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Pratiche, linguaggi e saperi dell'estetico

Identification as Embodied Practice:
Performing Counter Discrimination

edited by

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Identifications

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The present issue of *Aisthesis, Identification as Embodied Practice: Performing Counter Discrimination*, appears at a moment when the question of identification has acquired renewed urgency. Across different geopolitical and cultural contexts, the consolidation of far-right politics, the normalization of exclusionary nationalisms, the intensification of anti-migrant rhetoric, renewed attacks on gender and sexual dissidence, and the persistence of racialized violence have made clear that identification is not a secondary matter of private psychology, nor merely a descriptive category of identity. It is a central mechanism in the formation of political subjects, in the organization of belonging and exclusion, and in the production of symbolic, affective, and embodied attachments through which contemporary conflicts are lived and enacted. This issue situates this urgency within a broader conjuncture shaped by overlapping crises and by the increasing capacity of reactionary movements to mobilize identification as a force of social cohesion, polarization, and hostility.

The opening dialogue between this special issue editors, Goran Petrović Lotina, Francesco Della Puppa, Susanne Franco, and Aneta Stojnić, “Performances of Identification in the Age of Polarization. Bodies, Affects, Symbols”, responds to this conjuncture by proposing a broader account of identification than those usually available in either psychoanalysis, political theory, or performance studies alone. Rather than treating identification as an internal psychic mechanism, it approaches it as a symbolic, affective, and performative process through which subjects are discursively constituted at the intersection of languages, embodied practices, and institutions. In doing so, it places psychoanalysis, political philosophy, and performance studies into a productive dialogue. Freud, Klein, Lacan, and Kristeva, Laclau, Mouffe, Stavrakakis, and Žižek, Butler, and Schechner are revisited not as isolated traditions, but as resources for understanding how attachment, bodily intensity, signification, repetition, and exclusion participate in the formation of political and social identities. What emerges from this theoretical reflection is an argument for extending Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory through psychoanalysis and performance. This implies that political signifiers are not only symbolically articulated and affectively invested, but also sustained through bodily (re)enactment and the unstable return of what they exclude – namely, the abject.

From this perspective, the issue’s central proposition is clear: identification must be understood as an embodied practice. It is not limited to the formation of identities in the abstract, but concerns the ways in which subjects are attached to ideals, values, fantasies, communities, signs, and institutions through bodily and affective processes that are always symbolised and socially mediated. Such a perspective allows the issue to move beyond narrow oppositions between internal and external, psychic and social, symbolic and material. It also allows a more precise account of contemporary reactionary politics, which mobilize identification not simply by naming enemies or invoking fixed identities, but by binding bodies and affects to signifiers such as “the people”, “the nation”, security, or tradition. At the same time, this framework opens a path for thinking alternative, plural, and democratic forms of identification capable of contesting antagonistic closures and discriminatory regimes.

The essays gathered in this volume approach this problem from distinct methodological and theoretical positions, while remaining anchored in the shared concern announced by the issue’s title. In this sense, the issue brings together sociologists, psychoanalytic practitioners, political and aesthetic theorists, theatre, dance, and performance scholars, philosophers, and artist-researchers, whose contributions reflect its interdisciplinary engagement with identification across psychic life, politics, artistic practice, and public culture.

Following the opening dialogue, the volume first turns to psychoanalytic practitioners and theorists, whose contributions lay the conceptual groundwork for the political, aesthetic, and artistic explorations that follow. Laura Álvarez Garro's contribution, "The Moralization of Politics and the Denial of Constitutive Aggressiveness as a Mode of *Jouissance*", addresses the far right, fascism, and contemporary extreme violence by focusing on the moralization of politics. Rather than treating political aggression as an exception or aberration, the article argues that many academic and public readings of fascist and far-right phenomena conceal a more troubling issue: the refusal to acknowledge constitutive aggression and the possibility that destruction itself may be desired. In doing so, it relocates identification within a libidinal economy of denial, aggression, and *jouissance*, and insists that any serious political analysis must confront these dimensions directly. Isak de Vries, in "The Sameness We Cannot Accept", turns to anti-trans violence and heightened transgender visibility through a reading that combines Jacques Lacan's theory of the imaginary with René Girard's theory of mimetic desire. His article shows that transgender people become targets not simply because they are perceived as radically different, but because they are perceived as disturbingly similar, threatening the distinctions that stabilize personal and communal identity. Identification here appears as an image-bound and conflictual process in which narcissism, rivalry, and scapegoating converge.

The next section turns to political theorists who deepen the political dimension of identification through psychoanalytic theory, showing how collective formations are shaped by fantasy, affect, and processes of democratic rearticulation. Reid Kleinberg's essay, "The Sir George Williams University Protests as Embodied Politics of Traversal of the Fantasy", revisits the Montreal protests of 1969 as a scene of transnational, multi-racial, and cross-ideological coalition building. Drawing on archival research and psychoanalytic political theory, the article argues that these protest practices can be understood as instances of traversing fantasy, loosening sedimented identifications and enabling a left-wing bloc across difference. In this contribution, identification is neither fixed nor merely ideological; it is reworked through embodied political practice. Thomás Zicman de Barros, in "Identification and Aesthetic Transgression in Populism: Toward a Queer Theory of Sublimation", offers a significant reorientation of the debate on populism and identification. Against traditions that treat mass identification primarily as submission, he draws on psychoanalysis, queer theory, and aesthetic theory to conceptualize a radically democratic form of identification grounded not in closure or mastery, but in transgression, vulnerability, and openness to alterity. Through the notion of sublimation, the article proposes a more emancipatory understanding of affective attachment in populist politics.

By foregrounding the aesthetic reworking of identification, Zicman de Barros's contribution opens onto the next section, which turns more explicitly to artistic practices and examines how performance and art actively reshape the forms identification can take. Kate Katafiasz's "Death-cries and Strips of Foam: Indexing the 'other' in Edward Bond's Later Work" shifts the focus to theatre and dramatic form. Through Lacan's registers and a close reading of Bond's drama for young people, the article examines how theatrical boundaries can disturb mirror-stage identifications and release a desire for relation with the other. Rather than reducing theatre to mimesis or estrangement alone, Katafiasz highlights its capacity to index what society disavows and to open an alternative politics of identification through sound, space, and difference. Amanda Piña's "Performance is a Form of Knowing. Cosmopolitical Choreographies for a Burning Planet" broadens the issue's horizon by situating performance within cosmopolitics and political ontology. In dialogue with ritual practices from Abya Yala and with contemporary decolonial and ecological thought, the article challenges colonial understandings of performance as mere presentation. Performance is instead approached as an embodied epistemic practice and a form of world-making through which relations with non-human and more-than-human beings may be reconfigured. Identification here exceeds humanist and narrowly political frames, opening toward ontological pluralism and relational attunement. Helena Botto's "The Performer without Qualities — Empathetic Signification, Non-Performative Performance and Mimesis in Artistic Practice and Populist Politics" examines processes of identification through over-identification, mimesis, and performance practice. By placing artistic strategies alongside certain forms of right-wing populist performance, Botto analyzes how signifiers are resignified and how flexible political subjectivities are produced. Her concepts of empathetic signification and non-performative performance help illuminate the theatrical processes through which populist leaders attach themselves to collective affects and environments. Stephen Elliot Willmer's "Interrogating the Identity of Refugees" examines the asylum process as a site where identity is not only administratively judged but performatively produced. Contrasting national asylum regimes and examining theatre and film that expose their operations, the article shows how refugee identity is interrogated through opaque procedures of credibility and recognition. In bringing these hidden processes into visibility, performance becomes a critical medium through which the politics of asylum can be witnessed, challenged, and rethought.

The final two essays are especially important because they address identification without grounding their analyses primarily in psychoanalysis. Christian Frigerio's "On the Mode of Existence of Symbols: An Actor-Network

Perspective on Identification and Group Formation” develops an actor-network approach to the role of symbols in the formation of publics, particularly through Bruno Latour’s political ecology and the figure of Gaia. Identification here is understood through the circulation and performative efficacy of symbols capable of gathering a collective around shared concerns. Ilia Inishev’s “Postponing Identities. Slowed Perception, Layered Embodiment, and Lateral Politics” turns to phenomenology, enactivist aesthetics, and theories of socially engaged perception to propose that identification can be understood as a perceptual and embodied process. By foregrounding slowness, hesitation, and layered embodiment, Inishev opens the possibility of postponed identities and more plural, lateral, and breathable spaces of counter-discrimination. Together, these two essays show that the problem of identification exceeds psychoanalytic vocabularies even as it remains in productive conversation with them.

Taken together, the essays collected in this issue of *Aisthesis* demonstrate that identification is a crucial site where embodiment, affect, symbolism, exclusion, coalition, performance, and political imagination converge. Some contributions foreground aggression, fantasy, and *jouissance*; others emphasize ritual, mimesis, dramaturgy, asylum procedures, symbols, perception, or cosmopolitics. What unites them is a shared conviction that identification is not merely a question of self-definition, nor only a matter of discourse. It is something enacted, repeated, negotiated, and contested hence shaping public and cultural spaces. It can sustain hostility, closure, and discrimination, but it can also be reworked toward productive tension, plurality, and democratic transformation.

For this reason, the present volume does more than gather studies on identity. It proposes identification as a key analytic for understanding the present. At a time when exclusionary politics intensify by mobilizing fear, nostalgia, aggression, and fantasies of purity, the essays assembled here insist on another possibility: that identification can also be traversed, transgressed, slowed down, pluralized, and performed otherwise. In that insistence lies the intellectual and political timeliness of this special issue.

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Goran Petrović Lotina in Dialogue with Francesco Della Puppa, Susanne Franco, and Aneta Stojnić: Performances of Identification in the Age of Polarization. Bodies, Affects, Symbols¹

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Goran: This introductory chapter is structured as a conversation, which I would like to open with a brief overview of the notion of identification, situating it within the shifting landscape of contemporary politics, psychoanalytic political theory, performance studies, and the question of identity.

Over the past decade, far-right politics have been steadily gaining ground across the world. What once seemed like isolated national developments now appears as part of a broader global

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trend. From Hungary and Italy to Belgium, Sweden, Poland, France, and Romania, alongside countries like Israel, the United States, and Argentina, these movements have secured increasing influence in both electoral and public spheres. Their rise is not sudden. It has been shaped by a longer sequence of political and social transformations. In Europe, for example, several turning points have marked this shift: the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007; the sovereign debt crisis of 2009-2018; the politicisation of immigration from 2015 onward; the COVID-19 pandemic between 2019 and 2023; the energy and security crisis following the escalation of the Russo-Ukrainian war since 2022; and, more recently, the Israeli war on Palestine (7 October 2023). Although these developments differed in character, they collectively intensified disputes over mobility, borders, labour, protection, and national sovereignty, thereby deepening social insecurity, sharpening political polarisation, and reinforcing widespread perceptions of instability.

Far-right parties have positioned themselves as the voice of this discontent, claiming to offer protection in a world perceived as increasingly insecure, unstable, and marked by overlapping crises and threats. Crucially, they have made skilful use of identity politics. Originally emerging from emancipatory struggles, such as the civil rights movement, feminist and queer liberation, and postcolonial resistance, identity politics seeks to foreground the lived experiences and political demands of subordinated groups, whether people of colour, women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, or immigrants (Combahee River Collective 1977, Lorde 1984, hooks 1990). Central to these struggles is the understanding of identity not as an isolate experience, but as intersectional, constructed at the crossing of gender, race, class, and other structures of power, marginalization, and exclusion (Crenshaw 1991). Identity politics aims to make visible how these intersecting categories of discrimination – such as sexism, racism, and classism, as well as exclusions tied to gender, ability, or migration status – shape and limit one's identity and access to rights, recognition, and resources on multiple levels (Crenshaw 1991, Collins 2000). This perspective implies that the struggles led by women confronting gender-based violence, or racialized groups challenging systemic discrimination, or workers resisting exploitation, are not exclusively responding to the concerns of their particular in-group; rather, they contest broader interlocking structures of domination, such as colonialism, patriarchy, capitalism, and extractivism, that co-constitute and constrain diverse groups at the same time, thereby foregrounding the shared terrain of emancipatory struggle that exceeds any single identity. This view indicates that the struggles of various identities against discriminating politics entail the articulation of “ethico-political values” shared among diverse groups through the process of identification – a performative process of forming alliances based on collective principles, demands, and exclusions (Mouffe [1993]: 83-84). The challenge, then, is not to reject identity altogether, but to rearticulate

it within a democratic framework that acknowledges the plural and intersecting positions through which subjects are embodied, enacted, and performed.

Far-right movements have appropriated the language and mechanisms of identity politics, however, by inverting its original aims. Instead of embracing the plurality and intersectionality that defined its emancipatory origins, they rearticulate identity through an antagonistic logic that defines belonging in opposition to a constructed “other”, reinforcing conflict through enmity. Multiculturalism, gender equality, LGBTQAI+ rights, and anti-racism are reframed not as advances in social justice and democracy, but as threats to a traditional, often heteronormative, family driven, and monocultural social order. Through this inversion, European far-right actors construct a nostalgic and idealized image of national identity, often rooted in whiteness, patriarchy, and cultural homogeneity. More importantly, while far-right movements, including right-wing populism, often present identity as fixed and essential, anchored in race, nation, traditional family, or religion, their popular appeal does not rest on these categories alone, but rather on the group process of *identification*. By mobilizing stigmata of otherness such as colour, name, language, religious practice, or even environmentalist beliefs, they cultivate the sense of identification among the people around discourses centred on a singular, monocultural concept of nativist identity. This type of group identification in constructing subjectivity manifests through different affective, symbolic, and performative ties that legitimise gender-based discrimination, xenophobia, cultural racism, neo-imperial violence, and ecophobia, as self-preservative, defensive mechanisms. Consequently, all discontent with the security situation, whether in Europe or elsewhere, becomes embodied in the twin movements of in-group identification and, simultaneously, disidentification from the other.

This raises a crucial question at the heart of this volume: *how can we envisage alternative forms of identification that foster a pluralistic, intercultural, and cosmopolitan sense of belonging that contests antagonistic conflicts of the right?*

Addressing this question requires a deeper understanding of *identification* as a central mechanism in the construction of subjectivity, one that relies on three interrelated dimensions: the symbolic, the affective, and the performative.

Identification at the intersection of psychoanalytic, political, and embodied registers

In broad psychoanalytic terms, identification can be understood as involving symbolic, affective, and bodily ties with another person or group, as individuals internalize meanings and ideals, form emotional attachments, and incorporate and display these relations in embodied ways.

For Sigmund Freud ([1921] 1959), identification is a libidinal bond that arises through *conflict*. In the Oedipal phase – typically occurring between the ages of three and six – the child identifies with the father both as a rival who blocks access to the mother and as a model to emulate and eventually replace. Through this process, the ego gradually takes shape as a composite of internalized loves and rivalries, organizing desire and aggression. This psychic dynamic extends to the social field, where shared identification with an idealized leader binds the group together while producing hostility toward those excluded. Melanie Klein ([1955] 1975) relocates identification to earliest infancy, showing how projection and introjection mediate love and hate toward the maternal object, producing *ambivalence* that grounds later emotional life. For Klein, the ego is present from birth as precarious and conflictual, developing through a continual oscillation between destructive and reparative impulses. She thus retains the Oedipal complex, but radically repositions it in early infancy, arguing that Oedipal anxieties and rivalries are already active in pre-Oedipal phantasies and only later assume their classical triangular form: child, mother, and father.² For Jacques Lacan ([1949] 2003), identification operates across two registers, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. The ego is formed through imaginary identification in the mirror stage – typically occurring between the months of six and eighteen – as a misrecognized unity, while symbolic identification – typically occurring between the ages of two and four – consolidated though the Oedipal complex, positions the subject within language and law (the Name-of-the-father). Yet this symbolic order is traversed by *jouissance*, a surplus enjoyment produced at its limits, which resists symbolization and *destabilizes* both ego coherence and subjective identity. Extending these dynamics, Frantz Fanon ([1952] 1967) theorises identification under colonial conditions as a coerced, racialised attachment to the white norm. In this view, the ego is not primarily organised through the Oedipal “family romance”, but is formed through the violent encounter with the white gaze and the demand to “become” the ideal imposed by the colonial symbolic order, producing a split, alienated, and bodily overdetermined self (Fanon [1952] 1967). Politically, this makes identification a terrain of *struggle*, where emancipation requires practices of disidentification from the colonial ideal and the creation of new collective forms of agency capable of undoing the colonial order that produced the ego’s fracture (Fanon [1961] 1963). Julia Kristeva (1974; 1982) situates identification within the *tension* between the symbolic order of language and law and the semiotic i.e. the corporeal register of drives, rhythms, tones, and archaic affects rooted in the pre-Oedipal relation to the maternal and crystallized

2 The distinction between “phantasy” and “fantasy” belongs mainly to the Kleinian tradition, where “phantasy” names unconscious psychic activity; by contrast, Lacan and Žižek use “fantasy” for the structuring scene of desire and ideological investment.

in experiences of abjection. For her, the ego is not merely symbolic and affective, but corporeally grounded, continually reconfigured through abjection. Abjection is the process of expulsion and incorporation through which the subject casts off what it cannot assimilate, yet remains bound to it, thereby marking the boundary between self and other (Kristeva [1982]: 1-31). In these border crises, the semiotic “expenditure” of signifying energy can yield moments of *jouissance*, an excessive intensity accompanying the loosening of symbolic constraints and making felt, in and through the body, the fragile limits of the socio-symbolic (Kristeva [1974]: 79-81).

This partial, yet indicative sketch of the psychoanalysis’s development, reveals that identification is not merely an internal psychological mechanism, but a process mediated by loss, desire, projection, and the introjection of others into the self. Rather than positing a unified ego, it conceives subjectivity as a relational and contingent construction sustained through conflict, ambivalence, destabilization, struggle, and the continual tension between symbolic law and corporeal drives. Identification, thus, takes shape through a) structural inscription within *symbolic* and linguistic mediation, b) *affective* cathexis i.e. the libidinal investment of the ego in signifiers, figures, ideals, or others that simultaneously sustain and contest it, and c) *corporeal enactment* through bodily gestures and rhythmic repetitions. This, by extension, suggests that identification in the socio-political realm is twofold: it can foster life-affirming desires for connection, solidarity, and equality among members of an in-group, yet it can also mobilize jealousy, hostility, and envy through acts, actions, and interactions that exaggerate differences with neighbouring communities of (dis)similar cultures, a dynamic Freud famously termed the “narcissism of minor differences” (Freud 1930).

Some of these insights proved pivotal for thinkers of the *Frankfurt School*, such as Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who turned to Freud to critique the ways psychic life is entangled with domination. Marcuse (1955) reinterpreted repression and libidinal energies in relation to the possibility of social liberation, while Adorno and Horkheimer (1944) drew on psychoanalysis to analyse domination, conformity, and mass culture. Parallel to these Frankfurt interventions, thinkers associated with the *poststructuralist and post-foundational turn*, such as Michel Foucault (1976), Jean-François Lyotard (1974), and Jacques Derrida (1967, 1995), developed a critical framework for reconceptualizing subject formation beyond the stable, rational self.

Subsequently, these insights influenced the *post-Marxist, post-foundational thinkers* Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985), who reformulated psychoanalytic categories within a discursive framework of democratic politics encompassing languages, practices, and institutions. This approach enabled them to rethink identity, collective forms of identification, and democratic politics beyond essentialist notions of (class) identity. Political subjectivity, in their account,

emerges through hegemonic articulations, that is, chains of equivalence that unite diverse identities and demands around an empty signifier such as “the people”, or “nation”. As Laclau (2005) argues, “the force” of such signifiers is not reducible to meaning alone, but is sustained by *jouissance*, a libidinal investment that belongs to the order of affects (110-120).³ This is to say that “the people” is not merely a symbolic placeholder that functions as a nodal point articulating a collective identity out of diverse identities, demands, and grievances; it is also a site of *jouissance*, where heterogeneous claims are, in Freudian terms, sublimated into a shared affective attachment to a joint political horizon. More importantly, since “the people” claims universality, it is both secured and destabilized by the exclusion of particular identities and demands that threaten its stability. Identification is, hence, a contingent construction of collective identity, produced through symbolic articulation and affective attachment, affirming *tension* as constitutive of the social space through an (*ant*)agonistic division between “the people” and “the elite”, or, between “the nation” and “the Other”, or in more general terms, between “us” and “them”. Consequently, Yannis Stavrakakis clarifies this point by insisting that identification always operates on two inseparable levels: the symbolic/discursive, where meanings are articulated, and the affective/libidinal, where enjoyment anchors these articulations. He writes that «the mobilization of symbolic resources must be coupled with affective investment grounded in the body» (Stavrakakis [2005], 76), to ensure that discursive articulations are not only meaningful but also libidinally anchored.

While Laclau understands *jouissance* as a discursively mediated affective investment that binds subjects to political signifiers, Slavoj Žižek (1989), a Lacanian neo-Marxist thinker, emphasizes its excessive and traumatic character, locating it in the Real as that which continually disrupts every symbolic attempt at closure. Drawing upon Lacan, he describes *jouissance* as a “stream” of libidinal energy, a bodily “substance” of incarnated enjoyment that both precedes symbolic mediation and continually returns to disrupt it. As he writes, the presence of *jouissance* «in the field of the signifier can be detected only through the holes and inconsistencies of this field, so the only possible signifier of enjoyment is the signifier of the lack in the Other, the signifier of its inconsistency» (Žižek [1989]: 137). This means that the big Other is itself structured around an impossible kernel, a central lack that no signifier can fully fill (137). Identification is thus a way subjects bind themselves to this inconsistency, by investing in fantasies that make the social appear whole. In other words, identification is not only organized around signifiers such as “the people” and “the nation”, but is also underpinned by a bodily surplus of *jouissance* that overflows discursive articulation and gives these signifiers their adhesive force. Crucially, Žižek ties

3 “The force” stands in contradiction to “the form”. See: Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, p. 110.

this surplus to antagonism, asserting that society is constitutively split, and that *ideology* works by staging fantasies of a harmonious order that would overcome the split. Yet these fantasies inevitably fail, since *jouissance* returns in the figure of the Other whose excessive enjoyment is imagined as stealing, contaminating, or threatening “ours”. It is at this point, when the fantasmatic cover is traversed, that “going-through-the-fantasy” becomes correlative to identification with the *sinthome* – the subject’s singular knot of enjoyment that persists precisely where the Other is lacking and the symbolic cannot close (139). Politics, in this sense, is not just a hegemonic struggle over signifiers, but a confrontation with irreducible antagonism, the Real that no discourse can domesticate and that fantasy can only ever suture by staging an image of social wholeness.

While these theories demonstrate that libidinal investment is inseparable from the body, since psychic and political attachments are anchored in embodied intensities of drive, affect, and *jouissance*, it is with Julia Kristeva that the bodily, corporeal dimension of identification, and consequently its performative political implications, become more explicitly theorized. Since the semiotic and the symbolic are «two modalities [...] inseparable within the signifying process» (Kristeva [1974]: 24), one may argue, in a manner consistent with Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, that the semiotic is not a pre-discursive essence, but a corporeal and affective modality of signification on which every symbolic formation depends even as it seeks to regulate it. When semiotic forces disrupt hegemonic discursive norms, that is, linguistic, practical, and institutional constraints, they reappear as reenactments of the signifying process itself. They take gestural, rhythmic, and vocal form, structurally available wherever language is embodied, whether in everyday, civic, or artistic practices. These repetitions expose the instability of meaning and the embodied tensions that sustain it. At such moments, these re-enactments generate an affective excess that may be understood as *jouissance*, a destabilizing *enjoyment* that both animates and threatens the coherence of the subject and the boundaries of the hegemonic socio-symbolic order. From this perspective, identity is continually secured and destabilized by bodily intensities that are both necessary and repellent, generating dynamics of attraction and rejection organised through abjection and capable of taking both antagonistic and agonistic forms. Extending this insight to political signifiers, terms such as “nation” or “people” can be understood not only as discursive constructs sustained by *jouissance*, but also as what I termed “performances of tension” or “choreographies of (ant)agonism” in *Choreographing Agonism* (Petrovic Lotina, 2021), here reconsidered through the corporeal dynamics of abjection, whereby what is excluded and repellent returns as threatening otherness and unsettles the unity these signifiers claim to secure. Kristeva’s work can thus, I would suggest, be read as offering a *performative* account of *signification*, one that structures meaning through *bodily* tensions and *affective* rhythms and inscriptions, thereby extending and complicating psychoanalytic, political, and discourse-theoretical accounts of identification.

The emphasis on *the body* as a site where signification is enacted and reiterated anticipates later theories of performance and performativity. Judith Butler (1990, 1993), for example, reconceives identification as a repeated bodily citation of norms through which gendered and social identities are materialised and contested. For Butler, the body is not a passive surface inscribed by discourse, but an active site where power, desire, and prohibition are reiterated and potentially subverted. In this sense, both Kristeva and Butler situate identification in the tension between the symbolic order and the embodied enactments that both sustain and unsettle it, revealing subjectivity as a contingent choreography of affect, repetition, resistance, and transformation.

Taken together, these thinkers allow us to understand identification not as a merely internal process, but as a symbolic, affective, and performative process through which political subjects are constituted at the intersection of languages, performances, and institutions shaped by socio-political norms. While performance theory has opened important questions concerning the relationship between performance and psychoanalysis (Green 1979; Wright 1986; Diamond 1993; Murray 1997; Campbell and Kear 2001; Page, Koretzky, and Jodeau-Belle, 2016; Turri 2017), the question of identification requires more sustained theoretical attention today, particularly as contemporary conflicts increasingly unfold through embodiment, affect, and contested symbolic forms of belonging.

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This issue of “Aisthesis” explores identification not as an essential identity claim, but as a performative, affective, and symbolic process that structures how political subjectivity is formed, recognized, and contested. In light of the far right’s appropriation of identity politics where identification is mobilized toward regressive ends that favour exclusion, nationalism, and hostility toward the Other, the contributions in this volume aim to reimagine alternative forms of collective identification, at the intersection of diverse democratic subject positions, such as women, gay people, workers, or black people. They seek to foster pluralistic, cosmopolitan, and intercultural relations capable of articulating democratic belonging beyond essentialist closures. For example, Reid Kleinberg shows how the psychoanalytic notion of “traversing the fantasy” helps explain how the 1969 Sir George Williams University protests reworked political identifications by enacting transnational, multi-racial, and cross-ideological left coalition-building. On his part, Thomás Zicman de Barros borrows the psychoanalytic notion of “sublimation” to define populist identification as a performative gesture informed by queer theory, one that shifts affective investment away from fantasies of wholeness toward the affirmation of incompleteness. Christian Frigerio offers an alternative account of identification by shifting the focus away

from psychoanalytic theory and post-foundational political philosophy toward the anti-foundational tradition, emphasizing the capacity of affects to be performatively organised around a shared symbol – Gaia – and thereby hold the ecological movement together through processes of circulation, drawing on Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory. Similarly, Ilia Inishev draws on phenomenology and affect theory to reconceive identification as an enactment emerging through perceptual slowness, hesitation, and layered embodiment, thereby postponing reactive forms of identification and opening more lateral, plural, and affectively sustained spaces of counter-discrimination.

Against the backdrop of rising insecurity and reactionary politics, we ask: *How might the symbolic, affective, and performative processes of identification be rearticulated toward emancipatory, inclusive, and transformative politics? In what ways can alternative forms of identification emerge through embodied gestures, affective attachments, and performative acts that negotiate the contingent limits of subjectivity?*

The following conversation brings these questions from theoretical reflection into the realm of lived experience, cultural practice, and institutional engagement.

Goran: Kristeva’s *Nations Without Nationalism* (1993) remains prescient in diagnosing how identity crises in a globalized world often lead to regressive retreats into origins, whether cultural, ethnic, or religious. Psychoanalysis helps us see how these returns are not innocent but rooted in deeper unconscious dynamics of loss, fear, and disorientation. You are psychoanalyst with a background in performance studies. How might performance through its embodied, affective, and symbolic dimensions offer a unique space for enacting these reconfigurations of belonging? Can the intersection of psychoanalysis and performance help us envision identifications not grounded in purity, but in ambivalence, alterity, ethical cohabitation, or even sameness?

Aneta: As suggested by many contributions in this issue, the intersection of psychoanalysis and performance can offer a distinctive space for reconfiguring belonging, one that foregrounds ambivalence, alterity, and ethical cohabitation rather than fantasies of homogeneity. This is the idea of belonging that is never stable or given; it is produced, and continually unsettled, through processes of identification that are themselves divided, ambivalent, and open to the foreign within the self.

Julia Kristeva’s contributions are particularly relevant here for understanding a contradictory pull between national identity and the foreign. National identity corresponds to the symbolic order: the need for a stable, unified, and exclusive

sense of self; while the foreign corresponds to the semiotic / pre-linguistic: the unconscious, abject, unassimilable, fluid, and threatening aspects of otherness. In her book *Nations Without Nationalism* (1993) Kristeva articulates this double movement of identity in a globalized world. This is a simultaneous movement towards a defensive concretisation of imagined original identity, ethnic, religious, linguistic, or cultural, and an expansive opening to transnational, hybrid flows. This retreat to origin is both a psychic defence against the disorientation of modernity and an enactment usually performed through rituals, spectacles, gestures, and narratives. While such regressions into “purity” are typically articulated in historical or political terms, they are in fact always animated by unconscious forces of loss, mourning, and narcissistic injury.

For Freud, the ego is shaped through multiple losses: of the maternal body, of omnipotence, of objects of desire, etc. When a loss is not properly mourned / integrated, i.e. when there was an ambivalent relationship towards the lost object (simultaneous love and hate) then melancholia, or in contemporary terms depression, occurs. In other words, the aggression originally directed towards an ambivalent lost object gets turned inwards (Freud [1917] 1957). Kristeva (1991), elaborates these dynamics through the figure of the stranger within the subject, the internal, disavowed yet constitutive other. Nationalist and fundamentalist retreats frequently externalize this stranger, transforming inner ambivalence into persecutory hostility toward migrants, foreigners, racialized others, religious, sexual, gender minorities, etc. In collective imagination “they” (whoever they are), become scapegoats for the disavowed divisions in ourselves.

Kristeva (1993) points out that nationalist returns often invoke ritual repetition (e.g. anthem, flag, uniform, memorialization, parade) that promises continuity with an imagined past. Her insight is that these rituals attempt to quell the semiotic turmoil (the unassimilable energies) by staging a consistent, stable order (Kristeva, 1993; Kristeva, 1982). Following Kristeva, I would suggest that it is precisely in ritualistic performances that we might discover how one might dwell in this tension (between semiotic and symbolic) without capitulating to closure. We could say that identification, which produces the sense of belonging, is itself performative. We take on gestures, language, styles, even affects of those we love, fear, or wish to emulate. Identification therefore is not a return to “essence” but a continual process of construction and transformation. Pure, original national identity is always already a phantasy: the very process by which we “become” a people is performative.

Yet, performance theory teaches us that every repetition carries a difference (Schechner, 2013). The strictest ritual is never identical to its prior iteration; therein lies a crack, an opening. Performance can subvert the repetition by estranging it: repeating differently, interrupting the ritual with moments of dissonance or silence, thereby exposing the uncanny underside of collective sym-

bols. To perform the difference within the repetition is to stage the uncanny, the very gap that reveals that the origin was never intact. On stage, the ambivalence can be literally embodied. A single actor may carry conflicting lineages, switch languages, or oscillate genders; choreography may reveal vulnerability within martial postures. Such embodied contradictions invite spectators to tolerate ambiguity rather than rush to defensive categorization.

Kristeva's notion of abjection as a confrontation with what disturbs identity, system, or order, can be generative in this regard, and has often fascinated artists. For example, the abject finds theatrical corollaries in grotesque or carnivalesque forms, as well as in body horror movie genre. When performers display the abject body (repulsive, disgusting, unclean, bleeding, hybrid, excessive, transgressive, etc.), they dissolve the illusion of bodily and cultural purity, prompting audiences to renegotiate their relation to identity, vulnerability, human condition and mortality. In a theatre context a stage functions as a literal scene for the phenomena that psychoanalysis recognises as transference⁴: spectators invest performers with parental, ancestral, or antagonistic figures. A performance space becomes a psychic topology where identifications can surface, shift, be unsettled (Phelan, 1993). When performance harnesses that transference, it becomes a space for empathy, vulnerability, and unsettling of the unconscious identifications.

In cultural performances of participatory or improvisational nature – such as public rituals, protest, flash mobs, co-creative community practices – one practices responsiveness to the unexpected other, to the intrusion of difference. That responsiveness is a model of belonging not founded on sameness but on ethical attentiveness to alterity. This kind of ethical performance resonates with Emmanuel Levinas's (1969) notion of responsibility to the Other: the call is not to assimilate difference but to respond to it.

Drawing on my ongoing interest in performance beyond the stage, such as political performance, affective public gestures, digital protocols, border crossings, self-presentation across media, I believe that performance in this broader sense is our perhaps only medium for reconfiguring belonging. The body is both archive and experiment. It carries inscriptions of trauma, colonial pasts, gendered and racialized codes, but it is also porous, capacious, open to re-inscription. Embodied performance gives us the space to "test" new identifications without necessarily consolidating them into rigid forms. I have often been drawn to projects of co-writing and shared performance that do not impose closure but leave the undoing open, most recently in the book *Mourning*

4 Transference is the unconscious process of directing feelings and desires related to an important figure from one's past (usually childhood) to a figure in the present, and in the analytic situation to the analyst. It is a fundamental part of the psychoanalytic process that defines analysands relationship towards the analyst. Through analysis of transference in the present, the past conflicts can be worked through.

the Ends: Collaborative Writing and Performance (Stojnić et.al, 2025), that was developed as a performative practice of shared mourning through collective writing process across geographic distances.

In reimagining belonging, performance teaches us that belonging is not a thing we possess but something we do. Butler's (1993) notion of performativity helps here: belonging is a repeated act produced by complex processes of identification. National subject, religious self, ethnic identity – all are roles learned, rehearsed, and sustained by repetition. But when performances crack, slip, or falter, new identifications flicker into being. So, the question is not whether identity can be stabilized, but whether we can learn to dwell with its instability. Freud's differentiation between "acting out" and "working through" can help us illuminate different kinds of repetition in performance. "Acting out" corresponds with the unconscious repetition of past conflicts or trauma through actions in the present, while "working through" corresponds with making the unconscious conscious through the process of analysing and understanding the repetition of conflicts (a.k.a. patterns) and their effects on present behaviours (Freud [1914] 1958). Populist spectacles (both rightwing/nationalist and leftwing) often act out unprocessed collective trauma, re-enacting injuries through scapegoating. Performance, however, can also be curated to facilitate working through: revisiting wounds in symbolic form that allows recognition, mourning, and re-signification. In its best moments, it wrests the fantasy of purity and reveals how identity is always provisional, relational, and haunted by the foreign. The paradox is instructive: performance can either cement identitarian closure or crack it open.

Kristeva warned that nationalism's lure lies in the promise of a completed identity: a fantasy of returning to an intact origin that never truly existed (Kristeva, 1993). Psychoanalysis unmask that lure as a defence against what Kristeva calls the constitutive foreignness within; performance invites us to resist it, to rehearse identifications that are ceaselessly reworked, always partial, always haunted by alterity.

I would venture, then, that performance offers a praxis for a new belonging, one that sheds a light on the internal splitting, recognizes the stranger within not as a threat but as a basis for ethical relationality, and aims to sustain togetherness without demand for assimilation. If I, as both a psychoanalyst and a performance scholar, have tried over the years to trace this fragile border, it is because I believe that in our disoriented times, performance may not only diagnose our crises but also incite the possibility of cohabitation in the shadow of loss. To imagine identifications not grounded in purity but in shared finitude and ethical responsiveness is to inhabit the performative nature of identity: always in process, never secured. The task for artists, psychoanalysts, and publics alike is to keep this process open-ended. In that sense, performance becomes our fragile ethics, our rehearsal of new relational forms in a wounded world.

Goran: Psychoanalytic theory plays an important role in understanding political phenomena beyond their surface rhetoric. With the resurgence of far-right discourses, how might we revisit key psychoanalytic concepts, such as projection, melancholia, *jouissance*, or abjection, to understand the symbolic, affective, and performative dynamics underpinning nationalism and xenophobia?

Aneta: Psychoanalysis offers us apparatus to understand far-right nationalism and xenophobia not simply as ideological positions but as formations saturated with unconscious conflict. For example, in this issue, Laura Álvarez Garro, elaborates this in terms of *jouissance* and denial.

More broadly psychoanalytic concepts are useful in understanding that far-right nationalism functions as a kind of social symptom: a repetitive formation that attempts to resolve underlying contradictions without ever fully succeeding. The insistence and escalation of xenophobic rhetoric can be understood as a compulsion to repeat, driven by unresolved conflict. Of course, xenophobia is only one realm on which the questions of identification, belonging and identity get played out. In this issue, Isak de Vries explores the topic of gender identity and rise in violence against transgender people through Lacan's concept of imaginary and Gerard's mimetic desire.

The resurgence of far-right discourse is not simply a regression or a failure of rationality, but a complex psychic response to perceived loss, anxiety, and fragmentation. It organizes subjectivity and collective life through defence, identification, and affective investment, producing forms of belonging that are sustained precisely through exclusion. In nationalist discourse, the foreigner or migrant often becomes the repository of disowned aggression, dependency, or perceived moral corruption. What cannot be tolerated within the ego, or within the imagined coherence of the national body, is expelled and re-encountered as threat.

Goran: Immigration has long shaped European societies, from the rise of nation-states to post-WWII reconstruction, and today in response to climate change and geopolitical instability. Yet it continues to provoke anxieties around national identity, integration, and belonging. What explains this persistence? How do current narratives on immigration mobilize symbolic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and what does this reveal about collective identification today?

Francesco: The world is currently experiencing a historic and unprecedented crisis of the capitalist mode of production. Wars, economic and financial crises, the Great Recession, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increasingly frequent ecological disasters are all symptomatic of the contradictions inherent in the dominant socio-economic system and a mode of production that is now in irreversible decline. The inter-imperialistic war in Ukraine framed as a confrontation

between NATO and Russia and the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people, the imperialist aggression against Cuba carried out by the United States and the equally imperialist military aggression against Iran, carried out by Israel, and the United States, with the support of Western democracies, are only the most recent in a series of ensuing traumatic events. Historically, the major crises of the capitalist system have been (temporarily) overcome by dominant state formations—most notably the United States, its European allies, and NATO countries—through aggressive foreign policies involving war. Domestically, these crises have been managed through a combination of ultra-liberalism and turbo-capitalism in the economic sphere, which entails the reduction of social spending and the erosion of workers' rights, and through fascism in the political sphere, which serves to suppress dissent and class struggle. External warfare, internal repression, austerity measures, and the devaluation of labour have consistently been the mechanisms through which capitalist accumulation has attempted to reassert itself during periods of systemic crisis. Just as the First and Second World Wars were responses to global capitalist crises, so too was the rise of fascism in Europe a reaction to the challenges faced by the European bourgeoisie, which turned to authoritarian forms of governance for support.

Today, many Western governments are responding in a similar way: internationally, they align with militaristic propaganda, sending weapons, troops, and specialized personnel to Ukraine, Israel, and other conflict zones; domestically, they privatize welfare systems and cut public spending. At the same time, they issue increasingly repressive laws aimed at silencing dissent, particularly that which emerges from the organized working class. This repressive turn is bolstered by a racist ideological campaign, initiated by hegemonic institutions and amplified by controlled mass media, aimed at the general population. Western governments actively foment racism and hatred toward immigrants – constructed as “internal enemies” – to separate them from native working-class populations and prevent solidarity. This ideological manoeuvre distracts from the material convergence of interests between native and immigrant workers.

Indeed, we are currently witnessing, on the one hand, the emergence of a war economy characterized by cuts to social spending, healthcare, and wages, alongside rising inflation and increased military expenditure, and, on the other hand, the emergence of a war politics, marked by laws aimed at repressing dissent, and a war propaganda that targets both external enemies, such as Russia, China, Iran, and India, and internal ones, namely immigrants. And every war, inevitably, requires its own propaganda. The internal war against immigrants serves a dual purpose: it distracts native workers from identifying their true (class) enemy, and it disciplines immigrant labour, forcing them to accept exploitative labour conditions. The goal of anti-immigrant policy is not to prevent migration, but to render immigrants more exploitable by eliminating their rights and, by extension,

undermining the rights of the working class as a whole. Immigrants are used as a lever to blackmail native workers and to depress general working conditions.

This strategy includes various mechanisms of coercion, such as threats of deportation, protracted stays in so-called “reception” centres, and other forms of pre-emptive subjugation. They are intended to “break in” a future labour force that fuels the economies of agribusiness, the hospitality sector, and both small- and large-scale manufacturing. These practices aim to demonstrate to immigrants the power and arrogance of their new masters and to discourage any potential resistance. Such repressive measures also target long-settled immigrant workers in the Global North. When the supposed threat to national security, identity, and social cohesion is perceived to come from the outside, then all those who have crossed national borders become potential enemies, to be surveilled and controlled. This division or dissidentification ensures that immigrant and native workers remain separated, while native workers are lulled into believing that they are not themselves under observation or discipline. Nonetheless, while this propaganda has successfully produced a hegemonic racist discourse, cracks are beginning to emerge. In factories, warehouses, and other workplaces, we witness signs of unity, protest, and solidarity between native and immigrant workers.

Indeed, the only way to overcome this deepening crisis, one that is rapidly leading us toward broader conflict, is to transform the divisions between immigrants and natives, and among workers from different countries, into new forms of identification that will unify class struggle. The first step toward this is the rational and emotional deconstruction of the dominant ideology that obscures the shared material interests of native and immigrant workers alike. In this process, the cultural field, including the arts play a crucial role in exposing the ideological mechanisms at work, both intellectually and affectively.

Goran: Indeed, the politics of immigration extend beyond state policy into the cultural field, where museums, festivals, and theatres negotiate contested terrains of identity, belonging, and memory. With far-right politics gaining ground and targeting these institutions, can they still sustain critical reflection and foster inclusive, cosmopolitan forms of community, or are they being reshaped by exclusionary logics? Taking the Venice Biennale as an example, how might we understand this platform as an intervention into identity politics and a tool for new models of identification?

Susanne: We are living in a post-globalised era marked by transnational capitalism, large-scale migration, the ongoing effects of colonialism, and the persistence of patriarchal and heteronormative norms. In such a political and cultural context, the role of cultural institutions, such as museums, theatres, and art festivals, is undergoing transformation. However, while public funding systems

often reflect governmental orientations and require at least partial alignment with curatorial, artistic, and educational objectives and strategies, directors, curators, and artists still retain the capacity to imagine and realise projects that challenge these constraints. For example, in her contribution to this volume, Helena Botto demonstrates how her own performance practice, articulated through strategies of over-identification, operate as a critical dispositive for deconstructing and destabilizing discriminatory right-wing narratives.

The Venice Biennale, particularly the Contemporary Art sector, which attracts an increasingly large and international, albeit essentially elite, audience, is certainly an interesting observatory for focusing on these dynamics. The temple-like architectural models of the Biennale pavilions, each tied to a specific nation, function as cultural and political embassies as much as temporary national museums. While the pavilions are owned by the respective states, the land on which they are built belongs to the city of Venice. This delicate balance underpins crucial political decisions. The recent concession granted to Qatar to erect the first new pavilion since 1995 – when there were only 30 in total, compared to today's 66 – underscores a growing economic significance of this relationship. Altogether, the pavilions bear witness to the enduring importance of nationalism, the shifting dynamics of contemporary geopolitics, and the persistent tensions between wealthier nations often housed in prestigious palazzos, galleries, or foundations, and poorer nations relegated to less prominent locations. This very political, economic, and logistical structure turns the Biennial into a platform that exposes the enduring impact of these issues, while also revealing how each nation grapples with the legacies of capitalism, nationalism, and colonialism, and their lasting effects on knowledge, power, and culture.

For instance, in the 1990s, some national pavilions swapped their venues to experiment with forms of transnational hospitality (Vettese 2014). Since the Biennale's regulations recognises only official nation-states, other critiques of nationalism have emerged through collateral exhibitions organised by culturally autonomous territories, such as Catalonia or Wales, or by stateless nations, such as Palestine. In the more recent editions of the Biennial, curators have also selected artists from marginalised communities and encouraged new narratives based on experiences, histories, and memories of colonised environments, to inquiry into how art can counter the perpetuation of colonial and gender structures. The performative works and installations presented in the pavilions have proven particularly effective in this regard (Franco 2026). A remarkable example is the exhibition *Paradise Camp* presented at the 59th International Art Exhibition of *La Biennale di Venezia* (2022) by the Japanese-Sāmoan interdisciplinary artist, researcher, and curator Yuki Kihara, whose work challenges dominant and singular historical narratives and identity issues, and curated by Natalie King. Kihara is a dual citizen of Aotearoa New Zealand (as Kihara likes to name it

stressing both the Indigenous and the colonisers' name for the same island) and Sāmoa, and was also the first non-Indigenous Pacific Islander to represent New Zealand. Kihara is also a member of the minority community of Fa'afafine, a term meaning "in the manner of a woman" and identifying people who are assigned male at birth and who express their gender in a feminine way. Fa'afafine encompasses (but not entirely coincides with) the LGBTIQ+, describing those identifying with a third gender or a non-binary identity. Through her performances, photographic reenactments, and video works, Kihara invited visitors to critically rethink culturally constructed binary categories such as male and female, European (Western) and Oceanic, cultural and natural, and material and immaterial culture – topics addressed from indigenous perspective by Amanda Piña in her contribution to this issue of *Aisthesis*. One way this was demonstrated was by showing that Paul Gauguin's paintings created during his stays in Tahiti and Marquesas Islands were in fact stereotyped and exotic representations based on ethnographic pictures of some Sāmoan Fa'afafine, who he never met in person. Another was by providing evidence that Fa'afafine were central to the Sāmoan social fabric and came to be seen as problematic only after the arrival of colonisers. Paradise Camp witnessed how Venice Biennale can serve as a cultural and political epicentre for the arts, providing a space for epistemological reflection on our present and future, whilst fostering alternative forms of identification.

Goran: Since 2015, the EU has seen an intensification of migration alongside the rise of increasingly restrictive asylum regimes. Immigrants are often placed in administrative limbo, their futures indefinitely suspended by bureaucratic delays. You have powerfully theorized 'waiting' not simply a passive condition, but as a form of state violence, a temporal technique of control that renders migrants exploitable and invisible. How do you understand this temporality of suspended life in relation to broader capitalist and state interests? And can this waiting, though deeply ambivalent, also be reimagined as a site of political agency, counter-identification, or even solidarity? How might this temporality be reconfigured or resisted?

Francesco: «Waiting is one of the privileged ways of experiencing power», as Pierre Bourdieu (1997) reminds us. In the specific case of waiting imposed by a state on subaltern subjects – immigrants and, above all, asylum seekers and refugees – it constitutes a form of state violence. This violence takes shape in the state's capacity to control time and, ultimately, the life of these specific categories of immigrants. It manifests through the waiting times imposed by state apparatuses – specifically through confinement in various forms of administrative detention – where systematic violations of the most basic human rights

occur. To these waiting times are adjoined the in(de)finite delays for interviews with territorial commissions, for decisions on international protection status, for the issuance of documents, for obtaining a tax code, and more – thus amplifying a pervasive sense of uncertainty and existential precarity. Kate Katafiasz's contribution examines how theatre affects audiences by indexing traces of such migrant trauma and exclusion.

The performance of waiting, imposed on immigrants, functions as a temporal border, emerging alongside the physical and political borders that obstruct, filter, and govern spatial mobility. These temporal borders trap immigrants in a temporal immobility produced and maintained by national and supranational policies, as described by Stephen Elliot Wilmer in this paper, that impose prolonged stagnation as a device of governance.

This ideological, political, and institutional disciplining of immigrants and migratory movements is legitimized through a discourse of “permanent emergency”, which, paradoxically, fuels a pathological “fetish of speed”. In fact, European migration policies, historically and at present, have been enacted under the logic of urgency, shaping a contingent, reactive structure embedded in a present-oriented temporality that lacks long-term vision or sustainability. Therefore, waiting becomes both a key lived experience and a crucial analytical category for the study of immigrants' temporalities and spatialities.

Waiting operates as a “temporal governance mechanism”, implemented in a discretionary and arbitrary manner. It is often a costly process that depletes immigrants' financial and emotional resources. It operates as a mechanism of dispossession and existential precarization, aimed at extracting value from the labour power of immigrant populations, who are disciplined, among other means, through waiting itself. Refugees and asylum seekers find themselves both spatially and temporally immobilized, trapped within the legal and social limbo of the European asylum system. While waiting for a status, and thus a residence permit, they are forced to comply with severely restricted opportunities for mobility, employment, and social integration. Understood in these terms, waiting becomes a form of entrapment that extends both inside and outside the reception system. Mirroring, in many respects and contexts, the “camp form”, the European reception model foresees both physical and juridical confinement of asylum seekers. It is no coincidence that many asylum seekers refer to reception centres as “camps”, echoing the traumatic memory of the camps they transited, particularly in Libya, where they were subjected to torture, rape, and unspeakable violence. The space of the camp thus becomes a space “outside of time” – a space in which time is slowed, marked by prolonged waiting that may, however, abruptly end at any moment. The camp becomes a place where people “hold their breath”, caught in the unpredictable and often arbitrary rhythm of asylum decisions-positive or negative.

In fact, the entire journey of migrants, seen as a performance of waiting, begins well before they even reach the European reception centres. This waiting is not neutral, but a deliberate mechanism imposed by state policies that extends the journey's duration, making it increasingly dangerous and costly. European agreements with countries like Libya and Turkey have not only prolonged the asylum seekers' journey but also intensified its peril, positioning these waiting periods as part of a larger strategy of control and selection. The longer and more treacherous the journey, the more vulnerable immigrants become upon arrival in Europe, making them more likely to accept exploitative labour and social conditions. These state-imposed temporal regimes are not about closing borders entirely but about disciplining immigrants to tolerate degrading conditions, eroding their rights and freedoms. Policies such as assigning "safe ports" far from rescue locations, and enforcing pushbacks along the Balkan route, extend the journey and intensify the hardships, further breaking down the migrants' resistance.

For those who survive the journey, new forms of pressure await: the looming threat of deportation, long stays in reception centres, and the continuous, exhausting waiting that defines their lives in Europe. These prolonged times, both before and after arrival, lead to physical and mental deterioration, making immigrants more docile and compliant, hence, ready to enter a labour force that fuels Europe's economy.

The daily lives of immigrants and their families are deeply affected by waiting, as it creates a sense of suspended existence. Immigrants face economic setbacks due to their inability to send remittances, delaying debt repayment and limiting financial support to families back home. Additionally, waiting disrupts their social integration, marginalizing them in the marriage market and hindering their entry into adult life. This prolonged waiting, a form of permanent suspension, isolates immigrants socially and emotionally, while life continues to evolve for their families in the country of origin. Thus, waiting could be understood as a temporal dimension that fosters discriminatory identification among immigrants. Abdelmalek Sayad (1999) had already described the lives of Algerian immigrants as suspended in perpetual waiting – where the temporary, whether waiting to return or for something to happen, becomes permanent and is crystallized "here", in "exile", in the materiality of daily life and social isolation, while "there", in the country of origin, life continues to unfold, reimagined in the immigrant's absence.

However, waiting is not always empty or passive. It is experienced differently depending on how each individual lives their 'being-in-time' within the camp – developing personal tactics of resistance. Indeed, the time of waiting is not necessarily wasted or vacant; it can be a "productive" time, imbued with meaning: a time to learn the social maps of the new context, to understand the asylum system, to learn the language, to build social networks and establish daily routines.

Waiting becomes a spatio-temporal dimension in which affects of uncertainty and frustration coexist with hope and aspiration. In this regard, the use of smartphones becomes a tool, an antidote to the void of waiting time. Smartphones allow immigrants to engage in networking, entertainment, and the construction of collective and individual memory – filling temporal gaps and functioning as a “miniature time capsule” capable of containing, compressing, and expanding time. So, we can imagine a “positive” dimension of waiting in the camp: waiting as a counter-identification practice, a resisting and subverting performance through which new processes of identification can emerge.

Goran: Your work, including the European action research project *Dancing Museums* (2018-2023), highlights the transformative potential of cultural institutions. How can participatory artistic practices in these spaces challenge dominant national narratives while also cultivating alternative forms of identification and belonging?

Susanne: Museums play a strategic role in shaping our understanding of the world we live in and our complex identities. They also serve as sites where we can imagine how to transform both the world and us. One of the most effective ways to foster such critical reflection on the transmission of cultural and artistic legacies, and rethink our individual and collective identities – whether national, ethnic, gendered, linguistic, religious, and so on – is through collaborative and participatory practices. Many museums are increasingly incorporating these kinds of projects into their programming to challenge the traditional hierarchical structure of management and curatorship, suggesting a more fluid distribution of roles to unsettle the museological apparatus. This shift involves engaging visitors more directly in deciding what should be displayed in the galleries, and in some cases in co-curating exhibitions and events, starting from everyday objects and artefacts connected to ephemeral or intangible cultural practices. Similarly, curatorial projects sometimes extend beyond museum walls into other spaces, where collections are exhibited in temporal dialogue with selected communities or representatives of marginalised or underrepresented or disadvantaged groups, who would rarely set foot in the museum.

In this context, the first quarter of the 21st century has witnessed the growing presence of dance and performance within museum programmes. This phenomenon is an integral part of the “experiential turn” that characterises some of the contemporary art today and signals the shift from a fundamentally contemplative and ocular-centric to a multi-sensory aesthetic. Moreover, inhabiting museum and exhibition spaces by attending performances that unfold differently in space than the predetermined routes mapped along linear chronologies for visitors, fosters an experience of time – and consequently of the organization of knowl-

edge – that questions the very concept of cultural and social progress. Dance and performance in museum spaces invite visitors to engage with the complexity of historical temporalities and spatial configurations. Within these redefined spatio-temporal dimensions, the museum emerges as a crossroads of embodied knowledge and lived experience – a site where the memories and voices of those excluded, ignored, or silenced by official historiography may be articulated, shared, and preserved.

The direct participation of visitors in performance and dance pieces add to this potential the opportunity of experiencing alternative senses of belonging and innovative modes of building and transmitting knowledge. In such cases, the concept of choreography means more than simply a way of organizing bodies in space; it becomes a tool for aggregating and exploring different sociological, political, and economic models, as well as for mediating embodied investigations of troubled heritage and traumatic pasts, inscribing them into renewed (museological) narratives.

A striking example is Tanya Bruguera's performance *10.144.083*, presented in 2018, in London, in the frame of Hyundai Commission, a series of new and site-specific installations by international artists for the iconic Turbine Hall at Tate Modern. This project brings together many of the concerns of contemporary museology, integrating them into a coherent framework. The title of the exhibition corresponded to the number of people who had migrated from one country to another, combined with the number of migrant deaths recorded up to that moment, according to data from the IOM's (International Organization for Migration) Missing Migrants Project. A group of 21 people – selected by the artist and living or working in the area surrounding Tate Modern – shared reflections on the civic role of the museum and the concept of cultural heritage, and collaborated in shaping the exhibition. More specifically, they have discussed how Tate could approach the local community more closely and involve the neighbourhood residents in its cultural and educational strategies. At the end of the process, the participants drafted a manifesto, which appeared on visitors' mobile phones as soon as they connected to the museum's free wi-fi, to present the outcomes of their work. Visitors entered the hall, where the entire floor was coated with a thermosensitive anthracite-grey paint. Invited to sit or lie down, they gradually released warmth through their bodies, which revealed traces of a hidden portrait: the face of Yousef, a young Syrian who had left his country in 2011, to reach London. However, the entire portrait appeared only when at least three hundred visitors were present simultaneously.

In another room of the museum, fully illuminated by an intense white light, visitors entered and, within seconds, began to cry because of an organic menthol compound diffused in the air. This physical reaction induced a form of "forced empathy" with one of the greatest tragedies of our time: the journeys of migrants

and refugees. Although constantly before our eyes in the mediated dimension of news and images, these stories often go unseen, rendering migrants and refugees invisible. Finally, the project's participants named a hall of the museum after Natalie Bell, an activist chosen for her work with charitable organisations providing housing and social support for both residents and recent immigrants. The project has demonstrated how museums can create situations in which the public undergoes a direct (and often participatory) encounter with other people and stories, becoming an indispensable presence for the very existence of the work, and this includes the limited possibility of activating Yousef's portrait with a large number of visitors. In this sense, Bruguera's activism does not aim to replace political experience with an emotional response that is as immediate as it is simplified; rather, it creates a device that truly functions only if its effects endure over time through a sensibility enriched by art. Performative and participatory art inside museums can support self-reflection, deepening the recognition of others' experiences, and opening the possibility of transformation for both individual and collective identities through new forms of identification.

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The Moralization of Politics and the Denial of Constitutive Aggressiveness as a Mode of *Jouissance*

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Abstract. This paper examines the effects of the moralization of politics as a mode of *jouissance* in academic approaches to aggression and extreme violence, particularly in contemporary contexts such as the far-right, fascism, and totalitarianism. Drawing on the analysis of several key works, it argues that this moralization conceals a deeper and more insidious issue: the denial of constitutive aggression. Specifically, it highlights how this denial stems from an unwillingness to acknowledge that some individuals may genuinely desire destruction. As a result, this refusal undermines the development of effective public policies for managing political conflict, since such conflict is no longer understood as an inherent aspect of human subjectivity.

Keywords. *Jouissance*, constitutive aggression, moralization of politics, violence, far-right.

The current political atmosphere is one of unease and fear. The emergence of political movements and governments that identify with the far-right or openly fascist discourses across much of the world has set off alarm bells. At the same time, we are witnessing the normalization

of brutal genocide in Palestine¹, the rise of white supremacism, the persecution of LGBTQ+ communities, renewed conservative attacks on women's rights, and the growing influence of the so-called manosphere. These developments raise the question of what conditions have allowed political models, in which aggression and extreme violence prevail, to become so appealing and popular among millions of people worldwide. A clear example of such popularity is the re-election of Donald Trump as President of the United States in 2024, when he secured 49.8% of the popular vote (Federal Election Commission 2025), despite, or perhaps because of, his openly anti-immigrant, misogynistic, and far-right populist positions.

Nonetheless, Trump is not the only political figure who cast himself as an outsider challenging the dominant narrative that liberal-procedural democracy represents the best form of government. His populist, confrontational, and antagonistic style has been shared by figures such as Javier Milei in Argentina or Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, marked by open contempt towards women, migrants, the LGBTQ+ communities, people with disabilities, people of African descent and different ethnic groups. Similar positions can also be observed in far-right parties with a longer historical tradition, such as *Rassemblement National* (RN) in France. However, Trump's style is exceptional. His (brief) association with Elon Musk – who openly expressed sympathy for the German far-right party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD) and was even seen in public performing a Nazi-style salute (Bennhold 2025) – together with the launch of an intense campaign of raids against immigrants and the establishment of detention centers (Singh, Craft, & Witherspoon 2025), shows that we are facing a dangerous scenario that evokes the darkest episodes of the twentieth century.

This situation is particularly concerning given the vast number of newspaper articles and opinions published daily that warn about the *return* of fascism (Reich 2025, Stewart 2025, Lempinen 2024). A similar pattern is evident in the academic world. The proliferation of articles and books on fascism and its relevance and applicability for the contemporary era (Delfino & Eissa 2023, Eley 2021, Adeney Thomas 2020, Mudde 2019), the emergence of new concepts such as post-fascism or neo-fascism (Traverso 2017, Tamás 2001), and ongoing debates about whether the far-right is different from or equivalent to fascism (Delfino & Eissa 2023, Eley 2021, Mudde 2019, Ryngren 2018, Davies & Lynch 2002), all indicate that this is an issue that demands urgent attention. The following questions arise: how do different parts of the political community see themselves represented by these discourses? What do they get

1 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/09/israel-has-committed-genocide-gaza-strip-un-commission-finds>

in return? Why do they vote in favor of parties that advocate/promote aggression and extreme violence towards some communities?

Because our times remain overshadowed by the historical experience of fascisms and totalitarianisms in the twentieth century, discussing these questions is particularly complicated. Nonetheless, fascism and totalitarianism² have been studied in depth, with sophisticated and detailed analyses that examine their immediate political, social, and economic causes (Traverso 2017; 2002; Paxton 2004; Davies & Lynch 2002; Payne 1995, 1980; Laclau 1977; Brunner, Conze, y Koselleck 1975; Crick 1973), as well as the conditions of possibility shaped by medium – and long-term historical processes (Forti 2001; Marcuse 1998; Bobbio, Matteuci, and Pasquino 1976; Arendt 1963, 1951; Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswik, Levinson & Nevitt Sanford 1950)³. However, beyond the terror evoked by the horrifying images of concentration camps, the central problem, as we will see later, is that these studies are often accompanied by explicit or implicit moral judgments. As a result, fascism and totalitarianism are often treated as exceptional or *abnormal* episodes in history (Delfino & Eissa 2023; Eley 2021; Traverso 2017; Marcuse 1998; Payne 1995, 1982, Crick 1973; Arendt 1963, 1951; Adorno et.al. 1950). This tendency sidelines the crucial question of the underlying psychic and social conditions that enable the deployment of such extreme levels of aggressiveness and violence, producing interpretations that oversimplify or omit the complex dynamics at play. Such omissions, in turn, affect how contemporary far-right phenomenon is framed, since the existing studies often serve as immediate references, setting the tone for present-day analysis.

This does not mean, however, that there are no studies examining the psychic and social conditions that give rise to extreme political scenarios. A notable contribution was made by the Frankfurt School. Drawing on psychoanalysis, Theodor Adorno et al. (1950) suggested that identification with authoritarianism stems from behaviors that cannot be explained rationally, but rather in relation to «personality deep-lying trends» (Adorno et al. [1950]: 1-13). Also inspired by psychoanalysis, Herbert Marcuse (1998) studied how drives were articulated through the relationship between gratification and punishment under Nazism. Although the studies inspired by psychoanalysis have opened up an entire field of research into the relationship between psyche and politics, some authors tend to underestimate the agency of subjects who participate in or identify with authoritarian projects, thereby generating a diminished subjective responsibility –

2 Although this concept appears less frequently in the contemporary public sphere, I include it because it is part of the semantic network that was articulated in the 20th century to identify regimes that deployed a systematic use of extreme violence.

3 This list of references is intended to be illustrative, not exhaustive. To review the enormous production around these phenomena is beyond the scope of this paper.

either by suggesting that the masses are *manipulated* by external interests alien to them, or that they have merely fallen prey to *deception*.

More recent studies (Kisić-Merino 2025; Hook 2017; Glynos & Stavrakakis 2008) that integrate the psychoanalytic concept of *jouissance* (Lacan 1999, 1992, 1966b) as a key tool for addressing the problem of far-right movements or other political phenomena, tend to emphasize the celebratory and articulatory aspect of *jouissance* – its relation to fantasy and the identification mechanisms – while neglecting its distinctly destructive character. The modalities of *jouissance* associated with destruction, and their role in the escalation of extreme violence have not been studied in depth. A notable exception is Slavoj Žižek (1994), who stresses the relationship between *jouissance* and the death drive, the superego, and constitutive aggressiveness in politics. Yet, even his analysis fails to refrain from moral qualifications, conceptualizing these dynamics in terms of *evil* (Žižek [1994]: 70-71).

My aim is neither to discuss each of these views in detail nor to dismiss them simply because they ignore the destructive character of *jouissance*. These studies have greatly enriched and broadened the horizon of analysis. Yet, only a few studies take aggressiveness into account, and when they do, they tend to moralize the role it plays in the configuration of scenarios of extreme violence. This suggests that we are confronted with a *concealment* operation. In this light, what kind of analysis can be carried out if constitutive aggressiveness is not treated as a central element of society? How can we conceive the structural conditions that precipitate political conflicts without addressing the experience of provoked pleasure or displeasure? What about the pleasure derived from the exercise of aggression or destruction? How to incorporate the concept of *jouissance* (enjoyment) into the analysis of aggression and extreme violence? In short, what is the relationship between libidinal economy and politics? How can public policies be devised if they operate under the assumption of human beings that exist only in theory?

In the following lines, I will address these questions through two main premises. First, this *concealment* operation responds to a long-term historical experience in which the interpretation of political conflict has been moralized, a process Reinhard Koselleck (1959) called the *moralization of politics*. Second, the moralization of politics rests on a more insidious operation: the denial of constitutive human aggressiveness. Beyond the fact that this articulation shapes how the enemy is identified and how scenarios of aggression and extreme violence emerge (Álvarez Garro 2018), my concern is here to show how it operates insidiously within academic-scientific research, ultimately obstructing a realistic understanding of these phenomena and, consequently, significantly limiting our possibilities of envisaging realistic alternatives for the containment of political conflict.

The problem of aggressiveness

In his book *Critique and Crisis* (1959), Koselleck examines conditions that led to the development of weapons of mass extermination – the atomic bombs – and their relationship to philosophies of history. For this purpose, he suggests a *longue durée* perspective that situates the emergence of these conditions of possibility in the prelude to the Enlightenment, specifically in the eighteenth-century France and Germany (Koselleck [1959]: 5). Unlike Absolutism, which separated morality from politics, for Koselleck the Enlightenment was marked by a *moralization of politics* (Koselleck [1959]: 138-157). This *moralization*, as an heir to the Christian soteriological tradition, permeated critical exercise and opened the door to the moral judgment of politics (Koselleck [1959]: 130-131), a practice that persists to this day. In this way, Koselleck illuminates a crucial but often obscured aspect of political experience since the eighteenth century: the reduction of political conflict to a moral distinction that divides the world into *good* and *evil*. This reduction implies that when the enemy is deemed evil, the immediate consequence is the legitimization of prosecution and destruction, as the enemy becomes cast as the representative of earthly *evil*.

Framing political conflict as part of moral struggle not only guarantees impunity for actions carried out in the name of *the good* but also opens the space for a libidinal gain: the pleasure of assuming moral *superiority*. This affective dimension, not explicitly addressed by Koselleck, is central to my argument. I contend that the moralization of politics not only secures the illusion of certainty, the conviction of *possessing moral truth* by which others are judged, but also generates a space of *jouissance*, the enjoyment derived from imposing one's moral perspective on others. In this sense, the moralization of politics does not neutralize conflict but redirects constitutive aggressiveness into moralized forms of hostility, thereby legitimizing violence while concealing the psychic and social dynamics that sustain it.

It is striking how this moralization continues to act insidiously in the interpretation of political conflict to the present day. In many ways, we are still grappling with the consequences of the Enlightenment. Beyond its role in shaping how enemies are identified, whether from the left or the right, and in legitimizing persecution and annihilation of the enemy through strategies of dehumanization (Álvarez Garro 2018), I am particularly interested in how moralization works in the analysis and study of political conflicts. What stands out is the remarkable inability of most theorists and scholars, whether from the left or the right, progressive or conservative, to discuss or debate political antagonisms without resorting to moral judgments or relying on residues of the philosophies of history to ground their argument. I intend to show how this hidden moralization not only

obscures alternative mechanisms for understanding the roots of political conflict and borderline scenarios, but also radically undermines the possibility of generating innovative proposals for addressing them.

Arendt's view of aggressiveness

It is well known that one of the most influential authors in the study of political conflicts where aggressiveness and extreme violence are present has been Hanna Arendt. Her books *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963) are considered classics on the subject and must read for anyone who delves into the study of these phenomena. However, Arendt's exhaustive analysis of the political, social, and economic causes of totalitarianism is overshadowed by the presence of moral judgments that reveal the author's subjective position when confronted with it, and her difficulties in apprehending and accepting it as *possible*. The first thing that catches the eye in Arendt's work is the theoretical decision to approach the problem of aggression and extreme violence by examining the concept of evil. In this sense, stating that totalitarianism is gestated through the appearance of a *radical evil*, in a world without political, historical, or moral norms, or where common sense fails (Arendt [1951]: 443), sets an immediate distance with respect to the *possible*, as if with this qualification one managed to conjure at once the immanent character of aggressiveness and send it to a transcendentality:

wherever these systems became truly totalitarian, they started to operate according to a system of values so radically different from all others, that none of our traditional legal, moral, or common sense utilitarian categories could any longer help us to understand, or judge, or predict their course of action. (Arendt [1951]: 460)

This detachment is accompanied by an interpretation that confuses the conventional character of the law with a moral fact. Arendt assumes that the moral principles from the Enlightenment have become immovable ground, elevating Human Rights (HR) to the status of facticities. This is evident through the insistent denunciation that totalitarianism is a criminal State for denying human rights and for dismantling the relationship between law, utility, and justice; or by making injustice legal (Arendt [1963]: 290-291; [1951]: 269, 447). It is even more perplexing that Arendt ([1951]: 420) recognizes that human rights respond to the solution of a historical problem but does not recognize as politically valid that someone, under another historical context, may challenge this solution. It is established as a point of no return. In that sense, Arendt places the doctrine of human rights as an unquestionable and immovable foundation of politics, a convention that is elevated to the status of a *moral law*. She omits the *polemi-*

cal character of the law, the ever-present possibility of justifying the destruction of the enemy on the grounds that the enemy is not human and therefore is not *entitled to human rights*. Despite the exhaustiveness with which Arendt treats the subject, she sends totalitarianism to the realm of the incredible and the extraordinary. Although in other parts of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* she recognizes that extreme violence is possible in the practical world, it is not an object of analysis, generating an irresolvable tension in her argumentation. This is evidenced when Arendt states that:

it is quite conceivable, and even within the realm of practical political possibilities, that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude quite democratically – namely by majority decision – that for humanity as a whole it would be better to *liquidate certain parts* thereof. (Arendt [1951]: 299, author's emphasis)

That is, Arendt recognizes that a desire to liquidate a part of humanity is potentially possible, but she does not pursue this analysis to its full extent. If Arendt were to recognize that there can be a desire for destruction as part of a wide range of reasons that can lead human beings to support such political proposals, she would not only have to acknowledge the pleasure and *jouissance* that comes from the destruction of the other, but she would have to recognize that this is an ever-present possibility.

This hesitation in addressing the desire for destruction and the pleasure associated with it can also be observed in the way Arendt describes the masses. She tends to think of the group of human beings that compose masses as homogeneous⁴, as if they were a uniform group without significant internal divergences in terms of motivations or interests, passions, or affections, and at times she also portrays it as devoid of subjective responsibility for the destruction it supports. The mass appears *prey* to its circumstances and for this reason can be attracted by *evil*.

For Arendt the masses are fickle, innocent, naive, unreliable, and forgetful, thus prone to be *fascinated* by a leader (Arendt [1951]: 305-306). Accordingly, they may be drawn to *evil* and *crime*. All this is possible because in the context of totalitarianism the ability to think and discern has been annulled, introducing a total conformism (Arendt [1951]: 306-308). In this view, the masses are deprived of subjective responsibility and characterized as «apathetic and stupid», losing interest in their own welfare (Arendt [1951]: 311-317). In short, Arendt seems to construct an approach in which the masses are stripped of their responsibility and reason, as if they *could not* be called to account: «The chief characteristic

4 A tendency shared by many scholars who use the concept of the masses (Traverso 2017, Forti 2001, Paxton 2004; Payne 1995, 1980, Laclau 1977, Bobbio, Matteuci, y Pasquino 1976, Crick 1973).

of the mass-man is not brutality and backwardness, but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships» (Arendt [1951]: 317). They are puppets: «Total power can be achieved and safeguarded only in a world of conditioned reflexes, of marionettes without the slightest trace of spontaneity» (Arendt [1951]: 457).

Additionally, Arendt's use of the opposition normality-abnormality to characterize totalitarianism excludes it from the regular or common possibilities of existence, sending this phenomenon to a *beyond* that makes it difficult to approach. In that sense, it is as if she did not know what to do with the destructive potentialities of the human being: «For a considerable length of time the *normality* of the *normal* world is the most efficient protection against disclosure of totalitarian mass crimes» (Arendt [1951]: 436, emphasis given by the author). Meanwhile, the opposition normality – perversion or sadism (Arendt [1963]: 276) is another strong proof of the inadmissibility of the constitutive aggression in Arendt. By considering them opposites, she elevates sadism to a pathological category, since a *normal* human being could only commit these destructive acts unaware of the nature of his actions, and thus cannot be imputed or held accountable:

The worst in the Eichmann case was precisely that so many others were like him, and that those others were neither perverts nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, terribly and terrifyingly normal. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied, as had been said at Nuremberg over and over again by the defendants and their counsels, that this new type of criminal, who is in actual fact *hostis generis humani*, commits his crimes *under circumstances that make it nearly impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong*. (Arendt [1963]: 276, author's emphasis)

Yet, there are passages that indicate that Arendt clearly conceived that destruction can provoke pleasurable effects, but it is notable that she did not know how to analyze it. For example, when she makes the distinction between *us* and *them* (referring to those who support totalitarian movements): «To them, violence, power, cruelty, were the supreme capacities of men who had definitely lost their place in the universe» (Arendt [1951]: 330); or when she stresses the pleasure that could be generated through destruction: «The members of the elite did not object at all to paying a price – the destruction of civilization – for the *fun* of seeing how those who had been excluded unjustly in the past forced their way out» (Arendt [1951]: 332, emphasis given by the author); «The temporary alliance between the elite and the mob rested largely on this genuine *delight* with which the former watched the latter destroy respectability» (Arendt [1951]: 333, emphasis given by the author).

One might think that for Arendt it was out of common sense that some people possess a desire for destruction. This disbelief leads her to understand totalitarianism as a phenomenon that materializes what she considers *perverse and evil fantasies*. Her reluctance to accept that such an extreme level of aggression could

exist is remarkable, despite the fact that such levels of torture and murder have been witnessed throughout history. The experience of the colonies and plantations since the seventeenth century serves as the pertinent example (Mbembe 2016). The difference, of course, lies in the massive nature of aggression and extreme violence in the 20th century, but that is a technical issue, not whether it is possible or not.

In that line, although it can be argued that, at the time of Arendt's writing, this phenomenon was novel for the European world, it is striking that there are numerous events of extreme violence in European history, such as the wars of religion or the Inquisition (Álvarez Garro [2018]: 33). These events vanish into obscurity when Arendt states that it is the first time that such a level of cruelty and terror is observed: «we emphasized repeatedly that the means of total domination are not only more drastic but that totalitarianism differs essentially from other forms of political oppression known to us such as despotism, tyranny and dictatorship» (Arendt [1951]: 460). For Arendt, totalitarianism meant a different form of government that in an *unparalleled* way broke the relationship between legality and legitimacy (Arendt [1951]: 461), installing total terror as its «essence» (Arendt [1951]: 466) through an entirely new and *unprecedented* conception of power (Arendt [1951]: 417). In this sense, we should ask ourselves if the insistent qualification of totalitarianism as an unprecedented and novel phenomenon, accompanied by a convenient oblivion of the events of extreme violence within the European territory that resulted in the persecution of women and minorities in the name of religion, is the effect of the same excuse with which Arendt dilutes the subjective responsibility of Eichmann, when she stated that «*He simply never realized what he was doing*» (Arendt [1963]: 287, italics in the original).

Arendt's difficulty in accepting the possibility of a desire for and pleasure in destruction in human beings generates serious connotative effects in her theory. She creates a *tragic* historical narrative in which millions of people are *led* or *led unknowingly* to collaborate in the destruction, unaware of their *part* in the matter, so that they could not be called to account. In this line, totalitarianism appears as an aberration or an anomaly, rather than an ever-present possibility within any political community.

Moralization and the Far-right

It is clear that Arendt is not the only author who has engaged with the problem of extreme aggression, nor is she the only one who struggled to assimilate its presence. The echo of her interpretations of totalitarianism can be traced in contemporary authors. For example, Enzo Traverso ([2002]: 2)

refers to the period opened by the First World War as the «beginning of a barbarization of politics», as if war and the annihilation of entire populations had not been present before. Similarly, Simona Forti ([2001]: 139) reiterates the gesture of locating totalitarianism as an *aberrant* and *exceptional regime* with the ability to destroy *reality*. These examples illustrate a broader tendency to emphasize the exceptional and abnormal character of totalitarianisms. Beyond the conceptual debates about totalitarianism and its relations to fascism and the far-right, I am interested in obvious difficulty of acknowledging, even as a mere possibility, that some individuals actively identify with political projects that sustain aggression or violence against others, not merely as a result of deception, manipulation, or harm. Why is it so hard to accept that for some people constitutive aggressiveness and the desire for destruction might prevail? Why not consider the implications of such identification for narcissistic satisfaction and for regulating the pleasure-displeasure dichotomy? Neglecting these questions has consequences for theorizing totalitarianisms, fascisms, and contemporary forms of far-right. Although it is not possible to examine each interpretation in detail here, it can be argued that the disregard of the possibility of constitutive aggressiveness seems to form a common basis across them all.

The same difficulty is also evident in discussions about the far-right, beyond the debate the term itself may generate⁵. For example, when Delfino & Eissa ([2023]: 186) analyze the emergence of the far-right in the 21st century, they reproduce the commonplace that we are facing the possible loss of a civilizing milestone. Although they do not explicitly frame this as a departure from Enlightenment principles, they argue that the problem lies in the abandonment of the foundations that give rise to the modern social contract. In doing so, however, they overlook two key facts. First, that the idea of the social contract in Europe emerged partly as a response to the critique voiced by millenarian populations of the Americas against monarchical rule; and second, that theories of the social contract were used to justify philosophies of history dividing the world between civilized and primitive, thereby legitimizing colonial invasion (Graeber and Wengrow [2021]: 27-77). From this perspective, the social contract was far from being «the touchstone for making possible an order that would endow the fiction of the common good with vitality»⁶ (Delfino and Eissa [2023]: 188).

Although Delfino and Eissa try to dissociate themselves from naive explanations why people support far-right positions, they nevertheless reproduce an image of the *electorate* – no longer a mass but a public – that responds pri-

5 Is all Far-right Fascism? If so, why use the concept of Far-right? If not, how to distinguish them?

6 Each quote from Delfino & Eissa (2023) is a translation by the author.

marily to the damage inflicted by current political and economic conditions. What is never considered is the possibility that some in that electorate may derive enjoyment from exercising aggression or excessive violence against others.

It is tempting to think that leaders such as Trump emerged simply as a result of the votes of an ignorant population or of citizens deceived by fake news [...] However, people seem to opt for discourses that engage them, that speak to them, discourses that contain their sorrows and propose diagnoses and actions that offer a horizon of resolutions and paths [...] In this way, the discourse channels their discomfort with unfulfilled promises of the contract of Modernity, which once dreamed of a world of equals, of free people, of friends, and woke up to a world of the poor, the excluded, and wars (Delfino & Eissa [2023]: 187-188).

The reasons they outlined are certainly valid for understanding popular support for such leaders. But by omitting aggressiveness as a feature that is constitutive to humans, they leave aside a key element of analysis.

Likewise, Geoff Eley ([2021]: 10) interprets the emergence of fascism⁷ as a rupture with previous modes of managing political opposition, highlighting its brutal character. Yet, this again raises the question of historical background: not only does it repeat the tendency to overlook European history, but also to ignore all the postcolonial critiques identifying how such policies of death had already been applied in Africa, Asia, and Americas (Mbembe 2016). Hence, although Eley seeks to establish a formal concept of fascism that allows the analysis of far-right movements, he does not acknowledge the desire for destruction or something similar to the pleasure derived from violence as a defining feature of these scenarios.

In sum, the literature reviewed reveals a persistent difficulty in incorporating constitutive aggressiveness and its effects into analyses of political conflicts marked by extreme violence. This striking omission demonstrates the underlying moral position of many authors, which denies the possibility that aggression can produce pleasure and that excess is a fundamental tendency of human beings. In contrast, I will try to show how ignoring this possibility amounts to a collective denial, an unwillingness to confront or assume the presence of constitutive aggressiveness in human beings, and the fact that some people desire destruction. This denial creates enormous difficulties for generating realistic approaches to political conflict: by ignoring this property of human experience, we not only fail to analyze the conditions that fuel constitutive aggressiveness and transform it into hatred and vengeance but

7 For Eley fascism is Far-right, he does not distinguish it as two distinct concepts.

also makes impossible the development of viable proposals for containing such conflicts.

Violent delights have violent ends

The keystone of my proposal is the Lacanian concept of *jouissance* (Kisić-Merino 2025; Hook 2017; Glynos y Stravakakis 2008; Lacan 1999, 1992, 1966b). In Jacques Lacan the French term *jouissance* has a sexual connotation absent from its English translation ‘enjoyment’ (Lacan 1999, 1992, 1966b). He associates it with the orgasmic discharge, while also insisting on the distinction between pleasure and enjoyment. However, to deepen this analysis, we must first revisit the Freud’s concept of the *death drive* (Freud [1920]).

In broad terms, Freud introduced the death drive to explain a series of clinical phenomena, such as the repetition compulsion, or the negative therapeutic reaction. The drive has the status of a theoretical assumption which, like the concept of the unconscious, proves its heuristic value insofar as it provides an explanatory mechanism for phenomena that seem to go *beyond the pleasure principle*⁸. The fact that some patients seemed unable to escape the repetition of destructive scenarios or symptoms, or more troubling, showed a negative therapeutic reaction, led Freud (1920) to posit the existence of destructive forces within each organism: a tendency to return to the inorganic or earlier stages of organization. This implies a constitutive aggressiveness which is expressed differently depending on whether it is directed inward or outward.

Freud’s theory of death drive has two important consequences that I want to emphasize. First, in every human being there exists a tendency not only to regress to a previous stage of organization but also toward destruction. This has profound political implications, as it requires us to consider how this constitutive condition affects and shapes identification with conservative positions and becomes articulated through political discourses that redirect the drive for destruction outwards, against all that is located outside the community or culture, whether migrants, non-normative sexualities, and women, among others. Second, Freud’s account illuminates the relationship between the death drive, satisfaction, and pleasure. He never hesitated to expose the fine line between pleasure and pain, as evident in sadomasochistic scenarios (Freud [1924]). Nor did he dismiss the pleasure generated through the exercise of power, as suggested by his occasional use of the notion of the *drive*

8 The pleasure principle indicates that all psychic activity is directed at avoiding unpleasure and at obtaining pleasure. Unpleasure is understood as the increase in the amounts of psychic agitation, while pleasure is associated with its decrease (Freud [1920]).

for mastery [*Bemächtigungstrieb*] (Freud [1905]), later subsumed under the broader concept of the death drive (Freud [1920]). However, it is Lacan who explores these phenomena in greater depth, through his re-reading of the death drive in relation to *jouissance*.

For Lacan, every drive contains within itself the possibility of *jouissance*, since each can exceed the pleasure principle, which is the constitutive limit that prevents drives from tipping into excess. *Jouissance*, therefore, is excessive, traumatic, and anchored in the body (Hook [2017]: 612). In this sense, the pleasure principle sets a boundary to *jouissance*; it is a law commanding the subject to «enjoy as little as possible» (Hook [2017]: 609; Evans [2007]: 93-94). It is precisely this constraint to *jouissance* that makes human community possible, insofar as it imposes barriers that hinder and redirect drives that, if left on their own will, would only lead to destruction.

Yet, despite its destructive character, the libidinal satisfaction caused by the transgression of the pleasure principle seduces and constantly pushes the subject to breach its limit, at which point he/she only finds pain. Because the subject can tolerate only a certain amount of pleasure, its excess leads to painful pleasure, or *jouissance* (Hook [2017]: 612). At this point, the relationship between *jouissance* and the death drive appears, insofar as this compulsion for excess marks the path toward death.

If the pleasure principle may be considered as a life drive, it is because it sets limits on the destructive capacities inherent to human beings. This implies that it is through the renunciation of the absolute satisfaction of our desires, including the desire to destroy others or oneself, that culture can survive and keep at bay the tendencies toward its dissolution, as Freud (1930) rightly pointed out in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. For Lacan, this operation imposes the need to seek satisfaction *elsewhere*, which allows desire to emerge and metonymic drive pathways to develop, providing alternatives for the pursuit of pleasure (Lacan 1966c). However, when this possibility is blocked, whether by political, social, economic, or subjective limitations, the subject may come to desire the destruction of the community, finding no benefit in limiting his/her *jouissance*. Without limits, the subject jumps into the void of *jouissance*, where satisfaction collapses into a spiral of destruction of self and others.

I am interested in exploring the intimate relationship between *jouissance* and the death drive and how it operates in the moralization of politics, to expand Koselleck's interpretation of the legitimization of extreme violence (Koselleck [1959]) and to link this phenomenon to a psychic economy that makes it possible.

Koselleck stresses that one of the consequences of the moralization of politics was the development of a hypercriticism that permeated all areas of social life based on moral superiority. Those who were judged and condemned as immoral deserved their persecution and annihilation. From a psychoanalytic

point of view, this implied lifting drive barriers to justify the destruction of the other. The obstacles containing these powerful drives were removed under the pretext of moral rightness, supported by philosophies of history or any other moral justification.

Alongside Freud and Lacan, Koselleck's interpretation allows us to understand the emergence of extreme violence as a political phenomenon that is grounded in this human predisposition. Yet, while Koselleck associated the emergence of totalitarianism or fascism with this long-lasting structure, he did not explain why moralization functions so effectively in creating destructive scenarios. Beyond its theological substratum hidden behind moralization, we should look at the pleasurable and joyful character of destruction. I would like to emphasize that the moralization of politics provokes powerful identificatory effects, associated with the sadistic pleasure, stemming from a tendency to impose oneself on others and to demonstrate superiority and hierarchy. Let's not forget that Freud associated the drive for mastery with humiliation, control, and domination through violence. This desire to control others provokes an intense pleasure that can easily tip into *jouissance*. The crucial question is, then, which political scenarios enable or prevent the display of humanity's most destructive desires.

The greatest difficulty, however, lies in the invisibility of this whole operation. As Koselleck ([1959]: 98-123) points out, the moralization of politics is hypocritical and ignores its very political and violent exercise. From a psychoanalytic perspective, it constitutes a collective denial of constitutive aggressiveness that produces *jouissance*. This collective denial is not only confined to people who are part of a political conflict but, as I showed above, is also present in most of the political and social analyses. Since many scholars, from classical to contemporary, explain fascism, totalitarianism, or far-right movements through the lens of *evil*, it is worth asking whether such analyses rest on fantasy of ignorance. It is significant that this generates its own mode of *jouissance*. First, it guarantees a moral position in which *jouissance* as a possibility appears veiled and hidden. Thus, it allows for the reinforcement of moral superiority: it is a problem of *others* considered *evil*, not *our* problem. Here, moral indignation is a way of positioning oneself as *good* and therefore *incapable* of committing violent acts. Second, this moral framing of political conflict, even in academic context, rests on the fantasy of escaping aggression as a constitutive condition. This too enables *jouissance*: the enjoyment of denouncing others who are fascinated or driven by evil forces to act badly. In both cases, moralization enables an insidious position of power that enjoys the pretense of escaping from its inherent aggressiveness.

This leads me to the concluding point. If we accept Koselleck's premise that the moralization of politics has served as the socio-symbolic framework under which the possibility of annihilation and destruction has been justified, then this moralization must be seen as a part of the long-lasting symbolic structure shaping our

interpretation of political conflict. Once we also recognize that the collective denial of constitutive aggression itself enables a mode of *jouissance*, what emerges is a psychic-political framework that has long operated as the backdrop to our historical experience and has prevented a realistic approach to political conflict.

Hence, the moralization of politics remains an effective strategy. It is effective insofar as it is bound up with *jouissance*. On the one hand, it allows aggression to be unleashed under the guise of moral law, in which the other becomes a subject to be corrected through a sadistic authoritarian exercise in which I impose my moral vision of the world. This allows the release of inner aggressive impulses, exacerbated by current conditions of inequality and oppression. On the other hand, moralization operates insidiously within scholarly approaches to aggression and extreme violence. By dismissing inherent aggression in their analyses, scholars reinforce a boundary between those deemed *bad* or prone to *fascination* with violent proposals, and those deemed *good*, whose morally outrage sets them apart. This division perpetuates an endless spiral of violence.

As long as the concrete and real possibility of violence is not acknowledged, little can be done to contain it. Unless we explicitly accept the existential fact of our own aggressiveness and assume its consequences, we will remain unable to develop realistic approaches to political conflict, and, worse still, we will lack the resources to contain and prevent the violent overflow generated by moral *jouissance* and its powerful identifying effects.

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The Sameness We Cannot Accept

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Abstract. This paper examines the paradoxical rise in violence against transgender people amid their heightened social visibility by situating the phenomenon within Jacques Lacan's theory of the imaginary and René Girard's theory of mimetic desire. Lacan highlights how images structure ego formation through misrecognition, producing identities grounded in narcissistic illusion and envious aggressivity. Girard complements this by showing how mimetic rivalry and scapegoating stabilize fragile social orders through exclusionary violence. Reading Lacan and Girard together reveals how identifications with images of self and others bind desire to aggression, such that transgender people become targets not for their difference, but for their perceived sameness, which threatens the distinctions that sustain individual and communal identity. Clinical insights and real-world cases illustrate how gender identifications, cis and trans alike, function as psychic strategies for survival amid fragmentation, while scapegoating mechanisms expose the violent foundations of identity and social order.

Keywords. Populism, identification, aesthetics, psychoanalysis, queer theory.

When *Time* magazine designated 2014 the «Transgender Tipping Point» (Steinmetz [2014]) it was clear that transgender people had become more visible than ever before. Howev-

er, this heightened visibility did not correspond with a decline in violence. In 2022, hate crimes against transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals in the U.S. surged by nearly 33%, rising from 353 incidents in 2021 to 469 in 2022 (The Human Rights Campaign [2023]). In 2024, 617 anti-transgender bills were introduced across various state legislatures, marking the fifth consecutive year of record-breaking legislative activity targeting transgender rights (Factora [2023]). These increases in violence occurred while the rates of self-harm and suicide attempts among the transgender population remained alarmingly high, consistently exceeding those reported among their cisgender peers (Pampati et al. [2023]).

I turned to Jacques Lacan and René Girard to make sense of these developments, as both theorize how images – whether mirrored reflections, social representations, or psychic constructs – can become bound up with aggression. Lacan’s theory of the imaginary emphasizes the role that images play in the formation of the ego and identity, illustrating how identification with images can give rise to narcissistic dynamics that violently reject perceived differences in the self and others. In parallel, Girard’s mimetic theory highlights how the interindividual dynamics of desire shape the gender norms we inhabit. For Girard, the erosion of differences destabilizes the social order, prompting a process of scapegoating to restore arbitrary yet socially recognizable distinctions that undergird personal and collective identities.

The theories of Lacan and Girard overlap, resonate, and mutually enrich one another, particularly regarding identification, internalization, the nature and function of desire, and the influence of the Other’s gaze. Reading them together opens new avenues for understanding how identities are formed and maintained, especially when considering the roles that images and aggression play in shaping gender and gender dysphoria.

My methodological approach is to develop aspects of Lacan and Girard’s theoretical frameworks in tandem to demonstrate how the increased visibility of transgender individuals may paradoxically correlate with heightened aggression toward them. As the paper progresses, I use their insights to deepen and expand an analysis of this troubling dynamic.

1. *The birth of the I*

One way into Lacan’s concept of the imaginary dimension of unconscious functioning is through the experience of birth, which is sometimes described as a period of traumatic separation and loss (Rank [1924]) that is so raw and overwhelming (Bion [1962]) that unthinkable agonies result in the infant, who may feel as if its body is falling apart forever with no orientation or end (Winnicott

[1965a]). Within moments of having lost the enveloping protections of intrauterine life, the infant begins to cry, and psychic development accelerates to evolve a mind capable of enduring the world.

Sigmund Freud (1920) and Lacan (1949) both emphasize that all infants are born prematurely, with bodies as helpless as they are disorganized. At birth, their eyes barely focus, their ears cannot distinguish sounds, their hands flail, and their feet kick without purpose. Sensations pulse across their skin, muscles, and tendons as pressures and stimuli spread throughout their bodies. Freud described this as polymorphous sexuality coursing through the infant whereas Lacan emphasized the body's fragmentation, the infant's appendages so disconnected that its upper half might gaze into the caregiver's eyes while its lower half simultaneously defecates down its leg. Though the physical body's organization and its psychic capacity to intentionally orient itself does typically emerge over time, a coordinated body with integrated limbs, systems, and parts is an achievement, not a given.

At the center of Lacan's essay *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* (1949) is the question of how a body of uncoordinated appendages becomes a coherent self. There, Lacan argues that images are crucial in initiating and shaping human maturational processes. He focuses on a pivotal moment that usually occurs between 6 and 18 months when the baby first recognizes its reflection in a mirror. Captivated by the image, the infant enters a trance-like fascination that lasts until it reaches a striking realization: «That's me!».

Upon identifying with the mirror image, the baby's experience of itself as an internally disorganized collection of appendages appears transformed into a unified, coordinated body. Lacan argues that the mirror's two-dimensional flat surface blurs the difference between the baby and the seemingly sufficient others in its surroundings, merging the baby with its reflection, nearby objects, and the environment into a single visual *mise-en-scène*.

As the baby gazes into the mirror, the caregiver might say, «There you are! That's you in the mirror! You are a boy». In such moments, historically and materially determined networks of signifiers are transmitted from the caregiver into the baby, which attach to the baby's emerging sense of self like filings to a magnet. These signifiers accumulate and reinforce one another, enabling the baby to identify with the mirror image, an identification further secured by the caregiver's mirroring language. The baby's emerging sense of self, clothed in narcissistic grandeur through identification with the idealized mirror image, is essentially the birth of its ego – yet by way of a backward, virtual misrepresentation it is not. For the time being, the baby remains just as lacking, vulnerable, powerless, and uncoordinated as before. In the «that's me» moment, the baby obtains a sense of wholeness precisely by identifying with, and apprehending as

its self, a backward, virtual image that is, as a re-presentation, a misrepresentation. In Lacan's mirror stage allegory, the seemingly obvious self and its identity, are, in fact, a fictional mirage, the result of a fundamental misreading of visual information. For Lacan, the ego and the «I»¹ it creates will always be under the sway of its own illusions, obscured by an epistemological *méconnaissance* that will forever misunderstand itself and others.

However, to dismiss transgender identifications as illusory consolations of the ego's imaginary register of unconscious functioning seems like a superficial conclusion drawn from theoretical commitments. If identities form through identifications with images that weave narcissistic and alienated desires into the self, then why shouldn't cisgender identity be seen as imaginary and compensatory as transgender identity? While some transgender identifications may arise as defensive responses to trauma, are not all gender identifications psychic strategies for surviving and making sense of early life when we are born too soon with physically and psychically discordant bodies that do not yet function as they should?

2. *Mechanical corpse life drive*

The seductive power of images is often overlooked. Stare into the mirror long enough, and eventually the image in the mirror looks back. Images pull us in, drag us down, trap us, and even set us free. They can stop the breath, evoke laughter or tears, and trigger orgasms. Nightmares are made of images. Images seduce us beyond our awareness, masking alienation and inner conflict. Living in the imaginary register of unconscious functioning amounts to living for an idealized «I» that replaces the struggle with incompleteness. Like the baby, we are drawn to images that channel larger intersubjective currents of flesh, desire, emotion, and disconnection into an «I» that molds both self and others into idealized images that feign security and permanence. Identities, too, are such fictions, seducing us into mistaking a dynamic, incomplete, fluid *I* for an imaginary «I» that promises more wholeness than either self or other can ever truly possess.

Reflecting on Lacan's concept of the imaginary «I» that the baby takes as itself, Malcolm Bowie (1991) emphasizes that this «I» is a kind of psychic birthing, an internal childbearing. Yet the jubilant child before the mirror is not giving birth to itself in any straightforward sense but to an internal monster, a statue, an automaton, a fabricated thing. Freud had already imagined the psyche as machin-

1 Lacan points out that the German *das ich* («I» or I-function) corresponds to two translatable words in French: *moi* and *je*. *Moi* refers to an object; *je* refers to a subject. Although in English both are translated as «I», in French a grammatical split divides the ego between the me (*moi* or «I») and the *I* (or *je*). In this paper «I» refers to the ego and its identity, whereas *I* is meant to refer to the subject of the unconscious.

ery assembled from conflicting electrical forces and at times theorized the ego as a defensive apparatus for self-preservation. Lacan recasts Freud's mechanical ego with distinctly gothic inflections. As Bowie (1993: 26) writes, the imaginary «I» is «composed from spare parts, an armored mechanical creature... produced within the human subject, and developing unwholesome habits and destructive appetites of its own». Freud's dream-born divisions become, for Lacan, a waking nightmare of subjectivity.

Conceived as an uncanny assemblage of spare parts, Lacan's imaginary «I» inevitably recalls technologically altered bodies. And although cisgender and transgender bodies may be surgically and mechanically through implants, prosthetics, or other interventions, Lacan's notion of the *corps morcelé* refers instead to the psyche's earliest repressed yet active memory of the terrifying experience of the pre-mirror stage body as fragmented, disintegrated, and dismembered (Lacan [1964]: 1-20; Lacan [1977]: 51-80). Whether one looks backward toward the *corps morcelé* or forward toward the imaginary «I» that covers it, Lacan insists both are fantasies. In *Family Complexes*, he describes this fantasy as a «heterogeneous mannequin, a baroque doll, a trophy of limbs» (Bowie [1993]: 27). Clinicians working with psychotic patients know of worlds populated by «bodies without necks, arms wandering without shoulders, unattached, and eyes strayed alone in need of foreheads» (Bowie [1993]: 29). And clinicians working with non-psychotics know the *corps morcelé* returns unwanted in nightmarish dreams as well as in the daytime anxieties that feel like «images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, and bursting open of the body» (Lacan [2006a]: 85).

Cis, trans, and other gender identifications can be understood as ways humans psychically manage and bind these earliest infantile anxieties. Later in life, concentrated focus on gender identity through medical and surgical interventions can be vital for physical and psychic survival, particularly when severe regressions to the *corps morcelé* threaten psychic equilibrium. Among many other things, gender transition can function as a material suturing of psychic reality with the body, allowing the body to coincide with and represent the psychic subject, «a body that bears my internal scars and shattered fragments on its flesh», as one of my analysands expressed it. In my clinical experience, alternate-gender identifications and transitions are more often than not psychically generative acts – a re-birthing of the self undertaken when both physical and psychic survival are matters of life and death.

3. *Aggressivity and the other*

In his *Mirror Stage* essay, Lacan's concern is not simply that the urge to unite with the image of another reflects an epistemological illusion, a false

promise of wholeness or completeness, that exposes an intolerable lack of unity within the self. It is more that this lack becomes so unbearable that it is projected onto the other with whom one seeks to merge. The attempt to alleviate this lack by uniting with and projecting it onto another turns them into the cause of the self's fragmentation. Too often, this dynamic results in real, material violence as the longing for unity gives way to destructive attempts to annihilate the other who has come to embody what is intolerable in the self.

The psycho-logic linking images to aggression in Lacan's imaginary register of unconscious functioning emerges as paranoid introjective-projective dramas in which the other, whose image I identify with, somehow seems more than I am, and, importantly, enjoys more than I do. I, by contrast, feel alienated from my enjoyment and frustrated at work, in relationships, and with the world I inhabit. The unconscious supposition that the other enjoys sets them apart and turns them an object of idealization sought for identification. Yet, because the enjoying other is *not me*, my relationship to them is structured by a deep ambivalence. Desire becomes laced with envy and hatred. The narcissistic merger of «I am the image, and the image is me», which first promises solace and a sense of being, ultimately betrays. A *not-me* is embedded within the very mechanism that makes the self. Thus, the process that brings me into being (identification with the image) also introduces my negation. At the core of my becoming is a relationship with the image of the other that is not only foundational but also aggressive and violent, as my very selfhood is bound to both union and negation.

Paranoid knowledge, then, structures our relationships with both ourselves and others and expresses itself as violent aggressivity whenever one's identity is at stake. When my sense of self is grounded in identification with an image – my self-image, how I conceive and define myself – any threat to that image destabilizes me and must be eliminated. The attempt to destroy the other whose image I identify with is an imaginary solution to an imaginary problem that is enacted within the imaginary register of unconscious functioning. Why? Because the other whose image constitutes my identity cannot be destroyed without destroying me.

Lacan's account of the urge to unite with the image of another shows how that urge seeks to seal internal gaps of alienation and insufficiency by collapsing the separation between self and other. That urge is, according to Lacan, a manifestation of the death drive, and his assertion that there is only one drive – the death drive – becomes particularly clear in this context: the drive toward perfect union, wholeness, and completion is, at its core, a drive toward mutual annihilation, since self and other can only merge through the erasure of their distinctness. To be or possess the other entails eliminating difference, a wished-for return to

an imagined primordial unity that, he insists, never existed. This underscores the dialectical paradox at the heart of Lacan's account of subjectivity: we exist only insofar as we do not exist completely. Always split, our desire to undo the alienation that constitutes us is ultimately a desire for obliteration, a wish for a completeness only attainable through death.

It is tempting to dismiss Lacan's account of the mirror stage as an abstract theorization on a minor developmental moment, an overdramatic speculation lacking a sufficient explanation of how identity is actually formed. Nonetheless, relations shaped by unconscious functioning within the imaginary register do manifest in direct, representational, and institutional violence against real bodies. The destructive aggressivity so often aimed at the other whose image I am unconsciously identified with is intimately bound to the envious fantasy that they possess what I do not, and that they enjoy what I was forced to renounce in becoming a "civilized" human being.

But the issue is not only that I deny myself what I imagine the other enjoys; it is also that the other, in reality, does not possess or enjoy in the ways I imagine either. Within the Lacanian system, this deceptive logic of the imaginary underpins the paranoid knowledge that fuels racism, sexism, homophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and transphobia. The unconscious identification with an image of the other who is initially perceived as whole, sufficient, and desirable inevitably carries disavowed envy and hatred toward their imagined ability to enjoy what I have renounced. These disavowals, embedded in an unconscious fantasy system, drive the devaluation of the other and, ultimately, real material violence inflicted upon actual bodies.

The legal proceedings and obituaries of murdered transgender individuals offer stark illustrations of these dynamics. Idealized objects of fascination become the targets of envy and hatred precisely for the lives they are perceived to enjoy. Victims such as Dandara dos Santos, a Brazilian transgender woman brutally murdered in 2017, and Brianna Ghey, a British transgender teenager also brutally murdered in 2023, are killed in ways that grotesquely transform their bodies into an externalized *corps morcelé* (Billson [2023]; Jackman [2018]). It is as if the murderers create an external, embodied representation of the psychic disintegration they fear within themselves. Along the way, the murderers reclaim a perverse form of enjoyment while rationalizing their violence as securing individual, communal, or national unity, identity, and security.

Lacan's account of violence and aggression driven by the projection of unconscious envy and projection resonates deeply with René Girard's theory of how societies stabilize themselves by identifying and expelling scapegoats in their attempt to restore disintegrating social orders. It is to Girard's mimetic theory that we now turn.

4. *Mimetic triangles of desire*

One of the more intuitive ways to approach Girard's theory of mimetic desire is to return to the birthing room and observe the numerous coordinated interactions that occur, including the newborn's interactions with doctors, nurses, and caregivers. Almost immediately, the infant's initial cries begin to subside as it engages with those around it. Research by scholars like Andrew Meltzoff (2011) has shown that imitation occurs astonishingly early, within just 40 minutes of birth. A doctor protrudes their tongue, and the infant imitates the doctor's gesture. But how does the infant know how to imitate or mirror others? How does such cross-modal matching occur? Like the rhythms of the heart and breath, the tendency to imitate appears to be an innate self-other organizing system that is automatic and operating well before self-reflective agency comes online. Imitation is not learned; it is involuntarily lived from the start (Meltzoff [2011]).

Scholars widely recognize mimesis as one of the oldest and most foundational concepts in Western thought, noting that its usual translation as «imitation» fails to capture its complexity. Mimesis is an exceptionally protean thematic complex extending far beyond simple notions of imitation as representation, emulation, copying, performance, or miming (Gebauer, Wulf [1995]). For Girard and those aligned with his work, mimesis refers more to an immanent, embodied, coordination of individuals through contagious inductions of shared mental, emotional, affective, somatic, and psychic states. It is not an isolated cognitive or biological function but an interindividual force that links us through imitation. Girard's first major insight is that desire itself is mimetic (1966); his second is that mimetic desire rivalries, conflicts, and violence ranging from personal disputes to international confrontations².

Girard's theory of mimetic desire radically challenges any theory of brain, psyche, mind, body, self, identity, subjectivity, or intersubjectivity premised on a closed, self-contained subject, even those psychoanalytic frameworks that acknowledge the influence of the other and the Other. Instead, Girard posits a structurally open subject, akin to the Greek concept of the *holon*: a whole in and of itself that is simultaneously part of larger wholes. Replacing the individual as the irreducible unit of study, Girard (1987) proposes the term *interindividual* – a neologism that captures the self-as-other, or *holon*: an open system shaped and sustained through ongoing mimetic exchanges with others.

2 Although Freud encountered the nature of mimetic desire early on through his exposure to hypnotism in Paris, he ultimately disavowed its interindividual reality, opting instead to relocate desire from external models to an internal unconscious. Hypnosis and post-hypnotic suggestion had revealed how individuals unknowingly act on desires implanted by others, and that our fundamental way of being in the world is unconscious of mimetic desire.

This view of the subject distinguishes Girard's understanding of desire from Freud's, whose psychoanalytic system retains the Romantic assumption that desire arises spontaneously within the individual and is directed toward intrinsically desirable objects. By contrast, Girard's theory of mimetic desire holds that individuals do not desire spontaneously, nor are objects inherently desirable. Instead, desire takes a triangular form wherein a prestigious model of desire residing at the apex of the structure mediates the individual's desire in the lower left corner for an object in the lower right corner. The individual unconsciously imitates the model's desire for the object because the contagious nature of desire makes the object glow with an illusory, enchanted value (Girard [1966]).

If mimetic desire and its triangular structure seem doubtful, consider our world of "influencers", where economists and marketers understand that commodities appeal through models of desire, and recall Michael Jordan's promotion of Hanes underwear. Despite having no direct connection to the product, Jordan, as the model of desire, makes Hanes more desirable than, say, Fruit of the Loom. His mediating influence casts the mimetic spell of enchantment that manifests as a fantasy that moves consumers: «I will be like Mike».

The relevance of Girard's mimetic theory lies in showing that the attractive force of mimetic desire simultaneously drives rivalry, conflict, and violence (Girard [1966]; [1977]; [1987]). Resource-based theories claiming that fulfilling everyone's needs will eliminate conflict overlook what every parent knows from experience: in a room of thirty identical toys, if René becomes Jacques' model of desire, Jacques will only want the toy René holds. As both reach for the same object, conflict will ensue. Mimetic desire becomes mimetic rivalry.

Lacan and Girard's accounts of desire diverge on this point. For Lacan, the symbolic order creates a gap where a once real or fantasized object is missing, and the opaque sense of lack that Lacan equates with desire emerges in this gap. For Girard, desire is an immanent, embodied, process-oriented, interindividual dynamic that is becoming and propagates. Whereas Freud said libido is sticky, Girard says desire is contagious. It is infraconscious, self-organizing, and spreads through mechanisms that induce feedback loops that circulate around a model of desire whose prestige bestows illusory value upon objects that promise an enhancement of being through their possession.

What makes mimetic rivalry so insidious is that each participant remains unaware they are imitating the other. Underneath the seemingly straightforward pursuit of an object is an unconscious exchange of desire. As model and imitator converge on the same object, their reciprocal imitation deepens as each are unwittingly shaped by the other's desire.

Their rivalry for the object intensifies. The model of desire becomes the obstacle to the object, just as the imitator becomes the rival to the model. The object fades in importance, and attention shifts to the rivalry. Each have become each

other's source of desire and its obstruction. Their mutual fascination is their mutual frustration, and the destruction of the rival rather than the acquisition of the object, becomes the ultimate aim.

Those caught in mimetic rivalry cannot see the spiral they are in. Each mirrors the other yet remains convinced their hostility is justified, their defensive retributions right and necessary. But they are caught in feedback loops of mimetic desire that has transformed into mimetic rivalry and escalated to mutual annihilation. As Paul Dumouchel (2015) shows, Girard's mimetic theory explains the mechanisms and processes driving murderous violence, from family feuds like the Capulets and the Montagues to international conflict, nuclear escalation, and genocide ([Girard]: 2010). Global politics is, as Jean-Michel Oughourlian (2012) observes, mimetic rivalry on an international stage.

5. Norms, habits, and socially discursive practices

Girard (1987) also identifies the power of mimetic desire and rivalry as deeply embedded within communal, institutional, and political structures, where groups form around shared aspirations for certain goods, ideals, or virtues. Psychoanalytic institutes and discourse, for instance, often center on a psychoanalyst whose perceived prestige elevates them as an idealized figure who appears to embody the self-sufficiency candidates feel they lack. Freud, Lacan, and their respective circles provide prominent illustrations of this dynamic, as the communities around them embody and transmit the values, behaviors, and frameworks they promoted. Although such analysts are often regarded as inimitable, their status depends on their followers' imitation. Their prestige is continually reaffirmed through their disciples' repetition of their theories, clinical styles, and institutional models. In this way, mimesis and mimetic desire not only establish and sustain the model psychoanalyst but also underwrites psychoanalytic institutions, communities, ethics, theories, traditions, and practices (Borch-Jacobsen [1988]). Mimesis thus operates as the silent but enduring force of psychoanalytic transmission, preserving and reproducing its distinct world.

While this example drawn from psychoanalysis is heuristic, the mimetic process it reveals applies broadly across historical and cultural contexts. Every person is born into pre-existing social formations that are composed of dense, dynamic networks. Within these relational networks, who we take as models matters less than the fact that these models are themselves shaped by unconscious imitation. Models of desire do not stand outside the norms and practices but mediate them precisely because they are already mediated through mimetic repetition. Lacan's focus on symbolic mediation leaves unanswered the more foundational question of *how* we come to desire according to the Other's desire. It is the involuntary, embodied, affective, and contagious nature of mimesis that

explains how subjects are interpellated into the social order and how that order reproduces itself through the protean iterations of mimesis (Garrels [2011]).

Although the desire of the other in the mirror stage is thought to shape the self, and the desire of the Other expressed through language or the signifier is thought to structure the subject in the Symbolic, both the mirror and the symbolic are forms of mimesis. Mimesis is the condition of possibility for the imaginary relation; without it, the mirror stage collapses. Likewise, the symbolic order is not the origin of mimesis but its effect (Derrida [1988]). The chain of signifiers, the field of representation, and the symbolic order all emerge from, are sustained by, and operate through mimesis. Lacan conceives the unconscious as a repository of the Other's representations, but mimesis operates more broadly – within, without, and beyond symbolic mediation. To say the unconscious is structured as a language presupposes language as a ground when in fact language and the unconscious are a mimesis: systems of deferrals, repetitions, and representations sustained by unconscious imitation. Mimesis is the deeper mechanism that precedes and generates all the Lacanian structures: the self, language, the unconscious, the real, imaginary, and symbolic orders. It isn't a feature of these; it is their condition of possibility *and* their mode of operating. The Lacanian system does not ground mimesis; mimesis grounds the Lacanian system.

In her essay examining Girard, Freud, Judith Butler, and Lacan, feminist theorist Iwona Janicka (2015) refers to gender as a privileged illustration of how mimesis generates a range of seemingly natural effects. Through acts continuously imitated and reiterated, cultural and social layers accumulate, congealing into what appears as innate or self-evident truths. Such ongoing repetitions, observable across all societies and historical moments, produces the illusion of fixed entities such as sexual drive, masculinity, and femininity. Even *Being*, Janicka contends, is not inherent but formed through continual repetitions, becoming a mimetic sedimentation that gives the impression of essence. Her point is not so much that individuals actively choose to adopt the norms, behaviors, and discursive frameworks that constitute the unconscious and the social order, but that these patterns persist through unwitting imitation. Gender norms exemplify this process as embodied patterns repeating across time and space. The more frequently a particular gendered style repeats, the more natural, inevitable, or essential it seems. Thus, whether one identifies as cisgender or transgender, gender performance is less a matter of choice than of embodying the cumulative effects of repeated mimetic practices³.

- 3 Judith Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes the reiterative and citational nature of gender norms, whereas (in my opinion) Girard's theory of mimetic desire provides a deeper account of why individuals are drawn to particular gendered performances in the first place. Gender is not only constructed through repeated performances; it is also the object of mimetic desire, mediated through models whose gestures, attributes, and recognizability confer social value.

6. *The policing I*

If this is so, what kind of identity are we really referring to? What can gender identity mean if a social order has been forming us since before birth and regulating us through norms, disciplining us with routines, and policing us through institutional practices? French Structuralism taught that the basic element of identity is difference. Coke is Coke because it is not Pepsi. Psychoanalysts are defined against psychotherapists. And men are men because they are not women. Identities and the communities we affiliate with rely on recognizable differences that are stable enough to maintain their coherence. For Girard, however, the organizing principle is not difference but mimesis: the individual subject and its identity are ultimately inseparable from the models of desire that shape them. To claims of originality or meaningful difference, Girard seems to shrug: we are all ants in a pile, and our differences are not truly meaningful. And to declarations of radical alienation or separation along the lines of «there is no sexual relationship», Girard replies, «to choose to be oneself is to choose to be the Other» (Girard, Anspach [2004]: 28).

Our unconscious imitation of others is so pervasive that we never truly encounter ourselves as the evanescent reference states that we are, continually reconstituted through mimetic repetitions. Even the deeply felt experience of becoming what Winnicott (1965b) calls a *true self* is not a spontaneous emergence from within but the result of repeatedly aligning with another's desire for non-compliant spontaneity. Likewise, the process of becoming a "real" gendered self is inseparable from the unconscious imitation of the gendered behaviors, gestures, desires, and expressions of others. The individual subject is internally shaped – psychically and affectively – by the internalization of multiple gendered others such that no gender identity is ever fully self-contained or identical to itself.

Because the mimetic mechanism operates across all individual and social systems, no person, practice, or structure exists outside its reach. Embodying and channeling social norms, including those tied to gender, is less a matter of choice than a compulsory process of production. Yet, as Janicka ([2015]: 48) notes, this compulsion is not absolute. The force of mimesis shapes the individual, but does not fully determine it.

Each of my transgender analysands share a common experience. Conforming to the gender identity assigned at birth – by parents, doctors, and other early models – eventually became unlivable. At some point, that identity could no longer be sustained. Yet, this is not a uniquely transgender experience. Both cisgender and transgender individuals live with the fact that external models have shaped their innermost desires. To varying degrees, we are all subject to the gaze of those we imitate, a gaze internalized that becomes a policing eye

that, in extreme cases, demands conformity, sameness, and equivalence while condemning queerness and expressions of gender and sexuality deemed deviant and therefore contemptible.

The internalized gaze of cisgender heteronormativity sustains its dominance by installing fear and threatening punishment for anyone who dares to dis-identify or transgress the arbitrarily constructed laws of sex, gender, and desire. And there is no absolute escape from this predicament. We perceive the model and its images look back, often without our conscious awareness. They observe, judge, and condemn even as they form us through those judgments. We are made in the image of our gods, and those gods, however invisible, police us from within.

Consequently, one way to understand the alarming rates of self-harm and suicide in the transgender population is to see the extreme physical and psychic distress that manifests as gender dysphoria, as a breakdown in the primary model – self relationship. In my clinical experience, each transgender analysand I have worked with has had to transform the internalized, policing gaze of the model that once governed their identification with an assigned gender. From this perspective, the severe depression, anxiety, and self-harm that often accompany the pre-transition body can be understood as the psychic and somatic consequences of disintegrating identifications, especially with models who refuse to recognize, let alone affirm, the multiplicity of desires that constitute transgender desires and bodies. These divergent desires disrupt the model's narcissistic grip. The term "gender dysphoria" barely captures the gravity of this experience: a gravitational pull toward subjective collapse as the psyche and body severs ties to the primary model's gaze, which until then had regulated and coordinated the individual's sense of self.

7. Repetitions breaking beyond

If, as Girard contends, we are thoroughly mediated by mimesis, mimetic desire, and mimetic rivalry, then how is it possible to break from the pervasive norms, habits, and practices that constitute the social order? How can we disentangle from the models of desire that shape and mediate who we are to create something genuinely new? Strangely, or perhaps inevitably, the answer lies in mimesis itself. Janicka observes that every act of mimesis is inherently asymptotic. Each imitation or repetition is marked by structural failure. Perfect imitation is impossible because mimetic acts unfold in time and across space. «Gaps and fissures», she writes,

inevitably arise between socially prescribed sexual and gender norms of identity and the actual, lived *approximations* to those norms. It is within this space, between the standard and its embodied performance, that possibilities for gender variation and transformation

emerge. This gap reveals a constitutive but productive failure at the heart of all gender identity. (Janicka [2015]: 49)⁴

Thus, the same mimetic repetitions that produce and stabilize gender norms, habits, and practices also destabilize them. Because mimesis is not closed or static but marked by an internal discontinuity that simultaneously generates sameness and difference, it is an engine of variation. Mimetic repetition ensures that the norms of the social order can always be disrupted, refused, and reconfigured – within gender and beyond it.

8. *Communal and individual identity: the scapegoat*

If the ubiquity of mimesis means identity is neither fixed nor self-originating but is always mediated through models of desire, then how does the social order, which depends on stable enough differences to sustain recognition, keep from unravelling? Our identities and communities rely on recognition⁵, and without recognizable differences, identities, collectives, and group affiliations collapse into indistinction. Again, what is Coke once it cannot be distinguished from Pepsi? What are psychoanalysts if their difference from psychotherapists disappears? What remains of Israelis if they are no longer defined against Palestinians? And what becomes of cisgender identity if it is no longer legible as distinct from – or opposed to – transgender identity?

For identity and recognition to function within the symbolic system, there must be clear enough distinctions between what is real and unreal, imaginary and symbolic, original and copy, and natural and artificial. Without these differentiations, the binary system collapses. Within this logic, accepting the cisgender body as natural, original, and normal positions the transgender body as mere imitation, as fake, phony, or copy. The transgender body is thus devalued as a replica of the assumed “real” cisgender body and identity, which is cast as authentic and original – a non-imitation. But is it? Models are always representations, and cisgender bodies and identities are no exception. The “natural” cisgendered body is already a replica, a duplicate, a copy, an imitation. And the reproductive realities of birth affirm as much. It is the mimic, its supposed authenticity nothing more than a manufactured construct, reproduced – quite literally – by a (m)Other.

- 4 Girard’s mimetic theory also emphasizes that the same mimetic tendencies and processes that generate variation also give rise to rivalry and conflict. Gender norms are not only repeated, they are enforced and policed through antagonistic responses to perceived threats, deviations, or failures in imitation.
- 5 This is one reason why subversion, though possible, is not welcomed by the social order. It exposes the fragility of the distinctions that uphold identity and invites mimetic crisis.

Against this backdrop, René Girard's mimetic theory helps explain the disproportionately high violence faced by transgender individuals, as some see transgender people as erasing the very distinctions on which the cisgendered social order relies on. Natural/unnatural, real/fake, male/female, masculine/feminine, biology/gender, true/false, essence/appearance, natural/imitation – the transgender person's apparent *indifference to such differences* becomes the marker that some groups find threatening and fear-inducing. Those who transition genders are accused precisely for embodying a disregard for the differences deemed necessary for the conservation of the social order.

Girard's insight, then, is that hostility arises less from a difficulty with difference and more from an unconscious mimetic identification. Transgender people become targets precisely because they are too close, too similar, too much alike their cisgender counterparts. The transgender body exposes that even cisgender identity, with its supposed difference to transgender identity, is constructed and dissolving. In other words, what is "wrong" with transgender individuals is precisely that there is nothing wrong. They are a mimesis of cisgender life.

If anything, transgender individuals are made to signify an ambiguity that marks them as a pharmakon: both a remedy and threat, scapegoat and sacrifice (Girard [1977]; [1986]; [1987]). Throughout human history, images, imitations, mirrors, twins, ghosts, *Doppelgänger*, and other doubles that disrupt fixed identity by blurring or collapsing distinctions have been feared and cast out. More recently, homosexuals and cross-dressers occupied this role. Today, transgender people are similarly positioned as «monstrous doubles». What designates them as such is not any inherent trait but the indifference to difference they are said to embody, a quality recalling the timeless figures central to archaic sacrificial rituals who were accused of dissolving boundaries and thus made the target of collective fear and sacrificial violence (Girard [1977]; [1987]).

When undifferentiation threatens to disintegrate the recognizable differences between male and female, right from wrong, and inside and outside that are said to uphold and stabilize the social order, it is believed that those differences must be reconstructed to ward off the looming disintegration of the social order. According to Girard, this process involves selecting and marking one element within an undifferentiated space, assigning it an arbitrarily fabricated difference, and expelling it. The expulsion, or even murder, of bodies embodying indifference to socially enforced distinctions re-establishes the first opposition on which the community regenerates itself: difference as such in the form of us versus them. The sacrificed victim lying dead on the outside also reasserts the boundary between inside and outside. The violent marking and killing of transgender people reinforces spatial divisions while also securing temporality: a before and after marked by the event of their death, and a here distinguished from there, where the body lies. Whatever accusation is attributed to the victim becomes the

foundation for renewed laws, prohibitions, and the system of morals and ethics that will guide future behaviors and communal norms.

At the heart of being human lies a fundamental madness: expelling and destroying those who, in truth, are not meaningfully different to fabricate the illusions of difference that sustain identity and community. Girard's mimetic theory reveals this sacrificial process as the foundation of every identity and society, a process in which something is cast out from within an undifferentiated field to generate a differential order. Girard's account of this mechanism at the social level finds its parallel at the individual level in Freud's account of the psyche's formation through primal repression. Unlike Lacan, who locates identity within the subject's misrecognition in the mirror stage and its submission to the symbolic order, Girard emphasizes the externalized, communal violence that generates identity through collective violence vented on a scapegoat. Where Lacan emphasizes psychic structure, Girard exposes the social mechanisms by which communities forge difference through violence to give birth to structure – both psychic and otherwise. That order, in turn, misrecognizes both itself and what it has expelled. When identities depend on the negation of another, they are ultimately as imaginary as they are lethal. And still, the real traumatic kernel is that even as we cling to the differences that define us, it is the unbearable sameness that we cannot accept.

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The Sir George Williams University Protests as Embodied Politics of Traversal of the Fantasy

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Abstract. The Sir George Williams University protests occurred in Montreal, Canada between January-February 1969. The uprising was one flashpoint in a networked anti-colonial revolt comprising Quebec nationalist, Black Power, and pan-Caribbean elements. But were the acts of choreographed and impromptu solidarity performed during the protest enough to break through ideological partisanship and emotionally embedded identifications to produce a multi-racial left-wing bloc? The answer to this question is pressing for contemporary political theory debates over the models and capabilities of transnational left-wing politics. This paper draws on archival research to read the protests for their embodied political practices that sustained a cross-identification coalition. The paper turns to psychoanalytic political theory to explain how the political logic articulated by the protests is characterized as a ‘traversal of fantasy’. In this final sense, the paper aims to develop case-analysis of how the political practices of traversal of the fantasy enable cross-ideological left-wing coalitions.

Keywords. Sir George Williams University, Black Power, Quebec, left-populism, transnationalism, traversal of the fantasy.

1. *Introduction*

In Montreal, Canada on January 29th, 1969, a coalition of Caribbean, Black Canadian, and Quebecois students began an occupation of the computer center of Sir George Williams University (SGW) (Eber [1969]: 27-30; Shum [2015]: 262). The core issue was maltreatment at SGW, a microcosm of the hostility and racism Black and Caribbean people experienced in Montreal (Austin [2013]: 135). Among the protesting students were future leaders of Canadian and Caribbean society. Together, they challenged university administration to guarantee the rights and respect deserved.

The SGW protests featured in a procession of direct actions, intellectual exchanges, and political uprisings that I call «The Long Montreal Revolt»¹ (LMR) (Kleinberg [2025]). Between 1963-1976, a transnational network of activist and militant groups emerged across Britain, Canada, the Caribbean and the United States. The network intertwined and united the Quebec sovereignty, Black Power, and Caribbean anti-colonial movements and presented a transnational challenge to the post-colonial liberalism and hegemony of North Atlantic states (Austin [2013]; Fournier [1984]; Mills [2010]). While a fundamentally fluid and porous political phenomenon, the Long Montreal Revolt provides a name to index how the granular and intimate connections between people, groups, events, and geographies gave shape to a novel anti-colonial identification². Presenting more than a strategic or pragmatic calculus of mutual interests and aims, the actors in the LMR entangled ideas, ideologies, bodies, communal spaces, and political movements across race, geography, and national identity. Together they consolidated a network and an identification defined by solidarity in anti-colonial struggle.

This paper engages with the Sir George Williams University Protests as a key event in the LMR to intervene in contemporary political theory debates over the future of transnational left-wing politics (Kamola, Calkivik [2024]). The global populist moment of the 2010's has rescinded (Venizelos, Stavrakakis [2022]) and left-wing and transformative politics needs new inspiration. Discourse Theory, the intellectual force behind the 2010's left-populist surge (Mouffe [2018])" remains a productive philosophy for grounding left-wing politics.

Left-populism must attune to a post-foundational and cosmopolitan account of radical democratic theory as a guiding horizon (Kleinberg [2023]). Unfortunately, initial writings on transnational left-populism have so far remained largely introductory, conceptual and limited to Western Europe (Moffitt [2017];

1 LMR captures the transnationalism and ideological diversity of this North Atlantic movement compared to the archetypal term for Quebecois politics in the 1960s, the "Quiet Revolution".

2 Montreal provided a gravitational center to the network's orbit and is a convenient lens for analyzing the case but should not be understood as the unilateral geographic determinant of the movement.

Panayotu [2021]). Developing a more situated understanding of left-wing transnationalism is vital.

The LMR is productive for reanimating left-wing transnationalism because the historical record and political-theoretical accounting of the LMR are underdeveloped and underappreciated. As David Austin ([2013]: 130) notes about the SGW protests, they are remembered as a «moment of academic racism in the form of a professor who deliberately failed Black students, and a university administration that turned its backs on the students that filed the complaint against the professor», rather than as an element of a transnational movement that gathered and aligned diverse identities. Indeed, radical political theory has often overlooked the transnational connection between the Black Power, Caribbean, and Quebecois movements of the 1960s (Di Donato, Fulla [2023]). These histories are typically considered as geographically and ideologically isolated (e.g. Slate [2012]). Likewise, populism studies is guilty of paying almost no attention to the Black Atlantic and the Black Radical Tradition (Eklundh, Tavares Furtado [2022]), despite innovative steps by Black Radical Tradition scholars to adopt Discourse Theoretical concepts (Dawson [2013]) politics, and civil society. African Americans have been in the vanguard of progressive social movements throughout American history, but they have been written out of many histories of social liberalism. Focusing on the 1920s and 1930s, as well as the Black Power movement, Dawson examines successive failures of socialists and Marxists to enlist sympathetic blacks, and white leftists' refusal to fight for the cause of racial equality. Angered by the often outright hostility of the Socialist Party and similar social democratic organizations, black leftists separated themselves from these groups and either turned to the hard left or stayed independent. A generation later, the same phenomenon helped fueled the Black Power movement's turn toward a variety of black nationalist, Maoist, and other radical political groups. The 2008 election of Barack Obama notwithstanding, many African Americans still believe they will not realize the fruits of American prosperity any time soon. This pervasive discontent, Dawson suggests, must be mobilized within the black community into active opposition to the social and economic status quo. Black politics needs to find its way back to its radical roots as a vital component of new American progressive movements. The most productive scholarship on the LMR therefore has come from Black Studies scholars researching across the North Atlantic (Austin [2013]; Mills [2010]; Gowland [2022]).

To advance the theory and strategy of left-populism, this article revisits the SGW protests to identify political practices that enable psychodynamics of multidimensional political identification. The article draws on archival research conducted at McGill University, the University of Quebec at Montreal, and Concordia University Special Collections. The article makes three productive claims: (a) The SGW protests exemplify the political logic (Glynos, Howarth [2007]:

143) of «traversal of the fantasy», a significant process identified by psychoanalytic theory that prefigures novel political identifications. Traversal of the fantasy relaxes and “opens” subject’s static identifications – like party affiliation, nationality, or racialized identity – to the fundamental contingency of identity (Žižek [2002]: 19-21). Expositing the traversal of the fantasy as the overarching political logic emanating from the SWG protests is instructive for thinking about how to coordinate transnational, multi-racial, and cross-ideological left-coalitions in the contemporary moment. (b) The SGW protests provide a repertoire of interpersonal organizational practices, such as sit-ins, protest ensembles, and bodily acts of civil disobedience that are productive for orchestrating a politics of traversal of the fantasy. As a repertoire, these practices translate traversal of fantasy from a complex, descriptive theory into an embodied component of populist strategy. (c) Despite the complicated legacy and ultimate defeat of the LMR, the SGW protests offer an inspiring political horizon (or cultural discourse) important for instructing future politics. The works of media, such as films, plays, and documentaries memorializing the SGW protests present a «counter-logic» (Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 194) a lucid discourse where the protean realities of the movement become consolidated as a touchstone with which to orient future left-populisms.

2. The political theory of identifications: discourse theory and traversing the fantasy

For political theorists of radical and transformative politics, the question of movement unity and identification is crucial (Laclau [2005]; Dean [2016]; Mouffe [2018]). In the mid-20th century, radical political theory struggled with the prospect that Communist revolution had been impeded by the dual workings of state repression and a late-capitalist monoculture. Discourse Theory is a significant innovation in this tradition, emerging as a «post-Marxist» (Laclau, Mouffe [1985]) effort to theorize the semiotic, affective, and practice-based dimensions of political ontology in response to the transformations brought about by the long 1960s and the rise of new social movements in the early 1980s (Laclau, Mouffe [1985]; Glynos, Howarth [2007]; De Cleen et al. [2024]). Discourse Theory illuminates how social and political practices create emotional relationships between actors, identities, and organizations, an aspect that is crucial for understanding the stability of political coalitions (Laclau, Mouffe [1985]: 99). This analysis is predicated on the post-foundationalist and post-structuralist thesis that no social-semiotic structure or institution is naturally fixed. Rather, all identity is discursively mediated and all identifications must be politically and ontologically articulated (Laclau, Mouffe [1985]: 121; Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 109). The task of radical actors, or movements, becomes to connect varying

practices and symbols in the discursive field in emotionally galvanizing and relatable ways such that novel and potent assemblages form that contest and assert themselves on the status quo. The social meaning of these assemblages are never pre-given but become retroactively mediated and identifiable through discursive articulations (Laclau [2005]: 111). Therefore, while social, cultural, and political institutions provide semi-stable contexts for communication and meaning, their codes, rules, and practices are all ontologically contingent as the operations of articulation and hegemony engrain and maintain a discursive regime.

As Discourse Theory has matured, the theorization of the individual subject's envelopment in the discursive world has progressed through Lacanian psychoanalysis and the concepts of desire, fantasy, ideology, and identification (Stavrakakis [2007]; Glynos, Howarth [2007]; Glynos [2011]). Building on this turn to Lacan, Discourse Theory has further deepened its critical stance toward stable or essential identities, theorizing instead how the Lacanian "split-subject" engages in *identification* through the psychodynamic concepts of desire and fantasy (Stavrakakis [2007]: 69-71). All subjective identifications are structured through (ideological) discourses, that while never completely fixed, envelop and orient the way the subject receives *jouissance* (enjoyment) by investing in and pursuing the discourse's fantasmatic objects of desire (Glynos [2001]; Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 155). That is, in traditional Lacanian psychoanalysis desire is always desire for the *objet petit a*, the positivization of the subject's ontological lack in both identity and fulfillment (often metaphorized in the scene of the child's separation from the mother) (Glynos [2001]: 201). Discursive fantasies orient and structure the trajectory of the subject's desire and pursuit of this fulfillment, naming, and assigning in socio-symbolic terms, the "content" of objects of *jouissance* (the Lacanian *partial objet*) (Stavrakakis [2007]: 75-77).

Subsequently, ideology names the "grip" or "pull" that sustains the identification; the fantasy structure's complex emotional economy and promise of enjoyment-to-come as the subject pursues desired objects keeps the subject enthralled and stabilized in their identification (Glynos [2001]: 208). For example, nationalism is one such identification where the grip of fantasy is particularly strong (Kleinberg [2023]). The content defining or describing the nation's fulfillment changes over time – the national drama may shift from ethnic, linguistic, cultural, or historical criteria (Žižek [1993]: 213). What remains consistent, however, is the emotional force of the belief and commitment in the fulfillment of the mysterious thing represented by "the nation". In Žižek's analysis ([1993]: 203) this is because in nationalist (or national) identifications, "the nation" occupies the center of the fantasy, filling in the *objet petit a* and giving direction to desire. Fantasy provides identification with extreme staying power allowing them to remain resilient despite internal and external "shocks".

If identifications are resilient to change because of the grip of fantasies, what hope is there for forming coalitions *across* identifications? Discourse Theory's psychoanalytic tool kit provides one answer with the concept of traversal of the fantasy. Traversal of the fantasy was originally theorized by Lacan in clinical practice as the end stage of analysis, when the subject comes to recognize the contingency of their identification and learns to take *responsibility* for their fantasies (Žižek [2002]: 21). It is a subjective practice of critical self-reflection; of identifying one's relationship to fantasy and how the *jouissance* organized by the fantasy is a potent feature of one's life (Žižek [2002]: 22). Equally significant, a traversal of the fantasy calls for the subject to identify with the "Other" that is understood to block their fantasy – the group or entity the fantasy structures as the obstacle to *jouissance*. Žižek ([2002]: 91-95) explains this as a direct confrontation with our obscene imagination about the Other. One must come to terms with the structural role the "intrusive" "useless" or "evil" Other plays in the organization of our fantasy and *jouissance*. From this confrontation, we loosen our dependence on antagonism with the Other for our *jouissance* and form a solidarity with the Other reconciled with how they really are (Žižek [1993]: 214). We come to accept *both* the fundamental contingency of our identifications and to accept the role of *jouissance* in fantasy as the condition of a stable existence in reality; moreover with a mature understanding of the productive role of the Other (Žižek [2009]: 40) electronically inspired phantasms that cloud the ability to reason and prevent a true understanding of a world increasingly dominated by abstractions – whether those of digital technology or the speculative market. Into this arena, enters Žižek: equipped with an agile wit and the skills of a prodigious scholar, he confidently ranges among a dazzling array of cultural references – explicating Robert Schumann as deftly as he does John Carpenter – to demonstrate how the modern condition blinds us to the ideological basis of our lives.

The article maps and characterizes the practices that comprised the political logic of traversal of the fantasy articulated by the SGW protests (and the wider LMR). Political logic is an analytic concept utilized in Discourse Theory to illuminate how actors and movements exert agency, on an ontological level, describing the *quality* of political phenomena's assertion, contestation, or stabilization of power and hegemony (Laclau [2005]: 117; Glynos and Howarth [2007]: 143). Assessing the orchestration and articulation of a political logic requires characterizing the constitutive discursive practices through which actors assemble the symbols, bodies, material, social rituals, and affect of their campaigns. The political logic of traversal of a fantasy best depicts how the SGW protests transcended the emotionally-invested identifications of the individual factions that comprised the protest collective.

The article characterizes the practices of the SGW protestors as documented in archival sources and primary and secondary literature. Theoretically, the article attempts to “breakdown” and translate traversal of the fantasy – an admittedly complex and descriptive concept – into practices by drawing from Jodi Dean’s (2016) theorization of the contingent collective identity generated during crowds. Dean’s account of “crowd politics” – participation in protest assemblies, occupations, marches etc., offers an approximate demonstration of the embodied dimension of traversal of the fantasy. For example, Dean ([2016]: 58) describes how partaking in protest crowds renders a «political subjectivation [that] involves forcing this non-identity, making it felt» by the ensemble. Similarly, the SGW activists engaged their bodies in the heat of the protest, animating the years of prefigurative networking, critical study, and solidarity that permeated the LMR. This corporal articulation cultivated a reflexive psychological process of mutual recognition that allowed individual participants to identify with the role of “the other” in their own fantasy for political hegemony, the co-participant of another faction.

Two sets of bodily practices emerge from the SGW protest that help characterize a generalizable account of the political logic of traversal of the fantasy. First, bodily engagement naturalized and inculcated a shared political consciousness that was previously dormant, absent, or speculative. Second, intentional actions that threw bodies into kinetic or risky situations strengthened and fortified the social meaning of the protest as collective and anti-racist. The next section briefly describes the background of the Long Montreal Revolt and the Sir George Williams University protests before analyzing these practices.

3. The Sir George Williams Protests: networked revolt and practicing traversal of the fantasy

Montreal, Canada in French speaking Quebec province is both cosmopolitan and unique. Its geographical proximity to the United States’ northern border allows the easy exchange of American ideas while Canada’s place in the UK commonwealth has enabled post-colonial migration from the Caribbean (Forsythe [1971]: 50-55). The robust history of French settlement, and then domination by England, created a complex nationalism in the province. In the early 1960’s Quebec nationalism, long dormant, re-emerged in revolutionary form alongside the appearance of a newly (acknowledged) Black Power (Fournier [1984]; Austin [2013]).

Radical organizations like the *Rassemblement pour l'Indépendance Nationale* (RIN) called for territorial independence, an end to foreign (American) economic extraction, and the legal protection of the French language. Militant organizations, like the *Front de libération du Québec* (FLQ), operated clandestinely; partisans would drift between membership in legal, public-facing groups and extra-legal paramilitary groups (Fournier [1984]: 128). Intellectuals like Pierre Vallières and Charles Gagnon were the literary voice of this movement, providing a discourse for militants in the FLQ like Mario Bachand to express a mélange of Quebecois nationalism and Third Worldist anti-colonialism (Fournier [1984]: 171; Austin [2013]: 93). At the same time, Black political activism, organic in Canada since the slave trade, was strengthened in post-war demands for rights and equality (Austin [2013]: 72-73). Canadian Black Power politics surged with the civil rights and militant struggles happening in the United States and the influx of the Caribbean diaspora.

Sir George Williams University (SGW), now Concordia University, was housed in the Henry F. Hall Building in Downtown Montreal. By the late 1960s, SGW hosted a formidable clique of talented and politicized Caribbean students who would become future political and community leaders in both Canadian and Caribbean society (Austin [2013]: 59). For example, Anne Cools the future Canadian senator from Barbados, Joey Jagan the son of Guyana's President Cheddi Jagan, Rosie Douglass future Prime Minister of Dominica, Saint Vincent's Alfie Roberts and the Antiguan opposition leader Tim Hector, to name just a few, all studied or worked in Montreal during this period (Austin [2018]: 7-10). White Montreal student life was also inundated with left-wing political currents. In addition to the well documented flow of students into the RIN and the FLQ (Fournier [1984]: 124) McGill University archival records (MG 4319-01-018) document a wide spectrum of clubs, socials, protests, campus speakers, and lampooning commentaries from opposition to the Vietnam War, to Marxist-Leninist and Maoist parties.

The rise in the SGW student activists' identification with political discourses such as Caribbean anti-colonialism, Black Power, and Quebec nationalism is best exemplified by noting the series of conferences on these topics in the year preceding the protest.

In October 1968, Montreal hosted the Black Writers Congress (Austin [2018]) a global event bringing together Black Panthers, Caribbean intellectuals, Canadian Black Power activists, and leaders of the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ) (Forsythe [1971]: 63). At the Conference, Clarence Bayne, a professor at SGW and co-founder of the Montreal-based National Black Coalition of Canada, simultaneously captured the affective power of Black Power identification and its potential for driving factionalism, declaring, «We have a common humanity and a basic desire for freedom. However, Black people can-

not talk to white people until we have found our identity, until we have discovered where we want to go» (see also Austin [2018]: 14-15). In November 1968, the city hosted a major anti-Vietnam War conference marked by further meetings between the FLQ and the Black Panthers (Bloom, Martin [2016]: 268; Austin [2013]: 132; Fournier [1984]: 141). In December 1968, Rockey Jones the preeminent Black anglophone activist, organized a follow-up to the Black Writers Conference to focus on the specifics of Black Power in Canada in his home city of Halifax, Nova Scotia (Forsythe [1971]: 68). Many of the Caribbean leaders of the SGW protests, such as Philippe Fis-Aime and Rosie Douglass, attended some or all of these events (Eber [1969]: 53). Even the week of the SGW protests' culmination (February 11th, 1969) was capped by one of the most notorious FLQ bombings: the Montreal Stock Exchange on February 13th (Eber [1969]: 13). At the apex of heightened passions – with factions intently identifying with political-discourses like Quebecois nationalism, Black Power, and Caribbean anti-colonialism – a cross-racial and cross-ideological protest movement emerged.

In the spring of 1968, Black and Caribbean students collectively reported unfair treatment and racism by biology professor Perry Anderson to University officials³. The grievance bubbled over into the summer and the fall, as administrators began an investigation and clashed with the students over the procedure of the inquiry. After months of frustration, on January 29th of 1969, the students disrupted a faculty meeting on the case and led a sit-in and occupation of the University's computer center on the ninth floor of the Hall Building. Despite different origins, background pressures, identifications, and desires, the preceding years of LMR networking, activism, and exchange created prefigurative conditions for activists to orchestrate a multiracial and cross-ideological occupation. The protestors eventually arrested and criminally charged; Eber ([1969]: 7) places the figure as «forty-nine white, forty-one black, sixty male and thirty female... forty-four are Canadian and forty-six are foreigners» (Eber [1969]: 11).

4. Practicing bodily risk: kinesthesia, opening the gap in identity, and fantasizing with the other

On January 22nd, 1969, a few days before the occupation of the computer center began, two students broke into the University Vice-Principal's office to demand an apology for a letter he had written about Black and Caribbean

3 A cogent and impassioned explanation of the student's grievances can be found in a speech by student leader Kelvin Robinson. See Eber [1969]: 112.

students' capacity for violence. The pair sequestered the Vice-Principal until he drafted an apology; making such an impression that he filed kidnapping charges (Eber [1969]: 84-85). Such disobedient behavior, asserting control over and transgressing the predictable norms and hierarchies of the racialized academic space exemplifies the "risk taking" practices of the coalition's protest choreography. Physical confrontation, putting the body in shared situations of potential harm and provocation, had the effect of breaking down the participants' individual identifications with political discourses. Dean ([2016]: 107) attests to the effect of collective physical transgression in breaking down individual identification in her study of crowds. She explains how the collective "risky" kinesthesia creates an «exhilarating moment when a sense of individuality is obliterated as all the mediators of social interchange that maintain our separateness give way...» Moreover, as Foster ([2003]: 410) helpfully notes, the potency of physical disobedience does not stem from some quasi-spiritual property of the body – the body itself is not a direct channel for interfacing with identification – but the prolonged, repetitive experience of practice cultivates psychological reflection and openness. The more repetitive the practice, the more sustained the effect.

Amongst the first wave of protestors to ascend to the ninth floor to occupy the computer center was McGill University Professor Stanley Gray⁴ (Eber [1969]: 94). To underscore how big of a step Gray was taking in the hybridization and breakdown of ideological barriers between movements, consider that only a month after SGW, on March 28th, Gray would convene, in partnership with the FLQ's Mario Bachand, one of the largest student protests in Quebec history, Operation McGill Francais. McGill Francais demanded the creation of additional (there were only two at the time) French-language universities and French-language autonomy in Quebec. The protest brought together 15,000 student demonstrators with 65,000 striking members of the *Conseil central des syndicats nationaux de Montreal* (CSN) labor union (Fournier [1984]: 153-54). For a committed Quebecois militant like Gray, so invested in the project of Quebec autonomy and especially *French-language* education, to put his body on the line in an occupation centered on the Black, immigrant, and predominantly *anglophone* student experience is a tremendous showing of solidarity that cuts across the immediacy of ideological identification.

CSN members were also some of the rowdiest participants in the SGW protests. In the thick of the occupation, CSN members occupied the streets outside the Hall building, physically confronting racist hecklers in the crowd

4 Gray was a leader in the Quebec nationalist and labor movements and would later lead the FLQ aligned group the *Front de liberation Populaire* (Fournier [1984]: 156).

and amplifying the corporeal presence of the occupation (Mills [2010]: 167-68). The riskiness and provocativeness of the CSN's and the white Quebecois labor movement's willingness to be confrontational, and even violent, in support of the SGW protests cannot be understated. This was, after all, a time in Montreal that, due to the ongoing attacks of the FLQ, paranoia about terrorism and armed cells was high. The CSN under the leadership of Michel Chartrand had adopted a Marxist discourse and militant union tactics, drawing even greater public scrutiny (Mills [2010]: 164-165). Indeed, after the FLQ's bombing of the Montreal Stock Exchange on February 13th, Chartrand issued a fiery rebuttal to moral condemnations of the Quebec autonomy movement's use of violence (Fournier [1984]: 151). The shared confrontation seemed to have the effect of loosening the strict contours of the individual movements, interweaving their struggles and opening doors to not just future organizing, but the symbolic identity and meaning of the movements.

The CSN would continue to take to the streets to support the SGW protestors following the uprising, issuing press releases, demonstrating publicly, and contributing financially to the students' legal defense (Mills [2010]: 168). For example, Fournier ([1984]: 154; *my italics*) describes how a month later, in retaliation for the police harassment of McGill Francais participants, «A commando group of students and taxi drivers launched a lightning counterattack with Molotov cocktails against the *McGill computer centre* and several targets in Westmount». The choice of targets, the McGill computer centre – a clear reference to the SGW protests – points to the collective hybridization of the network. We should read this kinetic action (and its symbolic reference to SGW) as characterizing the traversal of the fantasy. The Quebec nationalists identified with the fight of the Black and Caribbean “others”. The Black and Caribbean struggle for rights and recognition in Quebec, inherently alien if not an obstacle to the Quebec nationalist fantasy of autonomy, had been reconfigured into a fluid discourse of anti-colonialism and a space for new identifications. Similarly, during the trial of SGW protestors, many of the Black and Caribbean student defendants wore buttons and gave comments in support of McGill Francais while in court, illustrating a parallel act of «identifying with the other» (Eber [1969]: 271).

Finally, the embodiment of this «obliterated individuality» (Dean [2016]: 107) is well captured in a remarkable anecdote about the end of the SGW occupation. As the Montreal police breached the Hall building Eber ([1969]: 203) relates how «After breaking through the barricades they followed the students to the ninth floor. ... Constable Jean Legros asked if there was a leader he could talk to and he remembers that the occupiers all said together, “we’re all equal – there are no leaders”».

5. *Practicing Occupation: sit-ins and the collective openness of identification*

The occupation stage of the protest mainly transpired as a sit-in, a popular tactic of both the global civil rights and student movement of the period. The SGW protests, however, occurred in two stages, with the occupation only commencing after a passionate session of debate and deliberation. Foster ([2003]: 399) describes sit-ins as designed, «to block access or to insistently remind those in power of protestors' demands». This was certainly true, but the SGW sit-in also resembled an experiment in integrated, communal living. The occupants quickly developed autonomous practices and rhythms of living together. The prefiguring experiences of solidarity, the years of joint attendance at conferences, of reading groups, and socialization seemed to prepare the occupiers to act not just calmly, but strategically, choreographing the location of their racialized bodies in ways to heighten the communicative message of the protest and mitigate against violent responses.

On February 4th, five days after the protests began, the SGW affair had reached its boiling point. A mélange of 350 bodies mixed between students, community and international activists, faculty advisers, and journalist observers gathered in the mezzanine of the Hall building to debate the next course of action. The protests were on the cusp-of turning into an occupation. Powerful orations were delivered by the Black and Caribbean SGW student coalition. One of the original complainants against Professor Anderson, Kelvin Robinson, bellowed a challenge to the Canadian white student body to accept and live up to the moral universalism, of not just Western liberalism, but the 1960s radical spirit of emancipatory theory:

Remember, I didn't say it, but you said it. You said the Administration was incompetent. You said the Administration was bungling. What are you going to do about it? You're going to class, you're going to class. Business as usual. Go up into the cafeteria, play a whole set of cards, though nothing goin on. And then you want to come and tell the world, you are Canadian, and you're different from the Americans, and a man is a man's you don't care if he's colored, black, pink, green in blue, that's the song they always sing, I ain't got no prejudice against anybody, a man is a man. And now you have an opportunity here to show that a man is a man, and to show that despite the fact there's black people concerned, you're willing to fight on their side because their side is right, and what do you do?... (Eber [1969]: 119)

Rocky Jones, the prominent Canadian-born Black political activist had travelled from his home in Halifax to participate. In his speech, Jones continued Robinson's challenge to white masculinity, humanism, and willingness to act in the defense of ostensibly held beliefs in universalism and activism:

You see, I know that I am standing up here condemning white folks. You see most white folks are pansies. White men are pansies, because they won't even fight for white folks. They allow their own society to exploit their own people, and black people have become

the vanguard of the revolutionary movement to overthrow that whole thing that's exploiting everybody. You're pansies. (Eber [1969]: 126)

For the true believing radicals in the crowd, it was a challenge to act and correct the premise of their ideology – to be accountable to the universal struggle that militants such as those in the FLQ had expressed – to put their bodies on the line.

With the student speeches reaching an end, the second stage of the protest, the sit-in occupation commenced. The ensemble, spearheaded by Gray, rushed the stairs of the Hall building to the computer centre on the ninth floor to camp out, which they would do for the next week. While many of the main organizers of the protests, white and black, had activism experience or were members of thriving movements (for example Gray the FLQ-aligned nationalist and Fis-Aime the organizer of the Black Writers Conference), many of the white participants in the mass ensemble were unaffiliated and political novices galvanized to act by the circumstances and *through* their participation.

For example, a white student protestor, Richard Swift, explained he joined the occupation because he thought the university procedure demonstrated an authoritarian use of power even though he was generally skeptical of the racism charges against Anderson (Eber [1969]: 99). Explaining the composition of the occupiers, he stated plainly, «many among both the black and white students were simply issue-oriented – they agreed with the issue. They probably had vague liberal tendencies and became politicized as a result of their experiences» (100). Dennis Kay described his 'aspirations to be a communist' and the disparate political tendencies and sensibilities of the occupiers (190-192). Morris Lemire explained a «principled basis, a moral basis for the occupation. The students charged a professor with racism. There must have been something to the charge – the University was stalling. It looked as if the University was doing everything in its power to stall» (206). Continuing, Lemire celebrated a heightened political awareness learned from the occupation, «And we set a new base from which we can further the struggle against racism» (207). Finally, Mark Medicoff a left-wing but non-affiliated white student protestor described the politicizing effect of the protest in idealized if eloquent terms, «None of us ever had half as great an educational experience as the sit-in. I could read Malcom X and Stokely forever but I didn't understand until I touched the hand of a black man. It sounds kind of poetic, doesn't it?» (223).

Based on these accounts it seems that participating in the ensemble created a sustained opening in the occupiers' identifications. That is, simultaneously, the occupation destabilized individuals' political fantasies (a vague liberal sense of justice or a universal communism), loosening the bonds of their identification and heightening the possibility of a novel, collective identification (Dean [2016]: 58). At the same time, the practice of the occupation

encouraged individuals to recognize the legitimacy of their compatriots' political fantasies.

Subsequently, the occupiers developed routines and practices of life in sequence with this ethics of respect 'towards the other' in-line with a traversal of the fantasy. The computer center facility manager recalled the actions of the first group to entrench in the room, «they just sat down on the floor and talked» (Eber [1969]: 177). Alfie Roberts, a key activist, intellectual, and occupier closely mentored by CLR James later recalled how this counter-society,

confirmed for him James's views on the principle of self-organization. He recalled how the occupants had organized themselves in the computer centre, some doing security, others taking care of food, while still others monitored the computers to ensure they were kept in pristine working order... hundreds of people demonstrated in support of the students and, seemingly spontaneously, many of them lined up in front of the apartment of a supporter of the arrested occupiers so that they could make a contribution to a legal fund. (Austin [2013]: 142)

This sense of hybrid and mutual identification is certainly present in the speeches, writings, and reflections of the participants. Black protest participant LeRoi Butcher would include the Quebec autonomy struggle in a list of recent anti-colonial movements that were violently repressed. Sandwiched between descriptions of British intervention in Anguilla and Guyana, and Jamaica's militarization of its police, Butcher states, «Canada called out for law and order and instituted the War Measures Act to siffle the yearnings of a people for right to be masters in their own Quebec home»⁵ (Forsythe [1971]: 77). Professor Bayne perceived that the events were politicizing for both Black and White communities, «In the course of talking to black people, I find they are relating things that happened to them in the past and which they are now willing to bring out in the open... People are now willing to talk about these things» (Eber [1969]: 200). In the course of the occupation, partisans and political novices alike had achieved a prefigurative moment, a solidarity that sustained an openness in political identification.

6. Conclusion: media and reactivation, the sgw protests as cultural counter-logic

The LMR did not end in the abolition of racial capitalism and the nation-state system and bring forth an inter-regional socialist polity. The LMR was impeded

5 A reference to a popular Quebecois nationalist slogan «Maîtres chez nous», or masters of our own house.

by both the external forces of state policing and the internal dynamics of strategic and material limitations (Austin [2013]; Gowland [2022]). For the SGW activists, the protests culminated with a confrontation with riot police, a criminal trial, punitive immigration proceeding, and years of surveillance and counter-insurgency policing (Eber [1969]: 283-85; Forsythe [1971]: 98-102; Fournier [1984]: 119; Austin [2013]: 174; Kleinberg [2025]). Indeed, it was never guaranteed that the SGW protests would be celebrated as a landmark case of civil disobedience against racism in Canada, notwithstanding a landmark case in anti-colonial resistance (see Forsythe [1971]: 8-10). On March 31st, 1969 (a month after the protests), Dorothy Wills, on behalf of the civil rights organization the Canadian Conference Committee, would term the destruction of the computers and the violence inflicted on the students a “tragedy” and state the organization’s desire for a just and legal resolution to the conflict (F035-03-f57). In 1973, protest participant Kiven Tunteng ([1973]: 235) was cynical and pessimistic about the results, opining that the student activists had eroded their credibility with the Canadian public.

To fully appreciate and take inspiration from the political logic of traversal of the fantasy, and the constitutive practices, articulated by the SGW protests, the article proposes (re)interpretation and recounting of the events of SGW through the recent cultural and artistic forms (film, theatre, audio, poetry) that memorialize the event. Approached through Discourse Theory, these media discursive add a productive texture that retroactively (re)articulates and consolidates the political logic of the protest. Moreover, considering that the memory of radical political movements are always threatened by revisionism, assimilation, and strategic forgetting mediated by state counter-discourses (Kamola, Calkivik [2024]; Kleinberg [2025]) the social meaning and lessons produced from engaging the LMR must be (re)animated. Thus, engaging the political logic of the protest through these media works allows us, «to reactivate and make evident options that were foreclosed during the emergence of a practice... in order to show how the present configuration of practices relies on exclusions and to reveal the non-necessary character of the present social formation» (Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 155).

Media portrayals of the SGW protests capture and express the utopian potential latent in the moment. These works consolidate both the tensions and successes of the protests and solidify an account where the protests succeeded; where the traversal of the fantasy took place and impassioned yet factional groups opened themselves to new identifications. Discourse Theory names this articulation a «counter logic», a meta-discourse that synthesizes the protean or disconnected demands, sentiments, and actions illuminating an alternative political and social regime (Glynos, Howarth [2007]: 194). Reading the counter-logic of the SGW protests through these works of media opens

a discursive-vector or a “horizon of possibility” where it becomes possible to imagine the desired outcome to strategize and calculate the tactical steps necessary for its construction.

Indeed, retrospection on the protests began almost immediately after their culmination. Forsythe’s (1971) academic volume brought together essays written by the activists to understand and conceptualize the significance of the event. The event was also an organizing point for reflection and discussion amongst the radical left factions involved in the scene. A 20-year remembrance meeting brought together original activists with scholars to discuss the legacy and lessons of the time (C025-017-43/C4).

Contemporary testaments include a feature documentary (Shum [2015]), a CBC limited series [2023], podcast (CBC Radio [2021]) and play (Brown et al. [2024]). All highlight the multi-racial and transnational scaffolding that supported the demands of the Black Caribbean students in protesting the racism of the institution. The CBC series *Black Life: Untold Stories* (2023) zooms-in on a moment of *jouissance* in solidarity, as activists sheepishly describe in interviews the street-fight that took place outside the Hall building between the White Quebecois labor movement and the crowd of racist hecklers. An anecdote from the podcast series *ReCall* (2021) captures the vivid and striking tenor of optimism, passion, and hope the activists found in solidarity with one-another and how this meshing destabilized the fixity of their identifications. Phillipe Fis-Aime, the Haitian activist and organizer of the SGW protests narrates a meeting that took place in Montreal at the Black Writers Conference between Stokely Carmichael and Mario Bachand:

Philippe FilsAime: That was a very, very hot meeting, at the end of which Stokely made this remark. He said, this guy is either a fucking spy or he is the next fucking John Brown of North America. That’s what he said of Mario Bachand... For me, Mario Bachand was the next, the next, I don’t know, the next Trotsky, the next Fidel Castro of this country.

Host: The FLQ had made an impression and found allies. And it wasn’t long before its members would come calling on those new allies.

Moreover, the ending scene of Shum’s (2015) documentary strikes a more future-oriented and optimistic outlook. In a joyous ensemble, a collection of original protestors, their families, and contemporary anti-racism activists from Concordia University gather for a musical performance – symbolizing the potential for (or an inspiring fantasy of) harmony that can emerge from political action. In sum, these works of memory crucially (re)activate a discourse of radical democratic transnationalism that can serve as the horizon for contemporary left populism.

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Identification and Aesthetic Transgression in Populism: Toward a Queer Theory of Sublimation

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Abstract. This article rethinks the notion of identification in populism by linking psychoanalysis, aesthetics and queer theory. Against the widespread view that identification necessarily entails blindness or submission to authority, it proposes an emancipatory mode grounded in transgression, vulnerability, and openness to alterity. Conceiving populism as aesthetic transgression – a disruption of the boundaries of visibility – it revisits Freud and Lacan’s reflections on mass psychology and sublimation, while drawing on Arendt’s idea of aesthetic judgment and queer theory’s attention to indeterminacy and openness. Without denying the persistence of reactionary identifications that idealize authority, the article argues that sublimation, unlike idealization, sustains democratic plurality by keeping collective identifications open and incomplete. In this perspective, certain forms of populist identification may assume a queer or sublimatory dimension, fostering receptivity to difference and ethical decentering rather than closure – thus illuminating how aesthetic experience can underwrite more radically democratic relations to others.

Keywords. Psychoanalysis, mimetic theory, mimetic desire transgender, theory of imaginary.

For over a century, the notion of identification has been received in politics with suspicion. In Sigmund Freud, it emerges within the psychology of

the masses: a terrain of blind attachments, obedience to the leader, and the loss of critical sense. Much of the scholarship on populism has inherited this lens: to identify is, almost invariably, to dissolve into the collective and renounce democracy. Even in Ernesto Laclau – who claims the legitimacy of populism – identification is often read instrumentally, as a mere device for mass mobilization that nonetheless entails the abdication of critical spirit.

This article proposes a shift. Building on an aesthetic theory of populism developed within the field of critical populism studies, I seek to explore how its dialogue with psychoanalysis and queer theory can illuminate the possibility of an emancipatory form of identification – radically democratic in nature, not grounded in mastery or closure but in transgression, vulnerability, and openness to alterity. The argument unfolds in two movements. Part I introduces the aesthetic theory of populism and revisits, through the lens of psychoanalysis, the darker readings of mass identification, marked by phallic fantasies, leader sacralization, and the impoverishment of democratic plurality. Part II opens a different path: I examine the psychoanalytic notion of sublimation as a way to conceptualize radically democratic forms of identification. I argue that sublimation creates space for a debate on aesthetic judgement and for experiences of transgression that, inspired by subaltern studies and queer studies, displace us and incite an ethics of radical democracy.

1. *Identification and its specters*

1.1 *Bridging leaders and masses*

Over the last decade, I have been working in two critical fields: *critical populism studies* and *critical fantasy studies*. The first approaches populism not as a pathology to be dismissed or a model to be celebrated, but as a process of constructing political subjects. The second is concerned with the psychoanalytical dynamics of politics. Although I often conceive of them as intertwined, the reflections I develop in one of these fields are not always explicitly connected to the other. Recently, for example, I have been developing an aesthetic theory of populism – a conception of populism as aesthetic transgression. In this theme, psychoanalysis has been present in the background, informing my understanding of transgression and the dynamics of visibility that I explore later in this work, even if it has so far remained implicit in my publications. Here, by turning to the question of identification, I wish to make this affiliation explicit.

The central objective of my proposal – to conceive populism as aesthetic transgression – is to bridge a gap between two approaches that have long circulated in critical populism studies as fellow travelers but whose articulation remains insufficiently clarified: the discursive and the performative. The first, most prominently developed

by Laclau ([2005]: ix), understands that «the people» is not a pre-given sociological entity but a symbolic construction that emerges through its opposition to «the elites», and institutes new collective identities. The second, exemplified by Théo Aiolfi's work ([2022]: 6; [2025]: 138) and his notion of a «transgressive style», highlights the disruptive performances associated with populist leadership.

My proposal is to demonstrate how these two approaches can be integrated in a conceptually rigorous way. I do so by extending the notion of «transgression» beyond the performative gestures of leaders and relocating it within the field of aesthetics. In this perspective, populism is not confined to a matter of style but enacts an aesthetic transgression in Jacques Rancière's ([2000]: 12) sense of aesthetics as the *partage du sensible*. Aesthetics here is not an ornament or superficial veneer, but the very ground of politics itself. Rancière's account situates politics within what one could call a symbolic order, ruled by a grammar of visibility and sayability that defines what can be perceived, named, and thought. It is in this sense that politics is fundamentally aesthetic: politics is understood as a question of appearances – of what can and cannot be seen, of what is rendered audible or consigned to silence.

Populism is aesthetically transgressive because it enacts what Rancière ([2003]: 63) calls a disruption in the partition of the sensible. It shifts the boundary between the visible and the invisible in politics – a gesture that cuts across its emancipatory and reactionary forms alike. It does so in two complementary ways. First, by invoking «the people», it brings into view what Rancière ([1995]: 31) called the «part of no-part» – those whom Antonio Gramsci ([1934]: Q25 §1, 4) named the subalterns, whom Georges Bataille ([1933a]: 142) described as the heterogeneous, and whom Hannah Arendt ([1971]: 19, 29; [1958]: 115, 118, 201) referred to as worldless. To use Benjamin Arditi's ([2019]: 57) expression, the «exodus from invisibility» enacted by populism is disruptive, for the very appearance of such excluded, uncounted and even «object» groups reconfigures the coordinates through which politics operates (Butler [1990]: 23).

However, populist discourse enacts aesthetic transgression not only by invoking «the people» but also, as Aiolfi has rightly noted in our joint work, by speaking of «the elites» (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi [2025a]: 8). Politics is always a matter of visibility and invisibility, organized through mechanisms of silencing and domination. These mechanisms are themselves aesthetic, since they operate most effectively when they remain invisible and insidious. Exposing these dynamics by naming «the elites», populism makes their implicit grammar perceptible. In this sense, populism presents itself as a counter-hegemonic force: it not only ruptures established political styles and hegemonic mechanisms of silencing, but reconfigures the very boundaries of the sensible, reinscribing on the political stage subjects and conflicts that had been invisible and excluded.

When populism is conceived as aesthetic transgression that exposes and reconfigures what has been rendered invisible, a psychoanalytic affiliation be-

comes unavoidable. This is, first of all, because of the notion of the «real», situated at the margins of the symbolic order. Introduced early in Jacques Lacan's work and reformulated multiple times, the concept has served to describe psychotic ruptures, the structural lack that traverses the subject, traumatic breaks, the force of the drive, and even the material resistance of the signifier – its trace, its sound waves in themselves deprived of meaning yet affecting the body (Zicman de Barros [2026]: 17). Beneath this apparent multiplicity, however, a constant remains: the «real» designates an experience that eludes symbolic capture, something discourse cannot assimilate, exposing the fissures in the order that strives to impose signification. In political terms, it corresponds to what remains invisible or unspeakable within the existing order – the excluded elements that resist representation yet insist on returning. To think of populism as aesthetic transgression is, therefore, to situate it in those moments when the «real» erupts into and transforms the symbolic order, placing it under strain – and in shock.

From the entry of the invisible into the political scene, a second way in which psychoanalysis informs the theory of populism becomes clear: the centrality of desire. Contrary to Laclau's proposal, what underlies the populist experience are not only «demands» but also desire – understood as the desire for belonging and recognition (Zicman de Barros [2020]: 514). As Lacan ([1960a]: 802, 813; [1963]: 76-77) reminds us, desire is always the desire of the other: we desire to be desired. This movement is embodied above all in the gaze – we seek to capture the gaze of the other, to be seen and recognized. Populism, by rendering the invisible visible, provides precisely this place of recognition, establishing an affective bond that exceeds the mere discursive articulation of demands (Zicman de Barros [2022a]: 73–74).

Finally – and now more explicitly entering the theme of this text, identification – psychoanalysis reappears as the bridge between stylistic and aesthetic transgression. From a psychoanalytic perspective, identification is a process of internalization through which the subject adopts an external ideal image of who they «should» be. The self, in this sense, is always an *alter ego*: constituted in relation to an image that remains irreducibly external (Lacan [1962]: 11). This process is never solitary, since such images are always mediated by the gaze of others (Lacan [1964]: 298).

Freud ([1921]: 105-7) had already traced identification back to its earliest moments in the libidinal bond between the child and its caregivers, later expanding it to more complex forms of adult identification, culminating in mass psychology. There is an extensive literature on the notion of the mass, both in political sociology and in psychoanalysis (see also Marx [1852]: 149). In most of these approaches, the mass refers to a situation in which symbolic references are lacking – what Lacan ([1980]: 11) once compared to a pile of grains of sand: elements that can be counted one by one but that lack the cohesion provided by a shared symbol. Identification, in this sense, is the process through which a dispersed and atomized crowd becomes symbolically organized, acquiring the consistency of what Freud called mass formations.

In these formations, Freud ([1921]: 112-116) distinguishes two axes of identification. The vertical axis designates the collective investment with a leader or guiding idea. For sure, the identification with a leader does not mean, however, that subjects wish to *be* the leader – as Freud ([1921]: 134-135) himself notes, such a will would often be absurd – but rather that they internalize a trait or quality of the leader as a model for what they ideally ought to become. Through this process, they seek to see themselves, and to be seen by others, as part of the ideal image that the leader embodies: «the people», or whichever collective ideal is at stake. The horizontal axis, by contrast, links subjects to one another through their shared attachment to that leader or idea. Laclau ([2005]: 56) reworks this dynamic, proposing that a common fascination with a signifier is what enables the formation of communal bonds within the mass.

Yet a point not extensively debated by Freud is that identification processes are fostered by moments of symbolic crisis – what Laclau ([1990]: 29) would call dislocation. Freud's focus was largely on the formation of masses through libidinal bonds, paying less attention to the prior state of atomization that renders such formations possible. And this is precisely what characterizes the contemporary condition. Processes of massification, marked by fragmentation and dispossession, erode social and symbolic bonds. Massification thus designates the dissolution of shared references, producing subjects deprived of stable attachments and increasingly available for new ones (see also Laclau [1960]: 24-25). Among the various forms this disaggregation takes today, a particularly salient one today is that of the precarious (Zicman de Barros [2024a]: 11–12). Precarization is not only an economic process but also a symbolic one: it strips workers of the instruments of political action and identification, relegating them to the margins (see also Butler [2019]: 15, 24-26).

It is within this availability that the force of populism today can be partly understood. Vast contingents become especially receptive to the transgressions of charismatic leaders who promise a breakthrough from invisibility. Although populism does not always depend on charismatic leaders – one need only recall the wave of horizontal «indignation» movements that swept across the world in recent decades, such as the French Yellow Vests (Zicman de Barros [2026]: 2) – the link between the transgressive style of populist leadership and the desire for recognition animating marginalized groups is evident.

The bond between the masses and the leader arises because the leader comes to embody a fantasmatic promise of recognition – a way to address the anguish or dislocation constitutive of the subject. By serving as a path to visibility – an emergence from the shadows of social irrelevance into presence and worth within the collective – this promise also entails a fantasy of wholeness, akin to what Freud ([1929]: 65-66) debated as an «oceanic feeling»: a fleeting sense of boundless unity and belonging. In psychoanalytic terms, this experience can be understood as a form of *jouissance* – an excessive enjoyment that fuses pleasure and pain, the dissolution of limits and the fantasy of plenitude.

From this perspective, the performative approach to populism brings into view the psychoanalytic dynamics that sustain identification with the charismatic leader – above all the promise of *enjoyment-in-transgression* (Glynos [2014]: 181). By breaking with decorum and overstepping established boundaries, the leader activates fantasies of enjoyment, which are then coupled with the production of scapegoats: groups blamed for collective suffering, the so-called «thieves of enjoyment» in psychoanalytic political theory – figures imagined as parasites who revel at our expense (Žižek [1993]: 202). Here the fantasmatic dimension of populism becomes apparent: the lure of what psychoanalysis terms an illusory phallic enjoyment – not merely a sense of privilege or completeness, but the fantasy of raw, ostentatious virility, of power exercised without limits, of an obscene bravado that parades itself in defiance of law, decorum, and constraint. It is this imagined omnipotence – excessive, shameless, jubilantly transgressive – that sustains the libidinal and political bond between leaders and masses.

1.2 *Blinding leaders and masses*

However, if the notion of identification allows us to think of populism as aesthetic transgression, it also casts it in a darker light. It is no coincidence that Freud developed his theory of identification precisely in the context of reflecting on the psychology of the masses. Yet Freud ([1921]: 113) is deeply pessimistic about their irruption. Mass dynamics, for him, are grounded in idealization. Once captivated by a leader or an idea, and forming horizontal bonds around this shared ideal, the subject becomes blind and may be led «to the pitch of crime». Within this horizon, there is no space to conceive forms of democratic identification or to imagine democratic masses. From such a perspective, populism can hardly be thought of in emancipatory terms.

This Freudian intuition is not isolated. A number of thinkers have taken similar paths, portraying the entry of certain invisible groups into politics as essentially undemocratic. In Karl Marx ([1847]: 211; [1852]: 149), the masses are associated with Bonapartism – a classic framework for 20th-century analyses of populism – and with the figure of the lumpen, an expression of the worldless whom Arendt ([1951]: 107-108) would later refer to as the «mob». These reactionary groups reproduce themselves in the shadows, and their sudden irruption into the public space acquires a disturbing character. There is, to be sure, an element of transgression when they emerge into what Arendt ([1958]: 199) calls the «space of appearances». Yet this is a reactionary transgression, one that reinforces rather than subverts social hierarchies.

Gramsci and Bataille also note the irruption of the radically excluded with a mixture of fascination and suspicion. Gramsci ([1930]: Q3 §48) acknowledges their disruptive potential but warns that, due to their disorganization, subaltern groups tend to reproduce reactionary common sense and lend support to tyrannical coups. Bataille ([1933b]: 161), in turn, associates the heterogeneous – his

term for the dregs of society, the «accursed part» whose eruption unsettles the social order – with fascism, underlining the risk that a force appearing counter-hegemonic may ultimately reaffirm dynamics of domination and silencing – in a transgression that, in the end, betrays itself.

Even Laclau, often regarded as a defender of populism, struggles to articulate a genuinely emancipatory account of it. While he claimed to defend radical democracy – understood here, as I will explain later, in ethical terms – his focus fell more on populism's instrumental logic. Radical democracy not only affirms the radical contingency of all naturalized, hegemonic social practices – the fact that things could always be otherwise – but also cultivates an awareness of this contingency. Laclau ([2000]: 85) himself argued that a radical democratic society is one that constantly interrogates its own certainties in the name of inclusion. Yet this reflective dimension is not consistently present in his theory of populism. There is, so to speak, an ethical deficit in his work on this matter (Zicman de Barros [2026]: 50). Populism appears above all as a powerful tool for mass mobilization placed at the service of leaders assumed to be guided by the best ideals. But such mobilization comes at the cost of critical reflection.

This is precisely where Slavoj Žižek ([2008]: 264) intervenes, suggesting that the politics of enjoyment inherent in populism may be «good in practice, but bad in theory». Populism does mobilize the masses, but it leaves no room for critical distance. Arditì ([2010]: 496) formulates a similar criticism, pointing to a cognitive asymmetry in Laclau: intellectuals know that fantasies of full enjoyment are unattainable, yet rather than sharing this awareness with the masses, they allow them to be carried away by illusions. The result is a process of identification close to what Laclau ([2004]: 180) himself described as «unconditional commitment» – an engagement that, in its extreme, resembles blindness and the pursuit of phallic enjoyment more than a horizon of emancipation.

2. Identification and its openings

2.1 Judging sublimation and populism

But is it possible to conceive of radical democratic modes of identification? I believe it is. And, paradoxical as it may seem in light of the previous section, it is in Laclau's own work that we find a decisive clue: the psychoanalytic notion of sublimation. While other authors have drawn on sublimation to think about democratic politics, Laclau was in fact a pioneer in linking it to populism. This is an association whose consequences for a radical democratic theory, and by extension for a theory of democratic identification, remain largely unexplored. I argue that sublimation, read through psychoanalysis, sheds new light on the reflections I have been developing on emancipatory populism, grounded in the idea of populism as aesthetic transgression. I

will briefly present these reflections and then show how sublimation has been implicit in them from the start. One advantage of approaching populism as aesthetic transgression, I suggest, is that it establishes a clearer connection with aesthetic judgement.

It was Arendt ([1961]: 222) who most explicitly brought the question of aesthetic judgement into the realm of politics. Her reflections on the subject are admittedly fragmentary, yet she insists that the structure of aesthetic judgement is analogous to that of political judgement. To say that something is beautiful or ugly, she argues, is not so different from saying that something is right or wrong. This perspective is particularly compelling for me, since I conceive of aesthetics and politics as inseparable. Arendt ([1970]: 72-73) further contends that such judgements are not reducible to mere expressions of individual taste – as if taste were immune to debate – but are grounded in a *sensus communis*, a capacity to feel in common that, in principle, belongs to everyone. At first glance, this *community sense*, as she calls it, might appear to her as something given. But in fact, Arendt insists, it must be cultivated – and, if neglected, can even atrophy. She calls this the exercise of an «enlarged mentality»: a mentality that, as the term itself suggests, can be stretched beyond the confines of one's own standpoint, opening the self to a moment of estrangement from its habitual perspective. As Arendt notes ([1970]: 71-72), community sense should not be confused with common sense. It is not a matter of received opinions or banal *clichés*, but of a shared capacity to take the perspectives of others into account – an «uncommon sense» that reflects what she calls plurality: the fact that people are different and interpret the world in different ways.

This notion of *community sense* resonates strongly with an ethics of radical democracy – where «ethics» is understood in a sense close to «aesthetics» (Zicman de Barros [2026]: 55). Ethics here means our mode of perceiving the world and allowing ourselves to be affected by it – not far from aesthetics, as the term is employed throughout this work, likewise concerned with perception and receptivity. Hence, radical democracy can be understood as a specific ethics: a disposition to look at the world with a certain strangeness, to foreground the contingency of our social practices, and thereby to question naturalized and hegemonic hierarchies (Glynos [2003]: 194). An open society, defined by its emancipatory character, is marked precisely by this ethics of decentering: it unsettles our certainties, forces us to see the world otherwise, and opens up the possibility of social transformation. At this point, the centrality of plurality in Arendt's ([1958]: 7-8; [1970]: 20) work becomes fully apparent: plurality exists only because there are no absolute guarantees – no final grounds of meaning, truth, or justice that could close the space of political debate. «Every truth is somehow coercive and tyrannical», writes Myriam Revault d'Allonnes ([1991]: 237), reflecting on Arendt ([1967]: 51). Politics is therefore not a matter of truth, but of perspectives: it is always possible to perceive the world from another

standpoint – in Lacanian terms, because there is an irreducible distance between the symbolic and the real.

This leads us to recognize something Arendt may never have stated explicitly: that there is indeed a condition of possibility for aesthetic judgement. What emerges from her reflections is the idea that specific aesthetic practices sustain community sense itself, enlarging the very enlarged mentality needed for judging. Although her writings on aesthetic criticism are rare and fragmentary, the moments in which Arendt ([1953]: 385; [1971]: 384-385) devoted herself more directly to the subject reveal her appreciation for works and experiences that establish a tension between the familiar and the strange – experiences that, as we shall see, point not to an ideal of beauty but to what might be called *the sublime*.

The notion of sublimation is among the most enigmatic in psychoanalysis. Freud is said to have written a metapsychological essay specifically devoted to the concept, but if such a manuscript ever existed, it has been lost or destroyed.¹ What remains are only scattered and fragmentary references – curiously, in a way similar to Arendt's writings on aesthetics. Yet, this very incompleteness already anticipates something essential to the sublimatory experience in psychoanalysis: the presence of lack, and above all its evocation through emptiness and incompleteness.

Here sublimation begins to prove especially fruitful for an aesthetic theory of populism. From the outset, Freud associated it with aesthetic practices. He described it in relation to the arts – though, of course, it is not confined to them, just as my conception of aesthetics also extends beyond that domain. Elsewhere, Freud ([1933]: 97) defines sublimation as a creative process aimed at producing a new object. Crucially, however, this is not just any object.

In Freudian metapsychology, sublimation – conceived as a destiny of the drive – is distinguished from idealization (Freud [1914]: 95). The artist who sublimates does not complete the work. It remains unfinished, or is deliberately presented as such (Freud [1910]: 66-67). Idealization, by contrast, fixes the object in a place of perfection and beauty, sealing it off from critique. Sublimation, instead, exposes the non-existence of such an ideal: it offers the object in its partiality, its incompleteness.

Lacan ([1960b]: 201) radicalizes this insight. He insists that the object of sublimation is not just any object, but an aesthetically singular one – an object that invokes its own incompleteness. He points to numerous works that mobilize a sense of incompleteness – invoking emptiness, evoking lack, and displacing the viewer – thereby generating what Freud ([1919]: 217) would call «uncanniness» – the unsettling feeling of something both familiar and strange.

More importantly, Lacan ([1964]: 186) argues that sublimation does not lie primarily in the concrete form of the object, but in a different relation to it. Here the bridge between sublimation and ethics becomes evident: ethics understood, once

1 On this point, see the editors' comments on Freud's ([1915]: 105-106) papers on metapsychology.

again, as a way of perceiving the world – close to the notion of aesthetics I have been developing, centered on receptivity and on how we allow ourselves to be affected. It is no coincidence that one of Lacan's most sustained discussions of sublimation takes place in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis. To sublimate, then, is to allow oneself to be affected otherwise: it is to embrace incompleteness.

2.2 *Queering sublimation and populism*

But is it possible to think of a political sublimation – and, more specifically, of a populist one? I have claimed that Claude Lefort would answer yes to the broader question (Zicman de Barros [2022b]: 229; [2024b]: 14). Deeply inspired by psychoanalysis, Lefort ([1982]: 15; [1983]: 27), seems to draw on the theme of sublimation to conceive democracy as the empty place of power. As for populism, following Laclau's intuition, I argue that the answer is also affirmative. Among aesthetic practices, sublimation is the one that most faithfully captures the transgressive spirit of populism.

What is at stake here is a discursive construction of «the people» with open borders: identification with the signifier *people* that does not present it as an idealized image, trapped in the narcissistic dynamics of desire, but rather as something incomplete, unrealized, and – at least to some extent – «unrealizable» (Marchart [2002]: 254). It is precisely this notion of the people that remains faithful to transgression.

To explain this fidelity to transgression in emancipatory and sublimatory populism, however, it is useful to draw on insights from subaltern and queer studies. Subaltern studies invite us to think of identities as fluid and relational, and to question claims of universalism on behalf of the invisible (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi [2025b]: 1409). Queer studies, in turn, emphasize deviation, disidentification, and the politics of vulnerability (Butler [1990]: 176). As I have suggested, it is no coincidence that *transgression* begins with the prefix *trans* – a movement across boundaries that renders visible what heteronormative and hegemonic orders exclude (Zicman de Barros and Aiolfi [2025a]: 12–13). Queer aesthetics foregrounds practices that refuse coherence and completeness, exposing the fragility of social norms and the instability of the subject. In doing so, it questions barriers and unsettles rigid boundaries – those characteristic of an *aesthetics of conflict*, which draws a hard line between «us» and «them» and portrays «them» as the thieves of enjoyment – and instead cultivates an openness to what does not «fit», what Oliver Marchart ([2019]: 23) calls *conflicting aesthetic*.

This space of non-fitting echoes the aesthetic emptiness discussed earlier in Lacan: not an absence to be filled, but rather a disquieting void that unsettles the subject's search for completeness. I argue that, by embracing incompleteness, these aesthetic practices sustain sublimation.² This aligns with Laclau's ([2005]: 119–

2 Though Marchart ([2019]: 27) hesitates to connect sublimation with emancipation, I suggest that sublimation enacts the very emancipatory *conflicting aesthetics* he evokes.

120) view that sublimation lies at the very heart of emancipatory populism. One is dealing here with «producing emptiness out of the operation of hegemonic logics» (Laclau [2005]: 166): the construction of a paradoxical counter-hegemonic hegemony that questions its own foundations and resists crystallization into a fixed order.

In this view, the emancipatory populism – this sublimatory *trans-populism* – aims to incorporate the subalternized, the «part of no-part», without hardening into a closed hegemony. As Rancière ([1995]: 31) observes, the «part of no-part» enters politics demanding equality, and in Arendt's ([1958]: 199) terms, the worldless step into the space of appearances to claim the «right to have rights». In this horizon, the reference to «the people» does not crystallize into an idealized, unquestionable symbol, but emerges as a truly empty signifier: a promise of inclusion for the marginalized that can only be honored by incessantly questioning its own identity. The mode of identification at stake here is therefore non-fixating: following Judith Butler ([2009]: 33), we might say that *trans-populism* combats precarity while embracing precariousness – the fact of our vulnerability, our openness to others.

At first glance, sublimation – and the mode of identification it sustains – might appear to require a renunciation of enjoyment. The opposite is true. It points instead to a more intense form of enjoyment than the phallic mode evoked earlier: an enjoyment of indeterminacy, of loss of control, of openness to the unknown (Revault d'Allonnes [2012]: 24-25). As Žižek ([2008]: 331) notes, sublime enjoyment is an experience of «absolute excess». Sublimation grants access to what Bataille ([1943]: 10) described as «a strange world where anguish and ecstasy intertwine»: an enjoyment beyond language – not outside discourse, but at its very limit, where signification falters and the materiality of the signifier itself becomes a source of affective intensity (Lacan [1973]: 97) –, an enjoyment in decentering, available only through the embrace of the unknown (Bataille [1943]: 66). Unlike the phallic mode – anchored in fantasies of obscene bravado and completeness – this enjoyment thrives on the unsettling of identity, on the subversive force of queer prurience that destabilizes rather than affirms (Lacan [1973]: 97). It resonates with forms of reveling in incompleteness, in disorientation, in openness – revelings that disrupt normative frames, that resist domestication, that delight in what unsettles the subject.

Conclusion

This article has sought to rethink identification by linking an aesthetic theory of populism with psychoanalysis. Identification has too often been understood as a regressive fusion into the masses, sustained by fantasies of authority and phallic enjoyment. Yet if populism is conceived as aesthetic transgression, we may begin to see other aesthetic practices linked to alternative modes of identification – practices

through which subjects previously excluded or rendered invisible in politics claim recognition and belonging in the name of equality.

The psychoanalytic notion of sublimation allows us to conceptualize this more emancipatory mode of identification. Sublimatory practices do not fix «the people» as an idealized image but keep it open, incomplete, and receptive to plurality. In this sense, sublimation can be read through a queer lens: it privileges openness, fluidity, and vulnerability over closure and idealization. When associated with sublimation, populist identification becomes a queer gesture that shifts affective investment away from fantasies of wholeness and toward the affirmation of incompleteness itself – a movement that unsettles identity while sustaining an ethics of the uncanny.

It is worth stressing, however, that such practices are never free of ambivalence: as Freud ([1914]: 94-95; [1921]: 113) warned, sublimation always risks sliding into idealization, thereby foreclosing critique. Identification, then, should not be conceived in binary terms – as either emancipatory or dominating – but as unfolding within a fragile and contested terrain, where the risk of blinding attachment coexists with the possibility of cultivating a queer, radically democratic ethics: an openness to plurality, contingency, and transgressive reconfigurations of the political.

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Death-Cries and Strips of Foam: Indexing the *Other* in Edward Bond's Later Work

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Abstract. This article proposes that Edward Bond's play for young people *The Under Room* (2006) reformulates ancient, progressive, practices of identification, for our times. The article uses Lacan's three registers to analyze how the boundaries instituted at the theatre of Dionysus disrupt *mirror stage* identifications. It explores the strange response of a Birmingham schoolboy following the staged murder of an illegal immigrant in *The Under Room* (2006), to suggest that unsettling *mirror stage* identifications releases the energetic search for unity with the *other* that Lacan terms desire. The paper applies its findings to a letter Bond wrote to German theatre director Antje Lenkheit as he began his work for young people in 1997. In the letter Bond explains how drama can index things that society disavows. He takes as his example the stadia that Hitler built for his ceremonies, and shows how drama can reveal their metonymic connection to the death camps.

Keywords. Drama, political performance practice, *skene*, Theatre of Dionysus.

Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* aims to distance us from what is familiar in our culture so that we can see its absurdity. This paper posits Edward Bond's radically different approach to drama's

political function: one which attracts us to the *other*. Instead of creating a binary between the strange and the familiar, this approach shows how drama – if we know how to use its boundaries – acknowledges and even embraces difference. For Donna Haraway it is imperative for postcolonial societies to take difference seriously:

How can people rooted in different knowledge practices «get on together», especially when an all-too-easy cultural relativism is not an option, either politically, epistemologically, or morally? How can general knowledge be nurtured in postcolonial worlds committed to *taking difference seriously*? Answers to these questions can only be put together in emergent practices; i.e., in vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies and ways of living that are accountable both to their disparate inherited histories and to their barely possible but absolutely necessary joint futures. For me, that is what *significant otherness* signifies. (Haraway [2003]: 7; my emphasis)

If we read Haraway in semiotic terms this means bringing *other* experience, that resists signification, into the social frame. We might consider this a tall order for drama which, according to Aristotle, rests on *mimesis*. What use to postcolonial living is an art form that does not take us beyond recognizing things we already know?

Theatre's Boundaries

If we take a closer look at drama however, we can see that there was always more to it than *mimesis*. The theatre of Dionysus, where the first dramas were staged, is a space whose boundaries were carefully calibrated. The wooden *skene* divided the stage into visible and invisible sections; and the first dramatists wrote for the play's action to take place both in front of and behind it. Classicist John Gould tells us:

The dramatic weight of comings and goings is proportional to the openness of the space that the Greek theatre presented to the playwright, who was also the producer, for exploitation. In its function as part of the scene of imagined action, the *skene* is the place where those dramatic events that occur, as we should say, «off stage» are imagined as happening. [...] violent death characteristically occurs within, that is inside the *skene*, and has its dramatic impact through the death-cries of the victim and the controlled passion of the messenger-speech. (Gould [1999]: 13)

The ancient *skene* is both impermeable and porous; its dark side excludes images, but as a wooden wall it is penetrable by the sound of death-cries. According to Mladen Dolar (2006), «the visible can establish the distance, the nature, and the source of the voice, and thus neutralize it. The acousmatic voice is so powerful because it cannot be neutralized with the framework of the visible» (Dolar [2006]: 79). In other words, hearing voices when we cannot identify their source

can make it difficult for us to differentiate ourselves from them; difficult to establish where the boundary between interiority and exteriority lies. If *mimesis* produces copies of things we recognize on the visible side of the *skene*, its invisible side is clearly doing something *other*.

The other significant boundary at the theatre of Dionysus would seem to be between the visible part of the stage, and auditorium. Unlike the *skene*, which presents us with a physical boundary, this boundary operates using conventions. But like the *skene*, these conventions generate a porous, yet at the same time restrictive, boundary. The audience gaze crosses onto the stage, and the staged voice crosses into the auditorium. But the stage may not return the gaze as in Lehmann's «direct audience address» (Lehmann [2006]: 31); nor may the audience return the voice as we can if we heckle at stand-up comedy. This is because if either side acknowledges the other, our focus on the fictional world of the drama is compromised.

When we view theatre architecture in this light, we can see it as a series of spaces that produce the differentiation we experience when we identify things, but also spaces whose porous boundaries assimilate us in interesting ways. Writers, actors, and production team work out of sight to construct a fictional society that the actors and the play's audience will imagine during the performance, in front of, and behind the *skene*. Each space – auditorium, visible, and invisible aspects of the stage, is differentiated from the others by physical and conventional boundaries. But each boundary has been constructed in such a way as to allow certain intersubjective criss-crossings of gaze and voice, the carefully choreographed projections and introjections that constitute the system as a whole. It is a system that conjoins participating individuals because they share the seeing, speaking, imagining, modalities of a single, unified, body.

So, we can say that *part* of the traditional theatrical model operates mimetically, as Aristotle thought. But that is far from the whole story. Semiotician Charles Peirce isolates three types of sign which can help us grasp how spaces and modalities intersect in the theatrical model as a whole. *Iconic* signifiers resemble the things they represent mimetically, and *symbolic* or linguistic signifiers substitute, or stand in, for the things they represent. The action of *indices* on the other hand «depends on association by contiguity, and not upon association by resemblance or upon intellectual operations» (Chandler [2000]: 42). *Icons* and *symbols* both depend on recognition for meaning; to understand a word or an image you have to have seen or heard something like it before. But *indices* are not retroactive in this way. *Indices* are active in the sense that their meaning has to be personally assembled out of the physicality of a situation. Icons and symbols key us into *a-priori*, or pre-existing, culturally-established patterns. But we make sense of indices bodily, metonymically, *a-posteriori*; that is to say we piece indices together for ourselves, out of our lived experience of the event.

So, there may be a metonymic process at work in the Theatre of Dionysus model that has not yet been properly understood. One aspect of the *skene* resists penetration; we cannot see through it. But the *skene* is also permeable: the obscene death-cry for instance, permeates it. Semiotically we can say instead of resembling the things they represent mimetically, death-cries *index*, or point towards the dying person behind the *skene*. In this case, meaning has to be actively constructed *a-posteriori* (afterwards) by onlookers. In consequence, and perhaps more importantly, the *skene* mediates between the preexisting or retroactive *a-priori* temporality of recognition, and the active *a-posteriori* temporality of meaning that is personally and only subsequently put together. It is these two different, forward and backward-facing temporalities that make culture and corporeality incompatible or irreducible. But we can pin the *skene* here as a mechanism that *cobbles together* – to use Haraway’s term – retroactive, and active meaning-making to generate a creative mechanism; one which has the potential to put the future together differently.

The skene in practice

How does this look in practice? Before we explore these boundaries in greater theoretical depth it may be helpful to consider a concrete example of the dramatic model in hand. When I first began observing Edward Bond’s rehearsals with Big Brum Theatre in Education company in 1997, the company was steeped in Brechtian practices (Finney [1996]). In addition to this, like many agit prop, education, and community theatres in the UK at the time, they operated with very sparse resources. For both of these reasons Big Brum’s productions often had minimal sets, sometimes with no *skene*. But the plays Bond wrote for the company make a point of detailing the room in which the play is set, with its exits and entrances, windows, and furniture clearly stipulated, which may be why his plays are often (quite wrongly in my opinion) seen as *kitchen sink* dramas. Following several rehearsals with Bond however, it became apparent that far from being realist plays, these dramas needed a *skene* for the same reasons that ancient tragedy at the theatre of Dionysus needed one. I remember during an open rehearsal in the early days, in which a wall was represented using a low rope, that Bond said his plays did not really work without an actual wall. And when rehearsing *At the Inland Sea* (1995) Bond spent time with the actors establishing the difference between being inside or outside of a gas chamber¹. The Bondian *skene* seemed to be about differentiating between internality and externality; a way of articulating between the person and the logic imposed by the social world they inhabit. The company responded

1 This refers to an email sent by Bobby Colvill to the author on 22 September 2011.

by employing Ceri Townsend to design wooden sets that fitted together and could be easily assembled and dismantled by the actors for use in school halls. And it is from those sets that we can see Bond modernizing or mobilizing the ancient *skene*. A character makes her entrance from a bed in *At the Inland Sea* (1995); while another hides under floorboards in *The Balancing Act* (2003). *The Under Room* (2005) was set in a cellar so that all of the entrances and exits were made down a flight of steps, which put the *skene* almost in the ceiling.

But this strangely positioned *skene* is only part of *The Under Room*'s extraordinary, and defiantly unrealistic, dramaturgy. The play is about an illegal immigrant, hiding in the cellar of a young woman, Joan in 2077. Joan is initially very suspicious of the immigrant, but then tries to help. She, and the other character in the play – a people smuggler called Jack, behave as if the immigrant was represented by an actor in the usual way: but he is not. The immigrant is represented using a Dummy, with a Dummy actor who speaks for the Dummy, and «usually stands upstage left» (Bond [2006]: 170). When my students were doing a production of the play during the pandemic in 2021, Bond (who was helping us via zoom and email) described Adam Bethenfalvy's performance of the Dummy actor in Big Brum's original production as being «really very good»; it was «almost as if he was a waiter. The waiter isn't enjoying the meal and doesn't have expressions»². We learn later in the play that the immigrant has been a child soldier in his own country and forced to kill his mother, which helps us make sense (*a-posteriori*) of his strangely split, dissociated state, which may have been troubling us hitherto. By Scene Six Joan has been betrayed by Jack, who says he will have to pimp her out to pay 'his costs'. We hear her rationalize her predicament by blaming the immigrant as she eviscerates the Dummy in a prolonged knife attack. The Dummy's foam stuffing explodes onto the stage. Not yet aware he has died, the Dummy actor encounters his own foam entrails; he speaks three words in a strange language – then the play ends.

After one of Big Brum's performances at Bartley Green Secondary School in 2006 I observed a strange event that I want to consider in relation to the retroactive, and the active meaning making processes under discussion here. Bartley Green is a deprived area of Birmingham that often fields far right candidates in local elections – despite Birmingham being one of the UK's most diverse cities. A class of thirty or so teenagers had just watched the play and were filing out to go and get their school dinner. One young man left his classmates and unobtrusively made his way onto the stage – an oilcloth on the floor of the school hall. He walked slowly across the stage, head down, contemplating the strips of foam rubber that had stuffed the Dummy, deep in thought. He noticed me looking at him, smiled shyly, and then continued across the stage, treading carefully to avoid the strips. When he had finished, he went off to rejoin his classmates quite cheerfully. I was struck by the

2 Zoom call to the author and her students on 25 February 2021.

boy's focus on the foam strips, and the care he took not to tread on them. What had attracted him to the stage? Why did he need to associate directly with the play's objects instead of discussing it later with his friends in class?

Sign and Psyche

We might begin our analysis by thinking about the Dummy, who begins the play as a barely *iconic* human figure suggesting «stuffed white pillowslips or bolsters» (Bond [2006]: 170). When it is eviscerated the Dummy loses any semblance of the human form; instead the foam strips *index* the Dummy actor by association. In addition to this, because the words he speaks after he has died are in a language we cannot understand, the symbolic dimension of his performance is similarly poleaxed. As with the ancient death cry, we can only derive meaning from his vocal tone and the situation in which he finds himself. The Dummy transitions from icon and symbol to index to bring *other* experience into the social frame of the theatre space. We see the boy responding to it as though he too were indexed by the foam strips after the performance has ended.

To understand what might have been going on for the boy who was fixated by the foam strips, it may help to read Charles Peirce's 1930s work on the three types of sign alongside Jacques Lacan's later rapprochement between psychoanalysis and linguistics. Lacan's 1957 *Graph of Desire* (Lacan [1957]: 671-701) remodels Saussure's version the linguistic sign. Saussure had fixed the linguistic signifier to its signified meaning using a single, impermeable, bar. But because he was bringing psychoanalysis into the picture, Lacan needed a semiotic model that accounted for the sliding (condensing and displacing) polysemic flux that Freud had identified in dream analysis. He needed to demonstrate how a single signifier can cover multiple meanings in metaphor, and a single signified can attach to multiple signifiers in metonymy. Interestingly, Lacan is explicit that his thinking in relation to the graph relates to comedy, particularly «the structure of jokes» (Ibid.: 671) – perhaps because their punchline hits us belatedly, *a-posteriori*. And also, that he wants «to accurately formulate Freud's dramatism» (Ibid.: 676).

In Lacan's hands Saussure's inflexible bar, mediating between signifier and signified, transforms into an upholsterer's stitch. Here a needle creates four holes, through which we can thread together the disparate entities of culture and corporeality; these two entities are inclined to move in different directions, and can only be stabilized by the third, which holds them in loose connection with each other. Although Lacan is not explicit about this, the graph represents the structural instability between culture and corporality we identified earlier in this paper. We can see this in the way the graph contrasts between the *a-priori* temporality of icons and symbols, and the *a-posteriori* movement of indices.

Retroactive movements left on the graph show how, to appreciate how pattern repeats, we need to look back; while active movements right show how sensation constructs meaning more personally (this in itself may help us grasp the difference for the boy between discussing the drama, and investigating the foam viscera for himself). Movements up and down on Lacan's graph show externality and internality – the psychic projections and introjections that take place in normal two-way conversation. These movements also allow us to grasp the impact of the very particular restrictions placed on actors and audiences in theatres; on the audience's projecting eyes, but their receptive ears; and on the actors' projecting voices, while their bodies receive the audience gaze. The complete graph gives us a fascinating, if highly complex, model of the potential ways that words, images, and bodies can interact.

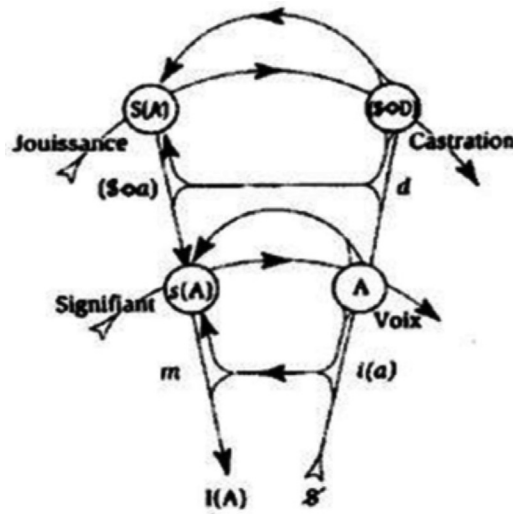


Figure 1: The Graph of Desire. From Jacques Lacan 2006: "The subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire" in *Ecrits* p. 692. London: Norton.

As I understand the lower part of the graph, movements left denote desire in search of iconic and symbolic patterns, whose *a-priori* repeating structure is recognisable retroactively. Movements right denote desire in its sensate, embodied, state; here *a-posteriori* meaning is constructed actively and personally, in the Real. Movements up denote projections, while movements down denote assimilations.

Thus on the Signifier-Voice line desire moves up and left to take meaning from the spoken word; or right and down to construct meaning from the speaker's tone of voice. Dramatic irony is often to be found in the flux between word and voice. I suggest the instability figured in the graph as a whole both defines drama and demonstrates its extraordinary political radicalism.

Following the *Graph of Desire*, Lacan's life's work involved exploring each of his three registers in turn; beginning with the Imaginary, moving on to the Symbolic, and finishing with the Real (Mellard [2006]: 49). Before he died, Lacan used the model of Borromean Knots to take up where his graph had left off in exploring how each register relates to the others. A Borromean knot is a chain formed of three distinct, yet equivalent, rings, linked together to form an interdependent unity. The defining particularity of the Borromean knot so that it holds together only as a triad; each pair of rings is held together solely by the third, so that if any single ring is cut, the other two also fall apart. Lacan's Borromean model of the psyche demonstrates how failure in one register can release the entire structure into psychotic collapse. When this happens corporeality and culture, self and *other*, go their separate ways to lose touch with each other completely.

My own twenty-first century reading of Lacan, takes the novel synchronic and structural approach of mapping Lacan's three registers, with Freud's topology, back onto Peirce's three types of sign. For some, particularly clinicians more concerned with psychoanalysis than semiotics, this may seem like a retrograde move; after all, poststructuralist thought left semiotics behind after Roland Barthes died in 1980, moving beyond the repetitions of *logos* in search of the energetics of desire. But my return to semiotics takes the Borromean model to heart – because it emphasizes the equal importance and interdependence of all three registers. I offer it here as a straightforward way into the structural practicalities of drama's profound political radicalism; an example of Haraway's «vulnerable, on-the-ground work that cobbles together non-harmonious agencies». This seems more important than ever now that *othering* is gaining such dangerous populist political traction.

Thus: semblance governs Peirce's *icon*, Freud's *ego*, and Lacan's Imaginary register. Whereas Peirce's *symbol*, Freud's *super-ego*, and Lacan's Symbolic register are controlled not by semblance, but by substitution – the arbitrary, yet rule-governed names we give to things that give them social recognition and legitimacy. These two types of sign, that make up Lacan's Imaginary and Symbolic registers, are socially sanctioned, and have to be internalized or *learned* to give people access to the *a-priori* cultural world of *logos* that began before we were born and will continue after we die. These are the registers of Artificial Intelligence. The corporeal *index* on the other hand, in common with Freud's *id* and the Lacanian Real, requires the presence of an actual body; it is structurally governed by our *a-posteriori*, unmediated, sensory association with the *other*. If we think of the Real relation to the Symbolic and Imaginary registers in Lacan's Borromean knot, we see it resisting translation into words and images or anything we might recognize; yet it holds those registers in loose association with each other and itself. In this way it impacts the other two registers – indicating its

physical presence as indices do – not visually, or linguistically, but existentially, directly, and actively. I'm fairly sure the boy stepping carefully amongst the foam strips could not have told you what he was doing – he just needed to do it.

Interrupting the Mirror

Perhaps we can understand what is happening to the boy in relation to Lacan's famous mirror stage, when the child's *ego* is formed (Lacan [1949]: 75). This is a transitional phase for the child from a world of fragmented bodily sensations into the wider social framework of symbolic identification: the *always-already a priori* world of socially-mediated meaning. For Lacan, this happens via misrecognition in the Imaginary register. The child is still in a state of «motor impotence and nursing dependence» (Ibid.: 76), but the imaginary register seems to promise a more coherent future. The mirror stage allows the child to anticipate moving from their immobile and chaotic «fragmented image of the body to what [Lacan] will call an “orthopaedic” form of its totality» (Ibid.: 78). Unifying their body will bring the child agency and mobility. The child uses their mirror image, or the idealized imago of a caregiver, as «the statue onto which man [sic] projects himself» (Ibid.: 76). This establishes an *ego*, or identity, that is founded in the gaze of the other. Lacan tells us that the child assumes this specular persona as though they were putting on a suit of armor: «the finally donned armour of an alienating identity that will mark his [sic] entire mental development with its rigid structure» (Ibid.: 78). But introducing a symbolic framework structured by the *other*, mediating between the child and their environment, disrupts the connected immediacy of indexical experience. According to Lacan its outcome is to break the harmonious loop between inner and outer worlds – shattering the «*innenwelt* to *umwelt* circle» (Ibid.).

Lacan's mirror stage has been criticized for its speculative and philosophical emphasis; it is far from being an empirically-sound, clinically-tested study. But if we read it in connection with the spaces the ancients constructed at the theatre of Dionysus when they invented their dazzling new art form, we can understand the political function of drama in a completely new way. The mirror stage babe-in-arms cannot, as yet, either move independently, or speak. This is a situation that the ancients seem to have replicated when they created the auditorium at the theatre of Dionysus. This seated space immobilizes the audience and focusses their gaze away from each other and onto the stage; during the performance the audience can make sounds that index their bodies – clap, stamp, cough, whisper, weep, laugh – but not speak. I am arguing that the theatre's careful curation of Lacan's metonymies of desire, giving the voice to the stage and the gaze to the auditorium,

allowing the stage to act while keeping the audience seated and immobile, echoes the modality of the pre-speech babe-in-arms to a remarkable degree.

What might be the effect of this replication? Perhaps the ancients felt that by seating their audience and removing the social gaze from them, they might release the desire for unity with the *other* experienced by the baby; who is as yet fragmented, unaffected by the social gaze, and so unencumbered by the identity it endows. Freud protected both himself and his patients from the social gaze; he positioned himself and his patient out of each other's direct line of sight by sitting behind his famous couch and perpendicular to it. The theatre of Dionysus too, splits the audience gaze from the staged voice, disrupting the *a-priori* stabilizing illusions of the Imaginary and Symbolic registers. If we think of these arrangements in relation to Lacan's Borromean knot, we can see how the auditorium at the theatre of Dionysus and Freud's couch are both positioned so that the Imaginary and Symbolic registers are only held together by the body in the *a-posteriori* Real. Only when the body is in a certain position can the Borromean interdependent unity be held in place. If Freud's patients wanted to look at Freud, they had to sit up and turn around to see him. Audiences in theatres form the gazing-and-speaking unity of a single person only when their gaze is held by the spectacle before them onstage; a gaze that intensifies into imaginative insight when the play's action moves behind the *skene*.

Of course, drama cannot change who we are. Unless we lose our memories (and even if we do) our identities, Haraway's «disparate inherited histories», are an unchangeable part of us. For Lacan the mirror stage is irreversible; it is a structural moment that marks our entry into subjectivity; and like the Borromean knot, our subjectivity operates triadically, or we fall apart. But perhaps what drama does (what the boy in Bartley Green was doing), is allow us to try on the position of the *other* for size. As audiences, we know perfectly well that we are sitting in the auditorium of a theatre, that the action is fictional, and that we are free to get up and go for our school dinner as it were, any time we like. But the way the drama splits the modalities of gaze, voice, and action, seems to allow us to flip the Borromean knot imaginatively, so that we can experience the way its three registers are configured in reverse. The boy literally crosses onto the stage to perform this reversal; but perhaps imaginatively crossing the boundary to engage with the *skene* is sufficient. Dramatized experience does seem to – temporarily, while we are engaged by the performance – subvert the alienation from the *other* that characterizes the mirror stage. And while it cannot reinstate the shattered «*innenwelt* to *umwelt* circle», drama does seem to enhance the connected, monadic, immediacy of our embodied collectivity. These things are evidenced by the extemporaneous expressions of laughter, pity, and fear, the embodied intelligences that audiences experience during dramatic performances. Were the ancient Greeks deliberately flipping, as if reversing, the mirror?

Aristotle understood *peripety*, or reversal, to be a crucial component of tragic drama; but it is as if he only grasped half the story, because he saw reversal in terms of plot rather than spatiality: «[a] reversal is a change to the opposite in actions being performed [...] for instance in Oedipus someone came to give Oedipus good news and free him from fear with regard to his mother, but by disclosing Oedipus' identity he brought about the opposite result» (Aristotle [1996]: 18).

On the other hand, Aristophanes the older, comic, dramatist offers a far more knowing account. At his *Symposium* Plato records Aristophanes' story telling «how, long ago, the innate desire of human beings for each other started» (Plato [1999]: 29). Aristophanes' model has archaic humans split apart by a jealous Zeus «as they cut hard-boiled eggs with hairs»: «[s]ince their original nature had been cut in two, each one longed for its own other half and stayed with it. They threw their arms round each other, weaving themselves together, wanting to form a single living thing» (Ibid.: 28).

Aristophanes is usually taken to be talking about sexual attraction because the agreed topic for discussion at the symposium was «in praise of love» (Ibid.: 9). But the symposium was also held in celebration of tragedian Agathon's victory at the Dionysia, and the participants were his fellow dramatists and philosophers. So perhaps we can read drama as sub-textually related to what Aristophanes has to say here; particularly the notion of drama's unifying split between auditorium and stage.

I am proposing that the boy in Bartley Green's attraction to the stage gives us some idea what interrupting the mirror stage looks like. It is not something we normally see in theatre settings; we usually cross the boundary between stage and auditorium with our eyes and thoughts – not our bodies as the boy did. Perhaps this is because of the convention that makes bodies onstage public and bodies in the auditorium anonymous – audiences do not sign up to be looked-at as actors do. The boy may not have seen live theatre before and may not have known the convention. In any case, the stage was not raised to make him conspicuous and his agenda seemed private not exhibitionist. Nobody was interested in what he was doing; and although he acknowledged me looking at him, the boy was clearly thinking about something else.

A unifying split

I want to get into the compulsion behind the theatrical attraction I'm uncovering here. A series of splits were taking place during the play's performance. First, the Dummy was split from the Dummy actor, so the immigrant's voice was split from his body. The Dummy initially faces the audience: one speechless Dummy faces the others. Each member of the audience experiences a split between their

eyes and their ears, because they cannot see what they hear or hear what they see. The Dummy actor is too far away from the Dummy to ventriloquize it; so, to unify the immigrant the audience must engage physically with the fictional situation, by shifting their gaze from Dummy to Dummy actor and back.

This split is particularly interesting. Bond seems to be adapting and enhancing the way the *skene* operated at the theatre of Dionysus. In classical tragedy, when the action of the drama moved out of the public sphere and into the domestic space behind the *skene* the audience could no longer coordinate what they saw with what they could hear. According to Dolar (2006), the voice «hits us from the inside, it pours directly into the interior, without protection». Dolar goes on to describe the difference between seeing and hearing: «[t]here is a stark opposition between the visible and the audible: the visible world presents relative stability, permanence, distinctiveness, and a location at a distance; the audible presents fluidity, passing, a certain inchoate, amorphous character, and a lack of distance» (Ibid.: 79).

It would seem the ear immerses us physically with our surroundings, while the eye separates us from them; when eye grounds ear and *vice versa* we can orientate our bodies in space-and-time. But when they are split apart we are de-centered; the mechanism unsettles the armorial coherence of the *ego*; and while it cannot restore Lacan's «*innenwelt* to *umwelt* circle», when we interrupt lip-synch in a gaze-voice split, we do seem to be able to momentarily return to a pre-subjective embodied immediacy. We can understand this using Lacan's example of Möbius topology (Lacan [1959-1960]: 139), whereby a surface appears to be two-sided, but in fact has only one side. The model takes us from subject to object without crossing any boundary, to locate the subject outside itself; but it also puts the strangeness of the other at the heart of our subjectivity. Thus, in spite of their physical distance from the stage, audiences can become as imaginatively immersed in the dramatic situation as actors – as the boy in Bartley Green seems to indicate.

Gottfried Leibniz characterized this decentered state as «monadic». In his *Monadology* [1714] he describes monads as «simple substances» which have «no extension or shape and are not divisible». Monads represent «a plurality within a unity» for whom «perception is the basic state» (Leibniz [1714]: 34-5). That is to say they function perceptually, not conceptually, putting them firmly in an *a-posteriori* rather than *a-priori* temporality. While we cannot literally reverse the mirror stage, audio-visual disturbance does seem to put audiences into a temporarily monadic state. Topologically it can be represented as a move from two discrete circles, (a) and (b), to one discrete circle split in half with a single mutable boundary between (a) on one side, and (b) on the other (Lewin [1936]: 176). We might usually understand monadic relationality in terms of spatial collapse; such as the skin-on-skin intimacy we experience during breast feeding or

sexual intercourse. But when we consider what Dolar has to say about the penetrative nature of sound, and my own observation that stage and auditorium share the gaze and voice of a single body, we can characterize the relationality of stage and auditorium, which is not literally skin-on-skin but is penetrative, as monadic.

Edward Bond's split immigrant then, echoes the split between gaze and voice experienced between stage and auditorium. In this sense the Dummy, with his motor impotence and projecting gaze, occupies the same *nurseling* position as his audience: one Dummy gazes at the others. With his *prosopon façade* center stage and his voice upstage left, Bond's immigrant stretches monadic relationality to an unusual extreme. What is interesting is that the audience has to fill the gap by shifting their gaze; because if they do not they cannot ground what they see with what they hear; the Imaginary and Symbolic registers fall apart without this physical effort in the Real. This means they too are indexed by – or roped into – the arrangement, as the boy was. It positions the audience between the front of the *skene*, which tends to house icons resembling the things they represent like the Dummy, and the back of the *skene* which often deals with indices – his voice, his foam entrails. It is worth noticing and exploring the metonymic structure of the index here. For Peirce, an index is like «a fragment, torn away from the object»; indices «direct attention to their objects by blind compulsion» (Chandler [2000]: 41). We can perhaps associate Peirce's interrupting split, or «tearing», with the trauma that precedes and escapes desire in the Lacanian Real. Perhaps it was this split that generated the boy's attraction to – temporary unity with – the strips of foam. This is the energy that sends Desire out into the Symbolic register, searching for the signifiers – words, bodies, or objects – that can *stand in* for, but never fully satisfy, or cover, the lack. The index has an energy, an *a-posteriori* incompleteness, that points to the Real, indicating a trace of something which resists symbolization entirely. This sense of incompleteness characterizes several key life events; such as when the child has to come to terms with being separated from their mother; when we are compulsively attracted to the 'other' sexually; and when we suffer grief and loss when someone dies. Drama replicates these subjective life events structurally, as well as in its content. Because, when we understand its boundaries, drama unsettles or complicates our identity by inviting the subject into fragmented, affectively charged, positions.

But Bond does not stop at prizing the immigrant from his body. Having split his gaze from his voice, Bond goes on to divest the Dummy of any resemblance to the human form at all. When the Dummy is eviscerated his body disintegrates into strips of foam rubber. No attempt is made at verisimilitude – Bond was emphatic in rehearsal there should be no blood or any attempt to make the yellow strips resemble actual viscera. These are not icons and this is not *mimesis*. As we have already observed, drama cannot undo the structural misrecognition on which our subjectivity depends; but when it uses indices it does seem to evoke

a trace of Lacan's Möbius «*Innenwelt* to *Umwelt* circle». By destabilizing and decentering our affective positioning, Bond's foam strips move us from *a-priori* to *a-posteriori* functioning. They draw us inside the play's fictional action and release the energy we see attracting the boy in Bartley Green to the foam detritus – the *other* that held his fascination so strongly for a short while. Peirce characterizes this energy as compulsion, while Lacan terms it Desire. Indices are I propose, the semiotic engines of both comic and tragic embodiment; the muscular response, the *jouissance*, that for Haraway *cobbles* us to what is *other*.

It would seem that for Bond, drama is a matter of stripping things down. In *The Under Room* he enhances the split made by the ancients between auditorial gaze and staged voice, by splitting the immigrant so that his voice and his body are in different locations onstage. Then he strips even the Dummy so that any formal resemblance to the human form is lost in the foam strips that litter the floor. As we have seen, the capacity for audience engagement with the *other* grows with each move; shifting the gaze from Dummy to Dummy Actor during the performance appears to develop, for the young man in Bartley Green, into a need to connect himself personally with the objects left onstage, even after the play had ended.

Bond's rules of creativity

Writing to German theatre director Antje Lenkheit³ less than a decade before he wrote *The Under Room*, Bond discusses several «rules for creativity». These provide us with a useful insight into his thinking as he began his work for young people towards the end of the millennium. Lenkheit has asked to direct a production of Bond's 1973 play *The Sea* in Germany, and she is proposing various theatrical «effects»; one of which is painting the actor's faces green. «The first rule of understanding, of creativity», Bond tells her firmly, «is take away. Instead, people always add». We have seen Bond *taking away* in *The Under Room*; his immigrant seems to echo the ex-centricity of splitting gaze from voice at the theatre of Dionysus. And eviscerating the Dummy disrupts the apparent coherence and wholeness which typifies Lacanian Imaginary identification. It is a move that resembles the way the ancient Greeks staged violent action behind the *skene* in their tragedies. For Bond the German theatre of the late twentieth century is empty – but not productively so: «I see many photographs of German productions. The sets are spacious and symbolic. They all remind me of the same thing: the stadia Hitler built for his ceremonies. And they all seem empty, even when the actors are on them» (Letter to Lenkheit dated 16 July 1997: 1).

3 My thanks to David Tuallion for sharing this.

Clearly, for Bond the specter of Adolf Hitler still stalked the German stage. Perhaps because a stadium without a *skene* makes it difficult to form the ex-centric identifications we have been exploring, that challenge monoculturalism. It is difficult to make the *other* significant as Haraway would put it, because the *other* behaves like an indexical sign. Because of their different *a-posteriori* temporality, indices are irreducible to, and resist, *a-priori* symbolization or imagery. Bringing the *other* into focus in the way the boy focused on the foam strips requires some sort of mechanism or boundary. We may think that in a stadium nothing can be hidden because everything is visible; but under such circumstances the crimes a society perpetrates on the *other* remain obscure. It was Brecht in 1948 who famously advocated, «the theatre must acquire *qua* theatre the same fascinating reality as a sporting arena during a boxing match» (Brecht [1948]: 233). But we are unlikely to focus on detritus during a sporting event in a stadium or an arena; the foam strips would just get trodden underfoot. They could not be used imaginatively in the way the boy in Bartley Green used them.

Three years after writing to Lenkheit, as he worked to divest Big Brum of their Brechtian methodology, Bond put it unequivocally: «[a]lienation [*Verfremdungseffekt*] is the Theatre of Auschwitz» (Bond [2000]: 187). This was of course, a deeply counterintuitive statement – something Bond clearly understood: «[o]bviously I did not mean this in the simple sense. In the simple sense it is the opposite of true. The Nazis at Auschwitz would have exterminated Brecht not staged him» (Ibid.: 171). There is much that is counterintuitive when we think of drama: how can a *skene* reveal things? How can the humans Zeus split in half be more united than ever? In a similar vein Bond addresses the emptiness in the stadium by counterintuitively taking things away. His letter to Lenkheit goes on to describe how to make Hitler's stadia *work* – in the sense they would become «a revelation».

The index as centre

Bond's first «rule of creativity» is to cut the «noise»: «shouting, music, rhetoric, choruses»; but «the sound of the feet would be useful [...] you take away the rest and you get to the bodies». By «noise» here, he seems to mean the words and emotive music and rhetoric rather than the sounds that index physicality, such as feet hitting the ground. In this way he suggests a director can help actors cut through ephemera to find the indices operating in the Lacanian Real at what he terms the play's «centre». It is a process that takes us «from the dressing up for parades in the stadia, to the stripping of the dead in the camps». This work would have been done by the *skene* in ancient drama; a *skene* cuts out the *a-priori* iconic *dressing up* we recognize, and makes us piece together the sounds

a-posteriori that penetrate its semi-permeable boundary. In the same way, the boy from Bartley Geen seemed to be piecing something together for himself *a-posteriori* from the obscene strips of foam left onstage after the play had ended. When we remove iconic structures from the stage audiences are no longer faced with an *other* they can ignore, because the monadic structure of indices draws us into their space to share their boundary with them. Bond says «I take away the rhetoric and listen to the centre – which speaks for itself». The «centre» Bond tells Lenkheit, «hides in normality – just as in the stadia the dead hide in the show of energetic life» (Letter to Lenkheit: 2).

In his plays for young people, which were written in the years immediately following this letter to Lenkheit, Bond seems to have developed the notion of the «centre». The way the Dummy is indexed by the Dummy Actor in *The Under Room* makes the immigrant's childhood trauma immediately noticeable to its audience – even if they cannot make logical sense of it straight away and have to do this *a-posteriori* like the Bartley Green boy. As Bond tells Lenkheit: «when you see a photograph of the deserted ruined stadia – years after the last parades – you cannot take away the bodies: they haunt the empty space» (Ibid.). Finding the «centre» then is a movement away from what is said and towards the voice that speaks; away from what is seen or recognized and towards the detail that troubles us. To use Roland Barthes' terminology, Bond's «centre» moves us from «studium» to «punctum» (Barthes [1980]: 25). Thinking about the «centre» of a play is about honing our sensitivity to those commonplace indices that hide in plain sight; about cutting out the iconic and symbolic signifiers that drown them out. «The centre is simple and particular, not complex and abstract» (Letter to Lenkheit: 2). What Bond seems to be doing here is taking one of the lesser understood metonymic processes set up by the ancients at the theatre of Dionysus, and making its political radicalism accessible in post-structural, extra-theatrical, applied settings.

Internalizing the Signifier

The next *rule* of creativity Bond shares with Lenkheit, is to focus not on the play's characters, but on the *a-priori* logic their situation imposes on them. «What will happen to the soldier or young woman in the stadia is of interest because it will be logical. That they kill and will be killed is the logic of their situation» (Letter to Lenkheit: 2). The logic of the situation takes us back to think about the Symbolic register, which contains the social law; as well as the *super-ego* which operates as an internalized voice of enjoyment and demand, that can be punishing and contradictory. Once you have understood the play's social logic as something that each person internalizes, «you can take a soldier from the

stadium and place him on the street – and the logic of the death camps will still be revealed» (Ibid.). In *The Under Room* the characters exist in a claustrophobic cellar insulated visually from the social world upstairs. Because society exists behind the ceiling *skene* as it were, it is not visible – at least in the sense that it is not represented iconically. But rehearsing the play with my students in 2021, we soon realized that the state of martial law outside governs every move in space that the characters in the cellar make, like a strategic chess game, regardless of the strength or weakness of their personalities. Bond tells Lenkheit «your letter talks of the actor playing the character. But first everyone involved must play the play – actors, directors, designers, and so forth. I am shocked that this is often not done because then there is no logic» (Ibid.). We realized that actors needed to think about how their character lived in the external society beyond the *skene*; but also, how the society beyond the *skene* lived internally, in them. This was the logic that meant the criminal Jack who was used to breaking rules could defy the army and help the immigrant; while good citizen Joan wanted to help, but eventually murdered him.

Telling the difference

Having prized indexical and symbolic structures apart and looked at each, Bond addresses the contrast, or *gap*, between them. He gives the example of the gap between a puppeteer and their puppet, and the gap between the smart SS uniforms in the stadia and the rags of the prisoners in the camps. These are the connections between the civilized and the obscene that society needs to make if it is to be human. Bond tells us: «We must not supply their strings that is the work of their audience» (Ibid.). We can see how that works in the case of the Dummy and Dummy Actor whose audience have to shift their gaze between them and in doing so are themselves indexed, and so affected, by the immigrant's state of disassociation. Bond gives the following example of an index crossing the gap from obscenity into the social sphere: «You may remember the story about the spec of brain that landed on Himmler's cheek – this had jumped across the gap. These are small things: a cheek, a journey of some meters, a fleck of brain tissue – but they illuminate history and responsibility» (Letter to Lenkheit: 3).

Bond says we need to measure this gap. «Macbeth wonders if he will kill the king. He could discuss this (and does) – but it remains theoretical. And then he sees a dagger in the air». Bond observes that the «the play's centre is full of apparitions. Whenever they appear Macbeth talks to them». But it is when he tries to touch the dagger that Macbeth takes an icon for an index and enters his own illusory *trompe l'oeil* hall of mirrors: «unborn apparitions in a looking-glass: his doom» (Ibid.). It is at this point that the Borromean structure holding the

flexible boundary between representation and the Real – between *a-priori* and *a-posteriori* structures – disintegrates, so that Macbeth cannot tell which is which. Bond suggests he gets stuck in the *a-priori* repeating temporality of the mirrors: «much of the play will talk about this moment (tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow...) because he will be trapped in it» (Ibid.). Crossing the gap can take us into madness or into creativity, depending if we focus on the *a-priori* iconic reflection or the *a-posteriori* index we might prefer to disavow and brush off – the speck on Himmler's cheek.

It is a demanding thing to enter the gap: but if we don't enter the gap there is no creativity. Instead, we lend ourselves to an illusion, not to the reality of drama. That is as immoral as the stadia (Letter to Lenkheit: 4).

Drama is sometimes vilified in poststructuralist performance circles because it involves fiction instead of real life. To call drama «reality» as Bond does one has to shift one's understanding, in a way I argue Lacan's three registers help us to do. It is about going beyond the *simple sense* of the reality-fiction binary; not in the sense that we try to immerse ourselves in hallucination like Macbeth. Instead of lending ourselves to the mimetic illusions we see on the front of our screens in the Imaginary register, dramatic reality draws our attention to the *other* beyond the social frame, in the Real. So, from our position in the auditorium, we look at the Dummy and other actors, their *prosopon* masks, faces, and characters, we listen to the things they tell each other, the music, rhetoric – all representing the future as an *a-priori*, retroactive, repeating, reflection of the past like Macbeth's hall of mirrors. The point for Bond, is to contrast these icons and symbols with the ancient death-cries, flecks of human tissue, and the foam strips that index, or indicate, the unseen presence of trauma, death camps, murder. What goes on behind the theatrical *skene* may be fictional; but indices release energy whether they come from the hidden reality of the death camps, or from Macbeth's imagined kingdom. They are true in that they go through us physically by evoking the Lacanian Real. In the Real we are confronted with fragments or affects that resist integration – yet in responding to them, we may retroactively reframe their symbolic reality. In doing this drama does not change our identity, but it does change how we relate to our social being.

Bond's reformulation of ancient dramatic technique would seem to be connected with the way he liberates the index from behind the *skene*. Bond brings the obscene center stage; but not in the sense he drenches the stage in blood, because the minute you stage *in-yer-face* blood, sex, or violence you are back in the land of representation... or pornography. Bond brings the obscene center stage in the sense that the foam strips are visible but do not operate iconically. Bond's move takes the stage beyond *mimesis*, into the Lacanian Real where, as Haraway puts it, difference can be taken seriously. The boy in Bartley Green can

show us what taking difference seriously looks like; not like Macbeth clutching at his hallucination; or like someone turning himself into an icon like a *selfie* to attract the social gaze. But someone doing the private, ontological, activity that Bond calls the «work of the audience»; that is, making *a-posteriori* personal connections between symbol and index – for themselves.

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Performance Is a Form of Knowing. Cosmopolitical Choreographies for a Burning Planet

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Abstract. This paper explores performance as a form of knowing and as a cosmopolitical practice that reconfigures human relations with the world. In dialogue with First Nations ritual practices from Abya Yala – specifically the Wixarika practice of *Asking for allowance to all directions* – the text challenges colonial conceptions of performance as presentation. Instead, it proposes performance as an embodied, relational, and epistemic tool for world-making. Engaging with the works of Stengers, de la Cadena, and Blaser, and grounded in the author's situated experience living between Europe and Latin America, the paper advocates for ontological pluralism and an ecology of knowledges. Through narrative, conceptual tools, and ritual practice, it offers performance as a counter-spell to modernity's extractivist logics, reclaiming its potential to compose un/common worlds. A ritual script is included as an invitation to engage performance as a cosmopolitical act of relational re-attunement.

Keywords. Compossession, cosmopolitics, political ontology, terran dramaturgies, site sensitive performance.

«Before digging the hole in the ground, we will do the ritual of asking for allowance to all directions», I said to Jozef while we were about

to start the process of digging earth for making clay at the back of my family's land in Zacualpan de Amilpas, Mexico.

«What is that about?» Jozef asked, with the shovel in his hand.

«Asking for allowance to all directions is a ritual that people native to this area still practice», I answered.

«But whom do we ask for an allowance when there is no one here?» Jozef asked.

«There are many here – just look around», I replied. «The trees, the insects, the animals, the plants, the fungi... all the communities of beings that live here, or dwell far off in the four directions – east, north, west, and south we will address them. Above us, in the cosmos; below us, in the soil – underworld; and within us, in our bodies, our hearts. All of them will be included in what we are about to do here».

«In Brussels, I usually ask the municipality or the police for permission – if I want to do a performance in public or throw a party, I always need a permit. But I've never asked non-humans for allowance. Do you think they'd get what we're doing?» said Jozef smiling while pointing to the surrounding forest.

We looked at each other and laughed for a while, then I answered: «Honestly, I'm not sure if they understand this ritual. For me, it's more of a performative practice – something I do to become aware of all others sharing this land. It's a way of recognizing them as beings, as people and not just as objects or natural resources. The practice enlarges our social relationships to include everyone – trees, insects, fungi, etc. The ritual teaches that, through the act of performing it».

«I see», Jozef replied.

We stayed quiet for a while listening to the sounds of the forest, birds chirping, leaves weaving, the wind sometimes passing through them... then he added:

«Who knows – maybe the earth is burning because it's missing more of these rituals».

Through learning rituals such as *Asking for allowance to all directions* from my First Nations teachers, I have come to realize that the socio-environmental-political capacity of performance, that is its cosmopolitical power, has been weakened in the western context of art and its colonial dissemination as global modernity. Modern colonial notions of performance, especially within the seemingly secular realm of Art, have limited its various societal functions, privileging the aspect of presentation and spectacle. This tendency to equate performance with presentation narrows its scope and diminishes its potential as a form of knowing and of knowledge transmission which is rooted in the body and in collective experience. Moreover, the exclusive focus on the aspect of presentation has excluded the complex relations between Humans and the non – and more-than-Human worlds (Cosmopolitics). In this context, theatre institutions, as well as museums that host performances, are designed to expel and resist any logic that extends beyond presentation. It requires effort, the right tools, and consider-



Fig. 1: *Asking for allowance to all directions during the first The School of the Jaguar at Tanz Quartier Vienna, Courtesy of the artist, 2018.*

able resistance from artists and cultural workers to transcend this narrow perspective, in order to explore *performance* as a form of knowing and *performative practices* as cosmopolitical devices for world making.

To imagine and compose worlds that redistribute agency and perception to non-humans, and to open up horizons for the emergence of alternative ways of being – new forms of relationality, attention, and perception – it is essential to interrogate the implicit assumptions about knowledge, time, space, and the body that underpin modern-colonial *naturalist ontologies* (Descola [2013]) and how they persist within performance studies and the artistic practice of performance. Precisely this was the focus of my work over the past decade. As a performance artist and researcher, I undertook to investigate alternative genealogies of performance. My particular interest lies in the relational dynamics between human and non-human beings in contemporary Amerindian ritual art, explored beyond colonial frameworks and outside the bounds of the Western art canon.

With roots in Chile and Mexico, and after two decades of working within the European art context, I advocate for an art practice that nurtures an ecology of knowledges (de Sousa Santos [2009]), challenging the monoculture of thought and practice embedded in Western modernity across both in Europe and

the Americas. My work engages with the re-emergence of ancestral modes of movement as social practice – ritual, dance, and song. Through the lens of decolonial aesthetics (Vázquez, Mignolo [2013]) and with the aim of de-canonizing art (Ndikung [2017]), I create work that confronts the erasures imposed by coloniality. In doing so, I seek to reclaim the socio-political-environmental potency of performance, envisioned as a form of cosmopolitics.

Cosmopolitics, as proposed by philosopher Isabelle Stengers (2010), is a philosophical and political project concerned with composing a common world beyond anthropocentrism and the monoculture of modernity. Anthropologists Mario Blaser and Marisol de la Cadena (2017) complicate this notion by introducing the concept of the *Uncommons* as a key to developing both the concept and practice of Political Ontology. While Stengers envisions a re-composition of the world that includes and grants agency to nonhuman beings, Blaser and de la Cadena challenge the modern assumption of a single, shared world interpreted through multiple (human only) cultural perspectives – an assumption still rooted in naturalist ontologies. Instead, they propose a shift toward ontological pluralism: the idea that many worlds exist, each brought into being through distinct world-making practices.

Inspired by and in dialogue with de la Cadena and Blaser's view of cosmopolitics, I propose alternative approaches to composition, dramaturgy, the somatic and the site specific, that transcends the scope of performance as presentation. Learning from the rituals, dances, and songs of First Nations communities in Abya-Yala serves as a form of counter-spell, uncovering and challenging the modern colonial assumptions embedded per default in Western contemporary art, as well as in choreography and performance. This approach allows me to propose a series of pedagogical tools that function as onto-epistemic openings (de la Cadena [2015]), creating pathways to explore the cosmopolitical potential of contemporary performance.

Through this lens, the cosmopolitical dimension of performance manifests as a field and situation that propose a temporary composition of *Uncommon* worlds: a practice that re-composes the way we relate, think, and feel beyond naturalist ontologies, enacting other ways of being together. The capacity of performance to re-compose can be seen as the potency of a performance to contest a dominant view rooted in colonial practices that reproduce the modern canon of art and with it, performance as presentation¹. The generative force of performance lies in its ability to compose uncommon worlds, not merely as sociopolitical critique but as embodied counter-proposal.

1 I differentiate "Performance" and "Performative Practices" as two different realms of my practice. "Performance" refers to the public, collective moment or presentation, including performers and witnesses, while "Performative Practices" describe the realm of knowledge creation and transmission existing within and beyond it.

As a Cheje² (Rivera Cusicanqui [2018]) artist and academic living between worlds (Abya Yala and Europe), in this text I include conceptual formulations, first hand narrations and artistic manifestos, weaving together the artistic and situated experience with the scientific analysis. The land plot of my family in Zacualpan de Amilpas Mexico joins this journey as my collaborator. Since I am writing from this place, I am writing with it. Its waters, produced by the volcano in deep relation with the surrounding vegetation, the ocean, the clouds, and the winds, are harvested by the well in our garden and contribute to nourish these words and intentions with life.

In addition, this paper includes a script of the ritual practice of “asking for allowance to the four directions”, as it has been handed down to me by my teacher Juan José Katira Ramirez. You are invited to engage with the ritual as a performative practice and to explore its cosmopolitical capacities as a form of knowing and relating.



Fig. 2: *Montañas Vivas performative walk within The School of Mountains and Waters at Yerba Loca, Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral, Santiago de Chile, Courtesy of the artist, 2022.*

- 2 Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's concept of Cheje (also spelled Ch'ixi) is a foundational idea in her decolonial thought and practice. The term originates from Aymara language, where it refers to a color produced by the juxtaposition of contrasting elements, such as black and white threads woven together to create a gray hue. This “gray” is not a blend but an arrangement where opposites coexist without merging, embodying a logic of “the third included”.

1. *Composition becomes compossession*

«Everything has an eye, a hand, and can speak. It will see differently, it will touch otherly, it will speak with a different tongue», said my teacher Katira as we gathered around the ceremonial fire. «The underground waterways can sing; they are called by the moist trees that grow in the small mountain oasis», he said. «The ones who build the mine think water is stupid and that it has no preferences. For them, only humans have intelligence – all the rest are things. “Natural resources”, they say, and with this idea they go about transforming this mountain into money, poisoning its waters, air, and soil. They are the stupid ones, the younger brothers. The way they think is all twisted», he stated, moving his head from side to side and sighing.

We had come to the central Andes of Chile to create a performative walk in the site of extraction of the mine Los Bronces from Anglo American Mining Corp. We were at my mother’s house not far from the mine, sitting around a fire close to the river. Above us on the road I could see the lights of the giant trucks that were transporting the extracted copper and other minerals to the near port to be shipped to the global north. «Everything has an eye, a hand, and can speak», I thought while I could still listen to the songs of the river. This moment of shared presence by the river resonates with the notion of *compossession*, where human and non-human agencies intertwine. In Compossession time, relationality, space, the body and the senses are understood beyond modern/colonial capture as co-emergent forces shaping performance and experience.

Over the years, I developed the notion and practice of compossession (Piña [2019]) combining the terms composition and possession. Compossession refers to a practice of composition that wishes to transcend modern ontologies by borrowing inspiration from forms of knowing that happen through embodiment and identification, that have been devalued in modernity (Castro-Gómez [2005]). Performative practices of possession arrive from mestizo, afro-Caribbean, and Indigenous sources. Compossession relates also to the idea of a tropical institution³ (Haitzinger [2019]) as a context, counteracting abstraction with situatedness. Compossession operates in decolonial terms beyond the notions of knowledge, time, space, and body, transgressing the binaries of subject-object and nature-culture proposed by “the contemporary” as a continuation of modernity/coloniality.

The term composition, one of the two components of compossession, was developed by Bruno Latour in his *Compositionist Manifesto* (Latour [2010]) to emphasize the ongoing process of building and maintaining worlds. The manifesto

3 The Tropical Institution is proposed as a model of decolonial institutional critique focused on situatedness, associating the *diversity of the tropics* with *trope* as a collective term for rhetorical figures.

serves as a provocative counterpoint to traditional critiques of modernity. Instead of advocating for deconstruction, which dismantles established structures, Latour proposes compositionism: a practice of carefully assembling new, livable worlds that embrace attention and heterogeneity. Drawing on Stengers, Latour's compositionism carries a cosmopolitical dimension: how can we create space for many worlds to coexist – not just many cultures, but many ontologies – to be negotiated together? Both Latour and Stengers are particularly concerned with the worlds we inhabit in relation to non-humans, technologies, and environmental entities. They suggest that we need to compose worlds that include all existents, granting agency to non-humans as a way of transcending the nature/culture divide that has brought about current environmental, social, and political crises.

To compose relations that integrate non-humans into our social worlds – and to inhabit realms of sensing and meaning beyond the limits of naturalist, ontologies – we must first examine the very nature of composition. As it stands, composition is a tool already deeply embedded in the binaries and assumptions of Western modernity: nature/culture, subject/object, human/non-human, control over nature, and so on. Consequently, it risks reproducing the very worldviews we aim to transcend.

Audre Lorde's powerful insight that «The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house» (Lorde [1984]) reminds us that we cannot build different futures using conceptual materials forged within oppressive systems. Likewise, to genuinely create other worlds – worlds that resist and refuse the logics that have contributed to planetary crisis – we must reach for different tools for thinking, practicing and stablishing relations.

Compossession emerges here not as an alternative composition but as a different paradigm altogether: a building block for worlding through performance, energy, relation, and affect. Unlike composition, which often centers control, individual intentionality, authorship, and separation, compossession gestures toward entanglement, reciprocity, symbiosis and shared inhabitation. It enables the crafting of future proposals that do not replicate colonial or anthropocentric logics, but instead allow for multispecies, multi-ontological relations to flourish.

Compossession is proposed as a creolised term anchored at the crossroads of modern forms of composition and ancestral-contemporary ritual practices from Afro-Caribbean and Amerindian First Nations origins. For the development of “brown”, creole or “cheje” art, compossession is a practice of dealing “in” time and space, with both influences for the emergence of something else, a third space of performance.

It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. (Hara-way [2016]: 12)



Fig. 3: *Montañas Vivas* performative walk within *The School of Mountains and Waters* at Yerba Loca, Centro Cultural Gabriela Mistral, Santiago de Chile, Courtesy of the artist, 2023.

A compossessionist manifesto:

Time: Composition, like modernity, is grounded in a linear conception of time – a straight line extending from present to future (Vázquez [2020]). This temporal logic reflects the developmental narratives of modernity and progress, where the future is assumed to be inherently superior to the present or the past. This forward-driving temporality is rooted in the human scale – a standardized, externalized sense of time measured by clocks, calendars, deadlines. The apparent universality of this time stems from its objectification. Once time is stripped of its plurality and made measurable, it becomes a tool of normativity. This “time-feel of the norm” is not just a tempo, but a political imposition – one that marginalizes other temporalities, other rhythms of life, and other ways of being in relation.

Compossession engages with time differently, by drawing on the notion of ancestrality found in First Nations philosophies. Here, time is understood not as linear progression but as a form of precedence (Vázquez [2017]) – a relational temporality connecting past and future. This multi-dimensional understanding gives rise to cyclical temporalities, where patterns evolve through repetition and variation rather than progress. The time of compossession is non-human; it reso-

nates with the rhythms of Earth, expanding perception as a way of exiting normative modes of sensing and relating to time.

Relationality: Composition, as traditionally conceived, is rooted in a subject-object relation. It is understood as something an individual does – adding to, shaping, or manipulating the world – acting upon materiality. This intentionality aligns with the modern/colonial worldview that seeks to control nature, and also with the classical notion of artistic creation as an act of individual intentionality, willpower or genius. To compose, in this frame, is to conquer materiality by imposing form upon it – a deliberate, authored act that reinforces human dominance.

Compossession, in contrast, is relational. It moves beyond individual intentionality toward the collective. It does not operate within a subject-object framework; rather, it is something we do with and are done by – a reciprocal dynamic in which agency is shared. Compossession is emergent and grounded in openness: the willingness to listen and be affected, to enter in relation. It is a listening practice, where attention takes precedence over control.

To compossess is to attune, to mediate between our needs and those of the other – whether human, non-human, or more-than-human – in a process akin to shamanism or diplomacy. Making, in this sense, is not about imposing but about meeting and being transformed by the encounter. The dance, the performance, the art is a being, not an object – a presence to be met, not a form to be mastered.

Space: In composition, space is typically understood as constructed – manifested through institutional architectures such as theatres, galleries, and museums. An abstract, decontextualized notion of place, apparently neutral, stripped of land, history, and relational depth. Shaped by colonial logics, this spatial conception allows composition to occur “anywhere”, reinforcing an uprooted, exportable framework that overlooks local ecologies and epistemologies. Within this view, space is treated as external to bodies – something that exists around or between them, defined by architectural form and designed to contain, frame, and separate.

Compossession, by contrast, insists that space is always situated and specific, rooted in the land and shaped by relationships. It is not a passive backdrop but a living, entangled presence, *not landscape*, but terrain, co-created with the multitude of beings that sustain it. It is something we are within and part of, not something we merely occupy. In compossession, space is at once within bodies, beyond their material boundaries, and alive in the pulse between them. This is not a space of neutrality or abstraction, but one of co-presence – defined by relation rather than separation.

The body: The body in composition is still the body-animal under the rule and control of the master, the mind. That body must be made into something dif-

ferent, be changed, controlled and manipulated in order to acquire value. It is a body, which needs to be tamed in some way, like a horse, by abstraction, stylisation, or deconstructions since it has no value in itself.

The body in compossession is bound to animality as a way of fullness. It does not need to be tamed by the mind but to be engaged in processes of “feel-thinking”. It is a manifold body – open, not singular nor self-contained. A body as a holobiont shaped by the presence of others, and by all beings that it hosts bringing it into existence. Multi layered, this body it is subtle and gross, visible and invisible, presence–form, content–container. Distal and proximal, cosmic and interior.

The senses: The senses in composition are subdued to visibility and to the coloniality of the senses. That is the use of sensory experience to establish and maintain the power and control of modernity/coloniality on a global scale. As Glissant states: «The west is a project, not a place» (Glissant [1989]: 2). This can include the use of imagery, language, and ways in which sensorial experience is organized and controlled. In coloniality, the senses the visual aspect of perception is predominant. This gaze is panoramic, grounded in the logic of classical perspective – a frontal view where the observer sees all while remaining unseen. This visual regime echoes the panopticon, not only in terms of surveillance. The dominance of the visual reflects a broader disciplining of the senses, enforcing a normative experience of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. The coloniality of the senses evolves into contemporary mechanisms of sensory control, particularly through visual and virtual technologies that shape how we perceive, engage, and feel in digital and mediated environments.

Compossession marks a shift toward the decolonization of the senses (Vázquez [2020]). In this framework, the visual is no longer privileged above other forms of perception. Instead, the senses are reawakened – the ear, the eye, the mouth, the skin – undisciplined and reorganized. This is an immersive, multi-sensorial experience, where proximity and multi-perspectival involvement enable new-old forms of commonality. The audience no longer functions as a unified observer meant to witness a totality. Instead, a multi-perspectival wit(h)nessing emerges. The wit(h)ness – is with the event, not outside it. No longer passive, the wit(h)ness is deeply involved, emotionally engaged, and personally touched. Performance becomes a ritual of participation, not a spectacle of consumption. This mode of wit(h)nessing, of “being with” opens space for *new forms of identification and relation*. In the absence of distance, control, and hierarchy, a relational co-emergency becomes possible – where what is shared is not an object to be evaluated, but an art world to be inhabited.



Fig. 4: *Mountains in Resistance*, performative walk within *The School of Mountains and Waters* at Kaiser Brunnen, Tanz Quartier Vienna, Courtesy of the artist, 2021.

2. Terran dramaturgies of performance

«We don't need more violence in the world, there is plenty, we don't need more conflicts in the world, we are full of them, we don't need the stories we have told ourselves all this time, they have brought us here! We need other stories, new tales, told in different ways. We need new forms of narration», I thought while sitting at the rooftop of my family's plot in Zacualpan de Amilpas. From there I could see the Volcano: the Popocatepetl, alive and active, exhaling smoke through its conic mouth. In Nahuatl *Popoca* means smoke and *Tepetl* mountain. The smoky mountain attracts water as clouds, rain and snow. Its skin, the vegetation that covers its mountain body, absorbs water condensing it into the watershed underneath the earth. The volcano breathes and lives while making the weather humid and colder. Sometimes it pushes ashes through its mouth filling the valleys with darkness. This may cause people to fall ill, which is why evacuation routes are well indicated and emergency protocols habitually performed. Will the Volcano erupt again when the weather warms up two degrees?

In modern and postmodern dramaturgy, the climax functions like a volcanic eruption – a concentrated, high-intensity turning point where conflict

peaks. This emotionally charged moment, often marked by confrontation or revelation, occurs in a compressed time frame and propels the narrative toward resolution. As a key feature of dramatic storytelling, the climax crystallizes tension and forces decisive action, shaping the outcome of the story. In the dramaturgies of climax, narrative attention fixates on antagonistic conflict and climax as event – the eruption is the event. The rest of the volcano’s existence, its quiet durations, its role in sustaining ecosystems of different peoples, its slow accumulations of ancestral waters, are rendered narratively invisible. These dramaturgies prioritize antagonism and rupture over relation and normative time over biocentric time. This persistent focus on antagonism and rupture contributes to the very conditions of crisis, functioning as an *under-narration*, shaping attention toward the event while marginalizing other modes of experience.

To move beyond this paradigm, we must ask: how do we tell the stories of the volcano when it is not erupting? How do we account for the deep time it embodies – the slow gathering, the unseen transformations, the holding of life within and around it? This invites a shift toward biocentric temporalities, which recognize the value of interdependence. It calls for other modes of attention – slower, more attuned, more porous – capable of perceiving the subtle, the sustaining, the ancestral. Such a dramaturgy would not be structured around antagonism and climax but around *relation, existence and blooming* – foregrounding co-presence, mutual impact, and the layered temporalities of living systems, cultivating emotional through identification and resonance. Terran dramaturgies are an alternative to modern and post-modern dramaturgies.

The term Terran, introduced by Bruno Latour (1991), distinguishes modern humans from the broader category of the Anthropos, which encompasses all human beings throughout history. I use the term Terran⁴ following Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Deborah Danowski (2018), as a decolonial critique to the notion of the Human as a universal category (Vazquez [2019]), such as in “humans have created the current crisis”. As they argue, Terrans (first nation and rural mestizos), have done little to advance the ecological decay. Terrans in this sense would be the people who are at the margins of modernity, at the margins of the monoculture of thought and practice imposed by coloniality but also those who contest the Human as a universal category. In this sense, Terran Dramaturgies refer to the human as a being with earth, a pluriversal category. A post-antagonistic dramaturgical proposition relating to both to climax and climate. Rather than centering on conflict, they respond to the challenges of climate change – the Anthropocene as Capitalocene – by foregrounding «lis-

4 *Terran*, from Latin *terra* or Spanish *tierra*, meaning both soil and earth. Following the proposition of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

tening to the land and its pedagogies» (Betasamosake Simpson [2014]). This post-naturalist dramaturgy expands social relation to include non-human beings, offering new possibilities of identification and relation with what western ontologies have called “nature”.

A manifesto of Terran dramaturgies of performance

Terran dramaturgies account for what it takes to be a mountain, a forest, a coral reef, the ocean, a land plot.

They aren’t eager for catharsis, climax and conflict nor from the habitual duration of a performance.

To create Terran dramaturgies, we must listen and learn from the cyclic rhythms of Earth, its biocentric temporalities, from geological formations, from non-human narratives, from the expressivity of earth.

Terran dramaturgies of performance provide time for existence beyond production and consumption. They can nourish and restore all presences involved.

They are beneficial and healing, restorative and nourishing.

They are political, they are militant, they create and provide us with what we are lacking, embodying resistance, enacting a live-able world to come.

Terran dramaturgies can transform perception.

They resist the event and don’t look for an applause.

3. Prácticas eco somáticas for becoming (with) earth

Chile’s geo-political history has tied the country to a neo-colonial extractivist regime, forcing it to remain an exporter of “raw materials” for the global North and undermining the future liveability of its territories. Within this context, the transnational mining corporation Anglo American is seeking to expand its operations, threatening Apu Wamani, a mountain in the central Andes that is vital to my community of origin.

Apu Wamani – “spirit,” “lord,” or “guardian” in Quechua – is what Marisol de la Cadena (2015) describes as a Tira Kuna or Earth Being: not a mountain in the Western sense of geology, topography, or tourism, but a living entity with agency and body.

In 2022, I created a performance about and with Apu Wamani. For this piece, I developed a physical score by embodying the mountain on whose slopes I grew up. Lending my body to the mountain revealed to me the immense power of performance and performative practices as ways of knowing through embodiment and identification – cosmopolitical devices that open spaces of relation between human and non-human worlds.

In that work, at the interface between art, activism, climate science and indigenous knowledge I had learned that terms like “natural resource”, “raw material”, “H₂O”, and “nature” have historically served the colonial extractive agenda, reducing existents into objects, living communities into resources, drinking water into commodities, and future existence in the territories to migration. The extractive logic has expanded sacrifice zones, polluting rivers and water wells in my community with heavy metals from mining.

Many Amerindian societies inhabit worlds best described as “animist” or “multinaturalist” (Neurath [2020]). In these contexts, identifying with the other – so fully as to transform into the other – is not only possible but often quite accessible. This ease of transformation is rooted in what is often referred to as *shared humanity*: while diversity is expressed through the exterior – through bodily appearance, skin, clothes, and furs – it is believed that within these varied beings resides a common interior, everyone is a human inside, all are people. Thus, amid the plurality of natures, there persists the notion of a single shared culture: people. Through this perspective, instead of reducing people to only humans, we have people-mountains, people-trees, people-buzzing bees, etc. Each carries agency and intentionality. Instead of having one nature common to all as in western ontologies, there are many different natures as the many habits of beings, as their different external forms, be them furry, scaly, barky. One culture, people, and many natures as the different external forms of all the beings that exist. Multinatural perspectives (Viveiros de Castro [1998]) to relate with socially. Multiple ways of seeing, touching, hearing, tasting and speaking. The perspective is in the body.

While 20-th century somatic practices in art drew on psychoanalysis, psychology, phenomenology, and semiotics, they remain embedded in modern colonial thought, centred on the self, the Human, its body and its experience. Knowing through identification, through the body and through the senses (first-person experience) constitute ancient forms of knowing. They emerged with artistic expression, long prior to the invention of writing persisting as an inborn capacity of Terrans and Humans alike. *Prácticas Eco Somáticas* tap into this form of knowing, opening the scope from the self-centered quality of modern somatics towards the ecosystemic and the relational. Towards forms of identification with non-humans in socio-, political-, environmental-configurations that contest naturalist ontologies and their extractive semantics. The name *Prácticas Eco Somáticas* remains in Spanish as a reminder of a situated knowledge of mestizo, indigenous and afro Caribbean resistances to the land degradation of so called “sacrifice zones” (*zonas de sacrificio*), particular to Spanish and Portuguese speaking contexts in Abya Yala.

One of the core principles of *Prácticas Eco Somáticas* is rooted in the thought of Amazonian First Nations, as interpreted/translated by Eduardo Viveiros de

Castro through the concept of Multinaturalism or Multinatural Perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro [1998]). This concept enables us to recognize non-human beings – such as animals, plants, mountains, and rivers – not as objects, but as peoples, each with their own body intentionality and agency. From this perspective, these performative practices embody other beings as a way of getting to know them through identification. These somatic socio-environmental practices are fundamentally poetic, political, and artistic, producing a form of sensory knowledge about the existence and current condition of other beings that radically differs from information. It is focused on environments such as mined mountains, deforested lands, and overexploited waters, seeking to establish solidarity between human and non-human bodies – be they mountains, rivers, forests, farmlands, wetlands, or estuaries particularly within the context of neoliberal economic systems and their extractive processes. In these practices we get to know other beings, such as mountains, rivers, fungi, by identifying with them through methods of embodiment, oral narration, and the imaginal.

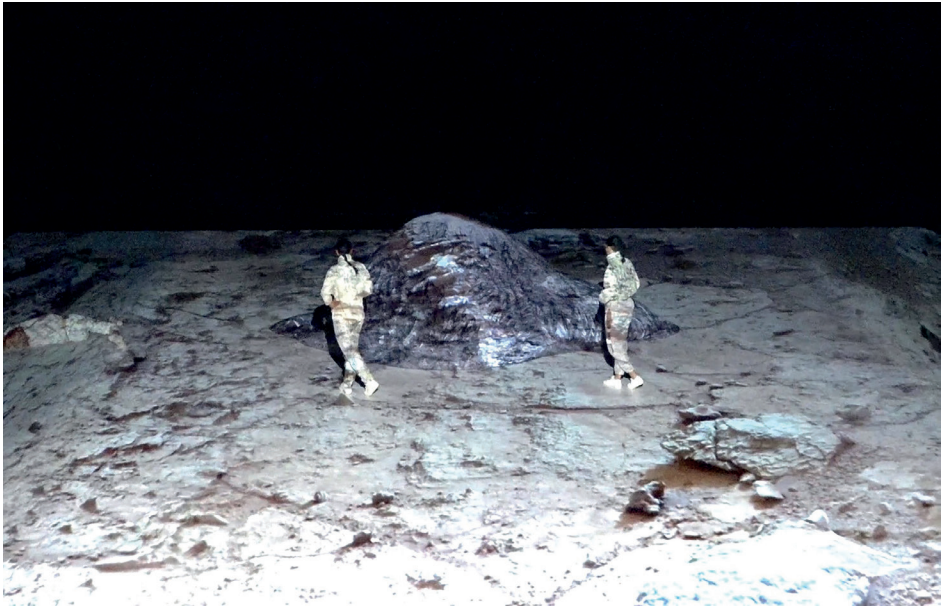


Fig. 5: Film Still, *Danzas Climáticas*, DeSingel, Antwerpen, Courtesy of the artist, 2020.

The knowledge generated through these practices sharply contrasts with scientific knowledge: it is poetic rather than quantifiable, subjective rather than objective. In an era overwhelmed by excessive information, this form of knowl-

edge offers a way to counteract the desensitizing effects of data overload, fostering new ways of re-relating with the living world through bodily experience.

One experience that often comes to mind as an example of the type of knowledge these practices can reveal is one shared by one of my students. An activist, who had been defending a clear-cut forest in Germany for several years, decided to embody that forest through *Prácticas Eco Somáticas*. In doing so, she realized that even after trees are cut down, their roots continue to live for some time. For the roots, the absence of the trunk felt like a phantom limb, a sensation she vividly recalled. This realization deeply moved her, as she truly understood, on a bodily level, what it felt like for the forest to be mutilated in such a way.

Listening to her and to many other similar accounts, I began to understand the power and utility of this kind of knowledge. It established a relationship between her and the forest as bodies, fostering an awareness of the forest's perspective.

4. Site sensitive performance, listening to Earth-beings and other bodies

One day, while harvesting figs from the trees my father had planted on the land overlooking the volcano, I realized – the volcano was speaking. Its language, made of smoke signals, could be called a *geo-graphos*, a form of the Earth's own writing. «This is an entirely different kind of geography», I thought. I then recalled a Chilean scholar, who had written a paper about Earth's expressivity, arguing that geological formations shaped by the Earth could be seen as artistic creations. His aim was to protect certain Chilean mountains from mining extraction, suggesting that – even if they weren't human made archaeological sites – these places, considered sacred by Indigenous communities, could be defended as cultural and aesthetic expressions of the Earth itself. «It would be far too arrogant to believe that only humans can make art», I thought. «Of course, the volcano can write».

When working with a land plot, a mountain, a volcano, or an earth being, performance cannot be proposed the same way as it would in museums or in theatres. Theatre and museums are spaces of apparent neutrality. They exist in diverse contexts, urban, rural, in the global north or south, but they don't address the specificities of those places, they resemble one another. Historically, they have been part of the pedagogies of modernity/coloniality (Vazquez [2020]) globalizing western ontologies as universal. Here, anthropocentrism functions as a central axis of separation from the Earth, underpinning the modern/colonial worldview. It positions the "human" – defined through Eurocentric ideals of reason, civilization, and culture – as superior to all other forms of life. This hierarchical ordering subjugates animals, rivers, forests, and other Earth beings, reducing them to resources or objects of knowledge. In doing so, these pedago-

gies of modernity enact a condition of *Earthlessness* (Vazquez [2020]), where the relational bonds with the more-than-human world are severed. Anthropocentrism, as it manifests through science, reason, and cultural institutions, reinforces a disembodied, extractive stance that alienates humanity from the ecological and spiritual dimensions of existence. As integral components of the narratives of modernity, both the museum and the theatre have been structured through anthropocentric logic, enacting this separation and aligning themselves, when not enabling with the broader extractive project.

In contrast, what I call site-sensitive performance is a situated practice that listens to the living context that hosts it. A living context can be a watershed irrigated by rivers, a forest with its own vegetation, an oasis, etc. When approached as bodies and through the lens of multinatural perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro [1998]), social relations can be enacted with these living ecologies, enabling forms of learning and listening that engage with them as pedagogies.

The practice and concept of the site-sensitive emerges from the work on Compossession, Terran dramaturgies, and *Prácticas Eco Somáticas*, sharing the conceptual frameworks and the theories and practices that inform them. As a multinaturalist practice, it thinks of the land and its different ecologies as having agency. This approach proposes an ontological opening (de la Cadena [2015]) between the western biological notion of Holobiont and the indigenous concept of Earth Being. The notion of holobiont redefines the individual organism. This idea challenges traditional views of individuality by emphasizing relationality, symbiosis, and collaboration as fundamental to life. The notion of Earth Being, drawn from Indigenous thought, understands the Earth as a living, sentient entity with its own agency and consciousness. Rather than a resource to exploit, the Earth is seen as a relational being, part of a kinship system that includes humans, animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and elements. This perspective emphasizes interconnectedness, rejecting the separation / dualism of nature and culture, and calls for humans to engage as stewards and co-participants in the life of a multispecies community. Between these two notions, the task of the site-sensitive is to feel and to listen to non-human others, (non-human people in multinatural terms) learning from them through a different notion of body that allows for other forms of identification.

In 2022-2023, I developed an artistic/educational project: The School of Mountains and Waters⁵: A school of unlearning that explored relations between science, first nations thought and practice, and art and activism, while addressing mining extraction in the central Andes of Chile. The school recognises mountains as living bodies actively involved in the reproduction of water. It comprised several activities: film workshops with children, an exhibition at the children's

5 <https://nadaproductions.at/index/escuela-de-las-montanas-y-las-aguas>

museum in Santiago de Chile, a series of curated conversations, and a walk – a performative walk to the site where the Anglo-American Mining corporation site Los Bronces was going to expand, in the area of the Yerba Loca natural park. Through different activities we aimed at establishing caring relationships between human bodies and bodies of mountains, glaciers, and water.

The school served as an interface between different forms of knowledge, scientific, experiential, artistic, and indigenous, by proposing frames of encounter between art, ecology, climate sciences, activism, biology, hydrology, and experimental geography. As a transdisciplinary team of mestizo and first nations' practitioners, we delved into walking on the Andean site, trying to sense its different places, rock formations, waters, and forests, at the same time incorporating the effects of mining extraction in the area. The performative walk titled *Montañas Vivas* (Living Mountains) was produced through site-sensitive research that explored the territory from these different perspectives, guided by Mapuche⁶ and Wixarika⁷ understandings of Mountains and Waters. The diverse strategies to the work on sensing the Mountain, the effects of the mining extraction on its body, vegetation, climate and water included Wixarika practices of address, such as asking for permission to all directions. The listening practices were guided by Mapuche poet and native forest restorer Leonel Lienlaf, and were based on ancient Mapuche chants that sing about the relations between mountains, forest and waters.

During a series of curated conversations with climate scientists, geologists, artists, First Nations experts, and activists, it became evident that terms like “natural resource”, “Nature”, “Geology”, “Topography”, and “H₂O” were not neutral but actively supported extractive logics. In response, we decided to challenge these terms within the site-sensitive practices we were developing for a performative walk, seeking alternative ways of naming and relating. This process revealed that site-sensitivity required breaking away from the subject-object divide embedded in language and instead cultivating new vocabularies as a form of resistance. In this way, semantic activism became a fundamental part of our approach to performance-making. The performance *Living Mountains*, made through site-sensitive practices included an audio tour that delved on the histories of the mining extraction, its consequences and the movements of resistance to it in the region. It recomposed the language used by the different actors in the political and environmental conflict, proposing new forms of identification with the mountains and waters at stake.

6 The Mapuche are a people native to south-central Chile and southwestern Argentina, particularly in the regions around the Araucanía and Patagonia. The name “Mapuche” comes from the Mapudungun language: “mapu” meaning *land* and “che” meaning *people* – so, “people of the land”.

7 The Wixárika (often spelled *Huichol* in Spanish, though Wixárika is their preferred self-designation) are a people native to the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains in western Mexico, mainly in the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Durango, Zacatecas, and parts of San Luis Potosí.

Site-sensitive practices are an opening field for performance making and performance studies, that wish to take seriously the knowledge of non-human entities, their agencies and experiences. Listening to the expressivity of the land, to sites as places of non-human creativity and non-human knowledge. They contribute to breaking the spell of the modern/colonial idea of the human as pre – existent to that which sustains its existence. Moving beyond spectacle, representation and presentation the site-sensitive redefines what performance and what audience can be. In the future, site-sensitive artistic practices could become a ground for urgent cosmopolitical agency – if supported by curatorial and cultural policy shifts.



Fig. 6: *The School of Mountains and Waters*, Tangente St. Pölten, Courtesy of the artist, 2024.

This paper offers a set of cheje tools – born at the crossroads of First Nations ontologies and Western thought – This collection of tools for practicing performance as a form of knowledge is not intended to reconnect with nature. Instead, it offers ways to move beyond the naturalist ontologies that have enabled the extractive logics and practices that bring about the current crisis.

The political and environmental challenges we face today, compounded by the global rise of the extreme right that sustains the dualism of nature and culture,

call upon us as artists and thinkers to not only critique but also revolutionize our thinking and our actions. It is time to transform our practices into ways of creating alternative worlds. We must become portals for birthing possible futures. To decolonize performance, dance, and art does not only mean to understand the historical, economical, and environmental process that had led to the current crisis, nor to only criticize existing models. It urges us to transform the ways in which we practice art, the ways in which we create and relate, the very thoughts we use to think with. The crisis is a symptom of an ontological model (Naturalism) that understands through separation supremacy and control, that has devalued forms of knowledge that happen through identification, relation and symbiosis. In this state of affairs to transform this model of thought is urgent.

We find ourselves in a moment when Western thought is beginning to move away from the mechanical paradigms that once justified the exploitation of the Global South under colonial, capitalist, and neoliberal systems. Ailton Krenak, the great thinker from the Krenak peoples from Brazil states: «today myth and science are coming together» (Krenak [2020]). Amerindian knowledge and contemporary science increasingly align in their understanding of plant, animal, and material life. This shift calls for academia to pay attention to the body and its capacity to know through identification and experience, and to actively seek meaningful engagement with other ontological and epistemological systems of knowledge.

Further research perspectives may unfold in exploring deeper the relationship between first nations ritual practices and contemporary performance through the lenses of cosmopolitics and political ontology. Much remains to be explored about how to practice an art that actively responds to the current crisis by imagining and enacting possible forms of healing. May this writing serve as an invitation – to conversations, collaborations, and actions – with artists and thinkers across disciplines who are equally invested in rethinking how we relate, create and imagine.

Asking for allowance to all directions:

We begin by facing East – where the sun rises, the birth of the sun, where knowledge first arose. It is the direction of the children, and of wise elders like my teacher Katira. From here came the maguey and the ancient pulque. The ancestors said that the first beings appeared from the East. We ask permission from all beings that live here: the sacred deer, the trees that greet the sunrise, the birds nesting nearby, the ants, bees, insects, lizards, frogs – all life that dwells in this direction.

Then, we turn to the North – the direction of the air, the sacred mountain of the ancestors and the dead, a place of rest and transformation. It is the realm of the underworld, where life and death feed each other. We greet the women who died in childbirth, the winds and the cold, and the buffalo people. We ask permission from all beings that live here: All life that dwells in this direction.

Next, we face the West – the womb of the Earth, source of life on earth home of the oceans, salt, clay, and mud. This is where the snakes, all marine life, the whale, and other sea animals live. It is where the first songs were born, and the first shamans met with one heart and one eye. It is the origin of the drum, the sacred violin, the parrots, the goldfinch, and the cenxontle, birds that sing endlessly. We ask permission from all beings that live here: All life that dwells in this direction.

Now, we face the South – the place of rain and thunder. The direction of Huitzilopochtli, the humming bird that brings sacred messages. The sacred fire – We ask permission from all who live here. To all life that dwells in this direction.

We then look up to the sky – to the stars, suns, galaxies, and all the forces of the universe. We recognize how they move in great dances in tune with the dance of our Earth mother.

We now look down to the Earth – we touch it with our hands and give thanks for holding us, feeding us, giving us life, and keeping us alive. We cuddle you mother, we thank you, though we are your children. We honour the fungi realm connecting the trees and composting life, to the microorganisms in the soil, and the underground waters that nourish this land.

Finally, we bring our hands to our heart. We feel our heartbeat and we remember the sacred weaving of life we are part of. Here we have come to bloom together, to strengthen ourselves together.



Fig. 7: *To Bloom – Florecimiento*, Performative Sculpture, at Instituto Tropical México.
Courtesy of the artist, 2024.

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The Performer Without Qualities. Empathetic Signification, Non- Performative Performance and Mimesis in Artistic Practice and Populist Politics

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Abstract. This article reports on instances of my performance practice developed through strategies of over-identification, while establishing a parallel relation with certain types of right-wing populist performance and their theatrical processes (of identification). By doing so, I question the ethics of these theatrical processes when applied to politics. Departing from Lacan and Laclau's notions of signifiers, I introduce the term empathetic signification, to reflect on the process by which populists re-signify signifiers to construct provisional and multiple political identities. I then draw on iterability and the performative to reflect on how the non-performativity of populist performance constructs a mouldable subjectivity. Finally, situating this subjectivity within the framework of mimesis and plasticity, I examine populists' relationships with their audiences and environments, showing how they strategically acquire power by making themselves sufficiently *plastique* to be shaped by their audiences' affects, and subsequently imprinting a newly created form upon them.

Keywords. Over-identification, empathetic signification, non-performative, mimesis, populism.

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1. Introduction

Between 2019 and 2022, Helena Botto developed performance work through strategies of over-identification. This term was introduced by Slavoj Žižek in reference to the Slovenian group Laibach in the 1980s. I apply it here to describe artistic strategies that involve enacting a magnified version of a given reality, in order to expose and critically interrogate its underlying contradictions and flaws, and often presenting the «worst of the options» (Bavo [2007]: 18). In 2019 I performed the lecture *How to Become a Populist?*, to this followed a series of experiments that culminate in *The Museum of Impropropriety* (2022). The latter event, happening at the Old Operating Theatre, in London, included a stage performance *The Conservatory of Populism*, four-screen performances which were part of the installation *The Centre for the Conservation of Endangered Political Species*, and an auction.

Botto, over-identifies with right-wing populist rhetoric, exposing how theatrical strategies are co-opted to re-signify signs and produce anti-democratic discourse. Botto is both a non-character and character, who also over-identifies with herself as a performer – trained in Grotowski's methodology of physical actions, and later as contemporary performance-maker and researcher – and as well with certain art practices whose aim for a concrete usefulness and political efficacy could be read as an enactment of Jacques Lacan's «Discourse of the University» (Lacan, Miller, Grigg [2007]).

This article reports on instances of this performance practice, while establishing a parallel relation with certain types of right-wing populist performance and their strategic processes of identification. Drawing upon Lacan and Ernesto Laclau's notions of pure, empty, floating, and master signifiers, I analyse populists' re-signification of signifiers in a process I term empathetic signification. I then deploy Judith Butler's performativity and Jacques Derrida's iterability to reflect on the construction of populist' subjectivity created through the iteration of consistently inconsistent statements, leading to the concept of the non-performative – the deliberate emptying of signifiers to unleash a pro-

liferating field of signification. Finally, with Denis Diderot, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Nidesh Lawtoo, I situate the populist figure within the framework of mimesis, arguing that the leader is a plastic subject or a «subjectless subject» whose power rests on their ability to embody multiple positions due to an absence of fixed ideology.

2. Debriefing the notions of signifiers

The «pure signifier» is, for Lacan, «a meaningless material element in a closed differential system», a «signifier without signified» (Evans [1996]: 189). The «master signifier» (S1), which has its origin in Lacan's «discourse of the master»¹, can be seen as a particular operation of the pure signifier: it takes on the function of representing «the subject (\$) for another signifier or, more precisely, for all other signifiers (S2)» (Žižek [1991]: 130). In S1 there is an attempt of totalisation, of hegemony. This attempt fails, however, as the «master signifier» can never represent the subject completely, because there is an excess, «some surplus which escapes representation» (Evans [1996]: 109)².

Laclau's notion of the «empty signifier» draws on Lacan's notions of the «pure signifier» and the «master signifier». He defines the «empty signifier» as a «signifier without signified» (Laclau [2007]: 36). This emptiness does not mean a total absence of meaning, but rather the impossibility of fixing it to any particular demand. Precisely because of this, the «empty signifier» can serve as a deposit for multiple demands, allowing them to be articulated together in an «equivalential chain». In this way, a particular demand can come to stand for universality, becoming hegemonic by representing a wider set of social demands. Laclau illustrates this with the example of Solidarność, the movement led by Lech Walesa at the Lenin shipyards in Gdansk, Poland, in 1980. The initial demands of shipyard workers gradually expanded to symbolise the frustrations of many other groups that live under oppression. As more groups joined in solidarity, the link to the original, partial demand weakened, and it came to function as more universal «empty signifier» (Laclau [2005b]: 39-40). The «*tendentially* empty signifier» (40) is, according to Laclau, the key to the formation of collective popular identity, and thus central to his understanding of populism.

Laclau also makes a distinction between «empty signifiers» and «floating signifiers», the latter term borrowed from Claude Levi-Strauss. As he states:

- 1 For Lacan there are four types of discourses: the «discourse of the master», the «discourse of the university», the «discourse of the hysteric» and the «discourse of the analyst».
- 2 This surplus is the *objet petit a*, which is the unattainable object-cause of desire – an empty form shaped by fantasy, representing what the subject lacks but can never truly obtain.

The first concerns the construction of a popular identity once the presence of a stable frontier is taken for granted; the second tries conceptually to apprehend the logic of displacements of that frontier. (Laclau [2005a]: 133)

A «floating signifier» is one whose meaning is «suspended» (Laclau [2005a]: 131), contested by competing projects until it is temporary fixed. Lacan refers to this temporary fixation as *point de capiton* (quilting point), where «the signifier stops the otherwise endless movement of the signification» (Lacan cited in Evans [1996]: 151). This quilting creates the «master signifier», which produces «the necessary illusion of a fixed meaning» (151). However, this supposed stabilised signifier can later acquire divisive and antagonising meanings.

Consider the Union Jack. We could think of this flag as a «master signifier» that assembles other signifiers (S2); this flag symbolises the United Kingdom, a union between several nations such as England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Yet, during the Pro-Brexit /Leave campaign this flag was used by pro-Brexit and nationalist parties as a symbol of the UK's autonomy from the European Union (EU). Within this context, the flag functioned as a «floating signifier», symbolising anti-EU statements, exclusive nationalism, and anti-migration policies. Its earlier hegemonic meaning of Union of Nations was torn down, and it came to symbolise divisiveness and antagonism.

A telling moment that illustrates the implicit antagonism occurred when Nigel Farage, then a Member of the European Parliament for the Brexit Party, together with other MEPs from his party, staged a symbolic act on the UK's last day in the European Parliament. They replaced the small European flags standing at each MEP's seat in the hemicycle with small Union Jack flags. This action provoked a huge stir in Parliament, as it was read as a symbol of anti-European, exclusionary nationalism.

2.1. *A (gestural) production of empty signifiers*

It is September 2019, in Exeter. I am performing a short performance-lecture at Theatre and Performance Research Association (TaPRA) annual conference, in the working group *Actor Training*. I am delivering *Training populism: How to become a populist? A toolkit of exercises for almost all emerging populists (or How to exercise a research?)*. The lecture begins with me demonstrating my background in physical theatre and in the Grotowskian tradition of laboratory theatre, which I practiced for many years in the past, but have long since distanced myself from. I, then propose to repurpose my skills and construct a training for a populist physicality. Similarly to Grotowski's *plastiques* exercises, I isolate body parts, the arms, the hands, the torso, and my face, but here to construct a specific physicality for populism,

or what could become populist signifiers. I play with existing bodily signifiers and with semiotics of politics. With the hand, I evoke the communists' raised fist, the Roman salute later appropriated by fascism, the distinctive royal wave of Queen Elizabeth II, and the hand gesture used in Occupy Wall Street assemblies. I play with those signifiers, whilst lecturing on their symbolic meaning. Then, through movement, I morph them into another original gesture, and thereby create a new gestural semiotics for populist politics. From the wrist, a rotative movement is initiated and progressively sped up, until it ends in an immobilised body with only the hands moving at great speed. The audience laughs.

Afterwards, I explore randomness and movements that did not possess any relatable cultural meaning. I stick three fingers out of my hand and move them slightly in a very sparse rhythm. The audience laughs.

Finally, I compose the elements found so far starting with the question «Sir, do you promise to deliver Brexit, on the 26th of October?»³. I answer this question physically, my face becomes sad – an affect I had explored previously – and I stretch it until the whole body mimics the physicality of crying. I suddenly pause to introduce a hand with the three pointing fingers. The audience laughs. But not as much as when I break all the movements to say: «well, at least this is different». Why did the audience laugh?

My interpretation is that this type of out-of-context-gesture operates as «a pure signifier». As Lacan states: «every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing. The more the signifier signifies nothing, the more indestructible it is» (Lacan cited in Evans [1996]: 189). This gesture is improper, it transgresses any system of language we already know, in the sense that it resists integration in any pre-existing meaning. When people laugh, they laugh at the arbitrariness of that signifier, because it is empty and signifies nothing, it has the potential to become an empathetic signifier and therefore signify anything.

3 After the 2016 referendum, a majority in the UK voted to leave the EU. The exit, originally set for March 2019, was delayed several times until January 31, 2020, when the UK entered a transitional period lasting until December 31, 2020. Due to successive delays in the process of «delivering Brexit», this was a question often asked by journalists to the then British prime-minister Boris Johnson.



Fig.1 Still from the screen performance: *The Centre for the Conservation of Endangered Political Species – The Educational Centre 2022*

3. Empathetic signification

It is March 2022, I am in the studio with a head-mic plugged into an amplifier, so I hear my voice resonating in the space. I am trying out ways of enacting a speech by Viktor Órban. However, at some point I only keep repeating: «illiberal democracy»⁴.

With no attempt to rationally re-signify them, I simply take the words as empty signifiers, exploring different pitches, different qualities and affects: aggressive, angry, neutral (without any affective charge), cute, sexy, etc; I explore a variety of sounds, rhythms and intensities: continuous and *staccato*, strong and soft, a mixing of both, different volumes, different languages. I decompose the word in syllables, to test how each vowel and consonant might resonate in specific body parts.

I spend hours in the studio playing with the enunciation of these words and letting my body be transformed by them. Affected by the resonance of these sounds within my body, and by hearing my own voice projected through the

4 Viktor Órban introduced the term «Illiberal Democracy» in 2014 at the Bálványos Summer Free University in Romania, to distinguish Hungarian politics and views on democracy from the western liberal democracies from European Union. Órban's democratic illiberalism takes a conservative approach to politics, based on traditional Christian values and nationalism.

loudspeakers – now detached and externalised – my body begins to move in a transformed manner. As the body acquires other forms, new associations and new meanings emerge, which I continue to explore until they fade or morph into something else.

As if voguing, I enact a series of postures, playing with rhythms, catwalk struts, exaggerated seductions, macho poses, displays of skill, and their simultaneous parody. I vocalise the syllables of i-lli-be-ral-de-mo-cra-cy, exploring different voices, melodies emerge. It evolves into a teaching session for an imagined audience, drafting a score I will later use in the live performance.

As I play with the materiality of those signifiers – the sound, the phonemes, the space resonance, the resonance of the syllables in my body – and the meaninglessness of those words, my body moves and acquires other forms, other associations and re-significations come to my mind and other behaviours to my body. It is as if my body is a sponge, absorbing and being transformed by its own actions and by the external *stimuli* it receives from the space – *stimuli* that, in turn, are transformed into a new embodiment of those sounds, resulting in a new behaviour, action, or character (or, to put it simply, a new performance).

I began by performing Viktor Orbán's speech but gradually I became performed by the act itself. Through a porous and empathetic engagement with the room's acoustic responses, my subjectivity was temporarily constructed in relation to its resonance. This process functioned as a feedback loop: I introduced an input, received external responses, and allowed these to reshape my performative presence. Rather than a fixed identity, this was a contingent, evolving subjectivity formed through an ongoing interaction with the environment.

If we were to think/feel now the words «illiberal democracy», we would acknowledge they have acquired different significations throughout this performance process. They were modulated and (per)formed while the body of the performer was rendering itself reactive to the ambience in the room. This approach emphasises the instability of signifiers and performs their fluidity. It can make us question how signifiers acquire emotional resonance and become politically charged and re-signified. It subverts the notion of illiberal democracy by dislodging its perceived stability and authority, showing how they are constructed and reconstructed through iteration, repetition, emotion, empathy, and context.

As we will see further on, certain trends of populist performance operate similarly. Through a process I term empathetic signification, the populist subject re-signifies signifiers to construct their (temporary) subjectivity that keeps volitionally changing accordingly to the surrounding demands.

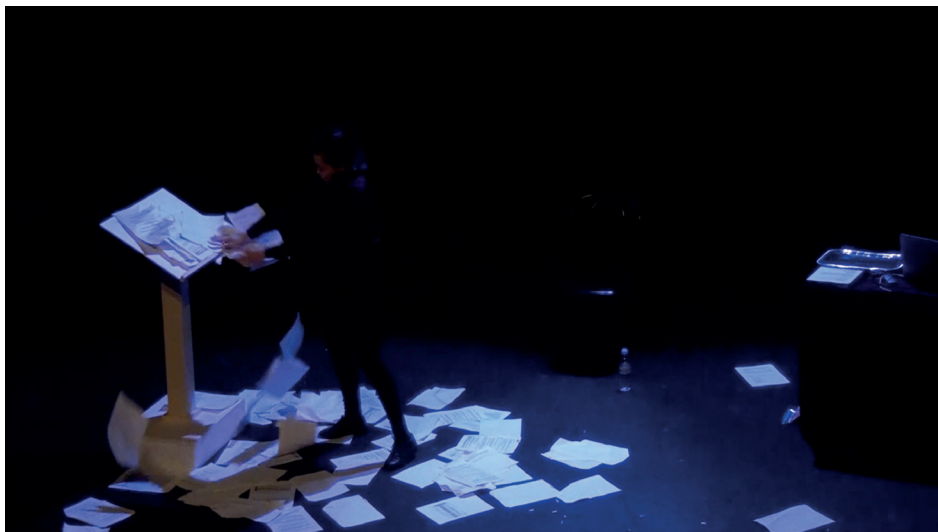


Fig. 2 The Conservatory of Populism – Mladinsko Theatre. Ljubljana November 2022

3.1. *A few examples of empathetic signification in populist politics*

It is August 2023, former US President and then re-candidate to the 2024 US presidential elections Donald Trump has been indicted several times over his attempt to overturn the results of the presidential elections in 2020. He surrendered at the Fulton County Jail, in Georgia, where he had his mugshot taken. For many, this incident would have meant the end of their (political) career, however not for Trump. He published his arrest in the social media platform X, reframing it as election interference (in relation to the then upcoming presidential elections in 2024) under the slogan «Never Surrender», with a link to a fundraising page. In only one day he managed to raise \$4.18 million and by August 27, 2023, he has managed to raise more than \$7 million in funds for his campaign with the mugshot's merchandising. Within a single day, the mugshot was re-signified, from an image of alleged criminality and public humiliation to one of victimhood or heroism, capable of generating political capital. It was swiftly instrumentalised to raise funds for a potential candidacy, the very prospect of which the mugshot would initially threaten to undermine.

When Trump published his mugshot on Twitter with a re-signifying slogan, he aligned with his voters' wish that his arrest and the electoral process are unlawful. By declaring his willingness to keep fighting, he reinforced his power and activated a feedback loop: his supporters, seeing him take ownership of the mugshot, felt their claims of injustice validated. Rather than resisting or feeling

ashamed by the mugshot, Trump embraced and capitalised on it, performing with it and allowing it to perform him – thus re-inscribing his authority as a populist subject. The massive sales and donations generated by this performance enhanced his campaign further, making his subjectivation as a populist leader even more efficacious.

Trump's strategy relies on empathetic identification that produces a performance of re-signification. Like Botto in the studio, he listens to his audience (or to the surrounding ambient) and let himself be performed, and performs, accordingly.

Empathetic performance starts by establishing a process of identification with the ambience in the room, to later modulate and produce a new performance. This performance will then, in its turn, influence the audience who, in a sort of projective activity, re-identify with the leader, who had previously re-identified with them.

4. *A plastic subjectivity*

Philosopher of language John L. Austin has defined a performative utterance to be void, or hollow, if pronounced by «an actor on stage, or introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy» (Austin [1962]: 22). He argues language in these circumstances is used non seriously and is «*parasitic* upon its normal use» (22). Derrida critiques Austin's idea that an utterance cannot be felicitous when parasitical of its normal usage. For Derrida, signs are always parasitic, not only when pronounced by an actor on stage. Any sign exists only and always in reference to another sign and the value and signification it acquires is related to the context, in which it operates. As Derrida states:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited* put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. [...] This citationality, this duplication or duplicity, this iterability of the mark is neither an accident nor an anomaly, it is that (normal/abnormal) without which a mark could not even have a function called «normal». (Derrida [1988]: 12, author's emphasis)

Derrida denies the existence of a transcendental signifier, a signifier that is at the origin of all meanings, an anchor, and from which all significations would derive or be parasitic of. For him every sign is always parasitical upon other signs; even in a dictionary, a sign requires other signs to define itself. Any use of a sign is already a citation, and thus a repetition of earlier uses of that sign. Furthermore, Derrida extends the logic of citation, affirming that the very fact that a performative utterance is efficacious is exactly due to the force of its iterability within a specific context:

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a «coded» or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a

ship or a marriage were not identifiable as *conforming* with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a «citation»? (Derrida [1988]:18, author's emphasis)

This idea that there is an iterability of a model in which words and actions acquire a value or a (re-)signification, is further developed by Judith Butler in her views of gender performativity. When a child is born and the words «it is a girl» are uttered, this sentence sets in motion a series of continuously iterated actions that are a product of what a particular time and society identifies as being appropriately female, e.g. wearing certain colours and certain types of clothing, performing certain type of behaviours, working in certain type of jobs, etc. The performative construction of gender happens, according to Butler, through a consecutive iteration of actions, behaviours, and words that are engendered in the social structure of a given society, but it is however seen and often presented as if natural and given by biology.

Drawing on the idea of citationality as a mean for social construction, Butler integrates a view on the performativity of injurious speech acts. She claims that performative acts are «ritualised practices» that conceal their own constitutive conventions points to how social reality is constructed through repetition. The effectiveness of a performative lies in its ability to appear natural, to «cover over» the fact that it is based on historically contingent practices that are performed in an accumulative manner. As she states:

If a performative provisionally succeeds [...] then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and *accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices*. [...] In this sense, no term or statement can function performatively without the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force. (Butler [1997]: 51, author's emphasis)

If identities, social realities, power systems, hierarchies, and authorities are constructed through the continuous iteration of actions, what type of authority, power, identity – and ultimately subject – is created when the iteration of a consistent inconsistency is performed?

Let us recall the case of Donald Trump, who by 1999 identified as «very pro-choice», but by 2021 shifted to «pro-life» without explanation (Swan and Haberman [2024]: np). By 2016, he briefly supported punishing women for abortions before quickly backtracking under pressure. Nonetheless, his appointment of conservative justices during his first mandate was instrumental in overturning *Roe v. Wade*⁵. In 2024, he was again shifting positions, trying to balance political gain with backlash from social conservatives.

5 *Roe v. Wade*, the 1973 Supreme Court decision granting women the right to abortion, was overturned in 2022 during Joe Biden's administration by conservative justices previously appointed by Trump. The ruling gave states control over abortion laws, and many have since restricted access.

The power and the construction of the populist figure does not seem to derive from its performativity (in Butler's sense), i.e. through an iteration (visible or not) and accumulation of specific set behaviours, actions, routines, but rather through a constant variation – often even contradictory – of statements (and, as we saw previously, through the curated re-signification of signifiers).

If we were to apply Butler's idea of performativity to the construction of the populist identity, one could say the populist subject – in this case Donald Trump – forms his identity, through the iteration of consistently contradictory or varied statements on a same subject. The (right-wing) populist subject is therefore never a stable identity, except in the sense that there is a meta-stability in always adopting varied and contradictory positions. However, there seems to be an extra step in the populist which involves upsetting the boundary conditions that define what counts as varied or contradictory on any given issue.

As some reports noted (McCreesh [2024]: np), Trump's speech varies according to the audience he is speaking to. It is a type of performance that is re-active and constructed to correspond to the expectations of the Other's gaze, in as much as these expectations will help him to remain in power. It is the iteration of an empathetic behaviour, which is then as much changeable as it is its audience or surroundings, what constructs the populist as a political subject or as a political identity. His political identity coherently changes to mirror the audience he has in front of him and to temporarily become and identify with the other's wishes, expectations and fears.

4.1. Performative / Non-performative

It is May 2022, I am at the Old Operating Theatre Museum in London, performing a speech in French. Whilst some people might understand the language, others might not. The speech is a victory speech delivered by a far-right candidate for the French presidential elections, Marine Le Pen, on their high achievement in votes, in the first turn of the elections in April 2017. The speech is celebrating the success but also a plea to stop migration and reinforce security.

I start performing this speech in an aggressive manner, in a strongwoman type of performance, similarly to what Benjamin Moffitt describes as «performances of strength» (2016). At some point, I stop it in an abrupt manner and Botto, the character, in a different voice tone, addresses the audience: «What do you think?». The audience laughs. I am aware that the laugh might have happened because they did not understand the language, the meaning of the words, and nonetheless I am asking them to comment, but it can as well

be because I suddenly and unexpectedly shifted the rhythm, the tone and the performance, from an aggressive politician delivering a speech at the lectern to the PhD candidate, performer, and performance-maker, who is delivering a performance-lecture, in modes of over-identification, teaching an audience how they can become themselves great populist performers⁶. The sudden shift in the performance has a comic effect, that is proved to provoke laughter because it operates with the unexpected. I then, interrupt their laughter to continue the explanation: «I think it's a little bit too aggressive. Don't you think? The performance of the strongmen and the strongwoman... the aggressiveness... has been hugely over-rated. So why not to try something a little bit different? Why not to try something cute? A performance of cuteness?». Some laughter occurs.

I move towards the lectern and restart the same speech again, now performed in a cute tone: «Mes chers compatriots, vous m'avez porté au second tour de l'élection présidentielle» (My dear compatriots, you have brought me to the second round of the presidential election). When I start the second iteration, the audience, even expecting something in a cute tone given that I had just announced it, laughs, nonetheless. As the speech continues, Rob Hart – the sound designer and creative collaborator, who is also performing live with me – starts to process and modulate my voice in real time, shifting it into the register of an even cuter tone. The audience laughs. The speech is chained with a song praising America, and I perform a childish, cute choreography as if parodying musical theatre. I then begin repeating Donald Trump's lines, whilst performing a minimalist routine that moves me across the stage from left to right, and right to left: «I am going to build a huge, huge wall [...]». I finish with a few turns around the lectern, kneeling on the floor as the audience applauds. An applause I interrupt to start the next segment.

In all iterations of *The Conservatory of Populism*, the audience reacts differently to the aggressive and the cute iteration. In the former, they listen attentively and only laugh after the interruption, while in the latter, they laugh immediately when the first sentence is spoken.

In this example, the (mode of) performance seems to empty the signifier, with the audience reacting more to the cuteness or aggressiveness than to the semantic content. It nearly reverses Austin's theory of «felicity» in performative utterances, although not in an infelicitous way. For a performative utterance to be «felicitous», it must be said in an appropriate context, followed by

6 Note that the audience has already acknowledged that Botto, who shares biographic elements with Botto, the non-character or the historical performer, is performing in modes of over-identification. By performing a version of a right-wing populist supporter, she is subverting the logics, showing the flaws and being highly critical of this politics.

an action⁷. Here, however, the performance prevents the words from becoming performative, turning them into non-performative.

Sarah Ahmed used the term «non-performativity» (2006, 2012) to demonstrate how institutions can undo anti-racist commitments simply by uttering them. In her model, the speech act «does what it says» by failing – by allowing naming alone to stand in for real change – so that stating anti-racism becomes a way of not enacting it (Ahmed [2012]: 117).

My use of non-performative does not mean that the efficaciousness of an utterance is reversed or not enacted but that by deliberately emptying the signifiers through performance – by stripping a speech or gesture of its usual meaning – the non-performative is filled with instability, ambivalence, acquiring the capacity for endless re-signification.

This idea echoes Lacan's «non-knowledge» (Miller [2011]: np) the analyst's stance of *tabula rasa* that lets the analysand's speech emerge unmediated by preconceptions. As Jacques-Alain Miller puts it, only by admitting «I know nothing» can the analyst open space for the analysand's own desire – and only by emptying a signifier of its prior weight can new meanings emerge. Similarly, François Laruelle's «non-philosophy» is not a negation of philosophy, but an expansion of thought to include art, technology, or science on equal footing with traditional philosophy. Non-philosophy «enlarges the set of things that can count as thoughtful» (Mullarkey & Smith [2012]: 2), de-hierarchising discourse⁸.

Trump's performance following the mugshot episode – transforming it into merchandising products – is also non-performative. Not only did it undo an established signifier – previously associated with potential crime – but it unleashed a proliferating field of signification, e.g. resistance, entrepreneurship or heroism. An even when taken as a signifier of crime, his performance re-signified it as if a political persecution.

7 For instance, a judge or priest (appropriate role) in a court or church (appropriate space) declares a couple married, an act followed by the signing of documents and a formal change in their civil status.

8 I am thankful to Dr. Simon Bayly for the hints on «non-knowledge» and «non-philosophy».



Fig. 3 Still from the exhibition video *The Centre for the Conservation of Endangered Political Species – Commemorative Memorabilia* – watercolour paintings printed on china by Sonia Roshal – Old Operating Theatre London 2022

My notions of non-performative performance as a catalyst for fluctuating and expansive signifiers, along with empathetic signification, capable of absorbing and generating multiple meanings, might be useful tools in artistic practice. They raise, however ethical concerns when unscrupulously applied to politics.

5. *Mimesis, and the subject without qualities*

In a critique to Laclau's notion of the «empty signifier», Benjamin Moffitt and Pierre Ostiguy coined the term «overflowing signifier»⁹. For these authors, an «overflowing signifier» is a signifier that can acquire different meanings within the same range of political affiliation. In this sense, the leader can signify different and many things to their partisans, which remain nonetheless their partisans:

with an «overflowing» signifier, partisans of the *same* political camp associate *many* meanings with the term, name, or leader. For example, Trump may mean different things

9 Laclau's notion of «empty signifier» has received critiques through-out the time, even by Chantal Mouffe, who has suggested instead the term «hegemonic signifier» (Zicman de Barros [2023]: 45).

to many of his partisans, but they remain *his* partisans, *his* camp. While there may be internal rivalry to impose a particular meaning, rather than another, on the same object on the part of different partisans, it remains *one broad* equivalential chain and the same broad political camp. (Ostiguy & Moffitt [2020]: 54, authors' emphasis)

An «overflowing signifier» locates the agency on the side of the voters – or the audience – who fabricate different meanings and have different modes of perception in relation to the populist actor. This type of signifier is therefore produced through a particular «mode of perception» (Burns [1972]: 1), through the external gaze and, therefore, is constructed by its own theatricality. Complementary, my notion of empathetic signification also positions the agency in the actor, the populist actor, whose actions are (re-)produced by mimicking and identifying with the behaviours of their different audiences.

Drawing upon Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's notion of mimesis, I argue that populists are a «plastic subject», embodying the qualities of the overflowing signifier. As seen previously, they keep adapting or changing their rhetoric and behaviour, based on what might be more favourable. For Lacoue-Labarthe, «mimesis is not a process of imitation, in that it cannot imitate some prior subject or essence, but consists in the production or fabrication of the subject» (Jane Hiddleston's introduction in Lacoue-Labarthe [2003]: 55). The subject does not have a prior essence, but it is hollow and empty, formed from equally empty models.

In his theory on mimesis, Lacoue-Labarthe draws extensively on Diderot's *Paradox of the Actor* (1830), which claimed that it is the absence of proper qualities that gives the actor the plastic capacity to perform anything:

The paradox lies, then, in the following: in order to do everything, to imitate everything – in order to (re)present or (re)produce everything [...] – one must oneself be nothing, have nothing *proper* to oneself except an «equal aptitude» for all sorts of things, roles, characters, functions [...]. The paradox states a *law of impropriety*, which is also the very law of mimesis: only the «man without qualities», the being without properties or specificity, the subjectless subject [...] is able to present or produce in general. [...] This is why the artist [...] is not truly a subject: he is a subject that is a nonsubject or subjectless, and also an infinitely multiplied, plural subject, since the gift of nothing is equally the gift of everything [...] the more the artist (the actor) *is* nothing, the more he can be everything. (Lacoue-Labarthe [1989]: 258-260, author's emphasis)

For Lacoue-Labarthe mimesis is a two-fold process, encompassing «passive» and «active» mimesis. «Passive» or «restricted» mimesis relates to receiving/taking form (from the model, even if the model is an empty one) whereas «active» or «general» mimesis relates to giving or producing form. Both processes are however entangled. Scholar Nidesh Lawtoo considers that there is an implied process of plasticity shadowing this double mimetic process:

Mimesis, just like plasticity, is the property of a subject without property whose defining characteristics are, indeed, to receive form and give form. It is both the subject of a passive *reception of form* (the subjective base, or «wax») and the subject of a typical virtuosity to *give form* (the plastic subject who assumes different «roles») (Lawtoo [2017]: 1213, author's emphasis)

In this double and paradoxical mimetic and plastic process, the subject is both a matrix that can imprint form on others and a malleable subject that can be imprinted by them. Thus, «the line between active and passive, copy and original, subject and object, inside and outside» blurs and destabilises equivalences (Lawtoo [2017]: 1213).

This double process of mimesis can be traced in Botto's work, as the following scene shows.

It is November 2022, I am performing *The Conservatory of Populism* at the Mladinsko Theatre in Ljubljana. Midway through, I re-enact Viktor Orbán's response to a journalist who questioned his «illiberal» policies erasing LG-BTQ+ rights in Hungary: «*I am defending the rights of the homosexual guys*» (Blenkinsop, Siebold, Baczynska [2021]). A blackout and house-techno music follow and strobe lights flash as I start dancing to the beat of the music. I move into the middle of the audience while whispering «*God, fatherland, family*», echoing a previously performed speech by Jair Bolsonaro. Though the audience remains seated, our bodies bounce together, in an atmosphere that seems to mimic a gay nightclub.

I have let myself be imprinted/restricted by those words, but in a generative mimetic process I have transformed them into something else.

I step into the stage again and, as I do so, the loud music stops abruptly, and the lights return sharply: «What about our culture?» – I shout. This sentence initiates the beginning of a sequence on anti-migration statements, assembling Marine la Pen's anti-Islamic, and André Ventura's anti-Roma rhetoric¹⁰. In increasing anger, I utter a speech on how western European culture is being erased by Islamic culture: the covering of women's the body, the veils that hide the faces. Whilst doing so, I strip down my shirt and throw it on the floor. Then wearing only a bra and trousers, I utter Marine Le Pen's statement: «My friends, France is not burkinis on the beach, France is Brigitte Bardot»! (Cooper [2017]). With these words I strip off my bra, provoking a sudden outburst of laughter in the audience. Once this image dissolves, I dress slowly again and begin addressing the audience with questions framed for a yes or no answer, followed by my mimetic identification with their response, «do you pay rent?» and to their «yes!» I reply, «I also pay rent!». This interaction progressively mounts into an angry and feverous speech

10 André Ventura is the leader of Portuguese far right party Chega.

against the Roma people – or «Gypsies» (in Ventura's words) ending with my right wrist raised, feverously shouting the words: «Chega!! Chega! Enough! Enough!!», which is both the slogan and the name of this far-right party.

All the sequence, from «what about our culture» until this moment, is repeated three times. I try, as much as possible, to enact the same movements and words. Yet, each time this score is re-enacted, the rhythm and the intensity of the performance decreases. By the third iteration, the words come as if mumbled, barely perceptible, the lips almost not moving, as if I were a puppet of my own ventriloquist act.

My empty gaze drifts into the horizon, my blank face is expressionless, and the body drags itself as if worn out by repetition. I sit on a chair at the back of the stage and remain in stillness for about two minutes. I can feel a dense and uneasy mood in the room now that was imprint in the audience as I hear them shifting uncomfortably on their chairs.

From the moment I utter «what about our culture» to the moment I sit on the chair at the back of the stage, another mimetic cycle unfolds: restricted, then generative, then restricted again. At first, I absorb the form of populist right-wing rhetoric – the words and their affects (restricted mimesis). As I repeat the score with declining intensity and rhythm, these affects shift and transform into something else (generative mimesis). This dense, heavy mood gradually imprints itself on the audience, who receives it. Silence and emptiness now fill the room – mine and theirs. What they will make of it is up to them.



Fig. 4 *The Conservatory of Populism – Mladinsko Theatre. Ljubljana November 2022*

As Lawtoo explains, for Lacoue-Labarthe restricted mimesis can give rise to totalitarian figures whose will to power may «be violently impressed on what he called the “*Masse*” or “unformed populations”». Such passivity entails a troubling political plasticity, rendering «subjects docile and easily subjected to fascist leaders (old and new) who erect themselves as figures of authority» (Lawtoo [2017]: 1212). Yet, as seen previously, restricted/passive mimesis also encompasses general mimesis, an in-potency «*active, creative, productive, or better re-productive supplement*» (Lawtoo [2017]: 1213), which Lacoue-Labarthe links to the poietic process.

What if general mimesis is applied into (re-)producing forms of politics that generate neither emancipation nor inclusion?

In the 2020 U.S. presidential election, Trump lost with approximately 74 million votes to Biden’s 81 million, leaving a vast segment of the electorate dissatisfied. This discontent and uncertainty – I am using these words because they are general, vague and ambiguous enough – already entail other feelings and emotions in potency, which were not yet defined¹¹.

Trump absorbed these indeterminate affects, allowing himself to be imprinted by them in a process of self-restricted mimesis. The populist subject is in-formed – in-felt [*empathetic*, from the Greek *en (in) pathos (feeling)*] – by these intensities. These amorphous affects are then transposed, by way of general mimesis, into determinate signifiers, (feigned) emotions – affective constructs strategically staged to empathise with and fulfil his audiences’ expectations. What this generative mimetic process produces then, is new fantasies, new rhetorics, new identifications, and new empathetic significations.¹² New signifiers, which, through a mimetic process, become now a newly formed model, ready to be (re-)imprinted and (re-)impressed into a population that renders itself available to receive it. Between November 2020 and January 6, 2021, Trump transformed amorphous discontent onto feelings of injustice and into the signifier of «electoral fraud». He addressed his voters, inciting them to walk towards the Capitol and show «their strength», ultimately culminating in the assault on the Capitol and the death of several people.

Contrarily to the authoritarian leaders of the twentieth century (Stalin, Mussolini, or Hitler) who operated through restricted mimesis, rigidly adhering to

11 Brian Massumi distinguishes «feeling» from «emotions» and «affects». As the scholar Eric Shouse explains: «Feelings are personal and biographic, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal» (Shouse [2005]: np). An affect is «a non-conscious experience of intensity» and it exists pre-language, pre-signification. It is upon affects that feelings are constructed. A feeling «is a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labelled» and thus it is «personal and biographic». An emotion «is the projection/display of a feeling. Unlike feelings, the display of emotion can be either genuine or feigned» (Shouse [2005]: np).

12 New, which are not exactly new, but rather a *trans-formation* or *re-trans-production* from the received model.

their ideologies and impressing them upon vulnerable audiences, contemporary leaders are *plastic* subjects. They operate within the realm of productive mimesis, rendering themselves malleable and plastic, and thus harder to break and to contradict, invalidating even democratic dissensus. Like in Diderot's paradox of the actor, the less the leader has his own ideology, the more ideologies he will be able to produce. They are «subjectless subjects» insofar as they are excessive subjects.

In *The Conservatory of Populism*, Botto too reproduces the paradox. By enacting and re-signifying this rhetoric in multiple ways, in embodied over-identification, she shows us that the leader's capacity to inhabit multiple positions rests not on conviction but on performative plasticity.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I suggest that through a process of empathetic signification, the populist subject deploys performance strategies to re-signify signifiers and construct a provisional political identity that plastically adapts to their specific audiences. This reactive, audience-responsive mode of signification makes populist subjectivity not only plastic but endlessly renewable. Botto's performance practice uses over-identification to expose this dynamic, revealing how populist actors mobilise theatrical strategies and theatricality to re-encode signs and temporarily identify with the projective desire of their audiences and thus remain or ascend to power.

Populist performance thrives on the instability of the signifier, on the emptying and refilling of signifiers, which detached from their referents can acquire new ideological charges. Certain signifiers are transformed into non-performatives, here not infelicitous performatives, but processes that intensify ambiguity, which render themselves endlessly open to new significations. Contrasting to Derrida's iterability and Butler's performativity, populist identity is constructed not through repetition and accumulation but through repetition of contradictory utterances and behaviours.

This iterability of paradoxical actions results in a plastic subjectivity, in a subject (a performer) without qualities, whose political efficacy derives from its plasticity rather than ideology or ethics. A plasticity that constructs and is constructed. In a mimetic loop, it takes the form (restricted mimesis) of indeterminate affects and retranslates them into determinate signifiers and affective gestures (generative mimesis). The populist allows himself to be performed as much as he performs.

While empathetic signification may be generative in artistic contexts, its political deployment risks legitimising manipulative forms of identification.

The spectacular re-signification and commodification of Trump's mugshot illustrates how empathetic resonance with audiences is not merely symbolic but materially productive.

In *The Museum of Impropriety* Botto exposes the illusion of populist authenticity. In doing so, her work underscores that populist power resides in the plastic, embodied capacity to perform multiple selves, in multiple forms. Recognising this mechanism is crucial: it reveals the process of right-wing populist subjectivation and confronts us with the ethical urgency of fighting these unethical forms of political performance.

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Interrogating the Identity of Refugees

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Abstract. Refugees around the world have been undergoing interviews, hearings, and court cases to determine their identities and rights to enter or reside in individual countries. In many instances this process is less than transparent as most countries seek to render the process invisible. Theatre and film, on the other hand, have opened a window on the process and allowed the public to view what has been kept hidden. In this paper I contrast different national approaches to the asylum process and consider specific case studies of theatre and film productions that represent and critique national judicial practices. Amongst others, I will consider the performance of *Illegal Helpers* in Potsdam (2016), *Dear Home Office* in London (2016), and the films *Well-Founded Fear* (2000) and *L'Histoire de Souleymane* (2024). Such works question the practices of assessing the credibility of asylum seekers, the accountability of those deciding such cases, and the possibilities of countervailing strategies for acceptance. They also illustrate how theatre and film have made more transparent, borne witness to, or undermined the asylum process, such as through what Žižek terms «subversive over-identification» or what Arns and Sasse call «subversive affirmation».

Keywords. Refugee, asylum, credibility, performance, theatre and film.

This essay investigates what we can learn about the asylum system when we consider it in

performative terms and when we review theatrical performances that shine a light on the system. Refugees around the world have been undergoing interviews, hearings, and appeal cases to determine their identities and the credibility of their claims for the right to enter or remain in individual countries. In many instances this process is less than transparent because most countries conduct it behind closed doors or “in camera”. Theatre and film, on the other hand, have opened a window on the process and allowed the public to view and critique what has been kept hidden. I have divided this essay¹ into two sections: the first contrasts different national approaches which undermine the asylum process in the EU in the last thirty years, and the second examines a few theatre and film productions that represent and critique national judicial practices during this time.

Far-right rhetoric amongst politicians, media and social commentators has affected the perception of migration as a danger to society, especially since the financial crisis beginning in Europe in 2009. Using such phrases as “refugee crisis”, they have created a sense of fear and alarm with «either fluvial or animal metaphors, such as likening the arrival of asylum seekers to a “flood”, “tide”, “torrent” or “wave” that threatens to “swamp” the recipient society... or alternatively likening it to a “stampede”, “flock” or “swarm” of arrivals with similar potential to overwhelm receiving countries» (Gill, Good, [2019]: 3). Nick Gill and Andrew Good ([2019]: 5-6) point to the «common tendency among politicians to identify refugees and migrants as, on the one hand, threats to the “culture” or “identity” of the local population and, on the other, as posing criminal or terrorist threats to citizens’ personal safety and security». They also assert that the rhetoric from competing politicians and social influencers has led to the «inexorable ratchetting up of immigration controls as power either swaps hands between parties who make increasingly bold and ambitious promises about control while in opposition, or as incumbent parties become more exclusionary in order to hold on to power» ([2019]: 4).

This has been especially true in the UK where anti-immigration rhetoric played a central role in the political campaigns leading up to the Brexit referendum in 2016 and paved the way to the “stop the boats” efforts to prevent refugees crossing the channel in small boats. It also led to a multiplicity of Conservative Prime Ministers promising to curb migration, with fanciful ideas of sending refugees to Rwanda for processing and housing refugees in offshore locations. The Bibby Stockholm, a box-shaped floating barge, was the first of what was supposed to be a number of barges to house refugees, and it was upgraded to house 400 people in cramped conditions. Unfortunately, the plans for this ship got off

1 This article contains portions of material that are being developed for *Staging Injustice: Performance and Asylum Hearings* edited by S. E. Wilmer, forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2026.

to a bad start with the outbreak of legionnaires disease due to contaminated water onboard. According to the BBC, when it docked in Portland, «More than 50 national organisations and campaigners, including the Refugee Council, Asylum Matters and Refugee Action, called the government plan “cruel and inhumane”. They said the vessel was “entirely inappropriate” and would house traumatised migrants in “detention-like conditions”» (Andrews et al. [2024]). Subsequently, after housing up to 400 refugees amid continuing protests, the Bibby Stockholm was decommissioned and towed away in 2025.

We have seen that the systems of control that affect the asylum process have grown worse for applicants. Faced with threats from far-right parties, EU politicians have emphasized security, surveillance, and sovereignty rather than acceptance of foreigners. States have introduced new restrictions on the entry of refugees, making the migration journey more difficult, dangerous and expensive, and worsening the conditions of residence, and therefore, ultimately making immigrants substantially more vulnerable and exploitable in the labour market. In many countries such as Britain, France and Hungary, it has become increasingly difficult to claim asylum. For example, under the “really hostile environment for illegal immigrants” introduced in 2013 by Theresa May as British Home Secretary (before being elected as British Prime Minister), the recommended rate of refusal of asylum appeals increased from 20% to 70% (Campbell [2019]:95-9). As result of the Arab Spring, the war in Libya and the Syrian civil war, «the EU, or single European states, reacted by signing “treaties” with non-European states in order to block the migrants before they even reached its external borders» (Sorgoni [2019]: 236). EU governments have accelerated deportations and forced returns to camps in Libya, Tunisia, and Turkey, offering funds to these countries to prevent refugees from entering Europe (See EC [2020]). They have threatened NGOs providing rescue surveillance planes and rescue boats in the Mediterranean with fines or impounded their ships in Italian harbours. Moreover, since the EU withdrew its own rescue boats from the Mediterranean in 2019, Frontex – the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, which is the EU’s policing operation to prevent migration into Europe and whose budget «has ballooned to €922 million for 2024», has started using drones to locate and stop boatloads of refugees from reaching Europe rather than bringing them to safety (Hayden [2024]: 7). The advantage of this policy for the EU is that drone activities tend to be invisible to the public, and maritime laws requiring ships to rescue boats in distress do not apply to aircraft (Hayden [2024]: 7). As Felix Weiss of the German NGO Sea Watch observes, the EU policy is to «keep secret what is happening each day in the Mediterranean» (quoted in Hayden [2024]: 7).

Moreover, Ursula von der Leyen, President of the European Commission, in 2024 wrote to EU leaders supporting externalization of EU migration policies, such as assessing asylum claims in third countries and thus preventing migrants

from filing for asylum within the EU (See Milne [2021]). Frontex has advanced their equipment for dealing with deportation. Given that some deportees would die rather than return home, the voyage can be boisterous and so Frontex has introduced special helmets and toilet facilities for failed asylum seekers. Thus, EU refugee law has become a form of legal pluralism in which «other forms of regulation outside law constitute law» (Merry [1988]: 874).

Ireland is one of many countries in Europe that has increased the restrictions on migration and has become less inclined to grant asylum. It has welcomed 100,000 Ukrainians since 2022, but partly as a result of this, it has also experienced a severe housing shortage and growing anti-immigrant protests. Numerous refugee shelters and designated sites have been burned down. Since 2022 far-right Irish extremists have become more vocal, encouraged by political activists in the UK and US (See Paul [2025]: 7). In 2024, fringe groups coalesced into a new political grouping called the National Alliance and promoted far-right candidates for parliamentary elections (See McQuinn [2024]). While their candidates were not successful, the Mixed Martial Arts fighter Conor McGregor began to attract considerable attention with racist and anti-immigrant comments on social media. On 22 November 2023, he urged supporters «Ireland, we are at war» (CNN [12 March 2024]). This was viewed on his social medium 19 million times and preceded a major riot on the Dublin streets the following day, with trams, buses and police cars set alight. More recently, McGregor was pictured with Nigel Farage, the arch Brexiteer and head of the Reform UK Party at a Washington ball for the second inauguration of Donald Trump in 2025 (Paul [2025]:7). Moreover, after being convicted of rape in Dublin in 2024, McGregor (much to the consternation of Irish political party leaders) was celebrated by Trump in the White House as «my favorite Irishman» on St. Patrick's Day and encouraged to run for president of Ireland (McGee [2025]: 5).

In response to these developments, the Irish government began clamping down on immigration in 2024. Refugees were no longer guaranteed accommodation and were frequently forced to live on the streets, often in tents provided by charities and NGOs. Moreover, the government announced a cutback in supports for Ukrainian refugees and accelerated the deportation of other immigrants. Irish naval ships, which formerly rescued boatloads of refugees in the Mediterranean, followed EU and Frontex policies by intercepting them and taking them back to Libya instead of to Europe.

Asylum seekers have not only suffered because of the changing policies of the EU and the social climate produced by right-wing agitators, but also because the hearings themselves have become more stringent as a result of the tendency for judges and administrators to raise the bar for admission by promoting model characteristics of the refugee. According to Carolina Kobelinsky, «In order to win the day, shape a positive belief, and be granted asylum, it is necessary [for

the applicant] to correspond to the “archetype of a refugee” (Akoka 2011), this ideal construct of a valuable institution which needs to be protected from abuse» (Kobelinsky [2019]: 66).

1. *Theatre performances*

Political protests, journalistic reports, NGO activities and legal appeals against negative decisions for asylum are often effective ways of trying to improve conditions for applicants. However, theatre and film projects can also be useful in demonstrating the unfairness of asylum processes. They can also reveal how the various individuals involved in each case for asylum can influence the outcome. In this section I want to consider the importance of a few specific theatre performances during the last thirty years to convey what is often hidden from the public about asylum hearings. As we will see, these performances take different approaches, such as identification with asylum applicants or over identification with anti-immigrant policies.

Few Irish plays have dealt with the asylum process, but an early example, *Asylum! Asylum!* by Donal O’Kelly, staged prominently in 1995 in the Abbey Theatre, the National Theatre of Ireland, provided a notable warning for the future. In *Asylum! Asylum!* Joseph Omara, an asylum seeker from Uganda who experienced traumatic conditions in his home country, is detained by Leo, a young ambitious immigration officer. Anxious to advance his career by quickly arranging to deport him, Leo injures him in the process of detaining him. When Joseph then applies for asylum, Leo worries that he will be accused of torturing Joseph, and so he asks his sister, a solicitor, to defend Joseph. During the play, Leo undergoes a conversion from being a hard-hearted civil servant, after witnessing the torching of a refugee shelter in Germany in which «Flames spread through the floors... people running up the stairwell dragging children.... Men, women and children leaning out for air. The men on the roof pelted them with bricks» (O’Kelly [1996]: 66). Nevertheless, despite the legal assistance of Leo’s sister, the authorities are unconvinced that Joseph is in mortal danger if he returns to Uganda. After losing his case, Joseph is so brutally treated by Irish authorities that he almost dies in the process of being forcefully deported.

The point of the production, according to O’Kelly, was to address the «repressive and inhumane Irish Asylum regulations and the coming European Union (EU) cooperative controls of borders that will deny the human rights of asylum seekers throughout the Continent» (O’Kelly [1996]: xviii). Staged in 1995 when the issue of asylum had not yet become a controversial issue, the performance in the national theatre arguably helped awaken the Dublin audience to an important matter of government policy. Julie Shearer ([2011]: 52)

observed that O’Kelly staged *Asylum! Asylum!* not only as a cultural event but also as a political act. «By choosing the Abbey and playing to the elite public of theatregoers, by engaging the press in debate, by running seminars on “The Refugee Experience in Ireland” every Saturday through the run and even by setting up stalls in the foyer and handing out literature for the Refugee Council and Amnesty International amongst others, O’Kelly was undoubtedly trying to provoke» (Shearer [2011]: 52).

Ten years later O’Kelly staged *The Cambria* about the historic journey of Frederick Douglas, a prominent American slave with a bounty on his head, who tried to escape to Europe under an assumed name in 1845. When Douglas approaches Ireland and his real identity is discovered, his slave owner attempts to ship him back to America. However, Daniel O’Connell, an Irish Member of Parliament, known locally as the “liberator” for his stance against the Penal Laws, greets him at the dock, surrounded by a large crowd of supporters, and provides him with asylum. The play is framed at the beginning and end by a sensational news story about a secondary school student in Ireland who had just been deported to Nigeria in his school uniform shortly before taking his final exams. While the play focuses on the welcome given to Douglas by the Irish people, the circumstances surrounding the production emphasized the arbitrary and unfair decision to deport the schoolboy in 2005. Surprisingly, the resulting outcry in Ireland at the youth’s deportation led the Minister of Justice to back down and allow the schoolboy to return to Ireland to finish his secondary school exams. This case revealed the effectiveness of public protest to force the authorities to take a more humane approach.

O’Kelly demonstrated in both plays the power of individual Irish people to stand up against bureaucratic and legal procedures in the name of human rights and natural justice. However, the two productions also conveyed the injustice of the legal system and the need to find different ploys – either by civic society (such as NGOs, civil liberty organisations, or political activists and artists) or by more specialized personnel – to counteract the power of the authorities.

Documentary dramas that enact tribunals or asylum hearings or personal experiences can also show the inner workings of the asylum process. Staged at the Kulturhuset in Stockholm in 2012, *Tribunal 12* served as a public inquiry into the treatment of immigrants by the European Union to review evidence and assess the appropriateness of the judicial process. Advertising their call for evidence, the production team announced that «Tribunal 12 will present an artistically formed trial that seeks to make visible what refugees, asylum seekers and migrants are experiencing in Europe. Tribunal 12 aims to investigate whether human rights are violated; expose the hidden structures that allow for the inhumane treatment of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants and locate the moral, legal and political responsibility for the current situation in Europe» (*Tribunal*

12 [2012]). According to Jennifer Allsopp (2012), «Henning Mankell, Nawal El-Saadawi, Nuruddin Farah, Saskia Sassen and other renowned cultural figures from across the world joined migration experts in Stockholm and thousands gathered at public screenings from Belgrade to Paris, as Europe stood accused of “the continual violation of human rights and the systematic mistreatment of refugees, migrants and asylum seekers”».

During the performance, expert witnesses and actors playing the parts of refugees presented testimony that reflected on current practices relating to immigration, asylum and deportation. Similar in structure to previous theatrical tribunals, such as Bertrand Russell’s *International War Crimes Tribunal* about the Vietnam War in 1966, *Tribunal 12* resulted from documentary evidence amassed from the stories of non-European exiled and diasporic writers during the five-year Shahrzad project. The all-day session in Stockholm was live-streamed to six other European cities and replayed on Swedish television. According to Jamie Trnka (2016), the Tribunal «accused Europe of systematic human rights violations in connection with immigration policies since the 1990s» and demonstrated that the «institutional landscape is ill-equipped to ensure the rights of people whose citizenship status – and, by extension, ability to assert rights claims – may be in question». In particular, the Stockholm Tribunal revealed the policies of national governments and the European Union to use «private surrogates» for border control, such as commercial airlines and Frontex as a «displacement of power from state to contractor – a process which enables the displacement of responsibility for rights violations and deaths» (Trnka [2016]). The tribunal also complained about other displacements which were becoming increasingly effective in undermining human rights. «One type of displacement occurs through regional agreements such as the maritime “push-back” agreement between Italy and Libya, and the recently exposed “gentlemen’s agreement” between France and the United Kingdom governing the return of unaccompanied minors» (Allsopp [2012]).

The jury in the Tribunal reached a verdict calling «for states to end restrictive practices that prevent asylum seekers and refugees from reaching Europe and to comply with legal obligations that its member states have undertaken voluntarily as signatories to international human right conventions» (Trnka [2016]). Trnka also points out that the Tribunal enhanced its credibility by being an EU-sponsored event, so that it was effectively accusing itself of wrongdoing and promoted corrective action. Rather than being a «trial of history», *Tribunal 12* was addressing the «unresolved problems of the present» (Trnka [2016]), using theatrical means to render visible the invisible mechanisms of power.

Performances by the refugees themselves such as *Letters Home* (2014) by Refugee Club Impulse in Berlin, as well as the verbatim stories told by actors representing refugees, as in the *Asylum Monologues* (2006) by Ice and Fire in Britain and *Bühne für Menschenrechte* in Germany, convey a rich understanding

of the hardships facing refugees in trying to immigrate, seek asylum (such as appearing in court before immigration officials) and settle into a new environment. One of the most significant pieces in Germany was Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Schutzbefohlenen* (2013) which she based on Aeschylus' *The Suppliants* and which was produced by more than ten major theatres in Germany, Switzerland and Austria in the ensuing two years. Jelinek used the original Greek play largely as a pretext for her version, which aimed to confront the policies of the Austrian government towards refugees. Little remains of the ancient Greek play in Jelinek's adaptation, other than some intertextual links and allusions and the similarity between vulnerable and powerless immigrants coming to a foreign land to ask for asylum. Like the women in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*, Jelinek's play depicts refugees seeking asylum in a foreign land, indicating the threat to their lives and the hazards of returning home², Jelinek related the Greek tragedy to the plight of refugees who had arrived from the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area and had been confined in the Traiskirchen refugee centre outside Vienna. About sixty of these refugees occupied the Votive Church in Vienna in 2012 and went on hunger strike to demand better conditions. Later, they were moved to a monastery and many of them were subsequently jailed or deported.

Nicholas Stemmann staged a first reading of the play in September 2013 in the St Pauli Church where a group of eighty refugees, newly arrived via Lampedusa, had been given sanctuary. Stemmann incorporated both professional actors from the Thalia Theatre and some of the Lampedusa refugees in the reading. He developed the production further and toured it to the Ruhr Triennale in Mannheim, and the Holland Festival in Amsterdam before finally opening it in the Thalia Theatre in Hamburg in September 2014. It was later invited to open the prestigious Theatertreffen in Berlin in May 2015, apparently on political grounds as well as for artistic reasons, given the increasing importance placed on the refugee question by the theatre community in a year in which a million refugees escaping the civil war of Syria were welcomed in Germany³.

The text is quite playful, parodying governmental and popular attitudes about immigration and ethnicity and calling attention to Austrian political issues such as the unequal treatment of those seeking permission to remain. It also refers to the dangers for specific refugees who have fled from war-torn countries and whose families have been slaughtered, and their difficulty in providing evidence

- 2 The title, *Die Schutzbefohlenen*, is a play on words of *Die Schutzflehenden* (literally, those who beg for protection) which is the usual German title for Aeschylus's drama. The altered title is somewhat subversive in that it means "those who were under protection or control", rather than "those who are seeking asylum". Thus, its meaning is ambivalent as to whether it implies that the government is protecting the refugees or simply controlling them (like children).
- 3 For each venue it was necessary to engage local refugees because of the legal requirement for asylum seekers to remain in one place.

that will convince the Austrian authorities of their need for protection. Jelinek's play also explores the role of religious and governmental authorities who can decide the fortune of the refugees, conflating images of church sanctuary with national asylum, and ancient Greek gods with the Christian God on whom the refugees call for protection.

Other plays and performances have also demonstrated strategies to overcome legal mechanisms or confront right-wing attitudes. Phosphorous theatre company in London developed *Dear Home Office* (2016), a play with unaccompanied minors⁴ from Afghanistan, to convey the difficulties for young people who are threatened with deportation when they reach the age of eighteen and need to make a convincing case to the Home Office for the right to remain. Because the project was initiated by the young boys themselves, it focused on their experiences as refugees in England and their efforts to understand the legal system. It also demonstrated the training process organized by their carers during which the refugees learned how to perform a particular role and present a convincing narrative to a judge. As Duffy and Jahangard (2016) explained, «A central focus of the play itself is the idea that in order to obtain refugee status ("become refugee"), children must adequately "perform refugee" in court». Thus, the play served overlapping functions, teaching these youths how to perform on stage in front of an audience and how to prepare them for interviews with the Home Office. According to Duffy and Jahangard, «*Dear Home Office* presents the legal system as confusing, inconsistent and demanding, ill-equipped to deal with children appropriately, so [...] that involvement in the project contributed to a rehearsal for a real life encounter and provided relief and empowerment for the young people» (ibid.)

Maxi Obexer's play *Illegal Helfer* (Illegal Helpers) [2016], which used documentary material obtained through interviews, demonstrated ways of avoiding the authorities as a tactic to circumvent arrest and deportation. For example, the Dublin Regulation, which requires asylum seekers to return to their first port of entry for processing, does not apply to a refugee who has resided in the country for at least eighteen months (Obexer [2016]: 3-4), sympathizers could hide refugees in their homes for this length of time so that they could escape deportation. Another misidentification tactic involved a refugee burning the ends of his fingers so that his fingerprints were illegible. In an opening statement, Genner, a legislator, advises the audience about their responsibilities, encouraging them to engage in illegal activities: «civil courage is more important today than ever, because deportations can be prevented [...] The civilian population has the ob-

4 According to the UNHCR ([1997]), unaccompanied minors are individuals who have not reached the age of eighteen and «who are separated from both parents and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible to do so». They are normally deported from Britain when they reach the age of eighteen, unless they obtain from the Home Office the right to remain.

ligation to provide sheltered places in which those in need of protection, and individuals who have been traumatized or tortured and therefore deserve protection can go into hiding» (Obexer [2016]: 3-4). Another important moment in the play depicts an administrative judge who takes sympathy on a refugee whom he is expected to deport. The judge, who asserts that his government rejects 98 per cent of the asylum claims and who spends most of his working life processing deported claimants, contrasts his duties of stamping deportation orders with the actions of a Portuguese diplomat in Warsaw who issued thousands of exit visas for Jews. However, one day, to his own surprise, the judge finds himself illegally driving an old woman across the border so that she can live with her daughter in Italy. Later he asks for a transfer from his job and implies to the audience that he has begun to subvert the deportation system: «It's hard for me to break the law. And yet by now I'm breaking it on a regular basis» (Obexer [2016]: 16).

Christoph Schlingensiefel in his performance *Bitte Liebt Österreich* (2000) employed the ruse of «subversive over-identification» (Žižek [2006]: 65) by masquerading as an ultra-right-wing enthusiast. For the 2000 Vienna festival week, he erected an industrial container in a central square with far-right slogans affixed to it, such as “Foreigners out!” Inside the container, he placed refugees from various countries and asked the public to vote online for whom to deport. The last remaining refugee could win a prize, marry an Austrian and remain in the country. The performance was designed to call attention to the right-wing policies of the newly elected government in coalition with a far-right party and thereby embarrass them by exaggerating their anti-immigration programme. By overidentifying with the far-right, Schlingensiefel attacked their policies and called attention to their inhumane treatment of refugees. Slavoj Žižek [2006: 65] calls this type of approach, “subversive over-identification”: «By bringing to light the obscene superego underside of the system, over-identification suspends its efficiency». Inke Arns and Sylvia Sasse have characterized it as “subversive affirmation”, defining it as

an artistic/political tactic that allows artists/activists to take part in certain social, political, or economic discourses and to affirm, appropriate, or consume them while simultaneously undermining them. It is characterized precisely by the fact that with affirmation there is simultaneously taking place a distancing from, or revelation of what is being affirmed. In subversive affirmation there is always a surplus which destabilises affirmation and turns it into its opposite. (Arns, Sasse [2006]: 445)

By imitating the rhetoric and ideology of Haider's party, Schlingensiefel was shining a bright light on the superego of the far right in Austria and disrupting its message. The choice of an industrial container as the place for housing the refugees was an especially potent symbol, given the horrendous experiences refugees have faced inside them, such as suffocating in trans-channel crossings.

Another effective scenic metaphor was deployed in the Finnish National Theatre's production of *Paper Anchor* in 2011. The play, which included refugees as well as Finnish actors in the cast, focused on the difficulties of obtaining asylum in Finland and began and ended with a symbolic tortuous ride in a sled. As Pirkko Koski ([2023]: 627) remembers, «the performance began with asylum seekers reading official instructions for entry into asylum centres... As the curtain rose, the light focused on a small boy ...sitting in a small sled that was hard to move. At the end of the performance, the scene was repeated as the whole cast approached the audience rhythmically and very slowly, each in their own sled propelling themselves forwards with their hands. The asylum issue was made corporeal and visible» since Finns recognised «from experience how challenging it is to shift a downhill sled on a surface with no snow» ([2023]: 627).

In asylum cases, evidence of persecution is often difficult to produce in a hearing. It is hard for an applicant to convince a civil servant that they are likely to be shot if they return to their country. Ariane Mnouchkine's *Le Dernier Caravansérail (Odyssees)* (2003) uses the transcript of an appeal hearing of an Iraqi refugee in Melbourne Australia in 2001 to good effect by staging an impatient and unsympathetic civil servant interrogating an anxious Iraqi refugee who is unable to produce documentary evidence that could prevent him from being deported back to Iraq.

By contrast, a startling but highly unusual case is that of George Seremba who was shot by a firing squad in Uganda for his political activities and miraculously survived. Unlike Joseph in *Asylum! Asylum!* who was deported back to Uganda because of lack of evidence that he would be killed, Seremba claimed asylum in Canada, where he was able to show at least ten bullet wounds in his back. Seremba has continued to demonstrate this evidence in his autobiographical play *Come Good Rain* (1993) which he has performed in numerous countries.

However, asylum seekers do not carry physical or documentary evidence of persecution, and the results of their application often depend on their ability to perform a credible and convincing narrative (See for example Gill and Good [2017]: 313). As Liodden ([2019]: 250) remarks, «Having assessed many cases with similar claims, caseworkers may establish an image of what a credible applicant looks like. When more, similar cases come along, they will probably have to live up to that standard – or an even higher standard – in order to be considered credible». Moreover, gay and lesbian asylum seekers and people who have converted to another religion may have difficulty showing evidence that they would be persecuted if returned to their home country. As Schneider ([2019]: 296) observed in the training sessions for caseworkers in Germany, trainees expressed «doubts concerning the truthfulness of statements during the interview in general and around credibility assessments concerning reli-

gious conversion and sexual orientation in particular». A trainee asked how to know «whether the applicant had really converted to Christianity. This was very difficult for him because these were things taking place inside the applicant» (Quoted in Schneider [2019]: 297). The Finnish authorities make an exception for appeals concerning religious conversion by allowing oral testimony, which otherwise is denied to other applicants. (Bodström [2025]: 9) Adjudicators may have stereotypical notions of what a gay or lesbian person looks like and form judgements of whether they should be given asylum on the basis of their appearance or their habits. In Ireland recently, a civil servant asked an applicant housed in the west of Ireland if he had attended a particular gay bar in Dublin on the east coast. When he answered that he had never heard of the bar, the civil servant concluded that he could not be gay and dismissed his application (Mfaco [2024]).

2. *Films and documentaries*

Films can add an extra semblance of actuality to portraying the asylum system. The documentary film *Well-Founded Fear* (2000) by Robertson and Camerini provides a rare behind the scenes glimpse at the asylum procedure in New Jersey. In *Well-Founded Fear*, immigration officers are filmed interrogating desperate applicants seeking the right to remain in the USA. The refugees come from very different backgrounds with quite contrasting life stories. The film shows both the live hearings in situ, as well as interviews with the officials who reflect on their work. The officials look like ordinary white administrators whose job is to assess the credibility of the applicants, and several of them appear as rather arrogant in their ability to assess claimants from all over the world. One of the asylum officers interviewed by the film makers says, «Usually with the Chinese cases, you just have to go for them in terms of their credibility and usually you can get them. I realise that sounds kind of sinister – “you got to get them” – but that’s what you gotta do» (Robertson, Camerini [2000]).

Many of the filmed decisions by the asylum officers seem arbitrary or cavalier, especially given the importance of their decisions for the applicants. As in Ireland, where a judge privately advised me that most applicants are liars, one of the asylum officers in the film indicates that he has become increasingly skeptical of refugee stories. «After you do this for a while you become much more critical, and you become aware of inconsistencies. I hope that’s what it is. It could be the fact that you are just very jaded. If I admitted that I was jaded, wouldn’t I be saying that I shouldn’t be doing this job anymore. So, I say I have a more acute understanding of credibility issues» (ibid.) Another asylum officer sounds less confident about her work: «How do you decide if someone is telling the truth

or not? It's not simple and you're never sure. That's the problem.... We have to make a decision based on fuzziness » (ibid.) Thus, the adjudicators are not always convinced that they are making correct decisions.

Unlike the documentary approach of *Well-Founded Fear*, *L'Histoire de Souleymane* (2024), provides a fictional account of a Guinean immigrant in Paris desperately trying to convince French authorities that he deserves to remain in France. The novice actor Abou Sangare, who won a best actor award at the Cannes film festival in 2024, plays an asylum seeker who has been advised to lie in his interview. The film shows Souleymane in a notoriously vulnerable and precarious form of employment for refugees, cycling furiously through Paris to deliver food and simultaneously in a race against the clock to get his papers together for his asylum hearing. To provide extra reality to the film, the director, Boris Lojkine, interviewed Guinean asylum seekers in France and sat in on interviews conducted by Ofpra (the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons.) Thus, although the film is fictional, it is based on realistic situations and adds the dramatic intensity of a thriller to convey the importance to Souleymane of a successful performance in his asylum interview. According to the film critic, Jessica Kiang, «In a showstopping climax – a gripping scene between Sangare and Nina Meurisse, playing the perfectly efficient but not unsympathetic face of French immigration bureaucracy – all the motion and confrontation of the last couple of days is funneled into one extended close-up monologue» (Kiang [2024]). The final scene focuses on the question of whether to lie in order to perform in accordance with what is expected from an ideal applicant or whether to tell the true story of why he is seeking refuge. Acknowledging that the refugee's personal history might not tick the right boxes for success in an asylum interview, the film emphasizes the dilemma for asylum seekers in determining whether to perform an ideal identity for a case worker or to tell the truth about their real-life situation. The film indicates that Souleymane's tragic life story, his real identity, may be more justifiable than a performed identity, one concocted to persuade an administrator that he is a “model refugee”.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the asylum determination process contains performative features with intimidating scenarios inhibiting free expression and affecting the outcome (Castañeda [2023]: 7). As Liodden ([2019]: 243) remarks about Denmark, «The many uncertainties in the decision-making process together make up a substantial space for discretion that decision-makers have to manage in order to reach a decision. Discretion is not only exercised at the end point of the process, when the law is applied, but throughout the entire decision-making process».

When asked whether she considers her work to be fair, a caseworker in Norway explained, «Our policies are definitely not among the most liberal, if you compare with other countries. [...] If it's fair depends a bit on the point of view. We try to be fair in what we do, [...] but if it's fair that we do not admit families with children who are in a difficult position [...]. I mean, that's an impossible question to answer» (Quoted in Liodden [2019]: 246). Perhaps, as Liodden advises, it would also be wise to monitor what has happened to unsuccessful applicants when they have been returned to so-called safe countries.

As we have seen, theatrical performances and films can help to inform the public about the asylum process and demonstrate some of the injustices in the identification process. They can reveal the emphasis placed on the credibility of the applicant and how judges or case workers assess this credibility in a judicial hearing, e.g., whether they believe the narrative and the identity of the applicant or not. Theatre and films can also demonstrate the influence of outside social and political pressure on the system and the effects of the changing legislation and implementation of procedures. Theatrical performances and films can offer novel tactics for enabling refugees to obtain a place in Europe, and they can ask questions of those responsible. They can expose anti-immigration practices through what Žižek calls subversive over-identification as in Schlingensief's work, unveil practices of misidentification in the case of Obexer's play, document injustices in *Tribunal 12*, or demonstrate the stresses of performing an ideal identity in *L'Histoire de Souleymane*. As Liodden ([2019]: 259) suggests, «In a situation where there are no clear answers, engaging with the uncertainty and doubt that are inevitably there, may be the best way of improving the conditions of just decision-making». By applying various approaches, artistic actions can expose and question the asylum process and help to strengthen the rights of refugees in society.

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On the Mode of Existence of Symbols: An Actor-Network Perspective on Identification and Group Formation

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Abstract. This paper analyses a specific aspect of the contribution of actor-network theory (ANT) to political theory, focusing on the role of symbols in forming groups or publics. Focusing on Bruno Latour's work in political ecology, the paper interprets ANT as an argument for including the affective dimension in politics. First, it explores the origins of the concept of symbol in ANT, drawing on the work of Tarde, Durkheim, Dewey and Lippmann. It then considers the «symbolic engineering» through which Latour aims to generate ecological mobilization by presenting James Lovelock's Gaia theory as a symbol for the ecological movement. The conclusion paves the way for further research by highlighting the differences between the concept of symbol in ANT and the left populism of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau: drawing on the reading of Dewey by Matteo Santarelli and Justo Serrano Zamora, ANT is presented as a pragmatist alternative to populism that recognizes the need to maintain symbols in touch with the reality they are supposed to stand for.

Keywords. Actor-network theory, Bruno Latour, ecology, populism, John Dewey.

1. *Introduction*

Actor-network theory (ANT), born in the 1980s from a combination of ethnomethodology and semiotics, can be described as «a disparate family of material-semiotic tools, sensibilities, and methods of analysis that treat everything in the social and natural worlds as a continuously generated effect of the webs of relations within which they are located» (Law [2009]: 141). Although ANT has been successfully applied in an increasing number of fields, it has not yet realized its full political potential, despite the efforts of its first proponents: Michel Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law. This paper presents ANT as a political method of group formation centered on the concept of *symbol*.

Much of the success of right-wing populist parties depends on «the current depoliticisation of politics advocated by Centrist political projects» (Stavrakakis [2007]: 213), and left-wing politics has not done any better: by depicting political actors as «Spock-like beings, devoid of passion and other human emotions» (Benford in Goodwin et al. [2001]: 7), it has overlooked the role of emotions in collective action, presenting them as exclusive to the right-wing tendency to irrationally follow the gut. The instauration of an ascetic political universe, in which emotions are incompatible with reality-based praxis, caused progressive politics to either lose its appeal or degenerate into technocracy.

This is especially true of political ecology, that has been one of the main areas of application of ANT in recent years. In particular, Latour's work on the «New Climatic Regime» or «Gaia» is permeated by a plea for political ecology to accept the political agency of affects: «we must continue to search for the tools necessary to finally translate certainty, anxiety, guilt and embarrassment into a general mobilization» (Latour & Schultz [2020]: 40). A shared emotional response to the ecological crisis must be induced to create a «public» around the ecological issue: crafting symbols in which people concerned with ecology may recognize is a crucial step in this process. Social movements need to be reoriented by crafting symbols that adequately represent our ecological predicament, because an «issue» can only attract a public if it is represented symbolically, condensing a set of questions, values, and attachments on behalf of which people are willing to act. Even though Latour was critical of the concept of symbol, that he saw as dependent on the reductionist talk about «the Symbolic» – «The symbolic is the magic of those who have lost the world» (Latour [1984]: 187) – we will argue that his attempt to reactivate ecological affects is best understood as an actor-network elaboration of symbolic politics.

Of course, the possible uses of symbols have been a constant preoccupation of political theorists: what Murray Edelman defined as «condensation symbols» «evoke the emotions associated with the situation. They condense into one symbolic event, sign, or act patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories

or humiliations, promises of future greatness... Practically every political act that is controversial or regarded as really important is bound to serve in part as a condensational symbol» (Edelman [1964]: 7). What ANT adds to these views is a more in-depth analysis of the ways in which symbols work to tie actors together in a group. In doing so, ANT offers an alternative perspective on group formation to that of mass psychologists such as Le Bon, as well as to psychoanalytic theories of identification with a leader, beginning with Freud (and also to the social monadology of Gabriel Tarde, to which ANT owes a lot). If «our political future resides in the task of deciding what binds us all together» (Latour [2005b]: 8), then that future will be determined by symbols, and Latour's most frequent criticism to contemporary ecological movements is that they have not been able to *represent* the ecological question in such a way to collect a public around it (see especially Latour [2015]). In short, every political deficit is to an extent a *performative* deficit: «the very definition of politics is seeking out people who are not present together... and who form what Benedict Anderson calls an “imaginary community” through an extraordinary peculiarity: a performative address in which we can recognize ourselves, even though it has no mimetic character» (Latour in Citton [2014]: 154).

Our main source will be Latour because, among the classical champions of ANT, he has developed the political strand the most, particularly with regard to the formation of groups (or collectives, or publics). We will therefore just need to make the concept of symbol, which pervades much of his recent work, explicit. However, the results should be generalizable to ANT as a whole and provide an interesting perspective on the mechanisms behind the formation of political identities. Also, although our case study will focus almost exclusively on ecology or the «people of Gaia», the concept of symbol singled out in this paper can apparently be extended to any form of political identity – including apparently conservative ones, a question that will be addressed in the conclusion.

The first section of the paper will analyze the insights that Actor-Network Theory (ANT) takes from sociologists such as Tarde and Durkheim, and theorists of the public such as Dewey and Lippmann, to demonstrate that much of ANT's political theory stems from ideas conveyed by other thinkers through the concept of the symbol. According to ANT, society is not an already constituted whole; «the social» is a fragile web of modes of existence that must be composed through a difficult collective process in which symbols play a decisive stabilizing role. The second section examines Latour's «symbolic engineering», i.e. his tips on how to create a symbol, with a particular focus on his criticism of heroization. This approach emphasizes the importance of creating new symbols rather than identifying with pre-existing actors, which exposes a group to a sort of symbolic tyranny in which a single actor capitalizes all the potency of those who associate with him. In the conclusion, following the

reading of Dewey by Matteo Santarelli and Justo Serrano Zamora, the ways in which Latour's pragmatist-inspired politics distances ANT from the left populism of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau are briefly discussed, opening the way to further enquiries.

2. *On the mode of existence of symbols: sociology and the theory of the public*

As Latour makes clear in *Reassembling the Social* [2005], most of ANT's insights into group formation come from Gabriel Tarde's social monadology (see especially Tarde [1890]). Against the classical sociology of Émile Durkheim, who considered the social as an already constituted field, Tarde was the first to explain solidarity between actors (or monads) not by fusing them into a totality that scales up and defines a new dimension, but by sewing them together through the agency of an actor that does not become «bigger» than others. Tarde replaced the metaphor of the Big Animal or of the Body Political with the rhetorical figure of *metonymy*, through which one actor comes to *stand for* all the others: «The whole is only one part among others which circulates like a cloud of qualities grouped in the middle of the monads... *the whole is a part taken for the whole* and which circulates differently thanks to forms to which the most extreme attention must be paid» (Latour [2011]: 10-2). It is this capacity to «circulate» that we erroneously define in terms of a «whole»; for example, France is not «something superior in dimension and in authority, in materiality and in ontology, to the billions of billions of entities» it gathers, but is an actor like all the others that «only circulates as a simplification of them all» (Latour [2011]: 5).

Latour never explicitly uses the concept of symbol. However, many definitions of the symbol convey the same idea that Latour draws from Tarde: a symbol is a sign that circulates without totalizing; it stands for something larger than itself; it is an actor that holds other actors together without «scaling up» or degenerating into a leviathan. Moreover, this Tardian heritage is best understood as an elaboration on insights taken from three other authors who interpreted the same mechanism in symbolic terms. Two of these authors are John Dewey and Walter Lippmann, who anticipated the need for symbolic condensation to guide the public through the complicated issues of the contemporary world. The third author is the more surprising Émile Durkheim, to whom ANT usually opposes Tarde's sociology of associations.

Let us begin with this *bête noire* to whom ANT theorists owe more than they are willing to admit. Durkheim learns that symbols are «material forces» that shape societies when he analyzes totemism in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1915], where terms like «emblem», «flag», and «coats of arms» recur. The totemic object is a symbol designed to make tangible the impersonal

force known as the totemic principle, but it is also «the flag of the clan, the sign by which each clan is distinguished from the others, the visible mark of its distinctiveness, and a mark that is borne by everything that in any way belongs to the clan: men, animals, and things» (Durkheim [1915]: 208). The totemic object is not a transcendent fetish; rather, it interacts «horizontally» with the practitioners of the cult: «the power to which the cult is addressed does not loom far above, crushing him with its superiority; instead, it is very near and bestows upon him useful abilities that he is not born with» (Durkheim [1915]: 225). As a result, «primitive societies are not Leviathans that overwhelm man with the enormity of their power and subject him to harsh discipline» (Durkheim [1915]: 226).

This concept of the symbol is strongly at odds with the reading of Durkheim as the origin of the tendency to hypostatize Society. Latour recognizes this in *Reassembling the Social*, his most anti-Durkheimian work, which includes a long quote of «Durkheim having a Tardian moment» (Latour [2005b]: 38):

That an emblem is useful as a rallying center for any sort of a group it is superfluous to point out. By expressing the social unity in a material form, it makes this more obvious to all, and for that very reason the use of emblematic symbols must have spread very quickly once thought of. But more than that, this idea should spontaneously arise out of the conditions of common life; for the emblem is not merely a convenient process for clarifying the sentiment the society has of itself: it also serves to create this sentiment; it is one of its constituent elements. Moreover, without symbols, social sentiments could have only a precarious existence... But if the movements by which these sentiments are expressed are connected with something that endures, the sentiments themselves become more durable. These other things are constantly bringing them to mind and arousing them; it is as though the cause which excited them in the first place continued to act. Thus these systems of emblems, which are necessary if society is to become conscious of itself, are no less indispensable for assuring the continuation of this consciousness. So we must refrain from regarding these symbols as simple artifices, as sorts of labels attached to representations already made, in order to make them more manageable: they are an integral part of them... The unity of the group is visible, therefore, only in the collective emblem reproducing the object designated by this name. A clan is essentially a reunion of individuals who bear the same name and rally around the same sign. Take away the name and the sign which materializes it and the clan is no longer representable. (Durkheim [1915]: 230-3)

In the 1986 essay *The Powers of Association*, Latour commented on the same quote as follows:

The main point [Durkheim] made during this short lapse is that the *durability* of the definition of the clan depends upon the *duration* of the resources used to make it hold together. The clan is a weak and short-lived notion, and it becomes longer lasting and stronger with tattoos, flags, names and scarifications. This means that in defining society we need a *longer* list that includes, of course, the notion of clan, but *also* includes flags, colours, names and tattoos. (Latour [1986]: 275)

Without using the term, Latour acknowledges that a collective is held together by the circulation of symbols. This is confirmed by the role that Latour assigns to Lippmann and Dewey, the theorists of the public who, in the 1920s, responded to Graham Wallas's diagnosis of the Great Society (the interwar precursor to globalization, in which it became increasingly difficult for ordinary people to find their way) by promoting the use of symbols to rally people around specific political issues. These symbols should have simplified complex issues, enabling people to understand and engage with them without delegating everything to experts.

In *Public Opinion* [1922], Lippmann makes the mediation of a symbolic «pseudo-environment» necessary to guide people through the Great Society. Against Le Bon and other mob psychologists, symbols are sufficient to explain mass behavior without invoking an «oversoul». Ideals and shared values, the heroization or demonization of certain figures, the «stereotypes» (a neologism introduced by Lippmann) on which our default approach to others depends – these are all symbols that condense a set of stimuli into an issue around which public life can revolve. As Lippmann explains with the example of Wilson and Americanism:

If among a number of people, possessing various tendencies to respond, you can find a stimulus which will arouse the same emotion in many of them, you can substitute it for the original stimuli. If, for example, one man dislikes the League, another hates Mr. Wilson, and a third fears labor, you may be able to unite them if you can find some symbol which is the antithesis of what they all hate. Suppose that symbol is Americanism. The first man may read it as meaning the preservation of American isolation, or as he may call it, independence; the second as the rejection of a politician who clashes with his idea of what an American president should be, the third as a call to resist revolution. The symbol in itself signifies literally no one thing in particular, but it can be associated with almost anything. And because of that it can become the common bond of common feelings, even though those feelings were originally attached to disparate ideas... when a coalition around the symbol has been effected, feeling flows toward conformity under the symbol rather than toward critical scrutiny of the measures. It is, I think, convenient and technically correct to call multiple phrases like these symbolic. They do not stand for specific ideas, but for a sort of truce or junction between ideas. They are like a strategic railroad center where many roads converge regardless of their ultimate origin or their ultimate destination. But he who captures the symbols by which public feeling is for the moment contained, controls by that much the approaches of public policy. And as long as a particular symbol has the power of coalition, ambitious factions will fight for possession. (Lippmann [1922]: 205-207)

A «strategic railroad center where many roads converge» is exactly what is needed to rally people around issues as complicated as globalization or ecology. In Lippmann's symbolic realpolitik, politics consists of a struggle to «capture» the symbols that make it possible to capitalize public opinion. However, in Lippmann, this becomes the basis for the demolition of the romantic idea that «the people rule»: in *The Phantom Public* [1927], democracy is reduced to the agonistic choice between symbols representing a few alternative parties.

On the contrary, Dewey is as realistic as Lippmann about the fact that only through symbolic filtering can the public cope with the complexity of the Great Society, but he is more concerned with participation and confident about the possibility of preserving it even in the face of growing technicality:

As symbols are related to one another, the important relations of a course of events are recorded and are preserved as meanings. Recollection and foresight are possible; the new medium facilitates calculation, planning, and a new kind of action which intervenes in what happens to direct its course in the interest of what is foreseen and desired. Symbols in turn depend upon and promote communication. The results of conjoint experience are considered and transmitted. Events cannot be passed from one to another, but meanings may be shared by means of signs. Wants and impulses are then attached to common meanings. They are thereby transformed into desires and purposes, which, since they implicate a common or mutually understood meaning, present new ties, converting a conjoint activity into a community of interest and endeavor. Thus there is generated what, metaphorically, may be termed a general will and social consciousness: desire and choice on the part of individuals in behalf of activities that, by means of symbols, are communicable and shared by all concerned. A community thus presents an order of energies transmuted into one of meanings which are appreciated and mutually referred by each to every other on the part of those engaged in combined action. (Dewey [1927]: 152-153)

The following passage, in which Dewey blames the «eclipse of the public» on the lack of symbols capable of mediating issues in this way, is an almost literal anticipation of Latour's lament about the inability of green movements to adequately represent the ecological question:

the older symbols of ideal life still engage thought and command loyalty. Conditions have changed, but every aspect of life, from religion and education to property and trade, shows that nothing approaching a transformation has taken place in ideas and ideals. Symbols control sentiment and thought, and the new age has no symbols consonant with its activities. Intellectual instrumentalities for the formation of an organized public are more inadequate than its overt means... Our Babel is not one of tongues but of the signs and symbols without which shared experience is impossible. (Dewey [1927]: 142)

ANT follows this lead. If *representation* is so central to Latour's ecological proposal, it is because the stakes of the New Climatic Regime need to be condensed into an image to which many can relate. His use of symbols is a response to Ulrich Beck's [1986] diagnosis of the «risk society», the 1980s update of Wallas's Great Society, which also highlights the increasing technical nature of public issues and the difficulty laypeople face in understanding them (cf. Marres [2005]). Complexity threatens to paralyze people because it prevents them from acting on the basis of a single motive, and our capacity for symbolic creation has not kept pace with the speed of the New Climatic Regime. ANT politics is in many ways a reprise of Dewey and Lippmann's concept of the public, and an attempt to serve ecology by framing it as an issue around which people must

be brought together through the proper use of symbols that can elicit collective identification and solicit mobilizing affects. The shared affectivity that sustains a public depends on an actor that circulates through many others – on a symbol that arouses the affects necessary to mobilize an ecological public.

2. *Symbolic engineering: symbols vs. heroes*

Tarde provides ANT with the general framework of its monadological sociology; Durkheim, despite his conservative view of the social as an already constituted whole, exposes the symbols that underpin its formation; Dewey and Lippmann – the former in a pragmatist-meliorist way, the latter pursuing an agonistic or realpolitik version of democracy – show how a public can be created and led to cope with the issues of the contemporary world, such as globalization and ecology, only through the proper use of symbols. The interplay between these authors leads ANT to advocate what Lisa Disch calls a «mobilization conception of representation», in which processes of representation «participate in forming demands and social cleavages, not merely to reflect them»; their aim is «not to reproduce a state of affairs but to produce an effect: to call forth a constituency by depicting it as a collective with a shared aim» (Disch [2011]: 107). It is because a public must be «narrated into being» that «both thought and practice need fiction» (Latour [2015]: 283). Symbols are such fictions. Much of Latour's work can be read as *an exploration of the conditions under which an actor can become a symbol, beginning to circulate without scaling up*. There is a «symbolic engineering» in Latour, in the same sense that philosophers speak of «conceptual engineering», that spells out the conditions that maximize the symbol's capacity to circulate and allow it to channel the «floods of emotion» that activate politics.

The importance of such engineering becomes clear when one considers the many possible symbolic framings of the ecological question. In 2016, Trump presented himself as the symbol of the popular resentment against experts, while Hillary Clinton presented herself as the «symbol of technocracy» (Sismondo [2017]: 4) – no wonder she lost. This is the context in which Latour wrote *Down to Earth*, where political oppositions such as local vs. global and left vs. right are presented as obsolete in a warming world, «like a circular saw cutting through thin air» (Latour [2017a]: 48). To dispel the confusion that afflicts public life, Latour proposes a pair of new «attractors», buzzwords that condense different cosmologies and channel «floods of emotion» and «political affects toward new stakes» (Latour [2017a]: 49, 90). These phrases are echoed almost literally in the quotes from Lippmann and Dewey above: attractors are Latour's way of conceptualizing the political agency of symbols. After Trump's election, world

politics had to be framed in terms of an opposition between the *hors-sol*, the Out-Of-This-World attractor of the climate deniers, and the Terrestrial, the attractor of those who were still concerned with the preservation of our planet.

Prior to the Terrestrial, Latour had been working on another symbol for the ecological movement: Gaia. This is the mythological name through which biologist Lynn Margulis and especially chemist James Lovelock attempted to convey the idea of the mutual dependence of the inhabitants of this world. Gaia remains Latour's most successful attempt at providing the ecological movement with a symbol around which to gather.

Classical mob psychology *à la* Le Bon and psychoanalytic theories of identification based on Freud would suggest turning Lovelock or Margulis themselves into the leaders of the new ecological struggle, or finding other leaders – one thinks of Greta Thunberg, whose «superpower» to unite people under the banner of ecology is admired by Latour. However, Latour takes a different approach due to his distrust of heroes. ANT's philosophy of praxis does not have identification with a leader as the core of group formation. Gabriel Tarde (1893) himself fell into this error, denounced by Latour through the «critique of heroization» he has carried out since *The Pasteurization of France* (1984). Latour's main source here may be quite surprising: it is Lev Tolstoy. Just as Tolstoy denied that the Russian campaign could be reduced to the decisions of Napoleon and Kutuzov, Latour denies that Pasteur alone can explain the scientific institutionalization of microbes. This was due to an uncountable list of actors – Pasteur himself, the French Academy of the Sciences, the new scientific instruments, the preexisting scientific theories, a series of pamphlets through which Pasteur tried to promote his ideas, not to mention the vast army of *microbes themselves*. This is Latour's comment on *War and Peace*:

In that book, Tolstoy summons up hundreds of characters to give depth to what for him is the essential question: What can one man do? What does a great man like Napoleon or Kutuzov really do? It takes Tolstoy some eight hundred pages to give back to the multitude of Microbes the effectiveness that the historians of his century placed in the virtue or genius of a few men. Tolstoy succeeded, and the whole of recent history supports his theories as to the relative importance of great men in relation to the overall movements that are represented or appropriated by a few eponymous figures. (Latour [1984]: 13-14)

ANT forbids reducing the fate of a collective to the deeds of actors endowed with titles like «great men», «geniuses», or «world souls». Such actors, like all others, have a limited agency; heroization is not only explicatively fallacious (no actor is ever really in control of the whole), but also politically dangerous, because it turns minute actors into leviathans whose «potency» absorbs the agency of other actors. (We may add that heroes, being human, always run the risk of making mistakes that could damage their reputation and that of the cause they are associated with.) The reason why Latour does not appreciate Bertold Brecht's

Life of Galileo is not only that he charges Galileo with the modern «bifurcation of nature», but also that Brecht presents Galileo as *a hero* against obscurantism – Galileo’s «unhappy the land that is in need of heroes» after he recants might well be the most famous line in the play (cf. Aït-Touati & Latour [2022]: 82-84). When he replaces Galileo with Lovelock – both names are used «to summarize a much longer line of scholars» (Latour [2017a]: 75) – as the scientist who represents the return to the centrality of the «sublunar world» in an ecological epoch, Latour warns against this mistake. He does not want to make Lovelock a hero to whom the ecological movement can be reduced. To respect ANT’s commitment to «irreducibility», symbolic engineering must not clothe a preexisting actor in symbolic garb but *create a brand-new actor*. The more atopic, dispersed, and impersonal this new actor is, the less danger there is of it becoming a leviathan. The more abstract a symbol, the more concrete its functioning, because its agency does not run the risk of being converted into domination.

Grouping does not occur through identification with a hero, but through the circulation of a symbol. The symbol of the ecological movement is not Lovelock, but the abstract actor he introduced into our collective: «We have no heroes, but we have Gaia» (Aït-Touati & Latour [2022]: 83). Gaia is a symbol because she is not a totality or a scientifically established certainty but a circulating agency with which many other actors associate: «For Lovelock, Gaia possesses no omnipotence; it is a “mental picture”, a convenience (“easy to invent”), a comparison (“something like”) made in an effort to conceptualize, in the manner of an inventor – inventors being better gifted, according to him, at understanding than scientists how things really work» (Latour [2015]: 132). Latour salutes Lovelock not as a hero but as the *mythologist* whose fabulation heralded the symbol that would gather the ecological «people to come» under a single banner. The following passage demonstrates how the present situation, in which Gaia is contested and does not yet define our common world, calls for a struggle over symbolic representations:

So far Gaia has no legal form beyond that of addressee. While it has no sovereignty, it may at least have what the Romans called *majesty*. One can address Gaia, not *as one addressed* Nature, as an impersonal but nonetheless personalized entity, but rather directly, naming it as a configuration of new political entities. To live in the epoch of the Anthropocene is to acknowledge a strange and difficult *limitation of powers* in favor of Gaia, considered as the secular aggregation of all the agents that can be recognized thanks to the tracing of feedback loops. Here, just as with the earlier invention of the political personification of the State, both thought and practice need fiction. (Latour [2015]: 283)

Gaia is not yet an established actor; she is simply the name for the family resemblance between beings who, without constituting a unified system, cannot dissociate themselves from each other. Gaia is a «power [that] acts everywhere at once, but [that] is not unifying. It is political, yes; but it is not statist. It is,

literally, atmospheric» (Latour [2017a]: 93). She is necessarily atopic, because she condenses the ways in which all *topoi* are intertwined; in the words of Aït-Touati and Coccia, «this atopic nature of Gaia is what makes her the actor *par excellence*, since she can be incarnated in the most diverse kinds of appearance and let herself be carried by the most diverse kinds of beings» (Aït-Touati, Coccia [2021]: 10).

For this reason, Latour's characterization of Gaia is never univocal. The difficulty of finding a satisfying figuration is such that he is tempted by a form of «negative geology» (Latour, Lenton [2019]: 2) that would just say what Gaia *is not* – she is not a Leviathan, not a Globe, not a new name for the Quest for Certainty. However, his symbolic engineering is at its best when it follows Lovelock's example: Lovelock's method of preventing Gaia from becoming a transcendent and totalitarian whole was to «anxiously revise the description so as to make sure the loops upon loops are not added to one another as if they were one Whole above the entities you started with» (Latour [2017b]: 72). Similarly, to prevent Gaia from degenerating into a totality, Latour *multiplies* metaphors rather than seeking an ultimate definition. «Gaia has a thousand names» (Latour [2015]: 82): the Earth, the Terrestrial, the Anthropocene, the New Climatic Regime, but also the playful Out-of-Which-We-Are-All-Born and the many tentative metaphors – Gaia-Sympoietic, Gaia-Thousand-Folds, Gaia-the-Recalcitrant, Gaia-the-Incomposable, Gaia-the-Uncommon-Commons – explored in *Why Gaia Is not a God of Totality* [2017]. Rather than negative geology, this is an attempt at a radically *equivocal* (or compositional, or piecemeal) definition of Gaia. In Latourian terms, symbols should not be subjected to *iconoclasm* or *idolatry*, but rather to *iconoclash*, the attitude of seeing the value of images not in the images themselves, but in the continual *passage* from one image to another, in their continual reprise and adjustment (Latour & Weibel [2002]).

A symbol must circulate through a number of actors without totalizing their agency. It must be general and vague enough to hold many of them together; at the same time, in order not to degenerate into symbolic reductionism, it must maintain an internal relationship with the issue it stands for, and the actors through which it circulates must not become so attached to it that they are unwilling to revise it if necessary. Latour's equivocal figurations of Gaia fulfil these conditions. However, this «muddle» may be difficult to visualize. A symbol must also be intuitive and memorable if it is to capture our heart and gut. This is why Latour gives Gaia a feature that is supposed to move people to the ecological cause by appealing to affectivity rather than description, to emotion rather than metaphor. This feature is *fragility*.

This is a feature that the inventors of Gaia denied her. Lovelock wrote a paper entitled *The Earth is not Fragile* (1992), and Lynn Margulis ridiculed the idea that she needs to be protected: «Our self-inflated moral imperative

to guide a wayward Earth or heal our sick planet is evidence of our immense capacity for self-delusion... Far from being fragile or consciously petulant, planetary life is highly resilient... Gaia, a tough bitch, is not at all threatened by humans» (Margulis [1998]: 143, 149). Lovelock and Margulis emancipated the image of the Earth from that of an abstract totality, but they are guilty of the «political crime» of «anesthetizing the actors» (Latour [2005b]: 85): either Gaia is fine on her own and needs no care – why get involved in ecology then? – or it is too late to prevent her self-regulating system from eradicating the «human illness» that afflicts her.

On the other hand, fragility is one of the most recurrent words in Latour's vocabulary. Gaia as he pictures her has much in common with Roger Dean's drawing of the Earth for Yes's 1971 album *Fragile*: a seemingly solid and spherical globe on the front cover that breaks up as soon as you look at the back cover. Only, this is no child's dream, and no cosmic glider will save us from ecological collapse. Latour hopes to make care for fragile beings, whose instauration must be sustained and protected, the defining affect of the ecological movement: «Matters of concern... have to be kept up, cared for, accompanied, restored, duplicated, saved, yes, saved» (Latour [2005c]: 49). The feeling that Étienne Souriau called «solicitude», the effort to help fragile beings to establish themselves in a manner that is appropriate to them, is generalized by Latour and ascribed even to the apparently largest and solidest actor. Gaia will not be fine by herself. This is why she can act at once as the symbol that brings an ecological public together and as the actor that should be placed into being by a renewed ecological mobilization.

This is where the role of performance, in a univocal sense that condenses its political and artistic meanings, comes in. It is by performing the affects associated with Gaia that the elected symbol of the ecological movement can effectively collect a public and mobilize people, as Latour makes clear when he defines the gluing role of the concept of performance for art, science, and politics in the Anthropocene:

This other meta concept [performance] does not simply mean the older arts of dance, music or theatre but a much larger set of transdisciplinary skills that provide players and audience with a sensitivity for situations where there was none before. What I have called the «political arts», is a way to explore the three aesthetics of arts, science and politics, where aesthetics is understood as gaining a sensitivity for the new planet on which we are supposed to land – sensitivity which is gained by scientific instruments, by political representation but also by what the arts have to offer. Performances have the crucial advantage of allowing the *dramatization* what is at issue, but also the *dedramatization* of issues since they are artificially staged. No politics of the Anthropocene is possible as long as its players are paralyzed and inarticulate. Without the arts, people will remain stuck in the old planet without moving an inch, terrified by guilt and willful ignorance. (Latour [2016]: 10)

4. Conclusion: political pragmatism beyond populism

In this paper, we have traced the origins of ANT's perspective on identification and group formation (Tarde, Durkheim, Dewey, Lippmann) and accounted for the symbolic engineering through which Latour tried to collect a public around a symbol, Gaia, that was capable of soliciting the affects necessary for a global ecological mobilization. A symbol is something that «circulates» without becoming totalitarian, tying a collective together without degenerating in a «leviathan». This is also why Latour carefully detaches symbols from heroes who might capitalize the potency of the whole collective by themselves.

In conclusion, let us address a question that may have arisen while reading this actor-network account of political identification: what is the difference between this account and the new forms of populism, especially the «left populism» of Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau, which demonstrates how populism does not have to be conservative? Consider Laclau and Mouffe's Gramscian account of the conditions of hegemony, that shares many similarities with Latour's view of the way symbols circulate: hegemony occurs when «a *particular* social force assumes the representation of a *totality* that is radically incommensurable with it», an account that Laclau and Mouffe distinguish both «from analyses in which universality finds in the social field a direct, non-hegemonically mediated expression, and those in which particularities are merely added up without any mediation between them being thinkable – as in some forms of post-modernism» (Laclau & Mouffe [1985]: x). Or consider the agonistic view of democracy they embrace (see especially Mouffe [2005]), according to which politics requires the identification of an «enemy»: this has much in common with one of Latour's definitions of politics, according to which politics amounts to «the shaping of a boundary between “us” and “they” through the performative use of “we”» (Latour [2005a]: 28). In *From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik* [2005], Latour construes *demon* and *demos* as two etymological counterparts, pointing respectively to the unification of a public and its opposition to other publics; but it is well known that *symbol* is the primary etymological nemesis of *demon*: *sym-ballein*, the symbol, gathers by pointing to a common origin, whereas *dia-ballein*, the devil, tears apart and divides. Just like Mouffe's agonistic view of democracy, Latour's account of symbolic identification draws on Carl Schmitt's view of politics as built around the friend-enemy opposition.

Thus, considering also his opposition to technocracy, Latour's proposal might well be framed as a populism of this kind, a sort of «ecological populism» that puts affects and symbols at the service of the ecological cause. However, there are also significant differences. For instance, Mouffe would have rebutted Latour's critique or heroization, revaluating the possibly virtuous role of charismatic leaders for the left (Mouffe [2018]: 70). Above all, however, there seems to

be a crucial difference between Latour's symbolic engineering and what Ernesto Laclau (2005) calls a «tendentially empty signifier», the object around which left populism is supposed to rally a public. The tendentially empty signifier is characterized by increasing extension but decreasing, almost evanescent intension: «popular identity becomes increasingly full from an *extensional* point of view, for it represents an ever-larger chain of demands; but it becomes *intensionally* poorer, for it has to dispossess itself of particularistic contents in order to embrace social demands which are quite heterogeneous» (Laclau [2005]: 92). The ways in which such views can be put at the service of the worst kind of post-truth politics need hardly be remarked.

Latour's concept of symbol follows a different lead. Given its Dewey-inspired character, we may define it as a *pragmatist* concept of symbol. Pragmatism has been framed as a third way between technocracy and populism by Matteo Santarelli and Justo Serrano Zamora [2020]. The authors show how Laclau's intensional emptying of political symbols can lead to post-truth populism by using the example of the empty signifier «Italians first». Laclau's skepticism of conceptual determination ends up removing the boundary between conceptuality and affectivity, making affects a mere supplement to rhetoric. Santarelli and Serrano propose an alternative account of the emotional dimension of politics inspired by Dewey's theory of emotions, according to which affectivity is never pure but includes two more inseparable moments that take emotions beyond themselves: a pragmatic one (emotions contain conceptual content, i.e. they convey something about experience, especially as articulated through bodily movements) and an objective one (they have an epistemic function, relating to the objects of experience through the practice of inquiry). By being given cognitive content, affects become means of *reaching* reality rather than ignoring it. This is the difference between populism, which clings to empty signifiers and replaces the objects of experience with emotional surrogates, and pragmatism, which includes emotion in politics but ties it to the other irreducible dimensions of experience. The authors conclude: «The main differences that separate a pragmatist from a populist account consist of understanding the emergence of popular identities as processes of collective inquiry. According to a pragmatist view, the agglomeration of heterogeneous political demands does not require a process of condensation of the kind Laclau describes but can be explained by pointing to activities of inquiry of political actors» (Santarelli, Serrano Zamora [2020]: 258).

Much more could be said, but we can safely state that Latour recognizes the need to condense identities around symbols, while also keeping track of the outcomes of collective inquiries. If the scientific basis offered by climatologists is «to gain consistency and autonomy and be translated into a historical momentum comparable to those of the past, it must recognize, em-

brace, understand and effectively represent its project by bringing together all these conflicts in a unity of action understandable to all» (Latour & Schultz [2022]: 12). It is no coincidence that he wanted to be portrayed as a political pragmatist in the tradition of Dewey: «Pragmatism... is the political philosophy that has developed the tools to follow the *consequences* of actions when these are unknown or when they overflow the boundaries of routines» (Latour [2007]: 814-5). In this process, scientists play a role just as do artists and «mythologists». ANT politics does not abandon the intensional aspect of symbols, their internal relation to the issue they stand for. It is this internal relation that Latour's insistence on representation seeks to preserve, and this is possibly the most important part of the symbolic engineering that can be drawn from his texts. Symbols must not be deprived of a referent, nor must they replace what they stand for; rather, they must be *articulated* with the complicated reality they are meant to condense: ecologists must learn to represent their attachments and interests in a way that is general and intuitive enough to gather many people, but that does not cut off the concrete issue they face. *Ecological pragmatism* rather than populism is the direction in which ANT politics pushes us.

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Postponing Identities: Slowed Perception, Layered Embodiment, and Lateral Politics

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Abstract. This article examines how non-divisive identities are enacted through perceptual slowness, understood as a multilayered, embodied structural trait that counters the immediacy and frontality characteristic of contemporary perceptual and communicative regimes. It explores how different instances of slowed perception reshape processes of identification by foregrounding affectability, layered embodiment, and lateral relations that both precede and exceed symbolic or intentional mediation. Drawing on critical phenomenology, contemporary accounts of material and visual inflection, enactivist aesthetics, and recent theories of socially engaged perception and ambient rhetoric, I argue that hesitation, inflection, and viscosity exemplify perceptual attitudes that suspend reactive and potentially destructive behaviors – including certain forms of socio-political critique – and instead open indirect, compositional modes of relation. These attitudes postpone identification, expanding the experiential field and thereby resisting racializing perceptual forms and normative recognition while cultivating spaces of non-frontal engagement. I conceptualize these modes as a form of lateral aesthetics and politics: indirect, embodied, and purposefully affective strategies of counter-discrimination that unfold through delay, dwelling, and practices of apparent passivity, creating more plural and breathable spaces of identification.

Keywords. Perceptual slowness, layered embodiment, lateral politics, affectability, counter-discrimination.

1. Introduction

In this article, I discuss the social and political role of sensory experience in shaping, resisting, and ultimately transforming processes of identification. I propose understanding identification as a form of perceptual experience rather than as a predominantly – or even exclusively – logical or linguistic operation. Moreover, this notion of identification is not entirely homologous with the psychoanalytic one, since psychoanalysis conceives identification as part of unconscious processes and thus cannot be considered an experiential phenomenon. In this sense, perceptual identification occupies an intermediate level: a domain in relation to which the logical-linguistic and the primary unconscious orders constitute the upper and lower strata, respectively.

What makes this middle level particularly compelling is its belonging to the sphere of everyday experience. Identification is something we all do explicitly and regularly: looking at something or someone, judging critically or approvingly, discerning differences, including or excluding, breaking, using, touching, and cherishing. Identification of this kind is embedded in most of our actions, whether in reality, thought, or fantasy. These middle-level identifications continuously produce identities which – so is my thesis – inevitably possess a socio-political dimension¹.

Predominantly, identity appears as an over-semiotized symbolic form or an amalgamation of such forms, as in the case of so-called personal identity. Understood in this way, identity correlates with a particular mode of experience that I would have described as rapid, reactive, and low-resolution perception. This perceptual mode has its own temporal regime and spatial organization. Its most characteristic and socially consequential feature is momentary reactivity – a sliding along pre-determined trajectories outlined by what we might call the symbolic. The far-reaching social consequence of this condition is a contraction – or even suspension – of the actor's experiential field in favor of momentary satisfactions that are simultaneously libidinal and cognitive. In other words, every

- 1 Martin Seel's *aesthetics of appearing* is one of the most consistent, elaborated, and convincing attempts to articulate the special role played by aesthetic experience – an experience endowed with a privileged, if not exceptional, access to the singular experiential fields of the phenomenal world. The latter is construed as a middle-level reality situated between the world of physical matter and causality and that of thought and fantasy (Seel [2005]). Seel understands the *aesthetic* not as something related to the realm of art – that is, not in terms of a specific “content” – but as an experiential attitude that discloses everydayness as a semi-autonomous form of reality: at once exclusive and highly trivial. It belongs to the specific temporal texture of elementary, sensuous forms of life and nevertheless remains largely covered over by propositional knowledge. In this sense, his account anticipates the notion of slowed perception developed in this article: aesthetic appearing unfolds through delay, dwelling, and non-instrumental attention, disclosing the world laterally rather than frontally, as a field of coexistence rather than an object of recognition.

identification-of is at the same time – though to varying degrees depending on the context – an identification-with. Hence a further social consequence arises, one that affects not only the object of identification – what or who is perceptually identified – but also its subject. The damage, in this sense, is bilateral.

Importantly, this experiential mode, which somewhat paradoxically downplays its own experiential nature, characterizes both the production of entrenched identities – such as those created by the racializing gaze and reinforced by populist political discourse – and the forms of social criticism aimed at overcoming them. To put it more pointedly, the critical stance itself – inasmuch as it relies heavily on processes of identification – may inadvertently reproduce some of the very discriminatory effects it seeks to contest.

Additionally, this tendency – the tacit reinforcement of discriminatory policies by the perceptual attitude itself – is intensified by contemporary media environments, particularly platform and generative media. These systems demand and promote immediacy², reactivity, and frontality through algorithms specifically designed to sustain users' engagement. As a result, regardless of their political motivation – whether emancipatory or reactionary – social actors risk becoming trapped in recurrent cycles of epistemological, psychological, and political oppression.

My aim is to propose an alternative mode of perception – *slowed perception* – characterized by high-resolution, lived temporality and layered embodiment, and to explore how it enables a form of lateral politics that perpetually performs what I call postponed identities. Slowed perception entails a shift from momentary reaction to attentive delay, from pinpointing recognition to receptive openness. It introduces a pervasive rhythm of experience that resists the compression of perception – and of the experiential field as a whole – imposed by contemporary media and political acceleration. Rather than offering a direct counter-image to speed, it reconfigures the relation between sensing, thinking, and acting, foregrounding hesitation and affectability as conditions for ethical and aesthetic engagement. Through this reorientation, perception itself becomes political: it opens indirect, non-frontal modes of relation capable of countering discrimination not by confrontation but through the cultivation of compositional, plural, and breathable spaces³.

2 Immediacy in this article is construed not as the absence of mediation but as a specific mode of mediality whose efficacy lies in its self-effacing operation. By functioning as a conduit – rather than a space – for perceptual attention and psychical energy, immediacy accelerates perception while rendering its own mediating role imperceptible.

3 The notion of slow, or high-definition, perception developed in this article is also influenced by the work of Tia DeNora. In *Making Sense of Reality: Culture and Perception in Everyday Life*, DeNora proposes a project of slow sociology whose primary aim is to explore «how our senses of reality take shape in daily life» (DeNora [2014]: 3). She understands *slow cognition* as a «form of attention to minutiae»: various perceptual micro-activities («artful practices»)

The argument unfolds in four parts. The first examines the link between perceptual frontality, reactivity, and discrimination, showing how fast experiential modes sustain both entrenched identities and forms of reactive critique. The second addresses long-term tendencies within a broader cultural transformation that I describe as the horizontalization of culture, in which hierarchical structures give way to immersive, surface-based forms of experience. The third turns to the notion of layered embodiment, analyzing how bodily and affective attunements – hesitation, inflection, and viscosity – constitute alternative modes of identification characterized by their unsurpassable performativity. The final part develops the implications of these perceptual attitudes as lateral aesthetics and politics, exploring how indirectness, care, and delay can ground an embodied counter-discrimination and an ethics of laterality.

2. Perception and culture: frontality, reactivity, discrimination

Beyond institutional and normative frameworks, every social configuration – and especially every concrete encounter – rests upon a perceptual regime: a tacit distribution of what can be seen, felt, and known, dependent on a dominant mode of perception (Rancière [2004]). In contemporary contexts, this regime is dominated by what may be called the frontal encounter: a perceptual and ethical structure that organizes experience around immediacy, exposure, and direct address. To perceive frontally is to face the world as a screen of already-legible appearances, as if relations must be uniformly available, explicit, and morally charged. Such frontality, though apparently spontaneous, is historically and technologically conditioned. It defines not only how the subject appears in the world but also how the world appears to the subject – flattened, intensified, and ready for reaction.

The epistemology of this encounter is one of contraction. Seeing becomes knowing, recognition becomes understanding, and affect becomes judgment. The interval that once separated perception from interpretation collapses into a single reflex. Reactivity replaces reflection; temporal depth is sacrificed to the instantaneity of moral response. Frontality thus sustains a specific ethics – one grounded in visibility and confrontation. It privileges the face-to-face and the verdict, preventing deviation from trajectories inscribed by the symbolic and

that lead to, or counteract, social phenomena which are politically and morally relevant at a level that allows them to be grasped conceptually. Unlike DeNora, however, I propose the notion of slow perception outside its primarily methodological use. For me, slow cognition designates a mode of experience that characterizes the very object of theoretical interest, not merely an epistemic access to it. In this sense, my concern is not only methodological but first and foremost theoretically and practically motivated.

displacing those slower, oblique relations or micro-performances that could allow for ambiguity or transformation. Experience becomes low-resolution: the world is apprehended not as a field of emerging relations but as a surface of categorical inscriptions.

The experiential field corresponding to fast, or low-resolution, perception is structured by a qualitative reduction of depth, density, and delay. *Resolution* here refers to the degree of differentiation that perception can sustain before collapsing into recognition or identification. In low-resolution perception, distinctions flatten: the world – both social and physical – is grasped through outlines and categories rather than through textures and transitions. Events unfold as instantaneous stimuli demanding immediate evaluative response. The interval between sensation and interpretation – the space in which reflection or empathy might arise – is eroded. Time becomes a plane where impressions succeed one another without accumulation; the present loses its thickness, turning into a chain of discrete moments. The subject of fast experience does not inhabit time but skims it, driven by the imperative to remain updated, responsive, and visible.

Spatially, frontality privileges what faces the observer and marginalizes what appears obliquely or peripherally. The world is rendered as a screen, and relation is reduced to positioning. Such a geometry produces the subject as an eye meeting the world head-on rather than as a body situated within it. This configuration carries ethical weight: to perceive frontally is to confront, to evaluate, to judge. In this sense, the perceptual field is already moralized before any explicit judgment occurs.

Fast, low-resolution experience also depends on narrow, focused attention. The dominant senses are the distal ones – vision and hearing – while the proximal ones, such as touch or kinaesthetic awareness, are marginalized. Perception thus becomes observation: the world turns into a picture to be decoded rather than a milieu to be co-experienced⁴. This disembodied orientation entails a straightening of the perceptual trajectory. Instead of bending toward or being drawn into its object, perception moves linearly – from identification to judgment, from sign to meaning, from stimulus to conclusion. The perceptual act mirrors the logic of the statement: it aims at closure. This directional bias

4 It is important, at least, to mention the – still indirect – influence that contemporary philosophical and psychological theories of perception exert on the problematics of the social and cultural sciences. For example, the ecological approach to vision (Gibson [2014]) and enactivism (Noë [2012]) suggest an understanding of visual perception as multi-directed, dynamic, embodied, and embedded in material and social ecologies. In these theoretical models, «meaning» is not the sediment of an act of identification but a continuous enactment – a practically motivated «style of access» to the surrounding world. However, this highly differentiated micro-practical dimension of perceptual experience, uncovered by contemporary theories of perception, largely remains an undercurrent: an unconscious base or background of everyday experience, rather than a praxis to be performed or an attitude to be assumed.

supports the over-semiotization of experience, whereby meaning congeals into a petrified form, replacing mediation, and the world appears as a repository of pre-given signs, enveloped in a kind of «information-skin» (Marks [2024]: 101). The straight line of perception enforces an economy of visibility that excludes ambiguity, depth, and delay⁵.

Finally, this experiential configuration entails a distinctive affective economy. Acceleration, channeled by symbolically preformed environments, produces alternating waves of arousal and fatigue, fascination and indifference. Emotional intensity substitutes for genuine resonance; affect becomes a cue for orientation rather than a space of relation. The ethical danger lies not only in the loss of sensitivity but also in the automation of response. Fast perception privileges the reflex – *like, share, condemn* – over the slower movements through which responsibility might develop.

Together, these traits form the phenomenological infrastructure of contemporary discrimination. Perception becomes pre-formatted for judgment; difference appears primarily as contrast or threat. The injustice that follows is not only epistemic but also perceptual – it determines who or what can appear as a subject of experience. While Miranda Fricker has shown (Fricker [2007]) that epistemic injustice originates prior to discourse, I propose to complement her thesis with the corollary that the modalities of perception, in turn, pre-shape the very possibility of knowledge.

Contemporary media environments amplify this configuration by demanding permanent visibility and immediate responsiveness. The algorithmic rhythms of platform and generative media synchronize attention and affect, keeping subjects in a state of reactivity. Whether the response takes the form of outrage or empathy, it remains bound to the same economy of reactivity. The ethics of visibility thus merges with the politics of distraction⁶.

To interrupt this configuration requires not another frontal opposition but a shift in perceptual choreography, including its vector and tempo – a reorientation that restores experience as a non-transitory space of dwelling, as the deliberate cultivation of an interval in which the world might again be encountered obliquely or laterally rather than being enforced frontally.

5 «When I am interpellated by an interface, on my computer, my phone, a recipe book, and so forth, informational interfaces predesign my experience, in ways that are sometimes just convenient, sometimes make me dull and numb, sometimes actively misinform me and steal my perception, knowledge, and time» (Marks [2024]: 101).

6 In addition to their capacity to hold attention captive, contemporary media interfere with bodily and affective reactions by anticipating them or feeding them forward (Angerer [2017]; Hansen [2015]). Yet even under these qualitatively new media-historical conditions, slowed perception remains fully attuned to affect, precisely because it operates through a withdrawal from symbolic preemption.

3. *Horizontalization of culture: from content to experience*

The shift from low-resolution perception to the possibility of slowed and lateral experience cannot be understood in purely perceptual terms. It is embedded in a broader cultural transformation unfolding since the mid-twentieth century – a transformation that may be described as the *horizontalization of culture*. This term designates the gradual erosion of symbolic hierarchies that once organized cultural production around oppositions such as high and low, form and matter, meaning and appearance. What replaces these vertical structures is neither chaos nor mere relativism, but a reconfiguration of cultural space into a continuum of practices, surfaces, and affects. The horizontal, in this sense, is not simply flat; it involves a dialectic of extensity and intensity – a mode of cultural distribution that privileges contact, simultaneity, and co-presence over representation and transcendence.

Already in Raymond Williams's notion of *structures of feeling*, culture appears less as a repository of values than as a living configuration of sensibilities – a «practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity» that precedes its own conceptual articulation while already being meaningful in itself (Williams [1977]: 132). Williams thus anticipates the performative turn in cultural theory: culture is understood as an ongoing mediation between the social and the perceptual, rather than as a system of meanings to be decoded. Similarly, Lawrence Alloway's proposal of a «long front of culture» rejects the pyramid of high art and mass culture in favor of a continuous field of aesthetic experience (Alloway [1959]). Alloway's *front* is not a leveling but a broadening – an expanded field in which artistic and everyday practices share the same perceptual and material conditions. Value, in this context, emerges not from symbolic distinction but from intensity and participation, from the specific ways in which things appear, affect, and engage.

Later developments render this transformation more explicitly visual and material. David Joselit's reflections on flatness describe how modern and postmodern art – culminating in networked image culture – abandons transcendence and embraces the surface as a site of connection. For Joselit, flatness is characterized by relational density rather than superficiality: the image understood as a plane that gathers heterogeneous elements without subordinating them to a single perspective. Similarly, Chiara Bottici's notion of the *imaginal* emphasizes culture as a space of shared, performative images – neither mere representations nor autonomous symbols, but mediating forms that generate relations (Bottici [2014]). What these accounts share is an understanding of culture as a field rather than a form: something that happens *in the between*, where perception, materiality, and imagination intertwine.

Andreas Reckwitz situates this condition between two dominant tendencies of late modernity: hyperculture and cultural essentialism (Reckwitz [2021]).

Hyperculture describes the proliferation and recombination of symbolic forms within a global economy of signs – an endless circulation of innovation and remix, in which meaning becomes fluid yet self-referential. Cultural essentialism, by contrast, seeks to restore stable identities and rooted traditions as a reaction to this volatility. Despite their opposition, both remain caught within the symbolic: one multiplies meanings, the other freezes them, yet neither escapes the logic of over-semiotization that structures culture as a realm of representations.

To complement – and, to some extent, overcome – this polarity, I propose a third formation: *hypoculture*. Whereas hyperculture operates through symbolic excess and cultural essentialism through symbolic restoration, hypoculture arises through attenuation – a loosening of representational density that allows material and affective dimensions to come forward. This attenuation does not entail loss but modulation: a relaxation of symbolic tightness that opens space for the sensuous, the unfinished, and the relational. In hypoculture, meaning no longer precedes experience but unfolds from it; culture becomes a horizontalized material–affective infrastructure that sustains such unfolding. It is no longer the source of meaning but a protective coating and enabling milieu for collective forms of sensing and doing – an envelope and optional resource rather than a normative horizon of the meaningful.

Far from signaling decline, this hypocultural turn provides the experiential ground for re-embodied perception and lateral politics. By downplaying the dominance of the symbolic and foregrounding the performative, horizontalization enables slower, plural, and layered forms of engagement – non-frontal, embodied practices of care and relation that unfold within shared experiential fields rather than above or beyond them. The horizontal field thus invites coexistence rather than confrontation, attunement rather than decoding. It creates the very milieu in which slowed perception can operate: a culture that no longer demands interpretation as mastery but allows hesitation, affectability, and dwelling to function as modes of understanding.

4. *Layered embodiment: affective and material attunements*

The trap of the symbolic – or of the frontal, or the normative – is extraordinarily strong. We cannot simply decree that experience must become slow, since any such imperative would already reproduce the logic of frontality: the logic of the symbolic itself. Every attempt to command slowness undermines it. The task, instead, is to trace how slowness occurs – to explore where and through which perceptual dispositions the continuous acceleration of low-resolution experience is interrupted. Slowing cannot be instituted as an activist stance or moral injunction (it would be a contradiction in terms); it arises as an event within perception

itself, as something that befalls rather than is willed. What must therefore be examined are the specific modes through which perception is slowed, displaced, or thickened. I focus on three such phenomena – hesitation, inflection, and viscosity – each exemplifying a distinct way in which the perceptual field folds back upon itself, reintroducing delay, mediality, and care into the act of sensing.

If the previous section described horizontalization as the cultural precondition for re-embodied experience, the present one turns to the corporeal micro-dynamics through which such re-embodiment takes shape. *Layered embodiment* denotes the stratification of affective, material, and cognitive processes that constitute perception as an event rather than a function. It figures the body not as a transparent medium of cognition but as a multilayered field of attunement, in which world and self co-constitute one another through tactile, rhythmic, and affective exchanges. Within this layered field, slowness is not inertia but differential mediation – the body's capacity to suspend momentary reactivity and open a space not yet striated by pre-ordered symbolic trajectories.

4.1. *Hesitation – The perceptual suspension*

Alia Al-Saji's project of a critical phenomenology of hesitation offers a compelling account of slowed experiential forms and their ethical and political implications (Al-Saji [2014]). In the vein of Sara Ahmed's *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Ahmed [2014]), Al-Saji explores the meaning-making potential of affectively and temporally complex experiences – those that unfold through delay rather than immediacy. Hesitation, often coded in activist or frontal cultures as weakness or indecision, is rearticulated as a productive stance. Rather than merely postponing action, hesitation suspends habitual, reactive responses of body and consciousness within over-semiotized communicative environments. It opens what Tia DeNora describes as a «zero-hour of artful practices where culture and action are conjoined» (DeNora [2014]: 82): an interstitial moment of withdrawal from established channels of perception and relation, enabling a reconfiguration of engagements with the «virtually real» of the world (DeNora [2014]: 123).

In Al-Saji's terms, hesitation is not a failure to act but a receptive delay – a momentary arrest in which perception refrains from completion and holds itself open to the other. It interrupts automatic recognition, lingering prior to interpretation and allowing affectability to emerge before intention takes hold. Hesitation reveals perception's temporal depth, transforming the instant into duration. In this way, it becomes both perceptual and ethical: vulnerability is reinstated as a resource, and sensitivity returns where reactivity has taken hold.

Crucially, hesitation is also a counter-movement to racializing vision. By pausing the momentum of recognition, perception can encounter the other out-

side pre-inscribed grids of visibility. Ethically, this pause reclaims the interval as receptivity; politically, it makes non-reactive relation possible. To hesitate, then, is to resist epistemic closure – to practice a perceptual ethics grounded in care and openness rather than judgment and mastery.

Yet hesitation cannot sustain openness on its own. Left unaccompanied, it risks collapsing into paralysis. What follows, therefore, is a second movement – a spatial modulation that allows perception not only to pause but also to turn. The next modality, inflection, describes this turning: the way perception bends, follows, and is shaped by material surfaces.

4.2. *Inflection – The material turning*

If hesitation suspends perception in time, inflection bends it in space. The notion, drawn from Michael Podro's reflections on pictorial inflection (Podro [1987], [1998]), designates a phenomenon in which the relation between an image and its material support alters the very mode of seeing. Within analytic-philosophical image theory, pictorial inflection refers to the interplay between a depicted object or scene and its material vehicle: the organization of surface, pigment, texture, or design through which visibility is structured.

Inflection offers a paradigmatic instance of perceptual slowing. Materiality intercepts the straightforward trajectory of a discrete perceptual act, contaminating its apparent clarity and shifting its movement from a perpendicular strike to a lateral glide along the surface. In doing so, it transforms frontal encounter into lateral dwelling. This is not an intentional choice but a structural effect enacted by the resistance and density of the material field. The pictorial medium, far from a transparent conduit, exerts counter-agency: it bends perception, introduces delay, and generates a tactile mode of attention⁷.

Podro captures the entanglement of materiality and imagination when he observes that «in neither painting nor ornament can we see where the real ends and the imaginary begins, because there is no such boundary inside appearance» (Podro [1998]: 17). The material and the imaginal are thus interwoven within a shared experiential field; perception moves within their interpenetration, and appearance acquires depth: the visible thickens, meaning becomes processual.

This dynamic is not confined to art. The proliferation of images in cinema, digital media, and interfaces extends inflection into ordinary perception. The more mediated our environments become, the more perceptually dense they grow; and the greater this medial density, the greater the potential for slowing. The acceleration of imagery thus engenders its own counter-movement:

7 For a more detailed discussion of tactile, or haptic, perception, see, for example, Laura Marks's work on video imagery (Marks [2002]).

intensified medial awareness that renders perception self-reflexive, tactile, and dwelling. The space we then inhabit is neither purely inner nor purely outer but simultaneously meaningful and experiential, accessible from both first – and third-person perspectives.

Pictorial perception therefore involves two intertwined movements: an initial frontal approach toward the object or scene, followed by – and often accompanied by – a withdrawal into the lateral dimension structured by the surface. The first establishes contact; the second sustains relation. Together they enact a rhythm that escapes both the closure of identificatory recognition and the antagonism of direct confrontation.

Seen from this angle, inflection carries political as well as aesthetic significance. The lateral withdrawal it enables constitutes a micro-politics of perception: an indirect resistance to frontal dynamics of exposure, accusation, or display⁸. It transforms attention into care and composition. Where hesitation opens a temporal interval, inflection introduces a spatial one. Yet for delay and curvature to endure, they require a medium dense enough to resist immediacy. That sustaining density is provided by viscosity.

4.3. *Viscosity – The affective medium*

If hesitation opens time and inflection curves space, viscosity gives both substance: material and affective density anchoring slowness against the pull of immediacy. Viscosity names the texture of relational persistence – the shared thickness in which perception clings and resists separation.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre describes the viscous as an ambiguous state between solid and liquid, simultaneously alluring and oppressive. To touch something viscous, he writes, is to discover that distance cannot be maintained: the substance clings (Sartre [2021]: 789). This ambiguity discloses a truth of perception – its inescapable embodiment and entanglement in what it senses. To perceive is always, in part, to adhere.

Morton extends this insight to the ecological scale. In his theory of hyper-objects (Morton [2013]), viscosity marks the impossibility of detachment from vast, sticky networks – climate, capital, digital infrastructures – that envelop us. We cannot step outside them; they adhere to our thinking and being. Viscosity

8 The notion of indirect resistance requires clarification. It may seem at odds with the article's anti-activist orientation, insofar as resistance is typically associated with purposeful and sustained political action. In this context, however, resistance is understood not as an intentional stance but as a material and perceptual phenomenon – closer to physical friction or viscosity than to organized opposition. It designates a mode of slowing, thickening, or impeding movement within perceptual and relational fields, rather than a strategy of confrontation or intervention.

becomes an ethics of implication: perception unfolds within entangled material systems rather than above them.

Ahmed translates stickiness into the social field: affects adhere to words and bodies, shaping orientations of empathy and aversion, belonging and exclusion (Ahmed [2014]). Viscosity thus describes how feeling holds the social together, underwriting both discrimination and solidarity.

Ambient rhetoric likewise foregrounds the meaning-generating capacities of sensuous experience in which viscosity plays a substantial role (Rickert [2013]; McNely [2019]). Here viscosity functions as the medium through which meaning reverberates environmentally: rhetoric is not only an exchange of signs but a field of atmospheric resonance, in which discourse remains attached to affective and material environments.

Rosa's concept of resonance deepens this understanding (Rosa [2019]). Resonance requires unavailability (*Unverfügbarkeit*): the world must not be fully transparent or instrumentalized. Viscosity – though not Rosa's term – names precisely this resistance: the density that keeps relation open and prevents the world from surrendering entirely to comprehension or control. To perceive viscously is to dwell within unavailability, to remain with what resists mastery. Such perception lingers; it endures rather than consumes. In this sense, viscosity transforms perception into care: an ethics of remaining within the world's density.

Where hesitation opens a temporal interval and inflection introduces a spatial curve, viscosity provides the depth that binds both into a continuous field – thick, relational, and unavailable. Through viscosity, slowness becomes an ethics of coexistence: not the refusal to move, but the capacity to remain.

4.4 *Structural traits of slowed perception*

To understand what distinguishes slowed or high-resolution perception, we must resist defining it merely as the negation of speed. Slowness is not a deficit of movement but a different structuration of perception – a mode of experience in which time, space, and sense regain thickness, building layers of embodiment. Where fast perception reduces experience to a network of channels, slowed perception unfolds it into a non-directional, intensive space with depth, rhythm, and relational complexity. Its structural traits can be described as follows.

1. *Expanded field of attention.* Rather than narrowing focus toward an object or goal, slowed perception distributes attention across a field. It is less the concentration of the gaze than its dispersion – a sensitivity to gradients, transitions, and peripheral presences. Such perception does not scan for information but inhabits a milieu, moving within folds and textures, allowing co-presences and overlaps. Attention becomes plural and dynamic – less a spotlight than an atmosphere – registering multiplicity without reducing it to figure and ground.

2. *Curved or oblique spatial orientation.* Slowed perception breaks with the geometry of frontal encounter. Its relation to the world is oblique, curved, lateral, and enveloping rather than direct and oppositional. Curvature introduces coexistence and partiality: things are encountered sidewise, never in full exposure, always within shared space. The world is met halfway; it wraps, leaks, resonates. Lateral geometry yields not a loss of clarity but a gain in relational density.

3. *Temporal thickness and rhythmic duration.* Slowed perception unfolds in layers and rhythms. Instead of moving from instant to instant, it sustains an internal duration – a coexistence of temporalities within a single act of sensing. Past impressions remain active; anticipation and recollection interweave. This thickness allows for hesitation, delay, and dwelling – forms of time that cultivate rather than consume. Perception acquires rhythm and phrasing; it becomes temporal composition rather than sequence. In contrast to low-resolution perception, it is non-transitory: it does not dissolve into subsequent experiences guided and consumed by the pre-given symbolic. It remains in and by itself, like an atmospheric envelope – like music.

4. *Mediality foregrounded.* Slowed perception experiences itself as mediated. Every act of seeing, hearing, or touching passes through a medium – light, air, texture, rhythm – that conditions the encounter. Rather than erasing mediation through rapid tension-resolution, slowed perception foregrounds it. The medium ceases to be a neutral conduit and becomes a participant in the event (Latour [2005]: 39). The subject becomes aware of bodily mediation – breathing, posture, vibration. Perception turns reflexive without becoming reflective: it feels itself as passage and transformation.

5. *Multi-sensorial density.* While fast perception privileges distal senses, slowed perception reintegrates proximal and cross-modal senses: touch, proprioception, smell, hearing, balance. The senses cease to operate hierarchically and instead form a synesthetic field in which each modality modulates the others. Perception becomes dense; one does not merely see the world but feels oneself within its textures. The body becomes the site of a perceptual ecology – a resonant surface among others.

6. *Performative and enactive character.* Slowed perception is not representational but performative. It does not merely decode signs; it co-creates sense through its own activity. To perceive slowly is to participate in the ongoing formation of reality – to enact rather than interpret. The perceptual act becomes co-composition, where knowing and being are inseparable from doing.

7. *Ethical openness.* Finally, slowed perception entails an ethical reorientation. By suspending judgment, it opens the perceptual field to coexistence, ambiguity, and care. The other is not confronted but accompanied; difference is not fixed but allowed to resonate. Ethics here relates less to rigid norms than to

performative stances, driven by internal motivations rather than external imperatives. These motivations are predominantly bodily anchored. The body should be understood not only centripetally but also eccentrically, centrifugally – or more precisely as a dynamic balance between the two. Breathing exemplifies this balance: inhalation and exhalation. Ultimately, what counts as ethically «correct» is neither statement nor action measured against a predetermined horizon, but a structure of feeling that renders the overall atmosphere – comprising all that is thinkable and feasible – breathable.

Taken together, these traits describe a perceptual mode in which experience regains depth, relationality, and ethical potential. In contrast to the reactive immediacy of frontal encounter, slowed perception enables layered embodiment – an ecology in which to perceive is already to participate. It is within this ecology that lateral politics can emerge: an indirect, embodied, and affective practice of counter-discrimination grounded in the texture of experience itself.

5. Lateral aesthetics and/as politics: indirection, care, and counter-discrimination

While the previous section traced the micro-ethics of perception, the present one considers how these embodied modalities unfold into collective and political forms of experience capable of resisting the perceptual grammar of domination described earlier. I propose to call these performative experiential forms lateral, or indirect, politics. Lateral politics designates a field of relation that resists both vertical hierarchies and the aggressions of the frontal encounter. It operates not through negation or overthrow but through re-composition – by redistributing attention, care, and affect within the shared texture of the sensible. To act laterally is to engage from the side: to create relations obliquely rather than confrontationally, and to sustain transformation through persistence rather than rupture.

In this sense, the aesthetic and the political are not distinct registers but reciprocal operations. I therefore propose a notion of lateral aesthetics that – precisely because of its laterality – is fundamentally social. Lateral aesthetics emerges where aesthetic orientation and political care coincide: in gestures that transform how we perceive rather than what we believe.

5.1. Lateral politics: the ethics of the sideways gesture

Lateral politics unfolds through indirect, sideways, and non-frontal modes of resistance. Its gestures are oblique rather than oppositional: they alter the organization of experience without appealing to confrontation or control. Whereas frontal politics is defined by immediacy, exposure, and direct address, lateral

politics operates in the interstices of perception, where attention can shift before meaning hardens into judgment.

To act laterally is to resist the compulsion to face, react, or decide prematurely. It reclaims the interval between perception and recognition not as indecision but as responsive potential. Within this interval, perception ceases to mirror existing structures of power and begins to recompose them. What is at stake is not merely a new political stance but a transformation of the sensory fabric that sustains social reality.

Lateral politics is thus *compositional* rather than *oppositional*. Instead of frontality's forceful linearity – address, verdict, counter-verdict – it privileges curvature, delay, and adjacency. Its mode of action is redistribution rather than reversal: a reallocation of care, attention, and affect across the shared field of the sensible.

5.2. *From hesitation, inflection, and viscosity to lateral agency*

The micro-ethics of slowed perception – hesitation, inflection, and viscosity – constitute the sensory groundwork of political laterality. Each modifies the perceptual tempo underlying relations of power, enacting a politics in miniature.

Hesitation introduces a vital pause into the reflexive loop of identification. By suspending the immediate coupling of perception and response, it opens a temporal interval in which alternatives can emerge. This delay is not passive withdrawal but active receptivity – an embodied resistance to the synchronization of perception with algorithmic, normative, or moral imperatives. By preserving ambiguity, hesitation creates the conditions for responsibility.

Inflection transforms the spatial axis of relation. In contrast to the frontal gaze that seeks transparency and mastery, inflection bends perception into a lateral, sliding mode in which vision approaches touch. Materiality intercepts perception's line of force, redirecting it from perpendicular confrontation toward parallel dwelling. Inflection thus enacts a politics of adjacency: engagement without capture, presence without appropriation.

Viscosity adds material and affective thickness to this field. Against the clean separations of fast perception, viscosity holds subjects and environments together in slow, continuous contact. As Morton shows, viscosity characterizes our entanglement within hyperobjects (Morton [2013]: 32); as Ahmed reminds us, affects themselves are viscous, «sticking» to bodies and signs (Ahmed [2014]: 60). Through viscosity, laterality acquires endurance: hesitation and inflection persist not as isolated gestures but as modes of ongoing relational maintenance.

Together, these perceptual gestures form a politics of attenuation: a deliberate weakening of the reactive, over-semiotized structures of perception that sustain

discrimination. They reintroduce delay, mediality, and thickness where immediacy and frontality have monopolized the experiential field.

5.3. The political stakes: countering racializing perception and epistemic injustice

Lateral politics intervenes not at the level of explicit ideology or discourse but within the sensory infrastructure of the social. Discriminatory perception begins with the collapse of the interval: the instantaneous reduction of the other to a type, the translation of visibility into identity. The racializing gaze operates through speed – it classifies before it perceives. Epistemic injustice (Fricker [2007]) thus originates not only in language or reason but already in the pre-discursive organization of the visible.

By restoring temporal and spatial depth to perception, lateral politics disrupts these mechanisms of automatic classification. Hesitation prevents the gaze from closing too quickly; inflection decenters the self as the primary locus of meaning; viscosity sustains relation long enough for complexity to emerge, resisting the hardening of perception into stereotype.

Through these micro-transformations, lateral perception enables postponed identities: forms of being that remain in process, unfinalized and plural. Postponement here is neither indecision nor refusal but an ethical suspension – a resistance to letting the symbolic congeal the experiential. To postpone identity is to keep it breathable, allowing difference to unfold in coexistence rather than confrontation.

Lateral politics thus resists both discriminatory and reactive perception. It does not demand recognition but alters the sensory and temporal conditions under which recognition becomes compulsory. Its effect is not reconciliation but redistribution – a shift in how social reality is sensed and shared.

5.4. Lateral social aesthetics as embodied counter-discrimination

The aesthetic dimension of lateral politics lies in its capacity to organize shared experience through sensibility rather than representation. Lateral social aesthetics names this embodied redistribution of attention and care.

Here, the aesthetics of care becomes instructive (Saito [2022]; Mihai [2022]; Donovan [2016]). For Saito, aesthetic practice permeates ordinary acts of living – caring, maintaining, and coexisting. Aesthetics and care converge as practices of attunement to the singular and the interdependent. Lateral aesthetics extends this insight by relocating aesthetic experience from ornament or expression to ethical mediation: a sensuous practice of coexistence grounded in responsiveness and shared space.

Kathleen Stewart's notion of tactile composition clarifies how such relations are continuously «enworlded» through small affective gestures (Stewart [2014]). Stewart describes social life as a network of «charged atmospheres», in which attention and intensity circulate without fixed origin or closure (Stewart [2011]: 445). Laura Marks's concept of the fold further illuminates laterality as a negotiation of proximity and distance that sustains relation without erasure (Marks [2024]). Jane Bennett's account of influx and efflux provides an affective model for this practice: vitality emerges through oscillation rather than mastery (Bennett [2020]).

In sum, lateral social aesthetics enacts embodied counter-discrimination: a redistribution of perceptual capacities that resists the closure of identity and the violence of channeled immediacy. Political agency here is redefined as a practice of sustained, sensory relation.

5.5. *Coda: the ethics of the lateral gesture*

Lateral politics does not seek to conquer or to reveal, but to keep open. Its gesture is neither heroic nor reactive. By moving sideways – by hesitating, inflecting, and lingering – it transforms the conditions of the sensible without reproducing the violence of frontality.

To act laterally is thus to enact care as resistance: to practice perception as ethics and delay as politics. Through these gestures, perception becomes a site of counter-discrimination, and aesthetics emerges as the very medium of political transformation.

The lateral gesture neither turns away from the world nor confronts it head-on. It touches it – slowly, obliquely, and with care.

6. *Conclusion – The aesthetics and ethics of laterality*

This article has traced a movement from reactive, low-resolution regimes of frontality to slowed, layered, and lateral modes of perception capable of sustaining alternative ethical and political imaginaries. Whereas frontal perception condenses experience into momentary reaction and confrontation, slowed perception unfolds through thickness and delay, allowing the perceptual field to become resonant rather than directive. Through hesitation, inflection, and viscosity, perception loosens its attachment to instant identification and recognition and reorients toward modes of coexistence that are neither oppositional nor indifferent, but compositional.

The horizontalization of culture provides the milieu for this reconfiguration. As hierarchies dissolve into networks of experiential continuity, culture increasingly functions as a surface of shared sensibility, where meaning emerges through

interaction rather than being given through representation. Within such a milieu, lateral aesthetics names a practice of care that proceeds through receptivity and dwelling rather than assertion or control. It sustains relations by keeping them open – by allowing the world to act through us before we act upon it.

In this sense, the aesthetic is not an ornament of politics but its perceptual infrastructure. To perceive laterally is already to resist the automatisms of reactivity; it is to inhabit the delay in which the world may appear otherwise. Lateral politics thus operates as an embodied form of counter-discrimination, grounded in resonance, permeability, and compositional coexistence. Its promise lies not in overcoming division, but in cultivating the in-between: those breathable intervals through which plural, postponed identities continually take shape.

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Varia



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Arte, creatività, anarchia: gli attivismi e la risoggettivazione dello spazio collettivo

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Abstract. The paper explores the anarchic potential of art as a transformative force capable of re-subjectivizing collective space through aesthetic, political, and performative practices. It examines how contemporary *activist* practices reclaim art's disruptive energy. Through feminist Latin American performances by Regina José Galindo, Cheril Linett, and the Bolivian collective *Mujeres Creando*, the analysis reveals how embodied actions in public space function as catalysts of resistance and social reconfiguration. These artistic interventions, situated between activism and poetics, deterritorialize institutional power structures, reclaim urban and symbolic spaces, and produce new collective subjectivities. The paper argues that *activism* enacts an anarchic politics of imagination, where the artwork dissolves into the event, generating new modes of life and community.

Keywords. Activism, performance, feminism, decolonial aesthetics, inactivity.

1. *Il potenziale anarchico dell'arte*

«L'arte è – abbiamo il coraggio di ammetterlo – una faccenda scomoda, e scomoda soprattutto per l'artista stesso» (Wind [2024]: 18). Così si

esprime Edgar Wind in *Arte e anarchia* che, per mostrarlo, risale fino alla condanna platonica degli artisti come produttori di immagini ingannevoli. La stigmatizzazione del loro operato dipende dalle falsificazioni, dagli inganni e dalla deviazione rispetto ai modelli ideali di cui si rendono colpevoli. La creazione di apparenze illusorie perverte ed è quindi estremamente pericolosa per la città poiché indebolisce i caratteri dei suoi membri e ne affievolisce l'afflato sociale.

Essendo un gioco frivolo, ma affascinante l'arte non è in grado soddisfare le esigenze di verità e utilità morale. Dando un'immagine falsa della realtà corrompe gli animi degli uomini allontanandoli dalla loro vera meta, spingendoli a guardare riflessi, parvenze e inganni piuttosto che orientarli verso il mondo delle idee quale unica sede del vero, del bene e del bello.

Gli idoli del mondo attraggono e deviano, *in primis* lo stesso artista che scambia per reale ciò che è solo copia. Proprio per questo motivo, gli artisti e le loro opere vanno allontanati dalla Repubblica¹. Quando infatti le arti raggiungono uno stato maturo di elaborazione², la *polis* ateniese e il mondo greco in generale attraversano una profonda crisi – la guerra del Peloponneso contro Sparta e l'avvento del governo dei Trenta Tiranni – che segna la disgregazione di un sistema politico. Proprio il nesso tra questi due processi spinge Platone a formulare una diagnosi e a indicare un possibile approccio terapeutico, come il «medico esperto il quale, diagnosticando una malattia di cui non si conosce la cura, mosso dalla disperazione e dalla pietà verso il malato, gli prescrive un rimedio inefficace» (Wind [2024]: 22). Di cosa si tratta? Di una «medicina disperata, e ovviamente inadeguata» (Wind [2024]: 22-23), ossia la censura di Stato.

La ricetta verrà utilizzata ampiamente nel tempo fino a quando si arriverà a trovare una nuova cura volta a scindere il plesso arte-politica. La terapia consisterà nello stemperare l'impatto dell'arte nel pubblico attraverso l'immissione di una quantità massiccia di opere-anticorpi in grado di produrre «una forte immunità alle esposizioni» (Wind [2024]: 26). L'arte si moltiplica nelle sue forme di produzione, si diffonde attraverso una molteplicità di canali, fino a perdere di «densità». Secondo Wind l'arte dissipa il suo carattere anarchico sciogliendosi in creazioni artistiche che non toccano più il pubblico, il quale, ormai «insaziabile», fruisce bulimicamente e distrattamente di tali opere. Di fatto, aumenta la sua capacità di assorbimento ma, parallelamente, si atrofizzano i suoi «organi

- 1 Questa lettura è in realtà una *lectio faciliior* della complessa e articolata posizione di Platone riguardo alle arti e alla *mimesis*. Come sottolinea Guastini «Platone annuncia nel *Cratilo* quello stesso duplice ufficio per la *mimesis* che nella *Repubblica* riguarderà anche la dimensione poetica: *mimesis* come mera riproduzione del tratto esteriore delle cose, ma anche come possibilità di rendere visibile la loro essenza. Mera copia di una copia, ma anche possibilità di risalimento all'originale essenza che è nella copia» (Guastini [2003]: 38). È in sostanza la doppia dimensione della *mimesis* come *mimesis* icastica e *mimesis* dell'apparenza.
- 2 Wind parla di «perfezione» leggendo l'arte classica ancora secondo il parametro hegeliano.

ricettivi» (Wind [2024]: 26) a seguito di un progressivo e costante addomesticamento. Quando l'arte entra in una zona di sicurezza allora gli effetti sulle nostre esistenze si fanno nulli; come del resto Platone aveva diagnosticato e Hegel confermato. E infatti, nota Wind, Hegel coglie la trasformazione dell'arte in oggetto *interessante* che «possiede una qualità che colpisce; suscita la nostra attenzione; prendiamo atto di ciò che ci colpisce, e poi lo lasciamo perdere. Un'esperienza "interessante" è un'esperienza che non ha effetti duraturi» (Wind [2024]: 29). L'arte, insomma, si distacca dalla vita, rifulge della sua «splendida superfluità» (Wind [2024]: 30) e secondo questa modalità continua a essere goduta.

Eppure, sostiene Wind, l'arte ha sempre in sé un'energia creatrice in grado di «trasformare o di rendere più acute le abitudini percettive» (Wind [2024]: 39), producendo un'alterazione a livello dell'*aisthesis* grazie allo sprigionarsi di «forze immaginative». Ci presenta, sotto forma di finzione estetica, qualcosa che ci coinvolge e ci rende partecipi. Di fatto, siamo di fronte a una duplice matrice dell'opera d'arte: partecipazione e finzione. L'intensità della partecipazione sarebbe allora consustanziale all'estetizzazione del reale mostrato sempre in termini finzionali, anche quando si ammantava di un effetto di realtà. È proprio qui che si riaccenderebbe l'anarchia insita in ogni creazione artistica, ed è proprio qui che l'arte rivelerebbe il suo *engagement*. Non tanto come presa diretta sul politico, quanto attraverso una finzionalizzazione che riavvicinerebbe l'essere umano alla sua capacità immaginativa e pertanto alla possibilità di trasformare la realtà.

La posizione di Wind è però rischiosa, perché sembra non considerare il grave pericolo che l'estetizzazione o finzionalizzazione del reale comporta, se manipolato e orientato dall'esterno a fini strettamente politici.

È la minaccia intravista con grande lucidità da Benjamin in relazione all'ascesa del fascismo attraverso l'estetizzazione della politica a cui corrisponde «lo stupro di un'apparecchiatura che esso mette al servizio della produzione di valori culturali» (Benjamin [2019]: 174). Come rimarca Desideri, l'estetizzazione della politica «traduce in accecamento sociale ossia in onirica illusione la fissazione feticistica sulle apparenze» (Desideri [2019]: XXXIII) proprio a mezzo della violenza perpetrata dall'apparecchiatura (*Apparatur*). Allo stesso tempo, però, esiste un'altra opzione, quella della politicizzazione dell'arte intesa in chiave emancipatoria rispetto alla perdita dell'aura: «sottratta alla teologia residuale dell'*art pour l'art*, l'opera d'arte per principio riproducibile è per così dire liberata dalla sua fissazione oggettuale e, nella dilatazione del suo valore espositivo (in rapporto con l'apertura del suo spazio di gioco), può raggiungere la forma emancipata e non assolutistica di un'effettiva autonomia» (Desideri [2019]: XXXIV).

Se fotografia e cinema dischiudono la possibilità della produzione di opere d'arte che nascono già predisposte alla riproducibilità senza per questo ridursi a

mera replica o copia, è al loro potere emancipativo che occorre guardare³, proprio attraverso la perdita della fissazione nell'oggetto unico e nell'ampliamento dei valori espositivi che aprono a un nuovo spazio di interazione e, quindi, di gioco. Con la possibile conseguenza, segnala Benjamin anche sulla scorta di Brecht, che l'opera d'arte per il suo valore espositivo diventi «una creazione con funzioni del tutto nuove, tra le quali quella di cui siamo consapevoli, l'artistica, spicca come quella che più tardi può darsi venga riconosciuta come accessoria» (Benjamin [2019]: 152).

Se a questo punto dovessimo sintetizzare potremmo dire che la dimensione trasformatrice dell'arte consiste nel toccare la vita attraverso il movimento immaginativo provocato nel pubblico attraverso delle opere che, grazie alla loro capacità finzionale, producono un'intensa partecipazione, spigionando un potere anarchico. Tale potere è strettamente connesso all'apertura di uno spazio di gioco in cui i valori espositivi si ampliano senza subire lo schiacciamento e la violenza dell'apparecchiatura che produrrebbe un'onirizzazione del reale incentrato sulla pura apparenza. Per fare un passo ulteriore, potremmo anche dire che questa liberazione emancipatoria, annunciata dalle (al tempo) «nuove» tecnologie, ossia fotografia e cinema, si produce anche grazie alla de-fissazione oggettuale che si libera dal residuo teologico connesso all'auraticità dell'opera per aprire dunque altre esperienze e possibilità di gioco, ben oltre la dimensione tecnologica.

Se guardiamo, infatti, alle esperienze artistiche che si aprono con le avanguardie storiche troviamo in Duchamp una liberazione dalla venerazione dell'oggetto e l'inaugurazione, con il *ready-made*, di quella che si potrebbe definire opera d'arte evento. Lo indica con raffinata chiarezza Giovanni Urbani:

per un tempo breve, il tempo dello scandalo e della sorpresa, gli oggetti restavano adespsti, non venivano presi in forza né dell'oggettività propria né da quella dell'arte. In maniera per così dire sperimentale, da laboratorio, Duchamp riusciva dunque a far cadere gli oggetti dal loro orizzonte oggettivo, e li provocava a farsi avanti come cose, ovvero (e in questo sta il limite dell'esperimento) come rappresentazioni di cose. (Urbani [2012]: 100)

È dunque il tempo dello scandalo e della sorpresa, cioè dell'evento, a produrre la sospensione oggettuale e il presentarsi della cosa. L'evenemenzialità effimera della presentazione determina sempre di più l'opera come dispositivo esperienziale che prende il posto dell'oggettualità estetica. Dall'oggetto all'evento, quindi, o meglio all'anarchizzazione dell'evento che libera il potenziale emancipativo dell'arte dalla fissazione feticistica nell'oggetto (merce), dalle pratiche di cattura dell'apparecchiatura, per aprire la strada a pratiche artistiche non convenzionali che, seguendo questo filo di riflessione, diventano veri e propri strumenti

3 «Al posto della sua fondazione sul rituale, subentra la sua fondazione su un'altra prassi: ossia, la sua fondazione sulla politica» (Benjamin [2019]: 150).

di intervento politico e di trasformazione culturale attraverso l'azione effimera. Insomma, dal declino dell'aura alla riproducibilità tecnica e da quest'ultima all'inoperosità dell'opera che sprigiona il suo effetto anarchico tramite l'effimero dell'azione.

2. *Pratiche artistiche e deterritorializzazione*

Per cogliere appieno questo effetto anarchico vorrei concentrare l'attenzione su quelle pratiche artistiche in cui il corpo, l'azione e la partecipazione dello spettatore generano tensione, provocazione e trasformazione sociale. Quelle pratiche artistiche⁴ capaci di generare dispositivi di esperienze che agiscono come strumenti di trasformazione politica e culturale, risoggettivando lo spazio collettivo e facendosi catalizzatori di resistenza. Negli attivismi l'opera si dissolve nell'evento generando nuove soggettività collettive e una resistenza anarchica ai meccanismi di mercificazione e repressione.

La triade artista-opera-pubblico subisce così una profonda trasformazione: 1) l'artista diventa un produttore di «operazioni» creative e connettore di nuovo senso; 2) l'opera si dematerializza e si risolve nell'evento-azione, facendosi vettore di nuove soggettivazioni; 3) il pubblico si trasforma da spettatore passivo a fruitore attivo (con gradi differenti di attivazione a seconda della libera scelta che gli viene riconosciuta) a beneficio della sua progressiva autonomizzazione. I tre poli della dinamica artistica restano strettamente interconnessi ma con una logica differente rispetto al passato. L'arte in azione produce, infatti, lo scatenamento di una rivoluzione creativa. In quanto strumento di sensibilizzazione e, in alcuni casi, di protesta, ha l'obiettivo di promuovere il cambiamento sociale poiché, come sostiene Guattari, l'arte è una placca di sensibilità collegata a un sistema globale. Agire sulla placca significa agire sul sistema, scomponendolo e ritagliandolo, secondo una logica di segmentazione e smembramento che rompe l'illusione di omogeneità e l'effetto di standardizzazione. Sulla scorta dell'estetica «potenziale» di Guattari, Nicolas Bourriaud rileva come gli artisti contemporanei creino e mettano in scena

dispositivi di esistenza che includono metodi di lavoro e modi d'essere, in luogo e al posto degli oggetti concreti che sino ad allora delimitavano il campo dell'arte, utilizzano il tempo come un materiale. La forma prevale sulla cosa, i flussi sulle categorie: la produzione di gesti ha la meglio su quella delle cose materiali. Gli spettatori sono oggi portati a oltrepassare la soglia dei «moduli temporali catalizzatori» più che a contemplare oggetti immanenti chiusi sul loro mondo di riferimento. L'artista arriva fino a presentarsi come un universo di soggettivazione in funzione, come il manichino della propria soggettività. (Bourriaud [2010]: 97-98)

4 Per un primo orientamento cfr. Trione [2002].

Questa nuova «economia comportamentale» dell'arte contemporanea, individuata da Bourriaud negli anni '90 del secolo scorso sulla scorta del paradigma estetico di Guattari, assume connotati più marcatamente trasformativi e oppositivi proprio con gli attivismi e, più in generale, con quella che secondo la definizione di Claire Bishop può essere designata come «arte partecipativa».

Ciò che mancava alla lettura di Bourriaud e dell'arte relazionale, secondo la critica britannica, era precisamente la sottolineatura della dimensione oppositiva e antagonista. L'interattività relazionale prodotta dall'opera d'arte come forma sociale veniva concepita come produttrice di incontri intersoggettivi positivi, grazie all'operatività dell'artista come designer di situazioni incentrate sullo sviluppo funzionale di momenti comunicativi e non sulla contemplazione di un oggetto, in base a una processualità aperta e capace di trascendere il contesto. L'arte partecipativa, invece, non presenta soltanto un aspetto estetico, ma anche una dimensione più marcatamente etico-politica, consapevole dell'esistenza di conflitti, divisioni e instabilità che non vengono cancellati ma sostenuti per essere visibilizzati, al punto da poter parlare di una «relazionalità antagonista» (Bishop [2004]: 77).

La dimensione partecipativa trasforma ulteriormente la triade artista-opera-pubblico perché mette in gioco molteplici soggettività, «l'artista-iniziatore, il partecipante, il curatore/organizzatore del progetto, il non-partecipante» (Bishop [2019]: 8), assieme a molteplici contrapposizioni, «attivo/passivo, individuale/collettivo, etico/estetico, produzione/ricezione» (Bishop [2019]: 7), creando una tensionalità creatrice che vede al centro le persone come *medium* prese nella loro pluralità, sulla base di un modello teatrale e più genericamente performativo⁵. La creazione artistica diventa il progetto *in corso d'opera* nella sua processualità evenemenziale.

In quanto esperienza immateriale incentrata sulla persona, l'arte partecipativa come arte sociale tende a «ricostruire e a realizzare uno spazio comune e collettivo di impegno sociale condiviso [...] [e a] forgiare un corpo sociale collettivo, co-autoriale e partecipativo» (Bishop [2019]: 277).

Proprio in quest'ottica è possibile leggere gli attivismi per i quali l'arte non si limita a rappresentare il mondo, ma lo interrompe, lo attraversa, lo risoggettiva. Continua quindi la messa in discussione del sistema dell'arte e del ruolo dell'artista già inaugurata dalle avanguardie storiche, in particolare

5 È Erika Fischer-Lichte ad aver avanzato la proposta di un'estetica del performativo incentrata proprio sulla trasformazione dell'opera in evento in cui «lo statuto segnico e quello materiale non sono più coincidenti, ma quest'ultimo tende a svincolarsi dal primo e rivendica una vita propria. Questo significa che l'effetto immediato delle azioni e degli oggetti non dipende più dai significati che vi si possono attribuire, ma si verifica indipendentemente da essi, in parte precedendoli e comunque restando al di là di ogni tentativo di attribuzione di significato» (Fischer-Lichte [2016]: 40).

in connessione con una critica del mercato dell'arte come luogo di cattura e dominio dell'eversività del fare artistico. Questo comporta una maggiore esplicitazione del posizionamento, anche enunciativo, dell'artista o dei collettivi artistici, impegnati nella creazione di quelli che potremmo definire, ancora con Guattari, nuovi universi di riferimento attraverso nuovi concatenamenti collettivi di enunciazione che aprono verso insoliti territori esistenziali (cfr. Guattari [1996]: 98-116). Questo comporta una complessificazione della soggettività individuale e comunitaria, attraverso rotture di senso, frammentazioni che producono «fuochi mutanti di soggettivazione», anche attraverso l'utilizzo di forme artistiche intermediali. L'obiettivo è quello di realizzare delle contro-prassi estetiche non solo come effetto di negazione e distruzione, come ancora accadeva con le avanguardie, ma come produzione di un'inversione semiotica e comunicativa. Un *contro-segno* generato da una *contro-prassi*, per scardinare il codice comunicativo stabilito e quindi produrre un *contro-discorso* in cui vengono visibilizzate zone marginali, represses e silenziate. L'azione artistica promuove allora «delle rotture attive, processuali, in seno ai tessuti significazionali e denotativi semioticamente strutturati, a partire dalle quali essa metterà in opera una soggettività dell'emergenza» (Guattari [1996]: 27).

Il paradigma estetico processuale individuato da Guattari, anche se ormai alla fine del secolo scorso, sembra efficace per analizzare linee di tendenza per le prassi creative artivistiche, poiché permette di leggere nelle azioni messe in scena dei processi capaci di generare soggettività che eccedono le modellizzazioni adattative e di concatenare nuove enunciazioni in cui sono prese assieme sia le singolarità che le mutazioni dell'epoca. Permettono, cioè, di creare e comporre percetti e affetti mutanti⁶, forieri di generare prassi emancipative e liberatorie.

I flussi spigionati dagli artivismi procedono secondo una ecologia generalizzata o ecosofia (Guattari [2019]), fondando nuove pratiche di rigenerazione politica in cui l'estetico, l'etico e il politico formano un unico intreccio. Ecosofia che, secondo la lezione guattariana, è un ecosistema in tensione tra i poli dell'ambientale, del sociale e del mentale. In questo senso, allora, non l'arte ma le pratiche artistiche diventano ecosistemi in flusso, produttori di valore, in cui si realizza una «deterritorializzazione dolce» che coltiva il dissenso e produce nuovi territori esistenziali capaci di fornire un nuovo grado di autonomia creatrice a chi vi partecipa.

Per gli artivismi, lo spazio è quello dell'ecosistema urbano, più precisamente la strada, che rappresenta un luogo di concretizzazione delle pratiche artistiche

6 Deleuze e Guattari definiscono, infatti, l'opera d'arte come «un essere di sensazione e nient'altro: esiste in sé» (Deleuze, Guattari [2002]: 162) in quanto «*blocco di sensazioni*, ossia un composto di percetti e affetti» (Deleuze, Guattari [2002]: 161).

anti-istituzionali, per quanto soggetto anch'esso a logiche egemoniche e oggetto di relazioni di potere. Lo spazio striato, organizzato, misurato e direzionale viene allora messo in crisi dalle performance attivistiche che lo sovvertono, introducono insubordinazione e cercano di trasformarlo in spazio liscio, fluido e non direzionale⁷. Si potrebbe parlare di insorgenze artistiche nello spazio urbano come strategie di sovversione o come creazione di «zone di tumulto» (Richard [2021]). Allargando le osservazioni di Nelly Richard rivolte, nello specifico, al collettivo di azione d'arte C.A.D.A. operativo nel contesto cileno dopo il golpe di Pinochet dell'11 settembre 1973⁸, si potrebbe dire che si tratta di «opere le cui strutture operative rimangono aperte e i cui materiali rimangono incompiuti, garantendo così la non finitezza del messaggio artistico affinché lo spettatore intervenga nell'opera e completi la sua pluralità di significati eterogenei e disseminati» (Richard [2007]: 17).

3. *La resistenza del margine: gli attivismi*

Per poter riflettere in maniera più compiuta sul ruolo del corpo, dell'azione performativa e della partecipazione dello spettatore come catalizzatori di resistenza nelle pratiche attivistiche propongono di esplorare la performance di Regina José Galindo, in cui il corpo percorre le vie di Ciudad de Guatemala lasciando tracce di sangue, il progetto *Yeguada Latinoamericana* di Cheril Linnett, in cui corpi femminili bloccano le strade di Santiago del Cile, sfidando la militarizzazione dello spazio urbano e la vergine barbie proposta dal collettivo boliviano *Mujeres Creando* con il contributo principale di María Galindo Guio.

La scelta di operare nell'orizzonte geo-culturale latinoamericano ci consente di collocare queste azioni all'interno di un contesto preciso, per quanto non uniforme e frastagliato, che permette di incarnare e singolarizzare l'azione sottraendola alla tentazione universalizzante del sistema globale dell'arte contemporanea in cui le creazioni estetiche tendono a essere riassorbite dal circuito economico

7 Per utilizzare il linguaggio di Guattari si potrebbe parlare di rottura molecolare, come «impercettibile biforcazione suscettibile di sovvertire la trama di ridondanze dominanti, l'organizzazione del "già classificato" o, se si preferisce, l'ordine del classico» (Guattari [1996]: 27). Rimarcano Deleuze e Guattari: «Lo spazio liscio e lo spazio striato – lo spazio nomade e lo spazio sedentario – lo spazio dove si sviluppa la macchina da guerra e lo spazio istituito dall'apparato di Stato non sono della stessa natura», non coincidono, tuttavia «lo spazio liscio non cessa di essere tradotto, intersecato in uno spazio striato; lo spazio striato è costantemente trasferito, restituito a uno spazio liscio» (Deleuze, Guattari [2003]: 663).

8 C.A.D.A. o Colectivo de Acciones De Arte è stato un eterogeneo gruppo artistico cileno, attivo in particolare dal 1979 al 1985, che faceva dell'arte uno strumento di sfida e agitazione del sistema politico e sociale. L'intermedialità e l'interdisciplinarietà erano alla base del gruppo composto dalla scrittrice Diamela Eltit, dal poeta Raúl Zurita, dal sociologo Fernando Balcells, e dagli artisti Lotty Rosenfeld e Juan Castillo.

del mercato e dalle sue propaggini istituzionali, denaturalizzandole e decontestualizzandole⁹. In questo sistema, infatti, si intrecciano economia, potere e confini che tendono ad agglutinare e generare un gusto uniforme dove ciò che devia e resta ai margini può e deve essere reintrodotta per annullarne l'effetto eversivo e renderlo, al contrario, produttivo (cfr. Dal Lago, Giordano [2008]).

Nel tentativo di resistenza del margine le performance artivistiche, in particolare nel subcontinente americano, si connettono a istanze politiche, spesso si confondono con movimenti sociali, operano tendenzialmente nello spazio pubblico, facendo dell'artista o dei collettivi artistici degli «etnografi dell'imminente», per dirla con Néstor García Canclini.

L'espressione è interessante e, nell'ipotesi del pensatore argentino, definisce l'operato artistico nel tempo sospeso di un presente imminente nel quale vi è traccia e annuncio di qualcosa che sta per accadere ma che non si compie e rimane sospeso: «non più il passato (che dava senso) né il futuro (che prometteva utopia), ma un presente instabile che chiede di essere *interpretato mentre accade*» (Canclini [2010]: 12). L'artista o i collettivi agiscono su questo tempo sospeso dell'imminenza cercando di far accadere l'evento tramite l'azione performativa e il coinvolgimento partecipativo del pubblico rompendo qualsiasi distanza osservativa e produttiva.

Seguendo questa linea di analisi, delimito ulteriormente il campo a favore di forme di attivismo artistico femminista in cui le questioni politiche assumono i connotati della sfida ai modelli e alle forme di potere, in vista di una trasformazione che passa anche attraverso nuove narrazioni o contro-narrazioni femminili. Queste azioni forniscono una inusitata densità che retroagisce contro l'immobilizzazione e la paralisi, producendo uno spazio sociale comunitario alternativo attraverso la generazione di reti, flussi ed esperienze estetiche effimere.

Prima di poter entrare nello specifico è opportuna una preliminare chiarificazione linguistica, utile a compiere una distinzione operativa necessaria. Ci stiamo infatti occupando dell'arte *in azione*, cioè di quelle forme in cui l'arte entra nella sfera della *praxis* per promuovere un'alterazione attraverso lo scatenamento di un processo creativo volto a produrre un cambiamento sociale e politico attraverso un'operazione di denuncia, di sfida allo *status quo*, anche grazie alla stimolazione attiva del dibattito collettivo, per proporre una trasformazione, senza però alcuna pretesa utopica ma, come si è detto, nell'instabilità e nella liminalità del presente imminente. L'arte si fa insomma elemento di protesta e sensibilizzazione, in modo diretto e provocatorio, attraverso un processo che lavora sugli elementi di rottura asignificante, soprattutto tramite il corpo, secondo un regime di connessione di eterogeneità (cfr. Deleuze, Guattari [2003]).

Negli attivismi, sempre definibili al plurale perché non riconducibili a un'unica matrice progettuale e formale, l'attivismo politico si realizza tramite i lin-

9 Per un approfondimento cfr. Dal Lago, Giordano [2018].

guaggi dell'arte in cui la performance artistica assume il ruolo di catalizzatore della denuncia e della trasformazione sociale attraverso la partecipazione attiva dello spettatore che diventa soggetto partecipante e co-creatore. Ciò che gli attivismi producono è una nuova forma di esperienza estetica basata sull'interazione tra soggetti, un interscambio relazionale che rende le opere dei veri e propri «esperimenti sociali», come nel caso di Tania Bruguera. Si tratta della stimolazione di una rivolta collettiva che nasce dall'osservazione partecipativa attraverso forme di promozione dell'empatia, in alcuni casi, di empatia forzata, che spinge alla produzione di nuovi concatenamenti enunciativi, costruiti, appunto, collettivamente¹⁰.

Occorre però precisare con maggior forza che gli attivismi si distinguono dalle *acciones de arte*. Per determinare alcune caratteristiche di fondo delle azioni artistiche richiamerò il caso ormai storicizzato del collettivo di azione d'arte C.A.D.A., promotore di una serie di azioni che prendono il nome di *escena de avanzada*. Nelly Richard, una delle più precoci e intese interpreti del collettivo, ne ha tratteggiato i caratteri di fondo: opera come azione e gesto sociale ma effimero, situato e processuale; marginalità come spazio strategico di resistenza e smontaggio dei dispositivi istituzionali di controllo e repressione; città come teatro politico e poetico dell'azione, territorio di memoria e dissenso e zona di interrogazione del tessuto sociale; interconnessione tra arte, società e politica, discorso obliquo («retorica dell'allusione») per dire l'indicibile e alleanza di linguaggi artistici, letterari e teorici; dimensione collettiva e accento posto sulla dimensione comunicativa dell'operare artistico; arte come gesto rischioso e condizioni limite delle pratiche che le rendono pericolose (ed è proprio la pericolosità a costituirne il valore), riattivando la domanda di senso tramite l'arte anche attraverso l'introduzione nello stesso linguaggio artistico di un materiale formale «represso» che perturba i codici che normalizzano il visibile (Richard [2014]).

Azione sociale e arte si uniscono, quindi, nello stesso atto critico e pratico, mostrandosi come forme di resistenza culturale che richiedono e sollecitano un'ampia partecipazione sociale, una vita che si risolve nell'opera d'arte come azione artistica, politica e sociale senza compiacimenti estetizzanti e, soprattutto, un ampliamento degli spazi d'azione oltre le istituzioni artistiche realizzato in luoghi aperti in luoghi aperti e pubblici della città per intervenire direttamente nei dispositivi di potere che agiscono nella vita quotidiana, oltre all'esposizione al rischio connessa ad un'estetica della pericolosità, poiché è proprio la pericolosità la condizione dell'arte che vuole pensare politicamente.

10 Goffman [1988] parla di rituale di interazione e si potrebbe pensare la partecipazione legata alle azioni artistiche come un laico rituale cerimoniale che mette in scena nuove regole di condotta con un'implicita funzione sociale. Sull'idea di performance rituale e di dramma sociale cfr. Turner (2021).

Molte di queste caratteristiche sono proprie anche degli attivismi, nei quali, però, la dimensione di pericolo si fa più sfumata, si potrebbe dire che il passaggio è da un rischio materiale a uno simbolico, da quello fisico e corporeo a quello epistemico. Per la maggior parte, gli attivismi contemporanei avvengono in contesti almeno formalmente democratici e tendenzialmente neoliberali, dove la posta in gioco non è più l'incolumità fisica ma la pericolosità simbolica e mediatica, anche perché lo spazio di azione è ancora la strada ma, allo stesso tempo, le piattaforme digitali con effetti di profonda viralità e di più marcato ibridismo. Da qui anche il cambiamento di prospettiva: non più la rottura del linguaggio del potere ma lo smontaggio della logica della sorveglianza e del controllo del capitalismo neo-liberale, attraverso forme di protesta reale ma unita a una mobilitazione mediatica e comunicativa. La lotta contro i regimi di visibilità e di conoscenza si concretizza con una parallela pericolosità epistemologica, riorganizzando e sovvertendo l'ordine epistemico attraverso la creazione di saperi minoritari (Deleuze, Guattari [2021]) e contro-egemonici (Laclau, Mouffe [2011]), destrutturando il discorso ufficiale come regime di conoscenza e la partizione preordinata del sensibile (Rancière [2022]), mettendo profondamente in crisi i binarismi conoscitivi utilizzati per leggere il reale e la macchina di soggettivazione collettiva (Raunig [2009]) e aprendo la strada a forme di sapere comunitario e non mercificabile in grado di abitare la «materia oscura dell'arte» (Scholette [2006]).

L'attivismo femminista agisce in modo ancora più radicale cercando di smontare le fondamenta epistemiche del patriarcato, producendo disordine nell'ordine fallogocentrico del discorso e ancora di più individuando nel corpo femminile non più un luogo di rappresentazione ma *il* luogo per la formazione di un sapere dissidente. La risoggettivazione tramite il corpo dissidente rispetto alle gerarchie estetiche e di valore di tipo androcentrico produce allo stesso tempo un nuovo orizzonte epistemico, estetico e politico, destabilizzando e rovesciando dispositivi cognitivi, simbolici e di potere.

4. Pratiche latinoamericane di attivismo femminista

Propongo ora di esplorare alcune forme di attivismo latinoamericano di matrice femminista prendendo in considerazione tre pratiche artistiche che si dislocano temporalmente, geograficamente e simbolicamente su piani differenziati, ma irrelati tra loro.

4.1. *Le tracce della memoria traumatica: ¿Quien puede borrar las huellas?*

Il primo caso è quello dell'artista guatemalteca Regina José Galindo che nel 2003 realizza la performance *¿Quien puede borrar las huellas?* (Chi può can-

cellare le impronte?)¹¹. Sullo sfondo di un Guatemala dilaniato da anni di guerre civili e di dittature militari che hanno imposto decenni di repressione e violenza, Galindo decide di attraversare le strade di Ciudad de Guatemala seguendo un percorso che in meno di un'ora tocca le principali istituzioni di potere: dalla Corte Costituzionale al Palazzo Nazionale, sede dell'esecutivo situato proprio in Plaza de la Constitución. A piedi nudi l'artista, vestita rigorosamente di nero, cammina silenziosamente seguendo un itinerario ben preciso e lasciando tracce dietro di sé, impronte di sangue che ottiene immergendo a tratti regolari i piedi all'interno di un catino bianco contenente sangue umano. I passanti osservano la scena come involontari partecipanti alla performance con reazioni opposte: qualcuno mostra indifferenza o addirittura si gira altrove, altri si fermano ad osservare, stupiti e incuriositi, altri fotografano e registrano video, in particolare nella parte finale del percorso, di fronte al Palazzo Nazionale, in cui si trovano le guardie immobili e fisse. La performance ha luogo a seguito della ricandidatura a presidente di Efraín Ríos Montt, ex generale del Fronte Repubblicano Guatemalteco e fautore di un golpe sanguinario e repressivo nel 1982-1983, tornato poi al potere nel 1995-1996 e nel 2000-2004. Proprio per denunciare le tracce di sangue lasciate e subito cancellate che i suoi governi hanno prodotto, Galindo realizza questo cammino materiale sulle tracce della memoria traumatica per visibilizzare la violenza, denunciare in maniera metonimica le efferatezze compiute sui civili e ridestare il ricordo delle vittime sempre sull'orlo dell'oblio istituzionale, gettando sale sulla ferita ancora aperta della memoria collettiva guatemalteca¹².

Il corpo dell'artista è non solo il mezzo di sfida al contesto politico e repressivo, ma il luogo di condensazione di un'operazione disturbante che si realizza nella tensione tra spazio e corpo e che a sua volta rende visibile la tensione tra dominio e resistenza. Il corpo irrompe, così, nello spazio pubblico come metafora del corpo sociale, come una sorta di pratica rituale anti-cerimoniale che «mette in discussione i processi di repressione, disciplinamento e abiezione esercitati durante la guerra sul corpo sociale» (Villiena Fiengo [2015]: 180). Ancora di più perché questo corpo è quello di una donna che con un gesto pietoso, quasi fosse una nuova lamentazione funebre, dà voce al dolore collettivo come gesto di resistenza e protesta, ribaltando il ruolo stesso della donna all'interno della sfera passiva del pianto collettivo.

11 L'opera ha ottenuto il Leone d'oro alla Biennale di Venezia nel 2005 per la migliore artista giovane). Lo sfondo sanguinario si lega storicamente a una lunga guerra civile iniziata nel 1960 e protrattasi per trent'anni che viene considerata uno dei casi più tremendi di pulizia razziale nell'America latina contemporanea. Solo nel 1996 la pace viene raggiunta e nel 2003 sono possibili le prime elezioni democratiche.

12 «Cuerpos desaparecidos, asesinados, exiliados, memoria ocultada, discursos perdidos y borrados para siempre vuelven a vivir y a mostrarse a través del cuerpo en acción de la artista», sottolinea Susanna Nanni (Nanni [2017]: 43).

È un corpo territorio che si riappropria dello spazio riterritorializzandolo. Di più, un corpo di donna che risignifica lo spazio pubblico violato dall'istituzione statale repressiva, coloniale e patriarcale che vuole cancellare le tracce della sua efferatezza ma che è costretta a rivederle comparire con un semplice atto fisico di impressione di orme, destinate certo a scomparire ancora, ma anche a ripresentarsi continuamente nella riattivazione della memoria collettiva per mezzo di altri atti pietosi.

4.2. *Femminismo dissidente*: Estado de rebeldía

Il secondo caso che vorrei proporre è il progetto di performance attivista di femminismo dissidente cileno ideato e diretto da Cheril Linett che prende il nome di *Yeguada Latinoamericana* perché, appunto, le performer si mostrano con la coda come se fossero *yeguas* (cavallo o giumento), ribaltando così l'insulto che l'uso di questa parola comporta.

La cavalla introdotta infatti dai *conquistadores* è stata utilizzata come strumento di riproduzione e di lavoro, per questo emblemizza lo stato di minorità, di sfruttamento e di abuso al quale le donne stesse sono state secolarmente soggette. L'utilizzo metonimico della coda associa quindi le performer alle cavalle per denunciare la violenza sistematica a cui le donne sono sottoposte, ridotte alla loro funzione biologico-riproduttiva da una società ancora a matrice fortemente patriarcale ed eteronormata.

La performance di cui propongo un'analisi è *Estado de rebeldía* dell'ottobre 2019 che si innesta nel vasto movimento di denuncia e protesta contro il governo di Sebastián Piñera Echenique, al suo secondo mandato, che rivendicava migliori condizioni di vita sociale, economica, politica; reclamando un plebiscito per varare una nuova costituzione rispetto a quella vigente di matrice ancora pinochetista, e maggiore riconoscimento e diritti per le minoranze, oltre a una migliore condizione di accesso alla salute e al generale calmieramento dei costi¹³.

In un contesto di forte repressione poliziesca con abusi di potere, lesioni, traumi (in particolare agli occhi) e violazioni dei diritti umani, Cheril Linett organizza diverse apparizioni collettive con una protesta pacifica contro la violenza fisica, politica e di genere perpetrata dalla polizia e dall'esercito, guidato dal generale Javier Iturriaga nominato responsabile delle operazioni. Sono sempre i corpi nudi e inerti di donne-*yeguas* che si mostrano in posizioni passive, con le code di cavallo esibite sfacciatamente fino alla performance che le vede sdraiate al suolo su una delle vie principali e più trafficate di Santiago del Cile, bloccando

13 L'esplosione delle proteste nell'autunno 2019 avviene a seguito dell'aumento del prezzo del biglietto della metropolitana di Santiago del Cile nell'ora di punta.

così il movimento e l'attenzione dei passanti con l'esposizione del loro corpo-arma e con la richiesta di azione e sollevamento collettivo dato dall'iscrizione in rosa sull'asfalto «Estado de rebeldia» (stato di rivolta).

L'azione si scaglia nella sua immobilità contro l'ingiunzione del coprifuoco, la militarizzazione dello spazio pubblico a fini del controllo e repressione delle forme di protesta, contro lo stato di eccezione indetto dal governo e contro il silenzio connivente dei media tradizionali. Con questo intervento nello spazio pubblico si realizza una forma di protesta in grado di provocare un blocco nella risposta comportamentale degli increduli militari che si trovano in difficoltà perché non capiscono la natura dell'azione e di conseguenza sono inibiti nella loro risposta. Le istituzioni vengono denunciate per l'abuso di potere e di imposizione dell'ordine facendole girare a vuoto nelle loro reazioni e implicando una partecipazione sempre più ampia, soprattutto femminile.

Come nel teatro della crudeltà di Artaud, queste performance sorprendono e impressionano perché, attraverso forme estetiche e in modo del tutto inaspettato, producono un'interruzione del flusso quotidiano immettendo forze tensive in grado di sprigionare un questionamento del presente in chiave sociale e politica. Forme estetiche che enfatizzano il ruolo del corpo femminile come strumento attivo di opposizione in grado di visibilizzare la violenza patriarcale direttamente convocata durante l'*estallido social*.

L'occupazione artistica degli spazi pubblici è lo sfondo di un'arte incarnata che vuole essere non solo strumento attivo di denuncia, ma favorire anche nuovi processi di identificazione collettiva attraverso una risoggettivazione del femminile che passa per la messa in questione della logica della sorveglianza e del controllo e la mobilitazione di una «moltitudine» di soggetti che fondano una comunità estetica, con l'ambizione di estendersi a comunità sociale. L'azione attivistica diventa quindi una macchina di soggettivazione e di creazione di comunità aprendo un contro-discorso anti-egemonico.

4.3. *Decolonizzazione e depatriarcalizzazione*: Virgen Barbie

Il terzo caso ci viene offerto dal collettivo *Mujeres Creando*¹⁴ attraverso la voce di María Galindo Guio che nel 2010 realizza per una mostra ospitata dal museo Reina Sofía di Madrid e intitolata *Principio Potosí. ¿Cómo podemos cantar el canto del Señor en tierra ajena?* (*Principio Potosí*. Come possiamo can-

14 Il collettivo anarco-femminista nasce a La Paz nel 1992 su volontà di María Galindo Guio, Julieta Paredes Carvajal e Mónica Mendoza con l'obiettivo di aprire un dibattito critico sulla società boliviana, agendo in particolare sullo spazio urbano della capitale attraverso degli interventi volti a sfidare le narrative patriarcali e coloniali. Le azioni implicano una circolarità tra teoria e prassi attente a un orizzonte femminista applicato contro quella che viene definita «tecnocrazia del genere».

tare il canto del Signore in terra straniera?) una performance nello spazio urbano di La Paz da cui viene generato un documento video che costituisce l'opera esposta. Il titolo è *Virgen Barbie* e consiste in un complesso rituale in cui delle *cholas*, ossia delle donne indigene e meticce, di etnia aimara e quechua, scortano su un carro una vergine in carne ed ossa vestita con i paramenti sacri fino alla punta del Cerro Rico, montagna famosa per essere stata una grande miniera d'argento durante il periodo coloniale e che fa da sfondo al noto dipinto barocco della *Virgen del Cerro* del XVII secolo in cui viene rappresentata la Vergine Maria come parte stessa della montagna, come madre terra o Pachamama, secondo un sincretismo e una transculturazione della cosmovisione andina con il cattolicesimo. La Virgen Barbie è vestita con un ricco manto di broccato in cui sono cucite delle barbie e porta in mano da un lato un globo gonfiabile e dall'altro la testa di un agnello, in grembo accoglie delle altre barbie. Una volta raggiunta la cima della montagna, tra lo sguardo incuriosito e attonito degli abitanti che credono di assistere a un corteo religioso, le *cholas* portano sulle loro spalle la vergine in processione fino a quando, depositata la portantina processionale, la Vergine scende e progressivamente si spoglia dei paramenti sacri. Da qui ha inizio un processo di purificazione, con il lavaggio dei piedi delle donne e quindi l'abluzione delle donne sul corpo della vergine, togliendo progressivamente le bende bianche sotto cui si scopre un corpo con ferite insanguinate e insulti iscritti sulla pelle che vengono lavati via. La Vergine ha ormai perso tutti gli orpelli, ha riguadagnato il suo corpo semplice di donna e dà inizio un lungo monologo di denuncia e di rivendicazione contro l'assoggettamento materiale e simbolico di quel corpo da parte del potere coloniale e patriarcale. Sullo sfondo l'*Ave Maria* di Bach e l'*Alleluia* di Mozart con immagini digitali di uccelli e fiori elaborati a partire da broccati barocchi.

Nella sua reprimenda la Vergine denuncia il modello andro-coloniale, eteronormativo e bianco imposto educativamente nei confronti di bambine e donne «brutalizzate» nel nome della virtù, della perfezione, della bellezza, della passivizzazione di cui l'altare mariano costituisce il simbolo, anche capitalistico. La Vergine abbandona la fascia che la rende «patrona del razzismo» per tornare a essere una semplice donna, che vuole essere felice, passeggiare per la città e ballare per le strade, reclamando l'impurità e la molteplicità contro il discorso imperialista.

La decostruzione dei simboli del potere fallogocentrico e la pretesa di una risoggettivazione a partire dal corpo che muove dalla rinuncia ai privilegi e alla «tristezza degli altari», apre una frontiera mutante di ambivalenza, uno spazio bastardo contro ogni binarismo (maschile/femminile; attività/passività; bianco/indio, ecc.). La profanazione dei simboli, la rivendicazione della ferita coloniale, la denuncia della violenza originaria, dello stupro e della conquista della terra spingono a leggere questa performance non solo come contro-memoria,

ma come tentativo di reimmaginare un'identità indigena femminile, anche e soprattutto attraverso la risignificazione e la ricontestualizzazione che parte da un preciso modello storico-artistico, quello della vergine barocca di Potosí, per risemantizzarlo dopo averlo decostruito, generando un referente *altro* per la rivolta e la lotta sociale. Si apre la strada di un'azione politica che parte dal basso, incrociando, come dice John Beverly parlando in generale dell'operato del collettivo, «allo stesso tempo una forma di azione sociale, un tipo di pedagogia popolare e una maniera di fare arte» (Beverly [2006]: 13). Si tratta di un'azione di resistenza realizzata tramite un processo visuale di decolonizzazione e depatriarcalizzazione rivolto, soprattutto, a quella forma più sottile di appropriazione, dominio e reinserimento nella schema coloniale di dominio rappresentato dalla egemonica «manipolazione della tematica di genere ad esclusivo interesse di una tecnocrazia di classe media che percepisce la donna (lavoratrice, contadina, prostituta, artigiana) come “soggetto di sviluppo”, garantendone la sua assenza come attore politico» (Monasterios [2006]: 22).

La funzione estetica e l'inserimento nel quadro istituzionale di un museo collocato proprio nella madrepatria coloniale, rendono il video e la performance uno strumento di sfida alle strutture di potere, dando voce al margine, trasformando e contestando paesaggi mnestici e narrative sociali ufficiali (Walker, Bowring, Davis [2025]: 14). Eppure è la stessa Galindo a rimarcare che *Mujeres Creando* non è un collettivo attivista perché se l'arte rappresenta uno strumento di contestazione e di affermazione di un contro-discorso «bastardo», il gruppo ha sempre un intento espressamente politico, a volte recuperato dal mondo dell'arte, ma genericamente legato alla produzione di giustizia, di sopravvivenza collettiva, di costruzione di relazioni conflittuali, di dialogo e provocazione, di destabilizzazione delle strutture immaginarie, di azione sulle «zone sensibili» (di dolore) (Galindo [2024]). Un esperimento sociale più complesso degli attivismi, che utilizza comunque il corpo, l'incisione nelle protuberanze dello spazio pubblico (graffiti), la strada come palcoscenico storico, il laboratorio per la costruzione di un nuovo immaginario sociale, non rispondendo alla logica della reazione. «Le azioni di controllo, persecuzione e repressione che il sistema esercita su di noi sono azioni vane e inutili, perché non pretendiamo di essere più forti di loro. La nostra risposta è innanzitutto l'affermazione della nostra fragilità e la capacità di porci al di là della loro logica di forza» (Galindo [2024]: pos. 124).

5. *L'attivismo artistico tra resistenza e inoperosità*

A questo punto, dopo aver preso in esame, anche se rapidamente, tre casi di attivismo occorre fare un passo ulteriore in direzione teoretica. Regina

José Galindo, Cheril Linett e il collettivo cileno la *Yeguada Latinoamericana*, María Galindo Guion e il collettivo boliviano *Mujeres Creando* fanno appello alla capacità dell'opera di creare un nuovo spazio-tempo, in grado di generare nuove costellazioni di senso e produrre una nuova sintassi, quasi «scavando una lingua straniera nella lingua» (Deleuze [2009]: 35). Le tre performance intervengono sul reale fendendolo, producendo un taglio, innestando sullo stesso vocabolario forme sintattiche disturbanti, decostruendo enunciazioni e riconcatenandole, generando nuove linee di fuga attraverso la sovrapposizione di strati e la moltiplicazione creativa di elementi in connessione. Non si tratta tanto di definire nuovi significati quanto di innescare concatenamenti o, meglio ancora, lavorare sul potenziale sopito di ciò che è già in atto. In questo senso l'opera d'arte si rivela non come informazione (circolazione di una parola d'ordine) né come contro-informazione, ma come atto di resistenza. «L'atto di resistenza ha due facce. È umano ed è anche l'atto dell'arte. Solo l'atto di resistenza resiste alla morte, sottoforma di opera d'arte o sotto forma di una lotta di uomini» (Deleuze [2009]: 23).

Così si riformula il rapporto tra arte e politica, dato che negli attivismi si rende visibile il progressivo spostamento dell'opera in direzione dell'evento. L'opera d'arte favorisce e produce l'evento scomparendo in esso. Seguendo Maurice Blanchot, Deleuze ci ricorda che nell'evento coesistono due dimensioni inseparabili: «da una parte ciò che sprofonda e si compie nei corpi, dall'altra un'inesauribile potenzialità che supera ogni attualizzazione» (Deleuze [2009]: 42). Se guardiamo con questa lente la performatività degli attivismi notiamo che l'opera-evento fa corpo con il suo autore o con la multiautorialità collettiva, fa tutt'uno con i corpi che ne costituiscono il supporto materiale. Della triade operatore, opera, operazione notiamo di fatto la scomparsa dell'opera che si risolve completamente nell'operazione/evento realizzata dal corpo dell'operatore (come soggetto singolare, multiplo e femminile).

Questo tratto non è tipico soltanto degli attivismi, ma è presente in molte performance basate su forme di body art. Ciò che caratterizza prepotentemente le forme di attivismo artistico è il consumarsi dell'azione nell'evento in cui, nel tentativo di resistere e di opporsi, anche alla morte (e questo è il caso *à la lettre* delle *acciones de arte*), permane un residuo che fa vivere o durare l'opera anche quando è terminata, pur in assenza di supporto o con un surrogato di supporto¹⁵. La resistenza e il perdurare sono dunque legati all'arco che unisce operatore, operazione e spettatore, dove il polo di resistenza è proprio lo spettatore che si fa testimone, diretto o indiretto.

15 Come nel caso di registrazioni, filmati, fotografie che creano, comunque, problemi museografici di natura anche teorica ed etica legati all'archiviazione e alla rimessa in circolo di quel materiale, al suo *reenactment*.

Se, ed è ancora Deleuze a sottolinearlo, «non c'è opera d'arte che non faccia appello a un popolo che non esiste ancora» (Deleuze [2009]: 24), allora gli attivismi ci mostrano il popolo che ancora manca, chiedono un nuovo popolo per una nuova azione politica¹⁶. In questo senso l'opera inventa il suo popolo, lo chiama alla vita, lo produce. L'opera è allora attività. Ancora di più lo sono gli attivismi, in quanto azioni poietiche, che nel farsi bruciano se stesse come opera per generare il proprio popolo, vale a dire mantenere aperta l'inesauribile potenzialità dell'evento che non si risolve mai nel passaggio all'atto.

Ecco il potenziale di resistenza che, come acutamente nota Agamben, «ha costitutivamente a che fare con la liberazione di una potenza» (Agamben [2017]: 34), di una potenza interna all'atto stesso e consiste nella possibilità del suo «non-esercizio» (Agamben [2017]: 35), nella sospensione dell'atto. Agamben fonda la sua analisi sulla rilettura della *Metafisica* aristotelica, in particolare sulla determinazione dell'ente come sinolo di materia e forma all'interno della dinamica di potenza e atto. Se l'*energeia* è l'attualizzazione della *dynamis*, è però anche vero che l'*adynamia*, cioè l'impotenza, è una presenza privativa della potenza, la presenza di ciò che non è in atto, è la «potenza-di-non (passare all'atto)» (Agamben [2017]: 36) o, per dirla ancora diversamente, è l'inoperosità.

Proprio l'inoperosità costituisce il momento di resistenza dell'opera, ciò che trattiene e arresta la potenza rivelando l'opera come un campo di forze teso tra potenza e impotenza, agire e resistere. L'opera concretizza il passaggio all'atto ma non esaurisce le potenzialità latenti, anzi le preserva, custodendo la potenza-di-non come momento di resistenza. La potenza di non è allora l'inoperosità dell'opera che disarticola e disattiva lo schema potenza/atto, «rende inoperosa la potenza e la esibisce come tale» (Agamben [2017]: 44). Questa resistenza è interna alla potenza stessa, è propriamente ciò che le impedisce di risolversi ed esaurirsi nell'atto, restando così inoperosa. Ed è proprio tale inoperosità a rivelarsi come elemento politico presente nell'opera in quanto potenziale inesauribile di non-azione, di negazione dell'agire tramite la *praxis* artistica¹⁷.

Gli attivismi, attraverso le *praxeis* che mettono in scena, rivelano un atto di resistenza inoperoso, improduttivo, che si sottrae al lavoro, facendo così cortocircuitare la triade arendtiana della *vita activa* fondata sulle tre azioni fondamentali degli esseri umani, vale a dire: lavoro, produzione (opera), azione (Arendt [2009]). Gli attivismi fanno saltare il meccanismo produttivo agglutinante del capitalismo tardivo che riassorbe le opere precisamente all'interno di uno sche-

16 Per un approfondimento su popoli presenti e popoli mancanti o meglio sui popoli in appello cfr. Didi-Huberman (2020): 432-434.

17 In realtà ci sono anche altri fenomeni in cui l'inoperosità e la potenza-di-non si mostrano come atti di resistenza, ad esempio la festa, il carnevale, l'attività contemplativa priva di produzione, l'ozio, classicamente inteso, ma anche il riposo, più in generale tutto ciò che è negazione del lavoro.

ma di detonazione del loro potenziale di resistenza immettendole nel mercato dell'arte. Cancellando l'opera a favore dell'operazione e del residuo potenziale che si mostra nella sua inoperosità senza mai esaurirsi, destituiscono il ruolo della produzione e del lavoro proprio mantenendosi nell'ultimo polo della triade, vale a dire quello dell'agire.

Nelle forme di attivismo è l'azione a mostrarsi nella sua improduttività, perché all'assenza di opera-oggetto (vendibile e quindi trasformabile in merce) fa da *pendant* l'inclusione nell'azione dello spettatore invitato a partecipare e non a comprare (l'opera o il biglietto per vederla). Queste forme artistiche mettono in scena l'elemento propriamente anarchico e inappropriabile, ossia l'azione come residuo dell'opera, ciò che resta dell'opera nella traiettoria trasformativa innescata dalla performatività. L'azione risulta improduttiva perché genera potenzialità di non agire secondo i dettami del mercato o dei quadri socio-politici di contesto. E questo emerge con un'evidenza ancora maggiore nel caso di attivismi di matrice femminista, come quelli di cui abbiamo parlato.

Gli attivismi ci mostrano pertanto come «oggi l'arte si present[i] come un'attività senz'opera» (Agamben [2009]: 12) che ha propriamente il suo luogo nell'agente, o meglio nella multiagentività dei suoi coproduttori, così da generare una nuova anarchia politica in grado di produrre una risoggettivazione nello spazio collettivo.

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The Aesthetics of Failure in Videogames. Beyond the Immersion/Emersion Dichotomy

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Abstract. The discussion about the aesthetic value of failure in videogames has taken two main directions. On the one hand, failure has been explored as fundamental mechanic within the general framework of immersive flow experiences. On the other hand, failure has been understood as a means of emersion and self-reflexivity, namely as a moment that highlights the conventions and made-up nature of games from a metacommunicative point of view. Instead, this paper investigates a third option, namely how video games can use failure neither to create flow state immersion nor to disrupt it in a self-referential manner. I will show that videogames also employ certain types of *emersive* mechanisms, that I will call *out-of-flow failures*, to strengthen the believability of the game world in an immersive manner but without aiming at flow. This discussion will shed light to the immersion/emersion dichotomy.

Keywords. Immersion, emersion, flow theory, failure, aesthetics of videogames.

Introduction

Videogames are frequently celebrated and examined for their capacity to create immersive experiences (Brown and Cairns [2004]; Ermi

and Mäyrä [2005]; Jennett et al. [2008]; Christou [2014]). Immersion is defined as «the sense of being absorbed in a game to the exclusion of all else outside of the game» (Cox et al. [2012]: 80). In order to facilitate experiences that engage players in such a manner, game designers, players and game critics frequently employ a paradigm grounded in flow theory.

In line with this theoretical framework, the design of a game is contingent upon the establishment of a balanced challenge and the provision of a reasonable level of difficulty. This is posited as a prerequisite for the creation of experiences that facilitate the attainment of a state of flow, as postulated by Csikszentmihalyi (1990). The concept of a flow state can be defined as a state of optimal experience in which an individual's cognitive abilities are fully engaged, allowing for optimal performance and complete absorption in the task at hand. The challenges presented by the game are of a nature such that players are able to overcome them through the application of prior skills, knowledge and active problem solving (Cox et al. [2012]). In order to maintain engagement, these challenges must be neither excessively simple (risking boredom) nor excessively difficult (eliciting anxiety or frustration). This fundamental principle is encapsulated in the concept of the «hedonistic loop» (Cardoso et al. [2019]), which refers to the experience of pleasure derived from engaging in a game that offers a balanced and challenging experience.

However, it has been argued that a design philosophy based on the flow paradigm can result in the «devaluation of the development of skills such as performing critical evaluation» (Soderman [2021]: 64). In other words, games which are designed to induce a flow state in players seems to be forced to necessarily suppress other forms of experience and mental agency to guarantee that players will perceive them as well-ordered activities. In a flow experience, all elements are predictable and proceed in accordance with expectations. In this, a flow-based design philosophy might be seen as the perfect example of the user-centred paradigm. Flow is a specific type of immersion, which is in turn a specific type of engagement that players entertain with game systems, and which is based on player centrality as defined by international standards (ISO 9241-210:2019(E)). This kind of critique was similarly posed by other scholars aiming to cast light «on expressive possibilities that are not customarily part of the dominant paradigm of user-centred design» (Gualeni, Van de Mosselaer [2021]).

Several scholars worked to create a theoretical paradigm to understand all the games that are not tailored to offer flow experiences. The result can be labelled as a paradigm of *critical engagement* which acknowledges the potential of videogames to entertain and engage players by invoking critical thinking rather than suppressing it. This article contributes to this body of research that

highlights the expressive and aesthetics variety of video games by going beyond the most common understanding of them as only an immersive medium based on flow experiences. However, this article also questions the simplistic correlation between critical engagement and emersive strategies. Rather than opposing uncritical immersion to critical emersion, I aim to illustrate how video games can create a richer type of *immersion* – one that goes beyond flow state. This more nuanced form of immersion integrates types of design strategies often associated with emersive effects, paradoxically using them to enhance, rather than disrupt, the immersive experience. This can mainly be read as a rhetorical move: rather than opposing immersion and emersion, I will appropriate the term immersion, that is so «ill-defined» (see Nilsson et al. [2016] and Calleja [2011]), and interpret it in a new way. Gordon Calleja (2011) was the first one to recognize the confusion surrounding immersion as a concept. In his analysis he identifies two main meanings of the concept of immersion: immersion as simple attention and a state of cognitive engagement (which we identified in the first part of the article and associated with flow theories); and immersion as habitation of a virtual world. In this second type of immersion, which unlike the first is necessarily technologically mediated, Calleja considers the importance of the body and perception in order to be transported and enable the experience of a «spatial elsewhere», not just a mental one. In this article, using Calleja's terminology, I will seemingly move from the analysis of immersion as cognitive engagement and attention enhanced by flow to the more dynamic concept of immersion as habitation, what Calleja calls «incorporation». However, my goal will be to show a specific way to sustain immersion as incorporation that depends on the believability of the game world, a believability that in turn depends on how the various narrative and playful elements fit together. The counterexample of unpredictable failure, a moment of severe disruption and apparent contradiction between playful and narrative elements, will serve to show how important high-level consistency can be in sustaining immersion and shape believability as a way to sustain habitation (incorporation of the virtual body) beyond simple concentration, as perception of the referential solidity and autonomy of the game world from players' desires and expectations.

In this article I will follow this outline. First, I reconstruct the foundations of the immersive paradigm grounded in the concepts of practical clarity and flow theory, highlighting its aesthetic and design implications especially regarding players' failure. I then turn to the major emersive interpretations of failure, examining their contribution to the metacommunicative and self-referential dimensions of videogames. From this dual theoretical background, I introduce a distinction between different types of failure, focusing in particular on cases in which failure neither sustains flow nor produces critical distance, but instead

reinforces the believability of the game world. On this basis, I develop the notion of *out-of-flow failure*, showing how it would allow us to overcome a rigid immersion/emersion dichotomy. In this, my aim is to challenge the philosophical assumption of a punctual immersion state, opposing to it a more realistic account of immersion as a process which can involve emersive mechanics¹.

1. *Immersion, flow and clarity*

Before being a player's experience, immersion is a technological characteristic of the medium of games. It is a commonly held view amongst authors that the clarity of in-game objectives and rules is the primary factor that enables games to function as a highly immersive medium. Nguyen ([2020]: 65-66) conceptualises this phenomenon as «clarity of practicality», which occurs in video games since there is a stable and reliable correlation between inputs and outputs, clarity of goals and definite rules to be «invoked by players» (Sicart [2008]) to achieve them. Within these boundaries, clear and unambiguous rules apply, which enable even the most complicated challenges to be broken down into the steps necessary to complete them as if playing was a puzzle-solving activity (Koster [2013]).

The relative stability and reliability of game systems, in terms of consistent rules and explicit goals, facilitates the establishment of a phenomenon referred to as the «hedonistic loop» (Cardoso et al. [2019]). This phenomenon depends on the premise that the game will align with players' skills and expectations in a consistent manner. Consequently, it can be posited that the incorporation of immersive features in videogames produces the establishment of an implicit pact of trustworthiness between the game system and the player. The issue of expectations is fundamental in this regard. Videogames must stay consistent with the expectations they established, in order to sustain players immersion in the virtual world.

However, consistency cannot simply translate into the mechanical repetition of familiar patterns: absolute predictability quickly leads to stagnation. For this reason, beyond maintaining a stable framework, designers must also introduce degrees of variation in the nature and configuration of challenges to prevent repetitive structures from devolving into boredom or cognitive saturation. Im-

1 The Game Studies field owes Calleja (2011) a still unrecognized merit of clearing the ground out of bad definitions of immersion, which he replaced with the concept of incorporation. His analysis had the merit to distinguish two different meanings of the term: one is immersion as involvement, the other is immersion as habitation of a virtual environment. Incorporation considers the importance of the body and perception in the experience of habitation of a virtual world. In this article, I will adopt a slightly different perspective. Rather than focusing simply on the body, I will consider the way in which we can believe a world thanks to the believability of its ludo-narrative coherence in extreme cases in which the believability seems challenged.

mersion therefore depends on a dynamic balance between recognizability and surprise, between the confirmation of expectations and carefully modulated deviations from them. It is this alternation that keeps players invested and preserves the vitality of the ludic system. What interests me in this context is the degree of clarity and care for the players that the novelties are introduced with.

The practical clarity of the game's goals and rules functions similarly to other narrative media in offering an epistemic framework that presents the illusion of necessary «sustained temporal-causal relations» between events (Currie [2010]: 27). This is the kind of claim made by Koster (2013) in his influential book, *A theory of fun for Game design*, in which he argues that a game is fun to play when it proposes challenges that are to be solved applying meaningful patterns of action. More specifically, what constitutes fun is the *discovering* of the patterns. This feature of videogames is based on the premise that games are reliable systems that reward appropriate solutions and punish incorrect ones in a meritocratic and objective manner. Games may be used to propose this dream of clarity by exploiting the necessary causal chain in response to player actions that rules, and computer-mediated technologies, enable.

In a book in which he offers a critical analysis of Csikszentmihalyi's theory of flow as applied to game design, Soderman similarly argues that «in the flow experience, psychic order arises when each bit of experienced information is organized to obtain the same goal» (Soderman [2021]: 52). The correlation between immersion and flow are so common that a literature review by Michailidis et al. (2018) shows that most theories of immersion use the two terms interchangeably.

However, while the paradigm of flow ensures engagement through clarity, system stability, and player care, it leaves little space for ambiguity, uncertainty, and surprises – experiences that are nevertheless part of what makes many games interesting.

2. *Emersion, self-reflexivity and metacommunication*

In game studies, the role of ambiguity, uncertainty and surprises is a theme popularized by Frasca (2001) and later expanded by Sicart and Wilson (2010) in a paper about forms of design that are directly aimed at subverting the expectations of the audience by employing unconventional methods that the two scholars defined as «abusive»². This discourse implies at least the acknowledgement that the player-centric design paradigm is not an innocent assumption of game

2 It is important to notice that abusive game design is framed by the two scholars as a form of conversation between game designers and players. This keeps players at the center of the experience. Players are the target of a communicative act of the designer, so following their view, they are even more central than usual.

design, and that game design can be employed as a «means of consciousness raising» (Frasca [2001]) rather than simply as a template to fulfil players expectations of entertainment.

In the last twenty years game scholars have investigated the variety and complexity of the forms of engagement that can be achieved in a video game beyond flow state immersion and player centric design. These approaches consider how video games can use strategies such as ambiguity, incompleteness, and unpredictability to foster critical reflection and nuanced forms of engagement. The most important voices focusing on more sophisticated engagement forms tend to assign a key role to the metacommunicative and self-referential characteristics of video games.

The literature on the metacommunicative potential of videogames tends to explore the variety of ways in which this potential can be used to design forms of engagement that are based on «*emersive* effects», as Kubinski (2014) called them. The work of Frasca is foundational in explaining the various ways in which videogames can be used as means of «consciousness raising» (Frasca [2001]) in general terms. Tulloch (2010) and Fassone (2015; 2017) developed the idea of videogames rules and boundaries as examples of digital bureaucracy and digital authority and explored the possibility of developing videogames as a reflection about their own conventions, and rule-based nature. Gualeni (2016; 2019) and Potzsch (2019) expanded the idea, first presented in Frasca (2001), that strategies typically employed in literary texts to alienate the readers could be used to better frame some strategies employed by game designers, such as defamiliarization and estrangement.

Finally, Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer (2021) developed a strong theory to frame deceptive game design as a form of design which uses deceit and misleading communication to foster aesthetically meaningful effects *in the interest of the players*³.

The implicit take of this kind of literature is that videogames can shape experiences in which critical thinking is not dulled, by drawing attention to the nature of play itself in a self-reflexive manner. This is achieved through techniques such as estrangement, deception, humor (Giappone [2015]) and breaking of the fourth wall (Van de Mosselaer [2022]). This array of expressive possibilities enables *emersive* experiences that encourage players to reflect on their actions in a more critical, detached and ironic way.

The games analyzed in this type of literature can be read as metagames (Waszkiewicz [2024]): games that offer, thanks to their interactive specificity, com-

3 Gualeni (2025) introduced antagonistic design, which is a form of design in which implied designers works as antagonistic players against actual players. This idea seems to go toward the direction I am outlining in this article: practices that are commonly framed as *emersive* that are used to strengthen the believability of the game.

mentaries about their very nature. Games such as *OneShot* (FutureCat [2016]), *Papers Please* (Lucas Pope [2013]), *The Stanley Parable* (Galactic Café [2013]) and *Undertale* (Tobey Fox [2015]) are a staple in discussion about self-referentiality and the metacommunicative potential of interaction⁴.

3. The threat of failure

As we have seen, emersion has been traditionally associated with distance and critical thinking. However, in this article I propose to explore its paradoxical potential to *reinforce* immersion through the design of failure. In this, I expand on Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer (2021) thesis that deception can be used not only to abuse players but also to *serve* them in counterintuitive ways: by leveraging deception to mislead players in making wrong assumptions about game's functioning, the game does not simply aim to penalize the players in a self-satisfied manner but to enrich their aesthetic experience in unconventional ways.

Since my aim is to understand the possible extension of engagement either beyond the classical ways of sustaining it (the creation of flow states) and beyond the disruption of it (the self-reflexive critical stance allowed by emersive mechanisms), I believe that the *mechanics of failure* offer a particularly insightful lens through which this discussion can be explored. This is because failure invariably poses a threat to immersion: it offers a moment of respite from the practical demands of the game and makes the players reflect on their mistakes, or even simply causes them to harbour unreflective resentment. Either way, it is a potential problem that every game designer must solve if they want to maintain players engaged.

According to widely accepted theories of Koster (2013) and Gee (2005) we can frame failure as an intrinsic element of the learning process in videogames which leads to immersive experiences. Within this approach the value of failure lies in its ability to stimulate the learning process by presenting players with situations that have not yet been fully mastered. This phenomenon does not impede immersion but rather serves as a catalyst for it, enabling the player to realise the potential for enjoyment. However, this model explains how engagement is achieved typically *after* the failure states and assumes that the idea of a continuous immersion in the game is not possible. This is because failures interrupt the flow state: even though failure serves to reinforce the flow state in later phases, the flow theory cannot reabsorb the failure states in a continuous of pleasurable experience for the players. Juul (2009) tried to go beyond the issues of integrating flow theory with failure, claiming that failure constitutes not only an integral

4 For a discussion of meta-proceduralism see Fest (2016).

component of the gameplay loop, but also a meaningful experience for players from an emotional point of view. Emotionality creates a powerful link between failure and active player engagement, a link that does not depend on recognizing the learning value of failure from a critical and detached perspective (as in Gee and Koster's accounts).

A particularly illuminating example of this integration of failure into the fabric of play is *Katana Zero* (Askiisoft [2019]). In this game, failure does not take the form of a disruptive game over, nor is it experienced as a rupture in the play loop; instead, it is narrativized as if the course of action that led to a failure was a plan gone wrong. After a failure occurs, the game allows the player to «rewind» the sequence, as if the player-character were reassessing the situation and devising a different strategy to beat the level. Failure thus becomes a diegetic and functional component of the experience – an element that does not expel the player from the loop but rather reinforces it by embedding trial-and-error into the player-character's gameplay process and narrative reasons. This kind of failure is not just an enabler of a future immersion but maintain the immersion as a continuous.

To sum up: on the one hand failure has been categorized as the enabler of the flow state. This raises issues about the very moment of failure which cannot be reabsorbed into the flow state. On the other hand, Juul defended the idea that failure is meaningful not as a means to an end (enabling the flow states), but as a moment in itself.

In this article I will start from the assumption that failure can hold value without being a precondition for flow states. At the same time, I will also explore the idea that failure can actually use the suspension of the immersion and I will argue that these two ideas can be unified in some cases of what I will define *out-of-flow failures*.

4. *Emersive deception*

As we have seen, failure can be read as a mechanism for guiding players to adjust their actions to achieve the goals proposed by the game and the flow state immersion. In this regard it plays a fundamental role in shaping the hedonistic loop and in the immersive flow paradigm. In order to be effective in reinforcing the experience of immersion, it is fundamental for failure to be properly communicated to the players so that they can learn from it through feedback loops.

However, there are cases in which failure is *not* foreseen (or even foreseeable) as a possible outcome. Scholars who explore the expressive possibilities of games apart from flow acritical experiences have focused on a particular characteristic of failure: its anticipation. For example, in their article about deceptive game design and ludic unreliability Gualeni and Van de Mosselaer (2021) pro-

pose several situations in which players are confronted with the delusion of their expectations. They propose the example of *Undertale*, an indie RPG game. After what may seem a classical adventure in a fantasy world populated by strange NPCs, a turn-based combat system and exploration, at the end of the game the players discover that the «EXP points» they have gained throughout the experience are not the common «experience points» which are needed to advance in levels, a common trope of RPG games, but they are «Execution Points», a metrics of the cruelty of the player during the playthrough. The game denounces the use of violence and the acritical assumption that killing is a means to advance in games. This is a typical example of metareferentiality, emersion and deception. They also propose an example from *Dark Souls* (From Software [2011]) in which players can find chests containing valuable items in a common fantasy genre fashion. From one point onward in the game, however, players will also find mimic, fake chests: monsters disguised as chests. If players try to open them, they will be devoured. These are examples of games that create certain expectations, only to later disrupt them.

This example hints to the fact that in videogames failures can be categorized upon their *degree of predictability*, which heavily influence their rhetoric effect on the players. Failures that result from a lack of player skill are, in principle, evitable, as they can be avoided through mastery of the game's mechanics. In contrast, unpredictable failures arise when the game offers clues that are misleading or insufficient to anticipate the failure state. This kind of failures are used to propose forms of design that does *not* align with the dominant immersive flow paradigm and foster critical reflection, disrupting the pact of reliability with the players.

5. Immersive deception

In line with the literature on emersive mechanisms and self-referential capacities of games, this paper emphasizes that unpredictable failures are sometimes deliberately designed to question the ludic pact of reliability. However, in contrast with existing literature on emersive mechanisms, I also claim that unforeseeable failures do not necessarily equate with a moment of critical emersion: I claim that when a game confronts players with unforeseeable errors and failures, it can actually enhance immersion. In such cases the game becomes more immersive not in spite of, but because of, an emersive mechanism. In this, failures can serve the *interest of players* in immersing them in the game.

It is important to specify that this line of reasoning suggests the need to reconsider the very definition of immersion. If immersive experiences can incorporate emersive moments that recalibrate rather than interrupt engagement, immersion

can no longer be understood as a punctual, homogeneous state. Instead, it must be conceived as a dynamic process unfolding over time, composed of heterogeneous stages, some of which may take the form of brief suspensions, deviations, or destabilizations. These emersive moments are not anomalies external to immersion: they are integral components of a layered experiential continuum, whose coherence derives precisely from its oscillations between absorption and emersion⁵.

My claim is that certain types of unpredictable failures can reinforce immersion in a specific way: reinforcing the coherence of the game world. The examples I will analyze have this in common: they are games in which mechanics and narrative works together to create a strong believable world.

For example, *Hollow Knight: Silksong* (Team Cherry [2025]) is a game full of threats and challenges: the game teaches players to advance in an attentive manner to anticipate attacks, menaces and traps the game world is filled with. During the gameplay, players will come across benches, a typical resting site in the game where they can recover life points and adjust their abilities to the specific challenge they are confronting with. However, while exploring an area of the game called Hunter's March, players will find a bench and after sitting on it, it will reveal itself to be a trap. In this case, there is no metacommunicative discourse whatsoever that the designer wants to engage in with the player, as Sicart and Wilson (2010) argue when they talk about «abusive game design». Nor there is a kind of disruption of the reliability pact with the end to point out the conventions of the game in a self-reflexive manner. *Hollow Knight: Silksong* is not a game about the nature of digital bureaucracy. I think the case is much simpler. Simply put, that trap logically follows within the space of possibilities of the game's rules of believability⁶. In a threatening world full of traps, finding a trap does not destroy immersion, nor does it call into question a special type of relationship between player and designer regarding the nature of the game. It simply reinforces the believability of the game world – precisely by using a means usually employed to destroy that believability and foster emersion.

Although we are discussing examples of *deceptive* design, not all unpredictable failures fall into the same category. I argue that they should be differentiated based on their *effects* on the player, rather than solely on the means they employ. While in the example of *Undertale* deception serves a self-referential purpose to cast a critical light on the practice of uncritically following the rules and conventions imposed by the game designers, I believe that the goal of the example of mimic chests in *Dark Souls* (so similar to the *Silksong* example) is of a different nature. In *Dark Souls*, there is no critical and self-referential intent to denounce

5 I owe Alexandre Declos an illuminating comment on the idea of immersion as a process rather than a moment.

6 The possibility space which follows from the explicit and implicit laws of the game world.

the conventional and made-up nature of the game, but rather the opposite: an intent to *reinforce* the illusion of believability of the game world using the means of deception. The worlds of *Dark Souls* and *Hollow Knight: Silksong* derive their believability from the fact that they are a threatening, hostile, and mysterious worlds. These features are achieved by not conforming to the player's desires and expectations. This does not result in the disruption of the suspension of disbelief. Rather here deception and going against the player's expectations reinforces the believability of the game world. The *inertia* of the game's world reinforces the illusion of a plausible world, one in which not everything will be controlled and in which mystery can prevail over mastery (Vella [2015]). When something exceeds our ability to predict or control it, we are more likely to experience it as alive (even if it isn't), because unpredictability and autonomy are essential cues that our minds use to detect agency and independence.

6. Failure and bad design

To explain the rhetorical potential of failure and the apparent paradox of deriving enjoyment from failure in the context of flow theory, Smith and Aytemiz (2020) distinguish between two types of failure: «in-loop» failure and «out-of-loop» failure. In-loop failures are integrated into the game mechanics as explicit communicative tools, anticipated by both designers and players as part of the natural process of learning-by-failing. These failures are typically tied to the player's skill and can be overcome through mastery of the game's mechanics.

In contrast, out-of-loop failures are unexpected disruptions in which players do not foresee the possibility of failure, resulting in jarring breaks from the immersive experience. As Smith and Aytemiz (2020) explain «out-of-loop failures are those in which the player does not expect uncertainty. They do not foresee a potential of failure, and they are jarred if failure does occur». These failures are not rooted in a lack of player skill but rather in the game's deliberate withholding of sufficient clues to predict and avoid failure. For this reason, this kind of failure is often criticized by players and critics. For example, video essayist Lextorias, in his video called «The Underrated Art of Video Game Failure», notes that:

a lot of games don't just trigger failure states when you die. It's actually become an increasingly common trope for a game over screen to pop up even when you just do something the developers don't like. You want to shoot your teammates: game over; go out of bounds: game over; you got too close to the target in one of those dump trailing missions: game over. The screen that pops up is the same as if you had died but now the failure state is just a punishment for doing something you're not supposed to and while some of these, like going out of bounds or throwing a flashbang at a baby, are pretty obvious why they'd instantly fail a mission, most of the time it just feels like your agency is being taken away. (Lextorias [2022])

The cases Lextorias is talking about would be defined as out-of-loop failures by Aytemiz and Smith, and they are commonly recognizable as bad design features. However, as I argue, in some cases an unpredictable failure, resulting from the withholding of information or even from deliberate communication of deceptive information, can result in *engaging* situations that deepens the effect of believability of the game world and concur to build the overall atmosphere of the game.

7. Out-of-flow failures

Although they can be a sign of bad game design that does not give players sufficient indications to properly interact with the game, out-of-loop failures that create a loss of control for the player can be intentionally employed to provoke immersive experiences when they are tied with the other parts of the game narrative and mechanics. I maintain that this kind of failure can be used in a smart way to enlarge the array of the designers' strategies so as to create a layered gaming experience not necessarily aimed at disrupting the immersion in a self-reflexive way. The game's pact of trust can be broken either to suggest a meta-reflective stance that destroys immersion, or to reinforce immersion by creating consistency and believability through the *illusion* that the game follows rules that are independent and unfathomable to the player.

It is important to note, however, that the impression that a game «follows rules that are independent and unfathomable to the player» must be carefully negotiated by designers rather than simply imposed. If the rules of the world become too opaque, the player loses any practical grip on the environment; if they become too transparent, the world risks appearing tailored to the player's desires rather than existing independently of them. Many games therefore cultivate a subtle balance between mystery and usability, maintaining a sense of a world not built to accommodate the player while still providing the minimal interpretative footholds necessary for meaningful action⁷.

This negotiation can be seen clearly in *Dark Souls*. The mimic chest exemplifies a form of deception that is, in principle, readable: subtle visual cues differentiate mimics from ordinary chests, though never in a way that makes the distinction trivial or immediately obvious. The world thus feels dangerous and indifferent to the player, yet the player is not entirely powerless; through careful attention and learned vigilance, they can gradually acquire partial mastery over

7 This balance has been explored through the lenses of what has been called «ludic sublime» by Vella (2015).

its logic. Here, the designer's calibration allows the world to appear hostile and autonomous while still being decipherable to a certain degree.

A different calibration is at play in the trapped bench in *Hollow Knight: Silk-song*. In this case, the design provides virtually no way for the player to anticipate the deception. The effect is more overtly estranging: it foregrounds the indifference of the world to player expectations and momentarily denies usability almost entirely. Yet this opacity remains thematically coherent with the game's broader portrayal of a treacherous environment.

An even more radical version of this negotiation appears in *Rain World* (Videocult [2017]) where NPCs are governed by complex AI systems that follow their own behavioural patterns, ecological niches, and predator-prey relationships (see Andriano, Caracciolo [2025]). These entities do not respond to the player as the central point of reference but act according to internal logics that often remain inaccessible. The resulting world can feel harsh and unaccommodating, but it also gains a powerful sense of autonomy and ecological depth. Here, the balance tilts heavily toward mystery and unpredictability, yet without abandoning usability altogether: the player can still learn to read partial regularities in the ecosystem, even though the system ultimately exceeds their control.

Across these examples, what emerges is not a dichotomy between transparent and unfathomable rules, but a spectrum of degrees of opacity.

Between the two extremes of a game that perfectly conforms to the players' expectations by immersing them in flow states, and a game that deceptively contradicts them to reveal the conventions of game design, there is an uninvestigated middle ground that uses the expressive forms of deception to reinforce the believability of the game world through paradoxical coherence between world-building, narrative assumptions and gameplay. For this reason, the case I am analyzing is especially evident in particularly difficult games with strong narrative elements and coherent mechanics.

Since my claim is that out-of-loop failures do not necessarily result in a decrease of the immersion in the game but on the contrary they can *increase* the immersive engagement with the game system, I will use the expression *out-of-flow* (rather than out-of-loop) *failure* to distinguish between the type of in-loop failure that aims to flow and is based on the practical clarity of objectives and the out-of-flow failures that fall outside the flow experience as classically understood, but are nonetheless immersive. I need to introduce the concept of «out-of-flow» because my aim is to describe an experience that does *not* equate to «out-of-loop» experiences. A course of action can be out-of-flow but still being integrated in an engaging interaction with a game when it feels justified and cohesive with the rest of the game. As a final example consider the videogame *Outer Wilds* (Mobius Digital [2019]). In this indie

videogame, the player controls an alien wandering in his solar system with a spaceship and can visit a number of planets. The game does not state a clear goal and there is no intended path to finish the game. Thanks to the ambiguity in the communication of the final goal, the designers of the game managed to create an atmosphere of mystery and freedom: the players can explore the various planets following their desire in any order. However, the exploration is not without risks: the planets are complex living systems which will catch players off guard. On one planet, for example, a perpetual storm rages and a tornado can easily destroy the spaceship, putting an end to exploration and decreeing the death of the player character. On another planet, sand tides occur at regular intervals, completely changing the geography and accessibility of areas. On yet another, enormous beings live that attract players with lights and then swallow them up. The point is that none of these dynamics are explained to the player beforehand, who finds themselves experiencing real space exploration, in which they must use cunning and caution to survive. Finally, every 22 minutes, the star of the solar system explodes, ending our journey by default, which must start again with a new exploration cycle each time. This time limit is totally unpredictable the first time around. All these elements in *Outer Wilds* function as failures that the player interprets as unpredictable. However, in the context of the game, which is space exploration and the sense of precariousness and threat of alien worlds, these failures are perfectly justified. They are out-of-loop because they end the exploration, but they are not self-referential. On the contrary, they reinforce the referential solidity of the game world.

We can therefore create a *tripartition*: (i) in-loop failures that are completely reabsorbed by the game's intended dynamics; (ii) out-of-loop failures that are not reabsorbed by the dynamics and suspend immersion; and finally, (iii) a class of failures in the middle that, while estranging the player by proposing unexpected and unpredictable failures, nonetheless increase engagement and immersion in a believable world without invoking self-reflexivity. In other words, out-of-flow failures I am introducing are unforeseeable, not metacommunicative and yet immersive.

Conclusion

In this article I argued that certain types of failures can be used to reinforce the sense of plausibility of the game world, proposing the illusion of a world that cannot be fully controlled and predicted. By creating an interplay between immersion and emersion, games can create a framework in which taking the agency away from players becomes a powerful rhetorical tool that is accepted by the players for the sake of the experience (Caracciolo [2024]: 83). This perspective

opens new ways of understanding the expressive potential of video games by moving beyond the immersion/emersion dichotomy.

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On the Importance of Sentence Crafting in Times of Text Mass Production

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Abstract. With the rise of artificially generated texts, there is growing concern about the future of creativity in written language. As a by-product of how they function, large language models push language toward normalized and homogeneous products, eroding the eccentric qualities of texts that reflect singular human distinctiveness. The notion of singularity is explored in relation to the act of writing. The argument is divided into two related parts. First, drawing on the work of Étienne Souriau and David Lapoujade, this paper underscores the importance of attunement to individual points of view in creation. It is argued that the erosion of distinctiveness in the writing gesture undermines the instauration of diverse modes of existence. Second, drawing on Walter Benjamin's distinction between information and narrative, this work highlights the artisanal nature of narrative writing in contrast with the serialized, mass produced quality of informational texts. It is argued that writing creativity lives in the act of crafting the sentence through a process that unfolds over time rather than in the "germinative idea" of the final product. At odds with this, large language models offer a labor-free shortcut to the final and polished written piece. Finally, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's notion of desiring-production, it is argued that the dynamic process of crafting a sentence is essential for keeping subjective desire alive.

Keywords. Large language models, creativity, modes of existence, desiring-production.

1. *On the erosion of singularity in automatically generated language*

Singularity is fleshed out in the stroke of the painter. Santana's guitar is recognizable after listening to just a few chords. Singularity in the act of creation lies in the gesture. Far from being a trait limited to the artist's work, distinctiveness is a quality that is present in the creative composition of any human being who is alive. Drawing from a Lacanian perspective, singularity refers to «the individual's non-negotiable distinctiveness, eccentricity, or idiosyncrasy [...] insofar as it articulates something about the undead pulse of *jouissance*¹» (Ruti [2011]: 1113). As Ruti puts it, singularity carries something that is related to the pulse of life itself.

In the realm of written language, we look for an encounter with an author's singular perspective in a piece. A point of view is fleshed out in a certain distinctiveness in the choice of words, a particular insight, or a story that carries a novel angle that awakens in the perceiver an original way of experiencing something otherwise familiar.

Amid the sea of sloppy information that bombards contemporary life, singularity gasps for air. According to a recent article in *The Atlantic*, in the last couple of years the internet reached a critical tipping point: the volume of artificially generated articles published online surpassed that of human written ones (Warzel [2025]). Writing robots, that is, generative large language models (LLMs), are predictability machines that produce text with qualities opposite to those of human-made distinctive writing. LLMs operate by pursuing the word that is most likely to come next given the one before it in an unfolding sentence, based on millions of texts fed into their training data. A by-product of the way LLMs get optimized is that they tend to exacerbate exactly the qualities that make language "predictable", considering what has been said before by others. LLMs produce the average of what all speakers have said before in similar circumstances taken together (humans and robots). This mode of language production downplays the presence of eccentricities, slips, hyperbole, and interpretation gaps in texts. By means of their very *modus operandi*, LLMs iron out the wrinkles of a written piece, pushing the end-product toward a version of it that is lint-free, polished, and, importantly, predictable.

In the 19th century, within the study of hereditary traits in genomics, Sir Francis Galton introduced the concept of "regression to the mean". Drawing from mathematics and biology, Galton was able to identify and analyze general patterns of transmission across generations – both biological and cultural. One of his central findings was that extreme traits in parents, such as height, tended to

1 In Lacanian terms, *jouissance* can be characterized as "the result of gratification pursued beyond the pleasure principle" (Hook [2020]: 276), conveying a kind of enjoyment defined as the most singular character of any being.

be less extreme in their children, demonstrating a general tendency toward the average. This concept is foundational in statistics. When information is reproduced, “outliers” often move closer to typical values over time, and the information being transmitted gradually converges toward its average values. The regression-to-the-mean principle is central to the operation of LLMs. As previously generated information is fed back into the model to predict the next word to be spoken, the resulting text gradually converges toward an average of what has been produced before by both humans and talking bots (see Senn [2011]; Shumailov et al. [2024]).

Thus, the LLM method of language production is designed to converge to the average of what has been said in the past. This process tones down the atypical, outlier-like language that often lives in the margins of human speech. The loss of distinctiveness in enunciation has deeper consequences than just wiping out originality. The regression-to-the-mean phenomenon also erodes the traces of individual points of view that manifest in deviations from hegemonic language. This has consequences for the manner of existing of ideas, and it compromises the singularity that is grounded in the novel enunciative gesture. From an existential pluralism perspective, the next section revises the importance of the endurance of multiple points of view as a condition for the instauration of different modes of existence.

In *The Lesser Existences*, David Lapoujade (2021) offers an interpretation of Étienne Souriau’s work in order to elaborate key concepts underpinning existential pluralism. He foregrounds the importance of what he calls “the lesser existences”, as well as the moral imperative that underlies their right to exist. In a sharp and sensible reading of Souriau’s work, Lapoujade puts forward the question of “how to see”, not just a work of art but any human composition, pinpointing that the attunement to a singular point of view conveys a manner of existence. Each manner of existence proceeds from a gestural instaurative stroke. «Each existence proceeds from a gesture that instaurs it, from an “arabesque” that determines it to be such as it is (Lapoujade [2021]: 14). The gesture in human creation reveals a certain shape and singular curvature that unveils the architectonic of what is being created». In Souriau’s philosophy, as presented by Lapoujade, the instaurative forces that underlie the work of art merge the necessity of existence with the necessity to act:

To discern [...] a movement toward existence with the appearance of a work, which involves instaurative forces down below, and appeals and iridescences – in short, an assistance of which the apparently inert object is evidence – up above. (Souriau [2015]: 156-157)

According to this approach, the point of view is intrinsic to the phenomenon itself – that is, the point of view inhabits the created piece, as the unfolding act of

composition is «animated by forces, by internal dynamisms» (Lapoujade [2021]: 41). In Souriau, to perceive involves “entering” a point of view, insofar as our own perspective ensembles with another one in a participative act of perception. As the aesthetic phenomenon ensues, it becomes compelling to find “the point of view of the phenomenon” (Lapoujade [2021]: 36), as the point of view entails an existence, «our perspective is inserted into another perspective – our point of view is inserted into another point of view, as if there were an intentionality or, better, an organizing principle visible within the architectonic of the phenomenon» (Lapoujade [2021]: 37).

In this sense, the point of view from which the creative act unfolds is ontologically intrinsic to the existence of “the thing” being created. «Each mode of existence envelops a point of view [...]. Souriau often repeats, we need to find the thing’s point of view» (Lapoujade [2021]: 38). A text may offer a unique point of view that invites the reader to enter. This is true in literature, but also in academic or journalistic work animated by the author’s analytical perspective that aims beyond the mere transmission of new information. However, as we increasingly consume our news and reading material online (Kennedy, Pratt [2019]), the abundance of available information does not necessarily translate into an abundance of different perspectives. Rather, the opposite occurs: the volume of LLM generated articles published online recently surpassed that of human written ones, so that reverberating text becomes the main diet of the algorithm. This process exacerbates the regression-to-the-mean phenomenon, so that encountering an original point of view in a text begins to become a true needle in a haystack.

2. *Crafting the sentence: On the need for artisanal writing*

Singularity carries something of the order of the pulse of life. Large language models show no pulse other than the operational prediction of the next word in a sentence. Artificially created language can be remarkably informative, but a different question is whether it conveys a provocative narrative. There is a distinction between the act of narrating a story and the act of providing information. Long before LLMs were among us, in *The Storyteller*, Walter Benjamin (1936) elaborates on the distinction between information and narrative. At that time, considering the rise of journalism, Benjamin was raising the concern that narration was being replaced by information:

The art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out. [...] The press as one of its most important instruments in fully developed capitalism, there emerges a form of communication which, no matter how far back its origin may lie, never before influenced the epic form in a decisive way. But now it does exert such an influence. And it turns out that it

confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way, and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information (Benjamin [1936]: 3).

Benjamin observes that information operates under the imperative to appear plausible, and in this regard, it stands in opposition to narration. This opposition, for Benjamin, marks a decline in the art of storytelling, as the demand for the diffusion of information rises. Information instructs us about the world's novelties; however, this does not result in the flourishing or accumulation of memorable stories. On the contrary, within the realm of information dissemination, stories are produced to convey novelty yet remain transient:

The value of information does not survive the moment in which it was new. It lives only at that moment; it has to surrender to it completely and explain itself to it without losing any time. A story is different. It does not expend itself. (Benjamin [1936]: 4)

Information is valuable if it carries novelty or explanation. Informative events are “burdened” with explanations. On the contrary, as Benjamin observes, the art of storytelling consists precisely in recounting a tale free from explanation. The extraordinary is never narrated with complete precision; rather, some gaps in the interpretation of the story are left for the reader to fill, never imposing upon the reader the psychological context of what takes place. The reader is left free to grapple with the subject according to their own understanding, and through this freedom, narration attains a resonance and amplitude that information altogether lacks. Benjamin offers the example of Montaigne telling Herodotus's story of an Egyptian king who, after being defeated by a conquering enemy, is forced to watch members of his family being humiliated in a public parade. After witnessing, with a stoic semblance, the passage of his own daughter, the king then sees his lifelong old servant walking before him – and only at that moment does he burst into lament. Montaigne does not explain why the king cried at that moment and not before, leaving interpretation to the reader. The interpreter will make sense of the story from their own subjective perspective. Benjamin argues that the story produces surprise and reflection. It leaves room for our own point of view to inhabit it. As an additional example, consider the first paragraph of Clarice Lispector's story *The egg and the chicken*:

In the morning in the kitchen on the table I see the egg. I look at the egg with a single gaze. Immediately I perceive that one cannot be seeing an egg. Seeing an egg never remains in the present: as soon as I see an egg it already becomes having seen an egg three millennia ago. – At the very instant of seeing the egg it is the memory of an egg. – The egg can only be seen by one who has already seen it. – When one sees the egg it is too late: an egg seen is an egg lost. – Seeing the egg is the promise of one day eventually seeing the egg. – A brief and indivisible glance; if indeed there is thought; there is none; there is the egg. – Looking is the necessary instrument that, once used, I shall discard. I shall keep the egg.

– The egg has no itself. Individually it does not exist. Seeing the egg is impossible: the egg is supervisible just as there are supersonic sounds. No one can see the egg. Does the dog see the egg? Only machines see the egg. The construction crane sees the egg. – When I was ancient an egg landed on my shoulder. – Love for the egg cannot be felt either. Love for the egg is supersensible. We do not know that we love the egg. (Lispector [2015]: 191)

In this paragraph, the referential meaning of “egg” becomes completely blurred. The passage establishes an atmosphere rather than a plot; what “egg” means in the narrator’s mind no longer matters. What matters is what the reader makes of it. The story provides a gate for the perceiver to enter – and then again, returning to Souriau, to perceive a singular piece involves entering a point of view, insofar as the perceiver’s perspective ensembles with the authors in a participative act.

To host the perceiver’s point of view, however, a story needs to leave room for interpretation; that is, its narrative needs to be loosely woven. The narrator should put the material together in a way that leaves gaps for the perceiver’s point of view to move through. Benjamin describes the art of storytelling by comparing it with the work of the artisan:

The storytelling that thrives for a long time in the milieu of work – the rural, the maritime, and the urban – is itself an artisan form of communication, as it were. It does not aim to convey the pure essence of the thing, like information or a report. It sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel. (Benjamin [1936]: 16)

Drawing on the textile metaphor, conceiving creative writing as an artisanal endeavor gives a new status to the presence of distinctiveness, atypicality, and idiosyncrasy in the thread of linguistic fabric. Handcrafted material can be distinguished from industrial fabric by its imperfections – but those imperfections are precisely what LLMs are built to remove through the serial manufacturing of adequate language.

2.1 *Cultural homogenization and the normalization of text*

Singular, artisanal sentences – embodying an aesthetic of imperfection – disrupt the homogenizing flow of capitalist serial production, standing against the standardization of mass-produced, formulaic texts.

In recent decades, cultural homogenization has been well documented as part of the more general phenomenon of globalization (Zulfiqar, Kalid [2022]). New forms of media have introduced new methods of organizing and sharing information. More than ever, a person’s identity is shaped by their belonging to a particular group defined at the level of a global culture. Identity-marking

groups, in turn, vary in scale and are relative to the context in which identification takes place. In the field of identity politics, for example, Todd McGowan (2020) provides an insightful account of the dialectic of the universal and the particular in relation to identity politics in the context of twenty first century collective struggle.

Cultural homogenization is intrinsic to capitalism and serves as a background for social identity development. McGowan notes in relation to the building of identity: «one place becomes indistinguishable from another, and even countries come to resemble each other because of capitalism’s homogenizing effect. McDonald’s colonizes the entire world and places the same stamp on all differences» (McGowan [2020]: 243). As an example of this, Kyle Chayka [2024] describes what has been known as the “hipster coffee shop” phenomenon, identified as the globally spread preference for the hipster coffee shop – an «industrial-size wood tables for accessible seating; a bright interior with walls painted white or covered in subway tiles» (Chayka [2024]). This example illustrates how forms of aesthetics that conform to this globalized norm are preferred over other, more idiosyncratic, culturally specific aesthetic forms, contributing to a broader phenomenon of homogenization in goods and consumption observed across different corners of the world.

An analogous phenomenon is starting to emerge in the realm of written language. The action of LLMs produces a new form of cultural homogenization, not at the level of services or goods for consumption, but at the level of language production: we can now tailor (and even buy) the kind of language we prefer to produce. LLMs offer us a shortcut to a polished version of our own language. We make LLMs write for us. We submit our emails, letters, and documents to the corrective hand of the robot. LLMs are even recruited to write emotion-filled letters to relatives and friends when words don’t come easily to mind. Students write essays using this “tool”. As a result, we see how, at an increasing rate, the production of written language is converging toward standardized piles of texts, in the same way the next coffee anywhere in the world will most likely adhere to the globalized style.

2.2 Sentence composition and desiring-production

Imperfections in written language are traces of subjective experience. However, we seem to choose to outsource our writing, even at the cost of sacrificing our personal linguistic fingerprint. One aspect of this is that we are offered a shortcut that reduces the labor involved in language production. Warzel (2025) observes that, in the creative process, LLM tools remove an enormous amount of “friction” between conception and completion – that is, they remove the work that goes with execution. LLMs enable us to go directly from the idea to the end-

product without traversing the “gruesome” process entailed in writing and editing. But as Warzel observes, «the frictionless future they portend is nightmarish – recursive and soulless, a cultural dead end».

LLMs are tools that save humans time and effort, promising to free up resources to focus solely on the “creative” process. However, as Warzel rightly argues, the removal of friction is the removal of agency and singularity. Creativity without craft is not possible. To think that artificial aids will enhance our creative potential by removing the friction that comes with the work of execution is a fallacy:

This is tragic. The loss of friction deprives people of something crucial. What happens between imagination and creation is ineffable – it entails struggle, iteration, joy, and frustration, disappointment, and pride. It is the process through which we enact agency [...] To lose that, I fear, is to capitulate on our very humanity. (Warzel [2025])

The process of composing a written sentence is clumsy in nature. A human made phrase involves the act of connecting a word with the next one as the sentence unfolds in time. The process of sentence crafting is intentional, as the choice of individual words and the order they take is a gesture infused with subjective sovereignty. LLMs offer a fast ride from the germinative idea to an envisioned final form. However, creativity is not just the initial visualization of the final product. Rather, the creative act entailed in language production is intrinsic to the dynamic process of weaving a word with the next one during the unfolding composition. The force of creativity lives in the act of word weaving that unfolds dynamically over time.

In the book *Spheres of Insurrection: Notes on Decolonizing the Unconscious*, Suely Rolnik (2023), offers a critical analysis of how contemporary neoliberal racial-capitalist structures produce the emergence of instrumental and serialized subjectivities. In this work, Rolnik engages with concepts developed in Deleuze and Guattari, especially around desire, production, and subjectivation. This work foregrounds the importance of reclaiming a form of singular production that is freed from the grid of capitalist normative parameters. Rolnik emphasizes the role of the creative process itself as a form of singular expression. As an example of the dynamic nature of the creative unfolding, she brings the work of the Brazilian artist Lygia Clark, entitled *Caminando (Walking)*. In this performative piece, Clark invites her audience to cut along a Möbius strip lengthwise with scissors, but without passing through the original cutting point. A potentially endless cutting process is produced – the artistic experience is embedded in decomposing the original strip into new strips of paper tape that follow a Möbius-like trajectory and become narrower. In this piece, however, the artistic experience is not so much realized in the final product as in the dynamic experience of cutting the strip. Suely Rolnik describes colonial and capitalist oppression

as processes that capture and drain vital force. This capture reduces subjectivity to its experience as a subject, neutralizing the complexity of the effects that the forces of the world exert upon the body, in favor of producing an individual endowed with a stable identity. This process of subjectivation operates through repetition and through the closure of possibilities for creation, thereby preventing the emergence of “virtual worlds”. In this sense, the modern colonial subject is a zombie who expends a greater part of their libidinal energy in the production of a normative identity.

The artisanal sentence – and the aesthetics of imperfection it embodies – introduces a rupture within the homogenizing logic of capitalist serial production. Rolnik’s approach to creative production draws from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conception of desire as an underlying productive force that creates reality, decentering the notion of desire as a lack that needs to be fulfilled. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari further elaborate the concept of *desiring machines*, in which desire is conceived as a constant life force that operates as a flow, connecting and articulating relations among people, objects, and social contexts, thereby generating subjectivities and realities. The productive phenomenon is the conceived as inseparable from the flow of desire:

The coupling that takes place within the partial object-flow connective synthesis also has another form: product/producing. Producing is always something “grafted onto” the product; and for that reason, desiring-production is production of production. (Deleuze, Guattari [1972]: 6)

The desiring machine is not taken there as a metaphor, but as that which “cuts and is cut” according to three modes that operate during production. The first refers to the connective synthesis and mobilizes libido as an energy of extraction. The second refers to the disjunctive synthesis and mobilizes the divine will (*Numen*) as an energy of separation. Finally, the third refers to conjunctive synthesis and mobilizes the force of joy (*Voluptas*) as residual energy. That is, to extract, to separate, to produce a residual, is to carry out the real operations of desire. Desire bursts forth, always carrying out the grafting of producing onto the product. Then, in *Anti-Oedipus*, the process of desiring-production is conceived simultaneously as the production of production, the production of recording, and the production of consumption.

Like LLMs, human beings are language-producing machines. However, unlike them, we are Deleuze-Guattarian desiring machines; we speak and write by weaving words according to the rhythms of what Rolnik calls “the pimping of life”. The premise that human language is produced, impelled by the rhythms of life, implies that LLM modes of language production obliterate human creativity because of the way they operate. Artificial language is designed and implemented to spare us from the “friction” and labor that are involved in the putting

together of words in a sentence to express some idea. Such friction, however, is the cost of life, as it is attached to the gears of desiring-production in the process of composing sentences.

The dynamic unfolding of the artisanal utterance inevitably leaves behind traces of imperfection and gaps in meaning, as the thread of expression knits itself together according to its own rhythms. Such imperfections and gaps – such unavoidable remainders – are not expected under the workings of artificial machines designed, by their structure, to erase imperfections. In fact, the sole objective of an LLM is to obliterate a virtual gap before it materializes in the unfolding sentence. In contrast, Deleuze-Guattarian desiring machines function «amid hiatuses and ruptures, breakdowns and failures, stalling and short circuits, distances and fragmentations, within a sum that never succeeds in bringing its various parts together so as to form a whole» ([1972]: 42). Cuts are productive and are even forms of connection, as the ways in which desiring machines break or malfunction form part of their functioning. These cuts are inherent to the operations of the speaking desiring-machines that work at the crafting of a sentence, insofar as they function “amid the hiatus” left by the processes of desiring-production, upon which they also feed. In this sense, they run counter to the logic of mass, serial production of texts. On the other hand, LLM offer of “friction free” mode of language production, together with an instantaneous shortcut to the finished product, both incompatible with the workings of desiring-production, which are dynamic and imperfect in form. That is, creativity fleshes itself out in the making of language, before the idea becomes crystallized as a final product. The weight that LLMs lift for us is inherent to the operation of desiring-production: if the friction involved in the crafting of a sentence is removed from the writing process, then, as a byproduct, desire is killed.

Concluding remarks

Building on Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of desiring-production, this paper proposes that the mobilizing power of subjective desire is intrinsic to the ongoing, dynamic process of composing a sentence. The act of writing can be seen as a micro-assemblage, in which the writer, language, and context co-constitute a flow of singular expression. Large language models tend to steer text toward standardized, uniform outputs, diminishing the eccentric features of writing that bear the mark of singular human creation. This paper examines the idea of singularity as it is expressed in the writing process and develops its argument in two interconnected movements. The first establishes, following Étienne Souriau and David Lapoujade, that the creative act requires

a careful attunement to distinct points of view. Then, the process of weakening singularity in the writing gesture hinders the instauration of different modes of existence, disrupting the productive interplay between desire and language. The second movement draws on Benjamin's contrast between information and narrative to emphasize the craft-based dimension of narrative writing, as opposed to the serialized, mass-produced character of informational discourse. Here, creativity is understood as inherent to the temporal, processual labor of construing the sentence, where desire, perception, and linguistic material intertwine. Large language models, by contrast, provide a frictionless route to a polished product, bypassing the step-by-step generative work that sustains the dynamic assemblage of human expression.

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Note e recensioni

Emmanuel Alloa, *Attraverso l'immagine. Una fenomenologia dei media visuali*, tr. it. di A. De Cesaris, Meltemi, Milano 2024, 520 pp.

«Com'è possibile vedere come vediamo? Dove si situa il visibile prima di divenire visibile? È possibile coglierlo nel momento stesso in cui sopraggiunge la sua visibilità?» (p. 351). Queste domande, poste in apertura del Cap. V dell'imponente studio di Emmanuel Alloa, *Attraverso l'immagine*, sono forse il modo migliore di accedere a esso.

Traduzione italiana del libro del 2011 *Das durchscheinende Bild. Konturen einer medialen Phänomenologie*, condotta da Alessandro De Cesaris sulla seconda edizione (diaphanes, 2018), il volume di Alloa ha infatti come obiettivo generale di mostrare che la possibilità e l'articolazione della visione dipende dal suo "aver luogo" in un orizzonte di visibilità che precede la visione stessa. Vale a dire in una dimensione mediale, in tutti i sensi *diafana*, attraverso cui il vedere si articola. E si articola non in senso "statico", quasi si trattasse del presente di Agostino che abbraccia, intatto, l'avvicinarsi degli eventi, ma in modo dinamico: declinandosi insieme al vedere e mutando tanto la sua forma, quanto la sua materia per e in base a esso. Questo *medium*, questo *dia-phanēs* che traspare assieme alle cose cui permette di apparire – lo dice il titolo italiano – è per Alloa *l'immagine*. Di più: è *l'attraverso* dell'immagine, nel senso di quel processo immaginale di generazione dell'apparire in cui diviene possibile cogliere non solo «il sopraggiungere della visibilità», come chiede l'ultima domanda citata, ma anche la concreta genesi del senso in essa.

Da questo punto di vista, ogni volta che ci troviamo davanti a un'immagine (ma, data la sua natura mediale, sarebbe più corretto: "ogni volta che ci troviamo *in* un'immagine"; meglio ancora: "ogni volta che *vediamo attraverso di essa*"), «abbiamo evidentemente a che fare con un fenomeno del tutto particolare, con un'apparenza il cui senso dipende costitutivamente dal fatto di essere un'apparenza» (p. 16), che, in quanto tale, permette di tematizzare direttamente e in generale lo stesso apparire (cfr. p. 394).

In questo senso, a essere in questione nel libro di Alloa sono, in fondo, il senso, i principi e i limiti della stessa pratica fenomenologica, che "attraverso l'immagine" Alloa intende rifondare, perseguendo – come scrive nell'Introduzione – un triplice obiettivo:

Il primo è quello di ricostruire «la doppia linea che ha orientato la speculazione sulle immagini per due millenni», secondo il «doppio paradigma, della trasparenza e dell'opacità, e le sue conseguenze per l'incorporazione dell'immagine negli ordini della conoscenza» (p. 23).

Il secondo, di dimostrare, grazie a un serrato confronto tra Aristotele e Husserl, che «le strutture fenomeniche e quelle proposizionali non obbediscono alle stesse leggi e non sono riducibili le une alle altre» (p. 24).

Mentre il terzo obiettivo – più teoretico – è quello di «trasformare la fenomenologia husserliana [...] in una *diafenomenologia*» o «fenomenologia mediale», fondata sulla tesi-cardine del libro, per cui «non esiste apparire puro, ogni apparire è già sempre un trasparire attraverso qualcos'altro» (p. 25).

Per perseguire questo triplice obiettivo, lo studio si divide in un'Introduzione, una breve Conclusione e cinque Capitoli volti a offrire una panoramica sugli snodi storici principali dell'analisi filosofica dell'immagine (nei Cap. I-IV, dedicati rispettivamente a Platone, alla teoria aristotelica dei media, alla sua ricezione da Temistio a Berkeley e al ruolo delle immagini nella fenomenologia) e a sviluppare la proposta teorica di Alloa (nel Cap. V).

Il risultato è un percorso estremamente ricco e ambizioso all'interno della tradizione del pensiero filosofico occidentale, che, oltre ad avere svariati meriti storico-ermeneutici, si segnala soprattutto per il coraggio teoretico con cui mette a frutto tutte le potenzialità e le difficoltà in cui si imbatte lungo il cammino.

Un esempio – il più rilevante, ma non l'unico – è la lettura del *De anima* di Aristotele che Alloa offre nel Cap. II. Lettura già di per sé degna della massima considerazione per la capacità che ha di mostrare tutta l'attualità della concezione aristotelica della *aisthēsis* e della *phantasia*, ma che acquista il suo vero significato solo nell'ultimo Capitolo del libro, dove Alloa la usa come base per mettere in questione lo stesso concetto husserliano di “fenomeno” e riformulare così, al di fuori di qualsiasi tentazione egologica, i principi della fenomenologia. La stessa individuazione di una radice essenzialmente aristotelica della svolta fenomenologica su cui Alloa insiste a più riprese (un esempio è p. 106) costituisce un guadagno della massima importanza per comprendere il paradigma epistemico in cui si muove la fenomenologia dalla sua fondazione. Tanto che, una volta accettata questa tesi – che, a giudizio di chi scrive, è difficilmente contestabile – non solo si è costretti a rivalutare, come fa Alloa, tutta una serie di mosse teoriche tentate da Heidegger negli anni marburghesi, ma diviene evidente anche l'effettiva portata del lavoro di Alloa, per cui questo si pone di diritto nel “punto di caduta” della parabola fenomenologica che da Husserl passa aristotelicamente attraverso Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty e Lyotard, come una radicale messa in questione dei principi fondamentali (o delle assunzioni teoriche di base) della fenomenologia.

Come Alloa stesso scrive all'inizio del §5.1, una volta accettata la matrice aristotelica del discorso fenomenologico e individuato nell'immagine il suo oggetto proprio, si assiste, infatti, a un progressivo slittamento, per cui al passaggio dalla fenomenologia eidetica a quella trascendentale e poi mediale (p. 353) corrisponde un passaggio ulteriore, con cui quest'ultima affianca alla fenomenologia *genetica* – che «cerca l'origine della potenza della manifestazione in un fondamento» – una fenomenologia *generativa*, in grado di far emergere «questa potenza in una *lateralità* percettiva» (p. 354).

Ora, data la notevole ampiezza del discorso di Alloa e i limiti inevitabili di ogni recensione, non è possibile fermarsi qui in dettaglio sulle tappe di questo percorso. Per provare a rendere giustizia alle ambizioni speculative del libro di Alloa e dare al lettore un'idea dell'altezza a cui esso si muove, mi sembra opportuno soffermarmi però su due punti "critici" del suo discorso, in cui appare evidente l'orizzonte problematico che la diafenomenologia di Alloa riesce a dischiudere.

Il primo punto – di carattere a prima vista meramente storico – riguarda la ricostruzione delle teorie filosofiche dell'immagine condotta nei Cap I-IV. Anche solo scorrendo l'indice del volume, non può non saltare agli occhi di un lettore pratico di storia della filosofia, infatti, il vuoto tra Berkeley e la fenomenologia. Un vuoto, questo, tanto più eloquente se si pensa che al suo interno cadono tutte le complesse strategie di risposta al problema dello statuto dell'immagine tentate dalla modernità: dallo Schematismo trascendentale kantiano (in cui lo schema fa dichiaratamente da medio tra concetto e intuizione), fino alla *Bildlehre* dell'ultimo Fichte, che riconosce all'immagine quella stessa *vis generativa* dell'orizzonte di visibilità (Fichte dice: del fenomeno o del sapere) che vuole rivendicarle Alloa.

Si potrebbe essere tentati, così, di rimproverare ad Alloa di aver saltato uno dei momenti cruciali di quella storia che, a suo modo, intende decostruire.

La verità è però che, messo da parte qualsiasi pregiudizio storicista più o meno latente, proseguendo nella lettura del libro di Alloa ci si convince sempre più che egli abbia una ragione ben precisa per operare una tale omissione: quella, cioè, di voler portare alle sue estreme conseguenze un paradigma epistemico – il paradigma *aristotelico* – che l'episodio filosofico che avviene, grosso modo, tra Descartes e Husserl ha rifiutato in blocco e inteso sostituire.

Dietro l'omissione dell'intera filosofia classica tedesca si nasconde, così, quella radicale alternativa tra Aristotele e Kant, rispetto alla quale Alloa prende sin dall'inizio posizione per Aristotele.

Il secondo punto "critico" – di carattere strettamente teoretico – si può riassumere allora nella domanda se la radicalizzazione del paradigma aristotelico basti a mettere da parte il "paradigma kantiano", o se questo non torni, viceversa, a far valere tutte le sue ragioni proprio nel momento in cui si traggono le estreme conseguenze dell'aristotelismo.

Che questo rischio sia concreto, lo dimostra storicamente il *Denkweg* heideggeriano. Ma guardiamo la cosa all'interno del discorso di Alloa.

Ammesso che «ogni filosofia dell'apparire rimane miope finché non riflette sul proprio orizzonte di possibilità, e ogni filosofia delle condizioni di possibilità resta formalistica fintanto che non riesce a spiegare perché abbia luogo una certa forma concreta di divenire-visibile», per lo stesso Alloa è possibile portarsi al «momento in cui la visibilità viene istanziata» (p. 377) solo a patto di conside-

rare lateralmente l'immagine in quanto lateralità stessa del vedere. Il risultato è un approccio "sintomatologico", che, seguendo l'esempio di Goodman, smette di chiedere cos'è immagine, per porre invece il problema del *quando* e del *dove* c'è immagine (§5.7). Cosa che, grazie alla descrizione della natura "occasionale" dell'immaginale, permette di risalire ancora a quella *medialità generativa dell'immagine* che la filosofia trascendentale, secondo Alloa, manca «perché subordina il processo dell'istanziamento al suo dove» (p. 377).

Rifondare medialmente la fenomenologia significa pertanto – Alloa è esplicito – fornire «una nuova formulazione del principio classico di apriorità», per cui «da che era un "in cui" come forma di tutti i possibili contenuti dell'intuizione, l'*a priori* si trasforma in un "tramite cui", che si manifesta come istanza di forme concrete» (p. 384). Il problema è se davvero nel paradigma kantiano l'*a priori* sia mai stato un mero "in cui", o se l'impresa critica non presupponga già la risoluzione del trascendentale nel processo di concreta istanziazione dell'esperire.

In fondo, basta seguire la problematizzazione dello statuto delle forme dell'estetico e del loro rapporto con l'intelletto nell'Analitica trascendentale e poi nella terza *Critica* (come hanno fatto Lyotard e Deleuze) per assistere a una progressiva funzionalizzazione dell'*a priori*, che lo pone come orizzonte di presentazione dei fenomeni (o "in cui") solo perché gli riconosce la natura di un *operatore* costituente la possibilità stessa (si legga: l'*apparenza*) dei fenomeni.

Il problema diventa così, semmai, lo statuto di questo processo di costituzione: se esso sia sintetico o differenziale (cfr. pp. 462 sg.) – alternativa che, mi permetto di segnalare, non è per forza netta. Ma mettiamo da parte questa rilevazione, in fondo estrinseca.

Accettando che la dimensione mediale funzioni come un *a priori*, non ci troviamo pur sempre dinanzi a una forma di trascendentale? Esibire la natura mediale dell'immagine significa per Alloa portare alla luce, lasciar trasparire nel vedere stesso la sua generatività (che coincide col trasparire stesso). Ma questa "generatività" è esattamente la stessa che Kant attribuisce allo schema. Di più: svolge esattamente la stessa funzione di produzione della temporalità della sintesi ontologica veritativa che Heidegger ricava dalla distruzione dello Schematismo. Poco importa se la temporalità costituita è una temporalità multipla e anacronistica e non estatica (cfr. i §§5.8-9): nel passaggio dalla fenomenologia genetica alla diafenomenologia mediale generativa di Alloa si iscrive comunque un momento *a priori*, una forma di "trascendentalità immaginale", per spiegare la quale non basta una sintomatologia che – Alloa non lo nasconde – «non può offrire che una fenomenologia esemplificativa» (p. 453). Bisogna ritornare a interrogarsi sullo statuto e sul senso del trascendentale e sul rapporto tra quest'ultimo e l'immaginale. E per far questo bisogna fare i conti con quell'"enorme parentesi" del pensiero occidentale che, da Kant a Hegel, ha inteso scavare al di sotto del paradigma epistemico aristotelico, in cerca di una logica capace di *dedurre geneticamente i processi di determinazione* dell'apparire stesso.

Non foss'altro che per la capacità che ha di riportare problematicamente a questo bivio del pensiero filosofico occidentale una fenomenologia post-novecentesca troppo spesso giocata sulla sua rimozione, il libro di Alloa si segnala come un testo cruciale della ricerca filosofica contemporanea, decisivo di un'intera tradizione.

(Antonio Branca)

Claudio Paolucci, *Nati cyborg. Cosa l'intelligenza artificiale generativa ci dice dell'essere umano*, 2025, Rome, Luca Sossella Editore, 144 pages.

Nell'arco degli ultimi decenni, alcune delle innovazioni tecnologiche a cui abbiamo assistito possono averci colti impreparati; possono averci posto di fronte a meccanismi difficili da comprendere e maneggiare; possono esserci sembrate necessarie, o del tutto superflue. Probabilmente, però, è stata soltanto l'intelligenza artificiale generativa a costringerci a interrogarci non tanto su ciò che facciamo, o come lo facciamo, ma in modo più radicale su ciò che siamo.

È proprio questa la convinzione che motiva il nuovo lavoro di Claudio Paolucci, il cui titolo, *Nati cyborg*, è un omaggio esplicito ad Andy Clark e al suo *Natural-Born Cyborgs* (2004). E già da questo riferimento è possibile intuire l'orientamento di Paolucci, per nulla allarmato dalla diffusione dell'IA, ma piuttosto convinto che essa sia soltanto l'ultimo degli "innesti" che hanno integrato l'essere umano, fornendo al contempo l'opportunità di riflettere su di esso.

Che cosa significa essere *umani*? Paolucci prende le mosse dall'importanza tradizionalmente attribuita a questo riguardo alla capacità di produrre enunciati, e più in particolare, con Benveniste (1996), un tipo molto specifico di enunciato, quello dell'«io che dice io». Che fare allora con una macchina, l'intelligenza artificiale generativa, che non solo ha imparato a parlare, ma ha imparato a «dire io»?

Secondo Paolucci, una reazione diffusa a questo interrogativo è di negazione; non soltanto riguardo alla capacità di linguaggio, ma anche rispetto alle molte altre operazioni che l'IA dà mostra di sapere svolgere.

Il riferimento polemico, qui, è a un lavoro recente di Luciano Floridi (2023). Floridi ha sostenuto, viene riportato, che non appena un compito può essere svolto da una macchina, esso dimostri di potere essere svolto senza intelligenza. In questo modo, utilizzando le parole di Paolucci, Floridi fa dell'IA un «Re Mida della stupidità»: se un essere umano fa una certa cosa, allora è intelligente, ma se a fare la stessa cosa è la macchina, allora si dimostra stupida.

L'argomento di Floridi, prosegue Paolucci, si basa su una separazione tra intelligenza e azione efficace, secondo cui sarebbe possibile portare a termine de-

terminati compiti senza che questo implichi *pensare*. Ma per Paolucci, che si rifà non soltanto alla semiotica ma anche alla teoria della mente estesa e all'enattivismo, una tale separazione risulta inaccettabile, dal momento che l'intelligenza è esattamente azione efficace. Il pensiero serve proprio ad agire nel mondo e l'intelligenza stessa è *definibile come un fare*.

Se è difficile “pensare al pensiero” in questi termini, secondo Paolucci, è anche perché si rimane ancorati a una visione antropocentrica dell'intelligenza. Seguendo allora un altro suggerimento di Andy Clark (2008) è possibile muoversi nella direzione di una parità non antropocentrica tra cognizione umana e non-umana, per esplorare se non sia piuttosto che l'IA esprime un'intelligenza, ma non quella che siamo abituati a ritenere tale.

Qui Paolucci, come già nel suo precedente *Persona* (2020), si diffonde su alcune *particolari* forme di «dire io»: per esempio, la capacità di figurarsi in scenari futuri e anticipare le conseguenze delle proprie azioni. Un insieme di abilità incarnate esemplarmente dal personaggio di Ulisse, rappresentante per eccellenza dalla *metis*, la ragione calcolante.

Secondo Paolucci, la capacità di prevedere il mondo per agire con successo in esso, oltre a essere ciò che fa la mente umana, è anche ciò che fanno le intelligenze artificiali generative, che funzionano in base a una logica sostanzialmente *predittiva*. Esse infatti, afferma Paolucci, non fanno altro che predire la parola e il pixel più probabile in base al *prompt* fornito.

Un altro concetto cardine al quale fa riferimento Paolucci è quello, mutuato questa volta dall'enattivismo, di significato come *sense-making*. Secondo Francisco Varela, padre dell'orientamento enattivista, qualunque organismo vivente costruisce significato nel mondo ritagliando dal continuum del proprio ambiente ciò che ha per esso un valore, in modo da ridurre la complessità dell'ambiente e finalizzare le proprie azioni.

L'equivalente semio-linguistico del *sense-making* è, per Paolucci, l'atto di enunciazione, tramite cui non si aggiunge qualcosa, ma piuttosto si sottrae dall'archivio del “già-detto”. Una «potatura», per mutuare un'altra felice espressione dell'autore, che di nuovo ben si attaglia al funzionamento delle intelligenze artificiali generative. Infatti, anche un sistema come ChatGP, alla sua maniera, si connette al materiale a cui attinge, a partire dal *prompt* ricevuto, per ritagliarlo in modo da rispondere in maniera adeguata.

«Alla sua maniera»: l'idea non è infatti che la mente umana e l'IA funzionino allo stesso modo, ma piuttosto che esse facciano qualcosa di analogo, ciascuna secondo la propria “natura”. E che questo possa illuminare retrospettivamente, invece di minacciarla, la specificità dell'essere umano.

Il lavoro di Paolucci propone una lettura dell'intelligenza artificiale generativa che mette in dialogo la tradizione semiotica con le correnti più recenti della filosofia della mente e della fenomenologia. Un esperimento intrigante potrebbe

consistere allora nel rileggere alcune delle questioni sollevate nel volume alla luce di discipline e riferimenti complementari. Questo consente anche, a mio avviso, di inquadrare la questione dell'IA all'interno del concreto contesto sociale entro cui essa si sta sviluppando, e che sta trasformando in modo profondo.

Torniamo al punto di partenza di *Nati Cyborg*: la negazione delle capacità tradizionalmente attribuite all'essere umano ed espresse oggi dall'IA. Mi pare che una simile reazione possa discendere non soltanto da una precisa presa di posizione teorica, ma anche da una più semplice e viscerale *paura*.

A mio avviso, questa emozione non è da screditare come ingenuamente tecnofoba. Al contrario, essa mi sembra rimandare a qualcosa di caratteristico dell'essere umano in quanto tale, e di potenzialmente ben motivato per l'essere umano che viva nella società di oggi.

Innanzitutto, sappiamo dagli studi sul fenomeno dell'*uncanny valley* (Mori [1970]) che l'essere umano risponde con profondo turbamento quando una macchina, che continua a essere riconosciuta come tale, assume però un'apparenza di umanità particolarmente pronunciata. Così come un robot che manifesti un eccessivo antropomorfismo, anche un'intelligenza artificiale può diventare *perturbante* quando esprime in questo caso non fattezze, ma capacità che sono tipicamente e persino esclusivamente attribuite all'essere umano. Negare intelligenza all'intelligenza artificiale, in questa chiave, potrebbe costituire una forma di difesa nei confronti di una paura radicata nell'essere umano per ciò che dovrebbe essere "altro", e che invece diventa preoccupantemente simile.

In secondo luogo, venendo allo specifico contesto contemporaneo, mi sembra innegabile che la diffusione dell'intelligenza artificiale generativa sollevi questioni che toccano ambiti di primo piano nella vita delle persone. Mi limito qui all'ambito del lavoro. Se molti esperti hanno parlato di una imminente «disoccupazione tecnologica», e di scenari in cui «non si lavorerà più» (Bastani [2019]; Susskind [2020]), in alcuni settori si profila invece il rischio opposto di un'era in cui si «lavorerà sempre». Il riferimento è in primo luogo al lavoro accademico, in cui l'IA rischia di diventare uno strumento per rincorrere aspettative di produttività sempre più irrealistiche. Una non improbabile tendenza futura sembra quella di una nuova e più aspra stagione di «capitalismo accademico» (Slaughter & Leslie [1997]; Preston [2022]), anche a causa di una competizione «drogata» da strumenti sui quali ancora non si ha pieno controllo. Ed ecco che, di nuovo, la questione dell'intelligenza dell'IA assume una più comprensibile coloritura emotiva, nonché una chiara rilevanza politica.

Questioni di questo genere vanno esplicitamente al di là del lavoro di Paolucci. Eppure, a mio avviso, possono integrare e arricchire una prospettiva come quella dell'autore, che si pone l'obiettivo esplicito di fare lavorare l'intelligenza artificiale generativa a vantaggio dell'umano, piuttosto che contro di esso.

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Tra le sue opere più importanti: *Studi di semiotica interpretativa* (Bompiani 2007), *Strutturalismo e interpretazione* (Bompiani 2010), *Umberto Eco* (Feltrinelli 2017), *Persona* (Bompiani 2020) e *Cognitive Semiotics* (Springer 2021).

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(Federica Cavaletti)

Rosa Luxemburg, *Un ardente desiderio di primavera. Erbe, animali e cieli nelle lettere dal carcere*, a cura di D. Baratti e P. Candolfi, con uno scritto di N. Schoenenberger, Edizioni Casagrande, Bellinzona 2025, 180 pp.

Come sono contenta di essermi improvvisamente lanciata nella botanica tre anni fa con tutto il mio ardore, come in tutto quello che faccio, con tutta me stessa, tanto che il mondo, il partito e il lavoro sono svaniti e una sola passione mi riempiva giorno e notte: vagabondare nei campi di primavera, riempire le braccia di piante e poi a casa ordinarle, identificarle e catalogarle in quaderni. Allora ho vissuto tutta la primavera come in preda alla febbre, e come soffrivo quando sedevo a lungo davanti a una nuova piantina senza riuscire a identificarla e classificarla; in simili casi sono stata più volte sul punto di svenire, tanto che Gertrud [Zlottko], infuriata, ha minacciato di «portarmi via» le piante. Ma ora sono di casa nel regno del verde, me lo sono conquistato – nella tempesta, nella passione – e ciò di cui ci si è impadroniti con tanto ardore mette profonde radici. (Luxemburg [2025]: 88)

Così racconta Rosa Luxemburg a Hans Diefenbach, in una lettera dal carcere di Wronke datata 30 marzo 1917. Il regno vegetale appassiona la militante, che del resto sin da studentessa universitaria segue i corsi di Scienze naturali a Zurigo, a tal punto da redigere un erbario dal maggio 1913, che custodisce circa duecentocinquanta piante. Eppure, non è solo l'ardore ciò che spinge Luxemburg verso le piante, bensì qualcosa di più radicale e ramificato – come emerge dalla selezione di venti lettere carcerarie a cura di Danilo Baratti e Patrizia Candolfi, con il proposito di far trasparire il legame tra la rivoluzionaria e la natura, un intento che restituisce con nitore i significati che Luxemburg

attribuiva a quel tutto, vivente e inorganico, a cui si sentiva interiormente legata con «fili sottili e invisibili». Alle lettere segue la riproduzione di sedici fogli dell'*herbarium* contenenti le piante menzionate nelle lettere, accompagnati da un saggio sulla flora carceraria di Nicola Schoenenberger, che, attraverso le *plantae* descritte dalla militante, rievoca e ridisegna gli ambienti abitati dalla rivoluzionaria, comparandoli con il presente. Edito da Casagrande nel 2025, il libro, che fa affiorare aspetti essenziali del pensiero e della personalità di Luxemburg da una prospettiva particolare, quella epistolare-carceraria e persino tassonomica, si apre con un'introduzione intitolata *Una cinciallegra in gabbia* e si chiude con una nota biografica di «R.», fornendo così al lettore la possibilità di orientarsi attentamente nel carteggio.

Dinanzi ai fiori che i suoi corrispondenti le spediscono durante le sue prigionie, Luxemburg prova una gioia immediata e forte, in grado di alleviare il dolore per la propria condizione e quella mondana, contemplare le forme delle nuvole, le tonalità del cielo, accudire i merli e le cinciallegre degli spazi carcerari, lasciarsi riscaldare dalla luce solare, camminare nei giardini delle reclusioni, dona senz'altro grande felicità alla comunista polacca, ma non è la felicità ristoratrice il fulcro del suo amore per le piante e la natura tutta, né lo è il solo entusiasmo febbrile o la mera curiosità scientifica. La natura dona gioia per la sua bellezza, questo l'aspetto più immediato, sensibile, fisiologico: nel contemplarla, Luxemburg è attraversata «dalla testa ai piedi» da un sentimento di contentezza, di stupore radioso nei confronti della vita malgrado l'oscurità delle celle; nondimeno, la natura ha un significato profondo al di là dell'estetico, in cui pur si riflette, e che certamente non è da sottostimare. Numerose sono infatti le lettere in cui Luxemburg considera la bellezza della natura come qualcosa che rende la vita degna di essere vissuta. In una lettera a Sophie Liebknecht del 20 aprile 1917, si legge a riguardo: «Se esistono simili colori, simili forme, allora la vita è bella e vale la pena di essere vissuta, non è vero? Ho assorbito con lo sguardo il quadro luminoso e ho inghiottito ogni raggio rosa, finché improvvisamente ho dovuto ridere di me stessa. Dio santo, il cielo e le nuvole e tutta la bellezza della vita non restano a Wronke, non ho bisogno di dir loro addio; no, vengono via con me e restano con me ovunque io sia e finché vivrò» (Luxemburg [2025]: 114). Similmente, il sentimento di gioia e gratitudine relato alla natura, malgrado tutto, affiora anche in una lettera a Hans Diefenbach del 6 luglio 1917: «Mio Dio, non ho forse abbastanza motivi per essere riconoscente e felice, visto che il sole splende così e gli uccelli cantano quell'antichissima canzone di cui capisco tanto bene il significato...?» (Luxemburg [2025]: 106). Anche la sola esistenza della sua gatta Mimi è motivo di gioia, benché lontana da Luxemburg e dai baci sugli occhi socchiusi che era solita darle. La bellezza della natura assurge a invito a goderne, a coglierla con devozione, nella consapevolezza dell'irripetibilità. Ancora a Diefenbach nella lettera del 6 luglio:

Una sola cosa mi tormenta: che io debba godere *da sola* di tanta bellezza. Vorrei gridare forte oltre il muro: Oh, la prego, presti attenzione a questa splendida giornata! Non dimentichi, anche se è molto occupato, anche se sta attraversando frettolosamente il cortile nell'affanno degli impegni quotidiani, non dimentichi di alzare rapidamente la testa e di dare un'occhiata a queste immense nuvole d'argento e al calmo oceano blu in cui nuotano. Stia attento all'aria, appesantita dal respiro appassionato degli ultimi fiori di tiglio, e allo splendore e alla gloria che riempiono questo giorno, perché questo giorno non tornerà mai, mai più.

Le viene offerto come una rosa in piena fioritura, che giace ai suoi piedi, in attesa che la raccolga e la preme sulle sue labbra. (Luxemburg [2025]: 109)

Il lucore della natura è un dono per l'esistenza e un monito ad accoglierlo, ma la natura non è solo questo, inoltre non è osservata come qualcosa di slegato dal politico. Mondo, lavoro e partito *non svaniscono*, come si accenna nella summenzionata lettera, al più sembrano talvolta sospendersi, congelarsi come i bombi in inverno che la spartachista riscaldava con il suo fiato, invero sono riassorbiti e guardati mediante la preziosa lente della natura – simbolo e insegnamento, del vivente per il vivente (e dunque anche per l'animale politico). La natura, indomita e addomesticata, libera e sfruttata, rigogliosa e prosciugata, dischiude tre nuclei teorici fondamentali del pensiero luxemburghiano, quali il capitalismo, il colonialismo e il militarismo – ovvero l'anticapitalismo, l'anticolonialismo e l'antimilitarismo. Paradigma della condanna della *distruzione* degli animali umani e non umani a causa del colonialismo e del capitalismo è la seguente lettera, che racchiude una precisa posizione teorica, secondo cui la violenza capitalistica e coloniale si impone su ogni forma della natura, suggerendo che la lotta al capitale porta con sé anche la salvaguardia di tutti i viventi, dalle piante ai popoli, difendendo e lasciando essere quell'unità di fondo che l'accumulazione capitalistica frantuma e prosciuga:

Cosa leggo? Soprattutto scienze naturali: geografie delle piante e geografia degli animali. Proprio ieri ho letto qualcosa sulla causa della scomparsa degli uccelli canori in Germania: è la razionalizzazione crescente delle colture – selvicoltura, orticoltura, agricoltura – che sta a poco a poco distruggendo tutte le condizioni naturali di nidificazione e alimentazione: alberi cavi, terreni incolti, sottobosco, foglie appassite sul terreno del giardino. Mi ha fatto tanto male quando l'ho letto. L'immagine della scomparsa silenziosa e inarrestabile di queste piccole creature indifese mi ha addolorato così tanto che mi è venuto da piangere, e non perché noi uomini ne perderemo il canto. Mi ha ricordato un libro russo del professor Sieber sulla scomparsa dei pellerossa in Nord America che avevo letto a Zurigo: vengono scacciati man mano dal loro territorio dagli uomini civilizzati e abbandonati a un silenzioso e crudele declino. (Luxemburg [2025]: 97)

La natura (o meglio, il naturalista esemplare) offre anche un'indicazione metodologica per il militante, una postura nell'agire, un esempio di sguardo non

viziato, nella misura in cui ha un atteggiamento di equilibrio spirituale, malgrado le intemperie, che consente di osservare con esattezza e dedizione l'oggetto indagato e dunque di comprenderlo adeguatamente. Per Luxemburg, paradigma di tale distaccata pacatezza è Goethe:

Questo lasciarsi prendere completamente dalla miseria del giorno mi è inconcepibile e insopportabile. Guarda per esempio come Goethe si poneva di fronte alle cose con distaccata pacatezza. E pensa cosa gli toccava vivere: la Grande rivoluzione francese, che vista da vicino dava sicuramente l'impressione di una farsa sanguinosa e del tutto insensata, e poi dal 1793 al 1815 una catena ininterrotta di guerre, dove il mondo sembrava un manicomio fuori controllo. E lui con che tranquillità, con che equilibrio spirituale portava avanti contemporaneamente i suoi studi sulla metamorfosi delle piante, sulla teoria dei colori, su mille cose. Non pretendo che tu scriva poesie come Goethe, ma la sua concezione della vita – l'universalismo degli interessi, l'armonia interna – ognuno può procurarsela o almeno perseguirla. E se tu mi dici: ma Goethe non era un militante politico, io penso: un militante deve soprattutto cercare di stare bene al di sopra delle cose, altrimenti va a sprofondare col naso in ogni pozzanghera -naturalmente penso a un militante di grande levatura, non a una banderuola dal calibro dei "grandi uomini" della vostra tavolata. (Luxemburg [2025]: 60,61)

La natura, ci ricorda ancora Luxemburg, racchiude nel profondo il significato della tessitura: l'empatia per il vivente in ogni sua forma è simpatia con l'umano oltre ogni frontiera; l'unità della vita nella pluralità delle forme afferma l'unità dell'umano contrapposto al disumano. Tale interpretazione, oltre a incarnare una precisa visione di mondo, retorico dirlo, ha anche un valore eminentemente politico. Il sentimento di fratellanza con il bufalo dominato è tutt'uno con il sentimento di fratellanza con i popoli oppressi. Le lacrime che rigano il volto della rivoluzionaria e che irrorano la sua anima militante sono per ciascun vivente e racchiudono la necessità di liberazione dall'addomesticamento, dalla civilizzazione e dal dominio. «Che cosa vuoi dire con le sofferenze speciali degli ebrei?» chiede Luxemburg a Mathilde Wurm in una lettera del 16 febbraio 1917:

Le giovani vittime delle piantagioni di gomma a Putumayo, i neri in Africa con i cui corpi gli europei giocano a palla prigioniera, mi sono altrettanto vicini. E ti ricordi ancora le parole sulla spedizione Von Trotha nel Kalahari nel rapporto dello Stato maggiore: «E il rantolo dei moribondi, e il grido folle degli assetati echeggiavano nel sublime silenzio dell'infinito»? Oh, questo «sublime silenzio dell'infinito», in cui così tante grida si spengono inascoltate, risuona in me così forte che non mi rimane nel cuore nessun angolino speciale per il ghetto: mi sento a casa mia in tutto il mondo, ovunque ci siano nuvole e uccelli e lacrime umane. (Luxemburg [2025]: 72)

Lacrime che esprimono uno stesso sentire, di coappartenenza. In una lettera da Breslavia a Sophie Liebknecht, del dicembre 1917, Luxemburg non solo rac-

conta con parole commosse e commoventi la sua gioia inspiegabile, nonostante l'oscurità, l'inverno, la privazione di libertà, riconducendola alla «vita stessa», ma a un dato punto le racconta di un episodio che le ha causato un grande dolore: spesso nel cortile dove passeggia, arrivano carri dell'esercito sovraccarichi di sacchi e abiti logori da distribuire tra le celle, di solito trainati da cavalli, ma quel giorno da bufali della Romania quale bottino di guerra, animali che dallo stato selvatico di libertà erano stati costretti all'addomesticamento, ammansiti con violenza. Il soldato che li guidava, per spronarli a varcare la soglia della porta, aveva iniziato a picchiarli con il manico della frusta, a colpirli con forza, a tal punto che uno sanguinava:

Mi sono messa davanti a lui e l'animale mi ha guardata, mi sono scese le lacrime – erano le *sue* lacrime; non si può fremere più dolorosamente per il fratello più amato di quanto non fremessi io, impotente, davanti a quella sofferenza muta. Come erano lontani e irraggiungibili e perduti i bei pascoli verdi, lussureggianti e liberi, della Romania! Come erano diversi laggiù lo splendore del sole, il soffio del vento, come erano diversi i bei canti degli uccelli che si sentivano là, o il richiamo melodioso dei pastori. E qui – questa città straniera, orribile, la stalla tetra, il fieno nauseabondo e muffo, frammisto di paglia putrida, gli uomini estranei e terribili e – le percosse, il sangue che cola dalla ferita fresca... Oh, mio povero bufalo, mio povero, amato fratello, ce ne stiamo qui entrambi impotenti e muti e siamo tutt'uno nel dolore, nell'impotenza, nella nostalgia. – Intanto i carcerati si affacciavano attorno al carro, scaricavano i pesanti sacchi e li trascinavano nell'edificio; ma il soldato, ficcatosi le mani nelle tasche dei pantaloni, rideva e fischiettava tra sé una canzonaccia passeggiando per il cortile a grandi passi. E tutta la magnifica guerra mi è passata davanti. (Luxemburg [2025]: 125)

Nella violenza sul fratello bufalo si riflette e coglie quella stessa violenza bellica condannata da Luxemburg, anche per questo imprigionata, in difesa del *tutt'uno*.

(Fiorella Giaculli)

Catherine Z. Elgin, *Epistemic Ecology*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2025, ISBN: 9780262551717.

Ecology is the study of the mutual adjustments between organisms and their environment. Epistemic ecology is the study of the interaction and reciprocal adaptations between epistemic agents in epistemic communities and their environments, which frame and promote, with some effectiveness, the epistemic ends that inform and unify them (pp. 3-4). «Epistemic» here does not refer to a peculiar, privileged or fixed kind of knowledge, faculty, skill, or competence.

Rather, it covers the vast and multifaceted range of phenomena of human understanding. Epistemic ecology, then, qualifies as a comprehensive study of how epistemic agents, niches and communities come to form themselves, and of how and why they structure their social and natural environments, in-forming, re-forming and trans-forming facts and values, persons, objects, things, instruments, institutions and events. The work's basic proposal is a change from a static, passive, merely classificatory conception of epistemic and scientific practices to a dynamic, active, engaged one; or, to use Elgin's terms, from a «spectatorial» to an «agential stance» (pp. 9-17). Thus, for Elgin, an epistemic agent should be epistemically autonomous, interdependent with the other members of her community, and should comply with flexible and pragmatic criteria of rational and objective acceptability.

Given fallibility and finitude of human understanding, active epistemic agents require autonomy, the capacity to make their own rules and standards, as well as interdependence with a community of other agents (chap. 2). More precisely, autonomy and interdependence are «mutually reinforcing» (p. 28). Autonomy, far from being the exercise of an insular subject, requires interdependence with other members of a community engaged in keeping and transmitting information otherwise not accessible. Interdependence without self-governance, or a critical stance towards received opinions, does not prevent wishful thinking, dogmatic and passive attitudes, or conformism. Weakening epistemic demands while enhancing pragmatic constraints is Elgin's general strategy. Not belief, but acceptance should count as a basic initial demand, and the cure for subjective idiosyncrasy is not inert consistency and coherence but more flexible co-tenability. Subjective participation is still retained. Indeed, according to Elgin, an autonomous understanding requires luminosity – or Leibnizian apperception (cfr. p. 49), cognizance – i.e., explicit awareness of how and why something is understood. To put it in positive terms, luminosity should guarantee a first-personal approach that eludes the danger of individualism. In the central chapters, Elgin advocates for, and inquires into, first-person modalities of transmission of knowledge like testimony – together with other ways of «word giving» and «word taking» (chaps. 6-7) – disputing and disagreement in philosophy (chap. 8), and teaching (chap. 9).

Luminosity highlights subjective contribution in the dynamics of mutual support between autonomy and interdependence. But genuine responsible epistemic agency, while depending on autonomy, springs from the cultivation of epistemic virtues such as competence, conscientiousness, open-mindedness, sincerity, sensitivity and attunement to the relevant communicative contexts (chap. 3). A first-person stance, then, reflect both subjective responsibility and the ends shared by a community of rational agents.

Epistemic communities are not basic neutral communities plus epistemic qualifications. Taking autonomy seriously implies that there is no fixed threshold to cross in order to be counted as “epistemic”. Truth and empirical adequacy, then, are but some ways of gaining epistemic success, not exclusively pursued or even primarily desirable. Rather, the mutual support of autonomy and interdependence requires a more nuanced normative approach.

The principal function of communities involved in transmission and instruction of all kinds of understanding is that they extend and expand the epistemic range of the agents (p. 122). Thus, according to Elgin, communities are not simply groups whose members share common expectations towards desired and fixed goals. With explicit reference to Kant’s characterizations of the categorical imperative in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, communities are systematic «realms of ends» structured by constraints, choices, decisions and preferences made by authoritative antecedent practices always susceptible to revision and further adjustments (pp. 52-54, and throughout the whole chap. 5). Members of an epistemic community, or «compatriots», then, pursue the ends that they have made by and for themselves, consciously aware that what is justified within their practices does not bind them to the justification, i.e., epistemic recognition or legitimation, of the practices themselves, unless the latter are open to confrontation with different communities and practices (see especially p. 125 ff., where Elgin elaborates on Rawls’ distinction between the goods of a practice and the goods in a practice). Autonomy is not arbitrariness; relativity is retained without conceding to mere stipulation or to any nihilist appeal to coherence and direct utility.

Advancement (not chimeric progress nor sheer novelty) of understanding is the supreme maxim of epistemic ecology. Leveraging, systematic and holistic endeavors, together with a reflective balance of evidence and explication, occurring instances and ideal demands, shared values and cooperative ends, are some of the most basic dynamics and widespread processes within an epistemic environment. All these actions and choices not only make advancement conceivable and viable, but also desirable (see especially chap. 4). This last point should be emphasized. Epistemic Ecology is less about the structure of environments than it is about fostering epistemic agency in responsible communities, clarifying ends and means for cooperation. While describing how epistemic environments are or should be, Elgin raises the question of how one should conduct her own cognitive life, often suggesting why we should cope with difficulties in order to minimize error (see for instance the sparse condemnations of pseudo-science or conspiracy theories, pp. 104-105, 133, and especially 258-259 and 308).

A book like *Epistemic Ecology* is better understood in light of its provenance. Elgin’s Kant redux marks a new phase of a long and venerable tradition of Harvard Kantianism. From Lewis’ conceptual empiricism to Goodman’s constructi-

ve nominalism, Elgin's version of the latter contributes to this heresy by shifting the focus on the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Her Kantian-responsibilist ecology offers then an ingenuous new application of the theme of the «primacy of the practical» in epistemic contexts.

Epistemic Ecology is also the latest example of Elgin's lifelong research into the most basic problems of epistemology. Many of the book's general conceptions were indeed presented in more detail in previous works: reflective equilibrium, understanding, acceptability, attempts to weak truth and other «felicitous falsehoods», even Kantian-responsibilism. *Epistemic Ecology* seems to be less concerned with the reconception of basic epistemological ideas, at least at the most general level, than it is with their ecological relocation. Something basic has, in fact, changed. The new ecological perspective has made definitional accuracy and systematic adequacy lose their previous explanatory privileges. Along with them have fallen the special interest in the logical and referential mapping of experience as well as any strict focus on methods of projection. It is not clear to what extent Elgin's constructional philosophy has been reshaped. Probably not radically. The ecological shift seems to be more a shift in weight and emphasis than a complete reconfiguration of the realm. However, if «environment» marks no significant difference from its social-epistemic counterparts «community» or «practice», the reader could be left with the impression that ecological thought affects Elgin's framework only peripherally, leaving the central logical and epistemological assumptions intact.

Another novelty, in comparison with Elgin's other works, emerges from the intended omission of problems that overlap scientific and artistic understanding, which are confronted only in the book's last chapter. What I find critical the service that the aesthetic offer to science as gatekeeper of standards such as symmetry, systematicity, simplicity, elegance and other contribution in inquiry. My worries are not about which aesthetic factor is more relevant, but about gatekeeping as a fruitful model. Elgin writes: «Gatekeepers set parameters, sketching contours on the appropriateness of taxonomies, measurements, standards of rigor, methods of investigation, and modes of inference» (p. 301). Given this description, the whole metaphor of the gatekeeper seems to me more factually correct than well-weighted when applied to the explorative dimension of inquiry. Even though Elgin explicitly recognizes the contribution of aesthetic understanding in shaping scientific practices, she does not avoid the risk of presenting a sublimated framework where our epistemic communities migrate to their respective realms of ends, severing the link with the perceptual source of teleological, normative and evaluative understanding. Perhaps the time is ripe for a transversal reading of the three *Critiques*. New and interesting problems might emerge.

The virtues of Elgin's book stand in her non-prescriptive stance, where the weakness of metaphysical and epistemological assumptions, together with a sober and parsimonious but wisely multifaceted technical apparatus, intertwines with a comprehensive study of epistemic normativity, nurturing further investigations and ways to implement an ecological approach in epistemology. The reader proficient in contemporary epistemology may disagree with Elgin on special topics, but will not be disappointed by the breadth and subtlety of her analysis. The ecologist, epistemic or not, moving to constructional epistemology, might find a flexible, steady and sharp conceptual toolkit. All readers, in following the proposed shift from the spectatorial to the agential stance, can appreciate a new way in which Elgin herself reflects on her major contributions to philosophy.

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