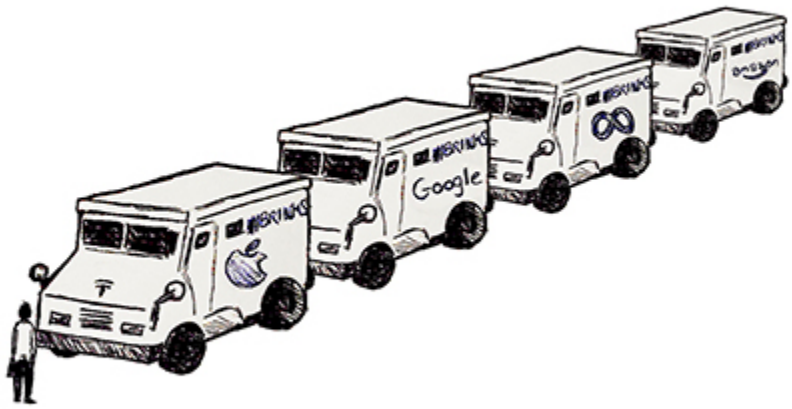
2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



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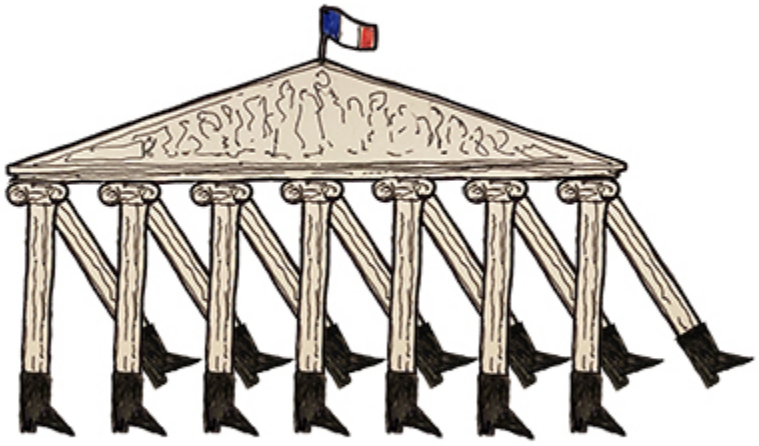
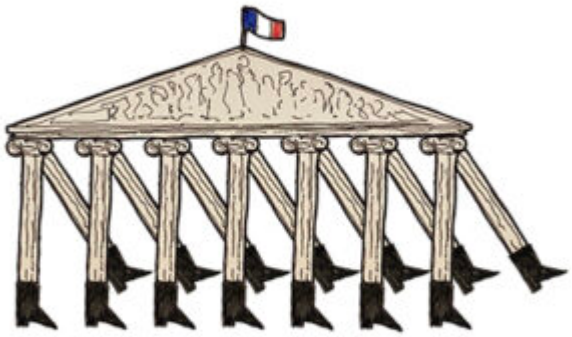
The Challenge of Tackling the Far-Right in France

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



A year ago, French President Macron surprised everyone by triggering a snap parliamentary election on the evening on the European Parliamentary elections, which that saw far-right party the National Rally (*Rassemblement National*, abbreviated RN in French) come first. Macron's own centrist coalition Together (*Ensemble*) came second, far behind the RN list led by then 28-year-old party leader Jordan Bardella. The parliamentary elections saw the New Popular Front, a left-wing coalition, win a plurality of seats, followed by Together and the RN. However, the number of RN deputies went from 89 to 142 in the space of two years. The months that followed this election and the collapse of Michel Barnier's government (September-December 2024) showed just how divided and unstable French politics are and how influential the National Rally has become.

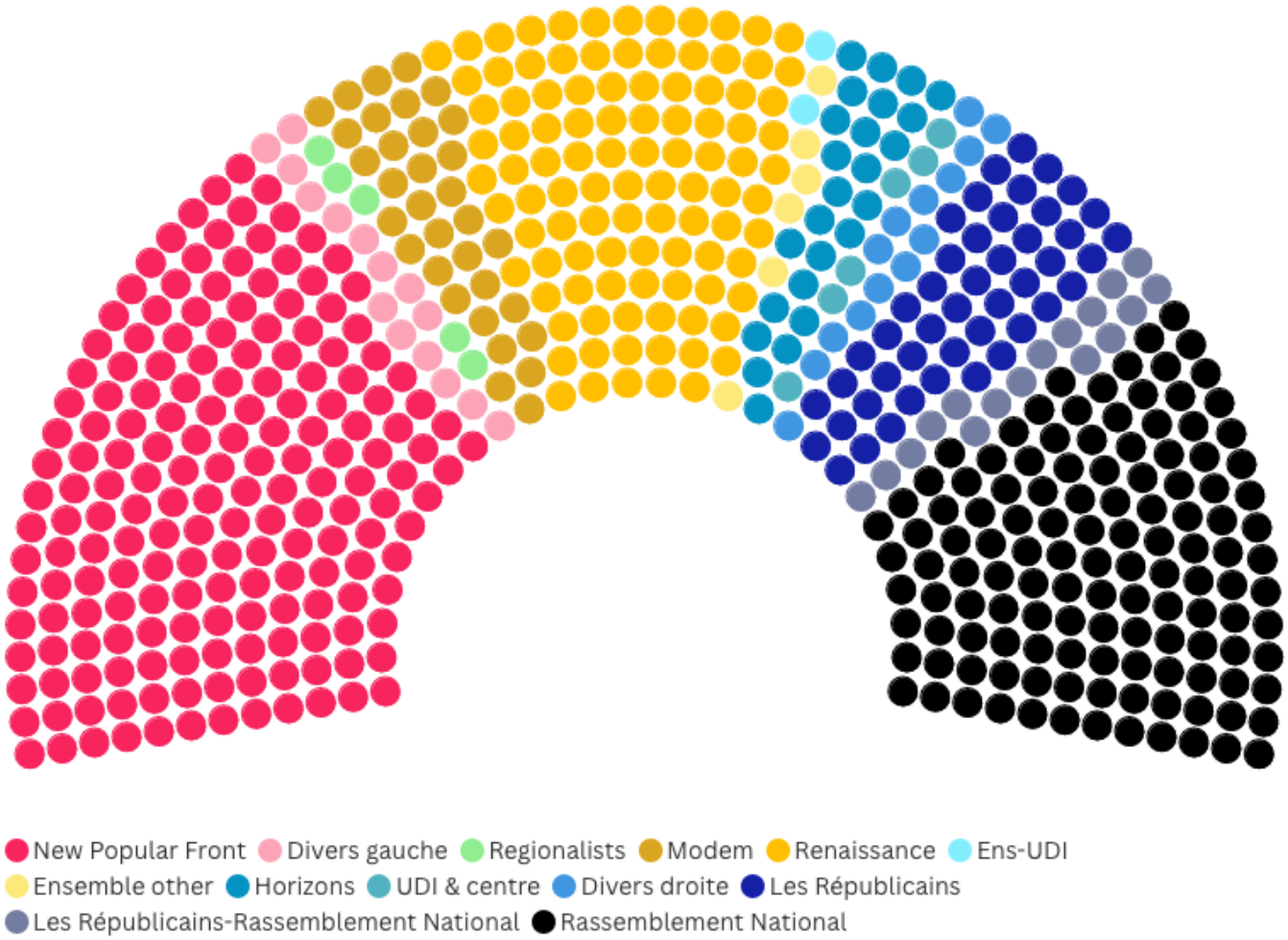


The RN has become a key party in the French party system, and no party, be it Macron's party *Renaissance* or the traditional parties of government (Socialist Party and The Republicans), seems to know how to tackle this problem. The divided National Assembly that resulted from these parliamentary elections strengthened the RN, which has become much more normalised over the years, as a result of both its own strategy to appear less extreme and other parties' strategies to tackle its rise by adopting some of its policies. In these parliamentary elections, the 'republican front' strategy, in which some of the other parties co-operate to prevent the election of LR deputies, worked well, but there are signs that this strategy may be weakening, potentially opening a path to power for the far right.

The 2024 elections and a government at the mercy of the far right

Over the past ten years, the French party system has become more fragmented, with the traditional parties of government of the centre right (The Republicans, LR) and centre left (Socialist Party, PS) losing votes and seats to newer parties. The July 2024 parliamentary elections created a National Assembly divided into three blocks: the New Popular Front, an alliance of left-wing parties including the PS, the Greens and radical left party *La France Insoumise* (LFI, France Unbowed), Together at the centre (including Macron's party *Renaissance*), and the RN at the far right. In such a divided Assembly (15 parties won seats), no coalition of parties was able to form a parliamentary majority. With the appointment of centrist François Bayrou as Prime Minister on 13th December 2024 and the formation of a minority government going from the centre to the right (LR), France had its fourth Prime Ministers in the space of a year.

Figure 1. Composition of the French National Assembly after the July 2024 elections



Like his predecessor Michel Barnier, Bayrou lacks a parliamentary majority, which also makes his government very vulnerable to a no-confidence vote. Unlike his predecessor, he has managed to pass a budget without losing a vote of no-confidence. Bayrou had claimed that he wanted to be less dependent on the RN than Barnier had been, and he made some limited overtures to the left, while also trying to keep his centrist and right-wing coalition partners on board. When PS deputies abstained from voting the motion of no-confidence supported by their radical-left and green coalition partners, it was a show responsibility to prevent another government collapse rather than a sign of political support. This lack of stable majority and the reluctance of the governing coalition to reach out more meaningfully to the parties of the left places the government at the mercy of the RN. This is therefore a sensitive time in French politics characterised by fragmentation, polarisation, instability, and a far-right party on the rise.

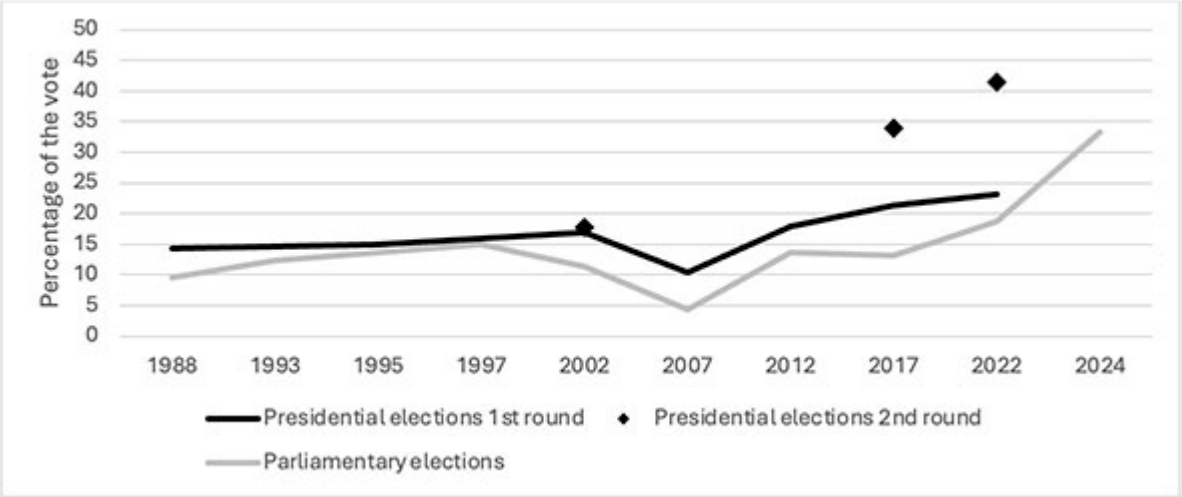
The mainstreaming of the far right

These days, stories about the growth of the far right are not new in France as in much of Europe or indeed the US. Since the early 2000s, the National Front (renamed National Rally in 2017) has been on the rise, reaching the second round in four of the past five presidential elections. However, the electoral system makes it difficult for the far right to win. French

presidential elections use a two-round system: if no candidate receives 50%+1 of the vote in the first round, a second round is organised two weeks later between the top two candidates of the first round. Whoever wins the most votes in the second round is elected. This system favours the candidate best able to reach out to parts of the electorate that had not supported them in the first round. In this context, the odds of a victory of RN candidates Jean-Marie Le Pen (in 2002) or his daughter Marine Le Pen (since 2017) looked slim, as there remains a significant part of the electorate that rejects the far right.

Nevertheless, the rise of the RN, with increasing shares of the votes in presidential and parliamentary elections, is undeniable (see figure 2). This is the consequence of the party's 'normalisation', which is the outcome of two parallel processes: Marine Le Pen's strategy to appear less extreme, and the adoption of some of the RN's policy positions by other parties. In *Reactionary Democracy: How Racism and the Populist Far Right Became Mainstream* (London; New York: Verso, 2020), Mondon and Winter call this process 'mainstreaming': mainstreaming from within, when the party tries to sanitise its image, and mainstreaming by other parties, when these parties adopt the themes, language, and sometimes policies of the far right.

Figure 2. Evolution of the vote for the National Rally, 1988-2022



Since taking over from her father Jean-Marie as party leader in 2011, Le Pen has tried to change her party's image. Whereas her father enjoyed the spotlight from controversies, much like Donald Trump now does in the US, Le Pen chose to portray her party as a normal party with ordinary members whose opinions were within the bounds of polite society. She even excluded her father from the party after he repeated that gas chambers were a 'detail of history', which led to another conviction for denial of the existence or extent of crimes against humanity, an offence in the French legal system. As her party grew more popular, she also started to appear in lifestyle magazines, presenting a softer image for her party, far removed from her father's persona as a hectoring far-right firebrand. This strategy was supported by the development of a far-right-friendly media ecosystem thanks to massive investment in TV, radio and print media by billionaire Vincent Bolloré, who supports an alliance between the

conservative right and the RN.

This strategy does not mean, however, that the National Rally has changed much in policy terms. Their main issues remain national identity and immigration, with a specific focus on immigration from Muslim countries. The focus on Islam allows the party to present its opposition to immigration as based on the principle of laicity, France's version of separation between State and Church, and opposition to Islamist terrorism. Recent election campaigns have also seen the party return to its long-standing policy of 'national preference', which would give precedence to French nationals in the attribution of social housing and other benefits. In France, social housing is attributed based on needs rather than nationality, and most benefits depend on whether and how much an individual has previously contributed into the system through tax. National preference would therefore be a clear break from the universalist and contributory principles of the French welfare state, as well as a break with European Union rules that prevent discrimination between EU citizens.

The second dimension of normalisation comes from the behaviour of the other parties. Faced with the rise of the far right, the mainstream parties have been divided. Macron was elected in 2017 on a platform that combined economically liberal policies, a relatively liberal outlook on immigration, and moderately socially liberal policies. Over time, his government's policies took a more conservative turn, with more restrictive positions on immigration and diversity. As the party and its allies lost their majority in the National Assembly in 2022, they became more dependent on the support of the right-wing deputies of LR, who have become increasingly anti-immigration over the years. Whereas Macron used to rail against the RN's declinist and narrowly nationalist policies in 2017, his 2022 government passed an immigration bill with the support of LR and the RN with LR-supported amendments that instituted migration quotas and further restricted family reunification. Some of these reforms, including migration quotas, were struck down by the Constitutional Court, but this bill further contributed to the normalisation of RN policies on immigration.

LR have been the traditional party of the right and, when in power, have adopted legislation to curb immigration since the mid-1980s. As support for the RN increased, former President Nicolas Sarkozy (2007-2012) chose to compete against the far right by focusing on immigration and linking it to national identity, thinking that he could attract RN voters by adopting policies closer to the RN's. Research has shown that voters tend to prefer the original to the copy, as Jean-Marie Le Pen used to say, and these efforts to accommodate the far right did not slow its progress. Even as it has declined electorally, LR has retained Sarkozy's strategy on immigration and national identity. The question of how to deal with the RN even led to a split in June 2024, when a minority faction led by their then leader, Eric Ciotti, decided to join forces with the RN. Whereas LR refused to form an electoral pact with the RN, some of their positions on immigration remain close to those of the far right.

The left is also divided on some of the issues associated with the RN, which has also contributed to mainstreaming the language of the RN. In 2016, the 'Republican Spring' movement emerged in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks against satirical magazine

Charlie Hebdo and the Bataclan concert hall, mobilising a section of the centre left that wanted to refocus the left on the principle of laicity. However, in doing so they went as far as claiming that the left's (already limited) support for minority rights undermined laicity and was complicit with political Islamism. The Republican Spring attracted beyond the left, and as it became increasingly strident against those who support minorities, alienated many of their left-wing supporters, who considered that it went too far. The PS, a moderate social-democratic party, is divided between its antiracist wing and those, influenced by the Republican Spring, who see accommodating Islam and minority rights as threats to the French models of laicity and assimilation of minorities. In contrast, LFI, a radical-left party that attracts significant support from ethnic minority voters, adopts a much more adversarial approach against the far right, with a left-wing populist platform that embraces diversity. Even as they formed an electoral coalition together, these two parties still diverge on some of these issues, weakening their efforts against the far right.

The weakening of the republican front

One issue over which the left is united, though, is the necessity to prevent the election of a far-right president or a RN majority in the National Assembly. This strategy, called the 'republican front', has often been used to prevent a victory of the far right. It involves parties, candidates, and voters mobilising against a far-right candidate and supporting their opponent, even when this opponent is from a party they would not normally support. For instance, Jacques Chirac won against Jean-Marie Le Pen with 82% of the vote in 2002 thanks to the support of scores of left-wing voters who would not have supported a right-wing candidate like Chirac in other circumstances. Likewise, Macron benefitted from the same type of voting behaviour when he faced Marine Le Pen in 2017 and 2022.

In 2024, as opinion polls showed a likely RN majority, the left parties quickly formed a coalition, aware that they were more likely to succeed united than divided and competing against each other. They were again at the forefront of the republican front, immediately and systematically withdrawing their candidates in constituencies where they finished third in the first round and encouraging their voters to support the non-RN candidate, whichever party they came from (parliamentary elections also use a two-round majoritarian electoral system, but all candidates who have received the support of at least 12.5% of registered voters can stand in the second round, so there may be more than two candidates). *Renaissance* followed suit, although some of their candidates refused to withdraw against candidates from the radical left. In contrast, The Republicans maintained all their candidates in three-way contests where they came third and refused to advise their voters to vote against the RN.

If the republican front worked well this time, there are also signs, beyond the right's refusal to engage, that suggest that it is weakening. After many unfulfilled assurances by the right and then Macron that they would remember that the left had loaned them their votes, leftwing voters have become increasingly disillusioned with the republican front, as evidenced by the diminished support for Macron in the second round of the 2022 election (he won with just under 59% of the vote in 2022 against 66% in 2017). The fact that the parties that most

supported the republican front are now out of government, while the party that rejected it and helped the election of RN deputies is now in government is also a source of disillusionment for some left-wing voters.

Uncertainty over the leadership of the RN and the next presidential election

The far right is therefore stronger than it has ever been. It is gaining ground electorally across the whole country, it has a sizeable and growing parliamentary group, and the share of the electorate willing to vote against it is shrinking, while other parties are struggling to find effective answers to counter its seemingly unstoppable rise. All this paints a picture of a political landscape dominated by the themes of the far right, with a National Rally increasingly at the centre of French politics, even when it is not in government. The current minority government is very unstable, with a divided coalition and a worrying dependence on the goodwill of the RN for its survival.

However, there is a risk that Marine Le Pen will not be able to be a candidate in the next presidential election. She and 27 of her colleagues were found guilty of embezzling European Parliament funds in March 2025. Part of her sentence includes a period of five years during which she cannot be a candidate in any public election. She has appealed the decision, but as the sentence of ineligibility applied immediately, she has lost her mandate as a local councillor (she can remain a deputy). Although the French justice system is notoriously slow, arrangements have been made so the appeal trial will happen in the summer of 2026, ahead of the 2027 presidential election. If the appeal court also finds her guilty, she will be prevented from being a candidate in 2027.

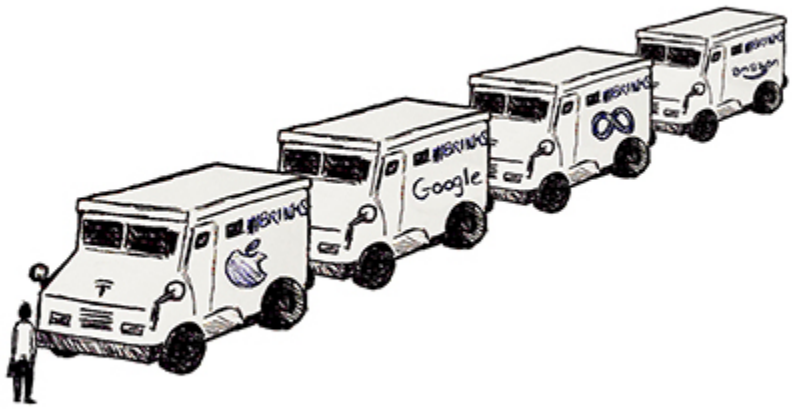
The question then, is whether the party has become sufficiently mainstream and reliable that the French electorate is willing to elect a 31-year-old President. Although she handpicked Jordan Bardella as her successor when she handed the party leadership to him in 2022, the plan was for Le Pen to be President and Bardella Prime Minister. He is following her mainstreaming strategy with a strong presence on social media like TikTok and building links with the European far right thanks to his leadership of the far-right Patriots for Europe parliamentary group. However, Le Pen and her party immediately attacked her conviction and the justice system, accusing the judges of attacking French democracy by preventing her from standing as a candidate in the next presidential election. This strategy may be risky, as attacking institutions could derail her mainstreaming strategy, but it seems to work with her supporters, who defend her despite her conviction and are convinced that she is a victim of ‘the system’.

If the Bayrou minority government manages to limp on, the next major national election will be the 2027 presidential election. Emmanuel Macron will not stand again, as France introduced a two-term presidential limit in 2002, leaving the field wide open without an incumbent. It is at this stage difficult to know who the candidates will be, but it is certain that the themes of the far right, immigration and citizenship, will once again be at the heart of the campaign. Whereas the radical left will adopt an adversarial strategy, moderate and right-wing candidates

are likely to pursue the same accommodative strategies that have been unsuccessful for the past twenty years. A judge will decide the fate of Marine Le Pen in 2026, and possibly that of French democracy, while most other parties are still wondering how to defeat the far right.

The Path to Oligarchic Governance

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



Photos of Donald Trump's second inauguration showed him surrounded by at least five tech billionaires: Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, Sundar Pichai, and Tim Cook. This image is stark evidence that we now live under oligarchic rule. Donald Trump and his fellow oligarchs are fixated on becoming even richer and that requires a further assault on the living standards of most people in this country.

There have been previous periods of oligarchic rule in U.S. history. Most of our founders were slaveholders or wealthy Northern merchants who were eager to minimize popular influence over governmental decisions. It was only through popular mobilization that white men without property gained a vote. And in the Gilded Age, the major parties competed to win the favor of robber barons who were becoming fantastically rich. But through the 20th century, with the partial exception of the 1920's, oligarchic tendencies were largely contained.

What happened to unleash oligarchic power in the 21st century? The most obvious explanation is a series of Supreme Court decisions including *Citizens United vs. FEC* (2010) that claimed that campaign donations were the equivalent of speech that could not be curtailed under the First Amendment's promise of freedom of speech. This judicial assertion was the equivalent of Orwell's satirical line in *Animal Farm* that some animals were more equal than others. The ruling transformed elections into bidding wars in which those with the most money had a huge advantage. In 2024, a single individual, Elon Musk, influenced the outcome of the 2024 Presidential election by spending around $277 million to elect Donald Trump. Musk and I are still formally equal since both of us are allowed only a single vote in the election, but his ability to multiply my donation by a factor of 277,000 effectively obliterates any idea of equality.

However, bad decisions by the Supreme Court are only a partial explanation. After all, some other dangerous high court decisions have been overturned through new legislation, or constitutional amendments, or popular pressure for the court to reverse itself. It is important to understand why there have not been more vigorous efforts by the public to once again mobilize against rulings that allow the reassertion of oligarchic power.

There are two longer term developments, predating *Citizen's United,* that have played an important, and yet rarely recognized, role in paving the road to oligarchy. The first has been the influence, particularly in the Democratic Party, of an approach to politics that can be called "technocratic liberalism". This is the idea that the best route to effective government is to hand over decision making to well-meaning experts who will draw on their own knowledge and that of other experts to formulate optimal policies. The role of the public is simply to vote for leaders who will hire good technocrats.

Technocratic liberals played a role in Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal, but their influence was often offset or countered by currents that were strongly committed to democratic participation through trade unions, farmer's organizations or popular involvement in electoral politics. But after World War II, the balance of power in the Democratic Party shifted strongly in the

direction of technocratic liberalism. Robert Moses, the technocrat who built much of New York City's infrastructure and Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense under both John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, were exemplars of technocratic liberalism.

As Sabeel Rahman has argued in his book, *Democracy Against Domination,* our system of regulatory agencies was built on the principles of technocratic liberalism. These agencies from the Federal Reserve to the Food and Drug Administration to the Environmental Protection Agency have been staffed with politically neutral experts who are expected to protect the interests of the public. The first problem is that these agencies lack any ongoing democratic legitimation; they are vulnerable to continued attack from vested interests who insist that the resulting regulations are nothing more than bureaucratic red tape that serve no legitimate purpose. Second, when these regulators are on the defensive, they are vulnerable to the ongoing campaign by the regulated industries to get the technocrats to look at the issues from the particular industry's point of view.

The consequence, in case after case, has been successful "cognitive capture". The so-called neutral regulators start to see the terrain from the vantage point of industry incumbents whether they are bankers or drug companies or the chemical industry. The resulting rulings prioritize industry profits rather than protecting the public. We saw this most dramatically when the Federal Reserve stood on the sidelines as predatory lenders and investment banks made enormous profits by packaging subprime home mortgages into collateralized mortgage obligations that ultimately crashed the global economy.

This process of cognitive capture has been central in making the wealthy even more wealthy, but it has also driven rising popular distrust of the political system. Despite the greedy and unethical behavior by mortgage brokers and bankers that led to the Global Financial Crisis, only one of those people in the U.S. was sent to jail. Meanwhile millions of homeowners lost their homes to foreclosures. It is hardly surprising that many came to the conclusion that the political system was rigged against them.

This disillusionment interacts with another long-term trend. Ever since the 1970's, state and local governments across the U.S. have faced ongoing fiscal crises. The Federal Government commands about two-thirds of all tax revenue collected in the U.S., and that remaining one-third is not enough to cover all of the responsibilities of state and local government including law enforcement, public health, education, infrastructure, and social services. One of the most dramatic signs of this ongoing fiscal pressure has been dramatically reduced funding of public higher education. For the first decades after World War II, the cost barriers to public colleges and universities were very low, creating a mobility route for children from families with low incomes. For decades now, these public institutions have been forced to fund themselves by raising tuition and fees. As a result, the costs have become prohibitively high for many families, effectively closing off an important avenue for upward social mobility.

This ongoing fiscal crisis has had a devastating consequence for democracy at the local level. A lack of resources means that residents cannot get government to address their needs; often

the best they can do is to try to keep damaging budget cuts to a minimum. City or town council meetings turn into pitched battles among conflicting factions over budgetary crumbs. But the whole idea of democracy is that people are supposed to learn how politics works by participating at the local level. Instead, people learn to hate politics and politicians and they start listening to demagogues who promise to overturn the whole system.

In a word, the triumph of oligarchy is a direct consequence of technocratic governance and decades of fiscal crisis that have eroded both public trust and public participation in politics. (For example, the number of voters in the 2024 presidential race was three million less than in 2020 even though the electorate was larger as millions of young people turned 18 each year.) And, to make matters even worse, the public's increased reliance on social media for news coverage has further magnified the clout of tech oligarchs.

The only consolation is that oligarchic rule has serious flaws. It is often difficult to maintain peace among a group of perpetually greedy leaders determined to make themselves even richer. Their strategy to avoid infighting is to take ever larger shares of income away from everyone else. In short, they have to impose austerity and major cuts in popular programs like pensions and publicly-funded health care. Moreover, oligarchic rule slows down competition and innovation as big firms are free to take advantage of their dominant positions. This, in turn, means slower economic growth and more unemployment.

We see this last dynamic at work in the acquisition practices of the dominant technology firms. Meta—the parent organization of Facebook– acquired more than 100 other firms between its founding and 2022. The number for Alphabet—Google's parent—is about 260 through the end of 2024. Many of these takeovers are designed to stifle a potential competitor that is working on a product that could threaten the acquirer's dominant position. The entrepreneurs who build the acquired firms usually find it extremely difficult to secure the funding needed to bring their products to the market. Hence, selling the firm to one of the dominant firms for tens or hundreds of million dollars becomes the path of least resistance. Just as often, the acquiring firm stops development of the new technology and assigns the firm's technologists to other tasks.

These flaws create space for opponents of oligarchic rule to build broad coalitions in support of democratic regimes that constrain the oligarchs. We saw a dramatic example of this in 1989 when such coalitions overturned the regimes in Eastern Europe that had consolidated both economic and political power in the hands of communist bureaucrats. Similar movements were able to establish democratic regimes in South Korea, Taiwan, Chile, and Brazil after years of oligarchic rule. Nevertheless, in all of these places, those with great wealth or control over the largest corporations continue to have far greater political influence than average citizens, and a restoration of oligarchic rule is a continuing threat.

In a word, the only durable strategy for diminishing the danger of oligarchic power grabbing control of government is to place limits on the levels of income and wealth inequality that are permitted in a society. The extremes of wealth inequality that we now have are not needed to

incentivize innovation. The fact that Mark Zuckerberg had the idea to create a website to rate the attractiveness of female students at Harvard does not justify his now having a net worth of roughly $250 billion.

There is a remedy. Just as the U.S. and other nations began passing minimum wage legislation in the period from 1896 to 1938, it is time to establish maximum income limits. For example, legislation could establish that any income earned above $2 million in a given year could simply be taxed away by imposing a maximum income ceiling. With such a law, entrepreneurs would continue to have an incentive to work hard and innovate so they would be sure to earn their $2 million, but they would be blocked from acquiring the kind of wealth that generates oligarchic power. Hollywood stars, the most skillful athletes, and lottery winners could be incentivized with contracts that guaranteed them the $2 million payments for multiple years. By combining this ceiling with taxes on accumulated wealth and strict limits on campaign donations, today's billionaires would be incentivized to give their fortunes away.

When minimum wage laws were initially proposed, they were widely seen as radical and too much of an interference with the workings of the market. The Supreme Court's notorious Lochner decision in 1905 struck down a New York State law limiting the number of hours that employees at bakeries could work because it interfered with freedom of contract. By that logic, minimum wage laws would also be an anathema. However, over time, the idea of a floor below which wages cannot fall has been recognized as a necessary instrument to make markets work. Today, more than 170 nations have minimum wage laws, although there are significant variations in their effectiveness.

While a ceiling on income might sound too radical today, the reality is that it is quite possibly the only way to protect democratic institutions from oligarchic capture. The danger was illustrated by one of Elon Musk's stunts during the 2024 presidential election. He ran a scheme in which seventeen checks for a million dollars were given to winners of a lottery that was open to registered voters in swing states who had agreed to sign a petition in support of gun rights and "free speech". Next time, he could promise to donate $10 billion to a state government to provide rent rebates to people if that state voted for his preferred candidate. In Pennsylvania, always a critical swing state, each of 1.5 million renting households could expect to receive a benefit of $6,666.00. In short, as the oligarchs race to be the first trillionaire in history, they are already able to use their dollars to eviscerate the idea of democratic governance. When the danger to society is acute, seemingly radical solutions must be considered.

The Center Needs to Fall Apart: The Democratic Party, Class, Solidarity, and the Failure to Confront Trumpism

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2

Donald Trump won the election, and at the time I'm writing this, he's been president for nearly six months. The Democratic Party has failed in taking this opportunity to incorporate an authentic, sustainable, and grassroots political opposition to MAGA and Trump. The party is still licking its wounds from November. It's reeling from abysmally low approval, according to poll data. However, the party is still leaning hard on its tone deaf, centrist, donor-driven strategy of addressing popular social and economic despair by hiring more experts and consultants to amplify feelgood talking points. Putting up expensive consultants in luxury hotels so they can further optimize swing-voter marketing strategiesand do more focus groups to streamline "language and content that gains attention and virality" with disgruntled voters is not meeting this vital moment. This is a segment of voters who continue to reject mainline Democrats (and Republicans) and are increasingly disenchanted with the elitism and performative concern of establishment political actors. As long as the party continues to disregard the material conditions and lived experience of economically and socially marginalized Americans, it will fall short of building such an opposition.

There’s another dimension to all of this. Confronting the prevailing psycho-social dynamics and conditions that have enabled an explicitly violent, authoritarian, antidemocratic, racist, misogynistic, anti-queer, anti-immigrant, and elitist politics to rise to a position of mainstream dominance is a heavy exercise. It’s sad and overwhelming, and following the protracted aftershock of Trump’s win, the movements have stepped up their activism. This has been in the form of the growing public opposition and recent massive protests in response to the Trump Administration’s mass detentions and deportations of immigrants (including documented immigrants) without due process. Faced with mounting pressure from what daily sounds and feels more like an ascendant fascism and real threat to the delicate semblance of democracy and due process that exists, people are taking to the streets to demand an end to the abduction and disappearing of their neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family, including the targeting of students and activists who simply hold views in opposition to the administration. But, yet again, rather than seeing this massive upswell as an opportunity to realign with its progressive base and young voters, to dig in and fight for our society’s most vulnerable, Democrats clumsily toe the line by offering more wavering language and courting that large fantastical cohort of swing voters waiting for the Dems to be just Republican enough.

Centrism and Its Discontents

This post-election aftershock was real, and, to me, it was bleak and paralyzing. However, a February article in The Atlantic had helped nudge me out of the haze. Unfortunately, not because it spoke to the conditions highlighted above but rather because it failed to do so. It was disappointing, but not in any way more than so many other articles that have appeared in the political magazines and news media that have made similar arguments since President Trump’s win. To be fair, it does include an incisive description of what’s different this time around with Trump 2.0, details some of the dangerous, hateful, and harmful measures already taken, and calls out the administration’s callous disregard for decency and the law. However, it mainly rehashes a lazy centrist critique of Democratic Party priorities. This centrist narrative is a variant that’s been foisted upon the public since Senator Bernie Sanders became an unlikely

contender for the Democratic nomination during the runup to the 2016 election. It presents things from the perspective that the status quo is just fine. The system continuing to operate largely in the interest of elites is "pragmatic," "bipartisan," and "nonideological," and progressive and populist proposals on the left are too far afield to be viable in US electoral politics. The Atlantic piece argues that a successful anti-Trump coalition needs to appeal "to suburban 'wine moms,' that's when you'll know you're doing it right." As if a lackluster centrist appeal for business as usual has been so energizing. As the failure of the Democrats to mount a substantive and effective challenge to Trump and Trumpism has shown, it hasn't.

These numerous election post-mortems from anti-Trump commentators of various stripes have grumbled that Vice President Harris and other Democrats lost their recent races against Republicans because the party is pandering to the far left. The story goes, the party has become taken hostage by radicals; it's become too "woke." They wring their hands and complain that the party has become too extreme in its advocacy for trans inclusivity and that support for trans acceptance and rights overall has gone too far. They groan that the Democrats have damaged their credibility by advocating policies that that are weak on crime and are "anti-police," have alienated men by attacking masculinity, and have endorsed a regime of DEI programs that are "unpopular" and offend a majority of the country. They complain that the party is doing too much to placate an out of touch fringe, one whose values are out of synch with working-class America, who, in turn, turned out for Trump as a result. However, none of this is why Trump won the 2024 election.

Who Are Working-Class Voters?

Centrist narratives that work to constrain leftist politics have the tendency to present working-class Americans as a White, native-born, straight, cisgender monolith. They are also usually misrepresented as essentially blue collar and conservative. Commentators urge Democrats to embrace a politics which appeal to this caricature, and there's an implicit presumption that American workers possess a parochial and obtuse grasp of the issues. Capturing exactly what and who the working-class is can be a fraught exercise. However, based on some practicable metrics, we know at least half of the working-class are women, and workers of color make up 45% of this group. Also, about 19% are immigrants and approximately 8% are disabled. Queer workers are about proportionately represented within the working-class, and they are among those most politically engaged, organizing for broad anti-discrimination protections, better conditions in the workplace, and fair pay. Given this, it does not make sense that engaging in a politics and discourse that speaks to the lives and hardships of these groups has in turn alienated these same people. The proposition that the messaging and policy platform of a viable opposition to Trump have to either harmonize with exclusionary and bigoted narratives or be welcoming and inclusive of marginalized people needs to be soundly rejected.

A Problem of Morale and Turnout for Would-Be Democratic Voters

Vice president Harris' campaign did not fall short because it appealed to the wrong political constituencies. Instead, it failed because it did not connect with economically and socially

disaffected voters who are irritated with the usual campaign overtures of the political class. Despite Trump's widely covered inroads with nonwhite voters, fewer voters turning out for the Democratic candidate in 2024 compared to 2020 was likely a more pivotal factor in his election victory than people who switched their vote. Also, overall, a smaller proportion of the voting eligible population turned out this past November in contrast to 2020. Comparing the popular vote totals from these two years, the Trump vote grew by roughly 3.1 million while Harris had about 6.3 million votes fewer than Biden four years ago. This is not a "to far left" problem. Rather, it is a problem of the Democratic Party establishment failing to energize voters. Over the last several decades, the party has shied away from a bold message and agenda that resonates with a plurality of middle- and working-class voters and validate their experiences with material hardship. Many working people are finding it more difficult to make ends meet. Therefore, Democrats' "America is already great" message of 2016 and Harris' more recent platitudes of American exceptionalism on the campaign trail are felt as a kind of tone deaf elitist gaslighting. This is a key reason why it's been easy for the right to smear Democrats as elitist, and in turn to ideologically tarnish the substantive issues they have taken up. It's true that when President Biden stepped down as the Democratic presidential candidate (albeit too late) and Harris stepped up, she had momentum going into and coming out of the Democratic National Convention. To be sure, some voters were inspired and hopeful, but many, terrified of the very real threat represented by Trump to formal democratic processes and civil society, voted for Harris out of fear. They did so because the status quo, bleak as it is, is better than aspirational autocracy (or worse). But, decisively, a large enough chunk of would-be Democratic voters didn't turn out at all.

A Transformative Politics of Solidarity as Antidote to Authoritarian Hostility

Building on this, without an alternative that speaks to the real financial strain many are experiencing as a large portion of American workers live paycheck to paycheck, a reality encompassing "roughly one-third of US workers," material insecurity and powerlessness can give way to a susceptibility to authoritarian discourse and politics. Effectively, authoritarianism is a staunch acceptance of one's place in the social hierarchy with resentment and aggression expressed toward "others" and those recognized as having lesser status and power, especially when their behaviors are perceived to be out-of-role. Classically, it's characterized by repressed hostility toward authority which (in relation to politics) is replaced with unwavering emotional and political devotion to a "strongman." In turn, members of outgroups become identified as legitimate targets of hostility, bigotry, detainment, deportation, oppression, and violence. As life gets harder, even though others have it worse, conspiracy theories and narratives that scapegoat and demonize marginalized people become more compelling. Imagine if – instead – deep, systemic, progressive reform was on the table. The transformative power of joining with others to advocate for meaningful political objectives is energizing. It has the potential to enable class- and movement-based solidarities to emerge that promote seeing our neighbors in our communities (and even on our screens) as worthy of dignity and humanity. Instead, Trump has capitalized on the disaffection of the public by activating hateful grievance and prejudice and harnessing it in service of a nationalist politics of retribution and cruelty.

It's critical to highlight that patterns of racism, xenophobia, and sexism in our society have always been prevalent, and they placed an inherent disadvantage on Vice President Harris, a South Asian and Black woman candidate. During their debate, this was apparent when Trump assessed that he could casually mock her biracial identity without damaging his campaign. He derisively asserted that "a number of years ago… she happened to turn Black." His insinuation being that she only embraced her Black identity to score political points somehow. Despite Trump and a majority of his voters seeing Harris' race as conferring a political advantage, according to Pew Research from September, nearly double the proportion of all voters saw Vice President Harris' South Asian and Black racial heritage as something that would hurt her candidacy compared with Trump's White racial background (19% vs. 10%). Further, the proportion that saw her gender as a liability was nearly four times larger compared to the share of voters which saw Trump's as such (31% vs. 8%). After the election, AP VoteCast data showed that, again, despite Trump making significant (and much discussed) inroads among nonwhite voters, especially Black and Latino men, votes still broke down disproportionately along racial and gender lines. Race and gender still clearly play an important role in the perceptions of American voters that correspond to dominant patterns of racial and gender prejudice and inequality. Also, given American society's intersectional complexity, such ideologies and circumstances are not solely internalized by dominant groups. After the election, Berkely sociologist Raka Ray offered insights into Trump's win. She highlighted that "the racist and misogynist rejection of a Black and South Asian woman" should not be discounted. The right, after all, proliferated mis- and disinformation that appealed to "the wounded racial and masculine identity of particular demographic groups." She also noted that Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric resonated, even with some in the immigrant community who were willing "to shut the door behind them." However, Ray concluded, in the end, if many Americans were not worrying about the cost of things like food, rent, and other expenses this outcome would not have happened.

Bearing these contradictions in mind, a particular moment on the campaign trail subtly signaled trouble for Harris. During her Fox News interview with Bret Baier, she was asked: If Trump is so bad, Why is "half this country now supporting this person who could be the 47th president of the United States?" later following with, "Are they misguided, the 50%? Are they stupid?" After assuring Baier that she didn't think the American people were stupid, the best response Harris could muster was to respond by saying that running for president is difficult. "It's not supposed to be easy. It's not supposed to be a cake walk." She then reiterated her concerns for Trump being the one that's "demeaning and engaging in personal grievances" against "the American people." She was not wrong, but this was the perfect place to discuss how mass support for Trump is possible because he has been able to tap into legitimate expressions of social and economic insecurity that people are feeling and to acknowledge these are issues her party has inadequately addressed in the past. This was a lost opportunity to concretely frame prevailing dynamics of economic exploitation and connect them to other experiences of social marginality. Attaching these points to a message and politics that highlight the need to dismantle the grotesque power and influence of America's oligarchs and significantly reign in the power they wield over regular people's lives would have been deeply compelling. Presumably, the failure to do so was because of the formidable influence of party

donors and other elite stakeholders.

The Dems Should Follow the Lead of the Movements and Their Base

Contrary to the admonitions of centrist Democrats and moderate Republicans, progressive and leftist policies are actually quite popular among Democratic and Independent voters, and many have substantial bipartisan support. For example, regarding guaranteeing healthcare for every American, according to the Pew Research Center, over 2/3 of survey respondents feel that "the federal government has a responsibility to make sure all Americans have health care coverage." The vast majority of Democratic voters (88%) reported this, but even 40% of Republican voters responded that the government should take such a role. Even on a seemingly risky wedge issue like the Israeli war in Gaza, identified as a genocide by Amnesty International, the United Nations, and other organizations, there is widespread support for a ceasefire. Just weeks after the October 7 attacks by Hamas 66% of voters agreed that the US should push for a ceasefire and de-escalation of violence in Gaza. That sentiment has only intensified, with survey data from January 2025 showing support climbing to 78% in relation to support for a ceasefire, "including 84% of Democrats, 76% of Independents, and 73% of Republicans." Trump ran aggressively against Transgender rights, and nationwide, Republicans spent over $65 million on television adds across more than a dozen states on this issue. In reality, transgender issues fall way behind economic issues as an important factor motivating voters, and Data for Progress found that 57% of all likely voters "reject candidates who support anti-trans legislation." More than 80% of Americans believe that the government should prioritize "cracking down on corporations that are price gouging, on things like food and gas" as a way of dealing with inflation, and a similar proportion believe that the government should reign in "the high cost of health care and prescription drugs." A GQR survey shows that 67% of Democrats and 63% of Independents identify corporate greed as the main driver of inflation and a More Perfect Union poll shows that 81% of all voters, including a majority of Republicans, think that that large corporations "are becoming too powerful." The list of progressive positions which poll generally well goes on and on: taxing the rich, getting money out of politics, addressing climate change, enhancing school funding …and, yes, even support for DEI programs.

Returning to Raka Ray's point, in addition to insidious social patterns like racism, sexism, and anti-immigrant bigotry, there is a fundamentally interdependent dimension of economic precarity and coercion in US society that needs to be reckoned with. It has resulted from decades of bipartisan policies that have weakened the safety net, promoted austerity, empowered deregulation, punished workers, etc. Perhaps the pressing question is, "Can these contradictions, with which the mainstream Democratic machine and its donors are fundamentally entangled, be effectively overcome for a meaningful opposition to Trump and Trumpism to be mounted from within the party?" If not, what is the alternative? What if it's too late?

Yes, and…

Such a reckoning needs to be a “yes, and” proposition. Advocating, safeguarding, and expanding rights in relation to social categories like race, gender, sexuality, immigration status, etc., often disparaged as mere “identity politics,” has also not hurt Democrats politically, per se. The derision of identity politics has been a recurring critique from the right as well as segments of the left. However, the Democratic Party’s tendency toward political performance, with a focus on “optics and gesture” and as a way of bypassing deep structural change, has furthered the party’s problem with coming off as superficial and insincere. While the discussion has rightly come to encompass diversity and inclusion, it has generally failed to include (along with it) (1) a real critique of the malignant and predatory capitalism that has left many Americans languishing and (2) a policy agenda that significantly addresses the real economic pain and inequality faced by the public as a regular part of life. This has been the party’s principal weakness in mounting a substantive opposition. An effective strategy and platform also must energize collectivities to be engaged across social margins to mount a meaningful resistance to Trump. This needs to accompany, not replace, the necessary critique of the systemic oppression marginalized people have historically faced. A viable alternative must also go beyond resistance to Trump. It must also include and follow the movements which work to organize people against the structures of power that constrain their lives. Whether the Democrats will be willing to successfully take this on – and/ or a sizable and formidable enough resistance to Trump and Trumpism outside the party can effectively leverage its power – remains to be seen.

The Illusion of Safety: How Israeli Security Arrangements Undermine Lasting Israeli-Palestinian Peace

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Introduction: Israel's Security Foundations

Israel's security doctrine rests on three conceptual foundations. The first is a defensive military strategy designed to deliver a decisive victory upon the presumed failure of deterrence. Prior to the 1967 war, this was the sole foundation of Israel's security approach. The concept still exists, but it has been complicated by the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, the expansion of Jewish-Israeli Settlements, and the diminution of external security threats following peace agreements with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994). The following two foundations now overshadow it.

The second pillar is the preservation of a Jewish state through the domination of the non-Jewish land and population between Jordan and the Mediterranean. What started as a military occupation of Palestinian territories has developed into a de facto annexation and apartheid. This has provoked and sustained a violent Palestinian resistance since 2000, which Rafaella Del Sarto concludes, has led to a general feeling of threat and insecurity among Israeli Jews. In

pursuit of identity-based politics and territorial expansion, successive Israeli governments have promoted the sense of existential threat to the Jewish-Israeli public and implemented brutal military operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Del Sarto expects that Israel's normalization of relations with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco (2020) is unlikely to break this vicious cycle of fear and brutality and may well intensify it in relation to Iran and the Palestinians.[1] The horrific ongoing war in Gaza, the military campaign in the West Bank, the Israeli–Iranian conflict, and missile exchanges between Israel and the Houthis in Yemen since October 2023 affirm her conclusion.

The third foundation is a corollary of the second. As fears around identity and safety increased—reaching an apotheosis on October 7, 2023—security has increasingly been framed as a matter of Jewish supremacy. This view shapes current Israeli strategy in which Israel operates not only against military targets in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon but utilizes the mass killing of civilians, population expulsion, and systemic infrastructure destruction, alongside dehumanization and genocidal rhetoric.[2]

While successive American administrations have remained committed to Israel's defense, to what extent will they continue to accept Israel's security concepts and methods? I suggest that this question is best addressed not by examining military cooperation or U.S. arms transfers to Israel, but by analyzing the most recent security arrangements proposed by the U.S. in regards to a two-state agreement and by considering which alternative frameworks have been excluded from consideration.

Security Arrangements Suggested by Secretary Kerry Team

While unimaginable now, security was largely seen as a technical issue during the Camp David summit in 2000 and the Annapolis talks of 2007-2008. At the time, the status of Jerusalem and the 1948 refugees were thought to be the most significant hurdles to an agreement. Members of Secretary of State Kerry's team working towards a two-state solution in 2013-2014 recall

realizing with some surprise that security had climbed to the top of Israel's list of fundamental demands.[3]

For Prime Minister Netanyahu, security demands functioned not as a path towards resolution, but as a means to preclude a Palestinian state or any significant political process leading to one. Kerry's naïve assumption, I would argue, was that Netanyahu saw security as part of conflict resolution. Instead, Netanyahu introduced a policy of conflict management and a propaganda campaign to mold Israeli public opinion. Promoted was the message that, in exchange for Prime Minister Sharon's evacuation of settlements from the Gaza Strip in 2005, Israel only received Hamas rockets. And suppressed were the harsh conditions Israel imposed on more than two million people and the fact that Gaza was an open-air prison.[4]

In 2016, two of the security experts from Kerry's team, Ilan Goldenberg and Kris Bauman, reflected on the interrelation of security, borders, and sovereignty and that security should never be an isolated demand. Instead, they presented their own vision of a security system for a two-state solution. Their proposal intended to bridge the contradiction between the security arrangements demanded by Israel and the Palestinian rejection of those arrangements that violate their full sovereignty. Israel will get security arrangements that violate Palestinian sovereignty in exchange for transferring more territory to the Palestinians than they were originally ready to offer. In essence, their plan was predicated on the assumption that reduced Palestinian sovereignty, regardless of its territorial size, creates more security for Israel. But I would suggest the opposite: full Palestinian sovereignty over the 1967 occupied territories with maximum openness and mutual connections ensures Israel's security. This conclusion, I argue, remains viable even after Hamas's October 7thattack and Israel's horrific retaliation.

Goldenberg and Bauman proposed a four-layer security arrangement: the first would operate within the State focusing on counterterrorism and other threats to Israel; the second would be established along the border between Israel and Palestine to prevent smuggling and cross-border attacks; a third layer would be deployed in the maritime, air space, and electromagnetic sphere; and finally, there will be a regional security pact. Crucially, the plan also stipulates that in extreme cases, Israel will retain the right to defend itself independently and unilaterally enter Palestine. The definition of what constitutes an extreme case will be purely determined by Israel, in consultation with the United States. Given that the definition is based almost exclusively on Israeli discretion, such cases would likely be frequent.

To prevent the West Bank from following the trajectory of Gaza after the 2005 withdrawal, Israeli forces will operate inside Palestine as part of the first layer of security. Their visibility in Palestinian streets will be minimal in order to convey the feeling that a meaningful change has occurred and that the occupation has come to an end.

Israel will withdraw from each Palestinian area separately according to a multi-stage plan conditioned on Palestinian compliance with predefined security objectives. The objectives as well as the measures for meeting them will be jointly defined by Israeli, Palestinian, and U.S. representatives. In the event of disagreements, Israel will enjoy veto power over the joint

resolution and the Palestinians will be called to improve their performance accordingly. If disagreements persist, the issue will be forwarded to higher political leadership. Goldenberg and Bauman estimate that the transition stage will take between 10 to 15 years, during which Israel will retain full security authority. It should be noted that during the negotiations with Kerry, Netanyahu demanded that the period be extended to forty years.

Under this plan, the future Palestinian state would be demilitarized, maintaining only a police force with an elite counterterrorism unit. This unit would receive extensive legal powers and its capabilities would be enhanced with American assistance. Joint operation command centers staffed by Israeli, Palestinian, and American officers would be established, along with a mechanism to manage operational disagreements among them.

The United States would play an active role in training, equipping, supervising and evaluating the performance of the Palestinian security forces even beyond the transitional stage. In addition, two American teams would operate in the Jordan Valley, on the Palestinian side of the border. One would occupy a 2-kilometer-wide strip in the Jordan Valley while the other would supervise the passage of goods and people from Jordan to Palestine in compliance with Israeli demands. The list of border crossers and their personal and biometric data would be shared among Israel, Palestine, and Jordan and transferred simultaneously to a joint operation room and separately to each of the three countries.

The border between Israel and Palestine would be secured by a physical barrier, security zones, patrols, guards, sensors, anti-tunnel measures, and restrictions on building next to it. In practice, the border would serve as a heavily fortified wall with checkpoints for the Palestinians and as a free-flowing entry and exit point for Israelis.

In the airspace, an agreed-upon protocol would govern routine operations, But in times of emergency, the full control would be transferred to the Israeli air force. Palestinian sovereignty over the airspace would be limited to ten thousand feet, and airports would be built in Gaza and the Jordan Valley. An Israeli-controlled security perimeter would also be imposed around Gaza’s territorial waters, and the same border arrangements applied in the Jordan Valley would extend to Gaza’s port.

While Palestine’s electromagnetic infrastructure would be modernized, overall control of the electromagnetic sphere would remain in Israeli hands.

Review of the Kerry Team Proposals

These security arrangements are built around a militaristic approach. They deal exclusively with military techniques and methods of control characteristic of parties engaged in armed confrontation rather than peaceful coexistence and cooperative partnership. Indeed, as I show below, Israel is preparing for the day after fighting ends in Gaza and Lebanon not by envisioning peace, but by entrenching even more rigid security foundations—ones intended to endure beyond the current framework rather than be replaced by reconciliation or mutual trust.

Second, the proposed security arrangements rest on the presumption of perpetual threat and deep-seated skepticism. Whether citing either incompetence, ideological motivations, or an unwillingness to act against their own people the arrangements assume that Palestinian security forces cannot be trusted to prevent attacks against Israelis or operate in accordance with Israeli expectations. In their eyes, the Palestinians are a permanent threat and will remain suspects even after they sign for peace with Israel. In other words, such an agreement is not intended to establish a new political reality or a fundamentally transformed relationship. The current asymmetrical power dynamic, defined by military dominance and underscored by notions of Israeli-Jewish supremacy, will continue to shape the any future peace–thus prolonging the conditions of conflict rather than transferring them onto non-aggressive tracks.

A blatant expression of this can be found in clauses relating to the deployment of Israeli forces within Palestine, limiting Palestinian sovereignty in the air and sea spaces, and revoking their ownership of the electromagnetic sphere. Palestinian sovereignty will be crippled and limited, but as far as possible, it will not be presented as such to the Palestinian public. They will live under the illusion that they are liberated. However, it is unrealistic to expect that Palestinians would accept such a drastic curtailment of sovereignty over merely 22 percent of their historic homeland. Such an arrangement is not a foundation for peace, but a blueprint for future instability—a time bomb embedded within the structure of the "peace". Genuine security for Israel cannot be achieved through the continued imposition of Israeli-Jewish supremacy.

Third, these arrangements rest on the assumption that Israel is a peace-loving country. Accordingly, Israeli violence against Palestinians is considered a marginal phenomenon rather than a systemic exercise of violence and state power. The war in Gaza illustrated the extent to which Israeli violence poses an existential threat to the Palestinian people. It is not only that Israel needs security and protection from Palestinian terrorism, but Palestinians must also be protected from Israel's far greater destructive power. Despite this, Palestine is denied the right to operate security measures equal to those that Israel enjoys. The American document fails to recognize Palestine's right to protect itself independently, even in extreme circumstances. Instead, it grants Israel sole authority to define what constitutes an 'extreme case'. History shows, however, that Israel has repeatedly expanded the definition of such threats. In the early 1990s, a "ticking bomb" referred to a person actively en route to carry out a terrorist attack. A decade later, it had expanded to encompass any member or supporter of a terrorist organization, which under their definitions included political activists and administrators. By 2022, Israel had gone so far as to designate prominent Palestinian civil society organizations as terrorist entities.[5] As previously discussed, during the war in Gaza, Israel pushed this logic even further.

Finally, the Goldenberg and Bauman papers reflect the consistent pro-Israel bias of U.S. administrations. Unlike the 2000 Camp David talks, which entertained the idea of deploying a multinational force along the Palestinian-Jordanian border, this document calls for an exclusively American force tasked with enforcing Israeli-defined security terms. As I will go on to show, President Trump takes this alignment even further, deepening this U.S. pro-Israel bias.

It is also worth noting the document's significant blind spots. Chief among them is the conspicuous disregard for Jerusalem. Beyond its religious, cultural, and symbolic importance, Jerusalem is also a living, dynamic urban center of nearly one million residents. In such a densely populated and connected environment, militarized control disrupts the flow of everyday life and interferes with the people and goods on which each city depends for its prosperity. These disruptions are particularly damaging in a city that attracts millions of tourists and pilgrims each year. Moreover, physical separation prevents the development of good relations between neighboring populations that are deeply interconnected and interdependent within the urban fabric.

The proposal's failure to engage seriously with Jerusalem is especially troubling given the impracticality of dividing the city according to the principle advanced by President Clinton in 2000—that Arab neighborhoods become part of Palestina and Jewish neighborhoods part of Israel. Anyone familiar with the city can see that implementing such a division would require mass home demolitions and population expulsion. Since 2000, Israel has actively expanded its urban settlements in East Jerusalem to prevent the realization of Clinton's plan. In many areas, Jewish and Palestinian homes now exist side by side with no physical separation. In others, Jewish settlers have moved directly into Palestinian neighborhoods.

Any lasting agreement in Jerusalem requires divided sovereignty with open or minimally restricted border crossings. Unlike the Oslo process, which deferred the city's status to the final stages of negotiation, future talks should begin with Jerusalem.[6] The city is not only a symbol, it is a microcosm of the conflict's core issues: borders, settlements, refugees, sovereignty, economy, sacred sites, and security.

A second major omission in the document is the absence of any economic or civil dimension in the proposed security framework. Its militarized lens ignores the role of trade, tourism, and cross-border labor as foundations for shared interest and mutual stability. It similarly neglects the cultural and psychological aspects of peacebuilding, like cultural exchange, mutual recognition of historical narratives, and the creation of civil society mechanisms for reconciliation. In short, security cannot be reduced to force or deterrence alone. It is forged through cooperation in the mundane activities and everyday contracts of public life.

Security in President Trump's 2020 Plan

It seems almost impossible that a second-term Trump administration would endorse the Goldberg and Bauman plan that was drafted under a Democratic administration. However, a comparison between the Democratic plan and Trump's 2020 first-term peace proposal reveals a striking convergence on security-related matters, despite differences elsewhere.[7][7]Both approaches envision a demilitarized Palestinian state and reject the prospect of full Palestinian sovereignty. Instead, they prioritize Israel's security demands, at the expense of Palestinian self-determination.

In both frameworks, Israel retains extensive control over Palestine's external borders,

maintains broad supervision of Palestinian territory, and directly manages Palestinian airspace and electromagnetic infrastructure. Trump's plan goes even further, extending Israeli sovereignty into Palestinian territorial waters. While the plans differ concerning the scale, duration, and visibility of Israeli control, they are aligned in their underlying logic. Both agree that no Israeli settler should live under Palestinian authority. The Democratic plan therefore proposes evacuating settlers from areas not annexed to Israel. In contrast, Trump's proposal incorporates all existing settlements into Israeli sovereignty, organizing them into a network of ethnically homogenous enclaves. To facilitate this network of settlements, Trump's plan proposes an extensive system of bridges and tunnels connecting these enclaves, each secured by a secured border. The implementation of this plan would result in a border of almost 1,696 kilometers—nearly twice the length proposed in the Annapolis talks which served as the basis for the Democratic framework.[8] Both plans also remove the Jordan Valley from Palestinian sovereignty: Trump through outright annexation, and the Democrats by deploying American forces to monitor the area in accordance with Israeli directives. In both the Trump and Goldberg-Bauman plans, security frameworks rest on the assumption that Israeli security requires a hardened and regulated border regime to separate Israelis from Palestinians. Each plan also establishes performance-based benchmarks for Palestinian security forces. As Palestinians meet these benchmarks, Israeli military presence within Palestine would be reduced. Additionally, in both proposals, Israel centrally retains the final authority to judge whether these benchmarks have been met.

A deep contradiction lies at the heart of Trump's proposal. While it calls for Palestinian economic prosperity, it also imposes a 1,696 km rigid border that fragments the West Bank into 43 Palestinian and 17 Israeli enclaves, True economic growth requires the freedom of movement for people and goods between ethnic enclaves. As long as security measures designed to uphold Jewish supremacy dominate the political settlement, Palestinian prosperity will remain out of reach. Israeli-controlled checkpoints stand as barriers between Palestinian areas and centers of economic activity like seaports and airports. As shown in the example of Gaza since 2007, these checkpoints can severely restrict or even outright prevent the flow of goods and people.[9] The same contradiction also exists in Trump's plan regarding Jerusalem. While the Democratic plan largely leaves the city untouched, Trump's proposal entails turning the wall established in 2003 into a permanent border. Under this arrangement a Palestinian capital would be limited to the few neighborhoods on the West Bank side of the wall. A terminal for Palestinian access to the city would be built to the north, deep within Palestinian territory.

At best, Trump's plan would lead to the establishment of Palestinian Bantustans of manual laborers in Israel and to the establishment of low-tec sub-contractor industries serving the Jewish economy. At worst, it could create an opportunity for the Jewish side to exploit its superiority and annex large portions of the West Bank ushering in a wave of large-scale dispossession. A second-term Trump administration is likely to facilitate such a scenario. In Gaza, Israel has already employed genocide, starvation, and mass expulsion.[10] Under the cover of war, similar patterns are emerging in the West Bank, where Israeli forces have violently expelled several West Bank Palestinian communities, all with minimal international response.[11]

The Gaza War Impact

The two U.S. peace plans reflect not only divergent American administrations but also collaboration with different segments of the Israeli political spectrum. The Israeli partners involved in drafting the Democrats' Annapolis document were former security officials that hoped to rescue the failing Oslo peace process to which they remained committed. They shared a militaristic Zionist ideology, believing that in order to preserve Israel's Jewish majority and substantiate its claims of democracy, Israel should end its civil rule over the Palestinians and let them build a small state that Israel would retain military control over.

Trump's plan, by contrast, was made in accordance with the worldview of the new Israeli elite, exemplified in the position of Netanyahu. This new elite has transformed Israel's leading identity from classical militarist Zionism to a more overtly Jewish supremacist ideology.[12] Jewish supremacy goes beyond Zionism in its subordination of Palestinians, not only denying their territorial or military autonomy, but also denying their right to national identity.[13] The war that began in Gaza and Lebanon in October 2023, along with subsequent Israeli strikes in Iran are direct consequences of this ideological shift.

The Hamas attacks on October 7th shattered the militaristic security doctrines of both plans. Of the four pillars that Goldenberg and Bauman identify as Israel's security foundations, three were critically compromised: the physical barrier around the Gaza Strip, the electromagnetic, air space and maritime control systems, and the regional support of Egypt and Qatar that had helped Israel to contain Hamas and manage the conflict with the Palestinians rather than seeking to solve it.

In response, Israel's Jewish supremacist government forcefully imposed the missing first layer of direct military control. It invaded the Gaza Strip, destroyed much of its infrastructure, and killed, wounded, or expelled most of its civilians. In its brutal retaliation for Hamas's war crimes on October 7, 2023, Israel committed war crimes of its own. By the end of March 2025, Israeli forces had systematically killed over 50,100 people, injured over 113,700, rendered about 70% of Gaza's homes uninhabitable, and displaced 1.1 million people. [14]

In preparation for the day when fighting ends, Israel created an uninhabited exposed buffer zone along the Gaza border on the Palestinian side and deployed military forces along three lateral routes: Philadelphi, Netzarim and Morag (the latter made in early April 2025).[15] Clearly Israel's Jewish supremacy establishment interpreted the Hamas attack as an operational failure, responding by intensifying its militaristic security measures rather than replacing the failed system with a peace agreement and cooperation with elected Palestinian representatives. As the war expanded into Lebanon, Israel conditioned any agreement for a ceasefire on the creation of a security zone in southern Lebanon and the freedom to conduct military operations if Israel decides that the terms of the agreement have been violated.[16] During the ceasefire, with backing from the United States, Israel has continued to operate militarily to enforce the agreement and prevent Hezbollah from building drones.

The war in Gaza led Netanyahu to not only extend the proposed transitional period—from the 10 to 15 years recommended by American advisors to a full 40 years—but also to broaden the scope dramatically. His new vision includes a campaign to de-radicalize the Palestinian public by reshaping the education system and media infrastructure. In pursuing such a policy. Netanyahu ignores the failures of the denazification campaign in West Germany. It was not the indoctrination imposed by the victors of the war that changed the German mind, but rather the new socio-political reality forged with the involvement of former combatants and affiliates from both sides.[17]

When Trump entered the Oval Office in January 2025, cooperation between the White House and Netanyahu's office reached a new heights. During Trump's first term, the two administrations worked closely on the United States' recognition of the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem, and presented a plan to establish a small, fragmented Palestinian protectorate state in the West Bank. In his second term, they promoted a plan to evacuate the Palestinian population from the Gaza Strip. It is worth mentioning that in the first days of the war, on October 13, 2023, the Israeli Ministry of Intelligence recommended the forcible and permanent transfer of Gaza's 2.2 million residents to Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. The Israeli Cabinet discussed this paper. [18] It seems that the transfer plan was not abandoned but merely shelved for the duration of the Biden administration. Just about a month into his second term, Trump revived the idea of transferring the Gaza Strip residents to Egypt and Jordan in a meeting with Netanyahu. "We just clean out that whole thing" he said pledging to turn the devastated territory into "the Riviera of the Middle East." [19]

Trump's plan for the mass transfer of Gaza's population met with strong resistance from Arab countries and for the moment he seems to have abandoned it. However, Israel's desire to push as many Palestinians as possible out from its territory remains intact. In February 2025, Defense Minister Katz instructed the IDF to prepare a plan for the "voluntary" emigration of Palestinians from the Gaza Strip in line with Trump's original plan. Shortly thereafter, Katz established a new directorate within the Defense Ministry to oversee and implement the transfer process [20]. Meanwhile, at the start of 2025, Israel launched a military operation in the West Bank modeled on its campaign in Gaza but on a smaller scale. During the operation, over forty thousand civilians were forced to leave their homes and barred from returning. [21]

Their extreme measures have gained increasing support in Israeli social media, where dehumanizing rhetoric about Palestinians is widespread. Currently, a majority of the Israeli public is in support of Trump's transfer plan: 66% in favor and only 14% opposed. [22] 49% supported the forcible expulsion of Gaza residents while only 25% opposed it. Among coalition voters, the support rate for forcible expulsion was 78%, with only 17% in opposition. [23]

Furthermore, Tel Aviv University's Peace Index from March 2025 found that 62% of Israeli Jews who define themselves as leftist, 72% among the center, 83% among the moderate right, and 78% among the right-wing support providing incentives to encourage Palestinians to leave Gaza voluntarily. The desire to see fewer—or no—Palestinians living in their homeland is a sentiment shared across the Israeli-Jewish political spectrum. To achieve it they prefer using

soft force on sheer brutal means.[24] Obviously, those incentives are not limited to non-violent means, nor does voluntary departure exclude the current reality in the Gaza Strip—a place considered unlivable even before its near-total destruction.

Indeed, using war as a pretext to expel Palestinians from their homes and land is a long-standing Israeli strategy. Israel used this method during and after the 1948 and 1967 wars. However, the current war marks a significant development in both scale and character. First in the magnitude of the displacement is unprecedented—at least twice as large as in 1948. Second, whereas past Israeli operations were carried out covertly and remained classified as top secret, today they are unfolding in the open. For decades, documentation of the mass expulsions of 1948 remained scarce until critical historians began publishing academic studies in the late 1980s. Only then did credible evidence emerge of Israeli involvement in ethnic cleansing during and after the war. Since then, Israeli officials and advocates have sought to minimize the perceived scale of the 1948 Palestinian deportations and outlaw any public acknowledgement of them. The Nakba Law of 2011 states that any institution that commemorates the Nakba or includes its narrative in art or publications will lose the state's funding.[25] However, in the current war, the Israeli Jewish public proudly welcomed the repetition of the 1948 method and asked to expand it. With Trump's plan for the Gaza Strip, population transfer has now been explicitly endorsed and legitimized by the US administration.

In an earlier issue of Logos,[26] I argued that the ideology of Jewish supremacy emerged in direct response to the demographic and political challenges posed by Palestinian presence. From the perspective of the Jewish supremacist regime intent on governing all of historic Palestine, survival depends on the increasingly forceful and violent assertion of Jewish dominance, since Jews now constitute, at most, half the population in that territory—possibly less. This framework offers Palestinians no prospect of equal collective existence alongside the Jewish identity, only a subordinated existence beneath it. From this point of view, the core threat is not Palestinian actions, but Palestinian being and identity.

Following the October 7th attack, not only did members of Israel's newer elite harden their stance, but the older generation of militarist Zionists also shifted its position. According to the Institute for National Security Studies—an organization home to many members of this old guard—a fully sovereign Palestinian state is no longer feasible in the foreseeable future. Their rationale is based on the Israeli assumption is that such a state poses a security threat. As a result, Israel intends to maintain indefinite, comprehensive security control across the West Bank, including the freedom to conduct military operations and enforce its policies at will. In exchange, Israel will let the Palestinian Authority marginally expand its limited control over 8% more of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip will be considered a separate territory governed by a local administration.[27] Whereas the Oslo agreements—which many militaristic Zionists initially supported—envisioned a Israeli authority as a transitional instrument, the events of October 7th have rendered that autonomy indefinite. Consequently, the distinction between Jewish supremacy and militarist Zionism has largely collapsed. Both uphold a system that combines apartheid with Jewish supremacy.

At the core of this system lies a threat-driven military doctrine that defines security as the capacity to dominate. Whether through hard power, soft coercion, or the credible threat of force, Israeli security is framed around control and subjugation. This framework inherently casts the Palestinian population as an enemy, foreclosing the prospect of a genuine peace. In contrast, an inter-human relations paradigm sees security as the product of the prevention of force. It emphasizes diplomacy, trade, economy, culture, tourism, transportation, and civil society encounters as the foundations of sustainable peace. The legal and political frameworks for such a peace can take several forms that are not necessarily mutually exclusive: open borders federation, confederation, or limited confederal arrangement.[28] In the Israeli – Palestinian context, they all share one joint foundation: collective equality and power sharing between two nations, each with its majority ethnic group, national symbols, and a distinct historical narrative. Tragically, Israeli policy remains shaped by fear, reinforcing the very conflict it seeks to suppress. In its pursuit of dominance, Israel became a victim of its own contemporary military superiority—one that fails to ensure peaceful security. With U.S. support, Israel chooses to live on its sword and operate as a fortress state, sustained by military dominance rather than a collaborative peace.

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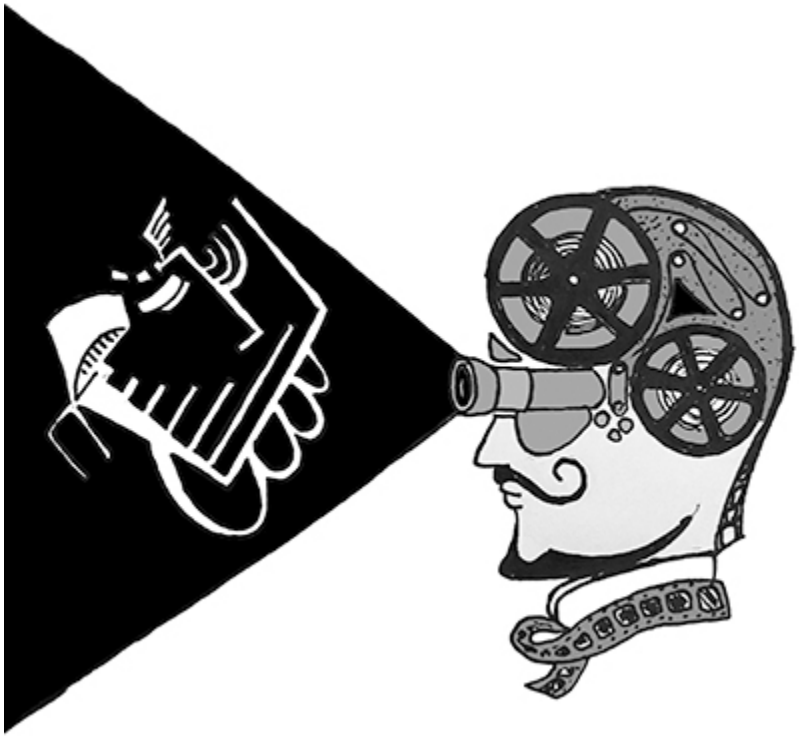
The Avant-Garde Film, Revisited

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



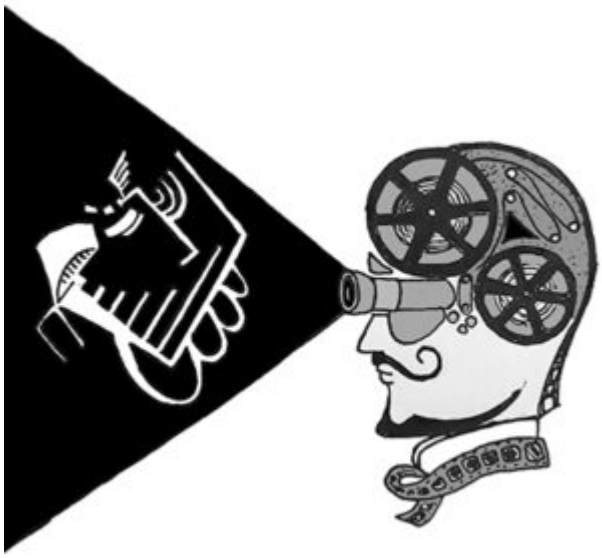
Shortly before his death this year, the film theoretician, P. Adams Sitney, significantly revised one of his earliest articles on avant-garde cinema and submitted it to Logos. *In its first iteration, the article provided one of the first attempts to chart the currents of avant-garde cinema at a point when the movement thriving. This revised version's tone and content is significantly different. It reflects on the movement – of which Sitney was, himself, an important part – as well as its achievements at a point when this strand of cinema has entered, at the very least, a period of decreased activity. Originally, Sitney had proposed publishing the article in multiple parts. However, given his recent passing, it made more sense to present Sitney's article – what may have been his final piece of writing after a distinguished career – in its entirety.*

– Gregory Zucker, Editor

1.

The earliest impulses toward the establishment of an independent cinema arose from a desire to temporalize pictorial strategies by Cubist, Futurist, and Dadaist painters. The very last issue of Apollinaire's *Les Soirées de Paris* (1914) contained Leopold Survage's description of his ultimately unrealized film *Le Rythme Coloré.* From the same period both Kandinsky and

Schoenberg conceived of film projects which were never executed. The text of Survage's "Le Rythme Coloré" has been translated in English, and the projects of Kandinsky and Schoenberg have been analyzed in Standish Lawder's *The Cubist Cinema* (1975). The earliest films actually completed by major figures of the "Modern" movement seem to have been lost or destroyed soon after they were shown; only stills remain today of *La Vita Futurista*, a collective effort involving Marinetti, Ginna, Balla and others. The Futurist Cabaret Number 13 of Larionov and Burilik seems also to have disappeared.

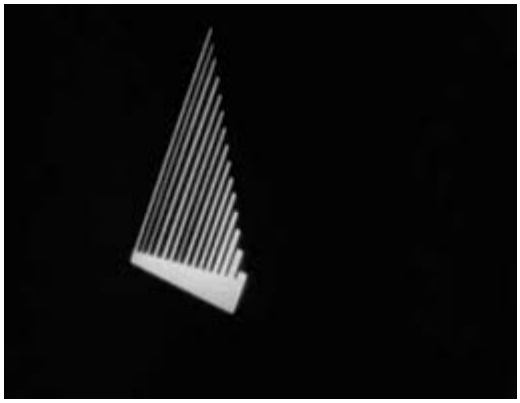


Artist: Drew Martin

The graphic filmmaker repudiated the rich inheritance that film accepted from photography. The first filmmakers, the Lumiéres and their cameramen, utilized with glory the deep space and re-ceeding movement available to the camera lens, which had been ground in conformity with an idea of perspective emanating continuously from the Renaissance. The first graphic filmmakers came to cinema from painting, especially from Cubism and geometrical abstraction. They believed that they could discover the essential in cinema only after they rejected the ease with which it recorded illusory depth. This was the reason many of them turned to animation. It was one route to the flatness of the modernist canvas. Four central works of the graphic cinema in its initial stage de-serve special attention here: *Rhythmus 21* (1921), *Symphonie Diagonale*, (1923), *Le Ballet Mécanique* (1924) and *Anémic Cinéma* (1926).

Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling worked and lived together when they made their first films. For both men, cinema seemed a natural extension of their scroll paintings. In 1920 they convinced U.F.A. to aid them with film experiments. Out of these experiments came Richter's *Rhythmus 21* and Eggeling's *Symphonie Diagonale*. For many years, informed taste preferred Eggeling's film to Richter's; in their shared aspiration to achieve a musical construction from elementary plastic shapes. The preference may have been abetted anachronistically by the achievements of Peter Kubelka's *Arnulf Rainer* (1960) and Tony Conrad's *The Flicker* (1966). Eggeling's film achieves a complexity of repetition, inversion, and variation that is lacking in

Richter's. Yet recently taste seems to have shifted; one finds critics preferring *Rhythmus 21* for its frank use of purely cinematic materials—the empty screen, black and white alternation, the disappearance and reemergence of simple shapes.



Viking Eggeling, Symphonie Diagnole (1924)

The shift in taste reflects a serious change in the concept of cinematic form among avant-gardists over a fifty-year period. Briefly, one sees the birth, evolution, and decline of the musical organization of filmic time. Simultaneous to that decline is a renewed interest in the overall shape of a film. It is precisely in its elaboration of a shape that *Rhythmus 21* became a prophetic film. It opens with the empty white screen. The edge moves from one side until the whole is black. That sweep is repeated from the other side; then the top and bottom edges converge on the center. Out of the alternations of full screen transformations of black and white emerges a white square which crosses the screen in various ways and dives in and out of its virtual vanishing point deep in the center. Through the multiplication of squares and the incorporation of negative images which again transform the black/white relationships, Richter gradually constructs a complicated composition reminiscent of a Mondrian. Although the image remains only briefly before the accelerated decomposition of the variations in the last moments of the film, one feels that the whole film has led up to this fleeting image. Its shape then-suggests a slow crescendo and a rapid diminuendo, affirming throughout the square of the screen and the alternation of black and white as the essentials of cinema.

In his manifesto "The Badly Trained Sensibility," Richter reiterates and enlarges upon the position of Survage, who had written:

> A static abstract form is still not expressive enough. Whether round or pointed, oblong or square, simple or complex, it only produces an extremely confused sensation: it is only a simple graphic notation. Only when set in motion, undergoing change, entering into relations with other forms, is it able to evoke a feeling.

To this general thesis Richter adds the fascinating proposition that abstract film is able to achieve "feeling" through its unique temporality; for by divesting itself of photographic objects

it reorient the work of “memory.” The mind, free from associations which the sentimental cinema exploits, experiences time as feeling.

Fernando Léger’s *Le Ballet Mécanique* sets itself several tasks: an anatomy of cinematic rhythm, comparing regular movements within a shot to rapid montage, the intensification of awareness towards objects, including the human body as an object; and as synthetic view of choreography of ordinary things and common actions (whence the title).

The optical space of the film is made shallow as a result of concentrating on objects, by means of closeups without establishing shots, masking out portions of the picture, the placement of objects against a shallow backdrop, and unusual angles of camera placement. The editing involves loop printing (repetition of the same shot without interruption), rapid intercutting of geometric forms, inversion, rapid intercutting of two views of the same object, animation of objects into crude “dances,” and especially comparison of movements by juxtaposition.

Fernand Léger, Le Ballet Mécanique (1924)

The whole of the film evolves through a conflict between deep and shallow space, between moving and still images, in such a way that the longer rhythmic movements (the girl on the swing, the washerwoman climbing the steps over and over, the rotation of gears and pistons, the moving prismatic distortions) form a kind of visual consonance and the shorter flat images a dissonance.

An interesting example of the cinematic application of a standard cubist strategy occurs at the end of this film when Léger plays with the headline “ON A VOLE UN COLLIER DE PERLES DE 5 MILLIONS.” Clement Greenberg has described the evolution of the flattened cubist canvas:

The first, and until the advent of pasted paper, the most important device that Braque discovered for indicating and separating the surface was imitation printing, which automatically evokes a literal flatness.

When the words first appear, we tend to read them as if they were written on the screen itself, without depth. Then Léger cut back and forth between three zeros in this sequence. The central zero is seen in closeup; then a long shot shows all three. The change of scale emphasizes the virtual depth between camera and image even though the white oval on a black

base has no depth in itself. Furthermore, Léger returns to the zeros to dolly to and away, making doubly explicit the sense of camera depth. He also shows the writing upside down, and in fragments, to formalize its literal message.

In 1926 Marcel Duchamp enlisted the help of Man Ray and Marc Allegret to make a film of his roto-reliefs, mechanized disks with spiral lines and printing. The resulting film, *Anémic Cinéma*, alternates a series of flat spirals which appear to recede or protrude from the screen when they move, with a series of puns printed spirally which appear perfectly flat as they are read. The issue of the relationship of the image to language, of which the Surrealists made much at the same time, becomes uniquely inflected. The sexual allusions in the puns tempt the viewer to read the spiral illusions as breasts, penises, vaginas, even feces. Yet this association is so deliberately tenuous that the very tendency to associate it brought into question. Here cinema itself is represented as anemic: shallow, the play of optical illusions, indeed a toy for inducing effects within a spectator's imagination. "L'aspirant habite Javal et moi j'avais lhabite en spirale," reads one of the disks. The je or "I" here is not that of the filmmaker or pseudonym Rrose Selavy, but an empty phoneme vainly aspiring to a reference with which it can never make contact.

While eliminating rhythm and analogy which are so important in *Le Ballet Mécanique*, Duchamp created a work whose radical importance did not become apparent until the late 1960's when avant-garde filmmakers began to reconsider the relationship of images to words.

2.

These four crucial works by Eggeling, Richter, Léger, and Duchamp either repudiate or reduce to a paradoxical status the authority photography has had in maintaining the Renaissance conception of haptic space. Furthermore, they ignore the privileges of diachronic causality as a model for filmic construction. Instead, they articulate a purely cinematic temporality, called "rhythm," which either excludes or subverts mimetic representation.

Although the spatial prejudices of the manufactured system of lenses and registration which are the givens of cinematic representation could be overcome by the techniques of animation and distortion characteristic of the graphic cinema, the temporal reconditioning of the mechanism was more problematic. The sheer successiveness with which the camera records images inscribes a linearity within the very act of cinematic recording. From the beginning, Lumiére's cameramen realized the comic or startling potential of the simple reversibility of that succession: they cranked the projection of divers at the Baths of Diana so that they arose from the un-splashing water and flew to the diving board. As early as1915, the psychologist Hugo Munsterberg conceived of the dramatic potential in the reordering of the camera's automatic succession:

We might use the pictures as the camera has taken them, sixteen in a second. But in reproducing them on the screen we change their order. After giving the first four pictures we go back to picture 3 ,then give 4, 5, 6, and return to 5, then 6, 7, 8, and go back to 7, and so on.

Any other rhythm, of course, is equally possible. The effect is one which never occurs in nature and which could not be produced on the stage. The events for a moment go backward. A certain vibration goes through the world like the tremolo of the orchestra.

By the mid-twenties Jean Epstein was captivated by the formal possibilities of manipulating different speeds of recording. It is remarkable that despite these theoretical insights, no filmmaker made radical use of the independence of otherwise successive photograms within a shot before Peter Kubelka made *Schwechater* (1958), where the individual photograms of a series of simple gestures, of pouring and drinking, are organized in a rhythmical, rather than representational, manner. Until that moment the fundamental attack on the linearity of filmic time took place at the level of the shot change rather than photogramically. Jean Epstein himself was one of the most interesting figures in film history. Initially a poet, he made forty-one films between 1922 and 1948; In, *La Chute de la Maison Usher* (1928) he combined two Poe stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Ligeia" to depict the darkest aspect of the artistic imagination through a Pygmalion myth in reverse, where the painting draws the life of the beloved model. No other film of this period so powerfully uses the visual representation of sound. Here the Orphic music of the artist, who plays a guitar, and the forces of nature shift continually between cause and effect, initiation and inspiration, delusion and actuality. Epstein portrays a hopelessly obsessive aesthetic vision as a wild confusion of mind and materiality through the use of differing degrees of slow motion.

Jean Epstein, Fall of the House of Usher (1928)

Slow motion becomes the vehicle through which sound effects are visualized. A considerable emphasis in Epstein's theoretical work (he wrote seven brilliant books) is placed on the different speeds of the camera. The constitution of an object and its narrative function, he held, is dependent upon the speed at which it is filmed. The climax of Usher illustrates this principle in several ways: the intensity of the wind is visualized through the speed of rustling drapery and of waves on the lake; while the mood within the chateau is rendered by the slow turning of the pages of a book (as it is read by the owner's guest, whose deafness is a foil to the elaborate sound imagery), or the superimposed reverberations of a guitar string as it breaks, and the superimposed hammering of coffin nails as it echoes in the artist's mind.

In his masterful *La Glace a Trois Faces* (1927) Epstein demonstrated his inventiveness with

narrative forms. He chose a simple story by Paul Moran as his vehicle; in it a playboy breaks dates with three different women to take a fatal drive by himself. Epstein uses four different cinematic styles to represent the perspectives of the four characters. At the time the film was released he published the essay “Event Art,” in which he wrote:

And two women, unknown to each other, by means of sixty feet of film, are brought together in the eye of the viewer, and there only is their true note sounded: just as the notes of a chord separated by a half-octave surrender their musical significance only in the ear of the musician. Banality is the least relative sign of truth. This studied, searched out, decomposed, multiplied, detailed, applied banality will give the cinematographic drama a striking human relief, a hugely increased power of suggestion, an unprecedented emotive force.

The accelerated or slowed-down events will create their own time, the time proper to each action, to each character, our time. In elementary school, the first compositions are written in the present tense. The cinema tells everything in the present, right down to the subtitles. As they learn more grammar and rhetoric, the students begin to mix pasts and futures in their stories, bringing them into harmony. The fact is that there is no real present; today is a yesterday, perhaps an old one, which obliquely bears a tomorrow, perhaps a distant one. The present is an uncomfortable convention. In the midst of time, it is an exception to time. It escapes the chronometer. You look at your watch: the present, strictly speaking, is gone already, and strictly speaking, is there again. It will always be there from one midnight to the next. I think and therefore I was. The future “I” bursts into a past “I”; the present is nothing more than this instantaneous and incessant molt. The present is only a meeting.

Cinematography is the only art that is capable of representing it as such.

A careless motorist seems an insignificant character; a swallow on the wing, even more so; their meeting: event. This tiny spot engraved by the bird’s beak on the man’s forehead, had against it the will of three hearts, the miraculous vigilance of love, all the probabilities of the three dimensions of space, all the chance of time.

But it took—it’s the proper word—place.

Supersaturation freezes the crystal in an instant. So it is with the drama, like the egg at the fingertips of the naked magician, come out of nothing, of everywhere. All around, characters and actions, submissively fall into order. Toward the future lies a false track which in its turn will undergo the surprising intersection with the absolute. Toward the past, the idyll, read backwards, is tragedy. The episodes each find their place, in order, deduced, bound together, comprehensible, understood. Exactly—the actors intimate—that’s why we were there. As in the beautiful syntax of a Latin sentence, from the final verb, you come back to the subject.

The superabundance of musical, linguistic, and temporal models suggested in this brief passage is characteristic of Epstein’s early theoretical writings. He was fundamentally an avant-garde figure, although he was never comfortable within any avant-garde “movement.” In the two early texts, he writes of the essence of cinema and of the avant-garde. His ideas

overlap in both essays, as he is attempting to expand and illuminate the concept of "photogénie" which his predecessor Louis Delluc introduced into French film theory. For Epstein, the photogenic, or what is essentially cinematic, demanded a dialectical relationship to any given technique, which he considered merely contingent, and entailed the recognition of interrelationships among space, time, and material things within the radically idealistic structure of filmic illusion.

In his later texts, he demonstrated his philosophical training by bringing the ideas of the Pre-Socratics and Spinoza to bear on film theory, showing how the relativity of camera speeds could underline the paradoxes of both atomism and pantheism. The tendency which I have somewhat arbitrarily called "subjective" (to distinguish it from the graphic) raises a series of questions about the character of cinematic representation while operating within the spatial and temporal conventions of the dominant cinema, often to subvert them. Drawing its model from oneiric activity, the subjective cinema needs photographic illusionism to constitute one of its essential moments; the other being the discontinuity of montage. Three examples of silent Surrealist cinema will illustrate this tendency: *Etoile de Mer* (1928) by Man Ray and Robert Desnos, *La Coquille et le Clergyman* (1928) by Germaine Dulac, and *Un Chien Andalou* (1929) by Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel.

Etoile de Mer operates through a series of polarities which variously contradict and converge upon each other; word/image, conventional photography/anamorphosis, and images and words in opposition to their referents. Early in the film the title "Les dents des femmes sont des objets si charmants . . ." is followed ironically with a shot of a woman's legs. The comic substitution of legs for teeth manifests a deeper allusion to the *vagina dentata,* a mythic obsession that seems to motivate many of the images of the film from the initial shot of an opening doorway photographed through stippled glass so that it suggests a female sexual organ, through an otherwise unaccountable scene of impotence in which the contemplative hero bids "Adieu" to the woman he is pursuing the moment she strips herself before him, to finally, the image of a living starfish that he holds in a glass cylinder, as a metaphor for the vagina dentata.

The first title, "Les dents des femmes . . ." completes itself with "Qu'on ne devrait les voir qu'en réve ou a l'instant de amour." Thus the model of the dream is immediately introduced into this film. The relationship between the film experience and dreaming, as well as the privileged access of cinema to representing the dream work, are persistent themes of the avant-garde film. In the American films of the 1940's this will become the major mode of independent filmmaking. Man Ray and Desnos however are not content to stop at the dream suggestion. In the rest of the film they gradually dissect the junctions of picture and text. When the titles announce that the woman of the film is "belle comme une fleur de verre" the poetic text puns upon itself (verre/vers) and gestures toward the mediation of the stippled glass through which most of the film is anamorphically recorded and even towards the latent sheets of glass in all lenses.

Germaine Dulac, La Coquille et Le Clergyman (1928)

Germaine Dulac brought to film theory her formulation of the concept of pure cinema. When she made *La Coquille et le Clergyman* she was entering a crucial stage of her film-making career. Later that same year she completed the much more artistically successful film, *L'Invitation au Voyage*, which like her earlier *La Souriante Madame Beudet* (1923) impressionistically explores a woman's erotic day-dreams and her dissatisfaction with her daily life. The following year she realized three important short films, *Disque 927* and *Thémes et variations* (two abstract montages of images inspired by classical music) and the slow-motion nature study *Germination d'un Haricot*. In 1929 she made another abstract film, this time inspired by Debussy*'s Etude Cinégraphique sur une Arabesque*.

In *La Coquille et le Clergyman*, Germaine Dulac attempted to do justice to a script by Antonin Artaud. Artaud seems to have detested the film. Together with some Surrealist friends he caused a commotion at its opening and had to be removed from the theatre. Nevertheless, one would not surmise from his writings on cinema the degree of his rejection of the film was exaggerated. In the essay "Cinéma et abstraction," he praised the actors and thanked Dulac for her interest in his script, "which seeks to penetrate the essence of cinema and does not pay the slightest heed to art or life."

Of the scenario itself he wrote in the same essay:

> …from It does not tell a story, it develops a series of mental states, which proceed one the other like thought deduced from thought without reproducing a logical chain of events. From the collision of objects and gestures real psychic situations deduce themselves between which the cornered intellect seeks a subtle escape.

Dulac employed slow motion, split images, and optical distortions in her adaptation of the scenario about a priest's displaced lust for a beautiful woman who comes to his confessional.

Artaud had no patience for the exploration of pure cinema. "Sorcery and the Cinema," affirms the power of raw cinema, even unenhanced by the technical options of transformation through the camera, to assume a central role in art, at the moment when the symbolical power of language ("son pouvoir du symbole") was dissolving, by repudiating narrative and seeking a "subtle," "secret," and internalized order among images.

The implicit dialogue between the texts of Dulac and Artaud approximates the exchange between Vertov and Eisenstein ("intervals" vs shock effects) and anticipates the theoretical debates within the American avant-garde cinema. On the one hand, she had a vision of a pure or essential cinema, the pursuit of which would constitute a radically new genre or film. On the other hand, some theoreticians seize upon the idea of an important and revolutionary change in art as a whole for which cinema would be the perfect vehicle. Interestingly both positions appropriate metaphors from music and language to justify their claims.

Un Chien Andalou is one of the purest examples of Surrealist cinema, which rejects the exploitation of imagery engendered by the camera. Robert Desnos, who was a film reviewer as well as a poet, used the occasion of its première to attack Epstein, Gance, L'Herbier, and the idea of what passed for an avant-garde cinema in general. He gave it a higher status than *Entr'Acte* (1922) or *L'Etoile de Mer* (both of which he admired) and considered it among the highest achievements of the cinema, along with the films of Chaplin, Stroheim, and Eisenstein, as a work "indisputably human, sane, and poetic."

Luis Buñuel, Un Chien Andalou (1929)

In *Un Chien Andalou* the examination of cinematic principles is shifted completely to the level of temporality. It is as if the camera had the same access to the visible world as a windowpane. In fact, in the middle of the film, when the protagonist looks lustfully down upon the androgyne hit by an automobile, he presses his face against the upper story window from which he is watching her. The window as a barrier through which the visible world enters but which cannot be transgressed; it is an icon of Buñuel's and Dalí's conception of cinema. Like the major Surrealist painters, especially Magritte, they accepted three-dimensional illusionism as the "rational" ground for irrational juxtapositions. In this film the juxtapositions take place sequentially but are edited so as to appear, through the second illusionism of narrative montage, simultaneous.

They employed the strategies of metaphor, synecdoche, and metonomy by which the simultaneity is sustained become the structural models of the film's formal development. For instance, the opening of the film elaborates a visceral metaphor in which a thin cloud passing before the moon is substituted for an image of a razor slicing a woman's eye. However, immediately after the metaphoric substitution which suggests, without representing, the horrible operation, the filmmakers show us the vitreous fluid flowing out of the eye. The

metaphor has called attention to its own failure as a substitute and yet has provided the moment for a subtler substitution in which a cow's eye, in close-up, can be substituted for the woman's eye. We see, then, in immediate succession an antithetical metaphor, whose very calmness evokes terrible violence, followed by an even more violent synecdoche.

The figure of synecdoche is thematically analyzed in the middle of the film when the protagonist is seen contemplating his hand. A following shot shows the hand alone with ants crawling out of a hole in the palm. This synecdochical illusion engenders a series of metaphors (a sea-urchin and a woman's armpit) ending in an image of a crowd of people gathering outside on the street around the androgyne like ants around the hole. The supervising policeman gives the hermaphrodite a severed hand, itself a metaphor for a synecdoche.

3.

Le Sang d'un Poète (1932) Jean Cocteau's first film, bridges the transition from an avant-garde cinema centered in Paris to one dominated by Americans. For of all the independent films from Europe this one had the most influence on those Americans who would revive the avant-garde cinema toward the end of the Second World War. Two aspects of Cocteau's film give it this privileged position: its manifestly reflexive theme, and its ritual. The film opens with an allegory of the relationship of the authorial persona to the temporality of cinematic representation. We see Cocteau, surrounded by the klieg lights of a movie studio, blocking his face from the camera with a classical dramatic mask, which foreshadows the moment in the film when the filmmaker will declare in a handwritten title that he is trapped in his own film; yet what we see of him then is still another mask, this time fashioned after his own profile. The declaration of the enigmatical distance between the authorial self and his mediating persona is coordinated with a bracketing device that affirms that the film transpires in no time, or in the instant between two photograms. We see a towering smokestack begin to crumble, an image reminiscent of many of the Lumiéres' one-shot films. At the end of the film the smokestack completes its fall.

Jean Cocteau, Le Sang d'un poète (1932)

The Hotel des Folies Dramatiques which the poet explores after crossing the threshold of the mirror is a series of rooms, accessible only to sight through their keyholes. In each, a principle

of cinematic illusionism is illustrated with the naive exuberance of Méliès films which Cocteau must have first encountered in his childhood. The assassinated Mexican is revived in reverse motion; camera placement allows us to see a girl clinging to walls and ceiling; finally, a hermaphrodite is constructed of flesh, drawn lines, and a roto-relief in Duchamp's style so that it is not only an illusionary blending of male and female characteristics but a figure synthesized from the very arts which feed into cinematic representation. The myth of the poet that Cocteau elaborates moves freely among centuries and between childhood and maturity.

The temporal ambiguity that Cocteau postulated between any two consecutive frames of a continuous shot operated independent of the camera which photographed that shot. In Maya Deren's reworking of that suspended temporality, account would be taken of the status of the camera in cinematic metaphors of reflection. She did not do this as Vertov had done, and as many would begin to do in the 1960's, by introducing the filmmaking apparatus into the imagery of the film. Her early, and best, films dwell instead upon the temporal and spatial complexities of representing the self in cinema. In *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943), which she made with her husband, the filmmaker Alexander Hammid, there is a moment after the heroine, played by Deren herself, has fallen asleep when she dreams of seeing herself. She stands before a large window, looking out upon a bright California landscape in mid-afternoon, with her hands pressed against the glass. A reverse shot from outside shows her hair blended with the reflection of off-screen trees, her hands defining the barriers of the glass, and her eyes in a distracted, almost narcissistically inward gaze. The montage will establish that she is watching herself through the window repeating with symbolic displacement the very entrance to her house that preceded her sleep.

Here the window, as a metaphor for cinematic representation, has neither the amorphous presence of Man Ray's distorting lens or the barrier quality of the window in *Un Chien Andalou*; it is, rather, a mirror. For Deren, and subsequently for most of the American independent filmmakers who followed her, filmmaking was essentially a reflexive activity.

In many of the American films of the 1940's the reflexive relationship between the authorial subjectivity and the Selfhood represented in the film was mediated simply by the filmmaker's crossing over to become his own central actor. Deren did this in three of her first four films. Yet more significant than this elementary transformation of the fiction into psychodrama was the elaborate structure of metaphors by which these films comment upon the problematic status of their imagery and their temporal structures. In her last essay, "Cinematography: The Creative Use of Reality," she formulates a reflexive relationship between a photographic representation and the world in the passage in which she writes of the "implicit double exposure" which the mind makes in recognizing the reference of a photographic image. In *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the mirror metaphor has an entire morphology: she pursues a black figure who turns out to have a mirror for a face; at the climax of the film, a knife that had menacingly recurred several times before, reflects her face just before she plunges it into the face of her lover finally that violent attack turns out to be a stab not at his flesh but at its reflection in still another mirror.

Maya Deren, Meshes of the Afternoon (1943)

Throughout Deren's work the cinematic image has the fragility of a mirror image. *At Land* (1945) works out more meticulously the temporal status of this imagery. In that film, Deren portrays herself as washed out of the backward rolling sea. Once on the shore, she begins a quest through several contrasting landscapes, ostensibly in search of some stable sexual identity. As she moves from one landscape to another, the compositions and the allusions to off-screen space are so coordinated as to make those disparate spaces seem continuous. In fact, with *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945) she generated an entire short film from this principle: the stretch, spin, and leap of a dancer through radically different spaces is portrayed as one continuous gesture. Implicit in such spatial paradoxes is the recognition of temporal disjunction between the time of filming and the time of representation. In *At Land* this disjunction becomes thematic at the end of the film. There is a retrograde recapitulation of the principal scenes of the film in each of which the heroine is looking off-screen. She introduces a new shot between each of these repeated elements showing the same heroine in approximately the position that the camera must have occupied to take the earlier one. A corresponding off-screen glance thus links the two versions of the same spatial field in an illusionary exchange of looks. Here she has not only pushed the metaphor of the mirror into a formal mechanism, but she has also accounted for the temporary omniscience of the camera and prepared the way for a final image in which the problematics of cinematic representation find a culminating metaphor. The shot begins with her feet as she runs along the sand of the beach where she first was seen; as the camera pans from her footprint to her running figure she has travelled much farther than the time of the pan could allow. Here through an elementary trick of stopping and starting the camera the temporal instability of the most elementary cinematic successiveness (that within the shot) is demonstrated.

Furthermore, the choice of imagery is significant. For a footprint is an indexical sign (in the trichotomy of C.S. Peirce); that is, it both signifies the passage of the runner and it simultaneously seems to have been caused by that runner. A bullet hole is another indexical sign; so indeed is a photograph. Photography, and therefore cinema, seldom fully escapes from the seduction of the indexical, which postulates at some earlier time the phenomenal presence of a camera to its object. The ambiguity of this polarity and its problematical "presence" in past time is the very theme of Deren's *At Land*.

4.

Maya Deren called herself a Classicist to distinguish her theoretical position from both the Surrealists and the practitioners of the graphic cinema (which she felt was nothing more than a form of painting in cinema). For her the central contribution of cinema was its temporal dimension. For her this meant accepting the conventions of spatial representation according to the dictates of the traditional lens and registration apparatus as the very ground for cinema. She wrote: “If cinema is to take its place beside the others as a full-fledged art form, it must cease merely to record realities that owe nothing of their actual existence to the film instrument.” Also, “The impartiality and clarity of the lens—its precise fidelity to the aspect and texture of physical matter—is the first contribution of the camera.” Its other and more fundamental contributions allow for the transfiguration of temporal complexes. The polemical position was first answered in the American context by the work of Sidney Peterson.

After an initial collaboration with the poet James Broughton on the film *The Potted Psalm* (1946), Peterson made a series of films under the limited sponsorship of the California School of Fine Arts where he taught what was probably the first class in avant-garde filmmaking. *The Cage* (1947), the first film to emerge from that situation, combined the subgenres of the city symphony and what I have called “the trance film” in my extended study of the American avant-garde film, *Visionary Film* (1974,1979, 2002). By “trance film” is meant those subjectivistic films in which a protagonist wanders through a menacing or mysterious landscape, as if entranced. in quest of an epiphany of sexual identity. In *The Cage* a young painter dislodges his eyeball while attempting to expand his realm of vision. The subsequent imagery of the film alternates between a view of San Francisco from the point of view of the freely wandering eyeball, and the allegory of its pursuit by the wounded painter, his girlfriend, and a malevolent medical doctor.

What is most interesting about the film is the way in which the theme of consciousness as pure vision that has been part of the American aesthetic tradition since Emerson and that dominates much of the theory of Abstract Expressionism, receives its filmic treatment. The liberated eyeball experiences a fundamentally temporal disorientation; it is incapable of seeing sequentially; it even sees forward and backward motion simultaneously. Peterson cinematically explored the postulate that temporality is a bodily rather than a visual function.

One of his most successful films, *Mr. Frenhofer and the Minot*aur (1949) combines elements of Balzac’s novella *Le chef d oeuvre inconnu*, Joycean interior monologue, and the imagery of Picasso’s “Minotauromachie.” The rhythmical intercutting of elliptical scenes from the story, as well as shots of two characters reading the story, images from the etching, and a continual monologue of puns, allusions, displacements, and metaphors, makes for a system of shifting levels of reference in a complex interplay between the passions of artists and the passions depicted in their art; between the act of modeling as a paradigm of film acting, and the representation of the model in painting, film, and dream. The shifting images are visually unified by the consistent use of anamorphic photography.

Sidney Peterson, Mr Frenhofer and the Minotaur (1949)

Peterson described his ambitions in making *Mr. Frenhofer and the Minotaur* thus:

> It was my decision to do a thing about the Balzac story, taking seriously as the theme of the story the conflict between Poussin's Classicism and its opposite. So strained through my mind it became really a way of exploring the conflict stated in Rousseau's remark to Picasso: "We are the two greatest painters; you in the Egyptian manner, and I in the modem.

In the dialectical history of the American avant-garde film, Peterson reformulated the Picasso-Rousseau distinction as one between himself and Deren. He refused to accept the clarity of the conventional lens as a value. Instead, he insisted upon a cinema in which the very space of representation was invented by the filmmaker. Thus, in his ironic rendering of the Balzac story Frenhofer's palimpsestic destruction of the portrait of the ideal woman became a visionary forecast of Abstract Expressionism, while the fantastic imagery of Picasso's etching became another form of neo-classical idealism.

James Broughton's filmic practice has tended to overlap with his activity as a poet and director of plays. Several of his films are organized with the economy and frontality of a theatrical production. This is not to say that Broughton is unaware of the specificity of cinema: in *Mothers' Day* (1948) he concentrates upon the temporal disjunctions between memory and its cinematic representation. The film takes the form of a family album in which the narrator attempts to reconstruct both his own childhood memories of his mother and the myth she has told of her courtship and marriage. Throughout the film the temporal figures continually shift into psychological metaphors. For example, the first image of the mother framed in the upper story window of an old house is followed by an image of a similar house in an advanced stage of destruction. The coupling of the shots emphasizes the irrevocable loss of time while at the same time the mother is identified with the empty facade of the structure. All through the film, the mother's children are represented as adults playing children's games; here again the temporal bind in which the narrator can only picture the children as grownups blends into the metaphoric perspective of childish adults. Broughton uses the cinema for both the evocation and the analysis of an ironic nostalgia. In *Mother's Day*, the cinematic tropes, the costumes

from various periods, the representation of children's games by adults, and the formal association of the whole film with a family album, all serve to undermine the presence of the images and to locate the film in the mind of a remembering subject.

In many of his subsequent films, such as *The Adventures of Jimmy* (1950); *Loony Tom, The Happy Lover* (1951) *Four in the Afternoon* (1951); and *This is It* (1971), the interplay of verse or prose narration with the imagery creates comparable disjunctions of time. Broughton, like his contemporary Willard Maas, was poet before he became filmmaker and like him, he believed that Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poéte* provided the essential model for the avant-garde film of the future: a welding of montage and poetic language.

James Broughton, Mother's Day (1948)

In his notes to *Mother's Day*, Broughton emphatically aligns himself with the position of Maya Deren, even including her favorite metaphor of choreography, against the Dionysiac cinema of Peterson ("camera trickery"). In his cyclic films, *Four in The Afternoon, The Bed* (1968), *The Golden Positions* (1970), Broughton incorporates choreographic movements into comic schemata of essential life rituals.

5.

Kenneth Anger too has worked within the spatial framework of the dominant cinema. His first publicly screened film, *Fireworks* (1947), describes a double dream in sado-masochistic homosexual imagery. Significantly, a photograph occupies a central and paradoxical position within the film as either the source or the residue of the dream. An opening passage of the protagonist held in the arms of a sailor, followed by a scene of the same protagonist waking, suggests that the former was his dream. This seems to be reinforced by the fact that a photograph, showing the same image as the dream, lies by his side, as if the source of his nocturnal masturbation fantasy has become "animated" in his sleep. Yet as the waking day proceeds, its mimesis veers progressively towards ironic displacements: for a match is substituted a bundle of burning sticks; for a heart, a metallic meter; for semen, cream; for a penis, a roman candle. The internal evidence then suggests that we are still within the oneiric model even before we see the final image of the protagonist still sleeping. What terminates the

dream and allows us to see the sleeping figure unmediated by his own imagination is the burning of the very photograph which seemed the source of the dream. Here the space and time of the dream coincide with the duration of the photograph as a fetishistic object occupying a twilight area between an experience of dubious authenticity and the awakening into a full present which is continually postponed.

Kenneth Anger, Fireworks (1947)

The filmic dream constituted for Anger, as it had for Deren, a version of the perceptual model that generated most of the subjective films of the American avant-garde. Whenever that model is operating, a subject/object polarity is established so that the camera's relationship to the field of its view reflects the functioning of a receptive mind to the objects of its perception. The metaphor of the dream permits the reflexive gesture of duplicating the presence of the filmmaker (subject) or his mediator in front as well as behind the camera. The introduction of photographs or other iconic representations as objects of the camera's gaze merely adds another reflexive turn within the model without altering it.

Thus, *Mother's Day* postulates an organizing consciousness involved in some variant of nostalgia. Likewise, the anamorphosis of Peterson's films pointed to a radically askew perspective grounded in a being upon whom the psychological and intellectual tensions of each film converged. As long as this model dominated the forms of this mode of filmmaking, the works it generated hovered near a solipsistic reduction of psychology to a transcendent self and a dialectically opposed Otherness, and naturally excluded were either the possibility of elaborating an interplay of several developed characters or the formal recognition of the mediating presence of a film viewer.

One of the most subtle and nuanced inflections of this model, and one which had enormous influence, was manifested in the cinema of Marie Menken. In a remarkable series of disarmingly unpretentious films, she demonstrated a rhythmic inventiveness perhaps previously unmatched in the cinema. In *Notebook* (1945-62) she stored fragments from all phases of her. There we can see how, at a cinematic career, from the mid-Forties to the Sixties time when most of her contemporaries were invoking the Dionysian imagination in their invented imagery, she was exploring the dynamics of the edge of the screen and playing with distinctions between immanent and imposed rhythm. The early and exquisite "Raindrops"

dramatizes the subtle wit of Menken's version of the perceptual model. As she waits behind the camera for a drop of rain on the tip of a leaf to gather sufficient mass to fall, we sense her impatience and even anxiety lest the film will run out on her; so an unseen hand taps the branch, forcing the drops to fall. Tampering in this way with an otherwise straight-forward observational film is characteristic of Menken, who cheerfully incorporates the extraneous reflection of herself and her camera, even her cigarette smoke, into an animated film and who makes the very nervous instability of the hand-held camera a part of the rhythmic structure of several films.

Marie Menken, Arabesque for Kenneth Anger (1961)

In *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1961) she offers her fellow filmmaker a version of his earlier *Faux D'Artifice* (1953). There Anger had made a water-dominated counterpart to his initial fire ceremony, *Firework*s. A figure in a Baroque dress emerges from a fountain, which evokes a penis in orgasm, in flight or pursuit through fountains of the Tivoli gardens. The entire film was tinted a deep blue and suggested the night passage of a frail psyche through an overpowering and menacing landscape until her eventual metamorphosis back into a fountain. Menken in contrast filmed a visit to the Alhambra in midday, achieving a comparable deep blue tone through the deceptively naturalistic choice of light sources and conventional blue-sensitive film stock. The spiraling flight of a pigeon among the roofs of the Alhambra provides her with an initial rhythmical figure and a metaphor for her wildly eccentric camera movements. Against this she plays the second metaphor, again deceptively naturalistic, of architecture reflected in a pool; a metaphor for the cinema's reduction of spatial configurations to a shimmering two-dimensional surface. The circles and swirls that her revolving camera imposes upon the Moorish structures can then be found translated into the rings that drops of water make in the pools reflecting the same buildings. This delicate mesh of observation and imposition that appears in almost all of Menken's films, inspired Stan Brakhage, who radicalized it and systematically explored its potential for the articulation of a new form within the avant-garde cinema.

6.

Brakhage's *Anticipation of the Night* (1958) took up the opening of *Meshes of the Afternoon*

and elaborated it in terms of a Petersonian consciousness. We see those parts of the body which a subject sees of himself: the shoulders, the legs, and especially the outlined image it projects as the shadow. The shadow man of *Anticipation of the Nigh*t leaves his home at the beginning of the film and encounters a series of sights of the natural and human universe as stations of imaginative loss which ultimately lead to his suicide at the end of the film.

Stan Brakhage, Anticipation of the Night (1958)

In this film, Brakhage fully achieves for the first time a dialectical fusion between the image represented on the screen and the filmmaker/subject's reaction to it. By constantly moving the camera intimation of the movement of the eyes and the fluctuations of attention, and by editing the movements in rhythms that suggest both the sudden and the gradual intrusions of memory and anticipation on the flux of the present, Brakhage mediates the visual world without a mediator. In his subsequent lyrical films, the shadow man disappears, and the montage will directly represent vision and thought.

According to Brakhage's theory, vision has at least three aspects. The first is open eyesight which is a continual flux of focus and movement, sensuously probing the actual world that manifests itself before the eyes. The entire cinematic tradition, he would claim, had ignored this mode of primary seeing before him. Secondly, he describes "brain movies" as images of the past or fantasies which briefly emerge before the visual imagination as if filmed from a fixed tripod. In this respect he is close to the brilliant early theories of Hugo Munsterberg, who claimed that cinema did not record the actual world so much as the reflective processes of the mind. Finally Brakhage would include the representation of "closed eye vision, "the phosphenes which appear when we close our eyes in moments of intense psychological stress. All three modes of seeing merge together in his lyrical films.

Reading Gertrude Stein, Brakhage found a narrative mode which corresponded to his theory of vision and which guided his theory of temporality. All of Brakhage's lyrical films operate upon the fiction of a man, the filmmaker, looking upon a natural sight and responding to it imaginatively. That encounter is always conceived as a crisis and the moment of the crisis provides the present tense and ground for the temporal ecstasies. For Brakhage, the cinema is primarily a visual medium with no direct means of representing a past which has not been recorded on film, and certainly no future. He rejects the fictional dramatic film and bases his concept of temporality upon the discontinuity between shooting and editing.

At the beginning of his theoretical book, *Metaphors on Vision*, Brakhage was to write:

> Imagine an eye unruled by man-made laws of perspective, an eye unprejudiced by compositional logic, an eye which does not respond to the name of everything but which must know each object encountered in life through an adventure of perception. How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of "Green?" How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye? How aware of variations in heat waves can that eye be? Imagine a world alive with incomprehensible objects and shimmering with an endless variety of movement and innumerable gradations in color. Imagine a world before the "beginning was the word.

Early in *Anticipation of the Night* the shadow man attempts to imaginatively reconstruct the adventure of grass to a preverbal infant. The camera moves through leaves and grass, encounters and pursues a rainbow, explores the tactility of ground movement and ultimately reveals the mediation of a crawling child whom the shadow man observes. The very structure of the sequence as hysteron-proteron, in which the childlike vision is imitated before the child is seen, suggests the ultimate failure of the imaginative attempt. Somewhat later the filmmaker sees children delighting in the rides of an amusement park at night and tries to participate in their rapture, moving his camera in sympathy with their whirling movements. Finally, near the end of the film he sweeps over the sleeping bodies of children. Their stasis emphasizes the isolated consciousness of the filmmaker. In this final and most extravagant attempt at recapturing the freshness of their vision he tries to imagine their animal dreams. Here the recovery is the strongest in the film, perhaps because it is without an external guiding gesture, but it too fails with the breaking of dawn and its implicit reduction of the entire quest for renewed vision to a nightly cycle. In the end, the hand of the shadow man fastens a rope to a tree and hangs himself.

7.

By the early 1960's those forms I have been describing no longer seemed to satisfy the most ambitious filmmakers. They began the elaborate mythic structures that equated the dialectics of individual consciousness with the elemental struggles of gods, demigods, much as the Romantic poets, Blake, Shelley, Hōdlderlin, and Hugo had done. The major works of this phase, such as Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963), Markopoulos' *The Illiac Passion*, (1967), Harry Smith's *No. 12* [*Heaven and Earth M*agic], (ca. 1963), Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures* (1963), Brakhage's *Dog Star Man,* (196`-65) and Jacobs' then unfinished *The Sky Socialist* (1968) substitute archetypal conflicts for narrative exposition. The plurality of figures they present as gods or titans are interiorized beings, and although the drive towards the mythopoeia represents an attempt to overcome the solipsism of the trance film and the lyrical film where the perspective is reduced to a negative selfhood and a menacing landscape (or otherness), the resulting films for the most part offer fragmented or unresolved myths that incorporate metaphors of their own failure to escape solipsism.

Ken Jacobs, The Sky Socialist

Each of the central works of the mythopoeic phase presents its own mode of mythology and its own strategy for questioning the authority of its mode. Kenneth Anger's *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome (*first version, 1954) depicts a convocation of Egyptian and Hellenic deities under the control of a Magus and a "Scarlet Woman" from the mythopoeic imagination of his chosen master, Aleister Crowley. From the opening ritual of waking and dressing, the film acknowledges the ad hoc nature of its divine personifications. It is both the making new of ancient myths and a contemporary masquerade. The turning point of the film, the poisoning of Pan and his subsequent sparagmos, coincides with the assuming of new masks and the compounding of guises.

Only the first of Jack Smith's three major films, *Flaming Creatures*, *Normal Love* (begun 1963), and *No President* (1967) was definitively completed and distributed. All three exploited the chemical changes that occur in film stock not used until long after the recommended time range for exposure. Smith derived this heightened textural ambiguity from seeing Ron Rice's picaresque portrait of a beat poet, Taylor Mead, in *The Flower Thief* (1960). However, he carried it to an extreme that Rice had not exploited. By costuming his actors in black and white gowns before flagrantly artificial white backdrops, he capitalized upon the tendency of outdated film stock to wash toward whiteness. In the color film *Normal Love*, a comparable pastel effect was achieved by elaborating an imagery that would coincide with the tendencies of outdated color material.

While Anger's *Scorpio Rising* describes the limitations of the mythopoeic imagination by grounding it in Hollywood and historical archetypes, *Flaming Creature*s offers a more complexly ironic version of the dialectic play of imagination and nature. In the pivotal scene of the film an act of imagination, or more exactly of the fancy, engenders a physical convulsion: the camera responds to a comic orgy by gyrating in sympathy to it; yet before the orgy is over, an earthquake occurs and the same spastic movement is presented again as a response to the natural disaster.

Jack Smith, Flaming Creatures (1963)

A very different relationship between editing and mythopoeia can be found in the long films of Gregory Markopoulos from this period. In his early films *Psyche* (1948) and *Swain* (1950), he had used impressive montages of recapitulation as an organizational principle in the former and as the climax of the latter. *Twice a Man*, Markopoulos' version of the myth of Hippolytus, employs a complex schema of memory within memory and a shifting mediation in the minds of four figures.

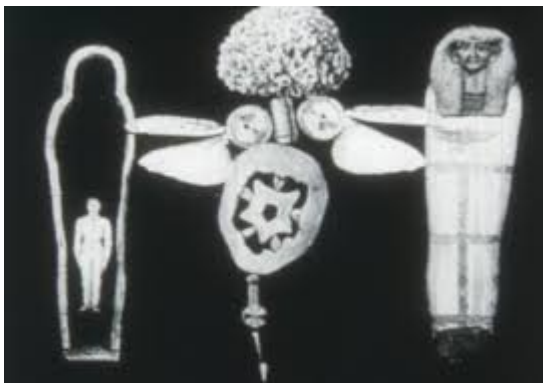
The ambiguous movement between recollection and prolepsis in this film is grounded in the very structure of the editing of every shot. Rather than directly splice one shot to the next and build his dynamics on the stress accent of the point of change, as in the classical montage of Eisenstein, Markopoulos will introduce one or two frames of the forthcoming shot before the "present" shot is completed; he also allows a series of brief flashes from the former shot to recur periodically as echoes after the former shot has ended its dominance. Thus, one image breaks into the next in a moment of vibrating fusions of past, present, and future time. With this structure operating throughout the film, Markopoulos can introduce metaphors and complexly bracketed themes into his montage; he can also shift easily to extended passages of recapitulation.

Gregory Markopoulos, Twice a Man (1963)

The filmmaker saw in this system an affirmation of the priority of montage over spatial transfiguration in the tradition I have associated with Maya Deren. In a crucial essay, "Towards

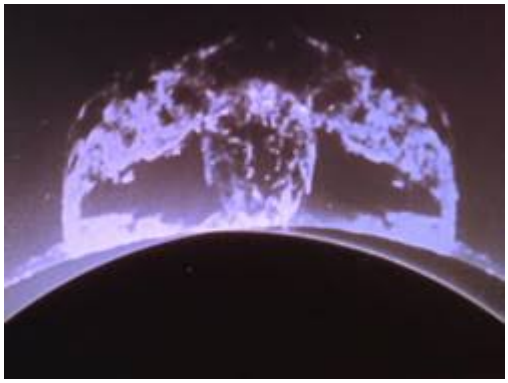
a New Narrative Film Form," he joins her in rejecting the use of filters, anamophosis, or any other means of transforming the elementary spatial givenness of the cinematic image. He extends her commitment to the immanent aesthetics of the filmic material in a direction she never took, when he points out that the fact that all films are a strip of still, rapidly changing, frames has been "understood only as a photographic necessity." He emphasizes that rather than being a contingent fact about cinema it is the potential source of its primary structures. The elaboration of the operations of the single frame then became the focus of Markopoulos' later theoretical work.

The Romantic myth of a divided and reunited Selfhood is the subject of Harry Smith's *Heaven and Earth Magic*. There a female figure of Smith's film is the major instance of an animated mythopoeic film and also the example from this phase that most fully uses combined sound and image to attest to its fictionality. At the very beginning of the film, as the magician brings into the frame the basic elements out of which the woman will be initially constituted, we see him exit on screen right and then reenter from screen left as if he had walked around the back of the screen. Similar acknowledgements of the illusion of animation occur throughout the film. Figures move along arbitrary imagined lines against the back of the screen until suddenly a bridge will appear and they are bound to cross it as the only possible line of movement in the field of vision.



Harry Smith, Heaven and Earth Magic (1957)

As a work of the graphic cinema Smith's film has a fundamental orientation toward the reorganization of spatial illusion. He wittily acknowledges this near the opening of the film when the magician pulls a photograph of a watermelon patch into the frame. The photograph has a horizon in Renaissance perspective, but the frame of the film does not. He takes a watermelon out of the photograph for his manipulation in the more ambiguous black field of the film. When Smith speaks of sources for his mythopoeia, MacGregor Mather's presentations of the Kaballah, Wilner Penfield's open brain surgery on epileptics, and especially D. P. Schreber's *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*, a link between radical myth-making as an exploration of the complexities of the self and paranoia manifests itself. Brakhage's major work on cinematic mythmaking, *Dog Star Man*, (1961-64), also presents a radically individualized spatial field and explores divided consciousness and its self-inflicted torments.



Stan Brakhage, Dog Star Man (1964)

The making *of Dog Star Man* occupied a crucial period in the development of Brakhage's exceptionally influential theories. His book, *Metaphors on Vision* (1963), was edited and published during this period, even though some of its texts go back to the mid-Fifties. Here Brakhage articulated, in his involuted punning prose, the most radical version we have yet had of the Emersonian strain in American film theory. Cinema, according to Brakhage, aspires to the representation of the full range of optical sensations experienced by the filmmaker, in active vision, in memory, and even with the eyes closed.

Much of the complexity of Brakhage's writings derives from the ironies of formulating in words a theory of the interference of language with vision. One strategy he has used to control this problem has been to mediate his text with profuse allusions and quotation of poetry (as the place where language is most self-aware). In the letter to Yves Kovacs, he reinterpreted the influence of Surrealism by bringing it into alignment with recent American poetics. In the late 1980s he relentlessly documented the breakup of his marriage to Jane Collom, Then he made the exceptional series of *Visions in Meditation* (1989-90) and married Marilyn Jull. Because she did not want to be filmed, he made a series of films on Vancouver Island (where he retired) to fuse his vision with what he imagined had been hers, growing up there. Prolific to the end, he also made his longest sound film (*Passage Through:A Ritual*, 1990) and nearly one hundred hand-painted films before his death in 2002.

Bruce Baillie, Castro Street (1966)

Bruce Baillie's major films occupy a region between the early lyrical films of Brakhage and the mythopoeic cinema that followed. *To Parsifal* (1963) *Mass for the Dakota Sioux* (1964), *Quixote*, 1965/67), even *Castro Street* (1966), *Valentin de las Sierras* (1971) and *Roslyn Romance (Is It Really True?): Intro. 1 & II* (1978) are heroic poems without heroes. The characteristic strategy of Baillie was to find an image of exaltation or liberation—in the movement of a train, the wind in the grass, a flying spaceman, a motorcyclist, or a particularly sympathetic and usually aged face—which is at first valorized of natural and musical sounds. Yet the more sinister implications of these metaphoric vehicles are seldom far removed. In *Mass* and *Quixote* this tension within the imagery is polarized by an explicitly political structure and the ironic use of filmic quotations (from advertisements and commercial films) which specifically attribute a negative value to cinematic representation. *Castro Street* and *Valentin de las Sierras* lack the social context of the earlier films and rely more heavily on the ability of sensuous imagery to convey the antithetical structures of meaning. In fact, it is as they veer toward the apogee of this sensuousness that the contradictory movement is initiated: in *Castro Street* it is the slow movement of the train through a field of flowers that raises the polarity of natural and mechanical consciousness which is deceptively couched in the center of the film; while in *Valentin de las Sierras* the close loving attention to the wrinkled flesh of the ancient guitarist, whose song gives the film its title, reveals that he is blind. His blindness intensifies the pathos of his song and underlines the optical scrutiny of the wandering filmmaker, who in this film presents himself as entering on horseback, but unseen, the village he records in a rich texture of close-up synecdoches. In his very attention to detail the filmmaker seems to be avoiding any direct glance that would acknowledge his presence; in place of a self-image, he offers us the moving shadow of the horse which brings him to and away from his subject.

8.

While Deren, Broughton, Peterson, Markopoulos, and Brakhage were mining their Surrealist, Dadaist, and Constructivist sources for a cinematic vocabulary with which to formulate crises of the self, another group of young American artists turned back to the geometrical abstraction of the Germans in the 1920s to revive the graphic cinema. Oskar Fischinger's presence in Hollywood during these years was a mediating influence. So was that of Len Lye in New York. Along with Ruttmann, Richter, and Eggeling, Oscar Fischinger had been one of the originators of the geometrical style in filmmaking. Unlike all the others, he continued that work until the 1950s. The coming of sound film helped him to realize his theories of synchronization between music and image. Lye, a New Zealander, may have been the first filmmaker to paint images directly on film (others had certainly tinted shaped outlines before him). His work in England throughout the 1930s marks the highpoint of the fusion of kinetic montage with abstract color dynamics in the cinema.

The younger Californian graphic film-makers Harry Smith, John and James Whitney, and Jordan Belson variously drew inspiration from Fischinger's mesh of geometry and melody and Lye's erratic vibrant colors and pulsing rhythms. Smith's early cinema was an attempt to translate music into color and shape. In 1950 he experimented in reversing this proposition by showing

four films with a live jazz band. They responded to the images in a jam session as if to a leading instrument. The Whitneys developed a synthesizer which could simultaneously generate picture and sound. In their theoretical formulation of this synthesis, they saw their work as a reconciliation of the positions of Mondrian and Duchamp, the Neo- Platonic purist and the anti-aesthetic ironist. Belson eventually pushed his abstraction to the boundaries of representation where geometrical shapes mediate between suggestions of macro-cosmic and micro-cosmic imagery, for instance between an eye and galaxy or between a cluster of stars and swarm of bees.

Joseph Cornell, Rose Hobart (1936)

Another powerfully influential figure was the collagist and box maker Joseph Cornell. His films were rarely seen until the late 1960s, but they were very important to those who did manage to see them. His collage films of the late Thirties, *Rose Hobart* (ca. 1939) and the "Children's Party" series, which he made by reediting other commercial films, are the masterpieces of their kind. Only Bruce Conner, who had not seen them, made collages of comparable intensity (*A Movie* [1958]*, Cosmic Ray* [1962], *Report* [1967]) more than twenty years later. Larry Jordan assembled the "Children's Party" series according to Cornell's instructions in the late 1960s. His own graphic films testify to Cornell's influence as a cutout collagist. Jordan brilliantly animated cutout figures against both fixed and shifting backdrops. Unlike the Polish filmmakers Lenica and Borowcyzk who practiced a similar technique, Jordan eschewed literalism. His collage films *Hamfat Asar* (1965), *Gymnopedies* (1965), *Duo Concertantes* (1964), *Our Lady of the Sphere* (1969)*,* and *Orb* are allusive evocations of visionary ecstasies and terrors, organized through delicate rhythmic patterns of transformation, culminating in his great *Sophie's Place* (1986)

Robert Breer, Fist Fight (1964)

Robert Breer's animation evolved from flat work (*Form Phases*.1953) through a mixture of flat and shallow movements (cutouts alternating with crumpled papers, a mechanical mouse, bits of hand painting) in *Recreation* (1957) to a complex fusion of cartoon, collage, single frame changes, and live photography in *Fist Fight* (1964). In this film he also incorporated a sense of the filmmaking process when he lifted the camera off the animation stand and walked outside with it, filming his feet as he went, to take a shot of the sun. Breer has moved between poles of synthesis and purification. In *Blazes* (1961) he created a spectacular barrage of fast images by shuffling a series of calligraphic designs and filming them over and over in different random sequences. *66* (1966) explores the formal options of flat colored shapes in an animation that works with extremely fast changes and unusually long holds in an eccentric alternation. *69* (1969) presents a similar set of options, explored and fragmented, with a new element of illusory depth. In *70* (1970), he abandoned shape, and sprayed areas of white cards with colored dyes. The film animates these unbounded color areas, fusing the free texture of the hand-painted film with the control of the frame-by-frame animation. In *Gulls and Buoys* (1972) and *Fuji* (1974), the tension between animation and actual photography manifests for him a new form. Using a rotoscope technique, which ultimately dates back to Emile Cohl's invention, Breer freely copies, in crayon and ink, isolated details of originally photographed material (seascape scenes, a Japanese train ride). However, unlike traditional rotoscopers, like Cohl and MacKay, Breer chose to emphasize elementary cinematic dynamics in the photography, by utilizing zoom shots, panning, hand-held camera, or by shooting from a train window, and incorporating single frame editing, and then allowing the freest possible hand strokes in the copying. The results are two cinematic iconic texts which mysteriously refer to an indexical original, "lost in translation."

10.

Michael Snow's *Wavelength* reformulated the central analogy of the American avant-garde: the camera as a model of cognition, by veering away from Brakhage's attempt to translate the mechanical traces of the filmic process into optical and physiological functions. In Snow's film

the camera and its lens maintain their status as physical tools while allowing for an interpretation as a complex model for perception. This tension within the structure of metaphor may be what Snow meant by “the beauty and sadness of equivalence” in his note on the film for the Fourth International Experimental Film Festival Catalogue, where he wrote:

I was thinking of planning for a time monument in which the beauty and sadness of equivalence would be celebrated, thinking of trying to make a definitive statement of pure film space and time, balancing of ‘illusion’ and ‘fact’, all about seeing.

The film begins with an act of pure recording as if the camera were a completely passive *tabula rasa* instrument capable of preserving without distortion the impress of the exterior world. When people enter the loft carrying a bookcase, we hear them in synchronization. But soon after that, the natural sound is suspended and replaced by an artificially generated sine wave. On the visual track flashes of pure color, transitions to negative, slight superimpositions occur. Thus, both the sound and picture recording instruments begin to generate their own subject matter.

The problematics of “equivalence” include the alternation of day and night which occurs suddenly, twice in the film, without disturbing the relentless forward zoom. During the day the metaphorical link between the recording instrument (camera) and its object (the room, camera in Latin) was emphasized by changes in the intensity of the light: when the interior of the room darkened, the street scene outside became visible as if the windows were the camera lens. When the details within the loft received illumination, the exterior was burned out. At one point two people turn on a radio, which is an “equivalent” machine for gathering and translating sound waves. The Beatles “Strawberry Fields” is heard while the filmmaker responds by shooting through a pink filter.

The first transition to night is accompanied by the violent entry of an intruder who collapses on the floor. When night returns after another day passage, a woman enters, looks toward the body (we have zoomed past it by now) and telephones for help. After she leaves, her image repeats in flashes of black and white superimposition, as a ghostly reminder of the immediate past echoing within the room. From this point the zoom proceeds into a still photograph of waves pinned on the wall.

The next to last shot is another superimposition. The closeup of the waves is placed over an image which frames the photograph on the wall. The temporal movement of the zoom is thereby represented in the compound image. By increasing the light on the photograph and fading out the framed image, Snow simulates the ultimate final movement in purely optical terms. In doing so, he reminds us that the zoom lens, unlike the moving camera, is static and represents virtual movement through the shifting optics of two lenses.

Michael Snow, Wavelength (1967)

The trajectory of *Wavelength* is initially mechanical, then a fusion of mechanism and the humanized presence of the filmmaker. But after the telephone call it provides a metaphor for a superhuman authority. At the middle stage, when the film-maker is co-present with this machine, Snow incorporates the strategies of Andy Warhol whose long takes of a man eating a mushroom (Eat), or of a building (*Empire, 1965*) and arbitrary zooming about in the room where someone is delivering a confessional monologue (much of *The Chelsea Girls*,1966), were themselves deflations of the metaphor of the camera as an eye or the mind.

Wavelength might be construed as a complex reaction to both the early and the late Warhol styles: the fixed camera and the impulsive zoom. Warhol's unbudging camera was at first a radical dehumanization of the tactics of earlier filmmakers within the American avant-garde. He recognized, at least implicitly, that their way of making cinema was closely bound to the aesthetics of Abstract Expressionism which he had been dehumanizing in his paintings. His shift to filmmaking involved an attack on the same front in a different medium.

However, as he became involved in making cinema, Warhol seems to have found himself possessed by the work of Jack Smith. Under Smith's influence, he slowly turned from the dialectically cold presentation of affective or at least private gestures (sleeping, getting a haircut, kissing, eating, etc.) to a cinema that focused on unstable psychologies and sadistically induced paroxisms of confession by its very refusal to be affected, as Stephen Koch has brilliantly analyzed in his book, *Stargazer* (1974).

A subsequent filmic structure investigating the nature of the zoom lens was Ernie Gehr's *Serene Velocity* (1970). The spatial illusion that Gehr analyzes is so radically reduced that it can no longer contain any human activities. Gehr set up a camera in the corridor of an academic building and photographed, one frame at a time, changing the exposure for each frame, phrases four frames long. Between each of the phrases he changes the position of the zoom lens. In the course of the film, he moves from two close zoom positions in the middle of the lens' range to its extremes of distance and closeness. The only articulation of temporal movement within the imagery of the film is the gradual breaking of dawn, seen in the brightening of a window in a door at the end of the corridor in the last minutes of the film. For a viewer, the film describes a rhythmic crescendo; for although neither the camera position,

nor the spatial field before it, changes, the illusionary movement of the zoom, from what appears to be a pulsing vibration, to a strenuous push-pull effect, creates increasingly greater optical tension and the concomitant effect of gradually destroying the spatial illusion by emphasizing the ort orthogonals of the corridor as a two-dimensional grid with each increment of the zoom ratio.

Ernie Gehr, Serene Velocity (1970)

In his subsequent film *Still*, (1971), it is the camera position that remains still while the ostensibly temporal difference between scenes shot from the same position, in clusters of superimposition, provides the structure of the film. Furthermore, by varying the light intensity of different layers of superimposition, Gehr can render the people and vehicles which pass before the optically "solid" cityscape with varying degrees of transparency. Thus, the temporal flux which introduces differences in color and horizontal movements (and occasional diagonals as people cross the street) as ad hoc ephemera in a relatively shallow theatre is limited by the frontal mass of building facades at a right angle to the camera. A version of the same principle can be seen in Ken Jacobs' *Soft Rain* (1969). There the filmmaker shoots out a window over low rooftops, onto a city street with cars and people passing. A piece of black paper, hung in front of the lens, occupies an ambiguous optical space, as if it might be a window shade. The projecting wall of a building next to the *Serene Velocity* rooftops forms a perfect line from one edge of the frame to its geometrical center, but the eccentric angle of its photography calls attention to the very disparity between a geometrical and an illusionary reading of the space. The title of the film directs our attention to a drizzle on the threshold of perceptibility which becomes, according to the film-maker's intention, confused with the grain of the film. Finally, a temporal pattern is manifested by the exact repetition of the same roll of film three times. However, the viewer must perform a deliberate act of memorizing arbitrary sequences of human and automobile movements, after the first roll has ended, to determine for certain whether or not the three rolls are indeed a repetition or three different takes of the same scene. In both *Still* and *Soft Rain* the absence of camera movement and the arbitrary patterns of movement help to establish an authority for the exterior scenes which is only gradually undermined when the active understanding of the viewer is engaged in spotting and following-up clues embedded in the image. The unusually long duration of the shot (within the standards of the dominant cinema contributes to engaging the viewer's understanding by disengaging his sensual involvement with the illusionary image.

11.

Brakhage's critique of the tripod has been part of his attack on the very resistance of filmic materials to conform to the subtleties of the representation of cognition. In *Metaphors on Vision* he wrote:

> And here, somewhere, we have an eye capable of any imagining. And then we have the camera eye, its lenses grounded to achieve 19th century Western compositional perspective (as best exemplified by the 19th century architectural conglomeration of details of the "classic" ruin) in bending the light and limiting the frame of the image just so, its standard camera and projector speed for recording movement geared to the feeling of the ideal slow Viennese waltz, and even its tripod head, being the neck it swings on, balled with bearings to permit it that Les Sylphides motion (ideal to the contemplative romantic) and virtually restricted to horizontal and vertical movements (pillars and horizon lines) a diagonal requiring a major adjustment, its lenses coated or provided with filters, its light meters balanced, and its color film manufactured, to produce that picture post card effect (salon painting) exemplified by those oh so blue skies and peachy skins.

In the paragraph that follows this, he offers a remedy to the tripod: "One may hand-hold the camera to inherit worlds of space." Snow chose to structure his film <—> (1969) according to the very horizontal and vertical limitations of the tripod Brakhage had condemned. In *La Région Centrale* (1971) he utilized that "major adjustment," an equatorial mount, to present a hitherto unknown mode of camera movement that would not imitate eye or body movements. The back-and-forth movement of the tripod in <—> scans a classroom in which human activities, such as sweeping, reading, window washing, boxing, passing a ball, and conversation, reflect the dominant movement of the camera. It is a reversal of the camera/subject relationship Warhol established. Yet as the film progresses, the movement picks up speed, transforming the illusion of the room from one of physical, haptic space where human activity can occur to a purely optical space, like that of *Serene Velocity*. At the apogee of speed the direction of the movement shifts to the vertical axis and gradually slows down. In the coda of the film, the forward and backward succession of the filmstrip itself becomes thematic as the film is run in both directions at once in superimposition, defining a uniquely cinematic space and time.

The spiraling, panning, twisting camera of *La Région Centrale* explores a barren portion of the Canadian landscape, which, of course, is one aspect of the title; the other, more obscure "region centrale" would be the blind spot so close to the camera which, despite the astonishing flexibility of the mount, remains outside the field of vision. The invisible center corresponds ironically to the subjectivity postulated behind the camera in the previous aesthetics of the American avant-garde just as the shadow of the mount corresponds to the shadow of the film-maker's body in films such as *Meshes of the Afternoon* or *Anticipation of the Night.*

Within the avant-garde cinema where the exigencies of the marketplace have no power in

determining the content and form of films, the currents of film history cross over one another with elaborate complexity. Film-makers respond to each others' work in a given period and across time. Thus, a crooked line can be traced from Maya Deren through Stan Brakhage to George Landow and Hollis Frampton and then back to Brakhage which would provide as viable a historical model as the chronological and theoretical grid I have been elaborating. In this case we should examine the attitude of each filmmaker to the fictional self and the imagined viewer.

The paradox of iconic imagery which ends *At Land* (the footprints recorded in sand in super-human time) became the central motif of Brakhage's *Blue Moses*, (1962), one of his rare sound films and probably his most explicitly polemical film. An actor directly confronts the film audience by addressing the camera. His language is both seductive and intimidating: "Don't be afraid! We're not alone. There's the cameraman… or was… once… what can I say?"

Stan Brakhage, Blue Moses (1962)

Through language the temporal ambiguities of the presence of the filmmaker to the world he views via the camera, in relationship to the later moment of projection is underlined. The pretext for the actor's address is the frightening appearance, now obscured, of footprints in a desolated woods:

> She wondered about the tracks. They're hopelessly obscure now . . . 'someone's been running here!' she said. You'll notice the space—between, I mean . . . tracks.") t on earth would anyone be running from—or to . . . here?" "You see what she means … or meant.

The montage of the film, which cuts among shots of the actor in various disguises, places the continuity of sentences across impossible time spans and thereby thematizes the invisible time of editing. *Blue Moses* returns to a trope from *At Land* to parody both Antonioni's *L'avventura* (1960) and Resnais's *L'Année Derniére & Marienbad* (1961), which were being taken as very important cinematic achievements at that time by critics who thoroughly rejected the native avant-garde cinema.

The title of the film must derive from the sublime speech of Jehovah to Moses (Exodus, xxxiii, 20-23) denying the patriarch the possibility of seeing His face. The actor of Brakhage's film

mimics both the role of Moses and of Jehovah in this encounter to declare the impossibility of an unmediated “presence” within the temporal and representational intricacies of cinema.

Landow’s *Remedial Reading Comprehension* (1970) condenses both the Brakhage and Deren films and displaces their polemical thrusts. At the beginning of the film a woman is seen dreaming. She looks remarkably like the young Deren in her somnambulistic trance films. Her dream involves the ambiguity of the pronoun “you” in a cinematic context. Where Brakhage emphasized the controlling presence of the filmmaker (“Don’t be afraid! There’s a filmmaker behind every scene—in back of ev-er-y wo-rd I spe-ak—behind you, too, so to speak—no! Don’t turn around. It’s useless.”) Landow shows himself running under the text which makes the viewer, the “you,” the organizing consciousness of the film rather than the filmmaker.

The comparable involvement of the viewer in Frampton’s *Zorns Lemma* (1970) is answered by Brakhage’s *The Riddle of Lumen* (1972.The alphabetical game which the viewer is invited to join in, implicitly, while watching Frampton’s film, leads to a thematic exploration of the tensions between names and sights. Brakhage answered Frampton’s puzzle with a “riddle” of his own. The only direct allusion to the word/image problem is a shot of a child, in the middle of the film, reading a book which illustrates things next to their names to each the alphabet. The Latin of the title is a more oblique allusion to the Grosseteste text Frampton translated for his film. *The Riddle of Lumen* is didactic insofar as it proposes a wide range of optical options which link one shot to the next: shape, density, color, depth, internal rhythm (the external or montage rhythm is steady, almost metronomic), along axes of similarity or contrast. The single organizing principle of the film, which the viewer is invited to guess, is contained in the title: light.

12.

A significant departure from the cognitive model began to emerge in the late Sixties, which is relevant to this scheme. It proposes the difference between two texts, a species of translation, as in the reflexive model for cinema. Breer’s *Gull and Buoys* and *Fuji* are good examples of this type of organization. Ken Jacobs’s *Tom, Tom, the Piper’s Son* (1969) begins and nearly ends with a1905 film of the same title. Jacobs refilm the original, isolating details, effecting repetitions, reversals of motion, shifts of scale and attention. It is a brilliant work of didactic aesthetics, enlarging the viewer’s attention to the original film when it is repeated near the end. Also incorporated into the “translation” are rests for the eyes and a violent rupture in the texture of the film.

In N:O:T:H:I:N:G: (1968) he worked with variations on the flicker film in color. With S:TREAM:S:S:ECTION:S:ECTION:S:S:ECTIONED (1970) he repeated images of flowing water so often and so quickly that they lost any sense of depth while a series of vertical scratches on the surface of the film affirmed a place even more literal and flush with the screen than the flattened water surface.

The early films of Hollis Frampton elaborated a lexicon of tropes which culminated in the

synthesizing vision of *Zorns Lemma*. S*urface Tension* (1968) introduced writing on the screen, counterpointing and "translating" a text previously spoken, and the first of his internal clocking mechanisms, this time a digital clock recording "real time" which is ironically accelerated by the time-lapse photography.

Hollis Frampton, Zorns Lemma (1970)

Palindrome (1969) made the chemical patterns of raw color film stock the visual material of the film itself, and he organized these patterns in a form which contrasted the frozen image with illusions of 'metamorphosis. The title of the film, coming from the Greek, "running backwards," denotes a form, or a word, which is the same backwards or forwards. The palindrome has been differently used by George Landow and Michael Snow as I shall elaborate below. Later in *Artificial Light* (1969) the polarities of sameness and difference took the form of a repeated cluster of shots in illusory depth, flattened and obscured by scratching, painting, superimposition, etc. Frampton has remained intensely, at times painfully, aware of his historical position as a filmmaker. His films constitute a dialogue both with the films of his contemporaries and the critical categories in which they have been seen. *Zorns Lemma* summarizes and parodies the quests of the graphic cinema. Beginning with a blank screen while a voice reads from the *Bay State Primer*, he grounds his film in the heritage of Peter Kubelka, whose *Arnulf Rainer* was a remote model for the metrical pulse (twenty-four frames long) that dominates Frampton's film. When the *Primer* ends, the soundtrack goes silent for about forty minutes while we see series after series of images, each one second long, and each containing a word filmed in a deep spatial context (signs in store windows, graffiti, names on passing trucks). The montage arranged the shots in alphabetical order. By occasionally mixing collages with the actual street signs he compounds the paradoxes of reading and perceiving depth which had been an essential trop of the graphic cinema since Léger's *Le Ballet Mécanique.*

Peter Kubelka with Arnulf Rainer.

Furthermore, he gradually eliminates letters from the series, replacing them with finite or infinite acts (e.g. tying a shoe vs. waves of the sea rolling backwards. As at the start of *At Land*). The anticipation of the eventual replacement of all the letters is a subtle version of the clock from *Surface Tension*; it is one of the ways in which the viewer gauges how far the film has progressed and how much longer that section will last.

The structure of *Zorns Lemma* continually puts itself in question. The opening recitation and the initial sequence of words suggests that alphabetical order is the common denominator of the film. But the replacement shots challenge that notion. A final section shows a single deep shot of two people trudging through a field of snow. There is obviously no alphabetic operation here. On the soundtrack a chorus of women's voices read a translation of Grosseteste's essay on light. What this section shares with the rest of the film—its real common denominator—is the pulse of one second, now transferred from the images to the sound, and "clocked" by a ticking metronome that signals each voice to read from the Neo-Platonic text.

The serial film, *Hapax Legomena* (1971-72), taking its title again from the Greek, meaning those words which pose lexical problems because they only occur once in ancient texts, is another mega-structure incorporating concentric, eccentric, parallel, and tangential structures within it. Again, the critical and historical issues are dissected. In (nostalgia) the time it takes for a photograph to burn (and thus confirm its two-dimensionality) becomes the clock within the film, while as Frampton plays the critic, asynchronously glossing, explicating, narrating, mythologizing, his earlier art, and his earlier life, as he commits them both to the fire in a labyrinthine structure.

The tension between reading and perceiving in depth becomes the undersubject of *Poetic Justice* (1972). as the film one sees (reads) shares only a room in common, perhaps not even that, with the film one reads about. In *Special Effects* (1972), Frampton explores a critical issue that informed many of Stan Brakhage's *Songs* (1964-69): As if asking, Can a film be made about the minute variations and fluctuations that occur at the edge of the screen? Frampton reduced the image to a bordered frame (a reduction of the screen shape itself) and made his film by shaking the camera before the image.

As a theoretician Frampton has focused his wit upon the fundamental issues of language, narrative, history, and autobiography in cinema. A lecture he prepared on the formative power of light in cinema and an essay on narrative are among his greatest achievements. He tends to approach the central problems of film theory as if they were puzzles, not to be solved by a head-on encounter, but to be reformulated as intellectual exercises. As such his essays are both stylistically and thematically antithetical to the important texts of Brakhage—who was the most influential theoretician at the time Frampton came of age as a filmmaker—for Frampton conceives of language not as a prison for restricting the perceptions but as a meta-cinematic tool for reorienting and enlarging the primary visual imagination. In this respect he is an heir of Marcel Duchamp.

In George Landow's *The Film That Rises to the Surface of Clarified Butter* (1968) the intertextual model devolves upon two cartoonists and the monsters they animate. The entire film has been rephotographed, with dirt deliberately allowed to accumulate, to underscore the illusionary status of both parts of the film, live photography and animation. The problematics of original and secondary texts determines the double structure of *What's Wrong with this Picture?* (1971)*..* In the first part we see a kinescopic "translation" of a videoape, in which the spontaneous dialogue of the original interview has been printed out and is superimposed over the image, often obscuring it. In the second part, Landow remade a mundane instructional film, allowing moments of interference such as superimposition and negative to intrude. By including the original film as well as the remake Landow displaces the mimetic model from the imitation of a hypothetical situation to that of the surface qualities of that film and its gestures as facts.

In *Wide Angle Saxon* (1975)*,* Landow parodies Frampton's *(nostalgia)* by incorporating a screening of the hypothetical Regrettable Redding Condescension by Al Rutcurts (a pseudonymous anagram for "Structural") (1971) into his film. Within the hilarious argument of Landow's film this screening constitutes a negative moment in the conversion of a man to Christianity. While clapping after a screening of the boring film, out of politeness, the hero suddenly recalls a passage from the New Testament and decides to change his life.

Wide Angle Saxon is an elaborate study of compulsive errors and displaced images, influenced by Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* with sequences illustrating the palindromes "Malayalam" and "A Man, A Plan, A Canal: Panama!" The filmmaker locates the moment of conversion, which he bases on the irreversible historicality of Typology, within a cinematic context of reversible, asequential, repetitive structures. Michael Snow's extravagant 267-minute-long *Rameau's Nephew by Diderot (Thanx to Denis Young) by Wilma Schoen* (1974), an encyclopedic exploration of image/language and image/sound relationships, also contains a filmic palindrome, but of a very different order. The camera first zooms back from a group of people having a polite conversation about flatulating. However, the unintelligible language they speak derives from reading their scripts backwards, and trying to pronounce the texts engendered by literally reversing the letters of each word. Snow then he reversed the strip of film, without turning it upside-down, so that as he zooms back to the original position their sentences approach a threshold of intelligibility. The

discussion of flatulence becomes an analysis of metaphor and a joke on Brakhage: “Is this the fart of vision?” “Without recourse to metaphor or simile could you describe the scent?” “Well, it’s getting stronger.” “Shit, it smells like shit.” “A crude metaphor.” “For what?” “Dog, cat, moose, rabbit, chicken, cow, human … what kind?” “All the bowels are on that list…U.O.1.E.A.”

Rameau’s Nephew is a film of separate scenes interconnected by an elaborate nexus of internal references (every time the expression “for” or “four” occurs it is marked on the screen, for example) and radiating external allusions to all of Snow’s previous works and to many other films. Near the end there is a climactic philosophical essay on the inability of a film to define its own ontological status:

several characters in a hotel room discuss and perform acts of language and sex and try to prove that there is a “veri-table table” in the room. One of them offers a solution by destroying the table with a hammer, but even then, it returns in superimposition (so that it can no longer support a glass when they try to place one on it) to confound their demonstrations. The previous organization of the script and the subsequent reorganization of the editing regularly enters the film as a barely submerged theme. For instance, in the long hotel sequence some notes of a trumpet are substituted in the soundtrack for a voice. A character immediately refers to this montage alteration when he observes, “I didn’t know you spoke trumpet.” As a whole this is a summa of the possibilities of sound montage avant-garde filmmakers began to explore in the late Sixties and throughout most of the Seventies with the ironic interaction of words and image.

13.

Since the 1980s many of the major avant-garde films have been made by those who established their reputations earlier Most of the American artists born after 1930, mentioned here, have died: John and James Whitney (1985, 1982), Andy Warhol (1987), Jack Smith (1989), Harry Smith (1991), Gregory Markopoulos (1992), Paul Sharits (1997), James Broughton (1999), Sidney Peterson (2000), Stan Brakhage (2003), Jordan Belson (2011), Robert Breer (2011), George Landow (aka Owen Land, 2011), Tony Conrad (2016), Peter Hutton (2016), Jonas Mekas (2019), Bruce Baillie (2020), Bruce Conner (2020), Kenneth Anger (2023), Michael Snow (2023). and others; in the void some younger filmmakers who had been working privately since the 60s brought their work to the public, Chief among them were Robert Beavers, Jerome Hiler, and Nathaniel Dorsky.,

Beavers reedited the image and sound of all of his earlier films and completed those he had left unfinished after reintroduced Markopoulos’s films to American audiences (for the filmmaker had withdrawn them from distribution when he left the United States in 1968 to join Beavers in Europe). Dorsky had had a cold reception to his first films in the late 60s. But his invention of “polyvalent form.” a themeless montage of gorgeous shots, made him an international cinema celebrity. He often acknowledged the inspiration of the films of his life-partner, Jerome Hiler, and thus encouraged Hiler to exhibit his considerably less prolific oeuvre,

One of the persistent aspirations of the avant-garde cinema was to reach beyond the temporal and ritual presentations of films. Harry Smith, Brakhage, and Frampton initiated vast projects which they could not complete. However, Gregory Markopoulos did; he edited a film much longer than their dream projects, His 80-some-hour-long *Eniaios* was not shown during his lifetime but Robert Beavers managed to restore and exhibit it, largely as Markopoulos wanted, outdoors in Lyssarea, Greece between 2004 and 2025. Its tile means "unity," perhaps inspired by *to en* of Plato's *Parmenides*. It tacitly asserts that all of Markopoulos's oeuvre is one; since he reedited most of his films to make it, and added dozens of new elements. His emphasis on fragmentation by inserting thousands of passages of leader (black and white clear film) between and within shots would demonstrate his belief that the single frame is the infinitesimal of cinema. This accounts for the idea of showing *Eniaios* slower and faster, backwards as well as forwards, as indicated in the notes he wrote during the editing. Slower makes the frames visible; faster, invisible,

The traditional Greek gods inform Markopoulos's cinema, In the ancient theatres he filmed, they once manifested themselves supra-human form. The heroes of the film, Herakles and Dionysus (and Prometheus, the Titan-God who created and befriended Mankind according to the myths) demonstrate the fusion of divinity and humanity that resonates throughout *Eniaios*,

Cities, rivers, and ships have been the subject of Peter Hutton's diaristic films. For more than a decade he stuck by black and white film stock and moved to color for his longer, commissioned films.in the 21st Century. Su Friedrich and Abigail Child began filmmaking in the diaristic mode: Friedrich scratched word into her dram diary, *Gently Down the Stream* (1981) and fused a inversion of Frampton's form (reversing the alphabet) with the subject matter of Jerome Hill's autobiographical attack on his father, *Film Portrait* 1972) in her *Sink or Swim* (1990). Child actually found her métier in a summer course taught by Frampton. Her seven=part serial film, *Is This What You Were Born For?* (19*81*-1989) makes such extraordinary use of montage and sound (noise, music, dialogue, silence, poetry, diaries, machinery) that he remains the most original sound film of the Eighties.

Su Friedrich, Gently Down the Stream (1981)

In that period, first, women filmmakers, and then, digital cinema has occupied the foreground.

Both Su Friedrich and Abigail Child became the most prominent of dozens of women avant-garde filmmakers. Nearly all the great masters of the avant-garde cinema switched to digital filmmaking because of the immensely reduced cost of video, the immediacy of seeing what had been shot, and the ease of using and then editing sound on computer systems. However, most of the finest digital films were made by artists who had proved themselves in chemical cinema: Jonas Mekas, Andrew Noren, Ernie Gehr, Su Friedrich , George Landow, Abigail Child, Michael Snow, Ken Jacobs, and in Europe: Jean Marie Straub, and the newcomers, Oleg Tcherny and Jean-Claude Rousseau. For Mekas the speed of making and distributing digital work was paramount: he took up the challenge from SONY to make and release three-hundred-and-sixty-five new films in one year; Gehr turned to video after completing his masterpiece, *Side/Walk/Shuttle* (1992); he and Noren explored complex symmetrical and asymmetrical images. easily created digitally; the death of Straub's partner, Danièlle Huillet, in 2006, eased the transition for him; a massive stroke forced Landow to employ a digital crew for his final film; Snow used Betamax to create more of the witty Surrealist illusions that had always been at the core of his enterprise; Jacobs acquired a digital 3-D camera; Tcherny discovered that the nearly infinite capability of superimposition in video could generate a new cinematic vision. Nathaniel Dorsky, Jerome Hiler, Peter Hutton, and Robert Beavers were the major holdouts for chemical images,

In my book, *Eyes Upside Down: Visionary Filmmakers and the Heritage of Emerson* (2008), I wrote about serial films by Beavers, Brakhage, Mekas, and Frampton without actually stating that they were quasi-therapeutic declarations of self-sufficiency after the end of a long relationship or marriage: Beavers three cycle of *My Hand Outstretched to the Winged Distance and Sightless Measure* (1967-2001) chronicled his life with filmmaker, Gregory Markopoulos for two decades and mourned his death, Frampton's *Hapax Legomena* was made as his marriage to Marcia Steinbrecher was ending, and Jonas Mekas's *As I was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty* (2000), his multi-part and longest chemical film, celebrated his marriage to Hollis Melton without acknowledging it was over when he put together the film. I believe I held back the idea of mourning in the serial film because I did not know enough about the production of Child's series, *Is This What You Were Born For?* Subsequently, Beavers has made another quasi-elegiac cycle, for which he abandoned the title, *Stranger in the World*, where he mourns the deaths of his mother and four friends, and a disappearing aspect of Greece. It is also an investigation of his poetic incarnation as an artist.

Abigail Child, Mayhem, Is This What You Were Born For? (1987)

One of the persistent aspirations of the avant-garde cinema was to reach beyond the temporal and ritual presentations of films. Harry Smith, Brakhage, and Frampton initiated vast projects which they could not complete. However, Gregory Markopoulos did make a film much longer and more comprehensive than their dream projects, His 80-some-hour-long *Eniaios* was not shown during his lifetime, but Robert Beavers managed to restore and exhibit it, largely as Markopoulos wanted, outdoors in Lyssarea, Greece between 2004 and 2025. Its title means "Unity," perhaps inspired by the paradoxical logic of *to en* of Plato's *Parmenides*. It tacitly asserts that all of Markopoulos's oeuvre is one; since he reedited most of his films to make it and added dozens of new elements, He emphasized its fragmentation by inserting thousands of passages of leader (black and white clear film) between and within shots to demonstrate that the single frame is the infinitesimal of cinema. This accounts for the idea of showing *Eniaios* slower and faster, as indicated in the notes Markopoulos wrote during the editing. Slower makes the frames visible; faster, invisible. Peter Kubelka may have been the first to claim "cinema is between the frames."

His theory of cinema scrupulously avoided the rigidities of a written text. It has been enunciated for the most part over the past forty years in a series of lectures, interviews and, above all, in academic courses in Europe and America. His lectures were usually illustrated with films and loops; Kubelka initially spoke while using an analysis projector and he considered his gestures and intonations an essential part of his argument. Crudely synopsized, we can say that Kubelka's film theory stresses the importance of the static photogram (the single frame), while maintaining that the fundamental dynamic of cinema is not the illusion of movement but the "articulation" between individual photograms and between the images and the sound at the photogramic level. In the precisely "metrical" structures of *Adebar* (1957), *Schwechater* and *Arnulf Rainer*, these theoretical concerns find their practical origin.

Peter Kubelka, Adebar (1957)

In the first two of these, visual references to fragmented and rigorously non-sequential actions (dancing, drinking) serve as foil for cinematic constructions that strenuously reject the

intrusion of narrative time. In *Arnulf Rainer,* the flickering of black and white photograms excludes even a brush with referentiality.

It reorganizes the temporal experience of a quarter-hour's sitting in the film theatre into a microrhythmical investigation of the two axes of pure filmic difference; black and white frames, blasts of sound and silence.

Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* (1966) employs an emphatically metonymic style by denying the referential continuity of shots adjoining each other. replacing them with an artificial ligature, enhanced by its intricately synchronized soundtrack that hyperbolizes the *ad hoc* status of the images and their extraneous sources. The formulations of Kubelka in both practice and theory represent temporal strategies by which the avant-garde cinema declares its independence from the domination of chronology in narrative films.

Ringing bell hooks: A Brilliant Feminist Calling for Liberation

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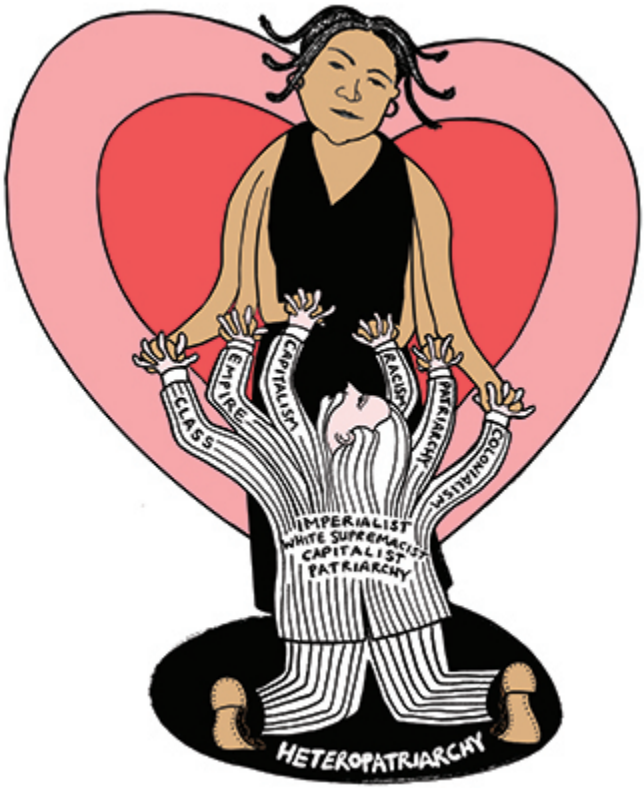
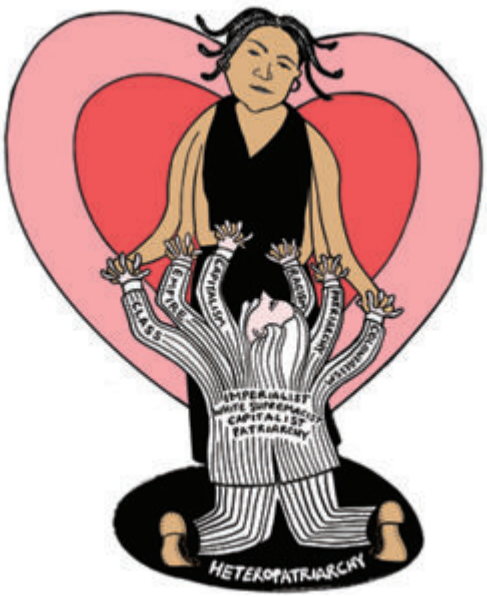


Spirituality Calls

bell hooks sought the transcendent. She was and remains a spiritualist, perhaps more so than a "Black feminist." At the September 24, 2022, Philadelphia "Inaugural Bell Hooks Symposium" keynote panel, prominent Black feminists asserted that hooks' critique of "heteropatriarchy" was her greatest contribution. In an interview, philosopher George Yancy asks bell hooks to explain her phrase "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy"; she replied by focusing on predatory, interlocking systems and structures of class, empire, capitalism, racism, patriarchy, colonialism. Yancy, in discussion with hooks, created in the December 10, 2015 *New York Times* conversation: "bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness." In *All About Love*, *The Will to Change*, *Feminism, Buddhism, and Liberation*, and *Salvation*, hooks wrote as if spirituality was her path for countering oppression. This does not negate feminism, it suggests something more transcendent.



Consider her role models for teaching. In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003, x), hooks cites Paulo Freire and reflects on the Brazilian activist-educator who instructed that we "maintain hope" despite harsh realities. Freire organized liberation educational materials at the risk of his life in Brazil. He fled from militarists in Brazil, landed in Europe with UN/NGO and re-entered struggles in the "Third World" by working with and learning from Angola freedom fighters. Hooks moved from the epicenter to the hypocenter as an intellectual to link to Freire's pedagogies. In *Teaching Community*, she seeks to bring "grace to the art of teaching," and to unify "theory and praxis" so that teachers find "practical wisdom." Quoting Martin Luther King, Jr. and Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, hooks— a Buddhist Christian— calls us to embrace global community and mass movements, as well as Black feminism:

Without all of those people engaged in civil rights struggles, I would not be here in this laboratory . . . how many black women have had the good fortune to write more than thirty books? . . . I try to read a [nonfiction] book a day . . . then I get to read total trash for the rest of the day. That's luxury, that's privilege of a high order—the privilege to think critically, and then the privilege to be able to act on what you know.[1]

Love and spirituality connect material struggles for food, housing and safety and move from the surface of politics to the core of politics. Yancy and hooks discuss the ethical and the political in "bell hooks: Buddhism, the Beats and Loving Blackness." Transformation is key. When hooks references, in *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity,* the mythical story of Isis and Osiris, she reflects on betrayal, war, death, and resurrection in which Isis, the fierce mother-sister-lover,battles to restore the life of Osiris. Isis gathers his dismembered body parts, sutures them and heals her beloved. For bell hooks, the Egyptian myth is our "shared story" for "soul-healing" within "a culture that keeps black men and women further apart." Reflecting on this ancient myth and Malcolm X (el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz) she rings a bell for us to recognize ourselves as broken and mended:

Malcolm X said we have to “see each other with new eyes” . . . that’s where self-determination begins and how we are with one another. . . . black males and females have suffered mental abandonment . . . more than police brutality, that’s the core for . . . our trauma. Betrayal is always about abandonment. And many of us have been emotionally abandoned.

For hooks, love is “the only way out of domination” and connections to other people require that we treat “every aspect of your life as a sacrament of love.” Linking Malcolm to MLK, Jr., she notes that our spiritual crises and political crises are mended if we remember Martin Luther King, Jr.’s prescient wisdom that “the work of love” would be essential for our transformation beyond scattered pieces of ourselves. bell hooks/Gloria Watkins is calling. Having rung many bells, we should stay in conversation with ancestors who care so deeply about the power of love in political struggles.

hooks was and remains a shiny star who created a blazing path for Black feminism, often without a co-pilot. She received accolades for decades of writing, while being isolated at times by academics. Prolific and powerful, she wrote what she thought fit to be published. As she matured and aged, she fell into a zone of grace. Transitioning in her early sixties, she would read and reflect on spirituality, ethical commitments and feminism against empire and violence. The author of over 40 books, her work would be celebrated for decades and across two centuries. Acknowledging this gifted writer and dedicated Black feminist would be skewed if we did not note that her contributions came with contradictions.

bell hooks self-identified as a black feminist not a “womanist.” In my view, she labored and worked as a “Captive Maternal.” Not a radical one that moved into war resistance, but a caretaker who contributed as an educator and author. In the stages of the Captive Maternal—caretaker, protester, movement maker, maroon, war resister and defender of sanctuaries—hooks focused on her intellect and texts, offered care through reflection and meditation and analyses, protested capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy, and avoided mass movements and radical materialism to settle in Berea, as a multi-racial maroon site of intellectuals and academics who would allow her a private sanctuary.

Deeply invested in her reflections and writings, hooks left the halls of elite academia (Stanford, Yale) and returned to the state where she was born and raised in small towns(s) nestled or nailed to Kentucky. Her roots were in the segregated, rural south. She uprooted herself to become a hyper intellectual and precocious author, only to later plant herself in Berea College. Founded in 1855 by antislavery abolitionists, Berea College became the first interracial and coeducational college in the South. Its epicenter was higher education of interracial students and charity and advocacy for human rights. However, Berea has a hidden hypocenter. The epicenter is the surface of political struggle, the hypocenter is “ground zero” where revolutionary resistance from a colonial regime or imperialism is a life-and-death struggle. (Hence, in *New Bones Abolition: Captive Maternal Agency and the (After)Life of Erica Garner*, I view hooks as an influential contributor to the epicenter of liberation politics and Assata Shakur as representative of the hypocenter of revolutionary struggles). Beneath college buildings, abolitionists had dug an underground railroad akin to Harriet Tubman’s courageous

endeavors to steer enslaved Black people from slave states to “free states.” When the Civil War began in April 1861, Berea had already trained in rebellion and resistance to slavery for six years. Nearly a century and a half later, bell hooks came “home” to Kentucky, but more precisely nestled into Berea as her maroon camp, where with multi-racial, nonbinary, and multi-disciplinary intellectuals she planted her roots.

Before Berea, hooks as a young intellectual published *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* in 1981. Her stellar star rising led her to engage in public intellectualism in which she criticized prominent and older Black feminism. Her early 1990s stunning critique of Oprah Winfrey called out Winfrey for performing as a “mammy” who “s**ks the di*k of white culture” (paraphrase, content is largely scrubbed from online). That boldness alienated hooks among some respectable members of Black academia, especially prominent Black feminists, and limited her appearances in some liberal arenas, such as the highly influential Oprah Book Club. Winfrey built a book-reading empire that serviced more than the intellectual and emotional needs of middle-class white women. hooks’ appeal to edgy or critical hip hop communities clashed with the liberal and capitalist sensibilities of Winfrey’s Book Club that made Black feminist authors wealthy and famous.

Amid a plurality of political identities, diverse feminisms range from centrist through liberal to radical. During a 1994 planning committee at University of Massachusetts-Amherst for the “Black Women in the Academy: Defending Our Names, 1894-1994” conference held at MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), the majority of Black feminist committee members insisted that hooks was not to be selected as a keynote speaker. The chosen speakers were Lani Guinier, Johnetta Cole, and Angela Davis, to which a fourth could have been added. I argued with the committee that hooks was the most influential Black feminist author among the chosen speakers. Likely, hooks’s transgressive public criticizing of prominent Black intellectuals led the majority of the committee to insist that she submit a workshop proposal for review in order to determine if she could present at the conference. With less patience than hooks, and some ire, I completed my work on the planning committee and did not attend the 1994 MIT conference. I later learned that hooks in fact had submitted a proposal and it was accepted for a panel in a side room, not on the main stage. hooks knew that she was marginalized as the “bad girl” with “dissident speech.” Yet, her intellectual autonomy remained central to her identity.

hooks displayed extraordinary patience when slighted by Black feminists. In the early 1990s, without an invitation, she showed up knocking at the front door of the home of a prominent black feminist. I answered the door and then went upstairs to announce her presence. hooks settled in the living room, sitting on the couch, when I soon returned and informed her that the feminist and homeowner was not available for a conversation. For several hours, I listened to hooks speak on a variety of topics. Several ventures upstairs did not lead to her having an audience with the only person she wanted to speak with. I finally told her that it was becoming late and she quietly, showing no embarrassment or ire, left the home. Black feminists embraced hooks uneasily until she transitioned in 2021. hooks as an ancestor is more embraceable. Her abrasive critiques were difficult to gloss over when she spoke directly; after

her transition, readers can filter hooks' "talk back" into a more conventional liberal voice. Her analyses and social criticism often had a ringing effect. Yet, her understanding of political and material struggles seemed constrained by her academic environment.

Are Academic/Feminist Pedagogies Deaf to Radical Organizing?

It might have been rare, but bell hooks's political analyses at times were distanced from facts and the material aspects of political struggles; this can be replicated among academics and authors who do not participate in local risk-taking activism for social justice. Radical organizing on the ground seemed foreign to her. Nowhere was this more evident than in the New York City 1989 Central Park 5 Case in which five Black and Latino teen boys from Harlem were falsely accused of raping and brutally beating a white woman investment banker from Wall Street. If one examines the NYC 1989 Central Park Case, one finds in academic feminist writing distance from material struggles shouldered by community activists who risk losing their safety and employment. Despite her analyses of white supremacy and patriarchy, hooks failed to see the racism in *New York Times* narratives on the 1988-89 Central Park Five. Mainstream media narratives of the NYPD that falsified facts in order to obtain convictions of five Black and Brown teens falsely accused of and incarcerated of the rape of a young white Wall Street

investment banker. Classroom discussions on the Central Park Five failed to include the intellectualism and analyses of community activists and impacted family members. Hence hooks publicly wrote that the youths were guilty of horrific violence, echoing a false narrative pushed by the police. (The actual rapist, Mathias Reyes, was incarcerated for multiple rapes and murder[s] of women; while in prison he confessed to the Central Park attack over a decade after the assault.) Multiracial women/LGBTQ folks organizing in opposition to rape and police violence attended Yusef Salaam's trial, where he professed his innocence before an indifferent multi-racial jury. Working with such groups, I met Yusef's mother, Sharonne Salaam, and learned from radical organizers. Communal educational encounters could not and cannot be replicated in a classroom hosted by a college/university. Political education on the streets and in under-resourced communities showed that the hypocenter radical movements supported fair-trial activism. Academia and its classrooms are not zones of revolutionary struggle. Productive collaborations exist between the formal classroom and community resistance. The 1994 anthology *Black Women in America*, edited by Kim Vaz, includes "Searching for a Tradition: African-American Women Writers, Activists, and Interracial Rape Cases." (https://sites.williams.edu/jjames/files/2019/05/Black-Women-in-America.pdf) In that chapter which focuses on interracial rape, fair-trial activism, Black feminism and the Central Park Case I directly question Black feminists, as well as hooks', writing on the Central Park Case defendants. Those literary condemnations of the teen defendants became a form of political pedagogy that mis-educated and mis-informed the public and gendered and racialized communities. Academia has educational productivity in the epicenter, e.g., years after the teens were exonerated (and received financial compensation for wrongful incarceration) faculty worked with UT-Austin graduate students to create an extensive bibliography on the Central Park Case to educate the public.

(https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/9fc81473-9c4d-4180-a8d3-0964e866a97e/content).

The classroom is not the street, the projects or the prison and detention center. The epicenter and hypocenter cannot be conflated; they are distinct zones of learning that is invested in struggle (most often literary and rhetorical if based in the academy). What is rooted in conventional politics and academia is not equivalent to street activism against repressive policing. The two zones can and do collectively work together but their functions do not overlap. They do not replace each other's functions even if they work as Captive Maternals. This is a pedagogy of radicalism that is not contained in rhetoric, debate, or writing and publishing. hooks' contributions ring throughout academic intellectualism. Academic intellectualism isolated from militant "grass roots" movements and influenced by bourgeois culture cannot replicate the functions of the underground and the capacity of "on-the-ground" organizers.

Something that we cannot always remember, we should remember: What "rings a bell" is the dichotomy between pedagogies developed in the epicenter and pedagogies developed in the hypocenter. That is, academic radicalism is not the same construct or practice as street/community material struggle.

Shouts from the Epicenter to the Hypocenter of Politics

Distinctions between the hypocenter and the epicenter exist; their pedagogical contributions are diverse due to vulnerability and radicality. The two sectors do not collapse into each other, thus the zones of political struggle—from liberal through radical to revolutionary— do not merge in political struggle on the ground. Pedagogies recognize the contributions of material radicalism but they cannot engage with such pedagogies without risk-taking organizing against social, political and state violence. For example, during the 1950s and 1960s civil rights movement, students left their college and university classrooms to "drop out" and organize for low-income and racially-communities and face police/white supremacist violence. The Student NonViolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) students dropped out of formal schooling to create the civil rights militancy that led the youth to describe the movement as the "second civil war" while SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Council) called it the second "Reconstruction."

Within the hypocenter of militancy, pedagogies for civil and human rights were led by teachers such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr. Their teaching methods as elders and now ancestors led to integration and thus bell hooks could attend or teach at Stanford, Oberlin, Yale, New School University, Berea etc. hooks shaped pedagogy as a practice of liberation. Yet, there were/are educational zones within which she would not wander. she identified and radiated as a radical; yet, she stayed within progressive politics. she was devoted to her students, those who were in the "free world" and those who were incarcerated. Negatively impacted by sexism, racism, imperialism, and academic denigration, drama, and aggression, hooks still remained sheltered and stabilized by

the epicenter. Although repression of human rights advocacy is expanding, sectors of academia remain stable shelters for progressive advocacy. As was true for bell hooks, most of us seek liberation pedagogies with courage and risk. Working to understand how we might murmur or shout beyond the campus in solidarity with those trapped in occupations, femicides, genocides, environmental devastations and war zones. Learning with and from bell hooks we can build pedagogies that will determine what knell brings us home.

You Do Not Talk About the Spirit of the Age: Revisiting Thomas de Zengotita's Mediated

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Twenty years ago, Thomas de Zengotita's *Mediated: How Media Shapes the World and the Way You Live in it* described a society reeling from explosive technological advances. Humanity's escalating conquest of nature clashed head-on with deep-seated beliefs about natural order, creating a disconcerting sense of alienation amidst an overabundance of media, control and information. The release of the iPhone two years after the publication of *Mediated* provided a solution by neatly categorizing information and options and making individuals the masters of their digital domains. In this new age, an excess of convenience no longer felt like an embarrassment of riches. Rather, it felt like a birthright.

Contrast this with life ten thousand years ago and humanity utterly at the mercy of nature in a world clearly designed by some great power or powers.[1] Gods were not just a credible explanation; they were the only viable ones. As Richard Dawkins remarks in *The Blind Watchmaker*, "I could not imagine being an atheist at any time before 1859 when Darwin's *Origin of Species* was published."[2] Even today, with advanced evolutionary science, the argument from design remains formidable. In premodernity, the vast fearsome universe was

out of the individual's control and clearly governed by unpredictable deities.

In *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault argued that the legitimacy of dominant entities becomes reinforced through societal institutions, and that is precisely what happened with respect to gods during premodernity. Observations of divine control prompted religions to advocate for divine rule. In accordance with the reasonable observation that gods ran the world, religions concluded that gods *ought* to rule the world. Under Foucault's theory, the status quo works to justify itself through the establishment of assumptions about the world: "Power relations give rise to a possible corpus of knowledge, and knowledge extends and reinforces the effects of this power."[3] In practice this means that whatever is, becomes what *should be*. Gods were in charge and thus over time humans came to believe that gods should be in charge and, ultimately, they had the power to establish moral law.

With the onset of modernity, the fundamental description of the world was poised for revision. The mid 1500's heralded a major shift with the discovery of the scientific method.[4] A new explanatory framework emerged for the existence of the world and its complexities. Science enabled humanity to exert greater control over its environment, allowing an observer to conclude that humans were matched evenly with nature, if not superior to it. The Enlightenment occurred a century later, reflecting mankind's elevated status, and the Foucauldian paradigm seemed to hold true. The world was being explored and tamed by humans working together using reason and science. It came to seem that the world should be a balance between humans collectively working together and nature. (It was this sense of balance that was disrupted during the period referenced in *Mediated*.)

Under Enlightenment humanism, people are obligated to each other because they are all part of one interconnected thing, the human race. This assumption cast humanity as the new moral source and spun a narrative consistent with this notion. To a humanist "No man is an island" resonated as a fixed truth, just as God's word had felt like a given, immutable moral fact to Judeo-Christian thinkers. In reality, both perspectives were the culmination of a process where

the collective unconscious described the world, concluded that it ought to be that way, designated the dominant force as a moral touchstone, and then selected particular narratives that could credibly be presented as logical results of these assumptions.

Successful moral narratives would need to appear to flow out of the spirit of the age, while aligning with innate moral instincts. By building on instincts, moral philosophies extend hardwired feelings of obligation beyond small groups. Judeo-Christianity and Enlightenment humanism, for example, rely on analogies to familial and tribal paradigms. The former establishes God as the father figure, and mankind as his children.[5] To the extent that we owe people outside of our immediate circles a moral duty in that tradition, it is partly because we are all part of the family of man. Similarly, Enlightenment humanism's concept of universal interconnectedness likens the entire human race to a gigantic tribe or family. We owe each other moral duty, just as the members of a tribe or family are obligated to protect the welfare of other group members. Most popular moral systems also mirror our instinctual adherence to rules, regardless of personal self-interest.

The technological progress that brought humans out of premodernity kept accelerating and "it crossed a qualitative threshold in the past couple of decades, with the rise of the new media."[6] Somewhere around the middle of the twentieth century the world had changed so much that a revised description was necessary and with the advent of the iPhone urgently so. Industrialization had already given humans access to a lot of good things; our phones now offered the ability to arrange those things at unprecedented speeds, access and organize information and communicate with people in new ways at an entirely new pace. Smartphones even allowed us to escape the present moment into our own minds by simply looking down, making participation in the physical world feel to some degree optional. All this was quite convenient.

Applying Foucault's logic, one would anticipate that a world of utmost convenience would eventually become a world in which people believe convenience is an inherent right. And that is what happened. The mental state described in *Mediated* wasn't a static outcome but rather a transitional state, the byproduct of a confrontation with new and unfamiliar circumstances. For a while, it felt weird. But the mind adjusted, forming a new set of expectations. People now living in technologically advanced nations expect things to be convenient, to such an extent that when things don't work out that way it feels like betrayal. In extreme instances, such as natural disasters, it can even feel unreal, a violation of our expectations about how things should be.

In a world that prioritizes the individual and his needs, the Foucauldian model further predicts the rise of an epistemological system where the individual is the source of his own moral legitimacy. That too has occurred with the spread of a popularized form of relativism, which attempts to accommodate contradictory but self-affirming principles: there is no fixed truth that can be imposed on an individual; but liberal values are considered true; individuals can select their own truths; but not when they conflict with others' choices; and so on. This type of relativism's focus on self aligns with the overall direction of the day but is unable to effectively

draw on the power of instinct to amplify itself the way that, say, Judeo-Christianity draws on familial metaphor. For good evolutionary reasons, moral instincts focus on the family and tribe, not on the individual. There is no fundamental moral instinct analogous to the idea that people should be their own moral guide. Without being able to make such a parallel, and riddled with inherent contradictions, relativism can be a difficult conception to swallow.

When the world changes so significantly as to deserve a new fundamental description, stories that were generated under previous conditions do not just disappear. The Enlightenment, for example, obviously did not lead to an eradication of religion. Nonetheless, the spirit of each age *is* potent, exerting an overall pressure that leads some to adopt a whole new schema (think the rise of humanism), and others to simply move in the spirit's general direction (think reduced overall religiosity and increased secularism in the wake of the Enlightenment).[7]

Accordingly, the spirit of the present age has its own gravitational influence, which happens to include a prohibition against becoming aware of it. That makes it an elusive phenomenon to study. Like Fight Club, whose first rule is, "You do not talk about Fight Club," the spirit of our age prohibits its own examination: in most instances, recognizing that one's beliefs are being influenced by convenience is inconvenient.

Besides, making broad generalizations about an age is so 19th century, a transparent attempt to control through classification.[8] It's arrogant. Anyone who would dare to coin the phrase "age of convenience" would clearly be doing so because it made him feel good somehow. And yet, our present distaste for grand generalizations aside, what if there really *is* an increased preconscious tendency to rearrange beliefs to maximize convenience? Of course, personal convenience has always influenced belief, but in the past that influence was something to at least attempt to resist. In the present day, according to the theory, we would actually be *supposed* to yield to our own convenience. That would be something new.

In such a world you would expect to see a magnification effect operating on people's views whereby those inclined in a certain direction would go deeper in that direction, while those inclined not to care about the larger world might retreat completely into a purely tribal mindset. This would be a world of both greater ideological extremism in patches and of greater selfishness or apathy in others. As de Zengotita observed in *Mediated*, "Fanaticisms flourish in an atmosphere of unlimited choice" as people "cling more desperately" to their fading narratives.[9] You might also see a faster and looser relationship with truth, where people either disbelieved in fixed facts on principle or bent the truth for their own convenience, or both. There might be a nagging sense that in practice any moral attitude that reached beyond instinct was somehow suspect. Conservatism would thereby gain in popularity, since conservatism is better aligned with tribal instinct than liberalism which demands that people care more about those outside their circles. Does this not all sound familiar?

It is easy to forget when focused on the larger public sphere that for most people the larger public sphere only occupies a small fraction of experience. Instinct, familial and tribal, cover almost all situations that we encounter on a daily basis. You don't need a moral philosophy to

feel the urge to offer someone a seat on the subway, or to want to help a friend in need. Moreover, as we touched on, of course convenience has always influenced—and to a significant extent—which moral systems people adopt. The problem is subtle, and it applies in only a small portion of our lives. So, it's easy to miss. You don't talk about the spirit of the age because it doesn't want you to, but you also don't talk about it because it's really not that important, at least not in comparison to the really important stuff: love, family, career, all the things that continue to work just fine thank you under the guidance of our still-intact innate instincts.

Yet something is demonstrably different. Have you ever noticed how quickly goodies in a company break room are consumed? People who wouldn't normally eat multiple chocolate chip cookies at 10:00 AM slip in like hyenas over a kill. The fact that it's free, that it's given, is enough of an excuse to nudge people over the edge who were naturally teetering. Something like that is at play with our choices of moral systems—the spirit of our age is only a tiny tailwind, just a nudge. A little voice that says, you do you. Even without that factor, coming to an authentic and sincere attitude about the larger world wasn't easy. But with it in play we're just a little more susceptible to our own convenience. Though we don't talk about this phenomenon very much, a piece of us has an inkling, and that part of us is responsible for permeating our culture with a pervasive sense of irony.[10] On some level we intuit there's a dynamic at play that undermines peoples' sincerity. Without understanding why, we can't fully trust others' motives or, when we look carefully, our own.

Even adopting an attitude about the general situation is problematic. Attitude is important since, as de Zengotita pointed out, "values adhere first of all in postures, in rhythms of speech and gesture, prior to semantics."[11] But when the issue at hand is a universal tendency in the way people form attitudes, any attitude about the tendency will be shaped by the tendency itself. We literally can't step outside of the tendency to evaluate the tendency.

A lightly mocking tone is a possibility, but the problem with that tone is that it subtly—and falsely—implies that the speaker is somehow exempt from the dynamic in question. The key is that the phenomenon is happening universally, not that some people's sense of virtue has slipped.[12] A mocking tone lets the reader off the hook. The wink alludes to some other path, some unarticulated exception, and allows writers to explicitly address the problem while implying that it doesn't really apply to those in the know, without ever putting forth any real alternative.

The other posture one could take is that the whole situation is plain inconvenient. It is inconvenient to have one's moral systems determined on the basis of convenience, because any system based on convenience is tainted, and it is inconveniently uncomfortable to have tainted views. There is some merit to this perspective, but it somehow feels inadequate. True, the state of things is inconvenient, but there can also be big real-world consequences of the problem that exceed the scope of the word, "inconvenient." The larger world has a way of reaching occasionally into our own little circles. "The likes of Trump and Orban and Putin and Bolsonaro and Poland's Law and Justice Party (the list goes on and on) will continue to thrive as long as facts and values remain nothing more than 'social constructions."[13] Moreover, being unable to

form a satisfying relationship with the larger world just feels wrong. Again, though, the word "wrong" does work in that sentence. Wrong from what perspective?

There is a reasonable argument that we ought to simply ignore the problem of authenticity, since focusing on the issue is a recipe for political paralysis. Fake it till you make it might be the best we can do. But before we load our ships and sail off to the undying lands shouldn't we at least consider the possibility that careful description of our circumstances could somehow yield a shred of hope? De Zengotita maintained a sense of optimism.[14] Admittedly, the headwinds are strong. Increased technological advances will likely only reaffirm the expectation of convenience. It might be that the only thing that can significantly alter the spirit of our age would be a major change in the organization of the world. Nuclear apocalypse, environmental disasters on a much, much greater scale than we've already experienced, or a drastic reordering of things via extreme and strange advances in artificial intelligence or a defeat of democracy and return to despotism. Not exactly rays of sunshine.

For better or worse, the result of our long mediation process is likely to stay with us for quite some time. Mediation, as in, "the intervention in a process or a relationship," was really the process of adjudication between old and new assumptions, not just a reference to the actual literal screens that surrounded us.[15] That adjudication led in most instances to the displacement of old assumptions. Sometimes actual digital media was an actor in the conflict, and sometimes the conflict just played itself out in the background of everyday non-screen-related consciousness. For several decades, the old and new needed to be constantly reconciled. That process was a sort of consumption, hence de Zengotita's "Blob," his way of referring to the whole messy experience whereby new assumptions were replacing the old. It is fair to say that, for the most part, our perceptions no longer require this mediation, no longer require reconciliation. We have adjusted our expectations to reflect the new conditions. As I scurry through the city, staring at my phone, the pursuit of my own convenience *is* the real world. What was became what should be. The Blob finished its meal.

Except for one small morsel. The Blob can't digest the contradiction between our sense that things should be convenient and the fact that there is something inconvenient about not being able to form an authentic moral attitude about the larger world. In that little bit of indigestion lies hope that de Zengotita was right and there is a positive path forward. It is inevitable that our attitude about the situation is influenced by convenience. But we can still choose to think further about the problem. As de Zengotita observed: "At each moment, it is up to us to act. The arrow points at each of us. What should we do with this gift?"[16]

Notes

[1] Thomas de Zengotita, "A Phenomenological Foundation for Human Ethics: An Essay in Philosophical Anthropology," Logos 22, no. 1 (2023).

[2] Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*(New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986), p. 6.

[3] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977; originally published 1975).

[4] Thomas de Zengotita, *Postmodern Theory and Progressive Politics: Toward a New Humanism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), p. 10.

[5] Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1961; originally published 1927), p. 24.

[6] Thomas de Zengotita, *Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2005), p. 18.

[7] Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason*, Science, Humanism, and Progress (New York: Viking, 2018).

[8] de Zengotita, *Postmodern Theory*, 2018, p. 95.

[9] de Zengotita, *Mediated*, p. 15.

[10] Thomas de Zengotita, "World World; or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Blob," Harper's Magazine 301, no. 1805 (July 2000): 17–25.

[11] de Zengotita, *Mediated*, p. 97.

[12] Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[13] de Zengotita, "A Phenomenological Foundation for Human Ethics," 2023.

[14] ibid.

[15] "Mediation," in Oxford English Dictionary (online), accessed January 17, 2025, https://www.oed.com.

[16] de Zengotita, "A Phenomenological Foundation for Human Ethics," 2023.

On Authenticity: Townes Van Zandt, Natasha Rostova, and the “Uncles”

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There is a famous scene in Leo Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* in which Countess Natasha Rostova, recently betrothed and enjoying the last days of youth, goes with her brothers to the rustic home of a distant relative—or “Uncle,” as they call him—after a long and exhilarating day of hunting. Slender and graceful, Natasha cuts a fine figure as she expertly dismounts from her horse, arousing the curiosity of “Uncle’s” domestic serfs. “A regular Tatar!” they exclaim. The merry and stout housekeeper brings the guests a tray arrayed with liqueurs, wine, herb brandy, mead, mushrooms, buttermilk cakes, raw honey, apples, and nuts. Later, the housekeeper serves roasted chicken, ham, and preserves made with honey. Natasha savors the simple but succulent meal, and with “sparkling eyes” she listens to her older brother and “Uncle” talk of hunting.

As they finish dinner, they hear from just down the hall the resonant tones of a balalaika, a three-stringed Russian folk instrument with a triangular body, played by “Uncle’s” coachman, Mitka. Enraptured by Mitka’s masterful playing, Natasha reproaches her brother Nikolai for calling the music merely “nice” and proclaims that it is “absolutely enchanting.” “Just as ‘Uncle’s’ mushrooms, honey, and liqueurs had seemed to her the most delicious in the world, so this song at that moment seemed to her to be the very acme of musical delight.” As they all

listen, “Uncle” remarks that Mitka did not get a certain part right, prompting Natasha to ask him if he also plays. “Uncle” smiles and then asks his housekeeper to bring his guitar. After blowing dust off his guitar, “Uncle” begins to play and sing a well-known folk song called “Came a Maiden Down the Street.” Natasha is so delighted with “his flawless, painstaking, vigorous” rendition that she demands he play it again.

As he plays, “Uncle” stands and strikes the pose of someone who is about to dance. Gesturing toward Natasha with the hand that just struck a chord, “Uncle” says, “Now then, little niece!” “Natasha flung off her shawl, ran forward to stand facing ‘Uncle,’ and with arms akimbo and a quick movement of her shoulders, struck an attitude.” Somehow, this young countess, educated by a French governess and largely unfamiliar with Russian folk traditions, captures the spirit of “those inimitable, unteachable Russian gestures that ‘Uncle’ had expected of her.” Her dance is “so absolutely perfect” that the housekeeper is moved to both tears and laughter. Everyone who witnesses her performance admires her grace and charm, the magical way in which she embodies the music.

When the song is over, Natasha sits down and listens to “Uncle” play a few other songs, the last of which is a favorite of his about hunting.

> “Uncle” sang as peasants sing, with the full and naïve conviction that the whole meaning of a song lies in the words, that the tune comes of itself and exists only to give measure to the verse, apart from which it is nothing. Consequently, this unconsidered tune, like the song of a bird, had an extraordinary charm. Natasha was in ecstasies over “Uncle’s” singing. She decided to give up her harp lessons and play only the guitar. She asked “Uncle” for his guitar and at once picked out the chords of the song.

Except perhaps when she marries Pierre at the end of the novel, Natasha is never happier than at this moment, during these precious hours at “Uncle’s,” enjoying the peasant food and folk

music. Unembellished by virtuosity and complexity, these sensual pleasures transport Natasha into “ecstasies.” The last song played by “Uncle” moves her so deeply because it speaks directly to the heart and captures the melodies and rhythms of nature—or, as she hears it, the spontaneous and artless song of birds. The tune and the words are in full agreement, the former giving expression to the latter. More sophisticated music performed in royal courts, concert halls, opera houses, and the parlor rooms of polite society can never touch her in the same way.[1]

One cannot help but smile when Natasha decides to give up the harp and play the guitar. If she lived in a time closer to ours, one can imagine that she would be inspired to reject a life of artifice and conformity, commit herself to a life of uncompromising artistic expression, and become a singer-songwriter. Of course, such a life is inconceivable for a Russian countess in the early nineteenth century. Not long after “Uncle” plays his last song, a droshky arrives to take Natasha and her brothers back to their father’s estate and to a world of resplendent wealth and aristocratic customs.

Natasha’s ecstasies at the home of “Uncle” are thrown into relief, no doubt intentionally by Tolstoy, when she returns to Moscow and attends the opera. With memories of the country still fresh in her mind, Natasha is shocked by what she witnesses. Upon arriving at the opera house, Natasha beholds the spectacle of finely dressed people who care less about the artistic performance than about seeing and judging and, in turn, being seen and being judged. This is a world not of substance but of appearances. When the lights dim and the opera begins, Natasha experiences more of the same.

> After her life in the country, and in her present serious mood, all this seemed fantastic and amazing to Natasha. She could not follow the opera, could not even listen to the music: she saw only the painted cardboard and the oddly dressed men and women who moved, spoke, and sang so strangely in that brilliant light. She knew what it was all meant to represent, but it was so blatantly false and unnatural that she felt alternately ashamed for the actors and amused by them. She looked about her at the faces of the audience, seeking in them the same bewilderment and sense of the ridiculous that she herself felt, but they all seemed absorbed in what was happening on the stage and expressed what appeared to Natasha to be a feigned rapture.[2]

Instead of being moved, Natasha can only see that which is artificial and phony about the performers and the audience members. She is terrified of—and intoxicated by—the bejeweled women with dazzling dresses and pomaded heads, and, of course, the handsome figure and penetrating gaze of Anatol Kuragin. The evening ends quite differently than the one at “Uncle’s.” She feels not unalloyed joy and peace but a confused mix of flattered vanity, dread, and shame. In essence, her return to society constitutes a movement away from a simple and authentic life of pure feeling and toward a world of pride and pretense.

After enduring some heartache, Natasha eventually finds her way to a good and meaningful

life, but she never fully recaptures what she had at “Uncle’s.” One can imagine that, as she grows older, Natasha might once again experience flashes of such intensity and purity of feeling, but it is her fate—as it is for most of us—to live with compromise and within the parameters of social convention. In many ways, her story is ours. As we mature into adulthood, those evenings like the one at “Uncle’s” are increasingly relegated to the beautiful realm of memory, evoked from time to time in moments of reverie, at best experienced vicariously during those quiet times when, say, we read a work of literature or put on a record. Yes, especially when we put on a record.

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Throughout my life I have encountered my share of “Uncles” through the speakers of my stereo. But the “Uncle” who grabbed hold of me more forcefully than any other, and has refused to let go, is the late, great singer-songwriter, Townes Van Zandt (henceforth, just “Townes”). Both lyrically and musically, Townes seemed to embody the notion that a true artist reveals and expresses himself with complete candor. The perception that he was the genuine article—that he was always true to himself and his artistic vision, no matter the personal cost—explains, at least in part, the enduring appeal of his work, especially the recordings of his live performances. These recordings have prompted me to consider what it means for artistic expression to be authentic, why it matters to so many artists and art consumers, and whether it is even a coherent ideal in our jaded postmodern world. Vital philosophical questions are at stake: What does it mean to have an authentic self in a time of fracture and dislocation? Is it an attainable or desirable goal? If so, how is it achieved—and at what cost? If not, why does it remain a goal for which so many people continue to strive? Despite the prevalence of the postmodern view that the coherent self does not exist, that identity can best be understood as a performance enacted within a system of social discourse from which no one can escape, Townes’s arresting songs have restored my faith in the authentic self. They persuade me that the concept of authenticity still has meaning, and is perhaps more relevant than ever before, in the age of artificial intelligence.

My obsession with Townes began in 2010, thirteen years after the singer-songwriter’s death. My introduction was the studio version of “If I Needed You,” whose cheerful musical arrangement and clip-clop rhythm, evoking the image of a horse trotting in a sun-dappled meadow, does not accord with the heartbreaking lyrics. This is a song about the desperate desire to overcome the pain that comes from loneliness and separation. Despite the obvious incongruity between words and sound, the song captivated me. I had to hear more.

It did not take me long to discover *Live at the Old Quarter, Houston, Texas*, a double album recorded over three hot nights in July of 1973 but not released for another three-and-a-half years. Unlike the studio versions of most of his songs, these performances are distilled to the essential elements, voice and guitar. I recognized immediately that Townes was an artist meant to be heard live, unmediated, free of studio artifice and elaborate instrumentation and production.

His rendition of “If I Needed You” on *Live at the Old Quarter* is not marred by that disconnect between words and sound. Townes picks the notes of the melody on his guitar, complementing his lyrics and voice perfectly, and he sings without adornment, eschewing vibrato and opting for a lean and flat delivery. As one can say about most of the tracks on this album, it is the definitive version of this song.

Thunderstruck by the powerful immediacy of his live performances, by the magical combination of melody and lyrics that often left me breathless, sometimes emotionally shattered, I played this album continuously, as if on an endless loop, for months. I felt I was in the hands of a master who would not shrink from laying bare his soul. His art brought together exquisite craftsmanship and brutally honest revelations that drew from a deep well of despair.

One of the more memorable songs on the album is “Waiting Around to Die,” which he tells his audience is “the first serious song” he ever wrote. Singing in the key of C-sharp minor, Townes tells the story of a wretched man, an unrepentant convict, boozer, and gambler, who awaits death as he reflects on his life, a series of tragic events involving domestic violence, abandonment, betrayal, dissipation, crime, prison, loneliness, and addiction. It is a tour de force, an American epic told in just five stanzas, a little over two-and-a-half minutes. The song strikes such an emotional chord, captivating the audience at the Old Quarter into pristine silence, because it reconciles the tension between artistry and authenticity. Instead of creating a sublime wall of sound, an explicit reminder that this is indeed a work of art, Townes’s exquisite melody, haunting lyrics, and flawlessly executed performance establish a direct line of contact between musician and audience. Well-crafted art ceases to be art and, as if through a kind of musical alchemy, is transmuted into primordial experience.

Townes gave another unforgettable performance of the song in *Heartworn Highways* (1976), an acclaimed documentary about some of the pivotal figures in the outlaw country movement. In December of 1975, the filmmakers found Townes living with his girlfriend in a trailer in Clarksville, an historically black neighborhood in Austin, Texas, into which many white hippies and burnouts had moved. Townes agreed to perform a couple of songs in the house of his neighbor, “Uncle” Seymour Washington, a 79-year-old retired blacksmith. Many of the young white people in the neighborhood would gather at “Uncle” Seymour’s home and enjoy his famous barbecue.

When the camera was rolling, Townes turned on his rakish charm and hammed it up. He emerges as the most charismatic figure in the film, but he also steals the show musically. Joined by “Uncle” Seymour and Phyllis Ivy, Townes gives a mesmerizing performance of “Waiting Around to Die” at the kitchen table. Wearing a blue button-down shirt and a white cowboy hat, Townes plays brilliantly as Phyllis hums along and sways to the music and a dog barks in the distant background. At first the camera focuses on Townes singing, as he always did, with his eyes closed, and picking skillfully at the strings of his guitar, but by the second verse it pans over to Seymour and begins zooming in on his face, capturing his emotional reaction to the song as he listens intently to the lyrics. By the end of the third verse, Seymour’s eyes are glistening with tears, which he wipes away with the back of his hand.

Phyllis leans toward him, whispering words of comfort and taking hold of his hands. Crying silently, Seymour nods or shakes his head when a particular lyric speaks to him. At the end of the song his tear-streaked face says it all. Here is a man, old enough to be Townes's grandfather, who is moved to the core by a song about a life full of pain and hardship, no doubt reflecting on the trials that he, a working-class black man, had to endure for nearly eight decades, most of it in the Jim Crow South.

The image of Seymour Washington's face as Townes strikes the final chord is a powerful document of that alchemy, his uncanny gift for stirring another person's soul. Townes would often say that his goal in life was to "write the perfect song that would save someone's life"—to "write songs that really do make a difference." Instead of wealth, fame, and adulation, Townes said that the real aim was to "hear the guitar ring one note correctly and your voice ring the same note correctly with the proper meaning correctly for that instant…if you hit that note, it goes around the world and maybe—this is not bragging but it's hopeful, kind of prayerful—maybe somehow connect up with a baby in England or Ireland or Ethiopia and somehow make a shade of difference." Throughout his life Townes received letters from fans who thanked him for rescuing them from depression or addiction.[3]

Unfortunately, the music that Townes recorded in the studio rarely conjured the magic of his live performances. Guy Clark, the legendary singer-songwriter who was one of Townes's best friends, lamented that his studio albums were overproduced. "I always thought Townes was done a disservice in the way his records were produced over the years," he said. "I don't think anything even comes close to a live performance like *Live at the Old Quarter*. However those studio albums were being made, that really quality part of Townes never cut through. There was always too much other stuff going on for me."[4] I would go so far as to say that there are only a handful of songs in Townes's entire oeuvre where the studio version surpasses all of the live performances recorded for posterity. Almost invariably, the producers of his studio albums would bring in a team of session musicians and turn his austere songs into grand and lavish musical creations. While Townes stood at the intersection of the blues and folk traditions, his producers were often trying to make a country music star out of him, creating sounds and arrangements that came straight out of Nashville.

Part of the problem was timing. As music critic Walter Dawson explained in a review of *Live at the Old Quarter*in 1977, "[Townes] came along too late for the sixties folk boom and too early for the progressive country movement."[5] His record producers thought that situating Townes in the country music genre would be the most effective way of selling units. But their strategy did not lead to commercial success and, even worse, diminished the power of his music. In short, his art was sacrificed at the altar of marketing considerations. What his producers failed to understand was that Townes was an artist who should never have anything stand in the way between him and his audience.

I think it is useful to understand Townes as a musician who, metaphorically speaking, embodies the Protestant spirit. Martin Luther, an early sixteenth-century religious thinker and a central figure in the Protestant Reformation, criticized the Roman Catholic Church for being

corrupt and turning Christianity into the practice of empty rituals. He believed that Roman Catholicism had abandoned the Christian faith with its focus on good works and sacramental observance and with its insistence that the Church must serve as an institutional intermediary between God and His flock. Along with other Reformation leaders, Luther believed that faith alone is sufficient to show that we are graced by God. He claimed that people could affirm their faith by reading the Bible and praying on their own without the interference or assistance of clergy. And they did not need the mystical ornamentations of a cathedral or other baroque aesthetic experiences meant to deepen their devotion to God. Indeed, Protestants regarded these forms of aesthetic mediation as a kind of idolatry, enshrouding God in artistic representations that evoked not faith but mystery.

By analogy, we can think of the artist as an ersatz god and the recording studio as a cathedral where the producer functions as the archbishop and the session musicians as priests. The virtuosity, innovation, and complexity on display in their musical arrangements are supposed to enrich appreciation of the artist's songs. But Townes was a musician whose art is meant to be unadorned, expressing without compromise or artifice feelings forged in the smithy of his soul. All you need is Townes and his guitar, and a direct line of contact will be established. Anything else just gets in the way and deprives his audience of the stark but beautiful message that he wants to convey.

In our disenchanted age, with the death of God and the fragility of other transcendental sources of meaning and authority, artists like Townes, who appear to bear the mark of authenticity, have a strong appeal. For it is not God but the authentic artist with whom the audience has any hope of finding communion. The authentic artist can use his craft to unmask himself and allow his audience to experience vicariously the great depths of joy and sorrow that dwell inside him. But for the authentic artist, it is mainly anguish and sorrow to which he feels a need to give voice. He is a Christ figure, a martyr who suffers—and bears witness to his suffering—for the sake of his audience. While he endures and expresses great pain, his audience experiences a kind of spiritual cleansing or grace.[6] This is because the authentic artist reminds us that we are not alone in what we are going through. We find solace in the fact that his forlorn voice cuts straight to the bone and speaks to universal truths about the human experience.

***

In a brilliant book he published over 50 years ago, Lionel Trilling shed light on the idea of authenticity by comparing it with sincerity. Trilling defined sincerity as "congruence between avowal and actual feeling,"[7] which in plain language means saying what we think. The sincere person is honest about his feelings. He abjures irony and always communicates in earnest with others. But Trilling recognized that, by the twentieth century, the prelapsarian simplicity of the sincere soul began to look like a laughable fiction, for it failed to account for the convolutions of the human psyche. We may insist that we are straight shooters who always speak our minds, but the truth is far more complicated. After all, we do not always know what we think or feel. When we do, there are often good reasons not to reveal it. So, in our more

sophisticated age, authenticity has emerged as a virtue on which people, including artists and consumers, have increasingly placed a high premium.

Perhaps the first formulation of the concept comes from Polonius, who somehow rises above his usual prolix buffoonery when he speaks these immortal words to Hamlet: "This above all: to thine own self be true." If sincerity involves being true to others, authenticity is about being true to yourself. And, as Trilling pointed out, the champions of authenticity regard it as having "a more strenuous moral experience than 'sincerity' does, a more exigent conception of the self and of what being true to it consists in, a wider reference to the universe and man's place in it, and a less acceptant and genial view of the social circumstances of life."[8] In other words, authenticity is about not telling the truth but *living* the truth, not saying what you think or believe but showing who you *are*, creating a strong and autonomous self that stands in defiant opposition to a society that insists on imitation and conformity. The sincere person means what he *says*. The authentic person means what he *is*.

But, even among those who see value in the idea of authenticity, there is a vigorous philosophical debate about what constitutes a self. What is this self to which the authentic person must be true? Do we even have stable, identifiable selves to which we can be true in the face of unrelenting social pressure and discourse? There are two schools of thought that understand the authentic self quite differently.

One school of thought can be called individualism, which sees the self existing independently of, and prior to, any external forces. People are authentic, according to individualism, when they remain unencumbered, free either to express the identity that lies at the core of their being or to fashion their identity *ex nihilo* by acting in the world. The former is Romantic individualism; the latter is existentialist individualism.

Ralph Waldo Emerson captured the Romantic idea of authenticity perfectly when he admonished his readers to heed the divine spark that lies within all of us. "Trust thyself," he said. "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men—that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense…and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment." Emerson believed that authentic people have faith in themselves and never surrender to social pressures. They reject "large societies and dead institutions" and "shun father and mother and wife and brother" when "genius calls." They act intuitively, even whimsically, and follow their own hearts, confident that what they do will align with the "universal" truths declared at "the Last Judgment."[9]

For the existentialists, there is no spirit dwelling inside people, connecting them to cosmic truths most often heard in the quiet of nature. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, authentic people recognize that "existence precedes essence," that action comes before truth and meaning. We are thrown into a life empty of *a priori* truth or purpose and then fill it with meaning by acting in the world. Our choices define who we are and reveal what we believe. "[M]an first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterwards defines himself," he said.

“He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it…man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.” To be authentic, then, means embracing our freedom and, through our choices, fashioning ourselves. There are no heavenly or earthly fonts of wisdom on which we can rely when choosing, and we cannot use nature or society as a justification for what we do. The condition of every human being is “one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid.” Existentialists cut their own path, rely on no one else, and assume sole responsibility for the actions that define them.[10]

The other school is communitarianism, which sees each person as a social creature that can only come into being and form a self in the context of a community and its traditions. People can exercise autonomy and push back against society, but they always maintain ties to the community in which they were nurtured. The communitarian says that the idea of the unencumbered self is sheer fantasy, that people can never be completely free of their origins, for that is the starting point, the place where they were forged. People are authentic, according to this school of thought, when they show fealty to, and respect for, the cultural traditions and norms that are a part of their inheritance. Communal ties and obligations often matter more than freedom.

Charles Taylor is currently the most important figure in the communitarian school. Authenticity, he says, does not demand “ignoring whatever transcends the self.” It does not require one to become a rugged individualist who rejects community, civic duty, citizenship, and solidarity. Nor does it embrace the relativistic view that each person must live “his own truth” and that all perspectives are equally valid. Taylor says that “authenticity should be taken seriously as a moral ideal,” which can only be realized if we start from the premise that the self is formed dialogically. “My own identity crucially depends on my dialogical relations with others,” he says. That is, we can only understand ourselves in relation to the people with whom we interact and connect in meaningful ways. And those self-defining interactions necessarily involve obligations and duties which further shape who we are. As Taylor puts it, “Authenticity is not the enemy of demands that emanate from beyond the self; it supposes such demands.” In short, the communitarian sees the authentic person as someone who does not stand alone. Rather than anomie or abandonment, she feels a shared sense of belonging with others.[11]

So, there are two ways of understanding authenticity: to be true to your autonomous self or to be true to your communal self. But we must not fall prey to the false dichotomy that insists on choosing one over the other. Through his art, Townes illustrates quite well the possibility of achieving a synthesis, both acting independently in the world and embracing community. His authenticity stems from an ongoing dialectic between the individualistic and communitarian conceptions of the self. The authentic person resists social pressures but also honors the people and traditions that shaped him. He recognizes that with freedom comes responsibility. Likewise, the authentic artist wants to be free of what others expect or demand while he is also drawn to artistic traditions that require operating within formal constraints. Out of that creative tension between freedom and constraint, between autonomy and relation, the

authentic artist emerges.

At least in part, Townes and others like him seem authentic because they stay true to their artistic vision, with nary a thought to selling units, filling seats, or creating a marketable brand. In the parlance of the 1960s, we might say that the authentic artist refuses to "sell out." He cares not a whit about what record executives or audiences want. He follows his heart and nothing else.

But in addition to *being* himself, the authentic artist is also concerned about *expressing* himself and making an impact on others. He is dedicated to using his craft, drawing on specific artistic traditions, to give voice not only to who *he* is but also to who *we* are. This requires an extraordinary commitment from an artist. To make that visceral connection, bearing your soul and reaching into the soul of your audience, means sacrificing everything else you might value and everyone you hold dear. To become a great musical artist and songwriter, said Townes, "you have to blow off everything else. You have to blow off your family. You have to blow off comfort. You have to blow off money. You have to blow off security. You have to blow off your ego. You have to blow off everything except your guitar. You have to sleep with it. Learn how to tune it. And no matter how hungry you get, stick with it. You'll be amazed at how many people turn away."[12]

Townes might have been amazed, but most of us would not be. His was a level of commitment that only a few can maintain. But sacrificing everything to his art, blowing it all off and focusing solely on his guitar and his songwriting, was what it took. It allowed him to develop not only his chops as a writer, singer, and guitarist but also his capacity for reaching deeply within himself. Combining both well-honed talent and true self-knowledge, an authentic artist like Townes can write and perform music that is both beautiful and devastating. His art bears witness to what it means to be a human being. When asked once why he wrote so many sad songs, Townes replied: "I don't think they're all that sad. I have a few that aren't sad, they're like…hopeless. About a totally hopeless situation. And the rest aren't sad, they're just the way it goes."[13]

Because the authentic artist resists the prevailing winds of culture and society, saying not what we *want* to hear but what we *need* to hear, such expressions of the human condition are—as Trilling put it—a "strenuous moral experience." The reason we need to hear what authentic artists have to say is that they expand our minds, challenging our assumptions, our values, our mental habits. Their art is disruptive and destabilizing. They stir our moral imagination, producing feelings, thoughts, and perspectives we have never had before. Their art speaks a larger truth not so much about themselves—for authenticity does not demand navel-gazing confessionals—but about the larger world they inhabit. From authentic art spring truths about the human experience more generally, and this just might make us more sensitive and empathetic people. Townes hoped his songs would "make a difference" and perhaps even "save someone's life." Those are the ambitions of the authentic artist.

Townes wrote and performed many songs that tell the unvarnished truth about human

existence, its joys and beauty, its mysteries and vagaries, its pain and misery. They compel us especially to imagine what it is like to experience the surfeit of madness, desperation, loneliness, longing, squalor, regret, and grief from which so many people suffer, and they heighten our compassion for those who live at the margins of society. At their most powerful moments his songs enable us to see and feel those mystic threads that connect us to our common humanity.[14]

Probably his best-known song, "Pancho and Lefty" speaks directly to the question of what constitutes an authentic life and urges listeners to enlarge their sympathies. The song recounts the story of two outlaws: Pancho, a legendary bandit who dies bravely in the deserts of Mexico, and Lefty, his friend who sells him out, absconds to Cleveland, and lives out his days alone and in obscurity. Even though the "poets tell how Pancho fell" while Lefty hid out "in a cheap hotel," Townes is not endorsing the old cliché that it is better to burn out than to fade away. Nor is he suggesting that our sympathies should lie solely with Pancho. In fact, Townes urges us not to be too hasty in our judgment of Lefty. He sings: "Pancho needs your prayers it's true / But save a few for Lefty too / He just did what he had to do / And now he's growing old." Both bandits are equally deserving of our compassion, Townes suggests, for if we are honest, we must acknowledge that there is a Lefty in all of us, even in those uncompromising stalwarts of righteousness who cannot countenance such an odious act of betrayal.

In the first verse, a sort of preamble to the main story about Pancho and Lefty, Townes sings in the second person of a mother's favorite son who hopes "living on the road" will keep him "free and clean" but, with "skin like iron" and "breath…as hard as kerosene," has surrendered to hard living and heavy drinking. He is both free and dependent, a rambler who sees the world and a mama's boy who often sinks into a drunken stupor. "She began to cry when you said goodbye / And sank into your dreams," he sings at the end of the first verse. And this man, perhaps a stand-in for Townes, dreams of two bandits—one a hero immortalized by poets, the other a sellout "the federales" let "slip away"—who clearly represent his divided self. He is both hero and blackguard, free spirit and fallen wretch; he is a conflicted man who has betrayed no one but himself.[15]

Of course, one can read the song as an allegory about the ongoing struggle within all of us. This is the dialectic, the tension, that resolves itself into a synthesis when the artist expresses, beautifully and heartbreakingly, our universal condition. We are all whole and fractured, free and bound, sacred and profane, noble and foul, good and evil. To be authentic is to recognize our wondrous complexity. It is to be true to who and what we are and to understand that others "contain multitudes" just as we do.

When he wrote, "I am large…I contain multitudes," Walt Whitman was not only acknowledging but also celebrating his expansive and varied self. And this honest account of himself deepened his capacity to sympathize with his fellow human beings, for he could see himself in them and, in turn, them in himself. Indeed, he was one of those rare souls whose heart felt with acute sensitivity the sufferings of his fellow human beings. "Whoever degrades another degrades me…and whatever is done or said returns at last to me, / And whatever I do or say I

also return," he wrote.

> Through me many long dumb voices,
>
> Voices of the interminable generations of slaves,
>
> Voices of prostitutes and of deformed persons,
>
> Voices of the diseased and despairing, and of thieves and dwarfs,
>
> Voices of cycles of preparation and accretion,
>
> And of the threads that connect the stars—and of wombs, and of the fatherstuff,
>
> And of the rights of them the others are down upon,
>
> Of the trivial and flat and foolish and despised,
>
> Of fog in the air and beetles rolling balls of dung.[16]

With just as much sympathy, Townes also sang about prostitutes, drunks, beggars, knaves, fools, lovers, thieves, and many others in desperate circumstances. Like Whitman, he saw the similarities between himself and others, and his poetry reminds us that we all deserve understanding, forgiveness, and, yes, a few prayers.

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When Townes performed on those three nights in July of 1973, knowing that his friend Earl Willis would be recording him, he was in peak form. At the age of 29, Townes was already an extraordinary poet, composer, singer, and guitarist—and it was all on display. But what makes *Live at the Old Quarter* such a vital album is that he harnesses that talent, exercising artistic restraint to ensure it never undermines what he wants to express. One never gets the sense that Townes is showing off. His virtuosity remains understated, even minimalistic. He never does more than is necessary, and one must listen attentively to appreciate his guitar-picking prowess and lyrical genius. Never performing for his own aggrandizement, Townes preserves the raw integrity of his songs, and that is why they endure to this day.

Using a portable four-track recorder and low-impedance microphones, Willis recorded 44 different songs—most of them more than once—over those three nights. Townes mostly performed his own compositions, songs rooted in the folk and blues traditions, ranging from soulful ballads to raucous foot-stompers. Willis selected 27 cuts for editing and eventual inclusion on what would become a double album. These recordings would remain in limbo for over three years in large part because Townes's manager, Kevin Eggers, did not recognize that this was art of the highest order. Hoping Townes would make another studio album, he showed no interest in doing anything with the Old Quarter recordings until 1976. But the regulars who packed into the Old Quarter on those nights, bearing the heat and faulty air-

conditioner, understood that they were in the presence of genius. Slouching slightly on his stool, picking at his guitar, and singing with his eyes closed, he held his audience in thrall. After a flawless rendering of "Pancho and Lefty," he said, "Man, I've never heard it that quiet in here before."[17] One can only wonder how many souls he saved.

Maybe—just maybe—one of Natasha's descendants was among the saved who either saw Townes at the Old Quarter in 1973 or, at the very least, listened to the album that came out of those transcendent performances. For they capture the essence of that perfect evening of dance and music at "Uncle's" joyous home, where Natasha channels the spirit of the Russian people. Natasha's dance and Townes's "Pancho and Lefty" become one, the apotheosis of authenticity.

[1] See Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (New York: Signet Classic, 1968), 614-621. For more on the significance of this scene in the broader context of Russian cultural history, see Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002).

[2] Tolstoy, 678.

[3] Van Zandt quoted in Harold F. Eggers, Jr., *My Years with Townes Van Zandt* (Milwaukee, WI: Backbeat Books, 2018), 177; Van Zandt quoted in John Kruth, *To Live's to Fly* (New York: De Capo Press, 2007), 17; Van Zandt quoted in Bill Flanagan, "Ragged Company," *Musician*, August 1995. See also Robert Earl Hardy, *A Deeper Blue* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 2008), 148.

[4] Guy Clark quoted in Brian T. Atkinson, *I'll Be Here in the Morning* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 13.

[5] Dawson quoted in John Kruth, *To Live's to Fly*, 168-169.

[6] See Paul K., "High, Low, and in Between." *New Times* (Los Angeles), January 16-22, 1997.

[7] Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 2.

[8] Ibid., 11.

[9] Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self-Reliance" (1841), last modified April 29, 2022, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16643/16643-h/16643-h.htm#SELF-RELIANCE.

[10] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 20-22, 47.

[11] Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 22-23, 41, 48.

[12] Townes Van Zandt quoted in John Kruth, *To Live's to Fly*, 63.

[13] Townes Van Zandt quoted in Margaret Brown (director), *Be Here to Love Me* (2004).

[14] It would pain Townes to see the homeless and the down-on-their-luck, and he would often hand them all the money in his wallet without thinking about it. His first wife remembers him even bringing a homeless man to their apartment. See Michael Hall, "The Great, Late Townes Van Zandt," *Texas Monthly*, March 1, 1998.

[15] Townes Van Zandt, "Pancho and Lefty," *For the Sake of the Song* (Houston, TX: Wings Press, 1977), 15.

[16] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: First and "Death-Bed" Editions* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2004), 90, 52-53. These verses are from the First Edition, originally published in 1855.

[17] Townes Van Zandt, "Pancho and Lefty," *Live at the Old Quarter* (Fat Possum Records, 1977).

Remembering P. Adams Sitney

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I do not know exactly when I first “met” P. Adams Sitney. He was present at Yale University, when he organized the world premiere of Stan Brakhage’s four-hour silent film, *The Art of Vision*, screened there over several days, likely early 1966. I came to New Haven to see it. I was 18. There was also a private screening; Brakhage had brought some other films with him, including *Fire of Waters* and the first ten of his 8mm *Songs*. I was able to talk to Brakhage a bit, and asked him a question or two, but I don’t think I spoke to P. Adams.

We did have some phone conversations a few years later related to bringing Brakhage and Peter Kubelka to show their films at the MIT Film Society, which I had co-founded. It was only when Sitney began to teach at NYU Cinema Studies in the early 1970s, where I had become a graduate student, that we began to talk. His courses were always excellent, and the scope of his erudition gradually emerged, uncolored by the slightest bit of performative display. If we were discussing a text in an English translation, he would usually have the original with him, and only when a point of interpretation was raised would he elucidate nuances of meaning in the German word we were puzzling over.

Henri Langlois and P. Adams Sitney in Jonas Mekas’ He Stands in the Desert Counting the Seconds of His Life

A few years later, after he had resigned in anger from NYU ("If any student wants to get in touch with me, tell them I have gone to Tierra del Fuego"), I was able to bring him to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where I had moved to teach. He flew in from New York once a week. Discontented with traditional academia, he enjoyed the quirkiness of art students, once mentioning, after he began to also teach at Princeton, that he felt he fit in a bit too easily there.

The 1970s and 1980s were, for some of us, a troubled time in film academia. Most colleges had not taught cinema at all in prior years, except for those few that had taught filmmaking. Now nearly every college was starting a film department and hiring film faculty. Yet the existing methods for discussing film were, to put it charitably, rather unsophisticated, as evidenced by some of the academic papers published in the 1960s. Many professors knew this was a problem. Some understood that that *they* were part of the problem. There were methods established in fields such as art history and comparative literature; not so in film studies. So there was an urgent search for approaches, and many young academics borrowed from then-current French theory, sometimes applying ideas rather mechanically, even incoherently.

P. Adams once told me about delivering a paper on Dziga Vertov at a conference. When he finished, one academic in the audience commented something like, "I was interested in your paper, but I was unclear as to which methodology you were using." He replied, "My methodology is known as thinking about the subject."

That "methodology" is evident in his writing. Best known for attending to the neglected field of "experimental" or avant-garde film, he brought insights from a variety of disciplines, including rhetoric, art history, and comparative literature, and his choice of which to draw on always seemed based on what was most appropriate to the points he wanted to make about the films under discussion. Unlike many film academics, he took films as his primary text. His writing about a film might combine some description, careful close analysis, statements by the filmmaker, comments by other critics, and related insights from other fields, and he could stitch these together rather beautifully. The combination of his intelligence and knowledge and his focus on the films themselves makes his writing and teaching of exemplary value.

While he rarely praised the films he wrote about, it was also evident from his writing that he chose them, and approached them, out of love. Other academics often chose films to write on for a variety of reasons other than aesthetic merit, and of course it is legitimate to do so. Still, when Sitney wrote about filmmakers such as Brakhage and Kubelka, he made an implicit recognized of their greatness as artists part of his writing. Of course, he also knew that they had almost no reputations — it was, indeed, his writing that helped give them one — at a time when to the uninitiated their films could seem not only intellectually obscure but difficult to view: "a headache" from their rapid movements and editing was a common complaint in those early years. Sitney was friends with both, knew that they were often without funds, and so felt that it was important to make the case for their work that he already believed in, and did so, brilliantly.

There was a fundamental modesty to Sitney's character and thinking that may not have been apparent at first. He wrote in a clear and authoritative voice. He enjoyed talking about his ideas, and did so forcefully, sometimes at length. Listening to a comment he found lacking, he could be nastier than in the example I mentioned above — though I never saw any nastiness directed at a student. On the first day of a course he taught on Brakhage, who aside from being a prolific filmmaker wrote on film extensively, Sitney said something like, "There are probably no important insights into Brakhage that he has not already stated." Since Sitney had already written on Brakhage himself, had broken bitterly with him ending their friendship years earlier, and could be quite critical of Brakhage's personal character, I was greatly impressed. More importantly, as someone who has been involved with and written on Brakhage's films for most of my life, I find Sitney largely correct in this.

It is not widely known that Sitney was not "only" a film professor. He had a deep knowledge of, and, dare I say it, love for, philosophy, literature, visual art, architecture, and classical music, and found ways to teach many of these at Princeton. Late in his life he spent some weeks traveling in France to visit Romanesque cathedrals. In his last few years he was rereading all of Plato, for pleasure. Visiting Istanbul, I discovered an amazingly great sixteenth century architect, Mimar Sinan, and spent wonderful hours at two of his mosques. I later learned that P. Adams had been to more than ten of them. Acutely aware of the problems of translations, he could read in ancient Greek, Latin, French, German, and Italian — and, for all I know, more.

The scholar I knew as a friend was not someone to make greatest film lists, or lists of any kind. He once suggested Brakhage, Dreyer, and Tarkovsky as among the very greatest of filmmakers. Ten years ago, I thought I was taking a risk by asking whether he could tell me his favorite writers. He answered without hesitation: Homer, Plato, Virgil, Dante, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Balzac, Whitman, Melville, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Proust. Noting some omissions, I cautiously inquired, "What about Milton?" "Milton is very great." "What about Joyce?" "Joyce is very great."

The reader will note that his is not the list one might expect from a professor specializing in avant-garde film. It is also a list that is unfashionable today. It's perhaps not really complete either; he once called George Eliot's *Middlemarch* his favorite novel. I risk revealing my own unfashionableness by saying that had I met Sitney knowing nothing of cinema, I would take the film recommendation of a lover of Homer and Shakespeare with particular seriousness. He cherished what increasingly seem to be regarded as older values: nuanced thinking, complexity

of argument, powerfully constructed forms.

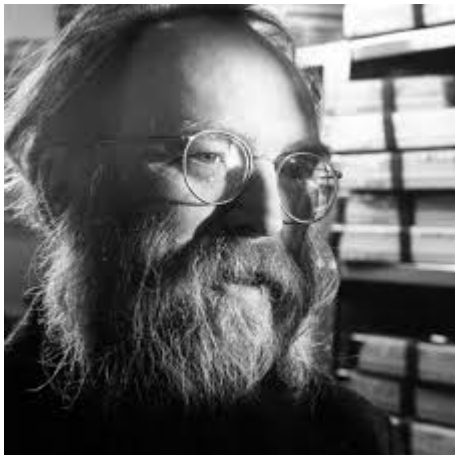
I occasionally reflected on his list. Eventually, I asked him about the criteria that would admit Shakespeare and Proust and exclude Milton and Joyce. His immediate answer: “Depth of humanity.” My own bias is toward the beauty of form as something impossible to translate, though then I try to do so. I had been looking forward to discussing all this with him, but then he died. Certainly he would have defended his view admirably. That certainty is reinforced by the many varieties of human experience he elucidated in the films he wrote on.

A Tribute to P. Adams Sitney

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2

The fact that the Princeton professor most intensely committed to introducing students to the ancient legacies of European and American literature, to Homer and Tacitus, Aeschylus and Dante, should have been the world's foremost scholar of avant-garde film can be explained solely with respect to the unique path in life and writing that P. Adams Sitney cleared for himself. He began his undergraduate years at Yale as a student of Sanskrit, devoting himself to Classics and Comparative Literature. For him, as for his friend Guy Davenport, after Pound and Olson, the engagement with the archaic was to remain inseparable from a commitment to the most radical forms of expression in film and poetry.

P. Adams and I met in 2001 in a seminar at Princeton taught by Giorgio Agamben, who was then visiting. Agamben taught the first six weeks of the course; I did my best to continue on my own after he left. Students and auditors came from across the university and from other institutions to hear Agamben. P. Adams, whose astonishingly broad intellectual interests included contemporary European philosophy, attended the seminar as a faculty member, according to the almost unheard-of habit that he developed of sitting in regularly on courses taught by his colleagues. When Agamben returned to Italy and I took over the seminar, all the non-registered participants stopped attending, as was to be expected. P. Adams was the exception. We became friends.



In the next years, I came to learn that being the exception was the rule for P. Adams. At Princeton, he was the only professor appointed to teach the history of cinema. Despite the fact that he was a scholar of towering international stature, having published his first, much-discussed book, *Visionary Film* in 1974, before obtaining a PhD, despite the fact that his writing had been translated into many European and Asian languages, he was the only scholar at Princeton who had chosen to belong a department for practising artists and creative writers, the Program in Visual Arts. He felt out of place, as he would often say, among "professional academics." He had a unique drive to introduce the Humanities to undergraduates. For years, I co-taught freshman courses with him on ancient and medieval literature, art, religion, and philosophy. Alongside our students, I learned from P. Adams about Aristophanes, Ovid, classical and medieval painting, sculpture, architecture, theology, and the Bible. P. Adams discussed all those subjects with erudition, yet also with absolute humility, his lectures intermittently punctuated by unforgettable comedic insights. In those years, when he was raising his two younger daughters single-handedly with the utmost devotion, he seemed – almost magically – at once infinitely available for students and always present for friends.

P. Adams was tireless in teaching the history of film and the theory and poetics of filmmakers. Because of his commitment to showing students cinema in the medium in which it was conceived, he saw to it that Princeton became a place where, each week, anyone could discover or see again extraordinary films by Dreyer, Brakhage, Straub-Huillet, Deren, Markopoulos, Bresson, Warhol, Hsiao-hsien, Menken, Tarkovsky, Frampton. (I was such a lucky "anyone.") P. Adams also regularly invited artists and filmmakers to the University to show and discuss their films, welcoming Peter Kubelka, Yvonne Rainer, Robert Beavers, Morgan Fisher, Nathaniel Dorsky, and Ernie Gehr. P. Adams thereby offered students, professors, and people in the area the chance to learn about those artists' work and the vital commitments that sustained them.

For P. Adams was sensitive, as no scholar I have known, to the existential challenges that a creative life puts to the maker. From the years when he began collecting films as a teenager and Jonas Mekas entrusted him with the task of introducing European audiences to the work of the New American Cinema, he developed an almost religious respect for the ethics of the artist. Hence his lifelong commitment to supporting films and writing that, without him, might never have been seen or read – from his crucial early effort to make Blanchot's prose available in

English to the founding role he played at Anthology Film Archives, to his uninterrupted dedication to filmmakers whom he knew for decades or whom he met later in life, who have yet to receive the attention that they deserve. Hence, too, the extreme generosity and encouragement that he never ceased to show younger and older poets, writers, and scholars. P. Adams was a critic for whom criticism consists not in discussing what there is to see and to read, as is often assumed today, but in judging, as the root of the word “criticism” suggests: in calling our attention to what, without the critic’s intuition, might well escape our notice – and in cultivating the sensitivity to what is most remarkable, most provocative, and most nourishing in it.

The ancient historian Polybius once remarked that “it can happen that by ignorance and lack of judgment, many people are not, so to speak, where they are, and they do not see what they see.” With an energy and enthusiasm that only death could extinguish, P. Adams never stopped pointing us to the unknown places where we are, showing us what we have yet to see.

This piece was originally written for Anthology Film Archives on June 12, 2025.

John Swanson Jacobs’ The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2

A TRUE STORY OF SLAVERY

THE UNITED STATES GOVERNED BY SIX HUNDRED THOUSAND DESPOTS

A Rediscovered Narrative

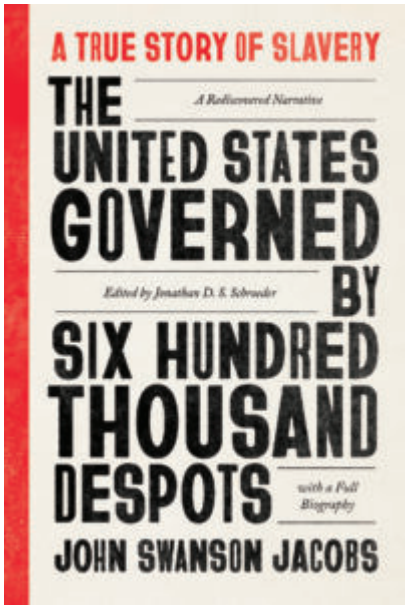
Edited by Jonathan D. S. Schroeder

with a Full Biography

JOHN SWANSON JACOBS

The United States Governed by Six Hundred Thousand Despots: A True Story of Slavery (1855) exemplifies—both in its content and reception— the kind of uncomfortable, status quo-defying denunciation which is subjected to erasure, suppression, or misrepresentation. Even though its questions and provocations about 19th-century American slave society have never truly been addressed by the systems that followed, its recent rediscovery offers us an opportunity to (re-)engage with its damning indictment of the United States.

In this pithy text (its most recent publication takes up only 73 pages) which reads more like a manifesto than a standard slave autobiography, a formerly enslaved man who simply identifies himself as a Fugitive Slave pinpoints the moral hypocrisy that allows for slavery to thrive with the explicit support of the legal and religious institutions in the so-called "land of the free". In condemning the Constitution as "the bulwark of American slavery," the Fugitive Slave also deconstructs the false binaries that obscure the cross-party/state/institutional collaborations in support of this slavery, which he decries as the "unnatural offspring from hell".



In the 21st century when many USians have been led to believe that they can only exercise their will by voting for one of two neoliberal parties, neither of whom represent their interests, there is a need to broaden the horizon of possibilities for those who want their nation's laws to truly represent "the will of the people". The Fugitive Slave's claim that "the only hope of abolition of slavery is in separation from the Union" is not a nihilistic/cynical resignation to the oppressive status quo, but an affirmation of something more than merely settling for a "lesser evil". People often cite the abolition of legalized slavery to challenge the need for complete separation from the Union, downplaying the fact that the persistence of slavery as punishment for a crime became yet another means to re-enslave Africans. The effect of this enduring loophole in the 13th Amendment underscores the Fugitive Slave's assertion that legal and moral appeals against deeply entrenched systems of subjugation are a futile endeavor. Since 1855, liberal reforms have chipped away at oppressive systems without dismantling them, and in the wake of the largest wave of legal reforms, people of African descent are still mired in inequities and, in many ways, are worse off. In light of his call for complete separation from the

settler-colony as the only viable path to liberation, it is worth reconsidering his argument today. The Fugitive Slave's argument for liberation, long dismissed as too "radical," remains as urgent as ever. Liberation has to be a courageous pursuit, and readers of the narrative are urged to fearlessly embrace mortality in the quest for dignity and true freedom.

Jonathan D.S. Schroeder's rediscovery and publication of *The United States governed by 600,000 despots: a true story of slavery: a rediscovered narrative, with a full biography* (published May 2024 by University of Chicago Press) is undeniably significant and commendable; unfortunately this august event is tempered by Schroeder's editorial changes, which have overwhelmed the original text and significantly altered its meaning. This review will therefore evaluate the original text as it was first presented—anonymously and fugitively—before separately considering Schroeder's editorial modifications. Such a distinction is necessary to honor the integrity of the original work, which was largely ignored when it was first published, and to resist the co-optation of radical narratives by contemporary scholarly apparatuses.

Un/Making the Fugitive Slave

"Since I cannot forget that I was a slave, I will not forget those that are slaves" (p. 73).

Setting aside Schroeder's endnotes which immediately disclose the author's identity, the reader is struck by the narrative's byline: "by a Fugitive Slave." The fact that the Australian newspaper chose not to modify this attribution and maintained this preferred authorship (they even mention it in the foregrounding editor's note) emphasizes that this approach was not just an oversight but a meaningful editorial and rhetorical decision. The astute reader may notice that the narrator inadvertently (or maybe it wasn't?) identifies himself by name when he recounts his escape, so why was this name not used for attributing authorship? After all, most well-known narratives written in the 19th century by Africans were published with the authors' names prominently displayed as a way to lend credibility to their accounts and make them more powerful as testimonies against slavery. There may have been some lesser-known narratives or accounts which might have used pseudonyms or initial anonymity to protect the author or others involved from retribution, especially if they were published before the abolition of slavery. (In some ways, this narrative was one of those lesser known ones, so that could be true…) There may be a case for this interpretation, given that the reinforced Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 (reinforced from the 1793 version) had made it such that there was "not a state, a city, nor a town left as a refuge for the hunted slave." But there's a stronger case that his choice to withhold his name from the byline and leave his identity somewhat open to interpretation reflects a strategic and intentional approach to narrative authorship, serving to underscore the duality of visibility and anonymity. Even when his name is revealed in a specific context, the overall framing of the narrative still prioritizes his identity as a fugitive, centering the lived reality and urgency of his escape rather than merely providing a personal account for consumption.

Far from distancing himself from his enslaved past or using his newfound freedom as a

platform for personal promotion, the author of “600,000 Despots” embraces the identity of Fugitive Slave as a badge of honor. Rather than aiming to present himself as a “respectable” figure, a freed man who had overcome his origins—something that would have been easy for him to do given that his “complexion would be hardly noticeable among the average specimens of the English face”—the Fugitive Slave’s self-identification reinforces his solidarity with the enslaved and emphasizes his commitment to “blot that out of existence which stands between man and his rights…the world and its progress”. His words, “Since I cannot forget that I was a slave, I will not forget those that are slaves,” suggest that he knew his freedom is inseparable from the fate of others still held captive. The Fugitive Slave then becomes a communal figure, representing both an individual path to freedom and an unbreakable connection to those who still “wear a tyrant’s chain”.

This stance aligns with the ethos of fugitivity found in the work of scholars like Fred Moten and Saidiya Hartman, which embodies not just physical flight but an existential rejection of the imposed limits of captivity and dehumanization. Hartman, in “Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America”, highlights how the figure of the fugitive refuses the terms of domination, taking on a unique agency that neither fully submits to nor ever fully escapes the forces of oppression. The Fugitive Slave exists in a liminal space, simultaneously outside the bounds of enslavement while bearing the indelible mark of the hunted, and remains compelled to disrupt the social order that categorizes his freedom aspirations as “criminal” and “pathological”. In refusing a conventional, respectable identity and instead foregrounding his legal status as a fugitive slave, the author of *600,000 Despots* asserts at the outset his solidarity with and responsibility to those who remain oppressed.

The attribution of authorship to the Fugitive Slave, rather than a specific figure (as Schroeder imposes on this re-publication) therefore transforms the story from a simple personal account of slavery into a powerful collective condemnation of America’s contradictions—legal, religious, and moral (or rather, its hypocrisy). This deliberate refusal (in the original version, at least) to be confined to a singular autobiographical account (as the edited version does) amplifies the narrative’s reach across space and time, inviting readers to confront the broader, shared, persistent reality of enslavement within the Union. It is a defiant strategy: by emphasizing the systemic rather than the individual, the Fugitive Slave resists the liberal conceit that progress can be achieved through incremental, surface-level changes. The narrative then stands as a testament to an unyielding demand for justice, compelling readers to acknowledge the intertwined brutality and dehumanization that slavery perpetuates and to recognize the complicity embedded in American ideals.

The Co-Constitution of Brutality and Slavery: Turning the Eye to the Oppressors

The Fugitive Slave’s life under slavery was shaped by an early and profound hatred for the institution that was instilled by his father, a hatred which he was unprepared to conceal, and which led to frequent conflicts and punishments. His hatred was understandable, as the brutal realities of slavery made him aware that the enslaved were denied the very basic dignities of family life and self-determination. The goings-on of slaves were subject to the financial whims

of slaveowners, and many slaves were stripped of their children, parents, and spouses if the master decreed so. This, perhaps, was a primary lesson in the dehumanizing power of slavery: no part of Black life, no family structure, no intimacy, was beyond its reach.

Despite highlighting how slavery was dehumanizing, and his own experiences of witnessing countless acts of violence, his descriptions of excessive acts of cruelty against the enslaved comprise less than a tenth of the book. By decentering the extreme expressions of slavery's violence, the Fugitive Slave refused to cater to the voyeuristic tendencies of white abolitionists, whose desire to dwell on the spectacle of extreme violence often bordered on the prurient. This is because he wanted to highlight the mundane, routine nature of slavery's violence: the total control over the enslaved person's body, the denial of family bonds, forced labor, surveillance, and the constant suppression of autonomy and dignity. He insisted that "brutality is inseparable from slavery" not because of the excesses, but because of the fundamentally violent, constitutive nature of slavery. Perhaps this is why a later publication of this narrative edits out many of these critiques.

Hypocrisy of Euro-American Christianity / Unctuous Piety of Northerners

One of the narrative's most provocative points is that the North's moral high ground was an illusory attempt to evade culpability by touting their non-slaveholding status while benefiting economically and politically from the slave system. The non-slaveholding whites often adopted a posture of helplessness, presenting themselves as morally opposed to slavery yet bound by the rule of law so that they could claim moral superiority and innocence while actively upholding the structures of slavery. Despite their supposed distaste for the institution, these individuals rarely risked their own safety and privilege by offering sanctuary to fugitives, or by resisting the Fugitive Slave Act, which mandated the return of escaped enslaved people to their so-called owners. The Fugitive Slave did not validate this performance of helplessness in his narrative, and called out the Northerners. He argued that rather than undermining slavery, their complicity helped to preserve a system that benefited even those who did not directly own slaves, exposing the insincerity of their moral posturing.

The Fugitive Slave also delivered a sharp rebuke to white Christians who, while professing faith in a gospel of love and equality, justified or ignored the oppression of enslaved Africans. He exposed the deep hypocrisy of these individuals and institutions, pointing out that their commitment to Christian teachings was often overridden by a desire to maintain economic and social dominance. While these so-called Christians recited Biblical principles condemning oppression and cruelty, they simultaneously rationalized slavery as either a "necessary evil" or, even more disturbingly, as a benevolent system benefiting the enslaved. Many white Christians in both the North and South maintained a façade of piety while cooperating in the capture and return of those fleeing bondage. By supporting or ignoring such laws, they showed a clear prioritization of earthly gains over spiritual principles. This selective application of their faith reflects what the Fugitive Slave saw as a worship of Mammon—a fixation on wealth, status, and economic power that directly contradicts Christian teachings of compassion and equality. By elevating their material interests above spiritual imperatives, they effectively placed capitalism

and racial domination at the center of their moral framework, while relegating their professed Christian values to a rhetorical tool used to soothe their consciences. But the Fugitive invokes Matthew 6:24 to remind these white Christians that “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

The Fugitive Slave’s critique remains relevant today, where wealth drives political influence, and those in power prioritize economic interests over genuine public service. Just as 19th-century Christians justified slavery to protect their social standing, today’s leaders often sacrifice integrity for the favor of wealthy donors, showing that the worship of Mammon still shapes American governance.

THE CONSTITUTION AS A BULWARK OF SLAVERY: A Black Radical Legacy of Legal Critique

One of the most unique aspects of the narrative is the legal critique that the Fugitive mounts. He exposes the legal apparatus upholding slavery as a national institution embedded within American laws and federal mandates, including the Constitution itself. In its broader implications, “600,000” is a powerful precursor to the work of Derrick Bell and other critical legal scholars. Bell’s concept of “interest convergence” suggests that the legal system’s concessions to Black people occur only when it serves white interests. Reflecting on his own experiences as a civil rights lawyer in Faces at the Bottom of the Well, Bell came to the sobering conclusion that even post-integration United States could not deliver (in fact, it could only impede) genuine liberation for Black Americans because even the “converged” interests are ultimately harmful for Black people. The Fugitive Slave shares this skepticism about an earlier iteration of American society, recognizing that appeals to American law are futile within a system built on Black exploitation and exclusion. He notes how terms like “slave” are strategically avoided in legal texts, obscuring the direct endorsement of slavery while preserving all its brutal, exploitative mechanics.

Condemnation of Slaveholders and Non-Slaveholders Alike

Through his sharp critique, the Fugitive Slave expands the circle of culpability far beyond individual slaveholders, implicating every white citizen who upholds laws that sustain the institution. The fugitive’s condemnation of gradual emancipation reflects this broader critique: any delay or compromise with slavery, he argues, only perpetuates the system’s inherent wrongness, allowing “a lingering death” to claim “the last glimmer of hope that cheered their [the enslaved’s] sinking souls.” Slavery, in his words, was not just a collection of abuses but a totalizing force that eroded every aspect of life.

The narrative incisively critiques the false binaries propagated by the supposed divisions between a pro-slavery South and an antislavery North, or a proslavery state and an antislavery church. It dismantles the myth that one side of these dichotomies embodies justice or moral high ground, exposing the complicity of both state and religious institutions in the brutal

system of slavery. The Fugitive Slave underscores that legal and religious justifications for slavery do not differ in essence; both uphold a system of subjugation that is fundamentally violent and oppressive. This critique resonates beyond the immediate context of slavery, inviting reflection on modern political dynamics. His argument suggests that merely choosing the lesser of two evils does not disrupt oppressive structures but rather entrenches them, echoing the frustrations many feel with the limitations of our current two-party system.

Constructing Abolition Through Complete Cleavage: American Liberalism as Anathema to Freedom

The Fugitive's cynicism about United States politics echoes the arguments later put forth by radical abolitionists who argued that true abolition could only be achieved through disunion, a stance seen as dangerously radical at the time. Rather than seeking to negotiate gradual emancipation, these people asserted that any compromise with slaveholders perpetuated slavery's legacy and influence. This Fugitive Slave similarly advocates for a complete and immediate dismantling of these structures, asserting that gradual abolitionism would merely facilitate a transition between modes of oppression. Refusing to compromise was not simply an idealistic commitment to certain moral principles, but also a strategically informed stance.

Furthermore, this narrative implicitly critiques liberalism, which professes equality, freedom, and universal rights but in practice enforces and justifies oppression. Liberalism's contradiction, as scholars like David Graeber and David Wengrow argue in *The Dawn of Everything*, is not a byproduct of misalignment between theory and practice; rather, it is intrinsic to liberalism's foundations. Emerging partly as a response to Indigenous critiques of feudalism and capitalism, liberalism presents a veneer of high ideals, allowing European powers to deflect criticism of their exploitative practices. This Fugitive Slave foreshadows such critiques by showing that American liberalism's lofty rhetoric about freedom obscures its deep entrenchment in the institution of slavery. Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* offers a contemporary perspective that parallels the Fugitive's critique of moderate abolitionism. Hartman argues that emancipation negotiations paved the way for systemic adjustments rather than liberation, transitioning from overt slavery to equally binding systems of racialized control. The Fugitive Slave foreshadows Hartman's view, pinpointing the true radicalism required for meaningful change and exposing how liberal institutions fail to secure genuine freedom.

The Fugitive's own escape from slavery exemplifies this uncompromising stance. His final act of defiance, boldly leaving behind a letter that simply stated, "I have left you not to return," demonstrates his rejection of any obligation to the enslaver, even one who had shown him a degree of "kindness." By walking out of his master's rooms and onto a ship, the fugitive seized his freedom, no longer willing to play the part of a deferential servant. Signing his note "no longer yours" makes a clear declaration that freedom could never be a "gift" from the enslaver but was something he had claimed for himself. This defiant act, an unyielding repudiation of both bondage and benevolence from a master, underscores his view that freedom could not be negotiated or granted piecemeal. His unshakeable conviction—that true freedom means to

never again compromise with those who seek to dominate—serves as a striking critique of any half-measures or gradualist approach to liberation.

Modern liberal institutions have conditioned us to believe that our freedoms are gifts bestowed by the very systems that subjugate the oppressed, creating an illusion of gratitude toward structures that perpetuate inequity. This dynamic is exemplified by French President Emmanuel Macron's recent assertion that Sahel states should express gratitude for France's military interventions, suggesting that without such support, these nations might have lost their sovereignty. Such statements perpetuate the narrative that liberation is granted by external powers, diverting attention from the underlying systems of oppression and control. By framing freedoms as concessions—rights "granted" rather than inherent—these institutions instill a sense of dependency on their authority. This perspective constrains our understanding of freedom as something conditional, revocable, and bound to the rules of the system rather than intrinsic to our existence. Similarly, people often cling to familiar systems and ideas, even if those systems are uncomfortable or repressive. The known feels secure because it offers predictable patterns, while the unknown is unsettling and filled with uncertainty. This attachment to familiarity can be deeply psychological and sociocultural. Systems of power, like liberalism, exploit this inclination by presenting themselves as the only stable "reality," framing alternatives as impractical, risky, or even dangerous. Yet, as the Fugitive Slave exemplified with his bold declaration of "no longer yours" to his former enslaver, true liberation lies in renouncing this dependency and refusing to identify with structures that thrive on exploitation and control. To claim our freedom authentically, we must not only sever our psychological allegiance to these institutions but also act in ways that defy the limits they impose. Embracing a mindset of self-sovereignty means recognizing that freedom cannot be granted or taken away by external authorities; it must be asserted, reclaimed, and embodied as an inherent right, independent of any system's approval.

In addition to his legal and religious critiques, the Fugitive Slave mounts a robust argument against the notion of freedom as something that can be "granted." He insists that freedom must be seized by the enslaved rather than received as a gift, echoing later anti-colonial thinkers like Che Guevara, who once asserted, "I am not a liberator. Liberators do not exist. The people liberate themselves." This philosophy also finds resonance in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which warns against revolutionaries who attempt to deliver liberation "from above." Freire and Amilcar Cabral argue that for true liberation, people must actively engage in their own freedom struggles; only then can they achieve meaningful autonomy. By seizing his freedom and refusing to allow benevolent abolitionists to purchase his freedom for him, the Fugitive Slave challenges the paternalism embedded in narratives of emancipation. This defiant self-liberation—particularly when compared to figures like Frederick Douglass, whose freedom was purchased and who eventually adopted a more conciliatory stance towards the United States—allowed him to maintain a staunch, uncompromising stance toward the United States even as a free man.

He challenges the assumption that freedom should be something negotiable within established legal or institutional frameworks. By portraying both the state and the church as intertwined

forces that affirm each other's lies, he asserts that subjugation cannot be meaningfully debated or reformed from within. This critique is particularly relevant when examining today's systems that claim moral or legal authority but perpetuate exploitation and harm. The implication is clear: genuine change cannot arise from appealing to institutions that are inherently designed to sustain power imbalances. This insistence on questioning the entire system calls us to recognize how contemporary politics, too, often offers superficial alternatives without addressing deeper injustices.

The narrative's call for resistance, unmediated by political or religious permission, remains powerfully resonant. By rejecting the notion that a corrupt system can be reformed from within, he invites us to reimagine what it means to seek freedom—free from compromises that prioritize the comfort of the powerful over the dignity of the oppressed.

It also has many implications for our current moment of US politics, in which voters are choosing between the two dominant parties who both support the genocide of the Palestinians, and enacting a never-ending war in the middle east. So many thinkers have arrived at the realization that liberalism's promise of "freedom" or "equality" is hollow, yet there's this pull to believe that reforms within the system can achieve real change. The Fugitive and other radical abolitionists knew it in the 1800's, Derrick Bell realized in the 1990's, and we know now the futility of liberal reforms. The system's capacity to repackage its goals makes it seem like incremental improvements are within reach. It has this way of presenting liberal values as the only conceivable framework for progress, as if anything outside those bounds is "too radical" or "unrealistic." This not only silences alternative ways of thinking but also co-opts the energy of those who seek change. The result is a repetitive cycle where efforts to "reform" just reinforce the status quo. So refusing to support genocide enablers through the vote is considered "unrealistic," but also challenging these genocidaires by validating their hegemony is the only conceivable way of securing change (a change that will never come).

When it seems like reform is happening, it's often because the system itself benefits. Civil rights, for example, were made palatable when they also served to stabilize the U.S.'s image globally. And yet, these gains didn't fundamentally alter the structures that perpetuate racial and economic inequality. So people keep returning to the system, hoping for different results but being met with the same limitations. We are caught on a hamster wheel of liberal reformism, attempting to escape a maze that is designed to keep us looping back to the start. Breaking free might mean shifting entirely away from these systems and mindsets that keep us in the loop, or it could simply mean rejecting the rat race. The challenge is imagining and building outside of these confines, but maybe there's power in the sheer act of recognizing the wheel for what it is.

Legacy of Armed Resistance and Revolutionary Suicide

The slave narrative powerfully asserts the inevitability of resistance to slavery, invoking a call for liberation by any means necessary. This ethos resonates with the spirit of the Haitian Revolution, the militant strategies of John Brown, and the uncompromising stance of figures

like Martin Delany, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers. Such figures and movements have long recognized that freedom cannot be handed over by the oppressor but must be seized, often through forceful struggle. The narrative's acknowledgment of this unrelenting resistance speaks to a legacy where people of African descent, along with their militant allies, have consistently understood the necessity of confronting and dismantling systems of bondage through collective and sometimes revolutionary action.

The Fugitive Slave narrative offers a profound meditation on death as both an escape from bondage and a dignified assertion of humanity. The enslaved person's relationship to death is marked by a paradoxical embrace of mortality: not as a defeat, but as a final liberation from oppression. Statements like "death frees the slave from his chains" encapsulate this sentiment, positioning death as the ultimate release from an existence defined by the brutality and inhumanity of slavery. This understanding complicates conventional fears of death, suggesting that the enslaved hold a unique willingness to face mortality if it means securing freedom or at least escaping the clutches of enslavement.

When the Fugitive says he would choose "liberty with a cannibal, rather than slavery with a professed Christian", what he is underscoring the lingering spiritual and physical death of slavery. This philosophy underscores a radical reimagining of life and death, where existence itself holds value only if it is lived free from tyranny. Here, the narrative resonates with Norman Ajari's reflections on Black people's complex relationship with death, where the pursuit of dignity may necessitate a readiness to die rather than submit to ongoing subjugation. When Frantz Fanon observes in A Dying Colonialism that resistance fighters would boldly embrace their mortality in the struggle against colonial powers, when George Jackson proudly declares his brother's death to be a martyrdom in the fight for true freedom, they were reflecting the recognition among freedom fighters across the ages that true freedom is worth the ultimate sacrifice. Death comes for us all. We might as well embrace it.

The existential shift—from death as something to be avoided to something to be wielded—represents a radical transformation in the collective psyche of the oppressed. For Black people, this reorientation is not a passive acceptance of mortality but an active choice to face down the specter of death with resolve, knowing that the fight for liberation may demand it. Rather than letting death be an instrument of subjugation, it becomes a means of self-determination—a refusal to live a life dictated by subjugation and fear.

Today, even as people lament that the "lesser evil" didn't win, the Fugitive's words remind us that the lesser evil is still, after all, evil. We still live under the shadow of the same compromises, governed by a system that, while reshaped, remains bound to its origins in exploitation and subjugation. If his vision of liberation sounded extreme in 1855, it now feels prophetic, raising hard questions about our present reformist approaches. Instead of building ramparts higher, as he put it, and extending the life of unjust systems, his words challenge us to ask if true freedom requires something more radical.

In light of the path chosen by the Union—non-transformative abolition without dismantling the

structures, including the Constitution, that enabled slavery—his cautionary words resonate even more deeply today. Writing in 1855, he warned against ending slavery without also ending the United States as it was then constituted, recognizing the futility of freedom within a system built on subjugation. The civil war would indeed bring emancipation, but not the liberation he envisioned. Now, as we witness the limited returns on integration and reform, his skepticism toward system-bound solutions feels prescient. Rather than doubling down on approaches that have repeatedly fallen short, perhaps his words invite us to question the wisdom of relying on half-measures that only extend the life of oppressive structures.

No Longer Fugitive: The Re-Covering of a Rediscovered Narrative

Despite Jonathan D.S. Schroeder's stated goal of "supplementing rather than supervising [the Fugitive Slave's] own words…[in order] to create a model for undoing the Black message/white envelope structure of the slave narrative," it is not evident to this reviewer how (if at all) Schroeder meets this goal (p. 78). In *The United States governed by six hundred thousand despots: a true story of slavery: a rediscovered narrative, with a full biography*, the Fugitive Slave is identified as John Swanson Jacobs, the brother of Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*), and one-time companion of Frederick Douglass. Schroeder provides a lengthy introduction and a comprehensive nine-generation biography of the Fugitive Slave and his family. While this biography undeniably adds context and depth to the world in which the Fugitive Slave lived, it also risks overshadowing the narrative itself. The editor, a literary historian, presents himself as merely a custodian of the text, but the reality is more complex: more than half of the book is devoted to his own analysis and framing. The biographical insertions throughout the Fugitive Slave's narrative are a quintessential example of the types of editorial overreach which dismantle the anonymity that the author crafted, and take the role of overseeing a narrative that was originally shaped by the author's refusal to be fully visible.

The Fugitive Slave's identity and biography aren't simply noted for the reader, but are forced into the limelight as a way to decode Jacobs's motivations, intentions, or subconscious influences. In fact, I would go so far as to suggest that his editorializing not only "fails to dismantle" the Black message/white envelope structure, but reinvents this dynamic in a manner that more subtly-but no less egregiously-asserts a controlling hand over Jacobs's narrative. His imposition of identities and claims where Jacobs intentionally resisted identification reproduce the very structures of liberal authority and visibility that Jacobs's narrative sought to elude, and in so doing re-covers key aspects of the recovered story.

The disservice of revealing and "centering" Jacobs's biography is compounded by how Schroeder downplays the extent of his influence by labeling himself merely as an "editor" which typically carries the implication of a more hands-off role—making minor corrections, clarifications, and adjustments which facilitate the reader's access to the original material, but not fundamentally reshaping or reinterpreting the work. I cannot ascertain Schroeder's motivations for presenting himself in this manner for the publication, and I am uninformed about the politics of publishing. However, Schroeder does not fit the bill for "editor" given his very hands-on approach not just in terms of providing an introduction, biography, and face for

John Jacobs, but also in terms of his supplementary comments on most pages of the Fugitive Slave's narrative. It is not uncommon for recent editions of slave narratives to contain introductions or essays which provide historical context and argue for the text's contemporary relevance. Some might even include endnotes to preserve the text's flow or maintain the author's original voice while providing historical context, but Schroeder's version is quite unique in the copious footnotes providing explanations, citations, or background details within, not after a narrative written by slave. One cannot help but be confronted by these "supplementary" notes, some of which take up to 70% of the page. And while most of this information is very compelling if one is looking for biographical details (the extensive footnote on a slaveowner's descendant who complained about Jacobs' presentation of her ancestor, for example, was quite interesting), their ever-presence on most pages makes it very hard to describe them as merely ancillary in the way that Schroeder's "editor" label implies.

Even if Schroeder presented the narrative in its true, unaltered form, his introduction and biography of Jacobs, which come to 121 pages (compared to the original narrative's 73 pages), on their own should suffice as reason to list him as an author on the cover as well as the copyright page. This doesn't even include the footnotes that Schroeder added to the narrative itself, which take up a total of nearly a third of the original narrative's 73 pages.

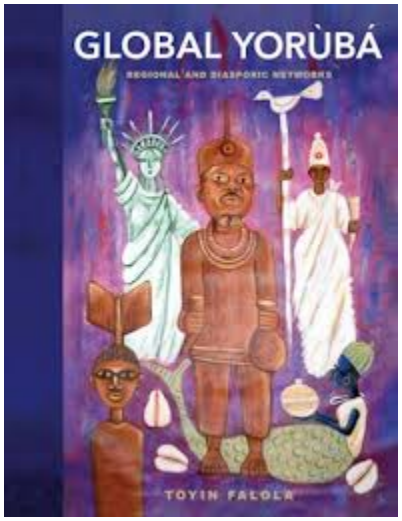
The book's cover design provides an evocative visual representation of Schroeder's (or is it the press?) concealment of his impact. The original title and John Swanson Jacobs's name (not the Fugitive Slave) dominate the layout, taking up most of the space in large, bold letters, while the "editor" and the mention of a "full biography" appear in much smaller print, confined to a total of about 1.25 inches of the 9-inch cover. This design choice subtly downplays the editor's substantial influence over the narrative. The limited visual visibility of the editor's byline suggests a minimal or supportive role whereas in reality, his contributions transform the work entirely, with extensive footnotes and a biography that outpaces the original text in length. The visuals lead the reader to believe they're getting more of Jacob's original work than the actual contents provide. It feels like a bit of a bait-and-switch, placing the editor's byline out of prominent view and diminishing the sense of his heavy editorial AND authorial footprint.

Indeed, the editor's choice to identify the Fugitive Slave and assign a portrait—presumably of the slave himself—further complicates the narrative's politics of visibility and anonymity. This act of forcibly attaching a previously anonymous identity to the portrait seems to reinforce, rather than dismantle, the white envelope around the Black message. By doing so, the editor may inadvertently perpetuate the very dynamics he claims to be undoing, highlighting the difficulties inherent in curating such a powerful historical document. In attempting to present the narrative as an academic artifact, Schroeder's interventions risk overshadowing the raw urgency and subversive power that defined the text when it was first written.

Even with Jonathan D.S. Schroeder's editorial impositions, the narrative's rediscovery and publication allows the Fugitive Slave to take his rightful place among Africans (and other subjugated groups) across the centuries who have recognized that liberation from oppression demands resistance by any means necessary.

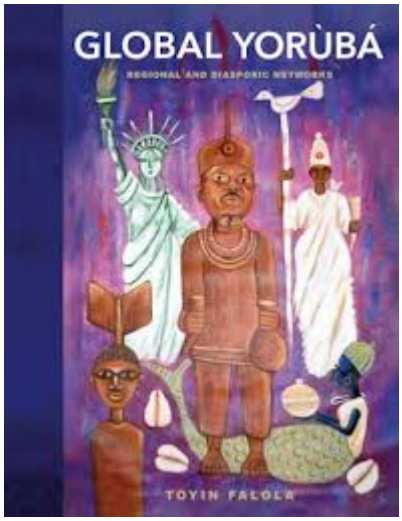
Exploring Yoruba Across Time and Space: Toyin Falola's Global Yoruba

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



Toyin Falola's book *Global Yoruba: Regional and Diasporic Networks* is a landmark in Yoruba Studies, and almost certainly going to become a permanent point of reference.

It is an epic book, unparalleled, to the best of my knowledge, in its breadth in exploring the natal, larger African and diasporic development of Yoruba history and culture, emphasizing the growth of Yoruba cosmology as a unifying force across both its native, larger African and trans-Atlantic developments.



Falola pours his decades of exploration of Yoruba life into this book and soars even beyond his earlier engagements with the subject. He does this in readily accessible prose, narratively sweet yet bristling with ideas, richly illustrated with images likely unavailable anywhere else,

eloquent examples of classical Yoruba art and new art addressing Yoruba realities.

Elaborate but clearly delineated maps depict the spatial configurations created by the demographic reworkings through which Yoruba identities emerged and moved across space within what is now Nigeria, in relation to West African proximities.

Contemporary Yoruba spatial centres in relation to those of others in Nigeria; the spatial relationships between the central locations of the various Yoruba subgroups; the proximities between these subgroups and other Nigerian and West African peoples; the spatial dynamics of the old Oyo empire, an early centre of Yoruba identity formation and diffusion; the locations represented by the intra-Yoruba wars of the 19th century central to shaping what is now known as Yorubaland; the resulting emergence of new Yoruba states in that time; the trade routes from the interior to the coast strategic to economic and cultural transmission and reshapings; the current spatial centralizations of the Yoruba in postcolonial Nigeria in relation to other peoples within the boundaries created by the River Niger, the River Benue and the Atlantic Ocean, all these are thereby visualized in the diagrammatic shorthand compressing space and time in a manner facilitating a bird's eye view of vastly spread situations and events.

A priceless guide emerges to the cultural and political adventure constituting Yoruba history across the world, from its natal origins to its trans-Atlantic incarnation.

Sumptuously produced in elegant coffee table format yet exquisitely scholarly. Profound in analysis and synthesis yet enjoyably readable, accessible to a broad range of readers, requiring only close attention to grasp its more theoretical passages.

Does any other book operate at this level of almost encyclopedic range on the subject?

Global Yoruba enables access to knowledge one would have to read through the equivalent of a library in order to approach its breadth of knowledge, but even the sheer accumulation of such knowledge is nowhere near the synergistic mastery within narrative flow and reflective power the book demonstrates, a mighty rock in the flowing river of knowledge that is Yoruba Studies, shaped by and possibly shaping the ocean of existence that is Yoruba being and becoming.

The book is jargon free while being grounded in various theoretically sophisticated fields of knowledge, from decolonization theories to philosophies of space and place, exposing readers painlessly and enjoyably to those cognitive networks, as the very latest orientations in global scholarship, from Africa to the West to the Americas, are brought to bear on the subject, distilling decades of Falola's own multidisciplinary research and publications, complemented by new knowledge and new theoretical positionings.

Structure

Global Yoruba is carefully and ingeniously structured, using various organizational strategies in creating fluid order, demonstrating seamless linkages over a vast, many-sided subject, evoking

intellectual excitement and stimulating imaginative uplift from the beginning to the end of the narrative journey.

The rhapsodic and the architectonic, adapting German philosopher Immanuel Kant's terms on the organization of knowledge, controlled passion and architectural order, imaginative radiance and intellectual structuring, combine, creating something strikingly beautiful in its parts and massively glorious in the complexly interlocking whole, realized in terms of an ultimately limpid beauty, clear and transparent.

Division into five, clearly signposted sections gives the work structural clarity, with the introduction of the idea of global Yoruba in the introduction operative across the text, ultimately summed up in its conclusion.

We are introduced to the formation of Yoruba society as a social order defined by correlative value and knowledge systems, eventually conjoined into a political and philosophical synthesis, the trans-Atlantic journey of these segments and their unifications across time and space, even to the Americas, being core to the book.

The beginnings of pan-Yoruba society in the social amalgamations of the Oyo empire, the destruction of this agglomeration by Islamic jihadists, the defeat of the jihadists by Ibadan and the eventual emergence of Ibadan as the axis of Yoruba cultural ascendancy is powerfully narrated.

The cultivation of egalitarian values in Ibadan's beginnings as a war camp for refuge from intra-Yoruba wars is discussed. The transposition of those values from a combination of military culture and an egalitarian governance model, a transition shaped within the matrix of the colonial encounter and its aftermath, into sterling cultural capital feeding the entire nation Nigeria, created by Britain, an achievement the impact of which resonates to the present and the future, is examined.

The complication of Yoruba ideological space by the emergence and eventual dominance of Islam, Christianity, Western colonialism, Western education and Western forms of government, are discussed, in relation to the strategies of resistance and accommodation evident in Yorubaland to these seismic changes as Yoruba culture travelled to and thrived in the Americas through slavery, and later, voluntary migration.

The nature of modernity in the Yoruba context is examined, at the intersection of Western and traditional cultures as Western influence radically reshapes the polity, even as Yoruba artistic forms undergo mutation in relation to the expanded scope of possibility opened up by the transformative encounter with new ways of living.

Artists and cultural activists, genetically Yoruba and from beyond Yorubaland and even beyond Africa, politicians and political movements, are vividly depicted, individualistic and group demonstrations of struggles for self-actualization and communal projection within and in relation to Yoruba geographical, cultural and ideological space.

Contemporary Yoruba politics in Nigeria, Yoruba film, Yoruba music and Yoruba written literature in Nigeria, Yoruba cultural politics in the Americas and Yoruba spirituality across the world, are explored in building a picture of contemporary Yoruba identity within and beyond its homeland in what is now Nigeria, as the book sums up the emergence of Yorubaness as an ethnic and genetic identity as well as an ideological and cultural matrix, manifest in various ways across the world.

Artistic Power

Global Yoruba contributes to enriching Yoruba culture and its study, not only through the book's ideational synergies but also in constellating works of art never before assembled for this purpose, some of them possibly created for this text.

The artistic dimension of the work is itself a sterling achievement, complementing the near encyclopedic scope of the gripping and ideationally ambitious narrative, scintillatingly crafted in striking prose readily accessible to the general reader yet beautiful in its rhythms.

Visual art strategically shapes the optical power of the text, amplifying its ideational projections and the pleasurable experience of assimilating knowledge within the multi-cognitive space constituted by the book, sensorially uplifting and intellectually stimulating.

The only comparable book known to me in unifying images and text on Yoruba culture and art at this level of volume is Rowland Abiodun, Henry Drewal and John Pemberton III's *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, an indispensable work in Yoruba arts and its philosophical contexts, its combination of glorious visuality and powerful text yet unequalled in Yoruba Studies, to the best of my knowledge, even by the very rich complementary book *The Yoruba Artist*: *New Theoretical Perspectives on African Arts* , edited by the same team.

Global Yoruba, however, operates in terms of a more modern artistic register than those two other books, which are centred in great examples of classical Yoruba art. *Global Yoruba* also demonstrates modern adaptations of the classical tradition while introducing new artistic orientations to Yoruba culture, mainly using strikingly original drawings.

Inclusion, Exclusion and Suggestive Force

Global Yoruba is foundational for Yoruba Studies, exemplary in terms of what it discusses and how it engages them as well as suggestive of how to approach what it does not discuss.

Though the text richly explores Yoruba film and modern Yoruba music, it does not examine such strategic Yoruba cultural forms as the history of Yoruba oral literature and Yoruba visual and performative arts outside film and modern Yoruba music, and Yoruba sciences, such as mathematics, significantly studied by such figures as Olu Longe and Aimee Dafon Segla.

Even though it does not discuss those subjects the book's interpretive model can be fruitfully

applied to the exploration of those fields.

Image and Text: **Cultural Personalization**

All the images, photographs of paintings, sculptures and drawings in *Global Yoruba* are either from Falola's private collection, as they are described in the book, or, as I expect is the case with the drawings, specially commissioned for the book, thereby also belonging to Falola.

Why would an author choose to populate such a large text on an ethnic group, a book centred on its global demographic and cultural spread, with only artistic works belonging to him or freshly commissioned by himself, thereby uniquely stamping his own aesthetic sensitivities on the book?

This orientation is amplified by the cover image which centres a painting of Falola in an iconic pose from the repertoire of classical Yoruba sculpture. He is flanked on one side by the Statue of Liberty, the famous sculpture symbolizing entry into the United States of America on account of its prominence on Ellis Island, New York, once the primary entry point for immigrants into the US, and therefore evoking the trans-Atlantic migrations of the Yoruba to the Americas strategic to the book's exploration of Yoruba globalization.

On the other side, Falola is flanked by an image of Orunmila, the Yoruba Orisha tradition deity embodying divine wisdom, suggesting the spiritual and philosophical culture distilled from Yoruba civilization in its journey within the Yorubas and cognate peoples and across the seas to new lands, an aspirational essence demonstrating reworking in new ways in varied circumstances.

At Falola's feet is an image of a woman with the body of a fish as her lower half, and that of a human woman as her upper body, a mermaid, as understood in other cultures, and a mami-wata, as this figure is named in African pidgin English, holding a covered bowl in her hands. A covered bowl in Yoruba aesthetics may suggest something precious, protected by being thus covered. It may be a spiritual potency latent within the ritual preparation inside the bowl, making the bowl a kind of shrine. In association with mami-wata, it could suggest wealth, since mami-wata is associated with wealth, an idea further evoked by the cowries strewn around her figure and at Falola's feet. Cowries passed from being used as currency in Africa to being employed as ritual objects.

As an entity believed to live in seas and rivers, the mami-wata represents the motif of intelligent life as transcending conventionally visible forms of existence exemplified by humans and other animals, extending to entities who are not normally visible but may be encountered in special situations, a globally emergent belief, particularly in terms of the mermaid motif depicted here, but which has sunk into folklore and fantasy in many cultures while it remains live in the animistic cultures of the kind represented by classical Yoruba thought.

The mami-wata not only evokes the multiplicity of obviously conscious species perceived to exist in an animistic cosmos, but also the aquatic element through which Yoruba migrants

passed to the Americas as they were ferried in slave ships, holding their culture within them even within the dehumanizing economic and political system of slavery in which the fire of that culture sustained them in preserving and even reshaping their humanity.

At Falola's bottom left is an oshe Shango, a statuette of the deity Shango, topped by a double headed axe, suggesting power evoked by the thunder and lightning to which Shango is related. "…the twinned celts [the double headed axe, suggest] power plus power … Shango squared [representing] the inner spiritual reality of the priest with the power of Shango imbedded in the head and emanating from the top" observes Margaret Thompson Drewal.

"The entire surface of the oshe", she continues, "becomes [in the ritual context, akin to] a vast force field of lightning, energized with …patterns that radiate outward from the central shaft [suggesting] power serving protective as well as decorative functions" (''Art and Trance among Yoruba Shango Devotees'', *African Arts*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1986, 60-67+98-99; 60, 62, 66).

Falola is depicted as holding in his hands objects emblematizing royal power, in the archetypal style evident in classical Yoruba art, ancient Egyptian and classical Tibetan art.

In one hand he grasps what looks like an ọfọ̀ horn, an instrument believed in Yoruba spirituality to enhance the spiritual power of speech, enabling the speaker's commands to magically come true. In the other hand, he holds what looks like a bag of oògùn, as named in Yoruba, magical concoctions meant to restructure reality through the overriding power of spiritual force.

Why would a scholar in the Western tradition in which Falola has been primarily educated, having achieved the acme of Western academic training, a PhD, as well as the height of professional academic advancement in that tradition, a professorship, and one employed in a 21st century Western university, in the United States, the University of Texas, representing a culture far removed from that of Yoruba spiritual culture, depict himself in terms more befitting for a Yoruba spiritual adept, complexifying the image through the evocation of the Statue of Liberty representing a world far from the Yoruba universe embodied by those icons?

The image collage evokes the transport to the US of the Yoruba spiritual universe depicted by its symbols in the visual tableau. Falola's image at the centre of the visual composition suggests him as embodying those spiritual values in their transport to the New World.

To what degree does he actually embody those values and to what degree is his image simply representative of a reality he studies but which does not define him? Does his powerful meditation on the orisha Eshu in his essay " Ritual Archives" suggest an actual contemplative practice in relation to the deity, complementing the more intellectual summation of his introduction to his edited book *Èsù : Yoruba God, Power, and the Imaginative Frontiers*?

What is the implication, for these questions, of his deep exposure to the practice of Yoruba spirituality, as evidenced by his autobiographical account in *A Mouth Sweeter than Salt* and *Counting the Tiger's Teeth,* of his childhood relationship with Iya Lekuleja, an elderly

female seller of assorted items for spiritual work, as well as being regarded as a preeminent spiritual figure herself?

As one of the most significant writers on Yoruba spirituality and philosophy, evidenced by the largely scholarly character of his writings, depicting Yoruba spirituality more in terms of analysis from an external standpoint rather than from within an internal, practitioner's vantage, may the Falola image be seen as evocative of the transmutation of the traditional symbolism in terms of his own practice as a writer, scholar, public speaker and institutional organizer?

May the ọfọ horn be understood as evoking Falola's mastery of the power of language in Yoruba and English, projecting expressions strategic to reworking thought worlds across the globe wherever Africa is studied?

May the oògùn bag suggest Falola's creation and maintenance of systems of knowledge creation, integrating people and industrial processes, research networks and publishing systems, creating landscapes of knowledge about Africa, monuments of understanding contributing to illuminating the continent?

Dominating the visual tableau defining the cover of *Global Yoruba* are the light held up by the Statue of Liberty and the radiant white of Orunmila's staff and form, the sense of illumination projected by both figures amplified by their towering height. Ideas of illumination, in terms of knowledge and freedom, are evoked by the synergy of these iconic forms, from the United States and Nigeria's Yorubaland.

May Falola's iconicized image at the centre of the visual framework suggests the book on the cover of which the artistic configuration appears as his own dramatization of the intellectual possibilities of Yoruba culture, his own textual actualization of a universe of values intimately related to him and which he identifies with in terms of a balance between identification and critical examination, an orientation developed at length in his *Decolonizing African Knowledge: Autoethnography and African Epistemology?*

The collage, however, goes beyond those purely rationalistic orientations, framing the central figure in mythic terms, as associated with the overwhelming force of Shango, radiant with the wisdom and power of Orunmila, the deity holding an ọfọ̀ horn similar to that held by Falola, thereby suggesting a parallel of power between human and deity, a human figure identified with the aquatic mobility of mami-wata and her cabalash of mysterious endowments, in a scene awash with the wealth symbolized by cowries, and correlative with the torch of illumination projected by the symbol of liberty, all these fused in the slightly bearded figure with the short Yoruba style trousers, part of the cycle of Falola's self iconicisation ongoing in the illustrations to various books of his.

Totalistic Yoruba History and Historiography Inspired by Yoruba Thought

The artistic dimension of *Global Yoruba*, taking further Falola's pattern of using visual art,

either drawings, paintings or photographs, at times uniquely created for particular texts, visualities particularly evident, among other texts, in his *The Toyin Falola Reader*, in his *In Praise of Greatness: The Poetics of African Adulation* and his *Milestones in African Literature*, suggests, not only the distance travelled in demonstrating the multi-dimensionality of Yoruba discourse, the degree to which this has been interactively engaged with in scholarship, but also the ground remaining to be traversed in creating a totalistic Yoruba history, something the scope of this ambitious work beckons towards.

Akinwumi Ogundiran's *The Yoruba: A New History* uniquely broke ground by historicizing Yoruba philosophy and spirituality on a large scale, exploring the situational logics across diverse times and places through which these cognitive orientations were developed, in relation to the breadth of the social contexts of the growth of Yoruba civilization from pre-history to the 19th century, if I recall his cut off time correctly.

Falola has taken up the historicising challenge initiated by Ogundiran, developing another conception of the development of the matrix of thought, action and creative forms constituting Yoruba civilization as both an ethnic identity and an ideological or even spiritual and philosophical configuration, demonstrating how "the arts of being Yoruba" to borrow the title of Adeleke Adeeko's book, have become a near global phenomenon through physical and cultural migrations of Yoruba civilization across the world.

Falola and Ogundiran powerfully dramatize the significance of the development of philosophical and spiritual thought worlds in this process, with Ogundiran demonstrating how some examples of Yoruba visual art, such as Yoruba bead work and ile iri, the house of ori, focus these ideational developments, an achievement which, however, could be taken even further than Ogundiran has done, building on his inspiration.

Falola focuses on illustrating the expressions of ideas in terms of art, and discusses Nollywood, the Nigerian film industry, in relation to Yoruba film, from the earlier periods represented by Hubert Ogunde to the contemporary work of Kunle Afolayan.

Film, Yoruba written literature and modern Yoruba music are, however, the only art forms discussed in depth in the book, although visual art strategically shapes the visual power of the text.

In unifying philosophy, spirituality, art, economics and politics to the degree they have done, Ogundiran and Falola suggest the possibility of totalistic Yoruba history, an achievement which, if my knowledge of the state of the field is adequate, still lies in the future.

What do I mean?

Further Developing Yoruba Hermeneutics Epistemology of Imaginative Forms in Yoruba Thought Proverb Epistemology

Ogundiran splendidly marshals an interpretation of the cognitive orientations of Yoruba

thought as emerging from and shaping the scope of Yoruba social experience.

His project could be further taken forward, through a use of Yoruba hermeneutic strategies beyond his employment of proverbs which strikingly enliven his text.

His foregrounding of Yoruba history as an adventure in the intertwining of thought and action could be further advanced through, not only using Yoruba proverbs in vitalizing his narrative and exploring the significance of the events he discusses, but through a discussion of the logic of the use of proverbs in Yoruba discourse, establishing the conventional understanding of proverbs as steeds of discourse, forms of discovery, excavation, recreation and transformation of thought and expression, as described by the Yoruba expression " owe lesin oro, toro ba sonu, owe la fin wa", " proverbs [condensed verbal imaginative forms requiring sensitive unravelling] are the steeds of discourse, when discourse is lost, when it goes astray, we use metaphorical expressions, proverbs, in seeking it out", but also in terms of metaphorical expressions as dramatizing the ontological unity of imaginative expression in Yoruba thought, ultimately projected through the mapping of the unfolding of being in space and time represented by the Yoruba literary genre, oriki, as discussed in Rowland Abiodun's *Yoruba Art and Language*.

Adapting Yoruba Philosophy and Spirituality and Related Thought on the Intersection of Possibilities

Yoruba hermeneutics may be further developed through adaptations of ideas of relationships between fate and free will, between individual creativity and circumstance in the construction of history represented by conceptions of "ori", the self, represented by the head, and "ase", pervasive and individualized creative power, in Yoruba thought, as these juxtapositions are particularly fruitfully explored by such works as Abiodun, Drewal and Pemberton's *Yoruba:Nine Centuries* and Adegboyega Oragun's *Destiny: The Unmanifested Being* (1998), grounded in interviews with Yoruba babalawo, adepts in the esoteric knowledge of Ifa and the writings of Segun Gbadegesin, references exemplifying texts I know that examine the relationships between fate and free will in Yoruba thought.

Such examinations of relationships between context and outcome, environment and history are vital for historiography.

They are more fruitfully engaged, though, through dialogue with varied responses to these subjects in geographically cognate thought to that of Yorubaland, such as Igbo philosophy, which develops its own orientations to the same questions.

These investigations may be further enriched through comparisons with a global choice of ideas on relationships between self and possibility, environment and outcomes, juxtapositions foundational to Yoruba thought on development in time and space, the subject of history.

Yoruba Sciences

A discussion of science in Yoruba discourse from the past to the present is strategic for a totalistic history of the Yoruba, demonstrating how Yoruba people have related to the understanding and shaping of the universe in ways that can be empirically verified by people using the same tools, from mathematics to medicine, even though in those contexts, scientific techniques, such as mathematics and the use of medicinal leaves, are likely to co exist with spirituality.

Falola's books, however, collectively engage the entire range of Yoruba discourse, but like *Global Yoruba*, often do not address science, to the best of my knowledge, except such an example as the discussion of Ifa mathematics in "Ritual Archives".

Science in Yoruba culture, however, is further represented by such texts as Aimee Dafon Segla's *Yoruba Mathematics* and his work on relationships between mathematics and cosmology in Yoruba thought, by Olu Longe's and others' work on relationships between Ifa mathematics, as an information management system, and computer science, and by Yoruba psychiatric medicine, which pioneering psychiatric doctor Adeoye Lambo describes as influencing his innovations (*Towards a Culturally Sensitive Psychiatry: Lessons from Adeoye Lambo*, Alapa Odugbo, 2024), and Yoruba herbalogy, evident in terms of its relationship with spirituality in Pierre Verger's monumental *Ewe: The Uses of Plants in Yoruba Society.*

Yoruba Oral and Written Literatures Within and Beyond the Yoruba Language

Global Yoruba also does not discuss Yoruba oral literature, a field in which a good body of scholarly publications exists. Yet, Falola's range of publications demonstrate his accomplishments in discussing Yoruba literature and his ability to engage it beyond his efforts so far, given his fluency in Yoruba and his publications on Nigerian literature, in particular, and African literature, in general.

Yoruba oral literature is foundational for the imaginative and expressive universe of Yoruba thought and arts. The identity imaging and historicising character of *oriki*, the philosophical, spiritual, and comedic thrusts of *ese ifa*, the naturistic celebrations of *ijala*, the musical pathos of *ewi*, the incantatory power of *ofo*, and more, are among demonstrations of the creative power of Yoruba arts at its best.

How did these genres emerge, develop and contribute to the development of Yoruba thought, influence other arts, such as the visual and the performative, and contribute to written literature within and beyond Yoruba culture?

I expect the scholarship exists to construct a relatively complete history of Yoruba literature, if one has not been done, from the more speculative efforts necessary to historicizing the oral tradition to the evident history of the written tradition.

My very limited exposure to efforts to historicise the oral tradition, though without dating but focusing on processes of change in how ideas are constructed in the tradition is Karin Barber's "How Man Makes God in West Africa: Yoruba Attitudes Towards the "Orisa" (*Africa: Journal of*

the International African Institute, Vol. 51, No. 3, 1981, 724-745).

Scholarship on the continuity between the oral and the writtentraditions is exemplified by Abiola Irele's particularly rich essay "Tradition and the Yoruba Writer: Fagunwa, Tutuola and Soyinka" (*The African Experience in Literature and Ideology (1981/1990)*, indicating a perception of Yoruba literature as extending beyond those writing in Yoruba, such as Daniel Fagunwa, but also to authors deeply inspired by Yoruba thought but writing in other languages, such as Amos Tutuola and Wole Soyinka's works in various kinds of English. Fagunwa, Tutuola and Soyinka are discussed in *Global Yoruba* but outside the framework of their relationship to the oral tradition.

The Scribal Tradition in Yoruba Philosophy

I also don't recall encountering in *Global Yoruba* a discussion of the scribal tradition in Yoruba philosophy. The scribal tradition in Yoruba philosophy is represented by texts that came into public visibility through writing, rather than the oral formulations represented by what I describe as the classical period.

Such scribal texts represent efforts to engage creatively with the oral tradition, rather than describing it, powerful and indispensable as that is, or strike out in new directions, while demonstrating significant affiliations with other thinkers in the tradition.

Examples of such creative reworkings include Segun Gbadegesin's explorations of the logic of the concept of "ori", the self (in *African Philosophy: New and Traditional Perspectives*, ed. Lee Brown, 2004); my own study of the interpretive possibilities of Ifa divinatory hermeneutics beyond Africana contexts, engaging Western autobiographical theory in relation to the letters and paintings of the Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh (*Reconfigurations,* Vol.6, 2020), and in relation to the philosophy of space, integrating the London Underground, Italian writer Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* and German philosopher Martin Heideggger (*The Palgrave Handbook of Africa and the Changing Global Order*, ed. Samuel Ojo Oloruntoba and Toyin Falola, 2022) and on the value of Yoruba philosophy for educational theory and practice(*Yoruba Studies Review,* Fall 2018); Wole Soyinka's discussion of drama in relation to cosmology through the lens of African and particularly Yoruba discourse (*Myth, Literature and the African World, 1976)* ; Richard Olusegun Babalola's discussion of his vision and challenges with adapting classical Yoruba architectural thought and practice in a contemporary context (INTBAU, 2013) ; Toyin Falola's individualistic adaptation of Eshu hermeneutics (in "Ritual Archives", in *The Toyin Falola Reader*,) Malcolm Allen's description of the challenges of the British Psychoanalytic Society in terms of Eshu hermeneutics ("Renewal or Retreat? Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy at the Crossroads", *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2010, 44–50; and Moyo Okediji's efforts at expanding the mathematical scope of Ifa in relation to ideas of infinity, if I have understood him correctly, Rowland Abiodun's creation of new concepts in Yoruba aesthetics (*Yoruba Art and Language*, 2014); Susanne Wenger's exposition and rethinking of Yoruba Orisha cosmology, represented most forcefully by her *A Life with the Gods in their Yoruba Homeland* (1983); (Akinsola Akiwowo's work in developing

sociological models from Yoruba oral literature and thought ("Contributions to the Sociology of Knowledge from an African Oral Poetry", *International Sociology*, Volume 1, Issue 4, 1986), among the few works I am aware of. Akiwowo is one of the most important figures in the globalization of Yoruba thought on account of the international impact of his efforts, as demonstrated by the debates it inspired in sociology about developing sociological paradigms beyond Western thought.

Continuities Between Oral and Scribal Cultures in Yoruba Philosophy

But then, to what degree can Babatunde Lawal's account of Yoruba aesthetics in "Àwòrán: Representing the Self and its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art" (*The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 83, No. 3, 2001, 498-526) , be described as a description of or a report on Yoruba aesthetics, rather than a reconstruction of that aesthetics shaped by his own creative selectivity in making sense of a broad range of material gathered from broad ranging field work?

Are his efforts at interpreting Ogboni symbolism of the number three and other Ogboni forms is not enriched by his combination of speculative creativity and concrete information? ("À Yà Gbó, À Yà Tó: New Perspectives on Edan Ògbóni", *African Arts*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 1995, 36-49+98-100).

To what degree is Akinwunmi Ogundiran's recreation of the ideational matrices of Yoruba society a product of that society or an outcome of his own convergence of intellectual observation and imaginative creativity? (*The Yoruba: A New History*)?

Rowland Abiodun's integration of various ese ifa in constructing an expanded conception of "oro", discourse, is magnificent in its skillful use of oral sources, but is he not better understood as a creative thinker continuing the reworking of the oral tradition represented by the oral artists whose works he draws upon? (*Yoruba Art and Language*).

Parallels with Indian Philosophy: B.K. Matilal and Jornadon Ganeri

A helpful example in appreciating the historical and ideational continuity of what I describe as classical and post-classical Yoruba philosophies is the Indian tradition, in which contemporary thinkers may both describe and rethink the classical culture as well as develop new orientations, in dialogue with other traditions, at various degrees of relationship with the classical tradition.

This is exemplified by such figures as Bimal Krishna Matital, whose works range from exploring the ethical implications of ancient Indian religious classics (*Ethics and Epics*, 2015), to a broad range of philosophical questions (*Mind, Language and World*, 2015) and Jornadon Ganeri, who has studied the epistemic implications of classical Indian texts (*The Concealed Art of the Soul: Theories of the Self and Practices of Truth in Indian Ethics and Epistemology*, 2013) while ranging widely over other aspects of philosophy (such as *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance*, *2012*, "The first book to draw together the Indian philosophical tradition with current philosophical work on the self").

Histories of Indian Philosophy

This sensitivity to continuity in Indian philosophy is represented for the classical tradition by such works as Surendranath Dasgupta's *A History of Indian Philosophy*(1922-1955) which traces intertextual developments from the most ancient texts across centuries of development in classical Indian thought.

Purushottama Bilimoria's edited *History of Indian Philosophy* (2017) takes the story up to the present, in terms of the continuity between the classical and the post-classical traditions, showing how the tradition is rooted in the most ancient texts and practices, presenting"the various streams of Indian philosophy in constant contact, as flowing in and out of each other as it were, for this truly reflects an aspect of Indian philosophy itself, which, to a certain extent, sets it apart from western philosophy. "-Arvind Sharma, *Journal of Dharma Studies* (Quoted on Amazon).

Parallels with Western Philosophy

Histories of Western philosophy do not include such foundational religious texts as the Bible while those of India necessarily engage with such equivalents in Indian thought as the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Mahabharata*, but an adequate grasp of the history of Western philosophy is impossible without an understanding of the influence of Christianity on that tradition, even amongst supposedly secular thinkers.

Martin Heidegger's exploration of the nature of being may be better appreciated in relation to Christian theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas' exploration of the same subject while Aquinas and Heidegger are both indebted to the ancient Greek thinkers, Aquinas needing to be understood at the intersection of Christian theology and its Biblical roots and ancient Greek thought.

Immanuel Kant's deeply impactful *Critique of Pure Reason* can only be adequately appreciated against the context of Christian theology, its Biblical roots and the influence of these religious strands on philosophy, influences to which he responds as he develops his own approach to the tension between faith and intellect, between spirituality, intellect and imagination that shapes his work.

G. W. F. Hegel's philosophical project may be understood as an effort to intellectualize a central point of Christian faith, the belief in the spirit of God as shaping history, an idea Hegel adapted to a study of the relationship between the human mind and that spirit interpreted in relation to consciousness as underlying the universe.

Ancient Greek thought, which, with the Judaic tradition, constitutes the other matrix for Western philosophy, is itself represented by the dialogue between intellect and faith, myth and logic, a dialogue from which ancient Greek philosophy emerged, as represented by Parmenides, particularly by the mythic framework of presentation of logical thinking as the quality humans share with gods (*To Think Like God: Pythagoras and Parmenides:The Origins of*

Philosophy, Arnold Herman, 2004) and Plato's use of the dialogue between intellect and imagination.

Yoruba philosophy may also be understood in terms of a dialogue from ancient times to the present, in which old and new themes and forms of thought are continually engaged through rethinking, creating, consolidating, reworking and breaking new grounds.

Emphasizing such a history, as it emerges in Yoruba thought within and beyond Yorubaland, would advance the complementary theme of *Global Yorub*a, Yoruba being and becoming, existence and change across the world, as a process reflected in various cognitive forms, representing people trying to make meaning of existence at different points in space and time. What better way to demonstrate this than through the permutations of Yoruba thought as taken forward by various thinkers from the past to the present?

Yoruba Visual and Performative Arts

Global Yoruba also does not discuss Yoruba visual and performative arts apart from Yoruba music and Yoruba film, even though the history of those genres is richly represented by various texts, making them strategic to the study of African arts.

Yoruba Visual Arts

Explorations of the history of Yoruba visual arts have become paradigmatic for the study of African arts from ancient times to the present, with particular names becoming prominent in the classical context, such as Olowe of Ise and Lagbayi (*The Yoruba Artist: New Theoretical Perspectives in African Arts*, 1994, ed. Rowland Abiodun, Henry John Drewal and John Pemberton III; *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thoug*ht, 1989, ed. Henry John Drewal, John Pemberton II and Rowland Abiodun).

Other masters are recognizable by their styles and schools of expression, such as that of edan ogboni sculpture, even when the creators may or may not be known, as evident with Babatunde Lawal's study of edan ogboni style and picturing of two artists in that tradition ("À Yà Gbó, À Yà Tó: New Perspectives on Edan Ògbóni").

Artists such as Lamidi Fakeye and his children bridge the classical and post-classical periods in Yoruba sculpture and figures such as Moyo Okediji, Osi Audu and Susanne Wenger and her school project traditional conceptions in new terms.

Okediji depicts the odu ifa, the organizational categories of ifa, in terms of organic assemblages ("Revisioning Odu Ifa:Abstraction to Concreteness: Earth to Earth: Moyo Okediji's Odu Ifa Earth Series Installations", 2013, Oluwatoyin Vincent Adepoju, Facebook) and in painting and thread weaving, as well as visually exploring the geometric inscriptional possibilities of opon ifa, the divination platform and cosmological symbol of Ifa ("Rethinking Ifa : From Classical to Post-Classical Geometries 1 : The Ifa Vectors of Moyo Okediji, 2021, Oluwatoyin Vincent Adepoju, Facebook).

Audu explores conception of the self through geometric and other images, moving from his grounding in Yoruba philosophy, on which he has published an article on the Yoruba philosophy of the self (Oxford Companion to the Mind, 2004) to more general considerations.

Wenger and her school have visualized Orisha cosmology in terms of sculptural and architectural forms in unique styles reshaping the Oshun forest in Oshogbo (the best introduction to their work known to me being Ulli Beir's *The Return of the Gods: The Sacred Art of Susanne Wenger*, 1975 complemented by the magnificent presentation at the site of the Adunni Olorisa Trust Adunni Foundation).

Demonstrating the various forms of globalization evidenced by Yoruba culture, Okediji and Audu were born in Nigeria, schooled there, and, with Okediji, already had a thriving art practice there, and subsequently emigrated to the US, while Wenger was an Austrian, already established as an artist in Austria before visiting Nigeria with her German husband, Ulli Beier, the great cultural catalyst, and remained in Nigeria, working with culture bearers and artists in Yorubaland.

Yoruba Performative Arts

Yoruba performative arts beyond modern music and film are also not discussed in *Global Yoruba*. These arts include theatrical forms which emerged from ritual, such as as the Alarinjo travelling theatre which evolved from the Egungun ancestral masquerade in the 16th century within the politics of the Oyo empire, undergoing creative transformation and diffusion into other Yoruba regions after the fall of the empire, thereafter becoming the inspiration or progenitor of Yoruba theatre and its influence on written drama and film making, with prominent figures in Yoruba theatre having been, among others, Hubert Ogunde, Duro Ladipo and Kola Ogunmola, developing their own innovations within the tradition ("Aláàrìnjó" (Wikipedia), Omotayo Oloruntoba-Oju, "From Alarinjo to Arugba : Continuities in Indigenous Nigerian Drama", *African Identities,* 2013, Vol. 11, No.4, 395-406; "Yoruba Theatre, Nigeria – A Study", Classical Arts Universe; Biodun Jeyifo, *The Yoruba Popular Theatre of Nigeria*, 1984).

Historical explorations of the development of ritual into theatre and the influence of these forms in other performative genres in the Yoruba diaspora may also be traced, as Robert Lima does for Cuba ("The Orisha Chango and Other African Deities in Cuba Drama, " Latin American Theatre Review, 1990, 33-42).

A totalistic history of Yoruba civilization would therefore involve the exploration of the growth of philosophy, spirituality, the visual, verbal and performative arts and the sciences in relation to the full range of social developments as they have unfolded in constituting that civilization across time and space.

Historiographies and Philosophies of History Inspired by Yoruba Thought

Such a history could also develop a philosophy of history or a historiographic methodology

correlative with Yoruba thought, demonstrating the potential of Yoruba philosophy as a guide to exploring and influencing the complex of factors shaping experience across space and time.

Is that not one way of describing Ifa divination, the premier Yoruba knowledge system?

May what can be described as Falola's illumination of temporal, spatial and ideological networks in exploring Yoruba history in *Global Yoruba* not be productively visualized through the symbols of Ifa hermeneutics?

Falola's book narrates the vertical, temporal progression of Yoruba history, from the remote past to the present, within and beyond Yorubaland, across Africa and into the Americas.

Ifa divination symbolism is represented by the drawing of a vertical line on the opon ifa, the divination platform and cosmological symbol of Ifa.

Falola also explores what may be described as the horizontal dimension of time in Yoruba experience, specifically in its spirituality and philosophy, a horizontality cutting across the vertical, and representing the aspiration to both immerse oneself in the depths of the immediacy of experience and transcend that immediacy through entry into the trans-temporal or timeless, aspirations pursued through ritual, through music, through textual engagement, efforts both discussed by Falola and potently visualized through art of spiritual activity in *Global Yoruba*.

Ifa divination symbolism also involves the drawing of a horizontal line to intersect the vertical line on the opon ifa, preparatory to a divination session, as described in Abiodun, Pemberton and Drewal's *Yoruba: Nine Centuries*.

Falola's interpretive model is centred in the spatial diffusion of Yoruba culture from its natal origins to different parts of the world, possibilities developing varied ways of engaging relationships between being and becoming, time and eternity constituted by philosophy and spirituality.

The opon ifa operates in terms of the visual equivalent of such a principle of centrifugal motion, motion from a centre to a circumference, represented by the empty centre of the opon ifa surrounded by its circumference populated by diverse carved forms, that centre being the space where the divinatory symbols are configured when cast in divination, configurations generating responses to queries brought to the oracle.

The ultimate possibilities of Yoruba culture are discussed by Falola as embryonic within its original formulation, breaking open afresh in new constellations under the impulse of diverse circumstances, multifarious creativities orbiting the inspirational centre as radiations from an originating nexus.

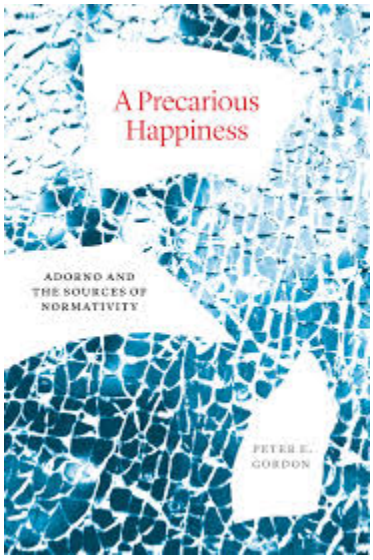
What is the significance of such interpretive models, using visual symbolism in generating a breadth of ideas?

They help stimulate thought through the evocative power of images and concentrate and consolidate understanding through the integrative power of visual symbols, evoking a field of ideations through a single image.

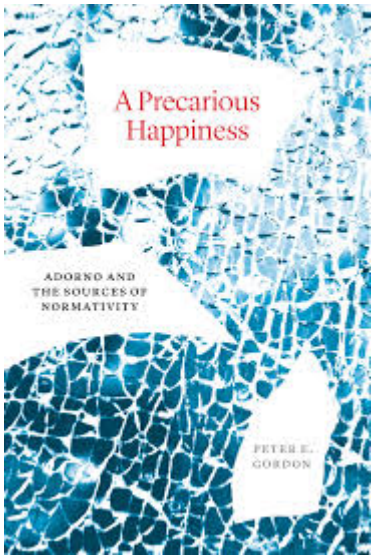
In achieving these goals, they demonstrate the cognitive force of Yoruba thought, the achievements of past centuries resonating in the present and future in new formations, the central thesis of Falola’s book on the globalization of Yoruba existence, moving from geography and biology to ideology, traveling across space and time.

Peter Gordon’s A Precarious Happiness

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



Peter Gordon’s *A Precarious Happiness: Adorno and the Sources of Normativity*, is assuredly one of the best books on Adorno and Critical Theory to have been written in the last decades. The book is comprehensive but detailed, focused but expansive. It is about Adorno’s concept of happiness and the flouring life, but it is also what makes a critical theory of society, critical and normative. The question is : how can we “justify” our claims of the social order or for another. Thus, the book exemplifies immanent critique in the highest form. It also argues that there can only be a “transcendence from within” to use that most apropos expression by Habermas. Gordon’s writing is also lexically powerful and rich. The book has a host of generative expressions, such as “normative surplus,” which imply “normative deficit,” and “normative failure,” which in recent work by Frankfurters and Berliners call “regression.” It should not go unnoted that Gordon’s knowledge of Adorno’s corpus is staggering. When I was writing my notes, I wrote “punctilious.” The book is indeed very carefully argued and carefully documented with reference to Adorno’s *Gesamtausgabe*. Thus, Gordon’s book is not only the best book on Adorno, but also a contribution to Frankfurt School inflected Critical Theory. In what follows, I want to raise not criticisms, but notes of nuance.



First, I have been reading and teaching Adorno for decades and I did so under the banner of what Gordon calls the "negativist" reading of Adorno. Adorno as the consummate Hegelian critic: the real is not rational, and the whole is the untrue. I thus took it that Adorno's maxim was: "against happiness." I was deeply impacted by Gillian Rose's *The Melancholy Science*, which argues, perhaps, the opposite of Gordon. Adorno's work is full of melancholy, for those moments when we get a glimpse of a rightly lived life illuminated in our otherwise alienated lives. Under the influence of Rose, I think of Adorno as thinker of nostalgia. Still, I am impressed by Gordon's argument that these moments of nostalgia are meant to point us in the direction of happiness. Many years ago, under the constellations of Benjamin, Adorno and Horkheimer, I read the book by Eric G. Wilson, *Against Happiness*: *in Praise of Melancholy*. If we read sections 107 and 108 of *Minima Moralia*, where Adorno writes on "negative Anthropology" and then paraphrasing Nietzsche's saying about not owing a home, that today "it is part of morality not to be at home in one's own home." (p.39) One could be justified in arguing for a form of "negative happiness" to match a "negative anthropology" and that is part of "morality not to be happy in one's alleged happiness." Do not be happy with your happiness; it is assuredly both ideological and ersatz. Happiness is its worst enemy.

Second, Gordon argues that, according to Adorno, there is a correlation between "flourishing and happiness." Arguably, by flourishing we may be happy, and being happy is a sign of flourishing. I want to dispute this putative correlation. Most, or a lot of people, flourish but they are not happy, and their happiness may inoculate them to the challenge of flourishing. The question here is the order of dependence between flourishing and happiness, i.e. must we be happy to flourish, or conversely, to flourish may lead to the elusive happiness? In other words, can we flourish and not be happy, and be happy but not flourishing. I have been asked by people who should be unnamed whether I am happy. My response is: with what? My job, my children, my relationships, my lifestyle, my work? Happiness and Flourishing are very metaphysical concepts and they are nebulous like the summer clouds that drift in an otherwise blue sky.

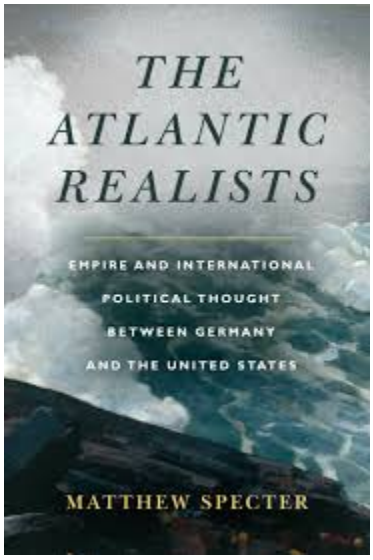
Third. The last chapter of Gordon's book deals with Adorno's aesthetics, as it should be. For

Adorno, I take it that the work of art is an embodiment of what he refers to as the *promesse de bonheur*, quoting Stendhal. All works of art are figurations and illuminations of what possible and perhaps reachable happiness may be. But it is only a promise, a prefiguration. I have read and studied Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* many times and I must acknowledge that this is one of Adorno's best works, albeit posthumous at it was. In this book, edited by his wife, Adorno argues that every work of art is a "social fact," or a "social event." As such every work of art projects a constellation, while being part of that constellation. Adorno argues that every work of art depends on four elements: the technological and material elements that enable and facilitate the creation of unique works; second, a social condition that enables the presentation of such works; third, the institutions of appreciation of works or art that, then fourth, light up the constellation. If I remember correctly, Adorno says that every work of art is a monad, as in Leibniz's monadology, but which is in relationship to other monads. Every work of art illuminates every other work. Every work of art teaches us to see differently and to feel differently.

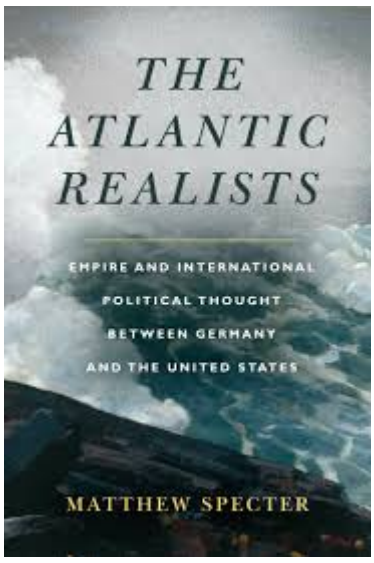
I want to close these brief remarks by praising Gordon for taking on the question of whither critical theory? There has been a Kantian turn in recent Frankfurt School critical theory where the dominant keyword is "justification." Gordon is absolutely right when he wants to argue that to "justify" something requires some normative ground. For him, it is this quest for both flourishing and happiness. Adorno's negative ethics, to use Schopenhauer's expression, is what I would call an ethics of affectivity and corporeality. In his *Lectures on Problems of Moral Philosophy*, Adorno refers to and quotes one of the Nazi officers who was sentenced to death as a co-conspirator in the attempt to assassinate Hitler. In this officer's testimony he says something to the effect that "he just could not do what he was ordered to do. It was against his being." Adorno goes on to argue that ethics must be based on our bodily reactions, on our senses of shame, sorrow, and regret. If philosophy is the attempt to make sense of the gaze of the other, it is also a quest to make sense of our visceral reactions.

Matthew Specter’s The Atlantic Realists

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



In *The Atlantic Realists*, Matthew Specter sets out to historicize a tradition of international thought—realism—whose defining feature may be its claim to exist outside history. The book “conducts a genealogy of the realist paradigm in North Atlantic international thought” (2), asking “how [realist] intellectuals… [came] to believe that specific theories offered a privileged glimpse of international ‘reality’” (2). Indeed, readers will be familiar with realism and the set of concepts—national interest, power-politics, grand strategy, geopolitics—that structure the realist approach to understanding international affairs. Born across what the British historian and early realist E.H. Carr called Europe’s “Twenty Years’ Crisis” between 1919 and 1939, and elaborated during the Cold War by intellectuals based in the United States, realism has defined itself as both an academic tradition and a set of long-inherited wisdom. Earlier sources of this wisdom, we are told, range from Herodotus and Machiavelli to Hobbes and Bismarck.



Specter, by contrast, argues that a key strand of the "Atlantic realist tradition" emerged through historically specific conditions between Germany and the United States from the 1890s into the twentieth century. Rather than a universally applicable body of received wisdom, this strand of realism becomes, in Specter's account, the product of transatlantic intellectual exchanges occasioned by the simultaneous emergence of Germany and the United States on the world's stage during the fin-de-siècle. *The Atlantic Realists* offers this chronology as a revision to other accounts of realism's emergence, which prioritize the disillusionment of the Interwar years and the early Cold War crucible. In so doing, it joins a fruitful revisionist strain of international history, which has emphasized the crucial imperial context for the origins of twentieth-century international thought and institutions.

The argument itself unfolds across seven chapters, which proceed roughly chronologically and orbit key figures in a genealogy of realism: Alfred Thayer Mahan and Friedrich Ratzel; Karl Haushofer, Carl Schmitt and Isaiah Bowman; Wilhelm Grewe and Hans Morgenthau. In its aim to problematize and historicize the genealogy of Atlantic realism, the book is undoubtedly successful and will prove important reading for historians of empire, international thought and international law, and the Cold War, as well as historians of Germany and the United States. The chapter on Wilhelm Grewe (Chapter 4) is a particularly interesting intervention into ongoing debates about German-American intellectual exchanges during the late Weimar and early Nazi years—debates supercharged by a broader recent interest in transnational fascism.

Three of the book's innovations will be especially fertile ground for scholars working further afield. First, Specter persuasively argues that the seeds of realist thought lay not in the *Realpolitik* of Otto von Bismarck but, instead, the inter-imperial competition that marked the turn of the twentieth century. Historians interested in the expansion and eclipse of empire in Europe, the United States, and Japan will find much of interest in this argument, which unfolds across the first two chapters. Second, building on this earlier chronology, Specter uses the book's middle chapters to "tie the discussion of realism to the historiography of classical geopolitics" (12). Given its contemporary vogue, "geopolitics" demands a more extensive critical historiographical treatment, to which Specter has offered a key contribution. Third, among the book's most piercing analyses is its critical focus on the realist "habitus," a way of being and seeing that underlay realism's epistemological claims. The byword for this habitus is often the German "*Haltung*," that is, a clear-eyed "stance," "attitude," or "posture" toward the supposed harsh, universal realities of politics. Specter argues that, much like realist thought, the realist *Haltung* was a historically specific construction that sought to masquerade in universalist get-up.

Among the book's central challenges is to conduct a genealogy on a "school" of thought whose thinkers did not always identify with the realist paradigm. The scale of this task is particularly relevant in the book's first two chapters, which uncover the origins of a realist tradition *avant la lettre*. Specter makes a compelling case that the central problems of twentieth-century realist thought should be traced not to Bismarckian *Realpolitik*, but to the world-historical concerns of German *Weltpolitik* (literally "world policy") and other fin-de-siècle imperial ambitions. However, this argument necessarily omits the strong strain of liberal thinking that

suffused *Weltpolitik*. "Liberal" here meaning self-consciously modern, inspired by a racial "civilizing mission," and optimistic about the opportunities afforded by imperial expansion and economic integration. Specter thus offers a reading of *Weltpolitik* that could have engaged more thoroughly with recent scholarship on Imperial Germany's global ambitions, especially Erik Grimmer-Solem's 2019 book *Learning Empire*.[1] Doubtless, *Weltpolitik* both drew on and fed a set of Social Darwinian discourses about power and inter-imperial struggle. But those discourses, and *Weltpolitik* in general, contained a prominent liberal component that does not appear in Specter's account. There is a reason *Weltpolitik* proved especially popular not only with geographers and political theorists, but also with economists, determined to carve for Germany a prominent place in a globalized world of economic winners and losers.

This line of thought spilled into the Interwar period and beyond, through figures like the economist Bernhard Harms, whose work on *Weltwirtschaft* ("world economics") and imperial competition would argue that Germany should pursue both a continental bloc and intensified international economic exchange.[2] Indeed, until 1929 Weimar Germany's most prominent foreign policy expert—the Chancellor-turned-Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann—was an exponent of this liberal tradition in German nationalism, which celebrated imperial and international interconnection as a lever for national interests. Specter refers to Stresemann as a "Social Democratic foreign minister" (142). He was in fact a member, indeed, the Chairman, of the right-liberal, nationalist, pro-business *Deutsche Volkspartei* (German People's Party). After 1919, the *Deutsche Volkspartei* provided a political home for Germany's disappointed former free-trade and liberal imperialists. The liberal strain of *Weltpolitik* endowed German politics with a long-enduring patrimony. As Kristina Spohr's recent biography of Helmut Schmidt and William Gray's work on West Germany as a "trading power" indicate, the Federal Republic's return to international political relevance in the 1960s and 1970s drew on this tradition of Atlantic liberalism, as well as Atlantic realism.[3]

If anything, this criticism would seem to underline the success of Specter's central aim—that is, to historicize a realist tradition in international relations whose discursive force often rests on claims to human nature and permanence. That, in Germany, the realist outlook was contested and forged in conjunction with a robust liberal imperialist/liberal internationalist tradition highlights the contingency of Atlantic realist thought. In this sense, *The Atlantic Realists* is essential reading for international historians and international relations scholars. Identifying the era of fin-de-siècle imperial "mimesis and rivalry," especially that between the United States and Germany, is an argument at once compelling and counterintuitive.[4] Nevertheless, what might be learned from a study that paired the Atlantic realist and liberal traditions? The story of Interwar-era geopolitics, for example, seems to suggest a dialectical relationship between an increasingly unstable, networked world and new mental maps that seek the certainty of space. Might the contemporary return to geopolitics—be it Putin's Eurasian pretensions, China's Belt and Road initiative, or the United States' protectionism—indicate a similar process: not the triumphant, natural wisdom of geography but anxiety about geopolitics' inability to grasp an increasingly interconnected world? *The Atlantic Realists* excavates the history of a field often considered transhistorical, and in so doing makes possible further inquiry into these central questions of twentieth and twenty-first century international

thought.

[1] Erik Grimmer-Solem, *Learning Empire: Globalization and the German Quest for World Status, 1875-1919* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

[2] Bernhard Harms, *Volkswirtschaft und Weltwirtschaft. Versuch der Begründung einer Weltwirtschaftslehre* (Jena: Verlag von Gustav Fischer, 1912).

[3] Kristina Spohr, *The Global Chancellor: Helmut Schmidt and the Reshaping of the International Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); William Glenn Gray, *Trading Power: West Germany's Rise to Global Influence, 1963-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[4] Jeremy Adelman, "Mimesis and Rivalry: European Empires and Global Regimes," *Journal of Global History* 10, no. 1 (March 2015): 77-98.

John Powers’ Technology and the Making of Experimental Film Culture

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2

Film scholars have in general spent surprisingly little time historicizing, theorizing, and analyzing the technological processes by which films actually get made. Even within studies of avant-garde and experimental cinema, which by necessity center individual filmmakers and their specific artisanal practices, emphasis is usually placed far more on formal analysis – itself leaning heavily on relevant political and philosophical concerns – than on the mechanical tools and innovations that shape the contours of an individual work. Thus, a book that surveys the basic technical materials that have undergirded and, one might argue, offered a coherence to the history of experimental film is not only valuable but long overdue.

John Powers' *Technology and the Making of Experimental Film Culture* does just this. Its central contention is that experimental film – nonnarrative, personal cinema that invents new possibilities for and/or interrogates film language – flourishes at the intersection of the tools filmmakers use and the way they imagine those tools' creative charge. Powers sets out to re-read different films from the (largely, but not exclusively, U.S.) experimental canon that are usually not seen as related by juxtaposing them on the basis of shared techniques. To a reader like this one with catholic interests in the avant-garde, the conjunctures of queer and feminist classics by Jack Smith, Michelle Citron, and Barbara Hammer with meat-and-potatoes staples of formalism by Ken Jacobs, Bruce Baillie, and Nathaniel Dorsky feel natural. The filmmakers' individual perceptions of the role their shared technologies play in their artistic process do vary considerably, though, and Powers uses these reflections to chart different modes of cinematic praxis.

The first two chapters of the book – on the relatively lightweight 16mm camera made by the Swiss firm Bolex International S.A. (celebrating its centenary this year) and on reversal film stock, respectively – could also be of use to those not expressly interested in the avant-garde, as they offer insight into the tools at an independent filmmaker's disposal in the latter half of the twentieth century. While the Bolex camera has become synonymous with the poetic mode of filmmaking as individual, personal expression that is taught in art schools, countless future narrative directors also cut their teeth behind it. For its part, reversal film stock (a cheaper alternative to negative film, since it does not require making an internegative en route to a positive print) is often faulted for being overly "grainy." The particularly "coarse granularity" of one popular stock, Tri-X, leads to a particularly sophisticated and sensitive analysis of Peter Hutton's films, one of several strong points in the book as pure criticism. Equally insightful is the discussion of a Kodachrome, a notoriously high-contrast film stock that many felt had the power to transport viewers to spiritual realms, through a deft reading of *Normal Love* built entirely around Jack Smith's play with the stock's garish excesses. Powers' consideration of whether a film stock can be inherently realistic or expressionistic (in the case of Kodachrome and its big bright colors, which Dorsky likened to "medieval stained glass" and "oil paint") typifies the hermeneutic power of his materialist mode of analysis.

While shooting an experimental film may be a hyper-individual act, the antithesis of Hollywood productions' army-like operation, often post-production is not fully solitary. The relationships that filmmakers had to forge with lab technicians in order to produce the best release prints possible were ones of intense collaboration. In chapter three, which deals more capaciously with how makers have interacted with labs, we learn about key partnerships such as the one that Hollis Frampton (who himself had worked for a lab) forged over many hours spent color grading his films with Joe Williams of Filmtronics. Many filmmakers, though, had a more adversarial relationship with labs. James Broughton, for instance, lamented that they "are set up just to grind it out" (87). The tension they often felt with lab technicians was sometimes by design, as they tested the labs' capabilities (as in J.J. Murphy's experiment *Print Generation* or Stan Brakhage's *Scenes from Under Childhood*, which used the baroque technique of multi-roll printing to create, as Powers eloquently puts it, a "weave of thought and memory" (102)).

In addition to being an essential waystation in the production process for any filmmaker, labs have doubled as de facto archives–at first, not unlike how a dry cleaner has at any point in time enough clothes on hand to rebrand as a consignment shop, as they waited patiently for filmmakers to pick up their show prints, but then over time as more permanent depositories, particularly as negatives get left behind. By the time one of the most important labs in the country, DuArt, finally stopped processing film in 2010 (after no less than a 88-year run), it was still housing so many films that not even all of the major archives in the U.S. put together were able to accept and process the entire holdings. They are to be credited for keeping many avant-garde and underground titles extant at all.

The title of the fourth chapter is suggested by Craig Baldwin's account of what using the machine was like: "for me it was always like holding the jalopy together when it was about ready to fall apart." Peter Rose, for his part, worries that the sound of a vacuum cleaner from three apartments away could always make the machine skip a few key frames. Unlike the other technologies examined in the book, the optical printer was hardly one unique to the avant-garde. It was used as early as the 1930s in *King Kong* and *Bringing Up Baby*. As other scholars, such as Julie Turnock, have highlighted, it was as important to George Lucas and others at the vanguard of Hollywood special effects as it was to the first generation of avant-garde filmmakers that used it. While it spread slowly in the avant-garde, due to its complexity and costliness, once it became commonplace by the 1970s (with the invention of the JK optical printer in 1971) it was there to stay. Powers highlights how it remains the most integral toolkit to many experimental filmmakers' practice, and the backbone of many MFA programs. In fact, one film department that was the catalyst for the JK's creation. As department chair at the now-defunct San Francisco Art Institute, Larry Jordan approached local camera wiz Jaakko Kuhri with the need for such a device ("reliable, easy to operate…and… relatively inexpensive so that it can be purchased by individual filmmakers and film teaching schools," as Kuhri's patent stated).

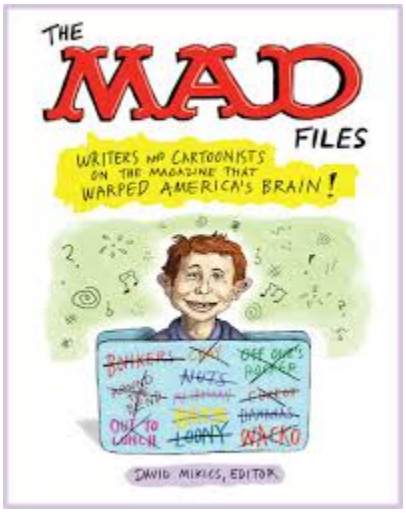
Enabling a partially-shot film to be rephotographed for the addition of visual effects or multiple complete new layers of imagery, the optical printer is the film artist's ultimate gadget. Without it, the accretive abstract expressionism of a filmmaker like Phil Solomon would be unthinkable. Powers highlights how Solomon's use of the optical printer centers around a paradox of burial and uncovering, merging the "alchemical and heretic" imperatives the device as part of a broad, if subtle, epistemological undertaking.

Technology and the Making of Experimental Culture may lean a bit heavily on how filmmakers theorize their own work; however, that feels appropriate given the book's mission of exploring what the technologies meant to filmmakers. An unexpected but welcome consequence of this focus is the demonstration that the meaning we ascribe to even the most rarified, critically neglected films often arises not from what is actually onscreen but from the way we hear people talking about them. More on the transition from an exclusively analog gestalt to the hybrid present that experimental film now inhabits would have been welcome, so as to open the question of whether and to what extent the auras around the book's four core technologies have shifted. It felt as though the continuities that some filmmakers have found between

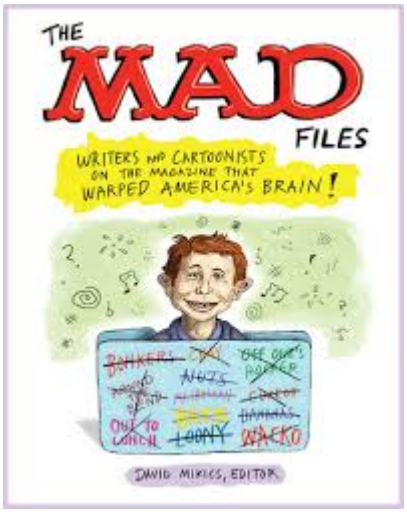
analog and digital may be overstated. While the creative possibilities of digital video remain considerable, one has to feel the visual poverty of much contemporary video art in comparison to the richness, dynamism, and boundless creativity of the decades of avant-garde film reanimated herein.

David Mikics' The Mad Files

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



Long before I ever read *the Communist Manifesto*, "the Soul of Man Under Socialism," or *A Peoples History of the United States*, *Mad* magazine helped make me a radical. Although *Mad* had no positive political program to offer, it served as a useful inoculation. *Mad* encouraged me, as it did for many readers, to see beyond the glittering promises made by advertisers, politicians, and the mass media. Media critic Marshall McLuhan caught the situation well when he wrote in 1964 that "the ten-year-old clutches his or her *Mad*… in the same way that the Russian beatnik treasures an old Presley tape obtained from a G.I. broadcast." *Mad* was a precious symbol of defiance.



I vividly recall the first issue of *Mad* I ever read. It was the 1999 *Mad Star Wars Spectacular*, a collection of all their *Star Wars* material. At that time, *Star Wars* seemed like the most important thing in my world. It was bigger than Jesus. I didn't know what to make of the comics in the magazine. Sure, they looked like *Star Wars*, but it was poking fun at my beloved

trilogy! Once I got over the shock, I appreciated the attention and effort went in to parodying the movies I cared so much about. Later on, *Mad* helped me see the funny side of religion, politics, society, and mass culture; things almost as important as *Star Wars*.

Mad emerged from the ashes of the 50s anti-comics crusade, and was a cultural phenomenon for decades. Even dedicated *Mad* skeptic Robert Warshow could write in *Commentary* that although the publication was "devoted to a wild, undisciplined machine-gun attack on American popular culture" he still "read it with a kind of irritated pleasure." Nowadays, *Mad* exists in a diminished form. New material largely stopped in 2019 and it can no longer be found on newsstands.

Last year, the Library of America released *The Mad Files: Writers and Cartoonists on the Magazine that Warped America's Brain! e*dited by David Mikics. The book collects essays and comics (and one fold-in) by 28 creators detailing the influence the magazine has had "on American life and culture." The foreign editions of *Mad*, of which there were many, are left out. A survey of them could and should make a book in itself.

Gary Hendrix and David Hadju both cover the aspect of *Mad* that enthralled a young me: the film parodies. Hendrix surveys the history of Mad's cinematic takedowns, beginning with 1954's "Hah! Noon." The feature changed alongside the industry. For years *Mad* spoofed popcorn blockbusters and smaller films, but that changed as studios kept films in theaters for shorter periods of time By the end, *Mad* was reduced to spoofing films the creators knew would be hits and still in theaters whenever the corresponding issue released. This also explains why parodies of television shows started to displace the ones of films. Hendrix concludes by recounting the amusing tale of an overzealous Lucasfilm lawyer sending*Mad* a cease-and-desist letter over "The Empire Strikes Out." *Mad*'s response was to send a copy of a letter from George Lucas himself expressing how much he enjoyed being spoofed. There were no further problems from Lucasfilm.

Hadju focuses more narrowly on *Mad*'s musical parodies. The magazine would create lyrics, set to existing songs, and lampoon a film. For example, the climactic battle in Star Wars would be set to "We're Off to Kill the Bad Guys," to the tune of "We're Off to See the Wizard" from *the Wizard of Oz*. *Mad* introduced readers to many classic songs via these sendups. I found Darth Vader's "My Day" well before I ever heard "My Way."

One of the most prophetic pieces is Geoffrey O'Brien's 1989 *Village Voice* piece "Stark Raving Mad." O'Brien describes how "the age of parody" begun by *Mad* ended when "potential targets" like Ronald Reagan undermined potential attacks "by deliberately making themselves parodies in advance." O'Brien was slightly ahead of his time. Although several effective parodies of Reagan spring to mind, most notably Phil Hartman's on *Saturday Night Live*, to search for a similarly effective Trump parody is to search in vain.

The *New Yorker*'s Roz Chast and Art Spiegelman of *Maus*, contribute short comics on their experiences with *Mad*. Chast notes with pride her letter to the editor praising their spoof of

Love Story as “funnier than the original.” Spiegelman explains that while he “couldn’t learn about America from [his] refugee immigrant parents,” he “learned all about it from *Mad*.”

Cartoonist and *Mad* contributor Peter Kuper’s summary of the career of Harvey Kurtzman is longer and more informative. Kuper parodies Kurtzman’s famous war story “Murder on the Imujin” at his opening and closing, a reminder that Kurtzman was equally at home with the dramatic and comedic. Kuper has to cover so much territory in summarizing Kurtzman’s career that his own cartoon Kurtzman attacks him, accusing him of glossing over important milestones. This metafictional touch would be right at home in *Mad*.

Bonnie Altucher tells the story of Antonio Prohias, Kuper’s predecessor on “Spy vs. Spy.” Prohias fled Castro’s Cuba, and his comic presents a fundamentally Third Camp view of the Cold War. Both sides pull the same tricks and have the same nebulous goal. They are distinguishable only by the colors of their uniforms.

Liel Leibovitz, Mary-Lou Wiseman, Leah Garrett, Daniel Bronstein, and Nathan Abrams all contribute essays on Mad’s Jewishness, paying attention to contrubotors Dave Berg, Al Jaffee, and Will Elder. Berg and Jaffee both contributed to the religious publication *The Moshiach Times*. Publisher Bill Gaines did not share this devotion. Whenever Berg would greeet him with, “God bless you,” Gaines would respond, “Go to Hell.” *Mad*’s Jewishness never came across as religious to me. Instead it embodied a certain Yiddishkeit, and its creators embodied historian Isaac Deutscher’s advice to “remain eternal protesters.”

There are three pieces that dampen the overall celebratory mood of the book and keep it from being simply a fond look back at bygone days. The least satisfying contribution comes from underground cartoonist Robert Crumb. It’s not a comic, but a text piece that doesn’t even reach a full page with nothing new to say. It reads like a poor excuse to have another famous name on the list of contributors.

Two others are more substantial critiques of the world of *Mad*. Cartoonist and critic Sarah Boxer takes the magazine to task for a variety of sins. In her hostile overview, *Mad* was sexist, unoriginal, and worst of all, unfunny. Even “Superduperman” widely considered one of the best of early *Mad*, comes in for rough treatment. Boxer complains the social commentary of the story is merely “working women are steel-hearted bitches and the men who work with them do not view them as potential allies or competition but only as a potential piece of ass.” Boxer seems unaware that the comic satirizes the wish fulfillment element of superheroes appealing to men and boys, and the legal battles between DC Comics and Fawcett Comics over similarities between Superman and Captain Marvel. Her argument that *Mad* was a warren of boys club sexism is also expressed by Rachel Shteir in her survey, “The Women Cartoonists of Mad,” when she makes the unconvincing case that “the #MeToo movement” was “one of the things that pushed Mad into obsolescence.”

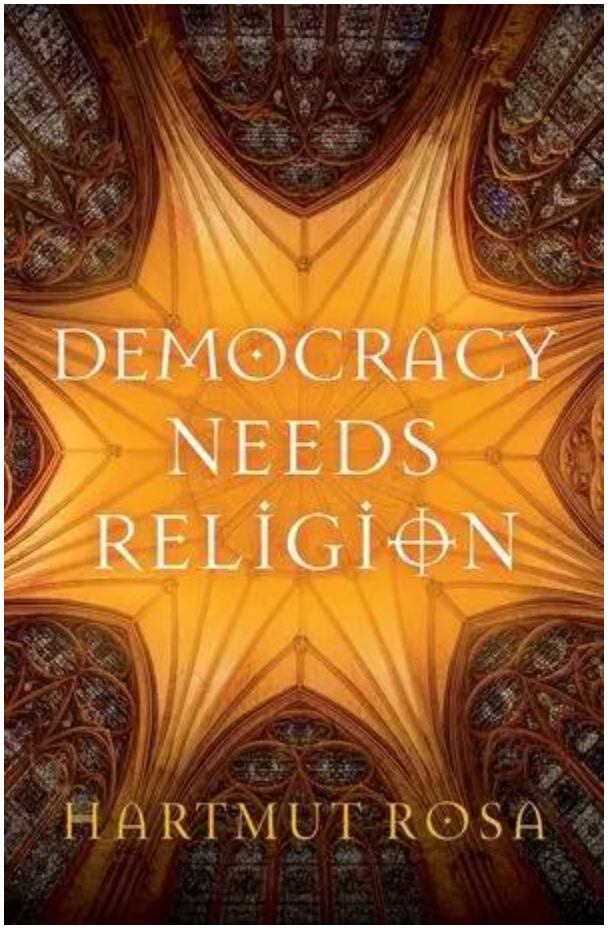
Disagreeing with my opening evaluation of *Mad*’s radicalism, Adam Gopnik’s piece criticizes Mad’s satire as being of a conservative bent. Gopnik writes, “satire was so fertile in the 1950s

because satire is…a conservative genre in the first instance." Gopnik echoes humorist Tim Kreider who writes the magazine's "ethos was essentially conservative." If *Mad*was indeed conservative, a contestable assertion, it was purely by default. Its cynical attitude prevented it from supporting any plan of action or change.

The Mad Files povides an admirable survey of an American humor institution, despite my misgivings with some essayists. Regardless, most show an engagement with *Mad* and its place in popular culture. The effect is to make one want to seek out reprints in order to spend time with the Usual Gang of Idiots responsible for so much laughter.

Hartmut Rosa’s Democracy Needs Religion

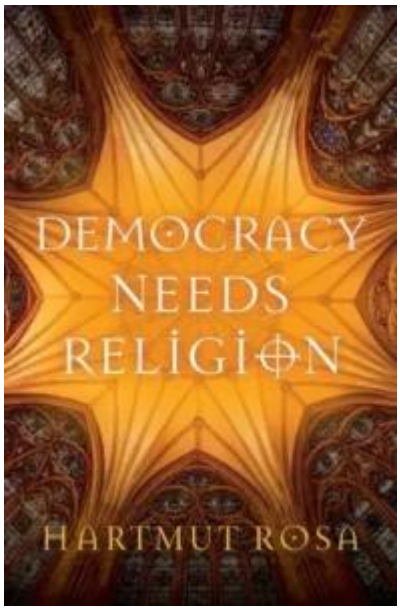
By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2



Maintaining that our democracy needs religion seems an idea ill-fitted to our times. In the West at least, religion is not faring well. Western Europe is arguably a post-religious society, with many churches and cathedrals converted to museums or concert halls. In the last several decades, the United States seems to be following Europe in a move toward creating a secular society, witnessed by the rapidly expanding ranks of the unaffiliated. More than 28% of Americans now assert that they do not belong to a house of worship, and this cohort of “nones” includes growing numbers of agnostics and atheists. “Nones” now exceed the percentage of Americans who are Catholics and evangelical Protestants, making it the largest group on the religious spectrum.

The loss of adherents may be a factor in pushing many conservative religionists to the extremes. Christian nationalism is on the rise, and the politicized evangelical churches have been among Donald Trump’s most stalwart supporters, without which he could not have attained the White House. If anything, contemporary religion proves itself to be a militant destroyer of democracy, making the title of the book under review at least ironic, if not

provocative. Reactionary religion has had a long history of supporting fascist regimes, and it is ominously happening under the direction of Donald Trump. Moreover, rampant sexual abuse in the Catholic Church has been a global phenomenon, undermining its claims to moral authority. And when it comes to abuse, Catholicism does not have a monopoly. The religions have a long, tragic history of complicity with the forces of darkness. Among those whose ethics are guided by decency, religion in our times does not have a good name. The Left has had a long history of condemning religion for its collusion with retrograde political movements.



Democracy Needs Religion by the German sociologist, Hartmut Rosa, is a small book that encompasses large ideas. At fewer than 70 pages, it is the revised and extended publication of a lecture that Rosa gave to the Diocese of Würzburg, Germany in 2022. Rosa's primary concept is what he calls "resonance," and it is the focal idea around which he critiques the malaise of modernity. Resonance is a concept central to Rosa's work and serves as a basis for an earlier work with that title. *Democracy Needs Religion* briefly applies Rosa's theory of resonance to the revival of democracy, especially in the interpersonal quarters of contemporary life.

Borrowing from Karl Marx and the theorists of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Rosa identifies alienation as the primary discontent of modern society. Resonance, which describes a change of consciousness, is proffered as the response to that alienation caused by the structure and rushed tempo of contemporary life.

In Rosa's analysis, society can be described as in a state of "frenetic standstill." Perpetual growth without direction is its prevailing dynamic. As Rosa notes,

"[frenetic standstill] is meant to imply two things. On the one hand, society is accelerating. Indeed, it is frantically rushing ahead; for structural reasons, in fact, it must rush in this way to

maintain its structure. On the other hand, however, it has become mired or sclerotic. It has lost the sense of its historical (forward) momentum."

Rosa refers to this condition as "dynamic stabilization," and relentless growth lies at its core. Such accelerated growth, he asserts, is necessary to maintain the status quo. As such, modern society needs to expend more and more energy to maintain existing conditions. The demands built into the structures of late capitalism ensure that we produce and have more: more energy, more expansion, more productivity, more inventiveness, more things, more wants, all moving at a forever accelerating pace.
As Rosa concludes,
"I find it truly absurd at this point to speak abstractly of growth without indicating where this growth should be achieved…"

"Even more absurd is the fact that we, as humans, don't even want all this growth because we are greedy and insatiable. We need it because, without growth, we could no longer sustain the entire existing social structure. Growth and acceleration are driven by fear, not by greed."

The relentlessness of accelerated growth results in consequences at both the macro social level and in the lives and consciousness of individuals. Environmental destruction is no doubt its most salient consequence on the planetary level. With regard to the fabric of social relations, Rosa asserts that the condition we are in renders more aggressive our relationship to the world and to each other. "Our relationship to the world is aggressive; we are always in attack mode or alarm mode." Industries, the extractive industries as the prime examples, are acting more and more recklessly in the search for oil and rare earth elements. This aggressive frenzy of perpetual expansion, Rosa asserts, informs our politics. He argues that it is the dynamic underlying our stark divisions and the transformation of political adversaries into perceived enemies.

There is a psychological toll as well. An ethos of relentless growth is experienced in what he identifies as the burnout crisis, which closely correlates to a burgeoning rise in mental illness. Rosa's realism causes him to admit that the modern agenda has given rise to tremendous levels of economic welfare, scientific knowledge, and technological capability. But despite this progress, Rosa concludes that the promises of modernity have not been kept.

The modern world is one of great utility, yet it has left us wanting for experiences fundamental to our sense of well being and our relationship to the world beyond ourselves. A pall pervades society. Growing competition and dwindling resources make the future less promising. Greater knowledge has led to more uncertainty, not less. There is palpable ignorance and skepticism as to how science relates to personal lives. Parents traditionally felt that their children would be better off than themselves: but no longer. At the same time, emergent awareness of historical evils has darkened our appreciation of the past. In Rosa's view, we have lost both the past and the future.

It is apparent that Rosa is a man of the left, and one concludes that he could amply elaborate a political analysis of the oppression and exploitation wrought by neo-liberalism and late capitalism. However, he does not take this direction in this brief work. One concludes that in his view even if economic egalitarianism were achieved, an essential element would remain missing. And this missing dimension, which resonance restores, is the answer to the alienation wrought by the modern circumstances he describes.

Resonance is a mode of experiencing the world around us. Rosa describes it initially as possessing a *listening, receptive and responsive heart.* Rosa describes resonance in an interview given in January 2017:

"I was looking for a way to save the concept of alienation by defining alienation's *true other*, so to speak. That's how I arrived at this notion of resonance. You're non-alienated from your work, for example, or from the people you interact with, when you manage to have a responsive, transformative, non-instrumental relationship with them, a resonant relationship. The difference is you don't try to manipulate the other side, which could be a person or an idea or a piece of music or nature, or to control it instrumentally or make it disposable and available. Instead, you try to listen and to answer. And whenever you are in that state of experience, when you listen to some music for example — or when you talk with people or when you do your work right, i.e. when you're in resonance, when you feel that the thing you interact with is important, then it speaks to you, it touches and affects you. So this is the one side of a resonant relationship: You are touched, and affected. But on the other side, you also have the capacity to experience self-efficacy. You reach out to the other side too! That's a relationship which is not instrumental and which is not about control, it's a form of resonance. It's a dialogical relationship, which we can never bring about merely instrumentally." (To read the interview in full, you may click here.)

In Rosa's current work, he elaborates on this concept:

"Whenever resonance does take place-whenever I really stop and connect with what has touched me- I enter into a different state of mind and consider different ideas. I begin to see the world differently." Rosa further notes that the moment of resonance, in which the person feels fully alive and is the opposite of burnout, cannot be forced or coerced.

The notion of non-instrumental relations evokes many associations, most distinctively with German epistemologies. It brings to mind thoughts of Kant's "ding-an-sich" and the unknowability of transcendentals. It suggests a mode of intuition identified with romanticism, which Rosa partially affirms. I think of Martin Buber. Rosa, in this work, cites Buber in passing and the centrality that Buber places on relationships and the experiences that occur with the engagement of 'I" and "Thou." Rosa also brings to mind Erich Fromm (an associate of the

Frankfurt School) who contrasted “having” with “being.”

While the applications of resonance in this brief presentation are undeveloped, Ross, as a sociologist, asserts that his concept of resonance has transforming possibilities for society, politics, and the prevailing logic of frenetic growth that governs contemporary life.

The nature of resonance, as a moment of changed consciousness, opens the door to religion as a an ally – indeed a locus – where we can find values and narratives that alight with what resonance suggests. To be sure, Rosa is not naive to religion’s gross failures to fulfill its most sublime objectives. He notes, “Historically speaking, hardly any other entity has been a more effective resonance killer than the Christian church.”

Intrinsic to the religions themselves, Rosa notes that religious institutions, “…and especially those that are dogmatically concerned with preserving their ‘pure teachings’ – can therefore quickly become monsters that not only kill the vertical axis of resonance but also, in so doing, cause social relationships to fall silent…” The dogmatizing of pure teachings, Rosa concludes, leads to the amassing of social power under the guise of “merciless commandments, domination, and submission in the name of God.” It is this propensity that can explain the rampant sexual abuse we have witnessed in the Catholic church and others, as well as in denial of an equal voice to women and exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community.

Rosa’s appreciation of religion is highly selective, which given religion’s variety and complexity, it must be. Despite its gross shortcomings, he nevertheless sees something distinctive in religion that provides the gateway to resonance that he seeks. Pointing to the best in religion, he notes that the religions, “…possess elements that can remind us that there’s another way of relating to the world, a way that is not growth oriented or intent on controlling things.” It is not only religious teaching or inspiring Biblical verses that can open us to this other way, but churches themselves can still play this role. He cites the experience of entering a church, chapel, or temple. Not always, but sometimes, our disposition, our relationship to being in the world, changes. Our experience is different from being in an office or a supermarket. We move from a stance of *agency* to one of *patiency.* Control falls away and aggression has no target. Will such encounters engender the experiences of resonance? Not necessarily. But the stage has been set, and this possibility is critical to Rosa’s analysis. As Rosa further notes, such openness to resonance can occur in other spaces. For those for whom religion has no appeal, resonance can emerge while standing at the ocean’s shore or when walking through the woods.

Rosa contends that the yearning for resonance is a powerful human need, and concludes with the notion that “If society loses this sense, if it forgets that this type of relationship can exist, then it’s ultimately done for.”

But what of democracy? What of its relationship to religion? With the virulent divisions we currently experience, with the consequent absence of dialogue across lines of political difference, Rosa asserts that resonance is necessary. The fundamental requirement of democracy is that people listen to one another. He states,

"Democracy needs a listening heart in order to function. It needs to be perceptive to (very) different ideas, and it needs to be transformed…religious traditions and institutions have at their disposal the narratives, cognitive reservoirs, rites, practices, and spaces in which a listening heart might be cultivated and experienced.…*We must allow ourselves to be invoked-spoken to* – if democracy is to succeed… At the heart of modernity's crisis lies a *crisis of invocability.*

One senses that Hartmut Rosa is an academic who is on a mission. The endpoint he seeks, I would maintain, has a long history of its own. The transformation of consciousness that will lead to the transformation of society and the often unseen ills to which the masses of men and women are not fully aware. Yet, having defined those ills and the needed response, Rosa provides scant information as to how opening the space for resonance can be effectuated. Whom is he addressing and what are they to do – politicians, church leaders, academics, citizens in general, people in the pews? The critical questions of which persons and mechanisms will lead and participate in the process remain unanswered.

But, as noted, this is a very short work, and by necessity raises more questions than it can answer. That said, the ideas that Rosa presents are critically worthy of attention. At a time when democracy is severely threatened, and religion's most precious resources have been drowned by a celebration of its own power, Rosa turns our attention to what is most basic to both religion and democracy. By introducing us to his concept of resonance, Hartmut Rosa is reminding us of what lies at the basis of our humanity.

In these times, when ominous political realities have been compounded by pessimism, it is good to receive a message of hope. Hartmut Rosa is a humane scholar who pushes against conditions that govern our lives and the malaise that has darkened our social horizons with creativity and passion.

Sarah Wynn Williams’ Careless People

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

Careless People

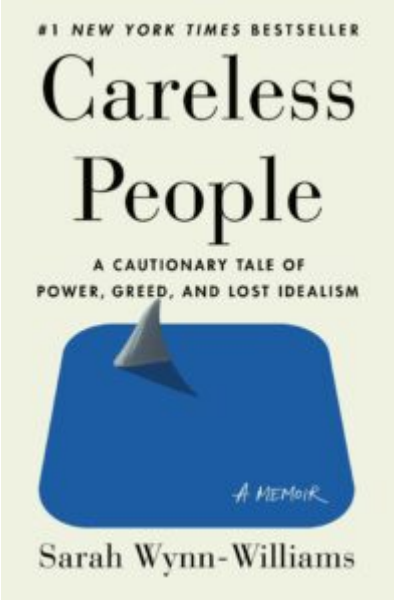
A CAUTIONARY TALE OF POWER, GREED, AND LOST IDEALISM

Sarah Wynn-Williams

Sarah Wynn Williams was a diplomat in New Zealand and an international lawyer. Inspired by what she saw as Facebook's formidable potential, she lobbied the platform for months, before being hired and ultimately rose to Director of Global Public Policy at the platform. Promoted it seems because her idealism was a completely new approach.

It was to be a harrowing ride midst some talented people who refined a techno puzzle, had some wins and some failures, all of it enhanced by lavish lifestyles, while generating fantastical amounts of money.

The figure at the center of this whirlwind was Mark Zuckerberg, initially a feckless Harvard undergrad, fast becoming one of the world's richest men.



Convinced that Facebook had the potential to remake the global communications universe Wynn-William's pitches the powers at Facebook on their latent potential and helps shape the platform into a power base that will come to rival the nation-state.

But the world she enters, driven by her sense of its potential is to prove a minefield littered with the victims of Zuckerberg's indifference, sexual predators male and female, and massive failures of character and vision.

An equity clause at the company insures some of the players will retire to millions should they survive the toxic corporate atmosphere. All of this is complicated by Wynn-Williams health problems which lead to hospital stays and coma. By tales end she will be mother to three children and a husband bewildered by a wife snared between Zuckerberg's ego and a male execs sexual harassment.

Facebooks failure to even comprehend the disaster in Myanmar is to have horrendous consequences: mass rape and murder, torture, and Zuckerberg's indifference combine to produce a horror scenario thats never really fully understood.

Anxious for a Chinese market, the business cuts sub rosa deals and then fogs its tactics despite Congressional interest and interrogations.

There is much evidence of vulnerable teens targeted for their dollars despite statistical evidence that they are being exploited.

Zuckerberg's political ambitions are aroused when one of his execs explains just what Trump's team did with Facebook's help to win his first election. Obama, enraged at Zuckerberg's complicity in the Trump win, insults the CEO, whose fragile ego never quite recovers – despite his employees attempts to salvage the moment.

Wynn-Williams discovers that Facebook enthroned a Harvard boy elitism that would shame a Borgia Court. She is mindful that Facebook had its beginnings as a Harvard dating app that soon ballooned to world phenomena.

Employees are careful not to leave the room following a Zuckerberg meeting before the CEO-a protocol carefully observed by the compromised elite who head a company overseen by a vacillating billionaire. That Zuckerberg and Co have tried to suppress the memoir should not come as News.

From what has filtered to us from Facebook, Amazon and Silicon Valley-the high tech cultures are both complicated and ruthlessly profit driven enterprises in demand by interests both national and domestic.

And there are some surprises, as Wynn-Williams notes: Zuckerberg is at first shocked at Trumps first run win, and wounded that he is being dissed for this initial success-unaware that Trumps team had worked closely with Facebook employees. Trump paid Facebook huge amounts for access to its platform.

What seems strange midst Zuckerberg's vacillating is the narrow mindedness of the Facebook operation, and its insistent low roading despite Wynn-Stewarts efforts to educate the company.

And yes it does all end badly-as Wynn-Stewart grows increasingly disenchanted with Zuckerberg and a sexually aggressive aide de camp who helps engineer her firing.

Lest you entertain any sympathy for Zuckerberg and Co……her computer was confiscated and she was escorted, by Security, from the building. It's a sordid end to what had begun as the attempts of an Idealist and accomplished woman.

In the meantime,Zuckerberg, like Bezos, grows richer by the minute.

Benjamin Heim Shepard’s On Activism, Friendships, and Fighting

By | 2025: Vol. 24, No. 1-2

ON ACTIVISM, FRIENDSHIPS, AND FIGHTING
ORAL HISTORIES, STRATEGIES AND CONFLICTS
BENJAMIN H. SHEPARD

Introduction

In the preface of his most recent book, *On Activism, Friendships, and Fighting: Oral Histories, Strategies, and Conflicts,* Benjamin Heim Shepard (2025) states a powerfully obvious fact about the times we are living in: “With pandemics ebbing and tyrannies rising, we all need friends” (p. xiii). At a time when social movements are more critical than ever, Shepard’s latest book stands as a testament to our need for connection, care, and community while exploring the role that friendship plays in resistance and advocacy.

Shepard knows a thing or two about this, both from his previous scholarship and his personal history as an AIDS activist, community organizer, social worker, researcher, and good troublemaker. He works as a Professor of Human Services at City Tech/CUNY. Over the years, he has protested, been arrested, and participated in various social movements, including ACT UP, Occupy Wall Street, Resist AIM, and the Clandestine Rebel Clown Army, among others. In all these spaces, many of which are chronicled in this book of oral histories, Shepard shows up with compassion and a deep curiosity about humanity. With an open mind, an open heart, and open ears, he listens to the rich stories of connection and disconnection, bonding and rupture that permeate social movements over several decades.

Building on his 2015 book *Rebel Friendships*, Shepard explores activism as relational work. Many of the groups he has been a part of or researched were often born out of conflict over who gets left out and who gets to tell the history of the movement. In this book, Shepard wrestles profoundly with these dilemmas while also demonstrating an embodied inclusivity rooted in Queer and Feminist theory and practice. Queer theory and pedagogy has been identified as an inclusive approach (Nemi Neto, 2018), and Shepard (2025) locates the epicenter of this inclusivity in queer friendships, which he believes “made room for those on the periphery” (p. 41). He also centers the long history of feminist friendship, “creating bonds of connection, breaking down isolation and separation, in favor of connection” (p. 6).

These frameworks support the structure of Shepard's book by ensuring a consistent commitment to the essential processes of relational rapport, rupture, and repair, which are fundamental to both activism and human relationships overall.

Summary and Analysis of the Book

Throughout *On Activism, Friendships, and Fighting*, Shepard examines the role of friendship and community in sustaining long-term movements. He gathers and analyzes oral histories of activists from various backgrounds, identities, and lived experiences. In doing so, he positions personal storytelling as a form of political testimony. He explores human narratives that arise from crisis and trauma but foster compassion and care. However, he does not shy away from the inherent conflicts in our human relationships and how even activist communities can mirror oppressive dynamics and hierarchies, which Shepard (2025) refers to as "supremacy projections" (p. 93). Still, even in the face of conflict, Shepard emphasizes the emergence of new identities and the potential for expanding our communities of care.

The book begins with an introduction on friendship and conflict and then explores the methodology of oral histories and the role it plays in telling the stories of social movements. Shepard then introduces queer and feminist theory that is embodied in activist friendships and brings a radical inclusivity that that sets the tone for weathering the impact of social problems, trauma, and conflict. The first half of the book navigates conflict and fighting within and beyond activist spaces, followed by a reflective interlude titled "Anarchy is for Lovers," in which Shepard (2025) ponders the question, "Why did the groups I was working with fall apart?" (p. 97). Ultimately, Shepard explores the importance of dialectical thinking, compromise, friendship, and love, and urges the reader to consider how we can—how we must—"learn from each other, open the movement of opposing forces, and find new possibilities" (p. 116).

The second half of the book boldly envisions the possibilities that arise when we expand our capacity to see, hear, and accept one another in all our beautiful differences, intersectionalities, and struggles. However, Shepard first acknowledges the conflicts that emerge when attempting to create safe spaces free from patriarchal and oppressive forces and dynamics. The oral histories he collects here are filled with ugliness, trauma, and harm, even within movements meant to be countercultural. These testimonies are difficult to read and challenging to bear witness to, but the truth-telling reveals a larger narrative that must be heard before we can move toward restoration. This echoes attorney and activist Bryan Stevenson's belief that if we have the courage "to engage in truth-telling, something good will happen. There is something waiting for us that feels more like freedom or equality or justice—but to get there, we have to do the hard work" (para. 9).

Shepard gives us tools to perform this important work: tools for listening and engaging in conflict through dialogue. Drawing from Freire's (1970) and Foucault's (1981) philosophies, Shepard emphasizes the significance of dialogue and discourse in human liberation, but only when power dynamics are analyzed and addressed. This forms part of the "working through"

process that Shepard chronicles through powerful stories and narratives, in which we "participate in a process of collective meaning making" (p. 25), which is, in itself, an act of resistance.

Meaning-making is an act of resistance because it emerges only through critical thinking, lived experience, and direct engagement with diverse perspectives. We do not truly arrive at meaning through passive acceptance of what others tell us something *should* mean. Instead, meaning is cultivated when we explore, question, and determine for ourselves the personal and subjective significance of an experience or event—especially as it relates to our own identities. In this way, choosing to make meaning together is a refusal to be defined by dominant narratives or social isolation; it is a reclaiming of voice, agency, and community.

"On Activism, Friendships, and Fighting" concludes with reflections on activist friendships, which becomes one of the most significant sections of the book as it situates the work of rapport, rupture, and repair within the current sociopolitical and cultural context of modern life (particularly in the United States). Shepard (2025) discusses the challenges that the macro-level context imposes on micro-level relationships, stating, "today's call out culture makes it difficult for friendships to endure conflict" (p. 166). Those of us whose work is public facing in any way know this to be true. There is a tendency for people to establish their own prowess and identity in opposition to, not in collaboration with, others, creating further rifts in a movement, even one in which supposed "enemies" are marching toward similar outcomes or goals. Oh, the irony.

Yet, instead of calling us out, Shepard honors the work of Loretta Ross (2025) and bell hooks (2000) to call all of us back in and help us find something of ourselves in each other, to embrace our differences, rather than fearing them. hooks (2000) wrote: "When we choose to love we choose to move against fear—against alienation—and separation…to connect—to find ourselves in each other" (p. 134).

Summarizing his own collective work, Shepard writes:

"This book begins and ends with stories of comrades clashing and coming together, ever joining and separating and linking anew, working through problems and finding meaning and connection. Multiple narratives overlap throughout the text, some literary, others theoretical, stories of activists coping with problems, striving to do something, and making friends along the way. Inevitably the comrades merge and split, clash or endure. Along the way, activists tried to keep these communities from replicating prevailing social dynamics of competition, racism, revenge, and sexism, negotiating ideas of speech, safety, fairness, and pleasure along with concepts of justice and accountability, resolution, and dialogue" (p. 170).

Shepard does not resolve these issues, which some may view as a limitation; however, to "solve" these complex dynamics might be too reductionist. Rather, like an activist historian, he archives these stories and testimonies of what is possible, serving as guideposts and warning signs for future activist communities. Instead, he leaves us contemplating how we can move

beyond our silos. He issues a powerful call to action to do so if we are going to harness our collective power to find and generate “new waves of care and community” in our world (Shepard, p. 173).

Conclusion

“On Activism, Friendships, and Fighting” is a highly relevant, insightful, and inspiring read in these complex times. Shepard’s integration of emotion, care, and vulnerability with his sociopolitical analysis creates an intersectional lens for the reader that calls us to reflect on our own personal, professional, and political squabbles with a more critical, reflective mindset and a more open heart. He is calling us in to broaden the coalition of change—to expand the tent to make room for our differences. His application of queer and feminist theory provides a useful heuristic for decoding the complex oral histories of social activism that Shepard includes in his book. In doing so, Shepard makes this book accessible to a wide variety of audiences: academics, practitioners, and grassroots organizers. This book can help inform activist praxis for future movements by helping us implement movement-building strategies based on allyship, collaboration, and radical friendship—the kind of relationships that can endure conflict by finding common ground through our shared humanity and values of justice and care.

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Matheus Romanetto’s Critique and Affirmation in Erich Fromm

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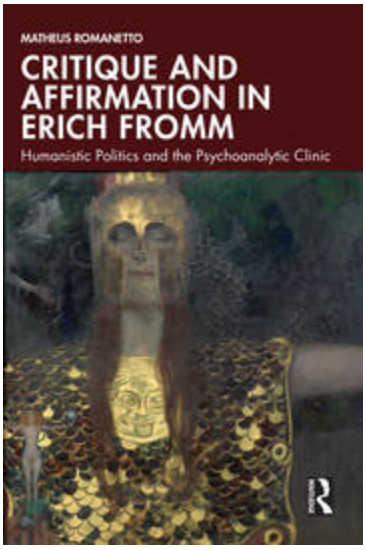
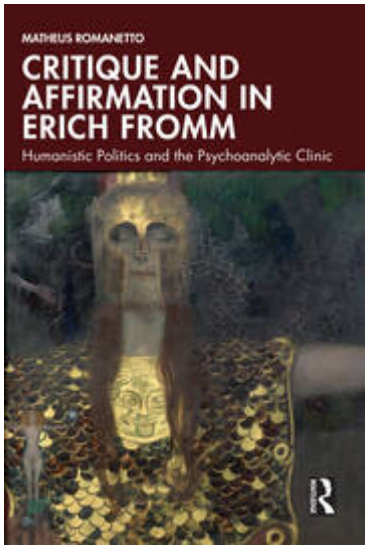


Critique and Affirmation in Erich Fromm radiates intelligence and insight. In addition to being thoughtfully written, meticulously researched, and exceptionally compelling, Matheus Romanetto’s new book is a meaningful contribution to Fromm scholarship. One of its defining features is its depth and breadth: the book covers, in some detail, a wide range of themes, from questions of religion, gender, revolution, ethics, aesthetics, and character to the minutia of the unique ontology implicit in Fromm’s writings. In fact, I would like to suggest that the book’s most important and original contribution to Fromm scholarship consists in its exploration and explication of this unique ontology, which, Romanetto maintains, is crucial for grappling with central Frommian concepts and demonstrating their continued relevance. Put simply, this book’s central innovation is its ontologically driven reconfiguration of our understanding of the significance of and relationship between key Frommian concepts such as love, narcissism, social character, sadism, alienation, productiveness, relatedness, biophilia, repression, the unconscious, etc. This ontology serves as the backdrop to the intellectual journey on which Romanetto takes his readers.



Having brought Fromm into conversation with Marx, Hegel, Freud, Marcuse, and others is among Romanetto's other accomplishments in this text's robust, novel engagement with Fromm. Romanetto faithfully compares and contrasts these thinkers' positions with those held by Fromm on a variety of issues, making the case that Fromm is a natural and worthwhile interlocutor. Another of the book's feats concerns psychoanalysis. Romanetto teases out and discusses in detail Fromm's relationship to and innovations within the field, both theoretically and clinically, showcasing his deviations from orthodox psychoanalysis and original insights, and exploring in the process the affinities and divergences of Fromm's ideas with those of other prominent psychoanalysts, including, for instance, Horney and Ferenczi (162-163). The subject of Fromm's relationship to psychoanalysis is a fraught one in Fromm scholarship, and Romanetto's intervention clarifies much. Yet another noteworthy and impressive innovation concerns Romanetto's re-evaluation of Fromm's characterological insights, and their relationship to the issue of radicalism, throughout the book through the lens of a latent Frommian ontology. Interestingly, the ontological premises articulated and analyzed here are linked throughout to astute observations about the significance and place of religious ideas (idolatry, the prophetic, etc.) in Fromm's thought. In chapter 3, for instance, Romanetto notes the influence of the Old Testament prophets on Fromm's thought and understanding of what it means to be a public intellectual (93). This, I think, is a very important point, as it highlights not only Fromm's continued rootedness in the Jewish tradition even after he renounced religion, but also the indispensability of the prophetic dimension to Fromm's secularized thought, ethics, and politics. Romanetto's reflections on the prophetic component of Fromm's work suggest that it serves as a kind of bridge between religion and secularism in his thought.

Finally, chapters 6 and 7 offer a new and robust grounding for Fromm's unique, radical, and hopeful humanism and its entwinement with his political attitudes, actions, and collaborations. In chapter 7 we receive a glimpse of Fromm's unique ability to balance the imperatives of solidarity, hope and realism in his political life, as well as of the continuing relevance of psychoanalysis to his understanding and interpretation of political phenomena. Here we are also walked through a thorough description of Fromm's engagements as a public intellectual, the trajectory of his political education, as well as his personal shortcomings and limitations

with respect to political organizing and activism. It should also be noted that throughout the book Romanetto offers intriguing reflections on Fromm's tacit understanding of the relationship between theory and practice, and on its implications for his ethical and political visions. Having said all this, it is my opinion that it would be impossible to do justice to the richness and complexity of this text by reviewing it in its entirety in a few pages. That is why I decided to focus my attention, in the remaining pages, on one of the chapters, chapter 3, which is titled "To Go to the Roots." One of the most provocative chapters in this book, it delves into the famous Fromm-Marcuse debate, offering in the process an analysis of the relationship between the two thinkers, personal and intellectual, following the Dissent exchange and an attentive consideration of key Frommian and Marcusean ideas. This chapter encapsulates the uniqueness and explosiveness of Fromm's ideas about politics, ethics, and humanism.

In a beautifully written chapter, Romanetto aims to show that overwhelmingly the evidence, in terms of writing, speeches, interviews, and interactions, points to underlying and irreconcilable differences between Fromm and Marcuse's intellectual and political positions. These differences should not be understood primarily in terms of disagreement over the interpretation and application of psychoanalytic concepts, which was foregrounded during the famous *Dissent* exchange, although a close retrospective reading of that debate would reveal that these differences were already present at that juncture, though perhaps they sharpened and deepened with the passage of time. These differences, in which questions of art, ethics, and religion figure prominently, would go on to shape and define Marcuse and Fromm's respective political commitments and conceptions of revolution and radical social transformation. Interestingly, even as Marcuse's positions moved closer to Fromm's own outlook over the years, certain fundamental disagreements continued to linger. One of Romanetto's many accomplishments in this chapter is the exploration of both the growing convergence of the two thinkers' views through the years on certain issues and persistent, irreconcilable divergences. For Romanetto, it is unequivocal that it is ultimately the differences that should shape our understanding of the relationship between the two thinkers and their distinctive legacies.

Romanetto opens the chapter by noting that while a surface level reading of the debate between Fromm and Marcuse would suggest that their main disagreements circled around Freud and psychoanalysis, a closer reading of the exchange points to other, more fundamental and enduring kinds of disagreement. At the same time, though this aspect of their encounters is often neglected, even by Fromm and Marcuse themselves, there was in fact much the two theorists agreed on, and as time went on, their positions, at least on some level, would only inch closer to each other, particularly owing to a shift in Marcuse's outlook. Among the ideas the two authors shared and agreed on is that of rational authority, which centers on a distinction between domination and rational uses of power. Romanetto also notes, for instance, that ideas reminiscent of Fromm's notion of social character were interspersed throughout Marcuse's own writings (87). Yet one issue they clearly differed has to do with the radical Left's relationship to the Establishment. Fromm was willing to work in and through the Establishment, while Marcuse eschewed it, embracing student radicalism and the counterculture (93). Romanetto foregrounds Fromm and Marcuse's differing attitudes toward

radicalism in his discussion, emphasizing at times the shifts in Marcuse's thinking throughout his career as a public intellectual. Scattered throughout Romanetto's discussion here are important observations about the nature of human aggression, radicalism, hope, and humanism, phenomena that are considered mainly from a Frommian vantage point. Interestingly, Romanetto also notes that Fromm was more consistent intellectually throughout his career than was Marcuse (98). More discussion on the issue is required to ascertain whether that is a manifestation of a flaw and deficiency in Marcuse's theorizing (and perhaps even character) or rather an expression of a non-dogmatic and non-linear intellectual trajectory. I suspect the latter is closer to the truth.

Bridging the divide between these two thinkers on some level, another one of Romanetto's astute and important observations is that both Marcuse and Fromm placed a premium on good character, seeing it as essential to an effective radical politics (99). Yet another interesting and relevant observation concerns both thinkers' embrace of the revolutionary promise, potential, and influence of certain "heretic" and non-conformist religious movements (100). Romanetto insists that, beyond this catalogue of self-evident affinities and differences, since the Dissent debate, the relationship between Fromm and Marcuse, though fraught, was characterized by a complexity that exceeded simple hostility and animosity. For one thing, the two intellectuals did indeed engage one another on multiple occasions following the debate. As Romanetto notes, they would have "a grudging respect for one another until 1965" (90). In any event, having noted notable convergences and divergences and discussed the nature of the relationship between the two thinkers, Romanetto goes on to skillfully and attentively explore the more essential, latent disagreements that underlay the famous Dissent debate and their implications for the two thinkers' respective ideas and positions, political and otherwise, beyond the debate.

The discussion gains momentum as Romanetto begins to identify the underlying, persistent differences separating the two thinkers. Very astutely and provocatively, the author notes that at issue is not whether Marcuse, similarly to Fromm, embraced values that affirm a love of life, but the specific understanding of life that Marcuse was promoting and wedded to (102-103). At first, one might get the impression that their differences centered on the problem of eroticism and sensuousness as such, with Fromm being more hostile to sensuousness as a locus of transformative social activity than Marcuse, who tended to emphasize the productive and transformative potentialities embedded in the eroticisation of the body. Yet the essential difference, insists Romanetto, in fact lies in Marcuse and Fromm's divergent conceptions of the basis for a new morality, with Marcuse stressing the transformative power of the aesthetic dimension and art, and Fromm affirming and emphasizing a kind of religious universalism as the core ingredient of radical social transformation instead. Romanetto notes that Fromm perceived a destructive sensibility in Marcuse's attachment to art and the artistic milieu in which Marcuse's thought was embedded, and that Fromm believed Marcuse was beholden to a notion of social change that de-emphasized the self-work of the personality and the will. Fromm saw maturity as the lynchpin of social change, in other words, while Marcuse was arguably hostile to the very notion of maturity. Related to this is Fromm's emphasis on the nuances attending the question of transition, which required both individual and social transformation,

and Marcuse's alleged inability, given his valorization of a Great Refusal, to grasp the necessity of constructive activity on the road to social transformation. The lingering differences in their conceptions of social transformation are reflected in their respective visions of the artist. For Fromm, the artist is a "passionate disciplined artisan" (107), while Marcuse saw promise in the vision of the artist as a "daydreamer who lived out his daydreams" (107), one who prefigures the collapse of the distinction between work and play (105-107).

In taking up the explicitly political aspects of the Fromm-Marcuse dispute, Romanetto zeroes in on the problem of work and productiveness, charging that Fromm treated as misguided Marcuse's attempt to collapse work into play, and failed to grasp the essence of Fromm's notion of productiveness, erroneously associating it with industrial productivity (108). He goes on to note tensions in Marcuse's political and economic attitudes to the question of centralization. Interestingly, he also notes tensions in Marcuse's understanding of the role of the New Left in the transition to socialism, being apt during the movement's heyday to see it as a meaningful, even leaderful, catalyst for change, but subsequently emphasizing the strategic need for and importance of practices of direct democracy and local political activity (109). Indeed, Marcuse was perhaps generally ambivalent in his politics, at once encouraging revolution, at least in the cultural sense, and insisting that the situation of the New Left was not in fact revolutionary or even pre-revolutionary (112). At times, unsurprisingly, aspects of Fromm and Marcuse's strategic orientations converged, yet strong disagreements lingered in the background. Marcuse, insists Romanetto, was ultimately drawn to a more individualistic style of political organization, one that foregrounded the powers of the imagination and play, whereas Fromm was drawn to a politics "in which communal bonds are strengthened through the aspiration towards a common vision." (111). From a slightly different angle, the divergence circles around the following tension: Fromm was committed to a religiously driven "vision" whereas Marcuse privileged an individualized, daydream laden politics of refusal, imagination and affect. Also at issue was the problematic of hope and its relative absence from Marcuse's politics. Alas, Fromm was probably not amiss in noticing that Marcuse engages with the question of hope only relatively superficially, and that a deeper engagement with it is an integral part of an authentically critical theory. It would perhaps not be out of place to point out here, however, that we should not overlook the fact that Marcuse's notion of the Great Refusal always implies a collective dimension and that it ought not to be understood in a strictly individualistic sense. At the same time, Romanetto correctly and astutely notes, though perhaps this observation could be fleshed out in more detail, that Fromm's theory of collective action and politic benefited from his articulation of and engagement with a concept of relatedness (113).

Romanetto concludes by drawing out the implications of these respective conceptions of political organization for each thinker's understanding of political authority. Marcuse stresses rebelliousness against authority, though still recognizing the need for some political leadership, as suggested earlier, while Fromm, of course, recognized that the act of rebelling against authority is not necessarily progressive or revolutionary. At the same time, Fromm, notes Romanetto, was at times prone to idealizing authority (113). This is a subtle point, but it seems to me that Romanetto's excellent analysis points not only to differing political

commitments, as far as Fromm was concerned, but to fundamentally antagonistic visions of radical social transformation. Fromm saw Marcuse's thought as tending toward the valorization of an absolute, and perhaps abrupt, revolutionary break with the status quo, whereas Fromm's own ideas coalesced around a more gradual and measured vision of radical transformation. It is clear enough from the author's analysis that this was Fromm's view of the differences separating Marcuse's and his own thought. But perhaps the author could have made clearer where he himself stands on the issue, that is to say, whether he shares Fromm's perception of Marcuse's views and their limitations. In other words, perhaps a sharper line could have been drawn at times between Fromm's ideas about Marcuse and the author's own stance. Moreover, though there are hints of this in the text, perhaps the author could have made clearer whose position he ultimately deemed superior and more compelling. As suggested earlier, perhaps more attention could have been given to one of the defining elements of Marcuse's thought during the New Left period, the Great Refusal. I agree with Romanetto's overall assessment of how the concept fits into Marcuse's dispute with Fromm, but fleshing out the concept would have made it easier to identify its strengths and weaknesses vis à vis Fromm's own thought. In a similar vein, perhaps the author could have provided a brief evaluation of Fromm's attitudes to the student radicals and the various movements associated with the New Left in general. This would have been helpful because it seems to me that Fromm's ambivalence toward the various movements of the New Left was one of his political weaknesses, as was his unwillingness, in direct opposition to Marcuse, to provide them with direction and guidance. It should be noted here that Marcuse acted as a leader and mentor to the New Left, though not without a level of ambivalence—this, of course, is the hallmark of ethical leadership.

I would like to make it abundantly clear that I believe this chapter to be of the highest academic quality, not least because it offers a highly original and meticulously researched intervention into the academic debate around the relationship between Marcuse and Fromm. I would also like to note that this chapter offers an extremely balanced account of the divergences, political and otherwise, between Fromm and Marcuse. Though he seems to side with Fromm throughout his discussion, at least implicitly, Romanetto nevertheless does not shy away from noting that Marcuse's assessments and positions were both more nuanced than Fromm often gave him credit for and at times even superior to those of Fromm (e.g. 112). As is the case with the rest of the book, the intervention offered in this chapter is groundbreaking. Romanetto's book positions him as a rapidly emerging authority in Fromm scholarship and Critical Theory. The chapter discussed above, and the rest of the book, should be read by all Fromm scholars and Critical Theorists, and they ought to be read carefully and attentively.

Alexei Navalny’s Patriot: A Memoir

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A year after his death in a Siberian prison, the New York Times reports, [“Even in Death, Navalny Is Seen by the Kremlin as an Enduring Threat …Russian authorities have zealously prosecuted people with links to Aleksei A. Navalny’s organization inside Russia in the year since he died.”]

On the 12th day of the second Trump administration, I rode my bike across town, over the Manhattan Bridge, and back, through Brooklyn, to Henry Street to talk about Navalny with my friends in book group. Before the election, a friend had suggested we read it. It’s particularly telling now, as the US seems to be joining the oligarchs and autocrats. We discussed why he went back, why anyone would choose such a fate. Themes of activism and martyrdom, freedom and conscience, truth vs totalitarian censorship run through this most personal of prison memoirs, inspiring a searing conversation, reflecting on his hopes and humor.

It's unnerving to think of what he endured, of his isolation as a sort of foreshadowing, that those sorts of detentions may be in store for the rest of us as well, for those who oppose the administration.

"For more than a decade the Kremlin persecuted, imprisoned, and tormented Navalny," said Tirana Hassan, executive director at Human Rights Watch, after Navalny died on Feb 16, 2024. "He should never have been in prison, in the first place. The Russian authorities bear full responsibility for what has happened to Navalny, starting with his first politically motivated arrest."

On Jan 17, 2022, he wrote, "The hero of my favorite books, *Resurrection* by Leo Tolstoy, says, 'The only suitable place for an honest man in Russia, is in prison.'"

Yet, here is the rub in this most unusual of prison memoirs, he doesn't believe it. For much of this story about his life and choices, the choices which Jean-Paul Sartre argued are all we have, he laughs about his situation, the absurd legal battles he finds himself fighting, as well as his options. Prison is not so free, neither is the outside world. He could be happy on a stroll in the yard, on the occasional moments when music wasn't blared through the air, covering up the sounds of screams. He could be happy to have a salad. He could be happy with a book from the prison library (although not by Flaubert). He still believed his treatment wrong and that he could prevail. Courageous or foolhardy, no one was really sure. His story offers useful lessons in today's struggling democracies, witness to astounding harm, courage and humor.

Throughout the entries, Navalny reflects on Russian novelists, writing in general, the Russian soul, Tolstoy vs Flaubert. Favoving *The Idiot* by Dostoyevski or *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* by Leo Tolstoy, he doesn't enjoy his reading of *Madame Bovary,* compared with the superior *Anna Karenina.*

"Hello everyone, from the bottom of Maslow's hierarchy," Navalny joked towards the end of his life. He'd spent much of the previous three years in jail, increasingly in solitary confinement,

after he returned to Russia in 2021, feeling the brunt of Trump's hero, Vladimir Putin's vengeance, before his demise. There is a sense that Trump wants to be more like Putin, doing as much harm as Bibi is doing. As I write this, the US president has been insisting Ukraine is at fault in the conflict over its territories, with right wing news outlets actually defying him, reminding us as the *New York Post* did posting a picture of Putin with the headlines Feb 21, "This is a dictator and other truths we ignore at our own peril." The war on truth, on evidence is everywhere. Navany's endless court trevails were a frontline in this war.

The first part of the story is a sort of conventional memoir Navalny drafted in Germany recovering from a 2020 poisoning attempt, assumed to be by the Kremlin. The second, completely gripping half, consists of his daily journal entries and letters as his time seemed to slip away. With each day, he's given less time with pen and paper. Each entry is more poignant. Still, he laughed, joked with judges at his kangaroo hearings, and penned meditations on belief, attachment, and a zen-like detachment, feeling the consequences for doing what he felt was right, without complaint.

A meta-story of reservations about penning what he sees as a tired genre, it is also a book about writing a book. He self-consciously confesses he doesn't want to add another prison memoir, he writes as if chasing fate.

"It's a masterpiece," says one of our book club members, "a Dear Richard" greeting.

As much as anything, this is a story about living with choices. Navalny is an activist who was adored, who breathed in adoration, and engagement with people, with his family, wife and kids. Going back to Russia, he knew he was risking it all. But he did it anyway, knowing that he could not live with himself if he did not. But the rest of the world would have understood. He could have stayed in Berlin and continued his work, his investigations of Russian corruption, posting youtube videos and blogs about as an opposition leader in exile.

Still, he went back to the country that poisoned him.

Detention followed as he set foot back in the airport in Russia.

He chained himself to his truth, his mind clear.

And kept on joking, his absurd response not legible to the state.

And the petty indignities, the Kafkaesque mundane tasks, emptying out his carefully organized room again and again, only to have to re-set it up again, among mind-numbing tedium; the solitary increased, the torture. Eventually, he had to say goodbye to his wife. "I'm not sure I'm going to get out of here," he tells her. She understands.

Cold, detached, real.

I could not imagine.

I know it can feel like torture to be away from family, kids.

I've been arrested dozens of times. It gets boring. It gets cruel. It gets tedious. The groups of guys in the holding cell wear on you, the stories stop offering respite. And at the end of the day, I am always the first to take a plea and get out fast, to a warm greeting, Chinese food outside Central booking, a pizza with colleagues, a donut, hugs and greetings with legal observers and support.

In *Before Night Falls*, Arneas writes about spending time in solitary in a Cuban jail. It's a harrowing tale.

Navalny clinically details the water at the bottom of the cell, the trapped feeling, the broom handle used to sodomize him placed in his cell, the cells getting smaller, the insane person who screams in the adjoining cell. It's worse than you've heard, he confesses, without more, leaving it up to us to imagine.

For Navalny, the process of letting go, of renouncing his material needs began with a simple process of "going zen." He explained that he simply imagined the worst thing that could happen and acknowledged that, letting go of desire for his old life. Sure, he writes about the possibilities that he sees for a democratic Russia, that he sees in the Russian people, not the state, tracing his daily pleasures and jokes, his embrace of the absurd. The little things still offer pleasure, a good salad or novel. But he also lets go of the trappings, meditating on the life of Jesus, reading "The Sermon on the Mount", Matthew 5:1-12, with its "Beatitudes" that sound like the Communist Manifesto. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.".

On Jan 17, 2022, Navalny wrote: "Exactly, one year ago I came home to Russia… Having spent my first year in prison, I want to tell everyone exactly the same thing I shouted to those who gathered outside the court when the guards were taking me off to the police truck. Don't be afraid of anything. This is our country and it's the only one we have. The only thing we should fear is we will surrender our homeland to be plundered by a gang of liars, thieves, and hypocrites."

There is a video of Navalny joking with the judge in one of his countless court hearings, secure in his beliefs, the faith that brought him back home, willing to sacrifice, making the whole court chuckle, the day before he died, still making everyone laugh.

He doesn't say he's close, but he seems to know.