

# Art and Culture in the Age of Empire and the Time of the Multitudes

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1. The critique of culture frequently repeats itself. Does it do so rightly or wrongly, with regard to our present situation? When, in 1947, at the end of the Second World War, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno published *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a new critical model emerged, as singular as it was reproducible, both different and capable of being repeated. Reflecting upon the Europe devastated by fascism they had left behind and upon the American society that had taken them in as exiles, Adorno and Horkheimer considered the Enlightenment's tendency to transform itself into its own opposite, not only into the open barbarism of fascism but also into the totalitarian subjection of the masses effected by the new seductions of the culture industry. European fascism and American commodification were treated as co-extensive. From then (the end of the Second World War) until today, that judgement on Western culture has been confirmed by the gradual constitution of Empire. The transformation of fascism into the commodification of culture was realized with unbroken continuity, spreading across the entire face of the planet as the systems of telecommunication became its main instrument of diffusion... The retouching of images was followed by the universal prostitution of tourism, and by a thousand other varieties of bad taste. Watch Murdoch's television and you'll find proof that Adorno's model of cultural criticism genuinely uncovered the ontology of the new world. The restructuring of this world into fascism, its reconstruction by means of war, its corruption through degrading imagery: no doubt all of this is proliferating exponentially today... Now television has become interactive, producing trash culture and constructing an appropriate audience! Musical culture demands new trash productions and the circle closes perfectly. The neutralization of information follows the same laws as the levelling of affect: if the romantic and the classic have both been reduced to signs without sense, truth is now either imposed or vulgar. Adorno's model has exhausted itself: whatever innovative elements its critique of culture may have contained at the end of the Second World War have become banal. Indignation is no longer possible. It is at this point, then, that the critique of culture necessarily becomes repetitive.

Within and against this infernal machine, which globalizes culture at the very same time that it ravages and perverts its values, there is always a ghost, an insurgent spirit. Yet while the circuit of cultural communication is perfect and self-sufficient, this spirit can only proceed by nourishing itself on things extraneous and other: bodily desire, the freedom of the multitudes, the power of languages. In the horrible abstraction of telematic communication, something subjectivates itself: the spirit of the multitude. In a world of perverted signs, someone produces simple signs of truth: look at Basquiat, his infantile signs and utopian descriptions... Production has become linguistic; consequently, subjectivity now presents itself through language itself. The abstraction of communication becomes the body of singularities... Thus the multitude is born.

2. TV seeks to reconstruct the visible world in the image of the boss or of the command function in general. It is downwardly interactive: dominating, disintegrating, and finally producing that which lies below it. Wars are recounted in languages that range from the obfuscation of reality to the narration of global fantasies. The documentation of war becomes a video game. And yet, when the multitude discovers itself within the neutralization of life, the whole sordid construction collapses in a shambles. It began in Vietnam, the multitudinous disintegration of truth as recounted by power: a few photographers and the occasional philosophically-minded soldier were enough to reveal the blood and tears with which that war was rife. Since then the mechanisms of demystification and the capacity to seize the world in its live immediacy have become viruses that proliferate as violently as an epidemic. Consider Genoa, where, during the anti-G-8 demonstrations, the police perfected their low-intensity warfare against peaceful demonstrators, accusing them—via the means of communication—of being gangs of thugs. In vain: it turned out that the multitude possessed more cameras than the police, infinitely more; the image of the policeman-assassin became familiar to every household... The multitude rebelled by means of its own capacity to produce images, rendering rebellious the abstraction of signs. No longer was it possible to transform the world merely by interpreting it: the last philosophical project, appropriated by those experts of communication Adorno would have defined as fascists, was no longer viable. In the words of a certain bearded old man: the only possible interpretation of the world consisted in its transformation.

If this is the point at which we have arrived, then the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* has finally exhausted itself, extinguished in the capitalist production of repetitive images (“history is over”) and replaced by the new production of desire. The very abstraction that was commodified has now perhaps been redeemed, thanks to the initiative of the multitudes. Farewell Adorno, farewell to the realism and repetitiveness of the modern critical model: here the critique of culture establishes itself on a new terrain, that of the multitude and of postmodernity. Perhaps the multitude no longer produces a utopia, but rather a dis-utopia: the capacity to remain within, to hollow out language from inside and make the material desire for transformation emerge.

3. The dis-utopia of the multitudes does not exist abstractly, but, rather, biopolitically. This means that culture now reveals itself in forms that are structurally dense and alive. To speak of biopolitics is to consider command and violence from below—that is, from a point of view opposed to that of biopower. And yet there is no possibility here of identifying a dialectic of the high and the low, or of an opposition between the high and the low. The multitude is an ensemble of proliferating singularities, capable of expressing new linguistic determinations. In its classic form, the dialectic leads back to the One, but this new dialectic is chaotic – the multitudes are ensembles of atoms that meet in accordance with ever untimely and exceptional *clinamena*. There is therefore no dialectic in the sense of an opposition between living within the structures of biopower, on the one hand, and freely and antagonistically travelling them as biopolitical subjects, on the other. The only problem that concerns us today, when we consider the new cultural determinations in imperial space, is that of seizing the moment of intersection, the determination of the event, the innovations that traverse the chaotic ensemble of the multitude. It’s a matter of understanding when biopolitical expression triumphs over the expression of biopower. There are neither syntheses nor *Aufhebungen*; there are only oppositions, varied expressions, multiplicities of linguistic tensions that escape in every direction. The passage from modernity to postmodernity is characterized by the immeasurability that postmodernity introduces: an immeasurability that marks the end of all criteria of measure proposed and imposed by modern rationalism. The measure and instrumental reason that presented themselves spontaneously during the golden age of modernity (between humanism and Descartes), that were expressed as the metaphysical synthesis of an ordered world in its silver age, between

Hegel and Bergson, and that were brought to bear with the violence of Weberian instrumental reason and Keynesian planning in its bronze age—this measure and this rationality are at an end. It's not straightforwardly true any more that poetry has become impossible after Auschwitz, as Adorno claimed, just as it's no longer straightforwardly true that all hope has perished after Hiroshima, as Günther Anders asserted; poetry and hope have been revitalized by the postmodern multitudes, yet their measure is no longer homogeneous with that of the poetry and the hope of modernity. What, then, is the new cultural canon of postmodernity? We don't know, nor is it clear that there has to be one. What we know is that this great transformation is taking place within life, and that it is within life that it finds new figures of expression: figures without measure, formal immeasurabilities—monsters.

4. Postmodern innovation is therefore monstrous. This monstrosity has two characteristics: its being without measure and its immeasurable becoming-ontological. Let us begin, then, to speak of the monster by considering these two characteristics in detail. And let us begin with its becoming-ontological. As suggested above, the living expressions of the new culture are not born as syntheses but as events, as untimeliness; they take shape within a genealogy of vital elements that constitute radical innovations and forms of immeasurability. In tracing this new expressive force of postmodernity, some contemporary philosophers have attempted to qualify it: Lacan already foregrounded the absence of measure characteristic of the new and of art, and of signifiers in general; in Derrida the productivity of the margin searches out new forms of order, disseminating itself; in one way or another, Nancy and Agamben harvest these fields of the extreme limit... Nothing in any of these authors positively qualifies the monstrosity of innovation, and yet there is in their work the acute sense and the intensity of ontological exasperation. The more unproductive and absent they are, the more the new forms reveal themselves, gliding into being. They immerse themselves or drown themselves in it. They seek to live and breathe in its shifting sands. Ultimately, what these authors fail to perceive is that this material into which they have chosen to venture is the clay from which new worlds are molded. The ontological dimension does not find its limit on the edge of nothingness, but lives off the constitutive capacity of the people who act on that impossible margin, daringly and without any alternative. The ontological dimension does not entrust itself to the command of an

ever-more parasitic capital, but develops on the basis of the multitudinous intellectuality of immaterial laborers, mobile, flexible, working under precarious conditions, desperate to be. The ontological dimension emerges from a series of paradoxes: the feminization of labor, the conjunction of reason and affect in production. And we could go on, endlessly defining this ambivalent but radical ontological condition that always implies the situation of those who are living through the passage from modernity to postmodernity. The monster is born within the ontological dimension.

But the second characteristic of this ontological dimension of innovative chaos consists precisely in the absence of measure. The monster is the absence of measure, or perhaps new measure – but who can define the negative and the positive, exodus and constituent capacity, from within the transition? During the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, scientists searched out deformities, which intrigued them in their investigation of nature, and kings collected those deformities in their chambers of horrors. But look closely: for them, immeasurability was the apology of measure; like the sublime, the horrible restores within the soul the desire for order. How many three-headed chickens, how many Siamese twins or androgynous fetuses, how many physical distortions and deformities were collected in those museums of the extraordinary and of anatomical deviation. Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire has left us historical encyclopedias of the anomalies of natural organization, even attempts to determine the laws and the causes of the monstrosities and natural defects of the various ages. There was even a name for it all: teratology. It's clear that the new, postmodern form of monstrosity is not teratological. It's simply life expressing itself differently; it's the hybridity that the singular machines for existing within chaos desire to construct between human and animal species; it's the hope for and the choice of a life that is not hierarchically ordered or prefigured by forms of measure. Like much of ancient philosophy before him (at least the part of it consigned to tradition), Aristotle's version of the origin of being is also its order and its measure; Aristotle tells us that the *arché* is both first principle and command. This eugenics was taken up again in that modernity that sought legitimization for its stylistic principles in antiquity. To gesture towards the monster is to negate both classical and modern eugenics, to display an ontological process that has abandoned essence as principle or point of departure. Perhaps this new journey leads us into gloomy regions and perhaps our sense of direction is sometimes confused; but it is this process of travelling with unanswered questions, it is this lack of an ordered and measured origin that we must champion. It's a tension

that unhinges every precept; not only every precept but also every prefiguration; not only every prefiguration but also every unitary matrix, whether spatial or temporal; and it's here, in the midst of being, that a convulsive creativity takes hold... not genealogies of vanguards, but the concrete history of multitudes of singularities, anthropological monstrosities. Where a forest is burned down, the earth becomes fertile. They've set fire to the forest (but it's moving), and we're returning—savage, free as birds—to inhabit a new nature.

5. The dimensions of globalization are close to immeasurable. In any case the world no longer has an "outside"—neither an outside nor a precedent. Consider the development of cultural anthropology: at its center there was European man, and it had two outsides: the primitive and the native or barbarian—that is, an anthropological precedent and a political outside. European man was the central point, surrounded by the rest of civilization. The market and the various aesthetic models, money and the habitat, *Welt* and *Umwelt*: history was geared to the monopoly of European man— whoever came first was primitive; whoever was dominated by European man was a barbarian or a native. But if, with globalization, human space no longer knows multiple limits but only one limit—its external circumference—then once this limit is reached, every subsequent expression can only be directed inward. There is a line of continuity that gives meaning to this greatest possible expansion of self-reflection; it's without doubt the final Prometheism, the final universalism of bourgeois culture, but perhaps it could also be defined as the first determination of a liberated humanity's *Gattungswesen*. All of history before globalization has led us to this limit: it wanted to mark the range of Western culture's dominion, but at the same time it reveals the greatest possible (and frequently monstrous) effect of a process of contradictions and struggles, of the genealogy of a subject that intends to be uncontainable but finds itself right there, within those limits. The world scene is therefore not simply a horizon: it's a genuine scenography, and the props (post-*Ballets russes*) have become part of the drama. The world scene is both unlimited and finite; it lives off this monstrous confrontation. On this scene, the end of history can be declared just as well as its full realization. It is by corroborating this paradox (affirmatively or negatively) that a work achieves aesthetic significance. The world has become both enormous and very small; we're in a situation worthy of Pascal. But there is no longer any God. The space is smooth and superficial; the immanence of value entrusts itself only to the works of men. What does it mean to be an artist in this situation?

6. What does it mean to make the monster act on the new world scene? It means watching it act within a process of anthropological metamorphosis; it means identifying it in mutation. This mutation is spatial, as we've seen, but it's also temporal: it's within time that the end of history realizes itself, once Western bourgeois civilization has reached the world's edge. The spatial synthesis of "here" and "the world" intends to absorb the temporal one of "now" and "the infinite." The anthropological metamorphosis plays out around these paradoxical ensembles. This is what postmodernity is: a grand narrative that is entirely monstrous... In fact the flesh of human events fails to be enclosed in the unity of space and time required for narration. Flesh does not become body. It overflows artistic expression on all sides, just as it spills over every boundary of global events. Tremendous passions run through this incapacity of flesh to become body. Once, during the great epoch that preceded 1968, this incapacity was lived as an opening towards utopia: the literary and aesthetic avant-gardes had to create utopia. The end of the world drew closer, to the extent that utopia swirled around the extreme capacity of collective praxis to construct reality. The objective, the masterpiece, was the Apocalypse, just as it was for the great pre-Christian authors... Yet in postmodernity—here, in our own time—it's no longer possible to be prophetic. We reflect on the Apocalypse without being prophetic; we speak of vanguards without being utopian: the world has become complete; all attention is directed inward; the escape routes have been blocked. The only possibility left for us is that of changing the world from within. The slogan "Another world is possible" implies an exodus that leads to ourselves. Every time the limit is reached (and it's a limit without a beyond, one that cannot be surpassed), we cannot but redirect our attention onto the present *kairòs*... But what is the *kairòs*? In Greek culture it was the moment in time marked by the flight of the arrow: that was a civilization that still envisioned a future, and hence a relationship between releasing the arrow and seeing it arrive. The arrow launched into the sky could reach the stars. Here, however, the *kairòs* is the arrow that strikes our own heart, the arrow that returns from the stellar limit. *Kairòs* is the necessity (but also the possibility) of taking ourselves as the starting point of a creative project. It's the possibility of transforming our bodies, not just of rendering them hybrid by an interaction with the outside world, but of constructing them and rendering them hybrid from within. It's the possibility of engaging in politics by leading all the elements of life back to a poetic reconstruction. The very term "biopolitics" implies this constitutive project. In short,

when we live under globalization, when we live in a world whose boundaries are insuperable, when the Copernican revolution has definitively exhausted itself and Ptolemy and the centrality of the *kairòs* have become the only reference point, when all this is the case, what does it mean to develop the creative and constitutive spirit of artistic practice? When the only possibility for action, artistic and ethical, consists in moving out from within being, through biopolitical practice, such that every making is a transformation of the very physical and spiritual essence of the human body; when the structure of the social has become so central and the world so small and restricted that there is no longer any possibility of leaving this habitat behind, when utopian illusions (illusions of other *topoi*) no longer present themselves; what, then, does it mean to act artistically? It means constructing new being; it means making global space reflect back on itself, re-directing it towards the existence of singularities. Will this mean acting to eliminate death, to dissolve the internal limits of the global machine? The monster promises us nothing less.

7. The multitude is the only subject that can pose death this creative challenge. The multitude is an ensemble of singularities, but each singularity is also an ensemble of multitudes. The multitude is an ensemble of bodies, but each body is a multitude of bodies. This machine struggles for life; it struggles within life and against death. The practice of the multitude is nothing but this constant proliferation of vital experiences that have in common the negation of death, the rejection and definitive refusal of that which stalls the life process. The global world as we know it, as Empire presents it to us in the political order, is a closed world, subject to the entropy that results when space and time have been exhausted. But the multitude that acts within this closed world has learned to transform it, by passing through each subject and towards each singularity making up the world. Foucault once said that when we thought history was over, we find that it renews itself on the vertical axis that we are. That is what's happening to us, as multitude and multitudinous body. Only within our own transformation, in a ferocious struggle against death, can the practice of the multitude begin.

This, it seems to me, is the meaning of art in the age of Empire and during the time of the multitudes.

*Translated by Max Henninger*