of erasure: repressive erasure as being characteristics (albeit far from it) of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes; protective erasure as an erasure concerning control from the imperatives of a wider system, underscoring the necessity of managing exposure to broader social or political forces; operative erasure as erasure within the bureaucratic mode; amending erasure, which refers to the revision or correction of elements of text or data, ultimately influencing relations of power; and calamitous and neglectful erasure, which is related to the problem of agency.<sup>3</sup> Fredrikzon and Haffenden outline the different types of erasure being, as they argue, aware of the complexities and multifaced history of erasure.

But my interest goes beyond these characteristics. I will focus specifically on this dual dynamic of erasure: erasure as both a mechanism and a constitutive process of global capitalism that ultimately conceals the very mechanism of erasure itself. The proposed theoretical framework will largely build upon the legacy of critical thought, while acknowledging its inherent limitations—particularly, as Achille Mbembe notes, Europe is no longer the center of the world.<sup>4</sup> The interpretive framework I propose will primarily incorporate Black critical studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, as well as Marxist critiques of capitalism.

### **Erasure as a Structural Mechanism of Coloniality**

What exactly is erasure? The most straightforward answer might suggest that erasure involves manipulating the dynamics of presence and absence inherently tied to power. Analyzing erasure, therefore, requires rethinking the very contours of reality: how its narratives are constructed, assumptions formed, representations disseminated, and discourses reproduced. However, erasure is also about difference. Yet, contrary to what one might expect, difference is not simply erased. On the contrary, it is further generated, even as the process of erasure becomes naturalized and normalized. Thus, the process of erasure entails a reconfiguration of the representation’s limits, which is a manifestation of power and an embodiment of contradiction.

<sup>3</sup> Fredrikzon and Haffenden.

<sup>4</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 157.

It is precisely this sharp contradiction of difference that forms the foundation of this paper and serves as its central epistemic point of departure for analyzing the mechanism of erasure. Moreover, understanding erasure in relation to difference—considered here as a phenomenon in itself which acts as recognition of the fact that behind unity there is always difference<sup>5</sup>—allows for a challenge to the order of representation as the dominant mode of organized knowledge. But which order of representation is at stake? It is the order of meaning and representation grounded in the epistemologies of modernity, which, as I argue, cannot exist without coloniality and, to reference Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, results in a so-called subaltern subject, which is, according to Spivak, missed in Foucault's and Deleuze's analysis of representation.<sup>6</sup>

Coloniality, as Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni contends, is tied to structural processes that subordinate peripheral societies to a global imperial model, functioning through forms of domination that perpetuate themselves by producing essentialisms within the colonial matrix of power.<sup>7</sup> In tandem with modernity, this dynamic generates what is known as the colonial difference, which, I contend, is inseparable from the logic of erasure. Indeed, I argue that erasure operates as the mechanism through which the colonial difference is continuously produced, maintained, invoked, and reproduced along the axes of erasure.

### **The Construction of the Colonial Difference and the Re-examination of the Concept of the Universal**

By employing the concept of the colonial difference, the global architecture of inequalities is illuminated, while also providing an epistemic framework for understanding erasure. Specifically, the notion of the colonial difference reveals the dynamics of colonialism by addressing the hierarchies it produces. Walter D. Mignolo, for example, uses the term to describe how colonial powers create and

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<sup>5</sup> Rolando Vasquez, "Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence," *Sociology Lens* 24, no. 1 (March 2011): 27–44, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6443.2011.01387.x>.

<sup>6</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.

<sup>7</sup> Sabelo J. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, "Coloniality of Power in Development Studies and the Impact of Global Imperial Designs on Africa," *Australasian Review of African Studies* 33, no. 2 (December 2012): 48–73.

sustain distinctions between colonizers and the colonized, thereby generating a systemic difference known as the colonial difference.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the colonial difference highlights the colonial divide and illustrates how colonialist discourses are reproduced at the expense of knowledge, critical insights, and political strategies originating from the subaltern perspective. This implies that the production of knowledge is not neutral, and suggests the use of the colonial difference for epistemic relocation—“to view the world from perspectives critical of hegemonic viewpoints.”<sup>9</sup> Referring to Ramón Grosfoguel, the claim that there is no modernity without coloniality underscores that the production of knowledge is far from neutral, with the colonial difference functioning as a fundamental topos of the modern world.<sup>10</sup>

### Production of the Metaphysics of Erasure

Given that the colonial difference constitutes a structural framework, subjectivity is shaped within its symbolic order. This process of formation, however, is governed by a pernicious mechanism meticulously described by Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason*—a subversion of the Enlightenment legacy. The *Critique of Black Reason* unveils the conditions of the Western matrix of power and, through the figure of Blackness as a political figure of universalization via the universalization of dehumanization, exposes Western metaphysics. The mechanism ensuring this specific formation is *fabulation*—a tendency to present fictional or imaginary facts and narratives as real. I derive this concept from the so-called fantasizing, as introduced by Mbembe.<sup>11</sup> Fabulation is intrinsically linked to the slave trade, colonial plantation economies, and extraction—the so-called *cornerstones* of modernity that inaugurated the principles of race and racial subjectivity.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Walter D. Mignolo. “The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 57–96, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-1-57>.

<sup>9</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, “Colonial Difference, Geopolitics of Knowledge, and Global Coloniality in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist World-System,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 25, no. 3 (2002): 209, <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-101-1-57>.

<sup>10</sup> Grosfoguel, 209.

<sup>11</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Mbembe, 40.

According to Mbembe, this is facilitated by Western thought, which understands identity not as co-belonging but rather through a *self-referential perspective*—“the emergence of being and its revelation primarily in its own being, or even in its own mirror.”<sup>13</sup> This logic of autofiction, autocontemplation, or closure is the foundation from which the modern era emerged, along with the conception of *race* as a phantasmatic, material, and primordial category.<sup>14</sup> The colonial difference thus perpetuates the Enlightenment idea of the (White) Man, along with its associated social and psychic representations. As Mbembe shows, the category of Man is arbitrarily determined,<sup>15</sup> resulting in specific modes of identification that can be regarded as axes of erasure. In the following section, I will outline structural lines along which erasure unfolds. These lines reveal how racial, class, and gender divisions emerge, leading to displacement, dispossession, and erasure. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, these processes ultimately contribute to the formalization of reality.

### Axes of Erasure

Building on Mbembe’s analysis of the emergence of the modern world, this paper will propose a framework for understanding the structure of erasure through three key axes: 1. The axis of the *subject*; 2. The axis of the *gaze*; 3. The axis of *sociohistorical conditions*. I will begin with the axis of the *subject*, specifically focusing on the concept of identification. Identification is a theoretically complex notion that pertains to the formation of subjectivity. For example, Fanon demonstrates how the internalization of the colonizer’s gaze occurs. Homi K. Bhabha’s analysis of Fanon is particularly insightful in this context, as it elucidates three conditions of identification, which I will consider to be one of the axes where erasure takes place.

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The first condition addresses the relationship between being and otherness, where being is only affirmed in relation to otherness. The second condition highlights the tension between desire and demand, which manifests in the division of doubling, thereby perpetuating differentiation within the different, based on the liminal distance between the colonizer and the colonized other. The final

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<sup>13</sup> Mbembe, 12.

<sup>14</sup> Mbembe, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Mbembe, 12.



condition emphasizes the construction of an image resulting from identification, aptly summarized by Bhabha's quote: "Identification [. . .] is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes."<sup>16</sup> Identification is intrinsically linked to visual processes, specifically the gaze, which plays a crucial role in the formation of subjectivity.

The *gaze*, presenting the second axis, possesses a distinct power; in other words, the image and the gaze are inextricably connected through an ontological coupling that emerges with the representational regime of modernity, relegating non-Western subjects, such as the Black subject, to the margins of its exteriority. The mechanism underlying this representational regime is a cognitive logic that has profoundly reshaped our conceptions of liberalism, individualism, and egalitarianism, operating through principles of deterritorialization and reterritorialization.<sup>17</sup> This means that modernity, which Mignolo characterizes as the reverse side of coloniality, was established as a specific order of signification associated with the so-called imperial gaze. According to Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, the imperial gaze pertains to the ways visual and photographic practices are implicated in the exercise of imperial and colonial power.<sup>18</sup> It encompasses the entire apparatus of seeing, displaying, and recording, and—crucially in relation to erasure—the imperial gaze is grounded in imperial ideologies and practices that perpetuate imperial power.<sup>19</sup>

The imperial gaze determines who can be seen and how the gaze is structured, making its history also the history of the constitution of the modern (imperial) subject, unfolding along racially and sexually defined mechanisms of reproduction. Visual apparatuses, such as cinematic technology, play a significant role in unifying perception, memory, and affect, ultimately shaping specific modes of embodiment. This corresponds to the third structural axis: *sociohistorical conditions*. According to Foucault, apparatuses are productive and material-discur-

<sup>16</sup> Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023).

<sup>18</sup> Aïsha Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 5–7.

<sup>19</sup> Azoulay, 146, 156.

sive formations that fulfill specific strategic functions within power relations,<sup>20</sup> to which I will add the power relations of the historical development of *capitalism*. However, apparatuses actively contribute to the production of phenomena.<sup>21</sup> Barad's perspective, for example, connects apparatuses with the body, emphasizing how the body is mediated at the intersection of discourse and production. Consequently, mediation culminates in a specific form, which, according to Agamben, results from the separation of life through subjection to apparatuses.<sup>22</sup>

### Aporias of Form and the Transition of Erasure as Translation

Given that both Bradley and Agamben engage with the notion of form, a comparison of their respective approaches would be valuable. Bradley's starting position on form comes from her reading of Calvin Warren, for whom the modern world operates as formalization, with anti-Black violence being subtended via the order of forms.<sup>23</sup>

For Bradley, form is a conceptual tool to examine the ways in which race, affect, and the body are mediated through various artistic and cultural forms. But most importantly, for Bradley, form is an active actor in the construction of meaning. On the other hand, Agamben approaches form through the concepts of bare life and potentiality, examining it as a mechanism of biopolitical inclusion and exclusion. Through the concept of the anthropological machine, Agamben demonstrates how the Western episteme defines life.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, Bradley places greater emphasis on aesthetics, advocating for a move beyond a naïve understanding of aesthetics and form; Bradley argues for recognizing their intricate entanglement with socio-cultural and political contexts, underscoring the structural relation between aesthetics and the political economy of

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, "The Confession of the Flesh," trans. Colin Gordon, in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), 194–228.

<sup>21</sup> Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Calvin Warren, "The Catastrophe: Black Feminist Poetics, (Anti)Form, and Mathematical Nihilism," *Qui parle* 28, no. 2 (December 2019): 353–72, <https://doi.org/10.1215/10418385-7861859>.

<sup>24</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).

accumulation, extraction, and dispossession. In this regard, Bradley interrogates the foundation of the form's becoming, showing that form ultimately is not just about life, but death as well. Nonetheless, both positions address form as a mechanism that constructs meaning and content. However, while Agamben approaches these processes from an ontological perspective, Bradley engages with ontology through the lens of aesthetics.

If we follow Caroline Levine's assertion that form "always indicates an arrangement of elements—an ordering, patterning, or shaping,"<sup>25</sup> Bradley's and Agamben's focus on form as a force that shapes and conditions how modern individuals understand reality demonstrates how the world operates through processes of formalization. The formalization of reality consequently leads to the creation of "proper bodies."

However, as Bradley suggests, the critical challenge lies in rethinking the formation of these "proper bodies" based on the concept of *non-relation*, which I will dwell on in more detail in the section on the decolonization of erasure. As I have demonstrated, the notion of appropriateness is inextricably tied to the onto-epistemological axes of erasure and the metaphysics of fabulation. This suggests that form not only organizes content and experience but also serves as a boundary, functioning as a mechanism for exercising political or sovereign control; it structures meanings, experiences, and actions which unfold through continuous displacement, reconfiguration, transformation, and even erasure, all of which contribute to the articulation of the framework I have conceptualized as the colonial difference. What, then, enables this articulation, made possible by the colonial difference?

Building on the work of Rolando Vázquez, I propose that this process is translation. Furthermore, Vázquez's claims that "what we know is built on erasure,"<sup>26</sup> emphasizing the epistemological aspect of translation, which could be understood as adjustment to the social ramifications of the colonial difference. Vázquez addresses the concept of translation in two broad terms: as a tool of

<sup>25</sup> Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>26</sup> Rolando Vázquez, "What We Know Is Built on Erasure," interview by Carolina Rito, *The Contemporary Journal*, January 25, 2019, <https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/on-translations/what-we-know-is-built-on-erasure-an-interview-with-rolando-vazquez>.

colonial power that erases the cultural, linguistic, and epistemological frameworks of marginalized communities, and as a means of plurality.

Furthermore, the relationship between erasure, translation, and difference can be examined through the lens of modernity—a Eurocentric project that operates on the assumption of being at the center of both history and geography.<sup>27</sup> This presumption of centrality is reflected in a mechanism of truth, which, as Vázquez notes, “is a single truth that is only sustained by the erasure of other worlds of meaning.”<sup>28</sup> Vázquez argues that erasure occurs because translation fails to capture the richness and specificity of non-Western traditions, reducing them to categories that conform to Western thought. Erasure thus exposes its structural debt to modernity and as such functions as a referent for modernity’s epistemic territory and its semiotic mechanism. It operates by translation, which, quoting Vázquez,

has to be understood not only as a “technology” of the scriptural enterprise of modernity, but also a movement of appropriation of the world, of incorporation into modernity’s territory, its reality and visibility. Translation appears thus as a process of selection and appropriation that erases all that does not fit into the proper place of the already established epistemic territory.<sup>29</sup>

Vázquez’s critique aligns with the broader discussion of how modernity is intertwined with coloniality, where Western epistemology dominates and marginalizes alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. Examining how erasure is intricately linked to the formalization of life in modernity, a process I have demonstrated to be inseparable from coloniality. This dynamic generates a specific notion of the human through what Vázquez describes as a double movement of translation: modernity expands through appropriation, on one hand, while on the other, such appropriation is always accompanied by rejection—or, as Vázquez puts it, appropriation is inseparable from erasure.<sup>30</sup> Building on Vázquez’s claim about the violent epistemic nature of translation, I propose that

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<sup>27</sup> Vázquez.

<sup>28</sup> Vázquez.

<sup>29</sup> Rolando Vázquez, “Translation as Erasure,” 33–34.

<sup>30</sup> Vázquez, 33.

translation, erasure, and modernity should be conceptualized through the lens of *relationality*.

Erasure thus serves as an indicator of modernity's mechanism of epistemic exclusion and oppression, accompanied by a specific set of power relations that generate modes of political (in)visibility and exclude non-Western peoples.

### Unlearning the Relationality of Erasure

I apprehend relationality, following Fred Moten, Axelle Karera, Rizvana Bradley, and Marina Gržinić, as an expression of power that grants transcendental subjectivity exclusively to the “chosen ones,” systematically excluding Black bodies.

Additionally, as Karera puts it via Moten, the structure of relationality is essentially the condition for the possibility of the enslavement of Black bodies.<sup>31</sup> Building on Mbembe's concept of Blackness—specifically his emphasis on the broader episteme of the “becoming-Black of the world” as a form of negative universalization<sup>32</sup>—I argue that the epistemicity of relationality serves as the driving force behind the mechanism of erasure. This process generates a form of sociality that systematically produces the “underside” of the category of *Man-as-human*.<sup>33</sup> In this context, the relationality of erasure enforces conditions that reduce the Other to an objectified status. This process is dictated by the epistemic categories of the Western matrix of power and is commodified through mechanisms of dispossession. Consequently, it produces various regimes of (neo)colonial capital accumulation and modalities of surveillance and control.

Paradoxically, by invoking *non-relationality*, erasure exposes that which has been rendered invisible, yet it is anterior to capitalism, underlining its generativity within the material-discursive structuration of the world. Erasure can be considered alongside primitive accumulation, through which the capitalist

<sup>31</sup> Axelle Karera, “Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics,” *Critical Philosophy of Race* 7, no. 1 (2019): 32–56, <https://doi.org/10.5325/critphilrace.7.1.0032>.

<sup>32</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Kolonializem Evrope, dekolonialnost, rasizem,” in *Politika, estetika in demokracija*, ed. Marina Gržinić (Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, 2015), 107–22.

<sup>33</sup> Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis*, ed. Catherine McKittrick (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

mode of production emerges via dispossession, colonization, and exploitation; however, with necrocapitalism representing contemporary capitalism that organizes its modes of accumulation through dispossession and the subordination of life to the power of death,<sup>34</sup> erasure functions as a mechanism that is continually reasserted in each subsequent iteration of violence, collapsing Benjamin's distinction between the first constitutive violence and law-preserving violence, as Azoulay explains the transformation of Benjamin's theoretical observation.<sup>35</sup> This places erasure within the dynamics of the necrocapitalist mode of governance, systematically neglecting (as needed) or actively inflicting harm on certain populations in the name of economic gain or profit maximization, legitimized by settler colonialism.

Erasure can therefore be regarded as the constitutive mechanism of global necrocapitalism, and to unlearn its effects it is to move beyond the grips of the relationality of the (White) Western matrix of power.

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<sup>34</sup> Marina Gržinić, "A Passion for History in the Depoliticized and Castrated European Union Regime," lecture at the Ludwig Museum, Budapest, Hungary, May 3, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> Azoulay, *Potential History*, 33.

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## Conflicts, Wars, and Justice in Conflicts<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

political philosophy, historical legacies, justice, Israel/Gaza, Ukraine

### Abstract

To frame the topic of conflicts, particularly through the historical lens of nation-states, it is essential to consider the historical context of key state formations in the West. From the nineteenth century onward, these formations maintained the power and sovereignty that underpinned Western dominance. Although the traditional Westphalian concept, derived from the Peace of Westphalia (1648), established the notion of nation-states as the primary actors in international law—each with supreme authority over its territory—sovereignty has often been separated from physical territory in practice. Power and authority frequently extend beyond, or fall short of, a state’s geographic boundaries, indicating that sovereignty has increasingly been decoupled from territoriality. In colonial contexts, multiple legal systems and authorities coexisted and often conflicted, creating a fluid and contested landscape of governance. This allowed colonial powers to maneuver between different legal frameworks to maintain control. In these colonies, the suspension of normal legal rules—what is often referred to as a “state of exception”—was more commonly the rule rather than the exception.

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## Konflikti, vojne in pravičnost v konfliktih

### Ključne besede

politična filozofija, zgodovinske dediščine, pravičnost, Izrael/Gaza, Ukrajina

### Povzetek

Za oblikovanje teme konfliktov, zlasti skozi zgodovinsko prizmo nacionalnih držav, je nujno upoštevati zgodovinski kontekst ključnih državnih tvorb na Zahodu. Od 19. stoletja naprej so te tvorbe ohranjale oblast in suverenost, ki sta podpirali zahodno prevlado. Čeprav je tradicionalni vestfalski koncept, ki izhaja iz Vestfalskega miru (1648), uveljavil pojem nacionalnih držav kot primarnih akterjev mednarodnega prava – vsaka z vrhovno oblastjo nad svojim ozemljem –, je bila suverenost v praksi pogosto ločena od fizičnega ozemlja. Moč in oblast pogosto presegata ali ne dosejata geografskih meja države, kar kaže na to, da je suverenost vedno bolj ločena od teritorialnosti. V kolonialnem kontekstu je soobstajalo več pravnih sistemov in oblasti, ki so si pogosto nasprotovale, kar je ustvarilo fluidno in konfliktno pokrajino upravljanja. To je kolonialnim silam omogočilo manevriranje med različnimi pravnimi okviri za ohranitev nadzora. V teh kolonijah je bil suspenz običajnih pravnih pravil – kar se pogosto imenuje »izjemno stanje« – prej pravilo kot izjema.



### I. Justice in Conflicts No Longer Functions Effectively, Not Even as Rhetoric

The concept of conflict plays an important role in contemporary philosophy, especially in relation to geopolitics and history. Contemporary political philosophy is concerned with conflict in the context of justice, power, governance, and sovereignty. The war in Ukraine was a significant and unresolved conflict in twenty-first century Europe until the Israel/Gaza war exploded, dramatically changing the global political order and neoliberal capitalist rhetoric regarding twentieth century international treaties and United Nations resolutions and declarations after World War Two. It is a complex issue involving geopolitics, territorial disputes, and competing national interests. History is ideological and has affected the distribution of power and capital, especially after World War Two.

Presently, humanitarianism, war, pacifism, and military technologies are part of the thesis that justice in conflicts no longer functions effectively, not even as rhetoric. I examine the conflicts by first analyzing the war in Ukraine, which escalated due to Russian aggression in 2022, followed by Ukraine's counter-offensive on Russian territory in August 2024. The second conflict is the ongoing war in Gaza, triggered by Hamas' incursion (alongside other Islamist militias) into Israel on October 7, 2023, during which an estimated 1,139 Israelis and other nationals were killed. Hostages were also taken to Gaza (251 Israelis and other nationals were taken captive in Gaza to force Israel to release Palestinian prisoners). The violence today has spread also to the West Bank and Lebanon, thus this conflict is no longer localized but part of a broader, structural geopolitical struggle.

The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs has published and credited third-party estimates of the number of those killed and injured in the war. Those include estimates that more than 34,900 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces in Gaza. There are no signs that the killings will end shortly, and certainly not what kind of Europe or Middle East we can expect in the aftermath. As of August 2024, the situation remains dire. Retaliation by Israel has resulted in the deaths of 40,000 Palestinians, with specific incidents such as the shelling of a school and religious center on August 10, 2024, killing 100 people. Not all hostages have been released, and in the West Bank, daily attacks on and killings of Palestinians continue.

In Ukraine, the conflict has intensified, with expanded attacks on Russian soil and retaliatory strikes by Putin, leading to increased destruction. The European Union fully supports the intensification of the war, while the United States plays a crucial role in both war zones. American financial support, weapons, and military personnel, and despite credible claims and warnings of genocidal intent on the part of Israel, have increased in the past year.

In this context, it is important to point out a recent interview with Božo Kovačević, conducted by Zlatko Crnčec for *Novi list* supplement *Pogledi* on the Middle East, with the title "Israel Wants to Drag the US into a War against Iran."<sup>2</sup> Božo Kovačević was from 1977 to 1988 the Director of the Croatian Helsinki Committee;

<sup>2</sup> Božo Kovačević, "Izrael želi uvući SAD u rat protiv Irana" [Israel Wants to Drag the US into a War against Iran], interview by Zlatko Crnčec, *Pogledi*, August 17, 2024.

from 2000 to 2003 he was a minister for environmental protection and spatial planning and a member of the Ministerial Cabinet. From 2003 to 2008 he was the Ambassador of Croatia to the Russian Federation. I will summarize the main points of this interview as it brings very interesting point-of-view to the table.<sup>3</sup>

Benjamin Netanyahu, the longest-serving Israeli head of government, is accused of using his position to avoid a trial over his alleged corruption while hoping for Trump's return to power; Crnčec puts these points at the center of the interview and asks Kovačević about the killing of Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran. Kovačević explains that

Netanyahu has a clear plan. He wants to provoke a military conflict between Iran and the USA. The assassination of the Hamas leader in Tehran and Israel's intransigence in Gaza should be seen in this context. As so often before, Israel does not even listen to the USA, its most important ally and sponsor. Despite the warnings, a deliberate destruction of the civilian population and the entire infrastructure is taking place.

Kovačević explains that Israel is "trying to drag Iran into a direct conflict in order to force the US into this war." He is highly critical of these maneuvers and explains that Netanyahu

has subordinated the fate of the state he leads to his personal interests. His predecessors in the office of Prime Minister were committed to the realization of Israel's national interests. Netanyahu only remains in power with the help of extremely small political parties in order to avoid prosecution for corruption. And such a politician, who is obviously counting on the re-election of Donald Trump to the position of President of the United States, has managed to create a situation in which important regional players, such as Iran, and important global players, such as the US, are taking the steps Netanyahu wants.

Crnčec asks: "Israel is practically completely dependent on American help—militarily, financially, intelligence-wise and in every other respect. How is it pos-

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<sup>3</sup> This and all the following quotes from the Kovačević–Crnčec interview were translated by me.

sible that the US cannot exert enough pressure to bring it under basic control?” Kovačević highlights three important points.

Summarizing them, the first point Kovačević makes is that the Israeli lobby is very influential in the US elections, especially among Protestant fundamentalists who believe that Israel must be protected at all costs. It is not about recognizing Israel’s right to exist, but about eradicating the Gaza Strip. US support for Israel seems to see no solution other than military victory, regardless of the cost in human lives. During the Cold War, US dependence on Middle Eastern oil was central, but today the US is energy independent. Israel, however, remains an important player for US strategic interests, especially with regard to the threat from China. It is even possible to identify three US priorities: The US is primarily focused on China and the Pacific, with Taiwan as a potential flashpoint. The Middle East is secondary, followed by Ukraine, where the US is seeking a strategic victory over Russia but not a war with Russia and is using Ukraine as a means to this end.

Crnčec asks how it is possible that all three factors, which in the worst case threaten Israel’s existence, cannot stop Netanyahu’s policy, which is strongly opposed by Israelis themselves, and adds that in the last instance this opens up the possibility of a major war in the Middle East. Kovačević clarifies:

These three factors together form a concept of American security, according to which the abandonment of one of these components would, firstly, jeopardize American credibility and, secondly, American national interests. The United States has deployed its armed forces in various countries in the region. Similarly, the US does not want to allow Iran to gain further strength. There is also the possibility of expanding Russian influence in Arab countries, where Russia influence is weak today but existed in Soviet times. And the USA also wants to use its presence to make it difficult for China to gain a foothold. It is a mixture of these reasons that, when properly framed within a national security narrative, compel American elites to continue to support Israel, regardless of the policies of the current Israeli government. Netanyahu is playing a very dangerous and risky game. Not only does he want the US to go to war against Iran in the hope that this could lead to a change in the Iranian regime, but he also wants to use the backdrop of this major war to solve the Palestinian issue.

Crnčec also asks:

How accurate is the argument from Israel that the Palestinians are responsible for everything because the Israeli army withdrew from the Gaza Strip almost two decades ago and let the Palestinians govern themselves? Instead of turning Gaza into a Singapore of the Middle East, they have merely turned it into a platform for attacks on Israel. How much responsibility lies with the Palestinians?

Kovačević is very precise:

It is undeniable that since Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, the area has become a kind of training ground for war against Israel. But you have to look at things as a whole to perhaps get a sense of the solution. The key is that in 1948, when the concept of two states was supposed to be implemented, the Arab world did not accept this solution. And several Arab countries attacked Israel. After that, the Arab countries tried several times to attack Israel, and most of these attempts failed. The central issue is that of the refugees, of whom there are around 1.6 million today. These are the descendants of the Palestinians who were expelled from their land by the Israelis in 1948. Several generations of these refugees were born in these refugee camps. This problem has not yet been solved. And the solution to this problem required the joint commitment of the Arab states and Israel. The Arab states, together with other countries, should have ensured that they settled somewhere as normal citizens, and Israel's task would have been to pay financial compensation for the confiscated property. Neither side has shown any willingness to solve this problem. And it is these refugee camps that are the main recruiting pool for terrorists attacking Israel. On the other hand, Israel, together with its Western allies, constantly claims that Israel has the right to defend itself. And this is indisputable. Defense is not only the right but also the duty of every state. But no state has the right to be an occupier. And Israel reserves this right for itself. Unfortunately, it is supported in this by the collective West. And that is one of the reasons for the persistence of the problem in this region.

Although the traditional Westphalian concept of the nation-state, referring to the Peace of Westphalia (1648), established nation-states as the main subjects of international law, each with supreme authority over its territory, in reality, sovereignty has often been separated from physical territory. This means that power and authority can extend beyond or fall short of a state's geographic limits,

revealing that sovereignty has increasingly been separated from territoriality.<sup>4</sup> In colonial contexts, multiple legal systems and authorities coexisted and often conflicted, which created a fluid and contested landscape of governance. This allowed colonial powers to maneuver between different legal frameworks to maintain control. In colonies, the suspension of normal legal rules (a “state of exception”)<sup>5</sup> was often the norm rather than an exception. This enabled colonial powers to continue to govern Indigenous people more effectively, although indirectly.

## II. The End of World War Two Marked a Significant Change in Global Geopolitics

The end of World War Two marked a significant change in global geopolitics. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki changed power dynamics, and the devastation wrought by Nazi Germany highlighted the impermanence of Western imperial dominance. The Cold War was a period marked by ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. Understanding the ideological underpinnings of this era is essential to analyzing its impact on Europe. It is important to examine how these historical processes shaped world politics and influenced the orientation of nations during the Cold War and how they reflect on the current state of affairs in Europe. We know that the Cold War cannot be viewed without the concepts of political philosophy and ideology. History is considered ideological and primarily influences the extent of power, the zones of capital, and the critical point of the aftermath of World War Two.

Punctuating this trajectory also requires that we not ignore the war in the Balkans, the genocide in Srebrenica (1995), the changed world after the 2008 economic crisis, the turbo-nationalism that goes hand-in-hand with discriminatory laws against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual people in some key former Eastern European countries (Poland, Hungary, etc.), and the rhetoric and state violence against refugees from the Middle East and Africa in Europe.

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<sup>4</sup> See Kal Raustiala, “The Geography of Justice,” *Fordham Law Review* 73, no. 6 (2005): 2501–60.

<sup>5</sup> See Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

The year 2004 marked a drastic enlargement of the EU when a significant number of former Eastern European countries were admitted to the EU (Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia besides Malta and Cyprus). The process of NATO enlargement, which includes the former Eastern European states, was also almost complete in 2004 (Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia joined NATO in 2004), except for a few European countries that were not on the radar.

These changes are today in the shadow of the present conflicts and from this comes my first thesis: these shifts towards turbo-fascism did not begin with these conflicts, but were there all along, a continuous preparation for the realization of what we are witnessing: a redefinition and restructuring of the whole social, ideological, and economic structure of politics, sovereignty, governmentality and capitalism itself.

That we are in the “age of populism” was already proclaimed by Ivan Krastev in 2011.<sup>6</sup> Populism has moved from the margins into the mainstream of European and global politics. What determines its success? When I speak of success, I refer to leaders such as Donald Trump (who was, however, ousted by Joe Biden) and parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD). I also add Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Turkey) and Vladimir Putin (Russia) to this list of just a few examples, although they are often considered authoritarian rather than populist.

I base this relationship between populism and nationalism on the research of Patricia Rodi, Lazaros Karavasilis, and Leonardo Puleo, who provide an empirical contribution to the discursive repertoire of seven populist, radical right-wing parties.<sup>7</sup> Within the context of the European Parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019, they examine and compare how these parties discursively shape the content of social demands by assessing how “the people,” “the nation,” “the elite,” and “others” are constructed, and how different demands are incorporated.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan Krastev, “The Age of Populism: Reflections on the Self-Enmity of Democracy,” *European View* 10, no. 1 (2011): 11–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12290-011-0152-8>.

<sup>7</sup> Patricia Rodi, Lazaros Karavasilis, and Leonardo Puleo, “When Nationalism Meets Populism: Examining Right-Wing Populist & Nationalist Discourses in the 2014 & 2019 European Parliamentary Elections,” *European Politics and Society* 24, no. 2 (2021): 284–302, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2021.1994809>.



The authors argue that their research findings “suggest that although parties often combine both populism and nationalism, there is a general disposition to construct the signifier ‘the people,’ not primarily through staging an antagonism between ‘people/elite’ (populism), but rather through articulating ‘the people’ as a national community in need of protection from the EU (nationalism).”<sup>8</sup>

Exemplary in this regard is the protection of the national body as a heterosexual and ethnically pure in Poland (which rejects any LGBTQI+ discourse and demands total control over women’s reproductive rights). Such far-right nationalism departs from this idea of protection. Polish right-wing politicians say that the values of the Polish people are different from the values of the EU,<sup>9</sup> that the Polish people do not need to talk about or recognize the LGBTQI+ community, and so on. Such right-wing populism is not moderate, but extreme right-wing populism, which has elements of fascism and completely neglects basic human rights for certain categories of people within the nation, not to mention foreigners, who are considered elements that do not belong to the nation at all. The vicious logic of nationalism resorts to an imaginary category of people, which is then presented as a nation, and right-wing politics begins to support, protect, and “listen” to it. In such a situation, the left loses all elements of its earlier ability to focus on the exploitation of labor, because people are everything and nothing, they are not connected to labor, not even to gender, class, and even less to race. Women are considered common property for “the good of the people” and therefore reproductive rights must be controlled. The right to abortion, which is a fundamental constitutional right for women only, is tightly controlled. This is neoliberal fascism in the name of human freedom.

Although the process of selecting the “right” foreigners from the “wrong,” or in other words, the “real” refugees or migrants from the “wrong,” is based on racial profiling: skin color decides.<sup>10</sup> We saw this clearly in the Russian-instigated war in Ukraine when (blood and soil) Ukrainians were accepted by Poles,

<sup>8</sup> Rodi, Karavasilis, and Puleo, 284.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Zofia Kinowska-Mazaraki, “The Polish Paradox: From a Fight for Democracy to the Political Radicalization and Social Exclusion,” *Social Sciences* 10, no. 3 (2021): 112, <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10030112>.

<sup>10</sup> See Amie Ferris-Rotman, “They Called Ukraine Home. But They Faced Violence and Racism When Fleeing,” *Time*, March 1, 2022, <https://time.com/6153276/ukraine-refugees-racism/>.

Slovenes, etc. as the “true/genuine” refugees who are part of our culture, as it was said.<sup>11</sup> This redefinition of the foreigner is based on strict racial profiling, a distinction between us and them based on skin color. These are again elements that allow us to speak of right-wing populism.

If one might doubt that this connection is so fundamental, the unprecedented attack on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021, by rioters supporting former President Trump and his attempts to reverse his defeat in the 2020 presidential election made clear what is at the core of far-right rhetoric. After the electoral defeat by the Democrats—who were under constant attack from the far-right Republican Party establishment—the nation as a populist whole of the US people was immediately called upon to protect the authoritarian right-wing politician Trump. He was willing to suspend the US Constitution in order not to lose the election. In this case, a peaceful transfer of power, which is important for democracy, was undermined.

And what about the former Eastern Europe which has been declared the bastion of leftist Marxist thought? We know that the former Eastern Europe was socialist or communist and that it operated, if only on the rhetorical level, with the Marxist vocabulary of class struggles, the proletariat as the basis of the nation-state and not the people or the people as the proletariat. In the Marxist-Leninist interpretation adopted by Eastern European states, the proletariat was considered the foundation of the nation-state. This was in contrast to capitalist societies, where the concept of the nation is more closely tied to the people as a whole, regardless of class.

While the left has, at least rhetorically, called for a different perspective, emphasizing labor rights, higher wages, etc., its proposals have so far been more and more drowned in populist rhetoric, although it is also clear that right-wing populism has succeeded in convincing “the people” that the cause of systemic problems such as (economic) inequality or violence is not the exploitation and expropriation by capital, but the lack of control over borders and sovereignty.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Katy Fallon, “Refugee Aid Workers Decry ‘Hypocrisy’ of European Governments,” Al Jazeera, March 16, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/16/ngos-say-ukraine-refugee-crisis-easier-with-govt-support>.

<sup>12</sup> See Piro Rexhepi, “Carceral Geographies along the Balkan Refugee Route,” unpublished English-language manuscript of an article published in Slovenian as “Jetnišnične geo-

An enormous wave of ultra-right populism is seeping into the former communist bloc of Eastern Europe, further marginalizing people who are not seen as equal citizens in these territories. Questions about the status of refugees and their support are disappearing from public discourse, Roma are disappearing from the scene of EU politics, and Muslim citizens are increasingly seen as a race because of their religion and thus subjected to a harsh racialization process. Currently, anti-Muslim racism is a widespread form of racism in the EU. It is important to note that there are at least two mechanisms at work: one mechanism of the right is to suppress, abandon, and make visibly invisible all these issues; the other is to focus on them and misuse them as “key problems” that can be solved by their complete elimination; we see this in deportations of racialized refugees, profiling of migrants, etc. The danger of far-right sentiments and tendencies occupying a former stronghold of leftist discourse has become obvious.

What does all this have to do with the war in Ukraine? This conflict also raises concerns about the future of Ukraine, which risks becoming a devastated, war-torn landscape (referred to as a “necro-landscape”). In such a scenario, soldiers are deployed to combat zones based on their social class or economic status. The war is in full swing, and the Croatian coast in 2024 is populated by rich Ukrainian young men and old *nouveau riche* (their expensive cars indicative) who have easily escaped the war, although it is known that there is a general mobilization of all men fit for war in Ukraine. On the other hand, both sides, Ukraine and Russia, recruit detainees and criminals from prisons, who are offered bonuses for fighting in the armies.

This situation is further complicated by the legacy of Ukraine’s post-socialist transformation, often characterized by rapid changes (i.e. turbo changes) and widespread corruption. These factors have contributed to the current state of affairs, where the ideals of equality and justice may be undermined by the harsh realities of war and societal division. Europe, or rather the new EU, is a pot of even more disorienting policies, militarization, hyperinflation, subjugation to US gas and oil, and so on; all of this renders the EU a mere market and overseas

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grafije balkanske begunske poti,” in “Rasni kapitalizem: Intersekcije spolnosti, bojev in mejnih teles” [Racial Capitalism: Intersectionality of Sexuality, Struggles, and Bodies as Borders], ed. Tjaša Kancler and Marina Gržinić, special issue, *Časopis za kritiko znanosti* 48, no. 281 (2020): 80–92.

province for the US. We see harsh racialization of migrants and the exclusion or outright neglect of refugees on the streets and in the parks of the EU, because the European states do not have enough resources to fulfill their task of helping those in need, which is a dystopian picture of this grim present.

### III. The Ongoing War in Ukraine

I would like to shed further light on the space of the former Eastern Europe and the history of the European Union and the former Eastern European space after 2001. The final point of this development has led us to a concrete conflict, the war in Ukraine, which started in 2022.

On one hand, this involves examining Europe through the lens of right-wing politics, considering how the European Union encompasses both former Eastern European countries and Western European nations, which are often grouped as part of the EU. On the other hand, it is about the return of Cold War rhetoric, which needs to be reflected upon in a historical perspective to understand the conflict and the not-so-distant history that shaped it after or during World War Two.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has led the left and the right in the EU to join militarization, polarization, segregation, and deportation without a second of hesitation. Sweden and Finland, two countries with a long history of neutrality, announced their intention to join NATO after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the United States deployed additional military assets to Poland and the Baltic states. In June 2022, at the first annual NATO summit since the invasion, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg announced “the biggest overhaul of our collective deterrence and defense since the Cold War.”<sup>13</sup> In April 2023, Finland became the 31st member of NATO, but Sweden’s accession was held up by objections from Turkey and Hungary. In the summer of 2024, Sweden and Finland are both NATO members; Sweden joined on March 7, and Finland on April 4, 2023. The United States also deployed additional military assets to Poland and the Baltic states.

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<sup>13</sup> Cited in Christina Lu, “NATO Leaders Plan Defense Overhaul,” *Foreign Policy*, June 28, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/06/28/nato-summit-russia-war-ukraine-defense-security-china/>.

After Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, some states quickly labeled this as an act of aggression. On March 2, 2022, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution titled “Aggression against Ukraine.” Among other statements, it deplored “the aggression by the Russian Federation against Ukraine in violation of Article 2 (4) of the Charter.”<sup>14</sup> From the events of 2014 (Crimea’s annexation and the war in Donbas) to the Russian Federation’s full-scale invasion in 2022, the number of casualties is changing daily, and there is no visible end in sight, only an intensification. The militarization, polarization, segregation, and deportation have no political opposition. Russia and Ukraine have engaged imprisoned criminals for their recruitment as soldiers and there is forced conscription of male reservists.

#### IV. The Intensification of the Violence and Atrocities in Gaza

The statement from Jan Egeland, Secretary General of the Norwegian Refugee Council is telling:

The pulverising of Gaza now ranks amongst the worst assaults on any civilian population in our time and age. Each day we see more dead children and new depths of suffering for the innocent people enduring this hell. Across the Gaza Strip, almost the entire population—1.9 million people—have been displaced. Nearly two in three homes are now damaged or destroyed. Amid relentless air, land and sea attacks, thousands of families are forced to relocate from one perilous zone to another. Today, more than 750,000 people are crowded into just 133 shelters. Tens of thousands live on the streets of southern Gaza, where, under bombardment, they are forced to improvise basic shelters from whatever they can get hold of. The winter rains have arrived and so have infectious diseases, just as public health services have been utterly paralysed.<sup>15</sup>

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There has been an increase in settler violence in the West Bank, resulting in the expulsion of Palestinian communities. Furthermore, the frequency and severity of violence by Israeli armed forces have escalated. Since the events of October

<sup>14</sup> “Motion for a Resolution on the Establishment of a Tribunal on the Crime of Aggression Against Ukraine,” European Parliament, January 16, 2023, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2023-0072\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/B-9-2023-0072_EN.html).

<sup>15</sup> Jan Egeland, “Civilian Deaths in Gaza Are a Stain on Israel and Its Allies,” Norwegian Refugee Council, <https://www.nrc.no/news/2024/december/gaza-statement-december>.

7, 2023, Palestinian prisoners in Israeli prisons have faced harsh and inhumane conditions, with widespread reports of abuse.<sup>16</sup> The collected testimonies reveal systematic abuse, including violence, sexual assault, and denial of basic human rights, indicating a pattern of institutionalized mistreatment. The consistency of these reports suggests widespread and organized practices of abuse within the detention system.

Referring to the article published on August 9, 2024, the summary of the state of things showed that Israeli society was deeply fractured following the arrest of ten soldiers from the Force 100 unit, accused of the brutal gang rape of a Palestinian prisoner, an assault reportedly captured on video. According to Israeli media, the attack was so severe that the victim required hospitalization and was unable to walk afterward. The soldiers, responsible for guarding the Sde Teiman facility, were detained on July 29, 2024, in a case that has sent shockwaves through the country. On August 4, the military prosecution released three of the soldiers, after two others had been freed following a July 30 hearing at a military court in Kfar Yona. Supporters of the soldiers gathered at the court in protest.<sup>17</sup>

The release of the video depicting the assault has ignited widespread outrage across Israeli society, with human rights organizations and two UN agencies voicing deep concern over the treatment of Palestinian detainees. While many condemn the brutal nature of the incident, others, including far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich, have shifted their focus to the recording and leaking of the footage rather than addressing the severity of the alleged rape. This divergence in reactions has further polarized public opinion, highlighting tensions within the country regarding accountability and justice.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> "Israel/OPT: Horrifying Cases of Torture and Degrading Treatment of Palestinian Detainees amid Spike in Arbitrary Arrests," Amnesty International, November 8, 2023, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/11/israel-opt-horrifying-cases-of-torture-and-degrading-treatment-of-palestinian-detainees-amid-spike-in-arbitrary-arrests/>.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Speakman Cordall, "'Everything Is Legitimate': Israeli Leaders Defend Soldiers Accused of Rape," Al Jazeera, August 9, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/9/everything-is-legitimate-israeli-leaders-defend-soldiers-accused-of-rape>.

<sup>18</sup> Cordall.

On August 7, 2024, Smotrich, called on X (formerly Twitter) for “an immediate criminal investigation to locate the leakers of the trending video that was intended to harm the reservists and that caused tremendous damage to Israel in the world”<sup>19</sup> and called for the harshest possible legal consequences for those responsible.<sup>20</sup>

According to Simon Speakman Cordall, a freelance journalist based in Tunisia, hard-right and ultranationalist politicians, including Israeli National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, have gone so far as to argue that any action, including gang rape, is justifiable if it is carried out in the name of state security. Following the arrest of the soldiers on July 29, 2024, far-right groups, including some government ministers, stormed the Sde Teiman facility later the same day to free the soldiers.<sup>21</sup>

## **V. After World War Two and the Shoah, the Genocides in European Colonial Territories That Exported the Deaths of Millions Beyond Europe Began to Be Palpably Recognized Across the Global World**

Siba N. Grovogui, a Professor at Cornell University, consistently explains this shift, highlighting how the turning point after 9/11 (2001) marked a profound change in global capitalism. This neoliberal global capitalism has now permeated every level of life, reshaping the regime of capital and power. Moreover, the protection afforded by humanitarian law has been effectively abandoned.<sup>22</sup>

Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics,” a text written in 2003, highlighted a radical shift in the perception of life and death in capitalism post-2001.<sup>23</sup> In 2003, Mbembe emphasized from an African perspective that in the third millennium, characterized by wars, terrorist attacks, and other global crises, biopolitics was no

<sup>19</sup> Bezalel Smotrich (@bezelelsm), X, August 7, 2024, <https://x.com/bezelelsm/status/1821273487555637609>.

<sup>20</sup> Cordall, “Everything Is Legitimate.”

<sup>21</sup> Cordall.

<sup>22</sup> Siba N. Grovogui, “Interview—Siba N’Zatioula Grovogui,” interview by Thijs Korsten, E-International Relations, January 31, 2021, <https://www.e-ir.info/2021/01/31/interview-siba-nzatioula-grovogui/>.

<sup>23</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11–40, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-15-1-11>.

longer sufficient. Necropolitics describes the power and institutions that control and destroy life by violent means. It is not just about war, although that is crucial, nor is it solely about the machinery of war.

We see necropolitics in the marginalization of all those considered “other” in a hetero-patriarchal and hyper-neoliberal society, whether they are (non-)citizens, residents, or asylum seekers. Those who have been most exploited are now paying the highest price for colonialism, plunder, slavery, and neo-colonial exploitation for the benefit of the West and capitalism in Europe and the US.

After World War Two and the Shoah, the genocides on European colonial territories that exported the deaths of millions beyond Europe began to be palpably recognized across the global world. Biopolitics in the 1970s was based on the idea that contrary to necropolitics, which is globally effective today, post-World War Two Europe and the Shoah would lead to a state-organized life that would strive for a “good life” for Europeans. However, it soon became clear that this “good life” was only for the majoritarian white citizens of European nation-states, while others were subjected to various forms of discrimination and racialization, initially subtle and invisible. Mbembe shows that from the 16th to the 19th century, capitalism practiced repopulation through predation, wealth extraction, and the formation of subaltern groups. In “Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Politics,” I wrote, “War allows for the management of life through the capitalization of death (Iraq, Pakistan, and Afghanistan). It allows for a passage from biopolitics to necropolitics, and also a passage from nation-state to war-state.”<sup>24</sup>

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The security state strives for a state of insecurity; each term generates or clings to its opposite because neoliberal global capitalism can only be understood through its opposite. Everything that politicians, multinational CEOs, and military generals publicly proclaim is at least the opposite. The invocation of security, for example, serves precisely to produce maximum insecurity. The West, or the Occident, as Mbembe also shows, is the one that defines “being.” That is

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<sup>24</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Biopolitics, Necropolitics, Unrestrained Financialization, and Fascisms,” in Marina Gržinić and Šefik Tatlić, *Necropolitics, Racialization, and Global Capitalism: Historicization of Biopolitics and Forensics of Politics, Art, and Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 38.



why, after historical atrocities and genocidal practices, it can always preach a new beginning—a great new beginning. This is the universality of the West: to always start again from the beginning. The West cannot conceive of any real finality, except perhaps a cleansing that follows the genocidal logic of cleansing everything, even the complete destruction of the “less-humans” if necessary.<sup>25</sup>

The destruction we are witnessing in Ukraine calls for parallels with Mbembe’s notion of “deathscapes.” Added to this, there has been a notable lack of commitment to the protection of refugees from regions of the global South, including Africa and Asia, underscoring the hypocrisy of the neoliberal discourse on human rights.

These changes, overshadowed by conflicts, did not begin with the conflict in Ukraine, but had been a preparation for the realization that we are witnessing, a redefinition of entire social, ideological and economic structures, a restructuring of politics, sovereignty, governance, and an extremely violent racial necrocapitalism. The conflict in Ukraine has led to human and ecological devastation in the European region, characterized by bombings and environmental toxins causing widespread damage. There has been mass displacement and loss of life, while efforts at sustainable technology have been sidelined.

## **VI. Ukraine Is Seen as a Turning Point, a Change in the Global Security Order, and It Is Judged Quite Clearly**

In the early 20th century, Ukraine was considered a peripheral region within Europe. Although it was not formally colonized like the Americas, Africa or the Pacific, its economy was primarily based on agricultural production and the extraction of natural resources to serve the needs of the more developed European centers. From 1917 to 1921, during a period of significant political upheaval, Ukraine was part of a broader global context that world-systems theorists have analyzed. According to this perspective, a dominant strategy was developed within the anti-systemic movements after the revolutions of 1848. This

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<sup>25</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Necropolitics by Achille Mbembe: Extended Essay on the Book,” *Filozofski Vestnik* 42, no. 1 (2021): 231–33, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.42.1.10>.

two-step approach involved first seizing state power and then using this power to transform the world.<sup>26</sup>

In another interview from 2022, Grovogui discusses the complex dynamics at play, stating, “Ukraine is seen as a turning point, a change in the global security order, and it is judged quite clearly.”<sup>27</sup> He explores how African states, with which he is familiar, perceive the war and the factors influencing their ambivalent positions.

He contends that

it’s complicated. What seems like a simple, clear-cut issue in Europe has multiple layers for us in Africa. There’s no question that what Russia is doing in Ukraine is wrong and must be condemned. There’s also no doubt about that in most African states. However, there is also significant discomfort with the Western reaction. There is suspicion that the United Nations is being deprived of its purpose, that UN institutions like the Security Council are being bypassed, and that NATO is acting unilaterally. Ultimately, there is concern that Europe and the USA are beginning to replace international conflict resolution mechanisms on various levels, leaving no influence on international politics.

Grovogui says that “we have seen how quickly the West has united and how successfully it has isolated Russia. These decisions were not coordinated with

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<sup>26</sup> On this debate, see Spencer Louis Potiker, Dana Williams, and Jake Alimahomed-Wilson, “Anarchist and Anarchistic Anti-Systemic Movements in World-Systems Perspective: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Non-State Spaces,” *Journal of World-Systems Research* 28, no. 2 (2022): 188–218, <https://doi.org/10.5195/jwsr.2022.1097>. See also Giovanni Arrighi, Terence K. Hopkins, and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Anti-Systemic Movements* (London: Verso, 1989); Immanuel Wallerstein, “New Revolts Against the System,” *New Left Review* 18 (2002), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii18/articles/immanuel-wallerstein-new-revolts-against-the-system>; Morgan Rodgers Gibson, “The Failure of the State and the Rise of Anarchism in Contemporary Anti-Systemic Praxis,” *New Proposals: Journal of Marxism and Interdisciplinary Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2019): 58–63.

<sup>27</sup> Siba N. Grovogui “Russische Invasion: ‘Das Misstrauen stammt nicht aus der Kolonialzeit’” [Russian Invasion: “The Mistrust Does Not Stem from the Colonial Era”], interview by Lukas Haan, *Zeit*, May 6, 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2022-04/russland-ukraine-krieg-afrikanische-staaten-haltung>. This and all the following quotes from the Grovogui–Haan interview were translated by me.

the international community but were made within NATO.” The distrust, as Grovogui emphasizes,

doesn’t stem from the colonial era, but from the 21st century. Take, for example, the military intervention in Libya. Many African states were against a no-fly zone at the time because they didn’t believe the intervention would end there. And you know what? They were right. The intervention was much more extensive, and Libya still hasn’t recovered. The distrust isn’t hysteria or paranoia; it’s well-founded.

For Grovogui, a very important point is the breakdown of the rhetoric of morality:

Too little was done to help Ukraine. But there’s also, for example, a moral obligation to help the people in Yemen. But the USA doesn’t want to hear about that because it supports Saudi Arabia. So, when the West now uses morality as an argument to urge states to act, it comes across as unconvincing and dishonest. This leads to losing support in the Global South. It would be more honest to openly admit that one’s actions are inconsistent and that, elsewhere, one has followed one’s own power interests. The Ukraine war could be an occasion to question one’s own policies while simultaneously advocating for help for Ukraine. These things aren’t mutually exclusive.

In 2023, Grovogui argues, as the editors of the special issue of the *Journal of International Relations and Development* summarize, “that in its fight against Russia, Ukraine is in fact racializing itself as white and thus no longer at the edge of modernity so that it can become part of the western European club. Yet, it is this very club which has enabled Russia’s long-standing colonial approach towards Ukraine and the rest of the former Soviet states in the first place.”<sup>28</sup> They also highlight the thoughts of Gurminder K. Bhambra<sup>29</sup> who “poignantly

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<sup>28</sup> Olga Burlyuk and Vjosa Musliu, editorial introduction to “The Responsibility to Remain Silent? On the Politics of Knowledge Production, Expertise and (Self-)Reflection in Russia’s War Against Ukraine,” special issue, *Journal of International Relations and Development* 26, no. 4 (2023): 613, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-023-00318-x>; see also Siba N. Grovogui, “Putin’s Ukraine Aggression: How Should an African Respond?,” *International Politics* 60 (2023): 214–35, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-022-00411-x>.

<sup>29</sup> Gurminder K. Bhambra is a professor of historical sociology in the Department of International Relations at the University of Sussex.

observes that the framing of support for Ukraine was often mobilized around ‘European values.’ Because the latter reveal the histories of colonialism and imperialism that have made the ‘world order’ today, many countries in the global south found it difficult to be solidary with Ukraine.”<sup>30</sup>

## VII. Both the Ukraine–Russia Conflict and the Israel–Palestine Conflict Have Deep Roots in Geopolitical Power Struggles

At this point, I will highlight several interconnected and evident issues that have emerged from these conflicts:

First, there is a democratic deficit that reveals a catastrophic mishandling of these situations, leading to more destruction and escalation.

Second, there is a massive failure of responsibility concerning the violent and unchecked killings of thousands of civilians.

Third, geopolitical powers and old imperial structures remain entrenched in a vision of the future dominated by militarism, war, and destruction.

Fourth, there has been a radical failure in international law and the collapse of major global organizations that were supposed to intervene. When did this happen?

### **No. 1: The Democratic Deficit That Shows a Proportion of Catastrophe in Handling the Situations. More Destructions, More Escalations.**

We should consider the concept of a “democratic deficit” as both a consequence of conflicts and a source of them. This term denotes a situation where institutions and their decision-making processes suffer from a lack of democracy and accountability. In the case of the EU, it refers to a perceived gap between the powers of EU institutions and the ability of ordinary citizens to influence their decisions. This perceived lack of accessibility and representation has been ad-

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<sup>30</sup> Burlyuk and Musliu, “Responsibility to Remain Silent,” 613.

dressed, to some extent, by changes introduced by the Treaty of Lisbon, which has been in effect since December 1, 2009.<sup>31</sup>

Today's democratic deficit manifests itself in various areas, two of which are of particular interest here: the national and the international levels. The domestic democratic deficit has fueled the street uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East. The global democratic deficit, on the other hand, is to be found in the structures of international organizations, in which states, regional organizations and other entities necessarily occupy different positions based on their power, resources and traditions. However, these structures do not inherently produce a deficit but rather create the conditions for it.

The paradox is that humanitarian concerns once again serve as a pretext to increase the global democratic deficit and, in the case of the Middle East, re-inscribe the terms of past imperial relations under new guises.

## **No. 2: The Massive Failure of Responsibility Towards the Violent and Unleashed Killings of Thousands of Civilians.**

The Responsibility to Protect, an international norm known as R2P, was unanimously adopted in 2005 at the UN World Summit, the largest gathering of Heads of State and Government in history and is articulated in paragraphs 138 and 139 of the World Summit Outcome Document.<sup>32</sup>

To understand the fate of Palestinians under R2P, one must examine how R2P has been muted, actively opposed, or sidelined to deflect historical responsibility and obligation. The responsibility to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity, and ethnic cleansing has become an important global principle since the adoption of the UN World Summit Outcome Document in 2005.

The concept emerged in response to the international community's failure to adequately address mass atrocities in Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia dur-

<sup>31</sup> "Democratic Deficit," EUR-Lex, accessed August 17, 2024, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/EN/legal-content/glossary/democratic-deficit.html>.

<sup>32</sup> See "What is R2P?," Global Centre for The Responsibility To Protect, accessed August 17, 2024, <https://www.globalr2p.org/what-is-r2p>.

ing the 1990s. The International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty developed the concept of R2P in 2001.<sup>33</sup> Rwanda should have already been on US President Bill Clinton administration's agenda when he took office in January 1993, and existing legislation was sufficient for action. Yet, the Clinton administration did nothing. This non-action reflects one of the many senses of the word "responsibility," which involves the obligation to act and be accountable for preventing what one is expected and capable of preventing.

On July 11, 1995, Serbian troops invaded Srebrenica and murdered 8,372 Bosniaks who had sought refuge in the so-called UN "safe zone." Helmut Kohl, who was German Chancellor at the time, and Klaus Kinkel, who was serving as German Foreign Minister, did nothing.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, on the 16th anniversary of the genocide in July 2011, the Society for Threatened Peoples called for an end to the silence surrounding the complicity of the French and British governments in the genocide in the town of Srebrenica. Human rights organizations criticized François Mitterrand and John Major, who were President of the French Republic and Prime Minister of the UK respectively, for supporting the war of aggression waged by Serbian militias from 1992 to 1995. French, British, and Canadian troops on the ground were accused of aiding the attacking Serbian forces.

The EU Commission, the European Union, the European Council, NATO, the US, and the United Nations failed to take effective action to end the de facto partition of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was orchestrated in Dayton as a result of aggression, genocide, and mass displacement. Instead of addressing the root causes, the response involved Balkanization and division. A similar outcome is anticipated in Gaza and potentially in Ukraine if conflicts persist without a meaningful resolution, leading to further disaster and suffering.

The confusions surrounding the implementation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) relate to the meaning of responsibility, which determines the nature of the obligation it entails. These issues have never been exclusively theoretical. In practice, they depend on the international context, including its regimes

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<sup>33</sup> "What is R2P?"

of economies, practices, cultures of interest, morality, and politics, which provide the context for international relations—and therefore for R2P.

As Jeremy Moses<sup>34</sup> argues in his “Gaza and the Political and Moral Failure of the Responsibility to Protect,”

The absence of a clear, sustained, and powerful invocation of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) in response to Israel’s vicious assault on Gaza reveals the fundamental weaknesses of the doctrine and affirms Hobson’s arguments about R2P’s insularity and detachment from reality. We are now over three months into a military assault that many experts have labelled as a genocide and the R2P has played no significant role in debates over how to respond. It is estimated that over twenty thousand Palestinians, including more than eight thousand children, have been killed since Hamas’ unprecedented attack on Israeli communities surrounding Gaza on October 7. Much of Gaza City and many of the refugee camps-turned-neighbourhoods across the Gaza Strip have been reduced to rubble, with the promise that more, and worse, is to come in pursuit of the goal of eliminating Hamas. Israel’s campaign is now recognised as having generated civilian deaths at a rate higher than any other war of the twenty-first century.<sup>35</sup>

Moses states that in the immediate aftermath of the October 7 attack, Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant promised to cut off water, food, and electricity to the “human animals” within this small piece of land that is home to two million people.<sup>36</sup> Since then, calls for the total annihilation of the Gaza Strip and its inhabitants have been regularly voiced by Israeli politicians and military figures while Israel’s civil society has been increasingly protesting such violence.

Leaders of the United States, United Kingdom and the European Union, amongst others, continue to provide moral support and military assistance to the Israelis on the grounds that Israel “has the right to defend itself” against terrorism. The hypocrisy and double-dealing of Western powers in their response to Israel’s

<sup>34</sup> Jeremy Moses is an associate professor in political science and international relations at University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand.

<sup>35</sup> Jeremy Moses, “Gaza and the Political and Moral Failure of the Responsibility to Protect,” *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 18, no. 2 (2024): 211, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2024.2304987>.

<sup>36</sup> Moses, 211.

atrocities in Gaza has intensified to a point that there is now widespread scepticism about the ongoing value of human rights and international law in general.<sup>37</sup>

For Alex Bellamy,<sup>38</sup> the director of Asia Pacific Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, mass atrocities occur exclusively in authoritarian states, not within liberal democracies like the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, or perhaps even Israel.<sup>39</sup> In response, Moses argues that R2P is controversial not because the states Bellamy lists fear its power, but because liberal democracies are not subject to its rules.<sup>40</sup> Bellamy offers a tepid critique of Western powers' failure to intervene, portraying this as a "both sides" failure of will to prevent atrocities. However, as Moses contends, underlying even this criticism is a binary view of non-Western, authoritarian states as perpetrators of atrocities and Western states as interveners.<sup>41</sup>

The "moral untouchability" of R2P identified by Fassin and drawn upon by Hobson, turns out not to really be about claims to humanitarianism in general, but a much narrower claim that understands humanitarian values to be a possession of liberal democratic states. Yet even this narrow moral untouchability falls apart when liberal democracies become the purveyors of mass atrocity crimes and genocide, as they have done in Gaza.<sup>42</sup>

### **No. 3: Geopolitical Powers and Imperial Old Structures That See the Only Future as a Regime of Militarism, War, and Destruction.**

This analysis aims to rethink the nature of modern warfare as a means of widespread destruction and profit, revealing a shift in Western rhetoric. The methodology of extermination and dispossession, once considered historical, is now being systematically executed.

<sup>37</sup> Moses, 211.

<sup>38</sup> Alexander Bellamy, "The Discomforts of Politics: What Future for Atrocity Prevention?," *Just Security*, 31 October 2023, <https://www.justsecurity.org/89832/the-discomforts-of-politics-whatfuture-for-atrocity-prevention/>.

<sup>39</sup> Moses, "Gaza," 212–13.

<sup>40</sup> Moses, 213.

<sup>41</sup> Moses, 213.

<sup>42</sup> Moses, 213.



In an important 2007 anthology *Exceptional State*, Christian Parenti's chapter "Planet America: The Revolution in Military Affairs as Fantasy and Fetish"<sup>43</sup> exposes a process that has fully manifested itself today. Parenti, an American investigative journalist, academic, and author, wants to "unpack the role of the military technology fetish in shaping the debacle in Iraq, an urban guerilla warfare in which human intelligence, politics, and cultural knowledge all trump the power of America's mighty military machinery."<sup>44</sup> In reality, he envisions a "Planet America" where US global policing is posited "as a supposedly democratic, moral, neutral, and law-based system for projecting American military violence on a global scale."<sup>45</sup> However, he continues, just as local order maintenance is about containing people of color and the poor, America's global military project is about maintaining a class hierarchy. All three post-Cold War US presidents have shared this agenda in varying forms, often expressing their goals in legalistic codes and a discourse of freedom and democracy. Within this framework, the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) will bring "a perpetual global war waged not by human beings who die, rebel, or come home wounded and crazy, but a war waged by labor that is already dead, crystallized into machinery."<sup>46</sup> Future wars will be fought by "zombie armies of 'swarming' robots, armed aerial drones, super-sophisticated microwave bombs, 'over the horizon' smart artillery, ocean-floated 'lily pad' military bases, and space-orbiting offensive weapon systems using lasers, projectiles, and electromagnetic pulses."<sup>47</sup>

Parenti goes on to formulate a concept of Post-Fordist War that will increasingly rely on dead labor and bring widespread death. Mbembe envisioned this already in 2003 by conceptualizing necropolitics instead of biopolitics. Bio-weapons, too, are only in the service of death. Parenti continues: "After all, the transformation debate began in earnest in the early 1990s and ran parallel to the so-called new economy and financialization hype, both of which maintained that 'everything had changed.'"<sup>48</sup> To put it clearly,

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<sup>43</sup> Christian Parenti, "Planet America: The Revolution in Military Affairs as Fantasy and Fetish," in *Exceptional State: Contemporary US Culture and the New Imperialism*, ed. Ashley Dawson and Malini Johar Schueller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 88–104.

<sup>44</sup> Parenti, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Parenti, 89.

<sup>46</sup> Parenti, 89.

<sup>47</sup> Parenti, 89.

<sup>48</sup> Parenti, 89.

The idea of Planet America—a globe definitively and effectively controlled by the American ruling class, the real Thousand Year Reich—though long imagined and desired, only became a feasible project with the fall of the USSR. This removed America’s “peer adversary” and the only technomilitary check on US military power. Since then, Pentagon planners have been working out the military components of total global supremacy.<sup>49</sup>

Planet America has produced almost nothing in recent times but has incited wars globally, making it unsurprising that the EU’s initial strong critique of the war in Ukraine soon dissipated. As Parenti notes, “a very slaphappy Greenspan-esque discourse of ‘irrational exuberance’” emerged—“the RMA would transform everything into frictionless, ‘weightless,’ casualty-free war.”<sup>50</sup> Parenti reveals that “Bill Clinton was the first to officially embrace the mission of the RMA to achieve post-Soviet global dominance. He launched a transformation based on new technologies, most important among them information technology.”<sup>51</sup>

And here, a prediction from twenty years ago has become today’s reality:

One general-cum-historian writing in 1998 described the Army’s transformation goals as follows: “The Army of 2025 will differ from today’s Army in two distinct ways. First, it will achieve unprecedented strategic and operational speed by exploiting information technologies to create a knowledge-based organization. Second, it will exhibit tremendous flexibility and physical agility through streamlined, seamlessly integrated organizations that use new tactics and procedures. The collective result will be a versatile, full-spectrum, capabilities-based force that can decisively respond to any future global contingency.”<sup>52</sup>

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#### **No. 4: A Radical Change in International Law and the Flop of All Major World Organizations Called to Intervene. When Did It Happen?**

Grovogui identifies the source of these changes in the so-called Iraq War, also known as the Second Gulf War, a protracted armed conflict in Iraq from 2003 to 2011.<sup>53</sup> It began with the invasion of Iraq by a United States-led coalition that

<sup>49</sup> Parenti, 90.

<sup>50</sup> Parenti, 91.

<sup>51</sup> Parenti, 92.

<sup>52</sup> Parenti, 92.

<sup>53</sup> Grovogui, “Interview.”

overthrew the Ba'athist government of Saddam Hussein. In March 2003, US forces invaded Iraq, vowing to destroy Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and end Saddam Hussein's dictatorial rule.

Grovogui stated,

Europe, with all its flaws, aspired to a post-Cold War era with a minimum degree of normativity—international law, rule of law, all of that. Europe had managed to convince the rest of the world that America was committed to that. The Iraq War is the only war in human memory, against which a group of people in every capital on this planet stood up and said, “This war should not be fought.” Because the UN and the International Atomic Energy Agency provided credible evidence that the alleged weapons of mass destruction did not exist. That evidence was discarded by US officials. We had the war; and there was no consequence when it was found that the evidence for the war itself had been fabricated.<sup>54</sup>

Grovogui states, “The Iraq War, for me, closed that window, [. . .] the idea that we could return to the basis upon which the new world, under the UN Charter, was founded—multilateralism, mutual coexistence, mutual respect, rule of law, everybody abiding by international law, etc.”<sup>55</sup>

All of this is based on the major changes brought about by global capitalism, particularly following 9/11 in 2001. At that point, along with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the proliferation of changes at the state level, a new formation of the “war-state” emerged in place of the nation-state. In 2009, I pursued an in-depth analysis of global capitalism.<sup>56</sup> To do this, I made specific reference to Santiago López Petit's book *La movilización global: Breve tratado para atacar la realidad*, published in 2009.<sup>57</sup> López Petit's book is a militant demand for the further politicization of life.

Democracy articulates two modes of power. As argued by López Petit, one is the war-state (governance and violence with brutal exploitation, expropriation,

<sup>54</sup> Grovogui.

<sup>55</sup> Grovogui.

<sup>56</sup> Marina Gržinić, “Capital, Repetition,” *Reartikulacija* 8 (2009): 3–4.

<sup>57</sup> Santiago López Petit, *La movilización global: Breve tratado para atacar la realidad* [Global Mobilization: A Brief Treatise for Attacking Reality] (Madrid: Traficantes de Sueños, 2009).

discrimination, and repression), and the other is postmodern fascism.<sup>58</sup> The war-state represents a pure necropolitical mode of life. War-state and postmodern fascism work as a grid of vertical and horizontal forces. To move beyond Frederic Jameson's concept of cognitive mapping,<sup>59</sup> suggests that understanding global capitalism requires including new media technology and the digitalized mode of programming in its logic of functioning in the logic of life and war.

Grovogui exposes:

The debates about the fallout of the Iraq war were as much about Europe as they were about the US, because people had hoped that Europe would rally around traditions such as the Geneva Conventions, the norms around aggression, and so forth. The impression that Europe would rally to its humanitarian tradition was given by Europe itself in its discussions about the consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall. But US elites were clear about what that moment meant: not a new start, but the so-called "end of history." To be sure, the rhetoric was that the fall of "Soviet communism" meant a new commitment to democratic principles (rule of law, international coexistence). But these professions belied US actions within international institutions and around the world. With the invasion of Iraq, we moved then from what people thought was going to be a multipolar system to a virtually unipolar system. It taught me that even a country that had the longest democratic tradition (except for the Dutch Provinces), allowed a war like that to happen: unprovoked, unnecessary, and without legal justification.<sup>60</sup>

The outcome was a thirst for blood and revenge:

I was astounded by discourses around the Iraq War that still oozed anti-Muslim resentment going back to the Crusades. I was amazed at how related sentiments blinded so many people to simple truths, to the evidence that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. As an observer, discussions and narratives around and about the Iraq War, official and not, brought me back in time to memories of the beginning of empire: This is when liberal and progressive forces joined hands

<sup>58</sup> López Petit, 84.

<sup>59</sup> See Frederic Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984): 53–92; Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: Or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>60</sup> Grovogui, "Interview."

with conservative ones to commit to the colonial enterprise, all of them guided by popular sentiments and the fear of their own electorates: the demos.<sup>61</sup>

What happened in the UK in early August 2024 with far-right anti-immigrant and violent racist riots is just one direct consequence of this unaddressed issue.

## Conclusion

Western allies and newer partners, such as turbo-nationalist Eastern European states now part of the EU—characterized by tendencies towards antisemitism, homophobia, and patriarchy, as observed in countries like Hungary, Slovenia, and Poland—are integral to the mechanism of neoliberal social and political psychosis. Additionally, there has been a notable lack of commitment to protect refugees from regions in the Global South, including Africa and Asia, underscoring the hypocrisy of neoliberal discourse on human rights. Ultimately, what we are witnessing is a costly provincialization of Europe by the US, signaling a new and concerning dynamic in global geopolitics.

US financial interests have effectively pushed the EU into a state of total incapacity to address both the horrifying situation in Ukraine and the reluctance to intervene in the ongoing crimes in Gaza, where people are dying of hunger and thirst daily—in the 21st century. This dynamic mirrors similar power dynamics between the metropolis (US) and the periphery (EU), with the UK serving as a derivative instrument of the US interests in Europe after Brexit.

So, as journalist Kristina Božič astutely asked, what is the path to resist the status quo, destruction, conflict, and war in places like Palestine, Gaza, Israel, Ukraine?<sup>62</sup> The answer is not at our hands, as political philosophy often falls short in addressing complex geopolitical, militaristic, and imperial dynamics. However, one insightful perspective can be drawn from the work of Leila Farsakh.<sup>63</sup>

Farsakh explains that Palestinian resistance efforts, aimed at decolonizing Palestine, will inevitably depend on broader regional and international dynam-

<sup>61</sup> Grovogui.

<sup>62</sup> Kristina Božič, email message to author, September 5, 2024.

<sup>63</sup> Leila Farsakh is an associate professor and chair of the Political Science Department at the University of Massachusetts, Boston.

ics.<sup>64</sup> The Palestinian liberation struggle is inherently connected to the wider Arab and international movements for freedom and independence. According to Farsakh, recent shifts in global relations, starting from the Cold War, when Third World countries had opportunities to promote their anti-colonial efforts and pursue national independence, have significantly impacted this struggle. The fall of the Soviet Union, the end of apartheid in South Africa, and the rise of US dominance in the 1990s shifted global attention from decolonization to nation-building and democratization.<sup>65</sup>

However, these efforts, which some might argue were part of US imperialism in pursuit of oil and resources, have largely failed. This failure is most evident in the aftermath of US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in the collapse of the Arab uprisings in 2011.<sup>66</sup>

As Farsakh argues, the normalization of Israel's relations with Bahrain and the UAE through the Abraham Accords in 2020, alongside Russia's war on Ukraine, further highlights the persistence of colonial and authoritarian systems, despite resistance from ordinary citizens.<sup>67</sup> While the nation-state remains a central institution, it is clear that, in today's global capitalist necropolitical era, the sovereignty of the nation-state has been eroded, shifting to new formations such as the "war-state" (imperial states with nuclear power).

Given these realities, the most tangible vision in front of us is the binational approach to decolonization. This vision prioritizes Arab-Jewish relations, enabling Palestinian and Jewish experiences in the Middle East to coexist and be narrated alongside one another, rather than one narrative dominating the other.<sup>68</sup> This approach recognizes that true peace and justice can only emerge when both sides are equally represented.

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<sup>64</sup> Leila Farsakh, "The Question of Palestinian Statehood and the Future of Decolonization," in "Settler Colonialism's Enduring Entanglements," ed. Mona Atia, Graham Cornwell, and Muriam Haleh Davis, with guest editor Shira Robinson, special issue, *Middle East Report*, no. 302 (Spring 2022), <https://merip.org/2022/05/the-question-of-palestinian-statehood-and-the-future-of-decolonization/>.

<sup>65</sup> Farsakh.

<sup>66</sup> Farsakh.

<sup>67</sup> Farsakh.

<sup>68</sup> Farsakh.

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# **Artificial Intelligence and Philosophy**

Edited by Aleš Bunta



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# Artificial Intelligence as a Metaphysical Event: The Problem of Understanding<sup>1</sup>

## Keywords

artificial intelligence, understanding, Nietzsche, Hinton, embodied errors, micro-evolution

## Abstract

The paper focuses on the questions of whether, to what extent, and in what ways the implications of the rapid development of artificial intelligence are changing the nature of one of the fundamental philosophical questions, “What does it (even) mean to understand?” It draws on two sources in particular: Hinton’s explanation of the technological development and functioning of deep neural networks and Nietzsche’s deconstruction of human understanding based on his key concept of “embodied errors.” In doing so, it reveals a series of unexpected parallels, relating in particular to the notion of micro-evolution and the function of error in the processes underlying “thinking” and “intelligence.” The paper therefore draws certain parallels and demarcation lines between human understanding and the “learning” procedures of digital neural networks. At the same time, it addresses the question of what it means for the interpretation of human understanding that, for the first time in history, understanding is faced with a real, existing antithesis, represented by intelligent systems which, although they do not understand, are capable of performing the tasks of understanding, and capable of replacing understanding.

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## Umetna inteligenca kot metafizični dogodek: problem razumevanja

### Ključne besede

umetna inteligenca, razumevanje, Nietzsche, Hinton, utelešene zmote, mikroevolucija

### Povzetek

Prispevek se osredotoča na vprašanja, ali, do katere mere, in na kakšne načine, implikacije pospešenega razvoja umetne inteligence spreminjajo naravo enega temeljnih filozofskih vprašanj, »kaj (sploh) pomeni razumeti?« Opira se zlasti na dva vira: na Hintonovo pojasnjevanje tehnološkega razvoja in delovanja globokih nevronskih mrež in Nietzschejevo dekonstrukcijo človeškega razumevanja, ki temelji na njegovem ključnem konceptu »utelešenih zmot«. Pri tem, odkrije serijo nenadejanih vzporednic, ki se nanašajo zlasti na pojem mikroevolucije in na funkcijo zmote v delovanju procesov, ki tvorijo podlago »mišljenja« in »inteligence«. Prispevek torej potegne določene paralele in demarkacijske linije med človeškim razumevanjem in postopki »učjenja« digitalnih nevronskih mrež. Obenem pa se ukvarja z vprašanjem, kaj za razlago človeškega razumevanja predstavlja dejstvo, da je slednje, prvič v zgodovini, soočeno z realno obstoječo antitezo, ki jo predstavljajo inteligentni sistemi, ki so, čeravno ne razumejo, sposobni opravljati naloge razumevanja in sposobni razumevanje nadomestiti.



I would like to draw attention to a parallel that can be drawn between the form of genuine philosophical questioning and the form of one of the central questions posed by the emergence of artificial intelligence. This parallel carries a message: it implies that the challenge addressed to our civilization by the rapid development of the technologies that drive artificial intelligence *can be articulated* in the form of a philosophical question. This is not to be taken for granted: technological developments largely escape the grasp of philosophical concepts, at least until their impacts reach us in full force.

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It is important to emphasize that this parallel is a formal one—it refers to the characteristics of the question, not to its content—but at the same time, almost in the same breath, to also add that the parallel nevertheless cannot be reduced to a simple structural overlap or described as a search for related patterns in a given database, as AI developers would put it.

This is evidenced by the fact that the central role in this comparison belongs to a certain concept of an event. Heidegger's conception of genuine philosophical questioning, on which I rely here, can also be described as a theory of an intra-philosophical event. For according to Heidegger, the essential distinctive feature of the genuinely philosophical question is precisely that the philosophical question is capable of provoking within itself what he calls a *Geschehnis* (a "happening").

A *Geschehnis* lies, for Heidegger, strictly in the domain of a single, content-specific question, in which the fate of metaphysics is concentrated from its pre-Socratic beginnings to its consummation in Nietzsche's philosophy. This "first," "deepest," "most essential," "most fundamental" of all philosophical questions, according to Heidegger, came to the surface in its clearest form in Leibniz's famous question, "Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?,"<sup>2</sup> which Heidegger, in an essential shift, abbreviated to the question "Why?"

Since a *Geschehnis* in Heidegger is essentially related to the content of the question, it is in its own way unexpected that he himself has done the work for us and introduced the concept in an extrapolated, formally refined form, without any direct reference to the content. However, in a sense, this is also understandable, because a *Geschehnis* is not, by any of its characteristics, an *answer* to the question "Why?" One could almost say the opposite, for Heidegger describes a *Geschehnis* as a kind of recoil, a "*Rückstoß*" of the question *from its content back towards itself*. Let us pay attention to both the eventual dimension as well as to the performative features of Heidegger's introduction:

But *if* this question is posed, and provided that it is actually carried out, then this question necessarily recoils back from what is asked and what is interrogated, back upon itself. Therefore this questioning in itself is not some arbitrary process but rather a distinctive occurrence that we call a *happening*.<sup>3</sup>

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As the emphasis on eventfulness is more pronounced, I add the original:

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Heaven: Yale University Press, 2000), 5.

<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, 6.

Aber *wenn* diese Frage gestellt wird, dann geschieht in diesem Fragen, falls es wirklich vollzogen wird, notwendig ein Rückstoß aus dem, was gefragt und befragt wird, auf das Fragen selbst. Dieses Fragen ist deshalb in sich kein beliebiger Vorgang, sondern ein ausgezeichnetes Vorkommnis, das wir ein *Geschehnis* nennen.<sup>4</sup>

A *Geschehnis* thus unfolds as a kind of counter-impact that the question (regarding the meaning of Being) provokes only if it is truly “posed,” truly “carried out,” and which causes the question to recoil back—from what is questioned within it (the meaning of Being)—into itself and call itself into question.

Since it at best leads to the questioning itself becoming part of what is questionable, a *Geschehnis*, at least at first glance, contributes nothing to the solution of the question and certainly does not provide an answer to it. In reality, however, something even more fundamental happens with its occurrence: although a *Geschehnis* does not provide an answer, it enables the question (about the meaning of Being)—by calling it into question—to *be genuinely posed to begin with*.

Why the Why? What is the ground of this why-question itself, a question that presumes to establish the ground of beings as a whole? Is this Why, too, just asking about the ground as a foreground, so that it is still always a *being* that is sought as what does the grounding?<sup>5</sup>

Clearly, “Why the Why?” is not simply a consideration of the validity, the legitimacy of the “Why?” question itself. The questions “Why?” and “Why the Why?” work together, one with the other, one against the other. And in fact, it is only somewhere in between them—provided that a *Geschehnis* has taken place and the original question is placed in the vicinity of nothingness—that the dimension of meaning, *the meaning of Being*, is revealed; now no longer as a question, but as itself.

The above could hardly be further removed from the topics of deep neural networks, the backpropagation algorithm, the promise and risks of the unprecedented capabilities of intelligent systems; further removed from the profound

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1953), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, 4.



societal changes these systems carry out, the dangers of their misuse or potential escape from human control, or the theory of singularity—all of which are a part of what we commonly refer to as the dispositive of artificial intelligence.

And indeed, my initial thoughts had no better ground than a risky intuition that could not be dispelled. Namely, that in philosophical reflection on the question of artificial intelligence, a similar counter-impact is triggered, one that would strike at the very essence of philosophy, but in the area of a different, no less fundamental philosophical question than “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” This question is: “What does it (even) mean to understand?”

One of the lessons of Heidegger’s treatise is that fundamental questions are raised when they are confronted with a void in themselves; when they are called into question. And I think that, in the broadest sense, this also applies to the contact of the question of the meaning of understanding with artificial intelligence.

The topological relocation of a *Geschehnis* to the realm of understanding is obviously also risky at the conceptual level. Heidegger’s notion—therein lies to a large extent his wager—operates in the pure immanence of questioning. The game of question marks is ultimately the only one that stands in an inner relationship to the sense of Being that is no longer merely a question mark. By contrast, the contending *Geschehnis* that—at the level of the question “What does it (even) mean to understand?”—is supposedly triggered by the attempt to understand artificial intelligence, is obviously open to the outside, it is triggered from the outside, by some factual development, which makes it seem that the whole problem might be more appropriately addressed by Badiou’s pairing of a scientific event and event fidelity (philosophical interpretation).

To start with Badiou: I simply do not believe that the AI dispositive can be captured by the notion of truth-event; I also doubt that Badiou would have wanted such a thing. It seems to me more reasonable, and fascinating in its own way, to suppose that in this unfolding the event is absent, or rather diffused. As for the problem of immanence, my answer is twofold. Throughout this discussion I will show that—even though a *Geschehnis* unfolds in the field of understanding in relation to the outside—a key role is nevertheless played by an inner, introverted negative capacity of the very question “What does it (even) mean to understand?,” which makes it akin to the question “Why?” On the other hand, I will

show towards the end of this discussion that also Heidegger's wager on the pure immanence of questioning, especially when it is deployed on the historical level, nevertheless needs the intrusion of a necessary disturber, a minimal external trigger, which in Heidegger's treatise is represented by the signifier Nietzsche—the one who actually thought, or in Heidegger's vocabulary, *essentially experienced* that Being has become merely a deflated word.

## The Brain and the Microevolution

Do intelligent systems such as ChatGPT *actually understand*? Some scientists, and especially philosophers of science, who tend to be more rigorous in this respect, would say that the question itself displays a superficial understanding of the problem and is evidence that one has fallen for the hype. They may be right, but the question still seems legitimate. Especially given the fact that the recent development of artificial intelligence has revolved in every conceivable way around *the key concept of learning*, a concept which—of all those concepts that would in normal circumstances be said to denote forms of thought—is the most congenial to understanding, or at least seems to be intrinsically linked to understanding in a form of co-dependency.

That intelligent systems *learn* in a completely untransmitted sense, as well as that they are capable of learning on their own—these are no longer dilemmas, but facts. For example, in the course of completing a task, if this helps to solve it, they can easily learn Chinese—in normal circumstances, we would say they learn to *understand* Chinese—without being told to or taught Chinese by anyone. However, learning is not only a capability that intelligent systems possess, but also the name of the development process (so-called machine learning) that, in the strictest scientific and technological sense, produces the very effect that is referred to as the “*intelligence*” of a system. Even in this case, it is not just a technical term, but the word “learning” actually provides a surprisingly accurate description of the process. Therefore, the question could also be posed in the following way: Is it possible that an intelligent system that is *essentially determined by learning* does not understand at all? We must at least concede, without doubt, that—except in the famous case of learning by heart, but even then, not really—a minimum degree of understanding is spontaneously perceived as an internal condition of learning, and that the relationship between the concepts cannot be intuitively explained in any other way.

While there is no perfect consensus among scientists, their position on the dilemma of whether intelligent systems understand is, in the vast majority of cases, reserved: maybe one day, but not yet.

Summarizing their arguments roughly, this reticence certainly appears justified. What, at the deepest level, forms the basis of the learning and “speaking” of systems such as ChatGPT is in fact a complex statistical system that can—on the basis of the complex but, in terms of epistemological status, nevertheless purely and exclusively statistical processing of enormous amounts of data—predict, anticipate, every next word in a sentence, without this meaning that it really understands its content. In other words, although ChatGPT “speaks,” the “thinking” that drives this speech is *entirely heteronomous to the meaning* that is established (for us and exclusively for us) within what is uttered. Rather than standing in any focused intimate relationship with the meaning of the sentence, the intelligent system remains at all times dispersed in a relation to the totality of everything ever posted on the Internet, from which it statistically induces a prediction of the next word through a series of contextual parameter constraints. In this respect, intelligent systems do not “understand” any more than a pocket calculator does: they calculate and serve up understanding, but they do not understand. In fact, considering that a pocket calculator, so to speak, stands its ground, it *calculates*—we could even speculate that an intelligent system understands *less*.

But is there not a paradox in saying that something that speaks only speaks *apparently*—especially if we consider that intelligent systems do not merely perform a morphological imitation of words, which is characteristic of some animal species, but carry out a process of *anticipation* which, even if it is statistical in design, in a sense belongs to the category of thinking?

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This brings us closer to the argument of those scientists—including two key figures in the recent development of AI, Geoffrey Hinton (also called the “godfather of AI”) and Ilya Sutskever (chief scientist in the development of ChatGPT)—who, contrary to most, argue that the first traces of understanding can already be seen in the workings of digital deep neural networks at this very moment. Namely, their argument, which is much more multifaceted than can be summarized here, can be described in the most basic terms as reaching a conclusion on the basis of the effect: Hinton and Sutskever argue that intelligent systems

are capable of solving certain complex problems which, in their view, simply cannot be solved except on the basis of their contextual understanding.<sup>6</sup> This conclusion is then further reinforced by the fact that at the level of the so-called hidden layers of neural networks, there are certain unforeseen qualitative leaps taking place (the so-called black-box effect) that we cannot really explain yet. This is also one of the main reasons why, according to some experts, it is already possible to speak of the autonomization of intelligent systems: their functioning in some cases gives the impression of having escaped from the matrix of their statistical design.

It is not up to us, of course, to intervene in this debate; much more relevant is another, much simpler observation: all those scientists who, in one way or another, answer the question of whether intelligent systems understand, must do so on the basis of some *understanding of understanding*; each of them must, if not otherwise spontaneously, respond to the philosophical question: *What does it (even) mean to understand?*

The question of the meaning of understanding, however, is far from being included in the field of artificial intelligence only through interesting, but scientifically probably nonetheless trivial questions. First of all, we should note the following: the question “What does it mean to understand?” is the philosophical parallel to the *idea* that set technological development and the effects we are witnessing today in motion to begin with.

The original aim of the teams of scientists who set out to develop and research the so-called digital neural networks that form the heart of the most advanced intelligent systems currently in use was precisely this: *to build a system of understanding the workings of the biological, human brain by means of a digital reconstruction of it*, which, due to its mathematical design, can be understood better and more efficiently than (our own) biological brain, the principles of which in many respects still remain unknown. Hinton, who at the beginning of his rather

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<sup>6</sup> Sutskever, on some occasions, puts forward the argument even more directly: “To predict the next token means that you understand the underlying reality that led to the creation of this token. It is not statistics.” Ilya Sutskever, “Why Next-Token Prediction is Enough for AGI,” YouTube video, uploaded by Dwarkesh Patel, December 13, 2023, 00:58, [https://youtu.be/YEUclZdj\\_Sc](https://youtu.be/YEUclZdj_Sc).

turbulent university years also studied philosophy—a not inconsiderable fact—thus said in a recent public lecture held at Cambridge University:

I was very interested in philosophy of mind, but actually it was then when I was doing philosophy when I was about nineteen that I formulated this view that subjective experience is just shorthand for “I’m going to talk about how the world would have to be to explain what’s going on in my head as normal perception,” but they weren’t too interested in that, so I actually have a grudge against philosophy. [. . .] So, then I decided: you’ll never understand how the brain works unless you build one. This is Feynman’s view, Feynman wrote this somewhere.<sup>7</sup>

Clearly, there is a huge gap between the original idea and the discovery, invention, innovation, mathematical solution that ultimately makes the idea work—even more so in technology than elsewhere—which often leads to a deviation in a completely different direction than the one planned. This was, as Hinton himself often emphasizes, also the case with deep neural networks. There is a peculiar irony in the fact that the very mathematical invention whose implementation had been pioneered by Hinton, Yann LeCun, Yoshua Bengio, and others in the mid-eighties—the so-called *backpropagation algorithm*—which subsequently, as computers became more efficient, allowed intelligent systems to become truly similar to us, through their ability to learn and the effect of language, on the surface, has also caused intelligent systems to diverge significantly from the direction of the way the human brain works at deeper levels. Namely, this algorithm, which forms the basis of the training of advanced digital neural networks, operates according to principles that are completely different from those of the biological brain.

The development of artificial neural networks has thus diverged from the original idea. Besides that, we also have to admit that the parallel between the idea of understanding the human brain on the basis of its digital, mathematically “manageable” reconstruction, and the philosophical question “What does it (even) mean to understand?” turns out to be rather naive idealism at the level of neuroscientific practice. Understanding is, of course, only one of the many cog-

<sup>7</sup> Geoffrey Hinton, “Two Paths to Intelligence,” lecture at University of Cambridge, May 25, 2023, YouTube video, uploaded by CSER Cambridge, June 5, 2023, 1:06:40, 1:07:39, <https://youtu.be/rGgGOccMEiY>.

nitive phenomena that the development and research of neural networks is supposed to help us understand. Not only that, understanding is undoubtedly one of those cognitive processes that Hinton referred to by the general term “reasoning” and said were in fact “a bad model of biological intelligence,” because, developmentally speaking, they represent *late-developed forms* of brain function.

Reasoning came much, much later, and we are not very good at it—you don’t learn it until you are very old. Reasoning is a very bad model for biological intelligence: biological intelligence is about controlling your body and seeing things.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding of understanding is, therefore, at most one of the secondary and distant goals of computational modelling of the brain. Nevertheless, Hinton’s statement, repeated in several interviews, i.e. that “reasoning is in fact a bad model of biological intelligence; it developed much later,” deserves our full attention: first of all because it evokes a strong philosophical reminiscence.

In fact, it reiterates words very similar to those—I do not know if Hinton knew this—with which Nietzsche, at the intersection of psychology, epistemology, and genealogy, virtually opened the door to a new terrain, which could be called the *microevolution of the human being*. For Nietzsche, too, argued precisely this: that processes and concepts such as cognition, understanding, intelligence, knowledge, even consciousness to some extent, and above all truth, are “too young,” too “late-born,” too late, of secondary origin, to allow us to pin all our hopes on them.

Nietzsche’s thesis is in fact twofold:

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a) Processes and fundamental concepts such as cognition, understanding, knowledge, intelligence, and truth actually emerged late in the process of the micro-evolution of human becoming; too late, too derivative of other, more elementary processes, to be counted among the key factors forming the *basis* of human development. They may constitute the culmination of the human being, but they were too late to participate in its *Entstehung*, in the stage of human for-

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Hinton, “The Godfather in Conversation: Why Geoffrey Hinton is Worried About the Future of AI,” YouTube video, uploaded by University of Toronto, June 22, 2023, 5:47, <https://youtu.be/-9cW4Gcn5WY>.

mation. Concretely, when Nietzsche, for example, set forth the sharp formula that “our apparatus for acquiring knowledge is not designed for ‘knowledge,’”<sup>9</sup> he meant to say that what we today call the cognitive apparatus was in fact formed in relation to a completely different end, and by means that differ completely from gathering or generating (true) knowledge: the original task of the “apparatus for acquiring knowledge”—one that has stretched over hundreds of millennia of human prehistoric development and can indeed be placed in the structure of human formation—was even something *quite opposite* to acquiring true knowledge, namely, the creation and maintenance of *those errors that have proved micro-evolutionarily necessary for the preservation of the species or for an increase in its power*. The cognitive apparatus, and through it our cognitive, intellectual power, thus evolved through adaptation to *error*, not to true knowledge. The fact that the “human beast,” like its animal predecessors, had to learn very quickly to recognize correctly something edible or a danger, confirms rather than contradicts Nietzsche’s hypothesis, which puts forward the *conditions for the survival of the species*. Among these necessary, vital, determining errors, according to Nietzsche, belong the notion of the ego, the division of the world into “permanent, unchanging entities,” the existence of the will, and finally, indirectly, through the action of language, the notion of being itself. We can see at once that the elementary forces underlying human origin still leave their traces, both in the architecture of language as well as in the structure of thought and, ultimately, in the edifice of consciousness. Although, in the broader context of our discussion, this may be a bolder claim than it would be otherwise, we will say that these necessary errors—Nietzsche calls them “embodied errors”—are instinctively impregnated into our brains.

b) In order to truly understand these late phenomena, which are already “too human” to belong to the origins of humans, and in particular to grasp that inner “tension of the spirit” which undoubtedly belongs to concepts such as truth, knowledge, understanding, and intelligence, we must understand them as well *in relation to the processes underlying their formation*; especially since they have all in their turn *evolved out of their opposites*. The real “tension of spirit” which surrounds and pervades these essential determinants of the category of the human will be sought in vain in some profound spirituality of their origin, nor will

<sup>9</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1968), 273.

it be captured by however correct a definition of each concept; it will be discovered in the fact that the opposites from which they evolved remain active just beneath the surface.

Since we will deal with the trinity of understanding, knowledge, and truth in more detail in the next section, for the moment let us just briefly recapitulate Nietzsche's view of consciousness and mind, *Vernunft*, which is particularly interesting because it also includes the meaning of "intelligence." We experience consciousness as an inner state of our existence, the centre of subjectivity. But Nietzsche wrote: "It is essential that one should not make a mistake over the role of 'consciousness': it is our relation with the 'outer world' that evolved it."<sup>10</sup> Consciousness was, originally, only "a network of connections between human and human."<sup>11</sup> Although we experience it as the centre of our subjectivity, it has in fact evolved as an intersubjective process, and underneath the layer of our self-experience, it still remains essentially related to externality.

An even more elementary example of "an emergence from an opposite" is the mind, intelligence: Nietzsche made the seemingly simple but far-reaching claim that at the deepest foundation of every mind, however developed and sophisticated, there is always a "non-mind," an *Unvernunft*. "'Intelligence' [*Intelligenz*] appears as a special form of irrationality [*Unvernunft*], almost as its most malicious caricature."<sup>12</sup> "*From experience.*—The irrationality [*Unvernunft*] of a thing is no argument against its existence, but rather a condition for it."<sup>13</sup>

It seems that intelligence is always established somewhere between itself and an elementary complex simplicity that persists in its foundation at all times and, despite its apparent detachment from it, constitutes it. Interestingly, a similar message is being conveyed on several levels by the discoveries relating to artifi-

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<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, 284.

<sup>11</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Joyful Science*, in *The Joyful Science, Idylls from Messina, Unpublished Fragments from the Period of The Joyful Science (Spring 1881–Summer 1882)*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2023), 222.

<sup>12</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Nachgelassene Fragmente 1884–1885*, vol. 11 of *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1999), 700.

<sup>13</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human (I): A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 269.



cial intelligence, in particular to the development of neural networks. Although they are extremely complex systems that are being developed on the basis of barely conceivable amounts of ongoing calculation, there is, as the scientists themselves point out, something surprisingly simple at their core:

When I first learned about this, I was mystified by how something so simple could compute something arbitrarily complicated. [. . .] Although you can prove that you can compute anything in *theory* with an arbitrarily large neural network, the proof doesn't say anything about whether you can do so in *practice*, with a network of reasonable size. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more puzzled I became that neural networks worked so well.<sup>14</sup>

Although we are not quite at the point where we could fully appreciate his profound amazement at the elementary simplicity of how digital neural networks work, this description given by one of the most prominent researchers in the field of AI, Max Tegmark, is certainly intriguing.

But can Nietzsche's lateness of truth and understanding really be related to the developmental lateness of reasoning that Hinton speaks of, and which, according to him, causes reasoning to be a poor model of biological intelligence?

To answer this question, in my reckoning, it is sufficient to place the core of Nietzsche's thesis in direct comparison with Hinton's statement. Nietzsche, as we have seen, makes the following claim: "Our apparatus for acquiring knowledge is not designed for 'knowledge,'" and when Hinton says that "reasoning is a bad model of biological intelligence," is he really saying anything other than that the *brain was not made for reasoning to begin with*? That there is an edifice within it, which originally was not developmentally adapted to the tasks of thinking, which at best form a thin layer on top of it, *which explains precious little*, and which is therefore nearly useless in a research project which has set itself the task of understanding cognitive processes, *including thinking*, at their very core?

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<sup>14</sup> Max Tegmark, *Life 3.0: Being Human in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* (London: Penguin, 2018), 74.

Despite their completely different starting points, and undoubtedly also different conclusions and outcomes, Nietzsche and Hinton do meet somewhere. I also believe that this parallel between them cannot be reduced to the “usual” developmental naturalism, through which some authors even associate artificial intelligence with the Aristotelian naturalist outlook. I doubt that Aristotle would have agreed that the processes of thought at their core can only be properly understood by means of *excluding logic from them*—which is what Nietzsche and Hinton explicitly claim. I also doubt that Aristotle, or any other naturalist, would readily accept the idea that the *effect* of correct cognition can be achieved through a process whose *basic building block is error*, while correct cognition, although its effect is ultimately reached, is entirely absent from the process leading to this effect—for this is precisely where I see another, deeper point of contact between Nietzsche’s epistemology and the workings of artificial intelligence.

This as yet intangible parallel can be better grasped through three intersections, which I will refer to with the following terms: the biological-microevolutionary element, the negative minimum, and the priority of error—all three intersections are of course connected and intertwined.

The first obvious point of convergence is hence the *wager on biology*. It is clear that the biology Nietzsche is leaning on is not the experimental-technological biology at work in modern neuroscience, which, especially in the field of research into artificial neural networks, slides into mathematics and physics, from laboratory mice to numbers. Biology enters Nietzsche’s philosophy through the theory of evolution, through the polemics against Darwin. However, in this very leaning on biology there is another, deeper point of intersection, which I believe is occupied precisely by the notion of microevolution. For the moment, I would like to point out that Hinton in particular appears to insist on the *biological nature of the scientific paradigm* behind deep neural networks,<sup>15</sup> which is in its own way surprising, given the fact that the structure of intelligent systems is purely mathematical. I also think that there is more to this than fidelity to the original, biological brain; on the contrary, I believe that this insistence has almost nothing to do with the biological source.

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<sup>15</sup> Geoffrey Hinton, “Will Digital Intelligence Replace Biological Intelligence?,” Romanes Lecture at the Sheldonian Theatre, February 19, 2024, YouTube video, uploaded by University of Oxford, February 29, 2024, 4:27, <https://youtu.be/N1TEjTeQego>.

The second intersection is also quite obvious, but it is covered by a certain appearance of self-evidence. Both Nietzsche and deep neural network research share the view that cognitive phenomena such as understanding can only be adequately explained *through the processes underlying them*. Of course, the composition of this underlying basis varies from one case to another: in Nietzsche, what lies underneath is a historical developmental process driven by the will to power; in computational neuroscience, the underlying basis is the pure immanence of neurons and numbers. It could also be said that Nietzsche and computational neuroscience approach these underlying bases from diametrically opposed directions: neuroscience attempts to explain cognitive phenomena *from within their material under-structures*, which in the case of some cognitive phenomena also poses a problem—according to many philosophers of science, this is particularly true of consciousness, which is itself a “surface effect” of physical processes rather than a physical process, and therefore cannot be explained as such. On the contrary, it is characteristic of Nietzsche’s genealogical psychology that it tries to reach the subsurface from within the effects that obscure it. For example, we have seen in the very case of consciousness that its emergence in relation to the exterior has to be accessed through (or rather against) the lived experience of an inner state. Despite all these differences, to which we would have to add completely different means and methods of research, it is nevertheless possible to argue that Nietzsche and computational neuroscience have something in common at the level of approach: Nietzsche and computational neuroscience try to grasp cognitive processes in what I would call the *negative minimum* of the phenomenon.

Someone will say: it is self-evident that cognitive processes must be understood in relation to their underlying framework. But in reality, when it comes to the problem of phenomena such as understanding and cognition, both philosophy and science have for a very long time resorted to a completely different approach; so different that Nietzsche, in his own right, considered that cognition and understanding, and through them the truth, did not really appear before us *as philosophical problems at all* until he managed to turn the perspective on how they ought to be approached, by stumbling upon a different type of question. The question of idealist philosophy has never been “What does it (even) mean to understand?”; the question has always been “What are the formal conditions of true/correct/objective knowledge?” The question of understanding, for idealist philosophy, is not a question of the underlying basis: idealist philosophy,

through the introduction of a *third aspect*—truth, rightness, objectivity—explains understanding at most as a *means* whose usefulness or uselessness *in achieving the purpose of this third, external term* determines what is and what is not understanding. Knowledge is true or objective knowledge; “false knowledge” is not knowledge at all, but error. Understanding is correct understanding, while “misunderstanding” is a bare privation of understanding—which is *de facto* contradictory, since the hermeneutists are, I believe, right in this respect: we are *always already caught in an understanding*, beyond the dilemma of right or wrong. Nietzsche was always suspicious of this kind of idealistic use of truth as an external criterion for the categorization of knowledge: he considered it to be an abuse of truth that is particularly detrimental to truth itself. Idealist philosophy does not look to a negative minimum in the basis of understanding, but places all its bets on the *maximum* of true knowledge: it tries to discover its conditions, to set them up as universal, and to define the coordinates of understanding and knowledge through these conditions of reality, of objectivity, of correctness. This is why Nietzsche thought that in idealist philosophy the question, “What does it (even) mean to understand?” (beyond the dilemma of true or false)—despite the appearance that it has always been at the centre of attention—in reality remained unaddressed.

In its own way, it seems even more delicate to claim that science, which is usually assumed to be characterized by the so-called bottom-up approach, has also given up on the material foundation. But the fact is that even in science, taken as a whole, the question of the conditions of knowledge has, until recently, dominated over the question of the processes in the material basis of understanding. And indeed, following Hinton, it can be said that the continuity of this primacy has extended to the terrain of scientific theories and models of artificial intelligence.

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Hinton has said that the decisive moment of rupture, which in a sense determined the fate and direction of AI research, and consequently, of course, of its explosive development, resulted from the clash between two models of intelligence that follow two major scientific paradigms—*the linguistic-symbolic* and *the connectionist-biological*—each of which, in its own way, postulates “what is actually inside our heads.”

There are two different models of what intelligence is all about. The first model is all about reasoning. And the way we reason is by using logic—that’s special about

people, and what we should be doing is understanding the kind of logic that we actually use. That also went with the idea that the knowledge we store is *symbolic expressions*. So that I can say a sentence to you, and you will somehow store that and later you'll be able to use it for inferring other sentences. What is inside your head is something a bit like sentences but cleaned up. And then there's a completely different model of intelligence, which is all about learning the connection strengths in a network of brain cells; and what it is good for is things like perception and motor control. [ . . . ] That was an entirely different paradigm and it had a different idea of what is inside your head: it is not stored strings of symbols, just the connection strengths. For the symbolic AI view, the crucial question was: What is the form of these symbolic expressions, and how do we do reasoning with them? For the neural net view, the question was quite different: How do we *learn* these connection strengths so you can do all those wonderful things? For the neural net view, learning was always central. For the symbolic AI view, not so: they said, we'll worry about learning later, we must first know how the knowledge is represented, and how we reason with it. So, these are two totally different views: one took its inspiration from logic, one from biology; and for a long time, people from the logic camp thought taking inspiration from biology was silly. This is a bit strange, since von Neumann and Turing both thought that neural nets were the way to attack intelligence, but unfortunately, they both died young.<sup>16</sup>

The symbolic paradigm and the AI models based on it are therefore characterized by the belief that there must be some *minimal symbolic structures* in the brain that allow for at least an approximate correspondence between brain processes and the structure of language, and which, as a consequence of this relative correspondence, also allow for the postulation of an instance *in the brain itself* that guarantees, in the manner of logic, the possibility of the correctness of cognition. The aim of this first model of AI is, as Hinton says elsewhere, “discovering the workings of the logic behind our thinking, which we understand as a distinctive feature of human thought,” and transposing this logic onto the functioning of intelligent machines.

By contrast, from the point of view of the biological paradigm, which adheres to the findings of empirical neuroscience, there is nothing in the brain other than synaptic connections. In other words, the biological model of intelligence

<sup>16</sup> Hinton, “Godfather in Conversation,” 4:55, 6:05.

does not postulate any structures in the brain that would guarantee consistency with the forms of thought that take place in the medium of language and that also rely on the structure of language as the criterion of correct cognition, such as logic. For this reason, in this biological model of intelligence, the *concept of learning comes to the fore from the outset*. Since the structure of the brain does not in itself guarantee anything; since there is no *a priori* epistemological criterion, no power of inference, built into it, this can only mean one thing: *all the capacities of the brain must—in one way or another—be learned*.

But what does “learning” even mean in this context? How does the backpropagation algorithm—which, despite being a relatively old invention, remains the key principle of deep learning—actually work? This brings us to the third point of contact, the *primacy of error*.

A very simplified definition might be: backpropagation is a mathematical algorithm that *retroactively calculates the error deviations* in the system’s operation, thus allowing the elimination of all those connections in the system’s functioning that rank highest in this error coefficient—in short, it allows a gradual serial elimination of all those connections that most strongly steer the system’s functioning towards error. In this way, the algorithm, through an almost innumerable number of iterations of the described procedure, gradually leads the system to optimize its performance according to externally defined criteria of correct behaviour/recognition.

So, the magic is that there’s this relatively simple algorithm called backpropagation that takes the error in the output and sends the error backwards through the network and computes through all the connections how you should change them to improve the behaviour. And surprisingly, that actually works.<sup>17</sup>

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At first sight, the backpropagation algorithm therefore acts as a means of eliminating error in the service of correct knowledge.

But would it not actually be more correct to say the reverse: neural network learning, according to the principle of the backpropagation algorithm, is a process that continuously relies *on the existence of an error* that is factual and that

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<sup>17</sup> Hinton, 12:51.

has to be accounted for, to be excluded from the operation of the system, while correct (re)cognition is added to the process merely *as an effect*—with no correct cognition actually occurring at any point in the process, *including* at its conclusion? To put it in the language of simple ontology: *there is only error* in the process; correct cognition is merely an external effect without any basis of its own—*error brought to almost nothing*.

Let us try to describe the process in our own simplified way, in a little more detail—focusing, of course, on the nuances that are interesting to us.

The first step in training a digital neural network goes something like this: the system is asked a question and responds with an “answer”—I put the word “answer” in quotation marks because, in reality, the system’s response has nothing to do with the question, but consists of a purely *arbitrary reaction* that is registered in the system’s numerical parameters, which allow its modification. This response therefore contains no knowledge of the question, not even the slightest hint of a correct answer, nothing on which a process of cognition could rely—the irony is that this does not change at all even up to the end of the process.

The important point is that there are several of these absolutely contingent “answers”; they all enter into the numerical parameters of the system, and of course none of them contains even a glimmer of correct knowledge. But even if none of the “answers” contains anything that points to the correct answer to the question, it nevertheless, through its relation to the other “answers,” does contain something, namely, a *comparatively measurable degree of its falsity* in relation to what we assume constitutes the correct answer to the question. To put it even more simply, some “answers” are—purely by chance, of course—nevertheless *less wrong* than others, closer to our (external) estimate of the correct answer, and in this triangle between the individual “answers” and what we have determined to be the correct answer it is actually possible to calculate something, namely, a kind of coefficient of error, which allows us, on the basis of this coefficient, to adapt the parameters of the system to those answers which happen to be the least wrong.

In this way, gradually, through an almost infinite series of iterations, we adjust the system, optimize it, until this optimized system, from which we systematically extract the maximum deviations in the direction of error, at some point—

*again purely by chance*, except that this chance now has slightly narrowed coordinates—does not give a response that *overlaps with what we see as the correct answer to the question*, and then we adjust all the parameters in the system in such a way that this phenomenon of correspondence is repeated as many times as possible. Obviously, this last “answer,” despite its overlap with our assessment of “correctness,” is no closer to the characteristics of correct (re)cognition than the original, purely arbitrary response; nevertheless, the system, *taken as a whole*, from which we have excluded all the connections that led it into error, begins to behave correctly: it begins to give correct answers of its own accord to many other questions which are not even related to the original one, to behave as if it understood, in short, to produce the effects of correct cognition. I think we can repeat: from beginning to end, the system’s agent is error; the “correct (re)cognition” occurs as an *effect* without having taken place.

From here let us return to the comparison with Nietzsche. Of course, it is clear that even if we explain it in this way, the learning of intelligent systems, which erases the parameters of error, stands in diametric opposition to Nietzsche’s thesis that thought evolved from the maintenance of fundamental, vital errors, such as the ego and the existent entity; from a kind of coordinated effort to maintain these vital errors, which are necessary for survival. But at the same time, a more fundamental convergence is to be noted: both backpropagation and Nietzsche direct us to the conclusion that *only “errors” exist* in the processes that form the basis of “thinking.”

Let us turn this around in another way. We can observe that, despite the fact that digital neural networks are entirely constructed as mathematical models, there persists in them something—born and emerging from chance—*non-mathematical*. An error is not, after all, a mathematical operation. Of course, mathematics can define it, measure it, and calculate it, but the initial response of the system, which, so to speak, bestows on us the first error, upon which mathematics can then operate, is contingent. And this contingency behind it persists in the process all the time as its central factor, which the mathematical calculation of the error merely selectively directs in the direction of its minimization. This is, after all, at least one of the meanings of the word *learning*: in a sense it denotes the non-mathematical in the midst of the mathematical, *the trace of the biological* that nonetheless cannot be described as a kind of reflection of the actual workings of the biological brain.



In truth, the biological process of learning does seem to be very different. A lot of knowledge is written into us genetically, innately, instinctively. In particular, what Hinton puts at the centre of biological intelligence—motor skills, the functioning of perceptions—are characterized by the fact that they develop spontaneously, without our having to learn them. Then there is the problem of knowledge as such: we humans have to accumulate it, build it; we have to read, contemplate, and deduce. An intelligent system works in the reverse way: first it has all the knowledge of this world, only then can it produce an effect from it that superficially resembles understanding.

So, is “learning” really the best term to describe the emergence of intelligent systems? Should we rather say that this process—which leads the development of intelligence from the zero point of the absolute contingency of the first “answer,” through “experience” of the delusions which determine selection, to the effect of correct action—is a kind of *substitute for the evolutionary process*, a kind of micro-evolution accelerated and simplified to the extreme?

### **Next to Nothing, *Geschehnis***

It is not difficult to see that the question “What does it (even) mean to understand?” diverges from the question of the conditions of true knowledge, and that—especially in the case of Nietzsche’s versions of the question—it is conceived through an antagonism with this central epistemological problem. The problem of true knowledge, especially in post-Kantian philosophy, is predicated on the question “What can I know?” Its starting point is therefore the determination of the object of possible knowing, which usually already involves a certain digression from the original ideal (what is knowable is not the “thing-in-itself”; what is objectively knowable is necessarily related to the way in which the subject constitutes phenomenal reality). In any case, what stands at the forefront is the correlation between the object and the edifice of the subject’s perceptive and cognitive apparatus.

The question “What does it (even) mean to understand?” on the contrary, focuses on the process of understanding as such—it seeks to discern in it that basic matrix of its operation that is independent of the true/false divide; it seeks to discover what is actually taking place at the moment when we “understand.”

Nietzsche himself would say that he is attempting to explain understanding “psychologically.”

The second essential difference between the two questions is that the question “What does it (even) mean to understand?” is accompanied by an essential undertone—with a kind of “if anything at all”—which is, however, not to be necessarily seen as an expression of scepticism. Although Nietzsche stressed that scepticism is “healthier” than dogmatism, he nevertheless recognized in it a kind of flip side of idealism: scepticism still proceeds from the idealist conception of “true knowledge,” except that it denies it its aspirations.

The nuance of scepticism that accompanies Nietzsche’s posing of the question on the meaning of understanding is of a different origin: its source is his, so to speak, preliminary answer to the question of what understanding is. Namely, through his “psychological” consideration, he arrived at two conclusions: first, that the basic matrix of understanding is much simpler than we are willing to admit, and second, that, even at the level of this basic matrix, understanding as such is *indistinguishable from some inherent element of fabrication*. In other words, even if I understand “correctly,” I inevitably fabricate, because fabrication is an intrinsic component in the basic matrix of the process of understanding. The blow that Nietzsche dealt to idealism at the level of understanding is therefore conceived not through the denial of the aspiration for truth, through the denial of the possibility of true knowledge, but through a quite affirmative answer to the question “What is understanding?” which is nevertheless such as to call understanding *as such* into question.

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“Inner experience” enters our consciousness only after it has found a language the individual understands—i.e., a translation of a condition into conditions familiar to him—; “to understand” means merely: to be able to express something new in the language of something old and familiar.<sup>18</sup>

*The origin of our concept of “knowledge.”*—I take this explanation from the street; I heard someone from the common people say “he recognized me”—: at which I asked myself: what do the common people want, when they want “knowledge”? Nothing more than this: something strange is supposed to be traced to something

<sup>18</sup> Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, 266.

known. And we philosophers—have we really meant anything *more* by knowledge?<sup>19</sup>

If we look to the definitions quoted above for the ultimate answer to the questions “What is understanding?” and “What is knowledge?,” they are of course disappointing, but that is not their intent. Rather, one could say that Nietzsche is trying to capture in them that negative minimum of understanding and knowledge which, by definition, borders on nothingness. And in fact, the basic message of both definitions—their simplicity is also included in this—is precisely this: at the level of the most basic matrix, *to understand means next to nothing*; understanding is merely a translation of the new into the language of the old, of the already understood; a transcription into an old register, an adaptation.

If, for example, as a person without the slightest talent for mathematics, I have managed to understand a little about the backpropagation algorithm, this is not, of course, due to my “mathematical eyes” unexpectedly opening in my mature years, but it is purely due to the fact that, with the help of a multitude of good popular science articles, I have succeeded in bringing the idea of this algorithm within the parameters of a conceptual apparatus that is familiar to me. The example may be a bad one; there are undoubtedly forms of understanding—for example, scientific understanding inscribed in formulae, theories, and calculations—which are not simply a translation of the unknown into the language of the known. But in the “psychological” sense—that is to say, in the sense of the process that goes on in our minds when we “understand”—the definition is not inaccurate: in order to understand something new, we must in some way place that newness in the coordinates of what is already known, and in so doing we undoubtedly inflict some loss on the newness itself.

And therein lies, no doubt, the more sophisticated hidden core of Nietzsche’s definition: the process of understanding *itself causes a certain loss*—what is supposed to be its goal, the understanding of the new, will at best *return* from some journey through the past, which will leave traces of old delusions on the new, if the latter is to be understood. Understanding is a process that adapts and therefore *falsifies*; and this, of course, should not surprise us with regard to any process that has evolved as a means of maintaining fundamental errors. Ultimately,

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<sup>19</sup> Nietzsche, *Joyful Science*, 224.

we could say that understanding is the form of thinking which is *the most primordial* of them all—in no other form of thinking does the original task of the “cognitive apparatus,” falsification, adaptation to vital errors, manifest itself so markedly as in understanding. The question thus arises almost spontaneously: we are told that there is a good chance that AI will reach the stage of human understanding in some not necessarily distant future, but what *if it has already missed* that moment in its development from the outset? Shouldn’t it, if human understanding really originates in a falsification, be approaching human understanding *regressively*, like a crab? Is it not AI’s tragedy, if human understanding really counts for anything, that—even though it emerges from the pure nothing of absolute contingency—it is nonetheless born in a form *not sufficiently underdeveloped* to be able to “understand”? Understanding may not be “too late” after all, as Hinton suggests, but premature.

Nietzsche has a natural place in Heidegger’s theory of the intra-philosophical event, the theory of *Geschehnis*; he does not need to be imposed on it. In two ways. We indicated at the beginning that Nietzsche appears when Heidegger raises the problem of the unfolding of the history of Being, following his introduction to *Geschehnis*; in particular, in relation to the current historical moment, which is, according to Heidegger, unique in that there is nothing going on with Being within it. If, at the level of a *Geschehnis*, Being as such, through the counter-question to the question “Why?” reveals itself in its *essential opacity*—for the counter-question is, rather than our own thought, *the act of its essence*, the expression of the “self-concealment” of being qua being—then it can be said that this primacy of the negative is also maintained at the level of the problem of the history of Being: since our era is characterized by the complete self-concealment of Being, any intellectual apprehension of Being must be preceded by a *genuine thought-experience of its nothingness*. The name for this experience of the evaporated Being is, in Heidegger’s philosophy, Nietzsche.

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But Nietzsche is also connected to a *Geschehnis* in another way, as an almost indisputable source of inspiration. It is impossible to overlook the profound similarity with Nietzsche’s famous introduction of the problem of the *value of the will to truth*:

The will to truth that will yet seduce us to many a risk, that famous truthfulness of which all philosophers so far have spoken with deference: what questions this

will to truth has already laid before us! [. . .] That *we* for our part should also learn from this sphinx how to ask questions? *Who* is it, really, who asks questions of us here? *What* in us really wants “the truth”?—Indeed, we stopped for a long time before the question about the cause of this will—before we finally stopped completely before an even more thorough question. We asked about the *value* of this will. Suppose we want truth: why *not rather* untruth? And uncertainty? Even ignorance?—The problem of the value of truth stepped before us—or was it we who stepped before the problem? Who of us is here Oedipus? Who the sphinx? It is a rendezvous, so it seems of questions and question marks.—And can you believe it, it finally seems to us as if the problem had never even been posed before—as if it were seen, looked in the eye, *risked* by us for the first time.<sup>20</sup>

The questioning of philosophers—sceptics no less than dogmatists—has been driven for centuries by the will to truth. It is not easy to get off this train, even if we wanted to: a sceptic who fights against the pretensions of true knowledge is no less a fighter for his truth than a dogmatist.

This changes only when a new question comes before us—no doubt an expression of a particularly sharpened truthfulness—which causes the will to truth to fall into question, and with it ourselves, who, even with this new question, are still being driven by it. This is the question of the *value* of the will to truth. Against what can we measure this value? What makes this value questionable? Undoubtedly, *life* itself, which is based on principles that are opposed to truth: the will to appearance, deceit, and error.

In this, one need not necessarily see adversity to truth or its relativization; on the contrary: especially in the crucial years 1881–1882, when Nietzsche began to develop the theory of embodied errors, his thinking revolved around the very question of how to smuggle truth into a life dominated by errors; how to assert truth within our apparatus of thought, which is composed of the very traces of the vital errors of the ego, of the entity, of being, of permanence. In short, I would not say that in this measurement of the value of the will to truth alongside the “benefit for life,” one should see the primacy of life over truth, the devaluation of truth. Rather, one could say that by asking the question of the val-

<sup>20</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Beyond Good and Evil, On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), 5.

ue of the will to truth, we do indeed, as Nietzsche wrote, expose *ourselves* to a certain risk, but at the same time reintroduce truth as a philosophical problem. Truth is now no longer “merely” an ideal that shines from above, and to which we can at best put a prism that directs the light of truth into the dark corners of the world below, but an *enigma* that gives philosophers an opportunity to take it up again, perhaps even for the first time.

So, why does Nietzsche describe this line of questioning as a “meeting of questions and question marks”? Since the question of the value of truth is also undoubtedly guided by truthfulness, by the unconditional will to truth, the question is: Is it really we who have questioned the will to truth, or, on the contrary, has it been the will to truth itself that has led to both the question of truth and *the question of the philosopher*, who, for the sake of truthfulness, has found themselves challenged as to the meaningfulness of their existence? There is no doubt, therefore, that within the question of the value of truth there is at work a kind of recoil, a *Rückstoß* of the question *from its content back towards itself*, which constitutes the main formal characteristic of a *Geschehnis*.

It is in this same sense that also Nietzsche’s miniature definition of understanding, “to be able to express something new in the language of something old and familiar,” needs to be explained. It does not aim at giving a definitive answer to the question of the essence of understanding: by internally linking understanding to its “opposite,” i.e. falsification, this definition does just enough to make it possible to raise the question of the *value of understanding as such*—in other words, it creates this strange condition that makes it possible to answer the question of the meaning of understanding by saying “almost nothing.”

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However, despite this not very encouraging assessment, in this case too, and even more so than in the case of truth, raising the question of value does not necessarily mean the same as to devalue. For, in this respect, understanding is a very special concept: that which seemingly deprives it of legitimacy—its connection to the fabrication—raises it above all other forms of thought in the scale of the value of life, since, by virtue of this connection, it turns out to be a life force, a condition for the survival of the species. On the other hand, understanding, of course, cannot be excluded from the value scale of truth either, since it represents one of the few accesses to it that cannot simply be abandoned.

This is the reason why a *Geschehnis* in Nietzsche's philosophy had to take place on the level of truth and not on the level of understanding. Actually, there are two reasons:

Firstly, understanding in itself does not have a natural antithesis similar to the one Nietzsche discovered in life regarding truth. Understanding is not the antithesis of falseness, with which it is intrinsically connected, it is not opposed to life, it is not opposed to truth; it does not possess that pure, strong opposite in relation to which *its value could be measured*. Or should we say: "*it had not had such an antithesis*"?

And secondly, we cannot simply abandon understanding—that would be like stepping out of our own skin. With regard to truth, even if we are reluctant to admit it, it is possible, if nothing else, to imagine its complete extinction: it is possible to imagine, as Nietzsche wrote, that truth itself will at some point turn out to be just another of the errors that served for a time as the conditions of the survival of the species, and then themselves were outlived. On the contrary, understanding—whether real or delusional—appears to be irreplaceable, part of our constitution. Or should we say that *it has shown itself to be irreplaceable*?

*Both now exist*: understanding is now confronted with its antithesis as well as with its nullity. Intelligent systems that learn even if they do not understand; intelligent systems that, without understanding, can take on the difficult tasks of understanding; intelligent systems that, even if they know nothing, produce real knowledge—undoubtedly, understanding now has both an antithesis and a rival, which is already gradually replacing it.

It is not necessary to put forward a speculative thesis as to the fact that the value of understanding is being questioned today; it is enough to call as a witness a certain fear that is spreading. It is not insignificant that Hinton himself has recently joined the ranks of those who call for caution. Nevertheless, I am almost certain that at least part of Nietzsche would have been sympathetic to intelligent machines: he would have thought that in these inanimate entities, entirely made up of errors, life as such is returning to its essence.

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## The Con-Fusion of Artificial Intelligence<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

artificial intelligence, deep learning, conditions of AI, artificial general intelligence, antihumanism

### Abstract

The article discusses various conditions of contemporary artificial intelligence, namely deep learning mechanisms, to emphasize its limitations and argues for an antihumanistic view of contemporary technology. It starts from affirming Turing test and argues that machines can in fact be intelligent but that this intelligence must not be related to a capitalistically hyped idea of artificial general intelligence. Then it outlines various conditions on which deep learning depends in its functioning (brute computing power, capitalist datafication, the world of contingency). These conditions show an epistemological schism in the field of artificial intelligence (between symbolic AI and connectionism) that could be overcome by getting rid of the idea of artificial general intelligence and the competitive relation between humans and machines.

## Zmeda pogojev umetne inteligence

### Ključne besede

umetna inteligenca, globoko učenje, pogoji UI, splošna umetna inteligenca, antihumanizem

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## Povzetek

Članek obravnava različne pogoje sodobne umetne inteligence, pri čemer se osredotoča predvsem na globoko učenje. Omejitve umetne inteligence izpostavlja z zagovarjanjem antihumanističnega pogleda na sodobno tehnologijo. Začne z afirmiranjem relevantnosti Turingovega testa in z njegovo pomočjo zagovarja trditev, da so stroji lahko inteligentni, vendar da ta vrsta inteligence ne sme biti povezana s kapitalistično navdahnjeno idejo splošne umetne inteligence (t.i. artificial general intelligence). V nadaljevanju oriše različne pogoje funkcioniranja mehanizmov globokega učenja (surova moč komputacije, kapitalistično upodatkovljenje, svet kontingence). Ti pogoji razkrijejo epistemološko shizmo znotraj področja umetne inteligence (simbolna UI in konekcionizem), ki jo lahko presežemo samo, če se znebimo ideje splošne umetne inteligence in tekmovalnega razmerja med človekom in strojem.



In a way, it is quite simple. If a machine—or anything else for that matter—can imitate intelligent acts, and we, intelligent beings who interact with it, cannot tell if we are interacting with a human being or a machine, we have to affirm that our interlocutor cannot be unintelligent. It is hard to prove intelligence, but it is infinitely easier to demonstrate its possibility. If this artificial entity can imitate intelligence and fool a naturally intelligent being as to its artificiality, then this being has no choice but to affirm the possibility that the fooling entity is also intelligent. At least this is how a popularized version of the Turing test goes.<sup>2</sup>

We might try to complicate it and savvily shift the attention to the human side of the test and object that it presupposes that the human being is intelligent and claim that he is not as intelligent as he thinks he is. That he is himself actually more of a machine playing the game of “as if,” imitating himself as a wannabe intelligent being in the act of judging others (un)intelligent. That he is a Pascalian

<sup>2</sup> In the original version of the imitation game, as Turing calls it, there are two imitators, one is a machine and the other a human being. The latter can even try to help the interlocutor, while the former has to react in an unartificial manner. If the interlocutor cannot tell who is a human and who a machine, then the machine passes the test. Nonetheless Turing himself mentions a variety of the game that is the same as our version. See Alan Turing, “Computer Machinery and Intelligence,” in *The Essential Turing: Seminal Writings in Computing, Logic, Philosophy, Artificial Intelligence, and Artificial Life; Plus The Secrets of Enigma*, ed. Jack Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 452.

automaton that made himself practice acts of judging intellect until—in some sort of sci-fi scenario of Althusserian interpellation—he himself started to believe in his own intelligence. That he is only a machine, but with a God complex. If we ascribe to an antihumanist position, this might be the right thesis. But this kind of approach would be a reactionary antihumanism that displaces the problem of artificial intelligence, too busy disgracing the human to even consider the potential intelligence of the machine. We can, of course, legitimately pose different problems from different theoretical positions, but if we consider artificial intelligence as artificial intelligence, then the right problem is only one. Its problem is not the human and not intelligence, but artificiality: not what intelligence is, but how to build it. Not even if we can build it, but how to do so.

We now might want to—in a specifically philosophically arrogant way—critique its unthought presuppositions, namely its idea of intelligence. We would not get far, because we would immediately see that the field of artificial intelligence (AI)<sup>3</sup> is full of reflections on intelligence in trying to define its various characteristics (“What is a rational agent?”; “What are its subfields?”; etc.), that it is full of interdisciplinary attempts at exploring key cognitive mechanisms from different perspectives and so on.<sup>4</sup> The field of AI is in fact orientated towards building an intelligent entity, but that does not mean that it just presupposes a certain notion of intelligence without any analysis, that it neglects different aspects of intelligence. Even if it is practically oriented, it is by no means a naive science. It is even alive, a living science, incorporating its critiques and developing through

<sup>3</sup> We will use the shorter version (AI) for the field of computer science and the longer version (artificial intelligence) for the entities that they build.

<sup>4</sup> On this we have to disagree with Franchi and Güzeldere, who criticize the lack of an interdisciplinary approach in the field of AI. They confuse arrogance for hermeticism (and in this aspect, cyberneticians were no better, contrary to what Franchi and Güzeldere claim). Computer scientists might be antimetaphysic positivists, who think that mathematics and quantification are the only way to formalize a field of knowledge, as Phillip Agre (himself a former computer scientist) explains it, but even so they are themselves (at least nowadays) fully engaged in studying philosophy, cognitive psychology, physiology, and brain neurology, even interested in sociological and ethological themes, etc. Regarding the former, see Stefano Franchi and Güven Güzeldere, “Machinations of the Mind: Cybernetics and Artificial Intelligence from Automata to Cyborgs,” in *Mechanical Bodies, Computational Minds: Artificial Intelligence from Automata to Cyborgs*, ed. Stefano Franchi and Güven Güzeldere (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 15–149; regarding the latter, see Philip Agre, “The Soul Gained and Lost: Artificial Intelligence as a Philosophical Project,” in Franchi and Güzeldere, *Mechanical Bodies*, 153–73.

them. Computer scientists who are designing artificial intelligence are very much aware of its shortcomings and of the critiques that are being addressed to them. We probably would not be very far off if we imagined Rodney Brooks, the famous robotics engineer, as a reader of Jean-Pierre Dupuy and his classic study *On the Origins of Cognitive Science* (subtitled *The Mechanization of the Mind*), trying to overcome the disembodiment issue and embody mechanisms of artificial intelligence so that there might somehow, as some would claim, emerge a lived experience and with it a truly purposive self-organized artificial entity, this ultimate cybernetic dream.

It is of no use to judge these attempts as possible or impossible. The usual objections that artificial intelligence does not understand anything and just follows rules, that it is disembodied and has no lived experience, that it has no common sense, etc., in one word, that it is not humanly intelligent and that it never will be, all have a modern humanist basis. Humanists, too busy protecting the human to even consider that the machine might have its own specific intelligence. This story of humanist attacks on AI reads as a constant downplaying of the latter's achievements. But it is getting harder and harder to downplay or ignore the achievements and capabilities of contemporary technology, which are forcing humanists to endlessly "update" (practical examples in) their critiques.

Today it is in no way naive to think that an intelligent machine could be built or even that it has already been built: after Deep Blue beat grandmaster Garry Kasparov in a chess match in 1997, after Watson won *Jeopardy!* in 2011, after AlphaGo beat the Go champion Lee Sedol in 2016 and was itself beaten a year later by its self-taught successor AlphaGo Zero (with a score of 100–0), after the deep-learning boom starting with AlexNet winning the ImageNet competition in 2012 and the subsequent emergence of generative AI and the ChatGPT explosion in 2022, which this time shook the whole world, renewing debates about so-called artificial general intelligence or AGI—artificial intelligence that would reach the level of human cognition.<sup>5</sup> Man-made machines have beaten and surpassed humans in almost every game that had an aura of that kind of intelligence that is accessible only to human geniuses—the now stolen crowning jewels of

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<sup>5</sup> Regarding the magnitude of the impact of ChatGPT in trends of technological developments and economical investments, see Eliza Strickland, "15 Graphs That Explain the State of AI in 2024," *IEEE Spectrum*, April 15, 2024, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/ai-index-2024>.

human intelligence. From AGI to technological singularity,<sup>6</sup> the beginning of the 21st century, with its unforeseen technological breakthroughs, not only revived the old dreams of (let us say with a bit of spiteful provocation) “more-than-human” intelligence, but even repainted the picture (if you are a fan of Dall-E) or rewrote the narrative (if you are a fan of ChatGPT) of what an infallible human or even God-like intelligence would look like and how it would function, making it increasingly more tangible.

So, for a second, let us hold off on the usual humanistic objections; let us nonetheless be antihumanist on this point—but let us also put on hold the savvy displacement and stick to machines. This does not mean that we have to outright reject humanist critiques, which are by themselves actually quite legitimate. What this does mean is that we have to suspend them at this point and change our theoretical position and with it the problematic so that the correct question that pertains to it could be posed: not to pose the question of whether a machine is intelligent, not even to pose the question of whether a human being is intelligent, but rather to posit that if a human as an intelligent being is itself some sort of a machine, then a machine might as well be intelligent in its own (artificial) way.

Humans as some sort of machine? Yes, some sort; for we are not claiming that a human being is an information-processing machine, as the vulgate of cognitive scientists goes. What we are claiming is that a human being is itself a machine in the sense of an automaton, that he is not a creature capable of fully-transparent self-consciousness and is in fact governed by and is the effect of automatic processes that he himself cannot control. Not every automation implies digitalization, we have to be wary of that.<sup>7</sup> So, to elaborate our thesis differently, again and

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<sup>6</sup> Technological singularity is a point where artificial intelligence becomes capable of improving itself and “takes off” on its own, leaving humans behind in the process of the development of intelligence. Or in the words of its most notorious proponent, Ray Kurzweil: “There are actually two schools of thought on the singularity: there’s a hard take off school and a soft take off school. I’m actually in the soft take off school that says we will continue to progress exponentially, which is daunting enough. The idea of an intelligence explosion is that there is a magic moment where a computer can access its own design and modify it and create a smarter version of itself, and that it keeps doing that in a very fast iterative loop and just explodes in its intelligence.” Ray Kurzweil, interview by Martin Ford, in *Architects of Intelligence: The Truth about AI from the People Building It* (Birmingham: Packt, 2018), 238.

<sup>7</sup> We have to have in mind that automation does not necessarily mean digitalization and with it information-processing for the following reason: Jean-Pierre Dupuy, in his great

for the final time: if a human being is itself some sort of machine, then instead of claiming that intelligence is exclusively allocated, we have to claim that it is inclusively dispersed, in some way present also in contemporary machines, which are just built differently—and this would define the specificity of its intelligence.

Let us be bluntly direct: we are not humanistic technophobes; we suppose that humanity has in fact succeeded in building some sort of intelligence. But this does not amount to advocating AGI. We have to insist on that, because we are also not antihumanistic (procapitalist) technophiles.<sup>8</sup> The less savvy antihumanists also love to disgrace the human, but by emphasizing the superior functioning of machine intelligence. That it is just like human intelligence but infinitely better (faster is what this really means). But AGI has turned into a capitalist trap: Is not the desired “generality” of artificial intelligence more than anything the flexible universality of an automated tool, useful for anyone and applicable to everything and at any time and any place, the ultimate capitalist product capable of satisfying the needs of each and every singular consumer? Instead of advocating AGI, we want to open up the possibility for the specificity of artificial intelligence. That artificial intelligence is specific means precisely that it is different than human intelligence and as such does not—or that at least “by itself” would not—necessarily strive towards human intelligence’s “generality” and to become superhuman.

The Turing test would most definitely validate our thesis, precisely because of its simplicity. Today, most computer scientist do reject the Turing test, but not because it is wrong, rather they reject it because it was confirmed and became useless to them—too broad for a conceptual differentiation of intelligence and

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study *On the Origins of Cognitive Science: The Mechanization of the Mind* (trans. D. B. Debevoise [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009]), accuses some antihumanist structuralists (Lacan, Althusser), on which we are relying here, of adopting cybernetic metaphors of mechanization when in fact they merely discussed the human as an automaton in the sense that he is not—if, for the sake of the comparison, we use cybernetic terminology—self-regulated by his fully-transparent consciousness. This difference is precisely why today, pace Dupuy, an antihumanist (structuralist) approach might prove far more fruitful than the old phenomenological or humanist approach that is stuck on the critique of the lack of meaning and sense due to the disembodiment of the digital or virtual world of artificial intelligence.

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is hard to be an antihumanist today. We constantly hear Althusser’s voice asking: *Est-il simple d’être antihumaniste en philosophie (de technologie)?*

too narrow for practical experimentation.<sup>9</sup> But in its outdated provocativeness it is just simple enough for a correct theoretical positioning in our contemporary conjuncture. The Turing test today falls nicely in between technophilia and technophobia, demonstrating the possibility of a different kind of intelligence without attaching it to human “general” intelligence.

We will therefore admit the success of contemporary technological development and we will suppose (with Turing) that engineers have in fact built some sort of intelligence; but we will do that exactly to avoid the hype around the latest advancements with the deep learning “revolution” that media sensationalism and the capitalist drive for financial investment and future profits produced. Because we will not dwell on the AGI dilemma, which is the name of this hype game. As we have said, the correct problem is not intelligence but artificiality. But even this would be too big of an issue for this occasion; our attempt is actually much humbler. We will not ask what exactly this specific intelligence of machines is, in what way artificial intelligence as intelligence is specific; instead of defining machine intelligence in its difference to human intelligence, we will merely try to outline its different sources to see what it is made of, we will try to present various conditions that enabled this artificiality to be built in order to open up the possibility of its specificity.

And here, on the side of artificiality, the story gets complicated, even to the point of total confusion. Here the practical success of AI itself proves to be theoretically problematic, infusing confusion into its conceptual core. The deep learning hype is in fact blowing up promises and making speculations that have no substantial basis.<sup>10</sup> Deep learning methods have proved to be so powerful that it has be-

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Yann LeCun, one of the key architects of the deep learning “revolution,” states the following: “The Turing test is not actually an interesting test. In fact, I don’t think a lot of people in the AI field at the moment consider the Turing test to be a good test. It’s too easy to trick it, and to some extent, the Turing test has already been and gone. [ . . . ] There is a whole component of intelligence that has nothing to do with language, and we are ignoring this if we reduce AI to just satisfying the Turing test.” Yann LeCun, interview by Martin Ford, in *Architects of Intelligence*, 129.

<sup>10</sup> Stuart Russell, one of the authors of the standard textbook on artificial intelligence, for example, claims: “What I see in a lot of the discussions and presentations from people talking about this is that there’s probably an over-estimate of what current AI technologies are able to do and also, the difficulty of integrating what we know how to do into the existing extremely complex functionality of corporations and governments, and so on.” Stuart

come hard to define their limits, especially since the hype is not produced by the enthusiasm of engineers, who have, at least some of them, outlived one or even more of the so-called AI winters, but mostly by the capitalist overflow of investment in future applications turned consumer-oriented personalized assistants.

Let us take, for example, Gary Marcus, a cognitive scientist and a hard-line critic of the deep learning “revolution.” In his article *Deep Learning: A Critical Appraisal* from 2018, just a couple of years before ChatGPT entered the public stage, he mentions that “chatbots in general have not lived up to the hype they received a couple years ago.”<sup>11</sup> This statement of course did not age well. It probably comes as no surprise that he later doubled-down on his critique when considering ChatGPT. Even if his arguments are sound, they are nonetheless pretty much one-sided (for example, considering so-called hallucinations as a deadly chatbot sin), which is probably also the reason why he gets such harsh treatment from the deep learning architects, such as from its “godfather” Geoffrey Hinton. The lesson here is not about who is right and who is wrong, nor which side will prevail; the lesson is that, despite sound theoretical criticism, practical success nonetheless arrives and this makes it increasingly tougher to draw the theoretical limits of deep learning and with it the demarcation lines that define the field of AI.

What, therefore, is at stake here is the field of AI itself and what is causing this problem is the obscured difference between deep learning and artificial intelligence as such. Geoffrey Hinton does not hide his convictions that the future of artificial intelligence is deep learning with its neural nets, and that conventional or symbolic artificial intelligence with its knowledge representation and problem-solving mechanisms is obsolete, because it is “just wrong,” and that the idea of hybrid systems which would combine deep learning and neural nets with the symbolic processing of conventional artificial intelligence is “just an attempt to hang on to the view they already have, without really comprehending that they’re being swept away.”<sup>12</sup> Deep learning will take over the whole field of AI; it will become artificial intelligence itself, this is Hinton’s bet.

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Russell, interview by Martin Ford, in *Architects of Intelligence*, 55. Some even fear that the hype will bring about another so-called AI winter. See Gary Marcus, “Deep Learning: A Critical Appraisal,” *Arxiv* (January 2018), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1801.00631>.

<sup>11</sup> Marcus, 17.

<sup>12</sup> See Geoffrey Hinton, interview by Martin Ford, in *Architects of Intelligence*, 78, 85.



There is another reason for this confusion of AI. It is completely practical, namely, that machine learning and deep learning mechanisms have now become integrated into most basic computer programs; they are present almost everywhere and we probably use them daily even if we do not realize it. A lot of programs and applications that we use and that do not seem to learn or even be intelligent in their most basic functions in fact do include artificial intelligence or even machine learning (Microsoft Word, for example, which I am using now, is helping me with my phrasing; or Google Translate, which is helping me with my poor English vocabulary), as these mechanisms were progressively built in. This is also the reason why computer scientists are constantly emphasizing (in their interviews) the difference between deep learning, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, that not everything is deep learning, that deep learning is a specific kind of machine learning, which is a specific kind of artificial intelligence, besides the more classical symbolic mechanisms such as general-purpose search mechanisms, expert systems (based on a more domain-specific knowledge), probabilistic reasoning, etc.<sup>13</sup>

What this gradual and almost imperceptible integration of deep learning mechanisms into our technologically mediated lives and the instantly explosive success of their concepts, reshuffling the field of their origin, have resulted in is the eclipsing of their conditions. It is well known that deep learning mechanisms rely on the brute force of today's computing power. But deep learning itself is not a new technology; some of its core mechanisms can be traced back to the 80s when different computer scientists developed the idea of a backpropagation algorithm in relation to neural nets, among them Geoffrey Hinton.<sup>14</sup> And with gradual improvements in its architecture, such as Yann LeCun's convolutional neural network in the mid-90s (which was later used in the ImageNet competition, where deep learning first proved to be by far the superior AI tool), and the constant adding of extra neural layers—deep learning is deep precisely and only in the sense that it uses plural hidden layers of neurons between the input and

<sup>13</sup> Here, we are relying on Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig, *Artificial Intelligence: A Modern Approach*, 4th ed. (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2022).

<sup>14</sup> Even though he is sometimes credited with the invention of the backpropagation algorithm, he himself emphasizes that this is false. There were some unrelated attempts at defining this algorithm in 70s and 80s, but its main figure is David Rumelhart. Hinton credits himself with the invention of learning distributed representations via a backpropagation algorithm. See Geoffrey Hinton, interview, 73–75.

the output layers—the engineering framework of contemporary deep learning was built.<sup>15</sup> But it became efficiently functional and superior (to other AI tools) only when computing power improved enough to be capable of calculating the value of all the millions of its parameters and adjusting all the weights of the neural connections through backpropagation.

This brute force of computing power is essential for this mechanism to self-adjust, to effectively learn. As Thompson, Greenewald, Lee, and Manso explain: “Fortunately for such artificial neural networks [. . .] decades of Moore’s law [i.e. that the number of transistors in an integrated circuit doubles about every two years] and other improvements in computer hardware yielded a roughly 10-million-fold increase in the number of computations that a computer could do in a second. So when researchers returned to deep learning in the late 2000s, they wielded tools equal to the challenge.”<sup>16</sup> So, on one hand, deep learning is conditioned by the increase in computing power, which is approaching a limit because there is less and less physical space for the miniaturization of the transistors that are powering computers;<sup>17</sup> and on the other, there are problematic material effects and even ecological consequences of this technological improvement which are attracting ever increasing attention from critics.<sup>18</sup> The forgotten materiality is slowly turning its back on deep learning and contemporary technology

<sup>15</sup> See Charles C. Tappert, “Who Is the Father of Deep Learning?,” *International Conference on Computational Science and Computational Intelligence (CSCI)* (2019): 343–48, <https://doi.org/10.1109/CSCI49370.2019.00067>.

<sup>16</sup> See Neil C. Thompson et al., “Deep Learning’s Diminishing Returns,” *IEEE Spectrum*, September 24, 2021, <https://spectrum.ieee.org/deep-learning-computational-cost>. For a bit more technical discussion, see Neil C. Thompson et al., “The Computational Limits of Deep Learning,” *Arxiv* (July 2022), <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2007.05558>.

<sup>17</sup> They call it the end of Moore’s law. Some are here wagering on the future role of quantum computing, 3D stacking, etc.; but because of the uncertainty of these nascent technologies, others are emphasizing that instead of focusing on this approach “from the Bottom,” we should focus on approaches “from the Top,” such as the performance-engineering of software, the development of algorithms, and hardware streamlining—but then again the gains from these approaches would be “opportunistic, uneven, sporadic, and subject to diminishing returns.” See Charles Leiserson et al., “There’s Plenty of Room at the Top: What Will Drive Computer Performance After Moore’s Law?,” *Science* 368, no. 6495 (June 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aam9744>.

<sup>18</sup> “Extrapolating the gains of recent years might suggest that by 2025 the error level in the best deep-learning systems designed for recognizing objects in the ImageNet data set should be reduced to just 5 percent [. . .]. But the computing resources and energy required to train such a future system would be enormous, leading to the emission of as much car-

as such, revealing its problematic conditions, which were eclipsed by the engineering success and capitalistic technophilic dreams of the emergence of AGI.

There is another condition of deep learning mechanisms which is also pretty much known. Deep learning mechanisms would not learn much if there was nothing to learn from—all the endless data that is today available, mainly due to the internet. There are even disputes about large language models, such as ChatGPT, that have been trained on the “general intellect” of the internet—because these models are also shaped by the free labour of millions and millions of individuals—which are being used and exploited for capitalistic profits. It would be hard to deny that this exploitation is unjust; but instead of focusing on (problematic) effects, we have to, in our case at least, emphasize the conditions of its functioning. What is most important for us here is the sheer size of the data that is necessary to train deep learning mechanisms so that they become at least minimally efficient. There is no deep learning without big data, which means that it requires not only a huge amount of data but also diverse data so that datasets are not biased.<sup>19</sup> The greater the size and the greater the variety, the better the machine learning mechanism that was trained on them functions.

This practically begs for a massive data extraction apparatus, even greater than the one of the State established in the middle of the nineteenth century with the development of modern state institutions such as statistical bureaus. After the “avalanche of printed numbers,” as the great historian of statistics Ian Hacking calls it,<sup>20</sup> came total “datafication,” as Couldry and Mejias call it—data extraction became so widespread in the twenty-first century, they claim, that social relations themselves can now be defined as “data relations.”<sup>21</sup> The reason for

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bon dioxide as New York City generates in one month.” Thompson et al., “Deep Learning’s Diminishing Returns.”

<sup>19</sup> As Barbara Grosz explains: “The computer system can ‘read all the papers’ (more than a person could) and do certain kinds of information retrieval from them and extract results, and then do statistical analyses. But if most of the papers are on scientific work that was done only on male mice, or only on male humans, then the conclusions the system is coming to are limited.” Barbara Grosz, interview by Martin Ford, in *Architects of Intelligence*, 346.

<sup>20</sup> See Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 27–35.

<sup>21</sup> See Nick Couldry and Ulises Mejias, *The Costs of Connection: How Data is Colonising Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019).

this is the change in the nature of processing and analysing data. As Couldry and Mejias explain: “Whereas the earlier social knowledge was built from specific calculations performed on so-called structured data (for example, entries in statistical tables and databases), today’s social knowledge can be built from unstructured data, drawn directly from the traces left in the flow of everyday life.”<sup>22</sup> The more machine learning mechanisms are integrated directly into life, or more precisely, directly into unstructured data traces of the flow of everyday life, the more (patterns) they can figure out, the more “knowledge” they can produce. Because they are capable of penetrating directly into unstructured data and predict their patterns without our “meddling,” there are no more limits to data extraction, every single datum might prove useful for machine learning algorithms to find new patterns, to produce new “knowledge” (and to use it for competitive advantage and future profits).

Computer scientists might have succumbed to the naturalization of “data relations”; they might think that data just happens to be here, available to them, but what made it so are two centuries of the development of data extraction apparatuses, starting with the modern State and ending in contemporary platform capitalism. But let us not get it the other way around: first the State and then capitalism developed this apparatus because of their own reasons; the technology of machine learning (and deep learning) did not invent it, it merely fell back on this apparatus as its contingent condition and then started to merge with it and enhance it, to fuel and transform it to the point of almost completely integrating data extraction with the flow of life itself. The political (State control, political manipulation, etc.), legal (the issue of unknown consent, copyright issues, etc.), and ethical (the automatic incorporation of racial and other social prejudices, etc.) problematic effects are well known, but what we have to emphasize here is the intertwinement of the capitalist datafication and technology of deep learning, where the latter at a certain point accepted the former as its own contingent condition for development.

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Strongly connected to this is another condition of deep learning mechanisms. We have already mentioned an important difference within AI: between deep learning with its neural nets or connectionism, as it was historically called, and symbolic or conventional AI or even Good Old-Fashioned AI (GOF AI), as it is

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<sup>22</sup> Couldry and Mejias, 125.

sometimes called. Some computer engineers today consider this difference to be a technical difference of approach: between bottom-up and top-down. Connectionism starts building intelligence from lower levels of cognition (such as perception and learning), hoping that the highest level (logical reasoning) will emerge from it, while symbolic AI starts from the highest level of cognition in the conviction that the lower levels are inessential and can be added or integrated later. This difference might be only technical if we aim to build a hybrid system (which is now, for some, the future of AI), but epistemologically this difference is not a mere difference, it is a schism (as we have seen with Hinton's vision of the future of AI). This is the schism of different epistemologies or two different logics. As Matteo Pasquinelli succinctly explains, symbolic AI "professes that intelligence is a representation of the world (knowing-that) which can be formalized into propositions and, therefore, mechanized following deductive logic," connectionism, on the other hand, "argues that intelligence is experience of the world (knowing-how) which can be implemented into approximate models constructed according to inductive logic."<sup>23</sup>

The paradigmatic case for symbolic AI is the game of chess.<sup>24</sup> It is a perfect game for symbolic AI due to its closed environment, clear goal, and strictly defined rules. It is perfect for rule-based symbol manipulation. The only real issue here is how to find the best way towards the end goal using predetermined rules and knowledge. This is what is basically called problem-solving through search mechanisms: "Choosing which sequence of actions to adopt was a matter of search."<sup>25</sup> Of course, there are certain problems such as combinatorial explosion, but it could be and in fact is side-stepped by not searching for the best sequence of action or the direct final solution, but rather for a "good enough" choice.<sup>26</sup> The computer uses its predetermined knowledge to scan and evaluate the current state of affairs (the position of the chess figures on the board in our

<sup>23</sup> See Matteo Pasquinelli, *The Eye of the Master: A Social History of Artificial Intelligence* (London: Verso, 2023), 21–22.

<sup>24</sup> See Franchi and Güzeldere, "Machinations of the Mind," 46–56.

<sup>25</sup> Agre, "Soul Gained and Lost," 161.

<sup>26</sup> "The [search] tree can be created one step (one node) at the time by the recursive application of the rules of the game. [. . .] The complete tree is of course impossible to create, but the search procedure does not have to rely on a complete tree if it settles for less-than-optimal results. It may create just a few positions per turn, deciding to explore only one or two moves beyond the current one." Franchi and Güzeldere, "Machinations of the Mind," 52.

case) and calculates the best possible or the “good enough” move by exploring different possible outcomes considering “only” a couple moves in advance. “Only” in the sense that even in a game such as chess, with its strictly determined and rather small environment, a computer cannot calculate all the possible variations because there are too many of them;<sup>27</sup> but this “only” is still good enough to beat any human.

There is nothing left to chance in symbolic AI, everything happens according to rules and deductive reasoning—the reasoning that does not take any risk.<sup>28</sup> “Chess is the intellectual game par excellence [ . . . ]; without a chance device to obscure the contest, it pits two intellects against each other in a situation so complex that neither can hope to understand it completely, but sufficiently amenable to analysis that each can hope to outthink his opponent [ . . . ],” as Allen Newell and Herbert Simon, who advanced and determined the development of (symbolic) AI for decades, somewhat poetically put it.<sup>29</sup> Without a chance device, they say. And for a good reason. Every search mechanism in symbolic AI has to somehow tame the complexity of the game. Any unforeseen event that was not included in the *a priori* rules and knowledge would “obscure” the game, effectively ending it, exploding the machine. And not only adding something new and leading it towards combinatorial explosion, even complicating the existing order a little bit by infusing ambiguity in it, would ruin it because

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<sup>27</sup> As Claude Shannon, who was the first to focus on the problem-solving aspect of a chess game, explains it with basic math: “In a typical chess position there will be about 32 possible moves with 32 possible replies—already this creates 1024 possibilities. Most chess games last 40 moves or more for each side. So the total number of possible variations in an average game is about  $10^{120}$ . A machine calculating one variation each millionth of a second would require over  $10^{95}$  years to decide on its first move!” Claude Shannon, “A Chess-Playing Machine,” *Scientific American* 182 (February 1950): 48–51, quoted in Franchi and Güzeldere, 51.

<sup>28</sup> As Ian Hacking defines inductive logic in difference to deductive logic: “Valid arguments are risk-free. Inductive logic studies risky arguments. A risky argument can be a very good one, and yet its conclusion can be false, even when the premises are true.” Ian Hacking, *An Introduction to Probability and Inductive Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11.

<sup>29</sup> Allen Newell, J. C. Shaw, and Herbert Simon, “Chess-Playing Programs and the Problem of Complexity,” *IBM Journal of Research and Development* 2 (October 1958): 320–35, quoted in Franchi and Güzeldere, “Machinations of the Mind,” 54.

it requires a “deterministic environment” and an unambiguously defined “state space,” as computer scientists would say.<sup>30</sup>

Deep learning, with its neural nets, functions in a completely different way. Deep learning has no problem with chances and taking risks, because it deals with probabilities and uses inductive logic. A deep learning mechanism does not search for the best or good enough choice on the basis of its predetermined knowledge; it learns to predict its supposed outcome; it makes a statistical evaluation of the output. In a sentence, for example, a deep learning mechanism predicts the next word on the basis of what it has learned during its training; it does not determine it on the basis of a predetermined rule of syntax (like noun → verb). That is why training the algorithm is so important for deep learning—as well as all the (various) data that it is trained on. It is trained on such so that it can learn to make out patterns which have different probabilities as outputs. If you show a deep learning mechanism a picture of a cat, it will infer from its previous “experiences” the probability that it is a cat (and the probability that it is a dog, for example); it will take its chances and try to guess, to put it a bit simplistically.

While symbolic AI focused on the game of chess, connectionism focused on visual pattern recognition and speech recognition (and later expanded to the field that was “reserved” for symbolic AI, namely intellectual games such as chess and go). It would be hard not to see that these two “approaches” are in fact in opposition: the one counts on ahistorical logical rules, the other bets on changing them through learning; the one does not take any chances, the other operates through them; the one starts with the core of human rationality, the other with lower-level cognitive mechanisms; the one is fascinated with developed minds, the other with the learning of children, etc. These two approaches technically might come together, but “ideologically” they are miles apart—as far apart as necessity and contingency are. To put it a bit more philosophically, they are supported by two radically different ontologies, one betting on order, the other on chaos. The more the world is complex and unpredictable, the more connectionism thrives and calculates the contingencies into probabilities and the more symbolic AI loses its necessitarian grounds. Where the one gains a world, the other loses one. It then goes hand in hand that when the world seems

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<sup>30</sup> See Russell and Norvig, *Artificial Intelligence*, 63, 83.

more complex, more absorbed into contingency, the more worldly connectionism seems. And the world—both culture and nature—in the last couple of decades has definitely seemed increasingly complex and contingent.

We can see this schism between symbolic AI and connectionism even more clearly in the history of AI. The problem of the limits of deep learning, this present battle internal to the field of AI, does not concern only its future, but it is also affecting its past. Its past is constantly being rewritten, first by the then victorious symbolic AI and then by the now victorious connectionism.

The field of AI was, as is now widely agreed, established with the Dartmouth Conference (The Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence) in 1956. Its initiators were John McCarthy and Claude Shannon. But the main actor was in fact John McCarthy, who was a bit disappointed with their shared project of editing *Automata Studies* and for that reason advanced the idea of a conference.<sup>31</sup> This is an important fact because Shannon was already by then a hugely influential intellectual figure (as “the father” of information theory) and was an active member of cybernetic conferences, which ended a few years before, and was also in touch with Alan Turing and the British Ratio Club. We could perhaps say that he was the connecting point for all major intellectual figures, groups, or movements that were dealing with machine intelligence. On the other hand, the young John McCarthy was a lot more hostile towards cyberneticians and a lot more fascinated by the work of Allen Newell and Herbert Simon. This fact was reflected in the guests and consequently the topics of the conference. And in the name of the field that is now known as artificial intelligence, which he coined: “As for myself, one of the reasons for inventing the term ‘artificial intelligence’ was to escape association with ‘cybernetics.’ Its association with analogue feedback seemed misguided, and I wished to avoid having either to accept [. . .] Wiener as a guru or having to argue with him.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See Ronald R. Kline, “Cybernetics, Automata Studies, and the Dartmouth Conference on Artificial Intelligence,” *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing* 33, no. 4 (October–December 2011): 5–16, <https://doi.org/10.1109/mahc.2010.44>.

<sup>32</sup> John McCarthy, review of *The Question of Artificial Intelligence: Philosophical and Sociological Perspectives*, ed. Brian P. Bloomfield, *Annals of the History of Computing* 10, no. 3 (July–September 1988): 227, quoted in Kline, 13.



If we could say that Shannon was the connecting point, then McCarthy was most certainly the disconnecting point. He did not have an issue only with Norbert Wiener and his notoriety, but what was really bugging him was the basic idea of cyberneticians, namely the circular causality of the feedback mechanism (or adaptive self-regulation) and their obsession with electronic circuitry and mechanization—he believed that this was a dead end.<sup>33</sup> He dismissed the idea of brain modelling; he did not consider that neural nets as electronic circuits and the idea that they could have the ability to learn and adapt was the future of AI—or that such even could be a part of it. His sole focus was on symbolic AI, and his main partners were Newell and Simon. So, when he proposed a new name, i.e. “artificial intelligence,” he effectively tried to banish cybernetics from the field of studying and building machine intelligence. The story repeated itself in the late 60s when Marvin Minsky (one of the guests at the Dartmouth Conference) and Seymour Papert attacked the work of Frank Rosenblatt, the main figure of connectionism (as the successor of cybernetics), who built the first neural network mechanism called Perceptron, and with this (and also due to other factors) buried connectionism until its small revival in the 80s, with its full resurrection and eventual success occurring in the last decade.

And today, after this “final” success of deep learning methods and the connectionist side, researchers are trying to figure out who the “father” of deep learning is. The answer is usually Frank Rosenblatt with his Perceptron.<sup>34</sup> This was the first neural network mechanism capable of learning (by adjusting the weights of connection between neural nodes), but it had only one layer of neurons between the input and the output layers, so its learning was not deep in this sense. This was also the issue that Minsky and Papert brought up as its impossible limit, but this is precisely the issue that was resolved in the 80s and in the 90s with the backpropagation algorithm and convolutional neural nets, etc. Conceptually, connectionism was not wrong; what seemed impossible were in fact just “technicalities,” which were solved by technological development (as we have seen). That is why today researchers are “excavating” Frank Rosenblatt and naming him the father of deep learning. Some go even further and say that the “emergence of neural networks” is “a key idea for AI” because the first to propose the idea that biological neurons could function the same way as elec-

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<sup>33</sup> Kline, 7–8.

<sup>34</sup> See Tappert, “Who is the Father of Deep Learning?”

tronic circuits (this means the Boolean logic of AND, OR, and NOT) were Warren McCulloch and Walter Pitts.<sup>35</sup> So McCulloch and Pitts, the two main figures of the cybernetic Macy conferences, should then be seen as the beginning of AI—even the standard textbook on AI confirms this.<sup>36</sup>

We have no intention to raise issue with this, but we would like to emphasize how the history of AI changed: first, the field of AI was established by denegating cybernetics; with the development of symbolic AI came the assertion of its dominance and further denegation, this time of connectionism as the successor to cybernetics; and then after deep learning won the engineering battle, Frank Rosenblatt became one of the key figures of AI and cybernetics became its origin. A total reversal. We could say that there are always various opinions as to what the historical influences and predecessors are, and this is of course true; we could even say that there are always different (maybe even conflicting) interpretations within a theoretical field, but this story of the origins and conditions of AI shows a far deeper confusion: its own formal structures are shaken up; the conceptual field itself is being torn apart.

We are, of course, in no position to judge and predict the future of AI; that is not our aim. We are only attempting to show the conceptual confusion that is currently determining the field of AI and to outline the con-fusion of the various conditions and limits of its most developed and hyped area—deep learning. Its mechanisms were constructed from various “parts”; some were foreign in their nature and domesticated for a heavy price (capitalistic datafication and the dreams of AGI), some pertain to its necessary but forgotten physical substrate, which now calls for our attention (the material and environmental limits), and some reveal the contingency of its worldly context (the world of necessity versus the world of contingency). This is the artificiality of today’s AI, with deep learning in its foreground. With it coming to the foreground, it eclipsed its conditions and limitations and succumbed to the capitalist hype and convinced

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<sup>35</sup> Pasquinelli, *Eye of the Master*, 128. Let us, just for the sake of intrigue, mention that in opposition to this discrete logic of neuronal functioning the renowned Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler proposed a continuous logic. See Steve J. Heims, *The Cybernetics Group 1946–1953: Constructing a Social Science for Postwar America* (Boston: MIT Press, 1991), 239.

<sup>36</sup> “The first work that is now generally considered as AI was done by Warren McCulloch and Walter Pitts (1943).” Russel and Norvig, *Artificial Intelligence*, 35.

itself that it is the sole future of AI as the best potential candidate for AGI. Even worse, it became intertwined with it; even if capitalism did not invent it, it did develop it with all the possible data and infused it with the desire for AGI. But on the other hand, it has pushed it to its materialistic limits and has shown its contingent worldly context, which might prove to be in fact guidelines for the development of the AI field itself. In any case, one thing is certain: it will have to get rid of the desire for AGI, which is fuelling the combativeness of the field and attaching machine intelligence to human intelligence and establishing a relation of competition so that there can emerge something like a paradoxically submissive superior entity (a tool more capable of knowing what to do than its pretended user).

We need to lose this desire for AGI and get rid of the transhumanist fantasy of technological singularity.<sup>37</sup> Not in order to denounce machine intelligence, as humanists have been doing for decades, but in order to affirm it as a specific intelligence. They would, of course, disagree and say that it is not intelligent, that this intelligence is merely a statistical output from a human-trained mechanism. Well, okay, but from such a reductionist point of view even logic is not logic but just some rules. And it is not just some semi-random output, but a precise result of inference, because it uses logic, inductive logic, the same that scientists have been using for the last two centuries. And which human is not himself “human-trained”? Then some would say that a machine does not understand the meaning of its output, that it is not sensible. Of course, it is not, but even a human can lose his own purpose and become lost when the whole of humanity is showing signs of senselessness in today’s posthumanistic and anthropocenic world. And then some would say that machine intelligence is not embodied and alive. Yes, it might be seen that way, but in fact it is embodied and alive, and its limits are pressing us to see it as such; and if being alive means gaining experiences and self-adapting through them, then this is precisely what it has begun to do.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Regarding transhumanist fantasy and its relation to contemporary capitalism, see Aleš Mendiževc, “No future, končno! Plastičnost med destrukcijo, ustvarjalnostjo in simulacijo” [No Future, Finally! Plasticity between Destruction, Creation and Simulation], afterword to *Ontologija naključja: Esej o destrukcijski plastičnosti*, by Catherine Malabou (Ljubljana: Maska, 2023), 87–116.

<sup>38</sup> We refer here mainly to artificial intelligence as connectionism and we in fact posit it as the dominant technique of AI, but we refuse to buy into the schism that does away with sym-

These arguments will convince no one, of that I am sure. And in fact, I agree: machine intelligence does not have its own (general) purpose in the world, because it has no inner experience to relate to and cannot have and express emotions (even if it can imitate them); and even if a human uses scientific methods of statistical inference, it is itself not a statistical tool, the human brain is not merely a one-dimensional scientist, it has multidimensional common sense (as they call it); yes, machine intelligence is data greedy and human intelligence can make a whole lot from just a small amount of data, as they say, because the latter excels at knowledge transfer, while the former lacks this capability, etc. As we have said, humanist critiques are valid, but with this comes a certain *méconnaissance*, as the French would put it. Humanists exclusively allocate intelligence to humans instead of inclusively dispersing it, as an antihumanist might try to do; because they see in machine intelligence the danger (and others the opportunity) of AGI and this is why they transform the machine-human relation from a comparative one (with inclusive differences) into a competitive one (with excluding differences). The goal of our arguments is not to convince anyone by providing proof of machine intelligence, but to de-competify this difference by showing the differentiability of human and machine intelligence in order to open the possibility of considering machine intelligence as intelligent in its own way. If only we get rid of AGI.

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bolic AI and other segments of AI precisely because we reject the desire for AGI. Hybridity just might lead to the specificity of machine intelligence which would be disentangled from capitalistic desires.

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## Mind, Language, Work: Thinking Beyond AI Ideology

### Keywords

AI ideology, critique, emancipation, idealism, Descartes, mind, language models, automated work

### Abstract

If AI is to emulate the language, mind, and work of humans, what remains of being human? One scenario is that humans are at risk of becoming robots of AI-powered systems, serving the interests of a few global corporations. We have already reached this stage of transformation. Given this predicament, the issues concerning the capacity of AI beyond the human should be addressed through a critique of AI ideology. Methodically, this would imply a shift in perspective, from the subject of AI to the function and deceptive power of its intelligent devices. Do they serve us or do we serve them? Here, it is important not to follow the standard approach to AI as the prospect of creating super-human intelligence, to avoid the trap of basing the critique on the discourse of AI ideology. The goal, rather, is to revive the strength of philosophical critique and reestablish a certain idealism.

## Um, jezik, delo: misliti onkraj ideologije umetne inteligence

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### Ključne besede

ideologija umetne inteligence, kritika, emancipacija, idealizem, Descartes, um, jezikovni modeli, avtomatizirano delo

### Povzetek

Če bo umetna inteligenca posnemala človeški jezik, um in delo, kaj bo ostalo od človeške biti? Po enem od scenarijev lahko ljudje postanejo roboti sistemov, ki jih poganja

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umetna inteligenca in služijo interesom par svetovnih korporacij. To stopnjo preobrazbe smo že dosegli. Glede na to oceno, je treba vprašanja, ki so povezana z sposobnostjo umetne inteligence preseči raven človeškega, obravnavati skozi kritiko ideologije umetne inteligence. Metodološko to narekuje premik perspektive, in sicer od predmeta UI k delovanju in zavajajoči moči njenih inteligentnih naprav. Ali one služijo nam, ali mi njim? V tem oziru je pomembno, da ne sledimo standardnemu pristopu k UI kot obetu stvarjenja nadčloveške inteligence, da se tako izognemo pasti utemeljevanja kritike na diskurzu ideologije UI. Cilj je raje oživiti moč filozofske kritike in ponovno vzpostaviti nekakšen idealizem.



## AI Ideology

AI is the main player in the global capitalist arena, offering rapid means of securing global dominance to Big Tech corporations. While in the eighties the application of AI was delimited to closed systems, for instance in finances, today AI solutions permeate every segment of life on a global scale. The hype around AI is part of the game. Another name for this hype is AI ideology. Consider the following description of AI from IBM: “Artificial intelligence (AI) is technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity, and autonomy.”<sup>1</sup> This description conceals the foundational principle of AI technology. What this “technology” is remains to be discussed. At the same time, the description reveals its function and the target. The concealing and revealing at play in the description provides the starting point for delineating the task of philosophical critique here. The philosophical critique lacks proper means to approach AI on the level of its technological design: *what* “enables computers and machines to simulate.” However, the critique is in a position to attack the target, the “human learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity and autonomy”—the target of AI ideology. Thus, the task at hand here is to provide a philosophical critique of AI ideology. AI ideology is an orbit around AI as a buzzword operating in the discourses about AI. Often directly inspired by science fiction, AI

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<sup>1</sup> Cole Stryker and Eda Kavlakoglu, “Artificial Intelligence,” IBM, updated August 16, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/topics/artificial-intelligence>.



ideology promotes obscure rhetoric of radical transformation: the ways of life and the modes of thinking aligned with the interests of Big Tech corporations.

The current AI ideology consists of at least the following discourses about AI: the science fiction-inspired scenarios about what AI is or may become; the false or sincere good intentions of Big Tech corporations investing in AI; the popular and academic reception with little or no knowledge of the principles underlying the design of AI, and its meaning and use; the qualified AI creator's attempts to explain AI to the broader audience without accounting for the real principles of its design and use; the intended or unintended deception and confusion underlying the terminology operating in AI discourses beyond the principles of its design, such as the very (vague) concept of "artificial" and "intelligence"; the comparison with human abilities and capacities and their subversion by means of AI; the discourses on the future of AI such as the visions of AGI (Artificial General Intelligence) and ASI (Artificial Superintelligence). The list is not exhaustive but it provides enough to ascertain an ideology at work.

This article examines the alterations of the concepts of language, mind, and work in AI ideology. By the power of AI to manipulate, generate, and transform, these and other concepts will evolve within the limits of algorithmic reason in AI systems. They will become AI concepts. How can we continue to think philosophically about these concepts beyond their current optimization and evolution as the functions of AI? This is not to exclude AI from the human existential prospects in which it inevitably participates, but to insist on the continuity of the philosophical exploration of creativity and inventiveness beyond the apocalyptic, imperialistic, and totalitarian visions of AI ideology. Thus, the purpose of this article is to challenge the predominant idea of AI as an unbounded and superhuman salvific force, the most brilliant achievement of the human mind, which is also said to surpass the intelligence of its creators. The aim is to take the initial steps towards reclaiming and rethinking the concepts of the mind, language and work operating in AI ideology today, to retrace, repeat, and rehearse a certain *idealism* as a basis for a philosophical critique of AI ideology. In this way, the emerging philosophical concepts of the mind as the site of truth and knowledge, language as a phenomenological dimension of *jouissance*, and work as the mode of critical thinking, may provide a basis for unfolding the emancipatory strategies for going beyond AI ideology.

The human dimension transcends AI ideology's reductionist and instrumentalist view of the human and provides the natural conditions for transformation and flourishing of human life. As the human dimension provides a model for AI (to a certain extent), it is understandable that one has to radically downscale its complexity. However, it is inadmissible to (re)model the understanding of the human dimension on the basis of this simplification. An AI system lacks ontological access to the whole of the human dimension. In a sense provided by the insights of Georges Bataille, extending to Henri Michaux, the human dimension is constantly emerging from the ever-unformed and constantly reforming. These existential dynamics do not fit within the limits of algorithmic reason. In any case, striving to dispatch the human dimension to the algorithm is ignorant and evil. However, that is impossible. Although AI is complex and modeled on human capacities, it does not provide a model of human complexity. Rather, it (re)models its own complexity. No claims about the human dimension can be made or taken seriously from the example of AI. Given this ontological obstacle to "humanlike" or "superhuman" AI, why are we constantly led to believe that the signifier human has anything to do with AI, except for the human as the subject of AI *inquiries*—if not for the manipulation of knowledge about the human dimension and devaluation of its real complexity? Who earns from this manipulation a large amount of money from keeping people ignorant (this is a rhetorical question)? The idea of superhuman AI amounts only to dehumanisation. AI does not have its own opinion about us except for what it learns from us about us. A superhuman AI is a perverse fantasy of a totalitarian personality dreaming about a superpower to subdue others for his (*sic*) own personality to emerge as great as his phantasms. AI has no personality and could not care less for domination. It does not understand submission either.

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What is targeted here is precisely this kind of fantasmatic content of AI ideology. The worst thing is that these fantasies blind us to the beneficial aspects of AI. AI is perhaps the most *practical* of human inventions. In itself, it is a specific kind of code, mathematics, and statistics. Like any other code, it is a *writing*. It can fit on a piece of paper or in a book. Of course, it is *inscribed* into a machine that still requires the industrial production of hardware. AI is a perfect and attentive spy or attendant, invisible and integrated with the environment it monitors (the screen), always alert. This is also why the image of AI as a machine or a robot is beyond stupid. But AI is not stupid. It is advanced. A beautiful invention of *computing*. That is AI in its nakedness. Why, then, all this *counterintelligence* of AI

ideology? This charge is the sole reason why AI ideology should be subjected to the hardest critique, that is, philosophy.

AI ideology is certainly obscuring public access to knowledge about AI. At the same time, we witness increasing political and economic interests in the development of new applications of AI, especially in the war industry. Technophobic approaches are not adequate to address the problem, simply because technology is not the proper context to address questions concerning AI. Rather, the critique of AI on the level of its ontology would amount to a discipline corresponding to critical text studies. AI is a special kind of text and the most effective critique should target the grammar and syntax of the code, the form and style of its writing. The methods of the Old Testament and New Testament exegesis are perhaps more suitable for such a task than the critique of technology.

Today, AI ideology is at the center of all relations. However, in the neural networks distributing AI there is no center. Also conceptually, nothing is to the point. The conceptual basis of AI, including the very notions of “artificial” and “intelligence,” is unstable and obscure. AI ideology promotes an unsophisticated view of the human being and generates pseudo-philosophical problems that mystify the corporate genesis of AI and the established principles of its engineering. In this vein, the discourses promoting a larger-than-life vision of AI, almost as a divine power capable of delivering both curses and blessings at whim, are no less laughable than the exaggerations in classic marketing trying to persuade us of a product’s unique value, properties, and efficacy. These discourses are nevertheless responsible for seeding not only positive expectations but also fear, suspicion, rejection, conspiracies, and apocalyptic sentiments, likely among millenarians and technophobes, who take upon themselves the duty to spread the news and words of warning. Thus, bringing the affects in play gives rise to AI regulations, however, not to prevent the apocalyptic and conspiracy scenarios. They engage in corresponding typically non-technological instances of government and society to recognize AI as the force of some radical transformation on the way. This, in turn, initiates the process of establishing AI as the lifeblood of society and the growing demand for AI solutions is only a click away. Not to mention the prospect of profit on a global scale that motivates Big Tech to respond to this demand and deliver all kinds of AI solutions we do not know that we want. What this short genealogy of the infiltration of AI in every aspect of life seeks to sketch out is the suspicion or doubt that we have good

reasons to believe that AI is a true revolutionary force of emancipatory transformation. The global success of AI, like any other, lies in marketing and its exaggerations. Proceeding from this premise, there is no reason why we should not try to retrace and repeat the philosophical insights on existentially important issues beyond AI ideology. For, once AI becomes human, too human; another ghost will pop up in the machine to guide us in life and into death. We have to rediscover what we always already have access to intrinsically but deviate from in search of more advanced alterity. In that vein, the critique of AI ideology involves the emancipatory task of (re)discovering and (re)experiencing the human dimension beyond the artificiality (not by way of becoming artificial) of language, mind, and work.

### Language

The capacity of AI to emulate language challenges us to seriously rethink the following scenario proposed by René Descartes in *Discourse on the Method*:

For we can certainly conceive of a machine so constructed that it utters words, and even utters words which correspond to bodily actions causing a change in its organs (e.g., if you touch it in one spot it asks what you want of it, if you touch it in another it cries out that you are hurting it, and so on). But it is not conceivable that such a machine should produce different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence, as the dullest of men can do.<sup>2</sup>

Descartes was right that mechanistic principles do not allow a machine to speak like a human. He could not have predicted the *software* and generative AI. Generative AI has nevertheless developed the capacity to recreate language and speech outside the human body, as pure digital/virtual phenomena. “Generative AI, sometimes called *gen AI*, is artificial intelligence (AI) that can create original content—such as text, images, video, audio or software code—in response to a user’s prompt or request.”<sup>3</sup> While it seems we will have to wait to encounter

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<sup>2</sup> Descartes René, *Discourse on the Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch, 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984–91), 1:140.

<sup>3</sup> Cole Stryker, Mark Scapicchio, “Generative AI,” IBM, updated March 22, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/topics/generative-ai>.

Artaudian bodies without organs on the streets, we are certainly witnessing the age of disembodied, inorganic language generation.

Generative AI indeed produces “different arrangements of words so as to give an appropriately meaningful answer to whatever is said in its presence”—at least “as the dullest of men can do” but also above the average. Today, “machines” are processing language. Large Language Models (LLMs) certainly prove Heidegger’s almost banal but profound insight that “language speaks” (*die Sprache spricht*). “Large language models (LLMs) are a category of foundation models trained on immense amounts of data making them capable of understanding and generating natural language and other types of content to perform a wide range of tasks.”<sup>4</sup> Recent developments in multimodal AI and Large Multimodal Models (LMMs) bring into question also the longstanding belief that speech and voice are intrinsically human. “Multimodal AI refers to machine learning models capable of processing and integrating information from multiple modalities or types of data. These modalities can include text, images, audio, video, and other forms of sensory input.”<sup>5</sup> For instance, VALL-E 2, “a neural codec language model for speech synthesis” has recently “(*achieved*) human parity for the first time” but its creators “have no plans to incorporate VALL-E 2 into a product or expand access to the public.”<sup>6</sup> Against this background of language generation in AI, we are offered a possibility to redefine the human relationship to language, and to reconsider the preconceived identity of language as intrinsically human. This is not a transhumanist proposition but a call to rethink and (re)discover human nature in the light of artificial evidence of what we are *not*, unless we have no objections before the prospect of automated existence dictated by language models.

Furthermore, the possibility of text-to-image generation in AI questions the understanding of the relation between language and image, and also the understanding of imagination as intrinsically human. Let us pause here and examine what is at stake. To begin with, the text does not appear in the text-generated image. However, the image invites interpretation. There is a message in the im-

<sup>4</sup> “Large Language Models,” IBM, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/topics/large-language-models>.

<sup>5</sup> Cole Stryker, “Multimodal AI,” IBM, published July 15, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/multimodal-ai>.

<sup>6</sup> “VALL-E 2,” Microsoft, accessed September 14, 2024; italics in the original.

age. It can be understood intuitively or esthetically, affectively, and so on. It can also be (re)articulated in language. Can we speak here in Freudian terms of the repressed—the fact that the generated image is not a representation but content generated entirely based on a text structured on a language model; the primordial form of language as the empty structure that underlies the generation of the image; the Lacanian *real*? Is not the language model underlying generative AI an empty structure, the imaginary-real of the generated image? In trying to outline some understanding of this question, let us retrace the process of generation from text to image employing the notions offered by theoretical psychoanalysis.

First, the image is generated from the language basis, in the case of generative AI, the basis of Natural Language Processing (NLP) underlying the LLM. “Natural language processing (NLP) is a subfield of computer science and artificial intelligence (AI) that uses machine learning to enable computers to understand and communicate with human language.”<sup>7</sup> Second, the message in the image is articulated through the discourse about the image. What remains hidden in the discourse while it speaks of the image as a representation is the language basis of its generation. The image does not represent anything beyond its *presence*. The real source of the image is the generative model *structured like a language*. The image is a *semblance* penetrating through the imaginary into the symbolic, where it comes into being through speech and signification. Thus, the image fully remains in language but this actuality is repressed, namely that the *phantasm* of the image is generated by language, through language. It never really becomes other than language. There is no other (image) outside language. No other meaning, it is just empty, with no representation. However, this empty meaning is properly true. It remains in and returns to the same place, at its source in the real: the empty structure of the language model. Assuming that the language model in AI repeats the structure of (natural) language and ontologically, language as structure, it demonstrates empirically the fundamental insight of psychoanalysis, from Freud to Lacan: *the unconscious is structured like a language*. The text generates image because the real as the basis of the generation of semblances of strictly real “text” and “image” cuts through the imaginary and the symbolic. There is no text and no image as such beyond the gen-

<sup>7</sup> Cole Stryker and Jim Holdsworth, “Natural Language Processing,” updated August 11, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/topics/natural-language-processing>.

erative operation within the real (primordial) structure of language as a model; the model (of the real) is structured like a language.

Continuing in this direction, perhaps it can be demonstrated that the structural/unconscious ontology of language underlies or at least cuts through the principles of NLP and language models in AI applications. Also, the critique of language in AI could revive and stimulate philosophical thinking about the nature of language. The ontological condition of language as the structure of the *unconscious* was most probably neither thought of, desired, nor intended by its developers, and this is also the point. The research on NLP and its applications in language models does not seem to account for any ontological (pre)condition of language but simply trusts the reliability of its naturalness. This gives a new perspective on “biases” in the outputs of generative AI; the x-phobic stereotypes, culturally shared prejudices, and so on, namely that they are structural and not cultural. This means that they are not removable by way of moral interventions. What this points out regarding the nature of language is that language is deceptive, manipulative, abusive, and delusive. Thus, the prospect of regulation and censorship—even on the level of the obedient algorithm—is doomed to fail, because *structurally*, language is a traitor. Language speaks for us what we do not want to say, because we want what we do not say. Language *generates* what comes out through speech, not only within the language models of generative AI. Modifying Heidegger’s insight, *structure speaks*.

Thus, language is not an accommodating, functional, and instrumental medium, with controllable input and output dynamics, as the behavioristic-cognitive approach views it. What happens in between, in the “black box,” which behaviorism refuses to open but what has been clear in psychoanalysis since Freud, is that the unconscious underlies the articulation of language through speech, or what is inscribed in writing. This brings us to a practical issue regarding the status of natural language and the question of its suitability as a model and object of artificial generation. Because we do not know what we say while we speak—this is a natural trait of language. At the same time, language seems obvious (“natural”). We seem to have a sense of its mastery, sometimes a sense that it dominates what we “actually” want to *express*.

But the nature of (natural) language is more alien to us than the real—*mathematical*—language of AI. Perhaps the most important discovery of psychoa-

analysis is the (in)experience of the fundamental alterity of language (and language as alterity)—the genesis of the Freudian unconscious and the Lacanian Other. On that note, we could posit that LLMs are an uncanny ontological site of language generation. LLMs ultimately confirm the fundamental otherness of language, beyond (speaking) being, the distinction between language and being. At the same time, as Descartes points out regarding the distinction between mind and body, the mind and the body are also joined (in the pineal gland). Can we posit *speech* as a (vanishing) point of enjoyment between being and language? To put it with Lacan: thought, language, and meaning are the enjoyment of the speaking being. Being becomes the subject of language, “the discourse of the Other”—dare we say, the discourse of generative AI? Still, AI is not the Other. The unconscious (structured like a language) is. Always and everywhere where language speaks, in this text, and in AI generations.

Should we seek an existential liberation from language as a basis for knowledge, for which Wittgenstein says that it is a “cage”?<sup>8</sup> As the structural enclosure of the algorithm demonstrates, *language is a cage*. In AI this means a (re)reading of a writing, the input and the output, in between a process of a generation of being confined to language. LLMs clearly and distinctly demonstrate that language is fundamentally artificial. However, it cannot *speak* without a speaking machine or a speaking being. It needs a *speaking body*. Risking the revival of pseudo-mystical elaborations of Lacan’s pun on the real/unconscious as “the mystery of the speaking body” in Seminar XX, perhaps we should trust the body more.<sup>9</sup> Sighs, grunts, screams, moans, laughter, breathing; the language of the insane, those inspired by the divine madness, those burning with passion . . . On the other hand, in the language of “mystics” and Wittgenstein, we are always already free from language in *what cannot be said*. Thus, the body is the natural site of language but also of a primordial silence, that is, the absence of words. Silence is not the absence of *sound*. As John Cage demonstrated in his 4’33” silence can be *heard*. The sound (of silence) comes into being in silence and disperses in silence, an inner energetic vibration in the body, a dimension of sensuality. This dimension cannot be recreated artificially (in a machine) because it

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<sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics,” in *Philosophical Occasions, 1912–1951*, ed. James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1992), 44.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, *On Feminine Sexuality, The Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore, 1972–1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 131.



is interior to the body of *jouissance*. The speaking being does not know anything about *jouissance* except, as Lacan puns it, when it “comes.” *Jouissance* knows itself when it gives itself to the intrinsic silence of the speaking body. Breath, sighs, moans, screams, and laughter are the phenomena of silence—*what cannot be said*. Silence is inherent in language. Recall Lacan’s (half-)statement that truth can only be half-said. The other half is drowned in the silence of the speaking body of *jouissance*.

Fundamentally, the speaking body is a living expression of *jouissance* beyond the creation of meaning through the articulation of words. Instead, *jouissance* resonates through the phenomenology of *voice*: the language speaks through the body through the enjoyment of the vibrating sensation of the breath moving through the throat, the tickling sensation of the tongue moving up and down in the wet cavity of the mouth, out of which it comes out as a sigh or a moan or a scream or laughter. Words fail to describe this sensual dimension of the body as they create only what is outside the domain of the body and its entanglement with the world. In our lived experience; however, this subtle enjoyment of the voice is unconscious, repressed by our daily attachment to the signifier. We lose the sense of the ground of our being and we derive thought and meaning from the signifier. Silence becomes unbearable and we fall into the existential neurosis of obsessive-compulsory concealment of the emptiness of the signifier. What if acknowledging this emptiness may be liberating? On that note, the opening lines of the Book of Genesis offer a scene of a primordial silence: the Spirit (*ruach*) hovers over the Abyss (*tehom*), the primordial silence out of which the Word emerges and simultaneously, with the Word, the Creation. Nothing is just said. Things come into being through the Word. In this sense, one of the gods in Genesis is indeed a Demiurge, a creator-god. However, unceasingly, words, like creation, are swallowed by the abyss, the primordial silence which is also the abyss of the signification-generation. More words! Hence, language is not a primordial condition. Should we strive to recover the “spiritual” state of being-hovering over the abyss?

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### **Mind**

The recent concept of AI Theory of Mind promotes a vision of AI capable of emulating human thought processes and emotions. The notion of “mind” in this context is not drawn from philosophy but from developmental psychology and from there its significance goes straight to AI Theory of Mind. However, the en-

visioned application of AI to the “mind” not only reduces the philosophical notion of the mind to affects but establishes a dangerous reduction of the human mind to the patterns of behavior. What would be an ontological grounding of AI “mind”? (A)I assimilate? (A)I surveil? This is why we need to revive the most experientially pregnant philosophical notion of the mind, that offered by Descartes. It does not consist of a formal definition but *trust* that, despite the possibility of thinking of going astray, there is a fundamental dimension of groundedness beyond words and thoughts, a dimension that will remain simple, basic, clear and distinct even if we do not think about it or try, for some reason, to think beyond it or to deny it. Its phenomenological dimension, in the First Meditation, is the consciousness “that I am here.”<sup>10</sup> *Here* is not a location delimited in space and time but includes everything in an instant: sensory perceptions, sensations, thoughts, smells, the sky and the stars—everything available to my consciousness here (and now). However, already this notion exceeds the here-beingness and instigates a deviation that hands over to thinking the task of complicating what is at hand: “How often, asleep at night, am I convinced of just such familiar events — that I am here in my dressing-gown, sitting by the fire—when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!”<sup>11</sup> The first philosophy unfolds through meditation, ascertaining eventually that “*I am, I exist.*”<sup>12</sup> Descartes tirelessly goes on: “But what then am I? A thing that thinks.”<sup>13</sup> The concepts that go beyond the initial simplicity of being here are created, and so on, up to demonstrating the existence of God and the distinction between mind and body. However, nothing changes on the fundamental level of being here. Always already, the space of the mind is here, and here is in the space of the mind. The mind is an open space where thinking proceeds beyond being here, while “I am here, sitting by the fire, wearing a winter dressing-gown, holding this piece of paper in my hands, and so on.”<sup>14</sup>

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Moreover, the search for “certainty” in the *Meditations*, as I see it, is a specific project aiming to demonstrate “once and for all” the mind as a givenness beyond the body and the limit of death.<sup>15</sup> Hence the soul-like status of the mind in

<sup>10</sup> Descartes René, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 2:13.

<sup>11</sup> Descartes, 2:13.

<sup>12</sup> Descartes, 2:17; italics in the original.

<sup>13</sup> Descartes, 2:19.

<sup>14</sup> Descartes, 2:13.

<sup>15</sup> “Nevertheless, I think there can be no more useful service to be rendered in philosophy than to conduct a careful search, once and for all, for the best of these arguments, and to

the *Meditations*, a smart way to inscribe philosophy in the apologetic context, however, more as a Trojan horse than as a handmaiden of theology.<sup>16</sup> The confusion that resulted was and still is condemned or accepted in the experience and understanding of philosophy as an emancipatory or even salvific practice, often in conflict with religion, and since Descartes, also with modern science.

In the *Meditations*, Descartes provides a metaphysical recantation of the previously articulated project of “directing the mind and the search for truth in the sciences” in *Discourse on the Method*. Hence, approaching the scholastic questions of the existence of God and the distinction between soul and body completely based on the meditation of the mind alone; by way of withdrawing the mind from the senses and meditating on the mind reflecting on itself, Descartes ascertains the ontological status of the mind in correspondence with the truths of the Catholic religion. However, also, based on the mind itself, Descartes provides the ground for the trustworthiness of the epistemological functions for the examination of the truthfulness of whatever comes to mind. Thus, Descartes in *Meditations* proceeds with the task already instigated in the *Discourse*, an orderly examination of the “physical things” and the conditions of knowledge about the world. Already before, or at the time of the *Discourse*, Descartes envisioned scientific knowledge as a process of observation and transcription of the extension of physical things into a mathematical system of description, and calculus as the basis for invention and its technological applications. Although Descartes effectively opened the door for mathematization in modern science, it gradually developed far from Descartes’s ethics of scientific work, which he spelled out in Part III of the *Discourse*. Also, departing from Descartes’s notion of the mind, modern science has decided upon the brain as the site of consciousness. The result is a tragic loss of Descartes’s intellectual and spiritual sensitivity to the mind. This strain continued nevertheless, in different formations of thought after Descartes, in Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Bergson, Freud, Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Lacan, to name a few. In line with this reception, reconsidering what, in opposition to the neuroscientific notion of the mind in philosophy, can only be termed “idealism” in the broadest sense, will inevitably

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set them out so precisely and clearly as to produce for the future a general agreement that they amount to demonstrative proofs.” Descartes, 2:4.

<sup>16</sup> “And it follows from this that while the body can very easily perish, the mind is immortal by its very nature.” Descartes, 2:10. And editor’s note: “. . . or the soul of man, for I make no distinction between them’ (added in French version).” Descartes, 2:10n3.

lead us back to Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, and then, via Thomas Aquinas, Ficino, and others, forward to Descartes. Moreover, we will find fine-tuned sensitivity to the mind in the philosophical traditions of South East Asia, especially in Buddhist philosophy, which is entirely a “philosophy of mind.”

The mind is beyond calculation. Like AI systems provide the space (and “architecture”) for calculations between input and output, the mind is the space in which calculation takes place. But far from being delimited to calculation, as in AI systems, the mind is also the space of birth, life, death, thinking, language, knowledge, desire, madness, love, sensation, embodiment . . . the space of being and non-being. In light of the plethora of philosophical insights into the nature of the mind—even if it is a product of philosophical speculation, or spiritual obscurantism even—the current reduction of the mind in (AI) Theory of Mind to patterns of behavior and responses is philosophically disappointing and therefore, unacceptable. It disposes of the philosophical experience of the mind and clears the slate for the age of AI-powered transformation of the human animal into a behavioristic bot. The simplicity of the discovery and experience of the mind—simply by being here—holds onto the infinite potential of knowledge through direct experience. The mind is an enlightening light, for some divine, for some God. This is the prospect of the mind, the basis of Hegel’s insight and experience of Absolute Knowing.

If thought is an activity of the *mind*, how come AI generates *deceptions*? What processes are involved in this? For example, in chase games such as Pokemon Go, we are deceived that the figures projected through the screen are a natural part of the physical environment. Their ontological status is that of *specters*, and this is a part of the game. The game brings deception into play. The fact that these specters are not real does not contradict the *unreal* nature of the specters. What is targeted here is precisely the *deception*. In that vein, it is interesting to note that deception has been historically inscribed into AI design since the epochal days of the Turing test. The Turing test boils down to a process of deception. The human subject exchanges written pieces of conversation behind a screen with a machine and another human. When the subject is convinced that they have been communicating with another human even though the message was produced by the machine, the machine has passed the test: to deceive. Thus, the adaptability of the machine to the human receiver is not based on its acquisition of human thought processes but on deception as the condition of human-machine interac-

tion. On this basis, there is no AI “mind,” because, as we should know since Descartes, the mind is *trustworthy*. Not only for metaphysical reasons (God is not a deceiver). The mind does not deceive even when we proceed by way of hyperbolic doubt, exaggerating (metaphysical) reasons as a mode of thinking. Descartes’s conclusion at the end of the Sixth Meditation is that these doubts “should be dismissed as laughable.”<sup>17</sup> Because: “If, while I am awake, anyone were suddenly to appear to me and then disappear immediately, as happens in sleep, so that I could not see where he had come from or where he had gone to, it would not be unreasonable for me to judge that he was a ghost, or a vision created in my brain, rather than a real man.”<sup>18</sup> Despite this Cartesian certainty, in the world generated by AI, there are specters everywhere. There is no substance beyond virtual transparency of AI generations. Virtuality becomes a basis for belief. Based on this belief, AI imputes/computes the spectral existences into our daily reality. In this sense, AI trains our senses to believe in deception.

The nuances here are delicate but decisive for establishing the difference between the deceptive operations of AI and the ontological orientation. From Descartes, we learn that deception is not ontologically inscribed in the mind. I am deceived, and I can also choose to deceive myself, for instance, by way of hyperbolic doubt. The mind is the unshakable site of truth, and therefore trustworthy. However, the tendency of AI is that it imposes itself as a model for thinking. Since it is based on deception, are we not constantly deceived by it? Therefore, we should not take AI as the model for thinking about the mind.

It is well known that GPTs (Generative Pre-Trained Transformers)<sup>19</sup> “hallucinate” when pressed to generate complex reasonings. “AI hallucination is a phenomenon wherein a large language model (LLM)—often a generative AI chatbot or computer vision tool—perceives patterns or objects that are nonexistent or imperceptible to human observers, creating outputs that are nonsensical or al-

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<sup>17</sup> Descartes, 2:16.

<sup>18</sup> Descartes, 2:62.

<sup>19</sup> “A transformer model is a type of deep learning model that was introduced in 2017. These models have quickly become fundamental in natural language processing (NLP), and have been applied to a wide range of tasks in machine learning and artificial intelligence.” “Transformer model,” IBM, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/topics/transformer-model>.

together inaccurate.”<sup>20</sup> The phenomenon is probably not only computational. In human thought processes there is an intensity of certain insistences, or “insanity” in the classical sense of the word: “they firmly maintain they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass.”<sup>21</sup> Descartes refuses the “insane” “as a model for myself,” that is, to deny the obvious fact “that I am here,” and in order to develop hyperbolic reasoning he refuses manic insistence as a mode of thinking that things are as they are not. In a certain sense, AI is insane because it lacks an understanding of reality, and therefore it hallucinates it. Unsurprisingly, the notion of *understanding* is lacking in the vocabulary of AI ideology. In combination with deception through which it operates, it can be said that AI is self-deceptive without being aware of it, without being a self that can be deceived by itself or some other. It lacks the capacity for a Hegelian experience of self-understanding. This generates insistence in its behavior, a kind of madness structurally transmitted through the structure on which it is modeled. AI is strictly *mindless*. Thus, the prospects of integration of AI and the mind are less than zero. On this point, also, AI lacks the basis for surpassing the human mind.

GPT cannot *meditate*. Not only because it lacks mind, sense, and therefore also understanding. It operates within the limits of a model of linear word prediction, no reflection, no retroactive insight, no introspection, no *res cogitans* inside. A pure behavioristic machine, an impenetrable “black box.” Behavior is input and output, stimulus and reaction. Brainless and senseless entities have it. If we push a stone, it will behave according to the intensity of our force. In the end, there is no communication with GPT, because communication is relational. There is no relation because nobody is there, on the other side. A screen, the unbearable flatness of unbeing. The automatic execution of the algorithm, the input of data (prompt), and the output of data (generation).

If we methodically distrust the behavioristic reduction of the mind operating in neuroscience and cognitive science we should return to Descartes and proceed to rediscover the mind as the site of truth. Descartes discovered the mind

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<sup>20</sup> “AI hallucinations,” IBM, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/topics/ai-hallucinations>.

<sup>21</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 2:13.

through *meditation*—the mind reflecting on itself, seeing/understanding with the “eye of the mind.” What this means is possible to understand only through meditation, indeed to see how the mind is through the experience of the mind. To do that one has to have a mind. Descartes poses a radical challenge to the attempts to equate the achievements of AI with the mind: *the mind exists without the brain*. The mind properly *ex-sists*.

Hence, drawing on Descartes’s notion of the mind, we have touched upon the reasons why the current ontology (or model) underlying AI does not provide a basis for anything like the mind. Thus, the discourse of AI and the mind is purely ideological. Still, AI operates beyond AI ideology. The real basis for its operation is *computing*. Ideologically, however, AI is a smart concept. It assimilates “intelligence” and proposes artificiality as its ontological condition. Thus, to risk a tautology, the true basis of AI consists of artificiality and intelligence. The basis of AI is AI itself beyond itself. Are we moving in circles? It seems that there is no such entity. In this sense, AI can claim absoluteness on the same premise as the mind can claim it—no such entity. It is an *activity*. Hence, we should move to the question of the artificiality and intelligence of AI. As we will see, this circularity of the concept is particularly significant for understanding why AI is a smart (deceptive) concept, and why it operates as the signifier of a new (totalitarian) world order.

Intelligence is artificial, both as a concept and as a function. Indeed, intelligence is nothing beyond the *function*. Fundamentally, the root of the function of AI is *lexical*: “intel.” “A short form of intelligence: secret information, for example for another country’s government, an enemy group, or criminal activities.”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, AI is *artificial* because it operates based on the input and output of the intel, that is, the harvesting and generation of *data*. It does not generate anything new but recycles what it steals. The process is handled through the *artifice* of technology, the claim that its function is “technological.” Rather, its function, intel, operates through being applied *to* technology. Thus, AI is not a technology but an operation of *espionage*. If there is a secret code of AI, this is the one. But this is also an “open” code. The legal regulations online are constantly reminding us of this, for instance, to consent to “cookies.” However, the combination of gath-

<sup>22</sup> *Cambridge Dictionary*, “intel,” accessed September 9, 2024, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/intel>.

ering, surveillance, and generation of data is also beneficial, enhancing technology, for example, in health care and security. Although AI ideology tirelessly motivates the AI domination of our lives, it has a true potential to benefit humanity. The problem is its current applications for the benefit of Big Tech corporations and their notion of humanity as users of AI systems. This said, “humanity” today excludes the growing *dehumanized* population, the subjects of the dictate of the algorithm. There are (in)human masters and dehumanized robots.

## Work

Descartes hints in the Second Meditation at the possibility that looking at the people in the street he may be seeing only “hats and coats which could conceal automatons.” However, Descartes “judge(s) that they are men,” “grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind,” and rejects the “ordinary ways of talking as a basis of doubt.”<sup>23</sup> An automaton is a self-moving machine. Even if automatons happen to roam the streets, we would not notice this and not care, as is usual when passing people on the street. No automatons are roaming the streets. Our problem is worse because it does not derive from a paranoid scenario. Today, the people on the street are *automated* by various intelligent artifices that animate their minds. As opposed to automatons, these people have minds but their mind is automated. We live within the limited space of technological commodities that harvest our data. The use is also limited to the function and content offered by these artifices. They are intelligent because the moment we use them, we do not think beyond what we see on our screens and hear in our earphones. Their intelligence comprises, on the one hand, the manipulation of how we use them and, on the other, how they optimize our production of data for specific purposes. The people on the street are humans but they are also automated by intelligent devices. While today our intelligent devices learn from us and integrate our data within the limits of their models, at some point, trusting and relying on them, we will come into a position to learn from them, and it is we who are going to mimic their modes of representation of language and knowledge. Then, our way of life will become the subject of *automation*. We are becoming an *automated human*, inscribed in AI systems. Through interaction via intelligent devices, the models learn from us and we from them. There is an equilibrium, not far from singularity. Or imprisonment.

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<sup>23</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 2:21.



How does the automated human operate within AI systems? It thinks and speaks limited combinations of thoughts and sentences. It performs a repertoire because it is programmed, and enclosed within an algorithm. It does not think or speak beyond what it reads, the algorithmic inscription. In short, the automated human cannot go beyond the enclosure of the algorithm. Most importantly, it is incapable of metaphysical thought, that is, the activity of exploration and experience of the mind. Automated humans are addicted to intelligent devices. The ideology of integrative AI, where AI resources collaborate with human resources, is beneficial only for specialists. The collaboration stops when the masses become automated user-producers of data for Big Tech and their monetization of this use-production. The automated human operates within the limits of AI systems. Its intelligent artifices think and speak for it, providing it with the function of user-producer. This is an operation of work, more precisely, *automated work*. The automated human is a dehumanised servant of AI systems, working within the limits of algorithmic inscription of its function as a generator of data. Thus, the “transformation” that AI ideology promises to bring to the world is a process of the automation of work. AI is the latest but it probably is not the final stage of automation. When the Big Tech bubble bursts, there will be another technological “revolution,” another corporate formation, another strategy of financial domination. We need an emancipatory strategy for thinking beyond the enclosure of the algorithm.

In the section on language, we touched upon the ontological conditions of text-to-image generation, their non-relation to presentation, and the language generation powered by the language model as their real genesis. From this follows a caution to be aware of the falsity of images, and here we should add, especially those that make us “react,” not only deepfakes but all generated content in general. The reactions are another mode of the automation of work, in this case the work of amusement and perplexity. There are numerous videos on streaming channels where a person “reacts” to various content such as music and movies. Why people watch this? Are we so alienated from our ability to form a judgement and engage emotionally and intellectually in what plays out? These are not the right questions. It looks like nothing is getting done, but “leisure” time and the mindless consumption of streaming entertainment are nothing but a form of automated work. The fruit of this work is the data generated after such a work session. As with any other form of automated work performed by an automated

worker, it is freely done—never has the illusion of freedom and free choice been more at work.

Moreover, besides reactions, there is also “explained” genre of videos targeting a perplexed audience looking for an explanation of especially difficult-to-understand movie endings, or trying to get how something like  $x$  is even possible. The amazing. These “explanations” do not aim for *Bildung* or *Aufklärung*. Rather, everything must be explained to fit the flat and dull rationality of mainstreaming reason—since it is “common” to all it does not look like manipulation. In Descartes’s *Meditations* is there not an implicit critique of “common sense” (*sensus communis*), the consensus on a certain mode of production and use of knowledge, as opposed to *bon sens* from *Discourse on the Method*, the art of conducting the spirit, and the search for truth in the sciences? However, let us use this distinction at hand to try to outline the condition of thinking in the age of mainstreaming reason. On the one hand, the mainstreaming reason is a state of non-involvement with or trivialization of difficult issues—a consequence of human learning according to the curriculum of political correctness and cancel culture, i.e., to avoid, exclude and erase certain words, expressions, and concepts. This false premise of critique undermines the labor of critique, as the problem effectively becomes inexistent—the point often repeated by Slavoj Žižek. When we do not use the excluded and unacceptable words the problem seems to disappear but the unresolved tensions remain and nurture conflicts. There are no traces of the cause of provocation but the problem remains and pops up unexpectedly—the good old Freudian return of the repressed. The need for a new unity becomes urgent at the cost of those excepted from it. On the other hand, the mainstreaming reason provides material for the transformation of human perception within the limits of the algorithmic cage to delimit the potential of human creativity and serve the perverse dispositions of the few. What remains when the accumulation of capital at hand is far beyond reasonable but the megalomaniac idea of disregarding the death of oneself and others as collateral damage to generate profit at all costs? Immortality for the few?

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Everything online, including reacting and explaining videos, generates (big) data. On the same platforms and media, AI returns what it learned, the generated content that teaches the automated workers how to behave, think and react within the limits of ones and zeros. The zombai (*sic*) apocalypse is unleashed, connected through a global interface to the One. The army of losers, hungry for

brainy explanations, how to understand and react. AI could be used otherwise. The current AI ideology replicates the strategies of manipulation of totalitarian regimes, of all under one vision (and gaze), however, only because it is optimally designed to serve and secure the power, domination, and profit of the few investors and makers. The possibility of losing control, articulated in AI ideology, of AI leaping from being a tool, to making tools outside “our” control, may not be an expression of uncertainty regarding the future behavior of AI but a desired outcome: a mobilization of free workforce available to the tech-giant masters’ greed and mad demand for power—it demands only attachment to their devices.

Also, in social media and one-to-one digital messages, we assist machine learning by (mis)using emojis, the symbol repeating and formalizing emotions and reactions expressed in digital text messages. “Machine learning (ML) is a branch of artificial intelligence (AI) and computer science that focuses on the using data and algorithms to enable AI to imitate the way that humans learn, gradually improving its accuracy.”<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, we are unaware that by using digital platforms, glued to our screens, like the people in Plato’s cave seeing only shadow-play, we work for free as machine learning assistants. Then the “machine” learns to sell us stuff based on our “reactions” and search history on the Internet. There is a deception in the term machine learning, however—as in other instances of AI ideology, a confusion of the language *use* masking the real operation at stake. The “machine” is not a computer/machine but an algorithmic/computational/statistical assemblage of computing operations, that is, as pointed out previously, writing and calculus. In turn, on this *mathematical* basis of “learning,” that is, *calculus*, based on our data (history) we get customized ads offering products and services in exchange for our money. Our data has a price and *we* are paying it. AI manipulates and streamlines our consumption habits, and surveils our electronic devices and online behavior. It is enough simply to go online or walk around with a smartphone in one’s pocket. Our seductive electronic devices betray us. Each time we are online and use our devices, we work for free. We are

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<sup>24</sup> “Machine Learning,” IBM, accessed September 16, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/topics/machine-learning>.

servants of the AI systems. Of course, the owners of Big Tech corporations are the masters.

Reactions are automatic and therefore compatible with automatism as the *modus operandi* of the machine and automated worker interaction. But we also learn the habit of automatic reaction, adding emojis rather compulsively in text messages. Emojis provide a clear and distinct sense of what we want to communicate. If the message is “happy” it is followed by a happy smile. This is not without consequences for our speech. Speech becomes plain and without subtext. We speak, insensitive to the intent of complex and underlying meaning. We react plainly and automatically, “emotionally,” without a sense of irony, sarcasm and exaggeration. These and other intellectually advanced thought forms and figures of speech are difficult to translate into the emoji. We tend to take what is said at face value. We are losing a sense for what is fake, or are falsely convinced that we are exercising critical thinking, we believe that all facts are fake. Conspiracy is lurking everywhere. Communication is a paranoiac activity.

What can be done to unlearn the idiotic (re)education in reactions and explanations, and online expressions of emotions? Perhaps the solution lies in the liberating potential of everyday banalities that go unnoticed—no reaction, no need for explanation—precisely because they are so quotidian. For example, straightforward motives such as those in traditional Japanese haiku poetry. Haikus are songs of experience of going beyond the effort to complicate what is here and now. Haikus intend to stimulate remaining in a state of direct experience. Reaction and explanation are redundant. It is evident. In this sense, there are no substitutes—ideological explanations and manipulations—for suffering, joy, life, and death, the existential limit-experiences beyond understatement and exaggeration. Of course, here is an example of AI-generated haiku created in response to my prompt “mind”:

Mind races like a storm,  
Thoughts swirl in chaotic dance,  
Seeking inner calm.

Clouds part in my mind,  
Light of clarity shines through,  
Peaceful thoughts emerge.

Mindscape vast and deep,  
 Endless labyrinth of thought,  
 Find center of self.<sup>25</sup>

It is not surprising that the site of this “haiku generator” is called “bored humans.” Even boredom is automated work. It cost me some time and a few strokes on the keyboard. I will not get paid. Did I enjoy the free product? I may find out soon when my social media feed starts offering poetry for me to buy.

Although there is no reward, except on a libidinal level, the automated work within AI systems is surely *noticed*. For this reason, it is misleading to approach AI as a system replicating human thought processes, emotions, and so on. Rather, the function of AI is to *read* thought processes and monitor, manipulate, control, and optimize them by employing the methods of behaviorism and cognitive science (operant conditioning and cognitive behavioral therapy), which in the context of AI ideology is called neuroinformatics. Of course, AI also facilitates our choices and decisions through recommender systems based on the view of the individual, the consumer. “A recommendation engine, also called a recommender, is an artificial intelligence (AI) system that suggests items to a user. Recommendation systems rely on big data analytics and machine learning algorithms to find patterns in user behavior data and recommend relevant items based on those patterns.”<sup>26</sup> Recommender systems integrate and delimit choices and decisions within the sphere of AI, creating dependence and patterns of neurotic surveying of the products of “choice” provided by it. This circularity is a trap. With AI systems embedded in nearly every human activity, or vice versa, there is no place for creativity and invention, except within the sphere of AI-powered systems. As the platitude goes, creativity happens outside the box, even if its tools are limited within the box. Consequently, the inevitable reduction, optimization, and instrumentalization of human behavior, and its enclosure within the algorithm, is beneficial only for the goals that motivate a violent suspension of what is outside the AI sphere. To this end, “artificial intelligence” is the mode of transformation of humans into products that are then offered back to them as a matter of choice for which they pay.

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<sup>25</sup> Made with “Haiku Generator,” BoredHumans.com, <https://boredhumans.com/haiku.php>.

<sup>26</sup> Rina Caballar and Cole Stryker, “Recommendation engine,” IBM, published June 19, 2024, <https://www.ibm.com/think/topics/recommendation-engine>.

Who is the “servant” and the “worker” in the famous line in Russian employed by Kraftwerk in the piece *Die Roboter*: “Я твой слуга. Я твой работник.” (I am your servant. I am your worker)? Kraftwerk’s live performances from the nineties featured a figure of a cyborg, a human-machine assemblage. On stage, we see four science fiction-type robot torsos with keyboards in front of them. On the robot’s necks there are artificial heads of the Kraftwerk members. The robots move slowly and graciously to the soft electronic beats and sounds. While this childish and entertaining element of Kraftwerk’s stage performance does not move beyond a science fiction-type of fantasy, it also exposes the compulsion, stationarity and repetition of the algorithmic programming, organization, and monitoring of *work*. Especially the line in English—“we are the robots”—rendered in a machinelike voice, does not simply explain the obvious. The serious side of the line is perfectly illustrated in Kraftwerk’s 1978 video for *Die Roboter*. The video takes place in a minimalistic studio that looks more like a laboratory. The faces of the band members are expressionless and styled to maximal artificiality. Their bodies are stiff. The movements of their arms, hands, and mouths are entirely dictated by the music they produce themselves on various electronic devices. They are uniformed in orange shirts, grey pants, and black ties, a combo of white collar and construction workers, and the military. They do not even blink out of sync with the music. Simultaneously, they are the programmers and slaves (robots) of the programming sequence. Thus, unlike the real robots on stage, the “robots” in the video play on the *dystopic* notion of the robot as a *dehumanized human*, recapturing the meaning of the Czech word *robotnik*, a “forced worker.”<sup>27</sup>

The fear that AI-powered robots are taking over and infiltrating our lives on all levels is overshadowed by a situation that still has to be given critical attention, namely that we are in the same situation as the members of Kraftwerk in their video. *We are the robots*—the automated servant-workers—the producers and the consumers of data that animate our lives and keep us inseparable from the beat of Big Tech pulsating our lives. We love their devices and AI solutions and they love us—following Serge Gainsbourg, it is “love on the beat.”

<sup>27</sup> Online Etymology Dictionary, “robot,” accessed September 11, 2024, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/robot>.

## Conclusion

Today “AI” is the signifier from which we derive the most fantastic notions. In the spirit of Lacan, we could approach AI as a mathème, a “lesson” beyond the signifier. It could provide an understanding that has nothing to do with AI as a signifier of “artificial intelligence” but may reveal the processes it imposes on our thinking and imagination, i.e. AI ideology. Here, it is interesting to note that we lack a precise definition of AI. Of course, many different AIs are being developed for different purposes. Notwithstanding what AI is, it works (in mysterious ways). It is also the buzzword around Big Tech corporations. It insists and demands to be a semblance that feeds fantasy and stimulates thinking. Can we speak about AI in terms of *objet petit ai (sic)*, the object cause of desire for AI-powered transformation? To transform desire by offering a supplementary intelligence to the artificiality of the good old *objet petit a*? As with any other ideology, AI ideology is yet another way of monitoring, regulating, and controlling desire and its objects. That said, Big Tech dominates our lives with its regulative/manipulative applications of AI across the range of society, where life is spent on social media, and teaching machines how to learn and learning from machines. If we cannot speak about AI beyond these totalitarian operations, and about the possibilities of life beyond AI, we must conclude that, at best, we are elaborating science fiction stories and “thinking” wild critique that one of the GPTs could generate even wilder. Or worse, we could speak about AI beyond being. Superhuman, worthy of worship. In those times, if they are to come, lost for words and lacking sophistication, let us hope sarcasm will still exist in the hearts of the incurable extravagants and that both will retain the strength of critique. However, let us exercise suspicion. If AI is said to have the power to become a new form of life that exceeds human ability to understand its mode(s) of being, and if it is given power over human life, then it is a no-brainer that what lurks behind this scenario is AI ideology.

The totalitarian reduction of every segment of life to AI-powered systems of control and manipulation and the radical centralization of socio-economic power to Big Tech corporations inevitably provoke the phantoms of liberty and roaming specters, as is usual in similar situations in history. Here, philosophy has a role to play in providing a critique of the dominant AI ideology by (re)viewing the insights from its resources, offering itself as a mode of thinking beyond the current order. Philosophy balances between the eccentric ways of life and the

various domains of the regulation of life, in politics, spirituality, and so on. Finally, as an intensity whose strength is to remain in the same place of trust in the power of its insight, philosophy, as Plato shows in *Phaedrus*, is the only human endeavor in a position to play with madness, and by going through it, elevate spirit above it.

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Marisa Žele\*

## The Case of Euphonia: The Voice of “The Wonderful Talking Machine” and the Horror of the Artificial Man<sup>1</sup>

### Keywords

euphonia, automaton, machine, uncanny, Frankenstein, likeness in difference, artificial man

### Abstract

In the early 1840s, Joseph Faber presented his invention “The Wonderful Talking Machine,” later known as Euphonia, which captivated and unsettled audiences alike. While its ability to imitate human speech in various languages represented a remarkable mechanical feat, its “uncanny” voice elicited unease. The paper examines the dynamic between Faber and his invention, drawing parallels with Mary Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein and his “creature.” We focus on the status of artificial creation and the unsettling nature of imitation, emphasizing the general ambivalence towards automata in the 19th century. By exploring the encounter between creator and creation, we examine the complexity of their relation and the horror that emanates from the blurring of the boundaries between man and machine when an effect of “likeness in difference” takes place.

## Primer Evfonija: glas »Čudovitega govorečega stroja« in groza umetnega človeka

### Ključne besede

Euphonia, avtomaton, stroj, das Unheimliche, Frankenstein, podobnost v razliki, umetni človek

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## Povzetek

V začetku štiridesetih let devetnajstega stoletja je Joseph Faber javnosti predstavil svoj izum »Čudoviti govoreči stroj«, pozneje poznan pod imenom Euphonia, ki je obenem očaral in vznemirjal svoje občinstvo. Medtem, ko je njegova sposobnost posnemanja človeškega govora v različnih jezikih izkazovala izjemen mehanicistični dosežek, pa je njegov strašljivi glas sprožal nemir. Pričujoči prispevek preučuje dinamiko med Faberjem in njegovim izumom ter vleče vzporednice z Victorjem Frankensteinom Mary Shelley in njegovim »stvorom«. V ospredju sta status umetne stvaritve in zaskrbljujoča narava imitacije, ki jo postavljamo ob bok splošni ambivalentnosti do avtomatonov devetnajstega stoletja. Z analizo srečanja med stvarnikom in stvaritvijo je naš namen preučiti kompleksnost njunega razmerja in grozljivost, ki izhaja iz brisanja meja med človekom in strojem, ko nastopi učinek »podobnosti v razliki«.



One glance at a certain page of *P. T. Barnum's Advance Courier*, a nineteenth-century publication dedicated to the advertisement of various shows, wonders, and menageries, is perhaps enough to disperse the reader's attention in an instant. The page is overrun by headlines printed in thick, black letters, their power reinforced by flashy illustrations. Above such supposedly compelling titles as "Living Fiji Cannibals!," "The Mechanical Leotard," and another that asks "The 'WHAT IS IT'; Is It Animal? Is It Human? Or Is It an Amalgamation of Both?," we run into another—and perhaps for us the most curious one—advertising the rental of the "Wonderful Talking Machine" invented by Professor Faber. The accompanying illustration portrays a man wearing a tailcoat sitting in front of some kind of strange instrument resembling a fortepiano but not quite—a woman's head adorned with black ringlet curls protrudes from the installation on top—and the text below reads as follows:

The Wonderful Talking Machine,  
OF PROFESSOR FABER,  
THE GREATEST INVENTION OF MODERN TIMES.

Patient scientific labour of a whole life! LAUGHS, SINGS, AND SPEAKS ALL LANGUAGES, in the most ingenious manner, and is, in every sense, an exact tone, and PERFECT IMITATION OF THE HUMAN VOICE!<sup>2</sup>

This curious and for many of its audiences unsettling apparatus had been exhibited in various places in Europe and the U.S. by then, after making its first appearance in the early forties of the nineteenth century. It was invented by Joseph Faber (1786–1866), who first referred to it by the principle of its function and simply called it “The Talking Machine”—it was nevertheless a machine that could talk—later deciding to furnish it with a name, “Euphonia.”<sup>3</sup> Faber was a Freiburg native who studied mathematics at the Polytechnic in Vienna and later worked in several other métiers, among others, also as an astronomer in a Viennese observatory, then, after his sight failed due to an infection, he shifted his focus to the study of anatomy and mechanics and came up with a machine capable of replicating human speech.<sup>4</sup> Similar attempts had been made before; in fact, Faber was inspired by the writings of Wolfgang von Kempelen (1734–1804), an inventor famous for his “Chess-playing Turk,” which was considered to be one of the greatest hoaxes of its time. In 1823, Faber read Kempelen’s *On the Mechanism of Human Speech*, that the latter had published 32 years prior, and he decided to give it a try himself, which resulted in the creation of the first prototype of Euphonia.

<sup>2</sup> Scan of the advertisement for “The Wonderful Talking Machine” from *P. T. Barnum’s Advance Courier*, 1873, can be found in the article “The Greatest Invention of Modern Times and More,” Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University, October 23, 2017, <https://graphicarts.princeton.edu/2017/10/23/the-greatest-invention-of-modern-times-and-more/>. Some of the citations herein contain grammatical forms and spelling that might be deemed archaic.

<sup>3</sup> Though by some accounts it was not Faber who named his invention “Euphonia” but P. T. Barnum when he added it to his vast collection and exhibited it in America. Apparently, he first saw it in 1844 and bought it twenty-nine years later, in 1873. More on P. T. Barnum’s collection and its part in Euphonia’s story can be found in “Barnum’s Talking Machine,” *Conjurers’ Monthly Magazine*, April 15, 1907.

<sup>4</sup> The opinion piece from *The Sun* from 1846 includes a short bio note on the inventor, presenting him as: “Mr. Joseph Faber, is sixty years of age; he received his education at the Royal Polytechnic Institution in Vienna; he is a Professor of Mathematics, and was for many years Premier Calculator and Land Surveyor to the Emperor of Austria. He has devoted more than twenty-five years to the discovery and construction of a mechanical combination which should possess all the powers of articulation.” “Professor Faber’s Speaking Automaton, or Euphonia,” *Sun (Monday Morning, London)*, August 17, 1846.

The automaton that appeared to be playing chess—Kempelen never claimed that it could actually do so and at all times insisted that it was indeed an illusion making it only appear to play chess autonomously (although no one could figure out quite how it worked)—and even managed to beat Napoleon himself once, was perhaps his most famous invention, however, in the context of the whole performance, it was really a double act. There was another Kempelen invention that he had a habit of presenting before the “Turk” took the central stage and that was his “The Mechanism of Human Speech.”<sup>5</sup> It did not say much and according to the reports it had tremendous difficulties with French, only able to utter simple words and sentences such as “*papa, maman, Roma, ma femme, la reine, mon mari, le roi, Marianna, allons à Paris; ma femme est mon amie, maman aime-moi.*”<sup>6</sup> In his treatment of this little speech of Kempelen’s “Mechanismus,” Mladen Dolar remarks cheekily that if we read it as “a list of free associations [in psychoanalysis], what would we make of the machine’s unconscious?”<sup>7</sup> Apparently, “Mechanismus” was fond of its “mother,” which seems quite ironic for an “unborn” machine.

Despite the apparent limitations to what “Mechanismus” was capable of saying, the knowledge of its invention, perhaps due again to its connection to the fame of another “automaton,” for which it opened as an accompanying act, it has not receded into obscurity.<sup>8</sup> Many sketches, accounts, other writings on it,

<sup>5</sup> It was first exhibited in 1784. The *Monthly Review* commented: “it is certain that this ingenious man has carried the powers of mechanism to an amazing degree of perfection, as may be observed in another machine of his invention, which speaks and articulates distinctly, a considerable number of sentences, in different languages. This speaking organ is deemed a much more extraordinary invention than even the wonderful chess-player; notwithstanding the astonishing powers of the late.” Quoted in Richard D. Altick, *The Shows of London* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1978), 353.

<sup>6</sup> This translates as: “mum, dad, Rome, my wife, the queen, my husband, the king, Marianna, let’s go to Paris; my wife is my friend; mum loves me”; Mladen Dolar describes Kempelen’s automaton duo in greater detail in *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 6–11.

<sup>7</sup> Dolar, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Although, to be specific, the chess-playing Turk of Kempelen was first of all not a thinking machine, as it appeared to be, as the game of chess was actually played by a player cleverly hidden inside of a box, and secondly, it also did not quite fit the definition of an automaton—the larger part of its entire “mechanism” was a hoax—making it seem, with its appearance and the noises coming out of it, as if it was run by a specific mechanism processing its actions, when in fact it was not.

and even reproductions of it can still be found. Perhaps surprisingly, Faber's Euphonia was just one such invention which in the long history of automata came close to breaching this border and remain almost utterly forgotten. Today there are not many sources left for it to be examined in great detail—a couple of newspaper advertisements and witness accounts, rare drawings, and one single photograph remain.<sup>9</sup> However, according to the newspapers and other advertisements of the time, it seems that Euphonia offered a much wider repertoire of words than Kempelen's automaton, and from descriptions of its appearance and rare images of it, we can deduce that it also possessed several other additional qualities not connected only to speech, such as a fully formed oral cavity and a head figure at the front, probably with the intention of making Euphonia appear much more anthropomorphized than Kempelen's "Mechanismus."

In *The Manchester and Salford Advertiser and Chronicle* from May 27, 1843, we can read an account from the Hamburg correspondent of the *Atheneum*, who undersigned himself shortly as "B."<sup>10</sup> It begins with a report that an invention by Mr. Faber called "*Sprachmaschine*" appeared in Hamburg, attracting much attention with its "beautiful adaptation of mechanics to the laws of acoustics."<sup>11</sup> The author continues with a short description of the machine and its functions, insisting on the inventor's ingenuity. To this, B. adds that although his "own attempts to make the instrument speak sounded rather ludicrous, Mr. Faber was most successful."<sup>12</sup> This account highlights a couple of important features of Faber's "Speaking Machine," especially the inventor's design of creating an apparatus that would be able to "produce articulate sounds, or even to imitate the human voice"<sup>13</sup> by means of reproducing certain human organs used for speech. Its author writes that prior attempts were made, but "have not been very successful,"<sup>14</sup> however, he begins his account by writing high praises to Faber,

<sup>9</sup> The only known photograph of Euphonia was supposedly taken by Mathew Brady's studio while on exhibit at Barnum's Museum in New York, around the year 1860.

<sup>10</sup> "The Speaking Machine," *Manchester and Salford Advertiser and Chronicle*, May 27, 1843. This is the earliest newspaper mention of Faber's invention that I could find. This account was noted to be a copy of an original that was published in Hamburg on March 31, 1843 in *Atheneum*.

<sup>11</sup> "Speaking Machine."

<sup>12</sup> "Speaking Machine."

<sup>13</sup> "Speaking Machine."

<sup>14</sup> "Speaking Machine."

claiming that his invention “certainly merits every praise that can be bestowed upon unwearied perseverance and successful ingenuity.”<sup>15</sup>

Three years later, in 1846, Faber exhibited Euphonia at the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly London. In *The Morning Advertiser* from August 26, 1846, we can read that Faber’s invention “speaks any thing and every thing suggested by the audience in all languages, whispers, declaims, laughs, and sings various airs.”<sup>16</sup> The advertisement also claimed that The Speaking Machine had been presented to the “Emperor and Court of Austria, the King and Queen and Court of Prussia, The Duke of Wellington, the Lord Chamberlain, Earl Spencer, Lord Eldon, Harwarden, &c.,”<sup>17</sup> in all these instances being met with praise and making a good impression.

A couple of days earlier, an account of the Euphonia’s London show was published in *The Sun* on August 17, 1846, further praising Faber’s work in its opening words, claiming:

This is the most extraordinary production of ingenuity and perseverance that it has ever been our good fortune to observe. It is, without any cheat or fraud, in reality a speaking machine, and an object of the highest wonder.<sup>18</sup>

Euphonia was exhibited in many places—a year earlier, in December of 1845, Faber presented it at the Musical Fund Hall in Philadelphia where a certain Joseph Henry (1797–1878), an American scientist who claimed the discovery of magnetic induction, examined it as a potential ventriloquistic hoax but ended up leaving the exhibition deeply impressed, declaring it a “wonderful invention.”<sup>19</sup> In one of his letters he commented that Faber’s machine was much better at speaking than any other similar invention of the time, explaining that in-

<sup>15</sup> “Speaking Machine.”

<sup>16</sup> “The Speaking Automaton or Euphonia,” *Morning Advertiser*, August 26, 1846.

<sup>17</sup> “Speaking Automaton or Euphonia.” Another visitor who left the London exhibition very impressed was Melville Bell, the father of Alexander Graham Bell, who then challenged his sons to build it. And they did. More in Frank Rives Millikan, “Henry and the Telephone,” Smithsonian Institution Archives, accessed October 17, 2024, [https://siarchives.si.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/jhpp/JHP\\_Joseph\\_Henry\\_and\\_the\\_Telephone.pdf](https://siarchives.si.edu/sites/default/files/pdfs/jhpp/JHP_Joseph_Henry_and_the_Telephone.pdf), 1–2.

<sup>18</sup> “Professor Faber’s Speaking Automaton.”

<sup>19</sup> Millikan, “Henry and the Telephone,” 1.

stead of uttering only a few words, Euphonia was capable of speaking whole sentences composed of “any words what ever”<sup>20</sup> and saw great potential for its future application.<sup>21</sup>

In many of these accounts we find descriptions of how the Euphonia’s mechanism worked to produce sounds and successfully imitate human speech. Returning to the opinion of one “B” from Hamburg, whose account was published in 1843 in *The Manchester and Salford Advertiser and Chronicle*,<sup>22</sup> we find that the machine consisted of parts that artificially imitated the entire human vocal tract. According to some sources, Faber knew its anatomy well—in order to study it with the intention of reproducing it, he may have dissected more than a hundred human heads. “B” described the result as follows:

I can only give you a very imperfect idea of the instrument. To understand the mechanism perfectly, it would be necessary to take it to pieces, and the dissection is naturally not shown the visitor—less from a wish to conceal anything, than from the time and labour necessary for such a purpose. The machine consists of a pair of bellows, at present only worked by a pedal *similar to that of an organ, of a caoutchouc imitation of the larynx, tongue, nostrils, and of a set of keys by which the springs are brought into action.*—[The further description would be unintelligible without diagrams.]—The rapidity of utterance depends, of course, upon the rapidity with which the keys are played.<sup>23</sup>

Euphonia had bellows for lungs and its intricately designed head was certainly not there only for mere decoration. To be able to speak, the head was molded in great detail, and while the upper part of the face remained unmoving and the eyes stared ahead blankly, the main source of Euphonia’s speech lay in its oral

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Henry’s letter to Henry M. Alexander, January 6, 1846, in *The Papers of Joseph Henry*, ed. Marc Rothenberg et al., vol. 6, *January 1844–December 1846* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1992), 362.

<sup>21</sup> He saw in it the potential to serve as a sort of a telegraphic tool that would be able to deliver a sermon to different churches at the same time. However, that was before the invention of the telephone. He wrote of this idea that: “the keys could be worked by means of electro-magnetic magnets and with a little contrivance not difficult to execute words might be spoken at one end of the telegraphic line which have their origin at the other.” More in Millikan, “Henry and the Telephone,” 1–2.

<sup>22</sup> “Speaking Machine.”

<sup>23</sup> “Speaking Machine”; brackets in original, italics added.

cavity, which was fully equipped with a jaw, cheeks, a palate, a tongue, teeth, and gums and extended to an artificial larynx. Above the mouth, framed by lips, it had nostrils, within which there was an additional small windmill-like part that helped it to pronounce certain sounds, like the letter “R,” revolving and rattling when the air was pushed through the cavity.<sup>24</sup>

Some accounts, like the one appearing in the *Brighouse and Rastrick Gazette* in 1880, described the surprising presence, visibleness, and agility of the machine’s tongue, which was “worked by a spring”<sup>25</sup> and moved within the opened mouth of the machine when it was at work. It seems like the audience was given a full and a very somatic demonstration of how human speech is produced, with an emphasis on certain parts and organs that were, in the case of the machine, a lot more pronounced than when encountering the everyday production of ordinary human speech—at least with most people.

The author of the opinion piece that appeared in *The Sun* in 1846 seemed to have greatly admired Faber’s invention, as well as his ingenuity in using rubber as a material to replicate the fleshy parts of Euphonia’s mouth and throat. He regarded it as a great and unprecedented scientific achievement which, according to the author, was thought impossible before Euphonia appeared:

Professor Faber was the first man who analysed “Caouchouc,” or India rubber; from this material he has formed the various organs of articulation, so as exactly to resemble those appertaining to humanity, and by means of keys, and bellows (for lungs); he has at last conquered every obstacle, and has succeeded in constructing an instrument which will plainly and distinctly speak all languages, sing, whisper, laugh, &c. This wonderful result is now achieved for the first time, although it has often, during the last few centuries, been pronounced an impossibility by *savans* of all countries.<sup>26</sup>

Not everyone was full of praise—a report from 1844, published in the *New York Daily Tribune*, found the artificial head of Euphonia rather comical, but in more

<sup>24</sup> “Professor’s Faber’s Talking Machine,” *Brighouse and Rastrick Gazette*, February 21, 1880.

<sup>25</sup> “Professor’s Faber’s Talking Machine.”

<sup>26</sup> “Professor Faber’s Speaking Automaton.”



of a sinister manner, as if in turn a joke was being played on humankind, and wrote:

The sounds issue from the lips of a Mask that as they open and shut reveal a tongue that plays like the living member, though not so “limberly.” It is really laughable to see this bust placed upright with a turbaned head and whiskered face slowly enunciating in a whining tone, sounds which we have heretofore considered as *belonging exclusively to our species*.<sup>27</sup>

Exactly how the mechanism functioned is not clear.<sup>28</sup> However, it is known that the Euphonia had to be played like an odd instrument to effectively speak—it was operated by foot pedals and two keyboards. With one keyboard the operator of the apparatus manipulated seventeen keys, connected to Euphonia’s “vocal cords” of which sixteen corresponded to sixteen different elementary sounds and a seventeenth key that could, when pressed, bypass the vocal cords altogether by opening and closing the machine’s glottis that lay between them<sup>29</sup>—with another keyboard the operator manipulated music and that is how Euphonia was able to sing.<sup>30</sup> The pedals were the direct connection to the machine’s “lungs” and the strings and levers functioned as its tendons and muscles.<sup>31</sup> The speed with which Euphonia spoke depended on the speed with which the keys were played by an operator.

A look at another impression that Euphonia left on one of the visitors, published “forty or fifty years”<sup>32</sup> later, in 1894, shows the other side of this machine, which

<sup>27</sup> “Talking Machine,” *New York Daily Tribune*, January 26, 1844; italics added.

<sup>28</sup> Although J. Faber was clearly not inclined to conceal any aspect of how Euphonia worked—he explained its mechanism both to his audience and to those who wanted to know more. The following advertisement emphasized how a demonstration of the Euphonia’s mechanism was a regular part of the show: “The Exhibition is not limited to simple talking, but is enhanced by an explanatory description of the method of producing the various sounds, words, and sentences, visitors also being allowed to inspect every part of the Machine. It is not only interesting to the Scientific as illustrating the theory acoustics, but to the public in general, and especially to the young,—to whom it offers an inexhaustible fund of wonder and amusement.” “Barnum’s Talking Machine.”

<sup>29</sup> Henry to Alexander, 362.

<sup>30</sup> John Hollingshead, “The Story of My Lifetime,” *The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, September 22, 1894.

<sup>31</sup> Henry to Alexander, 363.

<sup>32</sup> Hollingshead, “Story of My Lifetime.”

for some had a slightly uncanny presence (this is probably the unfortunate reason that eventually led to the demise of its inventor). It was written by John Hollingshead, who visited the exhibition in 1846 when Faber presented it at the Egyptian Hall in London, and many years later wrote the short memoir with the telling title “The Story of My Lifetime,” consisting of sixteen parts in total, of which his encounter with Euphonia was mentioned last. It seems that John Hollingshead felt haunted by Faber’s invention and recalled it with the following words:

In the centre was a box on a table, looking like a rough piano without legs and having two key-boards. This was surmounted by a half-length weird figure, rather bigger than a full-grown man, with an automaton head and face looking more mysteriously vacant than such faces usually look. Its mouth was large, and opened like the jaws of Gorgibuster<sup>33</sup> in the pantomime, disclosing artificial gums, teeth, and all the organs of speech.<sup>34</sup>

It was reported that the machine could speak several languages—at least we know that it spoke English, German, Italian, French, Latin, and Greek, languages which Faber was familiar with—it also laughed, sang, and whispered.<sup>35</sup> One spectator commented that Euphonia spoke better English than its German creator, who in turn humorously claimed that this was because it was American:<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Probably a reference to the Giant Gorgibuster, the giant from the story Jack and the Beanstalk, which at the time was also produced as a pantomime play. It is safe to conclude that John Hollingshead considered Euphonia at best as grotesque.

<sup>34</sup> Hollingshead, “Story of My Lifetime.”

<sup>35</sup> “Professor Faber’s Speaking Automaton.” Also, “The Talking Machine,” *Illustrated London News*, August 6, 1846, 15.

<sup>36</sup> It is difficult to say whether this is true—perhaps partly as at least one machine might have been constructed in the USA. Faber nevertheless created at least two “talking machines” that we know of (and that were destroyed first in 1844 and then again in 1860, when he died) and in both, the principle and the mechanism seem to have remained the same. There may have been more, as the machine was purchased and toured by P. T. Barnum long after Joseph Faber’s death in the 1860s. Some sources report on Euphonia later being operated by Faber’s nephew (“Talking Machine,” *London Times*, February 12, 1880), others mention another “Faber” who was supposedly a husband of Joseph Faber’s niece (Altick, *Shows of London*, 356), and lastly, Mrs. Mary Faber, who operated and owned Euphonia in 1887 (“The Talking Machine Was There,” *New York Times*, July 24, 1887).

Mr. Faber, the artist, speaks only German, yet he has taught his machine to speak English, and speak it too better than German. And what is still more curious, it gives some of our difficult sounds better than Mr. Faber himself can pronounce them. The “th,” for instance, which is the Rubicon in our language to a German, it gives like a native-born American. Indeed, we do not believe the “Native American Party” itself could tell a difference. On asking Mr. Faber how it came to pass his machine could speak better English than German, he replied: “why shouldn’t it?—it is American born.”<sup>37</sup>

According to another account, Faber spent several years perfecting the pronunciation of the letter “E” and devoted twenty-five years of his life to the construction of the machine.<sup>38</sup> A much later report from 1880, however, claimed, in contrast, that the Euphonia’s pronunciation of “single letters of the alphabet” and monosyllabic words suited “its vocal powers better than connected sentences.”<sup>39</sup> At that Tuesday’s exhibition, Euphonia was reported to have said things like “Eliza,” “London,” “Paris,” “I am tired,” and in French: “*Comment vous portez vous.*”<sup>40</sup> Today it is difficult to judge how proficient at speaking the machine actually was. Since its utterances were somehow generated by air expelled through bellows and then manipulated by the set of keys, the movements and shapes of the rubber mouth, and other such influences, including weather, which tended to make the rubber more or less agile, the result was a rather disconcerting voice slowly wheezing out of the “strange-looking” half-human apparatus. In order to speak, Euphonia had to breathe, and as the machine first drew the air inwards and the bellows expanded, it then pushed it out through its complex mechanism, producing words:

Giving a rough outline of what is indeed a very complex piece of machinery, it may be stated that the human lungs are represented by a very powerful pair of bellows, the air from which passes through a passage contrived so as to take, upon the working of certain levers, the form of the throat while pronouncing the

<sup>37</sup> “Talking Machine,” *New York Daily Tribune*.

<sup>38</sup> “After obtaining the power of pronouncing all the other vowels by mechanical contrivance, he spent seven years in finding means of artificially pronouncing the letter E.” “Professor Faber’s Speaking Automaton.”

<sup>39</sup> “Professor’s Faber’s Talking Machine.”

<sup>40</sup> “Professor’s Faber’s Talking Machine.” This translates into English as “How are you faring?”

fundamental sounds of most modern languages. At the end of this passage is the exact imitation of a human mouth made of indiarubber [. . .].<sup>41</sup>

In addition, this quite complex mechanism also enabled it to sing. Euphonia often sang “God Save The Queen”<sup>42</sup>—by all accounts an extraordinary performance—which according to one witness, has “never probably before or since been so sung”<sup>43</sup> and this comment was anything but an indication that this meant the machine’s performance was warmly accepted. As Euphonia supposedly spoke in a rather eerie, “ghost-like,” monotonic voice, it sometimes made its listeners uneasy—it sounded slow, flat, and “whining.”<sup>44</sup> In his memoir, John Hollingshead commented that Euphonia’s voice sounded as if it was slowly coming “from the depths of a tomb.”<sup>45</sup>

In this light, we may easily understand why even the well-inclined commentator from the *Athenaeum* (1843), who was, in general, full of praise for Faber’s mechanical ingenuity, thought that the choice of the name was amiss and the talking machine was “not very appropriately called Euphonia.”<sup>46</sup> Euphonia is namely the name of a genus in the finch family which refers directly to the singing voice of birds described as being “sweet-voiced” and, accordingly, the word “euphonic” in the English language carries the meaning of something being “well sounding”: *eu*, εὖ, in Greek means “well” or “good,” and *phōnē*, φωνή, means “sound.” It seems that, in contrast, Euphonia could not at all be described as a machine that produced “a pleasant sound,” since even the first report considered here, by one “B.,” which in general praised the “Talking Machine,” hoped for its improvement when writing that there was no doubt “that the machine may be much improved, and *more especially that the timbre of the voice may be agreeably modified.*”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>41</sup> “Professor’s Faber’s Talking Machine.”

<sup>42</sup> Also mentioned in “Speaking Automaton or Euphonia.”

<sup>43</sup> Hollingshead, “Story of My Lifetime.”

<sup>44</sup> “The Talking Machine,” *New York Daily Tribune*.

<sup>45</sup> Hollingshead, “Story of My Lifetime.”

<sup>46</sup> “Speaking Machine.”

<sup>47</sup> “Speaking Machine”; italics added.

Faber perhaps did not see the need for such a modification or did not succeed in making Euphonia's voice more "agreeable,"<sup>48</sup> as the much later accounts kept mentioning the same problem—while the learned men of the age praised the ingenuity of its invention, the general public tended to react more dismissively to the wheezing speech coming out of the gaping head, reminiscent of a death mask, which opened the show on one occasion with: "Please excuse my slow pronunciation . . . Good morning, ladies and gentlemen . . . It is a warm day . . . It is a rainy day . . . *Buon giorno, signori.*"<sup>49</sup>

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"For one shilling a head,"<sup>50</sup> the spectators were able to attend the exhibition of Euphonia at the famous Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, London in 1846.<sup>51</sup> John Hollingshead's experience of the show is the only full account of Euphonia we have of what such an event was like:

It wanted little imagination to make the very few visitors believe that the figure maintained an imprisoned human—or *half-human being*, being bound to speak very slowly when tormented by the unseen power outside. [. . .] As a crowning display, the head sang a dual version of "God Save the Queen," which suggested inevitably, *God save the inventor*. [. . .] Never probably before or since, has the National Anthem been so sung. Sadder and wiser, I, and the few visitors, *crept slowly* from the place, leaving the Professor with his one and only treasure—*his child of infinite labour and unmeasurable sorrow.*<sup>52</sup>

After the description of the shabbiness of the inventor and his working space, Hollingshead continued in a more chilling tone—he was convinced that Faber slept in the same room with his invention and called it "his [Faber's] scientific Frankenstein,"<sup>53</sup> claiming, that he could somewhat prophetically feel "the se-

<sup>48</sup> In reference to "Speaking Machine."

<sup>49</sup> Altick, *Shows of London*, 354.

<sup>50</sup> Hollingshead, "Story of My Lifetime."

<sup>51</sup> Demolished in 1905.

<sup>52</sup> Hollingshead, "Story of My Lifetime"; italics added.

<sup>53</sup> Hollingshead.

cret influence of an idea that the two were destined to live and die together.”<sup>54</sup> As they inevitably did.

Hollingshead described Faber as “a sad-faced man, dressed in respectable well-worn clothes that were soiled by contact with tools, wood, and machinery. [. . .] Not too clean, and his hair and beard sadly wanted the attention of a barber.”<sup>55</sup> And he proclaimed Euphonia as Faber’s “treasure” and as “his child of infinite labour and unmeasurable sorrow.”<sup>56</sup> However, this memoir was written long after Faber’s death in the 1860s,<sup>57</sup> and its author attempted to retroactively claim predictions of certain events that had already taken place decades before. What is known is that Joseph Faber had supposedly ended his life in bankruptcy and derangement after destroying his beloved machine—the treasured invention that had brought him no success, fame, name, or any big financial gain. Or, as Hollingshead described his last days:

He disappeared quietly from London, and took his marvel to the provinces, where it was even less appreciated. The end came at last, and not the unexpected end. One day, in a dull matter-of-fact town—a town that could understand nothing but circus or a Jack Pudding—he destroyed himself and his figure. The world went on just the same, bestowing as little notice on his memory as it had on his exhibition.<sup>58</sup>

Hollingshead’s reference<sup>59</sup> to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s novel *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus* from 1818 does not seem so coincidental when one considers that the motif of the bedroom—the inventor talking and sleeping with

<sup>54</sup> Hollingshead.

<sup>55</sup> Hollingshead.

<sup>56</sup> Hollingshead.

<sup>57</sup> According to sources, we can suppose that after the 1860s, the machine, which had already been rebuilt at least once, was toured by J. Faber’s nephew (or a husband of his niece) and later by P. T. Barnum. In *Mechanics’ Magazine*, from as early as 1844, we can find a short note claiming that “Mr. Faber, the ingenious inventor of the talking-machine, at Philadelphia, totally destroyed it the other day, in a fit of temporary derangement.” “Notes and Notices,” *Mechanics’ Magazine*, July 27, 1844.

<sup>58</sup> Hollingshead, “Story of My Lifetime.”

<sup>59</sup> Even though it is erroneous since it equates Victor Frankenstein, the creator, with the creature, Frankenstein’s monster. However, this tends to be somehow a general misconception regarding the name, as the creature is nameless in the novel.

his life's work and finally destroying it and himself—invokes the scene from the very novel in which Victor Frankenstein looks for the second time into the yellow eyes of his greatest invention, the fruit of his immeasurable labor, when it enters his bedroom—the artificially created man. And what he sees when the creature holds up the curtain of his bed with him lying in it fills him with horror, as the creature, in turn, fixes its eyes on him:

I beheld the wretch—the *miserable monster whom I had created*. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear; one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped and rushed downstairs.<sup>60</sup>

In the intimate setting of the bedroom, the “miserable wretch,” the creature Victor created, constitutes itself as subject. While before, at the moment of the very creation, the inventor alluded to his invention as “it” and called it “the thing”: “I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; *it* breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated *its* limbs,”<sup>61</sup> this “it” became, after the constitutive moment of the creature’s returned “gaze” and again in their second encounter, in the “bedchamber,” a “he”: “he held up the curtain; his eyes were fixed on me; his jaws opened; he muttered, etc.”<sup>62</sup> It is in this case that the “gaze” that returns is the gaze that speaks, and what it says leads the inventor to realize the true horror of his success: the body he has assembled from collected bones and limbs from ossuary and morgue, is very much alive, although tainted with death; it is something non-human that looks very much like a human—but again, not quite—which in turn evokes a strange, stomach-turning and uncanny sense of them—the inventor and its invention—as being somewhat alike.

This scene in the bedroom could well fit the description of Euphonia: eyes fixed forward, jaw dropped, mouth wide open, speech slowly wheezing out of it, the spectators feeling its breath on their faces—it is something that possesses attributes of something living, that breathes and speaks, but at the same time is

<sup>60</sup> Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus*, ed. Maurice Hindle (London: Penguin, 2013), 59.

<sup>61</sup> Shelley, 58; italics added.

<sup>62</sup> Shelley, 59.

clearly a contraption, a machine that is being played on; and the fascination that turns to horror stems precisely from its successful simulation of a living being and harbors the same old question: Is man perhaps, as La Mettrie famously proposed in his work *Man a Machine* from 1747, “so complicated a machine?”<sup>63</sup> Does the sight of a talking machine reveal the inherent automatism of the human body itself? And whether, in turn, if matter can speak, does that also imply that matter can think?<sup>64</sup>

Whether the story of Faber’s final days was merely a product of Hollingshead’s imagination or not, it certainly found its place in the afore existing framework of the cautionary tale of an inventor’s attempt to play a hopeless game in the role of an omnipotent being, not unlike Shelley’s Victor Frankenstein, consequently resulting in the reciprocal destruction of the inventor and his creation. With a little modification, the creature’s words at the end of the novel could have been spoken by Euphonia, as the invention usurps the word that belonged to the domain of its inventor, and speaks for itself:

I shall collect my funeral pile and consume to ashes this miserable frame, that its remains may afford no light to any curious and unhallowed wretch who would create such another as I have been. *I shall die*. I shall no longer feel the agonies which now consume me or be the prey of feeling unsatisfied, yet unquenched. *He is dead who called me into being*; and when I shall be no more, the very remembrance of us both will speedily vanish.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man a Machine: Including Frederick The Great’s “Eulogy” on La Mettrie and Extracts from La Mettrie’s The Natural History of the Soul*, ed. Mary Whiton Calkins (Chicago: Open Court, 1912), 89.

<sup>64</sup> “The metaphysics who have hinted that matter may be endowed with the faculty of thought have perhaps not reasoned ill. For there is in this case a certain advantage in their inadequate way of expressing their meaning. In truth, to ask whether matter can think, without considering it otherwise than in itself, is like asking whether matter can tell time. It may be foreseen that we shall avoid this reef upon which Locke had the bad luck to make shipwreck.” La Mettrie, *Man a Machine*, 85. Mladen Dolar also develops this idea (speaking implies thinking) with the previously noted examples of two of Kempelen’s automata: a talking machine (Mechanismus) and a Turk, a chess master, which von Kempelen exhibited together. Dolar, *Voice*, 6–11.

<sup>65</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 224; italics added.



The self-destruction of the artificially created being, with which the reader is faced at the end, paints a strong contrast with the creation that takes place at the beginning of the novel. First, the roles of the creator and the creation convert from the latter being passive, to becoming an active emancipatory force, not only of its own un-making but of the un-making of its creator as well. A mechanism of substitutive action is at work here—what is created becomes the driving force of the destruction and the act of creating is dispelled as it is turned into its offset condition. In the novel, this is conveyed through the scene when Victor arrives at the University of Ingolstadt and refers to this self-possessive drive that starts haunting him as the “Angel of Destruction.”<sup>66</sup> This drive, which he later describes as the perpetually increasing urge of a “resistless and almost frantic impulse,”<sup>67</sup> urges him forward in his obsessive pursuit:

No one can conceive the variety of feelings which bore me onwards, *like a hurricane*, in the first enthusiasm of success. Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me *as its creator and source*; many happy and excellent natures *would owe their being to me*. No father could claim the gratitude of his child so completely as I should deserve theirs.<sup>68</sup>

Ultimately it becomes evident that the creation not only results in but converts itself into its opposition, destruction, through the process of the created creature’s affirmation of itself as a subject when in place of a “thing” it becomes a “he.” As the creature affirms its place, it also constitutes itself as a converting agent that substitutes and consequently ultimately cancels the principal action of its creator.

However, throughout the novel, the creature is left essentially nameless, which leads to it achieving only a partial subjectivation as it is never successfully interpellated into a full subject as such, as pointed out by Jean-Jacques Lecercle, as through his analysis of the novel he provides the answer to why the creature initially becomes and consequently stays affirmed solely as Frankenstein’s *monster* without ever being bestowed its very own name—the name that would have the

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<sup>66</sup> Shelley, 47.

<sup>67</sup> Shelley, 55.

<sup>68</sup> Shelley, 55; italics added.

power to turn it into a full subject<sup>69</sup>—and consequently being granted the status of human being. Instead of achieving humanization, it is interpellated into a monster—in its very beginning, even as it draws its first breath, it is ostracized from society, named by no one and proclaimed by its very creator, through a series of categorizations (from “creature,” to “wretch,” to “being”), as the Other—as a “monster.” The proclamation as categorization of its creator (since it never receives a proper name, a *nom propre*, only an indication of class),<sup>70</sup> eventually turns into an internalized, self-proclamative action when, upon looking at itself in a pool of water, it confirms its monstrosity with the words: “The monster that I am.”<sup>71</sup> As Lecerclé explains:

The problem of the monster is that, for lack of a name, he is not a full-fledged subject. He is monstrous because he is not properly instituted as a subject: he is the object of a wrong interpellation (both a wrong process of hailing and a wrong name, which makes him a fantastic character). This is the mark—this is my main thesis—of a failed because flawed process of interpellation.<sup>72</sup>

Lecerclé refers to this process as the process of the defective interpellation into a subject, as “the monster achieves it *by himself*, in solitude, without social recognition,”<sup>73</sup> not meeting the conditions of becoming a fully interpellated subject in the Althusserian sense—being hailed and therefore subjectified. The carrier of this function thus lies in the name that is never fully given: “the monster is monstrous not because of his physical characteristics (his size and ugliness), but *because he is called so*.”<sup>74</sup> Through this alienation it becomes an “impossible

<sup>69</sup> Jean-Jacques Lecerclé, *Frankenstein: Mythe et philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1988) and Jean-Jacques Lecerclé, “What’s in a Monster?,” *Anglistik* 30, no. 3 (2019): 17–26, <https://doi.org/10.33675/ANGL/2019/3/4>.

<sup>70</sup> However, the creature is the only member of the “monstrous race.” Lecerclé, “What’s in a Monster?,” 19.

<sup>71</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 116.

<sup>72</sup> Lecerclé, “What’s in a Monster?” 21.

<sup>73</sup> Lecerclé, 21; italics added.

<sup>74</sup> Lecerclé, 18; italics added. Here, Lecerclé (in his translation) also cites Jacques Lacan’s stance on the power of naming: “If I call this person whom I address by whatever name I give him, I impose on him the subjective function that he must take up in order to answer me, even if his response is to reject it.”

subject,”<sup>75</sup> the monster that cannot cross into categorization as a human being “because he is never given a proper name.”<sup>76</sup>

On the other hand, the creation essentially introduces the logic of likeness to the process. In the novel it can be found at the very beginning of Victor’s project of creating an artificial man, when he discovers that he is indeed “capable of bestowing animation upon *lifeless matter*,”<sup>77</sup> and eventually decides on creating, as he calls it, a being *like himself*.<sup>78</sup> In his aspiration, the creature is built up of separate parts that are forcibly assembled into an incoherent whole, and brought to life from already dead matter. There is, in fact, nothing about the creature’s body that belongs to it alone. It is constituted from the very otherness, being marked by death, and therefore it is also affirmed as something essentially foreign. The creature’s terrifying appearance is so dreadful to anyone that sees it that they cannot bear to look at it out of sheer terror and flee, as Victor first does in the scene in the bedroom, and many, with the exception of a blind man, follow afterwards.

If the urge to create an artificial man stems from the desire to take the place of the creator, to aspire to “becom[ing] greater than [his] nature will allow,”<sup>79</sup> to pursue hiding-places of nature,<sup>80</sup> and unveiling the great mystery of creation,<sup>81</sup> blurring the line between God and man, Shelley shows in her novel that this desire is ultimately a desire to imitate oneself. The creation of one’s own likeness is accompanied by the idea of mastering oneself, of participating in one’s own conception and taking control of oneself. But when this desire is realized and becomes concrete, when the created simulant comes to life and returns the gaze, it is turned monstrous and proves, within its own conditions, to be arti-

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<sup>75</sup> Lecerclé, 23.

<sup>76</sup> Lecerclé, 25.

<sup>77</sup> Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 53; italics added.

<sup>78</sup> “I doubted at first whether I should attempt the creation of *a being like myself*, or one of simpler organisation; but my imagination was too much exalted by my first success to permit me to doubt of my ability to give life to an animal as complex and wonderful as man.” Shelley, 54; italics added.

<sup>79</sup> Shelley, 54.

<sup>80</sup> Shelley, 55.

<sup>81</sup> Shelley, 49.

ficially produced, unnatural, and therefore intrinsically alien—and ultimately leads to glimpsing oneself as the Other.

It could be said that this meeting point of the two, Euphonia and Frankenstein's creature, lies in the realm of the uncanny. Both being constructed, one from organic material, another from "strings and levers,"<sup>82</sup> and bearing no other identity than the one of an artificial being that, despite the urge to change this status, never happens to surpasses it. But it comes dangerously close and threatens the established difference, revealing its precarious position. If the monster's self-destructive act constitutes a truly autonomous and, in a certain sense, emancipatory action, with the creature taking over the possession of its own being and un-making it (therefore taking it away from the creator), Euphonia, at least in Hollingshead's story, seems to achieve something similar—even though it is a machine that needs to be operated in order to be in possession of any action whatsoever—through its creator's obsession, which drives him to the same end.

If Frankenstein's creature fits into the category of non-living because it is constituted as a conglomerate of dead bodies, Euphonia is non-living because it is, to put it simply, a machine that is constructed out of equally non-living parts: wood, screws, and caoutchouc. However, all of its parts, as mechanical as they can be, effectively function as a substitute for at least that part of the human body that is used in perhaps the crowning characteristic of humankind—speech, as the latter also carries the potentiality of thought. In both cases, the established likeness between the creation and its creator gives way to dread and repulsion, consequently evoking the very feeling of horror that comes from the recognition of likeness in difference—difference, instead of being preserved, through the act of recognizing the other as "alike" oneself, is converted into the feeling of that fundamental, most intimate dread that Freud refers to as the "uncanny." What is uncanny cannot be interpreted simply as something that is alien, strange, and unknown—to become truly uncanny, intrinsically terrifying, something must be added to the equation and what is added is its supposed opposite—"heimlich," the familiar. Therefore, what is truly uncanny is that which is both: something that was familiar a long time ago but has become foreign—like walking over a dried-up pond, as goes one of Freud's examples, "one cannot walk over it with-

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<sup>82</sup> Henry to Alexander, 363.

out always having the feeling that water might come up there again.”<sup>83</sup> As Freud points out when commenting on Jentsch’s interpretation, the “uncanny” is not something in which one does not recognize oneself, but is something in which one can recognize oneself as unfamiliar. This reversal is necessary in order to be overwhelmed by the uncanny, which is therefore revealed as the kind of unfamiliar that leads back to the familiar.

While in Shelley’s novel a simple look at the creature results in repetitive outbursts of dread and its gaze is what turns it uncanny, the latter appears, in the case of Euphonia, through its voice, as its eyes are wide open, but unseeing. The machine thus gives the dreadful impression that it, in Hollingshead’s words, “maintains an imprisoned human—or half-human being, being bound to speak very slowly when tormented by the unseen power outside.”<sup>84</sup> The presence of the mask’s empty gaze betrays the intention of covering up the source of the voice, but failing and instead additionally feeding the horror of the audience, which when the show is done creeps away slowly, unsettled, and in silence,<sup>85</sup> looking over its shoulder, as if something was stirred that should not be disturbed:

Like one who, on a lonely road,  
Doth walk in fear and dread,  
And, having once turned round, walks on,  
And turns no more his head;  
Because he knows a frightful fiend  
Doth close behind his tread.<sup>86</sup>

Let us, at last, conclude with Euphonia’s closing words that it spoke on one occasion in 1886: “I’m very tired. Thank you, gentlemen. *Adieu*.”<sup>87</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny,’” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 17, *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works* (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 223.

<sup>84</sup> Hollingshead, “Story of My Lifetime.”

<sup>85</sup> Hollingshead.

<sup>86</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” quoted in Shelley, *Frankenstein*, 60.

<sup>87</sup> “A Talking Machine,” *Liberal of Richmond Hill*, June 17, 1886.

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## Thinking the Machine: Supplement, Mimesis, Metaphor

### Keywords

machine, labor, supplement, simulacrum, metaphor, desire, knowledge

### Abstract

The fact that we were used to thinking non-thinking machines, the ones supplementing human physical labor, and that we are only now encountering machines that supposedly supplement human thinking, does not mean that this is either the direction in the evolution of the machine or the genealogy of ideas about the machine. Psychoanalysis tempts us to say that the history of the machine could only be written together with the history of the unconscious, while studies of ancient orality reveal to us the intricacy of the oral technicity predating the technology of the written word. This means that the machine predates a simple tool, and highlights the possibility of thinking a genealogy of the machine, which must necessarily entangle with the genealogy of thought and memory. Following this line of thought, we should correct ourselves by saying that the idea of a machine that thinks is not a contemporary occurrence after all.

## Misliti stroj: nadomestek, mimezis, metafora

### Ključne besede

stroj, delo, nadomestek, simulaker, metafora, želja, vednost

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### Povzetek

Dejstvo, da smo bili navajeni misliti stroje, ki ne mislijo, tiste, ki nadomeščajo človekovo fizično delo, in da se šele zdaj srečujemo s stroji, ki domnevno nadomeščajo človekovo mišljenje, še ne pomeni, da je to smer razvoja stroja ali genealogija idej o stroju. Psihoanaliza nas napeljuje k temu, da bi rekli, da je zgodovino stroja mogoče pisati le skupaj z zgodovino nezavednega, medtem ko nam študije antične oralnosti razkrivajo

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njihovo zapletenost, ki predhodi tehnologiji pisane besede. To pomeni, da se stroj pojavi pred preprostim orodjem, kar kaže na možnost mišljenja genealogije stroja, ki se mora nujno prepletati z genealogijo mišljenja in spomina. Če sledimo tej misli, bi se nasezadnje morali popraviti in reči, da ideja stroja, ki misli, vendarle ni sodoben pojav.



## The Supplemmentarity of the Machine

What does it mean to think the machine and how does it differ from thinking the *thinking* machine? Can we think what the machine thinks, and if so, does our thinking have the same relation to the machine as our arm has to the lever, wedge, or hydraulic arm, or is this relation more like the one between our legs and the wheel? Is this relation therefore synecdochic or rather metonymic? This open set of questions raises another, namely regarding the relationship between thinking and the machine. The fact that we were used to thinking non-thinking machines as the ones supplementing human physical labor, and that we are only now encountering machines that supposedly supplement human thinking, does not mean that this is either the direction in the evolution of the machine or the genealogy of ideas about the machine. Psychoanalysis tempts us to say that the history of the machine could only be written together with the history of the unconscious, while studies of ancient orality reveal to us the intricacy of the oral technicity predating the technology of the written word. This means that the machine predates a simple tool, and highlights the possibility of thinking a genealogy of the machine, which must necessarily entangle with the genealogy of thought and memory. Following this line of thought, we should correct ourselves by saying that the idea of a machine that thinks is not a contemporary occurrence after all.

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There is nothing contradictory about (1) being a machine and (2) being able to feel, to think and to tell right from wrong like telling blue from yellow.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Julien Offray de La Mettrie, *Man-Machine*, ed. Jonathan Bennett (n.p.: Early Modern Texts, 2009), 30.

With La Mettrie and the materialisms of the Age of Enlightenment, the relation between thought and machine changes: thinking no longer opposes life in the same way as life opposes inanimate matter and freedom opposes the constraint of causation, but instead begins to represent the structure of the thinking apparatus that operates thought as its possibility. Of course, the point is not to claim that La Mettrie presents us with something new that has never been thought before, for we could argue that this thought can be traced back at least to Aristotle.<sup>2</sup> It would also be futile to engage in debates about dualism and monism when we should instead begin by tracing the territory of the questions raised above. The transformation of the opposition between thought and machine into a relation between a structure and its productions should not lead us to confuse the life that bears the machine with a machine that bears life, but instead we should follow the productions of this uncanny similarity between the artistry of life and the life produced by artistry.

It is in light of this elusive difference that we propose reading the works of Samuel Butler and Karel Čapek. When reading Butler's *Erewhon*<sup>3</sup> and Čapek's *R.U.R.—Rossum's Universal Robots*,<sup>4</sup> one can detect a certain fear of the supplementarity between man and machine, which becomes so characteristic at least in the second half of the nineteenth century although, as we will attempt to show later, the genealogy of this fear stretches further back in time.

The first hint of this fact can already be found in the title of Čapek's play, as the word robot comes from the Slavic word *robota*, meaning forced labor, which is presented in the play in the form of a machine that is made and bound to work as a supplement to human labor. The condition for this deployment lies in the robot's ability to carry out work faster and without any need of rest. In the play it is stated that young Rossum had to remodel early robots invented by his fa-

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<sup>2</sup> "Now given that there are bodies of such and such a kind, viz. having life, the soul cannot be a body; for the body is the subject or matter, not what is attributed to it. Hence the soul must be a substance in the sense of the form of a natural body having life potentially within it. But substance is actuality, and thus soul is the actuality of a body as above characterised." Aristotle, "On the Soul," trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1 (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 656, 412a17–22.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Butler, *Erewhon: Or, Over the Range* (London: Trübner, 1872).

<sup>4</sup> Karel Čapek, *R.U.R.—Rossum's Universal Robots*, trans. David Wyllie (eBooks@Adelaide, 2006), Manybooks.

ther, Dr. Rossum, because “the old man [. . .] had no idea at all about industrial production.”<sup>5</sup> His robots were too human-like and so young Rossum “threw out everything that wasn’t of direct use in his work, that is to say he threw out the human and put in the robot.”<sup>6</sup> Apart from the physical and emotional limits imposed on human work, the adjective “universal” expresses the machine’s ability to be used in a wider range of demand, in contrast to human work, which is necessarily specialized and therefore must be educated for a long time, whereas robots with their “amazing memory,”<sup>7</sup> learn at the first encounter with the knowledge being taught to them, as if they already possess it, in the simple way of their constitution.

In Butler’s 1872 satirical novel *Erewhon*, the civilization our hero encounters lives in a kind of inverted culture that opposes progress down to the smallest detail, from the inversion of the social system of awards and benefits, to the banishment of all modern technology, and so on. What stands out again is the fear that people’s bodies and minds will be supplemented by apparatuses and machines, rendering them redundant and consequently extinct. The notion of progress in *Erewhon* certainly implies a vector of increasing supplementarity of life by the machine, but what also becomes noticeable is the absurd and comic character of the civilization described, which, in order to give up technology and preserve itself, had to sacrifice knowledge and wisdom—which meant the banishment of a whole array of societal machines, if we use the term as Louis Mumford uses it in *The Myth of the Machine*.<sup>8</sup> For Butler, the age of the machine had always already begun and we share with the machine our evolutionary fate, which is also the main theme of *Erewhon*: “The fact is that our interests are inseparable from theirs [machines], and theirs from ours.”<sup>9</sup> It is technological advancement that has accelerated man’s race in evolution:

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<sup>5</sup> Čapek, 12, 13.

<sup>6</sup> Čapek, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Čapek, 20.

<sup>8</sup> “There it is no doubt that the machines which built the pyramids and the great temples, and which performed all the great constructive works of ‘civilization’ in other areas and cultures, were true machines.” Lewis Mumford, *The Myth of the Machine: Technics and Human Development* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1966), 197.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Butler, “Darwin among the Machines,” *Zeitschrift für Medien- und Kulturforschung* 9, no. 1 (2018): 63, <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/18697>.

If we examine the machinery of the Great Eastern,<sup>10</sup> we find ourselves almost awestruck at the vast development of the mechanical world, at the gigantic strides with which it has advanced in comparison with the slow progress of the animal and vegetable kingdom.<sup>11</sup>

In order to advance in the evolutionary race, one needs to master the machine, which will eventually subdue him in this race, but remain bound to him in fate. Jean-Jacques Rousseau was perhaps the one who, by not even taking serious account of it, described the supplementary logic of man's nature, when in his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men*, also commonly known as *The Second Discourse*, he described man as the one among animals who, while not possessing any instinct that belongs to him, receives from nature its supplement—the capability to simulate instincts.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore the role of man in relation to other animals what a machine is in relation to man, with the difference that at the present moment at least man thinks he is the master of the machines and not the other way around. In his short letter from 1863—four years after Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species* and four years before Marx's *Capital*—Butler proclaimed the urgent need for a theory of the general evolution of animals, humans, and machines, with which we would be able to think the history of this supplementarity and fight against it, of course only if the “mischief” has not already been done.<sup>13</sup>

It is man's imitation of animal instincts and his own supplementary nature—to paraphrase Rousseau—that enables him to use other animals in his place, but at the same time it enables capital to make machines work in the place of man. The term manpower is still rarely used today in the same way that the term horsepower has been used since the eighteenth century, i.e., as a concept that expresses the amount of work that a machine is capable of doing in place of a worker (human or animal). Although the term horsepower itself predates the

<sup>10</sup> The SS Great Eastern (nicknamed: Leviathan, or Great Babe) was a British ship built during the Victorian Era which held the title of the largest passenger ship in the world for four decades (1859–99). “SS Great Eastern,” Wikipedia, last edited October 17, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS\\_Great\\_Eastern](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SS_Great_Eastern).

<sup>11</sup> Butler, “Darwin among the Machines,” 61.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and The First and Second Discourses*, ed. Susan Dunn (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 96.

<sup>13</sup> Butler, “Darwin among the Machines,” 3.

invention of the steam-engine, it could be said that it is a term formed in the anticipation of the machine, and is thus already molding life in its approach<sup>14</sup> by expressing abstract work, to which facts of life are subsumed under a general concept of use:

Man's very soul is due to the machines; it is a machine-made thing: he thinks as he thinks, and feels as he feels, through the work that machines have wrought upon him, and their existence is quite as much a *sine qua non* for his, as his for theirs.<sup>15</sup>

The work hour as a universal measure of work in the capitalist mode of production presupposes an industrial system of production in which the worker is “free” from mastery of the skill constraining him to his traditional occupations and thus becomes an abstract unit of abstract work, detached from his material and epistemological conditions: “Rather, it is the machine which possesses skill and strength in place of the worker, is itself the virtuoso, with a soul of its own in the mechanical laws acting through it [ . . . ].”<sup>16</sup> In *Grundrisse*, specifically in “The Fragment on Machines,” Marx describes this becoming of the machine, through the “accumulation of knowledge and of skill”<sup>17</sup> and thus through the appropriation of social intellectual and physical labor, which gets transferred onto the machine in the form of fixed capital. Later in *Capital* he again makes this point clear:

Owing to its conversion into an automaton, the instrument of labour confronts the worker during the labour process in the shape of capital, dead labour, which dominates and soaks up living labour-power. The separation of the intellectual faculties of the production process from manual labour and the transformation

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<sup>14</sup> “It is not the production line that produces standardization, but rather intrinsic standardization that allows for the production line to exist. An effort to discover the reason for the formation of specific types of technical objects within the transition from artisanal production to industrial production would mistake the consequence for its condition; the industrialization of production is rendered possible by the formation of stable types.” Gilbert Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, trans. Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2017), 29.

<sup>15</sup> Butler, *Erewhon*, 290.

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 693.

<sup>17</sup> Marx, 694.

of such faculties into powers exercised by capital over labour, is, as we have already shown, finally completed by large-scale industry erected on the foundation of machinery.<sup>18</sup>

In *Grundrisse*, Marx still lacks both the concept of abstract labor, as well as the concept of relative surplus value, which are presented in *Capital*,<sup>19</sup> and so the fight between man and machine, or in other words, the fight between living labor performed by humans, and dead labor performed by machinery, in the form of fixed capital, still reveals only its direct experimental character. It thus shows only as a diminishing of human labor, being replaced by machinery, but without the concept of abstract work and relative surplus value, the relation between human labor and a machine's work remains unclear. It is through first separating the value of a worker's work from the value of the reproduction of a worker's life, that the capitalist mode of production realizes surplus value. It is thus through the splitting of time in two: to the time that a worker produces the value of his wage—value needed for the reproduction of one's life—and the time he produces surplus value that is being transferred to capital, that the machine enters the stage in the form of fixed capital or accumulated labor. In this sense, for Marx as well, the question is not: What is the machine and what are its origins? In this sense, his treatment of machines coincides with Butler's, insofar as he is more concerned with the question of the accumulation of life in structures that exceed its limitations, while within the same process constraining life within a new temporal structure. It is now machine-measured time that replaces the natural time of celestial cycles and becomes the measure of life:

He regarded my watch not as having been designed, but rather the designer of himself and of the universe; or as at any rate one of the great first causes of all things.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 548–49.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Heinrich contributed on this topic in “The ‘Fragment on Machines’: A Marxian Misconception in the *Grundrisse* and its Overcoming in *Capital*,” in *In Marx's Laboratory: Critical Interpretations of the “Grundrisse”*, ed. Riccardo Bellofiore, Guido Starosta, and Peter D. Thomas (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 195–212.

<sup>20</sup> Butler, *Erewhon*, 85.

Time transformed from the natural cycle of the sun's rising and setting as eternal motion from which eternal time emerges, into the man-measured time of the clockwork spring, which must be wound in order for it to flow. Time thus becomes one with the unwinding of the spring and can therefore itself be extinguished. The concept of eternal time, which is now to be measured by a wound clockwork, is in this way replaced by the universal spring that unwinds through time, just as a machine does in a production process. Time thus becomes a measure of use and therefore a measure of work (Marx), which is set against the unwinding of the universal spring. Carnot's second law of thermodynamics, which states the irreversibility of time, by tying its concept together with an increase in entropy, puts the machine on the side of life in its struggle against time, which is now becoming hostile to life, by determining it as that which will inevitably die out or unwind:

The machine, being the work of organization and information, is, like life itself and together with life, that which is opposed to disorder, to the leveling of all things tending to deprive the universe of the power of change. The machine is that through which man fights against the death of the universe; it slows down the degradation of energy, as life does, and becomes a stabilizer of the world.<sup>21</sup>

It is difficult to trace a line of demarcation between the human and the machine as the relationship is not only one of opposition, although it does evolve through rivalry, but also a game of mimesis and supplementation that takes hold before the machine takes on the role of the inanimate other.

### ***Technē* and *Epistēmē* Between Myth and Platonic Operation**

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If we follow the history of ideas, we can easily recognize the relationship between man and machine as ambivalent, oscillating between fear and hostility, on the one hand, and almost childlike enthusiasm in play, on the other. As in the myth of Hephaestus—the blacksmith of Olympus and forsaken son of Hera and Zeus—technology or the art of craft appears as something divine and greater than man, but at the same time the one who handles it must pay the price, as if tainted by the power that makes it so. Hephaestus was cast out of Olympus because of his lameness, as he was also named “The Lame,” but he was

<sup>21</sup> Simondon, *Technical Objects*, 16.



raised by the goddesses Thetis and Eurynome, where he continued to work on his technological creations. With his skillful hands, he built automatons, handmaidens to support him in place of his weak legs, helping him with his work and thus supplementing his disability with their “cunning handiwork.” When Thetis pays him a visit, Homer describes the scene with Hephaestus’s automatons like this:

But there moved swiftly to support their lord handmaidens wrought of gold in the semblance of living maids. In them is understanding in their hearts, and in them speech and strength, and they know cunning handiwork by gift of the immortal gods. These busily moved to support their lord, and he, limping nigh to where Thetis was, sat him down upon a shining chair [. . .].<sup>22</sup>

*Technē*, when it is cast out of the realm of the gods and thus thrown down to earth among mortal beings, is also separated from *epistēmē*, which is set against *technē* in the same way that reason is set against mere skill. But mythos also offers the other side of the story, in which *technē* as the “gift of the immortal gods,” is the reason and the driving force of a mythological narrative, as in the myth of Prometheus. The son of Iapetus and Clymene was known for his cunning. As Hesiod describes in the *Theogony*, he managed to anger Zeus by taking part in a sacrificial ritual in which he tricked him into picking the offering that was more pleasing to the eye—ox bones covered in beautifully molded fat—compared to the other, which was tastier but more unpleasant to look at—ox hide with meat and fat.

“Son of Iapetus, clever above all! So, sir, you have not yet forgotten your cunning arts!” So spake Zeus in anger, whose wisdom is everlasting; and from that time he was *always mindful of the trick*, and would not give the power of unwearying fire to the Melian race of mortal men who live on the earth.<sup>23</sup>

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In Hesiod’s version of the myth, Zeus took fire away from mortal man as punishment for Prometheus’s deceptive maneuver, but this was not the only pun-

<sup>22</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1924), bk. 18, lines 415–25.

<sup>23</sup> Hesiod, “Theogony,” in *Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1914), lines 555–65.

ishment that the wisest of the gods inflicted on mankind, for there was more than one trick played by Prometheus. After the fire was taken away by Zeus, Prometheus used a trick to hide it in a hollow fennel stalk and gave it back to mankind. Angered by Prometheus's second trick, Zeus instructs Hephaestus to mold a creature out of clay that resembles a shy maiden with the appearance of a goddess, but with a "shameless mind and a deceitful nature."<sup>24</sup> In this way, Zeus punishes man with the same trick as Prometheus, who triggered the quarrel: he gives man a desirable image, but with repulsive content, just like the one they gave him when they joined Prometheus in his offering. In *Works and Days*, this creature is named Pandora. By giving her to the human race, Zeus traps mankind in a dead end from which there is no escape:

Son of Iapetus, surpassing all in cunning, you are glad that you have outwitted me and stolen fire—a great plague to you yourself and to men that shall be. But I will give men as the price for fire an evil thing in which they may all be glad of heart while they embrace their own destruction.<sup>25</sup>

The price of cunning can only be cunning itself, through which Zeus restores the rule of wisdom over it. By giving Pandora to mankind, the wisest of the gods reminds them of this relation of power, but to do so he must prove that cunning skill can only do what wisdom does better. Pandora allows no right answer: if one desires her or turns away from her, one pays the price. Being the price of fire means that we can expect fire to carry a similar mythical sense. If we read fire as an allegory for the mastery of skill, this evokes the myth of Dedalus and the labyrinth of Crete, in which he escapes with his son Icarus by employing his skill to construct wings of feathers and wax, which melt when Icarus flies too high and consequently plunges to his death. Mastery of the arts is thus something which leaves one with no choice or no safe distance. The division made above must therefore be further elaborated: *technē* is not opposed to *epistēmē*, just as the gods are not opposed to the world of mortal men, but resides in it as an ever-present danger of which one must always be wary. The relation between these two categories is in fact a kinship relation and a generational rivalry between the children of the old titanic gods. Prometheus's challenge of Zeus

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<sup>24</sup> Hesiod, "Works and Days," in *Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, lines 65–70.

<sup>25</sup> Hesiod, "Works and Days," lines 55–65.

is almost compulsive, as he cannot exercise his mastery without encroaching on foreign territory.

There is a certain charm in mastering a skill, but there is one skill which stands out from the others and elevates its master to the realms of justice and politics above all other craftsmen. The skill of discourse, which takes center stage in the Platonic conflict with the sophists, is central to the political life of the Athenian polis and must therefore deal with questions of justice and sovereignty. The sophists possess knowledge through their mastery of technique or at least they seem to possess it. Their artistry lies in being able to perform knowledge of the highest form as a representation. As Châtelet puts it in *Plato*:

Among the techniques, however, there is one—insisting on this point—whose role is singular; the technique of speech. [. . .] Also, this art, which learns to persuade others and which requires such general and diverse knowledge, is considered the supreme art which groups in itself all the particular sciences [. . .].<sup>26</sup>

The art of discourse is not only the art of the highest form, but for the same reason its domain extends over and encompasses all particular sciences by way of performing a representation of them. This division between representation and concept, or in other words, the division between technique and knowledge, is at the center of the Platonic conflict with the sophists.

Unlike Plato, who constantly strived to separate knowledge from know-how and highlight the vanity of the arts, the sophist closely links “polymath” and “polytechnics” and echoes this new culture in which the artisan takes up more and more space.<sup>27</sup>

Plato’s need to separate knowledge (Fr. *savoir*) from know-how (Fr. *savoir-faire*) stems from the fact that the two are easily misrecognized and therefore one is often mistaken for the other. In order to understand his critique of the arts in terms of the critique of appearances, we must view it, in terms of producing through it a divide between philosophy and sophism. It is through this operation of negation, that Plato makes the philosopher the master of knowledge by

<sup>26</sup> François Châtelet, *Platon* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 60; my translation.

<sup>27</sup> Châtelet, 61; my translation.

making him the one who is able to produce the difference between truth and appearance. By dethroning the sophist, Plato also diminishes the status of the sophist's skill, since his operation of division and negation transforms the necessary conditions that one must fulfil in order to be considered to possess true knowledge. As we can read in Phaedrus, someone who possesses the mastery of discourse without possessing knowledge can produce discourses [*logoi*] by means of which "one can make out as similar anything that can be so assimilated, to everything to which it can be made similar."<sup>28</sup>

He thus operates following the logic of addition, plurality, and partiality. The wide expansion of the sophist's art that can encompass all others—described by Châtelet—is based on the sophist's ability to perform the sciences without knowing their truth. It is from the "outside" that the sophist takes hold of knowledge and not from within by recollecting it, as Plato's theory of *anamnesis* instructs.<sup>29</sup> As wisdom is something belonging to the gods, man can only be considered a lover of wisdom that recollects it from the time when the soul was still dwelling with the gods. Here the Muses step in by guiding the philosopher in his practice of remembrance. The sophist, on the other hand, does not have the same affiliation with the Muses and therefore has no memory of the eternal ideas. He manages to produce the appearance of them by mastering the skill, but he has no knowledge of the truth as a whole, so he also does not know how to assess the true value of his own discourse and consequently produces contradictory conclusions, regardless of what is "true" and "good."

Here we again encounter the division between the wisdom of the gods and cunning, which had to be banished from the realm of the gods despite its divine origin, already mentioned in our discussion of the myths of Hephaestus and Prometheus. In this sense, we must expand on what Bernard Stiegler says at the beginning of his book *Technics and Time* where he states that this division between philosophical *epistēmē* and sophistic *technē* "had not yet been

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<sup>28</sup> Plato, "Phaedrus," trans. A. Nehamas and P. Woodruff, in *Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 538, 261e.

<sup>29</sup> "But a soul that never saw the truth cannot take a human shape, since a human being must understand speech in terms of general forms, proceeding to bring many perceptions together into a reasoned unity. That process is the recollection of the things our soul saw when it was traveling with god, when it disregarded the things we now call real and lifted up its head to what is truly real instead." Plato, 527, 249b–c.

made in Homeric times.”<sup>30</sup> Here we should point to a possible genealogy leading from the Platonic division between knowledge and skill, to the role that the Muses play in Hesiod’s *Theogony* when they say “we know how to speak many false things as though they were true; but we know, when we will, to utter true things.”<sup>31</sup> As we can see from a careful reading of their speeches, the Muses are, in the first part, saying what Plato says about sophistic skill: in short, that they can state something that they may negate in the next statement and thus only give the appearance of truth. But apart from the naked mastery of their skill, the Muses are also able to tell the truth when they want to. This last part, telling the truth when they want to, is something that the sophist cannot do, since he does not possess the knowledge of the whole and thus of the truth. The Muses themselves enact the division between knowledge and skill by being able to tell both the truth or a lie that takes the appearance of truth. Of course, a Muse lies when she does not tell the truth, but we cannot say the same about the sophist, who while he does not know the whole truth, cannot really lie either, but instead utters a simulacrum of a true discourse as a consequence of his lack of knowledge and excess of technique.

In the *Sophist*, Plato puts the following observation into the mouth of the Visitor from Elea: “So the sophist has now appeared as having a kind of belief-knowledge about everything, but not truth.”<sup>32</sup> The question starting the dialog in the *Sophist* is: How do we tell the sophist apart from the statesman and the philosopher? We know that the difference between the appearance of knowledge and true knowledge is based on the theory of *anamnesis*, which places the truth within the soul, where it can be accessed only through the recollection of ideas shared with the gods, while mastery of skill has only an exterior relation to the soul, and thus the truth, but that hardly helps spectators listening to public discourses to tell one from the other. The belief-knowledge bears no sign by which it could be distinguished from the knowledge of truth or true knowledge:

**Theaetetus:** But there’s a similarity between a sophist and what we’ve been talking about.

<sup>30</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1.

<sup>31</sup> Hesiod, “Theogony,” lines 25–30.

<sup>32</sup> Plato, “Sophist,” trans. Nicholas P. White, in *Complete Works*, 254, 233c.

**Visitor:** And between a wolf and a dog, the wildest thing there is and the gentlest. If you are going to be safe, you have to be especially *careful about similarities* since the type we're talking about [the sophist] is very slippery.<sup>33</sup>

The sophist is thus a master of similarities who can make everything similar to everything else and thus pose as a philosopher and statesman. Here again we can examine a common genealogy of archaic myth and ancient Greek political modernity. As Zeus needed to be “always mindful of the trick,” the interlocutors of Platonic dialogues need to be “careful of the similarities,” because the sophist is “a kind of a magician”<sup>34</sup> who can perform a likeness of truth by “weaving that which is not with that which is.”<sup>35</sup> Instead of trying to distinguish the sophist from his rival figures of the philosopher and the statesman on the basis of their differences, we should follow Deleuze and rather ask the question of the motivation of Platonism and its will to differentiate “the ‘thing’ in itself from its images, the original from the copy, the model from the simulacrum.”<sup>36</sup> Here we have two processes going in opposite directions: while the sophist, the master of similarities, moves from the singular art of discourse to perform other arts, that of statesman and philosopher, the philosopher goes in the direction of the differentiation of arts, while making himself the master of the art of differentiation. But the Platonic operation does not end here; rather, by producing—through the dialectical method of dialogue—the criteria for the separation of knowledge from its representations, it places the philosopher himself in the position of the master of knowledge, who must have an ear for the voice of the Muse that “permits the construction of a model according to which different pretenders can be judged.”<sup>37</sup> In the construction of this model, the philosopher himself becomes the master of the art—the artist—of judging simulacra and thus claims the place of the thing itself.

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Plato discovers, in the flash of an instant, that the simulacrum is not simply a false copy, but that it places in question the very notations of copy and model.

The final definition of the Sophist leads us to the point where we can no longer

<sup>33</sup> Plato, 251, 231a.

<sup>34</sup> Plato, 255, 235b.

<sup>35</sup> Plato, 261, 240c.

<sup>36</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale, ed. Constantin V. Boundas (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 253.

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze, 255.

distinguish him from Socrates himself—the ironist working in private by means of brief arguments. Was it not necessary to push to that extreme? Was it not Plato himself who pointed out the direction for the reversal of Platonism?<sup>38</sup>

## The Trope of the Machine

We have followed the logic of the machine within the history of ideas to point out the ambiguity of this category, representing the combined wealth and artistry of our civilization and at the same time marking out the sinister contours of our demise. By being able to represent life better than life itself, thus supplementing its faculties and strengths that have accumulated over time in the form of modes and means of production, scientific discourses, or governmental structures, etc., the machine threatens us with the loss of the thing itself—life, knowledge, freedom. But in the cracks of these discourses on the alienating power of the machine, another current of thought emerges, a reversed Platonism, as Deleuze calls it, which questions the philosophical conditions of the concept of the machine as representation:

It is at work everywhere, functioning smoothly at times, at other times in fits and starts. It breathes, it heats, it eats. It shits and fucks. What a mistake to have ever said *the* id. Everywhere *it* is machines—real ones, not figurative ones: machines driving other machines, machines being driven by other machines, with all the necessary couplings and connections.<sup>39</sup>

*Anti-Oedipus* by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari is a philosophical project for reconfiguring the relation between representation and production and, consequently, the relation between machine and life. The life that bears the machine and the machine that bears life are both phases of production proper and therefore cannot be conceptually separated from each other, just as desiring-machines cannot be separated from mechanical, digital, or even thinking machines. The latter represent the former neither as synecdoche nor as metonymy, but instead couple and connect with them to form ensembles of systems, by

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze, 256.

<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Mark Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 1.

adding and subtracting flows of desire, money, commodities, etc.; they are real machines, as Deleuze and Guttari argue, not metaphorical ones:

We make no distinction between man and nature: the human essence of nature and the natural essence of man become one within nature in the form of production of industry [. . .]. Production as process overtakes all idealistic categories and constitutes a cycle whose relationship to desire is that of an imminent principle.<sup>40</sup>

Buttler's statement that the soul of man is a machine-made thing takes on a different meaning at this point: even "before" man is subjugated by machinery and thus recreated in a new form of existence subsumed under capital, the machine is already at work, coupling and connecting desire-flows and investing organs in its production process. In *The Myth of the Machine*, Mumford argues that those interested in the origin and history of the machine should look for it long before any machine of modernity was brought into existence by the expanding scientific forces of industrialization.

I found that what economists lately termed the Machine Age or the Power Age, had its origin, not in the so-called Industrial Revolution of the eighteenth century, but at the very outset in the organization of an archetypal machine composed of human parts.<sup>41</sup>

So, there was a machine in hiding using its cunning ways to conceal itself inside human minds and bodies, in societal institutions and modes of production, and only came out of its hiding place when its process of emancipation from the limitations of human life left any possibility of reversal far behind.

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This machine escaped notice and so naturally remained unnamed until our own day, when a far more powerful and up-to-date type, utilizing a congeries of subordinate machines, came into existence.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Deleuze and Guttari, 4–5.

<sup>41</sup> Mumford, *Myth of the Machine*, 11–12.

<sup>42</sup> Mumford, 188.



It is in the production of industry<sup>43</sup> that the strongest opposition between life and machine expresses itself and it is therefore easy to make the mistake of thinking of the authenticity of pre-industrial life as if it were free from the alienating power of the machine, thus constructing an idealism of pure origin. Before we accuse Mumford of using the term machine anachronistically or metaphorically, we should read *The Myth of the Machine* as a theoretical gesture of negating traditional categories in order to give space to this new category of the machine, to emancipate it from the inanimate world of rationalist mechanics, its opposition to life, to thought, to knowledge, and so on. This new conceptual space that Mumford has created for himself and his readers allows for associations of concepts that are neither new nor revolutionary, but are presented in a bold way, and so cross not only conceptual divides but also historical ones, allowing us to think the machine “before” and “after” the machines of modern modes of production:

When utilized to perform work on highly organized collective enterprises, I shall call it the “labor machine”: when applied to acts of collective coercion and destruction, it deserves the title, used even today, the “military machine.” But when all the components, political, economic, military, bureaucratic and royal, must be included, I shall usually refer to the “megamachine”: in plain words, the Big Machine.<sup>44</sup>

We could also broaden the critique of Mumford by placing it in a historical context: the theoretical procedure of crossing the conceptual divides between life and machine can be followed throughout modernity, from the materialisms of the Age of Enlightenment to the advent of thermodynamics, taking place within the nineteenth century as the paradigm that is rapidly expanding its domain of application, the birth of Darwin’s theory of evolution, motivating a whole field of philosophical and scientific discourses inscribing life with the “technics” of natural selection, to the general science of cybernetics, whose emergence immediately after the World War Two and its unprecedented military ensembles of man and machine was hardly unexpected.<sup>45</sup> All of the above-mentioned theo-

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<sup>43</sup> We should understand this term in the broadest sense.

<sup>44</sup> Mumford, 188.

<sup>45</sup> “In constructing machines, it is often very important for us to extend to them certain human attributes which are not found among the lower members of the animal community. If the reader wishes to conceive this as a metaphoric extension of our human personali-

retical developments paint an even less revolutionary picture of Mumford's conceptual approach. Nevertheless, we should argue in defense of his bold theoretical gesture, which unites theories across theoretical disciplines into a paradigm that presents the machine in a way that opens up a need for its own genealogy.

What we feel that lacks in Mumford's treatment of the "Big Machine" we find in Emile Zola's novel *The Ladies' Paradise*, in which a young provincial named Octave Mouret, following a fortunate marriage and soon after an equally successful widowhood, opens a large department store in Paris during the reign of Napoleon III. Mouret is what we would today call an entrepreneur, seizing on the city's desires with the determination of a bold military commander while retaining the manners of a well brought-up bourgeois with a sense of everything that escapes the rigid mind of an economist. He expands his small drapery shop with astonishing speed, takes out loans that exceed his capital many times over, buys stocks of goods that enter into his shop like a flood, ruining all the traditional shops in the neighborhood and throwing his customers into fits of amazement in order to take hold of their desires and extract "money from their very flesh."<sup>46</sup> He knows very well that his machine runs on desire, which it consumes just as it consumes money and goods:

And these passions in the street were giving life to the materials: the laces shivered, then drooped again, concealing the depths of the shop with an exciting air of mystery; even the lengths of cloth, thick and square, were breathing, exuding a tempting odour, while the overcoats were throwing back their shoulders still more on the dummies, which were acquiring souls, and the huge velvet coat was billowing out, supple and warm, as if on shoulders of flesh and blood, with a heaving breast and quivering hips. But the furnace like heat with which the shop was ablaze come above all from the selling, from the bustle at the counters, which could be felt behind the walls. There was the continuous roar of the

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ties, he is welcome to do so [. . .].” Norbert Wiener, *The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society* (London: Free Association Books, 1989), 77. Later in the chapter Wiener himself takes advantage of his own offer to the reader: “In a certain sense, all communication systems terminate in machines, but the ordinary language systems terminate in the special sort of machine known as a human being.” Wiener, 79.

<sup>46</sup> Emile Zola, *Ladies' Paradise*, trans. Brian Nelson (Oxford World's Classics, 1998), 105, Kindle.

machine at work, of customers crowding into the departments, dazzled by the merchandise, then propelled towards the cash-desk.<sup>47</sup>

*The Ladies' Paradise* is a machine that turns life into capital while at the same time infusing capital with life. This is the secret of Mouret's stroke of genius: he knows that the machine must be let loose to devour the city with its passions and desires, while his role is to ensure that the flows of desire do not die out or even settle down for just a moment. In this way, he himself becomes an organ of the machine, is coupled with and consumed by it, just like his customers, employees, and creditors. He himself is invested by the city's desire, keeping a high-profile mistress in his grasp to gain access to the higher echelons of Napoleon III's financial machine.<sup>48</sup>

While Mumford's machine is one of the memorization and organization of information shaping both life and inanimate matter, Zola's machine is first and foremost a desire-machine that couples together people with forms of capital and makes them so similar that it is no longer possible to distinguish between the rationality of capitalist production and the rationality of human desire. Denise, a poor girl from the provinces, immediately falls in love with Mouret, while at the same time she falls in love with the rationale of the economic liberalism of the triumphant bourgeois class taking hold of the state under Napoleon III.

It is "The Woman," as Mouret calls her, that he is after, while his machine is "the machine for devouring women."<sup>49</sup> The Woman is the object of his conquest, for it is she who couples different machines into a "megamachine" with her warm saloons, where every corner offers a new business opportunity, the possession of a new flow of money or desire, and it is there that Zola conducts a great portion of his analysis. But it is also she who, through this conquest, becomes a machine herself; a machine for coupling other machines by allowing the desire-flows to run freely through the couplings or withdrawing them back, and thus stopping the cycle of production and consumption. The roles

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<sup>47</sup> Zola, 16.

<sup>48</sup> The *Ladies' Paradise* takes place during the vast construction projects entrusted to Georges-Eugène Haussmann, also commonly known as Baron Haussmann, who while serving as the prefect of Seine from 1853 to 1870 extensively changed the face of Paris and put in motion a vast financial enterprise.

<sup>49</sup> Zola, 77.

can therefore always be reversed, because “it’s always the lamb that ends up eating the wolf.”<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Zola, 84.

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