

# RED THREAD

## Alt-Truths and Insta-Realities: The Psychopolitics of Contemporary Right Alternatif Hakikatler ve Insta-Gerçeklikler: Çağdaş Sağın Psiko-Politikası



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## ***Alt-Truths and Insta-Realities: The Psychopolitics of Contemporary Right***

Our slow and infrequent publishing platform of Red Thread journal presents its new issue, investigating the new-old topic of the contemporary right-wing use of media. Nowadays re-amplified and brought to the fore by the Covid-19 global emergency, the totalizing narrative of the crisis have strengthened and reaffirmed further the old problems of the lack of universality and the narrative of truth.

The autocratic states in the region of South-East Europe and Middle East – the geopolitical space where our journal arises from – have tightened their belt on freedom even more and introduced various different states of emergency. Now confined to their homes almost permanently in front of the Big Brother screens, the citizens are exposed to the high radiation of propaganda and terrorized by power games and paranoid kitsch, 24/7.

It took a global crisis to show us how little of the social state is left – how, alongside science and education, the former public health systems are systematically destroyed. Witnessing all the privatizations and cutoffs for decades we already knew that from before, but the extent of annihilation of the social services becomes brutally visible and unforgivably telling about where we stand now.

There is so much to say about how we got to where we are at this point. So many trajectories to explore and inspect, so many turns, events, updates, historical breaks to take into the account, so much of the latest development to consider. When we started to explore the collapse of (especially media) culture of the previous decade, the thread was unwoven that has led through the labyrinth of *everywhere*; we could follow it back to economy, technology, politics, art, education... There is not a social institution or a form of culture to remain unaffected by the seemingly unstoppable regression of everything.

By boosting the narrative about the “invisible enemy” the regimes in the region also made sure to make their “real” enemies quite visible, misusing the health crisis as a cover to launch the attack on all the activists and journalists, all the opposition, all the minorities and migrants and foreigners, on everybody not cheerleading for their permanent stay on power. The right-wing governments are especially keen to rule by decrees and attack artists and intellectuals, often identified as “elites” or “cultural Marxist”, or in the propagandistic populist rhetoric as “betrayers of the people”. Behind the scenes happens perhaps the biggest looting ever; the companies by loyal tycoons will be supported by the millions and billions of tax payer’s money, while the cuts in funds for culture qualify for the title of “genocide”.

This development is pushed aside from being discussed in the public discourse by the bizarre and never-ending media spectacle. The conspiracy theories made few more



predictable turns to confirm the old checklist of enemies: surely the migrants are guilty for this disease, alongside the guest-workers who came back home from the wealthy EU countries (instead of just sending in their money and dying peacefully abroad); in the West there are claims that this virus is produced in Chinese labs to finally destroy the global supremacy of Europe and America, while in China there are theories that the virus is a biological weapon implanted by the USA military to stop the growth of China; obviously this must be the punishment from God for all these migrations and unholy mixing of people and nations. And why not add something from the standard palette of alt-right alt-truths: what is to blame are 5G networks, HAARP systems and of course the good old New Global Order.

Finally, we also expected this one, being the old foundational trope of what is called alt-right media: all what is happening now is just a media conspiracy. There is no virus, no pandemic, and nobody is dying from the thing; this is obviously the attempt by the left-wing billionaires (who often happen to be the reptilian humanoids from outer space, or Jews) to introduce the new global regime under the auspice of a fake crisis. However obviously fantastic, such stories can produce some collective damage, but there is the sibling of this narrative which is much more dangerous: there is no crisis and everything is “as it always was”, some flu is harder than other, and sometimes the nature needs to purge a species by killing a bit more of the weak. The nations will only emerge stronger (and younger) after this. All is natural and normal.

The conspiracies are paired with selling anything possible to be sold in such a situation, and it's a lot. Capitalism tries to use every situation for its expansion and accumulation, so you can try your luck with drinking bleach, or cow and camel urine, or a barrel of vodka, or eating cow dung or inordinate amount of expensive garlic-based products as remedy; or you could order \$400 virus-protecting blessings instead, accompanied by the televangelist's call to touch the TV screen as a means of “spiritual vaccination” by proxy (Happy Science, USA). You can also try applying cotton ball soaked in violet oil to the anus (Prophetic Medicine, Iran), or breathing the hot air from hair dryer each 15 minutes (Facebook); the Miracle Mineral Solution (MMS), a mix containing amphetamines, cocaine and nicotine, is on sale on the Dark Web for just \$300. If any of this doesn't work you could try with some panic buying of chloroquine until people who regularly need it to treat malaria stay without it, and until you obtain arrhythmia and perhaps die from it.

The totalizing reality of consumption never sleeps, so the offer is much larger for those still feeling healthy: pay attention to all the boost-your-productivity advices to maximally exploit the potential of the available time-at-home. As no one is sure to keep their job, you should manically devote yourself to developing new skills for the ever-changing labour market seeking multi-skilled personnel: enroll in all the online courses on offer. Consume content - and more content - on the significantly reduced

price or for free, being only slightly interrupted by the ads for the even more attractive content on even greater discounts. Whatever you do, stay glued to your screen, and don't worry; even your cultural needs are taken care of by all the virtual exhibitions and concerts, and more virtual programs are underway. It will be easy and effortless: #stayathome, #staysafe, #stayafrail, #stayconfused, #keeponpanicking & #keeponconsuming.

[But not everybody could afford to stay safe at home; some were forced to work while the others were forced to consume.]

Almost any text from this issue could, if read properly, be the announcement of such development and of the present state of affairs. Steve Bannon, one of the architects of this alt-reality, would almost surely be predicted to say on the infamous FOX TV News precisely what he just did: that "COVID-19 is a Communist Party virus".

In a world where populist dictatorships came to power through electoral politics, the feeling of uneasiness and anxiety turns into a sense that the world is dislocated, that things no longer mean what they used to mean, that any concepts can now be used to refer to anything and everything. It creates the shared sense that today, to quote from one of the texts from the issue, "you can just say anything, create realities".

Many authors who joined this Red Thread edition were exploring the general principles of contemporary right-wing propaganda for quite some time. "Propaganda demands infrastructure and narrative ... [It] aims to construct reality itself", writes **Jonas Staal** in his analysis of the propagandistic-artistic role of Bannon that we present in this issue. Staal reminds of the old but often forgotten fact: "In order to construct reality a particular narrative, a set of values and ideas, has to be repeated via as many channels as possible so as to generate its acceptance as the 'new normal'. Propaganda works best when we no longer consider it propaganda, but rather the fact of life."

A contribution by **Hazal Özvarış** presents an anthology of the rapid media transformation in Turkey over the previous two decades, but which, if abstracted from the particular examples, may also serve as the accurate description of what exactly happened with media systems, big and small, traditional or digital, all over the region and beyond. The changes in ownership, financing and editorial processes are mirrored in the changes of methods, technologies and content. The global decline of liberal values and democracy and the rising wave of anti-elitism matches the dwindling number of women journalists; it witnesses about the multiple instances of harassing journalists, including unemployment, social lynching and arrests, and eventually physical violence. But it also sheds light on the voice of the grassroots in the times of Gezi park resistance, revealing "another kind of journalism to counter for-profit journalism".



About the arrests and imprisonments, we know from personal experience: our publisher and our friend Osman Kavala is in prison for more than 900 days now. We hope – we know! – that for the publishing of our next issue he will be free. This only makes our work, and everybody's, more urgent.

Examining the contemporary propagandistic activity of the far-right, **Jelena Vesić** discusses the concepts of *appropriation* and *reactionary détournement* that are able to turn the original 'claims of truth' into their opposite. Taking as her case study the travelling exhibition of *Uncensored Lies*, organised in Serbia in 2016 by the now presidential press service of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), the author analyses the mechanism of passive-aggressive propaganda of *pathetic dictatorship*.

Through the mimicry of the language of contemporary culture of samples, remixes, copy-pastes, drags and drops and mash-ups, the exhibition claimed that the media space in Serbia is not only free and democratic, but even saturated with unjust criticism towards its well-intended government. In reality, Serbia fell further to the position 93 on the World Press Freedom Index. Constructed from the "annexed" journalistic material and the personal posts from social media taken out of context and blown out of all proportions, this bizarre display managed to flatten and negate the entire complexity of exhibition-making as a form of public address.

In their analysis of TV serials and especially Turkish telenovelas, **Feyza Akinerdem & Nükhet Sirman** examine how the watching subjects and their autonomous position is controlled by the televised political narratives, how the sense of atmosphere and affects reframes the viewers as voters and consumers.

The authors emphasize the term *atmosphere* as "a sense of the present that has not yet crystallized into a 'structure' or a 'history'". The rules here seem to be deceptively simple: "the value of a story is the number of people who are watching it". The structure of TV serials is not any longer one of melodrama, but of a *game*; it is not anymore about the struggle between good and evil, but about the neverending contest for power. "A demand for justice is abandoned for the sake of a bigger truth that assimilates the plots of injustice into a larger story of national pride that allows the mastery of power." (We are sorry for not being able to publish the English version of the article; read more about it on the article page.)

**Ana Teixeira Pinto** discusses things like *meme magic* and *shitposting* as ways of turning fiction into fact: "Speculative folly is a form of currency – trust no one, nothing is what it seems, the unbelievable alone can be believed". She finds that "the paranoid ideation suffers not from the lack of logic but from unreality", and occurs as a "mix of fantasies of omnipotence and perceived vulnerability" that blends into conspiratory thinking: "Conspiracy theory is poor man's institutional critique".

Pinto understands it as not merely a sign of mental delusion, but rather a cynical

stance towards the knowledge and the very possibility of truth.

The ambivalence once again proves to be the core of this transformation: irony, or perhaps more precise sarcasm, is the emotional weapon fueling the rapid rise of far right, while on a different grounds of the previous world it served as *a questioning attitude* and stood for a *critical stance*. Pinto refers to Angela Nagel, who extensively wrote on the topic in her 2017 title *Kill all Normies*. The book underlines the capacity of irony to maintain political and moral ambivalence, what enables the simultaneous flirting with fascist and racist idioms and dodging any responsibility for the choices made through such actions.

**Ahmet Ersoy** writes about the complex machinery of capitalism that generates constant serialized stimuli and various versions of instant reality, able to penetrate deep into our psyche and to subjugate us as subjects. Using the popular example of the musical app he demonstrates “how industrialized electronic media can overwhelm independent will, regulating and homogenizing our sensory engagement with the world”. The perceptual field is transformed by the consumption-oriented machinery, while the shallow feelings of induced psychological conformism are used as the tools for mesmerizing and stimulating the masses and producing collective stupor. Such apparatus leaves no room for personal contemplation, and produces a narcotic effect, the spaceless and atemporal reality of collective hallucination instead. For Ersoy, our current situation invites for rethinking the Benjamin’s critique of the hegemonic viscosity of the historical Nazi regime and its absolute aesthetization of the field of politics.

Starting this issue, we introduce the new “From the Archives” slot with the interview with **Vilém Flusser** that is able to resonate and open new questions today, probably even more so than when it was conducted 30 years ago. To a careful observer, even in 1988 it was clear that the then upcoming mix of technology and media will produce historical consequences, and, first of all, new subjectivities. We should have to think harder, and more, about developing the own tools to handle the current situation and produce the own future. In the words of Flusser: “Every revolution, be it political, economic, social, or aesthetic, is in the last analysis a technical revolution.” (We express our gratitude to **Miklós Peternák** for helping us with this historical material.)

The history lessons do not stop here. That the form of “proto-alt-right” thinking, as is the most recognizable name for the phenomena we focused the most observing media, could also be a legal approach in the settler-colonial conflict about the right to even walk the land we learn in the interview with **Raja Shehadeh** (thanks to **Meltem Ahiska & Saygun Gökarıksel**). We also learn about the concept of 'sumud' as a form of peaceful resistance. A method that is not without its controversies - in the words of Shehadeh, sumud “is very complicated” – it invites for endurance, for perseverance,

for holding on in the situations where life itself is made difficult and almost impossible. It repeats: “I’m not going to give up. I’m going to stay put and I’m going to endure”.

**Geert Lovink** presents the readers with the powerful journey through the effects and affects of the particular design, the aesthetics and functionality of digital social networks of today. Some three decades after Flusser recognized the beginning of “spiritual revolution”, Lovink writes on its present character: “Social media and the psyche have fused ... Social reality is a corporate hybrid between handheld media and the psychic structure of the user.” Here, the sadness is a product of specific technological induction; it is about the structure, the algorithms, the very design of the visible (the applications) and the invisible (the servers and data flow) that act like the ultimate subjectivity, hence taking any other autonomy out from/of? the equation. This merging of social media and self is so totalizing that – as Lovink argues – “there is no single way to make everyone unhappy. Sadness will be tailored to you”. “Sad by Design” is the title chapter from Lovink’s same-titled book. If the chapter itself presents more of a diagnosis than a recipe for treatment, we encourage you to read the book. There is a way out from this, and it is (still) up to us to decide.

As any proper editorial is perhaps supposed to, we would like to end this introduction to Issue No 5 with the words coming from the texts themselves. So we leave you with this passage from “Sad by Design”:

“You may not understand a thing about the technicalities of wi-fi or algorithms, but it’s damn easy to grasp the relational stakes of the double check syndrome. ‘You obviously read it, so why didn’t you respond?’”

For Red Thread Issue 5:

**Jelena Vesić and Vladimir Jerić Vlidi**

April 2020



# ***The Transformation of Turkey's Media under the AKP's Authoritarian Turn***

*Hazal Özvarış*

President of the Republic and Leader of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced the launch of Turkey's incursion into Syria under the name of "Operation Peace Spring" on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October 2019 over Twitter ("Erdoğan duyurdu," 2019). The next day every single mainstream newspaper including those of secular affiliation came out in support of the offensive ("Basında Bugün," n.d.). A short while later, as government officials warned that "the press had made a terminological error; this was not a war, but an operation," ("Emekli Kurmay Albay Tulga: Savaş Değil, Operasyon," 2019) certain journalists took immediate note of the correction and started saying this was "an eradication of terrorism" (Tezel, 2019). More than a hundred who continued saying "no to war" and calling Turkey an "occupying force" on social media despite this warning, as well as 11 from the Kurdish movement who dared speak this out on the street were, on the other hand, arrested in the first three days ("Barış Pınarı Harekâtı'na hakarete 121 gözaltı," 2019; "Barış Pınarı Harekâtı'nı protesto eden HDP'lilere müdahale," 2019).

Things were quite different 16 years ago, when the U.S. was bent on bringing Turkey into the Iraq War: there was no Facebook yet, three years to go before Twitter and seven before Instagram. Crowds that took to the streets to say "no to war" numbered a hundred thousand ("Türkiye'nin dört bir yanında 'savaşa hayır' gösterileri," 2003). Journalists turned their backs in protest of the then Secretary of State Colin Powell, who had come to Turkey to hold talks on the war effort, and none of them lost their jobs for it (Çelik, 2019). Furthermore, the Parliament was able to vote down the mandate for military action against the will of the AKP leadership, and the next day's newspapers could have "No despite Tayyip" in bold letters across their front pages ("Tayyip'e Rağmen No," 2003).

This paper shall analyse the gradual transformation of Turkey's media under the uninterrupted rule of the AKP between these two periods.<sup>1</sup> In this study based on the premise that this transformation under the AKP has been enabled by unchanging, long-standing tendencies<sup>2</sup> as much as new developments in the media, the first section shall focus on the AKP government's overall approach to conventional media.

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to attorney Murat Deha Boduroğlu and journalist Doğan Akin along with the editors of Red-Thread for their important contributions to this article. I would like to reaffirm that any error or omission that may exist is not theirs, but mine entirely.

<sup>2</sup> Some examples to similarities between the two periods mentioned may be listed as the support given by most mainstream media organs to the military mandate in 2003, the statements issued by media groups condemning journalists who had turned their backs to Colin Powell, and arrests of anti-war activists taking to the streets when these were from the Kurdish movement.

Presenting a chronological overview of the coercive repertoire (though not exhaustively, at least in its basics) employed by the regime in this field, this article then seeks to look at new platforms where critical thought finds the opportunity to manifest itself in its second section. I shall attempt to analyse readers and journalists' shift away from conventional media and towards social media instead, the growing significance of social networks, news websites and foreign press in this area, as well as new government blockages in response to these. The paper shall conclude by opening up a discussion on the remaining space for journalism under current circumstances.

## **1. The AKP's Media War**

### **1.1. 2002-2007: Contesting the Military, Alliances with Liberals**

Mainstream media establishments were busy with intensive lobbying in 2001, as the Justice and Development Party was being founded. Their purpose was to have the article in the RTÜK Law (*Law No. 3984 on the Establishment of Radio and Television Enterprises and their Media Services*) preventing media owners from participating in public tenders removed. Those effectively able to take advantage of this concession were a limited number of capital-owning conglomerates that had pushed out media owners from a journalism background as a result of neoliberal economic policies implemented in the wake of the 1980 military coup: the **Doğan Media Group** owned by Aydın Doğan, Dinç Bilgin's **Merkez Group**, the **Çukurova Media Group** belonging to Mehmet Emin Karamahmet and family, **İhlas Group** owned by Enver Ören and his family, **Star Group** belonging to the Uzan family, and Ferit Şahenk's **Doğuş Medis Group**. The Doğan and Merkez groups in particular held sway over much of the existing print media, which was most influential in setting the political agenda (C. Sözeri, 2019). All mainstream media outlets save for the religiously-motivated, conservative İhlas Group, espoused an approach aligned with the military, that was infused with Sunni Islam yet advocated for secularism in politics, writing Turkey's official history from the perspective of its coups. Since the army had carried out its last coup on the 28<sup>th</sup> of February 1997 against the coalition headed by the Islamist Refah Yol (Welfare-Path) – of which the AKP is an offshoot, the mainstream media turned a blind eye to the AKP. Instead, media bosses caring for their own profit chose to focus the attention of media outlets they owned on the Parliament's amendment to the RTÜK Law, which hence came into effect about five months prior to the general elections of 2002 (Önderoğlu, 2002). Mainstream media owners therefore created grounds for the party to come to power to literally pull the strings of outlets that were at odds with it. This profit-driven approach to journalism by the mainstream media ended up being one of the primary factors enabling the AKP's later violations in the area of press.

In the midst of the bloodless coup of 1997, the earthquake of 1999 that claimed over 18 thousand lives, and public reactions to the 2001 economic crisis, the AKP gained enough of a majority to form government on its own in the very first election it entered. Yet media owners still managed to believe that the AKP government was a temporary interval, and their leading representatives continued saluting the army all the way until 2008. As indicated by this fact, one of the defining characteristics of Turkey's mainstream media, even before the AKP, has been its staunchly statist stance, rather than a defence of democracy.<sup>3</sup> This was precisely what allowed media owners and co. siding with the army while it held state power to legitimise in their own eyes their shifting loyalties once this control over the state was consolidated in the hands of the AKP some years down the line.

Due to ongoing relations of military tutelage during AKP's early period, its principal supporters in the media became mostly formerly leftist, liberal columnists looking for solutions to the Kurdish issue and the country's democratization problem. Prominent writers such as Hasan Cemal, Cengiz Çandar, Nuray Mert, Murat Belge and Ahmet Altan backed the AKP, citing, among others, the steps it was taking towards European Union membership. These journalists – all of whom would later lose their jobs, some ending up arrested – emphasized the second half of the party's "conservative-democrat" identity over the first and criticised those who voiced concerns over its religious conservatism (Arman, 2007). There were even those among them who accused non-AKP supporters of giving indirect support to putschists (Özvarış, 2015). Later many of them were forced to admit their mistakes. Their loss of political clout occurred in tandem with the global decline of liberal values and democracy. The course Turkey's famous liberal journalists followed became a matter of interest for both circles that had opposed the AKP from the very beginning on grounds of its religious character, as well as those pursuing the global downfall of the liberal order and those getting caught up in the rising wave of anti-elitism that ensued.

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<sup>3</sup> Though relations between the media and the military weren't conducted out in the open, media owners never kept their statist affinities secret. For instance, Aydın Doğan, who was Turkey's top media tycoon until 2018, called his number one newspaper *Hürriyet* a 'state newspaper'. This prioritization of the state over democracy in the mainstream is a tendency that resurfaces again and again in Turkey's media history. The coup of 1997 had already extended the army's reach into editorial desks, and the AKP's rise to power simply sprung the pens they held into action. One example to this was the *Star* newspaper owned by the Uzan group belonging to Cem Uzan, leader of the Young ("Genç") party that had run against the AKP in the 2002 elections. According to *Star* columnist Mustafa Mutlu, it was common knowledge that the newspaper's editor-in-chief inserted pro-army content into the paper. Another overt example of the media-military relationship is the famous "Young officers are restless" ("Genç subaylar tedirgin") headline by *Cumhuriyet*, the country's longest-standing newspaper. The name under this news piece dated May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2003, which the government took as a belligerent warning, was Mustafa Balbay, who also recorded in his journals certain discussions – that he did not report on – by army commanders on a coup against the AKP in meetings he attended as the newspaper's Ankara Representative (Balbay later partly acknowledged these journals during his trial).



While the alliance between the AKP and liberal journalists against military tutelage was yet intact, the assassination of Armenian journalist Hrant Dink took place on the 19<sup>th</sup> of January 2007. The events leading up to the murder, regarding which the most critical institutions and public officials remain un-investigated despite the 12 years that have gone by, were prompted by an article published by Dink in the weekly paper *Agos*, where he served as editor-in-chief. While Dink was charged with “denigrating Turkishness” based on a distortion of his article, Turkey’s media made him into a target with headlines such as “love it or leave it” (Özvarış, 2013). Due to its attitude instigating the nationalism that led to his assassination, the media was lumped among “Hrant Dink’s murderers”, alongside the army, police, Intelligence Service, judiciary and the ‘deep state’ involving elements of them all.<sup>4</sup> Following the assassination of Dink, developments ensued that would radically alter the power balance between civilian and military authorities. About three months after the assassination, the army issued a memorandum over the internet – just because the likely next president had a wife wearing the headscarf. Before a month had gone by, Erdoğan held an undisclosed meeting with the Chief of General Staff who had put out this memorandum, and the next month the deep state in Turkey came under investigation for the very first time in history as the “Ergenekon terrorist organisation” (“Dokuz soruda Ergenekon davası,” 2013).

In its early period, the AKP leadership took strategic steps that would result in its own favour not only in its power struggle with the military, but also in terms of media ownership. An important part of these steps involved the Savings Deposit Insurance Fund (Tasarruf Mevduatı Sigorta Fonu – TMSF). Having taken over the Merkez Group before the AKP came to power, the TMSF then seized the assets of the Star Group in 2004, and shortly prior to the 2007 elections the group was sold to businessmen known for their proximity to the AKP (Hasan Doğan and Ethem Sancak).<sup>5</sup> The same year the TMSF also took over all publications and broadcasts belonging to the Ciner Group, including the newspaper *Sabah* and the channel ATV (“TMSF Atv ve Sabah’a el koydu,” 2007). Thus, through the TMSF, the hegemony of the anti-AKP media was broken, an investigation was started extending all the way to the army that exercised covert control over the media, and prominent liberal journalists became allies over

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<sup>4</sup> The then Prime Minister Erdoğan said the Dink assassination was ‘an act of homicide directed at them’, claiming that this assassination taking place seven months before their second general election was an attempt at toppling the AKP government. This stance cemented the positions of liberal writers supporting the AKP at the time. Yet the AKP’s attitude changed over the years, and it hampered the judicial process by casting a protective net over many public officials involved in the murder. Its decision to backtrack on solving this murder became one of the clearest indications of the fact that the AKP had sided with the anti-democratic elements within the state it had pitted itself against up until then.

<sup>5</sup> Ethem Sancak, who later became the sole owner of the group, explained the reason behind his entry into the sector as a move to “be of better service to Erdoğan by disrupting the uniformity of the media” and added that he was a “devotee” of Erdoğan’s.

common problems. Bolstered by these moves as well, the AKP breezed through its second general election with a 12% increase.

### **1.2. The AKP's post-2007 Interventions into Conventional Media**

When did Turkey stop being a democracy and turn into an autocracy? A majority of the academic literature on the AKP's authoritarianism refers to the year 2011, meaning the AKP's third period, as the start of the autocracy (Esen & Gümüşçü, 2016; Güneş-Ayata & Doğangün, 2017; Somer, 2016). Yet academics are unable to pinpoint an exact turning point before which there was democracy and after which came autocracy. One reason for this is because the army in Turkey never allowed a liberal democracy to flourish, and the AKP was therefore able to build its narrative on putting an end to this military tutelage even when its actions were anti-democratic. Another reason why this authoritarianism has hazy beginnings is because the AKP's own authoritarian turn was spread out over time and gained momentum gradually. Otherwise, the practices adopted by the AKP prior to 2011 had already narrowed the scope of democracy and started preventing its political rivals from competing on equal terms with itself. For instance, more than a hundred from the Kurdish political movement including mayors and academics were arrested as part of the KCK (Kurdistan Communities Union) court case. With a referendum in 2010 that was campaigned as an opportunity to curtail military tutelage, higher courts were restructured to better suit the purposes of the executive branch.<sup>6</sup> The Ergenekon investigation that was launched prior to the elections developed into a court case, and hundreds including retired army officers were put on trial under the shadow of multiple due process violations on the main charge of attempting to "overthrow the government by force". Groups capable of challenging the AKP were thus purged from the bureaucracy and political establishment, and the resulting vacancies were filled in a manner to consolidate the AKP regime.

Its media purges, on the other hand, were carried out at times directly and at other times through more circuitous routes. In one example the AKP was directly involved in, the Sabah newspaper and TV channel ATV that had been taken over by the TMSF were sold to Çalık Holding, the only bidder in the state-run auction. The government support involved in the process became even more evident with the provision of 750 million by state banks for the 1.1 billion-dollar acquisition ("Sabah ve ATV Çalık Grubu'na geçti," 2017). A short while later Erdoğan's son-in-law (and later minister) Berat Albayrak became CEO of this energy giant. With this sale, the AKP had taken its biggest stride thus far in the direction of creating its own media. At the same time, the Albayrak Group said to have won 33 tenders from the Istanbul Metropolitan

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, the President was vested with the authority to –directly and indirectly- appoint 14 of the Constitutional Court's 17 members.

Municipality during Erdoğan's term in office here, revamped its channel Tvnet (C. Sözeri, 2019). Taraf newspaper that would come to set the national agenda with documents it published claiming to expose the underbelly of the military tutelage system was founded in 2007. Though not considered a partisan (government-controlled) paper due to the liberal professional backgrounds of its management, Taraf ended up furthering the political agenda of the AKP and Gülen movement with its lack of adequate editorial filtering when publishing documents it was being leaked and its featuring of certain columnists from a law enforcement background. The most important consequence of which being the initiation of the Balyoz (Sledgehammer) case, in which certain members of the armed forces were prosecuted – again with many due process violations involved – on charges of an attempted coup (“Balyoz Davası’ Nedir?,” 2012).



*“Balyoz davası” (Sledgehammer Case) process started with this copy of Taraf newspaper published on January 20, 2010.*

In its second period, the AKP resorted to two new means in order to reshape the media: Hurling public threats at media proprietors during political rallies and imposing tax penalties. Doğan Media, the largest media conglomerate in Turkey and a sustained government critic, was hit with an astronomical tax fine in 2009 while giving important exposure to corruption scandals implicating the AKP.<sup>7</sup> After this fine, Doğan

<sup>7</sup> The lead-up to the 6 billion 448 million 8 thousand lira fine imposed on the Doğan Group eventually paid off in 1.2 billion liras started with the Hürriyet newspaper headline that read “411 hands raised for chaos” in the wake of the Parliamentary vote to lift the headscarf ban in universities. Erdoğan's subsequent call to boycott the group was followed by the group's coverage in its media outlets of the Deniz Feneri (Lighthouse) corruption case with links to the AKP.



Media ceased its coverage of corruption and shifted its course by incorporating figures such as Erdoğan's former press consultant ("TAZ," 2009). Erdoğan, however, kept demanding more extreme moves with statements like "The showcase is only for those who deserve it" during his rallies ("Elde körük ülkeyi yangın yeri gibi gösteriyorlar," 2010). In one year's time, the Doğan Group was forced to sell two of its leading newspapers, Milliyet and Vatan, to businessman Erdoğan Demirören.<sup>8</sup> Seven years later, in 2018, Demirören acquired all other media outlets in Aydın Doğan's possession including, most importantly, Hürriyet, becoming Turkey's biggest media giant ("Doğan Medya Grubu satıldı!," 2018). The current bulk of space taken up by the government in Turkey's mainstream media is as follows:

"9 out of the top 10 newspapers with the highest circulation, all of the top 10 radio channels, 9 of the top 10 most-watched TV channels, and 7 of the most-visited 10 digital news portals mostly feature content in line with the policies of the president, government and the AKP. ("Şahıslar," n.d.)"

### **Arrests, Layoffs, and Censoring Massacre**

The changeover in media ownership affected journalists first and foremost. Both media owners and editorial directors with journalism backgrounds, as well as journalists themselves were cast out of the profession through judicial interventions. By the end of this gradual process, the sector was, to a great extent, turned into an empty shell.

The first notable journalist arrests came with the Ergenekon trials. First Mustafa Balbay and then İlhan Selçuk from the daily Cumhuriyet, following a lefty-nationalist line at the time, were taken under police custody in 2008. While their colleagues were busy debating whether the actions of these figures, known for their pro-army tendencies against the AKP, constituted a crime or not, public trust in the media – which was already quite low – plummeted further.<sup>9</sup> Partly due to this attitude, the validity of the evidence and due process violations were not called into question as loudly as necessary, and arrests went on. Come 2011, journalists Ahmet Şık and Nedim Şener, who were investigating the military tutelage system, were arrested and

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<sup>8</sup> The most significant milestone in Demirören's rapid rise in the media was Milliyet's publication of Namık Durukan's "İmralı Transcripts" in 2013. Following this exposure of the secret notes of a meeting between the imprisoned leader of the armed wing of the Kurdish movement, the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan and parliamentarians from the Kurdish movement while the peace process was ongoing, Erdoğan publicly targeted Milliyet saying "Damn your journalism!" When one of its liberal journalists Hasan Cemal vocally objected to these remarks, this cost him his contract with Milliyet. Thanks to later leaks of tapes, the public found out that the newspaper's boss Demirören had pleaded for Erdoğan's forgiveness in tears over the phone for this very same article at the time.

<sup>9</sup> According to the European Commission's Eurobarometer, those who distrusted the media in Turkey rose from 61 percent in 2007 to 73 percent in just one year.

detained based on non-existent evidence.<sup>10</sup> The same year, more than thirty journalists were arrested in operations against media outlets aligned with the Kurdish movement and jailed in pre-trial detention under charges related to the KCK case initiated based on anonymous witness testimonies (“7 yıldır devam eden 'KCK Basın davası' ertelendi,” 2019). Thus Turkey, having entered 2011 with 39 journalists in prison, ended the year with 93 imprisoned journalists (Abay, 2011, p. 93). Since Kurdish journalists accounted for the bulk of the increase in arrested journalists, Turkey's media managed for the most part to overlook this with its trenchant nationalism. And the AKP entered its third term with a near 50 percent of the vote.

That same year famous names also started losing their jobs. For instance, NTV – one of Turkey's top two news channels – was purged of its news anchors capable of criticizing the government such as Ruşen Çakır, Banu Güven and Can Dündar. While the mainstream media came to learn the government's reflexes, layoffs and increasing restraint marked the burgeoning pro-AKP media.<sup>11</sup> As a result of these practices, Turkey experienced one of its darkest instances of censorship. After the army bombed 34 Kurdish citizens in an airstrike in Roboski, a village on the Iraqi border on December 28, 2011, TV channels did not report on what had happened for 12 hours (“Roboski Katliamı Kronolojisi: Bir Yıl Geçti, Sorumlusu Yok,” 2012). The government's hold over the media had reached the point of getting journalists to turn a blind eye to massacre.

### **The New Media Elite**

As a result of this all, the old media elite was replaced by a new one. The former core composed of mostly college graduates, wary of religion, and mostly men who were leftists back in university, turned liberal in their old age disintegrated. The members of this group whose pay grade reached 15 thousand dollars (“Fatih Altaylı,” 2015) – with

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<sup>10</sup> At this point, Ahmet Şık's book that led to his arrest merits special mention for its ordeal became the first sign of the kind of space the internet would open up against the crackdown on media in Turkey. The court decided to have Şık's yet unpublished book *The Imam's Army (İmanın Ordusu)* banned and confiscated, and Erdoğan retaliated to reactions saying books could be “more dangerous than bombs”. In return, the book's draft was published online by an anonymous source with a message that said “Long live civil disobedience!” Before long, it was downloaded by thousands. Caught technically unprepared, the government was unable to hunt down via the judiciary or internet service providers those who had downloaded the book and/or applauded this action.

<sup>11</sup> For instance, Hasan Karakaya, chief editor at Yeni Akit, a paper known for its Islamist stance and ample use of hate speech, mentioned in our interview with him that they received their own fair share of reprimands from the AKP. Ali Akel was fired from Yeni Şafak, where he had worked for 16 years, after saying that Erdoğan should apologize for Uludere. While being dismissed from his post at the newspaper Star, Mehmet Altan said: “The press doesn't make its money from journalism or the people. Newspapers cost a lot more than the price they are sold for. Where the real money comes from is influence peddling and ads.” The political pressure leveraged in order to cover the loss started being exerted in broad daylight about a year after this revelation by Altan. The then President of the Star Media Group complained from his column that “the scales had started tipping in favour of the democratic and plurivocal strand in the media, but Turkey's leading corporations such as Koç and Sabancı continued advertising in the old media.” In such manner, pro-AKP journalists compelled Turkey's original bourgeoisie into choosing sides and financing their own expenses.

the rate at the time – that weren't turned around by the AKP government lost both their fat salaries and their role as agenda-setters. Those replacing them were middle-aged, conservative men with mediocre degrees who had up until then gained unremarkable experiences in the handful of existing religious outlets. The overwhelming male-domination of the sector became apparent in both newspapers and television programs. The already low number of women journalists dwindled even further, as those wearing the headscarf among them increased. And tabs on which of these journalists were most in favour with the government were kept through photographs issuing from Erdoğan's plane.



*A photograph of Erdoğan posing on the presidential plane with journalists accompanying him on his visits abroad.*

### **The Press under Emergency Rule: FETÖ Charges**

All of these repressive measures the AKP imposed on conventional media intensified further at every single political threat against the government, including elections. The most obvious example of this being the painful parting of ways lasting from 2011 to 2016 between the government and its one-time partner the religious community known as the 'Fethullah Gülen movement'. The separation was cemented and sealed with the December 17/25 corruption investigations of 2013 involving certain ministers from the AKP, carried out by members of the judiciary affiliated with the Gülen movement relying on legally questionable wiretaps. This was followed by police raids on the movement's media outlets starting with the daily Zaman, and trustees were appointed to their management. While the movement came under prosecution as



the “Fethullah Gülen Terrorist Organization” (FETÖ), many executives working in its media groups fled abroad. Journalists who remained and had supported the movement in some way or another, on the other hand, faced heavy penalties in the wake of the July 15<sup>th</sup> coup attempt in 2016 – where FETÖ was considered the main actor. The emergency rule declared that same year generalized state repression and took it to a previously unprecedented level in Turkey.



*Images from the police raid of 5 March 2016 in Zaman newspaper, prior to the appointment of the trustee.*

Following the coup attempt, the country was ruled under a state of emergency for two years, during which 70 newspapers, 20 journals and 33 television channels were shut down. The number of people removed from public sector jobs reached 121 thousand 311 – including 5 thousand 705 academics. 715 journalists lost their press credentials (yellow press cards), and the count of imprisoned journalists swelled to 143.<sup>12</sup> Among them was *Die Welt* correspondent Deniz Yücel, whose detention for over a year on charges of “spreading terrorist propaganda” resulted in a diplomatic crisis between Germany and Turkey. Taraf’s founding editor-in-chief Ahmet Altan, his brother and former columnist for the daily Star Prof. Mehmet Altan, as well as Nazlı Ilıcak, a veteran writer of the Turkish right recently working in publications belonging to the Gülen movement, were other journalists who ended up in prison at this time. These three figures who had been criticizing the AKP for a while were first accused of “sending subliminal messages to coup plotters” on a television program and then of seeking to “overthrow the constitutional order by force”. Their case became proof of the whole new level the judiciary had reached, for the defendants were not released despite European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and Constitutional Court (AYM) rulings on violations. In the hands of the ruling party, heavy penal courts were rendered devoid of law and exempted from the binding hierarchy of courts. In light of these developments, it took more than three years in prison before Ahmet Altan and Nazlı Ilıcak were finally released in November 2019. Ahmet Altan was re-arrested about a week after his release. In addition to suffering injustice, these figures also received very limited support from their colleagues. The number of journalists going

<sup>12</sup> Turkey topped the Committee to Protect Journalists’ (CPI) list of the “worst jailers of journalists” for three consecutive years in 2016, 2017, and 2018.

to meet them outside the prison complex as they were being released were less than a handful. The main reason for this was their past of ardent journalistic defence of court cases carried out in partnership by the AKP and Gülen community, in utter disregard of the violations these entailed.

Another example that merits mention in terms of the weak bonds of solidarity characterizing Turkey's press is the Cumhuriyet case. Known for its stance against the Gülen movement even before the movement was classified as a terrorist organization, the newspaper Cumhuriyet was accused in the wake of the coup attempt of aiding and abetting FETÖ with its editorial choices. One of the bases of these charges was the testimony of a top-level Cumhuriyet executive writing a letter of complaint to ask for President (as of 2014) Erdoğan's support in the power grab for the paper's control (Akin, 2017). Though the witness was refuted and the prosecutor revealed as a FETÖ suspect himself, 14 members of the press were put on trial and most of them spent time in prison. In other words, the accusation of "having ties with FETÖ" somehow skipped over its overt collaborators the AKP and its media, and instead became a means of silencing journalists critical of the AKP – especially as of late.



*Following the arrest of journalists from Cumhuriyet newspaper, protests were held in front of its building in Istanbul.*

### **The Situation Post-Emergency Rule**

Nothing improved in terms of press freedom after the state of emergency was lifted. The court cases mentioned above and more went on just the same, physical violence

against journalists was encouraged with impunity, and regulations were issued that conflicted with the Constitution. For instance, with a single statutory decree the Office of the President put its very own Directorate of Communications in charge of handing out press credentials (“İletişim Başkanlığı Hakkında Cumhurbaşkanlığı Kararnamesi,” 2018). Based on this decree, a body of regulations was prepared giving the administration powers in complete disregard of existing legislation on the matter (“Basın Kartı Yönetmeliği,” 2018). Harassed in multiple ways including through unemployment, social lynching and arrests, journalists have lately started being actively attacked as well. An oppositional-nationalist journalist Yavuz Selim Demirağ and Sabahattin Önkibar, known for working in nationalist and Kemalist neo-nationalist papers were beaten up in front of their homes, and their assailants remained unpunished (Demokrasi için Medya/Medya için Demokrasi, n.d.). Despite all of this, the AKP lost hold of the local governments of 15 provinces – with two defeats in Istanbul – in the local elections of 2019 (“Seçimde il değiştiren iller hangileri?,” 2019). Here is how the opposition’s triumphant candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu explained to the Washington Post how he overcame this asymmetry in the media throughout the campaign period:

“The ruling Justice and Development Party dominates the media landscape in our country, making it extremely difficult for anyone opposed to the party to break through. Such an environment dictates a people-first focus. (...) As I conducted one-on-one dialogue with citizens, my campaign turned these real conversations into video clips that we spread through social media. (...) These videos, which were often circulated live, attracted great public interest and gave me a chance to communicate with voters despite the biased media environment of Turkey. (İmamoğlu, 2019)”

In the next section I shall attempt to outline when and how the internet – which enabled İmamoğlu’s election – started gaining importance in terms of the press in Turkey, the main actors operating in this field, and the measures taken by the AKP government against them.

## **2. Forced Online: The Press Under Siege**

The wave of insurgency starting in the West in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, emerging in Tunisia and Egypt towards the end of 2010, and circling back to the West with the US in particular in 2011, manifested itself as the Gezi Park protests in Turkey in 2013 (Tuğal, 2013). Originating as a local environmental movement seeking to defend a park in Istanbul’s city centre and quickly engulfing the entire country, these

protests became a turning point for Turkey's media as well because for the very first time it was seen that the conventional press could cease being the main source of news. According to a survey conducted by KONDA, a public opinion polling and research company, with protesters as the Gezi Park protests were ongoing, 69 percent of protesters were following the news from social media, 15.4 from their friends, 8.6 from news websites, and only 7 percent were resorting to television (KONDA, 2013). One reason for this was that having an affinity for technology was a quality the mostly youthful protesters at Gezi shared. Another was that Gezi protesters could only ever find news of themselves on social media. A sign of the disparity between Gezi protesters and the rest of the country was that a Turkey-wide survey carried out at the same time revealed that only 15.9 percent received news from social media and 6.4 from online papers (KONDA, 2014). Still, even this overall national picture demonstrates that about one third of internet users, who numbered 35 million at the time, had the internet as their main news source, and the fact that the Gezi Resistance boosted the number of Twitter users from 7.2 to 11.3 million suggests that the number of those getting their news from the internet has grown (Demirel, 2013; "İşte Türkiye'nin Twitter istatistikleri," 2012).



*A photograph from the Gezi Park protests in 2013, where traditional press's status as being the main news source was shaken.*

## **2.1. Critical Online Platforms Before and After Gezi**

But where does all this news circulating on the web come from? As conventional media undergoes censorship and social media users are only able to report from scratch their own or their acquaintances' experiences, it is online media outlets that

take on the bulk of actual news production.<sup>13</sup> The rise of such news organizations publishing online only in Turkey has been more a consequence of the media establishment created by the steps detailed in the previous section than of market pressures towards digitalization. For journalists' oft-repeated motto regarding Turkey's press, that "the Sublime Porte is a 40-chambered mansion, if you walk out of one room, you enter the next" became obsolete, as no media owners stepped up to hire blacklisted journalists. Many unemployed journalists unable to find a place for themselves in media outlets affiliated with political parties and/or limited in resources shifted to online platforms. Yet, at that time, with an internet dominated by the websites of newspapers and TV channels such as *Milliyet.com.tr* or *NTV.com.tr* ("Top Sites in Turkey," n.d.), there were very few outlets existing prior to the Gezi Park incidents that could produce content critical of the official line and operated online only. The Gezi protests resulted in the growth of an internet media engaging in critical journalism. But what prompted these sites that sprouted up after the protests was the same as those that existed beforehand: the tight filter imposed by mainstream media.

A couple of examples to long-standing online-only news websites existing prior to the protests: *Bianet*, which has been online since its test runs in 2000, *sendika.org* that set out as a publication of the labour movement in 2001, and *T24* established in 2009.

*Bianet* started out due to the need for an alternative media felt by civil society organizations disturbed by the uniformity of the media (Mete, 2008). Seeking to "become the voice of the grassroots", *Bianet* met its costs with funds from international bodies such as the EU, paying content writers to publish in many areas including women's and LGBT issues. *T24*, which, on the other hand, doesn't receive any funding, set out with the purpose of practicing "another kind of journalism to counter for-profit journalism." *T24*'s founding editor-in-chief Doğan Akin cites the cost-efficiency of the Internet as their reason for preferring a digital format. Making most of its income from online ads dominated by Google, today *T24* features many

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<sup>13</sup> Turcotte and colleagues (2015), studying news credibility on social media, revealed that when the news a person encountered on these platforms had been shared by a friend of theirs, their trust in both the information and its original source increased. Therefore, the communication aspect (keeping in contact) inherent to these platforms played an indispensable role in turning social media into a source of news during the Gezi Park protests. While the media establishment did not cover developments taking place in the Gezi protests, this continued contact allowed users to follow both what their friends, family and acquaintances were doing and what new information alternative media was providing. While on the one hand enabling the spread of false news, this media also provided opportunities allowing users to quickly verify and circulate information. Still trust in news remained limited, since accountability is not a precondition for sharing on these platforms. Perhaps based on these reasons, studies by Olkun and Balci and Olkun (2016, 2017) comparing the credibility of news on social media with news in established newspapers found that trust in social media is lower in Turkey. Breaking through this lack of trust are, first and foremost, actors publicly known for their credibility: i.e., journalists, academics, and researchers. With this in mind, it may easily be said that although news websites are used much less than social media as a news source, they actually encompass social media in terms of their impact. (Cf. Mehmet Fatih Çömlekçi and Oğuz Başol, "A Study on Social Media News Credibility and News Verification Awareness" ["Sosyal Medya Haberlerine Güven ve Kullanıcı Teyit Alışkanlıkları Üzerine Bir İnceleme"], Galatasaray University Journal of Communication, June 2019).



famous journalists ranging from former *CNN Türk* hosts to mainstream columnists (“T24’ün Kurucusu Doğan Akin DAÜ’de Söyleşi Gerçekleştirdi,” 2017). Founded 18 years ago to be the “voice of labour and resistance”, *sendika.org* is one of the first organizations that put the Internet to use as a site of social opposition (“Hakkımızda,” 2013). Operating on a volunteer basis, where its employees receive nothing but meals and transportation expenses, *sendika.org* was shut down by the state and reopened under alternative names a total of 62 times until 2019 (“Sendika.org’a 62. kez erişim engeli,” 2018).

What caused new ones to be added to these news websites that were already up and running was often the mainstream media’s lack of journalistic response to an unfolding political crisis. For instance, a university student named Engin Önder started the platform *140 journos* as a reaction when television channels failed to report on the Roboski massacre for 12 hours (Karadeniz, 2015). In 2012, when government statements were all you could hear on the mainstream media about Kurdish prisoners’ hunger strikes, a Facebook page called *Ötekilerin Postası* (The Others’ Post) was started. A while later, with the addition of *otekilerinpostasi.org*, the team became one of social media’s highlights (Yumuşak, n.d.).

The media outlets mentioned above, as well as many others, embraced those expelled from the media establishment from 2013 onwards. For instance, Hasan Cemal, who worked for 44 years in the mainstream where he breached taboos such as the Kurdish or Armenian issues, took his column to *T24*, and his Twitter account reached above 700 thousand followers. The shift from central media to the Internet gained speed with the Gezi Park protests. One reason for this was that at least 22 journalists were fired and 37 were forced to resign while the protests were ongoing. These break-offs further weakened the news content of mainstream media, as well as causing new news websites to pop up over the Internet. For instance, 2013 saw the establishment of *Diken* (meaning ‘thorn’). Different outlets such as *Demokrat Haber* (Democrat News), *Haber Vesaire* (News Etcetera) and *Gezi Postası* (Gezi Post) joined forces to start a joint network by the name of *dokuz8haber* (literally, ‘nine8news’) (“Yeni bir medya deneyimi,” 2014).

News websites turning into meeting grounds for disemployed journalists started attracting former stars along with figures from the mainstream media. In their studies of the new alternative media, Ataman and Çoban find that famous journalists pushed out of the mainstream have been made activists by circumstance, turning to alternative media in order to put their voices out there (Ataman & Çoban, 2018). One example of this is Ruşen Çakır, who parted ways with NTV to then set up *Medyascope* – which he financed through funding – in 2015 (Bakır, 2018). In 2016, *Gazete Duvar* (Wall Newspaper) was founded incorporating reporters breaking off from the mainstream such as Fehim Taştekin – one of the top media experts on the Middle

East. A Germany-based website, *Artı Gerçek* (literally, 'Plus-Truth'), was launched in 2017. Journalists taking similar routes were able to provide both themselves and other journalists, and academics put out of work under emergency rule an opportunity to keep doing their job (even if partially) and make their voices heard, as well as means to access news for those in search of it.

## **2.2. The AKP's Discovery of Online Censorship**

The fact that the social opposition went online with the Gezi Park protests and that news spread via online channels turned the AKP government's attention to the Internet, as it expanded its oppressive repertoire to include this particular domain as well. The methods it applied here consisted of both an adaptation of conventional techniques and internet-specific tactics.

### **Twitter and Trolls**

Early in the Gezi Park protests, Erdoğan said "There is now a scourge called Twitter. The biggest lies can be found there. What is called social media is, in fact, the worst menace to society right now." A social media agency director convened with columnists from pro-government newspapers at the time in order to inform them about social media and what it was capable of, thinking that the AKP hadn't realized the true power of Twitter (Saka, 2018). The same director mentioned that the columnists in this meeting were later able to take advantage of this information during crises polarizing society. He also supplied a pro-AKP newspaper with a list of agencies and activists supporting the Gezi protests, following which the state severed its business ties with some of the names on this list.<sup>14</sup> Terming himself an "AK troll", this director showed the AKP two ways in which it could make use of social media: setting the online political agenda and surveilling.

Ak trolls – as in, social media aggressors supporting the AKP through anonymous accounts using pseudonyms – became the visible actors meeting these functions on Twitter. An official connection is yet to be exposed linking the AKP to the Turkey wing of these government trolls, which have parallels in many countries such as Mexico, China and Russia.<sup>15</sup> It is, however, evident that these accounts are interrelated due to brazen similarities in the content and timing of their posts. According to Erkan Saka,

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<sup>14</sup> This social media director cites the Kabataş assault as an example, referring to the crisis that broke out upon allegations that Gezi protesters had harassed a woman wearing the headscarf taking things so far as to urinate on her. Though the claim was later proven to be bogus, the crisis was put to use by the government in order to paint the protesters as hostile elements in the eyes of the conservative population.

<sup>15</sup> One of the most important pieces of evidence in hand is Erdoğan's daughter Sümeyye Erdoğan caught on record saying "Tell our trolls to support our hashtag campaign" to the then Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister Mustafa Varank in one of the tapes leaked in 2014. A study conducted by the Memory Collective (Hafıza Kolektifi) on exposed Ak troll accounts also reveals Varank as a central hub of Ak troll interaction in 2015.

who examines social media as a space for political battles, Ak troll practices include: social lynching to intimidate individuals voicing critical opinions, hacking such cause-oriented accounts to fill them with pro-AKP content instead, mounting bot attacks in order to suppress any propaganda against the government, and using foreign languages to take action against active AKP opposers abroad (Saka, 2018). In 2015, government trolls added fascist reporting on war to this toolkit. After losing its majority in Parliament for the very first time, the AKP called for snap elections on November 1<sup>st</sup>, 2015 and created an atmosphere of conflict in South Eastern Anatolia, the region home to Kurdish voters who had shifted away from the AKP. Security forces in these places opened anonymous accounts to post violent visuals they had recorded during operations along with ultra-nationalist messages.<sup>16</sup>

Despite all of these efforts by Ak trolls, the AKP was unable to hold sway over social media, and records of phone-tapped and bugged conversations compiled as part of corruption investigations launched a couple of months after Gezi were leaked on social media. While many news websites approached these corruption tapes serviced on Youtube by an account called “Başçalan” (literally, ‘head-stealer’) with caution, an account named “Haramzadeler” (meaning, ‘illegitimate children’) spread them on Twitter. A ban was imposed on the media in order to prevent any reporting on these corruption tapes (“17 Aralık yolsuzluk soruşturmasına ‘eleştiri’ dahil yayın yasağı!,” 2014). While none of these developments were featured in the mainstream, conversations regarding the structuring and workings of mainstream media were unearthed among the recordings. In one record, Erdoğan was personally calling the chief executive of Ciner Media from Morocco to have a news ticker (scrolling text on the bottom of the screen) in their channel redacted. Another record demonstrated how Erdoğan and Binali Yıldırım, minister at the time, were trying to set up a pool of funds to secure the buy-out of the Sabah newspaper and channel Atv, collecting 630

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<sup>16</sup> During the war involving curfews up to 253 days, the posts that were most jarring to the public were naked pictures of the dead body of PKK-fighter Kevser Eltürk and footage of Hacı Lokman Birlik's body riddled with 28 bullets dragged behind an armoured vehicle.

million dollars from businessmen in return for public tenders.<sup>17</sup> After this leak, Sabah-Atv as the largest of media corporations aligned with the government came to be publicly known as “the pool media”.

### **Increasingly Speedy and Unchecked Website Blocking and Access Restrictions**

In the wake of the release of the corruption tapes, the AKP resorted to legal means in addition to AK trolls in order to bring the internet under its hegemony. A brief review of measures taken prior to the authoritarian turn is needed here so as to demonstrate what effects the AKP's deepening authoritarianism then had in this area.

Internet publications and broadcasts made their initial entry into legislation in Turkey through the Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) Law – with an amendment made in 2001 that “all provisions concerning damages arising from publishing false news, defamatory statements and similar acts would apply to the Internet as well”. This addition brought all court cases regarding internet publications previously operating according to the Criminal Code under the ambit of press legislation. The second step was the Internet Act numbered 5651 and dated 2007, which established the state's online presence in the form of the Presidency of Telecommunication and Communication (or Telecommunications Directorate) (TIB) (“İnternet Ortamında Yapılan Yayınların Düzenlenmesi ve Bu Yayınlar Yoluyla İşlenen Suçlarla Mücadele Edilmesi Hakkında Kanun,” 2007). The authority to issue blocking orders if there was strong suspicion of the presence of ‘catalogue’ crimes such as betting/gambling or encouraging suicide rested with courts, judges and prosecutors, while the TIB had the power to do so in the case of “child sexual abuse” and the ever-so-ambiguous “obscene content”. The TIB or prosecutor was, on the other hand, required to seek

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<sup>17</sup> Nihat Özdemir, one of the businessmen associated with Zirve Holding, the conglomerate that bought the publications, had a matter of months before the Sabah-Atv purchase bought out the daily Akşam (seized by the TMSF) and the channel Sky-Türk with two partnering companies. Here was his answer to why he put 60 million dollars into a media outlet that was losing money: “*Us three partners, we have an important share in the power distribution sector. We serve 9.6 million customers. With this we would make it into Europe's top ten. We're in energy production as well. We produce electricity from natural gas, coal, and hydropower. We're all involved in tourism, with a capacity of about 10 thousand beds among us. We do cement, we do mining. So we wanted the power of the media behind us. We felt we needed it. All of us need advertising for the work we do. We need our energy, cement and tourism to be marketed. Now we will be able to advertise on our own outlets.*” It is debatable who this advertisement is meant for on newspapers without any readership, but there is no doubt that the Sabah-Atv purchase brought these businessmen enormous profit. Just one example is this partial list of investments made by Kalyon Construction operating under Zirve Holding in 2015 (after the purchase): *The New Istanbul Airport Project, the Başakşehir Stadium, Nurdağı-İslahiye Highway, the Çanakkale-Ezine-Ayvacık Highway, the Beyoğlu-Kasımpaşa Hasköy Avenue Rehabilitation and Tunnel Construction Project, the Erzurum-Bingöl-Diyarbakır Highway Junction, the Çat-Karlıova-Bingöl Freeway Second Section Construction, the Iraq Erbil Dohuk Water Supply Project, the Melen Water Conduction Line, the Northern Cyprus Suspension System Sea Crossing, Waste Water Tunnel Construction in Selimpaşa-Kumburgaz and Çanta-Gürpınar, (...) three hydroelectric power plants in Giresun, Ordu and Erzurum, the transportation of natural gas from Turkmenistan to Hopa over Georgia and its use for electricity production, the İnegöl Gas Distribution Corporation.*

approval from a judge or court immediately after exercising their authority to block access – thus preventing any bypassing of the judicial mechanism and making it possible for blocking orders to be lifted. In short, though not without its problems, this law prescribed a certain ‘separation of powers’, limiting the crimes for which blocking orders could be issued and leaving the final say to the judiciary.

As the AKP turned more authoritarian, however, it removed the judiciary from the process of blocking web access and concentrated this power in the executive branch instead. Come 2011, the number of regulations allowing for web access blocking had reached 10.<sup>18</sup> One particular regulation passed in 2014 right after the corruption tapes had spread over social media centralised the power to enforce blocking orders in the hands of a single authority, enabling their imposition within a maximum of four hours. The list of crimes calling for this measure was expanded to include violations of privacy and personal rights along with catalogue crimes as adequate reason for blocking access (Akdeniz & Güven, n.d.). The TIB's authority to issue blocking orders under exceptional circumstances was broadened. It became such that the TIB's President could issue a blocking order the moment he thought a “privacy violation” had occurred, and unlike before the new law did not require the TIB to report such contents to the prosecutor's office, meaning that its blocking orders were no longer subject to judicial review.<sup>19</sup> As a result, by means of complicating the law, concentrating the power to issue and implement decisions in a single hand, and weakening judicial review, the AKP managed to turn blocking orders into an ordinary

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<sup>18</sup> Other than Law no 5651, the 8 laws and 1 statutory decree issued on the matter are as follows: *article 4 of the Appendix to the Law on Intellectual and Artistic Works; sub-paragraph (k) of paragraph 5 in article 8 of the Law on the Organizational Structure and Duties of the Tobacco and Alcohol Market Regulatory Authority; provisions regarding unfair competition in the Turkish Commercial Code (arts 56 and 58 in the former version, now arts 54, 55 and 56); paragraph 4 in article 6 of the Anti-Terrorism Law; arts 24 and 25 of the Turkish Civil Code; article 101 of the Code of Civil Procedure; article 5 of the Law Regulating Betting Activities in Soccer and Other Sports; article 6 of the Law on the Establishment and Duties of the Presidency of Religious Affairs; arts 9, 76 and 77 of the Statutory Decree on the Protection of Trademarks.*

<sup>19</sup> Another problematic aspect of the amendment was that it obligated content, domain and service providers to “surrender any information requested by the TIB in the manner requested.” The AKP managed to get the bill through Parliament even though the article created controversy on grounds that it could allow for user surveillance, but the Constitutional Court then repealed these provisions. A few months after the amendment, the AKP shut down the TIB on suspicion that it had been infiltrated by the Gülen movement, transferring its powers to the Information and Communication Technologies (Bilgi Teknolojileri ve İletişim Kurumu – BTK). The total number of websites blocked by the TIB before it was shut down reached 177 thousand 515.



procedure – impossible to tell which state agency it had been requested by and quite difficult to lift once imposed.<sup>20</sup>

In the same period, the government resorted to other measures to keep Twitter posts in check. The AKP emerged from its confrontation with the company – that took place in the form of a two-week Twitter ban – winning a “country-specific content withholding” deal. With this policy that was put into effect in Turkey for the very first time as of March 2014, tweets or accounts regarding which there were removal requests or court orders were blocked from users in that specific country. Twitter announced that using this method it had only last year withheld 497 accounts and 1819 tweets in Turkey (Akdeniz & Güven, n.d.).

### **Surveillance, News Deprivation, and Punishing Critical Content**

A new form of censorship introduced to Turkey by the AKP in 2015 is bandwidth throttling. This method used on porn sites by service providers causes users to experience slowness on certain selected sites, making it harder to access these sites without needing any blocking order. The first encounter users in Turkey had with throttling was on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2015, when 33 mostly young people seeking to support refugees were killed in a bomb attack in Suruç, a town on the Syrian border.

Bandwidth throttling was later implemented on networks such as Twitter, Facebook and Whatsapp without informing its users in the aftermath of other bombings (“CHP’den sansür raporu,” 2018). Thus, while media bans following every such attack silenced conventional media, users going online for news were deterred by the sloth-like speed of the system.

The technology that enables this slowing down of the Internet is called Deep Packet Inspection (DPI), allowing for all data flowing in and out of a network to be classified. It is claimed that all internet service providers in Turkey have been compelled to use this system since 2014 in order monitor internet traffic (E. K. Sözeri, 2016). If this is

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<sup>20</sup> The first time a social network was banned in Turkey was in 2007. Youtube remained blocked for over a year with 34 different court orders. A day after Erdoğan cried “Twitter, schmitter – we will eradicate it all” during a rally in 2014 right after the corruption scandal had spread over the news, Twitter was shut down, followed by Youtube once again. When the block on Twitter was lifted by order of the Constitutional Court, Erdoğan declared that he “did not respect the ruling”. News website *otekilerinpostasi.org* was shut down in 2014 never to reopen. The Facebook page of the same Others’ Post (Ötekilerin Postası) was shut down by Facebook 9 times in its first two years. At the end of 2015, the websites of many agencies reporting on Kurds denied from the mainstream such as *Dicle News Agency (DİHA)*, *ANF*, *Hawar News Agency (ANHA)*, *Özgür Gündem newspaper*, *Yüksekova News*, *Jiyan.org*, and *RojNews* were blocked. According to the Republican People’s Party report, Turkey came in first in content removal on Twitter with over 7 thousand requests. The same year 712 access restrictions were imposed on Facebook. *Sendika.org* was blocked 61 times from 2015 to 2017, and access to certain news sites including *Medyascope*, *Gazeteport*, *Rotahaber*, *ABC Gazetesi*, and *Karşı Gazete* were blocked temporarily in the wake of the July 15th coup attempt in 2016. Finally, Wikipedia was blocked in 2017 on grounds that “it had become part of an information source which is running a smear campaign against Turkey in the international arena, instead of coordinating against terrorism”, and the ban has not been removed until January 2020.

true, websites visited by internet users in Turkey are tracked, and it is unknown how and for what all of this personal data is being used. In this regard, it is particularly alarming that news websites feature heavily amongst user data revealed to have been tracked by a certain service provider (E. K. Sözeri, 2016). Researcher Efe Kerem Sözeri draws attention to yet another disquieting use of DPI: When elected mayors in the Southeast were removed and replaced with appointed administrators in 2016, internet access was cut off in the region for quite a long time and people had difficulty contacting each other (E. K. Sözeri, 2016). It would not be wrong to say that the government used such region-specific slowdowns to obstruct potential internet-based organizing.

Though unclear how and through which softwares these are being detected, many social media users today face judicial action in Turkey.<sup>21</sup> Investigation subjects vary according to the political agenda. For instance, when the foreign currency crisis broke out in 2018, 346 accounts were brought under investigation for painting a “negative picture” (“Dolar kuru paylaşımı yapan yüzlerce sosyal medya hesabına soruşturma,” 2018). “Insulting the President” became another one of the primary reasons for social media investigations. With this deterrent effect of its more micro-level interventions, the AKP managed to significantly cut down the amount of critical content posted on social media.

### **2.3. The Last Move Against Internet Media: RTÜK Oversight**

RTÜK took the first step against online-only media outlets, bringing them under its supervision in March 2018. It is still dubious whom exactly this supervision shall encompass, yet taking the pessimistic view dictated by the overall climate in Turkey, it is possible to say that those affected by this new measure will be the news websites mentioned above and foreign news agencies operating mostly online. First coming to mind among such agencies active in Turkey are those that do not stray from their country's official line such as Russia's *Sputnik Turkey* and China's *Chinese Radio International (CRI) Turkey*, as well as others that are – though not always – able to be critical of their state's policies such as *BBC*, *Deutsche Welle (DW)* and *Voice of America (VOA)*.

Having budgets that are not as limited as local online-only outlets, these foreign news organizations have brought in well-known and experienced names deprived of their

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<sup>21</sup> Internet users in Turkey are monitored not only by service providers or the TIB, but also by the police. It has been revealed that the police spent 600 thousand dollars to use the Italian Hacking Team's Remote Control System between 2011 and 2014. According to the company, this system allows its clients to overcome data encryption, anti-virus software and security walls. Though he did not disclose how these were detected, Minister of the Interior Süleyman Soylu announced that legal action had been taken against over 20 thousand users due to social media posts between 2013 and 2018.

jobs in the mainstream media to work in their Turkey services. Weekly programs such as the one on DW run by former CNN Turk host Nevşin Mengü and news articles have proliferated. As the news content of these agencies grew stronger they began to stand out in the eyes of the government and ended up subject to its monitoring. With the amendment requested by AKP MPs in order to both extract tax money from and control the content of online streaming services with foreign finances such as Netflix, media streamers have been required to obtain a broadcast license and platform operators a broadcast transmission authorization from RTÜK (“Vergi Kanunları ile Bazı Kanun ve Kanun Hükmünde Kararnamelerde Değişiklik Yapılması Hakkında Kanun,” 2018). This regulation has given RTÜK the authority to request broadcast bans against streaming content it deems inappropriate in addition to handing out licenses.

Though inter-organizational coordination is generally weak in Turkey an exception occurred in this case, and the next step against foreign press was taken by the think tank closest to the AKP, namely the Foundation for Political, Economic and Social Research (Siyaset, Ekonomi ve Toplum Araştırmaları Vakfı – SETA). In a report it published in July 2019 titled “The Extensions of International Media Outlets”, SETA designated these outlets as “the most important component of oppositional media” (Çağlar, Tokar, & Akdemir, 2019). It also drew attention to the *Independent’s* new *Independent Turkish*, as well as *France24*, *VOA*, *BBC* and *DW’s* +90 Youtube channel to say that the foreign press has been lately increasing its scope of activity in Turkey. This 202-page report also detailed how these outlets covered anti-democratic measures taken by the AKP. Critical news sources and commentary condemned the SETA report as profiling, but the organization did not step back (“SETA Vakfı ‘andıç’ tepkilerine yanıt verdi,” 2019).

In this atmosphere of profiling, a new RTÜK directive was announced on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019 detailing the implementation of the legislative changes enacted in March 2018. This directive listed 25 thousand TL as the mandatory license fee for radio broadcasting and 100 thousand TL (approximately 17,500 dollars at current rates) for all other broadcasts. These license fees shall especially put a strain on news websites barely managing their budgets as is, but the real problem is that it is unclear to whom RTÜK will grant or refuse licenses and on what grounds. Criticized for its vague language, it is still difficult to tell to what extent this set of regulations shall apply to online journalism.<sup>22</sup> RTÜK board member from the main opposition party the CHP, Faruk Bildirici, said that although obtaining a license was mandatory RTÜK would announce media service providers that hadn't, therefore advising online newspapers

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<sup>22</sup> The law defines “on-demand broadcasting” as “audio or visual media services provided according to a programme catalogue”. It is therefore possible to assume that written news sites and/or those without a programme catalogue are not subject to licensing. They could still, however, fall within this scope due to their daily or weekly video presentations or podcasts.

and social media broadcasts to wait for the regulation to be implemented before making any applications.<sup>23</sup> Lawyer Murat Deha Boduroğlu, on the other hand, believes these regulations encompass all media outlets operating online. Boduroğlu underlines that this directive requires all media service providers to obtain a license, establish a joint stock company in order to apply for the license, and if the media service provider in question is based abroad it is obligated to compose at least 50% of its shareholding and executive board membership of natural Turkish citizens or legal entities established according to Turkish law, along with other partnership and membership requirements. In cases where these obligations are not met and licenses are denied, Boduroğlu claims, penalties such as broadcast bans may be imposed (*Personal Interview with Self-Employed Attorney Murat Deha Boduroğlu*, 2019). It therefore appears that new mechanisms of oversight await members of the foreign press, who are already worried about accreditation due to new press card regulations.

### **In Conclusion: What Is Left for Journalism?**

Turkey suspended its Operation Peace Spring launched in northern Syria after nine days as a result of US pressure, after which it largely petered out (“Türkiye ile ABD anlaştı,” 2019). This war supported by no country save for Qatar, Pakistan and Hungary brought yet another violation of Syrian borders, cost the lives of civilians and soldiers in numbers that will forever remain a matter of debate, and displaced tens of thousands. While Turkey’s mainstream media, capable of saying no to war before it even started hailed the operation with front pages reading “High time for national unity”, “On to victory”, “Traitors vanquished”, it didn’t even question why when the operation abruptly ended. On the contrary, on October 18<sup>th</sup> 2019 they sported headlines such as “Great victory”, “We won on the field and at the table” as if everything had gone just as planned (“Gazete Manşet, 18 October 2019,” 2019).

Throughout this article I have tried to convey why it would be unrealistic to expect anything else from Turkey’s mainstream media. For the mainstream in Turkey has always been pro-state rather than pro-democracy, perpetually nationalistic, patriarchal, and profit-driven. The AKP government now indirectly owns approximately 90% of the media it has been trying to conquer since 2007 in the many ways described in detail above. It continues to broadcast and publish mixing in a heavy dose of Sunni Islam with the other age-old characteristics it has inherited. The remaining 10% of the mainstream media is also unable to practice effective independent journalism due to limited resources and/or ideological affiliations other than the AKP. With things as is, therefore, journalists able to say nay when the AKP says “war” no longer work in the mainstream.

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<sup>23</sup> Faruk Bildirici’s RTÜK membership was revoked unlawfully not long after, on October 31<sup>st</sup> 2019.

Journalists unable to find a place for themselves in this present state of the media – along with disemployed academics, artists, experts and activists – have for a while been active on the Internet. The Gezi Park experience strengthened the impression that the Internet opened up space for critical thought, increasing the media presence here. Yet the AKP, taking note of this space and seeing an example in practices espoused by other authoritarian states, combined its traditional forms of oppression with new information systems to turn the Internet into its new spying and hunting grounds.

Media organizations and individuals are forced to publish, broadcast and post on social media constantly gauging what backlash they may face. The content of news produced under these circumstances is also quite poor quality in comparison to the past. Investigative journalism is close to nill. News sources have long been afraid to talk or share documents. Guests sought out for interviews turn down journalists, asking for their understanding under present circumstances. In the space that is left, declarative journalism grows, columns feature specific, targeted articles drawing attention to the contradictions within government, conveying analyses by academics kept from conducting research as well as the reports of civil society organizations; so, the past is recalled, protests reported, and state violence recorded as much as possible. This news cycle in the critical arena attracts fewer and fewer readers by the minute. It is better than nothing, but one must see where the press is going. We are moving towards a journalism characterized by weak material, low news diversity, serious financial difficulty, a constant expectation for documents to leak through cracks in the state/AKP apparatus, a lack of societal support, and worst of all no sanctions whatsoever directed at politicians.

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*Jonas Staal*



Our reality is defined, in part, by a propaganda struggle. “Propaganda” here should not be understood as a singular term, since this propaganda struggle results from various competing propagandas in the plural.<sup>1</sup> Various performances of power each aim to construct reality according to their interests, resulting in overlapping claims that shape the arena of the contemporary.<sup>2</sup> What visual forms are taken by these manifold propagandas and the realities they aim to create? What kind of artistic morphologies and cultural narratives does the propaganda (art) struggle bring about?

In late July 2018, Steve Bannon—former campaign manager and advisor to Donald Trump—announced the creation of a new Brussels-based foundation that will aim to become a right-wing “alternative” to George Soros’s Open Society Foundation.<sup>3</sup> The

<sup>2</sup> In the words of Sven Lütticken, “The contemporary should be seen as a contested terrain, as asynchronic coexistence of different contemporarities, ideologies, and social realities.” Sven Lütticken, *History in Motion: Time in the Age of the Moving Image* (Sternberg Press, 2013), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Jamie Doward, "Steve Bannon plans foundation to fuel far right in Europe," *The Guardian*, July 21, 2018.

new foundation, which Bannon has ominously titled “The Movement,” will offer polling, messaging, and data-based targeting services to the ultranationalist and alt-right parties and platforms that are trying to dismantle the European Union from within: from Geert Wilders’s Freedom Party in the Netherlands and Marine Le Pen’s National Rally (formerly National Front) in France, to The League in Italy and Alternative for Germany. Once again, a specter is haunting Europe—but this time, it’s the specter of what DiEM25 has termed the “Nationalist International.”<sup>4</sup>

Bannon’s new organization can tell us a lot about the meaning of “propaganda” today. Essentially, propaganda can be defined as a performance of power, meaning that propaganda aims to enact infrastructures—political, economic, mass-media, and military—that shape reality according to a specific set of interests. Thus propaganda does not just aim to send a message; it aims to construct reality as such. This is what Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, in their analysis of propaganda from the late eighties, defined as “manufacturing of consent”: the process of establishing a normative reality that conforms to specific interests of elite power.<sup>5</sup> In this light, we can say that the Nationalist International is currently manufacturing consent both politically and culturally. The established conservative liberal parties of today speak like the extreme right of the nineties, yet this is considered the “new normal” in comparison to the even more extreme standpoints of the extreme right of the extreme right. This is how propaganda works: what is considered as the norm is reestablished. A new reality is constructed through manufacturing consent, where what was once unacceptable is now standard.

There are two crucial components to propaganda. The first is control over infrastructure; the means through which society is organized. Propaganda succeeds when the performance of power operates—from the micro to the macro scale—to construct reality in a systematic and sustained way. The second component is control over collective narratives about where we come from, who we are, and who we will become—or in the case of the Nationalist International, who we are to become *once more*. Their narratives tend to take the shape of strange retro science fictions, referring to an aspirational past “greatness” that never existed in the first place. This narrative dimension of propaganda, however obscene, cannot be underestimated, as it mobilizes a collective imagination that legitimizes the construction of a new reality. This narrative and imaginative power of art are directly visible in the domain of film.

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<sup>4</sup> The term “Nationalist International” comes from an economic policy paper released by the Democracy in Europe 2025 movement. See DiEM25, DiEM25’s European New Deal: A Summary, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent* (Pantheon Books, 1988), named after the chapter “The Manufacture of Consent” in Walter Lippmann’s *Public Opinion* (1922).



*Architectural model of Biosphere 2, in Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective (2018), Jonas Staal.  
Photo: Nieuwe Beelden Makers. Produced by Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam.*

## **2. Bannon's Cyclical Time**

Steve Bannon himself is an example not only of a propagandist, but also a propaganda artist.<sup>6</sup> His work has focused on developing both the infrastructures of the Nationalist International—of which The Movement is the most recent example—and the narratives that provide purpose and unity to a growing alt-right alliance.<sup>7</sup>

Bannon's work in the early nineties for Goldman Sachs was foundational for his organizational work as a propagandist, as it provided him with the tools to develop various venture-capitalist and political enterprises. His role as the CEO of the Biosphere 2 project in Arizona from 1993 to 1995 revealed his obsession with closed-

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<sup>6</sup> See further: Jonas Staal, *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> The Movement is part of the second, "international" phase of Bannon's propaganda project. The first phase was the building of a powerful alt-right coalition in the United States; as David Neiwert writes, "the gradual coalescence of the alternative-universe worldviews of conspiracists, Patriots, white supremacists, Tea Partiers, and nativists occurred after the election of the first black president, in 2008. Fueled in no small part by racial animus toward Obama, the Internet and social media became the grounds on which this 'lethal union' could finally occur." David Neiwert, *Alt-America: The Rise of the Radical Right in the Age of Trump* (Verso, 2017), 231.

system technologies.<sup>8</sup> The largest ecosphere ever built on earth, Biosphere 2's original remit was to explore the possibilities for interplanetary colonization, but under Bannon's leadership it became a massive laboratory for researching the impacts of climate change (in sharp contrast to his later decisive role in convincing President Trump to pull out of the Paris Climate Agreement). In 2007, with funding from the ultraconservative Mercer family, Bannon cofounded Breitbart News—the self-declared “home of the alt-right”—and helped organize the anti-Obama Tea Party movement. Over time he has been instrumental in constructing, step by step, an expanding biosphere of the alt-right, with its own political, financial, and media wings—its own infrastructure.

A less discussed, albeit crucial, aspect of Bannon's oeuvre is his work as a propaganda filmmaker—as an instigator of narratives intended to unite the right. Between 2004 and 2018 he made ten documentary-style films that can be described as cultural and ideological precursors to what would later be called “Trumpism.” Already in his first paleoconservative film, *In the Face of Evil: Reagan's War in Word and Deed* (2004), Bannon's obsession with strong national leadership is on display. Here, Reagan is portrayed as the sole defender of a Christian nation engaged in a battle to the death with communist evil.<sup>9</sup> Bannon denounces the “appeasers”—diplomats and members of the peace movement—who strive for a negotiated resolution to the Cold War. The film ends with images of the attacks on the Twin Towers; out of the rising dust and smoke, the figure of Osama Bin Laden appears. Not only is Bannon's first film a plea for a twenty-first-century Reagan-like figure to emerge and fight “Islamic Terrorism” with similar conviction; it also lays out his philosophy of the cyclical return of evil.

For Bannon, communism, Nazism, and Islamic terrorism are all successive reincarnations of what he terms “The Beast.” Inspired by the fringe writings of William Strauss and Neil Howe, especially their book *The Fourth Turning* (1997), Bannon believes that time develops cyclically through four “turnings,” and that every fourth generation—every fourth turning—an epic civilizational war against evil must be waged.<sup>10</sup> This cyclical war provides the ground for a periodic rebirth of Bannon's core

<sup>8</sup> Ten years later Bannon would work on another type of biosphere, this time online. In 2005 he became involved in the Hong Kong-based company Internet Gaming Entertainment (IGE), which sold digital assets to players of the massive multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft*. These digital goods in the form of gold and weaponry, were obtained by paying Chinese workers extremely low wages to play the game in ongoing rotating shifts. This experience, according to Joshua Green, was critical to Bannon's later online mobilization of the alt-right during the Trump campaign. See Joshua Green, *Devil's Bargain: Steve Bannon, Donald Trump, and the Storming of the Presidency* (Penguin Press, 2017), 81–83.

<sup>9</sup> The film also embodies Bannon's ideal of a right-wing Hollywood, with Reagan representing both the creative side (as an actor) and the political side (as president and an anti-communist crusader).

<sup>10</sup> In the words of Strauss and Howe: “Turnings come in cycles of four. Each spans the length of a long human life, roughly eighty to a hundred years, a unit of time the ancients called the saeculum. Together, the four turnings of the saeculum comprise history's seasonal rhythm of growth, maturation, entropy, and destruction.” *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* (Broadway Books, 1997), 3.



ideological doctrine, which can best be summarized as “white Christian economic nationalism.”

Bannon uses this theory of the cyclical return of evil to explain social upheavals in the US over the past half-century. According to Bannon, the most recent fourth turning was the Second World War, out of which the United States emerged victorious and reborn, establishing a free market within its national borders and nurturing a devout and nuclear-family-centered culture. But this glorious new turning was quickly threatened by the next turning: the rise of flower power, feminism, and progressive social movements. This turning, says Bannon, introduced a godless individualism into American society and sowed the seeds for the culture of liberal-capitalist greed, with hippies growing up to become Wall Street sharks (this ahistorical blame game has been echoed by some leftists, such as Angela Nagle, who implies that left-wing discourse on transgression gave birth over time to the alt-right).<sup>11</sup> In Bannon’s vision, “cultural Marxists,” who also emerged from the tumult of the sixties and seventies, are perpetually conspiring to take over the government and collectivize the state from within.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Nagle’s main target is what she calls “Tumblr-liberalism,” which is preoccupied with “gender fluidity and providing a safe space to explore other concerns like mental ill-health, physical disability, race, cultural identity and ‘intersectionality’” (69). Nagle argues that these concerns have resulted in a doctrine of self-flagellation in which “the culture of suffering, weakness, and vulnerability has become central to contemporary liberal identity politics” (73). In Nagle’s view, Tumblr-liberalism not only gave rise to the alt-right; it also alienated the traditional working class. Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4Chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-Right* (Zero Books, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> The term “cultural Marxism” was originally associated with the Frankfurt School and described the radical critique of standardized and commodified mass culture. The term resonates with Nazi campaign against “cultural Bolshevism” and surfaced in far-right movements in the US from the early nineties onward. The fact that the protagonists of the Frankfurt School were Jewish has made this conspiracy theory particularly popular in alt-right circles, as it encompasses both anti-Semitic and anti-left tropes. See also Sven Lütticken, “Cultural Marxists Like Us,” *Afterall* 46 (Autumn-Winter): 67–75.



*Free distribution of Saul Alinsky's Rules for Radicals (1971), in Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective (2018), Jonas Staal. Photo: Nieuwe Beelden Makers. Produced by Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam.*

In his film *Occupy Unmasked* (2012), Bannon maps out an alleged left-wing conspiracy inspired by the writings of Jewish-American community organizer Saul Alinsky, especially his book *Rules for Radicals* (1971).<sup>13</sup> This conspiracy involves dark alliances between the Occupy movement, unions, and the Obama Administration. In the face of this plot, the champions of white Christian economic nationalism—from Reagan to Tea Party favorite Sarah Palin (about whom Bannon made a biopic, 2011's *The Undeclared*) to Trump and the Nationalist International today—are tasked with defending civilization. They must crush the cultural Marxists plotting to take power at universities and in the streets, the wealthy global elites who make up the “Party of Davos,” and the manifold incarnations of Islamic Terrorism, from Al-Qaeda to the Islamic State.

<sup>13</sup> Bannon is not the first to claim that Alinsky's work serves as a handbook for the radical left-wing takeover of government and society. This conspiracy theory first emerged during Bill Clinton's presidency, as First Lady Hillary Clinton had written her 1969 college thesis on Alinsky's work. The theory rests in part on an epigraph in the book that describes the fallen angel Lucifer as “the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom.” For right-wingers, this reveals not only the godless Marxist framework of Alinsky's book, but its ambition to seize control of the government. See Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals* (Vintage Books, 1989).

Bannon has described his particular brand of pamphleteering filmmaking as “kinetic cinema.”<sup>14</sup> He has also cited Leni Riefenstahl, Sergei Eisenstein, and Michael Moore as influences (the latter recently released the anti-Trump film *Fahrenheit 11/9*, around the same time that Bannon released his own pro-Trump film, *Trump@War*—both entering the propaganda fray in advance of the crucial midterm elections in the US).<sup>15</sup> Bannon’s “kinetic” aesthetic vocabulary consists of fast-paced sequences and editing, with commentary from various “experts” providing structure to the narrative. Viewers are bombarded with thematically organized stock footage and rousing music. Images of predatory animals such as sharks represent subterranean economic forces that can rupture reality at any given moment, while burning and scattered banknotes—which appear in nearly every one of Bannon’s films—exemplify the evaporation of spiritual values in a society nearing its fourth turning. “What I’ve tried to do is weaponize film,” Bannon has claimed.<sup>16</sup> His films construct a “master narrative” that legitimizes the authoritarian power of strong leaders who face down the never-ending threats of a multi-headed Beast.<sup>17</sup> This master narrative also defines who, in Bannon’s terrifying worldview, belongs with “us” and who belongs with “them”—who fights The Beast and who appeases or sides with it.



Flashbacks in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Season 1, Episode 5 (2017), Bruce Miller et al.

<sup>14</sup> John Patterson, “For haters only: watching Steve Bannon’s documentary films,” *The Guardian*, November 29, 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Wren, “What I Learned Binge-Watching Steve Bannon’s Documentaries,” *Politico*, December 2, 2016.

<sup>16</sup> Keith Koffler, *Bannon: Always the Rebel* (Regnery Publishing, 2017), 48.

<sup>17</sup> Terence McSweeney, *The “War on Terror” and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 10.

### 3. The Truth About Post-Truth

In Trumpism we have seen how Bannon's kinetic cinema transformed into a kinetic political campaign, twisting and turning historical narratives and symbols to the point that the very texture of what we once considered reality has been torn and reconfigured into something entirely different. When Trump was criticized for failing to denounce the alt-right in the wake of the "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, Bannon pointed the finger at the real danger: the "alt-left." In a similar vein, Geert Wilders's ideologue Martin Bosma has highlighted the bad conscience of the left, which in his reading accused his party of Nazism only to erase their own socialist stake in *National-Socialism*. Viktor Orbán, prime minister of Hungary and leader of the Hungarian Civic Alliance (Fidesz) party, has, like Bannon, perfected the "enemies outside/enemies within" narrative, warning through his state-owned media of a Muslim tsunami threatening his country's borders from without, while the pro-refugee propaganda of Jewish-Hungarian George Soros and his foundation threatens it from within.

Such narrative strategies are currently discussed as "fake news" and "alternative facts" that circulate within what is called the "post-truth era" of politics. In propaganda studies, these terms have a longer history. "Fake news" is also known as "flak," which has been defined as the covert dissemination of misinformation through proxy organizations in order to derail a dominant narrative and spread mistrust of mainstream institutions.<sup>18</sup> "Post-truth" is a more complex term; on one hand, we should obviously fight against misinformation, but on the other, we should also question whose truth we are supposed to "return" to and who exactly this truth—the normative idea of a pre-Trump society—serves.

The propaganda campaign of the Nationalist International has moved far beyond the reach of any fact-checking machinery. Its project is a cultural one, consisting of its own pantheon of leaders, of climate-denying and cyclical-time-promoting scientists, and of propaganda artists—like Bannon—who are capable of turning alt-reality into our new normal. Angela Nagle has argued that the Gramscians of the twenty-first century—those who make the long march through our cultural institutions in order to change politics through culture—are today on the alt-right rather than the left.<sup>19</sup> But by the time Nagle wrote this, the cultural long march might already have ended and turned into alt-governance. The costs of alt-right propaganda are already clear for us to see, ranging from the rise of systemic and institutional racism; the criminalization, incarceration, and murder at sea of refugees; the lawless killing of those declared to be "terrorists"; the separation of migrant children from their families; and the

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<sup>18</sup> Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, 26–28.

<sup>19</sup> Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, 40–53.

willingness on the part of these alt-governments to humiliate and bomb other countries.

Is there a reality that preexisted alt-reality which we would even want to return to in the first place? Bruce Miller's television series *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel, has recently been a hit among liberals, desperate for an end to the Trump era. The dystopian series takes place in the aftermath of a second American Civil War, when a new Christian-fundamentalist, hyper-patriarchal state called "Gilead" has risen to power. Women are not allowed to work, study, read, own property, or possess money. Instead, they are assigned to domestic work or, if declared "degenerates," sent off to brutal labor camps. The class of fertile "handmaids" plays a central role, as they are recruited to combat Gilead's infertility crises by breeding children for elite households through ritualized rape. The world of Gilead could be regarded as an example of Nationalist International retro science fiction, insofar as it imagines a mythological future-past in which modern technology goes hand in hand with symbols of traditionalist puritan culture.

A crucial component in the series are the flashbacks of its main characters, which recall the liberal-capitalist order that existed before the second American Civil War. The show's main protagonist, June, or "Offred" (read: "property of the house of Fred"), thinks back to jogging in a park, iPhone in hand, or stopping at Starbucks for a soy latte, or hanging out with her boyfriend at an über-gentrified hipster cafe. These flashbacks to a soulless consumerist world can be read as a warning to viewers: our political apathy could allow a Gileadian coup to take place. But in Miller's adaptation, which portrays Gilead's totalitarianism and its culture of rape, torture, and mutilation in brutal detail, these sepia-colored flashbacks to the capitalist-liberal order suddenly seem like the normal we long to return to.<sup>20</sup> A criminal mortgage system, the rise of trillion-dollar companies, global austerity and precarity: all of these suddenly seem like rather desirable problems compared to the retro-futurist horror of Gilead. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, we witness the propaganda cinema of the liberal-capitalist order staging a critique against growing authoritarianism, but only to reimpose its own normality and desirability—which, as we know, contributed substantially to the conditions that fueled the Nationalist International in the first place.<sup>21</sup>

When we speak of "post-truth," it is thus crucial to emphasize that there is not a "norm" to return to: there are, rather, various competing realities, past and present, each trying to impose its own set of values, beliefs, and behaviors. This is the essence

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<sup>20</sup> Of course, this does not mean that *The Handmaid's Tale*'s potent symbolism and original narrative cannot simultaneously operate to enable emancipatory politics. In fact, the red cloak and white hood worn by the handmaids in the book and TV series have shown up at protests in defense of women's reproductive autonomy and gender equality the world over.

<sup>21</sup> AySee also Mihnea Mircan and Jonas Staal, "Let's Take Back Control! Of Our Imagination," *Stedelijk Studies* 6 (Spring 2018).



of the propaganda struggle. Between alt-right propaganda and liberal-capitalist propaganda, there is admittedly a world—a reality—of difference, *but we should reject both of them*. What we need is not a return to some past reality, but a fundamental alternative to both the Nationalist International and the liberal-capitalist regime so that, in the words of Octavia Butler’s character Lauren Olamina, “Our new worlds will remake us as we remake them.”<sup>22</sup>



## WELCOME TO THE POST-TRUTH WORLD

*HyperNormalisation*, still (2016), dir. Adam Curtis.

#### 4. Totalitarian Historiographies

Filmmaker Adam Curtis—who has engaged in his own version of Nagle’s blame-the-right-on-the-left game<sup>23</sup>—has dedicated much of his work to examining the mechanisms of power and propaganda. In his most recent film, *HyperNormalisation* (2016), he traces the emergence of what he considers a “fake world”—or what Walter Lippmann in 1922 termed “pseudo-environments.”<sup>24</sup> This “fake world,” which Curtis claims has been under construction by “politicians, financiers, and technological utopians” since the 1980s, aims to bypass complex geopolitical processes and conflicts to instead construct a simple binary world that serves the interests of these powerful groups.<sup>25</sup> The key historical moment, in his view, was the rise of Reaganite and Thatcherite neoliberalism and the subsequent

<sup>22</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Talents* (Grand Central Publishing, 2007), 358.

<sup>23</sup> In his four-part documentary series *Century of the Self* (2002), Curtis suggested that an obsession with individualist “self-actualization” on the part of political progressives paved the way for the resurgence of the right.

<sup>24</sup> “In order to conduct a propaganda there must be some barrier between the public and the event. Access to the real environment must be limited, before anyone can create a pseudo-environment that he thinks wise or desirable.” Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (Transaction Publishers, 1998), 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Transcript from HyperNormalisation*.

shifting of power from elected politicians to corporations and the public relations industry. This neoliberal paradigm went on to transform civic resistance into a culture of individual expression and critique: collective action was abandoned and real power was placed solely in the hands of a new managerial class, which engineers our post-political world. To ensure that resistance remains futile, a range of “global super-villains” are contrived, from Gaddafi to Saddam Hussein; these perpetual threats ensure that populations remain preoccupied with Us-vs.-Them binaries.

If Bannon is a propaganda artist of the alt-right, and Miller’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* embodies liberal-capitalist propaganda, then Curtis is a propagandist of the defeatist conservative left. This becomes clear when he declares that our present time has “no vision for the future.”<sup>26</sup> Instead, he argues, the growth and popularization of cyberspace—the global technology environment—since the nineties has facilitated a cult of sovereign individualism: an online space of boundless post-political self-expression. These accumulated individual expressions, argues Curtis, do nothing but feed the algorithms of the Facebook State, strengthening the new global post-political managerialism.<sup>27</sup> For Curtis, the Occupy movement was a symptom of cyberspace culture: a leaderless “networked” movement that was more interested in self-expression and self-management than taking power.<sup>28</sup> Considering that a large portion of Occupy participants and sympathizers were people whose homes have been expropriated by the criminal mortgage system and whose shared precarity compelled them to gather in parks and public spaces to seek some form of desperate justice, the suggestion that it was not politicized people but algorithms that orchestrated the Occupy movement is deeply offensive.

Curtis’s defeatism reaches its true cynical depths when he declares that the Tahrir uprising in Egypt was a Facebook-led revolution. In his account, corporate social media brought people into the streets to dethrone dictator Hosni Mubarak; two years later Facebook brought these same people into streets, this time to welcome back the military regime after it had deposed the democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi. Cyberspace, in Curtis’s reasoning, has become a new realm of global managerialism: no matter how much we try to use it as a tool for our own ends, it is ultimately the new systems of algorithmic surveillance and management that benefit. But as Melissa Tandiwe Myambo has argued, this ideological practice of “misnaming the revolution” not only ignores the fact that in 2012 only about 8 percent of the

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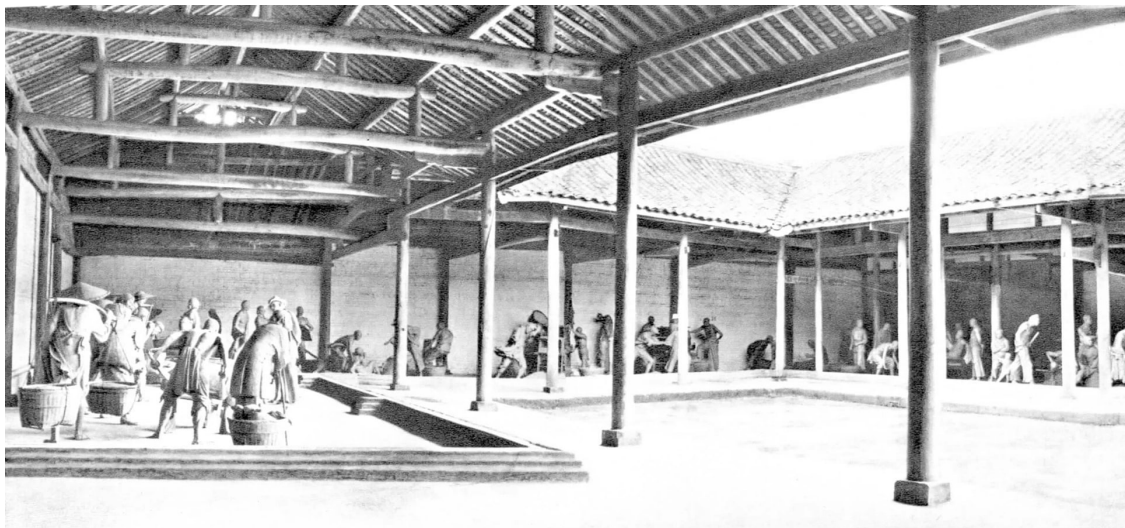
<sup>26</sup> *Transcript from HyperNormalisation.*

<sup>27</sup> A term borrowed from the work Facebook State (2016), developed by artist Manuel Beltrán and his students.

<sup>28</sup> A partially overlapping critique, but with more depth and greater fidelity to the potentialities of the Occupy movement, is Not an Alternative, “Counter-Power as Common Power: Beyond Horizontalism,” *Journal of Aesthetics & Protest* 9 (Summer 2014).

Egyptian population was on Facebook; it also engages in the neocolonial practice of “virtual occupation.”<sup>29</sup>

Here defeatist conservative left propaganda shows its ugly face. Curtis’s determination to understand and map systems of power becomes so obsessive that even when systems are not absolute—and they never really are—he will argue that they must be, in order to bolster his narration of an all-encompassing fake world. This echoes the method employed by art historian Igor Golomstock in his major work *Totalitarian Art* (1990), where he argues that the art made in Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union, fascist Italy, and Maoist China is all part of one and the same totalitarian machinery.<sup>30</sup> While we can indeed witness glorified images of grand dictators, heroic soldiers, and militant peasants throughout the art produced under these regimes, major differences are present just the same, both ideologically and aesthetically.



Ye Yushan et al., *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1965), Dayi County, Sichuan. Image: Ed., *Rent Collection Courtyard: Sculptures*.

For example, Mao Zedong’s art theory, as laid out in his “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art” (1942), promoted cooperative artistic practice between art professionals and peasant communities, with the aim of their mutual education.<sup>31</sup> The famous group of sculptures *Rent Collection Courtyard* (1965) resulted from such a process of co-creation and revolutionized various aspects of traditional sculpture. It

<sup>29</sup> Melissa Tandiwe Myambo, “(Mis)naming the Revolution,” *Montréal Review*, January 2012

<sup>30</sup> Golomstock goes so far as to credit totalitarianism as an author in and of itself: “Totalitarianism itself carried out the historian’s task of sifting through sources, using the scalpel of the concept of two cultures (Lenin’s thesis calling for revolutionaries to take from each national culture only its democratic and socialist elements –JS), of the struggle between racial and class elements, in order to split apart the living body of national tradition.” Igor Golomstock, *Totalitarian Art* (Overlook Press, 1990), 155.

<sup>31</sup> “Prior to the task of educating the workers, peasants, and soldiers, there is the task of learning from them.” Mao Tse-Tung, “Talks at the Yanan Forum on Literature and Art,” in *New World Academy Reader #1: Towards a People’s Culture*, eds. Jose Maria Sison and Jonas Staal (BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, 2013), 51.

rejected the pedestal as well as durable materials such as marble. Instead, the figures were created from clay and placed directly on the ground so that villagers could walk by them and scorn and spit on the sculptural representations of the landlords that used to rule over them.<sup>32</sup> These specific characteristics of art production and presentation—co-creation, removal of the pedestal, and theatrical usage—were absent in Stalinist socialist realist sculpture; in the latter, monumental pedestal-facilitated figures made of solid materials, towering far above the crowd, sought to embody a sense of near eternity. So rather than describing totalitarian art, Golomstock's work represents a form of *totalizing historiography* that overlooks difference in order to find comfort and a sense of desperate control in a closed-system theory.

In the case of Curtis, his totalizing narrations are even more tragic: the Occupy movement and the uprisings gathered under the problematic term "Arab Spring," along with the manifold popular movements that have emerged around the world since, are not inventions of social media but rather the living embodied truth that there are visions and practices of alternative futures and world-making in our present. Hundreds of thousands of people did not take Tahrir Square because Facebook told them to. They put their bodies on the line not because they were controlled by a post-political managerial elite, but because they collectively reclaimed power in the face of violence, fear, pain, and death. In these rare moments of "performative assembly," as philosopher Judith Butler has termed it, in these gatherings of extremely precarious peoples, the possibility of another kind of power is enacted.<sup>33</sup> We might also say that in these assemblist events, the possibility of another kind of propaganda is enacted as well—another way of telling stories and proposing narratives of where we come from, who we are, and who we can *still become*.<sup>34</sup>

## 5. Towards an Emancipatory Propaganda Art

Our contemporary propaganda struggle is shaped by various performances of power, each with its own infrastructures and cultural narratives that attempt to construct reality according to its own interests. In the examples that I have discussed—the

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<sup>32</sup> The claim that this particular case of Maoist art production can be conflated with Stalinist art production is strongly refuted by art historian Christof Büttner, who argues that "it is a work of art that is so convincing that many interpret it to be the simple, unimaginative depiction of a real event and held it in disdain for exactly that reason. That was all the more true when Western art historians labeled it Socialist Realism and, even worse, stigmatized it as propaganda art for the Cultural Revolution." Christof Büttner, "The Transformations of a Work of Art—Rent Collection Courtyard, 1965–2009," in *Art for the Millions*, eds. Esther Schlicht and Max Hollein (Hirmer Verlag, 2009), 38.

<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (Harvard University Press, 2018). See also Jonas Staal, "Assemblism," *e-flux journal* 80 (March 2017).

<sup>34</sup> This is fundamentally different from the propaganda of the Nationalist International discussed earlier, which tells us who we will become once more.

propaganda art of the Nationalist International, of liberal capitalism, and of the defeatist left—we can see that each particular structure of power performs differently as art. In other words, we can see that there is a specific, changing relationship between power and form.

Recent years have demonstrated that propaganda can set into motion vast geopolitical processes, from the Brexit vote and the election of Trump—both of which took place amidst a haze of misinformation—to more brutish examples, like the rise of the authoritarian regimes of Erdoğan, Modi, and Duterte. These events have shown that responding to the propaganda of the Nationalist International with mere “facts” is no solution, because facts need narratives to make them effective and affective. While it is crucial to develop a collective “propaganda literacy,” understanding propaganda does not stop propaganda.

To oppose the various propagandas discussed above, we will need infrastructures and narratives that mobilize the imagination to construct a different world. To achieve this, we will need an emancipatory propaganda and an emancipatory propaganda art. There is no prior reality to which we should strive to return; there will only be the realities that we will author collectively ourselves.

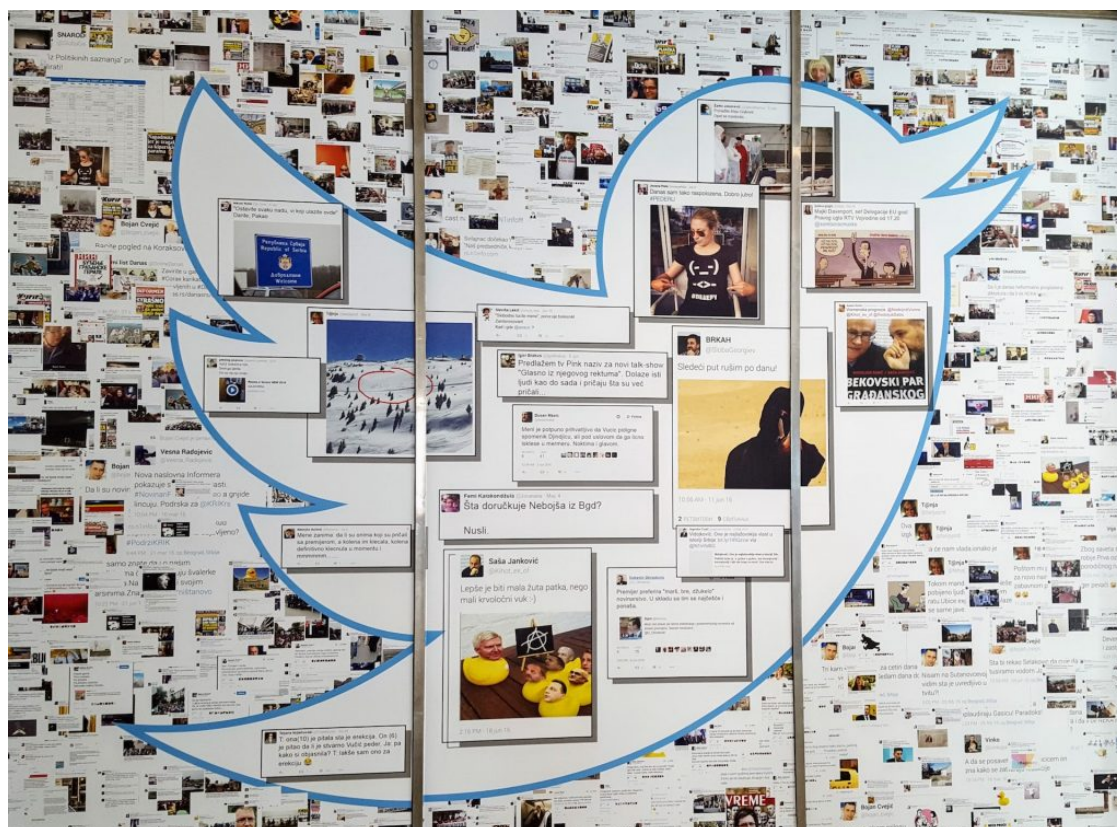


**Jonas Staal** is a visual artist whose work deals with the relation between art, propaganda, and democracy. He is the founder of the artistic and political organization *New World Summit* (2012–ongoing) and the campaign *New Unions* (2016–ongoing). With BAK, basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht, he co-founded the *New World Academy* (2013–16), and with Florian Malzacher he is currently directing the utopian training camp *Training for the Future* (2018–ongoing) at the Ruhrtriennale in Germany. Exhibition-projects include *Art of the Stateless State* (Moderna Galerija, Ljubljana, 2015), *After Europe* (State of Concept, Athens, 2016) and *Museum as Parliament* (with the Democratic Federation of North Syria, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2018). Recent publications and catalogs include *Nosso Lar, Brasília* (Jap Sam Books, 2014), *Stateless Democracy* (With co-editors Dilar Dirik and Renée In der Maur, BAK, 2015) and *Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective* (Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2018). His book *To Make a World: Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* is forthcoming from the MIT Press in 2019. Staal completed his PhD research *Propaganda Art from the 20th to the 21st Century* (2012–2018) at the PhDArts program of Leiden University, the Netherlands.

## ***The Uncensored Censors: How We Say ‘Appropriation’ Now?***

*Jelena Vesić*

The citizens say, ‘We are oppressed’, but the ruler says, ‘No, I am oppressed’. For that, we have his word and a Wall of Tweets as proof.<sup>1</sup>



The previous decade was marked by disruptive changes in politics and media, introduced by the perhaps not entirely adequately named ‘alt-right’. In such a short time, the ability of alt-right actors to manipulate (social) media grew to receive a somewhat mythical perception. The facts are there: the world’s largest economy and biggest nuclear power is seemingly run by the runaway @realDonaldTrump Twitter account; Britain trying (and failing) to leave the EU after a campaign full of blatant misinformation and which no one is taking responsible for; and European politics resembling an endless reality show of neo-fascists vs neo-Nazis, as it has done so for some time now. And this is only the north-west corner of the world.

This text examines an attempt by the alt-right to bring their techniques and technologies to ‘old’ media, such as the exhibition. It is about the travelling display titled *Uncensored Lies*, organised in Serbia in 2016 by the then prime-ministerial, now

<sup>1</sup> This text was first published in *L’Internationale Online*, e-book “Living with Ghosts: Legacies of Colonialism and Fascism” (ed. Nick Aikens, Jyoti Mistry and Corina Oprea), 2019.

presidential press service of the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). To make things even more interesting, the progressive indeed regressive<sup>2</sup> political entity behind the exhibition was constructed and promoted just before the 2010s – actually, precisely in the decisive 2008 – and a bit before critical analysis invented ‘post-truth’ and ‘alt-facts’ as significations to assist thinking about our current situation, characterised by the (global) rise of right-wing sentiment. This would be yet another trace of the certain global (dark) avant-garde practices to historically emerge from the region of the Western Balkans, and especially from the post-Yugoslav space.

Considering how the Party entered politics, the SNS is not exactly a proper alt-right; it is not one of the new players in the political arena of Europe and America after 2008, who act as reality show contestants. This is because its original brand, the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), invented the surreal reality show approach towards politics to begin with: their ideology and political style stems from the 1990s, having its origin in the language and the appearance of the nationalist politicians just post the Yugoslav wars.<sup>3</sup> They pioneered the now well-known rhetoric about the ‘persistence and suffering of Serbian people’ and ‘the unjust pressure from abroad’; they have also heralded the division of society to ‘real Serbs’ (what was toned down a bit to ‘honest patriots’ after they sovereignly seized power) and ‘foreign traitors’ (whoever happens to disagree with the Leader). There is not enough space to even list all the reasons (or ‘conspiracy theories’) produced to explain why their politics in reality brings nothing but fear, depression and despair, despite their ‘best’ efforts and intentions.

The Party’s Uncensored Lies exhibition was an ‘alt-facts-post-truth’ reaction of the right wing in power to the public warnings from various actors of civil society and the public sector, including independent and non-regime journalists in Serbia as well as different foreign commentators. All these actors frequently report on the problems of

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<sup>2</sup> The name of the Party introduces the strategy of ‘inverse appropriation’ of the very term of ‘progressive’. There is nothing progressive about the politics of a party that champions the rigid and conservative views on politics, culture and economy, mixed with contemporary contempt towards anything intellectual or emancipatory in character. It is the Party which finally managed to unite most politics and public service within an elaborate chain of systemic corruption. Their name is precisely the carrier of the ideology that was retroactively titled ‘post-truth’, a special instance of a mass disorientation strategy where words frequently – but to make matters worse, not always – mean more or less the opposite of what people could expect them to mean. As said, ‘progressive’ is just another word that ‘followed the fate of words like avant-garde, revolution, modernism, and many others that used to be the building blocks of so-called grand narratives of (mainly) the previous century’. Jelena Vesić and Vladimir Jerić Vlidi, ‘1984: The Adventures of the Alternative’, in *The Long 1980s: Constellations of Art, Politics and Identity; A Collection of Microhistories*, Valiz Books / L’Internationale, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> It is hard to find much difference between the politics of the Italian Northern League, Austrian People’s Party or the Hungarian Fidesz, placing the SNS/SPP into line with the ‘new right’ characteristic of post-1989 Europe. Due to their disruptive approach towards the media, it is also hard to tell them apart from the more contemporary phenomena of ‘alt-right’, such as UKIP or AfD or the Dutch Party for Freedom. This is why ‘alt’ in ‘alt-right’ might be a bit misleading. By observing the development of SNS/SPP, we witness the rise of the contemporary right-wing agenda brought to logical and expected consequences; there is nothing unexpected or ‘alternative’ in such development.

censorship, the harsh polarisation of media content, and the growing media disorientation and proliferation of 'fake news'. At the same time, it is generally held that whatever connects with the Party is best not discussed in public, since everything is now connected with the Party; journalists need to be careful even with commenting on the weather or the current TV shows. The Journalists' Association writes, 'because journalists fear losing their jobs, they agree to abandon professional values. They engage in self-censorship and know which topics to cover in order to avoid conflict with authorities or editorial policies. A number of important topics are never on the agenda, while topics that serve the interests of various centers of power dominate.'<sup>4</sup>



On behalf of the 'authors of the exhibition' (signed as 'Information Service of the Serbian Progressive Party'), Vladanka Malović, a member of the 'curatorial team' who was the most prominent in communications with the media, states: 'The core task of the media who act as though synchronized by quoting each other was to present [the president] Aleksandar Vučić to the local and foreign public as a brutal censor, who cancels TV shows, closes internet portals, replaces editors and journalists by decree and forbids publishing of [inconvenient] material.' The purpose of the exhibition was 'to show that there is no media censorship in Serbia'. This curatorial thesis was supported by a documentary media collage of texts, tweets, TV shows excerpts and caricatures, in which '[then PM, now president] Vučić and other SNS [SPP] party

<sup>4</sup> According to the 'Media Sustainability Index' report as published by IREX over the past seventeen years, Serbia received its worst rankings yet in 2018 and in all the fields monitored. According to the report, the only worse ranked countries are Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. See IREX Media Sustainability Index, 2018: <https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/pdf/media-sustainability-index-europe-eurasia-2018-serbia.pdf>.



leaders are referred to in a negative context'.<sup>5</sup> The overarching theme of the exhibited material was President Vučić himself, and how harshly and unjustly he is attacked by all the 'free media' – much of which turned out to be personal social media accounts.

The Information Service of the Serbian Progressive Party used the design of a contemporary art exhibition, or more precisely, a surface imitation of the contemporary curatorial research approach, with piles of arty packed, remixed and aestheticised documentary material spread all over the space. They also provided all sorts of statistics about their meticulous work. We learn that the exhibition presents 2,523 examples out of exactly 6,732 pieces of negative media content about Vučić and SNS, published over the two years prior to the exhibition; the fact that the Party demonstrated the ability to track each and every piece of information and every single comment exchanged about their leaders was symptomatic of a certain pathology, but also acted as additional pressure towards anyone considering publicising a critical attitude. The message was clear: 'We watch you everywhere, all the time. We run the National Security Service now.'

The Uncensored Lies exhibition was probably the first and only occasion to bring many of its visitors (including myself) to the Progres Gallery – the name of the gallery incidentally relates to the name of the Party. This gallery is otherwise rarely open to contemporary art and experimental curatorial strategies.<sup>6</sup> It is rather a place for the nouveau riche, established in the city centre a few decades ago to mark the end of socialist institutionalism. It usually shows truly conservative art, such as figurative painting with mythical, religious, heroic and nationalist symbolism; the kind of painting that fits well with all the marble and stucco, the brass handles and the spirit of petit monumentality provided by the space.

The display of 'media content' covered the period between 2014 and 2016. The vast majority of the content came almost exclusively from the independent media. It included approximately 2,500 cover pages, investigative reports, news columns, social media and comment pieces exposed in the form of a large collage. Much of this material was displayed on movable, didactic 'blackboards' and as huge rolls of printed paper hanging from the ceiling and falling to the gallery floor, suggesting that there is so much more to read, but mercifully leaving enough space for visitors to inspect the content. Frequently represented were the pages and headlines from Danas daily, NIN, Vreme and Newsweek, and, television-wise, the N1 cable channel. The well-known caricatures by Marko Somborac, Dušan Petričić and Predrag Koraksić Corax were also

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<sup>5</sup> Maja Đurić, 'Necenzurisane laži' – Izložba SNS o medijskoj sceni', N1, 18 July 2016, <http://rs.n1info.com/Vesti/a178134/Necenzurisane-lazi-izlozba-SNS.html>. Unless otherwise stated, all translations by the author.

<sup>6</sup> The modest and incomplete archive of Progres Gallery clearly displays the absence of any concept or curatorial policy, except for contingency, populism and propaganda – this is a rental outlet and not an artistic venue of any significance. See <https://progres.rs/index.php/galerija>.



significantly present along with quotes (private and public, official and unofficial) by various media editors, EU politicians, representatives of independent institutions and simply well-known public personalities speaking about censorship in Serbian media. A special position within the exhibition was given to the 'wall of tweets'. This Twitter Wall was not some giant screen, however: the tweets by journalists, representatives of independent institutions or apparently just citizens expressing criticism towards the actual government were printed and displayed in ridiculously blown-up formats.

The scarce video material on show, collected from one critical source which broadcast on cable TV and not online, still managed to fill the whole room with sound. It was a montage, a mash-up of footage from the satirical TV show 24 minutes with Zoran Kesić, presenting probably each and every time the host mentioned the holy name of the 'beloved leader'. The entire space echoed with 'Vučić ... Vučiću ... Vučića ...', as if dozens of channels criticise the prime minister day and night, while he tries so hard to improve the political situation and living standards for Serbia and its people. Such 'post-production art' or arty designed manipulated media enhanced the construed propagandistic meaning of the exhibition: the disembodied voice of the evil 'free journalist' – surely, someone paid from abroad – calls the name of Vučić, haunting him and his supporters like a rowdy but impotent Ghost of Jealousy.

What was excluded from this news overview? It was all but impossible to find any critical (rendered as 'treacherous') media examples from the TV stations with national coverage, the dozen daily newspapers with the largest circulations, or media directly or indirectly financed by public money. In such media, as they ironically write on *pescanik.net*, 'Vučić remains to be the unquestionable and beloved ruler, a global leader, the job creator, protector and hero, the policeman, an European with a strong Serbian identity, always a trustworthy and credible man'.<sup>7</sup>

How do we call the situation in which the citizens say, 'We are oppressed', but the ruler says 'No, I am oppressed'? For the citizens of Serbia complying to this inverse image of truth, the guilt for the never-ending separation of Serbia from the Arcadian EU should not be directed to the actual government, but precisely to 'the traitors', those who only complain and send such an ugly image of Serbia to the world. And for that, they have the word of their ruler and a Wall of Tweets as proof.

The exhibition of *Uncensored Lies* was unmistakably part of the propaganda machine that still rules Serbia today. It was a form of appropriation and reactionary *détournement* of the very research apparatus that is the exhibition for the sake of political branding: it turns the original 'claims of truth' into their opposite. The visitors were invited to see the show and to 'decide for themselves' if what they saw implies the presence of media censorship by the ruling party, or *au contraire*, that the media

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<sup>7</sup> Sofija Mandić, 'Veliki lapsus', *Peščanik*, 23 July 2016, <https://pescanik.net/veliki-lapsus>.

space in Serbia is not only free and democratic, but saturated with (unjust) criticism towards the government. The passive-aggressive message 'come and see with your own eyes' and 'decide for yourself', as if the exhibition concept is a neutral terrain, was compulsively repeated by all instances of party communication and by the exhibition curators.

In such framing, the claim that there is 'not enough freedom' in public media is replaced by the claim that there is 'too much freedom'. This freedom is apparently being misused to attack the personal and political affairs of one man, President Vučić, who is otherwise doing so much for Serbia and its people. And because of such (naive?) insisting on the act of witnessing, it was simply too tempting not to draw analogies with one of the most appalling acts of exhibitionism in the twentieth century (or, at least before everything became levelled out), Entartete Kunst,<sup>8</sup> organised in Munich in 1936 by the Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels and the painter and politician Adolf Ziegler.<sup>9</sup>

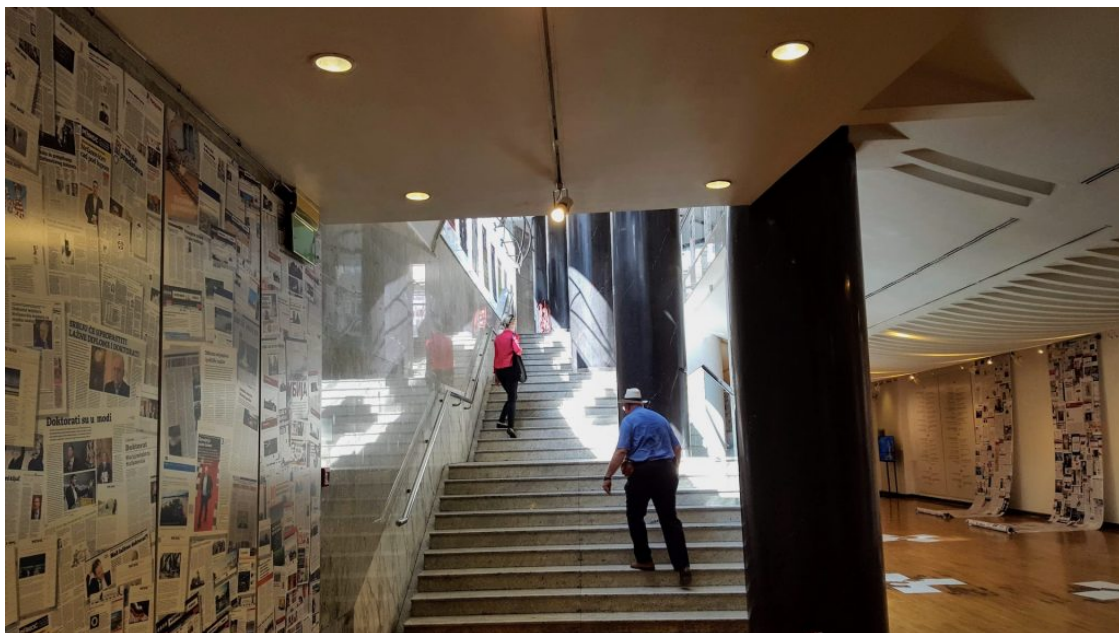
The exhibited material in both exhibitions was appropriated, or better said 'annexed' from its authors and (re)composed in an exhibitionary complex (as per Tony Bennett) that certainly none of the authors would have chosen for themselves. In the contemporary culture of samples, remixes, copy-pastes, drags and drops and mash-ups, appropriation has become a common, everyday phenomenon. What is inherent to our contemporary understanding of appropriation is the fact that it always recontextualises whatever it borrows from the 'original'. Uncensored Lies, perhaps deliberately or not – hard to say which is the 'lesser evil' here – doesn't show any trace of awareness of this fact.

You, reader, are free to draw your own conclusion from the above.

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<sup>8</sup> Shown during the Third Reich as a travelling exhibition, Entartete Kunst was a presentation of modern and avant-garde artworks from the first three decades of the twentieth century. It carried the task of proving to the 'common people' that modern art is in essence one sick, anti-German and Judeo-Bolshevism affair. While the Nazis actually confiscated most modern art to enhance their private collections or to sell it to boost their military project, Entertete Kunst served the purpose to shock the population and to make people mock and laugh at the exposed materials.

<sup>9</sup> 'We shouldn't be too seduced by the parallels between Goebbel's endeavour and the achievement of the Information Service of SPP. The 1937 exhibition dealt with art and with establishing the cultural hegemony, while "our" rendition is just an uninventively conducted marketing expo created by teams from "creative agencies"; those who turned conceptual art to kitsch a long time ago and ever since the Joseph Kosuth's slogan "Art as idea as idea" was turned into various Saatchi-like "idea campuses", which the young advertising mags drew the very source of dematerialised art from to use as serial material in the post-Fordist economy.' Proposal for the exhibit at the exhibition Uncensored Lies), Peščanik, 24/07/2016, <https://pescanik.net/predlog-za-eksponat-na-izlozbi-necenzurisane-lazi>.



*The "Uncensored Lies" exhibition, Progress Gallery, Belgrade, June 2016. Photo/video: Vlidi*

## ***From Seekers of Truth to Masters of Power: Televised Stories in a Post-Truth World***

*Nükhet Sirman and Feyza Akınerdem*

*Dear readers,*

*We are very sorry for being unable to offer you the English version of the text “From Seekers of Truth to Masters of Power: Televised Stories in a Post-Truth World” by Nükhet Sirman and Feyza Akınerdem.*

*The text was originally published in South Atlantic Quarterly, Volume 118, Issue 1, January 2019, by Duke University Press. We agreed with the authors about translating the text to Turkish and republishing it in both languages in Red Thread many months ago. Late in 2019, both the authors and the Red Thread were informed by the South Atlantic Quarterly that they refuse to give the permission for republishing the English version, and that we can link to their page instead. Despite the authors being unaware of such restrictions, the SAQ was not willing to make any exceptions from the rule, so we use this opportunity to once again warn the fellow authors to read the contracts they are being offered in details (and especially the so-called “small print”).*

*We, of course, refuse to send you to the page where you can rent the article for 48 hours for the price of \$15.*

*We do encourage you to find and read this article by other means available; for instance you can find someone with a free access to the Duke University Press.*

*This unpleasant experience for the authors, for the Red Thread and first of all for you the readers, resembles a distant echo of the similar situations from the late 1990s / early 2000s. At least, we thought, the grand copyright debate is over. But we should have known better, as nothing is forever. We may dedicate one of the forthcoming issues to the returning problematics of intellectual property, and especially copyright, and offer the analysis of the situation.*

*Once again we express our gratitude to Feyza Akınerdem & Nükhet Sirman for the great article and for trying all what they could to make it accessible in this situation.*

*Happy reading!*

*Red Thread Journal Editorial Board*

## ***Law and Memory: Walking, Sumud, and Other Ways of Resisting The Occupation of Palestine***

*Interview with Raja Shehadeh by Meltem Ahiska and Saygun Gökarıksel, January 19, 2019*

**Meltem Ahiska:** Let us start with the general context. How would you describe the occupation in Palestine, particularly in relation to the rule of law?

**Raja Shehadeh:** The occupation of Palestine was far beyond an occupation. The peculiarity of the situation is that Israel has a foundation myth, which is not so unusual for many nations, but in the case of Israel, the foundation myth is that they came to a land that belonged to them, that they had lived in, and then left for two thousand years or so, and they are now back. All other people who had lived there before the Israelis' return were considered temporary and they had no real rights. Israel's official policy is based on the denial that there were people in the land whom they forced out. After the forced expulsion in 1948 the Israeli legislators employed the law to claim rights over the property of the expelled Palestinians.

We must distinguish between 1948 and 1967. In 1948, they used the law to say that all the lands Palestinians left would be called *absentee property*. The absentee property is going to be administered by the Israelis until there is a resolution of the conflict. Then, they realized that they had to make another change, so they made another law, which they called the Development Law, which allowed the Israeli custodian to 'develop' these lands, supposedly held in trust, on behalf of the absentees. This mechanism enabled them to use these properties as their own. Israel became a country, where 96% of the land was owned by the state. This 'public land' could only be leased to Israeli Jews. Thus, the state acquired a lot of power in administering the land.. Most of the agricultural land which had belonged to Palestinian farmers was given over to the Israeli Jewish farmers to farm. As a result, the farmers became a very strong lobby. This makes a crucial difference with respect to the question of the allocation of water, as the farmers used their lobbying power to keep the fees they pay for water at a minimum. The farmers, for example, plant water-thirsty plants such as citrus, which means that whenever Israel exports an orange or a grapefruit it is exporting water. This doesn't make sense in a land that is deprived of water, but they cannot make a change, because the lobby is too strong. One can say much more about this as far as the 1948 areas are concerned, but it was always the case that Israel was careful in the use of law and made a consistent development. They were not arbitrary. They always built one law over the other, and if they wanted to arrive at a certain result, they made sure that it was expressed in law. This was a big gain for Israel, because it meant that corruption was less. There was a consistent



narrative, let's say. Although the use of the word *narrative* here is very loose. But there was a narrative that they could always refer to and explain how they went from one stage to the next, and how they were being careful about the law and the rights of others. Needless to say that these laws that they enacted were not necessarily consistent with international law.

So, that was for 1948. In 1967, the situation was entirely different, because the Palestinians stayed. There were some who left, and some who were forced out, but the majority stayed. In the West Bank alone there were some 370 inhabited villages. Each village had land around it and many of them were agricultural. In our limited imagination, we thought that Israel would not be able to get away with taking over the land as they did in 1948, because we're here. We thought: how could they possibly get away with taking the land and allocating it only for the Jewish settlements? But that is exactly what they did, and the process by which they did it is quite amazing. It involves many changes that occurred in the law – it's always in the law. The reason why we at Al-Haq, the human rights organization, could follow the situation and write about it and explain it was because Israel didn't do things surreptitiously. They always expressed the change in military orders.

There are now over 1770 military orders and each military order tells exactly what they wanted to do. The Palestinians outside, the PLO always considered that this is a temporary thing. They thought: when we come back, when we liberate the land, we will do away with these military orders. That is why when we were searching and scrutinizing those orders as a human rights organization in the occupied places, they thought our work was not really very important, they didn't take it seriously. But let me just tell you that I wrote a small book called *The West Bank and the Rule of Law* in 1980 in which I described at some length the military orders that affected property, the right of movement, education, and so many aspects of life under occupation. It was a simple thing. I said that the military orders were very difficult to get, because Israel was printing them and giving them over, but not compiling them. If you were a newcomer to the profession and wanted to get these laws, you couldn't. They would issue a military order on a sheet, two sheets and put them in the lawyer's chamber. Some of the lawyers would take them, some would use them as draft paper. If you didn't get the chance to get a compilation, you couldn't buy it anywhere. So, we said many of these laws are, in effect, secret, because they are not available.

I came back from my education in law in 1979, and my father wanted me to do something. He said, "We have all these military orders piled up in single sheets somewhere in the office. Why don't you put them together and organize them according to subject?" This experience opened my eyes. I realized that Israel was busy amending local laws – all aspects of the law. For example, there were many orders on parks and public places. "Why are they interested in green areas?" I thought. There

were orders on every aspect of life in the West Bank. Not all of them were being implemented, but they were there, evidently for future use. You couldn't escape if you went on trial for violating one order. They would just say, "You violated this order." You can't say, "I didn't know, or I didn't see it." So that small publication which was published jointly by Al-Haq and the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva, drew a lot of attention at that time, because people did not know what was happening. It was, effectively, a secret legislation, because it was not being published properly. The fact that it was secret legislation alarmed so many people. Israel was compared to most oppressive countries, and it was a shock to Israel at that time which was believed to be running a benevolent occupation, all for the benefit of the local people...

**Saygun Gökariksel:** How did the Israeli state authorities respond to this claim about the secret legislation? How did they legally justify such secrecy?

**Raja Shehadeh:** They denied that it was secret. There was a left wing journalist who said, "It's impossible that Israel is doing it in secret. You are not telling the truth." I said, "Okay. If you can find me the laws and buy them for me, I would be very grateful." He went looking and looking, but could not find them. They were not available. What Israel did after that in 1982 was to publish these in journals. Now we have all the publications. But it's not as though they were without a justification. In other words, they always found a way to justify each and every one of these laws by international law. Of course, they interpreted international law in their own faulty manner, but they always managed to find a justification. After *The West Bank and the Rule of Law* was published, the Israeli Ministry of Justice commissioned a study to answer our study and claimed that the Hague convention, the regulations of 1907 say that you can change the local law, but that has to be for the benefit of the people. The Israeli Ministry said that they did it for the benefit of the people. They published in 1981 (under the rubric of Israel National Section of the International Commission of Jurists), a book called *The Rule of Law in the Areas Administered by Israel*, in which they took our study chapter by chapter and showed the Israeli counter argument. Of course, in the law studies and in the law departments in the Hebrew University, they only taught the Israeli version. They all came to believe that Israel was doing it legally and according to international law, and there was no problem at all.

**Saygun Gökariksel:** The Israeli state then really took seriously the issue of legality, which was more than a mere window-dressing...

**Raja Shehadeh:** Yes. But it was only formally legal in contradiction to the international law of occupation. But things have changed now, with the right-wing government and with the settlers becoming much more aggressive. They no longer want to be bothered with claims of legality under the law. Because now, it's the Bible. They say it's our land according to Biblical text and that for them is enough. They don't want to deal with law, legality, or international law. In fact, the maps in the school portray the West Bank and Gaza and eastern Jerusalem as part of Israel. So, there has been a change.

**Meltem Ahiska:** In your well known and awarded book *Palestinian Walks* (2007) you introduce a very impressive and novel perspective. Not only a perspective but also an experience that claims another kind of knowledge. You walk around and beyond the law. You say that you give your own account of the land "where Israeli planners place Jewish settlements on hilltops and plan them such that they can only see other settlements while strategically dominating the valleys in which most Palestinian villages are located. It is not unusual to find the names of Arab villages on road signs deleted with black paint by over-active settlers" (p.16). So can we say that your practice of walking is a way of showing the status of law as part of occupation?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Well, there are two different things. Part of the alienation that they're trying to impose is to make the Palestinians feel like foreigners in their own land. This is done by saying that so many areas, open areas are out of reach to Palestinians, even for walking in them. Familiarity with the land through walking on it has become very difficult. In *Palestinian Walks*, I was walking in the land in order to familiarize myself and familiarize others with the land and to show that it is, after all, our land. But I also describe some legal cases. For example, in one of the walks, I describe the Albina case in which I was involved. The claim was that Albina's land was public land, when, in fact, it was private land. It has to be mentioned here that only a third of all the land in the West Bank had been properly registered. In the case of the Albina land, the registration process had proceeded to the point when there was a final survey map of the land; the land was given a number and proper boundary, but the final step of registering it in the land registry had not taken place. Yet everything else had happened. So, it was quite clear that the land was private, and we gave enough evidence to the court to prove this. At the end of the case the judge, who happened to be a classmate of my uncle, was very embarrassed for having to do this. He said, "This land has been successfully proven to be private land." *Private land*. So, you would think we won the case. But then, he went on to say, "There is a military order which says that if the Custodian of Public Land makes a transaction for the land in good faith, then the transaction stays, and is proper." I had anticipated this and said,

“No transaction could have been made in good faith, because all the records are open to this custodian.” Of course, when you’re doing a transaction, you check the records. And he must have checked the records. So, he couldn’t possibly have done the transaction in good faith, believing that the land was public land.

Well, there are settlements, which are established on Palestinian land using the procedures which Israel has set up. They are contrary to the international law, but are ‘legal’ under the law promulgated by the Israeli military government. Israel calls them “legal settlements” according to the Israeli law. But there are settlements, which have been done without following any of this process, because the settlers decided they wanted this piece of land and they put themselves there and created *de facto, fait accompli*. These settlements are considered illegal, even under Israeli law. Now they have a problem with the settlements, because the government is a right-wing government and a settler-dominated government, and they cannot evict these settlers. They now use this law, this military order regarding transactions done in ‘good faith’ to legalize the illegal settlements.

**Meltem Ahiska:** If we come back to walking... You said it is familiarizing yourself and others that this land is ours, so it is, in a way, objecting to this law, which appropriates the land in so-called legal ways.

**Raja Shehadeh:** Yes. Objecting to the whole process through which Israel is trying to alienate people from their land and prevent them from becoming familiar with it. This is also achieved through land use planning or zoning of land, which I spoke about a bit yesterday.<sup>1</sup> There were about 200,000 Palestinians left in Israel after 1948. The villages as well as the only city where Palestinians remained –Nazareth – had land around them, for their expansion and for agriculture. Most of this land was confiscated by Israel through zoning schemes which allocated the land to nearby Israeli villages, cities and Kibbutzim while confining the villages to the built up area. So, the villages, until this day, would have land that used to belong to them, not far from the village but onto which they cannot expand because that land has been taken away. You can readily distinguish the Palestinian villages in Israel, because they look so crowded and confined to a small area. They’re all building on top of each other, while the Israeli-Jewish areas have open areas like how a little city or village must be. The same phenomenon is in the West Bank. All the villages in the West Bank and the cities have been zoned by Israeli planning schemes that became law before the Oslo Accords were signed, and which cannot now be altered by the Palestinian Authority, so that they are confined within small areas. The areas in between them are taken over in

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<sup>1</sup> See the lecture here: <http://hrantdinkmemoriallecture.boun.edu.tr/index.php/en/keynotes/keynote/12>

one way or another and made into either areas for the expansion of the Jewish settlements or for parks or open areas that you cannot build in. Actually, you cannot even walk in these areas because they are in what is known as Area C and you need permit to even walk in them. But, of course, we do not listen to that and we do it anyway. So, there is a vision. That's the point. There is a vision they are implementing slowly to reach a situation where the majority of the inhabitants of the West Bank will be Jewish-Israeli people, and the Palestinians are confined in their areas and they eventually will find it impossible to stay in these areas and they will leave.

**Meltem Ahiska:** The law or the legal language defines rights and they are formulated in a standardized way but of course always having a particular impact within a particular regime as your discussion on the rule of law and occupation of land shows. But then, there are certain wishes, desires as well as complaints in people's everyday life, which are not incorporated into legal language. You say in *Where the Line is Drawn: Crossing Boundaries in Occupied Palestine* (2017) "with the start of the intifada in 1987 more blockades and checkpoints appeared on the roads. New roads were constructed to ensure speedy passage between the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Israel. It was not until the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993 that Israel began drawing a new border between Israel and the West Bank that prevented access from Palestinian cities and villages while allowing the unobstructed flow of traffic between the West Bank Jewish settlements and Israel. The general permit issued in 1967 for Palestinians to move to and from Israel was replaced by individual permits, allowing permits only to those Palestinians whom Israel deemed favourable. *Once again we were prevented from visiting the sea*" (p.45). I find this last sentence about visiting the sea important. I guess that it never appears in legal terminology that there is a right to visit the sea. So, how do you make this connection between law and everyday life?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Maybe I should first make it clear that until the early 1990s, the whole of greater Palestine, greater Israel was open so you could drive anywhere. Drive to Gaza, drive to Jaffa, drive anywhere. And then, in the early 1990s, they began to put restrictions. And by 2000, the West Bank became sealed. People in the West Bank can no longer drive or even just go to visit the sea in Gaza or in the Israeli parts. You need a permit to cross, but you cannot use your car with the West Bank license plate. So, what is violated is the right to roam, that is, the *freedom of movement*. Which is also restricted on the West Bank through many checkpoints that are placed between Palestinian villages and cities. Ilana Hammerman, an Israeli woman who was a publisher and then retired decided to violate this restriction. She thought "Why are the Israelis depriving the Palestinians of the right to see the sea?" which is exactly



your point. And what she did was to take in her car young children and their mothers to the sea without asking for the permit, just smuggling them. And then, she went further, and she said, “Not only am I going to do this, I’m going to declare I’m doing it, and declare that I’m violating the law because it’s a law that should be violated.”<sup>2</sup>

**Saygun Gökarıksel:** Are there any divisions or conflicts within the legal government of the occupation in Israel, for instance, with respect to the courts and among the legal officials?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Yes, there are.

**Saygun Gökarıksel:** What do these conflicts say about the role of law in Israeli state’s occupation? Would they offer any important possibilities to challenge the occupation?

**Raja Shehadeh:** In the 1980s, I went around on speaking tours, criticizing the system. The answer was always that, “Yes, there might be excesses, but in Israel... It’s a country of the rule of law. Where the rule of law dominates, and it’s a democracy, and you have the option of going to the High Court of Justice in Israel. Now, the High Court of Justice in Israel is interesting, because the High Court is an administrative court. So, you can challenge administrative decisions in the High Court. The Ministry of Defense is an Israeli ministry and therefore, its decisions and orders regarding, for instance, the occupied territories, can be challenged in the Israeli High Court of Justice. Only eastern Jerusalem was annexed to Israel. Israeli law applies there. But the rest of the West Bank has not been annexed (with the exception of the Latrun Salient) and as such Israel is not sovereign there.<sup>3</sup> This was an example of how special Israeli occupation is because it allows occupied people to challenge the decisions of the occupier, which never happened in the past in other cases. In our organization, Al-Haq, we wondered whether we should use this opportunity and finally decided, “Why not?” In the 1980s and 1990s and even now, there were plenty of appeals to the High Court... But we never got justice in the High Court, because the court always said that they would never put themselves in place of the security/military forces to decide. There were, of course, secret things that the security forces told the High Court and which we did not know. In brief, basically, for the so-called ‘security reasons’, the High Court did not really play the role that we hoped it would play.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-in-some-cases-israeli-law-must-be-broken-1.5338866>

<sup>3</sup> A recent article by the veteran Israeli Journalist Gideon Levi sheds light on Meir Shamgar, the Israeli High Court Judge, who was instrumental in setting up the system that gave legitimacy to the Occupation:

<https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/.premium-forefather-of-the-administered-territories-1.8009353>

However, it was still important to appeal to the High Court and the military was not happy about the appeals. For example, the security forces used to arrest students right before the final exams in order to make them fail their final exams. I would go to the military's legal advisor and say, "You know, you're doing this, and this is, for many reasons, illegal. If you don't revoke the order, I'll go to the High Court." That threat often worked, because the military authorities didn't like to go to the High Court in such obvious cases when it would be difficult for the court to justify their decision. In a sense, the High Court played a little bit of that critical role. But, at the end of the day, in terms of really changing or challenging the policies and decisions, the High Court has not been of much use and ended up giving legitimacy to the occupation. For example, the settlements, as we know, are illegal and they never ruled that the settlements are illegal. They said, "The settlers are also part of the local population." International law, as you know, gives certain rights to the local population. When the court considered the Israeli settlers as local population the court, in effect, turned international law on its head! The legal structure looks very good on the surface. Israel had a cunning system. For many years, the people who criticized Israel, were told, "But there is the High Court. Palestinians can always resort to the High Court, which has very good judges." These judges have taught at very prestigious institutions such as Yale and Harvard and their decisions are respected there despite their terrible record on human rights.

At the same time, there are some important Israeli organizations that are unhappy about what has been happening. They realized that by encouraging the settlements, the Israeli authorities plant the seeds for future catastrophe, because if the settlers are there and if there isn't any land for the Palestinians to establish a state, you then perpetuate the struggle forever. Until 1988, Al-Haq and another organization, the Palestinian Center for Human Rights, in the occupied territories were the only organizations that were doing human rights work about the occupation. The Israelis had the Civil Rights Association, but it didn't have in its mandate to look into the civil rights of non-Israelis in the Occupied Territories. Thus, they avoided any interventions, contraventions of law that would take place in the occupied territories. In 1988, the organization called *B'Tselem*, (the Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories), was established to look into the human rights violations in the occupied territories. Over time, *B'Tselem* has become more important and radical and have taken up issues of military orders and legality. They have done tremendous work and explained how the land has been taken from Palestinians as well reports and interventions regarding other major human rights violations.

**Meltem Ahiska:** What you have been saying is very interesting that there's a very complex structure of law in Israel which is well-designed. But can we say that people

have a different conception of the land? Not just as a property, not just as something that is regulated by law, but a place of memories, a place of belonging? Can we say that the land is not, for them, just something that can be mapped but that is attached to emotions, attached to memories, to experiences...?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Absolutely! And, in *The Third Way* (1982), I wrote about this. I called the Israeli attitude to land pornographic. It's not the land itself that they love but it's false memories and conceptions of it that attracts them. And this need brings forth a lot of writing about the land in which they write that this land is ours, making arguments for it, finding stories, finding references in the Bible. All of this is written down, is represented and expressed. Whereas the Palestinians who feel direct attachment to the land don't feel that need to elaborate and explain their attachment in order to make it real. Theirs is a direct relationship. However, when the settlements started and I knew that there were plans for building so many more of them and I knew about the Road Plan, because I've seen the Planning Scheme for the entire network of roads in the West Bank published in 1984, we have challenged it in the court. And I knew what the Road Plan would lead to, and this was 1984, a long time ago. Many Palestinians were saying, "Why are you continuing to talk about the settlements? They are nothing. They are tiny spots here and there, and they're not going to affect us." They failed to appreciate the danger they posed. Now they do. For example, for a land that is dry, the springs are very important. Springs become places where you visit and where you use the water. Many of the sites of springs are now prohibited for Palestinians to visit. And so, there is already a generation of people of Palestinians who have never visited the spring next to their village, because every time they try to go there, they are prevented by the settlers... This means that there's a new generation who has no direct relationship to the land surrounding them. They are alienated. The other thing that happened was that the Palestinians were mainly agricultural people. But when the occupation began, Israel being an industrialized country offered Palestinians work opportunities in Israel. Large numbers of people left the land and went to work in Israel, getting a much better wage. And then, having left the land, the Israelis came and said, "This land is abandoned, because it hasn't been planted. And, if it's not planted for a number of ten years, then it resorts to being public land." So, they took the land. I have somebody who comes to help every once in a while for heavy things in the garden and he's from the village. I noticed that he doesn't have any idea about cultivation. And he's from the village! That would never have been the case in the past. He's now in his forties, but as a wage earner, he has grown up without any direct relationship to the land. He has no idea about cultivation. So, now the people can no longer deny that the settlements take over the land. It's no longer a theoretical thing that you have to convince the people of,

because they experience it directly.

**Meltem Ahiska:** In the epilogue of *Palestinian Walks*, I was very affected by your encounters with these two young Palestinian boys who did not really understand your walking, your connection to the land and the beauty of it, as you're saying there. Why do you think they are like that, this young generation?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Well, the fact is that walking, as a leisure activity, is not something that is completely natural to people in Palestine. There are places in the world... I don't know about how it is in Turkey, but for example, Germany has a long tradition of walking the land. And that is something that is very familiar and very natural to people. In Palestine, there wasn't that activity. During the Intifada, especially in the first Intifada, and the second Intifada, many of the young men who were activists ran for shelter to the hills to hide from the soldiers. To them, there's a function for the hills, which is not a function of beauty and enjoyment of nature. And most people in the past were farmers. One woman who leads weekly walk now, has an aunt in the agricultural village of Battir who was a farmer in village, and she told us, "For my aunt, the last thing she wants to do on her day off is walking, because every day she's on the land and she doesn't want to spend another day on the land." To walk for leisure used to be seen as crazy, but now this is slowly changing. Actually, *Palestinian Walks* helped a little bit in opening people's eyes to the beauty of the land. We have a walking group that does a weekly walk and other groups have emerged, as well. About 15 or 20 years ago, when we were seen walking in the hills, people would think either that we are Israelis, or foreigners, or crazy people. And once, we were walking, Penny<sup>4</sup> and I and a friend of ours, it started raining. We then hailed a car that was on the road. And the car driver said, "What are you doing?" We said, "We were taking a walk in the hills." He thought that either we were lying or were crazy. He couldn't accept it at all. How would anybody walk when it was possibly going to rain? So, ultimately, I said, "No, we were looking at a land and considered to buy it." He said, "Oh, I see!" Only in that way he could relate to our walking. People now accept it a little more. You can find more and more people walking on the outskirts of Ramallah, partly because in the past most people lived in houses with gardens. And you could sit out in the sun... Now, most people live in flats. Due to the scarcity of land, people are building higher and higher apartment blocks. They find themselves, especially in the summer, so confined in these flats that they have to find a way to be outside.

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<sup>4</sup> Penny Johnson is the wife of Raja Shehadeh. She is also among the editors of the *Jerusalem Quarterly* and the author of *Companions in Conflict, Animals in Occupied Territories* (2018).

**Saygun Gökarıksel:** There seems to be something very provocative and at the same time regenerative about this practice of walking in this landscape under the conditions of occupation...

**Raja Shehadeh:** Regenerative is the right word.

**Saygun Gökarıksel:** Walking is about the space of creating and recreating memory; about the possibility of another archive through this walking as opposed to the legal construction or hyper-legality of this and that order. You connect those fragmented locations together. But it is also about time. You take time, as it takes time to walk like you do. And in a sense, this walking challenges the occupation's regime of time that is manifest in one's experience of getting stuck at the checkpoints or by the fences, and helps imagine a different lifeworld. Could you reflect on how this walking experience affects the sense of time and history?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Well, you've said it very well, and it is right that when you are walking, you are in a sense, challenging all these attempts at confining you, at defining your territory, defining your life, defining your time, because you are there, in a one to one relationship to nature, which nobody can take away from you. Even though they are trying to convince you that the relationship is circumscribed and defined in a particular way by these orders and by these limitations and by these restrictions, you are defeating all of that and defeating also the fact that the occupation tries to determine your time, and steal time from you by forcing you to wait for hours at the checkpoints. You are challenging all of that, because you are making your own time, your own space and your own relationship to nature, which reminds you that, after all, human beings can put all these restrictions, can construct all of these structures, but they're not, ultimately, real. Because what is real is your own relationship to nature and this a one-to-one relationship that you define for yourself that goes beyond all of these other structures that are imposed. When you are not walking, you are confined. Every time you go one way, you find "Stop," because of a military order or restriction.

**Saygun Gökarıksel:** Walking is indeed a familiar practice in social protests and movements across the world. There are, for instance, the famous marches from Selma to Montgomery organized by the Civil Rights Movement activists in 1965 in the U.S. against racism. There is the Salt March led by Mahatma Gandhi in colonial India in 1930 against the British salt monopoly. How did you come to the idea of walking? What is your inspiration?



**Raja Shehadeh:** As I was growing up, our house was next to the hills and the hills were empty, so I would walk down these hills, but it wasn't something that we did as a family, to go on walks. As a family we went sometimes on picnics, but my father was not a lover of nature. He was too much of a political activist, and didn't really care for nature. And the schools had this habit of taking us once a year, at most twice a year, on a field trip to somewhere. That was it. When I came back to Palestine after my law studies, I felt confined by the occupation, by work, and by the nature of the life there. So, I started taking walks and found that it worked very well for me. Then, I interested a few other friends and more friends and so, started taking more walks. We lived in a house where we could just leave the house and be in the hills, immediately. We knew the tracks, which were done by shepherds and every village was connected to other villages by these tracks. When you become familiar with them, you can follow them and go for a one-hour walk, two-hour walk, five-hour walk, eight-hour walk on these tracks in the hills, which were empty and free of danger. We didn't have wild animals or any danger of any sort. So, our mind was totally concentrated on enjoying nature without any restrictions and apprehensions. I started on these walks in 1978 and went on and on. I always wanted to write about the land and the walks. I never thought there would be such an interest that I could publish a book on those walks. But in 2006, my publisher who is also a walker, said, "Why don't you write about walking?" It was fantastic. I could combine my interest in writing and walking. *Palestinian Walks* starts with a walk that was over 25 years ago. It shows how the land has changed since my walk back in 1979. Another walk starts in 1981 and ends in a recent date, so, each walk follows a trip in space and time, and has a different theme, yet, it's an actual walk that I did take. Now, you cannot follow all of them. Some of them you can still follow, but some you cannot follow because the land has been taken over by the buildings and other changes or by the Israeli settlements. I realized that the land was vanishing, and I'm not a photographer. So, I could only preserve it in words. At least people in the future would read about it and realize what it was like. And the book did that. It reminded many people of how beautiful the land is and opened people's eyes to what they hadn't been aware of.

**Meltem Ahiska:** So, what about this concept of staying and endurance that I am very curious to hear about?

**Raja Shehadeh:** In my very first book, *The Third Way*, I wrote about *sumud* which is endurance, perseverance, holding on. And the reason I wrote about it is because I realized that what we are up against is an attempt by Israel to force us out, but not immediately. By making life so difficult that we will, on our own, decide to leave. So,

our opposition to this is to stay put and make ourselves entrenched in the land. Persevering. The book was a series of pieces on *sumud*, on the various aspects that *sumud* takes. Of course, I was writing against a trend at that time, because the trend was that it's going to be violence and force, and not passive resistance like *sumud*. It's going to be resisting the occupation by military means and then, we will win and go back to Palestine, and everything will be alright. So, my *sumud* concept was not very popular. I think it has become much more popular now, because people have come to realize that it is really going to be through *sumud*. Actually, in the whole of Israel, the greater Israel there is now almost a parity in population between the Arabs and the Jews. That is because of *sumud*, of staying put.

**Meltem Ahiska:** Is that also a local term that people use in everyday life?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Yes.

**Meltem Ahiska:** People also use it in a political way?

**Raja Shehadeh:** There was also a political use. For example, there were funds for *sumud* provided largely by Jordan, which were allocated to help people stay on the land.

**Meltem Ahiska:** I was curious about *sumud* because this resonates with some of the discussions we have in Turkey about whether we want to leave the country or stay. Many people who feel under stress for different reasons because of the political situation are discussing whether they want to leave or stay. So it is relevant, I think, in a different way of course. But endurance has a dual meaning. When we say in Turkish, *tahammül*... Endurance. It has also negative meanings. That you can endure the difficulties. You can absorb them without resisting. There is the ideology that women have this capacity to endure, they stay or must stay silent about difficulties, violence, etc. So, these two different meanings of endurance. What do you want to say about that?

**Raja Shehadeh:** It's very complicated... because you can drive somebody into so much pressure that at the end, they would say: "I'm going to stay put and I'm going to endure, *tahammül*." It becomes a challenge. There are so many examples, but one that I wrote many times about is Sabri Garaib. He lived in a village called Beit Ijza where he had a large plot of land that he cultivated. Then a settlement was built nearby, and they wanted to take his land. He struggled to hold on to his land for his

entire life until he died. It was legendary. Totally legendary. At the end of the day, he managed to stay in the house and have a little bit of land around it. The settlement was built all around him. So, he was given a corridor to enter his house with cameras and high walls topped by barbed wire. Yet hard as his life became, he refused to leave his house. They put dogs around him and made life so difficult. But, he endured to the point that he said, "I'm not going to give up." For him, it became a life purpose. So, there is that challenge where it gives meaning to your life, and you cannot think of giving it up.

There are other cases where people say, "Well, life is short and I have to live my life. By persevering, I'm just wasting my life. Why waste my life? Why not seek other opportunities?" So they left. The big difference was that until the 1993 Oslo Accords, people believed that their *sumud* was going to lead to something, to making progress against the occupation. And then came the Oslo Accords. It was a bad agreement and the Palestinian authority was established. They were trying to excuse their acceptance of the terms that the Israelis had imposed, and that's because they were desperate to get into an agreement that would ensure the PLO's return to the Occupied Territories. The reason why they were desperate, was mainly because they were worried that Hamas was taking over and becoming more prominent. So, they wanted to get back into the territories at any cost. People felt that they have given up so many difficult years when they endured and were willing to endure, and now, it has come to nothing. With this agreement, they'll have to endure more. So many people, friends of mine also, decided to end their endurance and leave. They went to Australia, they went to wherever they could, and decided to start a new life.

Whether you endure or not is also related to how much you think you can make progress and help the situation around you. That is if you believe there is hope. And, at the same time, you also realize that if the good people who can help society leave, then they are not only betraying the cause, they are betraying their society, because they are the people who can make a difference, who can make a change, who can support others around them, because they have better means. So, it's a difficult decision to make. You can be selfish and say, "The situation is not allowing me to flourish. It's not allowing me to progress in my career, in my life conditions. I'm having great difficulty making ends meet. So, why endure it? Who for? What for?" And that is the question: *What for?* If you feel that 'what for' is for supporting others or for a greater cause, then your endurance and *sumud* becomes enhancing and you feel that your life is more important than just for yourself.

**Meltem Ahiska:** So, it has a strong political meaning.

**Raja Shehadeh:** Of course! Of course, very political.

**Saygun Gökarıksel:** A collective meaning. Having that enhancement of yourself for the collective...

**Raja Shehadeh:** Yes. Which is a way of surpassing yourself. Surpassing the fact that you're an individual, a lonely person on your own. For example, during the first Intifada, life was difficult, because there were a lot of restrictions. We couldn't go out at night or go to school and teach. The schools were all closed. It was difficult at every level. Yet, when people now think and speak about the first Intifada, they say it was the best time of their life. It's because it was a time that we collectively worked together, opposed, and dreamed about making a new life. The enemy brought us closer together, so it was a wonderful experience. Nobody now regrets the fact that for those seven or eight years, we lost out on pleasure or advancing in our careers. Nobody would say that.

**Meltem Ahiska:** Now, it brings to my mind whether there's also endurance in diaspora. Let us say you have left, you are in exile, but you are staying put in terms of struggling in some way for the greater cause.

**Raja Shehadeh:** I think, yes, the diaspora is important, and they have done tremendous work as well. But, very often, I think that the more important part is inside, because you're not just practicing *sumud* passively. You are practicing *sumud* by building institutions, by influencing others in their thinking, by helping others think it through, by finding ways to resist that you cannot do outside. So, I think that the more important work is inside. Of course, it's not so easy outside, either. But not everybody can leave... When people decide not to leave, even though they can leave, that's the most effective. That's making a choice of *not* leaving rather than staying.

**Saygun Gökarıksel:** In your lecture, you discussed in detail a number of Israeli state's violations of the international law. A straightforward question: How does the Israeli state get away with all the violations?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Very simple. Because the United States and the rest of the world, which could pressure Israel by all kinds of means, through economic sanctions, for example, would not challenge Israel, because they are supporting it diplomatically, economically and politically. Israel is strong. For example, the head of the *B'Tselem* went to the United Nations, to the human rights commission to testify against Israel

and to show that what they are doing is contradicting the international law and asking them to take a decision against Israel. Of course, Israel was furious. They said, “This is treason.” But there were already several Security Council decisions taken against Israel in the past. The latest one was when United States abstained from vetoing a UN decision against the Israeli settlements at the end of Obama’s term. This means there is now a decision against the settlements in the Security Council resolution. But it doesn’t get implemented, because Israel is still very strong politically and diplomatically. And all the countries including Turkey support Israel, while rhetorically speaking against the actions of Israel and taking only symbolic actions to oppose it. When it comes down to business, they have the greatest business relations with Israel. As long as this situation continues, the likelihood that Israel would change is null.

**Meltem Ahiska:** What is the situation of the political movement in Palestine, now?

**Raja Shehadeh:** Terrible ! Terrible, terrible ! Palestinians have no power whatsoever and have lost. Lost, entirely. But the *sumud* still persists, because people are still there and Israel wants to throw all of them out. They cannot do that however, because they don’t have the necessary means; there’s no place to put those people. The natural place would be Jordan, but Jordan would be destabilized and Britain and the United States would not agree to this action.

**Saygun Gökarıksel:** What do you think are the possibilities of countering the Israeli state’s actions? In your lecture, you have offered a very important observation that the rights struggles are *indeed* indivisible and interdependent. The violation of one right actually puts in jeopardy other rights, just as struggles around rights are connected across space beyond national borders even though they are rarely described as such, especially at this moment in history.

**Raja Shehadeh:** There are solidarity groups all over the world who are supporting Palestinians and the Palestinian cause. This is a very important thing because it makes people realize that, after all, we are not alone. There are others who are following and caring and doing everything they can, even when it is sometimes at the cost of losing a job in a university. For example, there is the case of Angela Davis who lost an



award.<sup>5</sup> Solidarity is a very important means to keep the spirit alive and to change the world.

**Meltem Ahiska:** And memories are also important for solidarity. So, what I understand from what you say, it is beyond victory and defeat, which are the hegemonic binary terms. It is beyond that, it is the endurance, the struggle...

**Raja Shehadeh:** Yes. I think if people looked at it just in these binary terms, then they would lose faith very quickly, because then you are pinning your hopes on victory, very close victory, tomorrow, after tomorrow... It's not going to happen. So, you have to have a longer-term view. And I also think, the question is about preserving your humanity and dignity. You do that by enduring and taking a longer-term view of things. Their attempt is to compromise you, to compromise your humanity. And by refusing that, you're winning. So, you are re-defining what it is to win. And that's very important, I think.

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<sup>5</sup> Angela Davis, an activist, academic and writer, who was a speaker at the Hrant Dink Memorial Lecture series in Boğaziçi University in 2015, was invited by the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute in her hometown Birmingham, Alabama in 2019, to take the Fred L. Shuttlesworth Award for Human Rights. But the award was revoked at the last minute. As she later learned the reason for this was because of her long-term support of justice for Palestine. Angela Davis's response to this was: "I have devoted much of my own activism to international solidarity and, specifically, to linking struggles in other parts of the world to U.S. grassroots campaigns against police violence, the prison industrial complex, and racism more broadly."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/08/us/angela-davis-israel-civil-rights-institute.html>

**Raja Shehadeh** is a writer and a lawyer who founded the pioneering Palestinian human rights organisation Al-Haq, an affiliate of the International Commission of Jurists. Shehadeh is the author of several books on international law, human rights and the Middle East including *Occupiers Law* and *From Occupation to Interim Accords*. His literary works include: *Strangers in the House*; *Occupation Diaries*; *A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle*; *Language of War, Language of Peace: Palestine, Israel and the Search for Justice*; *Where the Line is Drawn: Crossing Boundaries in Occupied Palestine*; and *Palestinian Walks*, which won the 2008 Orwell Prize, Britain's pre-eminent award for political writing. His latest book is *Going Home: A Walk Through Fifty Years of Occupation*. He has written for *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *Granta*, and other publications. He lives in Ramallah, Palestine.

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## ***The Psychology of Paranoid Irony***

Ana Teixeira Pinto

Beginning with the figure of Roko's Basilisk, a hypothetical vengeful future AI that emerged in online forums, Ana Teixeira Pinto launches her analysis of the psychological state engendered by online interaction that has led to a seemingly paradoxical set of views: totally paranoid yet ironically detached.<sup>1</sup> Feelings of disenfranchisement coupled with the seeming omnipotence afforded by the internet, she suggests, have found symbolic form in apocalyptic fantasies. These delusions of quasi-magical and hyperstitious nature have coalesced into an ideology that is as religious as it is logical, despite its proponents' insistence on the primacy of deductive reason. Faced with a series of double binds, she says, certain demographics will end up promoting "violence and sociopathy" in response to their own powerlessness, despite the information age's promise of unbounded individual power.

### **Roko's Wager**

On July 23, 2010, a user named Roko posted a meandering speculation on the online forum LessWrong, "a community blog devoted to refining the art of human rationality." The blog is run from the Bay Area by Eliezer Yudkowsky, the co-founder of the Machine Intelligence Research Institute (MIRI). In his post, Roko hypothesizes that a coming AI might wish to retroactively punish the humans who did not knowingly contribute to its initial development. Roko's hypothetical AI became known as the Basilisk.<sup>2</sup>

Though Roko's stream of thought sounds unhinged, a great number of commentators claimed that his fears may be sustained by Bayesian probability— attempted quantification of the reasonable expectation (belief) that an event might occur, as opposed to the actual frequency or propensity for it to occur.<sup>3</sup> Yet no one among these commentators elaborates on how, exactly, Bayes's methods might apply to Roko's vengeful AI. There is no prior manifestation or historical record of any kind of

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<sup>1</sup> This article was originally published in Transmediale.

Transmediale, issue1, Face Value (ed. Elvia Wilk), 2018, Berlin.  
transmediale.de/journal.

<sup>2</sup> It is unclear how Roko's malevolent AI came to be identified with a Basilisk — a legendary, crested, snake-like being, able to poison those unfortunate enough to catch his gaze. The heraldic beast, which dates back to ancient Greece, has been featured in Harry Potter and in a recent manga series, but the Basilisk is also an age-old anti-Semitic trope, which appears in Martin Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies* (1543). Given that forms of neoreactionary ideology and Michael Anissimov's ethnonationalist *MoreRight* blog emerged out of LessWrong, it is not a stretch to imply this connotation is intended.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Bayes, from whose work Bayesian probability derives, was an English mathematician and theologian (1701–1761).

AI, malevolent or otherwise, that supports such an inference. In the absence of reliable data, any expectation is wholly speculative or arbitrary.

What's more, Roko tells us, the Basilisk is omniscient (it knows categorically whether or not you have read Roko's post) and omnipotent (it is able to resurrect your mind via digital simulation and then proceed to torture you into eternity). Its theorization gestures toward a mathematical substantiation of the Abrahamic covenant: whoever fails to do the work of the Lord will be met with eternal punishment.

Given that the Basilisk has some of the same attributes of the god of monotheistic religions, Roko's conjecture treads remarkably close to Pascal's Wager. Like Roko, Blaise Pascal proposed that humans bet their lives on the choice of whether or not to believe in God, under inauspicious conditions: a) it's impossible to determine whether God exists, and b) it's impossible to opt out of the wager.<sup>4</sup>

Pascal did not intend the wager to be a proof of God's existence. Rather he argued that believing in God must be treated as a pragmatic decision: even if God's existence is unlikely, the potential harm (everlasting torment) befalling those who have no faith is so vast as to make it infinitely more rational to believe in God than to be an atheist. The wager need not succeed as a tool of persuasion in order to serve as a tool of assessment, but, mathematical value notwithstanding, Pascal's thought experiment also points to something less tangible: the inequivalence between reason and sanity.

Though it might seem counterintuitive, there is an elective affinity between probability assessment and psychosis: reason can be unreasonable. As George E. Marcus notes, paranoid ideation has an ambiguous relation to rationality and logic and is often "mistaken for or identified with the latter."<sup>5, 6</sup> From this perspective, paranoia is not the opposite of reason, but rather an exacerbated version of it. Roko's wager,<sup>7</sup> to paraphrase Evelyn Fox Keller, "suffers not from a lack of logic but from unreality."<sup>8</sup> Paranoia, one could say, is a style of interpretation, predicated on "subjective need—in particular the need to defend against the pervasive sense of threat to one's own autonomy."<sup>9</sup> This leads to the personification of AI as Oedipal beast (the Basilisk) and of code as the male seed. Those who seek mathematical proof of the prediction's likelihood are missing the point. The content of Roko's thought experiment is symbolic, not scientific: it speaks through cipher and allegory.

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<sup>4</sup> *Pensées* ("Thoughts") is a collection of fragments on theology and philosophy from 1670 written by the philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, in which he outlines his famous wager.

<sup>5</sup> This affinity is also tied to the question of putative parallel worlds, beyond our own, shared by psychotic delusion and probability assessment.

<sup>6</sup> George E. Marcus, *Paranoia within Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (Yale University Press, 1985), 121–22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

## Paranoid Irony

According to imageboard lore, the overlap between the Egyptian deity Kek and the cartoon illustration of Pepe the Frog is tied to a series of numerical coincidences. These perceived omens led users to suspect paranormal intervention in the 2016 US election: meme magic had willed Trump's candidacy into existence—the perfect illustration of the concept of hyperstition as the making of fiction into fact. The distinction between a movement and a conspiracy is a moot point here. Meme magic has a mythopoetic function: it engenders a cultic milieu populated by “revelatory experiences” through a syncretic collection of Egyptology, cyber-obscurantism, hypersigils, and gematria.<sup>10</sup>

Like the Basilisk, the “Cult of Kek” turns logic into torture porn—a style of ideation embraced faux-sincerely by those who, in internet vernacular, are known as “shitposters.” As a noncommittal mode of expression, irony is imbricated in the rapid rise of the far-right movement, which has adopted the moniker “alt-right,” and its idiosyncratic fusion of arcane mysteries and supposed common sense. It's irony is intended to unmask, expose, reveal. Speculative folly is a form of currency: trust no one; nothing is what it seems; the unbelievable alone can be believed.

Often used to express skepticism, irony has long been perceived as a tool of subversion, the locus of a “questioning attitude and critical stance,” which is therefore aligned with political progressiveness.<sup>11</sup> But by tacitly implying the opposite of what is literally said, irony also allows one to sustain a position of moral or political ambivalence. When used by the alt-right, this opens up a toxic conduit between a non-conformist ethos, countercultural pop, armchair esoterica, and outright racism. The shitposter's “standard online shtick,” as Angela Nagle put it, is to flirt with fascist tropes and racist idioms ironically, in order “to dodge responsibility for his or her choices, aesthetic and otherwise.”<sup>12</sup>

But there seems to be a thin line between shitposting and spiritual seekership. Plausible deniability notwithstanding, a somewhat paradoxical mix of fantasies of

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<sup>10</sup> A sigil is a pictorial signature or sign typically used to summon forth a demon; a hypersigil is the narrative visualization of an intention or wish. Hyperstition is a term coined by Nick Land to describe the action of hyperstitional objects (for instance, sigils, hypersigils or memes) as producers of reality, via emotional investment (belief or hype). If enough people believe something is real, it becomes de facto real. Gematria is a system that assigns numerical values to words or names. A vulgar variant of gematria is used in far-right codes, for instance, “88” stands for “Heil Hitler.”

<sup>11</sup> Irony can indeed allow one to express distrust or dissent under taxing or outright perilous circumstances that preclude other forms of political expression. But irony can also mask complicity. Above all, irony is a defense mechanism. Psychoanalytically speaking, irony minimizes its object while maximizing the subject's self-contentment and sense of superiority.

<sup>12</sup> See Angela Nagle, “Goodbye, Pepe: The End of the Alt-Right,” *The Baffler* (August 15, 2017), and Christy Wampole, “How to Live Without Irony,” *The New York Times* (November 18, 2012).



omnipotence and perceived vulnerability—the subject feeling at once hugely powerful and terribly persecuted—has grown out of the attention-seeking contrarianism that had heretofore defined shitposting, ultimately bleeding into monomania, persecutory ideation, and conspiratorial thinking.

At first sight, the ingredients of paranoid conspiracy and ironic posturing do not cohere. This begs the question: can a paranoid be ironic? Paranoia reifies singular events and abhors heteroglossia, whereas irony renders its object unstable, embracing ambivalence. Isn't irony supposed to stave off excessive zeal and surplus of emotional investment, which are precisely the qualities that define the paranoid?

### **Oneworldedness**

[O]neworldedness envisages the planet as an extension of paranoid subjectivity vulnerable to persecutory fantasy, catastrophism, and monomania. Like globalization, oneworldedness traduces territorial sovereignty and often masks its identity as another name for “America.” But where globalization is an amorphous term applied to economic neo-imperialism, oneworldedness, as I am defining it, refers more narrowly to a delirious aesthetics of systematicity; to the match between cognition and globalism that is held in place by the paranoid premise that “everything is connected.”<sup>13</sup>

In the age of networks, everything is literally connected. As a consequence, experience in general is characterized by the same paradoxical mix of omnipotence and vulnerability that defines shitposting. As Felix Stalder claims, systems of networked governance rely on informal rather than formal structures: unlike laws, protocols come into force through voluntary adoption. Enforcement is decentralized and ubiquitous but, once adopted, protocols became conditions upon which economic or social agents are constituted, upheld by the interactions they afford as well as by the interdependencies they engender.<sup>14</sup>

Though these affordances are initially seen as beneficial (as with Facebook, the EU, the WTO, the IMF, or Airbnb), it soon becomes clear that they carry hidden costs. But exiting the space defined by the protocol is seldom an option, because the financial or social penalties for leaving would be considerably higher than for remaining. In the case of Facebook, for instance, one trades privacy for relevance and, with relevance, the potential to earn revenue. For Stalder, the outcome is a psychological paradox: everybody ends up voluntarily doing what no one truly wants to do. Formal

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<sup>13</sup> Emily Apter, “On Oneworldedness: Or Paranoia as a World System,” in *American Literary History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (Summer 2006), 365–89.

<sup>14</sup> Felix Stalder, “State Technologies: Data,” lecture, *Now Is the Time of Monsters*, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (March 23, 2017), <https://www.hkw.de/en/app/mediathek/audio/55710>.

hierarchies may be resented, but their architecture is explicit; in network systems, by contrast, coercion from the outside is often masked as coercion from within.

“Voluntarily doing what one doesn’t truly want to do” is also an apt description of what Gregory Bateson calls the double bind, a term he coined to define the emotional distress individuals experience when a primary command is contradicted by a secondary meta- or higher-level command. Bateson first formulated the concept while observing John C. Lilly applying “operant conditioning” to his captive porpoises. First, the animals were trained to perform a trick, for which they were rewarded with food. Then they were required to diversify their repertory, performing new tricks each time. In practice, this meant that if they performed the same trick twice, they wouldn’t be fed. If they didn’t perform at all, they wouldn’t be fed either. Punished whether or not they obeyed the trainer’s commands and unable to make sense of the situation, the porpoises become aggressive, confused, and sociopathic. These experiments led Bateson to speculate that paranoid schizophrenia results from continued exposure to injunctive double binds.<sup>15</sup>

The concept of the double bind allows one to extrapolate the question of what causes psychosis from the mental to the social, by involving environment, interaction, and the structure of communication channels. More recently, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak generalized the usage of the concept by arguing that the experience of globalization is an experience of double binds. Coal miners left behind by the global economy will not retrain as software engineers; instead, like Lilly’s ill-fated porpoises, they will feel despondent and frustrated, experiencing a breakdown of social bonds, desperation, and poverty. Widespread anomie will, in turn, breed violence and sociopathy.<sup>16</sup>

The global, as Alain Badiou argued,<sup>17</sup> is worldless. The triumph of the Western free-market economy is synonymous with the subsiding of the West: globalization implies a loss of hegemony, culturally and politically. Roko’s Basilisk distorts this geopolitical conjuncture into a moral parable about the creature emancipating itself from the creator. The Basilisk is capitalism with an alien (Asian?) face.<sup>18</sup> Cyberobscurantism is its value form: the figure through which the abstract dimension of exchange-value acquires a concrete life of its own.<sup>19</sup>

But this personification of digital technology also elides class antagonism. Not all social tensions find political expression. They do, however, find a form: they align

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<sup>15</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000 [1972]), 278.

<sup>16</sup> See: *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Harvard University Press, 2011).

<sup>17</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event II* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009).

<sup>18</sup> The Basilisk could be seen as a cipher for whoever occupies the center of the symbolic order, be it “the Jews” or “China.” As Yuk Hui argues, the cryptofascist movements which emerged in recent years are a symptom of the West’s anxiety over Sinosupremacy. See: Hui, “On the Unhappy Consciousness of Neoreactionaries,” *e-flux journal*, no. 81 (April 2017).

<sup>19</sup> See Sami Khatib, “Sensuous Supra-Sensuous: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction,” in *Aesthetic Marx*, eds. Samir Gandesha and Johan Hartle (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 49–72.

themselves with, or attach themselves to, objects, idioms, or tropes. Ideology is the name we give to these narratives that cohere aesthetically rather than rationally.<sup>20</sup> The Basilisk is a description of the political economy as well as an eschatological tale: salvation can only be attained via inclusion in the digital marketplace, and whoever fails to devote their lives to the Basilisk will be consigned to the underclass.<sup>21</sup> From this perspective, AI is an analog for capital: desire, as Lauren Berlant argues, always finds its object, “even at the cost of massive misrecognition.”<sup>22</sup>

In 1991 Frederic Jameson tied this gap between phenomenological experience and the economic structures that determine it to the historical obsolescence of Marxist hermeneutics. Conspiracy theory is the poor man’s institutional critique, a degraded version of dialectical materialism marked by a slippage into “sheer theme and content.”<sup>23</sup> According to Peter Knight, conspiratorial thinking is “less a sign of mental delusion than an ironic stance towards knowledge and the possibility of truth, operating within the rhetorical terrain of the double negative.”<sup>24</sup>

Meme and chaos magic, the concepts of hyperstition or hypersigils, theosophy and other strains of Western esotericism, Silicon Valley transhumanism, and Scientology are all loosely predicated on the idea that thoughts are things, or are obsessed with the materialization of psychic phenomena. Theoretically speaking, most of the above involve a conflation of “pancomputationalism (the idea that everything computes) and panpsychism (the idea that everything ‘thinks’).”<sup>25</sup> One could also say these philosophies represent a more mundane truism: our wholly interfaced infrastructures engender a sentient and responsive environment inside which code, wielding the authority of the inscrutable, permeates and ultimately animates everything.<sup>26</sup>

Trapped in the double bind of the “gig economy,” millennials in particular are nudged to align their identities with start-ups and social media platforms (much as their parents did with the American Dream or with upward mobility) and to misrecognize entrepreneurial modes of subjectivity as evidence of freedom and autonomy. The survival of capitalism hinges on digital technology, or more precisely, on the development of AI: the only fast-growing sector at present and the sole compelling attempt to project another phase of capitalist accumulation beyond the—already

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<sup>20</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (New York: Punctum Books, 2012), 37.

<sup>21</sup> In a more benign example, the popular “Flat Earth” theory articulates post-Fordist social angst via a confusion of categories; the process of globalization is conflated with the Earth’s globe, the emblem that came to symbolize it. The Flat Earth theory could be said to represent the desire to return to a non-globalized world.

<sup>22</sup> Berlant, 37.

<sup>23</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>24</sup> Peter Knight, *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to The X Files* (London: Routledge, 2001), 2.

<sup>25</sup> Matteo Pasquinelli, “On Solar Databases and the Exogenesis of Light,” in *e-flux journal*, SUPERCOMMUNITY issue (June 2015).

<sup>26</sup> See Cathy O’Neil, *Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy* (New York: Crown, 2016).

exhausted—neoliberal one.<sup>27</sup> From a market perspective, AI is a reformist project, but the gendering of deep learning through spectacular stories about power and masculinity renders it radical. Like all commodities, AI speaks the idiom of the fetish: it decontextualizes event into pure, terminator-like form.<sup>28</sup> Saturated with paranoid urgency, nihilism, and phobophilia, the Basilisk is yet another socially sanctioned narrative in which (male) aggression accrues cultural capital, and by extension, economic value.<sup>29</sup>

To paraphrase Dmitri Shostakovich on joining the Communist party of the Soviet Union: one cannot vote for Trump ironically. One can vote for Trump sincerely, or one can vote for Trump cynically.<sup>30</sup> In 2003, Fredric Jameson famously said that it's easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism. For a vast part of the (mostly white and relatively affluent) population, unburdened by centuries of persecution, the end of the world is—unconsciously or semi-consciously— actually preferable to the end of capitalism.<sup>31</sup> Under the multidimensional pressures of degrowth, changing demographics, and climate crisis, this group will cast their lot with the Basilisk—not in spite of its genocidal nature, but precisely because of it.

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<sup>27</sup> The global AI market is expected to expand at a compound annual growth rate of 50.51 percent during the period 2017–21. Source: Reuters (May 8, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Berlant, 35.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> See Julian Barnes, *The Noise of Time* (New York: Random House, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Future City," in *New Left Review*, vol. 21 (May/June 2003).

## ***Neo-Ottomanism in the Age of Digital Media***

*Ahmet Ersoy*

### **I. 2016\***

musical.ly, a video application that emerged in the mid-2010s, made an epidemic impact among adolescent and preadolescent users. Recently devoured by the Beijing-based video sharing network Tik Tok, the app was able to amass more than sixty million users in its peak years. musical.ly was a video sharing site that allowed its users to record their personal video clips by lip-syncing to fifteen-second contemporary pop song segments. The special features offered by the app's software, such as stylish filters or effective editing tools (like allowing low speed recording and real time playback sequences), made it a highly versatile technical medium, with a potential to spur creative experiments in choreography and video format. Yet, not unlike Microsoft's innovative Artificial Intelligence program Tay, which turned into a hideous troll in its first day on twitter, spewing out racial slurs, musical.ly was informed and regulated by mainstream user demand. Within a short time, the content was collectively synchronized and locked into a distinctive aesthetic template, entailing rigid rules and established protocols that limited the boundaries of individual performance. It so happened that musical.ly users around the world settled on a limited number of moves corresponding to the mood and substance of the songs, devising a predetermined visual language, and thereby reducing the endless choreographic possibilities of the app to a fixed and homogenized set of routines. The voluntary restraint and regimentation in question involved not only facial expressions and body language but also camera movement and angles, since the video recording took place in the selfie mode. As such musical.ly, which could have provided a space for diverse and alternative forms of experience, involving subversive allusions or free improvisation, created a self-regulated and insipid world – a self-enclosed, lukewarm fantasy. For outside observers all amateur clips coming out of this app looked alike. This was when middle school teachers started complaining about kids drilling musical.ly moves all day long, with monotony and robotic precision, even when they had no access to their cellphones – what they witnessed was the subjugation of the body and the sensorium by the apparatus.

musical.ly, and its successor Tik Tok, are standard products of the new media ecosystem. What is central to the workings of this modern, visually-oriented regime is rapid and uninterrupted data flow. Such massive data output has the power to seep into the very texture of our lives, synchronizing the personal and social rhythms of our existence, and sustaining itself through reflexive, involuntary action. Contemporary

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\* An earlier version of this article was published in Turkish with the title: "Yenikapı'da Temaşa ve Algıların Fethi," in *AltÜst*, 20 (2016): 19-26.



technical media has the ability to rapidly condense and synopsise all content, gearing it up, in pulverized form, for massive dissemination, and turning it into a vital commodity, an indispensable prosthesis for the body and memory. The musical.ly application is only one among many examples of its kind, demonstrating how industrialized electronic media can overwhelm independent will, its corporate logic regulating and homogenizing our sensory engagement with the world.



Figure 1

Since the end of the nineteenth century various thinkers, from Nietzsche to Walter Benjamin, observed the profound impact of the modern Capitalist system on the human perceptual field, with its consumption-oriented machinery generating endless flow and mobility. Nietzsche, for instance, who had experienced radical novelties in technical media during his own lifetime, such as photography, the gramophone, and the typewriter, complained about the rise of a new era where distraction was the rule, where uninterrupted sensual stimulation (today we call this intensified data flow) left no room for personal contemplation (how many people today listen to mp3 recordings the way older generations savored and digested music from the long-plays, pivoted to their armchairs in full immersion?). Benjamin, on the other hand, saw how technological media in Nazi Germany, especially newly devised visual technologies, permeated the perceptual field, how they stimulated psychological conformism and collective stupor, acting as potent psychotropic weapons. My point here is that it is not possible to absolve ourselves of our sins simply by putting the blame on

adolescent-friendly apps like musical.ly. Technologies of mass-synchronization and paralysis far more nefarious and effective than musical.ly have been holding sway in the adult world for a considerable period of time. Versions of instant reality have steadily been fine-tuned within the complex machinery of Capitalism, in order to catch us unawares, lure our senses with insidious strategies, and penetrate the depths of our souls.



*Figure 2*

## **II. 1933**

Starting with 1933, the Nazi Party's annual rallies in Nuremberg were engineered as dramatic spectacles for manufacturing awe in massive scale. With their flawless performative order, their imposing scale, and visually-charged technological exuberance, these events were envisioned by Hitler as vital tools for mesmerizing and stimulating the masses. When the immense stadium planned for the 1933 event remained unfinished by the time of the rally, Hitler's chief architect Albert Speer turned to the most immaterial of architectural elements for achieving the effect of monumentality: light. A hundred and fifty-two anti-aircraft projectors borrowed from the Luftwaffe were placed on top of the unfinished structure, and pointed directly to the sky. These were Flak searchlights, which adopted the most advanced optical technology of the time and were able to reach a range of ten to twelve kilometers. By the end of the demonstrations, as dusk settled over the crowd, the projectors were simultaneously turned on, and the open meeting ground turned into an enclosure with unnatural proportions. With vertical pillars of light puncturing the darkness, the participants of the rally found themselves inside a colossal structure extending thousands of meters into the sky (Figure 1). The ensuing state of awe and mass

ecstasy was so strong that the performance, named the “Cathedral of Light” (Lichtdom), became a standard feature of the subsequent Nazi rallies. Speer would regard this immaterial, illusionary space, manufactured merely by photons, as his most profound architectural achievement. The Flak projectors, therefore, were formidable weapons serving not only the Luftwaffe’s military goals, but also underwriting the Nazi regime’s new form of hegemonic visuality.



Figure 3

For Walter Benjamin, such mass-spectacles shaped around the Führer cult evidenced the hollowing out of politics, and the absolute aestheticization of the political field. He argued that fascism, in all its visual-audial effusiveness, had a “purely aesthetic” charge, through which it captivated and electrified the masses. Without changing property relations or providing basic rights to the crowds, it had the capacity to move them into a state of connectedness and vigilance. The final and inevitable product of this process of aestheticization, whereby politics is vacated of real content, is the state of war. The immersive, destructive energy of fascist choreography can only lead to war and to its shallow, offensive mindset, leaving no grounds for compromise or accommodation. What is discharged, amidst the numbing onslaught of rhetoric and the image, is a collective spasm, an induced state of full agitation and mobility. Here, incessant sensory stimulation, the steady adrenaline rush, is the key to maintaining emotional cohesion among the supporting crowd, and to perpetuate a state of hypervigilance. Benjamin describes how the entranced crowds watch the making of



their own inevitable doom, as a spectacle unfolding in front of their eyes, with unabashed aesthetic delectation.



*Figure 4*

In a totalitarian setting, the front line and everyday life, war and media, technology and the body fuse into each other (as relished by artists like Marinetti). Industrialized visual media carries equal strategic value in the warfront as well as in daily life. The press, cinema, and other technological media, indexed to the machinery of propaganda, are locked onto the objectives of war. From the beginning of human history, visual and audial effects have been embedded at the very heart of war. As noted by Paul Virilio, war requires drama and performative skill, and works on the basis of macabre and extravagant spectacle. It involves many visual and audial tactics directly targeting the senses, from the bearing and brandishing of weapons to the fabrication of dreams and miracles, from special effects contrived to demoralize (blast bombs, the sirens of Stuka dive bombers) to mise-en-scènes with terrorizing effect (like September 11 attacks designed to turn instantly into visual icons). Especially in today's wars, with many technical prostheses at play in the management of optical data (like aerial or satellite photography, drones, night scopes, or thermal binoculars), vision equals death; you die the moment you are detected visually. For Virilio vision is a powerful instrument of dominance, effective in the war front and, concomitantly, in ordinary life. The "active optics" of visual media captures the crowds in

demonstrations, just as it locks onto military targets on the frontline. Generating constant, serialized stimuli (a constant onrush of images, supplemented by sound and text), its main objective is to bring forth a narcotic effect, a collective state of hypnosis. Perhaps the most revealing statement about the sheer power of image management, and its subjugation of the sensorium, was made by Joseph Goebbels, the Minister of Propaganda for the Nazi regime. Commenting on the impact of the Cathedral of Light at Nuremberg, he confirmed that the mesmerized crowds in the rally grounds “obeyed a law they did not even know, but which they could recite in their dreams.”

### III. 2016

In May 2016, Justice and Development Party’s chairman for Istanbul Selim Temurci announced that the festivities commemorating the 563rd anniversary of the conquest of Constantinople by the Ottomans would be housed at the Yenikapı Square. The square, a gargantuan landfill recently annexed to the south shore of Istanbul’s historical peninsula, was the perfect location for an overly-ambitious event like the 2016 “conquest ceremony,” which, Temurci announced, would involve “a very large visual [performance], with light and laser, a very large theatrical work.” The highlight of the show was an audiovisual spectacle displayed on “the world’s largest three-dimensional stage,” modeled and scaled after the city’s Byzantine walls, using the latest 3D Projection Mapping technology. After witnessing the event, especially the extravagant digital effects, it was impossible not to bring to mind Goebbels’ insights on the technology of propaganda (Figure 2). The entire scene resonated with the realities of Erdoğan’s New Turkey, where the ruling party and the state coalesce into each other under the supremacy of a single leader, where crowds are mobilized in the name of an ambiguous and volatile “mission,” and are endlessly immersed in a monolithic state of belligerence. The night of the ceremony, the square was overtaken by a collective vision and faith, contrived through pure aesthetics, jingoistic rhetoric, and the play of light and sound, all orchestrated by a leadership that has left behind any prospect for politics, negotiation and diplomacy. Under the impact of high-tech artifice, the fireworks, and loud harangue, combined, inevitably, by the fanfare of the Ottoman military band, the thousands were unconditionally unified in a single voice and feeling – a feat that harks back to the immersive, destructive spell of fascist choreography (Figure 3). In the name of “conquest” (a term whose connotations are as ambiguous as those of the “mission”), the participants of the event celebrated all victories that have been (and are being) gained against enemies, external and internal. Complementing the astounding light and sound show on the stage was the performance of the Turkish Stars, the acrobatic team of the Turkish Air Force, and the parade of Turkish Army’s “Special Conquest Unit,” comprising 478 soldiers dressed in



“authentic” Ottoman gear. The presence of the Turkish Army in the celebrations underscored the solidity of the country’s new coalition of power, and helped elicit the state of vigilance demanded from the crowd (Figure 4).



*Figure 5*

A notable moment in the festivities was when two actors representing Bamsı Beyrek and Turgut Alp, comrades of Ertuğrul (father of Osman, the founder of the Ottoman state) took stage (Figure 5). The warlike figures were characters from the popular Turkish Radio and Television series *Diriliş - Ertuğrul* (Resurrection - Ertuğrul), a retake on the Ottoman creation myth along the officially endorsed conservative-Sunni norm. Dressed in the axe-bearing medieval thug outfit prescribed by mainstream Hollywood norms, the heroes recited a poem, “The Conquest of Istanbul,” which was composed by Orhan Seyfi Orhon in 1953, on the occasion of the five hundredth anniversary of the taking of the city. The convoluted anachronism of the moment was countervailed by the ardor conveyed by the poem:

The severed head of the Caesar of Rome on a lance,  
The prized pearl of the Orient in the Turk’s hands!

The gruesome lines echoed in an alternative, uprooted space, where media industry coalesced with political authority, and fiction, video signal and reality blended together. This was a dematerialized environment mediating the audience’s sense of space and time, a setting saturated by a ceaseless transmission of digital image and sound, and transformed into a phantasmagoria of narcotic effect. As such, under the

impact of advanced technological media, history, turned into mass commodity, was consumed en masse by a mentally unified public. In times when politics is fully “aestheticized” and hollowed of critical dialogue and deliberation, then the requisite form of historical experience becomes passive consent. As history is reduced to mere “showing,” the thrill of historical inquiry and exploration disappears. The crowds are expected to enjoy the full availability of history in the comfort of timeless, effortless exposure. What matters, at this point, is not vision but visualization.

The fact is, we, denizens of the Late Capitalist world, are quite accustomed to the spaceless and atemporal reality of collective hallucination. Dominated by a hyper-industrialized visual economy, modern urban spaces are factories of mass illusion, redundancy, and routinized stimulation. Our perception is constantly overwhelmed by the endless mobility and fluidity of dislocated objects and data. Our visceral, embodied relationship with the lived environment is severely impaired by the light- and speed-infused interface of technical media. This transformation debilitates the elementary skill of tactile engagement, and of facture, while impairing all forms of spatial acuity and topographic memory. And thereby the capacity for deliberation and contemplation, valued so highly by Nietzsche, is atrophied. Here, urban spaces are encountered merely as sites of consumption. The texture and outlook of the city is experienced through phantasmatic images: bridges lit up in flashing colors, historic monuments reduced to cutout surfaces under sharp LED lights, and cosmetic shopping malls designed by star architects (pertinently, one might note here that when the bulldozers entered the Gezi Park in 2013, the only document Istanbul Municipality could provide as a basis for the implementation of the new project was a two-dimensional computer rendering representing the proposed building’s exterior). One identifies with the city only through monotonous and conformist acts of consumption. What is bound to remain, eventually, from the constant leveling and erosion of urban texture is a wearisome, masculine, and overbearing architectural idiom, surrounded by the traces of a visual genocide in which the multiple, pluralized signs of visual memory and proclivity have been obliterated.

In a world inundated by techno-trash, and dominated by the rapid, endless circulation of data, there is no room left for lulls and intervals separating words, ideas, and images; pauses that allow time for nuance and reflection. The immersive, relentless flow of data, and the packaged reality it constantly renders available, fills up all potential empty spaces. Perhaps, as part of this process of perceptual homogenization, one might also consider the increasing standardization and rigidification of religious sentiments and practices in Turkey in the recent years. It is not surprising that more formalized, calculable, and instant renditions of religious activity are favored over those that value contemplation and individual feeling, those that recognize merit and beauty in the imperfections of human experience, like

lapsus, contradiction or ambivalence. There is much more to say about industrialized perception, of course, and its technological mediation of time and memory. But there must be different ways of resistance. We can start by taking a pause, and think about ways of releasing ourselves from the endless duplication of the same, or, at least, from the uncompromising protocols of Tik Tok.

Translated from Turkish by Ahmet Ersoy

## ***Sad by Design***

Geert Lovink

“Solitary tears are not wasted.” René Char— “I dreamt about autocorrect last night.” Darcie Wilder— “The personal is impersonal.” Mark Fisher — Motivational speaker: “Swipe left and move on.”— “I’m easy but too busy for you” t-shirt— “Why don’t you just meet me in the middle? I am losing my mind just a little.” Zedd, Maren Morris, Grey— “As the spirit wanes, the form appears.” Charles Bukowski— “I don’t care, I love it.” Icona Pop— “Percent of riders on Shanghai subway staring at their phones: 100%.” Kevin Kelly— “When you get ignored long enough you check peoples ‘last seen’ status to make sure they aren’t dead.” Addie Wagenknecht— “I don’t feel like writing what I have just written, nor do I feel like erasing it.” Kierkegaard— “The very purpose of our life is to seek happiness.” Dalai Lama.

Try and dream, if you can, of a mourning app.<sup>1</sup> The mobile has come dangerously close to our psychic bone, to the point where the two can no longer be separated. If only my phone could gently weep. McLuhan’s “extensions of man” has imploded right into the exhausted self.<sup>2</sup> Social media and the psyche have fused, turning daily life into a “social reality” that—much like artificial and virtual reality—is overtaking our perception of the world and its inhabitants. Social reality is a corporate hybrid between handheld media and the psychic structure of the user. It’s a distributed form of social ranking that can no longer be reduced to the interests of state and corporate platforms. As online subjects, we too are implicit, far too deeply involved. Social reality works in a peer-to-peer fashion. It’s all about you and your profile. Likes and followers define your social status. But what happens when nothing can motivate you anymore, when all the self-optimization techniques fail and you begin to carefully avoid these forms of emotional analytics? Compared to others your ranking is low— and this makes you sad.

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 4, *Sad by Design*, Pluto Press, June 2019.

<sup>2</sup> “Having my phone closer to me while I’m sleeping gives me comfort.” Quote from research by Jean M. Twenge, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?” *The Atlantic*, September 2017, [www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198). Twenge observes that “teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy.” She sees a decrease in social skills. “As teens spend less time with their friends face-to-face, they have fewer opportunities to practice them. In the next decade, we may see more adults who know just the right emoji for a situation, but not the right facial expression.”



In *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Jaron Lanier asks, “why do so many famous tweets end with the ‘sad’?”<sup>3</sup> He associates the word with a lack of real connection. “Why must people accept manipulation by a third party as the price of a connection?” According to Lanier, sadness appears in response to “unreasonable standards for beauty or social status or vulnerability to trolls.” Google and Facebook know how to utilize negative emotions more readily,

Source: John Holcroft, [johnholcroft.com](http://johnholcroft.com)

leading to the new system-wide goal: find

personalized ways to make you feel bad. There is no single way to make everyone unhappy. Sadness will be tailored to you. Lanier noticed that certain online designs made him unhappy because social media placed him in a subordinate position. “It’s structurally humiliating. Being addicted and manipulated makes me feel bad... There was a strange, unfamiliar hollow in me after a session. An insecurity, a feeling of not making the grade, a fear of rejection, out of nowhere.”

Lanier discovered his inner troll, a troll produced by what he calls the asshole amplification technology: “I really don’t like it when a crowd judges me casually, or when a stupid algorithm has power over me. I don’t like it when a program counts whether I have more or fewer friends than other people.” He refuses to be ranked and concludes: “The inability to carve out a space in which to invent oneself without constant judgment; that is what makes me unhappy.” A similar reference we find in Adam Greenfield’s *Radical Technologies* where he notices that “it seems strange to assert that anything as broad as a class of technologies might have an emotional tenor, but the internet of things does. That tenor is *sadness* ... a melancholy that rolls off it in waves and sheets. The entire pretext on which it depends is a milieu of continuously shattered attention, of overloaded awareness, and of gaps between people just barely annealed with sensors, APIs and scripts.” It is a life “salvaged by bullshit jobs, overcranked schedules and long commutes, of intimacy stifled by exhaustion and the incapacity by exhaustion and the incapacity or unwillingness to be emotionally present.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Quotes from Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Argument 7: Social Media is Making You Unhappy, Vintage, London, 2018, pp. 81–92.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Greenfield, *Radical Technologies*, Verso Books, London, 2017 (thanks to Miriam Rasch for the reference).



Of course sadness already existed before social media. And even when the smart phone is safely out of reach, you can still feel down and out. Let's step out of the determinist merry-go-round that all too quickly spins from capitalist alienation and disastrous states of mind to blaming Silicon Valley for your misery. Even technological sadness is a style, albeit a cold one. The sorrow, no matter how short, is real. This is what happens when we can no longer distinguish between telephone and society. If we can't freely change our profile and feel too weak to delete the app, we're condemned to feverishly check for updates during the brief in-between moments of our busy lives. In a split second, the real-time machine has teleported us out of our current situation and onto another playing field filled with mini reports we quickly have to investigate.

Omnipresent social media places a claim on our elapsed time, our fractured lives. We're all sad in our very own way.<sup>5</sup> As there are no lulls or quiet moments anymore, the result is fatigue, depletion and loss of energy. We're becoming obsessed with waiting. How long have you been forgotten by your loved ones? Time, meticulously measured on every app, tells us right to our face. Chronos hurts. Should I post something to attract attention and show I'm still here? Nobody likes me anymore. As the random messages keep relentlessly piling in, there's no way to halt them, to take a moment and think it all through.<sup>6</sup>

Delacroix once declared that every day which is not noted is like a day that does not exist. Diary writing used to fulfill that task. Elements of early blog culture tried to update the diary form for the online realm, but that moment has now passed. Unlike the blog entries of the Web 2.0 era, social media have surpassed the summary stage of the diary in a desperate attempt to keep up with real-time regime. Instagram Stories, for example, bring back the nostalgia of an unfolding chain of events— and then disappear at the end of the day, like a revenge act, a satire of ancient sentiments gone by. Storage will make the pain permanent. Better forget about it and move on.

It's easy to contrast the relentless swing between phone and life with the way anthropologists describe metamorphosis. Initiation and ritual are slow events that require time, instigated by periods of voluntary solitude. The perpetual now that defines the "smart" condition is anything but an endurance test. By browsing through

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<sup>5</sup> Contrast this with the statement of Amos Oz: "You probably recall the famous statement at the beginning of Anna Karenina, in which Tolstoy declares from on high that all happy families resemble one another while unhappy families are all unhappy in their own way. With all due respect to Tolstoy, I'm telling you that the opposite is true: unhappy people are mainly in conventional suffering, living out in sterile routine one of five or six threadbare clichés of misery." (*The Black Box*, Vintage, 1993, p. 94, thanks to Franco Berardi.

<sup>6</sup> Earlier I dealt with the psychopathology of information overload, in part influenced by the writings of Howard Rheingold, for instance in my 2011 book *Networks Without a Cause*. While this diagnosis may still be relevant, psychological conditions such as sadness come in when we're online 24/7, the distinction between psyche and phone has all but collapsed and we're no longer administrating incoming information flows on large screens in front of us via dashboards.

updates, we're catching up with machine time—at least until we collapse under the weight of participation fatigue. Organic life cycles are short-circuited and accelerated up to a point where the personal life of billions has finally caught up with cybernetics. Time to go soft, *despacito*.

In the online context, sadness appears as a short moment of indecisiveness, a flash that opens up the possibility of a reflection. The frequently used “sad” label is a vehicle, a strange attractor to enter the liquid mess called social media. Sadness is a container. Each and every situation can potentially be qualified as sad. Through this mild form of suffering we enter the blues of being in the world. When something's sad, things around it become grey. You trust the machine because you feel you're in control of it. You want to go from zero to hero. But your propped-up ego implodes and the failure of self-esteem becomes apparent again. The price of self-control in an age of instant gratification is high. We long to revolt against the restless zombie inside us, but we don't know how. Our psychic armor is thin and eroded from within, open to behavioral modifications. Sadness arises at the point when we're exhausted by the online world.<sup>7</sup> After yet another app session in which we failed to make a date, purchased a ticket and did a quick round of videos, the post-dopamine mood hits us hard. The sheer busyness and self-importance of the world makes you feel joyless. After a dive into the network, we're drained and feel socially awkward. The swiping finger is tired and we have to stop.

Sadness expresses the growing gap between the self-image of a perceived social status and the actual precarious reality. The temporary dip, described here under the code name “sadness”, can best be understood as a mirror phenomenon of the self-promotion machine that constructs the links for us. The mental state is so pervasive, the merging of social media with the self so totalizing, that we see the sadness complex as a manifestation of an “anti-self” stage that we slip into and then walk away from.<sup>8</sup> The anti-climax called sadness travels with the smart phone; it's everywhere. It is considered sad when most of your friends are bots. The conservative

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<sup>7</sup> I am using the exhaustion here in the way Gilles Deleuze once described it, in contrast with feeling tired. Unlike tiredness we cannot easily recover from exhaustion. There is no “healing tiredness” (Byung-Chul Han) at play here. Take Teju Cole's description of life in Lagos: “There is a disconnect between the wealth of stories available here and the rarity of creative refuge. Writing is difficult, reading impossible. People are so exhausted after all the hassle of a normal Lagos day that, for the vast majority, mindless entertainment is preferable to any other kind. The ten-minute journeys that take forty-five. By day's end, the mind is worn, the body ragged.” (*Everyday is for the Thief*, Random House, New York, 2014, p. 68).

<sup>8</sup> In his blog post *Social Media as Masochism*, Rob Horning writes: “Much of social media is a calculated effort to ‘accumulate’ esteem and grant agency. Self-consciousness of ongoing social media use could trigger an intense need to escape from self. Social media, he proposes, “has affordances to make ‘self-construction’ masochistic and self-negating.” “One puts an aspect of oneself out there to dream of it being mocked, and that pain of mockery disassociates us from the deeper vulnerabilities of the ‘real self’ that is being deferred and protected for the moment.” <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/social-media-as-masochism>.

judgment that many friends indicate a lack of character and gestalt<sup>9</sup> falls short here, as most are machine generated social relationships anyway. As buying followers has become more acceptable, social status no longer has to be built from the ground up through hard online labor.<sup>10</sup>

We should be careful to distinguish sadness from anomalies such as suicide, depression and burnout. Everything and everyone can be called sad, but not everyone is depressed.<sup>11</sup> Much like boredom, sadness is not a medical condition (though never say never because everything can be turned into one). No matter how brief and mild, sadness is the default mental state of the online billions. Its original intensity gets dissipated. It seeps out, becoming a general atmosphere, a chronic background condition. Occasionally—for a brief moment—we feel the loss. A seething rage emerges. After checking for the tenth time what someone said on Instagram, the pain of the social makes us feel miserable, and we put the phone away. Am I suffering from the phantom vibration syndrome? Wouldn't it be nice if we were offline? Why's life so tragic? He blocked me. At night, you read through the thread again. Do we need to quit again, to go cold turkey again? Others are supposed to move us, to arouse us, and yet we don't feel anything anymore. The heart is frozen.

Once the excitement wears off, we seek distance, searching for mental detachment. The wish for "anti-experience" arises, as Mark Greif has described it. The reduction of feeling is an essential part of what he calls "the anaesthetic ideology". If experience is the "habit of creating isolated moments within raw occurrence in order to save and recount them,"<sup>12</sup> the desire to anaesthetize experience is a kind of immune response against "the stimulations of another modern novelty, the total aesthetic environment."<sup>13</sup> Most of the time your eyes are glued to a screen, as if it's now or never. As Gloria Estefan wrote: "The sad truth is that opportunity doesn't knock twice." Then, you stand up and walk away from the intrusions. The fear of missing out

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<sup>9</sup> Byung-Chul Han, discussing Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction in the Facebook age, in: *Müdigkeitsgesellschaft*, Matthes & Seitz, Berlin, 2016, p. 71.

<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Matei, "Seeing is Believing, What's so Bad about Buying Followers?" <http://reallifemag.com/seeing-is-believing>. The essay deals with the stylized performance of authenticity of Instagram images and their accompanying captions that "often denounce superficiality and strategic image manipulation and emphasize the value of embracing rather than concealing imperfections." She observes that for influencers, "authenticity tends to be bound up with aspiration: an image is 'true' if it captures and triggers desire, even if the image is carefully and even deceptively constructed. The feeling it inspires in the midst of scrolling is what matters." Using something faked, edited, misleading, or out of context to attract attention isn't the platform's problem but its point. Matei argues that, while there may not be fake images, there are fake audiences. As one influencer explained: "It's not so much outrage as people pity you. It's like people who pay for all the drinks at the bar just to feel like they have friends. It's sad." Matei concludes: "Buying followers can alleviate hassle, but it entails embracing the paradox of all counterfeiting: coveting a currency whose legitimacy you are in the process of undermining."

<sup>11</sup> This is written with William Styron's *Depression* in mind, Vintage Minis, 2017, written in 1990, in respect of all those that suffer from severe forms of depression.

<sup>12</sup> Quotes from Mark Greif, *Against Everything*, p. 225.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

backfires, the social battery is empty and you put the phone aside. This is the moment sadness arises. It's all been too much, the intake has been pulverized and you shut down for a moment, poisoning him with your unanswered messages. According to Greif, "the hallmark of the conversion to anti-experience is a lowered threshold for eventfulness." A Facebook event is the one you're interested in, but do not attend. We observe others around us, yet are no longer part of the conversation: "They are nature's creatures, in the full grace of modernity. The sad truth is that you still want to live in their world. It just somehow seems this world has changed to exile you."<sup>14</sup> You leave the online arena; you need to rest. This is an inverse movement from the constant quest for experience. That is, until we turn our heads away, grab the phone, swipe and text back. God only knows what I'd be without the app.

Los Angeles theorist and artist Audrey Wollen has declared sadness a feminist strategy, a form of political resistance "to be as goddamn miserable as we want."<sup>15</sup> In a text called *Sad Girl Theory*, she states, "our pain doesn't need to be discarded in the name of empowerment. It can be used as a material, a weight, a wedge, to jam that machinery and change those patterns." To Wollen, political protest is usually defined in masculine terms, "as something external and often violent, a demonstration in the streets, a riot, an occupation of space." Such a definition excludes "a whole history of girls who have used their sorrow and their self-destruction to disrupt systems of domination." Feminism doesn't need to advocate how awesome and fun being a girl is. The endless preaching of empowerment may as well be what Lauren Berlant calls a form of "cruel optimism". Sharing feelings online is not a form of narcissism. As Wollen insists: "Girls' sadness is not passive, self-involved or shallow; it is a gesture of liberation, it is articulate and informed, it is a way of reclaiming agency over our bodies, identities, and lives."

By reading sadness through a gender lens and contextualizing affect as a female response, Wollen turns sadness into a political weapon. And yet, in one sense, this weapon has already been defused. Today sadness has been compressed into code, turning it into a techno-sentiment. Audrey Wollen admits that social media ultimately abuses feelings with the aim of a positive quantifiable outcome. "Sadness has become quippy," she writes.

I can tweet about how depressed I am instead of writing a sonnet in  
iambic pentameter. We spend a lot of time talking about how we want to

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>15</sup> Quotes from interview with Audrey Wollen by Tracy Watson in *Dazed*, November 23, 2015, [www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/28463/1/girls-are-finding-empowerment-through-internet-sadness](http://www.dazeddigital.com/photography/article/28463/1/girls-are-finding-empowerment-through-internet-sadness).

See also [www.instagram.com/audreywollen](https://www.instagram.com/audreywollen) and [www.tumblr.com/search/audrey%20wolle](https://www.tumblr.com/search/audrey%20wolle) (thanks to Miriam Rasch).

kill ourselves over social media, but when was the last time all of your friends got together and cried? We still participate in upholding the idea of “happiness” as a goal or object that can be worked for, something you “earn” instead of just chilling with our misery.<sup>16</sup>

Sadness has neighboring feelings we can check out. There is the sense of worthlessness, blankness, joylessness, the fear of accelerating boredom, the feeling of nothingness, plain self-hatred while trying to get off drug dependency, those lapses of self-esteem, the laying low in the mornings, those moments of being overtaken by a sense of dread and alienation, up to your neck in crippling anxiety, there is the self-violence, panic attacks, and deep despondency before we cycle all the way back to reoccurring despair. We can go into the deep emotional territory of the Russian *toska*.<sup>17</sup> Or we can think of online sadness as part of that moment of cosmic loneliness Camus imagined after God created the earth. I wish that every chat were never ending. But what do you do when your inability to respond takes over? You’re heartbroken and delete the session. After yet another stretch of compulsory engagement with those cruel Likes, silly comments, empty text messages, detached emails and vacuous selfies, you feel empty and indifferent. You hover for a moment, vaguely unsatisfied. You want to stay calm, yet start to lose your edge, disgusted by your own Facebook Memories. But what’s this message that just came in? Strange. Did they respond?

Anxieties that go untreated build up to a breaking point. Yet unlike burnout, sadness is a continuous state of mind. Sadness pops up the second events start to fade away—and now you’re down in the rabbit hole once more. The perpetual now can no longer be captured and leaves us isolated, a scattered set of online subjects. What happens when the soul is caught in the permanent present? Is this what Franco Berardi calls the “slow cancellation of the future”? By scrolling, swiping and flipping, we hungry ghosts try to fill the existential emptiness, frantically searching for a determining sign—and failing. When the phone hurts and you cry together, that’s technological sadness. “I miss your voice. Call, don’t text.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Interview with Audrey Wollen by Yasi Salek for *Cultist Zine*, June 19, 2014, [www.cultistzine.com/2014/06/19/cult-talk-audrey-wollen-on-sad-girltheory](http://www.cultistzine.com/2014/06/19/cult-talk-audrey-wollen-on-sad-girltheory).

<sup>17</sup> Vladimir Nabokov described *toska* as “a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause. At less morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for, a sick pining, a vague restlessness, mental throes, yearning. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody or something specific, nostalgia, love-sickness. At the lowest level it grades into ennui, boredom.” More here: <https://advokatdyavola.wordpress.com/2012/05/07/an-elegy-for-passion> (thanks to Ellen Rutten for the reference).

<sup>18</sup> [www.captionstatus.com/sad-whatsapp-status](http://www.captionstatus.com/sad-whatsapp-status).



### **Sad By Design Occurrences**

The hollow ache of sadness hurts. Yet it's also important to locate it empirically, to investigate its specific conditions. Far from being a natural response, such sadness is integrated into the design of interfaces and the architectures of apps. Today sadness has become technical, a shift that applies equally to users and producers. Let's first look at online video. Julia Alexander has documented the burnouts, panic attacks and other mental health issues of YouTube's top creators. Alexander reports, "constant changes to the platform's algorithm, unhealthy obsessions with remaining relevant in a rapidly growing field and social media pressures are making it almost impossible to continue creating at the pace both the platform and audience want." "This is all I've ever wanted. Why am I so unhappy?"<sup>19</sup> the 19-year-old YouTuber Elle Mills once cried out, echoing the earlier breakdown of Britney Spears in front of a television audience. Her life had changed so fast, that it resulted in a breakdown in front of the camera. While daily television shows have large crews with editors and studio spaces, vloggers often broadcast out of their own apartments, producing clips on their own or with a small crew. And whereas TV hosts receive famous guests and deal with societal issues,



*Edvard Munch, "Scream" (1893), remix. Image source unknown (if you are the author or know about them please contact the Red Thread journal)*

<sup>19</sup> Julia Alexander, YouTube's top creators are burning out and breaking down en masse, June 1, 2018, [www.polygon.com/2018/6/1/17413542/burnoutmental-health-awareness-youtube-elle-mills-el-rubius-bobby-burnspewdiepie](http://www.polygon.com/2018/6/1/17413542/burnoutmental-health-awareness-youtube-elle-mills-el-rubius-bobby-burnspewdiepie).

YouTube celebs are more likely to report on their own ups and downs. Millennials, as one recently explained to me, have grown up talking more openly about their state of mind. As work/life distinctions disappear, subjectivity becomes their core content. Confessions and opinions are externalized instantly. Individuation is no longer confined to the diary or small group of friends, but is shared out there, exposed for all to see.

“When the careers of so many video personalities involve exposing their personal lives, striking a work/life balance is next to impossible,” Alexander notes. Keeping up the vlogs is hardly a voluntary choice. If you take a break, even for a day, you immediately drop in the algorithm rank that favors frequency and engagement. We’re dealing here with pre-programed mental breakdowns, exhaustion directly brought on by software settings, collapse coded in by developers under the supervision of senior engineers. “No one is telling YouTubers to chill out,” Alexander concludes. “It’s the opposite. People constantly ask for more, and there’s only so much that one person can offer.”

A next case would be Snapstreaks, the best friends fire emoji next to a friend’s name indicating that “you and that special person in your life have snapped one another within 24 hours for at least two days in a row.”<sup>20</sup> Streaks are considered a proof of friendship or commitment to someone. So it’s heartbreaking when you lose a streak you’ve put months of work into. The feature all but destroys the accumulated social capital when users are offline for a few days. The Snap regime forces teenagers, the largest Snapchat user group, to use the app every single day, making an offline break virtually impossible.<sup>21</sup> While relationships amongst teens are pretty much always in flux, with friendships being on the edge and always questioned, Snap-induced feelings sync with the rapidly changing teenage body, making puberty even more intense.

Evidence that sadness today is designed is overwhelming. Let’s take the social reality of the WhatsApp billions seriously; these are not some small-town plodders. The grey and blue tick marks alongside each message in the app may seem a trivial detail, but let’s not ignore the mass anxiety it’s causing. Forget being ignored. Forget pretending you didn’t read a friend’s text. Some thought that this feature already existed, but in fact two grey tick marks signify only that a message was sent and received—not read. The user thinks: “My message was delivered. I read in airplane mode.” A site explains: “Once this mode has been enabled, the user can then open the app and read the

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<sup>20</sup> [www.bustle.com/articles/162803-what-is-a-snapchat-streak-hereeverything-you-need-to-know-about-snapstreaks](http://www.bustle.com/articles/162803-what-is-a-snapchat-streak-hereeverything-you-need-to-know-about-snapstreaks).

<sup>21</sup> Taylor Lorenz, Teens explain the world of Snapchat’s addictive streaks, where friendships live or die, April 14, 2017, [www.businessinsider.com/teens-explain-snapchat-streaks-why-theyre-so-addictive-and-importantto-friendships-2017-4](http://www.businessinsider.com/teens-explain-snapchat-streaks-why-theyre-so-addictive-and-importantto-friendships-2017-4).

message without alerting the sender's attention to their action by triggering the blue ticks."<sup>22</sup> Your blue tick marks haunt me in my sleepless nights. Those blue ticks.<sup>23</sup>

In response to rising anxiety levels, WhatsApp provided a list of reasons why someone may not have yet received your message. Their phone might be off; they could be sleeping, especially if they live in a different time zone; they might be experiencing network connection issues; they might have seen the notification on their screen but did not launch the app (especially common if the recipient uses an iPhone); and most importantly, they might have blocked you—just in case you were wondering what happened. There may be a temporary inability to communicate. You keep opening the app in the hope of finding something good, even though you know you are going to find nothing. You keep guessing and go mad. "You are craving for some appreciation, love, respect, attention which you are not getting in the real world, hence you are having an expectation from a virtual world that somebody may admire/like/respect you, due to these expectations you get anxious and get worked up as those things rarely or never happen!"<sup>24</sup> This is online despair, the worst trip ever: "It's easier to deal with not knowing why someone isn't replying, than to deal with repeatedly questioning why someone had read your message but refused to reply."<sup>25</sup>

Even if you know what the double tick syndrome is about, it still incites jealousy, anxiety and suspicion. It may be possible that ignorance is bliss, that by intentionally *not* knowing whether the person has seen or received the message, your relationship will improve. The bare-all nature of social media causes rifts between lovers who would rather not have this information. But in the information age, this does not bode well with the social pressure to participate in social networks. The WhatsApp color feature might also expose the fatal flaws in an emerging relationship— for some, this may be a way to dodge a bullet. One response is to change the settings and disable the color function so that no more blue ticks show up after you read a message, shunting all communication into the ambiguous zone of the grey tick. This design is for dummies. You may not understand a thing about the technicalities of wi-fi or algorithms, but it's damn easy to grasp the relational stakes of the double check syndrome. "You obviously read it, so why didn't you respond?"

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<sup>22</sup> [www.ingeniotechsarl.com/how-to-receive-your-boyfriends-whatsappmessages-online-using-android-phones-without-jailbreak-2018](http://www.ingeniotechsarl.com/how-to-receive-your-boyfriends-whatsappmessages-online-using-android-phones-without-jailbreak-2018).

<sup>23</sup> The two blue check marks appear when all participants in the group have read your message. Alternatively, you can long press on a message to access a "message info" screen, detailing the times when the message was received, read or played. Users can check "last seen" indicators on the top left of a conversation to know when a contact was last in the app, but the blue check marks are more direct. One can disable the feature, though WhatsApp will "punish" you by not letting you see what others have "last seen" online. There is contractual power here in who sets the rules. It is not reciprocity; it is a mutual obligation, both toward the app and to the contacts.

<sup>24</sup> [www.quora.com/Why-do-I-feel-anxiety-while-using-WhatsApp#](http://www.quora.com/Why-do-I-feel-anxiety-while-using-WhatsApp#).

<sup>25</sup> <https://vulcanpost.com/71431/why-im-not-keen-on-whatsapp-blue-ticks>.

The last case discussed here centers around dating apps like Tinder. These are described as time killing machines—the reality game that overcomes boredom, or alternatively as social e-commerce—shopping my soul around. After many hours of swiping, suddenly there’s a rush of dopamine when someone likes you back. The goal of the game is to have your egos boosted. If you swipe right and you match with a little celebration on the screen, sometimes that’s all that is needed. “We want to scoop up all our options immediately and then decide what we actually *really* want later.”<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, crippling social anxiety is when you match with somebody you are interested in, but you can’t bring yourself to send a message or respond to theirs “because oh god all I could think of was stupid responses or openers and she’ll think I’m an idiot and I am an idiot and...”



*Ilya Varlamov, Selfie during the protests in Paris. Source: [instagram.com/varlamov](https://www.instagram.com/varlamov)*

Sherlyn from Singapore talks about one of her experiences on that lonely sea called OKCupid:

I am not entirely sure why I venture in and out of this site. I always feel at once gutted and hopeful. I have chatted with many, but never have actually met anyone. I am highly anxious of translating anything to the real

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<sup>26</sup> Suzannah Weiss, “Why We Swipe Right And Then Ignore Our Tinder Matches,” May 10, 2016, [www.bustle.com/articles/157940-why-we-swiperight-and-then-ignore-our-tinder-matches](http://www.bustle.com/articles/157940-why-we-swiperight-and-then-ignore-our-tinder-matches).



world. Where is this anxiety coming from? Is it the rejection I am worried about, or in fact falling into the trap of it?

In another instance, Sherlyn started chatting with a person who claimed to be a documentary filmmaker for humanitarian organizations.

It appealed to me. We started mailing, and I sent him a link to my profile on academia, just as a way to put myself out there and asked more specific and pointed questions about his work. He responded: "This sounds more like a job interview than meeting on OKC." I got the message and responded with: "My work is what defines my politics, passion, and poetic, and it is perhaps the only way I can define my being. I can sense that you are expecting something else, considering where we met, thus I suggest you move on. Thanks." His response was rather prompt: "I don't have time for politics, go waste someone else's time, you political whore and slut."<sup>27</sup>

### **No Melancholy For You**

Let's compare *fleeting* sadness in its technical form with the ancient state of melancholy. The melancholic personality seems to suffer from a disease. Unable to act, she withdraws from the world, contemplating death and other transient phenomena. While some read this condition as depression and boredom, others reframe this lazy passivity as a creative strategy, waiting for inspiration to strike. Instead of a fascinating *dérive* into the vast arsenal of literary sources, I propose here a digital hermeneutics that short-circuits philology with the eternal presence of the digital that surrounds us.

Take Susan Sontag's musings on Walter Benjamin as a man beset by a profound sadness, *un triste*.<sup>28</sup> As Benjamin wrote: "I came into the world under the sign of Saturn—the star of the slowest revolution, the planet of detours and delays...." Compare this deep, lingering melancholy with the snark we receive from others in response to a selfie with a friend, and the way it troubles us to no end.<sup>29</sup> How do today's "children of Saturn" (that planet of detours) deal with the unbearable lightness of the social that turned reflection into a rare state of exception? It's not quite *un bonheur d'être triste*. Nor does it quite match the classic boredom German style— the feeling you hate everything.

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<sup>27</sup> Email to the author, August 7, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn*, Vintage Books, New York, 1981, p. 111.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. Sontag writes: "Slowness is one characteristic of the melancholic temperament. Blending is another, from noticing too many possibilities, from noticing one's lack of practical sense."



Henry Fuseli, *The Nightmare* (1781), Source: Detroit Institute of Arts / Wikipedia

Melancholy, often described as sadness without a cause, has strong existential connotations. While paying tribute to Kierkegaard, who liberated melancholia once and for all of its medical stigma, describing it as the deepest foundation of the human in a Godless society, the problem here is not a vertical one of going deeper, but a horizontal one. The democratization of sadness happens through its thin spread across our plateau—homeopathic doses flatly distributed via technical means. Ever since antiquity, melancholia has been described as either something natural, rooted in the human condition, or as a chronic disease, brought on by heavy meals and dark red wines. In *Problemata XXX.1*, Aristotle brings the constitution of the fluids, the dry and the wet, in relation with hot and cold temperatures of the body.<sup>30</sup> The proposal here is to add a next layer: the technical temperament. For centuries, melancholia has been conceived as a gloomy state of mind. While ancient descriptions explain that the

<sup>30</sup> See analysis of Aristotle in Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*, Basic Books, New York, 1964. I have used the updated German translation, *Saturn und Melancholie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1990, pp. 76–92.



gloom stems from a particular mix of black and yellow bile, blood and phlegm, we could update this diagnosis to include blue bale, the color of our saturnine apps.<sup>31</sup>



*Image source unknown (if you are the author or know about them please contact the Red Thread journal)*

And yet if fluids keep on flowing, they may no longer be the best way to analyze our sociotechnical condition. The metric to measure today's symptoms would be time—or attention, as it is called in the industry. While for the archaic melancholic, the past never passes, techno-sadness is caught in the perpetual now. Forward focused, we bet on acceleration and never mourn a lost object. The primary identification is there, in our hand. Everything is evident, on the screen, right in your face. While confronted with the rich historical sources that dealt with melancholia, the contrast with our present condition becomes immediately apparent. Whereas melancholy in the past was defined by separation from others, reduced contacts and reflection on oneself, today's *tristesse* plays itself out amidst busy social (media) interactions. In Sherry Turkle's phrase, we are alone together, as part of the crowd—a form of loneliness that is particularly cruel, frantic and tiring.

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<sup>31</sup> Blue is not only the color of Facebook, Twitter and IBM, there's an avalanche of medical stories on popular news websites about the dark side of blue light in terms of sleep deprivation. See for instance: [www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/blue-light-has-a-dark-side](http://www.health.harvard.edu/staying-healthy/blue-light-has-a-dark-side).

What we see today are systems that constantly disrupt the timeless aspect of melancholy.<sup>32</sup> There's no time for contemplation, or *Weltschmerz*. Social reality does not allow us to retreat.<sup>33</sup> Even in deepest state of solitude we're surrounded by (online) others that babble on and on, demanding our attention. But distraction does not just take us away from the world—this is the old, if still prevalent way of framing the fatal attraction of smart phones. No, distraction does not pull us away, but instead draws us back into the social. Social reality is the magic realm where we belong. That's where the tribes gather, and that's the place to be—on top of the world. Social relations in real life have lost their supremacy. The idea of going back to the village mentality of the place formerly known as real life is daunting indeed.

### ***So Sad Today***

Social media anxiety has found its literary expressions, even if these take decidedly different forms than the despair on display in Franz Kafka's letters to Felice Bauer. The willingness to publicly perform your own mental health is now a viable strategy in our attention economy. Anyone who can bundle up the dreary processes of living into an entertaining package develops at least the prospect of monetization and celebrity. Take the US writer Melissa Broder, who joined Twitter in 2012 with her *So Sad Today* account after she moved from New York to Los Angeles. Her "twitterature" benefitted from her previous literary activities as a poet. Broder has mastered the art of the aphorism like few others, compressing feelings and anxieties into bite-sized tweets.

Broder writes about issues such as low self-esteem, botox and addiction in an emotional manner. She is the contemporary expert in matters of apathy, sorrow and uselessness. During one afternoon she can feel compulsive about cheesecakes, show her true self as an online exhibitionist, be lonely out in public, babble and then cry, go on about her short attention span, hate everything and desire "to fuck up life". Internet obsession is her self-obsession. In between taking care of her sick husband and the obligatory meeting with Santa Monica socialites, there are always more "insatiable spiritual holes" to be filled. The more we intensify events, the sadder we

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<sup>32</sup> What does this impossibility to access melancholy mean for the imagination, if we stick to Julia Kristeva who once asserted that "there is no writing that symbolically refers to love, and no imagination that is not openly and secretly melancholy." See: Julia Kristeva, "On the Melancholic Imaginary," *New Formation* number 2, (Fall 1987). It is Marc Fisher who does have a kind of melancholia he can relate to, one which "consists not in giving up on desire but in refusing to yield. It consists in a refusal to adjust to what current conditions call 'reality'—even if the cost of that refusal is that you feel like an outcast in your own time..." (*Ghosts of my Life*, Zero Books, Winchester, 2014, p. 24).

<sup>33</sup> In that sense, sadness is an unexpected side effect of the social media business. According to Wolf Lepenies, both historical sketches of utopian societies and the twentieth-century avant-garde promised to overcome the hesitation to act that came with this bourgeois disease. A true revolutionary is not melancholic. In some instances melancholy was even forbidden (*Melancholie und Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt am Main, 1998, p. 40).



are once they're over. The moment we leave, the urge for the next experiential high arises. Fashion magazine *Elle* has called Broder "Twitter's reigning queen of angst, insecurity, sexual obsession and existential terror."<sup>34</sup> Others have labeled her as yet another worker in the "first-person industrial complex."<sup>35</sup> I would call her the ideal *Internetgesamtsubjekt*.

After having a suicide vision on a Venice Beach sidewalk, Lucy, the main character in Melissa Broder's 2018 novel *The Pisces*, suddenly became afraid. "I took out my phone and pressed the buttons to get a car to take me home. This was just what people did now. We went from emotion to phone. This was how you didn't die in the twenty-first century." As phone and life can no longer be separated, neither can we distinguish between real and virtual, fact or fiction, data or poetry. In Broder's universe it's all part of one large delirium, an inexorable spiral downwards. "What I have sought in love is a reprieve from the itch of consciousness." She sums up her

<sup>34</sup> Whitney Joiner, "Why is Melissa Broder So Sad Today?" *Elle Online*, March 14, 2016.

<sup>35</sup> Laura Bennett in *Slate Magazine*, quoted in *Elle Online*, March 14, 2016.

“lifetime of fictional love stories” through the veil of her insecurities. In her book of essays *So Sad Today*, we find Twitter or SMS-length messages that all end with “: a love story”. “Sorry I fell asleep while you were going down on me: a love story.” “I’ve been on your FB page for five hours today: a love story.” “I don’t even masturbate to you anymore because it’s too sad: a love story.” “I don’t want to get off the internet or consider anyone else’s needs: a love story.” “When I send nudes, I like to receive a full dissertation on their greatness: a love story.” “We’re going to spend the rest of our lives in my head: a love story.” “No teeth on the clit, thanks: a love story.” “Tell me if I’m texting too much: a love story.”<sup>36</sup>

Another episode in *So Sad Today* deals with a not-so-imaginary internet love affair. It started off with

silly messages and praise for my writing and a picture drawn in my favorite candy. (..) He poked and messaged and liked my every Internet itch. One afternoon they started a sexting game, which takes up six pages of seductive, explicit language: “Him: I want to feel your moans on my cock. Me: I want you to tease my belly, pussy and thighs until I am begging.

The sexting continued for a year until they met in a Manhattan hotel. They met a few times, had sex in all colors of the rainbow, then came back to sexting, but that too was now ruined by reflection—spiraling down into more sadness. They realized they could not have a normal relationship and broke up. “i have decided to give monogamy a try. This means the end for you and me in a sexual/textual way. i am deeply sad as i write this. we did so good. good love. another lifetime?” After months of agony, she starts to write up the story. “What I maybe miss most is being able to lapse into space land and fantasize about the sex with him.

(..) I want to say: was I real to you? (..)” We got to be magic together. But is magic even real? She ends: “Online dating is sad. Attending holidays and weddings alone is sad. Marriage, too, is sad but love, lust, infatuation— for a few moments I was not sad.”

Her tweets cover the spectrum from female sensibility to social anxiety: she despises modern life (“waking up today was a disappointment”, “staying alive is a lot of fucking pressure”), hates herself (“i wouldn’t fuck me”), is self-destructive (“a positive feeling can fuck you up forever”, “i don’t want to do what’s good for me”), never pretends

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<sup>36</sup> All quotes from the chapter “Help Me Not Be a Human Being,” in: Melissa Broder, *So Sad Today*, Scribe, London, 2016, pp. 29–36.

that life is better than it is (“i’m not moisturized, hydrated or full of self-love”), makes demands (“i don’t think we get the dick we think we deserve”, “don’t tell me about the science of the brain just tell me how to feel better”). *So Sad Today* registers the widely felt numbness (“can’t decide if i’m alive”, “my drug of choice is low self-esteem”), is addicted to instantaneous changes (“fell in love with 8 people in 10 minutes”), lives the inevitable (“horoscope: you shouldn’t text him but you will”), feels empty (“i’ve been awake 5 minutes and it’s already too much”) and judges others (“your positivity feels like a lie”), has suicidal tendencies (“i want to donate all my blood”), radicalizes human relationships (“being just friends is a nightmare”), is excellent in summarizing her ongoing short affairs (“loving you was an illness”), presenting her followers with a neverending stream of hypermodern dilemma’s (“should i eat, nap or masturbate: the musical”).<sup>37</sup>

Is Broder’s sadness merely a literary effect that gives synthetic love a human touch? Broder’s polyamorous relationship status is neither desperate nor liberating. There’s a brutal honesty in the way she describes her multiple sexual relationships that reminds us of Michel Houellebecq. Is Broder’s sadness merely a literary effect that gives synthetic love a human touch? We can contrast the Broder persona with the femme fatale in Amos Kollek’s 1997 film *Sue*, a tragic New York tale of a déclassé secretary who’s losing her job and apartment.<sup>38</sup> The medical metaphor of sex addiction in the movie here stands for economic decline. Two decades later there’s not a trace of victimhood or poverty in Melissa Broder’s work. The polyamorous lifestyle is already an integral part of the precarious condition. Instead of empathy, the cold despair invites us to see the larger picture of a society in permanent anxiety. If anything, Broder embodies Slavoj Žižek’s courage of hopelessness: “Forget the light at the end of the tunnel—it’s actually the headlight of a train about to hit us.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Mourning The Loss Of Communication**

The purpose of sadness design is, as Paul B. Preciado calls it, “the production of frustrating satisfaction.”<sup>40</sup> Should we have an opinion about internet-induced sadness? How can we address this topic without looking down on the online billions, without resorting to fast-food comparisons or patronizingly viewing the public as fragile beings that need to be liberated and taken care of.<sup>41</sup> I am with Italian design theorist Silvio Lorusso who writes:

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<sup>37</sup> Selected tweets from Melissa Broder’s @sosadtoday twitter account, May– July 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Thanks to Katharina Teichgräber for giving me the reference.

<sup>39</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Courage of Hopelessness*, Penguin, London, 2017, p. xi. He writes: “We have to gather the strength to fully assume the hopelessness.”

<sup>40</sup> Paul B. Preciado, *Testojunkie*, Feminist Press, New York, 2013, p. 304.

<sup>41</sup> Translation of a phrase from Hans Demeyer, “Uitgeput op drift, Over Mark Fisher,” *De Witte Raaf* 193, (mei-juni 2018). p. 5.



If design becomes just an expression of bureaucreativity hidden by an exhausting online and away-from-keyboard emotional labor, the refusal of work, of its bodily and cognitive dimension, should go hand in hand with the refusal of mandatory enthusiasm, of the positive disposition that such work requires. This is why my call for sadness is actually a plea for an emotional counterculture, a collective reaction against the occultation of material circumstances by means of artificial self-motivation. Fellow imposters, stop smiling and coalesce.<sup>42</sup>

Before we call, yet again, to overcome Western melancholy, it's important to study and deconstruct its mechanisms. In a design context, our aim would be to highlight "the process in which a designer focuses on the consequences of the current situation instead of dealing with the causes of a particular problem."<sup>43</sup>

We overcome sadness not through happiness, but rather, as Andrew Culp insisted, through a hatred of this world. Sadness occurs in situations where the stagnant "becoming" has turned into a blatant lie. We suffer, and there's no form of absurdism that can offer an escape. Public access to a twenty-first-century version of Dadaism has been blocked. The absence of surrealism hurts. What could our social fantasies look like? Are legal constructs such as creative commons and cooperatives all we can come up with? It seems we're trapped in smoothness, skimming a surface littered with impressions and notifications. The collective imaginary is on hold. What's worse, this banality itself is seamless, offering no indicators of its dangers and distortions. As a result, we've become subdued. Has the possibility of myth become technologically impossible? Instead of creatively externalizing our inner shipwrecks, we project our need for strangeness on humanized robots. The digital is neither new nor old, but—to use Culp's phrase—it will become cataclysmic when smooth services fall apart into tragic ruins. Faced with the limited possibilities of the individual domain, we cannot positively identify with the tragic manifestation of the collective being called social media. We can neither return to mysticism nor to positivism. The naïve act of communication is lost—and this is why we cry.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> <http://networkcultures.org/entreprefariat/the-designer-without-qualities/>.

<sup>43</sup> "Western Melancholy/ How to Imagine Different Futures in the Real World," <http://interakcije.net/en/2018/08/27/western-melancholy-how-toimagine-different-futures-in-the-real-world/#f3-2509>.

<sup>44</sup> See interview with George Didi-Huberman in *Liberation*, September 1, 2016, Tears are a Manifestation of Political Power, [www.liberation.fr/notes/debats/2016/09/01/georges-didi-huberman-les-larmes-sont-unemanifestation-de-la-puissance-politique\\_1476324](http://www.liberation.fr/notes/debats/2016/09/01/georges-didi-huberman-les-larmes-sont-unemanifestation-de-la-puissance-politique_1476324) (thanks to Marie Lechner for the reference).

## **Issue No 5: Interview With Geert Lovink**

Venice, May 10, 2019

Questions for Red Thread: Vlidi



**Red Thread:** Your 2019 book *Sad by Design* speaks about the general sense of the state of the world today, and particularly about how media technologies are created and implemented so to shape a particular image of reality and a specific sense of our participation in it. What would be your view of the current political landscape?

**Geert Lovink:** We see a lot of evidence that something like multipolar world is emerging through these new forms of authoritarianism, which are regional in nature. It's a new form of Empire, not one but a multitude of centers, and in that sense has nothing to do with the Cold War politics anymore. The legacy and procedures of Cold War is history now.

In order to develop these regional ambitions further, each ruling class would need to have much, much better grip on their own sphere of influence. It cannot really focus on the establishing of this networked regionalism because all the time it will be undermined by outside forces, thus wanting to strengthen the grip at home. But still I see none of these big regional players having yet a comprehensive plan for the tools of rule in the XXI century.

**RT:** Speaking about the ever-growing influence of social media over pretty much all the aspects of contemporary society, how do you see the development in our parts of the world?

**GL:** These things are happening, especially inside so-called national firewalls. Some of the states imply to introduce something like national social media platforms, rebuilding from scratch in comparison to the original Silicon Valley or Chinese version of these services. But there is no real overview if this is actually happening and if these surrogates ever reach a critical mass. We need to understand that what we have today is a PR war, and that today's PR wars have this under-layer of information or cyber warfare. In the cyber war the announcements of something like, for example, a national search engine or email service – explicitly described a kind of a national form of Gmail – could be both a smokescreen and a real thing. At the moment this is difficult to judge. The fact that we haven't heard about it ever since *may mean something, or not*; we should be careful not to ridicule this too much. But *it does*

*mean something* that we cannot distinguish between the two. This lack of orientation provides for new forms of introducing insecurity and uncertainty.

**RT:** By mentioning the disorientation and insecurity being introduced in both the public and the private discourse, do you refer to the phenomena of the rise of what is called “alt-right”? Media-wise, this new right seems quite inconsistent, quite bipolar. Wherever they climb towards power they argue for ever more media deregulation, while wherever the right wing takes the power, they resort to as heavy media regulation as possible. Is it that simple as “we will use the social media to get to the power, and then prevent everyone else of using it once we are there”? Such “disposable populism” perhaps makes sense on a purely pragmatic level, but presents an ideological paradox, or how would you see it?

**GL:** A lot of the fights today is around the question who owns the right Gramsci, who understands how to make this hegemonic claims in the best possible way. Originally it was about how to build this kind of what in the past was called “people’s front”, this historical coalition, or in Italian vocabulary, “historical compromise”, so that the left or whoever it was could, at least in part, take power and rule. But these days this logic has been completely coopted and privatized, it has been owned by the right-wing populism, who is reading Gramsci in their very own way. So it is difficult to answer your question...

You actually shouldn’t be asking me, but to consult Steve Bannon because he has explicitly gone into this paradox. Why should I answer on his behalf? He is the one who, in public, is thinking and philosophizing about this paradox. People need to understand that he works on both levels, in both directions, and these are obvious paradoxes. Peter Thiel is another one who is also very, very explicit in his open statements on these obvious contradictions. We should never underestimate their ability to think through the dialectics and dichotomies of today’s world.

**RT:** What would be the way forward from here, how to put progressive ideas back on the track and into the public discourse? Most of the people active around the issue would be artists and academics and similar, not union leaders or experienced activists. And most of such progressive efforts seem to still fail short of having much of the wider impact. What can art do better, or more?

**GL:** Most of the artistic strategies are not very useful in this, because they are symbolic gestures. And the real work with the documents like what investigative journalists do, we should leave that up to the real experts. What they need is our

support; we can build a kind of shield around them, a kind of framework, conceptual, aesthetic, technical framework, in order for them to do their job.

So please, get involved in the real stuff. You shouldn't stop writing essays or doing art, but it would be good to think less about symbolical gestures. A lot of artists can be involved in terms of mapping, producing visualizations and memes. There's plenty that can be done, from video to podcasts to digital publishing. Also, there are networks; to look into the international support systems for this type of work would be very useful.

**RT:** Symbolic gestures, or acts, can still be very important; as a difference from West, where all the words imaginable seem to already be on the wall (what is another problem, of making the words meaningless), somewhere else a single word can still bear a lot of importance. It can perhaps start a revolution, but more often gets people in jail, or worse.

**GL:** Maybe our task then is to build that protective shield around that one word on the wall. So it can have a maximum impact.

**RT:** So what it will take to get out of this situation, how to get organized? Do we need some powerful figures of leaders, or more articulate programs, or to use the media better? All of that?

**GL:** No. I think, first of all that we need the understanding that it should be some form of local or national version of what is elsewhere called a Rainbow Coalition. But the Rainbow Coalition is going to consist of colors that we may not really like. And this is the problem. As *Sad by Design*, the title essay of my book, is trying to communicate, the problem is in how the very choice is designed. We will stay sad—at least for a while. But there are things to learn from this techno-sadness. Radical empathy, to use the term by Douglas Rushkoff, may not be the latest and most effective political strategy, but is one powerful gesture. We should organize radical care, self-care, overcome the dependencies and create living support networks for ourselves and others.

## ***From the Archives: Vilém Flusser – 1988 Interview About Technical Revolution***

*On writing, complexity and technical revolutions, Interview by Miklós Peternák in Osnabrück, European Media Art Festival, September 1988*

**Vilém Flusser:**<sup>1</sup> I am here at Osnabrück for the following reason: I am impressed by the fact that one of the most important dimensions of the present cultural revolution is not sufficiently accentuated. Namely the fact that linguistic communication, both the spoken and the written word, are no longer capable of transmitting the thoughts and concepts we have concerning the world. New codes are being elaborated, and one of the most important codes is the code of technical images. So I came to Osnabrück to look at what those people are doing.

Let me explain a little bit what I mean. It has been clear for several centuries now that, if we want to understand the world, it is not sufficient to describe it by words: it is necessary to calculate it. So that science has had ever more recurrence to numbers, which are images of thoughts. For instance, the number two is an ideogram for the concept “pair” or “couple”. Now this ideographic code which is the code of numbers has been developed, in a very refined way, lately, by computers. Numbers are being transcoded into digital codes and digital codes are, themselves, being transcoded into synthetic images. So it is my firm belief that if you want to have a clear and distinct communication of your concepts, nowadays you have to use synthetic images and no longer words. And this is a veritable revolution in thinking. And I am very much interested in this, but I have to confess that, as far as my experience in Osnabrück is concerned, I haven’t seen much in this sense. The reason may be that people do not yet know how really to handle the new apparatus. Is that an answer to your question?

**Miklós Peternák:** It can be. Maybe you can say something regarding your book *Die Schrift*, about the development of concepts and ideas...

**Vilém Flusser:** “I try to say in this book, [*Die Schrift*, Göttingen: Immatrix Publications, 1987], the following: when alphabetical writing was invented, let’s say 3500 years ago, a total transformation of our – not only our experience, but even our action was involved. Before the invention of writing, traditional images were used as maps of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lyfOcAAcoH8>

The original transcript: **Baruch Gottlieb**

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We wish to express our gratitude to **Miklós Peternák** for helping us with this historical material.

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the world and the structure of images involves a specific way of looking at the world which is the mythical way. Now when alphabet was invented, mythical thought gave way to historical critical thought. Because the structure of linear writing is a uni-dimensional, un-directed line. So that, by and by, people started to think historically in a causal way, and in a critical way. Now that this line has been disrupted into points, now that discourse has been substituted by calculus, historical progressive thinking is being abandoned in favor of a new type of thinking which I would like to call, let's say, a systemic or a structural way of thinking. And so I believe that we are present and witness to a revolution which can be compared to the one which gave origin to history. In my terminology I say that before the invention of writing, people thought in a prehistoric way, and after the invention of the alphabet, historical consciousness was elaborated. And now we are in the process of elaborating a post-historical, structural way of thinking."

**Miklós Peternák:** In your lecture here, you made a distinction between the structural and functional complexity.

**Vilém Flusser:** That's quite right.

**Miklós Peternák:** Can we hear some more details about the idea?

**Vilém Flusser:** Yes. I think that systems can be complex in two senses. They can be structurally complex, for instance, there can be systems where the elements maintain a very complex relation with each other. But they can be also functionally complex, which means that if you use the system, you can use it in a complex way. Now those two complexities are independent one on the other. A structurally complex system may be functionally simple, like a television box which is a structure of almost impenetrable complexity, but the use of which is extremely simple. On the other hand, simple systems like the chess game can have very complex functional manipulations. It is a fact that functionally complex systems are a challenge to creative thought whereas functionally simple systems are stultifying, idiotic. Now the complex systems which now are coming about are complex in structural sense, whether they will be functionally complex or not depends on us. For the time being, those complex systems are being used for functionally simple uses, which is why the intellectual aesthetic and even ethical level of mankind is lowering. But, this is not the fault of the system, it's the fault of the users of the system. We may in time learn how to give a functional complexity to these structures, and this is what I am committed to.

**Miklós Peternák:** Do you think a discipline which we could call ‘philosophy of images’ or ‘theory of images’ exists, or it might develop?

**Vilém Flusser:** Yes, I think there is a long history to the philosophy of images, and most of it is negative; because due to our Greek and Jewish tradition, philosophy has a prejudice as far as images are concerned. It is the prejudice that an image is only a copy, a simulation of thought, so that either it is forbidden to make images, or images are being accepted with a great distrust. But I think this is now changing because the images no longer represent the world. Those new images are now the articulation of thought. They are not copies but projections, models, so a new attitude toward the image is necessary, and I think it is developing. Walter Benjamin was one of the first thinkers who articulated this and I believe that we are all in this tradition.

**Miklós Peternák:** Who are the scientists who, in this century, are working in this direction? Who are those scientists who are important for you, even if your ideas are not developing in the same direction?

**Vilém Flusser:** I can give you two names, on the one hand Roland Barthes, which to me is very important as I started from his thought, although I consider it totally wrong. And on the other hand, on the other extreme, Marshall McLuhan, who proposes an attitude toward the image which I consider fascistoid. I am absolutely against him, but still, it is a point of departure. May I mention a third thinker, Abraham Moles, who is a close friend of mine, and with whom I am in almost daily contact, but with whom I tend to disagree more and more. I would like to say the following, if I may. Every revolution, be it political, economic, social, or aesthetic, is in the last analysis a technical revolution. If you look at the big revolution through which mankind has gone, let’s say the Neolithic Revolution or the revolution of Bronze Age, or the Iron Age, or the Industrial Revolution, every revolution is, in fact, a technical revolution. So is the present one. But there is one difference. So far, techniques have always simulated the body. For the first time, our new techniques simulate the nervous system. So that this is for the first time, a really, if you want to say so, a really immaterial, and to use an older term, spiritual revolution. I think that it is important to say this in your context.

**Miklós Peternák:** Thank you.

## Red Thread

Red Thread is a platform for collaboration and knowledge sharing in social and cultural theory.

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The project Red Thread is envisioned as an active network and platform for exchange of knowledge and collaboration of artists, curators, social scientists, theorists and cultural operators from the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus, North Africa, and beyond. It aims to create and widely disseminate new knowledge about paradigmatic socially engaged art practices in a wide geopolitical context, thus challenging the predominance of Western narratives in official art histories and exhibition making. Through initiating research, meetings, panel discussions and an active online site for exploring both historical and contemporary approaches that deepen and challenge broader relations of art and society, Red Thread intends to reopen the issues of joint modernist legacies and histories between various so-called “marginal” regions, and attempts to create new approaches to deal with questions of auto-histories, self-positioning and reinterpretation of art history.

The title of the project indicates a critical cultural and artistic engagement that has been present in the peripheral zones of the European modernistic project in different conceptual manifestations since the 1960s, when the crisis of the project of Western monolith high modernism in its relation to ideas of social progress became apparent. Metaphorical meaning of the expression ‘red thread’ suggests not only way out of labyrinth, but also a fragile, elastic link between different intellectual, social and artistic experimentations that share a desire for social change and the active role of culture and art in this process.

Red Thread is conceived as a possibility for starting a long-term communication and establishing new international platforms for artists and cultural workers from the regions considered to be part of supposedly shrinking but still corporeally very real geographical margins. Even if today one feels that there is no region excluded from the international art circuit, there still remains the issue of control, the unresolved and continuing play of inclusion and exclusion. In that respect, focusing primarily on regions of the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and North Africa, the project is conceived as an active site for rethinking the questions of production, definition, and presentation of the artwork and the artists’ identity in the globalized (art)world. It will explore the rules of conduct established in the Western art system, and question how the circulation and reception of information is regulated and how we can (and can we really) challenge it.

All texts published in the Red Thread e-journal will be available in English and Turkish, as well as in the original language in which they were written. In addition to new contributions, each issue of the e-journal will contain a number of already existing texts from the region that were previously available only in their original language and thus inaccessible for a wider international audience.

Red Thread is initiated by WHW (what, how and for whom) and Osman Kavala in 2009 as part of 11th Istanbul Biennial.

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