



# **machete**

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## Margin of Utility

### The Politics of Nature

Natural disasters are often perceived as moments of uniform human suffering. Largely unpredictable and uncontrollable, they occur as part of indifferent movements in the earth's surface and atmosphere. They occasion, moreover, in the human environment we're all familiar with, the rapid appearance of media vultures, which hastily hover overhead to give panoramic views of death and destruction. These images of disaster convey, with rare exceptions, a relatively singular message: "Here is the unavoidable human carnage left in the trail of the awesome and cruel powers of the natural world."

And yet, as the media vultures spiral overhead, soon to disappear after the carnage is buried and gone, one has to ask if this is all simply the result of the cold and indifferent forces of "nature." In an era of growing awareness of man-made climate change, we can begin to work for a more astute understanding of the ways in which human agency is intertwined with the transformations of nature.

Unfortunately, however, this awareness has often been capped by a relatively shortsighted moral imperative: recycle and buy green to save the planet! This imperative, though surely important at a certain level, has the corporate benefit of being readily amenable to marketing campaigns, as we have seen with the greenification of the billboard industry in which the world's most infamous polluters are now suddenly "green" and coal can miraculously become "clean."



Moreover, the emphasis on consumerism is rarely remarked upon. Not only can individuals save the planet by buying more things, but the emphasis is on the

## Untitled (Notes on the Graphic Unconscious)

The idea of a graphic unconscious in modern critical theory can most straightforwardly be traced to Walter Benjamin's brief essay on "The Mimetic Faculty," where he notes that "graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it." The idea appears relatively straightforward: our handwriting reveals elements of our mental life through the form of our writing which do not necessarily come across in the content of our words. It builds on basic Freudian insights, as well as an early 20th century "science" of mind which looked to understand the relationship between our conscious faculties and our ability to control our inner desires. Against the Cartesian revolution which attempted to banish doubt of internal thought processes, these sciences (of somnambulation, hypnosis, etc.) sought to reconcile the presumed necessity of an enlightened subject for good governance with the obvious fact that the vast majority of our mental processes lay beyond our control.

As such, the relatively simple idea of a graphic unconscious has rather explosive implications. The writing subject, (which is to say, the revolutionary subject of the Declaration of Independence or the Declaration of the Rights of Man) supposedly capable of persuasion, reasoned argument, and so forth, is betrayed by the very form of writing. The evolution of printing presses should have, at some level, obviated this problem. By hiding the hidden – that is, by concealing what handwriting would reveal – the printed word allows for a degree of standardization that makes rational subject formation possible. (Even mistakes here become encoded: we speak of typos and not Freudian slips in typing, although "slipping" is precisely what the fingers do when they type a word differently than the one consciously intended.) In the ancient philosophical quarrel between speaking presence and written word, the two come to coincide with the removal of the unconscious in the typed word which appears equally in official print media and the teleprompted speeches of today's politicians.

It is important, then, that Philagrafika's 2010 exhibition, "The Graphic Unconscious," draws its title from a different moment in the work of Walter Benjamin:

Walter Benjamin proposed an interesting analogy in his essay, A Small History of Photography (1931): "It is through photography that we first discover the existence of th[e] optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis." Let us ask a provocative question: Is there a print unconscious? If so, where does it lie? Just as printed materials have become so ubiquitous in our daily visual culture that they pass unnoticed, so too have print processes become an integral part of art-making without being acknowledged. Can the ethos of printmaking serve as a framework for understanding contemporary artistic production? Can a close reading of the realm of contemporary art from the perspective of print help illuminate, in some way, our understanding of the world?

To speak of a "graphic unconscious" here is not to speak of what is revealed in the psychoanalytic slips of personality, but rather in what the social matrix itself obscures in the very move to print culture. The conceptual formulation of the show

thus owes as much to Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* as it does to Benjamin. The question here is not the psychoanalytic moment of individual psychology, but rather the functional repressions, disavowals and slippages of society at large. Indeed, this does not remove the individual, it only forces us to confront the personal psyche as a worm in the blood of a vast (and often prosthetic) social organism.



Consider, as an example, Sue Coe's daring piece, *Helping Hands*, which appears amidst a number of excellent works currently on display at the Print Center. Coe displays the much mediated images of post-earthquake Haiti in a virulent black and white that shows in many ways the graphic and political unconscious of the tragedy. The graphic element is the way these images are stripped of their unconscious in media representations. Anderson Cooper covered in blood and soot, Pat Robertson covered in mania, Tom Hanks in self-righteousness. Each, in their own way, reaches out a hand to Haiti under the banner of "help" (indeed even Robertson), but it is never clear what the actual (unconscious) intention of those hands are. For whom or in whose space does one speak? What unspoken desires mingle with the ostensible need to send money and help Haiti? How does the notion of help obscure the figure of "helping" the native which underwrote the colonial decimation of Haiti for the past four centuries, continuing through the ousting of the democratically elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide in 2004? At the same time, what genuine outreach (most obviously that of Paul Farmer), might offer a democratic, infrastructural form of help? What methods of learning to help are there still to be employed?

These forms of domination or genuine concern or apathy or empathy or love or racism that might appear in the graphological unconscious, which are erased in the modern media, are enabled to reappear in Coe's work. One need not make here some grandiose statement on the viability or necessity of print culture in such an environment. Nor is it necessarily to unduly laud an artistic representation when the real work remains on the ground and in the backrooms of local and global governance. But the specificity of the graphic unconscious here, at the very least, allows for a conversation to happen which is otherwise repressed daily by the repeated calls for an "apolitical" discourse to help those in need.

- Avi Alpert

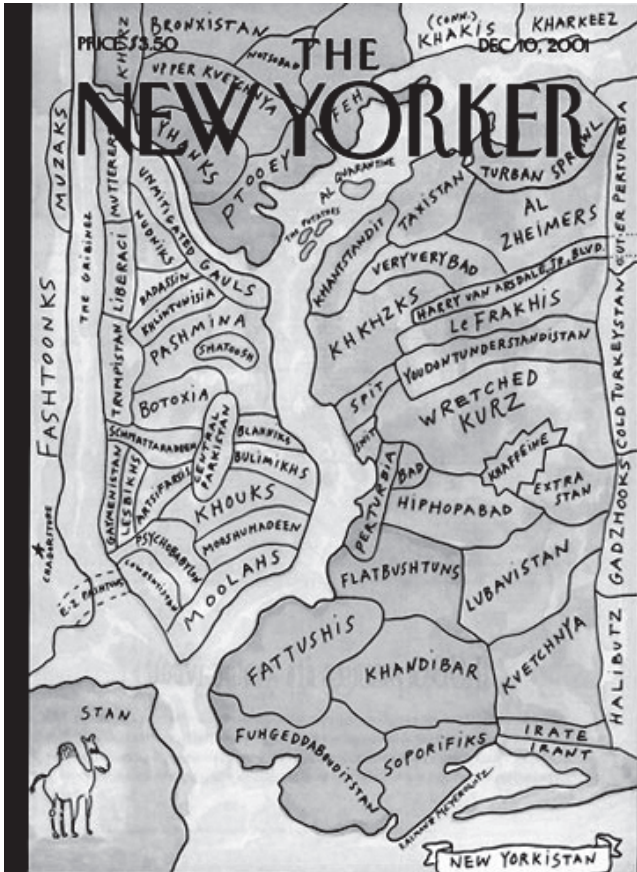


# Limits of Triviality

For the first major museum survey of her work, Maira Kalman has transformed one of the rooms in the Institute for Contemporary Art into a unique cabinet de *curiosité*. Various works on paper, embroideries and quotations create a visual tapestry on the walls surrounding a heteroclite assortment of chairs, ladders, suitcases, buckets, shoes, paint rags, display cases and tables teaming with lists, bobby pins, balls of string, children's books and assorted paraphernalia. Unlike the intriguing oddities of 19th-century collections, which often ranged from natural history to geology, ethnography and archeology, Kalman's collection is a testament to our culture, to the everyday existence of the contemporary world.



If the first glance at this heteroclite assortment of objects were not enough to call into question the category “fine art,” the motley activities of the artist herself would surely succeed in dismantling the hierarchies that continue to plague the art world. For even the most avant-garde attempts to overcome the divide between high and low art very often slip into a performative contradiction precisely because they rely on ‘noble’ aesthetic practices (video, performance, etc.) to call into question the very distinction between ‘noble’ and ‘ignoble’ arts. Kalman not only avoids this contradiction, she seemingly disregards the hierarchies of aesthetic practices by moving fluidly between painting, illustration, embroidery, installation, citation, design, etc. She also seamlessly navigates between a clear preoccupation with art history (Matisse, Magritte, Cartier-Bresson), and a playful engagement with contemporary culture (keenly illustrated by the “Newyorkistan” cover for the *New Yorker* three months after September 11, 2001).



This exhibit confronts us with what authors such as Danto and Rancière have theorized as the contradiction of the commonplace: if art succeeds

in abolishing its structural hierarchies by becoming identical with the commonplace, it ultimately destroys its identity *qua* art. Therefore, it is worth asking whether or not the art of the commonplace is destined to failure: either it remains on the side of art and is never commonplace enough, or it finally succeeds in becoming commonplace but at the price of destroying its identity as art.

This conundrum extends well beyond Kalman's exhibit, and two of the three citations that preside over it recall the heritage that she is keenly aware of. Let us take the poignant example of the quote from Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*: "as if the fullness of the soul did not sometimes overflow in the emptiest metaphors, since no one can ever give the exact measure of his needs, nor of his conceptions, nor of his sorrows; and since human speech is like a cracked tin kettle, on which we hammer out tunes to make bears dance when we long to move the stars." The new context that Kalman invents for this quote seems to suggest a partial response to the contradiction highlighted above: human passion is always funneled through the triteness of the quotidian, and all we have are the cracked kettles that we have accumulated through our personal travels. In other words, art is nothing more than the commonplace act of sculpting an existence out of the everyday things we have inherited.

And yet, it is Maira Kalman's doodling that makes it into a museum, and Flaubert's writings that have been canonized. Taken independently, some of Kalman's work is distinctly unremarkable (especially when contrasted with pieces like *C.L.U.E.* by A.L. Steiner + robbinschilds in the contemporaneous exhibit, "Dance with Camera").



Indeed, Kalman's *cabinet de curiosité* is light and airy, and is much less captivating than slightly amusing. The question that remains after a relatively un-engaging visit to the show is: what—if any—are the limits of triviality? And why does this assortment of trivialities merit the spotlight of a museum whereas others do not? Since the message of the exhibit seems to be that there is art in the trivialities of our everyday lives, the transition between the entrance and exit of the museum is as smooth as it is voluntary.

- Theodore Tucker

flow of commodities: consume and recycle (instead of re-use or don't use so that you can stop buying...).

This shortsighted moral environmentalism, in spite of its friendly face and benign demeanor, can have the cruel consequence of masking the deep political and economic causes at work behind the destruction of the environment. Indeed, it can act as a stage prop to distract from the rampant pillaging of the natural world, as we have recently seen in the Copenhagen charade.

From Coca-Cola's Copenhagen Campaign that canvassed the climate summit with the message of hope in a bottle to Obama's soaring rhetoric that once again put bows and ribbons on "business as usual," this colossal failure marked by back-room deals sidelined frank discussions concerning the economico-political interests behind the continued sacking of the environment. Evo Morales was one of the few world leaders to take a serious stance on climate change, and in the wake of Copenhagen he has decided to summon the First World Conference of the People on Climate Change in order to include indigenous peoples, social movements, environmentalists and scientists in the decision-making process.



The natural world, in spite of what the media vultures suggest, cannot be separated from the social, political and economic world. Although this should be clear in the case of climate catastrophes, it might appear to be less obvious in the case of earthquakes. The recent calamity in Haiti should serve to dispel any doubts. Indeed, the earthquake itself was not produced, as far as we know, by man-made changes to the environment. However, the results to the earthquake and the world's reaction to it are tightly intertwined with social, political and economic factors.

If the destruction and death toll were so massive (perhaps as many as 200,000 people died), it is in part due to poorly constructed homes



and the progressive urbanization of the poor. Before falling prey to the rampant stereotypes concerning the unorganized and uncivilized nature of the “developing world,” we would be wise to remind ourselves that a significant portion of the concrete buildings had to be built without steel reinforcement and that the population of Port-au-Prince has skyrocketed to 2 million due to the influx of the desperately poor from the countryside. To fully understand this situation, light needs to be shed on the fault line lying deep beneath the recent earthquake: the fault line of American imperialism in Haiti.

From 1957 to 1986, the U.S. supported the corrupt dictatorships of Papa Doc Duvalier and then Baby Doc Duvalier (according to some estimates, Haiti owes \$1.3 billion in external debt and 40% of it is due to the U.S.-backed Duvaliers). Baby Doc opened the Haitian economy to U.S. capital in the 1970s and 1980s, and American agricultural imports flooded the market, destroying peasant agriculture. Hundreds of thousands of people flocked to the slums of Port-au-Prince to work in the sweatshops located in U.S. export processing zones.

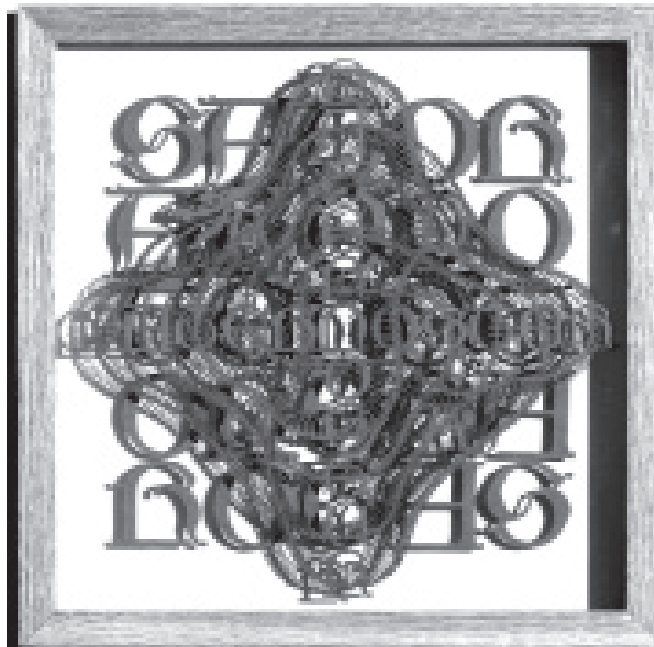
Haitians drove the Duvaliers from power and eventually elected Jean-Bertrand Aristide as president on a platform of land reform, reforestation, peasant aid, infrastructure investment, increased wages and union rights for sweatshop workers. However, the government of George H. W. Bush backed a coup that ousted Aristide the very same year of his election (1991).



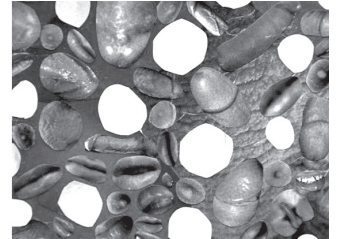
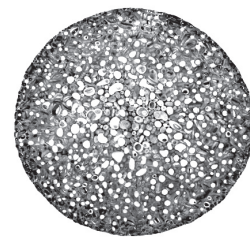
Although Bill Clinton sent troops to Haiti to restore Aristide to power in 1994, it was on the condition that he implement the U.S. neoliberal plan. Since he never fully cooperated, the U.S. eventually imposed an economic embargo on the country, driving workers and peasants deeper and deeper into poverty. Finally, George W. Bush's government collaborated with Haiti's ruling elite in 2004 to back death squads that toppled the

## Let us Not Pine After an Absent God

*Unveil* at Tiger Strikes Asteroid (January 8-29, 2010) gather together a number of complimentary and, as I will hope to show, conflicting attempts to investigate the contemporary power of the art object or image to disclose, unveil or unconceal. And the exhibition purposely leaves obscure precisely what art unveils. Whereas for Corey Antis, unveiling has distinctly phenomenological connotations, investigating the manner in which painting unveils unveiling as such, in Ben Pranger's sculptures the notion of unveiling is cast in prophetic tones: both secular, as in his interest in the scientific messianism of Buckminster Fuller, and sacred, as in his reference to the Book of Revelations. However, for my purposes here I would like to simply focus on the problematic dialectic that emerges between the sacred and profane notions of unveiling in Hunter Stabler's *Sator Square*, Adam Parker Smith's collages and Dona Ruff's *Aureola Series*.



Hunter Stabler's *Sator Square* seems paradigmatic, precisely because of its mock sophistication, of a contemporary impulse that fetishizes craft and invests in the hand made a redemptive force. The intricacy and complexity of Stabler's cut-paper does not serve a merely decorative function. The various cuts, twists, and folds in the design serve to unfold a latent, invisible mystery—the mystery in this case of the *Sator Square*. Without going into the archeological record in detail, this ancient graffiti, whose earliest appearance is traced back to 79 AD, is a Latin palindrome that spells out *Rotas Opera Tenet Arepo Sator* (the sower [Farmer] Arepo has [as] works wheels [a plough]). Since the palindrome itself contains the anagram *Pater Nostra* (the Lord's Prayer) that can be made into the Greek cross, the remaining letters, A and O, letters symbolizing *alpha* and *omega*, some interpreters have suggested that it functioned as an early code that enabled early Christians to clandestinely announce their presence to other Christians. Due to these esoteric connotations, the *Sator Square* has entered into folk traditions and contemporary new age spirituality as a magical talisman capable of warding off calamity. Isn't the suggestion here that art is itself a talisman, drawing on hidden forces which exceed the understanding? Is art a cipher for esoteric, hidden meaning? The artist a shaman? Stabler might indeed be exposing the manner in which decorative gestures have substituted for religious palliatives. However, I fear that it is precisely for such a palliative that the piece longs. In stark contrast to Stabler's reactionary attempt to invest the decorative with an esoteric use-value, Adam Parker Smith's collages depict a profane universe stripped of any sacred meaning where consumption depends upon libidinal investment.



Salami is cruelly literal in this regard and *Hella Diamonds* is a close second. Whereas the literal in *Sator Square* served to initiate the viewer into an esoteric depth, with Smith's vision we have no comforting exit from the piteous colonization of our desire by the commodity. Such truths, however, by no means provide an echo of a complex and vulnerable universe, as the news release suggest. Rather these collages seem to expose a universe buried, if I may borrow a formulation of Jacques Rancière, beneath the rubbish of its frenzied consumption. But to



expose that this is indeed our universe hardly goes far enough. The work clearly capitalizes precisely on the grotesque and abject spectacle that it purports to unveil without the hysteria that one finds in Paul McCarthy or Jason Rhodes, or the unparalleled cynicism of Jeff Koons. Donna Ruff's *Aureola Series* would appear to chart a middle ground between the sacred and profane. Her tasteful abstractions we are instructed allude to Afghani gold and Islamic art (traditions of which I am woefully ignorant). The title, however, clearly centers the series within the legacy of Christian art works (aureola refers to the golden cloud surrounding for the most part the Godhead in Christian paintings). This melding of eastern and western traditions could indeed be read as symptomatic of the ease with which the late liberal subject appropriates the foreign in a blind and dehistoricized manner, following the dictates of her “good taste.” However, when looking at these paintings, I could not but conjure up images of the aerial views of Afghanistan's rugged terrain and the geometrical patterns that take shape in the paintings began to remind me of targets, of geographical coordinates that chart out territories that either await or have been bombed. If such an hypothesis is tenable, the work assumes an explosive new dimension. Ruff's paintings would then establish an analogy between the process of abstraction that leads the liberal subject to extract decorative elements from the Islamic and Afghani tradition and the technological, geographical and cultural abstraction required of the bombardier or the new breed of gamer that remotely incinerates villages by unmanned drones. We would then glimpse that art cannot indeed be neutral and that every document of civilization is indeed a document of barbarism.

-Alexi Kukuljevic



# The Poor Rich\*

IN THE PAST, the operation of great wealth has often been to free its possessors from ignoble pursuits and low company and to impose on them a sense of public responsibility. Today that tendency has been reversed.

By far the majority of the rich are daily drudges in the same mills as the go-getters who are still on the make, and they work tirelessly at tasks which render the operation of their wealth and power as uncontrollable as that of any other marketeer. Thus, it may very well be that the effect of mass production and consumption is really to bring about a practical rather than a theoretic communism. When men and women have been transformed into replaceable parts by competitive success drives, and have become accustomed to the consumption of uniform products, it is hard to see where any individualism remains. Certainly the sense of personal or private property has become very weak in these circumstances. And the fanatic defenders of private enterprise are mainly those corporation bureaucrats who manipulate the savings of an anonymous crowd of invisible investors.

In practice, then, the very rich today are bureaucrats in their various monopolistic empires of soap, oil, steel, cars, movies, newspapers, magazines, and so on. And they have the minds of bureaucrats. They are timid, cautious conformists. Like anybody else, they accept the doctrine that economic success is rewarded by the power to conform.

Playing the money for all the consumer goods, they have arrived. And at that point the success code plays them false. There are no more trees to climb. Having arrived at the top, they find no plateau on which to arrange a spacious and useful existence. As men at the top, they inherit a code of work and play no different from Tom's, Dick's, and Harry's down below them. The English or European businessman, once at the top, used to shift his mode of existence to the squirarchical in a generation or two. He could use his leisure in politics, scholarship, or in patronizing artists directly and personally. But not so today. For us it is the process of arriving that has meaning, not the positive content of possessing ourselves and of enriching our experience and that of others through our wealth and leisure.

This, then, is the dilemma of the behaviorist, the child of Calvinist forebears who saw not in wealth but in the process of acquiring wealth the surest means of defeating the devil's power over idle hands. (See H. H. Tawney's *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*.) Having lost the Calvinist's motive, we are left only with his behavior patterns.

Consider the plight of the children of the rich. How can they go their parents one better and earn a good conscience for having come up the hard way? Life is dull for these children who cannot share the collective passion of

those who hope to be rich. The speed, the struggle, the one-man fury are not for them. In *Time and Free Will*, Henri Bergson puts this question: Suppose some mischievous genius could so manage things that all the motion in the universe were doubled in speed, and everything happened twice as fast as at present? How could we detect this fraud by which we would be deprived of half our lives? Easily, said Bergson. We could recognize the impoverishment of our conscious lives. The contents of our minds would be reduced.

Apply that criterion to those caught in the success trap, where speed is of the essence. What is the state of their minds? What is the content of their lives? Do they not rather despise anybody who pauses long enough to acquire a mental content from reflection or to win a wisdom which will only cut down his speed in making for the goal? And is it strange that those who travel so fast and so light should arrive in a nude and starving condition?

The very conditions of success render the rich suspicious of those failures whom they might be expected to assist. They have no training or taste which would enable them to select struggling artists or writers who might be worthy of aid, in these matters, therefore, they work through the dealers in old pictures or distribute many tiny gratuities through bureaucratic

foundations which are run on the most finicky, academic lines. This, of course, overlooks these endowments for hospitals and libraries which are intended as family monuments. And it is not true to say that the rich are 'parsimonious'. The point here is simply that they are timid and unresourceful in a way which stands in stark contrast to the zip and push that has put them where they are.

The relative helplessness, social isolation, and irresponsibility of the rich highlights the same situation among those who are striving toward that goal. The circumstances of the struggle insure that the winners will arrive in no condition to enjoy their advantages.

Except in an economic sense, the rich do not even form a class, as, for example, the "film colony" does. So that when distinguished foreigners come to America they naturally seek the company of movie stars rather than of the wealthy. The stars have a personal symbolic relation to the currents of national life which the remote and anonymous figures of celestial finance do not. The stars are distinct individuals wearing human masks that represent some aspect of the collective dream. But the rich are dim and obscure, sharing the tastes and make-up of the very people above whom they have risen, and yet deprived of the satisfactions of mass solidarity in an egalitarian society. -Herbert Marshall McLuhan

(\*article originally published in *The Mechanical Bride* 1951)



government and deported Aristide. The United Nations sent troops to occupy Haiti, and the puppet government of Gérard Latortue was established to pursue Washington's neoliberal agenda. Latortue's regime dismantled Aristide's mild reforms and helped to continue the pattern of impoverishment and degradation of urban infrastructure.

René Préval, a longtime Aristide ally, was elected in 2006, but he has largely bowed to U.S. pressure and failed to address the growing social crisis. In fact, many argue that Haiti is now controlled by NGOs and their foreign investors (Haiti has the largest per capita presence of NGOs in the world). The real decisions, some have claimed, are made by the imperial powers and implemented by select NGOs.

The massive destruction and death resulting from the recent earthquake in Haiti needs to be situated in this larger, socio-political and economic perspective. If we fall prey to the media vultures and simply lament the immediate suffering and assume that "we're all equal before nature," we lose sight of the deep fault lines that have been pushing Haiti into a social and economic abyss. Although it is absolutely essential to provide much needed aid (rather than military build-up) to the Haitians, it is only by addressing these deep fault lines that we can allow Haiti to rebuild itself with its foundations free from imperialist fault lines.

- Etienne Dolet



# Michael Haneke and *The White Ribbon*

‘When did the gaze collapse?’

‘Before TV took precedence.’

‘Took precedence over what? Current events?’

‘Over life.’

‘Yes. I feel our gaze has become a program under control, subsidized. The image, the only thing capable of denying nothingness, is also the gaze of nothingness on us.’

- Jean-Luc Godard’s *Eloge de L’Amour*

In many ways, Michael Haneke stands virtually alone in contemporary cinema. One of the most divisive and controversial filmmakers working today, what has set Haneke apart from other cinematic provocateurs is the consistency with which his provocations have remained committed to a rigorous and unflinching critique of contemporary Western culture. Philosophically rooted in the modern German tradition of Nietzsche-Freud-Marx and its development in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, in particular Adorno, Haneke’s critical vision is as ambitious in scope as it is

life, but then to present it cinematically in such a way that it becomes unsettlingly unfamiliar as the violence and structural oppression beneath the surface of everyday reality reveals itself.

This approach is frequently punctuated by a sudden shock-moment in which we are ripped out of the onscreen narrative and confronted with the fact that we are experiencing a cinematic image, a constructed reality. These include the horrific scenes in *Code Unknown* that are then revealed to be dubbing sessions, the unease created by the mysterious videotapes in *Caché*, and of course the infamous fourth-wall shattering ‘rewind’ scene in *Funny Games*. The effectiveness of these shock-moments is wholly dependant on Haneke’s mastery as a realist – it is the sudden betrayal of the impeccably achieved naturalism that produces their unsettling power. Such moments make explicit what is implied throughout the rest of the films; for Haneke, realism always presents a double bind, it is always ‘realism’, a construction of reality that he challenges us

fanaticism leave room only for cruelty and violence, whether in rebellion or in acquiescence. It is surely meant as a kind of parable not only for the German descent into fascism that occurs in the years immediately following those portrayed in the film but also for our own contemporary age of terrorism.

As such it is certainly of interest, and one can imagine why Haneke might be interested in exploring his usual themes in a different historical setting, thereby broadening the critique of Western culture. And yet, removing this critique from the present comes at a cost. The effectiveness of Haneke’s naturalistic approach is considerably dampened when it is removed from a contemporary context. The tension he has become such a master at generating, which is rooted in the ontological uncertainty between image and reality as it is experienced both onscreen and in contemporary life, and which is the explosive core of his aesthetic, is necessarily absent from *The White Ribbon*, set as it is in a period preceding the age of the image.



attentive to the (often toxic) minutia of the present. Crucial to this critique, as well as to Haneke’s bold, austere aesthetic, is his ruthless acknowledgment of the degree to which contemporary life is inseparable from the influence of the cinema, television and the culture of media images in general. There is perhaps no major filmmaker today, aside from Godard, who has fused such a sophisticated and original cinematic practice with such a brazenly polemical insistence on implicating the culture of images in a sustained critique of contemporary culture as a whole.

There is a contradiction at the heart of Haneke’s cinema that is not often remarked upon. Cinematically his pedigree is almost exclusively the high modernist tradition of mid-century European auteurs: Antonioni, Godard, Passolini, Bunuel, and his most eagerly acknowledged influence, Bresson. However, stylistically Haneke is a staunch realist. There is nothing in Haneke’s cinema like Bresson’s idiosyncratically austere use of non-professional ‘models’, and certainly nothing of the unique idiom of essayistic montage Godard has developed. With every element of his films – the acting, the dialogue, the photography, the settings, the sound and music – Haneke favors a strictly naturalistic approach. His stylizations reveal themselves mostly in his predilection for fragmentation (of narrative and mise-en-scene), as well his deft experiments with duration (shots held well past the point of comfort). His basic approach is to reproduce the texture and details of contemporary

to acknowledge as such, even as he continues seducing us with his skill as a realist, tempting us to accept the seemingly flawless reality uncritically and then punishing us when we succumb to these temptations. In this way, the usually conservative impulse toward conventional naturalism ends up producing radical social critique in Haneke’s hands.

His acclaimed new film *The White Ribbon* won the Palm D’Or at the Cannes Film Festival last year and was recently nominated for a Best Foreign Film Oscar. Indeed, it is an easy film to admire, featuring superb performances, stunning black and white photography, a subtle and original script, unsettling themes, etc. In many ways, it is very much in keeping with his previous work. It examines systemic violence, repression, and social oppression, and illustrates the ways these are passed on from one generation to the next – it could be viewed as a kind of thematic counterpart to *Caché*. The difference is that unlike all of Haneke’s other features, *The White Ribbon* is not set in the contemporary world. The film takes place in a village in the Austro-Hungarian Empire unsettled by a series of mysterious violent incidents in the years preceding the outbreak of World War One. It is a chilling portrait of a community locked in a deteriorating cycle of Nietzschean *resentiment*, a psychologically and philosophically lacerating illustration of the ways in which injustice, inequality and exploitation breeds hatred and repression, and of the ways in which moral authoritarianism and ideological

Haneke’s previous film before *The White Ribbon* was *Funny Games*, his critically reviled and commercially unsuccessful American shot-for-shot remake of his controversial 1997 German film of the same name. Haneke’s quasi-sadistic method of critique reaches its apotheosis in *Funny Games*, which takes the self-betraying and untenable ‘game’ of cinematic realism as its structuring principal and mounts an almost unbearable polemic on the relationship between violence and the image in a culture saturated by both. It is not surprising that such an openly confrontational film failed to engage American audiences and critics, and so it is understandable, if perhaps disappointing, that after this attempt at mainstream subversion proved commercially unsuccessful (and failed to receive the serious critical appraisal it deserved), Haneke has decided to retreat to the safer shores of an art-house period piece, which, for all its unsettling power and meticulous realization, ultimately lets viewers contemplate a fable about the roots of evil from a comfortable distance.

*The White Ribbon* may well be a masterpiece – but is it the kind of masterpiece we need? I, for one, will hold out hope that after basking in the justly deserved establishment praise, Haneke will return to his more crucial role as a divisive polemicist and critic of the present.

- Mike Vass



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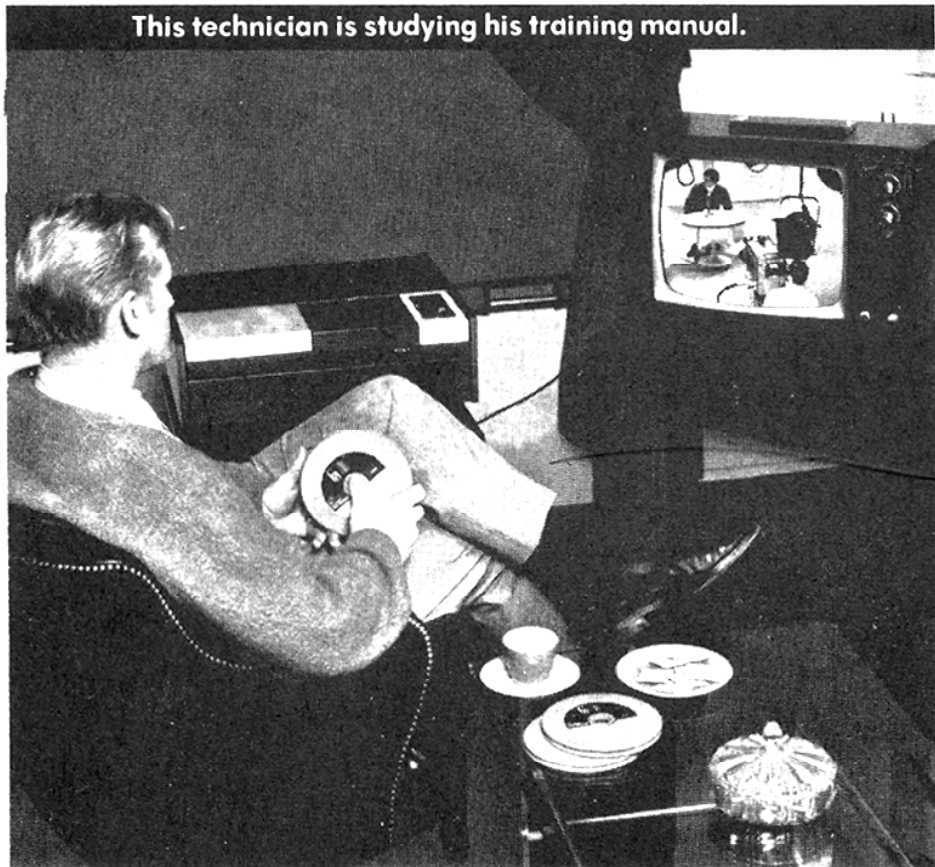
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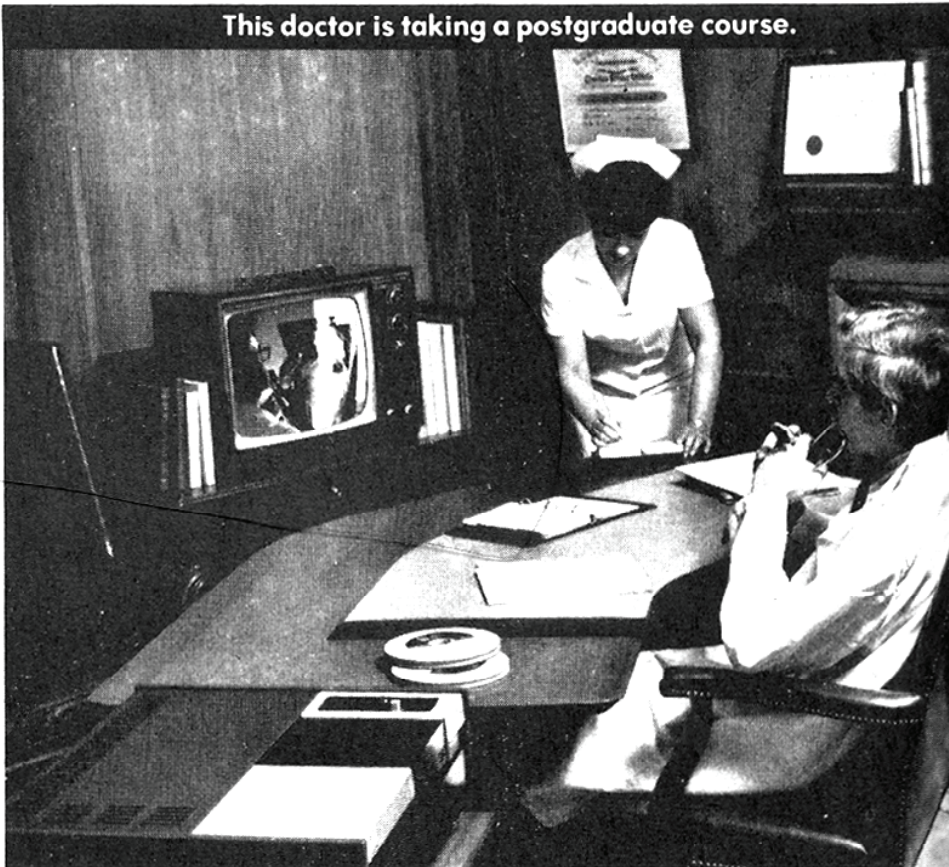
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# Machete Interview with Cornel West

## First Installment

### The Flickering Light of Performative *Paideia*... in the Night of the American Empire

**Gabriel Rockhill:** An overview of your work to date gives less a sense of sharp turns or breaks than an impression of intellectual intensification. I mean by this that the majority of your fundamental concerns have been present from your very first publications: prophetic pragmatism, radical historicism, genealogy, the critique of nihilism, black cultural democracy, race matters, and social critique. In looking back over your work to date, do you have the same impression? How would you explain your intellectual itinerary from your current perspective? How do you see your research projects evolving in the immediate future?

**Cornel West:** I think you're right about intensification, and I think that when you actually look at what I have done over twenty-five years now, since 1982, it certainly began with a deep sense of existential scars, ontological wounds and psychic bruises of white supremacy. At the core of my work is the issue of what it means to be human and living in a situation where you encounter the absurd as an American in America because you're dealing with these scars, bruises and wounds and yet determined to respond, to resist, to critique, to make some sense out of it. That's why Kierkegaard has always meant so very much to me, because here is somebody who's wrestling with the absurd in the sense of his own thorn in his flesh. Of course, I had a different thorn than he did, but we're both human. I grew up in a segregated America, segregated California, and tried to come to terms with what it means to be human, but my initial encounter was with this white supremacy bombardment. Now from there, of course I would go on to engage in a much larger critical analysis of American empire, capitalist modes of production, patriarchal modes of domination, homophobic modes of degradation, but it was that encounter with white supremacy that sat at the centre. And then there was also the deep prophetic Christian foundation for me, which has always been the launching pad for my conversations with Marxism, pragmatism, various forms of radical historicism, even radical forms of radical humanism (I would consider people like Erich Auerbach and Edward Said humanists from whom I've learned much, though neither one would be in any way Marxist).

**GR:** Given this existential source of your engagement, why was it important for you to articulate your struggle in a philosophic trajectory?

**CW:** Well I just felt that one has to be in conversation with the most sophisticated voices, the most refined viewpoints, and as I matriculated through college I was deeply, deeply affected by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Marx, Lukács, and Simmel. These writers and thinkers constituted not just a challenge to my own sense of wrestling with the absurd in the form of trying to make sense of the white supremacist bombardment coming at me, but they also reflected on *paideia*, which I take very seriously, this deep sense of cultivating a self and a maturation of the soul, and an attempt to somehow generate an energy, an agency, an effort, some kind of resistance before one dies.

**GR:** How does the intertwining of this existential dimension and the philosophic dimension relate to your own discursive strategies and your ability to adeptly navigate between publications that are primarily for the erudite audience of the intelligentsia and less scholarly writing that touch the larger public?

**CW:** I think that for me the deepest existential source of coming to terms with the white supremacist bombardment was music. And I think, in some ways, that this is true for black America as a whole, from spirituals and blues through jazz, rhythm and blues, and even up to hip hop. From the very beginning, I always conceived of myself as aspiring to be a bluesman in a world of ideas and a jazzman in the life of the mind. And what is distinctive about using blues and jazz as a kind of model or source of intellectual inspiration is to be flexible and fluid and improvisational, multi-dimensional, finding one's own voice but deploying that voice in a variety of different contexts, a variety of different discursive strategies, a variety of different modes of rhetorical persuasion as well as logical argumentation in order to make some kind of impact on the world. In that regard, you can imagine, I had to almost reverse the disciplinary divisions of knowledge in the academy. I always had to go up against more academic forms of presentation, even of producing knowledge in a certain sense, and of course as a bluesman or a jazzman it meant that I wanted to be a public preacher of *paideia* and I had to go where the public was. For there's an academic public I take very seriously as a professor at Princeton and teacher to students and so forth. There's a cultural public through television and radio, such as with my dear

brother Tavis Smiley's show, every week now for 5 years we go from Leopardi's poetry to the hip hop music of Chuck D. There is an artistic public that I relate to, and of course there's a religious public which is not simply Christian. There's an organized working class public; I spend time with trade union movements and their various centers. Each one of these publics is a crucial site for the articulation of a kind of deep democratic vision that I have. But in the end, it has much to do with the blues orientation and the jazz sensibility where you're not static, you're not stationary, you're always dynamic and open to speaking in and enacting one's own *paideia* in the light of these different contexts.

To be continued in the next issue of *Machete*

- Excerpted from the interview "A Prisoner of Hope in the Night of the American Empire" in the forthcoming *Politics of Culture and the Spirit of Critique* edited by Gabriel Rockhill and Alfredo Gomez-Muller. Copyright © 2010 Columbia University Press to be published in the fall 2010. Used by arrangement with Columbia University Press. All rights reserved.

