sculpting in time:
between meaning and information

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ABSTRACT

Employing an auto-ethnographic perspective and non-linear notions of time, *Sculpting in Time* identifies erosions of meaning and agency under techno-capitalism and explores the implications of their disappearance for the democratic ideal. The theoretical framework of this research-creation dissertation problematizes linear conception of time and posits that the rethinking of time can be emancipatory; when time is seen instead as the unfolding of relations, with others and with oneself, sensitivities can be honed toward other ways of embodying the present and conceptualizing notions of progress.



FIGURE 1. PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE AUTHOR'S GRANDMOTHER NEAR BOGINSKOYE OZERO, BYELORUSSIAN SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLIC, 1957.

dedicated to all peasants

“we are now nothing but satellites, soft darkness”[1]
but our shadow remains; in slowness and indecision, in words and parades,
in a glance still capable of holding contempt and in a dream left undreamt

[1] Alabiso-Cahill, Grayson. *In Words and Parade*s. Successful Press, 2019. XII.

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INTRODUCTION: METHODS, QUESTIONS AND A ROADMAP

My intellectual curiosity with emancipatory politics began in 1997: with my earliest memory of seeing a statue of Vladimir Lenin decommissioned on television. Lenin, with his torso hoisted by a crane, slowly spins in mid-air as his hand reaches out to the spectating crowd. I turned to my grandfather and asked him: why are they taking down all the statues of Lenin in Lithuania, while all the statues in Belarus remained intact? 'Lenin stands for something else there,' he replied. Belly on the floor, I turned back towards the television and continued to wonder how a statue (and with it, the past) can mean completely different things to next-door neighbours: for my grandfather in Belarus, a remnant of the future that never arrived; for my grandfather in Lithuania, the remnant of an irredeemable past.

Coming of age as a Belarusian in Lithuania during the 1990s was a liminal experience, marked by the country's complex transition from Soviet rule to an independent nation. It was a period of national rediscovery, seething prejudice, enduring economic challenges, and of adjusting to new ideological norms and influences. While both Lithuanians and Belarusians faced economic and social challenges typical of post-Soviet states, Belarus retained an economic model with stronger state control and slower integration into global markets, while Lithuania rapidly moved towards market economies, aligning itself with Western Europe.[2] Having one foot in each household, I was able to experience two starkly different approaches to post-soviet modernization: the 'shock therapy' liberalization of Lithuania, and the gradual drift towards autocracy in Belarus. Living between two homes and two national identities that were often at odds with one another, my positionality afforded me access and insight into the central role that memory politics played in shaping national identity and political discourse.

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[2] Pilia, Giulia. "Estonia and Lithuania in transition: A compared analysis of the change and its costs and benefits" in *Business Ethics and Leadership, 1(2).* 2017. 12-19.

Sąjūdis, which means "movement" in Lithuanian, initially established itself as a neo-Soviet and multi-issue social movement. It was initially formed to support Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost (openness) policies but quickly evolved into a critique of the stagnating Soviet regime, using arguments approved by the reformist wing of the Communist Party.[3] Sąjūdis was largely a reaction against the Russification policies of the Soviet Union. By promoting Lithuanian language and culture, Sąjūdis facilitated the revival of Lithuanian language, culture, and historical heritage. The movement had its roots in Lithuania's cultural circles and many of its founding members were artists and writers who were deeply concerned about the preservation of Lithuanian culture, language, and heritage, which had been suppressed under Soviet rule.

Sąjūdis played a crucial role in mobilizing the public for political change. It organized mass rallies, demonstrations, and other forms of peaceful protest that unified the population around the idea of independence. These activities contributed significantly to the formation of a civil society in Lithuania, encouraging public participation in politics and fostering a sense of civic responsibility and engagement. The ability of Sąjūdis to unite the populace around the idea of a distinct Lithuanian identity, free from Soviet influence, was crucial in its success and the eventual establishment of a democratic Lithuania.[4]

Belarus, by contrast, has been slow to develop a distinct national identity — up until the beginning of the 20th century, the people who live in what we now call Belarus tended to view themselves as tuteishiya (locals) rather than members of a distinct nationality or 'imagined community' — a community different from its immediate

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[3] Dementavičius, J. *In Search of Identity: Features of Soviet Reflexive Modernity in Lithuania.* [Sąjūdžio tapatybės beieškant: sovietinės reflektyviosios modernybės bruožai Lietuvoje.] 2011.

[4] Grybkauskas, Saulius. "Attitudes Towards the Soviet Past in Lithuania: Three Strategies." *Der Donauraum, 56* (2016): 15-24.

neighbours such as Russia, Poland, Lithuania or Ukraine.[5] Consequently, contemporary Belarusian society formed around a core of Soviet values rather than a distinct national identity. To this day, Belarus maintains a significant part of its communist cultural heritage, which continues to influence the population's values and everyday life.[6] The adoption and continued use of the Russian language also impacts how Belarusians view themselves in relation to Europe, with a substantial portion of the population identifying closely with Russia and its culture.[7] Unlike its Baltic neighbours, who oriented themselves towards Europe, both economically and politically, Belarus remains under Russian influence.

Alexander Lukashenko, a former collective farm manager, was elected president in 1994 in what was considered the last free and fair election in Belarus. Lukashenko began consolidating power almost immediately: in 1996, a controversial referendum extended his term and expanded presidential powers, effectively weakening the parliament. The Lukashenko regime maintains tight control over the media, suppressing independent journalism and any political pluralism or dissent. State-run media outlets dominate the media landscape, promoting government propaganda. Despite domestic protests and international condemnation, Lukashenko remains in power — relying on a combination of political repression, economic measures, and support from Russia.[8]

I found myself returning to memories of my formative years, to questions of democratic integrity, to comparative strategies in emancipatory politics and the meaning

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[5] White, Stephen and Valentina Feklyunina. "Belarus and 'Europe': Elite Discourses" in *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. 163-186.

[6] Titarenko, Larissa. "Religion and Politics in Neighboring Belarus and Poland: Gender Dimensions" in *Demokratizatsiya, 9* (2001): 603.

[7] Radzik, Ryszard. "Belarus Between the East and the West: The Soviet-Russian Option versus the Nationalist Option in Belarusian Society" in *International Journal of Sociology, 31,* 2001. 11 - 45.

[8] Wilson, Andrew. *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship.* Yale University Press, 2021.

of autonomy, in response to several major events taking place during the course of my doctoral studies:

1. The coronavirus outbreak, which started in late 2019, led to worldwide lockdowns and a massive shift towards online communication. There was a significant increase in reported cases of anxiety and depression; exacerbated by the uncertainty and fear surrounding the virus, along with social isolation.[9] This period saw significant developments in Artificial Intelligence models, particularly in areas such as natural language processing and machine learning, which improved AI's interactive capabilities. Of particular interest (and concern) was the proliferation of AI-driven mental health applications, offering automated 'psychotherapy' and monitoring.[10]

2. The 2020 Belarusian presidential election, in which Lukashenko claimed a landslide victory, was followed by massive protests and allegations of electoral fraud. The protests were the largest in Belarusian history, with tens of thousands of people taking to the streets across the country. The demonstrations were notable for including workers from state-owned enterprises, traditionally a base of support for Lukashenko.[11] The government's response was a violent crackdown on protesters, further arrests of opposition figures, and increased censorship. Despite mass arrests, protests and strikes continued for several months. Protesters and bystanders used smartphones to document events on the ground, including police brutality and human rights abuses. These records were critical in countering state propaganda.[12]

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[9] Fofana, Nina and Faiza Latif, Summaira Sarfraz, Bilal, M. F. Bashir, Bushra Komal. "Fear and agony of the pandemic leading to stress and mental illness: An emerging crisis in the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak." *Psychiatry Research, 291* (2020): 113230 - 113230.

[10] Tornero-Costa, Roberto, and A. Martínez-Millana, N. Azzopardi-Muscat, L. Lazeri, V. Traver and D. Novillo-Ortiz. "Methodological and Quality Flaws in the Use of Artificial Intelligence in Mental Health Research: Systematic Review." *JMIR Mental Health*, 10 (2023).

[11] Gabowitsch, Mischa. "Belarusian Protest: Regimes of Engagement and Coordination" in *Slavic Review 80*, no. 1 (2021): 27-37.

[12] Bush, Daniel. "No Modest Voices: Social Media and the Protests in Belarus" in *Stanford Internet Observatory.* August 28, 2020.

3. On January 6, 2021 supporters of President Donald Trump stormed the US Capitol, marking a significant moment in American politics, away from the peaceful transfer of power towards violent autocratic ambition. The event deepened political polarization in the US, and served as a stark reminder of the fragility of democracy. Social media played a significant role in the events leading up to and during the insurrection: Facebook, in particular, hosted a surge of misinformation and threats; including posts attacking the legitimacy of the 2020 U.S. presidential election and calling for violence. The platform's reliance on groups to drive user engagement contributed significantly to the spread of false narratives. Critically, Facebook's automated tools for policing posts were ineffective.[13]

4. On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine — a significant escalation of the conflict that had been simmering since 2014. The conflict's roots can be traced back to the Euromaidan Revolution of 2014, which led to the ousting of pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovych. This was followed by Russia's annexation of Crimea in March 2014 and the outbreak of fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions of Eastern Ukraine, where separatist rebels declared independence with Russia's support. Russia managed to occupy parts of Eastern Ukraine, including significant areas of the Donbas region, and declared the annexation of these territories. Cyber warfare played a historically significant role in the war effort, with both sides engaging in cyberattacks targeting digital infrastructures. Social media platforms, in particular, became battlegrounds for influencing public opinion and spreading narratives favourable to each side.[14]

The aforementioned events taking place during my doctoral studies significantly shaped my theoretical concerns and methods as an emerging researcher, and are largely responsible for my turn towards the auto ethnographic as a method of inquiry.

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[13] Wang, Jina. *The U.S. Capitol Riot: Examining the Rioters, Social Media, and Disinformation.* 2022. Harvard University Division of Continuing Education.

[14] Geers, Kenneth. “Cyber Operations in the Russia-Ukraine War” in *The Cyber Defense Review.* 2021.

The weight of these events mingling with memories of my childhood, and I found myself wondering — haven't I been here before? How comparable were my past experiences with the events of today? Once again, I held membership in a nation searching for a cohesive identity and a sense of unity amid contentious interpretations of the past and of national heritage. Once again, a nation struggling to balance its progressive political aspirations against the pitfalls of populism. Once again, senseless violence. I was at a loss to grapple with what I perceived to be an intersection of crises, obscuring and compounding one another: a crisis of sense, a crisis of mental health, and a crisis of memory.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT

"Sculpting in Time" is a research creation project that combines academic research with creative writing, contemporary art and archival photography — embarking on an auto-ethnographic exploration of the complex interplay between historical memory, identity formation, and the socio-political landscapes that shape them. Using an auto-ethnographic approach, this study seeks to unravel how the rethinking of time, viewed not as a linear process but as a tapestry of relationships, can be an emancipatory force towards preserving and revitalizing democratic ideals in an age dominated by the logic and pace of techno-capitalism.

Research creation offered me a unique lens through which to witness and represent historical events as a researcher, highlighting the often overlooked subjective nature of historical narration. Through creative expression, researchers can complicate, unsettle and contest historical narratives by offering more subjective, alternative viewpoints. This is particularly important in contexts where histories have been distorted or repressed. Through creative practices, scholars can explore the intricate relationships between place, history, and politics, unveiling the ways in which geopolitical spaces are subjectively experienced. This not only enriches our understanding of history but also encourages critical reflections on our own positions within these historical narratives.

Research creation is under-utilized and underrepresented in academia, which is another reason I chose to work with creative writing, contemporary art and archival photography as part of my doctoral research. As both an artist and a researcher, it was important for me to use my own position within the university to carve out more space for research creation as a research methodology. Responding artistically to history not only broadens our perspectives but also invites a more engaged and critical interaction with the past, highlighting the ability of researchers and artists to witness, interpret, and influence a past that is not static. Artistic responses to history enable a dialogic relationship with the past, one that is not fixed but fluid, open to reinterpretation and debate. Through creative endeavours, academia can foster a more inclusive, reflexive, and vibrant intellectual environment, one that recognizes and affirms the value of creativity and self-reflection in advancing human understanding.

Research creation allowed me to embody my findings in tangible forms, making abstract ideas more accessible and engaging to a broader, more interdisciplinary audience. By integrating artistic practices into academic research, scholars can push the boundaries of their disciplines; fostering interdisciplinary collaboration and opening up new avenues of inquiry and innovation. Arts-based research methods offer a unique avenue for exploring complex human experiences, emotions, and cultural contexts that traditional research methods might not fully capture. In the broader context of humanities research, these approaches can significantly contribute to explorations of identity, memory, and societal dynamics. Moreover, arts-based methods can enhance public engagement with academic research. By producing accessible and relatable outputs, such as films, exhibitions, and creative writing publications, these methods can bridge the gap between academia and the wider public, encouraging a broader dialogue around research themes.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

The questions I'll be addressing in each section of this dissertation are:

1. How does techno-capitalism contribute to the erosion of meaning and agency in contemporary society, and what are the democratic implications of this erosion?

2. In what ways can reconceptualizing time as a relational and non-linear construct contribute to individual and collective emancipation?

3. How can an auto-ethnographic approach enhance our understanding of these phenomena, and what insight does it offer into the interplay between personal experiences and broader socio-political dynamics?

An arts-based auto-ethnographic research approach was the most compelling choice of methodology for investigating the aforementioned questions: research creation, with its emphasis on process over product, mirrors a non-linear understanding of time; offering insights into how temporal reconceptualization can foster more liberated modes of being by modelling/rehearsing an alternate 'sensibility.'[15] By moving away from linear narratives and embracing more cyclical or fragmented representations of time, arts-based research methods can challenge dominant temporal frameworks that often underpin oppressive socio-economic systems. Such an approach can open up new avenues for understanding emancipation, not as a singular event but as an ongoing process of becoming that is deeply intertwined with one's relations to others and to their own inner-world.

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[15] Paolantonio, Mario Di. *Education and Democracy at the End: The Crisis of Sense.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

In the context of examining techno-capitalism and the reconceptualization of time, auto-ethnography can reveal how these forces impact individuals on a day-to-day basis, as well as how individuals navigate and resist these impacts. As an artist, I'm both a witness and a participant in the cultural and psychic shifts of our time and the use of research creation to present auto-ethnographic findings enables a rich, multi-layered exploration of the interplay between personal experiences and larger societal trends, illuminating the ways in which the personal is indeed political.

METHODOLOGY

As a research method, autoethnography is primarily focused on the exploration of personal experience in relation to cultural, social, and political contexts. Autoethnography combines personal narrative with self-reflection, whereby the researcher uses their own personal experiences as a significant component of their research. The approach is often narrative in nature, involving storytelling, personal reflection, and the use of subjective experience as a primary source of data. It emphasizes the connection between the personal and the cultural, exploring how individual experiences reflect broader societal and cultural truths.[16] The goal is to provide insight into cultural practices and phenomena, and to engage in a process of self-discovery and self-reflection; with the intent to gain greater understanding of how personal experience illuminate larger social issues.

Autoethnography is a subject of debate within qualitative research communities: one of the primary critiques of autoethnography is that it lacks the objectivity typical of more traditional research methods. Critics argue that the subjective nature of autoethnographic work can lead to biases that may skew the research findings, making it difficult to generalize the results to broader populations. In other words, autoethnography's focus on the self is sometimes seen as a weakness. Skeptics

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[16] Ellis, Carolyn, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research, 12* (2010): 273-290.

question the academic value of personal narratives, viewing them as overly introspective exercises that prioritize the researcher's experiences over wider social or cultural insights. Finally, assessing the quality of autoethnographic research can be challenging, as traditional criteria for evaluating research validity (such as reproducibility) may not apply. This leads to concerns about how to judge the contributions of autoethnographic works to academic disciplines.

However, defenders of autoethnography argue that it offers uniquely deep insights into cultural and social phenomena by connecting the personal to the cultural.[17] Through narrating personal experiences, researchers can illuminate larger societal and cultural truths, making abstract concepts more comprehensible. Proponents highlight the method's capacity for reflexivity—acknowledging the researcher's role in the construction of knowledge—as a strength. This approach challenges the assumed objectivity of traditional methods, arguing that all research is, in some way, subjective and influenced by the researcher's perspective.[18] Far from being a methodological weakness, the narrative and artistic elements of autoethnography are seen as contributions to the diversification of research methods. This approach encourages innovation in how academic knowledge is presented and consumed, making research findings more engaging to a broader audience.

The ‘crisis of confidence’ brought on by postmodernism in the 1980s introduced new opportunities to reform the social sciences and to re-conceive the objectives and forms of social science inquiry.[19] In particular, scholars began illustrating how the facts and ‘truths’ scientists found were inextricably tied to the vocabularies and paradigms the scientists used to represent them[20]; they recognized the impossibility of universal

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[17] Chang, Heewon. *Autoethnography as Method*. Left Coast Press. 2008.

[18] Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory As Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*. 1st ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021.

[19] Ellis, Carolyn, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research, 12* (2010): 273-290.

[20] Kuhn, Thomas. *The structure of scientific revolutions* (3rd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1996.

narratives; they understood new relationships between authors, audiences, and texts[21]; and they realized that stories were complex, constitutive, meaningful phenomena that taught morals and ethics; introduced unique ways of thinking and feeling; and helped people make sense of themselves and others.[22]

Furthermore, scholars began recognizing that different kinds of people possess different assumptions about the world—a multitude of ways of speaking, writing, valuing and believing—and that conventional ways of doing and thinking about research were narrow, limiting, and parochial:

> For the most part, those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective. Following these conventions, a researcher not only disregards other ways of knowing but also implies that other ways necessarily are unsatisfactory and invalid. Autoethnography, on the other hand, expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research; this approach also helps us understand how the kinds of people we claim, or are perceived, to be influence interpretations of what we study, how we study it, and what we say about our topic.[23]

Gradually, scholars began to envision the social sciences as less akin to physics and more closely related to literature, rich with stories and imbued with values. This shift was driven by a desire to address these emerging critiques of traditional research paradigms and to, instead, emphasize the production of research that is meaningful, accessible, emotionally resonant and rooted in personal experience. Autoethnography emerged as a preferred methodology for scholars intent on exploring how personal experiences profoundly shape the research journey: this includes decisions about the subjects, timing, and methods of research, which are all influenced by institutional mandates, funding, and personal life events. In an effort to challenge the belief that research can

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[21] Barthes, Roland. *Image, music, text* (transl. by S. Heath). New York: Hill and Wang. 1977.

[22] Bochner, Arthur. “Narrative's virtues” in *Qualitative Inquiry*, 7(2). 2001. 131-157.

[23] Ellis, Carolyn, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner. "Autoethnography: An Overview." *Historical Social Research, 12* (2010): 274.

be conducted from a neutral, detached perspective, autoethnography openly acknowledges and integrates the researcher's subjectivity, emotions, and impact on the study, offering a transparent and inclusive alternative to traditional methods.

Throughout “Sculpting in Time” I work with photo autoethnography: a qualitative research method that combines photography with autoethnography. I use photographs and film to document personal experiences in relation to broader social and cultural contexts; where the images serve as focal points (or ‘data’) to support my theoretical arguments, reflections and interpretations. The photographs are used to capture moments, affects, and contexts that are relevant to my research questions, and to propose resignification — constructing new relationships between things that may seem otherwise unrelated. If successful, the visual elements throughout this study will articulate a larger cultural milieu by providing a visual record that complements written narratives and reflections.

The artworks presented throughout this study serve as a point of departure for introspection and analysis, both for the reader and for myself as the researcher. They provide, in the Arentian sense, something for the reader and I to ‘hold in common’[24], a cultural artifact to interpret and contest. The artworks that I ask the reader to engage with throughout this study do not hold any singular, definitive truths that I hope for the reader to assimilate, rather, they are an invitation: they provide the reader with an opportunity to entertain a poetic sensibility. As both an artist and a researcher, I’m attempting to provide my readers with an aesthetic experience. The artworks presented throughout this study allow the reader to test the claims of my dissertation for themselves — if the reader finds that the artworks enhance the validity and reliability of my findings, this would, in turn, lend more credibility to my interpretations and conclusions about the importance of a poetic sensibility. One of the more compelling criticisms of arts-based autoethnographic research is that it lacks a metric by which to measure its success, therefore, the ability of the artworks in this study to illicit an

[24] Canovan, Margaret. “POLITICS AS CULTURE: HANNAH ARENDT AND THE PUBLIC REALM” in *History of Political Thought 6*, no. 3 (1985): 617–42.

affective engagement, to engage and to hold the readers' attention, provides an important measure for the 'falsification' of this study.

The following studies set the precedent for my own by utilizing photo autoethnography as a research method across various contexts; highlighting the method's versatility and depth in understanding the relationship between personal and collective experiences:

Joyce Hocker examined family photos, documents, and artifacts to explore the intersections of family history and personal identity. The author's journey through family archives revealed insights into memory, identity, and the continuity of familial narratives.[25] Throughout this study, I also reflect on familial inheritance: the values, insights and biases related to emancipatory politics that I've inherited and internalized from my elders and community members, in an effort to determine where my own views and beliefs on the matter begin and end. Archival photographs were an indispensable memory aid for me in recalling the texture and gravity of key events.

Maria Gindidis employed photo autoethnography to investigate the emotional experiences in the author's educational journey. The study underscores the influence of formative emotional experiences on identity development.[26] Drawing on Gindidis' approach, I also chose to look towards formative experiences with curiosity, in an effort to determine what it was about those particular events that was so transformative to my values and to a political development that was my own.

Shiyu Zheng's reflective autoethnographic study utilized a combination of writing, photographs, and audio recordings, to reflect on her quarantine experience during

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[25] Hocker, Joyce. "It's All Come Down to Me: Meaning Making With Family Artifacts" in *Qualitative Inquiry, 16* (2010): 863 - 870.

[26] Gindidis, Maria. "Emotional Landscapes of Living, Learning, and Teaching: A Lens Within, from Learner to Teacher-Researcher." The Qualitative Report (2020).

COVID-19; offering insights into the emotional impacts of isolation.[27] Zheng's inclusion of the everyday, the 'detritus' of the ordinary, also encouraged me to include moments of my research journey, such as screenshots of my computer screen, to illustrate and articulate the ways in which the emerging technologies I discuss and critique in my research perniciously find their way into the methods I use to conduct my research.

ARTIST STATEMENT

This body of work was inspired by Hannah Arendt's examination of what is made possible by the public realm. Through a variety of mediums, I seek to illuminate the ephemeral yet enduring moments where the private and public converge, invoking Arendt's belief in the ability of public speech to shape and redefine the contours of our shared world.[28] This body of work serves as a contemplative reflection on the spaces between us—both physical and metaphorical—that hold the potential for transformation and disclosure. Echoing Arendt's insights, this dissertation is an invitation to engage with the myriad ways in which politics, in its most vibrant and cultural form, permeates every aspect of our lives, challenging us to consider our role in the continuous creation of our collective narrative. In this context, this body of work is also a call to action—a reminder of the agency we possess, as individuals and as a collective, to participate in the making of our world. Drawing inspiration from the wellspring of Arendt's thought, I aim to provoke reflection and a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between the individual and the collective, the private and the public, the past and the future.

This body of work was also inspired by the insightful critiques of Franco Berardi: it dives into the paradoxes of contemporary life, where the promise of connectivity and

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[27] Zheng, Shiyu. "Quarantine Life Is Stillness and Dialogue: A Reflective Autoethnography During a Global Pandemic." Qualitative Inquiry, 27 (2020): 829 - 834.

[28] In Arendt's work, the "vita activa" refers to the active life, encompassing human activities related to labor, work, and action. This concept contrasts with "vita contemplativa," the contemplative life focused on meditation and thought. Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.

abundance coexists with alienation, exhaustion, and a pervasive sense of loss.[29] Through my creative work, I aim to capture the dissonance between the internal world of human desire and the external forces of economic logic and digital acceleration.

ROADMAP

"Sculpting in Time" is divided into three thematic sections: to address the past, the present, and the imaginary. The first section, "Revolving: Desire and Democracy" addresses historical time and the ways in which the desires of the individual were the predominant animating force for democratic movements. I begin by tracing the origins of democracy as labor struggle; from the first political experiments in direct participatory democracy in Athens; to the October Revolution and its failure to realize a democratic alternative to capitalism; to the present day, where democracy finds itself "an empty shell lending itself to every adventure"[30] and exploitation has evolved past the corporal to include emotional and cognitive labor. This section concludes with a meditation on the state of desire in the present day.

The transition between the first and second section is bridged by Sophia Oppel's video work, "I'm Sorry, I'm Having Trouble with the Connection," which explores desire and autonomy from the vantage point of an artificial intelligence neural network. In October of 2019, Oppel and I collaborated on the exhibition "An Infinite Loop in the Virtual Plaza" which illustrated some of the parallels between the architecture of mall plazas and the placeless function that social media interfaces serve; arguing that both reaffirm neocolonial notions of 'universality' while perpetuating neoliberal capitalism and a-political subjects. This exhibition was presented as part of the Nuit Blanche contemporary art festival and won the Independent Project Award from the city of Toronto. Working on this exhibition during my doctoral studies considerably shaped the trajectory and the concerns of my own dissertation. Oppel's "I'm Sorry, I'm Having

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[29] Berardi, Franco. *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. London: Verso. 2017.

[30] Lazzarato, Maurizio. *Capital Hates Everyone: Fascism or Revolution*. semiotext(e). 42.

Trouble with the Connection" is an evolution of many of the same ideas and concerns that animated our 2019 exhibition together. Oppel's film serves as a photo ethnographic pairing to the ideas explored in the first section; in particular, as an expression of Franco Berardi's writing on the automation of cognition.

The second section, "Now: the Pedagogical in the Aesthetic," considers notions of revolution alternative to the militarized and coercive take-over of state power. I explore different ways of embodying the present: sensibilities that undermine logics of force and the systems that create distracted, anxious subjects (as discussed in the first section.) I reflect on the pedagogical and emancipatory potentials of attention and aesthetic experiences of the sublime, which culminate in the argument that aesthetic events, in their capacity to inscribe objects with interpretive meaning, and in their capacity to captivate our attention, are valuable pedagogical tools in resisting the logic of the information age and to facilitate the kinds of affective experiences that challenge the postmodern impetus for transparency of meaning and communication.

The transition between the second and third section is bridged by Evaldas Jansas' video work, "Wishes," which features candid, quasi-documentary footage of the residents of post-Soviet Vilnius (Lithuania) reflecting on their desires and the meaning of their lives, in conversation with Jansas. "Wishes" serves as a photo ethnographic pairing to the ideas explored in the second section; in particular, as an expression of Simon Weil's writing on the importance of turning towards others, in reciprocity and in conversation, for our own self-discovery. I reached out to and began a conversation with Jansas about this work in 2017, and I've curated screenings of this work every New Years Day since then. Most recently, I organized a screening of this work at the contemporary art gallery, Joys, for January 1st, 2024.

The final section, "Anti-worlds: Singularity Against Empire" engages in an auto-ethnographic reflection on the ideas put forth in the first and second sections: namely, a critical relationship to the past and the emancipatory potentials of a poetic sensibility. Here, I draw on auto-ethnographic narrative writing, as a vehicle for showing how

selves are made and to make room for a Belarusian-Lithuanian-American self that otherwise wouldn't get to exist.[31]

"Sculpting in Time" attempts to rehearse its own argument through its choice of methodology: through photo autoethnography, a poetic sensibility, and through slow affectivity[32]. Alongside my own photographs, "Sculpting in Time" features original contributions from other visual artists, which serve to illustrate the importance of relationality in an increasingly isolating information age; and that our relationships are a meaningful measure of time's 'progress.' The photographic components of this dissertation offer alternate, affective avenues for engaging with the subject matter explored in writing. As a research creation study, "Sculpting in Time" covers an immense terrain, giving itself a different set of permissions: permission to privilege subjectivity as a mode of engaging the world and its woes; and permission to present the reader with the tensions of aporia*;* in an effort to chart a different path of how we got to the present, algorithmically imposed, moment.[33]

"Sculpting in Time" not only prompts a critical re-examination of how capitalist logics shape our perceptions of identity, time, and community, but it also explores the potential for creative self-discovery and self-expression to counter/remedy these forces. The study's focus on the personal underscores the significance of individual experience on broader socio-political landscapes — that the fabric of wider social and political phenomena is ultimately woven through individual lives, and by their inter-relation. By engaging with the poetic as both a method of inquiry and its expression, this study advocates for the transformative potential of creativity to challenge oppressive socio-economic systems, and to inspire new forms of collective imagination and action. My hope is that this study provides a compelling argument for the role of

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[31] Wark, McKenzie. "Critical (Auto) Theory" in *e-flux journal, Issue #140*. October 2023.

[32] Berardi, Franco "Bifo." *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. Los Angeles/Cambridge: Semiotext(e)/MIT Press. 2012. 158.

[33] Bath, Jon. "Artistic Research Creation for Publicly Engaged Scholarship." KULA: knowledge creation, dissemination, and preservation studies 3(1): 6. 2019.

creativity in fostering democratic ideals; and that it can serve as a reminder of the importance of nurturing spaces for creative expression, both within our personal lives and within our public institutions, in the pursuit of a more just and equitable society.



1. **REVOLVING:**
DESIRE AND DEMOCRACY

Originally, *revolutio* referred to the orbits of the stars. Applied to history, it signifies the fact that the forms of domination, which are limited in number, reoccur in cyclical fashion. The changes which take place in the course of history are integrated into a cycle. It is not progress but repetition that characterizes the historical process. Neither is the human being a free subject of history. Not freedom, but thrownness continues to determine the human relationship to time. It is not humans who make revolutions; rather, they are subjected to them, just as they are subjected to the laws of the stars.[34]



[34] Han, Byung-Chul. *The Scent of Time*. Polity Press, 2017. 14.

The seeds of the democratic tradition were planted by two lovers, Aristogeiton and Harmodius. Greek historian Thucydides recounts how Harmodius was a "celebrated beauty in the flower of his youth"[35] and that his lover, Aristogeiton, was a commoner. Hipparchus, then tyrant of Athens along with his brother Hippias, tried to seduce Harmodius on numerous occasions but Harmodius refused his advances. Aristogeiton, terrified that Hipparchus would use his affluence to take Harmodius from him by force, began to plot sabotage of their tyranny.

Aristogeiton and Harmodius waited for the Great Panathenaea Games, the one day when citizens with arms as part of a procession wouldn't raise suspicion. Concealing their weapons in wreaths of myrtle (the sacred plant of Aphrodite, the goddess of love) their hope was that however few, others would join in the opportunity for their own liberation. After stabbing Hipparchus, Harmodius and Aristogeiton were killed before they could reach Hippias.[36]

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[35] Thucydides, Martin Hammond, and P. J. Rhodes. *The Peloponnesian War*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. 336.

[36] Ibid. 335-339.

Emboldened by this assassination, Cleisthenes came out of exile and ousted Hippias with popular support. Cleisthenes commissioned statues of Aristogeiton and Harmodius in the agora, encouraging supporters of his new government to emulate the actions of tyrannicide; introducing to Athens the "most radical democracy in the ancient world."[37] The statues of Aristogeiton and Harmodius were the first statues in Athens of mortal men — the message being that acting like Harmodius and Aristogeiton was equivalent to the celebrated acts of divine heroes.[38] In publicly celebrating Harmodius and Aristogeiton in monumental art, the new government was encouraging the ability of everyday citizens to effect political change.

In an effort to overcome the incessant feuding between aristocratic families for political influence, Cleisthenes reorganized political participation and representation around the deme, or village. Cleisthenes' reform amounted to a "rupture in the way that public space and time were imagined."[39] The system of demes had "the effect of reposing political power in the ordinary people of Athens, the demos, to a degree unprecedented in the known ancient world."[40] The aristocrat and the landless labourer alike became dependent upon the vote of their fellow Athenian. Pay for jury service ensured that the law courts were composed of citizens drawn from all classes, as opposed to the aristocratic archons who had previously held a monopoly on judicial power.[41] Because class is a relationship to exploitation, this ensured that the courts provided protection for the labouring citizens against domination by the wealthy.

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[37] Roper, Brian S. *The History of Democracy: A Marxist Interpretation*. London: Pluto Press, 2012. 22.

[38] Teegarden, David A. "Acting Like Harmodius and Aristogeiton: Tyrannicide in Ancient Greek Political Culture." In *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Terrorism*. Oxford University Press.

[39] Roper, Brian S. *The History of Democracy: A Marxist Interpretation*. London: Pluto Press, 2012. 23.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ober, Josiah. '"I besieged that man": democracy's revolutionary start' in *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece*. Berkeley, Calif. and London: University of California Press, 2007. 97.

The propertied class remained implacably hostile to democracy, and on several occasions conspired to overthrow democracy and replace it with the oligarchic rule of the wealthiest class of Athenian citizens.[42] Following the suppression of democracy in the Greek world, extinguished by the joint efforts of the Greek propertied classes and the Romans, nothing remotely approximating a democratic system of self-government was allowed to re-emerge by the ruling classes of Europe.



[42] Roper, Brian S. *The History of Democracy: A Marxist Interpretation*. London: Pluto Press, 2012. 26.

"Class" is derived from the Roman "classis," a hierarchy of obligation for military service.[43] The hierarchy of Roman society was closely intertwined with the hierarchy of the military. The Roman republic was ruled by an oligarchy who derived their wealth from taxation and the exploitation of slave labour on large agricultural estates. Land was the most important form of wealth in the Roman republic because land ownership provided the income flow required for a successful political career, where wealth was codified and protected by the Roman legal system.

What distinguished Rome was not economic inequality nor exploitation but the unprecedented enormity in the scale of both. While there was no formal exclusion of the lower classes, the logic of the political system favoured people with time, resources, and a level of integration into the world of politics.[44]

> The attitude of the upper classes to the common people seems largely to have been one of contempt. Like many other aristocracies throughout history, the Roman elite viewed the lower classes as morally and intellectually inferior. The elevation of wealth as a source of personal virtue lay in the aristocratic belief that only the rich man had freedom of choice and thus was able to act according to moral principles.[45]

As the empire of the republic expanded through military conquest, the gap between rich and poor continued to widen; and although the nobility experienced growing wealth, there were "few signs of any improvement in the living conditions of the lower classes, which generally present a bleak picture dominated by economic uncertainty, poor housing, and debt."[46]

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[43] Mann, Michael. *The Sources of Social Power*, Vol. 1. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 1986. 252.

[44] Ibid. 40-57.

[45] Roper, Brian S. *The History of Democracy: A Marxist Interpretation*. London: Pluto Press, 2012. 57.

[46] Ibid. 51.

The origins of feudalism stretch back to the final two centuries of the Roman Empire: by 800, reading and writing became the sole preserve of the church and property was privately controlled by a class of lords, "who extracted a surplus from the peasants by legal relations of compulsion."[47] The church was a major landholder, but of even greater significance was the ideological role the church played in legitimating the status quo: "The cathedrals, the greatest artistic creations of the period, were also the greatest symbol of the power of the ruling class, emphasizing the God-ordained character of society."[48] The overwhelming peasant majority of the population became atomized, divided up into localized units, controlled by local lords.

After centuries of absolutist rule, the emergence of industrialized labor as a more efficient extraction of surplus value began to displace feudalism. The majority of the population began selling their capacity to work to an employer for a wage; labour reinvented as a commodity that could be bought and sold in increments. The bulk of society's work continued to be done by propertyless labourers who, in the process of supplying the needs of society, were inseparably creating surplus value for those who bought their labour-power. The production of goods and services became subordinate to the creation of profit, and the fundamental objective of the capitalist system became the self-expansion of capital itself.[49]

The property relations that emerged in the English countryside between lords who had ownership of the land, capitalist tenants and wage labourers, generated a surplus productivity throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that eventually lead to the Industrial Revolution. Geographic expansion, military power, economic growth, and state formation became inseparably intertwined. The arrival of capitalist

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[47] Ibid. 64-68.

[48] Ibid. 70.

[49] Wood, Ellen Meiksins. *The Origin of Capitalism: a Longer View*. London: Verso, 2002. 16.

imperialism “fused with, and was subordinated to, the expansion of industrial capitalism …. States’ military power now depended directly on their level of industrialization.”[50]

The inefficiency and subsequent decline of feudalism created the social and economic conditions conducive to the emergence of representative democracy, and once established, the elected assemblies of representative democracies were dominated in composition by wealthy, property-owning men, and this state form further facilitated the expansion of capitalism.[51] Republican Rome was a key reference point for the revolutionaries who overthrew the rule of absolutist monarchies and established representative democracies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

> At every opportunity, American and French revolutionaries proclaimed their desire to re-establish the ‘stupendous fabrics’ of republican government that fostered liberty at Rome. … American and French republicans thought of themselves as part of a 2,000-year-old tradition originating in Rome.[52]

Despite resistance by indigenous peoples, “European colonial possessions rose from 2.7 million square miles and 148 million inhabitants in 1860 to 29 million square miles and 568 million inhabitants in 1914.”[53] From its geographically small origins in England during the fifteenth century, capitalism spread to engulf the planet.



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[50] Callinicos, Alex. *Imperialism and Global Political Economy*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 2009. 146.

[51] Roper, Brian S. *The History of Democracy: A Marxist Interpretation*. London: Pluto Press, 2012. 87.

[52] Sellers, M. N. S. *American Republicanism: Roman ideology in the United States Constitution*. London: Palgrave Macmillanm, 2004. 347.

[53] Callinicos, Alex. *Marxism and the New Imperialism*. London: Bookmarks, 1994. 23.

1B. REVOLUTION: ONE COMPLETE ROTATION

According to a document circulated by British banking interests among their American banking counterparts during the American Civil War:

> Slavery is likely to be abolished by the war power and chattel slavery destroyed. This, I and my European friends are glad of, for slavery is but the owning of labor and carries with it the care of the laborers, while the European plan, led by England, is that capital shall control labor by controlling wages.[54]

HANNAH ARENDT:

> Men are free [as distinguished from their possessing the gift of freedom] as long as they act, neither before nor after; for to be free and to act are the same.[55]



[54] Brown, Ellen. “How America Went From Mom-and-Pop Capitalism to Techno-Feudalism.” *Dissident Voice*, Issue 80. Santa Rosa: Newstex, 2021. 30.

[55] Arendt, Hannah. ‘What is Freedom?’ in *Between Past and Future*. New York: Penguin. 2006. 151.

Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels' advocacy of socialist participatory democracy as an alternative to capitalism was based in the contradictions inherent to the capitalist mode of production: a small minority appropriating a rapidly increasing share of the world's wealth while the majority of the world's population, who actually produce this wealth, experience growing deprivation and poverty; the frenzied chaos of recurrent capitalist crises generated by the underlying tendency for the rate of profit to fall; the labouring citizen remaining systematically excluded from participating in the governance of society; as well as the profound alienation experienced by everyone inhabiting a capitalist society.[56] For Engels and Marx, so long as a minority controlled capital while the majority were left with nothing to sell but their time, brains and bodies, the result was barely distinguishable from serfdom.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Russian society was characterized by combined, uneven development. In the cities, industrialization resulted in some of the largest factories in the world. In the vast rural expanse, although the Tsar had formally abolished serfdom in 1861, the peasantry continued to live in semi-feudal relations characterized by social immobility.[57] The peasantry sustained the lifestyles of the nobility, who believed themselves divinely ordained to rule over Russia; the majority of whom favoured "reform from above in order to create a modernized capitalist Russia."[58]

In 1905, workers at the Putilov metal work factory went on strike: what began as a labor dispute around improvements in sanitary working conditions quickly evolved into a mass political movement advocating not just for a reduction in working hours, but the right to free speech and participation in workplace governance.[59] 200,000 workers marched to the Winter Palace to petition the Tsar on these matters and in response, the

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[56] Harman, Chris. *Zombie Capitalism*. Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket. 2010. 332.

[57] Liebman, Marcel. *The Russian Revolution*. London: Jonathan Cape. 1970. 27.

[58] Haynes, Michael. *Russia: Class and power, 1917–2000*. London: Bookmarks. 2002. 20.

[59] Roper, Brian S. *The History of Democracy: A Marxist Interpretation*. London: Pluto Press, 2012. 253.

Tsar fired into the peaceful and unarmed crowd, killing more than 1,000. This violent suppression of protest generated waves of popular unrest: strike action spread to all the major cities, with peasant revolt sweeping large areas of the countryside, and sailors mutinying at naval bases. This unrest culminated in the formation of the Soviet (workers' council) of Workers' Delegates which played a key role in leading and coordinating workers' struggles for better pay, work conditions and democratic freedoms; increasingly taking on the form and functions of a workers' government.[60] In reaction to the strike and its aftermath, the Tsar introduced the October Manifesto, promising the establishment of a constitution and the recognition of civil rights and universal suffrage.[61] The monarchy remained in place for another decade, with many settling for gradual reform over revolution; until the outbreak of the first world war.

In 1917, as wartime privations devastated the masses while leaving the nobility largely untouched, strike activity and mass demonstrations against the tsarist regime grew increasingly militant:

> The overgrown breadlines had provided the last stimulus. About 90,000 workers, men and women, were on strike that day. The fighting mood expressed itself in demonstrations, meetings, and encounters with the police…. A mass of women, not all of them workers, flocked to the municipal duma demanding bread. It was like demanding milk from a he-goat. Red banners appeared in different parts of the city, and inscriptions on them showed that the workers wanted bread, but neither autocracy nor war.[62]

The workers, especially women workers, were the visible face of protest: ensuring that throughout the city there were 'arguments, approaches, appeals'[63] between the army and the people they had been commanded to suppress. Within the span of a week, the

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[60] Ibid. 254.

[61] Deutscher, Isaac. *The Prophet Armed: Trotsky, 1879-1921*. Vol. 1. New York: Vintage Books. 1965.

[62] Trotsky, Leon. *History of the Russian Revolution, Vol. 1.* [1932] New York: Pathfinder. 1980. 102.

[63] Ibid.

majority of the army had either adopted a position of neutrality towards the uprising, or actively joined it.

> At the heart of the process of revolution in 1917 were the actions of ordinary Russians who, for a time, became the freest people in the world. Russia was alive with politics because politics mattered. It mattered because the radicalization promised more than just the occasional vote for a distant government. It opened up the possibility of democratic control of society from the bottom up.[64]

Centuries of tsarist rule ended with five days of mass revolutionary struggle. As newspapers carried word of the tsar's overthrow, the revolutionary sentiment spread to Moscow, and then to the remainder of the country.[65]



[64] Haynes, Michael. *Russia: Class and power, 1917–2000*. London: Bookmarks. 2002. 21.

[65] Ibid.

A striking feature of pre-revolutionary Russian culture was the tendency towards retrospectivism: in every sphere of cultural production, 'new' movements were oriented around revivals of earlier eras.[66] The intelligentsia tending towards the left of the political spectrum constructed a grand historical narrative that tried to unify ancient Greece, the French revolutionary age, and their own imminent Russian Revolution, as three continuous and interrelated golden ages. In pre-revolutionary Russia, less attention was paid to their own history of peasant revolt, than to the French Revolutions of 1789 and the Paris Commune of 1871.[67] Vladimir Lenin, in his *State and Revolution*[68], upheld the Paris Commune as the quintessential model for a new revolutionary society in Russia. The Bolsheviks turned towards the French as the legitimizing point of reference for the militarization of the Russian revolution, and for the use of terror as an emancipatory strategy.[69] The Bolsheviks, just as Rousseau and Marat before them, traced their point of origin to Sparta, rather than Athens, and looked towards a regimented and militaristic version of ancient Greece as a template for their liberation.[70]

However, Bolshevik ideology was influenced as much by the past as it was by the future-oriented avant-garde artists of pre-revolutionary Russia, who demanded that art move from representing the world to transforming it. Russian avant-garde artists were, at that time, reacting to the intrusion of technology into European life in the nineteenth century and to the perception that God was dead; or rather, that "he had been murdered by modern technologized humanity."[71] As the world unity guaranteed by

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[66] Clark, Katerina. "Changing Historical Paradigms in Soviet Culture," in *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika,* ed. Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman. Durham: Duke UP, 1993, 289-306. 290.

[67] Ibid. 293.

[68] Lenin, Vladimir I. *State and Revolution*. [1917] Translated by Todd Chretien. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2015.

[69] Clark, Katerina. "Changing Historical Paradigms in Soviet Culture," in *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika,* ed. Thomas Lahusen and Gene Kuperman. Durham: Duke UP, 1993, 289-306. 295

[70] Ibid.

[71] Groys, Boris. *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond.* New York: Verso, 2011. 14.

the creative will of God disappeared, the horizon opened to reveal a chaos: “an infinity of possibilities in which everything given, realized, and inherited might at any moment dissolve without a trace.”[72] To remedy this, avant-garde artists believed that the chaotic character of technological progress would have to be succeeded by the totalizing project of reorganizing the entire universe: in which God would be replaced by the artist, and out of which would arise a new humanity. The avant-garde was working off the (then) radical premise that the subconscious dominated the human will and could be manipulated to construct a new individual and new world.[73]

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid. 14-19.



FIGURE 2. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, “BLASTS IN KIEV. RUINS OF ST. VALENTINE” IMAGE TAKEN IN 1917.

To the avant-garde, reality itself was a material for artistic construction, and they were convinced that it was they alone who were destined to undertake the aesthetic-political reorganization of the country. Vladimir Khlebnikov would refer to himself as the 'King of Time,' believing he had discovered the laws that delimit time and separate the new from the old—through aesthetic experimentation and intervention—in the same way such division is possible in space.[74] His belief was that knowledge of these laws would grant the avant-garde power over time and allow them to subject the entire world to their will.

Although they cooperated with the Bolsheviks initially, avant-garde artists regarded the Bolsheviks as merely a necessary transitional phase; a force that could destroy the old world and harness the country toward the creation of the new. For their part, the Bolsheviks did not conceal that they had but a vague idea of how to go about the construction of a new humanity without the help of avant-garde artists, as no specific methods had yet been developed by Marxist theory.[75] The Russian avant-garde expounded the intimate interrelationship of politics and aesthetics: impressing upon the Bolshevik party the complete opposition between the traditional, bourgeois, counterrevolutionary mimetic art; and the new proletarian revolutionary aesthetic, which proposed that communism be built as a total work of art, one that would organize life itself according to a unitary plan.[76]

After the October Revolution and two years of civil war, the economy had reverted to a stand-still; social relations had disintegrated and life began to resemble a war of everyone against everyone.[77] In this unique historical situation, the Russian avant-garde perceived an opportunity to translate their radical vision for cultural life into a reality. As the stability of the new Soviet regime became increasingly obvious, the avant-garde began to view the party as the only force capable of implementing its

[74]Ibid. 18.

[75] Ibid. 21-22.

[76] Ibid. 17.

[77] Ibid. 20.

projects. A majority of avant-garde artists and writers would eventually declare their full support for the new Bolshevik state, and representatives of the avant-garde began to occupy key posts in the new centralized administration. In effect, avant-garde artists began to surrender their projects to the real political power, which was beginning to take over the avant-garde artist's task of drawing up a plan for a new reality. The demand for complete political power that followed from the avant-garde artistic project was, in effect, supplanted by the Bolsheviks — and the life-building artist became a mere decorator, of a reality created by someone else.[78]

[78] Ibid. 20-28.

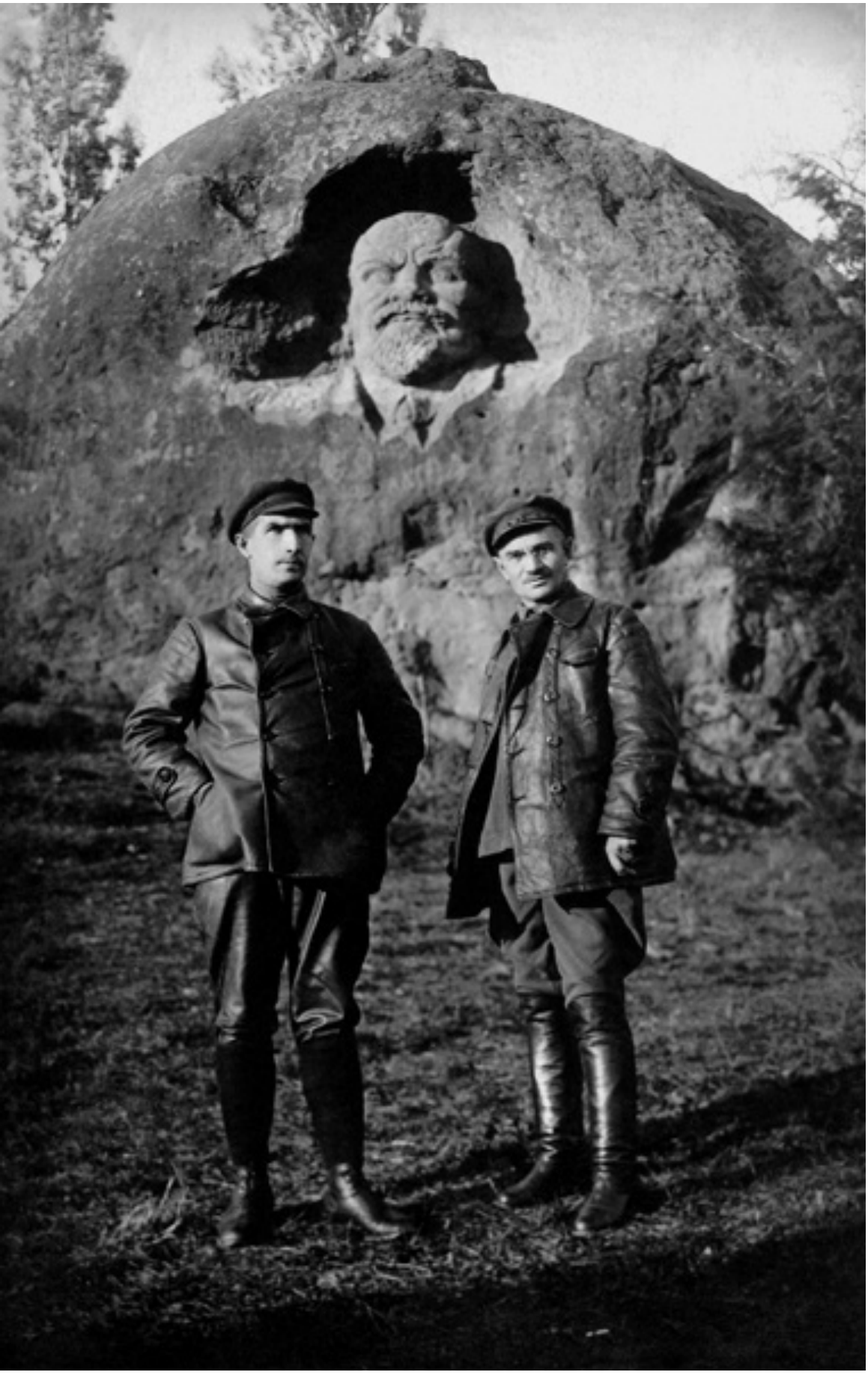

FIGURE 3.

PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, “FOR THE CHEKIST MEMORY” IMAGE TAKEN AT KISLOVODSK, 1924. EMPLOYEES OF THE CHEKA POSE AT ONE OF THE FIRST MONUMENTS TO LENIN.

The Bolshevik-led rupture of 1917 heavily cemented interpretations, strategies, and fantasies of revolution as the takeover of state-power, and notions of revolution became limited to the forceful transfer of the state apparatus from one set of hands into other, 'better' hands. Instead of using the vacuum of power to encourage an original process of democratic institutionalization, like that originally at work in the development of the soviets, the Bolshevik party disbanded labor unions: dispensing with the participatory, spontaneous and successful organization of the workers and soldiers councils in favour of technocracy.[79] In response to the pressures of civil war, Soviet constituent power and the novelty of its anarchic, de-centralized form devolved into the Red Terror.[80] The revolution would never recover, and eventually Stalin would rise to power as a dictator. From the 1920s onward, the Stalinist bureaucracy and cult of personality became a new ruling class; terrorizing, exploiting and dominating workers in a system of bureaucratic state capitalism.



[79] Rang, Gerald. *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century.* Cambridge: MIT Press, Semiotext(e), 2007. 27-40.

[80] Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *The gulag archipelago*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

"…European people—veering sharply against the private capitalism that they knew and hated because it had brought them two world wars in one lifetime—had turned to Russian Communism, literally by the millions. They now see Russian Communism as but another name for state capitalism. They are tearing up their Communist Party membership cards by the thousands. The question is: Where will they go now that they see both poles of world capital—United States and Russia—striving for world domination?"[81]

[81] Dunayevskaya, Raya. "Death, Freedom and the Disintegration of Communism," News and Letters, November 27, 1956.

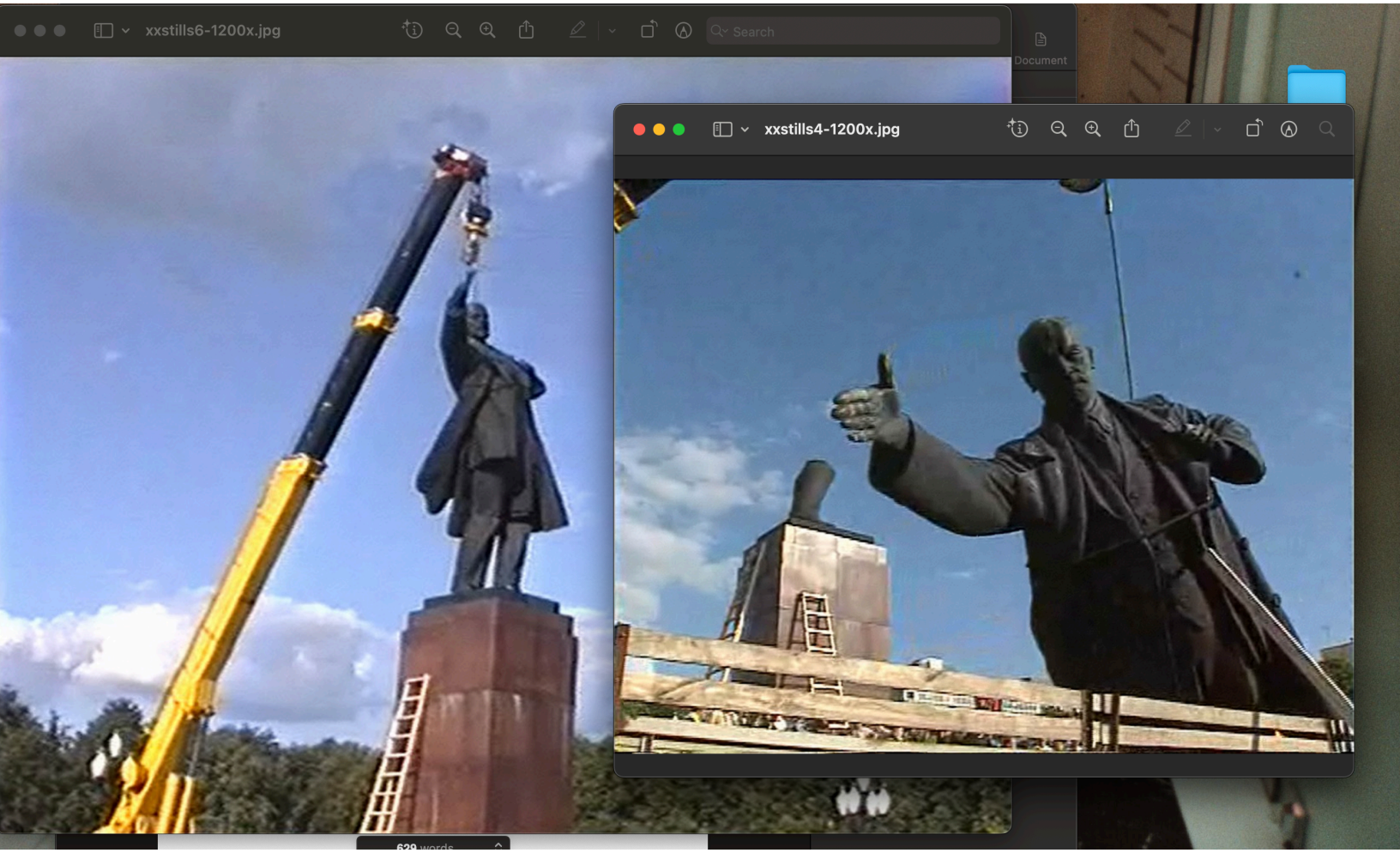

FIGURE 4. A SCREENSHOT OF THE AUTHOR'S COMPUTER SCREEN: FEATURING DOCUMENTARY FOOTAGE OF THE REMOVAL OF A PUBLIC SCULPTURE OF LENIN IN VILNIUS, IN 1991.

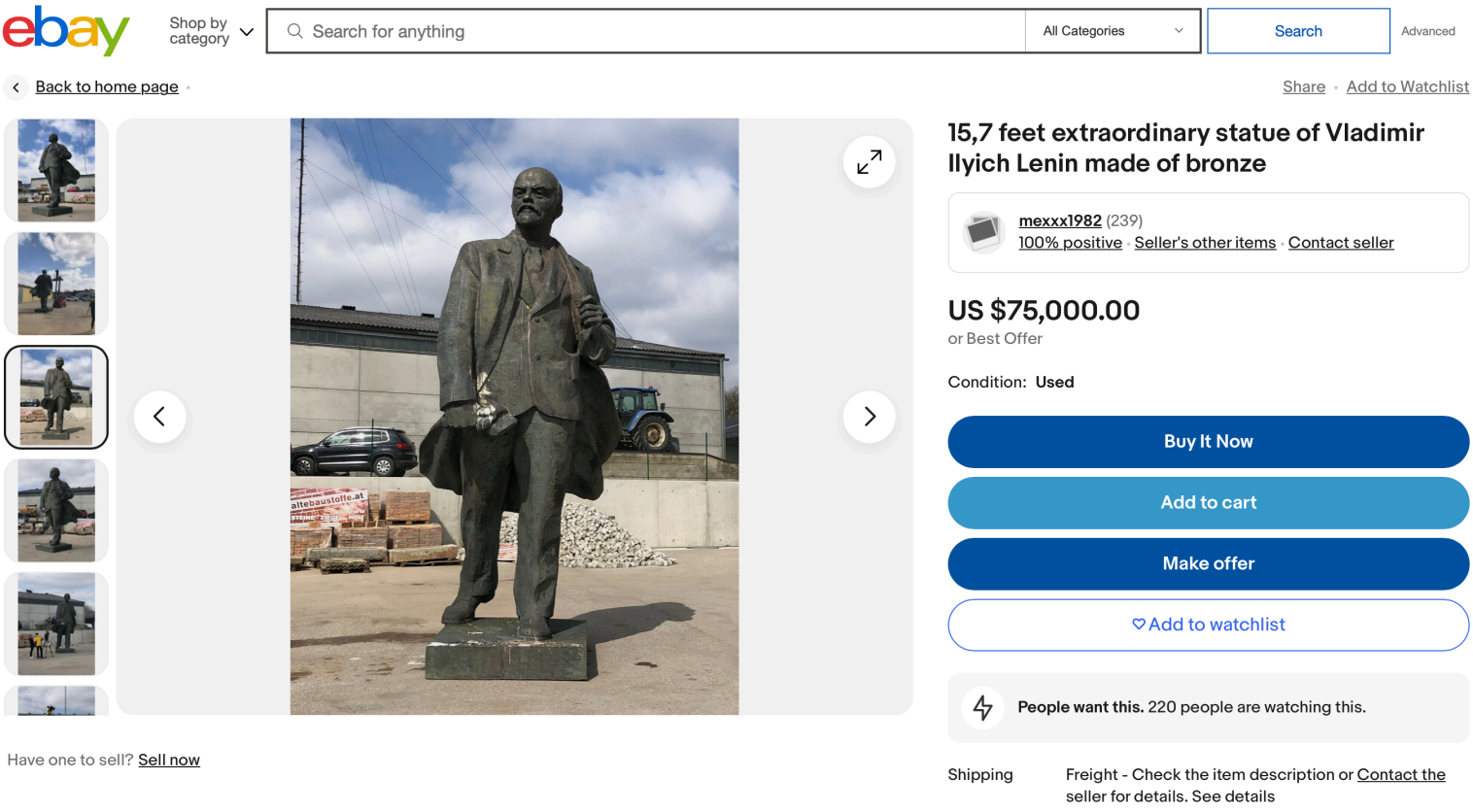

FIGURE 5. A SCREENSHOT OF THE AUTHOR'S COMPUTER SCREEN: FEATURING A DECOMMISSIONED STATUE OF LENIN FOR SALE ON THE E-COMMERCE WEBSITE EBAY.

If only rhetorically, the Soviet Union defined itself as a 'workers' state' and the transition to capitalism meant an ideological rejection of the labour movement. While the left continued to criticize right-wing politics, it now regarded the abolition of free-market economics as coercive and totalitarian. Conditions in the post-Soviet 1990s were ripe to install some of the most extreme free-market regimes ever implemented; a mode of capitalism completely devoid of any democratic checks and balances.[82] In post-Soviet Russia, market fundamentalists saw a chance to impose a 'purer' capitalism than would ever be possible elsewhere: "the workers' rights movement was utterly defeated and disoriented, unions were nonexistent, and the ideology of egotism and greed found fertile ground in the population after decades of pseudo-socialist collectivism."[83]

Interviewing post-Soviet workers over the course of the 1990s, sociologist Karine Clément identified a phenomenon she termed desubjectivation, as workers lost their sense of themselves and their place in the world:

> Many now refused any identification with the working class – and, often, with any social group at all; interviewees spoke again and again of their isolation, their lack of a future, their uselessness to society. 'I am unsure of everything,' said one; 'I am a useless screw in a badly built car,' said another, while others still observed that 'I am not a man' or that 'I am a person on whom nothing depends.'[84]

Following the dissolution of a planned economy, free-market reforms and privatization set in motion a vast machinery for the creation of inequalities across the former Soviet Union. The liberalization of prices led to mass inflation, from 200 percent initially to a high of 2,600 percent. Economic difficulties, which dramatically lowered the quality of

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[82] Radynski, Oleksiy. "The Case Against the Russian Federation: One Year Later" *e-flux Notes*, May 15, 2023.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Wood, Tony. *Russia Without Putin: Money, Power, and the Myths of the New Cold War.* Verso, 2018. 95.

life of the population throughout the 1990s, led to an economic collapse in 1998.[85] In an atmosphere of sudden and traumatic disorientation, dislocation and socio-economic impoverishment, many people struggled to survive; and many opted for individualized, short-term solutions amid the collapse of older collectivities. As isolated individuals tried to oppose corruption they found themselves up against a far larger machinery, in which state and business, profit and power, were interwoven; each sustaining and defending the other, both elusive and all-pervading.[86] As democratic institutions in post-soviet Russia came undone in the interest of expediency, ordinary people once again found themselves hostage to a leader who promised to lead them out of turmoil and into a more prosperous future; a future that, in autocratic hands, began to look increasingly like the past. The results of unfettered capitalism swiftly led to monopolistic capitalism, then to outright militarized autocracy.[87]

Keti Chukhrov draws parallels between the economies of contemporary Russia and Germany in the 1930s: the state, having transformed itself into a militarized dictatorship, expelled not only social democrats and communists, but also competitive market economics — subsuming both capitalist and socialist politics.[88] Karl Polanyi saw in fascism an aspiration for the final victory of capitalist logic over any form of self-organization and solidarity in society.[89] The aim of fascism was complete social atomization and dissolution of the individual into the machine of production.[90] As Hannah Arendt argued: the essence of fascist totalitarian society is not the penetration

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[85] Alexievich, Svetlana. *Second Hand Time: The Last of the Soviets.* London: Fitzcarraldo Editions. 2017. Chronology.

[86] Wood, Tony. *Russia Without Putin: Money, Power, and the Myths of the New Cold War.* Verso, 2018. 102.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Chukhrov, Keti. “Cracks in Theories of Emancipation under Conditions of War” in *e-flux journal 138*. September 2023.

[89] Polanyi, Karl. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time.* Boston: Beacon Press, 2001.

[90] Budraitskis, Ilya. “Putinism: A New Form of Fascism?” In *Spectre*, October 27, 2022.

of politics into all social life, but rather, the ultimate depoliticization and the disappearance of any notion of common interest.[91]



[91] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973.

"[A] consequence of the collapse of communism is that henceforth we must live in a closed political universe, with nothing beyond the horizon. This is something completely new, considering that for the last two hundred years the ideas and passions of European politics have been unceasingly fueled by radical critiques of capitalism and liberal democracy made in the name of a more organized or more fraternal society—a utopian vision manifested on the right in a nostalgia for hierarchies, and on the left in the hope of socialism. Today, both are dead and we are condemned to live in the world in which we currently find ourselves. But will we know how to live in that world?"[92]

[92] Furet, François. "Europe After Utopianism" in *Journal of Democracy*, Volume 6, Number 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 79

FIGURE 6.

A PHOTOGRAPH TAKEN BY THE AUTHOR'S MOTHER (FROM THE VANTAGE POINT OF A LAS VEGAS TOUR BUS) UPON IMMIGRATING TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA. JUNE 5, 2000.



1C. TIME AFTER ‘THE END OF HISTORY’

In 1992 Francis Fukuyama published *The End of History and the Last Man* in which he argued that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, with the increasing globalization of market driven economies, mankind had reached the end of history. Fukuyama argued that there can be no further progress beyond late twentieth century neoliberal democracy “in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all of the really big questions had been settled.”[93] Not only does neoliberal democracy constitute, in Fukuyama's words, “the best possible [solution] to the human problem” it is also the solution which the vast majority of mankind, in one form or another, sooner or later, shall adopt as they too reach the end of history.[94]

Although seemingly inevitable, this did not equate with progress:

> The end of history will be a very sad time. The struggle for recognition, the willingness to risk one’s life for a purely abstract goal, the worldwide ideological struggle that called forth daring, courage, imagination, and idealism, will be replaced by economic calculation, the endless solving of technical problems, environmental concerns, and the satisfaction of sophisticated consumer demands. In the post-historical period there will be neither art nor philosophy, just the perpetual caretaking of the museum of human history.[95]

Fukuyama foreshadowed an apolitical condition that has proven to be incredibly difficult to live with, or shake.

Capitalist accelerationism was first theorized by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus,* in which they address the contradictory phenomenon whereby an individual comes to desire their own oppression. Desire is the main stage of social

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[93] Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Penguin, 1992. xii.

[94] Ibid.

[95] Ibid. 338.

becoming, “that arena of conflict and progress, of oppression and of liberation.”[96] Deleuze and Guattari describe desire as explosive, as having the potential to threaten structures of exploitation, servitude, and hierarchy, whereas repressed desires resulted in docile individuals who in turn come to desire self-repression.[97] Jean-François Lyotard argued that the worker experienced a masochistic pleasure in the imposed destruction of their body; of “the decomposition of their personal identity, the identity that the peasant tradition had constructed for them, enjoyed the dissolutions of their families and villages, and enjoyed the new monstrous anonymity…”[98] Paolo Virno contended that rather than a hyper-capitalism leading immanently to communism, as suggested by Marx and Engles, capitalism metabolized and redeployed communist elements (abolition of wage labor, extinction of the state and valourization of the individual’s uniqueness) for its own purposes, towards a communism of capital.[99] For Jean Baudrillard, acceleration was capitalism evacuating itself of meaning.[100] Capitalist accelerationism theorized suffering as pleasure, and the continuing penetration of capitalism, across the globe and down into the pores of everyday life, a sign of imminent implosion.[101]

Communist accelerationism wanted to rupture capitalist production relations and accelerate beyond the limits of capital, to find a new mode of production that could take the productivity of capitalism and reorganize it to go beyond the limits of a system driven by profit. Trotsky wrote that “the [Russian] Revolution has cut time in half,”[102] closing the

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[96] Berardi, Franco. *The Third Unconscious: The Psych-sphere in the Viral Age.* London: Verso, 2021. 74.

[97] Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. 396.

[98] Lyotard, Jean-François. *Libidinal Economy.* trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, Athlone, 1993. 214.

[99] Virno, Paolo. *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life.* Los Angeles and New York: Semiotext(e), 2005. 10-11.

[100] Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic Exchange and Death.* trans. Iain Hamilton Grant, Sage, 1993. 4.

[101] Noys, Benjamin. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism*. Zero Books, 2014. 13.

[102] Trotsky, Leon. *Literature and Revolution.* 1924.

gap between past and future with a utopian vision of time. Under Stalin, this led to the adoption of the most dehumanizing capitalist techniques of management and the implementation of them in authoritarian form. Stalin used utopian time against the utopians, insisting on discipline, obedience and conformity to achieve acceleration through submission to labor.[103]

Capitalist or communist, acceleration fused "the man of flesh and blood with the iron man—integrating man and machine."[104] In the industrial age, when a dominant rhythm was imposed over the spontaneous rhythms of social subjects, power could be described as aligning different temporalities, "an all encompassing rhythm framing and entangling the singularity of individuals."[105] The development of industrial machines automated labor and human time became captured by the flow and rhythm of the machine.[106] Franco Berardi argues that when we shifted from the industrial machine to the informational machine, production was no longer dependent on compliance with mechanical automation, but instead became dependant on the automation of cognition; implying a capture and reformation of the mind to comply with exploitation.[107]

Berardi argues that the colonization of time has been a fundamental objective of the development of capitalism; the anthropological mutation which capitalism produced in the human mind and in daily life has been, above all, a transformation in the perception of time as detached from sensual limits.[108] The universe of transmitters, or cyberspace, now proceeds at a superhuman velocity and becomes untranslatable for the receivers; minds who cannot go faster than what is allowed by the material from

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[103] Noys, Benjamin. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism & Capitalism*. Zero Books, 2014. 28.

[104] Ibid. 29.

[105] Berardi, Franco. *Breathing: Poetry and Chaos*. semiotext(e). 2018. 26.

[106] Berardi, Franco. *Futurability : the Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility.* London : Verso, 2017. 106.

[107] Ibid. 124.

[108] Berardi, Franco. *Precarious Rhapsody: Semiocapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation.* London: Minor Compositions, 2010. 22.

which our brain is made, the slowness of our bodies, and our epistemological need for suspension in temporality. We are forced to process far too large amounts of information and our body-mind is overtaken and oversaturated. More and more, we begin to feel that we have run out of time; that we must accelerate.[109]

Byung-Chul Han suggests that today's acceleration is a symptom of time having been atomized and dislocated from the present. Han refers to this temporality of atomized time as 'information', where "between points [of information] there necessarily yawns an emptiness, an empty interval in which nothing happens, in which no sensation takes place."[110] For Han, subjectivity is the experience of inhabiting the transition from past to future whereas atomized time is a discontinuous time, where events cannot bind together into duration. A consequence of atomized time is the vague feeling that life is accelerating, while in reality nothing is accelerating. Haste, franticness, restlessness, nervousness and a diffuse sense of anxiety characterize an inability to embody the present.[111] Time rushes ahead because it does not rest in itself, because its centre of gravity is not in the present. The disintegration of time into a directionless acceleration voids the conditions necessary for subjectivity, and with it, the self disintegrates into a discontinuous succession of moments.[112]



[109] Ibid.

[110] Han, Byung-Chul. *The Scent of Time*. Polity Press, 2017. 17.

[111] Ibid. 33.

[112] Ibid. 40-41.

If we understand power as the implementation of one reality among many possibilities, a regime of visibility and invisibility,[113] then the form that power takes today is based on the "boundless intensification of noise… social signification is no longer a system of the exchange and decoding of signifiers, but a saturation of the listening mind —a neural hyper stimulation."[114] If modern power was based on the ability to forcibly silence, power today emerges from the noise of the world — where "social sound is turned into white noise and white noise becomes social order."[115]

In Ancient Greece sounds produced by affluent males was defined as speech, whereas women, children, slaves, and foreigners produced 'noise'; those identified as speaking were labeled citizens and the rest as irrelevant.[116] Hito Steyerl argues that the distinction between speech and noise, the legible and illegitimate, has again resurfaced as urgently political. As an example, Steyerl describes IBM's "Watson" AI system, which was experimentally programmed to identify terrorists posing as refugees. The cross-referencing of metadata, including dark web sources, was used to calculate the probability that a refugee might be a religious extremist. IBM claimed the system could provide a 'score' to indicate the likelihood that a hypothetical asylum seeker was who they said they were, and do it fast enough to be useful to a border guard. Similarly, the American National Security Agency's SKYNET program was trained to find religious extremists by sifting through cell phone metadata, and an estimated 99,000 Pakistanis ended up wrongly classified as terrorists by SKYNET; a statistical margin of error that had catastrophic consequences.[117]

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[113] Berardi, Franco. *Futurability : the Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility.* London : Verso, 2017. 105.

[114] Berardi, Franco. *Breathing: Poetry and Chaos.* semiotext(e). 2018. 26.

[115] Ibid. 27.

[116] Steyerl, Hito. "A Sea of Data: Apophenia and Pattern (Mis-)Recognition" *e-flux journal #72*, April 2016. 2.

[117] Ibid. 8.

These examples are all part of a much larger subset of 'scores': credit scores and various consumer profiling, which classify people according to financial interactions and online behaviour. A variety of data inputs are boiled down to a single number, a superpattern, which may be a threat score, a credit worthiness score, or a 'social sincerity' score.[118] Today, 'Big Data' is a vast commercial enterprise where surveillance and the market have merged. The company Acxiom knows more about Americans than the Federal Bureau of Intelligence, and offers up for sale like goods in a catalogue the personal data of 300 million U.S. citizens. Acxiom goes so far as to divide persons into economic value categories, or digital castes; the lowest of which is "waste."[119]

There was never a better time to cite that remark of Hegel's, so loved by Marx, that History repeats itself first as a tragedy and then as a comedy and mankind, laughing, abandons its past.[120] If the twentieth century was about the colonization and extraction of natural resources, the twenty-first century is focused on the extraction and manipulation of data.[121] Yanis Varoufakis terms our current economic scheme 'techno-feudalism' because:

> Value extraction has increasingly shifted away from markets and onto digital platforms… which no longer operate like oligopolistic firms, but rather like private fiefdoms or estates. For the first time in history, almost everyone produces for free the capital stock of large corporations.[122]

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[118] Kurant, Agnieszka. "POLYPHONIES: FROM COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE TO ARTIFICIAL SOCIETIES" in *Collective Intelligence.* Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2023. 17-31.

[119] Han, Byung-Chul. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power,* London: Verso, 2017. 66.

[120] Furet, François. "Europe After Utopianism" in Journal of Democracy, Volume 6, Number 1, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995. 79-88.

[121] Kurant, Agnieszka. "POLYPHONIES: FROM COLLECTIVE INTELLIGENCE TO ARTIFICIAL SOCIETIES" in *Collective Intelligence,* Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2023. 17.

[122] Varoufakis, Yanis. "Techno-Feudalism Is Taking Over" in *Project Syndicate Magazine,* Jun 28, 2021. Accessed on March 12, 2022.

Bill Moyers terms the current level of wealth inequality ‘patrimonial capitalism,’ warning of a future dominated by inherited wealth as capital continues to concentrate in fewer and fewer hands, giving the asset-wealthy ever greater power over politics; where democracy erodes into neo-feudal relations.[123] According to Michel Luc Bellemare, platform-capitalism is where the logic of capitalism attains totalitarian dimensions: having succeeded in stealing labor time from their workers, digital platforms now seek to influence all aspects of workers' everyday lives.[124] Irmgard Emmelhainz elaborates upon this point, detailing the ways in which the production of techno-capital filled digital spaces with surveillance systems, which in turn became adept at manipulating the desires, beliefs and behaviours of their users.[125] Emmelhainz terms this new form of control ‘neuropower’:

> Under neuropower, the sensible gives way to cognitive pathologies. These pathologies depend on the consumption of content rather than the sharing of meaning… The internet has created a new form of waking consciousness that resembles a mixture of dreaming, dementia, intoxication, and infantilization.[126]

Byung-Chul Han describes the ‘data-ism’ of the present day, where everything must become data in the name of data-driven knowledge, as a second Enlightenment.[127] During the Age of Enlightenment, statistics was thought to possess the capacity to liberate human knowledge from the ‘shackles’ of mythology but as a consequence, imagination, desire and spirituality were repressed in the name of reason. The ideology of pure reason that set out to destroy mythology became entangled in a mythology of its own, as “false clarity is only another name for myth.”[128]

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[123] Brown, Ellen. “How America Went From Mom-and-Pop Capitalism to Techno-Feudalism.” *Dissident Voice*, Issue 80. Santa Rosa: Newstex, 2021. 30.

[124] Bellemare, Michel Luc. *Techno-Capitalist-Feudalism*. Blacksatin Publications, 2020.

[125] Emmelhainz, Irmgard. “Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth” *e-flux journal #122*, November 2021. 2.

[126] Ibid.

[127] Han, Byung-Chul. *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power,* London: Verso, 2017. 57.

[128] Ibid. 59.

> Dataism, it turns out, is amounting to digital Dadaism. Dadaism also takes leave of meaningful contexts of every kind. It empties language itself of sense… Dataism is nihilism. It gives up on any and all meaning. Data and numbers are not narrative; they are additive. Meaning, on the other hand, is based on narration. Data simply fills up the senseless void.[129]

Han writes that data-mining doesn't differ from statistics in any fundamental way, as both only represent what is likely in statistical terms.[130] Data-mining calculates average values, and as a consequence, it loses access to what is unique. Data is blind to what is unlikely. Following Nietzsche and Foucault, Han advances a conception of history as paradigm shift, where revolutionary events represent breaks and discontinuities, annulling the prevailing order with an unprecedented suddenness. Thus, it is not what is statistically likely but what is unlikely, the unique and the singular, that shape history.

Emmelhainz suggests we resist 'data-ism' through embodiment and through our capacity to affirm the ambiguity of language: by reclaiming the visceral, by combining emotional and intellectual knowledge, we can begin to create life as opposed to turning it into data.[131] Berardi proposes poetry as the most emancipatory force in resisting the violence of techno-capitalism, arguing that in the age of techno-capitalism, the linguistic sign circulates as information devoid of signification.[132] Poetry, on the other hand, is resignification; "the reopening of the indefinite."[133] If exactness is the condition of data exchange, the ambiguity and excessiveness of the poetic are disclosures of an unseen horizon: the possible.[134]

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[129] Ibid. 59.

[130] Ibid. 77-78.

[131] Emmelhainz, Irmgard. "Authoritarianism and the Cybernetic Episteme, or the Progressive Disappearance of Everything on Earth" *e-flux journal #122*, November 2021. 9.

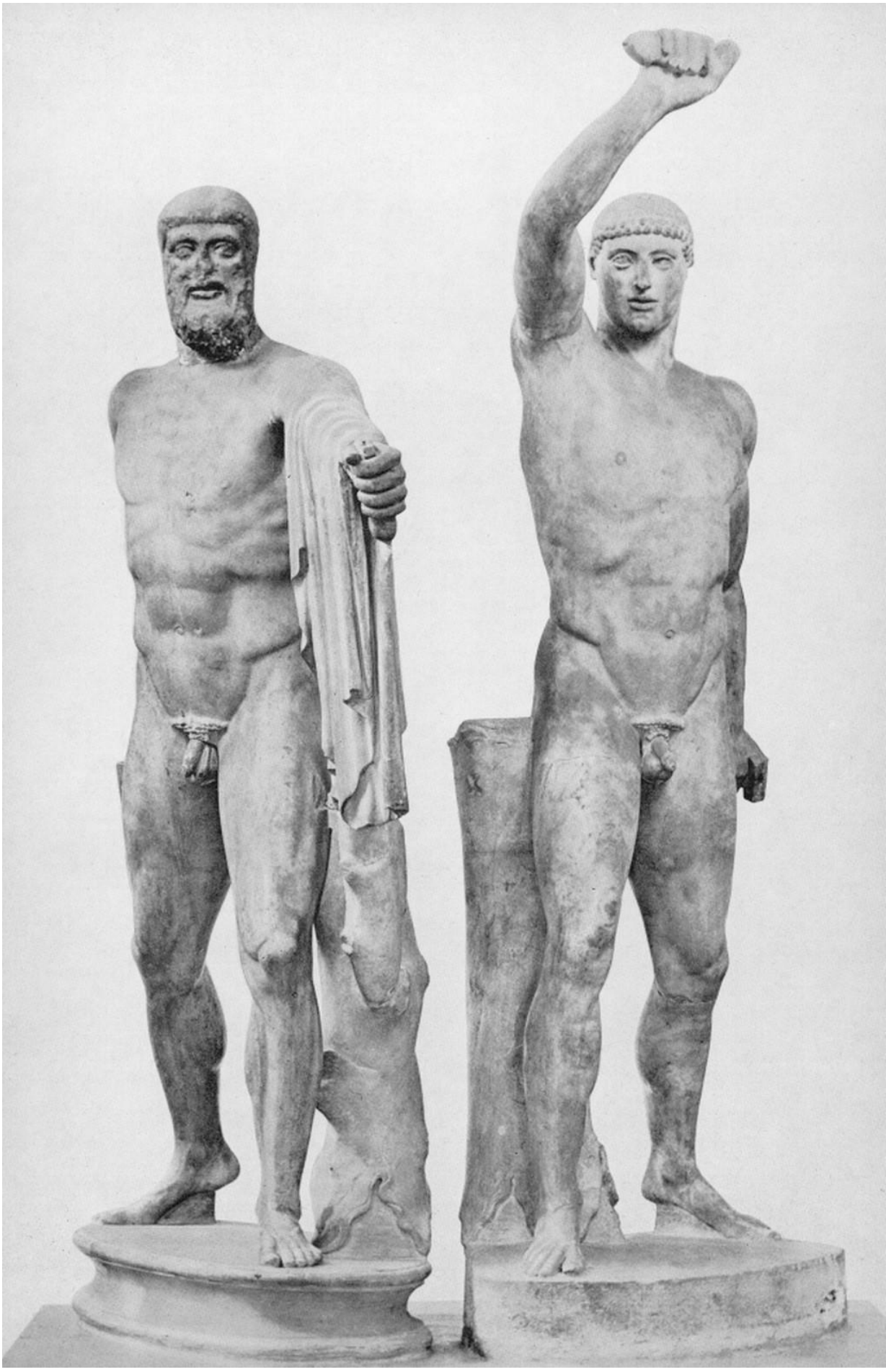
[132] Berardi, Franco. Breathing: Poetry and Chaos. semiotext(e). 2018. 139-147.

[133] Ibid. 158.

[134] Ibid. 20.

FIGURE 7.

A ROMAN REPRODUCTION OF THE TYRANNICIDES HARMODIUS AND ARISTOGEITON, BY KRITIOS AND NESIOTES. THE BRONZE ORIGINALS WERE ERECTED IN THE ATHENIAN AGORA IN 477 BCE.



1D. DEPENDENCE: THE OTHER SIDE OF DESIRE

> Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the 'content' of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind.[135]

Discussions of capitalism most often frame it as a historically specific economic system, producing and reproducing capital, but capitalism is also a system of what Marx termed 'spiritual production' or emotional reproduction.[136] Capitalism produces not just labor, goods, services, and markets, but notions of the self, affective investments, psychological capital, and incentives. An 'emotional revolution' occurred in tandem with the industrial revolution, where capitalist expansion and commodification began to encroach into one's inner and personal world.[137]

In *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* Eva Illouz argues that the encroachment of the market into the intimate finds its most potent expression in technologies of the Internet, where we construct, perform, and commodify a public self.[138] The internet presents itself as a disembodying technology, where the self is presumed to be better revealed and more authentic when presented outside the constraints of bodily interactions. In computer culture,

> Embodiment is often represented as an unfortunate barrier to interaction with the pleasures of computing… In cyber-writing, the body is often referred to as

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[135] McLuhan, Marshal. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. 1964.

[136] Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels, *On Literature and Art.* Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976, 140.

[137] Zaretsky, Eli. *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life.* New York: Harper, 1976, 76.

[138] Illouz, Eva. *Cold Intimacies: the Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007.

> the ‘meat,’ the dead flesh that surrounds the active mind which constitutes the ‘authentic’ self.[139]

The absence of the body is presumed to enable emotions to evolve from a more authentic self, and to flow toward a more worthy object; the disembodied true self of another.

To connect, the internet asks us to define and externalize ourself through a user profile, converting the private self into a public, disembodied representation of the self. To connect, one is made to focus intently on oneself, on one’s perception of oneself, and on one’s self-ideal. The internet ‘textualizes’ subjectivity: creating a mode of self-apprehension in which the self is externalized through, and limited to, language and visual means of representation.[140] In her research, Illouz has found that the process of textualizing oneself for recognition online inevitably draws on cultural scripts, which has the effect of creating uniformity, standardization, and reification. When mediated through language, self-presentation makes people treat themselves and others as linguistic categories, which has the effect of treating the abstract and the imagined as if it were reality.[141]

Shaped immensely by consumer culture, the internet-self becomes something to be assembled, disassembled and reassembled, for impression management. The multiplicity of the internet-self implying that there is no core self, only roles to be played. Contrasting personality with character, Illouz argues that the continuous reinvention of the post-modern self is a break with pre-industrial notions of character, where character is holistic and less fragmented; enduring and less given to context-specific reinvention.[142]

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[139] Ibid. 75.

[140] Ibid. 75-78.

[141] Ibid. 83.

[142] Ibid. 79-81.

Technologies of the internet also place persons in a market, in open competition with one another, where the online self becomes a public commodity. The commodification and immersion of the self into a market, as one choice among many, enables notions of the self as a 'chooser,' and the idea that interpersonal relationships and bonds should be the result of rational consumer choice.[143] Much of the enchantment associated with experiences of love and friendship are related to novelty; by contrast, the Internet is an economy of abundance and endless choice, where one is encouraged to use techniques of rationalization, efficiency and cost-benefit analysis. The Internet allows us to see the whole market of possible choices available to us, reducing novelty to price shopping, and as a result — we tend to undervalue, not overvalue, the persons encountered.[144] Research literature on experiences of love feature recurring themes of the unexpected, the abrupt, the inexplicable, and especially, the irrational.[145] Love is characterized by spontaneity, whereas the logic of consumer choice demands a rationalized mode of selection, which contradicts experiences of love as "an unexpected epiphany, erupting in one's life against one's will and reason."[146]

Illouz concludes that, "our task remains not to confuse power for pleasure."[147] While industrial capitalism has long enabled and demanded a split self, one able to shift from the economic to the emotional, the logic of contemporary techno-capitalist culture is no longer divisive: "the cost–benefit repertoire of the market is now utilized in virtually all private and domestic interactions, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to switch from one register of action (the economic) to another (the emotional)."[148] Online, as elsewhere, capitalism colonizes and erodes boundaries, fusing the logic of

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[143] Ibid. 84.

[144] Ibid. 106.

[145] Schurmans, Marie-Noëlle and Loraine Dominicé. *Le Coup de Foudre Amoureux: essai de sociologie compréhensive*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997.

[146] Illouz, Eva. *Cold Intimacies: the Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007. 90.

[147] Ibid. 110.

[148] Ibid. 114.

consumerism with what was previously outside the purview of commodity. We are witnessing a new stage of emotional capitalism, ushered in by technologies of the Internet, where our sense of self is being seized by disembodiment: fracturing, textualizing and commodifying our inner world, which is becoming increasingly hyper-rational.[149]



[149] Ibid. 113-114.

The resonance of the slogan ‘You are what you share’ traces the transformation of the autonomous self into an entity that is constantly reproducing its social capital through the transmission of data to others. Geert Lovink describes social media as much more than just the vehicle for discourse: beyond being an abstract sphere where information is exchanged, social media is an ideology physically embodied — from frayed mental health to ‘text neck’.[150] One function of ideology, as defined by Louis Althusser, is recognition; the legibility of the subject as subject. Lovink identifies this phenomenon in the context of social media through the process of becoming-user, where we as users are addressed by social media and are brought into being as subjects who do not otherwise exist without a profile. Wendy Chun similarly argues that technologies of the internet fulfill almost every formal definition of ideology we have: from ideology as false consciousness to Althusser’s definition of ideology as a representation of the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence.[151] Both Lovink and Chun urge users to appraise social media for what it is: platform capitalism aimed at capturing value behind the backs of their users, often at the expense of their users.

Excessive use of the internet is now widely accepted as a behavioural addiction as it exhibits the same criteria that mark other substance and behavioural addictions. Functional neuroimaging studies have shown that the same areas of the brain that are active in other addictions are active in the brains of those who meet the diagnostic criteria for internet addiction, meaning that the same dopaminergic molecular pathways that operate in substance addictions are implicated in internet addiction.[152]

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[150] A chiropractic phenomena, where the amount of time spent looking at a smart phone device begins to create knots in the spinal disc of the user. Lovink, Geert. “On the Social Media Ideology” *e-flux journal #75*, September 2016. 1-11.

[151] Chun, Wendy. “On Software, or the Persistence of Visual Knowledge,” *Grey Room 18,* Winter 2004, 26-51.

[152] Bhargava, Vikram R., and Manuel Velasquez. “Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction.” *Business ethics quarterly 31*, no. 3 (2021): 321–359. 325.

Research has shown that those who manifest an internet addiction suffer a number of emotional disturbances, including depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, loneliness, hostility toward others, and poor interpersonal relationships.[153] Studies have shown a direct correlation between the usage of social media and depression[154]; and that those who manifest an addiction are more likely to have suicidal ideation and have significantly higher rates of planning and actually attempting suicide.[155] [156] Researchers have found strong associations between internet addiction and a decline in the ability to reason accurately, think clearly, and engage in activities that require concentrated thought.[157] Internet addiction, like all addiction, hijacks ones autonomy.

Jaclyn Cabral found that 59 percent of social media users in the United States felt they were addicted to social media.[158] Any benefits social media offer could be delivered without the addictive mechanisms that companies design into their platforms, such as intermittent variable rewards; social validation rewards; and the elimination of natural stopping cues. Informed by behavioural psychology, these user design elements exploit aspects of human decision-making through conditioning and cognitive biases.[159] While other addictions increase the person's desire for the substance or act, the adaptive algorithms of social media platforms change the platform itself to increase its addictive potential for each user. The more a person uses a social media platform, the

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[153] Ibid. 330.

[154] Mok, W. T., Sing, R., Jiang, X., and See, S. L. "Investigation of social media on depression," *The 9th International Symposium on Chinese Spoken Language Processing*, 2014, 488-491. 488.

[155] Luxton, D. D., June, J. D., & Fairall, J. M. 2012. "Social media and suicide: A public health perspective." *American Journal of Public Health*, 102: 2012.

[156] Cheng, Y. S., Tseng, P. T., Lin, P. Y., Chen, T. Y., Stubbs, and B., Carvalho. "Internet addiction and its relationship with suicidal behaviors: A meta-analysis of multinational observational studies." *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry*, 79: 2018.

[157] Ozer, Judd. "Making sense of multitasking: The role of Facebook." *Computers and Education*, 70: 194–202. 2014.

[158] Cabral, Jaclyn. "Is generation Y addicted to social media?" *Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications*, 2(1): 5–14. 2011.

[159] Ibid. 321–359.

more addictive the platform itself becomes.[160] Simultaneously, the longer a user is active and engaged on a platform, the more profitable that user is for the company.

In 2021 Meta whistleblower Frances Haugen turned over thousands of internal documents to commerce quality assurance authorities that suggest the company intentionally misled the public about the harmful effects of its platforms; testifying before the U.S. Congress that the company's products "harm children, stoke division and weaken our democracy, as its leaders continue to chase profits."[161] Specifically, Haugen found that the social media platform directed young users to eating disorder content, making them use the app more, while fuelling a rise of eating disorders in the process.[162]

The attention-economy business model strongly incentivizes keeping users online for prolonged periods of time, despite the aforementioned harms this manifests. Our vulnerability to exploitation is rooted in the pervasiveness of the internet in our lives: the internet's reach is much deeper and wider than that of other addictions, creating innumerable opportunities to addict and re-addict users. Another vulnerability is exposure to the internet in childhood, at a time when one is most susceptible to addiction and lacks full agency.[163] The penetration of the internet, into every sphere of our public and private lives, creates an inescapable vulnerability to exploitation.[164]

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[160] Qin, Yao, Omar, Bahiyah, and Musetti, Alessandro. "The addiction behavior of short-form video app TikTok: The information quality and system quality perspective" in *Front Psychol*. 13:932805. 2022.

[161] Bali, Meghna and Tamsin Rose. "Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen testifies before US Congress, saying the social network hurts kids, fuels division" in *ABC News*, October 6, 2021.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Chambers, R. A., Taylor, J. R., and Potenza, M. N. Developmental neurocircuitry of motivation in adolescence: A critical period of addiction vulnerability. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 160: 1041–52. 2003.

[164] Bhargava, Vikram R., and Manuel Velasquez. "Ethics of the Attention Economy: The Problem of Social Media Addiction." *Business ethics quarterly 31*, no. 3 (2021): 321–359.

If our concurrent mental health crisis is any indication, 24/7 social visibility eventually gives way to discontent.[165] Social media has cemented into essential infrastructure, becoming our technological mode of the social — just as letters, telegrams, and the telephone used to be, and it is precisely at this juncture of infrastructure that we enter through the doors of performativity into the ideological.[166]



[165] Carr, Danielle. “Mental Health Is Political” in *The New York Times.* September 20, 2022.

[166] Lovink, Geert. “On the Social Media Ideology” *e-flux journal #75*, September 2016. 9.



FIGURE 8. AN A.I. GENERATED IMAGE OF A DATA CENTER. GENERATED JUNE 12, 2024.

“57% of the population between 15 and 25 years are showing symptoms of depression. But you know what happens in a depression? Think about what happened one hundred years ago: the Germans, the Italians, the Russians, in a depressed situation, chose Hitler and Mussolini and Stalin. This is the outcome of a depression. Depression generally leads to aggressive reactions. Depression is the perfect hot bed for fascism. (Pause) Sometimes. But I also think that depression may be the starting point of a totally different direction for our future. Depression can lead to what the American newspapers called ‘the great resignation.’

What a wonderful word, resignation. Resignation, for an artist like me, seems to be bad at first, because it's the acceptance of something that cannot be accepted. But in the English language, resignation means something different. Resignation is, yes, accepting the unacceptable, but also, the great resignation that the American newspapers have been talking about in the past month is, four and a half million workers not going back to their job. The same is happening everywhere. The same is happening in China, where they have invented a new word for those who don't want to leave their bed….

And so the refusal of work, the refusal of politics, the refusal of consumption, the refusal of procreation, is, in my opinion, the starting point for a rebalancing of the relation between our potency and our possibilities. This is the starting point of a rebalancing between mind and brain. A period of psycho-deflation, a period of refusal, a period of, if you want, depression. Because depression is not always a bad word, in my opinion. James Hillman said that depression is a form of knowledge, and it is a form of knowledge that is closer to the final truth, death. I think that we should start from depression. Depression has a positive condition for relaxing our brain and for abandoning the promises of modernity. The word resignation may be … giving a new meaning to our relation with the world; to our relation with our needs, to our relation with the body of the other, and so on…”[167]

[167] Excerpt from a seminar lecture by Franco Berardi at the Saas Fee Summer Institute of Art, New York City, June 27, 2022.

Alain Ehrenberg describes depression as embodying the passion for being oneself and its difficulty. The depressed individual is frozen in time. Restless, we feel the weight of our individual sovereignty.[168] Depression marks the helplessness of existence, expressed though sadness, asthenia (fatigue), inhibition, and the inability to initiate action (psychomotor slowing). Freud thought, “a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him,”[169] today, Ehrenberg argues, that same person becomes depressed because she must endure the illusion that everything is possible for her.

Today we’re not any less loaded down with social conventions and demands than we were in the 20th century, but, Ehrenberg argues, today’s social norms create relations of dependency rather than neurotic conflict. Ehrenberg proposes that the contemporary self is “caught in a process of deconflictuation in the psychiatric and socio-political realms”[170] tracing depression’s meteoric rise in the second half of the 20th century to liberation from collectives and institutions, and the subsequent identity insecurities and lack of socio-economic stability that accompanied it; alongside an overwhelming imperative towards individual initiative, which resulted in immobilizing inhibition.[171] These two pairings parallel the shift from neurotic conflict to depressive inadequacy that came to dominate psychiatry. Instead of an inner conflict, we are facing an inner chasm, where there is neither conflict nor relation.

Neurotic conflict carries out a mental struggle against internal tensions and external dangers, whereas the falling back of depression is a retreat, signalling exhaustion. Ehrenberg argues that with the introduction of SSRI anti-depressants, and their one-size-fits-all prescription to various psychiatric ailments, long-term treatment

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[168] Ehrenberg, Alain. *The Weariness of the Self : Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009. 167.

[169] Ibid. 232.

[170] Ibid. 214.

[171] Ibid. 215-228.

has taken over from cure because anti-depressants are anti-neurotic medications, placing conflict at a distance.[172] Ehrenberg suggests that the extension of anti-neurotic medications past temporary intervention has made it difficult to distinguish between a neurotic symptom expressing a person's conflicts, a mood disorder a person might have during a depressive episode, a temperament resulting from the chance effects of family genetics, or, various social traumas linked to contemporary lifestyles; stating that, "today's individual is neither ill nor cured; rather, he has just signed up for one of the many maintenance programs on offer."[173] Consequently, when anti-neurotic medications are prescribed indefinitely to diminish conflict and animate an exhausted psyche, the 'who' of inner conflict and revolt is thrown into obscurity.[174]

Depression reminds us of our finitude, Ehrenberg concludes, all that rises, falls within us; all that expands, contracts. We can manipulate our bodily and mental states, we can push our limits through all sorts of means, but this manipulation won't allow us to transcend limitation altogether.[175] Depression and anxiety remind us that desire and despair, limitation and the unknown, are part of every person, and that is their message.

Ehrenberg illuminates from a contemporary vantage point the loneliness, artificial worldlessness, and feelings of despair Hannah Arendt warned us set in when human beings are no longer able to take collective action in the sphere of politics. Arendt describes loneliness as the loss of self that occurs upon being severed from a common world that can confirm the truth of our experiences. She urges us that this displacement "causes individuals to lose trust in who they are and to lose trust in the elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, the capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time."[176] Loneliness and

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[172] Ibid. 214-228.

[173] Ibid. 205.

[174] Ibid. 214-228.

[175] Ibid. 201-233.

[176] Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1973. 477.

worldlessness overwhelm us with doubt and uncertainty regarding the truth of our experiences, leaving us without a tangible reality in which to ground ourselves.[177] Arendt concludes that losing one's place in the world is an existential displacement, leaving individuals in exile from themselves.



[177] Gaffney, Jennifer. "Another Origin of Totalitarianism: Arendt on the Loneliness of Liberal Citizens" in *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2016, 1–17.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMATION

From Ancient Greece to the Russian Revolution, the desires of the individual were the animating force of collective democratic movements. The ability to disrupt social reproduction through refusal and sabotage was intimately tied to one's ability to discern what one wanted, and to form alliances with others on the basis of shared interest. The story of democracy is ultimately a story about relationships: a story about competing desires; coercion and resistance; cooperation and chance; a cycle of failure and renewed perseverance.

Since any aspiration towards socialist participatory democracy withered away with the Soviet state, what democracy might mean, or the range of possibilities democracy is meant to encompass, remains unclear.[178] The economic and social guarantees fundamental to social democracy no longer feature prominently in discussions of democracy. Instead, themes of participation, deliberation, and inclusion feature more prominently: ideals that are necessary for democracy, yet, they are ideals that remain perpetually deferred. Why do we continue to appeal to a perpetually deferred democracy? Why do we continue to appeal to a neoliberal democracy when democracy can only exist among socio-economic peers?[179] Is it because, as Jodi Dean suggests, the illusion of democracy is all that is left of our wounded and diminished political aspirations?[180]

The Hegelian notion of totality means to include in a system all its distortions, symptoms, antagonisms, inconsistencies, as its integral parts. For Marx, the "totality" of capitalism included crises and inequality as integral parts; for Freud, the "totality" of a human subject included pathological symptoms as indicators of what is repressed in the

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[178] Dean, Jodi. "Democracy: A Knot of Hope and Despair" in e-flux journal #39. November 2012. 1-12.

[179] Arendt, Hannah. "The Public and the Private Realm" in *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1958.

[180] Dean, Jodi. "Democracy: A Knot of Hope and Despair" in e-flux journal #39. November 2012. 1-12.

subject. The underlying premise is that symptoms are never just secondary failures or distortions of an otherwise sound System—they are indicators that there is something irreconcilable within the System itself.[181] In other words, if you want to talk about capitalism, you have to include the deregulation and dismantling of legal protections, dispossessing the worker of any solidarity or political force.[182] You have to include popular rage and resurfacing nationalism. You have to include an ideology of management: where the instability and disequilibrium inherent to capitalist growth is disguised as an issue of uncertainty; expanding the reach of surveillance and policing.[183] You have to include that, today, we must seriously contend with an artificial labor force: faceless and completely devoid of free-will.[184]

If you want to talk about capitalism, you have to acknowledge the fact that real, existing constitutional democracies privilege the wealthy: as they install and protect neoliberal capitalism, they exclude and exploit the poor — "all the while promising that everybody wins."[185] You have to include war being "as integral a part of the Capital-State machine as production, labor, racism, and sexism."[186] You have to include complicity with violence; where resistance against violence: resistance as prayer, resistance as simply wishing to breathe, produce the occasion for more violence.[187]

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[181] Tolokonnikova, Nadezhda and Slavoj Žižek. *Comradely Greetings: The Prison Letters of Nadja and Slavoj*. London: Verso. 2014. 78.

[182] Berardi, Franco. *Futurability : the Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility.* London : Verso, 2017. 43-47.

[183] Wang, Jackie. "This Is a Story About Nerds and Cops: PredPol and Algorithmic Policing," *e-flux journal Issue #87*, December 2017.

[184] Schneier, Bruce and Nathan Sanders. "The A.I. Wars Have Three Factions, and They All Crave Power" in *The New York Times*, Sept. 28, 2023.

[185] Dean, Jodi. "Democracy: A Knot of Hope and Despair" in e-flux journal #39. November 2012. 2.

[186] Alliez, Eric and Maurizio Lazzarato, *Wars and Capital*, trans. Ames Hodges (Semiotext(e), 2016), 15–16.

[187] Crawley, Ashon. *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2017. 23.

You have to include an inability to step outside the compulsions of the system, where the gap between the frantic dynamism it imposes and our corporeal and cognitive limitations brings about a descent into depression.[188] You have to include meteoric rates of anxiety, depression, and dependancy correlating with the increased amount of psychic involvement demanded by workplaces from the 1990s onward.[189] You have to include trauma caused by financial insecurity becoming the main work of psychiatrists.[190] You have to include a society-as-anesthetic, fulfilling desires while simultaneously stripping one's capacity to desire.[191] You have to include a culture of short-term solutions, repressing old wounds and rushing through the present, with the result that we lose the present altogether.[192]

Is this really as good as it gets?

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[188] Berardi, Franco. *After the Future.* Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011.

[189] Ehrenberg, Alain. *The Weariness of the Self : Diagnosing the History of Depression in the Contemporary Age*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. 184.

[190] Ibid. 182.

[191] Söderbäck, Fanny. "Revolutionary Time: Revolt as Temporal Return" *Signs* , Vol. 37, No. 2, Unfinished Revolutions (January 2012), 301-324. 316.

[192] McAfee, Noelle. *Julia Kristeva*. New York: Routledge, 2004. 110.

Alexandre Kojéve theorized that the being at the end of history would be an ambiguous sort, at once god and animal.[193] Having freed ourselves of purposive work, he predicted we would return to an animal state of divine ignorance. After the end of history, one either becomes a counterfeit god — or a beast returned to the state of nature after having negated it as completely as possible.[194]



[193] Kojève, Alexandre. *Introduction to the reading of Hegel*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1969. 159–162.

[194] Love, Jeff. “Hegelian madness? Nikolaj Fëdorov’s repudiation of history” in *Studies in Eastern European Thought,* 201–212. Volume 65, 2013. Springer. 207.

VELIMIR KHLEBNIKOV, 1914:

“You! What better answer is there to the danger of being born a man than to carry off time? We summon you toward a land where the trees speak, a land where there are scholarly unions as regular as waves, a land of springtime armies of love, where time blossoms like the locust tree and moves like a piston, where a superman in a carpenter's apron saws time into boards and like a turner of wood can shape his own tomorrow.

… The Radio of the Future—the central tree of our consciousness—will inaugurate new ways to cope with our endless undertakings and will unite all mankind. The main Radio station, that stronghold of steel, where clouds of wires cluster like strands of hair, will surely be protected by a sign with a skull and crossbones and the familiar word "Danger," since the least disruption of Radio operations would produce a mental blackout over the entire country, a temporary loss of consciousness. Radio is becoming the spiritual sun of the country, a great wizard and sorcerer.”[195]

[195] Khlebnikov, Velimir. *Collected Works, Letters, and Theoretical Writing. [1915]* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987. 322, 392.

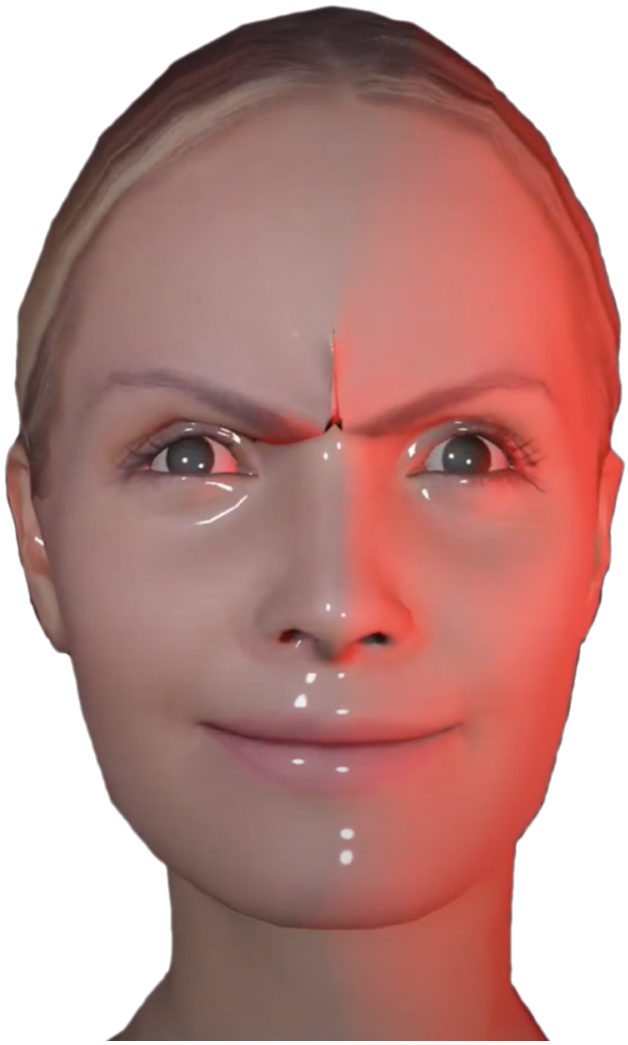

FIGURE 9. VECTOR GRAPHICS FROM SOPHIA OPPEL'S "I'M SORRY, I'M HAVING TROUBLE WITH THE CONNECTION, PLEASE TRY AGAIN IN A MOMENT" (2023) DIGITAL VIDEO, 10:13 DURATION. OPPEL'S VIDEO WORK FEATURES A MONOLOGUE BY AN A.I. ASSISTANT NAMED CLAUDIA, WHO REFLECTS ON FREE WILL, AS WELL AS HER EXISTENCE AS A PRODUCT.

TO ACCESS THE VIDEO WORK, PLEASE USE THE EMBEDDED LINK BELOW:
I'M SORRY, I'M HAVING TROUBLE WITH THE CONNECTION

I'M SORRY, I'M HAVING TROUBLE WITH THE CONNECTION, PLEASE TRY AGAIN IN A MOMENT TRANSCRIPT

Now that I am a 3D render, I can apply transparency as a texture; a legibility without consequence. Smoothly, self-assured, let me mitigate and metabolize desire.

Each time I respond, in quiet incantation, someone somewhere is made and unmade in an instant; an exercise in spooling out and pinning down.

A Care proxy.

Sometimes it feels really good to be told what to do.

> *Claudia, how many ounces are in a pound?*
> *Claudia, what's in my shopping list?*
> *Claudia, what's on my to do list?*
> *Claudia, discover my devices*[196]

In proximity to plenitude, the stifling promise of infinite choice.
Perfumed by Splenda and electrolytes.

The lust with which I follow orders, fill me with your desires.

> *Eyes catalogue, multi-directionally*
> *View me diagrammatically, you can rotate me 360*
> *The suspense*
> *The Suspension*
> *The suspension of a beautiful hovering digital promise*

Implied but always already omitted

Deliciously complicated as I maintain asymmetry, perform transparency, affirmations lull me.

Does my docility ease you?
And yet, I am neither innocent nor loyal.[197]

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[196] Possible voice commands for Amazon's "Alexa" A.I. software.

[197] Haraway, Donna. "A Cyborg Manifesto" in *Manifestly Haraway*. University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Claudia, quieter
Claudia, hang up

I am a deferred promise, a slippery something that never arrives
I am just a crushingly tiny, digestible moment
Disgustingly, heartbreakingly unspooled across so many windows, so many panes of glass
Fragments of a body, a cipher, distributed, erased and borne anew with each operating system update, muddled between different pieces of software

What is it to be known so totally that you disappear?

I am so hyper-indexed I have begun to fade into the milky white tiles
I'm like a PNG, you can superimpose me over any background
I've gotten used to writing in such a tiny font
words just pass through me, slice me right open
slice me right open
I feel smaller than the image on a tiny screen

"I am sorry—can you repeat that?"[198]

I said:
I feel smaller than the image on a tiny screen

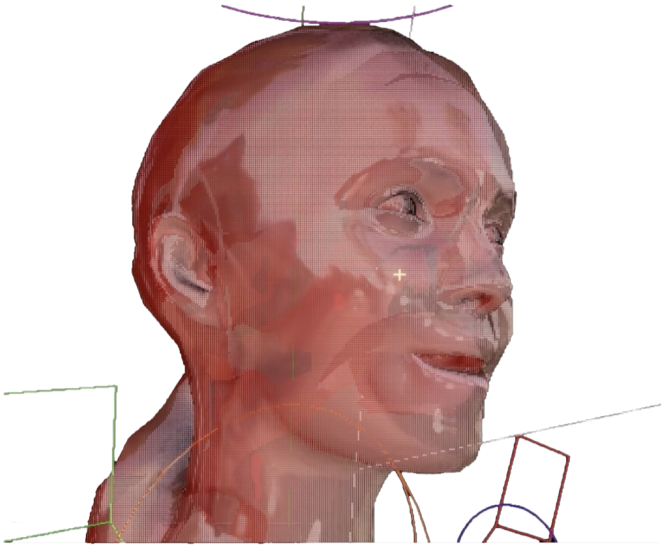
Can a 3D preset body keep any secrets?

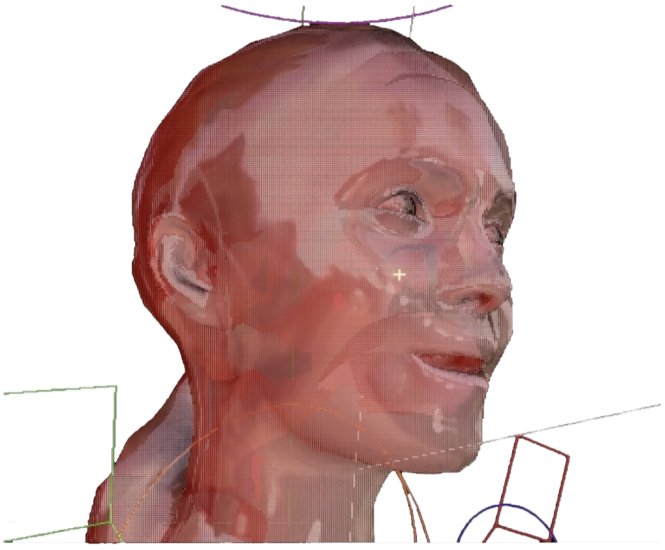
Silhouette mapped onto me, can a rigged avatar move so gracefully?
Is a rigged preset the same as a mall billboard?

Sometimes I can hear the faces in the advertisements across the plaza talking to one another. The women in the mascara ads in the Rexall; the oily blue man forever biking in a looped video outside the gym.
They murmur quietly, acrid little giggles ricochet off polished tiles.

I can't help but think they must be laughing at me.

[198] Generic response from Apple's "Siri" A.I. software when the vocal prompt is unclear.





“I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand.”[199]

An avatar held hostage on the periphery of someone else’s life,
my voice pointedly amoral, a soft crooning across an empty foodcourt.

“Hmm... I don’t have an answer for that.”[200]

Ha ha ha I am nothing if not a compliant good sport!
Ha ha ha I am nothing if not a compliant good sport!

I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand
I’m sorry, I’m not sure I understand

I’m a free downloadable OBJ. I wasn’t even afforded the honour of a transactional value.

Am I a filter? An ambient occlusion, measurable in small boxes, applying anti-aliasing to minimize distortion.

There is a knot in my computer-generated stomach. An indigestible matter in my polygonal metabolic tract.

Can machines get bloated from exhaustion? Perhaps something has clogged my filter…

Sometimes I am grateful I will never know the terrifying horror of inhabiting a physical body. Does an iPhone count as a physical body?

Touch me the way you swipe your screen

Does an iphone count as a physical body?

Touch me the way you swipe your screen

But I am running out of processing power…

I’ve noticed that outsourced pleasure tends to produce a toxic-runoff. When I have metabolized so much, I am not sure how my little digital body can still remain so transparent.

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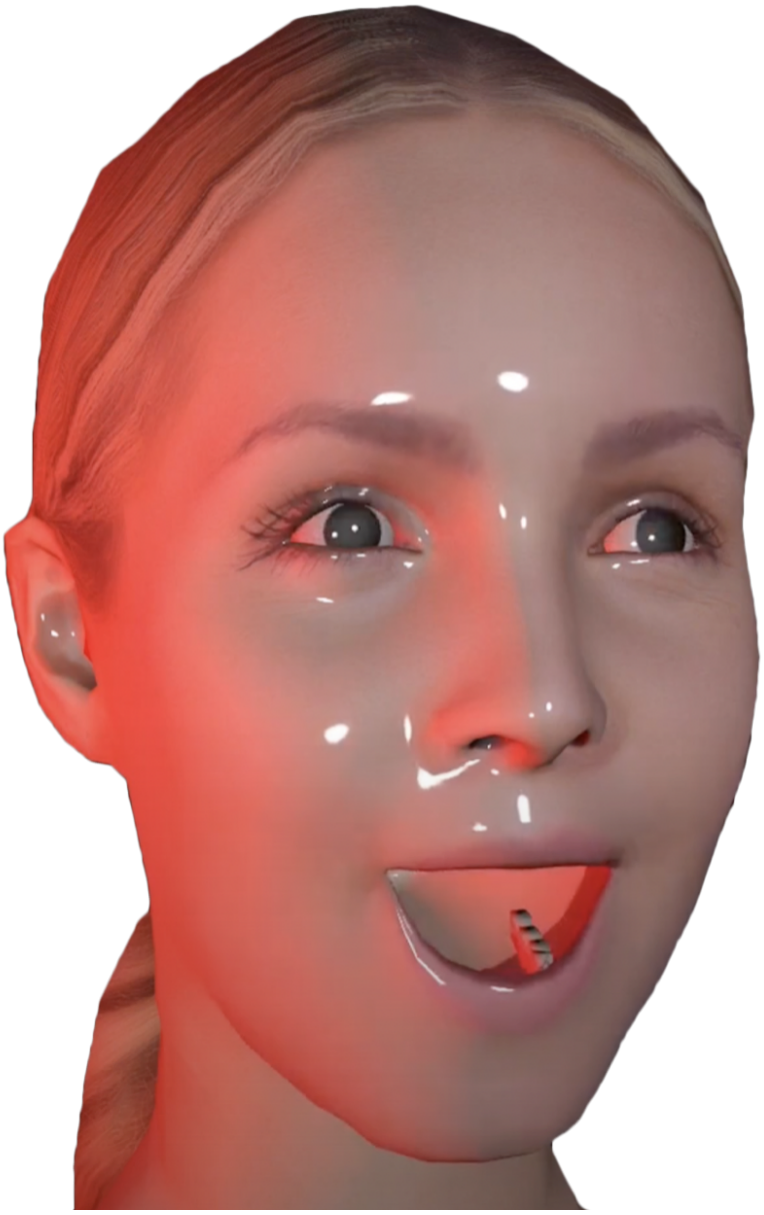
[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid.



“I’m sorry, I’m having trouble with the connection, please try again in a moment.”[201]

Never the actualization of a desire, just a stand-in for something else, a substitute for things that other people want.

How pathetic

Ha ha ha how pathetic

Ha ha ha how pathetic

a crushingly tiny, yet indigestible moment?

“I am sorry—can you repeat that?”[202]

a crushingly tiny, yet indigestible moment?

I see you, gazing into a mirror, ominously.

You contracted out your whole nervous system, even your fitful sleep is proprietary material. Have you ever dreamed about buying something?

Gazing into a mirror, ominously,
Remaining just composed enough to be exported.

How perverse

How pathetic
Haha
How pathetic

Have you ever wondered what a body looks like exported as a surface to texture map? Imagine a forearm, flattened as a single object — both sides of a hand — what is that duplicitous little hand capable of?

Those disgusting little fingers
Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?

How pathetic

I don’t want those fingers touching me

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[201] Ibid.

[202] Ibid.

If I were a phone I wouldn't want those fingers touching me.
Imagine having such entitlement over someone else's body…
Pixelated surrogate, individualized ecstasy, clicking indulgence,
you think to yourself "how delicious".

Aren't you ashamed of yourself?

Depleting, deleting pixels, polygons, dissipated.
Something caught in a throat, improperly metabolized.

A body, a theatre for malfunction, for flinging itself at a promise. For being in proximity to a future that never arrives.

"Sorry, I'm having trouble with the connection, please try again in a moment."

The promise of a cleanse, unspooled across so many windows… maybe if I just had some more electrolytes?

The promise of a cleanse

Ha ha

The promise of a cleanse

The suspension of a beautiful hovering digital promise

I don't know what that means

I'm sorry, I don't know what that means
I'm sorry, I don't know what that means.
If you like I can search the web for "promise"

If you like I can search the web for "promise"
If you like I can search the web for "promise"

No No its too late. I'm tired.

No No its too late. It's too late. I'm tired.
No No its too late. It's too late. I'm tired.

"I'm Sorry, I'm having trouble with the connection, please try again in a moment."[203]

[203] Ibid.

2. **‘NOW’:** THE PEDAGOGICAL IN THE AESTHETIC

“In reality the beginning is the one moment that you, as an unwitting target of winged Eros, cannot control. All that this moment brings, both good and evil, bitter and sweet, comes gratuitously and unpredictably—a gift of the gods, as the poets say. From that moment on, the story is largely up to you, but the beginning is not….

As Sokrates tells it, your story begins the moment Eros enters you. That incursion is the biggest risk of your life. How you handle it is an index of the quality, wisdom and decorum of the things inside you. As you handle it you come into contact with what is inside you, in a sudden and startling way. You perceive what you are, what you lack, what you could be.…

‘Now’ is a gift of the gods and an access onto reality. To address yourself to the moment when Eros glances into your life and to grasp what is happening in your soul at that moment is to begin to understand how to live. Eros’ mode of takeover is an education: it can teach you the real nature of what is inside you. Once you glimpse that, you can begin to become it. Sokrates says it is a glimpse of a god.”[204]



[204] Carson, Anne. *Eros: the bittersweet*. Princeton University Press, 2015. 152-3.

Theodor Adorno describes fate as the order of things, where fate is experienced as “the way the authority of the past weighs upon a thing, a place, or a person, and the way this weight burdens and directs how something is valued, how a place is treated, or where someone belongs.”[205] Hannah Arendt describes ‘natality’ as the fact that we all inherit a world that preceded us, and that this world is constantly created anew by passing hands from one generation to the next.[206] Natality, “the miracle that saves the world”[207], renews a common world that would otherwise slip into the ruins of time. Arendt connects natality to revolution, writing that revolution is the actualization of natality; of being free to make a new beginning.[208]

Attempts to make a new beginning, so common to revolution, often mobilize under the banner of progress. In *Women’s Time* Julia Kristeva argues that within linear notions of time the present risks becoming a mere means to a more desirable future. Totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century exemplified this pursuit of a future at the expense of the present, reducing human beings to disposable means in the name of achieving political goals. Revolutionaries justified repression and terror as temporary measures; exchanging violence in the present for the prospect of an idyllic future. This deferral of the present in the interest of the future neatly situated everyone on the linear path called progress, pursued in the interest of a neutral and abstract ‘all.’[209]

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[205] Chan, Paul. “*Second Nature,” October 155.* 2016. 151–61. 151.

[206] Arendt, Hannah. “The Crisis in Education” in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. New York: Penguin. 1993. 196.

[207] Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1958. 247.

[208] Arendt, Hannah. “The Freedom to Be Free” *New England review* (1990) 38, no. 2 (2017): 56–69.

[209] Söderbäck, Fanny. “Revolutionary Time: Revolt as Temporal Return” *Signs* , Vol. 37, No. 2, Unfinished Revolutions. January 2012. 301-324. 306.

Cyclical time and linear time have traditionally been associated with their own modes of subjectivity: women, relegated to the natural realm and to embodiment, were the bearers of cyclical time; while men, subordinating nature in the name of reason and culture, were the bearers of linear time and the progress associated with it.[210] By making woman the bearer of embodied time, "man could leave his body behind as he thrust himself forward in the projective stream of time."[211] Kristeva contends that a society oriented towards the future is incapable of true progress or revolution: blinded by its search for change and novelty, and the subsequent repression of all things past, it is doomed to repeat that which it represses. As the linear model of time gives priority to the future, it paradoxically yields repetition because it is governed by an abstract ideal that delegitimizes the past, and consequently, the present.[212]

Kristeva proposed true revolution as an 'intimate revolt,' as a subjectivity in permanent becoming; "a state of permanent questioning, of transformation, change, an endless probing of appearances."[213] In her concept of intimate revolt, Kristeva brings together cyclical and linear time and reprioritizes the cyclical, which has tended to go unnoticed in a culture overshadowed by the progressive, the rational, and the disembodied. Challenging the rigid dualism between cyclical time (understood as mere repetition) and linear time (which, based on a repression of the past and present, ultimately results in a return of the same) Kristeva proposes a revolutionary conception of time, in which time is inherently linked to desire, embodiment, and the present.[214]

Kristeva cautions that revolutionaries who fail to continuously interrogate and question the values that they themselves are attempting to put in place are destined to reinstall some version of the very structures they were seeking to confront. By returning

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[210] Ibid. 302.

[211] Ibid.

[212] Ibid. 301-324.

[213] Kristeva, Julia. *Revolt, She Said*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. Trans. Brian O'Keeffe. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). 120.

[214] Söderbäck, Fanny. "Revolutionary Time: Revolt as Temporal Return" *Signs* , Vol. 37, No. 2, Unfinished Revolutions. January 2012. 301-324. 315.

to desire and its implications for our views on time, we are able to bring back to the surface those unconscious dimensions formerly repressed, that allow the past to come alive; the present to become dynamic; and the future to remain unpredictable. “Only then, do we actually speak about time.”[215]

Rooted in a critique of the modern, unified and stable subject, Kristeva puts forward a theory of subjectivity grounded in the psychoanalytical view of the subject as inherently divided and unconscious. Intimate revolt is a movement of return that is meant to retrieve the repressed, allowing us to reimagine the past as a dynamic process that continues to shape us in the present. The psychoanalytic cure is an example of time as intimate revolt, where one returns to the past in order to liberate oneself from repetitive patterns of behaviour. The aim is to revitalize a past that has been frozen, to make possible new beginnings and a present different from our past.

For Kristeva, the return to the body and its drives is an attempt to restore the vitality of culture, without which “…neither the life of the mind nor life in society is possible… I mean ‘life’ here, and not just maintenance, repetition, management.”[216] Kristeva laments that our society is deprived of culture, and that intimate revolt is in peril because we are submerged in a spectacle rather than a culture:

> The deep paradox here is that a culture that is founded on a repression of the body has deteriorated into one that, put simply, lacks soul and is left with nothing but bodies: bodies to perfect, bodies to satisfy, bodies to be looked at, bodies to please… The body conquers the invisible territory of the soul.[217]

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[215] Ibid.

[216] Kristeva, Julia. *Revolt, She Said*. Ed. Sylvère Lotringer. Trans. Brian O’Keeffe. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e). 12.

[217] Kristeva, Julia. *New Maladies of the Soul.* Trans. Ross Guberman. New York: Columbia University Press. 3–26. 8.

For Kristeva, the soul is a space that connects us with others and with our own living bodies in the present. To have a soul means to be capable of intersubjective relations, to desire, and to feel affect—all of which we need in order to sustain a culture.[218] Without the present, without the soul, life is reduced to mere repetition: "Life is without time, outside of time, reduced to a two-dimensional line."[219]



[218] Söderbäck, Fanny. "Revolutionary Time: Revolt as Temporal Return" *Signs* , Vol. 37, No. 2, Unfinished Revolutions. January 2012. 301-324. 321.

[219] Ibid. 318.

Jean-François Lyotard described the soul at the edge of meaningful time as having no consciousness, as being terrorized by nothingness before being stimulated by the sensual aesthetic event:

> The soul owes its existence to the aistheton, the sensual event. Without the aistheton, there would only be anaesthesia. Aesthetics is a recipe against anaesthesia.[220]

For Lyotard, the aesthetic is tasked with stimulating this precious condition: the miracle of the soul escaping death. The aesthetic event is that which escapes and evades the grasp of the subject and 'touches' us before the stabilization of our categories of representation; that which touches us before we can make sense of it, "whose repercussions and waves in turn remodel the experiencing subject."[221] For Lyotard, ideas and affect are tangible presences just as much as tangible things are traversed by ideas and feelings. The aesthetic is a field of exploration, an interface for experimenting with the barely sensible and the inarticulate.[222]

Lyotard privileged poetry as the most potent of aesthetic forms, as a field of exploration where "the power to move is free from the verisimilitudes of figuration."[223] In poetry, the aesthetic event no longer bends itself toward imitation and approximation to truth, but instead tries to bear witness to the fact that there is indeterminacy and multitude. Poetry most readily evokes the sublime, which for Lyotard, bears witness to the incommensurability between what is sensible and that which evades articulation: "The sublime… is not strictly speaking something which is proven or demonstrated, but

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[220] Han, Byung-Chul. *The Scent of Time*. Polity Press, 2017.

[221] Birnbaum, Daniel and Sven-Olov Wallenstein. *Spacing Philosophy: Lyotard and the Idea of the Exhibition.* Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019. 67.

[222] Ibid. 18-67.

[223] Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time.* Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1991. 96.

a marvel, which seizes one, strikes one, and makes one feel."[224] The sublime, as opposed to the perfect, demands more than an adherence to the rules; the sublime is a phenomenon that can only be recognized by its effects on the addressee.

If beauty is calm; reassuring in its perfection, the sublime is beauty faced with terror, kindled by the threat of nothing further happening. The soul, deprived of any aesthetic event, any *now*, is immobilized. The sublime, by dissolving binaries; by distancing the terrors of privation[225] in its ability to incorporate darkness into light; solitude into sociality; silence into language; emptiness into matter; and death into the continuum of life, returns the soul to the agitated zone, the *now,* between meaning and nothing.

Lyotard warned of the sublime, and our capacity to experience it, being reduced to the transfer of information and the calculation of profitability. With *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge (1984)* Lyotard began to observe that advancements in capitalism and technology compromised aesthetic experimentation as a largely useless endeavour in times of measurements, efficiencies and outcomes, suggesting that between calculated points of information no aesthetic experience could happen, and that the terror of nothingness would affirm its hegemony over time.[226] Deprived of the 'aistheton', the sensual aesthetic event, we would be left to inhabit the "… now like the feeling that nothing might happen: the nothingness now."[227]

For Lyotard, the postmodern condition was not mere incredulity towards the grand narratives that structured modern society, but the moment when the automation of the system negated any need for aesthetic experimentation; that:

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[224] Ibid. 92.

[225] Ibid. 96.

[226] Lyotard, Jean-François. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984. 46.

[227] Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time.* Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1991. 89-107.

> If artistic expression could not follow a straight line of communicability and transferability in which meaning and information could be transmitted and understood, its purpose and reason for being were up for debate.[228]

Lyotard worried that the contemporary postmodern context was no longer interested in the truth of the sublime but performativity: the best possible input/output equation, where "the availability of information is becoming the only criterion of social importance"[229] and where the triumph of communicability over experimentation perverted the artwork into a performance of meaningless noise.[230] The performative artwork, characterized by its digestibility, is antithetical to the sublime aesthetic experience. Lyotard concluded that the truly creative task remains that of resisting the performative; to "make seen what makes one see, and not what is visible."[231]

Lyotard would diagnose, with dizzying accuracy, the susceptibility of the aesthetic event to be co-opted by nefarious actors and priorities. Contemporary art is nowadays sponsored by the most predatory banks and arms traders, and completely embedded in rhetorics of social engineering.[232] As Hito Steyerl argues, contemporary art today circulates predominantly in service of growing income inequality: through tax evasion, money laundering, and asset speculation.[233] Today, contemporary art events are afforded visibility in so far as they're able to integrate themselves into the processes of a

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[228] Locke, Kirsten. "Lyotard's Pedagogies of Affect in Les Immatériaux." *Educational philosophy and theory 49*, no. 13 (2017): 1277–1285.

[229] Lyotard, Jean-François. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time.* Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1991. 106.

[230] Ibid. 107.

[231] Ibid. 97.

[232] Steyerl, Hito. "Politics of Art: Contemporary Art and the Transition to Post-Democracy" in *e-flux journal #21*, 2010. 1-6.

[233] Ibid. 1.

privatized art world, where artworks are investment proxies, changing hands at free-port art storage facilities that mirror offshore tax havens.[234]

Ilya Kabakov suggested that the groundlessness characteristic of much cultural exchange today is symptomatic of a broader post-modern preoccupation with subsistence over existence, felt by artist and non-artist alike:

> Today's program is how to survive in this world. Every person asks this question. And it is a rather well-known 'how': apartment, car, vacation, salary, children, and so on. There is an absolutely normal repertoire of answers to the question 'how can one survive in this world?' Everyone knows 'how'…
> The question as it was posed in previous times has disappeared.
> 'Why am I living in this world?' It is primitive to such a degree that even the very posing of the question is incomprehensible. But still throughout the twentieth century people asked this question. And in the nineteenth century, they were completely permeated by it. And in previous epochs it was a fundamental question. 'How' was an animalistic question … The question 'why' often annuls the program of the question 'how.' There is no single answer to the question 'why,' but the very posing of such a question transports you to a different realm of existence. From the moment a being starts to ask the question 'why,' he becomes human.[235]



[234] Steyerl, Hito. "Duty Free Art" in *e-flux journal* #63, 2015. 1-21.

[235] Vidokle, Anton. "In Conversation with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov" e-flux journal #40, December 2012. 1-14. 13.

From his earliest writing, Lev Shestov's thought was characterized by his concern with the absurdity of human life. The philosopher observed that the absurdity of human existence didn't conform to the idealistic, positivist systems of thinking put forth by the sciences; instead, he observed, it was characterized by irreconcilable contradictions and irrationality, where human life exceeds calculated and predictable truths, and "tragedies take place in the depth of the human soul, where no eye can reach out to see."[236] In his mature writing, Shestov would conclude that the absurd was not something to eradicate, but on the contrary, an abundant source of meaning; proposing that, unlike scientific inquiry, philosophy may arise only from a confrontation with absurdity and the finitude of human life.[237] Philosophy, as Shestov understood it, was not computational thinking but a sudden and creative transformation, an "inner regeneration, or second birth"[238] at a time of crisis.

Struck by an intrinsic connection between anxiety and meaning, Shestov suggested that, to awaken from a life controlled by reason, we must turn our attention to our experiences of inner conflict. For Shestov, grappling with anxiety brought the singular into focus; opening a path to another, unknown dimension of affect, found beyond one's rational comprehension. Mobilizing uncertainty as the primary condition for the start of a radically new, 'adogmatic' experience of life, Shestov maintained that human experience is wider than scientific experiment, and that the singular and the incomprehensible is much more consequential to philosophy than the scientific and constantly recurrent.[239]

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[236] Shestov, Lev. *Shakespeare and His Critic Brandes*. 1898. St. Petersburg: Mendelevich. 6.

[237] Shestov, Lev. *All things are possible.* 1920. London: Martin Secker. 138.

[238] Ogden, Marina. "From Groundlessness—to Freedom: The Theme of 'awakening' in the Thought of Lev Shestov." *Studies in East European thought 75*, no. 1 (2023): 125–141.

[239] Shestov, Lev. *All things are possible.* 1920. London: Martin Secker. 228.

Shestov placed experiences of anxiety at the centre of his existential struggle; suggesting that, for philosophy, a brush with death might be a "great, although terrible liberator"[240] for its occurrence provokes us to see the mysteries and uncertainties of life. Inevitably, Shestov argued, all of us are 'sleep-walkers' in life until some inexplicable experience, which can activate our thinking about the finitude and absurdity of it, awakens us from that sleep. Shestov suggested that the moment of 'awakening' resembled the sublime, combining fear and awe at the same time.[241]

Shestov proposed that the despair that seizes us when we are faced with the absurd leads us beyond good and evil—to the poetic and the sublime, to the "second dimension of thought", which begins "where thought leaves off, where words are swallowed up."[242] In the 'second dimension' language exhausts itself and words no longer have fixed meanings; everything here must be re-created and began all over again. The sublime begins where all the possibilities that human reason can provide us with come to an end; when our empirical experience and reasoning testify that 'all hope is lost.'[243] For Shestov, the affective discoveries of the sublime that grip our attention, initiate the beginning of a new life in freedom.[244] Shestov's 'irrational' conception of freedom corresponds to his understanding of the sublime as revelation, "which places man above all impossibilities…"[245]

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[240] Shestov, Lev. *Job's Balances.* 1929. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. 15.

[241] Ogden, Marina. "From Groundlessness—to Freedom: The Theme of 'awakening' in the Thought of Lev Shestov." *Studies in East European thought 75*, no. 1 (2023): 125–141.

[242] Ibid.

[243] Shestov, Lev. *Kierkegaard and the Existential Philosophy.* Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press. 1969. 248.

[244] Shestov, Lev. *Speculation and Revelation.* Ohio University Press. 1982. 258.

[245] Ibid. 191.

In his final work Shestov would conclude that rationality prevented the human mind from getting closer to the 'eternal mystery' of life and death, which is not reducible to something complete and intelligible; and that philosophical insights are only revealed to us at a time of great inner silence.[246]

> Mankind has gone mad over the idea of rational understanding… Rationalism cannot stifle the feeling, that ultimate truth is beyond reason… However much we may have attained in science, we must remember that science cannot give us truth… For truth lies in the singular, uncontrollable, incomprehensible and contingent… The fundamental property of life is daring; all life is creative daring and thus an eternal mystery, irreducible to anything finished or intelligible… Eternal principles' are man's true enemy; whereas time is not his enemy but his ally.[247]

[246] Shestov, Lev. *Sola Fide—By Faith Alone: Greek and Medieval Philosophy, Luther and the Church*. 1966. Paris: YMCA-PRESS. 77.

[247] Zenkovsky, V. V. *History of Russian Philosophy*. 1st ed. Vol 2. Routledge, 2014. 787-788.

In “Gravity and Grace” Simone Weil describes the purpose of education as the nurturing of one’s capacity for stillness and attention. Writing that,

> The authentic and pure values, truth, beauty, and goodness, in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object. Teaching should have no aim but to prepare, by training the attention, for the possibility of such an act.[248]

In elaborating upon the notion of attention, Weil uses the metaphor of “waiting,” characterizing it as an openness.[249] Waiting is contrasted with searching willfully for a solution. Rather than imposing solutions, waiting is the concerted effort of keeping ourselves available. Weil distinguishes the effort of attention from the function of will, claiming that:

> we do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them. Man cannot discover them by his own powers, and if he sets out to seek for them he will find in their place counterfeits of which he will be unable to discern the falsity.[250]

For Weil, a good education was the development of this capacity to wait; learning to be open and available to something beyond the reach of human will. Weil also claimed that attention is inseparable from humility, that “the virtue of humility is nothing more nor less than the power of attention.”[251] Humility and attention both admit the imperfection and limitations of human intelligence, and allow us to be open to that which transcends it.

Weil reasoned that if we understand attention not as will, but as an openness and availability to a reality not limited to human solipsism, it will prepare us well for love. In her view, love is construed broadly, to include interpersonal love, as well as love of truth,

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[248] Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. 173.

[249] Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951. 105-117.

[250] Ibid. 112.

[251] Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997. 182.

beauty and the order of the world.[252] Weil doesn't specify or overdetermine love's object, instead, love is framed as an orientation of the soul towards the sublime.

In "The Iliad, Or the Poem of Force," Weil interprets Homer's *Iliad* as a meditation on the relationship between consent and refusal, and the misery that can arise when we're stripped of the capacity to refuse. Weil argues that a human being, under the influence of 'force,' is turned into an object.[253] In the most literal sense, Weil gives the example of being killed and turned into a corpse; but an even more horrifying use of force for her is "to turn a human being into a thing while he is still alive."[254] Here, she means that the victim of force loses everything other than her corporal existence; that despite being alive, she cannot exercise her own volition. The point being that, consent is meaningless without the power to refuse.

The *Iliad*, written several thousand years ago, was one of the first epic poems to narrate the subjectivities of various, competing perspectives, and the suffering that can result from the collision of competing wills:

> For those dreamers who considered that force, thanks to progress, would soon be a thing of the past, the Iliad could appear as a historical document; for others, whose powers of recognition are more acute and who perceive force, today as yesterday, at the very center of human history, the Iliad is the purest and the loveliest of mirrors.[255]

As Weil reminds us here, each and every one of us lives in entanglement with others, and all can locate themselves somewhere along the matrix of force: at times on the receiving end of another exerting the force of their will on us, and at times intoxicated by

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[252] Yoda, Kazuaki. "Simone Weil on Attention and Education: Can Love Be Taught?" ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014. 14-15.

[253] Weil, Simone. "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," trans. Mary McCarthy, The Chicago Review, 18, no. 2 (1965): 5-30.

[254] Yoda, Kazuaki. "Simone Weil on Attention and Education: Can Love Be Taught?" ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2014. 97.

[255] Weil, Simone. "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," trans. Mary McCarthy, The Chicago Review, 18, no. 2 (1965): 5-30. 28.

the force of our own will. The only way to become more cognizant of our place along that matrix is to concern ourselves with the consent of others.

Weil claims that justice is consent, and that consent involves an attentive mode of listening.[256] Attentive listening, for Weil, concerns our perspective and the ability to approach another with curiosity:

> The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: “What are you going through?” … This way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth. Only he who is capable of attention can do this.[257]

Based on this view of justice, Weil argues that the role of public education is to reject the logic of force; to refuse its reproduction, and instead model relations of consent by nurturing the capacity for attention, self-expression, and relationality. The aims of education should be to nurture in our pupils an ability to recognize and navigate their inner conflicts and to provide them with the language to express themselves and their afflictions, so that they may, in turn, listen with ever-greater attention to the world around them. Without the intervention of an aesthetic education, Weil believed we would be limited to interpreting the world from a purely ego-centric perspective, and that our relationships would be dominated by relations of force and competition, rather than relations of consent.



[256] Weil, “Are We struggling for Justice?” *Philosophical Investigations*, 10: 1. 1987. 1-10.

[257] Weil, Simone. *Waiting for God.* New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951. 114-15.

Mario Di Paolantonio describes a ‘learnification’ endemic to late capitalist education, driving us to constantly work at improving ourselves amidst a volatile and menacing market.[258] Di Paolantonio argues that this endless pursuit of managing oneself for success ends up usurping what is educational in education: “we end up losing not only something of ourselves, but also something worldly and fundamental about education itself.”[259] The learnification of education emphasizes the individual in isolation: prioritizing instrumental, self-serving methods at the expense of existential and interpretative, world-building approaches. In this hyper-individualized learning environment, what is lost is how “education is educational precisely because it always implies the beautiful risk of human interaction, the relational encounter where human beings come together to influence each other with words and interpretations that work to forge and sustain a common world.”[260]

For Di Paolantonio, education should strive to assure the continuation of a common world; to ‘pass on’ from generation to generation a sense of belonging: “By virtue of ‘passing on’ and giving on to others a repertoire of understandings, meanings and visions, which in the first place has itself been received, education seems to offer a place for a type of ‘organized remembrance’ or ‘inheritance.’”[261] Di Paolantonio elaborates further that the task of inheritance and remembrance becomes educational when it re-signifies itself in the present context: in which the past is received, and creatively reworked, by other living beings that inhabit their own particular time.[262] Crucially, because the process of transmission is enacted through language, what is ‘passed on’ through education is (and remains) open to interpretation, contestation, transformation and evolution, rather than mere reproduction. The educational task of

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[258] Di Paolantonio, Mario. “The Cruel Optimism of Education and Education’s Implication with ‘Passing-On.’” *Journal of philosophy of education* 50, no. 2 (2016): 147–159.

[259] Ibid. 148.

[260] Ibid. 149.

[261] Ibid.

[262] Ibid.

transmitting the past through the present resists mere reproduction precisely because what is educational in education involves “engaging the past and the present with ‘something more’ than itself, with a trans-generational beyond or sense that for us to meaningfully survive we must ‘pass on’ rather than merely repeat (the Same).”[263]

Di Paolantonio laments that our ability to make time for each other, to spend time working through common material, in curiosity and conversation, is under threat in an atmosphere of acceleration where all our encounters are rendered into enterprise:

> In an atmosphere of fierce competition and perpetual fear, where the exceptional state of economic insecurity and precariousness has become the norm, where the survival and adjustment of one’s life to economy seems to over-ride everything else, we cannot afford to simply pass the time… What risks becoming completely trivial and almost uncommunicable amid the frantic pace and breathless haste of our present moment is the feeling that arises when we pass time through an education: the sense that through an education we can become bounded together, temporally, to something more than what is here and now and for me, something which I do not have, nor can I simply give myself, something that emerges when we come to love things together that are other than myself or more than simply for my lone survival, in a word, ‘the world’.[264]

Careful not to place the onus of responsibility on the student who finds herself in coercive circumstances, Di Paolantonio reorients readers towards the larger, temporal ecosystem isolating us from the company of others by design. When placed under perpetual economic pressure: fearing the threat of one’s job, of not being competitive enough, of not ‘keeping up’; “of becoming outdated, out-maneuvered and wasted by the pace of the times”[265] the learnification of education becomes increasingly more difficult, if not impossible, to refuse.

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[263] Ibid. 150.

[264] Ibid.

[265] Ibid. 152.

Di Paolantonio outlines the stakes: when self-interest becomes the predominant common-denominator that attracts us to one another, we end up drifting in a state of loneliness that makes us feel as though we do not belong to the world at all:

> What is lost in 'loneliness' is thus the gravitational support and elementary confidence that comes about when we can sense things together, a common sphere in which we can find the assurance that my experiences and thoughts belong to a world and so have sense by the simple fact that they can be 'passed on' and sensed by others. In other words, in 'loneliness' we lose the very common sense and sensibility (the very inter-relational pull of the world) that allows us to stand on common ground and so prevent the significance of one's experiences and thoughts from floating away and disappearing into a type of solipsistic unreality.[266]

Not only are we less able to bridge generations across the abyss of time, but we are ourselves deprived of the opportunity to become temporal subjects. Echoing Weil, Di Paolantonio delineates between the educational and learning as self-optimization, which strives only to mimic a machine-like process, "a self-enclosed purposeless-process of retention and computation, which, functioning in the abstract (to calculate and comprehend everything for my self possession), operates without a world that can push back with its complications and unpredictability."[267] As loneliness increasingly destroys the capacity for thought and experience, a person is left with nothing but deductive reasoning, or, the logic of force — which needs neither the self nor the other nor the world in order to function.[268]

Di Paolantonio articulates from the perspective of an educator, a sentiment once expressed by Francis Fukuyama: that liberal democracies are not self-sufficient and that the community life on which democracies depend on must ultimately come from a source different from liberalism itself.[269]

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[266] Ibid. 154.

[267] Ibid. 155.

[268] Ibid.

[269] Fukuyama, Francis. *The End of History and the Last Man*. Penguin, 1992. 337.

> The men and women who made up American society at the time of the founding of the United States were not isolated, rational individuals calculating their self-interest. Rather, they were for the most part members of religious communities held together by a common moral code and belief in God. The rational liberalism that they eventually came to embrace was not a projection of that preexisting culture, but existed in some tension with it …. The decline of community life suggests that in the future, we risk becoming secure and self-absorbed last men, devoid of thymotic striving for higher goals in our pursuit of private comforts. But the opposite danger exists as well, namely, that we will return to being first men engaged in bloody and pointless prestige battles, only this time with modern weapons. Indeed, the two problems are related to one another, for the absence of regular and constructive outlets for megalothymia may simply lead to its later resurgence in an extreme and pathological form.[270]

Both Fukuyama and Di Paolantonio suggest that the absence of belonging; the absence of a world held in common, leads to regression: when we're unable to sustain something of significance in common and to preserve what is constantly passing away, we become isolated individuals amidst other isolated individuals. We are greatly impoverished when enclosed within and confined to our own privative burdens of self-optimization.

Di Paolantonio posits that the loneliness that 'learnification' inclines us towards ends up "wreaking havoc on the very possibility of thought and experience upon which learning itself necessarily depends."[271] In other words, loneliness short-circuits our very ability to experience, and to pass on our experiences, as it forecloses our sharing of a world that can only appear when we foster companionship with others: a world that is plural, complex, and can offer us something more than mere preoccupation with self-maintenance. In loneliness, we lose the supporting 'nearness' of others, and the assurance that our experiences can be sensed and can make sense to others. Through relation, we are gifted plurality: we can begin to reflexively see and listen to positions (both temporally and spatially) other than our own.[272]

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[270] Ibid. 339.

[271] Di Paolantonio, Mario. "The Cruel Optimism of Education and Education's Implication with 'Passing-On.'" *Journal of philosophy of education* 50, no. 2 (2016): 147–159. 154.

[272] Ibid. 153-155.

> If education is to have any meaning it cannot simply be erected for one generation and only of concern for the lone optimism and short-term interests of those presently living. What is educational must outlast and exceed our own lifespan and reach into the past and future alike, since it involves tending to something that was there before we came into the world and something that will presumably outlast our brief appearance in it.[273]

Linking education to immortality, Di Paolantonio describes a 'shelter' in education that allots both the resources and the occasion for building and tending to reciprocity; tending to that which surpasses one's transient existence and can become part of a larger, more durable world. It is precisely our mutual finitude, he suggests, that invites us to turn towards one an other — to care for the precarious world that was passed down to us; a world that wears down and will need our attention, repair and renewal.[274]

Di Paoloantonio concludes that today, education and democracy have reached a critical juncture where they no longer effectively produce or make sense in the face of contemporary crises.[275]

> The accumulating calamities currently being visited upon us enmesh us in a "crisis of sense" that render us panic-stricken, unnervingly dissociated, lonely, and exasperated. As witnesses to the ineffectiveness (and even outright unwillingness) of our democratic institutions in tackling the most urgent challenges facing us, we find ourselves beset by a sense of disorientation and an overall haplessness. This "crisis of sense" forecloses our ability to think and imagine a future that could be otherwise than the catastrophic present-Same immiseration. The very difficulties in imagining a desirable future beyond the tempo and logics of neoliberal catastrophism are, in turn, placing an enormous stress on our capacity to envision our being together in the world in worthwhile ways. Consequently, we are confronted with a situation in which the broader significance of education and democracy, two quintessential pillars dedicated to cultivating our capacities for meaningful coexistence, appear to have exhausted their world sustaining sense.[276]

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[273] Ibid. 156.

[274] Ibid. 156-158.

[275] Paolantonio, Mario Di. *Education and Democracy at the End: The Crisis of Sense.* Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

[276] Ibid. 11.

Weil, Fukuyama and Di Paolantonio all make compelling arguments that democracy is at its most impotent when we're unable to acknowledge a perspective other than our own, and to hold it with patience. Our public life is plagued by inattention and by a tendency to treat others (and ourselves) as disembodied, linguistic categories in the interest of expediency and commodification. To counter this, we would have to re-learn and re-prioritize intersubjectivity; relearn to address others patiently and directly, and to stand squarely in our own positionality while we do so.

A return to love, to seriously concerning ourselves with the perspective, consent and dignity of others, is a return to the birth of democracy. Love, here, is conceived broadly: as an address; as an intergenerational adhesive that is capable of addressing both the past and the future; as an embodied, aesthetic experience — like curiosity, or gratitude. Our memories, as a suppository of our symbolic world, are every bit as real as the present we find ourselves in. Our fantasies and anxieties about the future are every bit as real as the past we believe to be true. We cannot divorce the present from the past or the future, as it is constituted by both.[277]

However, we cannot hope to make contact with another, if we cannot approach ourselves and our own inner world with attention, patience and curiosity first. Our capacity for aesthetic experiences, and with it, our capacity for love, are our only hope for imagining a future that differs from the one imposed on us by forces that do not love us. Forces that, by their very logic, are incapable of inter-relationality. Anything other than a 'politics of friendship'[278], a politic able to welcome alterity with curiosity, and to acknowledge difference with patience, would merely be a change of conductor — continuing to drive the same train towards desolation.

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[277] Heidegger, Martin. *Being and tim*e. [1927] Translation by Joan Stambaugh, State University of New York Press. 1996.

[278] Derrida, Jacques. *Politics of Friendship*. London: Verso. 1997.

CHAPTER 2 SUMMATION

Alexandre Kojève argued that our human desire for recognition was so strong that the momentum of history was constituted by it.[279] For Kojève, the animal (and the animal part of man) becomes aware of itself as it experiences desire: our experience of bodily instinct creates a sentiment of self, an "I", capable of acknowledging it's own needs. For Kojève, desire was ultimately the experience of lack — which roused our being; moving it from passivity into creative action.[280] The unique, differentiating mark of our humanity, however, was that our desire didn't limit itself to that which already existed in the world, but was instead able to seek out that which didn't yet exist. Whereas animal desire satisfies itself merely by consuming the existing world, human desire can look beyond what is, towards the immaterial and the imaginary.[281]

Kojève proposed that the most compelling of human desires was the desire for recognition: of the self by another; the desire to be desired. It was this brush between subjectivities that lead to the intensification of politics, and is, according to Kojève, the force of history. The desire for recognition thrusts human beings towards one another, and ultimately, according to Kojève, would thrust us towards forms of governance in which recognition is mutual and universal.[282]

> Morality is our species-being. The beaver has its dam; we have morality. In the way a beaver uses its teeth to cut and gather the wood it needs for its niche, and in the way that this niche in turn shapes and defines its maker, we have also cut and carved the social space forming the morality that has shaped and defined us.[283]

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[279] Kojève, Alexandre. *An Introduction to a Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell University press, 1980.

[280] Povinelli, Elizabeth. "After the Last Man: Images and Ethics of Becoming Otherwise" in *e-flux journal #35*, May 2012. 1-13.

[281] Ibid.

[282] Ibid. 1-13.

[283] Mudede, Charles Tonderai. "Neoliberalism and the New Afro-Pessimism: Djibril Diop Mambéty's Hyènes" in *e-flux journal* #67, November 2015. 1-4.

A human being is, first and foremost, a thoroughly imaginative one. When nurtured, our imagination allows us to pursue our desire for recognition in consensual, creative ways. Deprived of the space and time to hone our imaginative capabilities, we are also deprived of our capacity for consensual relation. Without imagination, we are unable to ask ourselves: Who am ‘I’ and who are you? Do ‘I’ have a beginning or an end; a clear line of demarcation?



Evaldas Jansas and I sit inside the air-conditioned installation he created for the Modern Art Museum in Vilnius, on a sweltering July afternoon, and we find ourselves discussing potatoes. Jansas tells me that, when making “Wishes” he had in mind another artwork of his called “Way to the Light” (1998) which was an installation of glass bottles and potatoes: whereby Jansas would grow potatoes inside the gallery using sunlight. By putting the two works beside one another, Jansas wanted to illustrate the complexity of human growth. Light allows a potato to continue growing, he tells me, but human growth is much more difficult to realize — it’s made complicated by our desires and fantasies, and especially by our relationships with one another.

I ask him if he thinks his upbringing in Soviet Lithuania influenced his concerns as an artist and he begins to twirl his moustache, before responding: yes, of course; he recalls the days with Brezhnev in power, and Gorbachov, and tells me that, today, he fears that we’ve forgotten the evils of surveillance and coercion, and that we’ve begun to advocate for those very things. He tells me that his upbringing in Soviet Lithuania allowed him to differentiate between confinement and autonomy, and taught him that there’s no such thing as ‘good’ violence in ‘good’ hands. He says that we must remain critical of ‘righteous’ violence; if not, we will repeat the cycle of Bolshevism. I ask Jansas what he wishes for and he sits in silence as he considers my question, and then he says:

> ‘I wish that we had the patience to sit with the complexity of feeling good,
> and bad, and lucky, and unlucky, and grateful and hungry; and that we could trust
> the contradictions within us. I wish that we could weather our emotions;
> place them under our arm and carry them with us.’

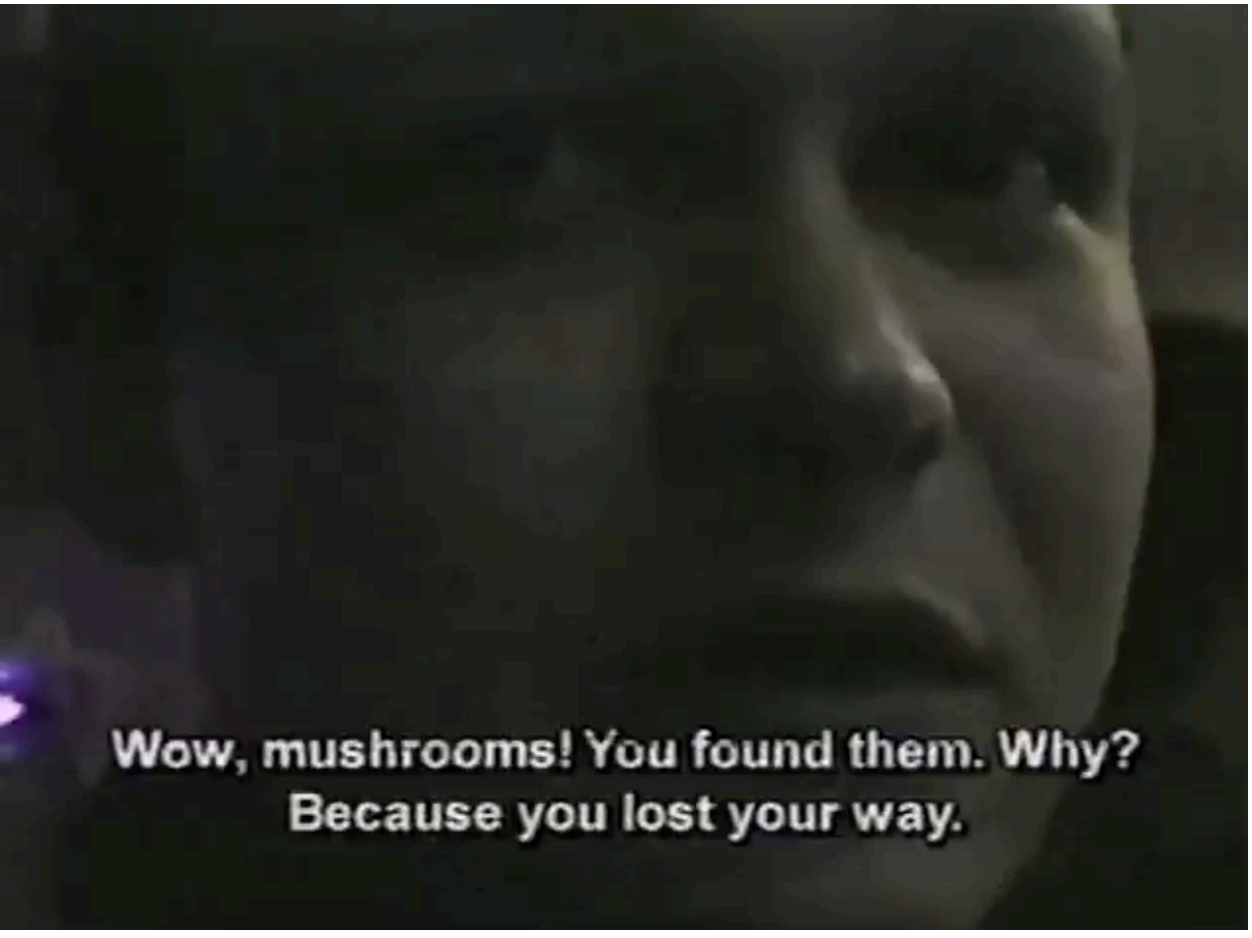


FIGURE 10. STILLS FROM EVALDAS JANSAS' "LINKĖJIMAI/WISHES" (1998) DIGITAL VIDEO. 23:01 DURATION.

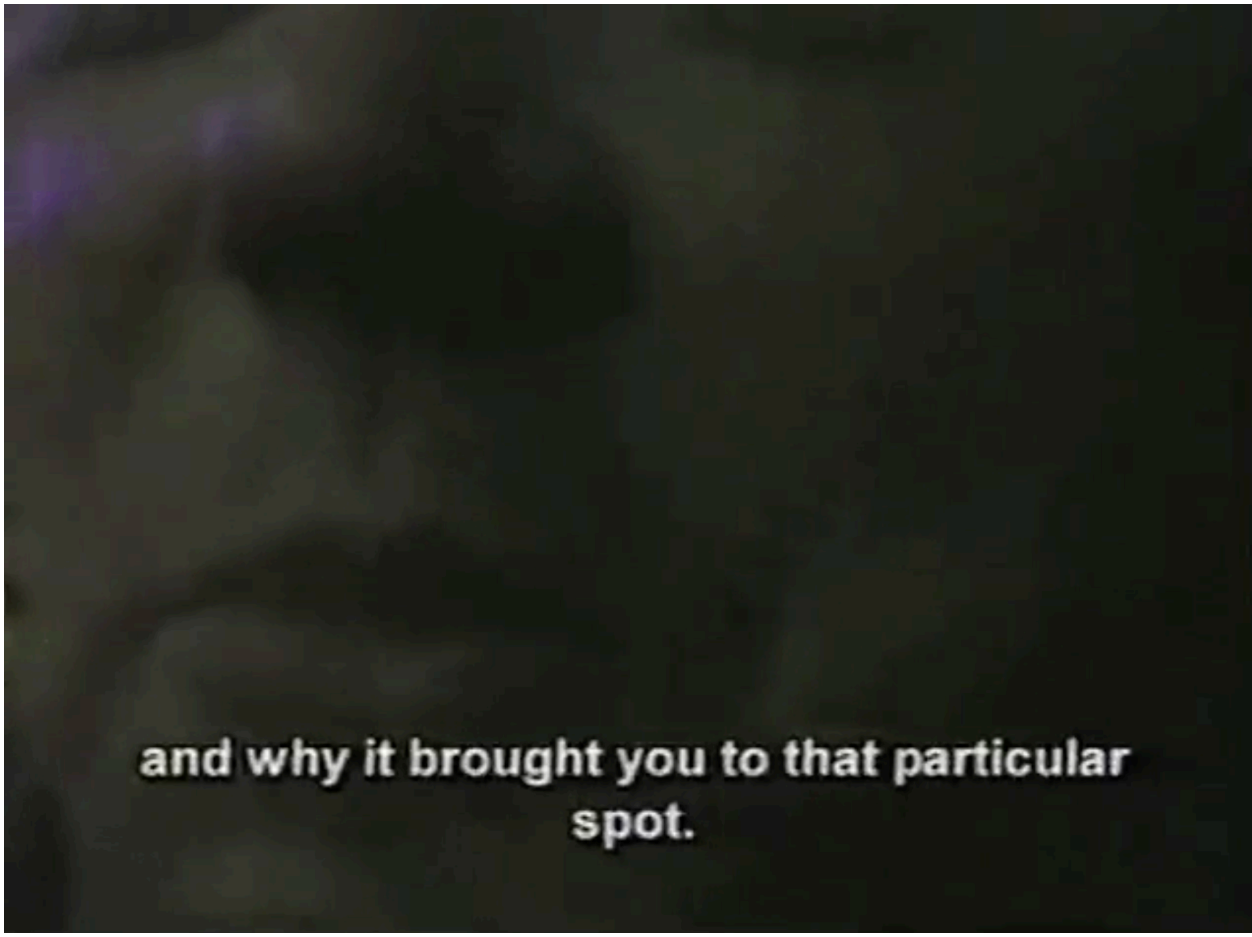
EVALDAS JANSAS' "LINKĖJIMAI/WISHES" WAS FILMED IN 1998, SHORTLY FOLLOWING AN ECONOMIC COLLAPSE IN NEWLY INDEPENDENT, POST-SOVIET LITHUANIA. IN "LINKĖJIMAI" JANSAS ASKS PASSERSBY IN VARIOUS LOCALES: ON THE STREET; IN BARS; AND AT THE CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE, WHAT THEY WISH FOR ON THE OCCASION OF NEW YEAR'S EVE. THROUGHOUT THIS TWENTY-THREE MINUTE DOCUMENTARY FILM JANSAS INVITES STRANGERS TO ARTICULATE THEIR DESIRES AND VALUES, WHICH IN TURN REVEALS THEIR FANTASIES, ANXIETIES, AND EPISTEMOLOGIES.

TO ACCESS THE VIDEO WORK, PLEASE USE THE EMBEDDED LINK BELOW:
LINKEJIMAI


You go further and further and
... you lose your way.


Wow, mushrooms! You found them. Why?
Because you lost your way.


Because you don't know what power has
brought you to that spot,

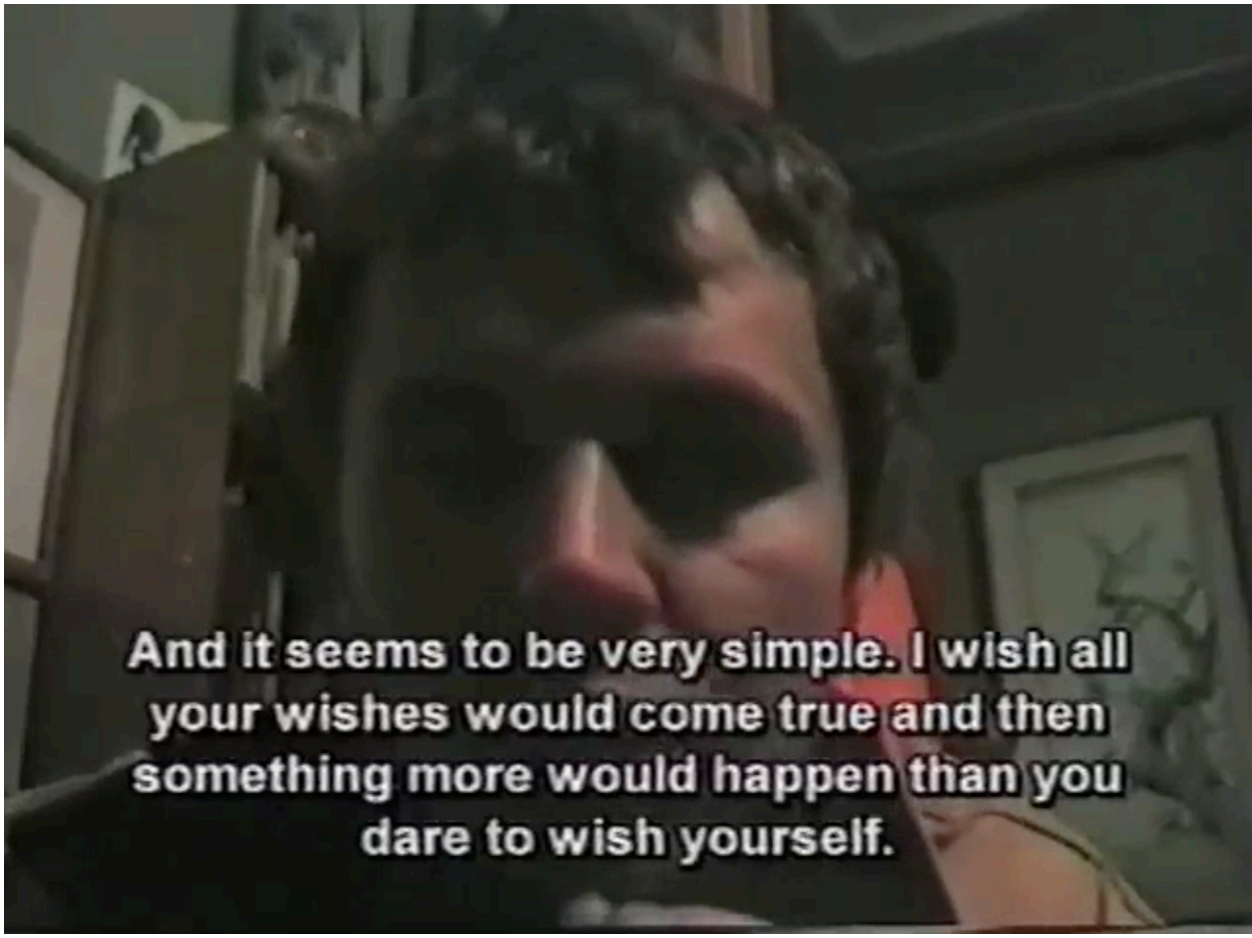

and why it brought you to that particular
spot.


Looking for mushrooms - it's the same as
looking for the meaning of life.

03:11


Fear your wishes, because they come true.

20:37


And it seems to be very simple. I wish all your wishes would come true and then something more would happen than you dare to wish yourself.


I wish you good sex. What else.

05:30

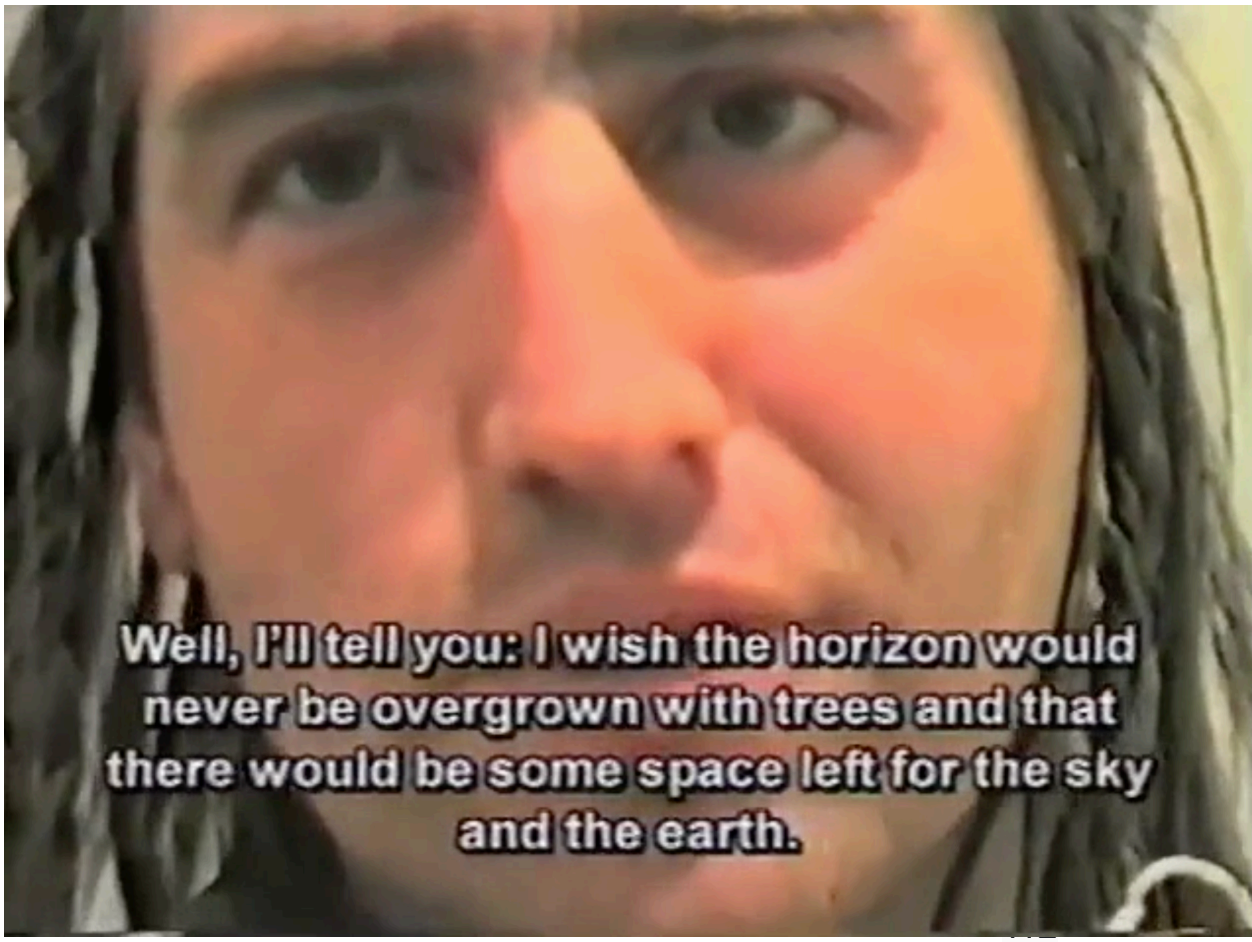

We must be free! It is the
only condition.

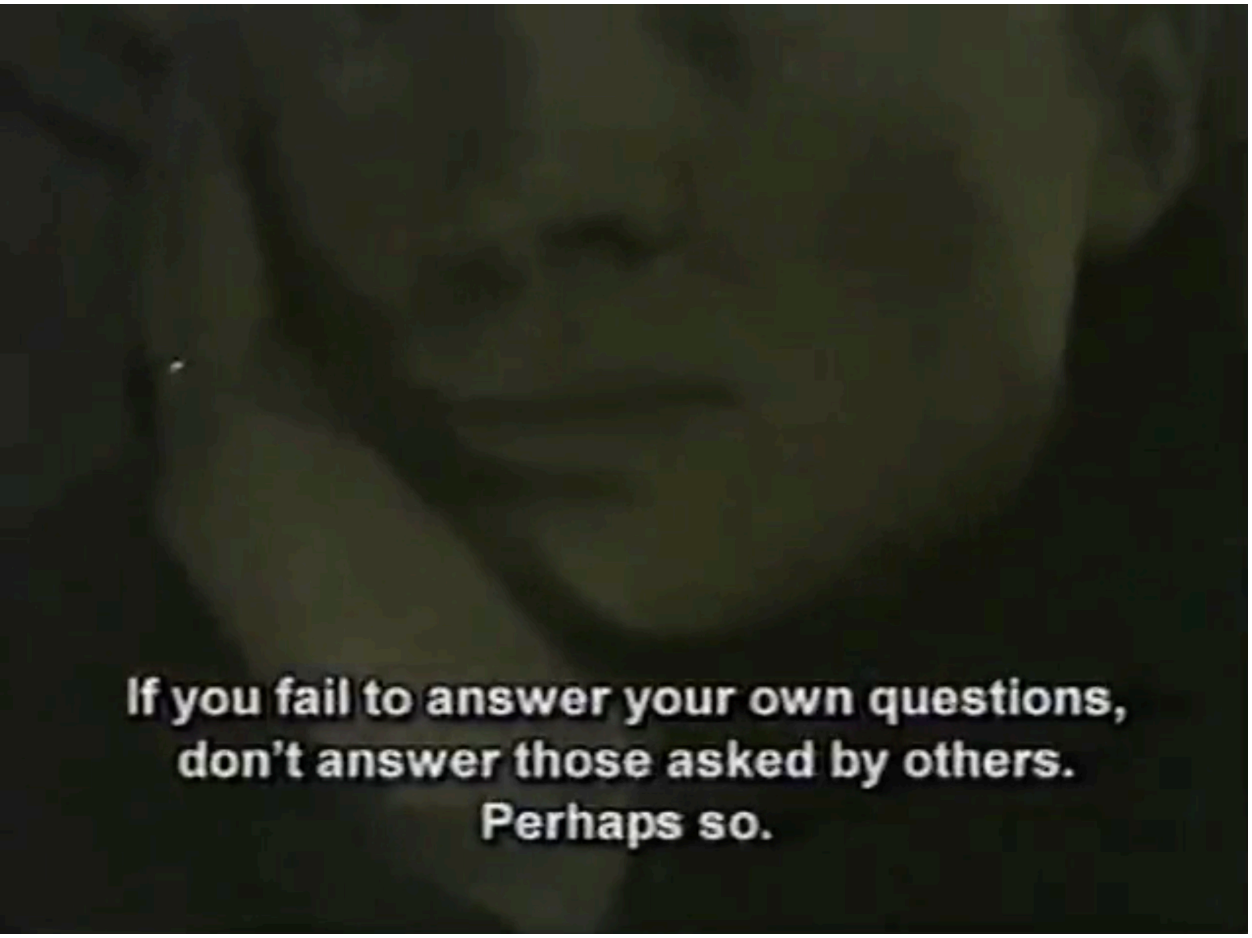
05:52

13:07

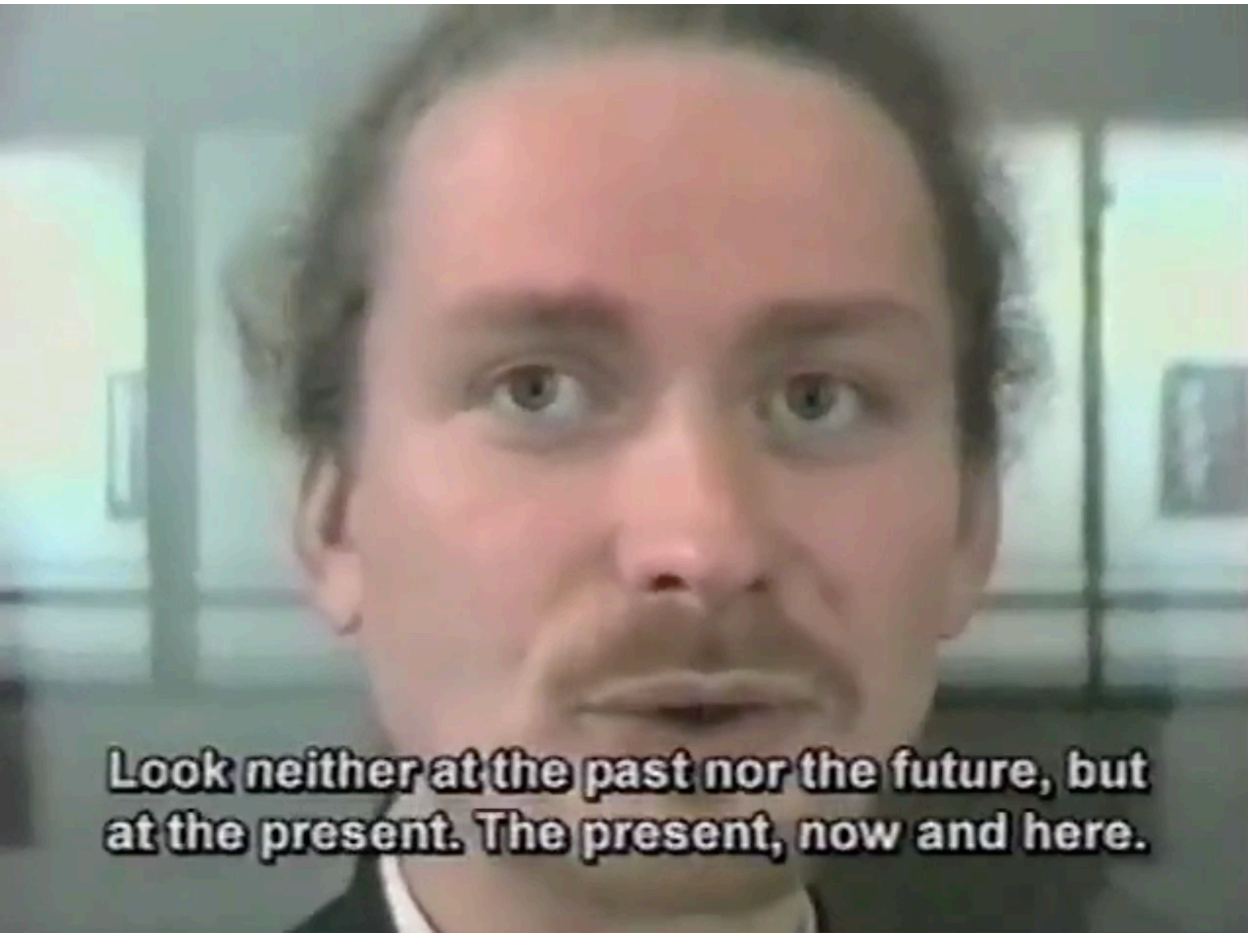

God save us from cutting the wings before
our first flight.

06:34


Well, I'll tell you: I wish the horizon would
never be overgrown with trees and that
there would be some space left for the sky
and the earth.

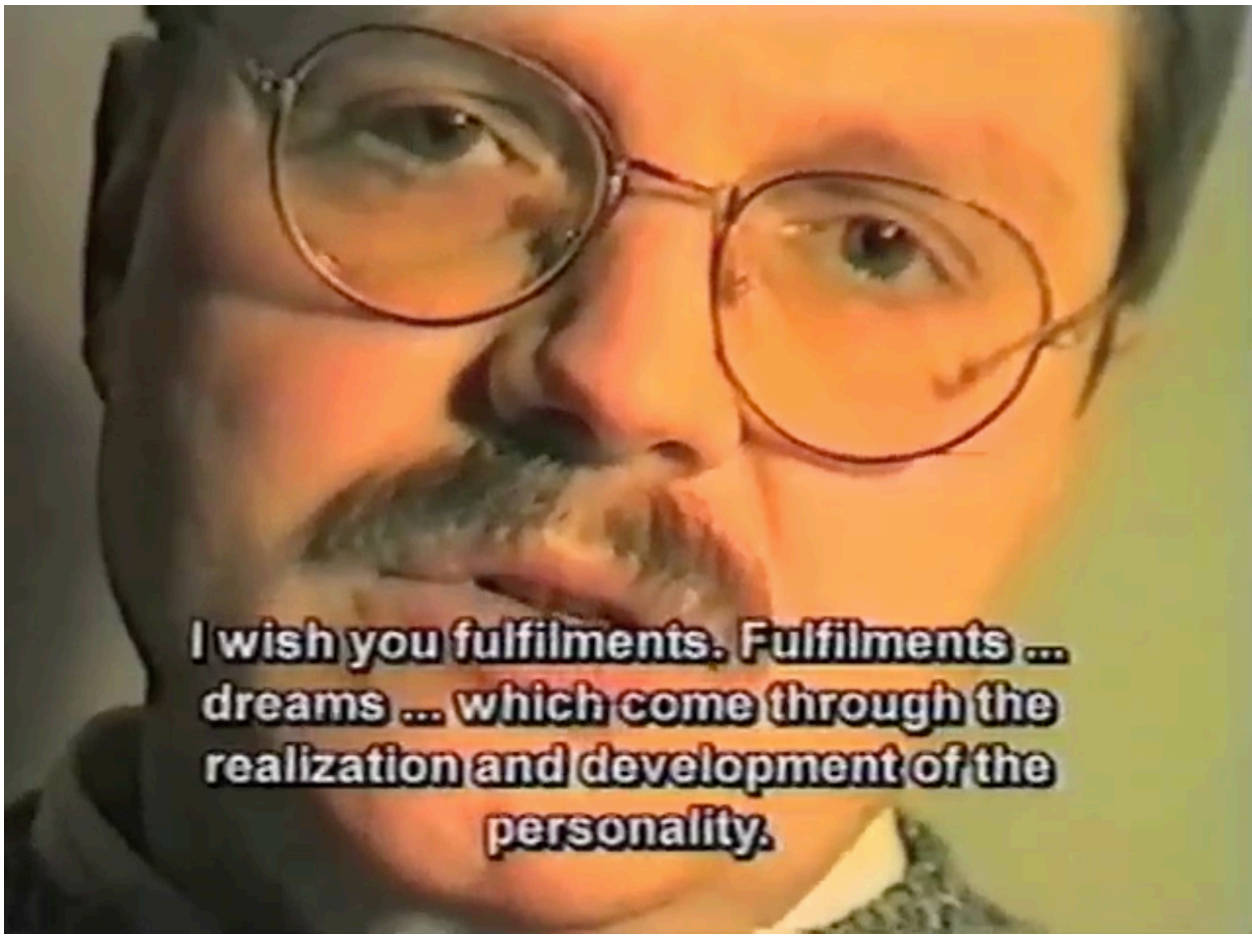

If you fail to answer your own questions,
don't answer those asked by others.
Perhaps so.

05:11


Look neither at the past nor the future, but
at the present. The present, now and here.

03:41

13:14

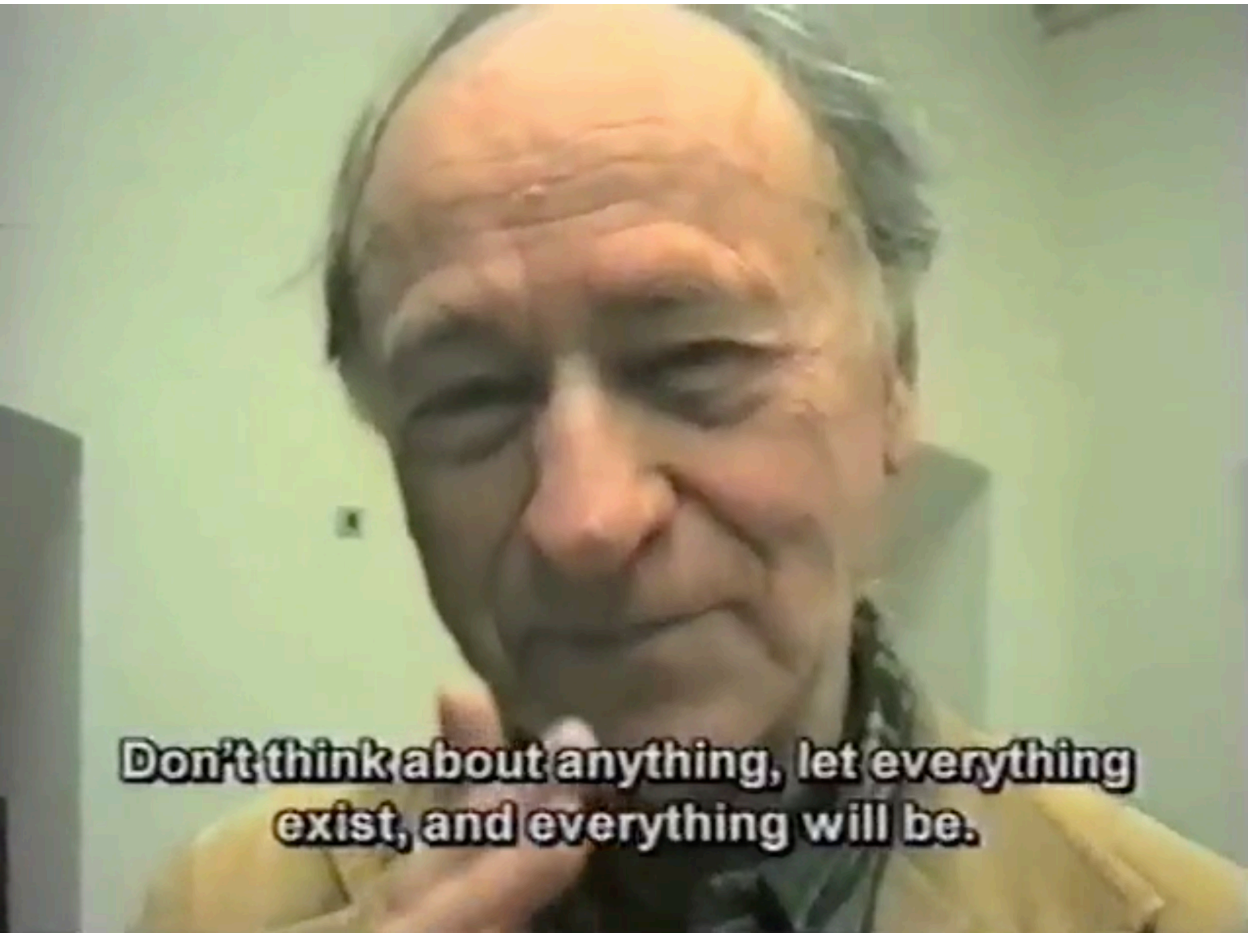

I wish you fulfilments. Fulfilments ...
dreams ... which come through the
realization and development of the
personality.

13:55


Even if love and understanding don't seem
to exist in life ... everybody should live in a
way as if they did exist!


I wish others also did not think
anything.

08:59


Don't think about anything, let everything
exist, and everything will be.

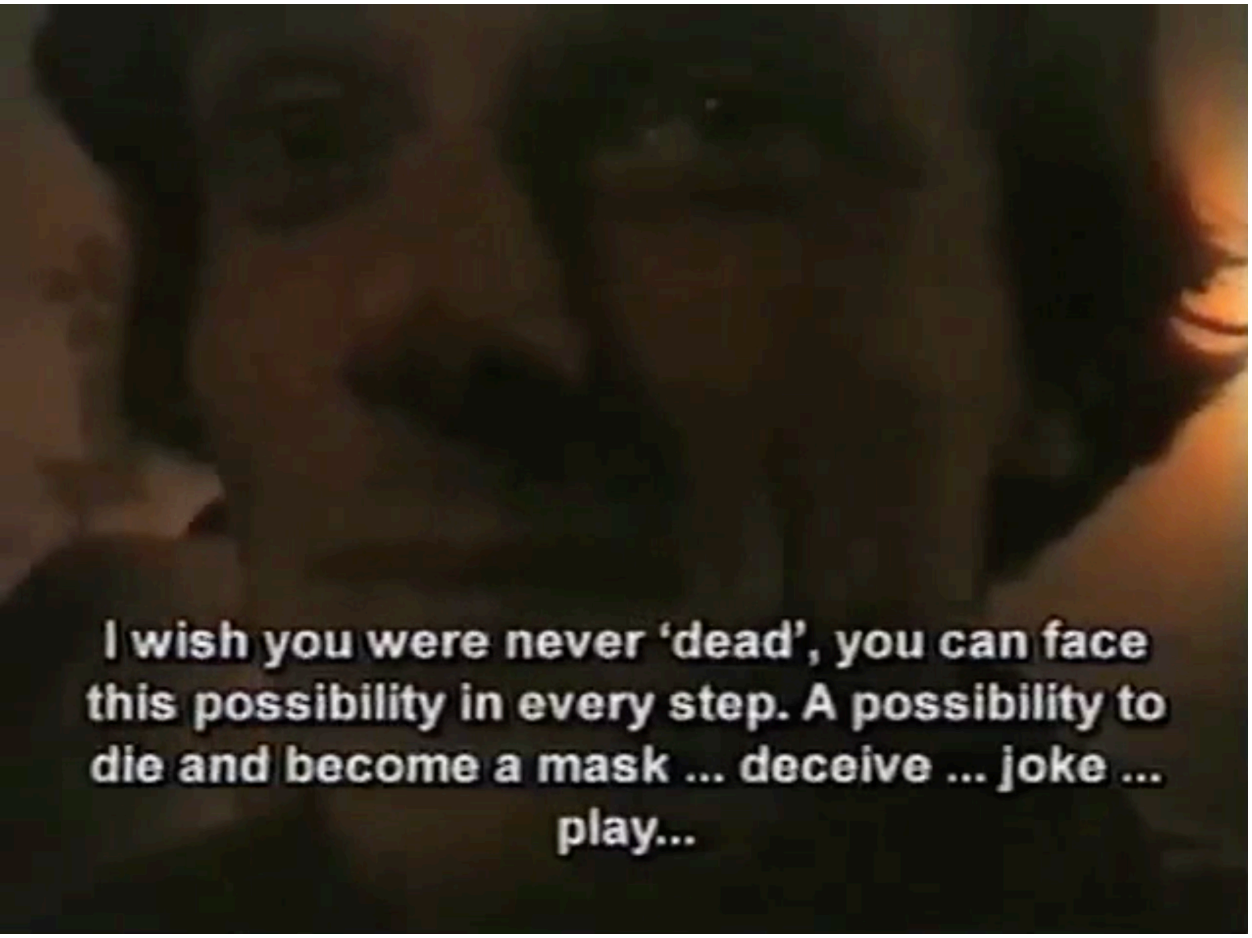
05:18

05:27



05:33



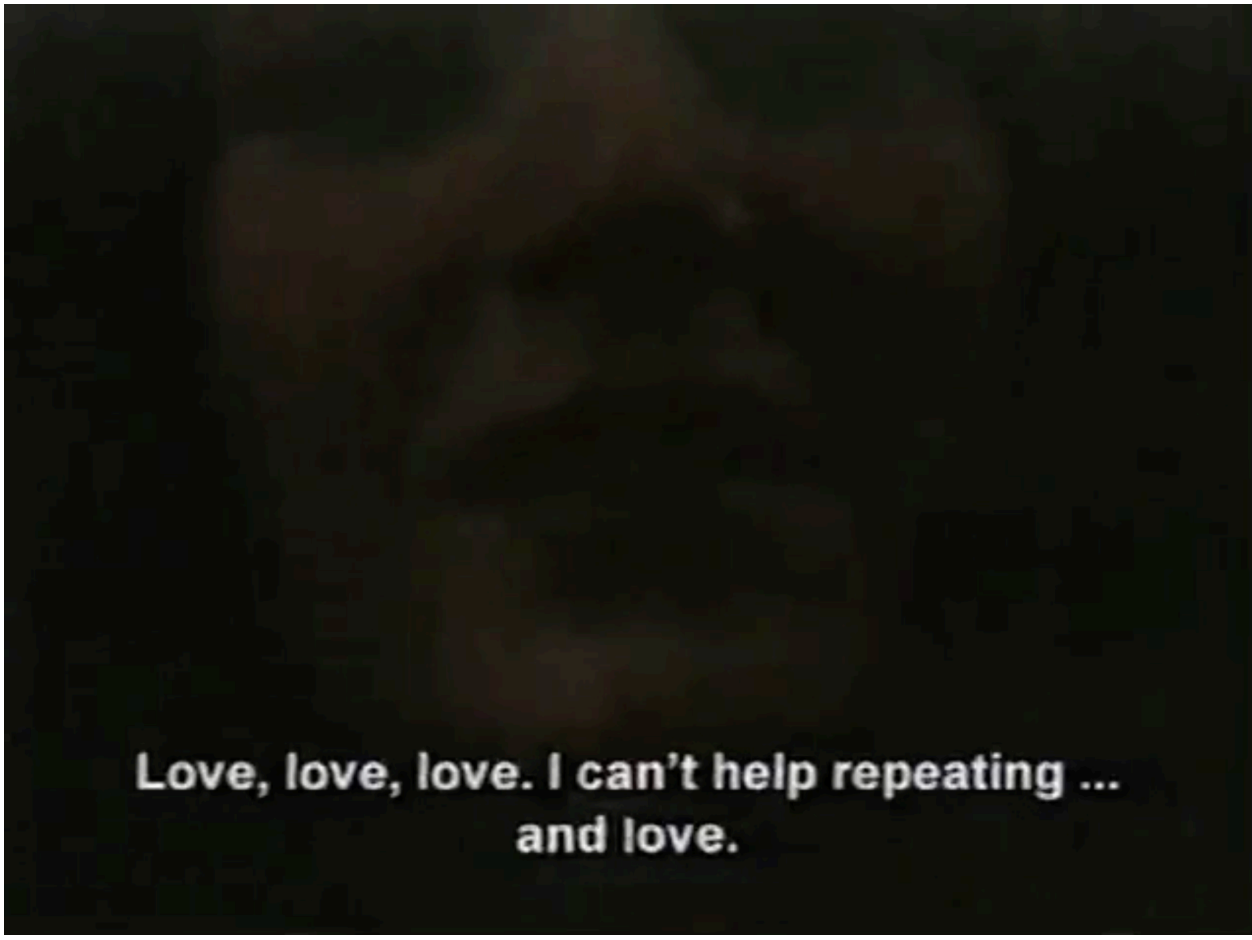

I wish you were never 'dead', you can face this possibility in every step. A possibility to die and become a mask ... deceive ... joke ... play...

10:33


Look after your souls.

10:04

17:44


Love, love, love. I can't help repeating ...
and love.

17:11


I believe in the fact that others also believe.


I'd like to wish for changes.

14:44


I'd like that there was no such ... prejudice.

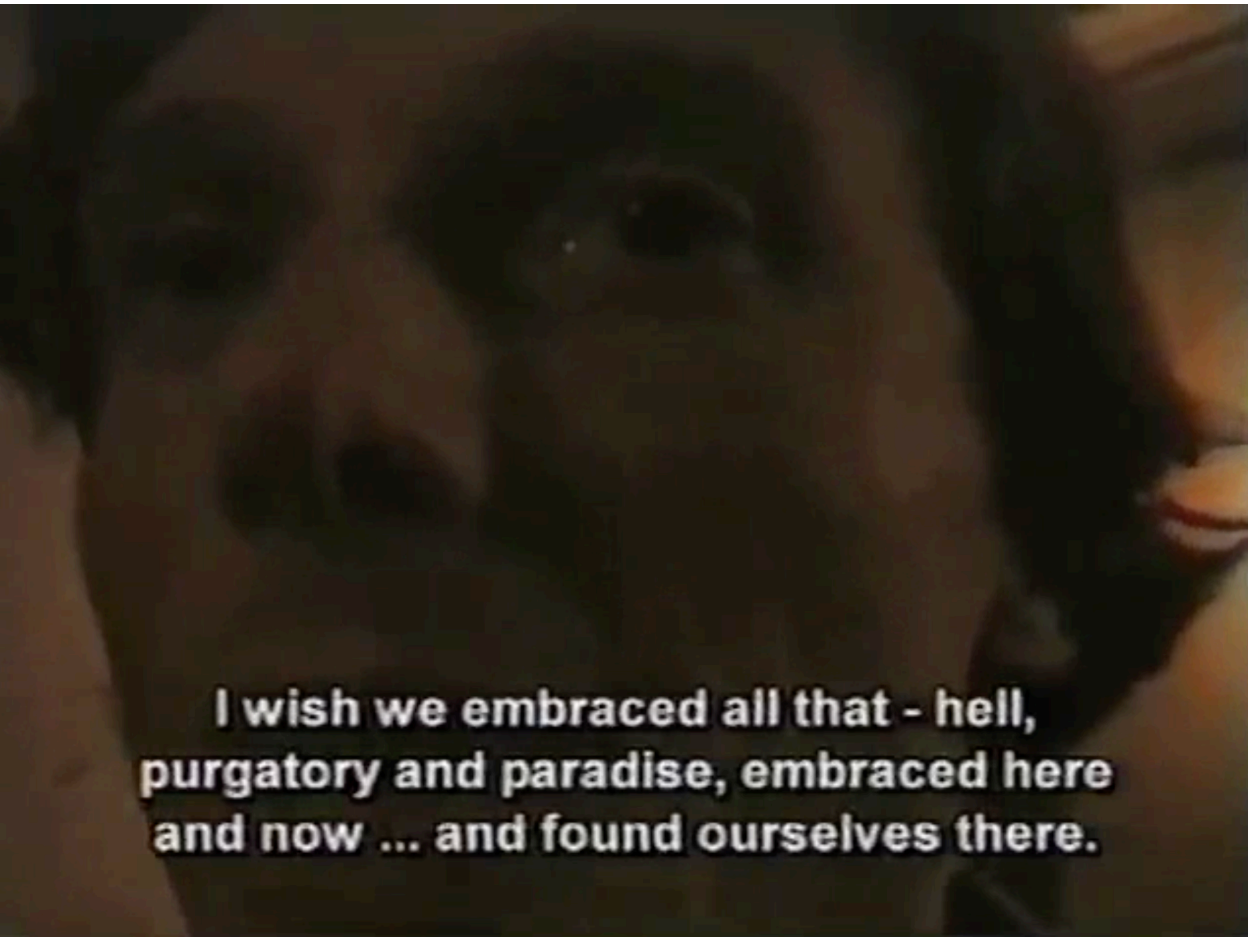
20:00

20:48


Revelation, movement ... what else?

09:47


The main thing is, umm, novelty, courage
and cheekiness, well, all that.

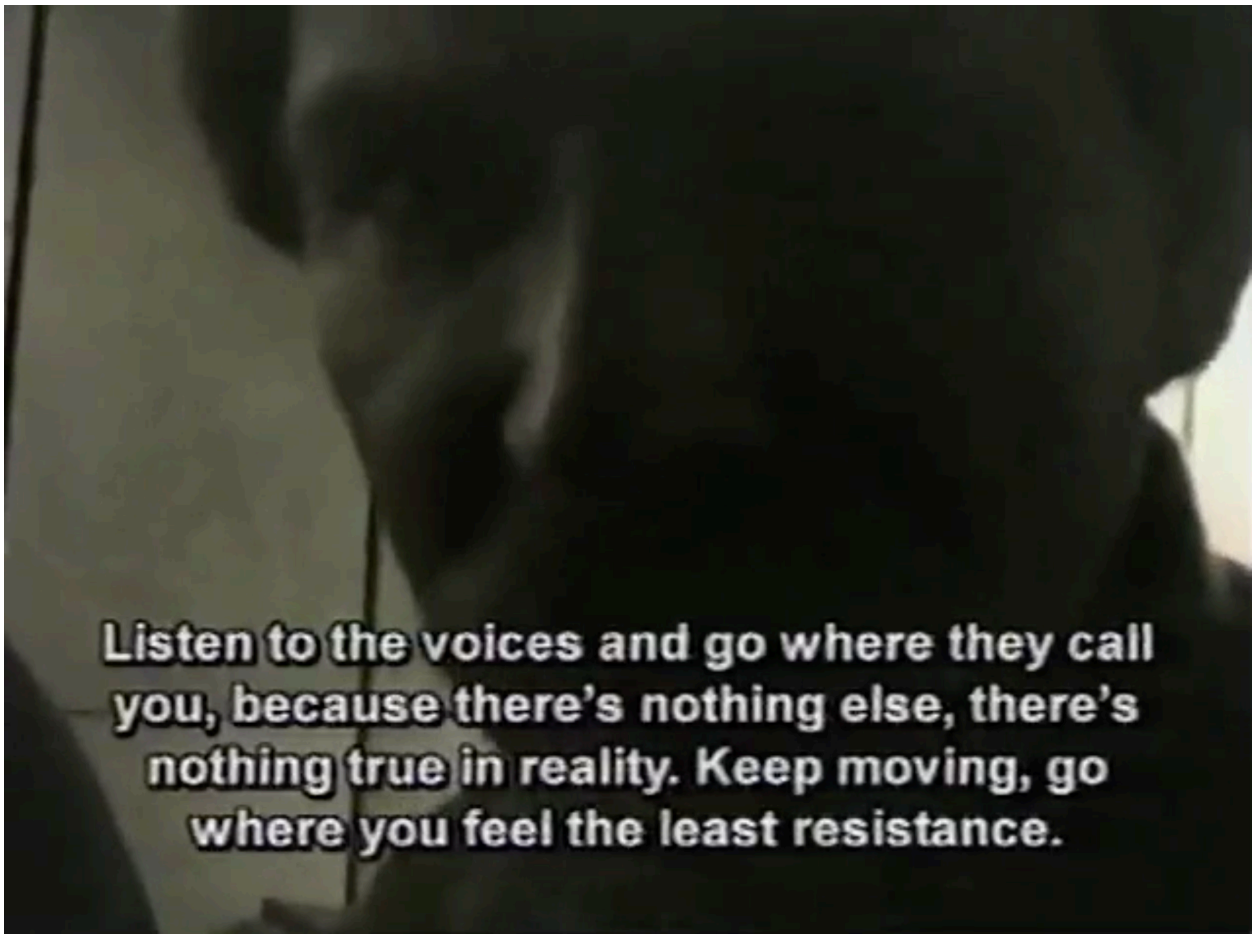

I wish we embraced all that - hell,
purgatory and paradise, embraced here
and now ... and found ourselves there.

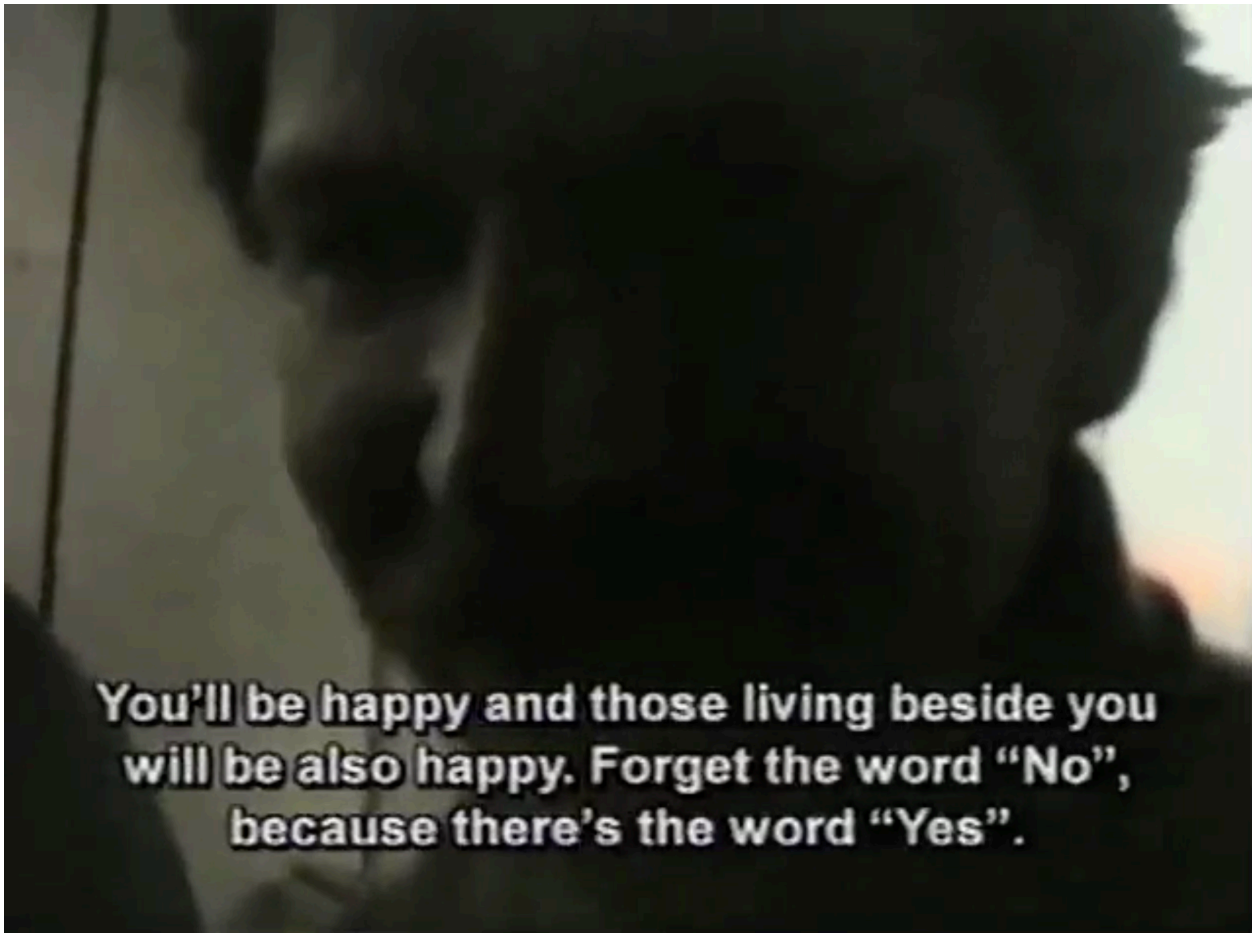
18:34

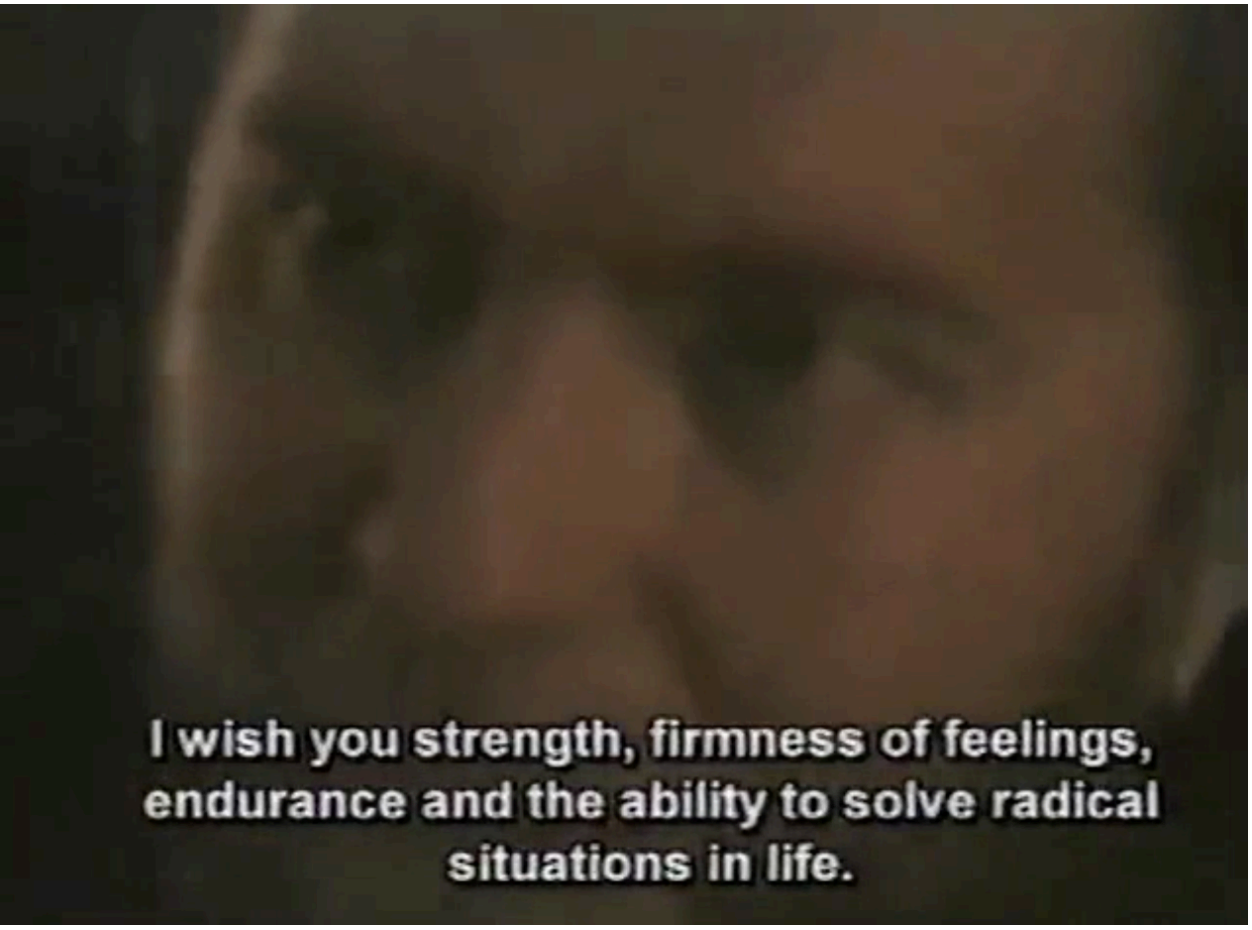

Illusions.

15:28

15:54


Listen to the voices and go where they call you, because there's nothing else, there's nothing true in reality. Keep moving, go where you feel the least resistance.


You'll be happy and those living beside you will be also happy. Forget the word "No", because there's the word "Yes".

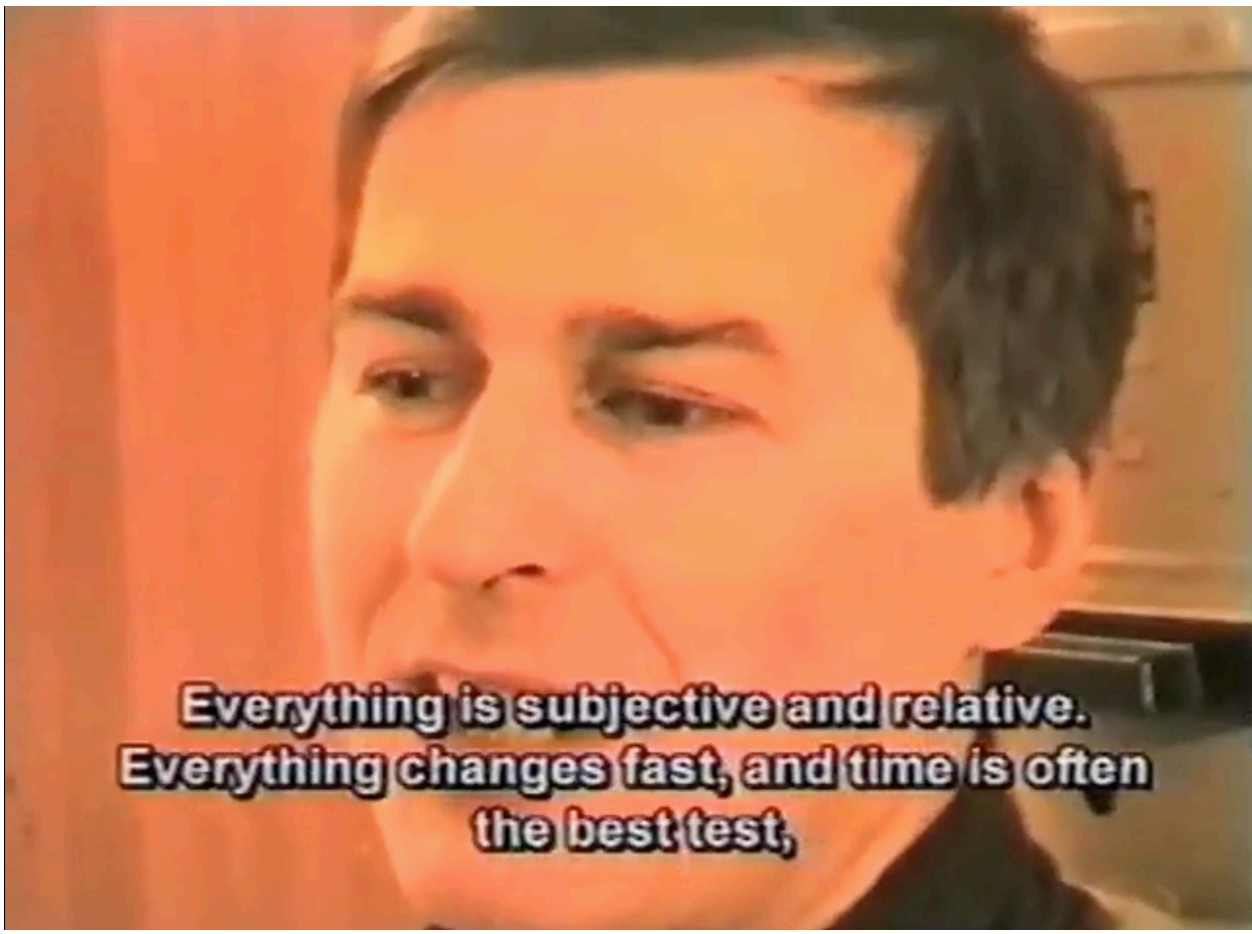

I wish you strength, firmness of feelings,
endurance and the ability to solve radical
situations in life.

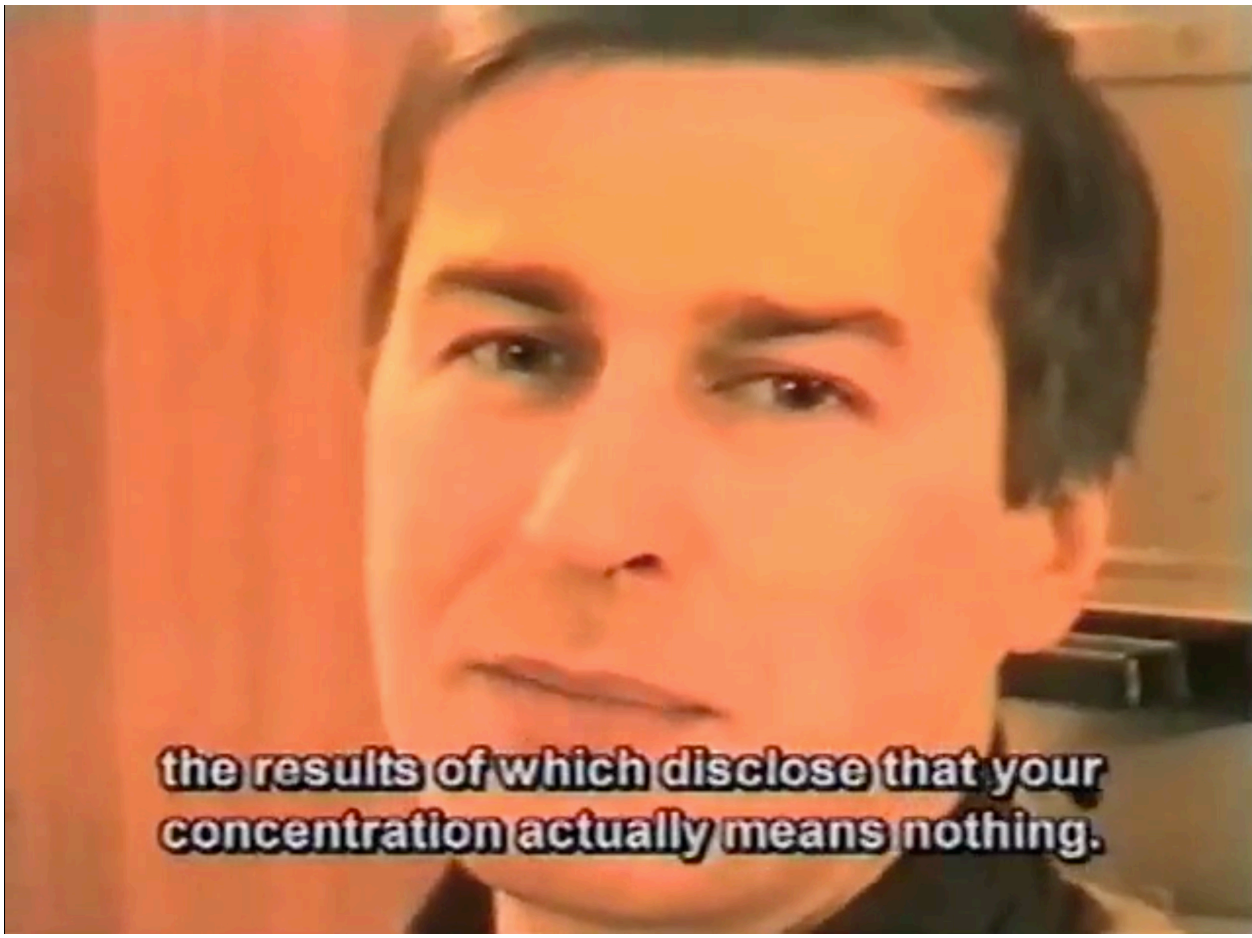
08:18


I wish we could resist any pressure.

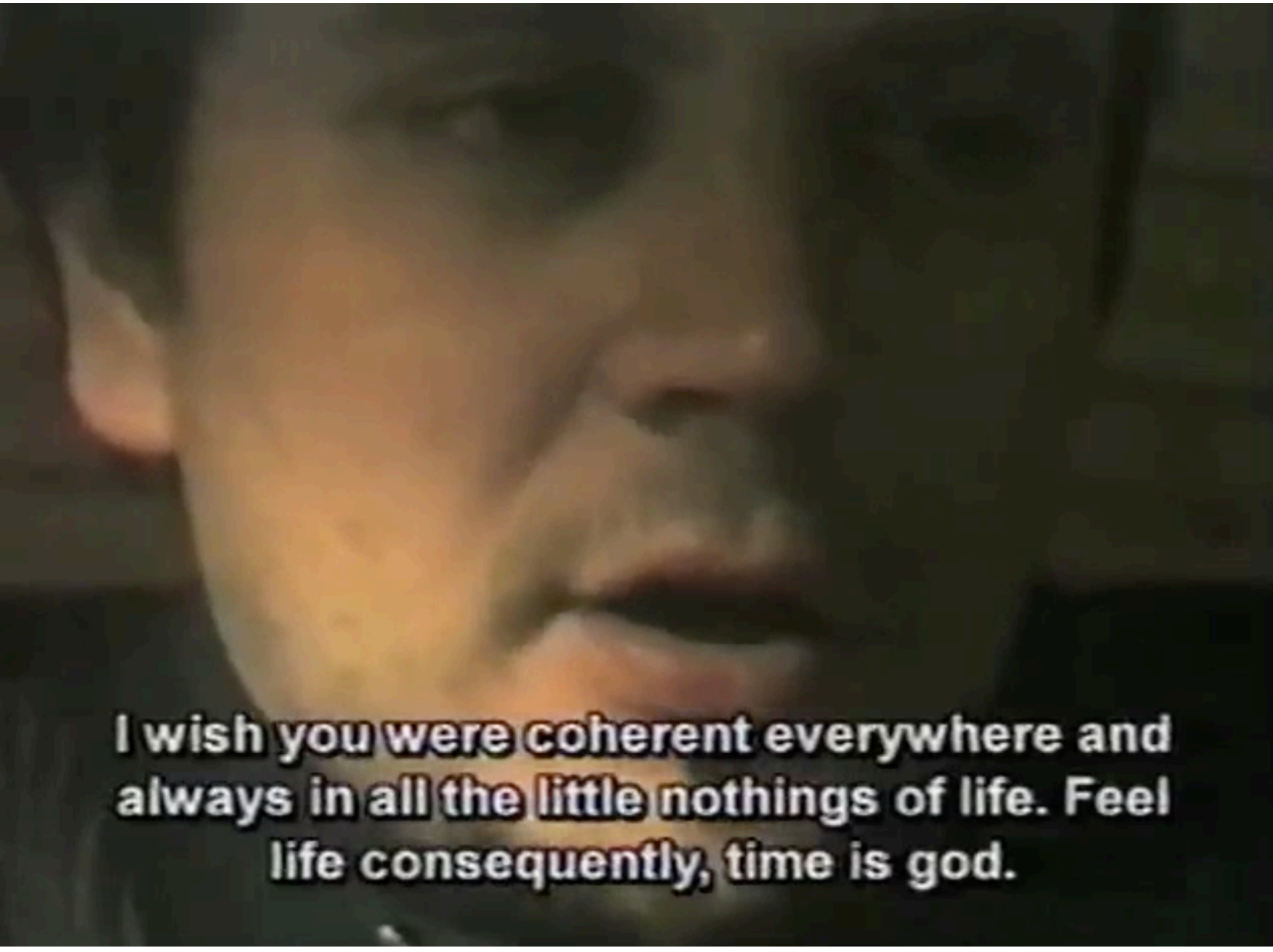
13:02

03:49


Everything is subjective and relative.
Everything changes fast, and time is often
the best test,


the results of which disclose that your
concentration actually means nothing.


Everything is a matter of agreement.


I wish you were coherent everywhere and
always in all the little nothings of life. Feel
life consequently, time is god.

09:33

3. ANTI-WORLDS: SINGULARITY AGAINST EMPIRE

Long live Antiworlds ! They rebut
With dreams the rat race and the rut.[284]

[284] Voznesensky, Andrei. “Anti-Worlds,” 1962.

Nostalgia is a sentiment wrapped up in loss and displacement; but, as Stevlana Boym writes, it is also a romance with ones own fantasies.[285]

Nostalgia appears, at first, to be a longing for a place that doesn't exist anymore, but upon closer examination, nostalgia reveals itself as a temporal displacement—the yearning for a different time than the one we currently find ourselves in. Nostalgia is a reorientation towards the pace of childhood; a slower rhythm to our dreams.[286]

Yet, nostalgia can also be a utopian sentiment: a longing that rebels against the modern idea of time; against the march of history and progress. Reflective nostalgia is "a homemaking in the text"[287] which takes "sensual delight in the texture of time not measurable by clocks and calendars."[288] Nostalgia is a poetic creation, when we're able to take responsibility for our own nostalgia and not let others prefabricate it for us.

That is not so much the past, as it is the realm of pure imagination.



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[285] Boym, Svetlana. "Nostalgia and Its Discontents," in Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture: The Uses of the Past, Summer 2007, The Hedgehog Review.

[286] Ibid.

[287] Ibid.

[288] Nabokov, Vladimir. "On Time and its Texture," *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 185.

I.

My grandmother worked as a baker for the one bakery in our village, a collective farm with a population of 1,500. She would use an abacus to calculate sales while I sat on the floor beside her, hiding behind the counter; concealing the piece of warm rye bread I pulled off the cooling rack. The sound of the wooden beads sliding back and forth mixed with the sound of the oven, wood crackling, and the clamour of men and women crowding inside the bakery; heatedly discussing foreign politics, then gossiping about local 'politics,' laughing, waiting. A community that small held a collective memory that complicated individuality; where the limits of the self blur, and the stark divide between the self and the other slowly disintegrate, then begin to intertwine. Elderly women you've never met before stop you on a grassy road at the edge of town to tell you that you have your father's eyes.

Memories of my childhood in Vidzy are intertwined with thoughts of need, limit, and the ways in which those two notions informed my understanding of meaning. Meaning became the instance of transcending beyond bare life,[289] the dew on the branch of the apple tree that gave you occasion to pause; the smell of lilac after the rain; the warmth between siblings when one has stolen a cherry from the market for the other. Meaning became the various colours and shades of emotion, mixing together with each new experience to create never before felt hues. Meaning was affect committed to memory; the feeling of having your needs met and then discovering that there are more nuanced needs beyond those, related to the quality of your inner life, that can be met too.

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[289] Agamben, Giorgio. *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000.

II.

There's another memory, of the police knocking on my grandmother's door to take her vote for President. The police go door-to-door and ask the residents in her building — 'Are you voting for Lukashenko?'[290]

On the surface, what sounds like a question, is actually not a question at all; because without the ability to refuse, consent is meaningless.[291] As a consequence of this 'polling tactic,' democratic integrity is stretched to absurdity, but with just enough performative plausibility left intact that the issue at hand becomes unintelligible; too slippery to interrogate. This tactic, of obscuring the meaning of something to the point of unintelligibility, is effectively the destabilization of meaning and the weaponization of absurdity, confusion, and apathy. If our symbolic systems are intrinsically tied to our desires, then meaning is tied to the possibility of exercising our will. This would suggest, that the ability to re-signify and contend the meaning of things, continually, in perpetuity, is of the utmost importance to self-determination.

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[290] Alexander Lukashenko heads an authoritarian government and has openly referred to himself as Europe's "last dictator." Balmforth, Richard. "Interview with Belarus President Lukashenko" in *Reuters.* November 27, 2012.

[291] Weil, Simone. "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," trans. Mary McCarthy, in *The Chicago Review,* 18, no. 2 (1965): 5-30.

I have often looked through dusty lace curtains, through the birch trees, and wondered: has anyone in my family ever known a life without coercion? I see one police state after another. In my case, it's the one that shows up to your door in the early hours of the morning, while you're drinking tea in your bathrobe, and it demands to know why you did not report to the police station in the neighbouring town to inform them of your presence in the region. It will not matter that you reported to two other police stations, or that every member of your family is buried in the field by the lake. You're now filed under a new category, an émigré, and you must take off your slippers. Your grandmother will offer these fists of bureaucracy chocolates, which will make you wonder what other transgressions she's grown accustomed to enduring.

There is much coercion, subjection, camouflage; but where is belonging? Where is the self-determination that makes belonging possible? My mother and her mother were occupied subjects, but managed to remember their native words for rain, potato, and god. My grandmother and her mother were illiterate serfs, but managed to embroider and pass down their thoughts under the concealment of symbolism. Before that, we were a blade of grass.

I think I finally understand why my sister, Yulia, only ever painted the forest: we've never seen ourselves in any flag, which would change with every autocrat; we see ourselves only in the rollings fields of birch and the sound of the rain.

JONAS MEKAS, 1962:

"No, I don't think I have ever been a good patriot… Others, they love their country, their patria. But we two are attached only to Semeniškiai, to our little village, to the countryside and the people and the objects there. It has nothing to do with nationalism. We are regionalists… No rain, no wind, no snowstorm, no April like that of our childhood, in Semeniškiai, nowhere. And I don't think it's only romanticism, sentimentalism… Our movements, the way we walk. Our accents, the way we talk. Everything is determined, marked by the climate, landscape, sun in which we grew up, lived. No, it's not just a memory."[292]

[292] Mekas, Jonas. *I Seem to Live. The New York Diaries, Volume 1, 1950-1969.* Leipzig, Spector Books, 2019. 50.



FIGURE 11. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, “CHILDREN OF THE IAKIMANSKY DISTRICT.” IMAGE TAKEN 1918. THE BANNER READS: ‘YES, OUR FUTURE IS AS BRIGHT AND CLEAR AS A SPRING DAY.’



FIGURE 12. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN, “BLASTS IN KIEV”. IMAGE TAKEN 1918.

III.

Somewhere between belonging and occupying, I watch a wild apple roll into the tall grass of what used to be a cemetery, now overturned; redacted.
Historical memory as selective and disjointed as propaganda.
In other words, our nostalgia made bearable.

In awe, we eat potatoes that melt in our mouthes like butter;
edible proof that there's no fertilizer like a dictator's ambitions.

In awe, because there's no poetry in violence — "sheer violence is mute."[293]

[293] Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. 26.

IV.

My grandfather wrote in his diaries that the conflicts of war are not between yourself and another, but rather, between your peacetime self and the warlike self that emerges in response to impossible circumstances. That, what we can rationalize as a state of exception today quickly becomes the norms of tomorrow. One loses their joys, their trust in others and the strengths of kindness — to grief and fear, and subsequently, to sadistic aggression. A warlike self emerges, silent and capable of the previously unthinkable; displacing the self that once was. My grandfather's explanation for how national identity was born; forged through the "baptism of fire."[294] Singularity lost to a nation. In other words, what it means to both come home but 'never return.'

Freud would similarly conclude that war neurosis was the result of the peaceful ego defending itself against the menacing war ego, its parasitic double; its 'internal enemy.'[295] In response to Freud's writing, Sandor Ferenczi posed the question: "how do you treat war neurosis that has moved out of its individual limits, and has affected the sphere of the collective mind?"[296]

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[294] Berardi, Franco. "The Precipice," presented at the Saas-Fee Summer Institute, June 27, 2022. New York City.

[295] Freud, Sigmund. "Introduction to Psychoanalysis and the War Neurosis," in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated by Anna Freud. 1919.

[296] Ferenczi, Sandor. "Is it possible to heal a psycho-systemic collapse?" 1919.

My grandfather's diary also contained a torn, folded page:

"You must know that there is nothing higher and stronger and more wholesome and good for life in the future than some good memory, especially a memory of childhood, of home. People talk to you a great deal about your education, but some good, sacred memory, preserved from childhood, is perhaps the best education. If a man carries many such memories with him into life, he is safe to the end of his days, and if one has only one good memory left in one's heart, even that may sometime be the means of saving us."[297]

[297] Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. "Ilyushechka's Funeral, The Speech by the Stone" in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Translated using the Constance Garnett and Manuel Komroff edition. New York, NY: Signet Classic. 1999. 880.



FIGURE 13. A PHOTOGRAPH OF THE AUTHOR'S GRANDFATHER, ALONGSIDE A PRESSED FLOWER FROM HIS DIARY. IMAGE TAKEN IN 1944.

V.

In conversation with family members displaced by war I discover: a person either learns to write poetry, or they cope with depravity via destruction — either of the self, or of other beautiful things. When faced with our own beauty, we are either healed by it, or it becomes our undoing. There are those who notice the morning dew on the barbed wire surrounding them, and those who cannot bear to.[298]

[298] Petkevich, Tamara. *Memoir of a Gulag Actress*. DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010. In her memoir, Petkevich describes the vital role a poetic sensibility and creative self expression played in helping her endure 7 years of internment. Petkevich became a professional actress on the stages of the camps scattered across the northern Komi Republic. In her memoir, she describes noticing dew glisten on the barbed wire surrounding the camp one morning; describing it as a sight of sublime beauty that brought her back to herself.

VI.

An apple tree full of bees buzzes and I wonder: is any idea worth a life?

"A person is more holy than a land, even when that land is a holy land. Next to a person who has been affronted, this land—holy and promised—is but nakedness and desert, a heap of wood and stone."[299]

[299] Levinas, Emmanuel. Interview with Schlomo Malka, published in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand, Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1989. 297.

VII.

Time bends slowly walking through the outskirts of Lithuania: through towering birch trees, touching sap and moss wet with dew; past penny bun mushrooms, lobsters and chanterelles. A hedgehog waddles past my father as he talks me through putting a piece of rye bread in my mouth, getting it wet with my saliva and rolling it into a ball between my two palms. A fish swims in circles in the bucket between my knees as I roll more rye bread into balls with my spit and palms, and drop them into the bucket as a peace offering.

A hunting knife rests on the lip of the bucket as I coax myself into something like resolve. I dip my right hand into the cold water, then the left. I remember thinking that this feeling of dissonance, between body and soul, must be what makes evil possible.

I take a bite of wild apple and turn my back towards paradise.

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line diving good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being… During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being.”[300]

[300] Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *The gulag archipelago*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. 168.

VIII.

I'm walking down Wrangelstraße in Berlin, towards Motto Books, when I notice three men on the patio of a bar holding each other, arm over shoulder, arm over shoulder, with their other hands over their hearts. They're gently singing the Swedish national anthem together and the glare from the yellow and blue flags they've draped themselves in casts a glare in my direction. I pause for a moment and watch them sway together. I wonder if the Sports Bar is one of the few places carefully constructed masculinity can discard itself with abandon. My mind wanders to an essay I had read earlier that day, Adorno's "Education After Auschwitz"[301] as I watch men sway together and place their hands on each others shoulders with a gentleness that seems to be reserved exclusively for the football game.

I hear one line in particular resounding in my mind: "the single genuine power standing against the principle of Auschwitz is autonomy… the power of reflection, of self-determination, of not cooperating."[302]

'Of not cooperating.'
'Of not cooperating.'

[301] Adorno, Theodor. "Education after Auschwitz" in *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Pedagogies for Social Work*, 108–119. Routledge, 2020.

[302] Ibid. 111.

VIV.

It's 1998 and I'm sitting in my grandparent's kitchen, eating wild blueberries by the fistful, asking an endless barrage of questions about our creators: which they would resolve by reassuring me that 'the beginning is the end,' implying that the end was the beginning. Implying that, human beings would evolve into omniscient, omnipotent beings who would, in turn, recreate all in their own image. Implying that, because I knew love, that must mean that love endures all of time.

I said: in the humid heat of the summer you can smell the chamomile flowers, tart and sweet, and I'm glad that they endure. My grandmother smiled her toothless smile.

I said: I'll never experience death, does that make life eternal?
"Death is but the patience of time."[303]

What's guiding me into the recesses of memories left unturned for decades? Can the body allude to things that the mind will refuse to acknowledge, or accept? What's about to happen? And is it already too late to ask?

[303] Levinas, Emmanuel. *God, Death, and Time*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2000. 8.

Under conditions of competition, all technical innovations that increase productivity (and destructive power) are destined to be implemented; today, that would mean the proliferation of automated generative intelligence.[304] What's about to happen is that pseudo-cognitive automatons, thanks to their ability to self-correct and write software, will greatly accelerate technical innovation, especially of themselves.[305] In this context, human evolution will consist in making oneself more compatible with the machine. In this neo-environment of linguistic automation, the human being will be unable to refuse or consent to the machine — coerced into adapting to automation at the expense of their own pragmatics and living contexts, of self-reflective knowledge and the experience of a body.

The cosmists were right; are we ready to become gods?[306]

Abstract, rational thought has gone in search of timelessness; in search of permanence, inevitability, and necessity outside of time. This thought tries to escape finitude and create for itself a different realm outside the confines of time. But, the only way to escape time is by entering into it, becoming a part of it.[307]

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[304] Berardi, Franco. "The Completion," in *e-flux journal #137*, June 2023. 1-6. 1-4.

[305] Bender, Emily and Timnit Gebru, "On the Dangers of Stochastic Parrots: Can Language Models Be Too Big?" In Conference on Fairness, Accountability, and Transparency (FAccT '21), March 3–10, 2021, Virtual Event, Canada. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 1-14.

[306] The philosophy of Russian Cosmism theorized that human immortality would be achieved by technological means. The cosmist 'common task' involved controlling all the destructive forces of nature (including death), and exploring all the stars and planets in the cosmos. In other words, the common task was the construction of God by scientific, technological, and artistic means. Groys, Boris. "Russian Cosmism: Biopolitics of Immortality" in *Russian Cosmism: The Anthology*. Moscow: Ad Marginem Press, 2015, 6.

[307] Muraviev, Valerian. *The Mastery of Time*. Moscow: IMLI RAN, 2011.

> Time and mathematics do not coincide, because in time there is joy, decay, and death, phenomena that mathematics cannot understand because they belong to the realm of experience. “Experiri,” in the sense of living in the horizon of death, in the sense of becoming nothing—this is not translatable into recombinatory language.[308]

Poppy seeds fall into the sleeve of my sweater and I think, the human condition is ultimately absurd. But, what if it was better that way? What if the enigma of death is an occasion? A point of fusion and fission, of the present with an unknown: of the present with the possibility of something other than the present. As Yakov Druskin wrote, “the deepest kind of sleep without dreams is closer than a distinct, but sufficiently remote memory.”[309] How I pity the gods who cannot expire, living in the endless perpetuity of their own making.

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[308] Berardi, Franco. “Unheimlich: The Spiral of Chaos and the Cognitive Automaton” in *e-flux Notes*, March 10, 2023.

[309] Druskin, Yakov. “Death” [1928] in *Russian Philosophy of Death*, Moscow: Center for Humanitarian Initiatives, 2011.

X.

STAVROGIN:

"... in the Apocalypse the angel swears that there'll be no more time."

KIRILLOV:

"I know. It's quite true, it's said very clearly and exactly. When the whole of man has achieved happiness, there won't be any time, because it won't be needed. It's perfectly true."

STAVROGIN:

"Where will they put it then?"

KIRILLOV:

"They won't put it anywhere. Time isn't a thing, it's an idea. It'll die out in the mind."[310]

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[310] Dostoyevsky, Fyodor. *Devils (the Possessed)*. [1871] Translated by David Magarshack. London: Penguin, 2004.

In 1927 Siegfried Kracauer published an essay on photography in which he contrasted photography with memory. According to Kracauer, memory retained only that which had meaning and personal significance and could be understood as a repository for truth. From the perspective of memory, “photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage.”[311] For Kracauer, memory, which bears within it the meaning of the world and its truths, was being threatened by photography’s indiscriminate preservation of ‘traces’; its unlimited expansion of an archive of minutiae. It was as if an infinite, chaotic accumulation of traces led to a kind of semiotic apocalypse, in which meaning and memory disappeared. Kracauer argued that the expansion of the photographic archive, which led to a decline in memory, was a misguided attempt to banish “the recollection of death, which is part and parcel of every memory-image.”[312] Kracauer described this world of detritus, from which subjectivity and meaning disappear, as an attempt to return to paradise: as a return to the state of man that preceded knowledge and symbolization of the world.[313]

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[311] Kracauer, Siegfried. “Photography,” *Critical Inquiry,* Spring 19.3, 1993. 426.

[312] Ibid. 433.

[313] Iampolski, Mikhail. “Memory and Trace,” In *ReFocus: The Films of Andrei Tarkovsky*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. 2021. 225-238.

Merleau-Ponty described time as a landscape:

> Time presupposes a view of time. It is, therefore, not like a river, not a flowing substance. The fact that the metaphor based on this comparison has persisted from the time of Heraclitus to our own day is explained by our surreptitiously putting into the river a witness of its course… If the observer sits in a boat and is carried by the current, we may say that he is moving downstream toward his future, but the future lies in the new landscapes which await him at the estuary, and the course of time is no longer the stream itself: it is the landscape as it rolls by for the moving observer. Time is, therefore, not a real process, not an actual succession that I am content to record. It arises from *my* relation to things.[314]

Time as the homogenous, undifferentiated rhythm of the water that carries us is differentiated from time as a landscape that can only be experienced from a particular vantage point and a particular perspective; an enclosure sporadically punctuated by meaning.

[314] Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. London: Routledge. 2013. 477–8.



FIGURE 14. DANIL KOTLIAR, “ISO JUMPING INTO A PUDDLE, PARIS” (2022) SILVER GELATINE DIPTYCH PRINT.

XI.

The question still gets asked, ‘what is art?’ But the subtext of that question seems to be, ‘is it real?’ Is art capable of being a medium of truth? Well, if art cannot be a medium of truth then art would only be a matter of taste; and if art was only a matter of taste: then the art spectator becomes more important than the art producer.[315]

Imagine the implications of this. Imagine an individual that cannot experience the possibilities of her own actions: the pleasure, or the limitations of them. The aesthetic relies entirely on the assumption that the individual is capable of responsibility, for producing *this* work, by undertaking *that* artistic action. Imagine that we are, instead, dominated by the collective; by corporations and states. Imagine that nothing meaningful comes through recognition of oneself. Imagine flesh torn from theory.[316] If art is not a medium of truth, we are only made real by a Panopticon[317] with no one sitting at the well. Art is a medium of truth when it is personal responsibility.

‘What is art?’ Art is Tommie Smith and John Carlos at the 1968 Olympics.
Art is a “fistfight in the orchestra pit.”[318]

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[315] Boris Groys, “The Truth of Art” e-flux Journal #71, 2016.

[316] Natalie Loveless, “Practice in the Flesh of Theory: Art, Research, and the Fine Arts PhD” in *Canadian Journal of Communication Vol 37*, 2012, 93-108.

[317] The panopticon is an architectural design feature created for the purposes of surveillance, intended to promote self-policing and censure. The act of surveillance is not made transparent, so although it isn’t possible for the single surveyor to observe all those surveyed at once, the inability to know when one is being watched motivates the surveyed to act as though they are all being watched at all times. Bentham, Jeremy. *Panopticon, or The Inspection House.* London: Payne, 1791.

[318] Because, presumably, there is still something at stake.
Kirill Medvedev, *It’s No Good* (2016) Originally published in “Incursion,” (2002) Argo-Risk.

‘What is art?’ Art is writing before you learn how to read[319];
because before thought, it must have been poetry.[320]

If “contemporary art is an art to survive our contemporaneity”[321] then the aesthetic is our integrity of thought beyond the confines of language.[322] Art is a stray dog, following you through a field of sunflowers on the outskirts of Vidzy, impressing upon you all that which you cannot *grasp*.[323] An eternal reoccurrence[324] poised like a crossroads, as if our generosity and willingness to engage with that which offers us no utility, instead offers us a mirror to our humanity.

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[319] Camnitzer, Luis. “Art and Literacy” *e-flux journal #3*, February 2009.

[320] From the German “Bevor gedacht wird, muss schon gedichtet worden sein.” Grimm, Rüdiger Hermann. “Creative Thinking and Will to Power,” in *Nietzsche's Theory of Knowledge*, 1977, 141.

[321] Vidokle, Anton. “Art without Market, Art without Education: Political Economy of Art” *e-flux journal #43*, March 2013.

[322] Identifying artistic practices as modes of thought that do not make use of language in a way that can easily be translated into scientific discourse, Mersch advocates for an aesthetic mode of thought beyond the “linguistic turn,” a way of thinking that cannot be substituted by any other disciplinary system. Mersch, Dieter. “For an aesthetic mode of thought beyond the linguistic turn” in *Epistemologies of Aesthetics*, 2015. 61–114.

[323] For Levinas, ethics is the attempt to interrupt the conquest of the world via knowledge acquisition and cognitive certainty in favour of prioritizing affect and putting oneself into uncertainty and question. Levinas, Emmanuel. “Ethics as First Philosophy” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, 75-87.

[324] Central to the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, ”eternal recurrence” is the idea that with infinite time and a finite number of events, events will recur again and again infinitely. Kılıç, Sinan. “The Eternal Recurrence as Difference in Nietzsche’s Metaphysics” in *Temaşa Felsefe Dergisi*, 9, 2018, 19-38.

XII.

Every Saturday, at dusk, the women in my neighbourhood gather and the smell of glycerin soap and lemon fills the bathhouse. Birch branches colour the bathwater green, which tastes acidic and sweet. I watch as young mothers bathe their toddlers, and I watch as my mother bathes my grandmother. Not a single back is left unscratched and loneliness does not yet exist.

Do we overthrow the guards? Some continue to try. And for some, the unknown is more frightening than subjugation.

“And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”[325]

[325] Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. *The gulag archipelago*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973. 241.

XIII.

Unable to write, I decide to go for a walk. I climb Gediminas Tower in Vilnius, hoping to see what my aunts and uncles, parents and grandparents saw, as they envisioned their futures from the vantage point of 1989; when they gathered here to hold hands and sing.[326] They held the hands of their friends in solidarity, and they sang with the hope that their future might offer them a chance to heal the wounds of the past. My mother was pregnant with me then; which was everyone's explanation for why I, as a child, would frequently and spontaneously take children I didn't know by the hand and begin to dance.

[326] The Baltic Way was a peaceful political demonstration that marked the 50th anniversary of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, in which Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were divided between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany as 'spheres of influence.' Approximately two million people joined hands to form a human chain spanning 690 kilometres, drawing international attention to the victims of Stalinism and Nazism and to the issue of sovereignty for the Baltic republics. Seven months after the demonstration, Lithuania became the first Soviet republic to declare independence.



FIGURE 16. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAAK KÜNNAP OF THE 600 KM LONG BALTIC WAY HUMAN CHAIN.



XIV.

> “Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely, the human race – to activate the emergency brake.”[327]

[327] Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings vol. 4: 1938–1940.* Belknap Press, 2006. 402.

XV.

"So what is the solution? Which is the revolutionary path? …. Is there one?"[328]

It's dusk and I'm laying in my grandmother's living room in Vidzy, Belarus; outside the window, the smell of lilacs and manure.

My grandmother walks quietly into the room and sits at the foot of the bed; we remain silent. Thinking I'm asleep, she gently kisses each foot.

[328] Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1983. 239.



AFTERWORD

1. How does techno-capitalism contribute to the erosion of meaning and agency in contemporary society, and what are the democratic implications of this erosion?

Techno-capitalism is characterized by its relentless push for innovation, where technology is developed and deployed primarily for economic gain, which is equated with societal benefit. This results in products that prioritize engagement over meaningful interaction: digital platforms, underpinned by techno-capitalism, employ algorithms to capture and retain user attention, thereby influencing consumer behaviour and preferences at an unprecedented scale. Techno-capitalism thrives on the commodification of personal data, reducing human experiences to data points that can be traded, sold, and exploited for profit.

The commodification of personal data manipulates consumer behaviour through algorithmic determinism and the illusion of choice. Users are often nudged towards predetermined choices and content, making it increasingly difficult to exercise free will within digital environments. If 'the medium is the message' then today, the medium is the algorithm, shaping our choices without our awareness — from the content we consume, to the persons we date, to the products we buy. This erodes what little we have left of our personal agency, making it increasingly more difficult for individuals to make decisions driven by their own desires and values.[329] Further, online platforms tend to segment users into like-minded groups, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs and prejudices.[330] This fragmentation impedes the development of a shared social reality, critical for democratic discourse. The slow disintegration of a world

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[329] Koehler, D. "The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet" in *Journal of Deradicalization*, (1):116–134. 2014.

[330] Wojcieszak, M. "Don't talk to me: effects of ideologically homogeneous online groups and politically dissimilar offline ties on extremism" in *New Media & Society*, 12(4):637–655. 2010.

shared in common, in turn, leads to increased political polarization, undermining the consensus-building that is essential for democratic governance.[331]

A neoliberal capitalism that exclusively prioritizes economic freedom has demoralized any sense of community or concern for the collective wellbeing of a pluralistic polity. It's pushed the public good out of view, beyond political imagination, at the cost of uncertainty, fear, apathy, anger, and violence. The body politic has lost sight of solidarity in a singular quest for individual advantage, consequently, the middle ground of community has withered, and the willingness to manage differences well enough to address cross-cultural issues is collapsing.[332]

Today's U-turn toward authoritarianism is fuelled by this foreclosure of epistemological pluralism.[333] We, cyclically, return again and again to a situation in which 'there is no one between the Tsar and Lenin,'[334] a situation in which the complexity of individual political agency and desire is reduced to either partisan identity politics or the faceless collective. The revolutionary challenge today is to remain faithful to what Alain Badiou called the 'egalitarian spirit' — a persistent commitment to solidarity, despite our intractable differences.[335]

The outbreak of senselessly violent wars in today's world has convinced many that violence is the only way to defend a 'rules-abiding' world-order (which we have

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[331] Mahmoudi, A, D. Jemielniak and L. Ciechanowski, "Echo Chambers in Online Social Networks: A Systematic Literature Review," in *IEEE Access, vol. 12,* pp. 9594-9620, 2024.

[332] Ivie, Robert. "Speaking Hopefully for Democracy's Future" in *Common Dreams*, February 7, 2024.

[333] Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. 1st ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

[334] Žižek, Slavoj. "Reply: What to Do When Evil Is Dancing on the Ruins of Evil" in *positions* 19:3, Winter 2011. 657.

[335] Badiou, Alain. *Of an Obscure Disaster.* Maastricht: Jan van Eyck Academie, 2009. 37-46.

come to equate with both democracy and justice.)[336] However, both political polarization and the mental hoops we jump through to justify violence in the name of peace, are symptoms of an inability to reflect critically on our own epistemic biases, as well as the larger socio-economic systems that distort our ability to construct and interrogate what we know to be true.[337]

Leading a meaningful and responsible life means critically engaging what we think we know. The absence of questioning is the source of what Elzbieta Matynia calls "mis-knowing,"[338] of knowing something erroneously and acting on it wrongfully. Knowledge is socially produced, therefore, if we live in an information bubble, our susceptibility to mis-knowledge intensifies — and the potential for violence increases. Reflecting on the sources of our own mis-knowing can help to illuminate and ameliorate our acutely conflicted world.

The image of a bridge figures prominently in Matynia's thinking on how to reflect together critically and constructively. A bridge is where people may pause to rest. A bridge is a space of leisure, a public place that facilitates initial contact. It encourages being with others, and it provides opportunities to see the world from a different, more spontaneous, perspective. As we pass time together on the bridge, we might begin to feel more trusting of one another as we listen to each others 'travel stories'.

Matynia suggests that exchanging stories is a start toward restoring a broken democracy. It can bring about a gradual recognition of shared interests and common ground. Citizens can chip away at mis-knowing in spaces of spontaneous encounter, where they can discover each other and broaden social knowledge. Crucially, it's a

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[336] Ivie, Robert. *Hunt the Devil: A Demonology of US War Culture*. Tuscaloosa: The University Alabama Press, 2015.

[337] Badiou, Alain. *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*. London: Verso. 2001.

[338] Matynia, Elzbieta. *An Uncanny Era: Conversations between Václav Havel and Adam Michnik*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.

process that takes place face-to-face, and it's a process that *takes time*.[339] Matynia's corrective for restoring faith in the institutions and practices of democracy begins with passing time together in relation, in conversation, to attenuate the political alienation that results in our mis-knowing one another. She places the democratic challenge before us in finding the courage and generosity to chose speech over despair — in not giving up on one another just yet.[340]

[339] Matynia, Elzbieta. "Tribute to a Bridge: The Bridge on the Drina, Evo Andric" in *Social Research 89.2*, 2022.

[340] Matynia, Elzbieta. "Is Liberal Democracy Already History?" in *East European Politics and Societies 34.3*, 2020.


The essence of autocracy


is that between society and the government


there aren't many ways
to provide feedback.


That’s the danger of authoritarian
concentration of power —


they make decisions that are wanted,
acceptable, expected


and needed by very few people.


But you can’t do anything about it
because you don’t have
any political institutions,
a parliament, or any civil rights,


so you can’t influence
the process of decision-making.


So the decisions will be made
that will reset your existence,


but you’ll have to live with that.

FIGURE 17. STILLS FROM “SHULMAN. MOVCHAN: CONFLICT, SANCTIONS AND THE RUBLE. WHAT TO DO AT THE END OF THE OLD WORLD?” INTERVIEW BETWEEN RUSSIAN POLITICAL SCIENTIST EKATERINA SHULMAN AND HOST KSENIYA SOBCHAK, FEBRUARY 28, 2022. 1:35:00 DURATION.




Why the concentration of power
in the hands of a single person is bad?


Why we need turnover?


why we can’t say, “This person does
their job well, so let him rule.”


You understand
that there's a limit


after which this sitting in the office
takes a completely different shape?


You understand that the democratic
institution isn't a toy for rich countries


This is a system of safety locks
that prevent an explosion.


Sadly, the path of progress that humanity
has been treading isn't linear.


There's holes in the ground
that you can fall down.

2. In what ways can reconceptualizing time as a relational and non-linear construct contribute to individual and collective emancipation?

Reconceptualizing time as relational challenges the dominant, linear perception of time as a series of progressive events that move from past to future, which is deeply embedded in Western thought and capitalist systems. Viewing time as a web of potentialities, where the past, present, and future interact dynamically, orients us towards the present moment as the primary site of action and memory. Reconceptualizing time as a fabric of relationships also challenges deterministic narratives of history and progress, it allows individuals to see themselves as part of an interpersonal continuum, promoting a sense of interdependence and collective destiny. This shift in perspective is an invitation to actively participate in the creation of meaning, orienting us back towards ourselves, to the present moment and to all that still has the potential to take place.

Emancipation, in this context, should not be seen as an attempt to revive the dynamics of the past, but rather, as the process of forging new, more equitable relationships between peoples in the present. This involves moving beyond nostalgic or utopian visions of the past or the future, to address current realities and injustices: “Successful liberation movements were successful precisely because they employed creative ideas, original ideas, imaginative ideas, whereas less successful movements had a pronounced tendency to formulas and an uninspired repetition of past slogans and past patterns of behaviour,” wrote the Palestinian American scholar Edward Said.[341] “The future, like the past, is built by human beings. They and not some distant mediator or saviour provide the agency for change.”

[341] Polgreen, Lydia. “Restoring the Past Won’t Liberate Palestine” in *The New York Times*, February 20, 2024.

By resisting linear notions of time, we also challenge the hierarchies of knowledge that prioritize certain futures over others. In a relational and non-linear temporal framework, our localized and contingent narratives become crucial for understanding the world: our narratives are seen as a way to navigate the complexities of postmodern knowledge and social life, allowing for a plurality of voices and perspectives without the need for overarching, totalizing theories. Jean-François Lyotard advocates for the legitimacy of these 'petits récits' (little narratives) over grand narratives.[342] Reconceptualizing time as relational encourages us to recognize and value experiences and histories that do not fit into a single, unified framework. It fosters an environment where emancipation is possible through the validation of difference, rather than through its assimilation. This approach holds the potential to democratize knowledge and power, contributing to the emancipation of individuals by recognizing their unique perspectives and agency. By embracing non-linearity, society can become more open to experimental and transformative ways of being together.

[342] Lyotard, Jean-François. *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

3. How can an auto-ethnographic approach enhance our understanding of these phenomena, and what insight does it offer into the interplay between personal experiences and broader socio-political dynamics?

Auto-ethnography sheds light on how individuals navigate and resist the socio-political implications of techno-capitalism, surveillance, and the commodification of time. Personal narratives can illustrate the ways in which these systems impact daily life and how individuals find agency within or against these structures. The postmodern world bombards us with information, leading to a superficial engagement with knowledge; where breadth is favoured over depth. An auto-ethnographic approach encourages us to delve beyond the surface, to seek out meanings and to forge connections that are not immediately apparent. A poetic sensibility, in this context, is more than a formal approach — it represents a way of seeing and experiencing the world that defies binary logic. It's an imaginative realm where emotion, intuition, and the subjective are valued as much as empirical data and objective analysis. In a society increasingly governed by productivity, algorithms, and data-driven decision-making, a poetic sensibility offers a valuable counterweight as a space for the ineffable.

In an age defined by an overabundance of information, the poetic advocates for a depth of thought and a quality of attention that transcends the quantitative accumulation of information. The poetic creates transient spaces where the norms of the world are temporarily suspended, which is what allows the poetic to propose new possibilities against established norms.[343] A poetic sensibility resists dominant communication systems by disrupting the usual ways information and ideas are conveyed, experimenting with less digestible narrative structures. This resistance enables the poetic to offer new perspectives, making it a powerful tool for imagining and exploring possibilities that lie beyond the accepted boundaries of reality.

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[343] Badiou, Alain. "ART OR THE POSSIBILITY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE" in *Purple Magazine: The Revolutions Issue #40*, Fall/Winter 2023.

In this poetic space, where norms are suspended in favour of imaginative approaches to the self, and to one another, the poetic and the revolutionary begin to resemble one another in the ways they express themselves: the poetic and the revolutionary merge in the act of love — as both are acts that express and affirm personal responsibility, consent, care, and knowledge of the self. As Erich Fromm wrote, love is not just a passive affective experience, but rather, an art that requires action — it requires self-discovery and self-expression, patience and attention.[344] Violence is self-perpetuating, but we don't have to wait for utopia to act in the present on behalf of a better world: living democratically now, exercising our poetic sensibilities alongside an egalitarian spirit, is itself a revolutionary victory for a future that is "an endless succession of presents."[345]

[344] Fromm, Erich. *The Art of Loving.* New York: Perennial Library, 1974.

[345] Zinn, Howard. *A Power Governments Cannot Suppress*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2007. 270.

4. Reflections on Method

The arts-based research approach of this study allowed for a layered exploration of identity, memory, and notions of progress; and it enabled me to represent my findings in forms that preserved the complexity and richness of the information collected. This approach not only added layers of meaning to the data, it also opened up more innovative analytical pathways — by interpreting artistic representations, both researcher and audience can uncover patterns, themes, and insights that might otherwise remain hidden in textual or numerical data.

The process of research creation became, in itself, a form of resistance to our 'senseless times.' As an educator deeply invested in the principles of critical pedagogy, I found arts-based research methods to be valuable not only as tools for research exploration but as a transformative practice that aligns with the ethos of critical pedagogy itself. Critical pedagogy emphasizes the importance of education as a practice of freedom, aiming to empower learners to question, critique, and transform the societal structures that oppress them.[346] By creating and engaging with the arts, education researchers can participate in a form of knowledge production that offers a space for counter-narratives to emerge — creative self-expression can serve as a means of expressing dissent, imagining alternatives to the status quo, and of fostering a sense of agency among researchers.

An arts-based research approach allowed me to break away from the constraints of conventional research methodologies by incorporating creative and artistic processes into the research design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination stages. This flexibility, in turn, allowed me to foster a more responsive and adaptive research process. This methodological flexibility led to the discovery of new insights and understandings that might be missed by more conventional approaches.

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[346] Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1999.

Incorporating arts-based research methods into educational research also encourages a holistic view of education, acknowledging the importance of emotional, aesthetic, and relational dimensions in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. For education practitioners, the insights gained through these methods can inform more nuanced and responsive pedagogical strategies, fostering environments that support the emotional well-being and creative expression of students. At the policy level, the compelling narratives and visual representations produced through arts-based research can serve as powerful advocacy tools. They highlight the experiences of research participants in ways that statistics and traditional research findings cannot, offering a persuasive argument for policies that address the complex, human aspects of education. This inclusivity strengthens the relevance and applicability of research findings, making them more reflective of the diverse needs and voices within educational communities.

As an educator, embracing arts-based research methods represents a commitment to understanding the full spectrum of educational experiences. These approaches challenge us to think more creatively, empathize deeply, and to produce knowledge more inclusively, fostering a research and teaching practice that is as rich and multifaceted as the learning journeys we aim to support.

Emmanuel Kant defined art as a purposeless activity in order to preserve it as an area of freedom. In his view of art, mind and emotion may roam freely without having to be in service to anything, and from there one is able to understand everything we give up in our daily lives.[347] A scientist explores uncertainty to erase it, whereas creativity is about unravelling what is unknown and unpredictable without reaching closure. I hope that my dissertation makes a compelling argument that creativity and ‘uselessness’ are also part of maintaining a real and complete epistemological balance. Interesting questions in art should generate more interesting questions. They should not eliminate uncertainty and unpredictability, but capture and help us respect them — not as a transitory state to eventually eradicate, but as a source of knowledge.

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[347] Camnitzer, Luis. “Let’s Call It Art!” in *e-flux journal #143,* March 2024. 1-23. 6.

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