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ISSUE #12: CONTEMPORARY POLITICS AND HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

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ABOUT NONSITE

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ISSUE #12: CONTEMPORARY POLITICS AND HISTORICAL REPRESENTATION

In nonsite's 12th issue, a collection of views on the meaning and uses of postcolonial theory in and around modern Poland, plus photography and 'sixties Paris and a feature essay on Thomas Piketty's celebrated *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*.

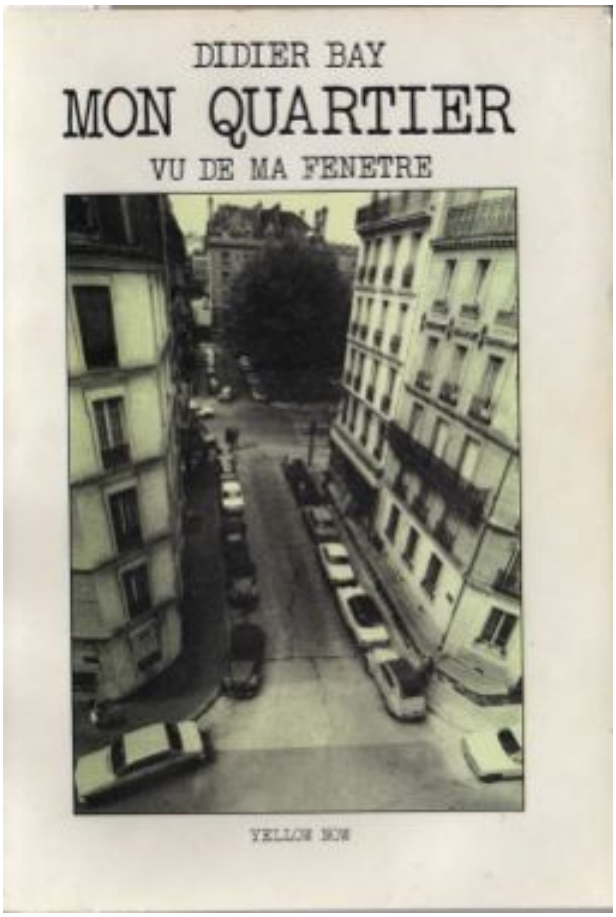
ARTICLES

DIDIER BAY'S PHOTOGRAPHIC SOCIOLOGY OF POST-1968 PARIS

LILY WOODRUFF

> We must always first contemplate something else—the water, or Diana, or the woods—in order to be filled with an image of ourselves.
>
> —Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*

In the wake of May 1968, Didier Bay began documenting the daily life of return-to-order Paris such as it was visible through a telephoto lens that he positioned in the window of his Latin Quarter apartment. Nine years later, he published the 263-page volume, *Mon quartier vu de ma fenêtre*, or *My Quarter Viewed from My Window*,[1] [Fig. 1] which presents sequences of small black-and-white photographs of local residents in their homes and in the street accompanied by type-written explanatory narratives. At a time when sociologists were restructuring the landscape and politics of post-World War II France, Bay considered himself a "sociological" artist.[2] Yet, unlike sociology engineered for technocracy, Bay's sociology did not quantify in order to categorize. Instead, the distant and multiply fragmenting views of his neighbors expressed a profound suspicion that it is impossible to fix social knowledge due to the insularity of the private individuals who compose a society. If Bay's project invited doubt about sociology however, it transformed such doubt into a critique of order that was particular to the years following 1968. As much as *Mon quartier* is a study of his civilian neighbors, it is also an examination of the state power that resided down the block in the Republican Guard barracks on the Place Monge, and across the street in the apartment where an undercover police officer supposedly lived with his family. Through sequential repetition Bay continually fragments conventional, unified images of both civilians and state power. In this way, Bay resists casting the subjects of his serial photographs, the neighbors and state power alike, as "types" that could then be interpellated by the law—a law that constructs the fixed identities that define it and upon which it depends.



Didier Bay, My Quarter Viewed from My Window

As Bay claimed, his interest in surveilling others originated in a highly personal loss, that of his mother to suicide when the artist was twenty. Upon her death Bay experienced frustration at reviewing photographs from her life that fail to provide any explanation for her death. In the idiosyncratically typed English and French texts that introduce *Mon quartier*, Bay recounts, "I discover that the only souvenirs left of her are rather inaccurate and purely 'motherly.' Of the woman, the individual she was I knew nothing. Although it is more likely the individual than the mother that committed suicide"[3] [*sic*]. These old family photographs revealed to Bay the double impossibility at the heart of the artistic project he subsequently undertook: the inadequacy of identity categories, such as "mother," to communicate information about those they would describe, and the limitations of the photographic medium in conveying information more dynamic than what is immediately visible in the static image itself. *Mon quartier* seeks to discover in the private lives of others what Bay never knew of his own mother, but in doing so, it presents sequential photographs that multiply views of his subjects and replace sociologically produced identity with a continuously evolving process of identification.

Categorical distinctions are not, however, absent in Bay's book. Indeed, Bay's observations are typically classed and gendered. The first page of photographs presents images of two types of women that Bay shows to be of a kind.[Figs. 2 and 3] Both have emerged from their windows to manipulate cleaning tools providing a moment for Bay to snap a few nearly illegible photographs on whose snippets of information he elaborates:

> These two women of different ages have the same "femine" occupation in the morning. The older one is dressed. It is an habit, a discipline taken a long time ago; since with age coming she can't bear any more things or people that look neglected. Since sha has no beauty anymore, at least she tries to be neat , and live among neat things , cleanliness . The youngest uses the "middle-class" priviledge of the dressing-gown, as a distinctiv sign of not being obliged to go out to work, then wear street clothes [*sic*]. [4]

While *Mon quartier* includes studies of men and children as well, the photographs' residential site positions them to capture subjects that would resemble Bay's mother. Middle-aged to older women at home during the day are the subject of a preponderant number of frames. As

he wrote in 1974, "I was more and more interested, attracted to those individuals of whom one can feel the loneliness (self-willed or not, but it seems to be the rule) of whom you can establish the strict and narrow system of habits that govern their lives."[5] This loneliness, Bay argues, is the product of a generalized "education" in which individuals learn to adopt a public persona that ends up stifling communication, even in the privacy of one's own home.

Although Bay's project focuses on the close observation of people in their everyday lives, the emergence of difference through serial photography actuates his work in opposition to the habitus in contemporary sociology. With regard specifically to his interest in classed behavior, Pierre Bourdieu describes habitus as an "objective relationship" that "enables an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation, the meaning of which is produced by habitus through categories of perception and appreciation that are themselves produced by an observable social condition."[6] Bourdieu conceives of habitus as a tautological and inescapable loop of both cause and its own interpretation such that the individual can be reduced to a collection of observable social effects, as a result of which he or she becomes the product of society's ideological reproduction. Even the seeming agency of individual taste becomes an ossified representation of categorized, predictable choices and habits such that, according to class, education, and political leanings, individuals could be predicted to demonstrate affinities for Bach or Brassens, *Le Monde* or *Le Figaro*, tennis or football, a tidy or a harmoniously designed home. The temporality in which such norms are reproduced is cyclical.[7] It is the time in which, after taking hundreds of photographs of people cleaning, primping, working, or smoking out of their windows, Bay can conclude that daily activities are necessarily ordinary, and that in them "nothing really happens."

In a period of explosive social change, "nothing happens" was a condemning accusation of conservatism. The idea that it was people, not structures such as habitus, that are responsible for inciting action was, indeed, the criticism to which one anonymous May '68 protester famously alluded when scrawling across a blackboard of the Sorbonne, "structures don't descend into the street."[8] The threat of stagnation posed a particularly pointed threat to representations of society during the years following the May movement when its impact was subjected to continuous reappraisal.[9] In his own post-1968 study then, Bay does not circumscribe his neighbors within perpetually reproduced categories. Rather the project functions as a sort of sociology of masking whose social categorizations would undermine structural reification. In an album of text and photographs that shortly followed on *Mon quartier*, Bay takes up the issue of structuralism explicitly. *La Jeunesse de Didier Bay vers 1975*, or *Didier Bay's Youth circa 1975*, provides an account of everyday Parisian life by assembling the chronology of a day from real and fictitious events designed to showcase objects or phenomena as diverse as alcoholism, pigeons, pregnancy, and revolution. While the categories

range from natural (snow) to ideological (church), Bay highlights each one's multiple connotative points of access by defining it according to both broadly cultural and personally idiosyncratic expressions. Amidst this vast heterogeneity, he includes a lengthy discussion of the category, "structures," and its academic offshoot, structuralism. While Bay recognizes that making structures serves the basic organizational, comparative, and analytic function of setting things, people, and ideas in relation to each other, he also insists that doing so can serve the "imperious" "hierarchical political impulse" of "a pseudo-science, which is very widespread in our era."[10] "I flee structure as much as I can," Bay asserts: "That is to say, the structure of others." Rather than plugging data into seemingly self-evident horizontal and vertical structures designed by technocrats for their efficiency and supposed progress, Bay instead attempts to structure "in all directions," a technique he sees as the most rich, scattering, and difficult to perform.[11]

An essential difference between Bay and Bourdieu is the way they describe and construct models of temporal unfolding. The serial multiplication of nearly identical photographs in *Mon quartier* counter-intuitively undermines temporal structures that would normally give the impression that "nothing happens." Whereas representation risks fixing identity in a closed circuit consistent with the reproduction of habitus, sequential repetition offers an alternative temporal model that resembles the linear time of accumulation. Repetition makes the everyday 'nothing' significant by detailing the minute difference of moments and gestures. The significance of these details, however, is not in what they represent, but in how their visibility alters representation. For Gilles Deleuze, modern artistic practices that make use of repetition provide instances in which repetition may avoid solidifying into representative norms since they allow for permutations that ultimately lead to the abandonment of representation itself. It is not that repetition multiplies perspectives on any given subject, but rather that each instance of repetition leads to a decentring, to a perpetual divergence that leads to the dissolution of the very identity of the subject.[12] This type of "active" self-differing repetition "never ceases to unravel" in a continual juxtaposition of instances that demonstrate an internal splitting of the representation repeated.[13]

Bay demonstrates this unravelling most exhaustively in a series of 106 photographs that show the lengthy process of a "typical housewife" as she curls her hair and applies make-up while sitting at a table positioned in her window.[Fig. 4] The initial photographs show the entire window and its framing set in the exterior of the building as the woman sets up her hair drier. After she has settled into her chair, Bay's camera zooms in to capture her arms' every movement, the way she holds the hairpins between her teeth, the towel she drapes around her shoulders. In a few frames she stands up from her chair and the camera jostles as though Bay's own movements were themselves unsettled by this unanticipated initiative. A few ill-framed images squeeze her into the lower left corner of the image heightening the impression that Bay shoots with automated regularity rather than carefully composing each individual shot, and in the midst of the series, he includes an image of her empty chair in a moment of absence, which heightens the realism and impression of neutral objectivity. Finally, she finishes attending to her own appearance and directs her attention to the up-keep of the home—the sweat-producing action of which, Bay notes, threatens to counteract her labored refinement. In the last several frames, the place in the window is repurposed by a studious 12-year-old daughter who sets about to doing her homework. Taken together, these are the "traces of life" that Bay insists one can make out among the social "indifference

and anonymity" of habit. In the course of the series, the figure of the 'typical housewife' comes to seem less a type, and more a specific individual composed of gestures, impulses, and motivations.

Moreover, the content of the photographs metaphorically reflects back on Bay's use of the medium itself. Sequence allows the viewer to see the woman's made-up appearance as the result of a process. In turn, her putting on of a public image, "like a sort of Geisha," as Bay says, reflects back on the fact that a photographic representation is also the accumulation of moments in time, whether the photographer selects a single, ideal image among hundreds or prints a selected range, as Bay does here. More importantly however, while Bay's authorial point of entry and serial reproduction disperses the unified representation that his subject creates of herself, it also fragments his own authorial unity. As he documents and interprets the scene he becomes a self-differing repetition of it: his position with regard to the typical housewife is dependent and reactive as his own movement is determined by hers. Each process underscores the fact of the construction of the other.

ALL RESEMBLANCE…

The relative subjectivity that Bay's serial process constructs with regard to his own authorship extends, moreover, to implicate the reader as the book suggests that all interpretation provides an ethical basis by which individuals negotiate their relationships to their communities. The opening pages present the reader with a disclaimer of the sort one finds at the ends of films. A conventional French rendition of the legalistic formula reads: "Les personnages et les situations de ce récit étant purement fictifs, toute ressemblance avec des personnes ou des situations existantes ne saurait être que fortuite."[14] Historically, the phrase was developed to protect the rights of the author. The disclaimer assures that the characters in a film are fictitious even as the film may benefit from references to real people.[15] Such a disclaimer validates a narrative fiction within its genre through what Gérard Genette has called "professing the work's fictiveness."[16] The disclaimer guarantees the originality of the author and the primacy of authorship as a practice of pure invention. It allows for the possibility of resemblance, without ascribing authority to the viewer who does the recognizing. Such contracts depend on, and reinforce, the nominal definition of fiction as imaginary, and exonerate the novelist from taking responsibility for resemblance. The world of resemblance remains abstract, potential, undefined. The role of the disclaimer is to refuse liability as it provides a legalistic observation *and disavowal* of the problem of influence.

As the very existence of the disclaimer implies, however, film viewers or book readers will inevitably find resemblances. Confident of this, Bay manipulates the traditional disclaimer so as to pose the responsibility of the reader not as a potential threat to authorship, but as an

invitation to the reader of his book to find similarity between the work of art and the life to which it refers. In Bay's words, "Toute ressemblance avec des lieux ou personnages existants serait purement fortuite et n'engagerait que la résponsabilité de ceux qui voudraient se reconnaitre dans ce travail" ["Any resemblance with existing places or people would be purely fortuitous and would engage only the responsibility of those that would want to recognize themselves in the work"]. By moving the latter half of the original phrase to the beginning, he isolates and forefronts the idea that such resemblance is desirable. Doing so also renders the phrase ambiguous as it makes it unclear who would be the subject doing the resembling. "Characters and situations" are no longer features of the work of fiction that one would relate to the exterior world of reality. Instead, "places and characters" "exist" in the real world, thereby blurring the distinction between fiction and the otherwise apparently documentary rhetoric of the images and texts that appear throughout the book. The places and people who might potentially and fortuitously resemble those in *Mon quartier* or those in the real world could be those that appear in the book, but as Bay also suggests, they could be those who read it. The suggestion that resemblance would be fortuitous puts the evidential quality of photography into question thereby threatening to reduce directly referential indexicality to merely approximative mimesis. The boundaries between the book and the world it depicts, the book and the reader who might see him or herself in it, and therefore the boundaries between the reader and the real world that the book would depict, all blur. The distinction between fiction and reality comes to hinge on the processes of seeing and interpreting.

Introducing "responsibility" and "engagement" into his version of the disclaimer, the process of recognition that Bay suggests takes on ethical overtones. The reinvented phrase calls attention to the implied, yet unstated, position of the person who sees the resemblance. Instead of imagining a potential prosecuting party against which the film disclaimer pre-emptively protests, his suggestion that the reader would recognize him or herself in the work is an invitation to enter into a relationship of responsibility with an other, if only imaginatively, by placing oneself in the position of that other and identifying with her. The work operates between documentary and fiction to suggest that the process of identification is a form of narrative building that involves taking responsibility for understanding one's relationship to society. Bay's own photographic and textual processes of interpretation acts as models for how the reader should him or herself respond to the work and, by extension, to one's own neighborhood. The disclaimer thereby is transformed into an invitation to claim responsibility.

Essentially however, this strategy of self-recognition that Bay invites on the part of the reader of *Mon quartier* involves recognizing oneself as potentially different from any internalized self-conception, that is, recognizing how one might be seen through the eyes of another.

In rewriting the disclaimer, Bay counters a tendency of the law more broadly to reduce specificity to general categories and rules that can be maintained and regulated, and to apply a pre-fabricated moral order that overrides individual analysis. The standard film disclaimer operates through the generalization of information and the erasure of the specificity of any original story upon which a fiction may be based. The profundity of individual experience is effaced by the nominal assertion of truth value, the insistence that resemblance is purely coincidental, that authors compose original fictions. In photographing and publishing snippets of others' lives, Bay does not condemn his subjects to a permanent identity such as it is written through an authorial act through which it is generalized. Rather, he attempts to create an open form that proposes an alternative and fluid way of understanding private lives as unique, variable, and only accessible by the very interpretations that would threaten their autonomy.

Much like the humanist photographers of post-war France, Bay focused on everyday people in everyday life, yet unlike them, he eliminated their triumphant tone as well as their belief in the medium's capacity to communicate universal values. After 1968, the idea of the "reporters illustrateurs" such as Robert Doisneau and Henri Cartier-Bresson artistically documenting the dignity of human struggle fell out of fashion.[17] While Bay shared the ambition of the previous generation of photographers to create a sense of community, his approach to doing so emphasizes the contingencies by which such narratives are produced, and promotes the production of self-critical alternatives. Bay typifies the generational turn away from the conviction that one could capture an event and the forms that perfectly signify it in a "decisive moment." Indeed, his sequences reject the idea that one moment could be decisive about anything. While his anecdotal human-interest stories participate in the "literary" quality that Clement Greenberg championed for photography, his work evades the transcendent effects that the critic sought in figures like Eugène Atget.[18] Making photography literary for Bay did not involve monumentalizing the banal, but multiplying its minutiae in what he refers to as a sort of photographic "prattling."[19] His narratives centre around actions, but these are not sentimentalizing scenes of children playing in the street or workers dancing in cafés. Bay's serial images of individuals engaged in everyday activities do not reveal actions that serve to generalize the expressions of the individuals pictured through their very stereotypical nature. Bay does not reveal actions that serve to generalize the expressions of the individuals pictured through their very stereotypical nature.

Instead, the stories Bay tells begin by reducing everything to stereotype, recognizing the generality, and then, through the process of textual description, imagining a specificity that imputes psychological depth and motivation as it imaginatively fills in a back-story. Rather than creating the image of something like a "Family of Man" in order to inspire universal

human values, *Mon quartier* attempts to bind the individual viewer to a community beyond him or herself by allowing the mundane to remain mundane. The viewer's primary point of access to the subject of the photograph is not through recourse to a larger set of social myths, but through occurrences that can only be experienced as personal because they escape narrative interest. In part, this is because the likeness of objects within the series both establishes and circumscribes a field of reference. In part, it is because the photographs reveal few details that could provide associative traction for the memory or imagination. Nothing happens within each frame, there is little obvious 'interest' in the actions of a person washing windows (however 'human' the activity may be), and from start to finish, Bay provides no narrative arc that would unite the fragmented scenes of the book. Instead, the reader is presented with a collection of 'chapters' that could each stand alone, and the book ends as abruptly as it begins: with two images of a truck removing horse litter used by the Republican Guard.

Even as Bay's work does not transport the viewer into a realm in which life seems more like literature, the pocket-sized book proves to be a particularly rich mode for a project that aims to incite in the reader a personal identification with the individuals pictured. As Bay noted in his DAAD application of 1975, he was looking at the time for a publisher who would consider his collections of text and photographs not as "artistic" works, but as novels, which he hoped might integrate into his audience's lives as bedtime reading.[20] The paperback is a medium that one consumes privately, ensconced behind the walls of one's home, that is, in the very space that Bay penetrates with his camera. Publishing his photographs in a form intended for private consumption collapses the space of the viewer into that of the viewed thereby bringing the reader closer to recognizing him or herself in the images as they share analogous settings. Extending this circuit even further, Bay includes at the beginning of the book his then-current address in the Belleville neighborhood and invites the reader to write to him so that the monologue of his work might be transformed into a dialogue.[21] Responding to Bay's invitation for dialogue-by-mail would then approximately respond to his desire to know something of those that surround him, as observation of his neighbors would expand into a potentially infinite array of responses through the reciprocity of the audience.

This process of transforming individual identities into intersubjective relations was a specifically phenomenological endeavor. The progressive unfolding of photographs combined with textual narration slows viewing so that the time required to closely inspect each image draws attention to the process of seeing and consequently encourages a critical awareness of mediation. Whereas distraction may have been tactically apt to art of the early twentieth century as it looked to overturn bourgeois easel painting, by the time Bay began his work in the 1960s, moving, flashing images had become so overwhelming that he specifically sought to recover contemplation in order to scrutinize what is invisible to

spectacle society and to the art world that was increasingly coming to resemble it in what he called an "involution of the escalation of appearances."[22] As one example of this shift, art photography publications of the twentieth century separated themselves from the world that yielded up its imagery in what David Campany has called a "relentless avoidance of textual elaboration and a graphic isolation of each image in a buffer of white" that "offered beautifully alienated commentary on a continental slide towards spectacular consumer society without invoking their own medium as one of its prime agents."[23] Isolating the photographs from all textual description showed them to be impeccable images that, in becoming identical with the page, seemed to elevated these books to the status of fine art objects while suggesting that photography was the peer of painting or sculpture.

By these standards, *Mon quartier* is a conspicuously modest affair. Bay reproduces the photographs at 35mm scale and lines them up like prints on a contact sheet. The small scale undercuts the descriptive adeptness that Museum of Modern Art photography curator John Szarkowski promoted as an essential attribute of the medium, while the gridded multiplication of frames across the page recalls historic photo-essay installations that artists such as El Lissitzky and Edward Steichen had in earlier generations deployed to promote the medium's journalistic capacities—an association that is deepened by Bay's emphasis on the equipment that he used since press photographers were increasingly replacing their detail-rich medium formats with 35mm cameras during the 1960s. Although Bay used photography in an artistic practice, the rawness of his work aligns it with late 1960s and '70s street and performance documentation, and distances it from the technical perfection that characterized the high art print. In this, his work participated in conceptual photography's move to drastically reduce descriptive content, and to instead focus on the social function of the medium as a means of communication.

Bay's serial photographs emphasize that they are repetitions of the world, and as repetitions, that they are different from that world. As Bay stated in an interview from 1993:

> Photography, one knows its a lie because it is nothing but an image, but it is a very interesting lie because it allows for detachment: one looks at an object, not at reality. It is a trace of what was, but it is no longer what was; it is situated in a different context with another meaning [*sens*], etc. It is interesting to try to explore obscure zones with a medium that is thought to be, on the contrary, very objective, and to make it play the role of giving false testimony to update not what is available to be seen in the object represented, but what is sensed by the look that one brings to it. It is a great advantage of photography, at the same time that it is a difficulty.[24]

Bay's texts help to separate the represented object from reality via testimonial interpretations of actions that are otherwise visually illegible. In one instance, Bay explains a series of eleven images of a woman washing her windows by mentioning that the daughter has left behind her cat—which is barely visible in the photos—while she went travelling in India with her boyfriend. The apartment, Bay notes, was just purchased by the family, which had been living there for years. Their change in status, Bay concludes, meant that they would undoubtedly view the space and the neighborhood differently from now on. Through the introduction of text then, images of a seemingly insignificant activity, undertaken by numerous of the figures in Bay's book, become suffused with a sense of prospectively enduring, lonely preoccupation—a tone that can only be provided via information that is otherwise completely unavailable to the reader-viewer. In this way, Bay undermines the authority of photography to deliver detail-rich and accurate account and instead transforms it into a more interesting lie, an experience of self-conscious sensitivity.

By constantly shifting from one moment to the next, referring to events beyond the frame, and focusing on the details of reproduction itself, Bay makes photography a potentially multiple and self-different mode of representation. His concern to engage the viewer in an experience with the artwork provides an opportunity to examine the points of contact between different registers of narrative construction. As he explained with regard to his work broadly, "[m]y desire to explore the fields of mediatizsation with the aid of photos, of texts, and of video, is a 'natural' anachronism in our era of normalisation-informatisation where the media have an increasing importance as they become the omnipresent visible message."[25] In this post-1968 moment, Bay aligned his own writing and the terminology for the process of selecting and recording a scene using a camera with the language of May's revolutionary ferment. In his work, "the capture of speech [*prise de parole*] developed through the capture of the image [*prise de l'image*]."[26] The incorporation of the two together drew him to the conclusion that "the world of the 'visible' (images) is not as alienated from the world of the 'readable' (culture) as one likes to believe, and in this conjoined work, of photos and texts, emerged other autonomous dimensions of the two media (the invisible, the illegible?)."[27] If images were the bedrock of spectacle society, Bay also saw their potential to provide the first step in a process of critique by challenging, as he stated, "the alienating socio-cultural 'acceptances' that favor automatisms, synchronized perception, clichés, and [that] therefore mutilate the possibilities of creation and the perception of writings and readings (photos and texts)." In line with other incisive conceptual photography practices of the time, here also, bringing text and image together makes the inadequacy of each descriptive system perceptible.

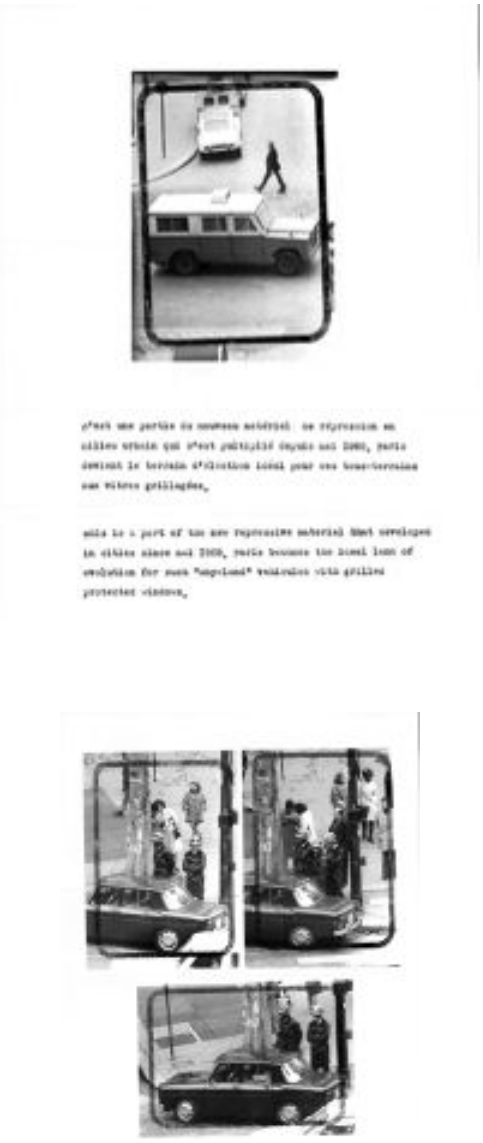
Indeed, throughout *Mon quartier* Bay counteracts the automation of slick forms whose transparency threatens to elide content with the spectacle of their own invisibility by instead showcasing human error. Pronounced over- and underexposure and the occasional flipped negative point to the photographs' difference from the world they represent and underscore the fact that the accumulated images have been arranged and cannot therefore be considered a direct transcription of reality. Similarly, the texts that Bay types up are riddled with spelling and typographic errors; he has purposefully neglected to correct them in order to close the gap between language as it is naturally spoken and its artificial transcription through what he referred to as the "cultural fascism" of perfect writing. In a pseudo-dialogical "self-interview" from 1975 Bay wrote, "I do NOT KNOW anyone who is at ease in writing, because it is a fictive, artificial culture that is imposed by strict rules that are foreign to what one wants to express (the packaging taking precedence over the contents)."[28] Writing, he notes, is an alienation that takes place in the most intimate familial spheres as it is often parents who impose on their children a correct form of speaking, thereby privileging form over the content of the message communicated.

The "Rabelais" style of writing that Bay understands himself to employ is part of his broader rejection of the structuralist transformation of culture into scientifically rational fragments divorced from their lived reality. On one hand, Bay argues that we are alienated from writing as the consequence of living in a culture where reading is supplanted by radio, cinema, and television—media that he sees as replacing reflection with entertainment. On the other, writing becomes foreign due to its over-study by etymologists, semioticians, and "technocrats among others."[29] As Bay understood it, culture was in a moment of crisis that had arisen because "science grafts itself onto the lived in order to recuperate it, to denature it, to efface it … leaving in its place rigid structures of a 'scientific culture' … of imposture." The typographical disorganization of Bay's work then resisted the mystifying transparency of clear writing. "Here we undertake then," he wrote, "the image + text aspect of my work, the image being for me a necessity, reference of a certain reality around which the text turns, departs, and returns." Unedited text, like raw, underexposed, and haphazardly framed photographs, attempted to transmit content immediately, even as the means of communication were opaque and could not be taken as objective. They aimed to produce an immediacy that should lead to contemplation by providing a palpably new, yet slowed, perceptual experience of information and the means of its communication.

THE POLICE

Two thirds of the way through, *Mon quartier* becomes not just a record of Bay's personal exploration of hidden humanity, but a user's manual that instructs the reader in identifying State power. Two chapters take this up explicitly as Bay analyzes the movements of individual

police officers and the street pageantry of the Republican Guard. Whereas previous chapters about windows and civilians adopted a more subjective and interpretive approach the chapter on the police provides histories, definitions, and a taxonomy of ranks. It cites articles of the civil code and observes notable moments of surveillance and insurrection that define the shifting interests and functions of the police through history. Similarly, in the chapter on the Republican Guard, Bay notes that this military order developed out of the 1795 Légion général de Police, and describes its evolution across the centuries including the augmentation of the numbers of men and horses at their disposal, the changing of titles, and administrative shifts. He identifies the symbols that mark the Guard's visibility in the city such as the motto of their flag ("Value and Discipline"), the distinguishing markings of their dark blue uniforms with brass buttons and alternatively white or black belts, the weapons that they carry according to rank, and he notes that their brass band is "very well-known." His tone is that of the dictionary of the *Académie Française*, the institution that polices the French language.



Positioned just off of the Place Monge Republican Guard barracks, and within only a few blocks of the Sorbonne and its obstreperous students, Bay had frequent opportunities to observe the activities of state power.[Fig. 5] In his photographs, police in riot gear assemble and confer, unmarked cars circulate plain-clothes officers, all-terrain vehicles with grilled windows roam the streets, helicopters hover overhead. Bay notes that after May 1968, "the republican guard has now a special repressive force equipped with brand new material: big Triumph motor-cycles, special helmets , overall for close-fight , bludgeon and special gun holsters , cow-boy style" [*sic*].[30] Even as their spectacular presence achieved dazzling new levels of visual arrest, Bay recounts, "When I wanted to take a snap-shot of the first coming

out of this 'elite armada' I was forbidden to do so by officers that said they will confiscate the camera if I do it" [*sic*]. [Fig. 6] In a unique instance, Bay himself descends into the street to stalk the police, perhaps with the retaliatory goal of capturing the images that had been aggressively denied to him before—the low position of the camera and each frame's slight cant sensationalizing Bay's risk in taking the pictures, which otherwise, like most surveillance photographs, reveal very little.

His confrontation with the Guard aside, Bay otherwise downplays the drama by personalizing the officers in narratives about quotidian banalities. He recalls that his mother received help with her housework from the wife of one of the guards, who would sometimes supply them with inexpensive bottles of champagne. He observes the mutual relationship of vulnerability between officers and their horses, recalling that the husband of his mother's friend broke his leg when thrown, and pointing out that an officer might be reduced to infantry if he is seen to be abusive toward his animal. Hardly the image of the noble cavaliers arranged in neat rows with plumed hats and flashing sabres at the ready, Bay's portrayals all take place in the wings of the military stage; he shows the breaking of the set rather than the show itself. Silhouettes of tiny figures on horseback purposelessly stand in the middle of a narrow street, hay is delivered, and litter is taken out along with the trash. At one point, the text wanders away from a pair of guards sauntering down the street to an unresolved rumination: "It is said you can engage them, like the firemen, to polish the floorboards of a flat for instance. But then would they take their horses for such a mission," he wonders, "and would they stand so straight in the saddle" [*sic*].[31] He thus draws the activities of the guard back to the same genre of house work undertaken by the many women that populate his book. Amidst a series of twenty-seven photographs that show the tedious movements of a guard directing a cavalcade

of vans to exit the barracks against traffic, Bay comments that these activities constitute, as he puts it, "another day…"[Fig. 7] If the state's performance of its authority rests in assuring identity between the Guard and its image, then Bay's strategy for undermining that power is to fragment and diversify that image through the integration of a difference that resembles the banality of what one might see as their sociological opposite: the faceless, domestically-bound housewife.

If the Republican Guard represents France's most spectacle-oriented cadre of state order, at the opposite end of the spectrum would be the invisible presence of the plain-clothes police officers that blend in with civilians in the spaces of their daily activities. The French term, and the one which Bay uses throughout *Mon quartier*, is *policier en civil*. Whereas the English expression "plain-clothes" simply suggests that the officer moves about under cover of the everyday, *policier en civil* incorporates the legal signification of "civil" such as it refers to the private relations between individuals beyond the concerns of the state. The term echoes the "civil status" that Roland Barthes referred to in describing the photographic "pose" as an "an art of the Person: of identity, of civil status, of what we might call, in all senses of the term, the body's *formality*."[32] The pose intertwines the subject and his or her civil status into a single identity that is reinforced by visual evidence. But who is the subject of formal study for the plain-clothes police officer? Like a photograph, the *policier en civil* is a representation of a civilian. Unlike the photograph however, the plain-clothes officer does not present himself as a representation, but as an immediacy, as actually identical to himself. Whereas the photograph, as a consequence of its technical limitations, fails to represent more than the visual identity of the individual the *policier en civil* is a fake version of a civilian without

biography or specificity. He represents the general "man in the street," a no one in particular amidst the daily "nothing happens" whose order he is there to maintain.

Unlike the figures of the Republican Guard, the plain clothes officer is not given a chapter of his own, rather he is punctually and obliquely present throughout the book. He blends into *Mon quartier* just as he would be intended to blend into the community, in both cases serving as a thread of continuity between domestic and official spheres. Bay first introduces his character only nominally while observing the activities of his "wild-haired" housewife as she goes about her morning chores and surveys the street with her son. The focus is not on the officer, but is squarely on "the civil policeman's wife," a "good specimen of a house-wife," as evidenced by her dedication to her middle-class private sphere and devotion to the men in her life—husband and son. Bay's incidental introduction to the officer prioritizes his relationship to the domestic sphere by subordinating his discursive presence not to the state, but to the collection of otherwise invisible activities upon which his private life is structured, and which refer back to Bay's seeming primary interest in figures resembling his mother. The first time that the plain-clothes officer actually appears as an image it is in the context of his wife as they make the "conjugal bed" and go out into the street together. Bay uses visual information to underscore the link between the officer and civilian life, observing that "in some way they look alike, him, the civil policeman, and her, his wife" [*sic*]. His hesitance in making this assessment may simply refer to questions of physiognomic or stylistic likeness, yet it also plays on the ambiguity of the officer's identity—that is, the fact that his private appearance cannot be separated from the civilian guise he wears as a state agent. Is he ever more than a simulacrum of himself?

The figure of the plain-clothes officer positions Bay's objective of seeing beneath the public mask of socialization in terms of the problems of representation specific to the post-May '68 era, as he observes the potential power of the distinction between the real and realism in everyday life. The evolution of the police in nineteenth-century France saw the accumulation of effects that made the authority of the state increasingly visible by distinguishing officers by height, education, and costuming.[33] The visibility of the uniform became a preventative weapon of the "democratic Leviathan" that was intended to reduce the need to reactively inflict bodily harm with actual weapons. Likewise, the police pre-empted popular resistance by immersing themselves within the neighborhoods they patrolled, consuming on credit, and locally taking on other jobs while their wives mingled with the community through popular local women's activities—activities that recall Bay's ruminations on the possibility of engaging the Republican Guard's services to strip a floor or to supply champagne. While an organization of undercover agents had existed since the eighteenth century, conspiracy among civilians and the fear of revolution during the twentieth century led the police to develop

mimicking privacy as a standard tactic. That is, the police made use of the distinction between a representation and its object to operate as a force that, like the photographic pose, acted upon the presumption of identity. As Maurice Blanchot observed in July 1968, the street had awakened as a site of free speech and politics during the events of May, and in response, those streets were invaded by *policiers en civil*: "They are everywhere, in every place that draws their suspicions, close to the cinemas, in the cafés, even in museums, approaching any time three or four people are innocently talking: invisible, but all the same very visible."[34] Four years later, in 1972, the profession of *police enquêteur* would come into legal existence with the simple purpose of observing the public and making inquiries.[35]

As with the official public taxonomy that Bay provided of the police, he also presents classificatory information about the plain-clothes officer. But here, rather than drawing from official public intelligence, the information is derived from private knowledge that Bay has accumulated through his own counter-surveillance operation. On one page, three snapshots concentrate on a man loitering on a sidewalk while looking up at a building, and below another six track the progress of a black car turning at an intersection. Bay explains: "One of those discreet anonymous car is waiting for the civil policeman . Those cars are easy to recognize because of being so well polished (policed) and because of the particularity of having a double opening window on the back-seat door"[*sic*].[36] Along with Bay, the reader takes on the role of the one who does the policing. Whereas banalizing the image of the Republican Guard undercut the official mode of self-presentation that allows them to form a stable identity for the state, banalizing the image of the plain-clothes officer would only endorse its intended effect. Unlike the Republican Guard, the plain-clothes officer already shares Bay's aesthetic idiom, since his public image depends entirely on banality. By making him more visible in his civilian clothes, Bay at once makes use of, and undercuts, identity by bifurcating it into the official and private uses of a single style of costuming. Integrated into the book, rather than set aside as a type, the officer becomes the specific individual whose family the reader has come to know, and it is on this point that Bay's serial photographs reposition his official capacity in order to suggest that the representation he performs is also a representation of his civilian self. Bay thus highlights representation by making the dissimulation visible through the multiplication of perspectives on public and private personae and their overlapping.

CONCLUSION

It is not that Bay attempts to expose the truth of the officer's identity, rather, his decoding here, as in the cases of the other civilians throughout the book, demonstrates an imperative to be suspicious of all identity. Because of his active dissimulation, the plain-clothes officer would seem more false in the identity he projects. Yet Bay's conclusion goes further. In the

end, he finds that it would be impossible to know anyone other than himself—and that even then he would know himself only as a reflection of his environment—thereby indicating that the officer is not exceptional in his masking. It is useless to ask when point the plain-clothes officer's exterior appearance is factitious and when it is the honest, direct presentation of a true civilian. It is rather that his masking is doubled, the conscious camouflaging both covering, at the same time that it is identical with, the automatic camouflaging that is the standard mode in which all people present themselves, according to Bay. If, in the end, all appearances are simulacral, it would seem impossible to decide whose version of identity is more accurate: that of the police or that presented by Bay? The important distinction between them is that Bay reveals the rhetoric of sameness in representation that the police would instrumentalize.

In her book on the "afterlives" of 1968, Kristin Ross calls attention to the discourse that emerged among sociologists who came forward to argue that nothing had really happened in May.[37] Citing Jacques Rancière, she proposes that the language of the sociologists is that of the police in the act of breaking up a crowd by assuring that there is nothing to see, nothing happening. "Nothing happens" is the language of anonymity, the opposite, Rancière notes, of the interpellative "hey you!" that binds the identity of an individual to the law. Nothing happens may not bind the individual to the law, but it does bind the anonymous masses to sociological laws of representation. In contrast, *Mon quartier* demonstrates the importance of the specificity of the individual and the minutiae of daily happenings as they provide sites for ethical interpretation on the part of the reader. It is tempting to interpret Bay's representations of the police and Republican Guard as using a negating "nothing" to strip them of the power they attempt to wield in determining when and where an event can be seen to take place, or to themselves be the event when that event is state spectacle. Doing so however, would mean reinforcing the same concept of the circular, reproductive time of habitus upon which order is reproduced, as it would confirm the structuralist descriptive tendencies that Bay sought to avoid.

Bay's sociology of masks invites the viewer to separate the specific individual from the general representation, and in doing so, to see both that unique individual and the points that the viewer may hold in common with that other vis-à-vis their shared social education. Insofar as Bay attempts to suggest the specificity of the police as much as the housewives, his invitation to identify with the characters in the book also implicitly asks the reader to determine whether or not he or she might identify with the forces of order as well. While identification may allow for greater community building through the empathetic expansion of understandings of self and other, identification can also mean further assimilating forces of repression and fixity. If it is impossible to escape masking in the end, then the most ethical position may be to recognize

oneself as a collection of instances of repetition of the community to which one belongs and to understand such repetition as a process that can either involve passive entrenchment or active, perpetual decentring in which one is constantly shifting the view and demanding new means of representation.

NOTES

1. In English translation, Bay prefers the term "quarter" to "neighborhood" as it plays off of the French expression "le pirate qui ne fait pas de quartier" or "the pirate who takes no prisoners." Bay feels that the habitual everyday world that he documents does not represent what he would consider "his neighborhood." Didier Bay, e-mail message to the author, Aug. 6, 2014. All images reproduced in this article are copyright D. Bay.

2. Gilbert Lescault, "Didier Bay: Le photographe hostile aux apparences," *Chroniques de l'art vivant*, November 1973, 20.

3. Didier Bay, *Mon quartier vu de ma fenêtre* (Liège: Yellow Now, 1977), 11. "Je découre qu'il ne me réste d'élle que des souvenirs assez imprécis, tous 'maternels.' De la femme, de l'individu réel qu'était cette mére…je ne connais rien. Or c'est vraisemblablement plus l'individu que la mére qui s'est suicidé." The texts that Bay types up are riddled with spelling and typographic errors which he has neglected to correct in order, as he says, to close the gap between language as naturally spoken and its artificial transcription through what he called the "cultural fascism" of perfect writing.

4. Bay, *Mon Quartier*, 18. "Ces deux femmes d'ages différent ont la méme occupation matinale et 'fémine.' La plus agée est habillée. C'est une habitude, une discipline établie depuis longtems; car avec l'àge elle ne supporte plus les choses ou gens d'aspect négligés. Puisqu'elle n'est plus belle, au moins elle s'attache a étre nétte, et s'entoure de nétteté, de propreté. La plus jeune utilise le privilége 'bourgeois' de la robe de chambre; comme un signe distinctif de ne pas étre obligée de sortir travailler , donc de porter des habits de rue" [*sic*].

5. Didier Bay, *Fenêtres* (Hjorring: Forlagt Sommersko, 1974), n.p. While Bay imbues these figures with a psychological malaise, he also says that he was not searching for the ghost of his mother in these figures. While he was attracted to them as subjects, they were also the figures who happened to be visible during the day time. Didier Bay, e-mail message to the author, Aug. 6, 2014.

6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 101.

7. Pierre Bourdieu, "Structures, Habitus, Power: Basis for a Theory of Symbolic Power," in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 159–197.

8. Lucien Goldmann, cited in Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: esquisse d'une vie, histoire d'un système de pensée* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), 444.

9. The refrain "nothing happened" echoed through the decades that followed 1968 and in particular was used by social commentators and politicians as a way to neutralize the May movement's consequences and discourage repeat occurrences. This effect is illustrated throughout Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

10. Didier Bay, *La Jeunesse de Didier Bay vers 1975, text, photographs, vinyl photo album* (1976), collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne, n.p. Translation mine. "Je strucuture ou déstructure mes exemples de structures pour mieux faire allusion à notre façon de structurer qui peut étre un besoin impérieux. Qui peut étre aussi une impulsion hierarchique politique. Qui peut étre aussi un pseudo-scientisme, donc trés répandu à notre époque." [sic] And farther down, "Je fuie la structure autant que je peux. C'est à dire la strcuture des autres." [*sic*].

11. Bay recalls that in for these albums from the 1970s, including Mon quartier he worked "without a preconceived idea… or preceding concept" but rather that he allowed themes to emerge over a long period of gestation during which familiar structures would create landmarks in his "question for exoticism through banality." "ma façon de travailler, si possible sans idée préconcue… ni concept préalable, en me nourrissant de son avancement et de sa lente gestation pour finalement lui donner une forme où certaines structures familiéres sobres (donc porteuses de sens présumés connus) facilitent repérages et expréssion ds ma quéte d'exotisme à travers la banalité." Didier Bay, e-mail message to the author, Aug. 6, 2014.

12. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 68-69.

13. Ibid., 77.

14. "The characters and situations in this account being purely fictional, all resemblance with existing people or situations would be nothing but fortuitous."

15. The convention was first adopted by MGM in response to the trial Youssoupof v. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (1934) in which Princess Irina of Russia successfully sued the studio for defamation after they creatively adapted her personal history for the 1932 film Rasputin and the Empress.

16. Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 215. In the original French, Genette uses the phrase "une protestation de fictivité," which even more suggests the suspicion that he meant to imply. Gérard Genette, *Seuils* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 200.

17. Laure Beaumont-Maillet, Françoise Denoyelle, and Dominique Versavel, eds., *La photographie humaniste, 1945-1968: Autour d'Izis, Brassaï, Doisneau, Ronis…* (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2006), 24.

18. Clement Greenberg, "Four Photographers: Review of *A Vision of Paris* by Eugène-Auguste Atget; *A Life in Photography* by Edward Steichen; *The World Through My Eyes*, by Andreas Feininger; and *Photographs* by Cartier-Bresson, introduced by Lincoln Kirstein," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 183–87.

19. Didier Bay, e-mail message to the author, Aug. 6, 2014.

20. Didier Bay, German Academic Exchange Service [Deutscher Akademischer Austausch Dienst] application, 1975, unpublished document, Kandinsky Library, Didier Bay dossier. Originally Bay showed the text and photographs in Liège at the gallery Yellow Now. The work took the form of a collection of ten A4 format plastic pocket albums. Lescault, "Didier Bay: Le photographe hostile aux apparences," 21. Bay eventually published the book with the Belgian publisher Yellow Now who printed the book in around 300 copies and set the price at 450 Belgian francs, which today would be approximately equivalent to € 20.

21. Bay, *Mon Quartier*, 6.

22. Didier Bay, untitled essay in *Une idée en l'air* (Paris: Canal, 1980), iv. Translation mine.

23. David Campany, "Conceptual Art History or, A Home for Homes for America," in *Rewriting Conceptual Art*, eds. Michael Newman and Jon Bird (London: Reaktion, 1999), 126.

24. Anne Dagbert, "Didier Bay: peintre moderne de la nudité," *Art Press* (December 1993): 18. Translation mine.

25. Bay, *Une idée en l'air*, iv.

26. Ibid. "la prise de parole se développe à travers la prise de l'image. […] le monde du 'visible' (images) n'est pas aussi aliéné au monde de 'lisible' (la culture) qu'on veut le faire croire et dans ce travail conjugué, de photos et textes, surgissent d'autres dimensions autonomes des deux media (l'invisible, l'illisible ?). […] les 'acquits' socio-culturels aliénants qui privilégient les automatismes, les synchronismes de perception, les lieux communs, et mutilent ainsi les champs de création et de perception des écritures et des lectures (des photos et textes)."

27. Ibid.

28. Didier Bay, *A Pioneer's Life around 1875 or Didier Bay's Youth, text, photographs, vinyl photo album* (1975), collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne Paris, n.p. Translation mine.

29. Ibid.

30. Bay, *Mon Quartier*, 243. "la garde républicaine a une partie de ses éffectifs spécialement équipés d'un matériel de répréssion tout neuf: puissantes motos Triumph, casques à visiéres spéciales, combinaisons de close-combat, matraque et révolver visible en parti dans son étui style cow-boy….Lorsque j'ai voulu photographier la premiére sortie de cette 'band d'élite'; je me suis vu interdire la prise de vue par de gradés, sous peine de confiscation de l'appareil photo" [sic].

31. Ibid., 260. "Il parrait que l'on peut louer les services des gardes républicains, comme les pompiers, pour leur faire cirer les parquets d'un appartement par exemple. Mais prendraient-ils leurs chevaux pour une telle mission, et résteraient-ils aussi droit sur leur selle." [sic]

32. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 79.

33. Jean-Noël Luc, "Anthropologie du policier: le corps, le temps, l'espace," in *Métiers de Police: Être policier en Europe, XVIIIe-XXe siècle*, eds. Jean-Marc Berlière et al. (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2008), 393–396.

34. Maurice Blanchot, "La rue," in *Écrits politiques, 1953-1993* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 180-81. Translation mine.

35. John Philip Stead, *The Police of France* (New York: MacMillan, 1983), 112.

36. Bay, Mon Quartier, 164. "Le policier en civil est attendu par une de ces petites voitures discréte dont l'aspet trop soigné et la particularité de la vitre des portes arriéres en deux parties coulissantes indiquent tout de suite qu'il s'agit là d'une voiture de la police" [sic].

37. Ross, *May '68*, 23.

Woodruff's research focuses on modern and contemporary art in France with particular interest in its transnational dialogues and interdisciplinary influences. Her manuscript in process, *Disordering the Establishment: Art, Display, and Participation in France, 1958-81*, examines conceptual, kinetic, and media-based art designed to subvert normalizing institutions during a period of economic affluence, political conservatism, and social upheaval. She is currently writing

articles on André Cadere and the Collectif d'Art Sociologique, and her article on the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel will appear in the Fall 2014 issue of *Art Journal*.

SEEKING THE AUTHENTIC: POLISH CULTURE AND THE NATURE OF POSTCOLONIAL THEORY

STANLEY BILL

The notion of postcolonial theory has been floating around the Polish intellectual scene for the last ten years like a colorful balloon that nobody can ever quite capture or claim. Given the country's experience of foreign occupation and domination throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries – and an earlier quasi-colonial history of its own in present-day Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine – postcolonial theory seems at first glance to open some intriguing possibilities in Polish historical, political, sociological, cultural and literary studies. Indeed, various scholars in all these fields have advocated a turn towards it, though the discussion has generally failed to advance far beyond repeated prefatory remarks and prolegomena. Postcolonial theory in Poland increasingly resembles an unrealized possibility that has somehow already exhausted its creative potential – a stillborn theory.

Nevertheless, the slogan of "postcolonialism" continues to crop up in the Polish academy – and especially in public discourse – with increasing regularity. In many cases, the thinkers and writers applying the concepts of postcolonial theory have openly associated themselves with the Polish conservative right. This is surprising when we consider that postcolonial theory in its canonical forms owes a great deal to Marxist, postmodernist and feminist theories – none of which are especially dear to Polish conservatives. In this paper, I shall begin by examining this paradox, assessing why the theory might be so appealing to conservative intellectuals and how they have employed it. Yet postcolonial theory has also appeared in a very different ideological context in Poland – namely, in the work of Maria Janion, an eminent literary critic who belongs to the opposing side of the ideological divide in Poland's contemporary "culture wars" between "traditionalist" and "progressive" factions. In my analysis of her work, I

shall suggest that the fundamental imaginative repertoires fueling quite disparate visions of Poland's past and future may turn out to have a great deal in common. On this basis, I shall bring the Polish case into broader discussions on the very nature of postcolonial theory, with particular reference to Vivek Chibber's recent study, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (2013).

1. Postcolonial Theory as an Instrument of Conservative Discourse

First of all, I would like to briefly reconstruct a general outline of the Polish conservative version of postcolonial theory. Clearly there are important distinctions between diverse thinkers, but the theory tends to appear in a surprisingly consistent and homogeneous form. In my reconstruction, I shall refer primarily to the thought of four leading figures: the two literary scholars currently providing the main intellectual impetus, Ewa Thompson (Rice University) and Dariusz Skórczewski (John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin); the influential conservative magazine columnist and author, Rafał Ziemkiewicz; and the eminent poet, Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz.[1]

The basic shared assumption of all four thinkers is that Poland's nineteenth- and twentieth-century history of domination, partition and conquest by foreign powers is essentially comparable with the colonization experienced by the peoples of Africa, Asia, the Americas and Australia. According to this narrative, the empires of Russia, Prussia and Austria "colonized" the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth at the end of the eighteenth century, dividing it into three "partitions." A century and a half later – after two decades of renewed independent existence between the wars – the Soviet Union "colonized" the Second Polish Republic in 1944.[2] These historical experiences imprinted themselves deeply in Polish thought, politics, culture, art and literature throughout these periods. Today the imprints are still evident in all these cultural spheres – and in a general Polish "mentality" – since Poland is now a classically "postcolonial" culture. From this point of departure, the authors of the narrative set about applying the highly developed apparatus of postcolonial theory to the Polish case, using its key concepts as ready-made explanatory tools, introducing certain adjustments only where the specific context necessitates them.

According to Skórczewski, the Western European powers "orientalized" Polish culture in a fashion similar to the operations first described by Edward Said in relation to the Middle East – feminizing Polish men and assigning a lower level of cultural development to the entire region.[3] Poles subsequently interiorized these judgments, and now they suffer from a typically postcolonial inferiority complex. Thompson argues that Homi Bhabha's concepts of "mimicry" and "hybridity" are also relevant to the Polish case, since an orientalized, denigrated and devalued Polish culture has sought slavishly to mimic the patterns of its

colonizers, thus giving rise to a new hybrid culture characterized by a mingling of native and foreign elements.[4] All four thinkers agree that this hybridity and deferential mimicry now find expression above all in the ideology of Poland's cosmopolitan "elites," which include members of the "liberal" ruling Civic Platform party, as well as journalists associated with Adam Michnik's *Gazeta Wyborcza* newspaper and with TVN television. These "elites" supposedly deny the native soil from which they have sprung, always looking to Western Europe and the United States for cultural, political and artistic models to follow, disdaining everything naturally "Polish" as inferior. On this basis, Ziemkiewicz characterizes the primary political and cultural fault line in contemporary Poland as a division between "creoles" and "natives," between those whose minds are captive to the postcolonial mentality and those who have freed themselves of it in a return to an original "Polishness."[5]

In general, the Polish conservative postcolonial theorists simply apply Said's and Bhabha's most famous slogans without much discussion of their nuances or local specificities. At the same time, certain troubling inconsistencies inevitably demand theoretical solutions more precisely adapted to Polish circumstances. For instance, Russia – in both its imperial and Soviet manifestations – has been the major colonizer in the Polish case, yet it would be difficult to find examples of Polish cultural phenomena consciously mimicking Russian models, since Poles have tended to view themselves as civilizationally superior to the "barbarian Mongols" to their east. Accordingly, Russian political domination of Poland has never implied the accompanying cultural hegemony so typical of other colonial contexts. Today this fact is also evident in post-communist Poland. Indeed, none of the theorists claim that the so-called "creole" elites look to Russia for their cultural models. The most recent colonial experience is Soviet and eastern, yet the hybridized culture looks longingly to the west.

The conservative theorists develop two solutions to this problem. First, we find a certain conflation of the structures and ideology of European integration with those of the Soviet Union under the broad banner of political "leftism." For instance, Rymkiewicz insists that "the European Union was invented precisely . . . in the period of early communism."[6] Thompson does not support such excessive claims. Instead, she devises a second solution to the problem: the notion of the "surrogate hegemon."[7] In short, since the oppressed Poles could not find a cultural hegemon in their barbaric eastern colonizers, they had to search elsewhere to satisfy their need to be subordinate. The west became the shining ideal for post-communist Polish elites, whose members were already accustomed to obediently following instructions from outside the country.

I do not wish to discuss the specific validity of this application of postcolonial theory here, though various other Polish scholars have pointed to what they regard as fundamental differences between Poland's situation and the circumstances of the postcolonial Global South. Some have proposed the term "post-dependency" as more appropriate to the Polish situation.[8] However, I am more interested in examining how the Polish conservative postcolonial theory functions in order to make some broader points about the question of "culture" in Poland and about postcolonial theory more generally. Above all, postcolonial theory is useful to Polish conservatives because in its most simplified form it fundamentally represents an ethical and political project with strongly essentializing tendencies. As Skórczewski puts it, the central issue here is "the ethical project of postcolonial redefinition of Poles' identity."[9]

The most important function of postcolonial theory in this sense is not to describe the reality of Polish cultural history – insofar as this could ever be possible – but rather to diagnose and evaluate the political and cultural order of *contemporary* Poland. Indeed, when the word "postcolonial" appears in Polish public discourse, it inevitably imposes a value judgment. I shall argue that this is not only the case when conservatives use it, though – by and large – conservatives have found the term most conducive to their aims of defending traditional, Catholic values and a "primordialist" understanding of nation against new multiculturalist, individualist and civic models of identity.

Here the postcolonial theory comes into play on an immediately political level. The "creoles" are the liberal political and intellectual elites, supposedly holding themselves scornfully above the backward masses, while the "natives" are the rest of the Polish nation, whose interests are represented by the socially conservative Law and Justice opposition party, the Catholic Church or various neo-nationalist groups – with whom Thompson, Rymkiewicz and Ziemkiewicz, respectively, identify.[10] The division between "creoles" and "natives" is axiological. The "creoles" are self-hating Poles, internally divided, pretentious, artificial, inauthentic, smitten with the West and its alien values, incapable of thinking for themselves, "lemmings" – as the conservative press likes to call them – haunted by complexes resulting from an interiorized sense of inferiority inculcated by the western "surrogate hegemons." The "natives" are simple, authentic, deeply committed to Christian values, proud of their own traditions, devoid of any complexes before the West. As Leszek Koczanowicz characterizes it, the basic opposition is between "the real Poland" and the "fake or inauthentic Poland."[11]

Postcolonial theory lends this opposition between alleged authenticity and inauthenticity a strongly ethical dimension, as well as a sense of historical *telos*. The creole elite is on the wrong side of history, trapped within its own colonized mentality, while the masses of the Polish nation – perhaps lulled to sleep or partly colonized by creole propaganda – must eventually

rise to reclaim their authentic identity. This is unmistakably a rhetoric of emancipation, or even of revolution – a conservative revolution. Various conservative writers, including the poet Rymkiewicz, have employed the classic metaphor from Adam Mickiewicz's national mystery play *Forefather's Eve, Part III* to describe the current historical phase. The nation is like lava, with a cold crust as its upper layer and fire deep within.[12] Eventually, the revolutionary volcanic eruption will occur, and indeed many conservative commentators welcomed the surge in activism around the 2010 Smolensk catastrophe as the first rumblings of revolution.

Here the Polish case sheds a particularly stark light on the general potential of postcolonial theory to essentialize and exclude. In this sense, it may make a key contribution to important debates taking place within the broader field. As early as 1993, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak backed away from her earlier concept of a "strategic use of essentialism," lamenting that her notion "simply became the union ticket for essentialism."[13] More recently, in 2013, Vivek Chibber has advanced a more radical argument in his book, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, claiming that postcolonial theories, particularly those of the so-called "subalternist school," ultimately promote a strongly essentializing vision of culture, especially in the case of non-Western societies. Consequently, such theories have obscured the global reach or relevance of capitalism, class and the universalist Enlightenment projects of emancipation.

According to Chibber: "The lasting contribution of postcolonial theory . . . will be its revival of cultural essentialism and its acting as an endorsement of orientalism, rather than being an antidote to it."[14] To put the problem in other terms, postcolonial theory defends the specificity of local cultures, but in doing so it risks falling into a form of "culturalism," placing illegitimate limitations on the repertoire of emancipatory action available to individuals in specific places. The emphasis on essential cultural difference obscures both the universal power of capital and the universal human needs forming the basis of any potential resistance to it: "The core thesis of postcolonial studies is that a deep structural chasm separates East and West, so much so that it undermines any framework claiming universal applicability."[15]

Chibber seems particularly astonished that postcolonial discourse has become so prevalent on the left: "For two hundred years, anybody who called herself progressive embraced . . . universalism. It was simply understood that the reason workers or peasants could unite across national boundaries is because they shared certain material interests. This is now being called into question by subaltern studies, and it's quite remarkable that so many people on the Left have accepted it."[16] The subalternist project of emancipation is fundamentally anti-leftist in its attack on the concept of common class interests across cultures and the accompanying underestimation of capital's universalizing power. Therefore, the theory's popularity among ostensibly "leftist" intellectuals appears to Chibber as a terrible misunderstanding: "The irony of the project is that, while it presents itself as the new face of radical critique, as the

leading edge of criticism in an age of global capitalism, its arguments resurrect key pillars of conservative ideology." [17]

In this context, the Polish case seems tailor-made for Chibber's claims, effectively exposing the true nature of postcolonial theory as he understands it. There is nothing ironic or inconsistent about the Polish conservative postcolonial project. After all, its aim is quite explicitly to "resurrect key pillars of conservative ideology." The Polish conservative theorists evince a strong positive interest in promoting cultural essentialism and anti-universalism, since they wish to propagate a particular vision of exclusive and integral "Polishness." More important, the resulting incapacity to launch a critique of global capitalism is a perfect fit with Polish conservatism, because its critical project is not directed at capitalism, but rather at Eastern European communism and its supposed remnants as a postcolonial system.

Chibber attacks the subalternists for their poorly supported claims that "the forms of domination that obtain in postcolonial formations are *not* capitalist, and that they cannot therefore be analyzed through categories developed by political economy." [18] Yet in the Polish case, the postcolonial formations condemned by conservative theorists may genuinely not be capitalist at all. Indeed, the most recent "colonizer" in Poland was the Soviet Union, whose military power installed a government that dismantled private capital in the country and introduced a system of centralized economic planning. These colonizers were at least ostensibly communists. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that the leader of the conservative Law and Justice party, Jarosław Kaczyńsk, would accuse the ruling elites in contemporary Poland of presiding over a system that is both "postcolonial" and "post-communist," where these terms are almost synonymous. [19] For many Polish conservatives, including Ziemkiewicz and Rymkiewicz, postcolonial emancipation partly continues to mean liberation from a dominant leftist agenda which they still perceive in the political structures of post-1989 Poland and even of the European Union. In other words, the Polish conservative postcolonial theory negatively confirms Chibber's hypothesis by uniting fierce anti-leftism with a powerful emancipatory political project rooted in visions of authentic culture.

2. "Authentic Culture" and the Black Hole of History

The question immediately arises: if contemporary Poland is postcolonial, culturally hybridized and inauthentic, then when did the authentic Poland exist? There are various responses to this question, but Ewa Thompson's is clearly the most prevalent. She finds the authentic Poland in the pre-partition era of Sarmatianism – the peculiar gentry culture of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that dominated from its golden age in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to its long decline over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. According to Thompson,

the historical and literary documents from this period reveal a fiercely independent and self-reliant republican culture, comfortable in its own skin, justly proud of its own productions, somewhat disinterested in the outside world, unselfconsciously taking its place as an equal among other European cultures.[20] Yet here the argument begins to break down, as essentializing claims about authentic culture are perhaps bound to do.

The Sarmatian era in Polish culture was precisely characterized by an extraordinarily high level of *hybridity* and *mimicry* of foreign models. We need only walk the streets of Krakow – the former royal capital – to appreciate this fact. The medieval core of the city was laid out according to a German framework for urban planning and legal regulation dictated by the Magdeburg Rights. Many of the city's distinctive structures and interiors were built in Italian styles by Italian architects. Thompson herself concedes that most Polish noblemen of the era received their educations in Western Europe. Even the greatest Polish poet of the time, Jan Kochanowki, had his university education in Prussia and Italy. His lyric poetry borrowed substantially from the model of Pierre de Ronsard, whom he met in France, while his famous drama – *The Dismissal of the Grecian Envoys* (1578) – was heavily indebted to the innovations of the Italian Gian Giorgio Trissino's earlier tragedy, *Sophonisba* (1524).[21]

Thompson and Skórczewski both refer to the postcolonial concept of "necessary fictions" constructed by nations afflicted by a cultural inferiority complex – myths hailing an ancient and glorious past. Yet Thompson does not consider the necessarily fictional function of the Sarmatian myth itself, founded on the curious claim that Polish noblemen were descendants of the ancient Iranian Sarmatian tribe. This myth led to a peculiar self-orientalization, the adoption of various extravagant styles of eastern custom and dress, perhaps in an attempt to define a glorious Polish historical identity separate from the dominating influence of Western European cultural forms. Moreover, the specific content of the myth itself imposed a highly colonial interpretation of Polish history, according to which an Iranian tribe had swept into Slavic lands and conquered the native population. The ensuing divide between the ruling Sarmatian *szlachta*[22] and the downtrodden Slavic peasantry was far more severe than any contemporary division between "creoles" and "natives." So where is the authentic Poland?

In fact, the problem of authenticity runs much deeper than these specific observations. Clearly all cultures are hybridized and dynamic, since no human culture has developed without any contact whatsoever with other cultures. Nevertheless, in the canonical postcolonial cases, one can – at least in principle – draw a relatively clear line between "native" cultural content and the aggressive incursions of the colonizing cultural hegemon. This is especially clear in the Americas and Australia, where fully formed and developed local cultures encountered Western cultures they had never previously seen. So the line between "authentic" and "inauthentic" content in the postcolonial context of contemporary Australian Aboriginal

cultures is often not difficult to locate, though even here the idea of cultural authenticity is problematic, once again throwing the essentializing tendencies of postcolonial theory into a stark light.[23] Things are even more complex in the South Asian and African spheres – which had often seen varying degrees of earlier contact with European cultures – though undoubtedly certain crucial and identifiable political, religious and economic distinctions remained.

The Polish situation is nothing like these classic postcolonial cases. From its symbolic beginnings with the baptism of Mieszko I in 966, Polish culture has always been a hybridized culture developing under the influence of Western and Southern European "colonizing" influences. In fact, the symbolic beginning is above all an irruption of *hybridity*, the dragging of Slavic lands along the Warta and Vistula Rivers into the orbit of Western Christianity and its associated culture. The symbolic origin of Polish nationhood lies in an act of cultural colonization willingly accepted by a tribal elite for immediate political gain, as the nascent state adopted the Christian religion from Rome in order to stymy the aggressive intentions of the Germanic Holy Roman Empire. According to this theory, Mieszko I would become the first "creole," betraying the earlier "authentic" elements of his own pagan culture.

The distinguished literary scholar Maria Janion – who is renowned as a strong critic of traditionalist versions of Polish culture – has developed her own postcolonial theory based on a similar vision of history in her book, *Uncanny Slavdom* (*Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna*, 2006). Her project unites multiple threads, yet an important part of her argument is that Polish culture is still deeply scarred by an original colonial encounter with Latin civilization via an often brutal conversion to Christianity. The Western Slavs lost their mythology, and thus their cultural identity, extinguished by the missionary zeal of the new cultural masters.[24] Janion finds the traces of this deep wound in certain classic works of Polish literature, particularly from the Romantic era, where Slavic mythological motifs frequently appear, almost like the return of the repressed. From 966 onward, Poles have been alienated from themselves, feeling inferior to the colonizing West, as peripheral latecomers to Latin civilization, and superior to the Slavic East, where they have often entertained a colonial sense of civilizing mission. As the playwright Sławomir Mrożek once formulated the dilemma, Poland has been east of the West and west of the East.[25] For Janion, the contemporary Polish imagination must struggle against the ghosts of this originary colonization, which express themselves in what she calls the "messianism of national megalomania."[26] Janion complains that Poland in its current form is "a shallow monolith, mostly national and Catholic."[27] In order to join Europe on truly equal terms, it must first throw off this restrictive monolithic identity, embrace diversity and its own uncanny eastern Slavicness – its "*niesamowita słowiańszczyzna*." In other words, it must overcome the legacy of its original colonization by Latin Christianity.

What strikes me most here is that Janion essentially uses the "postcolonial" moniker for the same distinctly political purposes as the conservative theorists – namely, to draw a fundamental line between authentic and inauthentic identity. While Thompson draws the line at the close of the Sarmatian era, Janion simply goes further back in time to the tenth-century

Christianization and the beginnings of the Polish nation within the Latin Christian political system, where an alien new religion and mythology imposed themselves on an authentic pre-Christian Slavic proto-Poland. Accordingly, those who would support the model of a national and Catholic Poland today – that is, the opposition Law and Justice Party, the conservative media and the more radical nationalist political options – stand for an inauthentic Poland, an alienated and complex-ridden Poland, a postcolonial Poland. Once again, the argument is primarily political rather than historical, and its aim is to exclude. History appears only as a useful tool in an ongoing ideological struggle over the political and cultural shape of contemporary Poland.

Postcolonial theory in its diverse Polish forms inevitably returns to the contemporary political question of authenticity: what or who is the real Poland? With her account of the Latin colonization of the Western Slavs, Janion unwittingly reproduces the narrative of Polish martyrdom and exceptionalism she is so keen to oppose, since she does not acknowledge that this history – in diverse forms – is common to all European nations, all of which have their own pre-Christian repressed. After all, Europe as a whole is essentially the product of the encounter between southern Latin Christianity, with its classical civilizational foundations, and various northern and western pagan cultures. Admittedly, Poland came into existence relatively late on the geographical periphery of this European scene, and it has historically tended to be a net consumer rather than producer of influential cultural models. Therefore, as Ryszard Nycz observes, we can only come to appreciate the originality and uniqueness of Polish cultural productions after a full recognition of this peripheral status. [28]

Postcolonial theory is of little use in this context. Both the putative colonization and peripherality of Polish culture are inscribed into its very origin, which ultimately cannot be separated from the symbolic moment of 966, since everything before this moment is practically inaccessible to historiographical reflection – a black hole or cultural unconscious that betrays its existence only in traces. We shall never uncover the "authentic" Poland, so we are left with a peripheral, hybridized and dynamic Poland whose political existence has been fragile and whose participation in European culture has often been characterized by what we might alternatively describe as "belatedness." Yet scholars and public intellectuals on both sides of the Polish culture wars continue their search for "the authentic."

3. Postcolonial Theory and the Problem of Culturalism

Liberal critiques of the essentializing "right-wing" version of postcolonial theory in Poland are equally susceptible to the trap of fetishizing certain "authentic" visions of Polishness to the exclusion of others. In this sense, when Maria Janion argues for the shaping of a "new Polish imaginary" in the face of what she calls a "crisis in Polish identity," she seems to be saying that a new "Polish identity" can be imagined that would somehow be more coherent with the "authentic" nature of its Slavic origins.[29] Instead of orientalizing Russia by insisting on its inferiority to a European Poland, Poles should embrace their own non-"European," "Slavic" identity. Only in this way will Poland be able to take its independent place – unfettered by complexes or narrow parochialism – at the political and cultural table of a redefined and united Europe. Janion wishes to point to an "alternative way of thinking about [Poland's] place in Europe."[30] In her solution, we find echoes of Witold Gombrowicz's arguments from half a century earlier in the first volume of his *Diary*: "We will not be a truly European people until we separate ourselves from Europe because being European does not mean fusing with Europe, but being one of its integral parts, a very distinct, integral part."[31]

What is most surprising here is that Janion – famous as a sworn enemy of integral nationalist visions of culture – turn out to be a "nationalist" herself, at least in the ethno-symbolist understanding of this term outlined by Anthony D. Smith: "The nationalist's overall aim is to ground the nation on firm and 'authentic' foundations . . . to unite the community, restore its autonomy and self-expression and, in this way, to prepare it to take its rightful place in the concert of nations."[32] According to Smith, ethnicity provides the most typical foundation for such narratives – and this would certainly appear to be the case in Janion's theory of "uncanny Slavicness."

Undoubtedly, Janion offers a broader and more inclusive model of Polishness than the primordial nationalists of the right wing. However, she still reveals an essentializing sense of a singular cultural history that can and perhaps should dictate how people imagining themselves as "Poles" – and this remains a largely unproblematic category – are to define themselves in contemporary times. Consequently, the present situation of young Polish citizens emigrating, or saying "farewell to Poland," for a more liberated European identity appears to Janion as a cultural crisis in need of creative cultural solutions. Poles must rediscover or perhaps even recreate the authentic dimensions of their own natural culture. Throughout Janion's narrative, authentic "Polish culture" seems to exist above all for those who can imaginatively trace their identity – and their identity troubles – back to the time of the pagan Slavic tribes before the crucial moment of Christianization.

One way or another, such arguments exhibit a species of culturalism, or what Leszek Koczanowicz describes as the "culturological illusion," assuming "a continuity of culture and its tropes . . . that goes beyond any economic, political or social changes."[33] In the very

different context of the culturally pluralist United States of America, Walter Benn Michaels argues that "the question of which culture we belong to is relevant only if culture is anchored in race."[34] His point is that any sense that particular people have a right or responsibility to attach themselves to particular cultures is ultimately grounded on the assumption of essential racial distinctions. Therefore, the supposedly progressive ethos of cultural pluralism is at heart a racialist doctrine, since it is "the appeal to race that makes culture an object of affect and that gives notions like losing our culture, preserving it, stealing someone else's culture, restoring people's culture to them, and so on, their pathos."[35] At the same time, this focus on race obscures the operation of economic inequality across racial boundaries.

Can we discern a similarly racialized doctrine in the distinctly non-multicultural Polish case? Clearly the conservative "postcolonial" theorists assume that "Polishness" is the right culture for "Poles." But do they understand the word "Pole" in an ethnic, political, religious or geopolitical context? Would Jewish Poles have the same right to this culture? Apparently not, since Thompson concedes that her Sarmatian myth would be "hard to imagine without Catholicism in its background,"[36] while Skórczewski advocates a current of thought that would find "the core of national self-identification in Christianity."[37] Janion undoubtedly offers broader possibilities, arguing that young Poles would not feel so inclined to renounce their Polishness in favor of a liberating European identity if Polish culture were more "diverse" and "colorful." In this way, she follows other more liberal scholars in seeking to forge "broader communities that would offer a secular plane for people to come together."[38] Yet this still suggests a cultural solution to a cultural problem, while crucial questions remain as to which specific characteristics would then define the borders of this broader culture and for whom it would exist.

Perhaps "Polish culture" would denote a purely linguistic territory, so that Polishness would reduce itself to a certain rootedness in the Polish language and its products. But then what about culturally self-identifying "Poles" who do not speak Polish, like so many Polish Americans or the descendants of people deported from Poland's former eastern territories to Soviet Central Asia? And what of Polish-speaking people in Israel who feel irrevocably cut off from "Polish culture"? Janion speaks of "Poles" as if this term in itself constituted a perfectly natural classification. The challenge for her is to create a more modern and inclusive "Polish culture" to replace the outmoded patriarchal, national and Catholic model. The new culture would find space for women, non-Catholics, sexual minorities and its own "Slavic" roots. Yet the very notion of "Poles" still remains a strongly essentialized category in this schema, perhaps despite Janion's intentions, and the new culture would predominantly exist for them.

Although Janion never says so explicitly, it is difficult not to conclude from her argument that the unspoken foundations of "Polishness," especially with its "Slavic" provenance restored, are ultimately ethnic. For instance, Janion speaks of the mixed emotions of superiority and inferiority that have haunted the attitudes of "Poles towards Jews."[39] Such a statement makes little sense if we assume – as the multicultural narrative of Polish identity theoretically does – that a person may be both Polish and Jewish at the same time. Perhaps we might define the tension as a clash between Jewish Poles and Catholic Poles, or between cultural Poles and ethnic Poles. Either way, Polish culture would appear as a choice, or at best a single element within a hybridized identity, for members of the merely cultural group, while it would seem naturally destined for or rooted in the very nature of those belonging to the ethnic category.

The persuasive power of Janion's argument lies in the outraged sense that patriarchal, Latin Christian, "anti-Slavic," racist and homophobic distortions have robbed "Poles" of their "authentic culture." Admittedly, this authenticity appears in her writings more as a provisional and imaginary construct than as a lost historical reality. Yet ethnicity emerges very clearly as the essential measure of cultural identity, as Janion focuses her central thesis on the powerful claims supposedly flowing from the cultural unconscious of "uncanny Slavicness," the hidden call of ethnic origin, which returns like a collective repressed in literature and art.

Janion's postcolonial project, like those of the conservative theorists, consistently ignores the potential significance of other social structures, including class, in favor of an emancipatory project that emphasizes cultural specificity, authenticity and continuity. By focusing on culture and ethnicity, Janion's argument falls into the "subalternist" pattern outlined by Vivek Chibber in *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. The forces of international capitalism occasionally appear in the background of her discussion, but their significance remains strangely indeterminate. For instance, she mentions in passing that young Poles first began to emigrate "after the opening of the European job markets," and yet she focuses almost exclusively on cultural rather than economic explanations of this phenomenon.[40] In Chibber's terms, "the most powerful social and structural force in the world becomes a wisp of smoke, something so ghostly that one becomes not quite sure it exists."[41]

Jan Sowa has provided a partial explanation for the general paucity of reflections on class, capitalism and political economy in the Polish humanities and social sciences by pointing to an "historically determined aversion" to Marxist thought.[42] Initially, as Sowa observes, this inhibited the development of postcolonial theory in Poland. However, I would argue that various conservative intellectuals have eventually made the same discovery as Vivek Chibber – namely, that postcolonial theory is at odds with leftist intellectual traditions of universalism and the defense of class interests across cultural boundaries. Within Chibber's framework, Maria Janion simply falls into the same contradictions as the "subalternists,"

defending cultural specificity at the unintended expense of universal interests. Yet the right-wing Polish thinkers produce a much more ideologically consistent argument – whatever its logical flaws. Postcolonial theory offers a ready-made instrument for pursuing the explicitly conservative objective of defending exclusionary and essentialist visions of authentic culture against universalist claims, including those based on Marxist understandings of capitalism or class. The peculiarities of the Polish case make this patently clear.

In post-communist Poland, it has thus far proven extraordinarily difficult to forge a vision of culture and society independent of ethnicity, where the essence of ethnicity lies in imagined ties of ancestry and kinship stretching back into the mists of history. Even the most inclusive models imply that Polish culture – though it should seek to welcome members of other ethnic groups – is above all the natural inheritance of ethnic Poles, the imagined descendants of the West Slavic tribes that moved into the area between the Oder and Vistula rivers during the first millennium. As Poland grows wealthier and begins to attract greater numbers of immigrants from other parts of the world, two crucial questions will increasingly arise. Will the new arrivals on the diversifying labor market become "Poles"? And will "Poles" embrace hybridity and abandon the claims of "authentic" culture?

NOTES

1. Here it is worth pointing out that Jarosław Kaczyński – the leader of the main conservative opposition party, Law and Justice (*PiS*) – has also referred to the concept of "postcolonialism" on numerous occasions.

2. In July 1944 – as the Red Army steadily drove the Wehrmacht back to Berlin – the Soviets established a provisional government in Lublin to oppose the London-based Polish government in exile. The communist successors of this government were effectively to rule Poland under Soviet auspices until 1989.

3. See: Dariusz Skórczewski, "Polska skolonizowana, polska zorientalizowana: Teoria postkolonialna wobec "Innej Europy," *Porównania* 6 (2009): 96-105.

4. See: Ewa Thompson, "Sarmatyzm i postkolonializm: o naturze polskich resentymentów," *Dziennik* (11 May 2007); "A jednak kolonializm: Uwagi epistemologiczne," *Teksty Drugie* 6 (2011): 303-314.

5. See: Rafał Ziemkiewicz, "W Polsce, jak w krajach postkolonialnych, funkcjonuje podział na 'kreoli' i 'tubylców'," *Polska Times* (10 July 2011).

6. Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, "Elity nie potrzebują Polski – wywiad z Jarosławem Markiem Rymkiewiczem." Bibuła: Pismo niezależne (11 December 2010).

7. Ewa Thompson, "Postkolonialne refleksje: Na marginesie pracy zbiorowej 'From Sovietology to Postcoloniality: Poland and Ukraine from a Postcolonial Perspective' pod redakcją Janusza Korka," *Porównania* 5 (2008), p. 117.

8. See: Dorota Kołodziejczyk, "Postkolonialny transfer na Europę Środkowo-Wschodnią," Teksty Drugie 5 (2010): 22-39; Grażyna Borkowska, "Perspektywa postkolonialna na gruncie polskim: Pytania sceptyka," Teksty Drugie 5 (2010): 40-52.

9. Dariusz Skórczewski, "Towards a Better Understanding of the Self: Polish Literature in the Light of Postcolonial Theory," *The Task of Interpretation: Hermeneutics, Psychoanalysis and Literary Studies*, eds. Dariusz Skórczewski, Andrzej Wierciński and Edward Fiała (Lublin: The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, 2009), p. 194.

10. Thompson and Rymkiewicz have expressed sympathies with the Law and Justice party, while Ziemkiewicz has associated himself with a reactivation of the interwar nationalist tradition.

11. Leszek Koczanowicz, "Post-postkomunizm a kulturowe wojny," *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2010), p. 11.

12. See Joanna Lichocka's interview with Jarosław Marek Rymkiewicz, "Czy to już koniec Jarosława Kaczyńskiego? Rymkiewicz woli wierzyć w niepodległości," Newsweek (22 November 2010).

13. See: Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," *boundary 2* 2.20 (Summer 1993), p. 35. Spivak described this strategy in her essay "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" as follows: "I would read [the work of Subaltern Studies] as a *strategic* use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest." See: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 205.

14. Vivek Chibber, "How Does the Subaltern Speak?" *Jacobin* (April 2013).

15. Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 284.

16. Chibber, "How Does the Subaltern Speak?"

17. Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*. p. 286.

18. Ibid. Chibber supplies considerable evidence throughout his book in support of this critique, claiming that postcolonial theorists have generally misunderstood the role of the bourgeoisie within capitalist systems and failed to appreciate the general capacity of capital to subordinate diverse cultural systems without necessarily changing every aspect of them.

19. See: "Kaczyński: PO jest główną formacją postkomunistyczną," Gazeta.pl (22 October 2013). Ewa Thompson has strongly supported Kaczyński as an opponent of both postcolonial and post-communist formations in Poland: "For the first time in the postcommunist reality, somebody in Poland has shown some political common sense and built a party without people associated with Polish or international 'fellow travelers" of communism." See: Ewa Thompson, "W kolejce po aprobatę," Dziennik.pl (11 May 2007).

20. Ewa Thompson, "Sarmatyzm i postkolonializm: o naturze polskich resentymentów," *Dziennik* (11 May 2007).

21. Reul K. Wilson, "Kochanowski and Ronsard: Contemporaries and Kindred Spirits," *Polish Review* 22.1 (1977), p. 20.

22. Of course, this word – which refers to the noble class – is also clearly of foreign origin, probably from Old High German, though the precise etymology is disputed.

[23.] Apart from the great diversity of distinct Aboriginal cultures inhabiting the Australian continent at the time of the European arrival, scholars have pointed to likely cultural influence in the north from the nearby islands of present-day Indonesia and Melanesia. For instance, see: Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

[24.] Maria Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna: Fantazmaty literatury* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006), p. 17.

[25.] Ibid., p. 11.

[26.] Ibid., p. 329.

[27.] Ibid., p. 330.

[28.] See: Ryszard Nycz, "Możliwa historia literatury," *Teksty Drugie* 5 (2010), p. 178. Nycz is speaking specifically of Polish literature here.

[29.] Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna*, p. 329.

[30.] Ibid., p. 179.

[31.] Witold Gombrowicz, *Diary: Volume One*, trans. Lillian Vallee (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p. 121.

[32.] Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-Symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 66.

[33.] Koczanowicz, "Postkomunizm a kulturowe wojny," p. 20.

[34.] Walter Benn Michaels, "Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 18.4 (Summer 1992), p. 684.

[35.] Ibid., p. 685.

[36.] Ewa Thompson, "Stefan Żeromski's Ashes as a Postcolonial Narrative," Historyka: Studia Metodologiczne T. XLII (2012), p. 83.

[37.] Skórczewski, "Trudności z tożsamością," p. 142.

[38.] Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna*, p. 330.

[39.] Ibid., p. 328.

[40.] Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna*, p. 330.

[41.] Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, p. 288.

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FORGET POSTCOLONIALISM, THERE'S A CLASS WAR AHEAD

JAN SOWA

In his inspiring book, *A Singular Modernity*, Frederic Jameson offers a notion of modernity that is particularly useful when it comes to paradoxes of postcolonial theory (such as those that Stanley Bill presented in his text). Jameson claims that modernity is an interplay between two distinct notions operating separately on the level of material base and of cultural superstructure: there is **modernization** which accounts for all that falls into the realm of material economy: highways, stock exchange, supermarkets, cellular phones, the internet, computers etc. But there is also **modernism** – a set of values, norms and ideals operating in the socio-cultural sphere and linked with the legacy of Enlightenment: equality, social justice, emancipation, rational organization of society etc. Modernity should not be – Jameson claims – reduced to any of these two aspects or components. It is a complex combination of both. [1]

This is a good starting point when talking about a reception of postcolonial theory in Poland and in the region of Central-Eastern Europe that used to fall within the sphere of domination of the Soviet Russia. Stanley Bill is quite right in exposing the paradoxes, inconsistencies and impostures associated with this process. I agree with his general diagnosis of postcolonial theory as an attitude cunningly camouflaging its inherent conservatism that gets exposed in its peripheral applications. However, I believe these phenomena should be put into a more general frame and be cast against the background of troubled and traumatic relations with modernity that Poland and the entire region has had for the last couple of centuries. The ideas and convictions expressed by the Polish conservative adherents to postcolonial theory that Bill so eloquently analyzes are just a new articulation of an attitude long established in Polish culture: the one of an alternative and indigenous modernity sharply contrasting with the content of Western modernism, to use above-mentioned Jameson's notion. What the Polish adherents of the postcolonial studies advocate is not a simple rejection of modernity *tout court*, an attitude that can nowadays be found in such places as Bhutan, but rather a perverse deviation from modernity: modernization without modernism.

The fate of postcolonial theory in Central and Eastern Europe is a kind of symptom – not an autonomous phenomenon stemming solely from this theory's logic, but rather a complex articulation of local ideological content through the conceptual framework of an imported theory. Saying this I do not mean to question Bill's assertions but rather to give them an additional angle. It is perfectly true that conservative urge to look for authenticity beyond any cultural influences is contradictory with history of Polish, sarmatian culture that borrowed heavily from foreign traditions. On the other hand it is also true that between the 16th and 18th century Poland developed a peculiar and singular socio-cultural regime that offered an alternative to the Western world. One could trace these differences quite a long way back in history as the Marxist historian Perry Anderson does in his seminal books *Passages from Antiquity to the Feudalism* and *Lineages of the Absolutist States.*[2] Different proprietary relations of nobles to the land (allod in the East as opposed to fief in the West) combined with a different, much more horizontal organization of Eastern European aristocracy led in the early modern times (the 16th century) to a regime radically opposing the Western absolutism. It evolved in an autonomous way into a peculiar kind of democracy, very distant from Western parliamentary system based on representative institution. It resembled much more the ancient, Greek democracy with its emphasis on participation and direct elections of government. As in ancient times this participation was restricted to an elite group of free citizens (the nobility called *szlachta*), however it gave them collective powers incomparable to these of western aristocracy. From the late 16th onwards kings of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (a country covering much of Central-Eastern Europe and stretching at that time from the Baltic to the Black Sea on what is much of today's Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus and Ukraine) were elected directly by the entire body of nobility gathering in person on election field in Wola, now a district of Warsaw. Every nobleman had a right to come there and vote for any person he regarded suitable for the job; not everybody could afford such a trip and in practice these events gathered around 50 – 70 thousand participants; still a huge number for any democratic proceedings. It was called *electio viritim* and should be distinguished from other forms of elections that functioned at the time in places such as The Holy Roman Empire or Italian Republics in the Western Europe. The latter was exercised by a very narrow body of top aristocrats and had little to do with a popular sovereignty of Polish *szlachta*. The Polish parliament – *Sejm* – was equally under full control of aristocrats and did not function as an institution of class compromise as it did in Western Europe. Bourgeoisie was completely excluded from any part in the government and *Sejm* was used as solely aristocratic instrument of exercising power in the interest of the nobility. This political regime was combined with an agrarian lifestyle of *szlachta* who remained utterly hostile to the city and deeply in love with their rural estates. The material base for their existence was provided by a manorial economy producing grain for the nascent capitalistic market. A form

of slave labor was used for this purpose. It was called serfdom, however it functioned very much like slavery (with an important difference that individuals were not sold or bought; human trafficking took form of wholesale exchanges of entire villages with their peasant populations). Polish aristocrats believed themselves utterly superior or even racially different from the peasants. That was expressed by the myth of Sarmatian origins of the *szlachta*; a myth of colonial nature and I will go back to this point later on. A reader familiar with social history of the United States would probably spot a resemblance with social, cultural and economic landscape of the American South before the Civil War. It's a legitimate and accurate analogy. In general, Polish society – with its emphasis on family life, implication of religion in the public life and eager use of the word "God" on political occasions, its agrarian ideology, blatant individualism and some other traces – resembles much more to some aspects of the US society than it does to the mainstream of European culture, especially its French, republican and secular ethos.

Traditional, Sarmatian Polish culture shaped by this kind of social relations believed itself to be not only different, but also superior to the West. *Szlachta* looked with a particular despise on the elements of nascent modernity and its main protagonist – capitalistic bourgeoisie. They believed it to be a degeneration and degradation, they felt proud not to be a part of this evolution and to keep their peculiar form of social organization. They particularly cherished their liberties, describing Poland, opposed to absolutist West, as the land of genuine freedom. Although this liberty was rather a class privilege than freedom in modern sense, they were surely right in one respect – their social and cultural world offered a genuine alternative to the Western culture. Poland was a part of Europe with close ties with other European countries and – what is very important – remained a part of the capitalist world-economy from its very beginning, on the other hand it was culturally exotic and it occupied a peripheral economic position structurally comparable to the place the overseas colonies. Thus Central and Eastern Europe was historically first Third World. [3]

I devoted so much place to the matters that seem quite far historically, because they form the Sarmatian kernel of Polish postcolonial conservative illusion that boils down to a conviction that we – Poles – do not need to look up to the West or the EU to find an inspiration or a model and we should rather go back to our glorious, Sarmatian past. The temporal distance that separates us from this epoch does not seem to matter. Polish society has got a peculiar attitude towards time and distant past is much closer for us that it is for an average citizen of the Western world. In this respect we resemble the Islamic societies, where crusades dating back to the Middle Ages may very well serve as a justification for today's politics.

Western modernism – in the sense given to this term by Jameson – remains disgusting and repugnant to most of the Polish adherents to postcolonial theory. But not the Western modernization. Their plan, called „a conservative modernization", can be accurately described and deconstructed with the pair of notions put forward by Jameson: highways, smartphones, ATMs, the internet, the Dreamliners – YES! Equality, emancipation, diversity, social justice, women and gay rights – NO! Again – in their embrace of capitalism they resemble much more to the American neocons than to the oldschool continental conservatives who tried to somehow curb the free market. Although they verbally defend the lower classes, their policies, while in power, did not differ from neoliberalism – two governments led by the conservative Prawo i Sprawiedliwość party between 2005 and 2007 made Zyta Gilowska, an outspoken neoliberal economist, the ministry of finance, lowered the taxes for the rich and diminished the obligatory contributions for social insurance that employers are required to pay.

There is, of course, a blind spot in this nostalgic, neosarmatian discourse. It does not seem to notice, that while the old, Sarmatian regime did offer an alternative to the West, it utterly failed to withstand a confrontation with it. The timeframe and crucial moments of its existence coincide with a developing modernity in the West in a very peculiar way. Sarmatism, like Western absolutism that paved the way to modern statehood, develops from 15th century, however the very same year 1648 when the modern international order takes shape with the Peace of Westphalia at the end of Thirty Years' War marks the first major failure of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth: the Ukrainian Revolution led by Bohdan Chmielnitsky (an uprising of Ukrainian warrior nobility – Cossacks – and peasantry against Polish colonial rule). Actually, its aftermath was the Russian conquest of Eastern Ukraine, thus the beginning of a process that we can still see developing today. What is even more pertinent is that the final end of the Sarmatian order in the second half of the 18th century closely coincides with the three major triumphs of modernity: The American, French and Industrial Revolutions. It's not a mere coincidence. Poland disappears from the map precisely because it was not able to function within the political and social framework of modernity.[4] Even Russia, regarded by the Poles as eternally backward, had developed at the time some essential traits of the modern state such as a strong central administration, efficient taxation system and powerful army all of which Poland lacked. From that moment on the relation to modernity of every traditionally and truly Polish soul – I'm not talking here of a rotten cosmopolitan intellectual like myself –is an antagonistic one: „modernity" is the name of force that eliminated our traditional way of life, destroying the most precious aspects of our social order; including its material base, peasant's slavery, as serfdom was abolished by colonizers in the 19th century (the final reform of Polish agriculture was done, again, by the foreigners, i.e. Soviet sponsored government at the end of Second World War that liquidated large estates and distributed the land among small, individual farmers in 1944). Pragmatic, material efficiency of the Western world is

difficult to deny nowadays and the conservatives are very willing to copy it, however not in order to further modernism, but precisely to fight it. So, ironically, modernization is regarded as an efficient way of resisting modernity in its full scope (i.e. modernization **combined with modernism**).

The conservatives, that embraced the postcolonial theory did it in a very particular way.[5] What they refuse to acknowledge is that the culture that they cherish so much, Sarmatism, was in itself a deeply colonial cultural entity. Firstly in its description of the Sarmatian origins – they were supposed to be an alien tribe of warriors that came from the East (or the South in some variants of the legend) and conquered the agrarian populations of Central Eastern Europe. Thus the Polish *szlachta* believed there was an essential, ethnic difference between themselves, deriving from these Asian warriors, and peasant population descending from the tribes that the Sarmatians believed to have had enslaved. This aspect of „postcolonial imaginary" is, of course, skillfully omitted by contemporary Polish postcolonial „thinkers" (I put the word in quotation mark, because I doubt if a mere repetition of someone else's concepts can be rightfully called „thinking"). Their even bigger omission is a colonial practice of the Polish mobility in the East. The so called Union of Lublin that created the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 1569 cut a huge chunk of land – what is a present day Ukraine – from the Great Princehood of Lithuania and put it, within the union, under a direct administrative control of the Kingdom of Poland. One does not need to be a Marxist zealot to see a material motivation for such a move – Ukraine is blessed with one of the richest soils in Europe, perfect for grain cultivation; Polish nobility needed it in order to further and extend its material base – the manorial economy. And that's what they did. The so called *Kresy* (the Ends – a Polish term referring to the Eastern ends of the empire, i.e. contemporary Lithuania, Belarus and Ukraine) just like the British Raj gave birth to formidable fortunes. There is no anachronism in calling *Kresy* "Polish colonies" as the term itself was literary used by the Polish political writers in 16th and 17th century (for example in *Polska Niżna Albo Osada Polska by Piotr Grabowski dating from 1596; Paweł Palczowski in his Kolęda moskiewska* published in 1609 likens Polish expansion in the East with colonial domination of European powers over the West Indies). There was also a whole discourse surrounding Kresy devoted to the proper use that Poland could and should have made of these lands. It can be easily compared to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Travail sur l'Algérie* or to Edmund Burke's discourses such as *Speech on The Nabob of Arcot's Debts* or *Articles of Charge of High Crimes and Misdemeanors against Warren Hastings*. We'll find all major elements of a colonial discourse in the Polish political thought of the time: a myth of *terra nullius*, of *mission civilisatrice*, of natural longing of the savages for progress, of racial and religious superiority of the colonizers and inferiority of the colonized (called, to make ironical „coincidences" even more poignant, *Czerń* which means „Blacks") etc. It comes as no surprise that today's relations between Poland and Ukrain bear a strong postcolonial

traits as it can be observed in conflicting evaluation of national heroes (Bohdan Chmielnitsky, but even more Stepan Bandera – a hero for many Ukrainians and a bandit, or a terrorist, to use a more fashionable term, for the Poles), to places of memory (such as cemeteries in Lviv and other Ukrainian cities that used to have a considerable Polish community all the way until the Second World War) and in a general nostalgia that penetrates a lot of Polish discourses on *Kresy*, a very similar to the British nostalgia for the Raj.

Interestingly enough, this kind of postcolonial critique is completely lacking from the Polish „postcolonial studies" that focus on rewriting Polish historical defeats (partitions in the 19th century, the second world war, the soviet period) in the language of postcolonial theory. For this reason they should not be called „studies" in any academic or intellectual sense of the word. As it was shown by many scholars, Ewa Thompson's conceptual frame is self-contradictory and full if blind spots. Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez was quite right to point out that the notion of "surrogate hegemon" supposedly explaining, why Poland tries to mimic the West, while it was colonized by Russia is an unjustified and unnecessary conceptual complication and its main purpose is to maintain the ideological message and not to account for the facts. As she argues, a much more plausible explication is that, just like many other societies who do not need to look for a surrogate hegemon, we like the West, because we like the West – or at least the West the way it is perceived: as rich and full of opportunities that lack elsewhere.[6] The function of the local, Polish postcolonial discourse, although formally associated with the academia is primarily socio-political: it serves as a way to manage collective traumas of Polish history and to use them for specific political aims. It's hostility towards the cultural mainstream of the Western world and ceaseless efforts to emphasize that „we are not inferior and we have our own patterns of social and cultural development" should not be mistaken with a self-pride. It's rather a sign of profound complex of inferiority, much larger than that of the Western style liberal modernizers who are accused of lack of dignity. With all reservations that I have against liberalism, the liberals are at least historically more sober – they realize that „our own dear patterns of social and cultural development" are, as a matter of fact, patterns of lack of development and we should not look for inspiration in our own socio-cultural tradition.

Now, a question more interesting for an international reader: how the entire process of this conservative use made of the postcolonial studies changes our perception of postcolonial theory as such and how it puts into questions its supposedly subversive or emancipatory character. First of all, the entire obsession of authenticity and essence penetrating decolonizing world had been described before postcolonial critics started to develop their insights into the souls of the colonized. Clifford Geertz was writing back in 1969 of what he called a tension between „epochalism" and „essentialism" in the new, postcolonial states.[7] He

found the contradiction between going with the spirit of the epoch – liberal democracy, free market, social emancipation etc. – and cherishing one's one particular past or essence to be defining for peripheral socio-cultural debates that followed the demise of colonial empires. From this point of view the case of Poland is just another story that repeats what Greetz witnessed in Indonesia or Morocco. What lies between the contemporary postcolonial „thinkers" in the peripheries and the time when Geertz made his observation is not only „postcolonial theory", but also and mainly postmodernism, or to be more precise poststructuralism (or whatever one wants to call the whole body of texts that many, for instance Slavoj Žižek, refer to as „French bullshit"). In this particular point I do not agree with Stanley Bill – postmodernism received in the 1990-ties and early 2000s a quite a warm welcome from the Polish conservatives. One of its first Polish proponents was Zdzisław Krasnodębski, a philosopher and leading intellectual supporting Kaczyński brothers that just got himself elected to the European Parliament. What Polish conservatives saw in postmodernism was mainly its hostility towards Enlightenment, a denial of master narrations (including any form of emancipatory politics), affirmation of the „other of reason" – religion, local customs, alternative cultural logics (all that in the good old times would just be called by one word: "superstitions") – and, last but not least, prizing of diversity that got to be automatically interpreted in the peripheries as our right to be different from the mainstream of modernity/enlightenment. It's not surprising that the communitarian ideas of Will Kymlicka, Alasdair Macintyre, Michael Sandel or Charles Taylor received quite an attention from Polish intellectuals in the 1990-ties. Poststructuralist roots of postcolonial studies are well known and we can see an easy passage here. How close is it to the original intent of the postcolonial studies? One can argue that it's a false interpretation, a kind of Karamazov complex: Ivan makes a purely theoretical, philosophical comment at the family table (the center) and his semi-retarded bastard brother (the peripheries) goes on to murder their father. The one who would like to defend the postcolonial studies could easily point to the figure of Franz Fanon as an important protagonist, who was a Marxist revolutionary and could not be held accountable for conservative reaction. It would not be intellectually fair to completely deny a Marxist origins of postcolonial studies and to focus solely on postmodernism. However, besides intellectual debates there is also social and political practice. And it's in this sphere that Marxism suffered a huge blow in the 1990ties as a result of the fall of the USSR. One could complain it's been somehow unjust as there is a vast Marxist narration that criticized the entire Soviet experiment and it would be difficult to find any major Marx's work that logically leads to the Bolshevism of early 20th century Russia (one letter to Vera Zasulich from 1881 cannot account for such a foundation). That is, unfortunately, an academic approach, wrongly focusing, despite an insightful advice from Wittgenstein, on the meaning and not on the use. And the use of Marxism as well as of its defeat, was such that it delegitimized any

forms of its existence in the mainstream of public life all the way until the crisis of 2008.[8] In the East even far more than in the West. That is, in my opinion, a crucial circumstance that tilted the balance and made postcolonialism – in compliance with its poststructuralist and despite its Marxist roots – a deeply conservative and not a progressive discourse. The need for such a discourse – at the same time conservative and fashionable enough to pose as a vanguard of intellectual life, thus conquering the position that had been monopolized by the academic left since the 1960ties – existed before it, as I tried to show and what the abovementioned analysis of Clifford Geertz also proves. It was a need to articulate resentment in an intellectually acceptable way. Postcolonialism perfectly suited this urge and hence it's carrier in the peripheries.

So, what do we do with the legacy of the postcolonial thought, now that its conservative intend has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt? Theoretically, there is a place for it. As I argued before, a sincere and systematic exploration of the colonial nature of the Polish relation to Ukraine (and Belarus) would be very needed. Especially know, that the fatal triangle Russia-Poland-Ukraine that haunted the history of the region for many centuries seems to be coming back to life. It's a matter of tactical assessment whether maintaining the postcolonial studies, with their strongly conservative undertone, for such purposes is worth it or not (and whether we need postcolonial theory to do it – maybe classical history of culture could do?). Even a person not as convinced of the uselessness of the postcolonial thought as Vivek Chibber has to admit, that this branch of thought has not produced any major literature that would make quarreled nations reconcile over their troubled past. What's worse and far more important in the contemporary world, it is even more obvious that no one has become materially better off thanks to the postcolonial theory. It just puts too much stress on recognition and not enough – if any – on redistribution. The major problem of poor postcolonial states is not to have the injustices done to them recognized, but to stop being poor. Unfortunately, a class issue comes into play here – postcolonial recognition is mainly the question for a given nation's elites that do not need to care about how to make the ends meet. In this respect the postcolonial discourse, despite its apparently anti-establishment stand it has got in Poland, is as elitist as any other academic fashion. The main problem that Polish state should face is not how to stop pleasing to the Western world, but how to start pleasing to its own citizens, that clearly do not show postcolonial admiration with Polish traditions: in the first decade of our membership in the EU (2004-2014) almost 3 million people used the opportunities of the open European job market and escaped the country; that's surely one of the biggest waves of emigration Poland has ever known in its troubled history, if not the biggest one. The last hype of Polish conservative thought, meant to address this problem, is something called „economical patriotism" that should be more rightly called „national capitalism" and regarded as an unfortunate variation of „national

socialism" – a conviction that Poland could be better off if we had some Polish capital (and not only „capital in Poland", as they say).[9] One could think it's a progress, because at least they realized that capitalism is not a system that benefits everyone, but mainly those who own capital. One could also see, how it goes hand in hand with the revindications of postcolonial theory, so we should not be surprised it includes imperialist claims and advocates for „a global expansion of Polish capital". Would it somehow benefit people, who live in Poland? It's doubtful as we can see huge groups of Western societies that have never benefited from the expansion of Western capital. If they ever got any crumbs, it's only thanks to the struggle they have maintained – on the street and in the factories. Would this expansion benefit anyone outside Poland? Surely not. Even the contrary. Polish garment company LPP was among those that located their production in the infamous Rana Plaza complex in Bangladesh that collapsed last year killing around 1300 people. LPP behaved much worse than major international companies and declined to pay any compensation to the workers. They argued that international brands, like Primark, are well established and rich, so are able to pay, while LPP is a rising company from a poorer country and cannot afford such compensations.[10] As one would expect – the capital remains the capital and follows the logic that it finds the most profitable for itself.

We can clearly see the main problem behind the postcolonial discourse: again it all comes down to identity and recognition. If we believe, like many critics of postcolonial thought, including myself, that the main challenge for contemporary progressive politics is to develop a universal emancipatory narration that could conquer people's imagination the way Marxism did a century ago, than postcolonial theory, despite the legacy of Franz Fanon often quoted in postcolonial text,[11] is not a useful tool, but rather an obstacle. There are people, who like Peter Hallward, believe that there is a room for universalism within postcolonial theory.[12] Maybe, theoretically, there is. But, again: don't look at meaning, look at use. Given the entire conservative bias in the way postcolonial theory has been used, it would require a formidable effort to turn the tables. And if we succeeded, would it be a very useful tool? Even the wars between nations are not won by successfully convincing the public of one's moral superiority and unjust suffering. There is no reason to believe that the class war ever will.

NOTES

1. Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present*, Verso, London 2002.

2. See Perry Anderson, *Passages from Antiquity to the Feudalism*, New Left Books, London 1974 and Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist States*, Verso, London 1979.

3. More on this point see the first volume of Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World-System* (University of California Press, Oakland 2011). The issue is also analyzed in detail in Fernand's Braudel *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XVe-XVIIIe siècle*, vol. 2: *Les jeux de l'échange* (Armand Colin, Paris 1979).

4. I realize it's an assertion that requires an elaborate proof – the one I developed elsewhere and I cannot repeat in detail here as it requires an extensive historical analysis (see Jan Sowa, Fantomowe ciało króla. Peryferyjne zmagania z nowoczesną formą, Universitas, Kraków 2011).

5. I skip enumerating their names and summarizing their point of view as that was skillfully done by Stanley Bill, so I'd have to refer to the same names and texts.

6. Claudia Snochowska-Gonzalez, Czy jesteśmy postkolonialni. O pewnym wrogim przejęciu, in: Joanna Tokarska Bakir (ed.), PL: Tożsamość wyborażona, Czarna Owca, Warszawa 2013. It's an extended version of the text On an Unavoidable Misuse published in „East European Politics & Societies (vol. 26, no 4, pp. 708-723).

7. Clifford Geertz, *After the Revolution: The Fate of Nationalism in the New States*, in: Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretaition of Cultures*, Basic Books, New York 1973.

8. I wrote extensively on this issue on a different occasion. See my text *An Unexpected Twist of Ideology. Neoliberalism and the Collapse of the Soviet Bloc*, "Praktyka Teoretyczna", 5/2012. Avaible on-line: http://www.praktykateoretyczna.pl/PT_nr5_2012_Logika_sensu/13.Sowa.pdf.

9. A classic example here is Jan Szomburg, a neoliberal intellectual from Gdańsk, Head of the Instytut Badań nad Gospodarką Rynkową.

10. They only changed their minds when an activist campaign by Clean Clothes Poland ashamed them so much that *Café Kulturalna,* a major youth night-club in Warsaw refused to host a concert sponsored by LPP, citing the company's attitude towards the disaster at Rana Plaza as the reason.

11. References to *Black Skin, White Masks* outnumber by far references to *The Wretched of The Earth*, which is in itself a good illustration of the tilt that postcolonial theory has got itself into.

12. See Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing Between the Singular and the Specific*, Menchester University Press, Menchester 2001.

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EAST EUROPEAN ART PERIPHERIES FACING POST-COLONIAL THEORY

PIOTR PIOTROWSKI

One of the main challenges of recent art historical studies seems the come from globalization. Whether its response is convincing or not is another question, but it looks like art history tries to deal with this problem, and one of the points of reference for this scholarship, actually the key one, is post-colonial studies. This way of thinking, coming mostly from history, literature, and philosophy provides most important concepts to the so-called global art history. Analyzing a global art history is another question for a different occasion.[1] Here, just let me mention that it is a complex issue, related among others to rethinking modernism, its decentralizing, a question of a pluralism of modernisms, a new geography etc.[2] The real point of departure of this paper is that a couple of East European scholars are very enthusiastic to use post-colonial studies in their own research on these European peripheries.[3] I am not going directly to argue with that rather occasional than systematic research. What I would like to do here, instead, is just to say that if Eastern Europe, one of European peripheries that will be the real subject of this paper, wants to find out its place in this intellectual context it should attempt to discuss the question how post-colonial studies could or could not shape this research.[4] At the end of this paper I would suggest that art geography, or critical art geography might be more effective in such a study than post-colonial theories. I am not going to say that post-colonial theory is useless while studying European peripheries, and cannot share some concepts with our subject matter, e.g. such as imperialism, racism, exclusions, repressions etc.; what I am saying instead is that the post-colonial matrix, while applying to European peripheries research, including Eastern Europe, would simplify the issue and could not touch the real problem. Let me also add that what I am going to say comes from an art historical position, from an experience of visual art so to speak, and not from general cultural history, literature, etc. Although we can see a general historical background of all cultural

activities, that is still a big methodological difference while talking on literature on the one hand, or visual art history on the other.

I will present my position by drawing four arguments and one case study.

I

Let me begin by noting that post-colonial studies are developing mostly in literature, or philosophy, which in fact is a kind of literature as well. The most important concepts and analytical methods used to be originated there, and as such not always do they fit in our discipline, i.e. visual art history. The most interesting discussion of post-colonial theory was written by Rasheed Araeen, the editor-in-chief of the *Third Text*. In his epilogue for *The 'Third Text' Reader* under the very striking title "A New Beginning," Araeen raised fundamental doubts about the concepts and ideology of post-colonial studies, formulated–paradoxically–from the post-colonial perspective.[5] First of all he distinguishes a post-colonial condition from post-colonial studies. While the former is the political, intellectual, social, cultural, etc., situation mostly found in the West, i.e. in former colonial metropolises, and could be a subject for multidisciplinary research done from as many as possible perspectives, the latter according to him is an ideological discourse couched in the language of academia.

Let's start from fundamental, and at the same time quite obvious remark: literature operates with language, which in its nature is national, or ethnic (which of course is not the same). Literature, including modern literature, is always mediated by language, whether it would be a language of the colonized, or the colonizer. Participation in modern culture, universal, cosmopolitan "imagined community," thus, is always mediated by language, or languages, i.e. "indirect" in its nature. Metaphors, concepts, constructions and narratives are somehow translated on particular languages, having their own ideological burdens. In art, especially in the so-called high art, but not only, we also have similar traditional burdens, which used to influence our understanding of modernity, or modernism (this is not the same of course), but participation in visual and artistic culture, or "international style," allegedly universal, seems to be more "direct," than in the case of literature. We have been taught to believe that the human being sees more universally, than he or she reads. It is of course a sort of construction. Araeen, however, criticizes the "hybrid subject" or "culture in between" (e.g., literature written in a language of diaspora, i.e. not in the native language of particular writer), which are fundamental concepts of post-colonial studies, identified as buffers of tensions between the colonizer and colonized, and notes that (visual) artists who were supposed to be in exile, such as Brancusi (Romanian), Wifredo Lam (Cuban), or Picasso (Spaniard) and others coming from different continents, were actually not émigrés, since they did not recognize

themselves in terms of diaspora, rather they acknowledged their situation as the privilege to be in a cosmopolitan community creating new culture; they felt that they were a part of larger modern and universal art milieu, that they created new international art, whether they came from Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe, or from somewhere else in the world. According to Araeen the so-called "being in exile" was a result of their desire to be in the center of the new artistic world, in Paris, and not to be forced to be "in between." This is something, Araeen continues, that "the post-colonial cultural theory does not understand or does not want to understand" ("A New Beginning," 340). Of course, he does not ignore post-colonial studies as such; on the contrary–he sees it as one of the most important perspectives in the way to understand the post-colonial condition, the core of the contemporary world. What he is doing instead is just a critical approach to some of its methodological concepts and practices.

For us, art historians, this is a very important contribution to rethink the complexity of European peripheries, stressing both a distinctiveness of art from other cultural production, and its particularity in relation between the center and peripheries in the old continent. Not only the above-mentioned Lam, Picasso, or Brancusi, but others, too, could be the subject of such a study.

II

The main concept of post-colonial studies, and at the same time the main problem, is the question of Eurocentrism, or rather its critique. Without such a critique globalizing Eastern Europe will not be possible, since the way to make East European art global goes via Europe, not against it. For post-colonial scholars, instead, Europe is the negative rhetorical figure. Post-colonial scholars used to homogenize culture of the old continent. Frankly speaking they can perform such a simplification, since for their purposes detailed differentiation of inner-European issues, including inner-colonization, does not have much sense. Europe for them is "simply" the Dutch, Belgian, English, French, Portuguese, and Spanish colonizer. They do not care so much about Moldavia, Lithuania, Slovenia or Slovakia, and the latter are very often confused to each other; they do not care about Poland which does have its own Eastern colonization history;[6] nor Russia with Western colonization. Italian colonial history is a little bit grotesque, and Scandinavian countries did not have such an experience at all, not to mention Ireland, which was the subject of British colonial imperialism—an imperialism sometimes even more severe than that imposed on India, since it definitely was not the "jewel in the crown." The quite inverted problem shows Greece, one of the sources of European civilization, which was not the colonizer, rather the colonized country. Indeed, Greece was colonized by the so-called oriental Empire, i.e. Ottomans' Turkey. In one word: there was not one Europe: it was both the colonizer, and colonized, imperial and occupied, dominating

and subordinated. For us, thus, studying European pluralism, a critique of the homogenizing vision of Europe such as the one produced by post-colonial studies, seems to be crucial. Their concept of Eurocentrism turns out to be a little bit problematic—at very least, not so useful for research into European peripheries.

III

A couple of consequences should be drawn from above, since the next crucial concept of post-colonial studies, namely the "other," also looks problematic. For British colonizers the Indians and Native Americans are obviously "others," just as Arabs were or are for the French, or Amerindians for Spaniards. Of course, it's a sort of simplification. The relationship between the self and the other is not the same in Asia, as in–let's say–Latin America. As Walter Mignolo argues, America was conceived of by Europe not in terms of "difference," but of extension, as the daughter of Europe, its promised future, and not, as in the case of Asia or Africa, as the past. He calls it Occidentalism, which–contrary to Orientalism–means the above-mentioned extension, not otherness.[7] That was at the beginning. The situation started to be even more complicated when Latin American countries gained their independence. The main groups of people who supported it and identified themselves with America, Mignolo argues, where Creoles and intellectuals born in America from Spanish descents, and not indigenous Amerindians (*Local Histories/Global Designs*, 130, 137). So now, if we look forward, we see that for Latin Americans the other could be both Spaniards, former colonizers, and Amerindians, former colonized; what's more–in the course of decades of the twentieth century, when Latin America was (and still is) the subject of North America's neo-colonial strategy–the U.S. could appear as the other as well. If we, however, turn our attention to art and culture, we would see close relations between South America and Western Europe, especially France, both before and after World War II, which wouldn't be called the real other in that case. Anyway, coming back to the issue, which is to say, Central and Eastern Europe, West Europeans—Czechs, Hungarians or Poles—are not really "others"; rather, they are "not-real-others," or "close-others," so to speak,[8] at least if we compare them with Amerindians, Arabs, Africans etc. The same goes for the other side: Slovaks or Bulgarians would not call Austrians, Germans, or Spaniards the "other," which would not be the case with Indians or Africans. The "close other" lives and thinks in the same *episteme,* in the same system of perception and understanding of the world, the same cultural models, traditions, religion, etc. This is a fundamental difference. West European art centers are, for the artists from Prague or Zagreb, not exactly, or not entirely, external, as they are, for example, for artists from Shanghai. Thus, the Parisian avant-garde (cubism, for instance) was not the same at the beginning of the 1920s in Lvov as it was in Calcutta. Marginal European countries, in the East, South and North, or even West (Portugal), were not the countries where "art history

had no history," as Andrea Buddensieg once said of Rasheed Araeen (from Pakistan).[9] That is to say, European peripheries (including Central-Eastern Europe) did participate in the development of art history as an academic discipline; South-East Asia did not. Therefore, the supposedly analoguous syncretism in the reception of cubism does not hold in Krakow, or Riga, as it did in Calcutta.

Let me briefly develop the last example and compare it with the situation in East-Central Europe, i.e. the exhibition of the Bauhaus artists in Calcutta in December 1922, and its impact over Indian art, analyzed by Partha Mitter some years ago,[10] on the one hand, and the situation in Galicia, the province of Austro-Hungarian Empire, later independent Poland, just after World War I,[11] on the other. The Bauhaus exhibition in Calcutta, which consisted of art works of Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feiniger, Johannes Itten, George Muche, Gerhardt Marcks, Lothar Schreyer, etc., was a sort of founding moment of modern art there, which helped to develop the Bengal School artists, including one of its leading members, Gagenendranath Tagore, into a part of international modernism, and at the same time to join that Bengal school to what Mitter called "global primitivism," or "virtual cosmopolitanism." Its point of departure was the Western avant-garde and its critique of (Western) materialism, which was supposed to make way for a spiritual rebirth of humankind. Western avant-garde artists, as Partha Mitter argues, referred to the Eastern knowledge in order to achieve their goals. It was not the colonial strategy, as was the hegemonic impact of the Western academic model of art on India; rather, the universal prospect of "global critical modernity" was based on the spiritual unity of human beings. As it developed, Indian art following the Calcutta exhibition stressed the local discourse of "primitivism," including Bengal rural culture. Sometimes, however, the situation concerning "global primitivism" was more complex. As Andrea Giunta has noted referring to the strategies of modernity in Latin America, we would observe the "appropriation of appropriation," made in a subversive way of course, as in the case of one of the most famous Cuban artist, Wifredo Lam, who turned to the so-called primitive, or native, art not directly, but via cubism. That is to say, his appropriated cubism, mediated his interest in native Cuban art when Lam came back to the island at the beginning of the 1940s, after living for years in Paris.[12]

That was not, however, the case of India. Here we would do better to speak about mediation, rather than appropriation. Even after 1947, when India declared its independence, the rural cultural references in modern art, a sort of local mediation of modernity, did not disappear. On the contrary, as Rebecca M. Brown argues, it was one of the important components of Indian identity expressed by modern art. This complex issue she calls "the modern Indian paradox,"[13] and the result is that Indian artists did not draw a "radical conclusion" (in the Western sense of the word) from artistic revolution of the beginning of the twentieth century,

as for example Russians did, and were not so much interested in pure abstract art, neither before nor after 1947, including the famous Progressive Artists' Group, at least up till the beginning of the 1960s, when the Group 1890 emerged on the art scene. The problem, however, is that the source of this impact came from a culture of the colonizer, even if the art was critical of the colonizer.[14] Cubism, the artistic heart of these processes, at least at the beginning, even if it was not recognized as the art of the colonizer itself, since in fact it helped to develop a critique of colonialism by joining with local folk tradition, still was seen as the art from outside, as art from the other culture.

Such a conclusion would not apply in the case of Austrian Galicia, former and later Poland. Lvov, then the capital of the province, was the scene of the first manifestation of modern art, or avant-garde if you like, almost ten years before Calcutta exhibition. The exhibition "Futurists, Cubists, and Expressionists" took place there in 1913. It was organized with the cooperation of Der Sturm Gallery in Berlin, and Wassily Kandinsky, Alexander Jawlensky, Oskar Kokoschka, Bohumil Kubišta and others were shown there. It coincided with the interest in cubism seen in some artists in the region, in Krakow, however, rather than in Lvov. One thinks of Tytus Czyżewski, Gustaw Gwozdecki, and Zbigniew Pronaszko, who were later the initiators of the *Formists* group. Quite interesting might be that their first exhibition in Krakow (named at that time "Polish Expressionists") was accompanied by folk glass painting referring to genuine, indigenous local culture, thus stressing their "Polishness." Up till now I can say that we see a process similar to that in India some years later—a sort of mediation of modern art by local visual tradition and practice, especially among those artists who referred quite clearly to it in their own art production, at least at that time. Obviously it was a manifestation of the national identity through modern form, and such a form had of course ideological meaning. In short it claimed to be both modern and national, which was very important in the wake of regaining independence by Poland just at the end of the World War I. When it happened, when a Polish independent state was set up and stabilized in the course of few years, the artists simply left this local mediation of modern art. The point is that modern art was not perceived as a symbol of–let's say–a close colonizer, but rather as a symbol of modernity coming from the cultural capital, Paris. It is a general view. However, if we come closer we can see the situation more complexly, maybe less in Krakow, but in Pozna?, another Polish province of the close colonizer, Germany, or Prussia to be precise. I am referring here to the Bunt (or Revolt) group, formed by Stanisław Kubicki, radical Polish-German artist, closely associated with Der Sturm and Die Aktion, and later with Die Kommune and Progressive Künstler groups, who came to Poznań from Berlin in 1917 and organized the first Bunt exhibition there in 1918. It met a very hostile reception in the city, since modern forms associated with expressionism at this time were definitely identified as German, as of the colonizer (or close, or neighborhood colonizer so to speak),

and the relations between Germans and Poles were quite hostile in the entire province, and in the city in particular. It was a different situation than that in Krakow or Lvov, since the close colonizer, or neighborhood colonization strategy was different. Nevertheless, modern art forms were in the course of the post-WW I decade seen as the "self," rather than the "other," especially in the avant-garde milieu, even if they were seen in the framework of political competition.

IV

Now the third question: who really was the colonizer, and who was the colonized? The question "who is who" is definitely more problematic in East-Central Europe than in India, and it does not apply to the issue of the status of the colonizer only: overseas colonizer in India's case, and–as I've said–the close, or neighborhood colonizer in Eastern Europe. However, even such a roughly sketched distinctions are simplified. We can say that German or Prussian colonization, a sort of "Drang nach Osten," was colonization per se, in terms of culture, education, and other "soft factors," which came together with the "hard factors," such as politics and economy. As far as Russia is concerned, the situation would not be so simple, since the western part of the Russian Empire seems to have been more economically developed than other parts. Likewise culture, in terms of symbolic capital, did not come entirely to that part of Poland from St. Petersburg; rather, it arrived from the West, especially from Munich and Paris. Even more, that was the same trajectory in terms of Russian metropolises, which also were under strong Western influences. Poland, Lithuania, and Ukraine were definitely occupied, or exploited, rather than colonized in the traditional sense of the word. I agree, however, with Ewa Thompson, that the colonial discourse was inscribed in Russian great literature, even more: from some points of view we can say that it is, at least partly, colonial literature, but it does not mean that in historical practice culture was a tool of colonization, as it was in the former case, Prussia's. It explained why the Poznań audience was so hostile to Kubicki, and the Warsaw one did not protest against (actually later, after the Soviet war in 1920) Russian constructivism, which in fact appeared in different time and context.[15] Whatever we would say about Tsarist or Prussian colonial strategy, each of which differs from the other, it is different from that of Austria, or of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In that case I would like to draw you attention to Czech lands.

Bohemia, or the Czech Kingdom, frankly speaking lost its independence in 1620. What is important is that at the beginning of the twentieth century it was a province of the Habsburgs' Empire. However, unlike Galicia, it was very developed and advanced in terms of industry and education, more advanced than the capital, Vienna, and its neighborhood. Politically speaking of course Bohemia was under Austrian domination, but it would be hard to say that it was the same in terms of culture, even if we agree that the region was heavily

Germanized. Of course, the Czechs wanted to recover their own national tradition, especially in the nineteenth century, but how it was attractive to the local intelligentsia at the beginning of the twentieth century is an open question. We know, however, that cubism appeared at the time as a very attractive tool for constructing a modern Czech identity, one that was regional rather than national, which is to say, understood in terms of cultural geography rather than ethnicity. Czech cubism emerged as very popular style, or cultural manifestation, among the city dwellers, professionals, intellectuals and business people, in one word among the metropolitan class of Prague, as the alternative to both: folk, or peasant tradition, and Viennese *fin de siècle* culture. If colonization means the culture of the colonizer overshadows that of the colonized, it was not the case of Prague, at least not at that moment. Czech cubism, thus, referring to the world cultural metropolis, Paris, was not perceived in Prague as the other; on the contrary–it was recognized as the self of European high culture, actually modern culture as the product of modern, highly civilized society. This is the background of the future of Prague, later the capital of Czechoslovakia, one of the most democratic countries between the World Wars, and at the same time one of the modernist cultural capitals of Europe. [16]

After 1945 the question who was the colonizer and who was the colonized in East-Central Europe, in the Soviet Bloc dominated by the USSR, is even more interesting and far away from the "classical" colonial and post-colonial paradigm. Definitely, the Soviets after 1947-48, by seizing full power in Czechoslovakia, as well as in Poland and Hungary (although, in fact, in two latter countries they already held it before), and by introducing hard Stalinist cultural policy, including Socialist Realism as the mandatory style and theory in the region, did open a way for a sort of colonization. At that moment everything is clear: there was the colonizer (the USSR), and the colonized (East-Central European countries). However, after Stalin's death, and especially after Khrushchev's so-called secret speech in February 1956, the situation began to be more complicated. Generally speaking the colonizer was gradually withdrawing its interest in colonizing art and culture and opened what came to be known as a thaw. In some countries, including the German Democratic Republic and the USSR itself, Socialist Realism remained the official art language, which did not mean that it was the only style that could be practiced and exhibited even in those places. But in other places, especially in Poland, Socialist Realism disappeared completely, since the communist authorities simply did not support it. On the contrary, as the famous exhibition of the twelve socialist countries (Art of Socialist Countries*)* in Moscow in 1958 showed, Polish communists preferred to show abstract, or semi abstract (indeed: modern) art at the most official art exhibition in the Eastern Bloc. [17] They were, of course, criticized by other participants, including the Soviet officials, and even mocked by the press, but at the same time, Polish curators (actually, the officials as well) showed their independence from Soviet cultural policy. The point is, therefore, that the alleged colonizer gave up its colonizing strategy and turned out to be "just" the military

occupant and economic exploiter. At least, it was such a situation in Poland after 1956. Thus, let's ask what was the decolonizing strategy here? Quite simple: looking to the West, and bringing new modern art forms from there, especially from France and its *informel* painting. It was so popular and so much supported by the authorities that the opening of the Second Exhibition of Modern Art in Warsaw in 1957 (showing almost only abstract art) was attended by high-ranking communist officials. We can say, on the other hand, that it was another cultural colonization. If that was the case, it looks like one colonization was replaced, or displaced, by another one, but the latter was welcomed very much, and seen as liberation. To some extent it was like in Calcutta in 1922, in that the art of colonizers (academism) was replaced by its critique (cubism). This is not, however, a correct analogy since in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and some years later Hungary, it was a different geo-political trajectory: culturally speaking the East (USSR) was replaced by the West, but the East–this time speaking in terms of politics–was still the dominant political power in the region. The situation is even more complex since France itself was the object of another cultural colonizing strategy, as Serge Guilbaut has argued.[18] French culture, especially film production, was a victim of the Marshall Plan, which was as much economic aid as cultural supervision.

If we now look at this situation from the global perspective, since the Cold War was a global phenomenon, indeed, we can see these processes were even more complicated. The Cold War was a competition between the West and East, so to speak the First and the Second worlds, but one of the targets of this cultural competition was the Third World. In terms of art it was a competition between two universalist myths: abstract art, and Socialist Realism.

V (Case Study)

As a case study of center-peripheries relationship in Europe let's take Kazimir Malevich's art story. The artist never went to Paris, although he wanted to.[19] His only trip to the West, or generally speaking abroad, was in 1927. He was supposed to reach Paris, then still seen as the capital of world modern culture. On his way, he stopped in Warsaw for one month and in Berlin for two months, then returned to Russia, and did not continue to France. Only in 1957 were his works shown in Paris for the first time, namely in the framework of the exhibition *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* at the Denise Réné Gallery.[20] This desired trip shows what exactly Rasheed Araeem had in mind while talking about Paris. Although radical avant-garde art after World War I had been developing in different parts of Europe, including and in particular the Soviet Russia, when radical visual forms became a project of the new post-revolutionary—i.e., communist—world, the artists still saw Paris as the right place to be.

Definitely, Malevich is not a peripheral artist in terms of his significant role in a mainstream history of modern art. On the contrary, he was one of the key and most important founders of avant-garde and modern art in the world. However, he was not an artist (nor is any artist, indeed) who came from nowhere. As Andrzej Turowski explains in his groundbreaking book (unfortunately, available at the moment in Polish only) *Malevich in Warsaw*, Malevich was a Russian artist, born in Ukraine, to a Polish family.[21] According to Turowski this background had a formative, or at least important function in Malevich's whole life and art, and this complex relationship is the real issue I refer to here. Ukraine, the place where Malevich was born, suffered from long neighborhood colonization, first Polish, then Russian, and later Soviet. Ukraine national and cultural identity has been always constructed against one or two colonizers, and it did not have such a pre-colonial golden-age point of reference as India had. Nevertheless, there were some attempts to create a modern art milieu in Kiev around and after World War I, attempts which were both modern and Ukrainian. As Miroslava Mudrak has written that milieu was Panfuturism, an artistic and literary movement, which developed into Ukrainian constructivism and culminated in the publication of the journal *New Generation* (1927-1930).[22] Although Malevich had not so much in common directly with these events, it was in the *New Generation* where he was able to publish his writings while facing trouble in Moscow after falling into disfavor with the Soviet authorities. Also in Kiev he gave one of his last lectures, and the last publication (when he was still alive) appeared in this city as well, in the *Avant-Garde Almanac;* even more: the exhibition of his works was also planned in Kiev, and if it had been realized, it would be the last one in the USSR before years of silence, but unfortunately it did not come to pass.[23] This Malevich-Ukrainian relation should not be perceived as coming back from the capital of the Empire to the colonized peripheries, which happened to be the place of his birth; rather, it was a practical response to trouble he was facing in the metropolis. It simply seems that the peripheries were more free than the metropolis, at least at that time and in that place.

The Polish story, however, according to Turowski, is more complicated than the Ukrainian. Being a Russian artist, thinking and writing in Russian, Malevich identified himself with the Russian art milieu. Dreaming of going to Paris, as his fellow artists did, he considered at the same time settling in Poland, in the country of his family, where actually some members of his large family, including his brother, used to live at that time. This project was supported by his Polish friends, especially Władysław Strzemiński and the circle of Polish constructivists, but for administrative reasons it was never implemented. The precise reasons remained unclear because many archives were destroyed during World War II. Of course, we do not know what would happen if Malevich had relocated to Poland, and how it would have changed his artistic profile, if at all. What we know is that it definitely would have changed the context of his art, as it did that of Strzemiński's, who also left revolutionary Russia at the beginning of the

1920s (illegally), and was probably thinking to go West—that is, to Paris, too… (*Malewicz w Warszawie* , 125). Context, however, is the point here.

Paris used then to be the myth of modern art, rather than the real scene of radical avant-garde in Europe. If Cubism was a sort of lingua franca of modern art before World War I, however, the heart of its radicalism moved out to the East. The artists did not want to fulfill demands of the revolution, or revolutionary leaders–they wanted to create them, actually to create the new society, and they perceived themselves as more radical than politicians. In my opinion that was the core of the avant-garde in the exact meaning of the word. Malevich was one of them, even though he did not join the radical wing of the avant-garde, namely the Productivists. Anyway, Paris and the modern art originated from this mythical capital of modernism, based on cubism as a historical point of departure, were not the "other" for him and his fellow-artists. On the contrary, they were something like a part of the self, or the place of their own ancestry. They combined, especially Malevich, this tradition with other traditions, more local and quite complicated, as Turowski argues. However, the catalyst, accelerator or formative factor of that art was geo-historical context. The conclusion, thus, will be not that the post-colonial relationship between the "other" and "self" might be the methodological approach to European art history, but rather that the geo-historical context of particular art production is the key. Although I am not going to ignore post-colonial studies as possible way to analyze European peripheries, wherever they might be, I would rather propose geo-historical prospect as the basis; I claim for art geography, critical art geography in fact, which generally means that art is not given by the "soil and blood," as traditional German *Kunstgeographie* used to say, but is constructed by historical circumstances, understood, in this particular case, however, as operating within the same *episteme*. The question of a critical geography of art, as I once pointed out, is the question of the relationship between different European places, particularly between West and Central and Eastern Europe, which could be of course applied to the other, non-European places, and is in fact the question of the power of the center and the margins. It is somehow a discourse of space relations, and the space (and its relations) are not of course transparent. [24]

This way of thinking, let me briefly repeat my previous study, are deeply rooted in Irit Rogoff's and Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann's research. [25] The crucial approach to the issue seems to be both to understand geography though the question of a place, rather than space, and to historicize it in order to get a dynamic structure between the place and time, geography, or even topography so to speak, and history. Kaufmann, whose studies seem to be very useful in historical research practice, described the "place" in terms of nations (or ethnicity), regions, cities, metropolises, etc. Although my own interest in geography of art is a little bit different—not a migration of objects, stylistic influences, cultural radiations of

the centers, diffusion of artistic ideas etc., but rather comparative studies between different art-historical places are my scholarly agenda—nevertheless, to develop such an approach I would say that the context generally speaking understood as the intersection between time and place in its diachronic and synchronic dimension, should be always taken into account. Such a context consists of political, cultural, social, ethnic, sexual and many other references, both real and desirable, seen in the framework of the specific situation in particular place, as well as historical background. Since we are talking about place, it would be quite important to relate the particular place to other places, in terms both of the real nomadic movements (emigration, migration etc.) as well as of desired ones. The key question would be, however, to understand that all those references are not given by blood, soil, landscape, climate, etc., but are constructed by particular circumstances, strongly determined by politics.

To illustrate how it would work let me return to the comparison between Władysław Strzemiński and Kazimir Malevich. The former, while living in Smolensk, was around the latter in the framework of UNOVIS created in Vitebsk 1919, but soon left Soviet Russia illegally for Poland in 1921-22. His first home city was Vilnius (which then belonged to Poland), where he participated in the Exhibition of Modern Art organized by Lithuanian artist Vytautas Kairiukstis, whom he met probably for the first time in Moscow. Malevich remained in Russia, and only in 1927 for the first and last time travelled to the West, stopping–as I have said–for a few weeks in Warsaw. His attempt to possibly settle there failed, and after visiting Berlin he returned to Russia. What happened with those two artists? Strzemiński, who frankly speaking never shared Malevich's metaphysical theory, but was close to his radical visual language, developed his art into the concept of Unism, which aimed at unifying the surface of the canvas by eliminating any possible visual tensions, on the one hand, and into a spatial analysis (together with Katarzyna Kobro) rooted in Malevich's *Planits* and *Architektons*. Malevich, on the other hand, gave up his radical art, Suprematism, in the mid-1920s, while the atmosphere around the avant-garde begun to be hostile in Russia. By the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, he somehow went back to the figurative painting that preceded his abstract art, including "peasants" as its subject matters. How his art would develop, if he could leave the country for good, we will never know. What we know is that painting (which is, frankly speaking, fascinating) was a sort of a game that he played with the Soviet government, under circumstances definitely not favorable for abstract art. Strzemiński was free in Poland in the 1920s and 1930s, and was able to do what he wanted. No political game was necessary there at that time; however, he repeated almost the same strategy, picking up similar subject matter at the end of the 1940s, when communism was introduced in Poland, and Socialist Realism began to be not only favored by the party and state officials who were responsible for the cultural politics of artistic style, but also mandatory as the only art it was possible to show to the public. In both cases this political game failed. Communists did not

trust the former avant-garde artists, and had different expectations; finally both artists died in poverty and obscurity: Malevich in 1935, Strzemiński in 1952, at two different moments in the history of the same political system, namely Stalinism.

Conclusion

The point, therefore, is: if we think about global art history, postcolonial theory would not be the (only) methodological approach to make it, since the peripheries of the art world are not only postcolonial. The postcolonial scholars who are involved in writing global art history ought to realize that they have to leave their own position, or at least not see it as the privileged and the only point of departure from which to rewrite art history, simply because global art history is broader than a history of former colonies. It has to embrace the other peripheries, as well as the other centers.

The present practice of global art studies based on post-colonial theory faces several problems. One of them is its exclusivity, or priority of former colony-metropolis relation as the key to understand the world. For these theorists, and for their own projects, this is probably an effective approach, since a deconstruction of the colonial-decolonial-postcolonial complex relation is crucial, but this is not global. In the course of history we have had not only different types of colonization, but also different peripheries that experienced a different relation to the center (to the metropolis or metropolises). If postcolonial relations, understood in terms of transcontinental relations might enjoy a privilege to be a universal key to global art history we will finally face another hegemony, and other exclusions, this time as a sort of reverse of the former ones. Global art history must be "horizontal," deprived of any domination; must be open for both all peripheries and all centers, seen probably as peripheries as well, or at least on equal footing with the peripheries. Although, while studying all hegemonic positions, we can see similar problems with racism, exclusion, imperialism, exploitation, etc., not all peripheries used to define themselves in the same way, since their cultures developed in different epistemic frameworks in comparison to the center's. Thus, if postcolonial studies cannot work as the only methodological approach to global art history, I would claim for art geography, or critical art geography, to be precise, a greater usefulness, as I suggested above. These sorts of studies are more heterogenic and less homogenic, more open and less exclusive, more plural and less hegemonic.

NOTES

1. See among others: David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (New York: Phaidon, 2003; Chartlotte Bydler *The Global ArtWorld Inc.: On the Globalization of Contemporary Art* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2004); Julian Stallabrass *Art Incorporated: The Story of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); John Onians, ed., *Compression vs. Expression. Containing and Explaining the World's Art* (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2006); James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008); James Elkins et al., eds., *Art and Globalization* (University Park, Penn.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); Jonathan Harris, ed., *Globalization and Contemporary Art* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011); Elaine O'Brien, et al., eds., *Modern Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013). As well as the project "GAM–Global Art Museum" in ZKM|Karlsruhe; Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *Contemporary Art and the Museum: A Global Perspective* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007); Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets, and Museums* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009); Hans Belting, et al., eds., *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture* (Ostfildern: Hatje Canz, 2011); Hans Belting, Andrea Buddensieg, and Peter Weibel, eds., *The Global Contemporary and the Rise of New Art Worlds* (Karlsruhe: ZKM and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012).

2. Kobena Mercer, ed., *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2005); Partha Mitter, "Intervention. Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery," *Art Bulletin* 90.4 (December 2008), 543-544. Ming Tiampo, "Cultural Mercantilism. Modernism's Means of Production: The Gutai Group as Case Study*"* in Jonathan Harris, ed., *Globalization and Contemporary Art,* 212-224; John Clark, "Beyond Euramerica," in Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *Contemporary Art and the Museum,* 66-78; Jim Supangkat "Multiculturalism/Multimodernism" in Elaine O'Brien, et al., eds., *Modern Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America,* 106-119.

3. Among others: Andrzej Szczerski, "Colonial/Post-Colonial Central Europe–History vs. Geography" in Adam Budak, ed., Anxiety of Influence: Bachelors, Brides and a Family Romance (Stadtgalerie Bern, Bern, April 23-May 23, 2004), 64-72 ; Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius "Unworlding Slaka, or Does Eastern (Central) European Art Exist?" in Vojtěk Lahoda, ed., Local Strategies, International Ambitions: Modern Art and Central Europe, 1918-1968 (Praha: Artefactum–Ustav Dějin Uměni AV ČR, 2006), 29-40.

4. This paper is the extensive development of a small fragment of my previous text devoted to "alter-globalist" art history. See Piotr Piotrowski "Od globalnej do alterglobalistycznej historii sztuki," *Teksty Drugie*, 1-2 (2013), 272-281.

5. Rasheed Araeen, "A New Beginning. Beyond Postcolonial Cultural Theory and Identity Politics" in Rasheed Araeen, et al., eds., *The "Third Text" Reader* (London: Continuum, 2002), 333-345.

6. Jan Sowa, Fantomowe ciało króla (Kraków: Universitas, 2011).

7. Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/ Global Designs. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 51, 58, 106.

8. Bojana Pejić has used the concept of the "close other" referring to Boris Groys (fremde Nahe), but did not provide any specific bibliographical references: Bojana Pejić, "The Dialectics of Normality," in Bojana Pejić and David Elliott, eds., After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe (Moderna Museet, Stockholm, October 16, 1999-January 16, 2000, and Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Budapest, June 15-August 27, 2000), 20.

9. Andrea Buddensieg, "Visibility in the Art World: The Voice of Rasheed Araeen," in Peter Weibel and Andrea Buddensieg, eds., *Contemporary Art and the Museum. A Global Perspective* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007), 52.

10. Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 15-27.

11. Piotr Piotrowski, "Modernity and Nationalism: Avant-Garde and Polish Independence, 1912-1922" in Timothy O. Benson, ed., *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* (Los Angeles, Calif.: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2002), 312-326.

12. Andrea Giunta "Strategies of Modernity in Latin America" in Gerardo Mosquera, ed., *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America* (London: The Institute of International Visual Arts and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996), 61-63.

13. Rebecca M. Brown, *Art for a Modern India, 1947-1980* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), 1-17.

14. On the question of how cubism was critical to French colonialism see, among others, Patricia Leighten *Re-Ordering the Universe: Picasso and Anarchism, 1897-1914* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989).

15. Ewa M. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2000; Polish ed., *Trubadurzy imperium. Literatura rosyjska i kolonializm,* trans. Anna Sierszulska, [Kraków: Universitas, 2000]).

16. See Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century: A Surrealist History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2013).

17. For more, see Susan E. Reid, "The Exhibition 'Art of the Socialist Countries,' Moscow 1958-9, and the Contemporary Style of Painting" in Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism. Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 101-132.

18. Serge Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1983; Polish ed., Jak Nowy Jork ukradł ideę sztuki nowoczesnej. Ekspresjonizm abstrakcyjny, wolność i zimna wojna, trans. Ewa Mikina [Warszawa: Hotel Sztuki, 1992]).

19. Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie. Rekonstrukcje i symulacje* (Kraków: Universitas, 2002), 125, 128.

20. *Malewicz w Warszawie*, 219; Turowski also notes that before 1957 only once and on that occasion only three of Malevich's paintings were shown in Paris, namely in the *Salon des Indépendants*, in 1914, which of course is hard to see as his own exhibition (397).

21. On Malevich's heritage and biography, see Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie.*

22. Miroslava M. Mudrak, *The New Generation and Artistic Modernism in the Ukraine* (Ann Arbor: The UMI Press, 1986).

23. *New Generation and Artistic Modernism*, 62; *Malewicz w Warszawie,* 67-68; see also W.A.L. Beeren, et al., eds., *Kazimir Malevich: 1878-1935* (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; State Russian Museum, Leningrad; Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow, 1989), 84.

24. Piotr Piotrowski, "Between Place and Time: a Critical Geography of 'New' Central Europe" in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann and Elizabeth Pilliod, eds., *Time and Place: The Geography of Art* (Hants: Ashgate, 2005), 153-171.

25. Respectively: Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma. Geography's Visual Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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FEATURES

THE THEATER OF INEQUALITY

THOMAS JESSEN ADAMS

Let politics attempt to abstract the concepts from the practices, and build for them a home independently of these, and far removed from any dialogue with their object, and then we will have—the theatre of inequality.[1] Certain readers might recognize these words as a paraphrase/plagiarization of Edward P. Thompson's classic defense of historical materialism (and for that matter, historical epistemology generally) in his 1978 evisceration of Louis Althusser's structural Marxism. The global financial crises of 2008, the Occupy Wall Street protests of 2011, and now the intellectual and cultural phenomenon centered on Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* have made clear that inequality has become an explosive political and cultural buzzword as we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century. The most striking aspect of this discussion, whether at the juvenile level of most of Occupy or at the highly sophisticated level of Piketty and his growing legion of adherents, is, evoking Althusser, an essential antihistoricisim. Thompson closes his polemic against Althusser by asking his readers to choose between the "idealist irrationalism" of Althusser and "the operative and active reason" of political experience and history.[2] In a way, this is also the choice that is engendered by the growing discourse of economic inequality. The (seeming) politics of inequality, like Althusserian structuralism, has enormous appeal. It allows those who "have not found a medium of practical engagement" to escape into the "secluded observatory" of cathartic witness-bearing or the intellectual exposure of structural inequality.[3] It removes the past of inequality as well as the present, and future, from the ingredients of history—it becomes something to be chastised or exposed, not fought. By so eliding history, the terms of the discussion imagine solutions without politics. In this way it has more than a few qualities of the kabuki.

It's become increasingly clear in our contemporary political life that how one understands the middle decades of the twentieth century *historically* says much about one's contemporary political orientation. After centuries of growing inequality that marked the various spatial and political transitions to capitalist accumulation and social relations across the western world, these trends began to reverse themselves across industrialized North America, the Antipodes,

and Western Europe.[4] Was this reversal divided, in disparate ways, across racial and ethnic lines? Absolutely. Did it include marked aspects of gender discrimination? Of course; and as I will note later, these histories are especially responsible for its defeat. In places like the United States, Great Britain, and France, was it propped up by a growing military-industrial complex that visited untold horrors on peoples in places like Vietnam, Cuba, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Algeria, Iran, and on and on? Undeniably. Were these social states rife with contradiction, always far too piecemeal, and built on utterly tenuous and often self-defeating political and social foundations? Yes, and then some.

Nonetheless, the wealthy nations of the world spent a good portion of the decades around World War II absorbed in an effort to move certain aspects of life outside of the cash nexus and revalue some forms of human labor. Across these nations, for moments that were varying but relatively brief it became policy to try to place housing, health care, tertiary education, old age security, a basic standard of living (either through welfare, collective bargaining agreements, or minimum wages), and food outside of the risk-driven world of capital and the pecuniary values of market culture and turn them into basic rights. These gains often rested on incredibly shaky political, social, and cultural foundations. That is, in many places and in regard to many policies they were frequently susceptible to debilitating countermovements and in some cases, seemed designed with such faults as to encourage and foment opposition.[5]

As Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore have argued in the context of the United States, this was a period of tremendous exceptionality, not easily if at all reproducible in today's environment.[6] Indeed, to a certain degree, their argument applies across the western industrialized world. I would, though, quibble about the emphasis on replicability. Certainly, the Popular Front and New Deal coalitions of the 1930s and 1940s will not be back anytime soon; and they absolutely cannot be willed into existence by proclamations that this election or financial crisis represents, finally, an end to neoliberal revanchism. That said, understanding the historical logics and contingencies on which these successes were built is a task central to rebuilding a redistributive politics, one that can plausibly pull us out of the current morass. Our continual failure to move beyond the political cul-de-sac of the last forty years suggests that understanding such an anomalous juncture is integral to understanding how we can move beyond the contemporary impasse. The growth of an incomplete but nevertheless ascendant social state in the middle decades of the century, and its subsequent dramatic dismantlement to the point of oblivion over the course of the last forty-years featured certain underlying logics of strategy and theme, all of which are markedly absent from our contemporary world—and just as importantly, alien to the political strategies of what passes for progressive politics and thought these days.

At the strategic level, a relatively cohesive class and workplace politics took shape across the aforementioned nations. This politics, expressed in labor organizations like the CIO in the United States, leveraged point-of-production solidarity and moments of strategic possibility like World War II to frequently make effective demands on employers through various forms of contentious politics, ranging from the picket line to the sit-down strike to the contract negotiation. Just as importantly, to lesser and greater degrees depending on place and moment, these groups were able to make transformative political demands on the state by giving labor and socialist parties–as well as the (now long dead) left wing of the Democratic Party in the U.S.–a coherent and organized base from which to pursue redistributive policies and demand the inscription of labor rights.

Thematically, the goals this politics pursued can be understood along two different lines. First, it sought to *revalue* various kinds of work. Factory and assembly line production, extractive industries, municipal services, and various kinds of "unskilled" manual labor like construction, transportation, and longshore work became, in many locales, avenues to a relatively secure and prosperous life. Without the long vantage of history we forget just how radical this development was. In most of the aforementioned places prior to the middle of the twentieth century, such work was understood culturally and economically to be essentially without value. It was "unskilled" and dirty, fit for those whom bourgeois society would happily discard were a cheaper replacement to come along. Working conditions were atrocious, wages barely enough to get by, job security inexistent, and the notion of advancement a cruel joke. That in a few decades such work could provide a relatively secure life, develop mechanisms to challenge the worst workplace abuses, and gain a certain cultural respect and pride is one of the most dramatic shifts within the long history of economic inequality.

At the same time that class politics forced the revaluation of certain kinds of human labor, it also became the political base for a process of redrawing the moral boundaries of the marketplace. One way to understand the long global history of capitalist social relations is to think about what has, and has not, become saleable over time. At its heart, capitalism is a moral system as well as a system of production: it is a set of political and social relationships that divides the collective fruits of human endeavor, based on certain ideological justifications–"skill," "initiative," "intellect," "usefulness"–while simultaneously relegating much of everyday life to commodity relationships. For most of the last three hundred years, in the wealthiest nations, more and more things have become commodifiable; that is to say that they have come under the moral purview of what can be exchanged in the marketplace. The great exception, of course, is the human body itself. As many of our most sophisticated scholars have pointed out, the commitment to the eradication of unfree labor in various

forms was also an ideological precondition for the absolute saleability and commodifiability of doubly free labor itself.[7] What becomes striking, then, about the mid-century interregnum is the policy thrust to move basic human housing, health care, old age security, education, bottom-level nutritional needs, everyday welfare, and even in some places leisure and mass culture outside of the market. This was a political process of *disenclosure*: of removing some basic human needs from the risks, vagaries, and price fluctuations associated with the profit motive and the market as moral arbiter.

To return to the original point, the backdrop to the growing inequality and dislocation of the last decades is the defeat of a mid-century class politics that provided a political and point-of-production base in which some kinds of work were revalued and the moral boundaries of what was to be produced and distributed through the capitalist market contracted. To be clear, I have no interest in placing this mid-century world on some nostalgic pedestal, to turn it into some Winthropian City on a Hill for us to gaze upon with longing. It was fraught with internal contradictions, it was decidedly more complete in some countries (Scandinavia) than others (the United States), and it frequently found itself in devil's bargains with capitalism and capitalists while sometimes tacitly and sometimes institutionally, supporting a Cold War that in various locales can only be characterized as genocidal. Yet, it's also worth pointing out that when it failed, it did so because it moved away from the themes I outlined above. It refused to see the interest of class solidarity with certain people (African Americans, Immigrants, Vietnamese Peasants, Cuban Revolutionaries, Communists of all stripes in various times and places, etc.) and accepted instead an ideological commitment to white supremacy, nationalism, and economic imperialism in its stead. It refused, out of a tendency toward masculine producerism, to engage in the revaluing of certain kinds of human labor, particularly that labor traditionally associated with women's household production; jobs revolving around cooking, cleaning, and caring, that were to become the central sectoral location of the working class in the last decades of the century. The class politics of midcentury often quietly stood by as housing, welfare, health care, education and multiple other basic aspects of social equality became reenclosed and emerged as locales for tremendous profit and social dislocation. It is this history that we must bear in mind as cultural and political attention increasingly turns to inequality. It is a complicated history, hardly in lockstep across space and time. Nonetheless, it is a *history*, one marked by the interactions between people and institutions at the quotidian level and over the *long durée*. It is neither abstract law nor the result of simplistic, single-origin forms of causation such as capital-depletion shocks caused by global war. It is—to borrow from William Sewell's excellent notion of the theoretical unconscious of history—*eventful, contingent*, and *temporally heterogeneous*.[8]

If Occupy Wall Street accomplished anything, it brought economic inequality out of a dusty political attic and into mainstream political conversation.[9] The language of the "1%" versus the "99%" has entered into cultural discourse over the last three years through protest, music, art, slogans, bumper stickers, and cable news. That inequality has been on the minds of more than just the small and disorganized Occupy Movement and its aficionados is well-illustrated by the last three World Economic Forum *Global Risks* reports.[10] Income disparity, apparently not a risk at all before 2012 in the minds of that elite group of bourgeois ideologues, has skyrocketed to top their concerns in 2014. It is in this context that, in the spring of 2014, an unlikely academic text of nearly 600 pages of prose reached the *New York Times* and Amazon.com bestseller lists and lingered there for weeks. By now it is cliché to call Thomas Piketty and his *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* a phenomenon. Nevertheless, a whistle-stop tour of the United States, scores of front-page newspaper articles, dozens of television and radio appearances, and a star turn on the Colbert Report certainly make the book the most discussed piece of academic literature in decades. Dubbed by multiple publications the "rock star economist," Piketty has not denied the role of "the brains behind Occupy Wall Street."[11]

Such a title is not in fact unfounded. Like the ideology undergirding Occupy Wall Street, Piketty's book exhibits a marked lack of historical consciousness and complexity. Like Occupy Wall Street, it confuses capitalism with capitalist social relations. And thus both protest and text imagine solutions without politics, lack coherence regarding the necessity for a revaluation of labor and a shrinking of the moral confines of the market, and hope for a better world *sans* class politics as a mechanism.

By now, it's not worth rehashing in detail the arguments that Piketty makes regarding the structural tendency of capital to increase inequality over time. It is a fairly simple argument, understood intuitively by many for centuries:

> If, moreover, the rate of return on capital remains significantly above the growth rate for an extended period of time…then the risk of divergence in the distribution of wealth is very high. This fundamental inequality, which I will write as $r>g$…sums up the overall logic of my conclusions.[12]

Put even more simply, if the fundamental law of capitalist production is the greater the rate of return on capital growth vis-à-vis the growth of the economy as a whole or the annual increase in income, then economic inequality and divergence will rise. This is the basic empirical argument of the book, and it is no doubt correct. A second key argument foregrounds the exceptionality of the mid-twentieth-century interregnum. That is, the moment when

r's starkest decline relative to *g* came, in the middle-decades of the twentieth century—the decades of the ascendant social state that I outlined above.

Nor is it worth rehashing the paean to his research, though I'll simplify it for those readers who haven't paid close attention: he went to archives! He collected prodigious amounts of data! He consulted non-traditional sources to be able to make comparisons across space and time![13] As this is a humanities journal, though, I should inform the reader, in case she or he hasn't heard, that he's an economist who's read Austen, Balzac and watched what apparently is their American equivalent, James Cameron's *Titanic*.[14]

It is, however, worth bearing in mind that there are multiple audiences for this book. Within the discipline of economics, the book serves as a crucial corrective. Bearing in mind Philip Miroswki's excellent study of the triumph of neoliberal thought, it is no accident that what we might understand as the left wing of neoclassicism, its standard-bearerers like Paul Krugman and Joseph Stiglitz, have showered the book with praise.[15] Piketty has offered an immense service their epistemological perspective. Demolishing the Kuznets curve once and for all, as Piketty does, is worth the price of admission alone. This is by no mean a bad thing, and one might even be able to argue that work in this mode will over time help open up space for the return of heterodox and political economic critiques of neoclassicism to the fold of mainstream economics.

Yet the influence of *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* on the discipline of economics has very little relationship to the broader phenomenon of its reception in the western world. At a moment of absolute neoliberal revanchism, why it has garnered such attention is the more important question. At the basic thematic level, the stock answer has been, echoing defenses of Occupy Wall Street, that a simple increase in discussion of inequality signals some sort of political paradigm shift. As this explanation goes, a greater empiricist understanding of the devastating divergence of wealth in the contemporary world will naturally birth commitment to a politics of redistribution. At its best, this is wishful thinking. The simple fact is, the majority of humanity understand the tremendous inequality that pervades the world. The problem is not consciousness of material reality; it is the lack of viable ways to shift this consciousness into concerted and self-interested political action. Exposures of inequality, be they shouts of "we are the 99%" or neoclassical treatises on the structural tendencies of capital to increase economic disparity, are supremely unthreatening when untethered to a political mechanism that can imaginably challenge the growing dominance of unfettered capital accumulation. Beyond unthreatening, they are often in fact, demobilizing, as they imagine solutions like a debt jubilee or a global wealth tax as magic bullets that will somehow appear if people shout loud enough or just understand how antidemocratic $r>g$ is. It is

especially important to push against this impulse in work like Piketty's, precisely because it is perhaps the most sophisticated recent example of this tendency.

It has been suggested that Piketty acknowledges class politics with his sporadic references to various strikes and labor conflicts. He indeed opens the first substantive chapter of the book with a brief recounting of the 2012 Marikana mine massacre: "(h)ow should the income from production be divided between labor and Capital?—has always been at the heart of the distributional conflict."[16] So far, so good. Quickly, though, things begin to fall apart. At the beginning of his analysis, Piketty introduces his argument in a manner that subtly though ineluctably produces both its trendiness and marketability and in the end, its essential conservatism. He tells the reader that he is embarking upon a six-hundred-page discussion of the growing divergence between wealth and income ($r>g$), a divergence that is structurally built into capitalism. In actuality, Piketty does something else entirely. He spends the next 600 pages exhaustively detailing the (usually) growing divergence between spoils awarded to capital and labor in a variety of different contexts—that is to say, the product of capitalist social relations. Now, if this were simply a marketing ploy to distance himself and the book from a certain nineteenth-century German political economist, it would not necessarily be a problem. But, whether intentional or not, substituting wealth for capital and income for labor means analytically, the category of class falls out of the equation. Capital, labor, and what goes to each become stark and abstracted numbers, as opposed to social relations and products of history.

To understand this in more detail, it's worth examining his explanation for the convergence of r and g in the middle of the twentieth-century, as well as his suggestions for mechanisms to overcome the more recent rapid divergence. These are not arbitrary choices for examination and critique. They represent in regard to the former the key moment of change over time–that is, the key subject of both history and contentious politics. In regards to the latter, we can then see how Piketty's oversimplification of historical change leads to a future solution in the *deus ex machina* style of political mobilization. The treatment for the problem that Piketty has described is not incidental to his analysis, as some have suggested, but is, rather, derived from its facile historical understanding. That treatment's unimaginability is thus related to the broader argument's antihistoricism. Of course, Piketty is not alone in this regard. Ideas of social change embraced by groups like Occupy, the Seattle anti-globalization movement, Democratic Party apologists in the United States, Labor Party apologists in places like Great Britain and Australia, and countless other groups exhibit the same antihistoricism. In the end, the problem is neither specific to Piketty nor to any one movement but is in fact at the heart of contemporary political demobilization.

That *r>g* is a law of capitalist accumulation is at once undeniable, circular, and meaningless. It is undeniable in the sense that in the imagined world of an utterly free market with perfect information the returns on capital investment will always rise relative to the returns on labor. This is, in fact, the essential nature of the difference between wealth (returns on capital) and income (returns on labor). Thus, it is both undeniable and circular. Finally though, such a law is historically meaningless. It is not simply the truism that free markets with perfect information never have and never will exist outside of a Milton Friedman wet dream. Rather, the manner in which markets become "unfree" or regulated, especially how they become regulated in such a way as to reverse this trend is the historically and politically meaningful point.

As an example, take Piketty's discussion of the decline in private capital relative to income in the United States, from roughly 500% in 1930 to a little more than 300% in 1970. This represents the most striking decline in economic inequality in American history.[17] The reasons that are given for this decline include: declining value of U.S. fortunes as a result of the World Wars and Great Depression; Roosevelt era policies designed to "reduce the influence of private capital such as rent control"; increase of progressive taxation; and major public investments in infrastructure.[18] Not bad, not nearly complete, but not horrible either. We move on to a discussion of dynamics in Canada, Japan, and elsewhere, as well as an interesting analysis of capital in human beings in the antebellum South (a discussion that imagines chattel slavery as the only form of bonded labor in the nineteenth century, an idea conjured by someone who likes to makes odes to history but not actually read it).

At this point, the reader might ask herself: we have now established another excellent (amongst many others) measurement of the mid-twentieth-century interregnum. But how did we get there then? How did we get here now? But like a Nazi refugee in wartime Casablanca, she will wait—and wait—and wait. If one wishes, as Piketty seems to, to overcome the gross inequality of the contemporary world and its likely future expansion, these are the questions that must be asked and answered. Let us return then, to the ever so brief answers that Piketty gives in regard to the United States.

The commonality in all these answers—declining fortunes, curbed influence of capital, progressive taxation, and infrastructural investment—is their essential removal from history and social relations.[19] They are mentioned, and to be sure, *inter alia*, did lead to this decline in inequality. But the pertinent question and in many ways, the only question, is the question that only historical epistemology can provide answers for. The Glass-Steagall Act, the Securities and Exchange Commission, World War II price controls, rising marginal tax rates, a variety of federal and state public works programs, new federal and state regulation of multiple industries, the establishment of social security and (later) public housing, state

minimum wage laws and (later) a federal one, the right to join a union and the subsequent massive unionization of American industrial workers, rural electrification, regulated and in some cases federally owned power, housing subsidies, growing investment in public primary, secondary, and tertiary education; the list goes on and on—these were the policies that contributed to the dramatic decline in inequality during this period. And why did this plethora of policies take root? Historians have debated these questions for decades, but the general logic of the most accepted arguments mirrors the brief schema I laid out earlier.[20] During the Great Depression and World War II Americans increasingly came to recognize common goals. They did so as members of industrial and craft unions and through the Democratic Party. They established and cemented various cultural tendencies toward solidarity. Through such *institutional* tendencies they accepted and encouraged state regulation and redistribution. They turned the meaning of patriotism into sacrifice for the common good. They fought and succeeded in revaluing some labor. They favored narrowing the moral boundaries of the market through the establishment of Social Security, price controls during World War II, federally subsidized public housing and later welfare, Medicare and Medicaid. In short, they wielded a broadly construed class politics in their general interest and against those of capitalist accumulation.[21]

This class politics grounded the *abstract* law of $r>g$ in the context of the regulation of a host of prices (ranging from labor to milk) and subsidized and removed scores of human goods from the profit motive. And it was *eventful*: that is to say, things that happened as a result of political and social relations mattered in its development and defeat. It required big events, like the mobilization for World War II and the passage of the Wagner Act, as well as more quotidian shifts, such as a growing labor cultural aesthetic and the everyday sacrifices of Americans during World War II. These events happened *contingently*: war mobilization, the Wagner Act, a laborite cultural aesthetic, and everyday behavior for the common good all happened as the result of a variety of social and political relations that occurred over variegated stretches of time. Finally, midcentury class politics were *temporally and causally heterogeneous*. The order and the context in which these countless events happened, and their contingent relationship to each other mattered in the way in which this politics took shape. To understand the greatest moment when r began to shrink relative to g, to understand how inequality has been overcome in the past, we must understand it *historically* or not understand the nature of $r>g$ at all.

The troublesome political implications stemming from Piketty's facile history, as well as those of broader political discussions of inequality, become apparent when we look at their proposed solutions. Piketty begins his musings on a (supposedly novel) progressive global tax on capital with a consolidating trope of neoliberal political thought. He notes that the social state and progressive income tax must assume a greater role, but "if democracy is to

regain control over the globalized financial capitalism of this century, it must invent new tools, adapted to today's challenge."[22] While certainly not within my scope here, there is something about the assertion of a need for novelty that seems particularly endemic to our age. His progressive global tax on capital is a perfectly solid piece of policy. It would absolutely do wonders to shrink global inequality, although, like all taxation policies suggested as high-order solutions, there is something of the flavor of panacea to it as well. What is bordering on absurd is the notion, or its lack, of how we get from here to there in this plan. In the book's introduction Piketty chastises and thus dismisses Marx for his vision of an apocalyptic end to capitalism through violent revolution.[23] Say what you will about Marx's political predictions (and I am certainly no defender), at least they included an essentially historical–a contingent, eventful and causally and temporally heterogeneous–vision of their own becoming. If you believe that groups like the European Union and IMF will slowly move toward progressive capital taxes and growing cooperation between regions, as exemplified by contemporary U.S. and E.U. *bank information sharing,* then by all means, step into my office; I'd like to discuss a time-share opportunity in Tuvalu with you.

A progressive global tax is an imaginary *tool* that can only take form on the shoulders of political action. It is imaginable as a solution to contemporary inequality only if one has displaced previous reductions in inequality from the logics of history. It is of a piece with Occupy Wall Street and with the call of that movement's other prophet, David Graeber, for a debt jubilee. Progressive global taxes and debt jubilees are both tools that are inconceivable in our political and historic context. Politics and policy tools are not synonymous, and the assertion of the latter without the former is effectually demobilizing. The approach is both cause and condition of our political atrophy in the contemporary neoliberal moment. It is also a condition, not unrelated to neoliberalism, of a debilitating antihistoricism in social and political thought. Social and political change comes through complex interactions between individuals and institutions, in multiple temporal scales. The growth of g relative to r has historically been a process whereby a politics of class simultaneously has revalued labor and narrowed the moral boundaries of the market through workplace and state intervention. A global wealth tax, debt jubilee, and other such tools could certainly be ways in which such a politics might achieve its goals; but positing solutions and imagining that a global governing class will somehow institute them *sans* contentious and institutional class politics is politically debilitating and symptomatic of our cultural antihistoricism. Capitalist social relations are lived, reproduced, experienced, and challenged in a messy world rife with contradiction and contingency. To paraphrase Thompson once again, the concepts cannot be abstracted from the practices. With the reduction of capitalist social relations into quantities and abstractions via an elision of history, Piketty, like Occupy and so much of what passes for contemporary

left politics and thought, performs the theatre of inequality, a kabuki spectacle for which the forces of capital in the twenty-first century will only be too happy to grab a front row seat.

NOTES

1. Edward P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 44. I would like to thank Mike Beggs, Andrew Fitzmaurice, Sarah Gleeson-White, Chris Hilliard, and especially Glenda Sluga for participating in discussions surrounding these issues. Lisa Furchtgott, Walter Benn Michaels, Charles Palermo, and Adolph Reed gave me particularly helpful comments and editing.

2. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 192.

3. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, 187, 191.

4. While not my main point of emphasis, it is worth noting that Piketty's work, like much contemporary thought, assumes a sort of linear and spatially even transition to capitalist social relationships. As multiple generations of historical scholarship have pointed out, what could be bought and sold, what constituted free labor and what constituted its antithesis, were markedly different in different times and places. This temporality and spatiality is integral to any understanding of historical rates of capital return. In other words, it matters for Piketty's numbers that he ignores the fact that the labor of women was essentially owned, like that of slaves under regimes of coverture. It matters for these numbers that large portions of the capitalist periphery were transposed into wealth or functional capital at relatively late periods vis-à-vis Piketty's scale, etc.

5. One thinks, for instance, of the American tendency to utilize the private health insurance market as the delivery method for what passes for public health care in the United States.

6. See Jefferson Cowie and Nick Salvatore, "The Long Exception: Rethinking the Place of the New Deal in American History," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 74 (Fall 2008): 1-32.

7. For instance, David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005); Thomas Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992); Amy Dru Stanley, *From Bondage to Contract: Wage Labor, Marriage, and the Market in the Age of Slave Emancipation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

8. William Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), esp. 6-11.

9. To be clear, this is not necessarily a positive accomplishment. Like multiple other movements whose perceived radicalism trumped the coherence of their politics, the posture of radicalism exhibited by Occupy was intoxicating to the global media and cultural elite.

10. World Economic Forum, *Global Risks, 2014,* 16.

11. Quoted in Jonathan Blitzer, "Occupy the Bestseller List," *New Yorker*, May 5, 2014.

12. Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, translated by Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 25.

13. It's worth noting that much discussion of Piketty's methodology has presumed that the entire discipline of history somehow fell off the earth. The broader problem, as I will address later, is that historical epistemology has been expunged from intellectual life.

14. To be fair, he also references Henry James in the American case, but the *Titanic* references stand out for what one suspects is a continental disdain for American mass culture. More interesting for some readers will likely be the detailed argument that with the onslaught of annual inflation in the early twentieth century specific references to monetary sums quickly fell out of literary reference as they would cease to have cultural meaning. As a literary philistine I am unable to evaluate this claim, though as my colleague Sarah Gleeson-White pointed out, this seems highly selective; one only needs to recall the multiple sums of money mentioned throughout Faulkner's *Phylon* and in the corpus of Faulkner more generally.

15. Philip Mirowski, *Never Let A Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Economic Meltdown* (New York: Verso, 2013).

16. Piketty, 39.

17. Beyond my own acknowledged geographical specialization in the United States, focusing on Piketty's discussion of the U.S. allows one to remove what we might call the noise of physical capital destruction in Western Europe as a result of World Wars I and II, and the corresponding volume effect of postwar rebuilding. That being said, his discussion of the similar if more dramatic u-curve of mid-twentieth-century Europe suffers from the same slight of political and social contingency.

18. Piketty, 153.

[19.] Fortunes continued to decline during World War II and its immediate aftermath; thus, the shock of the Great Depression does not come close to explaining this convergence. See Gabriel Zucman and Emannuel Saez, "The Distribution of US Wealth, Capital Income and Returns since 1913," accessed June 13, 2014. http://gabriel-zucman.eu/files/SaezZucman2014Slides.pdf.

[20.] I am especially drawing on the work of William Leuchtenberg, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal: 1932-1940* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Philadelphia, Penn.: Temple University Press, 1983); Lichtenstein, *The Most Dangerous Man in Detroit: Walter Reuther* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Lichtenstein, *The State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Michael Bernstein, *The Great Depression: Delayed Recovery and Economic Change in America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1998); Alice Kessler Harris, *In Pursuit of Equity: Women, Men, and the Quest for Economic Citizenship in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jennifer Klein, *For All These Rights: Business, Labor, and the Shaping of America's Public Private Welfare State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011)

[21.] Of course, the question still becomes how such institutions of class politics were able to solidify. It is here that histories of movement building become especially important. Far too often, Lawrence Goodwyn's words at beginning of his classic study *The Populist Moment* have been ignored in favor of simplistic assertions of agency and resistance. As Goodwyn argues, "(t)he simple fact of the matter is that so difficult has the process of movement-building proven since the onset of industrialization in the western world that all democratic protest movements have been aborted or limited…The underlying social reality is, therefore, one that is not generally kept firmly in mind as an operative dynamic of modern society—namely, that mass democratic movements are overarchingly difficult for human beings to generate" (Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment: A Short History of the Agrarian Revolt in America* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1978], xvii).

[22.] Piketty, 515.

[23.] Piketty, 9-10.

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POETRY

POEMS BY TADEUSZ RÓŻEWICZ AND EWA LIPSKA

TRANSLATED FROM THE POLISH BY JOANNA TRZECIAK

TADEUSZ RÓŻEWICZ, EWA LIPSKA AND JOANNA TRZECIAK

Two poems by Tadeusz Różewicz (1921-2014)

[untitled]

I was sitting in an armchair
I put away a book
suddenly I heard
the beating of my heart
it was so unexpected
as if a stranger had entered me
and was pounding with clenched fist
some unknown creature
locked up inside me
there was something unpleasant about it
pounding there without any connection
to me
to my abstract thoughts

Thorn

I don't believe
I don't believe from the moment I rise
till the moment I fall asleep

I don't believe from one shore
of my life to the other
I don't believe
as openly
as deeply
as my mother did believe

I don't believe
eating bread
drinking water
making love

I don't believe
inside his shrines

I don't believe on a city street
in a field in rain
in the open air
in the gold of annunciation

I read his parables
simple as a shock of wheat
and I think of a god
who did not laugh

I think of a small
god bleeding
in the white
shrouds of childhood

about a thorn which tears
our eyes lips
now
and at the hour of our death

Three Poems by Ewa Lipska

Study Death

Study death. Learn it by heart.
Following to the rules of spelling
dead words.

Spell it together
like commonwealth or toadflax.

Do not split it
among the dead.

You are the chosen of the gods
Study death early.

Love of country
can be mortal too.

Study death
in love.

Study death not just
to kill time.

Time can be suicidal
and hang from a tree for hours.

Quiz yourself.

A real live quiz.

Plum crumb cake

I pluck from your face
a crumb of plum crumb cake.
A tiny press of tenderness.

Away from all ideas
I set it on the fine china of the page.
Let it be recorded forever.

It's hard to tell when
a draft has blown everything away.
Someone opened a window. Someone opened a door.

Years later
I still walk among the pastry shops.
It's a shame I only think you up.
Even the night doesn't realize…
when we are together.

Tram

In the palm of my hand I hold this landscape
I cover by tram. Line number one.
I feel the iron of wheels. Submissive strips of rail.
Like an educational toy.

A girl gives up her seat for me.
As we round the bend language overturns.
Syllables fall from a mouth.
A crude screech.

"Enjoy it while it lasts, child,
enjoy this moment. This tram. This further."

But not the Furthest. This much I know.
Your gray hair is already waiting
at the end of the line.
I am still seated
as your white cane gets off
supporting my prophecy.

"I am talking to you, child"

The girl laughs. What a joke,
the passengers say: life love death.

And when the tram reaches the stop
its brakes are still laughing.

Tadeusz Różewicz is widely considered to be the most influential postwar Polish poet. Winner of the 2000 NIKE prize, Poland's top literary prize, and the 2007 European Prize for Literature, he has published over twenty volumes of poetry, and is a major playwright, essayist, and fiction writer. Among his works available in English translation are *The Survivor* (Princeton UP, 1977), *Recycling* (Ark, 2001), *New Poems* (Archipelago, 2007), and *Sobbing Superpower* (Norton, 2011). Różewicz died on April 24, 2014 at the age of 92, and was laid to rest in the mountain village of Karpacz.

A native of Kraków, **Ewa Lipska** has published over thirty volumes of poetry and has been translated into over a dozen languages. She made her début in 1967 with the critically acclaimed collection *Poems*, and since then has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Koscielski Fund, Robert Graves Pen Club, and the Gdynia Prize for Literature. She has served as Poland's cultural representative in Austria and throughout the 1990s was Director of the Polish Cultural Institute in Vienna.

Joanna Trzeciak is Associate Professor of Russian and Translation Studies at Kent State University. She is currently on a Fulbright Fellowship at Jagiellonian University in Kraków. Her translations of Polish and Russian literature have appeared in The New York Times, The New Yorker, Times Literary Supplement, Harpers, The Atlantic, Paris Review, Field, and New Ohio Review, among others. *Sobbing Superpower: Selected Poems of Tadeusz Różewicz* (W.W. Norton, 2011) was shortlisted for the Griffin Prize, and received the Found in Translation Award and the AATSEEL Award for Best Scholarly Translation.

RESPONSES

QUESTIONS FOR ADAMS

CHARLES PALERMO

Thomas J. Adams' review of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* begs what I consider to be a vital question. In what follows, I want to pose that question. In that sense, I am criticizing Adams. I should say, further, that that is the only sense in which I understand myself to be criticizing Adams. I don't aim to find fault with his general thesis, that by "eliding history, the terms of [Piketty's] discussion imagine solutions without politics," which is to say, without a good account of the history of inequality, you cannot have an effective, mobilized political engagement.

I would note, first, that Adams is not claiming that Piketty's analysis is incorrect on its own terms. Adams does not revise numbers or criticize the methodology behind Piketty's description of inequality. Rather, Adams feels that, like many who complain about growing inequality, Piketty offers inequality as "something to be chastised or exposed, not fought." This is why Adams describes Piketty's work as (yet another) "theater of inequality"—because it offers an occasion for chastising and exposing, not for inciting action. Not that Piketty considers policy improvements impossible. He supports a global wealth tax, for instance. But he does not say how the institutions that have fostered inequality (the "global governing class" of Adams' analysis) will be made to reverse their apparent preferences and begin to take steps to decrease inequality, rather than continue to increase it. This failure to specify how policies favoring the redistribution or wealth or income should reverse themselves is where Adams sees the absence of class politics in Piketty.

Somewhat surprisingly, though, Adams' diagnosis does not yield a prescription for a more robust and class-conscious action. Not precisely. Rather, for a patient who suffers from a lack of class politics, the prescription is a dose of history. According to Adams, mobilizing class politics depends on history:

> Politics and policy tools are not synonymous, and the assertion of the latter without the former is effectually demobilizing. The approach is both cause and condition of our political atrophy in the contemporary neoliberal moment. It is also a condition, not unrelated to neoliberalism, of a debilitating antihistoricism in social and political thought.

What never quite gets explained, however, is how the antihistoricism and the political atrophy go together—how antihistoricism brings about and absolutely guarantees political atrophy. Of course, in the passage I've cited, Adams doesn't say that antihistoricism *causes* political atrophy. But he implies it there and elsewhere. Thus: "positing solutions and imagining that a global governing class will somehow institute them *sans* contentious and institutional class politics is politically debilitating and symptomatic of our cultural antihistoricism." And so on.

I have no desire to be taken to argue that we should embrace antihistoricism. (Maybe we should, for all I know. But I'm not in a position to argue that thesis. That is why I insist that what I am doing here is asking a question, not refuting Adams.) What I would like to ask is, how do past history and present action go together?

This is where E.P. Thompson enters the argument:

> *Let politics attempt to abstract the concepts from the practices, and build for them a home independently of these, and far removed from any dialogue with their object, and then we will have—the theatre of inequality.* [1]

I will not attempt to summarize or even represent Thompson's careful response to Louis Althusser (and Karl Popper, and a host of others). And I'll keep the italics, so as to underscore, as it were, that it is Adams' use of Thompson with which I concern myself. But I'll permit myself to cite Thompson once or twice, too, to help set my question in relation to Adams' argument and what I can understand of its background. Anyway, I take this opening salvo to be a declaration of Adams' principle: that experiences (in the form of practices, in this passage, but more generally, too) inform one's politics and that one's politics emerge from one's interpretation of experience. To attempt to isolate—or theorize—politics in isolation from experience is to enter a kind of idealist echo chamber within which theoretical assumptions merely underwrite theoretical conclusions. (I take it that Thompson would agree, at least to this point.)

Writing, as he did, around the end of the interregnum of which Adams speaks, Thompson acknowledged the exceptional character of recent history and experience:

> "Experience"—the experience of Fascism, Stalinism, racism, and of the contradictory phenomenon of working-class "affluence" within sectors of capitalist economies—is breaking in and demanding that we reconstruct our categories. Once again we are witnessing "social being" determining "social consciousness," as experience impinges and presses upon thought: but this time it is not bourgeois ideology but the "scientific" consciousness of Marxism which is breaking under the strain.
>
> This is a time for reason to grit its teeth. As the world changes, we must learn to change our language and our terms. But we should never change these *without reason*. ("Poverty," 25)

Experience—even, or especially, experience that challenges our deepest beliefs, our surest ideas—has to modify our arguments and our social consciousness. "Fascism, Stalinism, racism, and […] the contradictory phenomenon of working-class 'affluence'" all present challenges to the kind of social consciousness Thompson found himself inhabiting; his arguments would need to accommodate them.

But Adams, while acknowledging racism, the passing period of working-class affluence (the interregnum), and other embarrassing features of the history of good class politics (such as its coincidence with sexism, etc.), considers the basic rightness of class politics superior to those accidental features. I'm completely sure he's right about that. However racist or sexist American society was during the interregnum, the success of organized labor during that period was a success. And it should be a lesson to us now—and we can surely do things differently this time, without the racism and sexism, for instance.

With this totally salutary and right thought come some other issues, though. Early on, Adams expresses some concern about the "replicability" of the United States' mid-century triumphs (always understood as qualified along the lines Adams suggests with regard to racism, sexism, etc.). Replicability notwithstanding, "understanding the historical logics and contingencies on which these successes were built is a task central to rebuilding a redistributive politics, one that can plausibly pull us out of the current morass." That is, we cannot repeat (the parts we like best of) the mid-century triumph, but we can learn from them. And we can learn from them because we can separate certain contingencies (Fascism, Stalinism, racism, etc.) from principles (effectively organized labor counters inequality) that transcend the circumstances of a given historical example. We might say that the principles are different from the contingencies because we can see causal mechanisms that unite them to desired outcomes, but

that would be to permit "theory" to dictate to "experience," to validate itself in the absence of historical experience.

Of course we think that way all the time. Any imputation of causality does as much as that. One does not need to replicate in every detail the last circumstance in which one drove a nail with a hammer in order to imagine how to drive a nail with a hammer. But the trick is to figure out which elements of the situation need to be the same in order for the historical hammering to offer a useful model for the latest hammering project. To say that theory must emerge from practice is to say that a sufficient history of hammering will tell you how to approach a given nail.

"Contingency" is, to simplify things considerably but not wrongly, a name for the limitations of that principle:

> "history" affords no laboratory for experimental verification, it affords evidence of necessary causes but never (in my view) of sufficient causes, the "laws" (or, as I prefer it, logic or pressures) of social and economic process are continually being broken into by contingencies in ways which would invalidate any rule in the experimental sciences, and so on. ("Poverty," 38)

Thompson does not leave the matter there, but I think we may. If we take the notion of historical contingency seriously—as a way of limiting talk of the replicability of historical events or of naming the sufficient conditions of historical or projected outcomes—then we raise a serious question about the relevance of historical examples to present predicaments. In short, when we look to the past (New Deal America, for instance) for an example, we bracket certain differences between our situation and that past situation (globalization, the information economy) and declare the separability of certain factors (racism, sexism) from our calculations, so that we can take other factors (an explicit politics of class, organized labor) in something close to isolation, as necessary (if never sufficient) causes of processes that are continually disrupted by historical contingency.

How do we decide what factors are wheat and what are circumstantial chaff? Once we have, can we say that we are attending to history, or should we rather say that we are producing a carefully counterfactual story of our past history with the right features to motivate action in the present that suits our present sensibilities? Or, to put the matter in terms of the question I want to ask, does history provide evidence of historical consciousness (as opposed to antihistoricism) as a necessary condition of class-driven politics? This is the matter Adams assumes, and which I want to make explicit. Is it not at least hypothetically possible that a fiction of history could motivate an effective class politics? How correct does our historical

interpretation (of, say, mid-century America) need to be to motivate a class politics? If it needs to be true and accurate—which is to say, if it needs to be historical at all—then according to what principle are we permitted to carve out those features of that history (Fascism, Stalinism, racism, etc.) that we need to isolate from it in order to render it acceptable to our sensibilities now?

This is not to argue that the mid-century interregnum is not a useful model for future action. I fully support the agenda Adams evidently proposes (organized labor and political action from within a class consciousness), but I want to ask, above all, where the authority—that principle of mobilization that turns calls to action into action—resides? Steven Knapp has argued, in a different context, that historical accounts get mobilized, and selectively distorted, in order to provide an explanation for our situation, on one hand, and an analogy to mobilize us in the present—two purposes or functions that live in an obscure and shifting relation to one another.[2] Is it in history itself, understood as the object of our inquiry, or is it in the present, in an interpretation of history that is made possible by and limited by our present ideas and ideals. If it is the latter, then what is it about history, in its obdurate, factual mixture of the exemplary and the execrable, that is fit to guide us? Would a finer fiction—or a set of internally coherent ideas—not do just as well? How do history and action in the present go together? How does history gain authority over us?

Notes

1. Edward P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 44; as cited in Adams.

2. Here, I am developing what I believe is the argument of Steven Knapp in *Literary Interest: The Limits of Anti-Formalism* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. 106-20.

Charles Palermo's two current research projects are an account of the importance of authority in the work of Pablo Picasso and Guillaume Apollinaire before cubism and inheritance as a metaphor for understanding in and around photography, from Peter Henry Emerson to Douglas Gordon. His *Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miro in the 1920s* (2008) appeared in Penn State University Press' Refiguring Modernism series. He has spoken and published on Cézanne, cubism, Michel Leiris, Picasso, Apollinaire, Eugène Carrière, P.H. Emerson, Eugene and Aileen Smith, and James Agee's and Walker Evans's Let Us Now Praise Famous Men.

ON MODELING
RE: THE FORCE OF A FRAME

MARINA PINSKY

Editor's Note: Marina Pinsky is responding to a set of essays previously published in issue #11 of nonsite by Walter Benn Michaels ("The Force of a Frame") and Margaret Olin ("Response to Walter Benn Michaels").

Dear Prof. Michaels and Prof. Olin,

I have read with interest your essays on Owen Kydd's recent work, including the video *Marina and the Yucca* in which I appear. I've thought a great deal about your interpretations, about the work's formal components, its framing devices, and most importantly, as Prof. Michaels states, its disinterest in my personality or interior life. Upon reflection I feel I may have some small contribution to make to the discussion. I have the benefit of having been part of the work's creation, along with the gift of distance and time for consideration between that moment and now.

Owen asked me to pose for the video one day towards the end of our graduate program at UCLA. I was very hesitant – I've always been uncomfortable having my photo taken, so I've preferred to be behind the camera. During those last few months of school, I was taking portraits of male friends of mine. I showed them as comic relief from my thesis show and jokingly called the series "Beautiful Young Men," but of course my friends really were all beautiful. I thought it would only be fair to assume the role of the model myself after having subjected my social circle to similar treatment—although my and Owen's working processes are very different.

So that afternoon I took a break from what I was doing in the studio and told Owen I'd sit for him. He set up his tripod and camera, and I sat on the steps just outside my open door. It took a few takes to get the right shot. There were some technical issues with the lens—I think my sweater was too sharp in capture. And even though I thought I was sitting still I really wasn't. When my eyes were closed my mind seemed to move even faster than when they are open. It took a while before I could force my mind to still my body. Nobody will ever know exactly

what I was thinking in those minutes, I suppose that is what so much portraiture is really a container for. But I can tell you that in the time that Owen was recording me, in my head I gave forms to the abstractions that give order to the world. I thought very hard about the shapes of numbers. I drew their contours and filled them in and turned them over. I popped them up out of nowhere and added them up and kept recombining them. And this is what I sometimes think about before I fall asleep. So maybe I relaxed too much playing games with numbers. But to tell the truth, I've always been a bit of a slouch and I think it's a cool look.

I am clearly not a professional model and have never been one, but I have friends who did it for a living when they were younger. I also worked alongside a fashion photographer when I had a job for a while as a black-and-white printer. He was a brilliant man, and in our long days in the dark he told me in detail about the workings of that world. Fashion models work very hard. They have to know their bodies on a deep technical level in relationship to a machine. They have to possess awareness of the full potentiality of their movements in relationship to every angle of sight of a lens, a range of technicians with differing abilities, a range of products with varying qualities, an endless complex of machinery. An actress has an even more difficult job, on top of all of this: to channel a fictional character, culled from a text, to draw up whatever empathy she is capable of and enact a situation she's never experienced in her own life. And she must do this repeatedly until the camera captures the perfection of her emotional state. Photographing my friends I came to understand how different it must be to work with someone whose profession it is to be looked at. Though I've learned from living in LA that it's really about the right casting.

I have heard Owen mention Warhol as an influence. To speak specifically about Warhol's durational films, he left the camera running on his subjects for lengths of time far exceeding a regular film with little to no direction. In his screen tests he let his subjects act out their selves. Or take Warhol's first film *Sleep* – that film was interesting because sleeping was such a rarity in those days – everyone was on amphetamines. Warhol writes that he thought sleep was becoming obsolete and hurried to film it. In the present day, I get more than a full night's sleep, and most of the people I know do too. But I did read a recent psychological study stating that most people would rather inflict pain on themselves than be alone with their thoughts – so maybe being able to sit and think is now a rarity. However, Owen didn't ask to record me in my natural state (I generally think with my eyes open), he gave me some specific directions.

What does it really mean now for there to be a picture out in the world of me with my eyes closed? Nobody will really know what I was thinking about that day. Does anyone really want to know what women in pictures are thinking about? Could the theoretical question of a work that shows someone thinking, an image of the outside of an alive person's head, be "(Why)

is there something in there instead of nothing?" What form does thought take since it cannot be deduced from staring at a brain?

I don't expect a picture to reveal anything about my interior life. But here, since I'm not playing a character, I do wish it could reveal something of my outward engagement with the world, as proof that my thinking is not merely tautological. To use the force of a frame to extract a person from their world, symbolic or physical, is a violent act. If I act out my response lightly, it's only because I've grown inured. I wish on screen I could look as alive as I usually am. But my eyes are closed, my body is out of focus and squeezed into a narrow frame, too narrow and with too little depth of field to be able to see into my studio. Instead of being pictured with the surrounding outward signs of what I do with my mind and how I make a living, I just look like a girl nodding off next to an exotic plant.

I keep trying to think about Owen's video in the third person, but that kind of dissociation is impossible here. Prof. Michaels states that the work's autonomy reminds us that we indeed live in a society based on class. But the work's particular framing devices do not separate it from the outside world, they reinforce those workings in how the viewer is made to behave when facing the artwork. If we as spectators assume the behavior I am modeling, if we sit politely, inactive, if we do as we're told, play the part we're asked to play and close our eyes to the world, how would this ever produce any form of justice, inside or outside the arena of art? The way that a person addresses an artwork is so deeply conditioned that people think the work is addressing them as though it were alive itself! The way that people act in society is so deeply conditioned that they don't even know they are acting. The complexity of social struggles in the US cannot be subsumed under the umbrella of class struggle without belittling their particularities.

Photography and cinema have been intimately connected to unrest in the United States since they were brought here (or at least since Muybridge immigrated to the country and did everything that made him notorious, including shooting a man and being acquitted in his era's "Stand Your Ground" law). The complex of inventions making up the spectrum of photography and cinema have always been used in the service of both authority and protest. The issues being fought for aren't just out in the street, or in the storefront, they're also behind closed doors and behind the camera. To look from another vantage point and think outside terms of scale, it's possible to see that the poorest place in America aside from Detroit is Blackwater, AZ—of which the overwhelming majority of the population is Native American. Consider the race disparities in the American prison system. Compare mandated maternity leave in the US to the policies in other nations. Observe the continued income disparity between men and women at every level of education and in nearly every profession. I'd prefer to read theories that could help make many more of these issues visible—that show how

artworks open up all the possibilities of activity out in the world. Doesn't the image's power lie in its proliferation of meanings? So what is the point of arguing for such autonomy? Is it possible to separate ourselves from all the forces that teach us how to act in a room with an artwork?

Marina Pinsky is an artist currently living and working in Brussels, Belgium. Her photographs and sculptures have been exhibited nationally and internationally. At present, she is preparing for an exhibition at the Kunsthalle Basel and procrastinating by writing open letters.

RESPONSE TO MARINA PINSKY

WALTER BENN MICHAELS

It's both unusual and exciting to hear from the subject of a work of art, especially when that subject has a lot of interesting things to say and, furthermore, is herself an artist of considerable interest. And I think Marina Pinsky is exactly right when she insists that "To use the force of a frame to extract a person from their world, symbolic or physical, is a violent act." But I think she is exactly wrong when she suggests we resist that force (resist the autonomy of the work) and when she identifies this resistance with the "possibility of justice, inside or outside the arena of art."

In my reading, the violence of the frame in *Marina and the Yucca* not only makes what Pinsky calls the particularities of its subject's life unknowable, it also, more crucially, makes them irrelevant. What I mean is, it's not just that the photo doesn't show what Marina is thinking or imagine her life but that it isn't even interested in them. And because it's not interested in what she thinks, it's also not interested in what we might think about her. That's the point of its insistence on its own internal structure. Thus, for example, it's not Marina's barely visible (but, I completely agree, cool) slouch that matters; it's the loop that straightens her up, that doesn't belong in any way to her (it's not an element in her body language) and that has nothing to do with how we feel about her. It's created and contained by the work itself. Hence its power lies not in any "proliferation of meanings" (what it might mean to you, to me, to men, to women, to black people, to white people, to rich, to poor) but in the fact that it means what it means regardless of who we are.

Another way of putting this is to say that the violence of the frame consists above all in making our lives as irrelevant as hers, and it's in this indifference to our particularity (this allegorizing of its irrelevance) that I locate the politics of Kydd's work. The fundamental categories of both conservative and liberal politics in the U.S. today are deployed in debates over how we should understand our own and each other's particularity, over (to use Pinsky's examples) questions like whether racism is responsible for the disproportionate number of black people in prison or Native Americans in poverty and whether sexism is responsible for the state's indifference to providing adequate child care. But these debates are empty, and for

two reasons. The first is that it obviously *is* racism and sexism that's responsible for these disparities. (Which means the liberals win.) The second is that success in eliminating these disparities – in creating a world where as many white people as black people are in prison, as many Asian Americans as Native Americans are poor, and women are just as free to enter the job market and compete for the best jobs as men – would not create a more equal society. (Which means the conservatives win.)

Why do the conservatives win? Because economic inequality is left materially undiminished and ideologically enhanced by a critique that identifies justice not with the effort to minimize it but with the effort to minimize the role played by racism or sexism in causing it. This is what Adolph Reed and Merlin Chowkwanyun mean when they say that the "disparitarian perspective" is "reflective of a class position tied programmatically to the articulation of a metric of social justice compatible with neoliberalism." And it's what Karen and Barbara Fields are talking about when they worry that what they call "racecraft" (the ability of conservatives and liberals to racialize both their defense of inequality and their opposition to it) leaves us "no legitimate language for talking about class." Indeed, one could put the point in even stronger terms; it leaves us, even when we are talking about class, treating it as if it were a kind of identity, like race or sex, as if opposing "classism" were a way of opposing capitalism.

But works like *Marina and the Yucca* do have a way of talking about class, and without turning it into just another identity. Indeed, the way they do it is precisely by refusing identity (that's what it means for *Marina*, as Marina Pinsky says, to reveal neither its subject's "interior life" nor her "outward engagement with the world") and by insisting on distinctions that are instead structural (that's what it means for *Marina* to establish the frame itself and hence thematize the irrelevance of the beholder's interior life and his or her engagement with the world too). The politics of the work thus consist not in its subject matter but in its relation to that subject matter and not in making itself open to the responses of its audience but in asserting its autonomy from them.

So when Marina Pinsky ends her letter by asking, "what is the point of arguing for such autonomy," one answer is political. It's a way of imagining our society as fundamentally structured by differences that are produced by the relations between capital and labor and not by how we see or feel about each other. But I don't imagine that this political answer is entirely adequate. That is, I don't imagine that the goal of (what seems to me) a good politics is primary here. Naturally, different artists will have different motives but it's probably pretty safe to say that the desire to make good art takes an almost tautological precedence over any other. The interesting question then is not about the artist's politics but about his or her understanding of what good art is, about the work's theory of itself. And *Marina and the Yucca*'s

answer to that question is precisely the assertion of its autonomy. Its good politics, in other words, are less its point than an entailment of its point.

NOTES

1. Take a look, for example, at some of her work here: http://hammer.ucla.edu/made-in-la-2014/marina-pinsky/

2. Part of the point of the yucca is the contrast here—we don't need the loop to help make perspicuous the consequences of the fact that we can't know its thoughts; it doesn't have any thoughts. But that opens up a whole new line of inquiry—about the relation between human life and plant life, and about the ways today in which the question of that relation gets posed. Of course, the yucca can't write into *nonsite.org*, but it's easy to imagine that some readers might feel moved to do so on its behalf. Furthermore, whether or not the force of the frame is differently applied in the two elements of the diptych, the pressure on the frame (on the very idea of the frame) is itself intensified by the fact that there are two elements, and thus there's a sense in which the frame is disconnected from the objects and reproduced in the form of a concept. All of which (including the cord that Margaret Olin rightly draws to our attention and that links the two elements and plugs into the wall) is just to say that *Marina and the Yucca* is brilliantly obsessed with the question of what counts as part of the work of art and what doesn't.

3. Adolph Reed, Jr. and Merlin Chowkwanyun, "Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and its Analytical Discontents." http://ssc.wisc.edu/~chowkwanyun/ReedChowkwanyunSR.pdf

4. Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso, 2012), 39.

5. Thus, for example, Peter Frase's recent enthusiasm (in *Jacobin*) for the idea that even though "class may be a structural relation," it is "also an identity," could easily have been cross-posted on *Jezebel* since its payoff is to make possible Frase's disapproval of "*soi-disant* leftist(s)" who "ridicule the tastes and mores of a rabble" they "perceive to be made up of fat, lazy stupid rubes" (https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/06/stay-classy/). No doubt, fat-shaming (and slut-shaming and smart-shaming and, Frase's point, class-shaming) should be avoided. But avoiding them doesn't actually make you any kind of leftist, even a *soi-disant* one.

6. By tautological, I just mean that you're not really making art at all unless you're trying to make it good and that if all you mean by making it good is having some kind of beneficial social effect, you almost certainly made a really bad career choice.

Walter Benn Michaels is currently at work on a manuscript called *The Beauty of a Social Problem*. His books include *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century*; *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*; *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History*; and *The Trouble with Diversity: How We Learned to Love Identity and Ignore Inequality*. Recent articles—some on literature, some on photography, and some on politics—have appeared in such journals as *PMLA*, *New Labor Forum*, and *Le Monde diplomatique*.

REVIEWS

THE MEANING OF PAIN

TODD CRONAN

Review of Paul Scheerbart, *Lesabéndio: An Asteroid Novel*. Illustrations by Alfred Kubin, translated, with an introduction, by Christina Svendsen. Wakefield Press, Cambridge, MA 2012. 232 pages.

Special thanks to the editors of Radical Philosophy for allowing me to reprint my review from issue 185 (May/June 2014): 64-65.

For admirers of the work of Walter Benjamin, a translation of Paul Scheerbart's *Lesabéndio: An Asteroid Novel* is a major event. Benjamin continually lauded *Lesabéndio* throughout his life, most decisively in his famous vision of architectural politics, "Experience and Poverty" of 1933. Benjamin's interest in Scheerbart spans the whole of his career, from Gershom Scholem's gifting him the book at his wedding to an essay on Scheerbart written near the end of his life. Most significantly, Benjamin intended to write an extensive essay on the book that was meant as a fulfillment of the claims set out in "The Destructive Character" and was to be provocatively entitled "The True Politician." As the Benjamin literature grows, so does Scheerbart's reputation. Since 2007 there has been a dramatic rise in the stature of Scheerbart's writings, including the translation of four books and a range of essays and artistic projects related to his work. At the center of Scheerbart's current reputation is the identification of technology (glass and steel) and politics. As Josiah McElheny, the artist whose work has revolved around Scheerbart's example in recent years, recently put it, the "most important aspect of Scheerbart's thinking" is to see how his "world of fantasy was in fact his attempt to discuss politics by other means."

Scheerbart's 1913 sci-fi novel—undoubtedly his most significant literary achievement—provides another in a series of wildly ambitious architecturally-based explorations of utopia. The subject of the story is the construction of a gigantic tower by rubbery creatures called Pallasians who live on the planet Pallas. The tower is meant to connect the Pallasians with the "head-star" beyond an obscuring web-like cloud. A main dramatic current that runs throughout is the conflict between the artists (Labu, Manesi

and Peka) who resist the building of the tower and the builders (Dex, Lesabéndio [or Lesa for short], Nuse and Sofanti). As the story unfolds, the artists are slowly and literally absorbed—destroyed—by the builders: the artists merge with the architects in an act of physical and metaphorical submission to the architects' higher ambitions. The artists dream that after the construction of the tower "other times will come" that will provide a "solid new basis for art." But the completion of the tower marks the end of art itself. Art pales before the architectural search to solve the "last riddle of existence."

Contemporary critics have championed Scheerbart as a *post-human* visionary. Conceptually, we're meant to measure with every phrase how different life is on Pallas than on earth. Earthlings exist in a "backward spiritual state" due to their resistance to the sun's infinite metamorphic capacities. The sun "revitalizes everything around it" and it calls for a transparent architecture of glass to spread its transformative powers. "All death," Biba (the wise philosopher) tells Lesa in his monologue on personhood, "should be ascribed to this broad, omnipresent principle of transformation." And transformation is what occurs when Lesa reaches beyond Pallas' atmosphere and connects with the head-system. He is "completely altered" by the merger and "everything…looks utterly different" from the new perspective.

At the center of Scheerbart's utopian vision is an evolutionary scheme where lower forms are mentally and, more significantly, perceptually functioning on an inferior level. When a Pallasian visited earth he was unable to make himself perceptible to Earthlings due to the bluntness of their perceptual capacities. Because they are "stuck at such a low level of evolution" their mode of perception prevented them from seeing the more highly evolved Pallasians. The narrative follows Lesa's attempt to overcome his evolutionary position by connecting with the head-star. "Everywhere I look I see matter ordering itself hierarchically below something greater than itself," Lesa observes. "We should all seek our healing grace in this hierarchy." Lesa, the "great leader" at the top of the Pallasian hierarchy, heals the Pallasians by marshalling them around the "colossal labor" of the tower construction. The monstrosity of work required to raise the tower—a central theme of the narrative—prevents the workers from getting lost in their "individual insights" and from destroying the utter unanimity of their task which alone will evolve the species. It is the task that defines the work's meaning, not any "artistic intentions." As one of the builders reflects, "we charged ourselves with a gigantic task before *genuinely* understanding why we're doing it." This is the kind of construction Detlef Mertins describes as a "kind of direct bodily production of labor, a potentially unmediated, collective physiological event in which dream-consciousness comes to realization." In other words, there is nothing to understand, because it is the work itself—the back-breaking labor of working with steel and glass—that defines the work's significance,

rather any meaning to be found in the work. Intentions, artistic or otherwise, are identified with a lower level of evolution one that revolves around books and writing. "Sharing thoughts is accomplished…through books and other types of written signs," both of which assume and reinforce an ideology of *distance*. Thoughts are not important for the "major astral beings" because they presume at least two separate agents, whereas the "formulation of new qualities" happens in the physical merger of formerly separate beings.

Lesa's gospel is one of total renunciation: "one must subordinate oneself to something else over and over again." His "religion" is one of "surrender," "devoted submissiveness" through violent purgation toward "something greater than ourselves." Leaping from the tower, Lesa will merge with the healing force of the head-system. Finally absorbed into the head-star what is revealed is how even the "most disparate come together"; once we move beyond all physical limitations the separate asteroids "unite" in a "big comet-system." The newly discovered unity also projects a new sense of difference. With a set of "new eyeballs" Lesa discovers how asteroids could be unimaginably "varied and diverse." Like Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*—which Benjamin explicitly imagined as a Lesa-like creature—he is "carried forward by a strong wind" and is only able to do "what the wind wants." And like the *Angelus Novus* Lesa performs a relentless destruction of distance, "all he could feel was that he was noticing how everything distant wanted to come closer" thereby destroying every manifestation of "aura," what Benjamin defined as a "phenomenon of distance, however close it may be." Everything came "very close" to him—including other asteroids and the sun—and he felt "no obstacles or restraints *anywhere*." Lesa comes to know the sun's immense power of "*drawing closer*" the formerly disparate, a power which neutralizes any lingering auratic forces tied to "individual projects." Individuality itself "push[es] us back down and prevent[s] us from reaching the being that so continuously and relentlessly desires the approach of those who are drawn to it." Lesa's primary ambition is to "demystify" the auratic cloud structure "by means of the tower"—something he continually stresses "has nothing to do with art"—and which will eventually break through it to the head-system. Achieving violent union with the head-system he "no longer perceived or thought in the ways he had before the transformation."

If the sun represents a "spurting excess of life," then the forces that resist it are rest, sleep, torpor, and habit. Before the construction of the tower the Pallasians are characterized as "tired, sleepy and drooping," "want[ing] to die" they "habitually sleep" through much of their lives (although far less than humans). The artists represent this deadening force of routine and their aesthetic rests on a commitment to "*matter*," to "density and compactness" which weighs down the immaterial forces of light suffused through glass. Scheerbart affirms the "*perpetuum mobile* of technology…and desire that foretells the posthuman adaptation," Branden Joseph writes, he provides a cosmic vision of the "experiential poverty" of our

contemporary condition. It is much harder to see what he provides—except buckets of pain—for those experiencing material poverty, rather than the experiential one.

Like most versions of the post-human, Scheerbart imagines that the process of going beyond will require immense suffering. We discover that the sun is far from "kind-hearted." It is an instrument of terror. "Terrible things always leads us forward," the sun tells Lesa; "Terrible things transform us." Revitalization means death of the physical body and its mode of perception while "pain and suffering should actually be seen as the biggest generators of happiness." The last four chapters offer an unrelenting vision of "pain and torment" as the path to evolution (this is what Benjamin means when he says Scheerbart "succeeded in shedding the dross of sentimentality"). Chapter 22 ends with an underscored phrase uttered by the sun that articulates the basic theme: "*All of you, don't fear pain—and don't fear death either*." On the other side of the human "there is no concern for the smallest objects"; the sun "suffocate[s] anything trivial." Rather "certain brutalities" are utterly necessary for progress. *Lesabéndio* introduces what Benjamin called the "positive concept of barbarism." The new barbarism indicates how it is "only through difficulty do we arrive at the greatest ecstasies." And again: "The greatest suffering and the greatest bliss…are almost inseparable." This is something Lesa insists "one must get used to." Lesa explains to the Pallasians that the "most important element of the great Sun philosophy is that…subordinating and surrendering are the greatest things." "Dying is just another form of surrendering" and only for the "one willing to suffer will [he] always go farther." The basic failure of the Pallasians, a habit they share with earthlings, is that "their lives flowed onward *all too peacefully*." The last chapter is filled with the screams of the torpid Pallasians as their "old star is waking to a new life" under the influence of the light beaming down from the sun. "It's bliss—once one has withstood of the process" of evolution, Lesa reflects. Lesa's final meditation is a variant on the basic thought of the novel: "Surrendering oneself to a Greatness is very painful" to which the sun adds its thundering commentary, "As long as we fear neither pain nor death!"

Todd Cronan is Associate Professor of art history at Emory University. He is the author of *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2014) and articles on photographic "previsualization," Brecht, Adorno, Merleau-Ponty, Santayana, Simmel, Valéry and Richard Neutra. He is currently at work on three book projects. The first, with Judith Sheine, *Modernism at the Edge of the World: The Architecture of R. M. Schindler and Richard Neutra*. A second, on the origins of media theory and politics from The Bauhaus to Kittler, *When the Medium Became the Message: The Bauhaus and the Invention of Media Politics* and a third volume on art and politics between the war on Rodchenko, Eisenstein and Brecht.

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