

One creates a work only if one has the feeling that one is measuring oneself up against this resistance.

Century of epic and resistance, remorseless destroyer, the century will have desired in its works to become the equal of the real whose passion it bore so deeply.

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## Avant-gardes

I will remain faithful to the immanent method established at the very start of this series of lessons and ask the following question: From the standpoint of the works of art which it showed itself capable of producing, what did the century declare with regard to the singularities of art? This is also a way of trying to verify – within one of the principal types of generic procedure – the hypothesis that motivates these lessons, briefly, that the passion for the real is the touchstone for the century's subjectivities. Is there or is there not within the century a will aimed at forcing art to extract from the mines of reality, by means of wilful artifice, a real mineral, hard as diamond? Can we observe, within the century, the deployment of a critique of semblance, a critique of representation, mimesis and the 'natural'? Quite apart from these verifications, which by and large we've already undertaken, we must acknowledge a strong current within the century's thought which declared that it is better to sacrifice art than to give up on the real. We can call artistic avant-gardes of the twentieth century all the different avatars of this current, all of them sporting abstruse monikers, such as Dadaism, acmeism, suprematism, futurism, sensationism, surrealism, situationism . . . We have already glimpsed the century's deliberate iconoclasm in Malevich's *White on White*. The century does not hesitate to sacrifice the image so that the real may finally arise in the artistic gesture. But when it comes to the destruction of the image, we should immediately add that the other tendency is always present: the subtractive tendency, which seeks the minimal image, the simple imaging line, the disappearing image. The antinomy of destruction and subtraction

animates the entire process of the deposition of the image and of resemblance. In particular, there is an art of rarefaction, an art of obtaining the subtlest and most durable results, not through an aggressive posture with regard to inherited forms, but through arrangements that place these forms at the edge of the void, in a network of cuts and disappearances. Perhaps the most accomplished example of this path is to be found in the music of Webern.<sup>44</sup>

It is still incumbent upon us to identify, within the art of the century, the sacrificial and iconoclastic forms of the passion for the real, all the while evaluating, on a case-by-case basis, the correlation of destruction and subtraction.

One way of approaching this identification is to examine the meanings of the term 'avant-garde'. More or less the whole of twentieth-century art has laid claim to an avant-garde function. Yet today the term is viewed as obsolete, or even derogatory. This suggests we are in the presence of a major symptom.

Every avant-garde declares a formal break with preceding artistic schemata. It presents itself as the bearer of a power of destruction directed against the formal consensus which, at a given moment, defines what merits the name of art. Now, what is striking is that throughout the century it is always the same thing that is at stake in this break. It's always a matter of going further in the eradication of resemblance, representation, narrative or the natural. We could say that an anti-realist logic pulls the force of art either towards pure subjectivity and the expressive gesture, or towards abstraction and geometrical idealities. Obviously, it is the development of painting which here serves as the major model, but one can also find equivalents in music, in writing (to focus literary creation upon the sole power of language), and even in cinema or the choreographic arts. At its deepest, avant-garde polemic, which adopts the extreme stance of promoting everything previously considered ugly, is directed against the classical axiom that posits the existence of some forms that are more natural, more appropriate, more pleasing than others. An avant-garde aims to break with any notion that there exist formal laws of the Beautiful drawn from the accord between our sensory receptors and intel-

lectual expression. It is a question of having done with the offspring of Kant's aesthetic, all of which turn the beautiful into a sign of the harmony of our faculties, a harmony synthesized into a reflective judgement. Even if it promotes certain formal devices rather than others, an avant-garde maintains *in fine* that every arrangement of the sensible is capable of producing an art-effect, so long as one knows how to share its rule. There is no natural norm; there are only voluntary coherences, drawing their lot from the fortuity of sensible happenings.

The result is that the declared break does not just affect a certain conjuncture of artistic production, but also those great formal devices that had slowly become hegemonic during the course of Europe's artistic history: tonality in music, the figure in painting, humanism in sculpture, the immediate intelligibility of syntax in poetry, and so on. All of a sudden, the avant-gardes are no longer simply artistic 'schools', they become social phenomena, points of reference for opinion. Fierce polemics are unleashed against them, going well beyond individual works or familiarity with the artists' theoretical writings. This is because an avant-garde affirms – often in the most violent terms – its refusal of the consensus about what does or does not substantiate a judgement of taste, and declares its exception to the ordinary rules for the circulation of artistic 'objects'.

In order to stand their ground in the midst of the storms of opinion they inevitably set off, avant-gardes are always organized. 'Avant-garde' means group, even if this group only comprises a handful of people. An avant-garde is a group that lets its existence and dissidence be known; a group that publishes and acts, and which is motivated by strong personalities, ones that are not too inclined to share power. Sticking to France, consider the exemplary character of surrealism under the direction of André Breton and of its situationist successor under that of Guy Debord.

This organized and often vigorously sectarian dimension already forges a link – at the very least an allegorical one – between artistic avant-gardes and politics (in which communist parties also presented themselves as the vanguards of the popular masses). There is an aggressiveness to the avant-gardes, an element of provocation, a taste for public intervention and scandal. In

retrospect, Théophile Gautier's quasi-military orchestration of the battle of *Hernani* will have proved an apt anticipation of the avant-garde practices of the twentieth century. For the avant-gardes, art is much more than the solitary production of works of genius. Collective existence and life itself are at stake. Art can no longer be conceived without an element of violent aesthetic militancy.

This is because the avant-gardes only think of art in the present and want to force the recognition of this present. This is their way of assuming the newly acquired passion for the real. Invention is intrinsically valuable, novelty as such delectable. Repetition and the old are despicable, so that absolute rupture, which restricts one to the consequences of the present alone, is salutary. This is the dominant interpretation, by the avant-gardes, of Rimbaud's statement: 'One must be absolutely modern.' Art is no longer essentially a production of eternity, the creation of a work to be judged by the future. The avant-gardes want there to be a pure present for art. There is no time to wait. There is no posterity, only an artistic struggle against sclerosis and death; victory must be achieved, here and now. And since the present is constantly threatened by the past, since it is fragile, it's necessary to impose the provocative intervention of the group, which alone ensures the salvation of the instant and the ephemeral against the established and the instituted.

This question about the time of art is an old one. When Hegel declares, in his lessons on aesthetics, that art is now a thing of the past, what he means to say is not that there is no more artistic activity, but rather that the supreme value of thinking is no longer the preserve of art, as it had been since the time of the Greeks. Art is no longer the privileged historical form for the presentation of the absolute Idea. Obviously, it follows from this that the works of the past cannot be outdone, since they alone are adequate to the Spirit's moment of actuality; something that no work in the present can aspire to, however full of talent or even of genius it may be.

We can recognize here a properly *classical* conception of art, and even, within classicism, that conception which opposes the Ancients to the Moderns. More proof, if needed, of the fact that

Hegel's aesthetics is in no way romantic, and perhaps not even modern. The greatest French artists of the seventeenth century were already convinced that the time for great art had passed, that Greco-Latin antiquity had produced models beyond our reach. Closer inspection reveals that the true basis for classicism lies in essentialism. There is an essence of the Beautiful, which given rules distribute into the different artistic genres. A consummate art is an art that is equal to its own essence, or provides the highest example of what its genre is capable of. But what it is capable of has already been measured and experienced. To present an example is always to re-present it. To say that art must be what it is (that it must effectuate its essence) is at the same time to say that it must become what it has already had the opportunity of becoming. In the end, there can be no distinction for classicism between the past and the future of art.

The avant-gardes, in this respect more romantic than classical, generally maintain that art is the highest destination of a subject; that its full power has yet to make itself felt; and that it is precisely the classical reaction which has constantly hindered art. Thus, contrary to what Hegel said, art is a thing of the present, and essentially so. That the present is the time of art is far more important for the avant-gardes than their own rupture with the past, which is only a consequence and in no way precludes, as one can readily see with surrealism, locating in the past genealogical precursors for the intensities of the present (Sade, some German romantics, Lautréamont).

An avant-garde group is one that decides upon a present – for the present of art has not been decided by the past, as the classicists contend, but rather hampered by it. The artist of the avant-garde is neither heir nor imitator, but rather the one who violently declares the present of art.

The ontological question of twentieth-century art is that of the present. I believe this point is linked to the conviction, oft encountered in the course of these lessons, that the century is a beginning. Classicism can also be defined as the certainty that in art everything began long ago. The avant-garde says: We begin. But the genuine question of the beginning is that of its present. How does one sense, or how does one experience, one's own beginning?

The most widespread response to this question among the avant-gardes is that only the vital *intensity* of artistic creation allows the recognition of a beginning. Twentieth-century art is the attestation of beginning as the intense presence of art, as its pure present, as the immediacy and presentness of its capacity. *The tendency of twentieth-century art is to revolve around the act rather than the work*, because the act, as the intense power of beginning, can only be thought in the present.

The familiar difficulty is that of knowing which doctrine of time or duration envelops the idea of the beginning as norm. It's at this juncture that the thesis of a perpetual commencement rears its head, a thesis that constitutes one of the century's chimeras – and a suicidal chimera at that, one that a number of artists have paid for with their life. But there are other problems, especially the following: If commencing is an imperative, how can it be distinguished from recommencing? How is one to make the life of art into a sort of eternal dawn without thereby restoring repetition?

As we experienced through Álvaro de Campos's frenetic poem, such questions fatally corrode the idea of beginning. The most mediocre or most commercial consequence of this corrosion is the need to periodically invent yet another radical doctrine of beginning, to keep changing the formal paradigm, to replace one avant-garde with another: acmeism with suprematism, sensationism with futurism, and so on. In the seventies and eighties, especially in the United States, this low form of beginning took the guise of an accelerated succession of formal 'mutations', so that the plastic arts began to model themselves on fashion. The high form, which attempts to conserve the present-intensity of the artistic act, consists in conceiving the work of art itself as the almost instantaneous combustion of the force of its own beginning. The guiding idea is that beginning and end should coincide in the intensity of a single act. As Mallarmé already put it, 'the drama takes place all at once, just in time to show its undoing, which unfolds like lightning'. These 'undoings', which are the victory of the pure present, are the hallmark – for example – of certain pieces by Webern; pieces which, in a matter of seconds, graze against the silence that absorbs them; or of certain plastic constructions that are there

only to be effaced, or of certain poems eaten away by the white of the page.

Since in such cases the works are uncertain – almost vanished before they are even born, or concentrated in the gesture of the artist rather than its result (as for 'action-painting' in all its various guises) – their gist has to be conserved in the theory, the commentary, the declaration. Through writing, one must preserve the *formula* for this bit-of-the-real extorted by the fleeting passage of forms.

That is why throughout the century the drafting of manifestos and proclamations constitutes an essential activity of the avant-gardes. It's been said that this is proof of their artistic sterility. As you can see, I am diametrically opposed to this retrospective contempt. Contrary to what some maintain, the Manifesto bears witness to a violent tension that seeks to subject to the real all the powers of form and semblance.

What is a Manifesto? The question is of special interest to me in that in 1989 I wrote a *Manifesto for Philosophy*. The modern tradition of the manifesto was established in 1848 by Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. It effectively appears that a manifesto is something like an announcement, a programme. 'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win,' Marx concludes. This 'world to win' is an option taken on the future. It seems that the programmatic element is alien to the present urgency of the real. It is a matter of finality, of prospective conditions, of a promise. How are we to understand the way in which the imperative of the act and the present inscribed itself into so many proclamations and manifestos? Again, what is this dialectic of present and future, of immediate intervention and annunciation?

It's probably time to say something about André Breton, from whom I will presently draw today's text. Who more than he, within the century, bound the promises of the new art to the political form of the Manifesto? The first and second *Manifesto of Surrealism* are there as clear testimony. But in a more insistent fashion, it is Breton's entire style that is turned towards the future storm, the poetic certitude of a *coming*: 'Beauty will be convulsive

or not be at all.' Where then dwells this beauty? This beauty – whose attribute ('convulsive') is plainly that of a violated real, but which is dependent, beyond the present, on the alternative 'to be or not to be', much in the way that Marx could summon human History to face the distressing dilemma 'socialism or barbarism' – where is it to be found? Breton's genius is often concentrated in such formulas. They are formulas which receive their urgency from the image, but in which it is also not certain whether the *thing itself* is already present. In the text I will shortly be reading, we find the following line: 'It's [the rebellion] a spark in search of a powder keg.' The spark is indeed the consummation of the present, but where then is this sought-after 'powder keg'? This problem, which is here localized by writing, is the same as the global one concerning the function of Manifestos. Where can we find the point of balance between the pressure of the real, which is the absolute will of the present, the dissipation of energy in a single act, and what is presupposed by the programme, the announcement and the declaration of intent in terms of waiting, of the foothold sought in an indiscernible future?

My hypothesis is that – at least for those who in the century are prey to the passion of the present – the Manifesto is only ever a rhetorical device serving to protect something other than what it overtly names or announces. Real artistic activity is always eccentric with respect to the programmes that brazenly declare its novelty, just as what is inventive in Heidegger's thought remains foreign to the pathetic announcement, which makes a big impression, of a 'saving return', or of the thoughtful, poetic coming of a God.

The problem, once again, is that of time. The Manifesto is the reconstruction, in an indeterminate future, of that which, being of the order of the act, of a vanishing flash, does not let itself be named in the present. A reconstruction of that to which, taken in the disappearing singularity of its being, no name can be given.

From Wittgenstein to Lacan, this statement traverses the century: 'There is no metalanguage.' This means that language is always tied up with the real in such a way that a secondary linguistic thematization of this bond is impossible. Language *says*, and this 'saying' cannot be re-said in any speech that would itself

be appropriate. An informed reading of the Manifestos and proclamations of the avant-gardes must always begin with this axiom: there is no metalanguage appropriate to artistic production. As long as a declaration is concerned with artistic production it cannot capture the present of that production. It is thus in the nature of declarations to invent a future for the present of art.

This rhetorical invention of a future which is on its way to existing in the shape of an act is a useful and even necessary thing, in politics and art as well as in love, where the 'I love you forever' is the patently 'surrealist' Manifesto of an uncertain act. When Lacan says, 'there is no sexual relation', what he also wants to declare is that there is no metalanguage of sex. Now, to say that where there is no metalanguage a projective rhetoric must come to be amounts to a theorem. This projective rhetoric provides a linguistic shelter for what takes place, without however either naming or grasping it. The 'I love you forever' is an altogether expedient rhetorical figure for the protection of the active powers of the sexual bond, even though it bears absolutely no relation to these powers.

To criticize an aesthetic programme for failing to keep any of its promises is to miss the point. Granted, there is nothing 'convulsive' about the undeniable beauties that populate Breton's poetic art. Rather, one should see in it the restoration of a forgotten French tongue, at once carnal, imagistic, and very solidly structured by oratory syntax. But a programme is neither a contract nor a promise. It is a rhetorical device whose relation to what really takes place is only ever one of envelopment and protection.

The avant-gardes activated formal ruptures in the present and at the same time produced – in the form of manifestos and declarations – the rhetorical envelope for that activation. They produced the envelopment of a real present in a fictive future. And they called this double production 'new artistic experience'.

So we should not be surprised by the correlation between vanishing works and staggering programmes. Always precarious and almost indistinct, real action exists in such a way that it has to be pointed out and emphasized by loud proclamations, rather like the circus ringmaster amplifies his calls and orders a drum roll so

that a pirouette on the trapeze – novel and daring, but also extremely fleeting – will not be ignored by the public.

Ultimately, the aim of all these constructions is to devote every energy to the present, even if the subjectivation of this present sometimes gets bogged down in the rhetoric of hope. Only the recognition of the fabrication of a present can rally people to the politics of emancipation, or to a contemporary art. Despite its name, even futurism was a fabrication of the present.

What characterizes our present day, which scarcely merits being called, to borrow an expression from Mallarmé, 'a beautiful today', is the absence of any present, in the sense of the real present. The years that followed 1980 remind one of what Mallarmé rightly said about those that came after 1880: 'A present is lacking.' Since counter-revolutionary periods resemble one another far more than revolutionary ones, we should not be surprised that after the 'leftism' of the sixties, we now revisit the reactive ideas that emerged in the wake of the Paris Commune. This is because the interval between an event of emancipation and another leaves us fallaciously in thrall to the idea that nothing begins or will ever begin, even if we find ourselves caught in the midst of an infernal and immobile agitation. We have thus returned to classicism, though we are deprived of its instruments: everything has always already begun, and it is vain to imagine that foundations are built on nothing, that one will create a new art, or a new man.

Indeed, this is what allows one to say that the century is over, since the art of the twentieth century, and its formalization by the avant-gardes, can be defined as the radical attempt to practise a non-classical art.

Some subjectivated foundations for this non-classicism and some of the elements of its programme – together with a number of examples of its protective rhetoric – are contained in the following text by André Breton, whose commentary will conclude this lesson.

It's there, at that poignant moment when the weight of endured suffering seems about to engulf everything, that the very excessiveness of the test causes a *change of sign*, tending to bring the

inaccessibly human over to the side of the accessible and to imbue the latter with a grandeur which it couldn't have known without it [ . . . ]. One must go to the depths of human suffering, discover its strange capacities, in order to salute the similarly limitless gift that makes life worth living. The one definitive disgrace one can bring upon oneself in the face of such suffering, because it would make that conversion of sign impossible, would be to confront it with resignation. From whatever angle you noted the reactions that the worst evil you could conceive of left you open to, I always saw you put the heaviest accent on rebellion. There is, in fact, no more barefaced lie than the one that consists in asserting, even – and above all – when faced with an irretrievable situation, that rebellion is good for nothing. Rebellion is its own justification, completely independent of the chance it has to modify the state of affairs that gives rise to it. It's a spark in the wind, but a spark in search of a powder keg. I revere the dark fire that comes into your eyes whenever you are reminded of the unsurpassable wrong that was done to you and which is inflamed and clouded over again at the memory of the *miserable priests* who tried to approach you on that occasion. I also know that the very same fire raises its bright flames so high for my benefit, twines them into living chimeras before my eyes. And I know that the love which at this point counts on nothing but itself does not recover and that my love for you is reborn from the ashes of the sun. Also, each time a train of thought treacherously brings you back to the point where one day all hope was denied you and, at the precipice where you then stand, threatens, like an arrow seeking a wing, to hurl you again into the abyss, having experienced myself the vanity of all words of consolation and holding all attempts at distraction to be unworthy, I have convinced myself that only a magic formula could be effective here, but what spell could instil in itself and instantaneously give you the whole force of living, of living with all the intensity possible, when I know that it came back to you so slowly? The one I decide to confine myself to, the only one I judge acceptable to call you back to me when it happens that you suddenly lean towards the opposite slope, consists in these words which, when you start to turn your head away, I just want to lightly brush your ear with: *Osiris is a black god.*

This beautiful text, with its sombre and volatile amorous rhetoric, contains a number of maxims worthy of enveloping the

real acts of an avant-garde, whatever its name may be. It is taken from *Arcanum 17*, perhaps the least known of Breton's prose pieces; less well known in any case than *Nadja* or *Mad Love*. It's a relatively late text, one of his mature yet also vaguely disenchanting texts, of the kind dating from the war and immediate post-war period (*Arcanum 17* appeared in 1944). Even if there were nothing in this book apart from the axiom that posits the self-sufficiency of rebellion and the indifference to the pragmatic calculus of results, it would still deserve to be read and reread today.

I wish to make four remarks, in order to structure our reading of the passage.

(1) 'The very excessiveness of the test causes a *change of sign*' The problem posed from the very first lines of the extract is that of the conditions for an affirmative excess. How is one to produce an excess that moves in the direction of the intensity of life, a 'limitless gift', a 'greatness', 'clear flames woven into living chimeras'? By now, we have become acquainted with the nature of this problem. It is a matter of knowing how the fire of *real* life can assure the creative combustion of thought.

On this point, Breton defends a thesis whose appearance is dialectical and whose line of descent is romantic: the only resource resides in pain as a *negative excess*. A creative disposition, be it vital or artistic, must be the conversion of a negative excess into an affirmative excess; of an unfathomable pain into an infinite rebellion. It should carry out what Breton first calls 'a change of sign' and then 'a conversion of sign'. It is indeed a matter of reversal. Not, however, under the constraint of a dialectical progression whose motor would be contradiction, but in the manner that an alchemical operation (the resonance of this theme among the surrealists is well known) transmutes the signs of lead into those of gold.

Notice that Breton does not claim that a creative excess can be directly produced by negating ordinary life. No, there must already be an excess in place, precisely 'the very excessiveness of the test'. There is no alchemy that could change the sign of ordinary states; that could produce a bewitching excess or a creative rebellion on

the basis of a neutral sign. One can only pass from an excess that has been suffered and inflicted, or from a terrible, negative sign – a *black* sign (like the god Osiris) – to the hard-won possibility of celebrating what 'makes life worth living'. This passage consists of an operation that is at once voluntary and miraculous, one which inverts the sign of excess, and which Breton calls 'rebellion'.

The crucial lesson in this entire sequence is that knowing how to endure the most terrible suffering is a creative virtue, and that nothing of value would exist were we not *exposed* to excess. Here we find that particular sort of stoicism which encourages desire to extort from life all the intensity it contains. We also encounter here the paradoxical praise of creative passivity that we have come across before, namely in Pessoa's poem. To accept the lesson of the worst is a necessary condition for vital intensity. One must, with rebellious acceptance, 'go to the depths of human suffering, discover its strange capacities' to be able to restore 'the whole force of living, of living with all the intensity possible'. Every affirmation must be conquered, or reconquered, on the basis of a consenting exposure to the negative sign of excess. The risk of a passive exposure to the worst is the deepest resource of an affirmative life. This is because creation can only be a change in the sign of excess, and not the occurrence of excess itself. In this sense, as it pushes the alloy of spirit from the negative towards the positive pole – according to another image cherished by Breton – this is indeed an operation in magnetism. By forcing the passage of 'the inaccessible human over to the side of the accessible', this operation confronts the subject with its own impossibility, and thus with its rigorously real capacity.

(2) '*Rebellion is its own justification*' In the experience of the negative, of 'the weight of endured suffering', the fundamental antinomy between resignation and rebellion comes to the fore. In negative excess, the whole problem is that of knowing which of the two orientations the life within us will choose. It is here that volition and magnetic magic become indiscernible. 'Rebellion' means that within the extremity experienced in negative excess abides the certainty that we can change its sign. Resignation, on the contrary, is the acceptance pure and simple of the inevitable

and insurmountable nature of pain. Resignation maintains that the only apt words for pain are words of consolation. But for Breton such words are merely mediocre 'attempts at distraction', since nothing in them points to the surviving possibility of vital intensity.

We then have the very beautiful passage affirming the complete sufficiency of rebellion – which does not need to measure up to its own results – for life. Rebellion is a vital spark (i.e. the pure present) 'completely independent of the chance it has to modify the state of affairs that gives rise to it'. Rebellion is a subjective figure. It is not the engine of change for the situation; it is the wager that the sign of excess can be changed.

It is here that the persona of resignation, which Breton calls *the miserable priest*, makes his entrance. His ruse lies in not simply insisting on the intrinsic badness of rebellion. The 'priest' adopts an insidious voice which is ubiquitous today, in the murmurs and vociferations of politicians, essayists and journalists. Day after day, this voice entreats us to weigh up the worth of rebellion against its results, and to compare it, according to that sole criterion, to resignation. It then establishes, modestly triumphant, that for comparable – or even inferior – objective results, rebellion is extremely costly in terms of lives, suffering and tragedy. In response to this omnipresent 'realist' voice, Breton magnificently declares that what it propounds is nothing but the most 'barefaced lie', since rebellion has no relation at all with the pragmatic calculus of results.

Up until these last few years, one of the most powerful forms of the passion for the real, of action thought in the here and now, of the intrinsic value of revolt (Mao's axiom: 'it is right to rebel'), will have been the proud refusal to appear before the rigged tribunal of results, be they economic, social, 'human' or otherwise. At the heart of the priest's realist plea lies only the reactive desire to oblige subjects to choose the meagre pickings offered to them in exchange for their resignation.

If the century was Nietzschean, it's in part because it regarded the priest as much more than a mere clerk for established religions. A priest is anyone for whom rebellion is no longer an un-

conditional value; a priest is anyone who measures everything in terms of 'objective' results. Alas, at the century's end the priest is everywhere.

(3) '*My love for you is reborn from the ashes of the sun*' The century has been a great century for the vision of love as a figure of truth, which is entirely different from romanticism's fatalist and fusional conception of love, as embodied in Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*. The role played by psychoanalysis in this transformation has been far from insignificant, to say nothing of the successive waves in the struggle for the rights of women. The key issue consists in thinking love not as destiny, but as encounter and thought,<sup>45</sup> as an asymmetrical and egalitarian becoming, as the invention of oneself.

Surrealism was a step in this reconstruction of love as an arena for truth, of love as the procedure that produces a truth of difference.<sup>46</sup> Only a step though, for surrealism still remains in thrall to sexual mythologies that revolve around a fatal and mysterious femininity, the one found walking through the streets of the metropolis, naked under her mantle of fur. This generates a very unilateral masculine vision, whose classical obverse is the hyperbolic praise of Woman. Even in the text quoted above, when Breton reveres 'the dark fire that comes into your eyes', we can discern an idolatry that is more aesthetic than amorous. All the same, surrealism, and Breton especially, did more than merely accompany the movement that saw women climb onto the stage of love just as the masses had climbed upon that of History – so as to become the subject of a truth. When Breton writes that 'the love which at this point counts on nothing but itself does not recover', he says something essential. Love can no longer be mystical fusion, astral conjunction, an Eternal feminine offered up to man, even if it is in order to carry him 'so high'.<sup>47</sup> Love is a dual adventure of the body and the mind; it is the experience and thought of what the Two is, a world refracted and transfigured by contrast. Of this world, there is no recovery.

By linking love to the anti-dialectic of excess, Breton ultimately includes it within the thinking resources of life, within the wager



of intensity. After all, as our text testifies, today it is up to a woman rather than a man to be the complete and incontestable heroine of such a wager.

(4) '*Only a magic formula could be effective here*' I've already said that the power of the act and the real of the pure present do not let themselves be named, that they justify their envelopment 'at a distance' within proclamations and manifestos. However, we must not neglect the attempts by the avant-gardes and their artists directly to match the creative act with a nominal distillate of its power. This is what, following Rimbaud, could be called the 'formula', in the sense in which he wrote: 'I, impatient to find the place and the formula'. Obviously, it should also be understood as the 'magic formula', the one which has the power to open all the secret places ('Open, Sesame!').

Love inspires Breton to find a formula for the devastated woman, made vulnerable by repeated rebellion against absolute unhappiness to being hurled once again 'into the abyss'. It's the only one worthy of her, the only one which is not a consolation, that is, an invitation to resign herself. It is the formula: 'Osiris is a black god.' This formula distils the idea that every metamorphosis, every rebirth, every secondary deification, depends on standing one's ground in the midst of life's most terrible darkenings. The formula conjoins the initial donation of excess in its negative form, the instantaneous forces of rebellious creation, and the elevated language of the Manifestos.

This is because the formula is the supposed point of conjunction between the act in the present and the future that the programme envelops. In politics, everyone knows that the formula is the slogan – when it takes hold of the situation, when it is echoed by marching thousands. Once the formula is discovered, it becomes impossible to distinguish between the material body and the spirit of invention that inhabits it, and like Rimbaud, again, at the end of *A Season in Hell*, one can declare: 'I'll be able to possess truth in a single body and soul.' For Breton, the formula names the change of sign, the rebellious passage from suffering to the affirmative intensity of life. A large part of the century's undertakings – political as well as artistic – devoted themselves to

finding the formula, this slightest point of attachment to the real of that which announces its novelty; this explosion in language whereby one word, one word alone, is the same thing as a body.

At the height of its concentration, the art of the century – but also all the other truth procedures, each according to its own resources – aimed to conjoin the present, the real intensity of life, and the name of this present as given in the formula, a formula that is always at the same time the invention of a form. It is then that the pain of the world changes into joy.

To produce an unknown intensity against a backdrop of suffering, through the always improbable intersection of a formula and an instant: this was the century's desire. Which explains why, despite its multifaceted cruelty, it managed – through its artists, scientists, militants and lovers – to be Action itself.

## The passion for the real and the montage of semblance

What is this 'distancing' that Brecht turned into a maxim for the actor's performance? It is the display – within the play – of the gap between the play and the real. More profoundly, it is a technique that dismantles the intimate and necessary links joining the real to semblance, links resulting from the fact that semblance is the true situating principle of the real, that which localizes and renders visible the brutal effects of the real's contingency.

Much of the century's greatness lay in its commitment to thinking the relationship – often obscure at first – between real violence and semblance, between face and mask, between nudity and disguise. This point can be encountered in the most varied registers, from political theory to artistic practice.

Let's start with the Marxists, or Marxians. Those among them who lived in the century ascribed extraordinary importance to the notion of ideology, a notion designating the dissimulating power of false consciousness with regard to a decentred real that is neither grasped nor localized. Ideology is a discursive figure whereby the representation of social relations is effectuated, an imaginary montage that nevertheless re-presents a real. In this sense there is indeed something almost theatrical about ideology. Ideology stages figures of representation that mask the primordial violence of social relations (exploitation, oppression, anti-egalitarian cynicism). As in the Brechtian theatre of distancing,

ideology organizes a consciousness separated from the real that it nevertheless expresses. For Brecht the theatre is the didactic exposition of this separation; it shows how the violence of the real is only effective in the gap between the real effect and its dominant representation. The very concept of ideology is the crystallization of the 'scientific' certainty whereby representations and discourses must be read as masks of a real that they both denote and conceal. As Althusser observed,<sup>25</sup> we are in the presence of a symptomal set-up; representation is a symptom (to be read or deciphered) of a real that it subjectively localizes in the guise of misrecognition. The power of ideology is nothing other than the power of the real inasmuch as the latter is conveyed by this misrecognition.

The word 'symptom' obviously indicates, when it comes to this power of misrecognition, that the century's Marxism and its psychoanalysis have something in common. Lacan made this point especially clear when he demonstrated that the Ego is an imaginary construct. Within this construct, the real system of drives is only legible by means of all sorts of decentrings and transformations. The word 'unconscious' precisely designates the set of operations whereby the real of a subject is only consciously accessible via the intimate and imaginary construction of the Ego. In this sense, the psychology of consciousness is a personal ideology, what Lacan calls 'the individual myth of the neurotic'. There exists a function of misrecognition which makes the abruptness of the real operate only through fictions, montages and masks.

Where the positivism of the nineteenth century affirmed the power of knowledge, the twentieth century deploys the theme of the efficacy of misrecognition. Against the cognitive optimism that characterized positivism, the twentieth century both discovers and stages the extraordinary power of ignorance, of what Lacan rightly calls 'the passion of ignorance'.

Distancing – conceived as the way that semblance works out its proper distance from the real – can be taken as an axiom of the century's art, and of 'avant-garde' art especially. What is at stake is the fictionalization of the very power of fiction, in other words, the fact of regarding the efficacy of semblance as real. This is one of the reasons why the art of the twentieth century is a reflexive

art, an art that wants to exhibit its own process, an art that wants to visibly idealize its own materiality. Showing the gap between the factitious and the real becomes the principal concern of facticity. For the Marxists, it is clear that a dominant class needs an ideology of domination, and not just domination alone. If art is an encounter with the real channelled through the exhibited means of the factitious, then art is everywhere, since every human experience is traversed by the gap between domination and the dominant ideology, between the real and its semblance. We find the exercise and experience of this gap everywhere. This is why the twentieth century proposes artistic gestures that were previously impossible, or presents as art what used to be nothing but waste matter. These gestures and presentations testify to the omnipresence of art, inasmuch as the artistic gesture ultimately comes down to an intrusion into semblance – exposing, in its brute state, the gap of the real.

Pirandello is a great inventor in this regard – all the more so in that he is entirely alien to Marxism, and even reliant on the worst bourgeois representations (cloistered families, affairs, salons). Pirandello's essential thesis is that the reversibility between the real and semblance is the only artistic path for accessing the real. Pirandello presents the entirety of his theatre under a particularly suggestive title: 'Naked Masks'. The real, or the naked, is what gives itself only by adhering to the mask, adhering to semblance.

What makes the theatrical incarnation of this thesis so forceful is that it takes place in an unusually violent subjective context. An exemplary passage can be found in the conclusion to *Henry IV*, in my view one of Pirandello's strongest works, together with *As You Desire Me*, *The Pleasure of Honesty* and *Madame Morli*, *One and Two*. The Henry IV in question is a German sovereign of the thirteenth century. The hero of the piece is a present-day man who declares throughout that he is Henry IV, surrounding himself with a court of people who, for various reasons, agree to be the conscious accomplices of this fable. In the end, he carries out a murder. This murder can be understood in a 'historical' register, on the basis of the character traits and existential circumstances that one presumes would pertain to the 'real' Henry IV. It can also be understood in a subjective register, on the basis of the life and

passions of the hero of the piece who, perhaps, exploits the historical mask of Henry IV. Throughout the bulk of the play, the thesis of reversibility, set forth with amazing virtuosity, stems from our inability to decide whether the hero 'really' does take himself for Henry IV – which would mean that he's mad (in the ordinary sense of the term) – or whether, for complicated reasons to do with the context of his private life, he's only playing at being Henry IV, and thus 'making it seem' (the verb is here particularly apposite) that he is mad. Once the murder is committed, however, things change. From that moment on, lest he be condemned for murder, the hero is definitively forced to make others believe that he's mad and that he killed because he took himself for Henry IV. Beyond semblance there is a *necessity* of semblance, which has perhaps always constituted its real. At this juncture Pirandello introduces a remarkable stage direction: 'Henry IV is to remain on stage with eyes wide open, terrified by the living force of his own fiction, which in the flash of an instant has led him to crime.' Though it reckons with the living force of fiction – and therefore with what makes fiction into a real power – this stage direction is not entirely decidable. It only says that a force must pass through a fiction. But a fiction is a form. One will therefore conclude that every force is only localizable, or effective, through a form that nevertheless cannot decide upon meaning. This is why one must maintain that it is precisely the energy of the real that presents itself as mask.

Within the century, there has been no shortage of terrifying manifestations of this thesis. First and foremost, we must recall the *mise en scène* by Stalin and his entourage of the Moscow trials at the end of the thirties. After all, in these trials it is purely and simply a matter of killing people, of liquidating a significant part of the communist establishment. We are in the realm of pure, real violence. The 'Bolshevik Old Guard', as it was called by Trotsky (its supposed linchpin and himself the victim of assassination), must be annihilated.

Why then stage trials in which pre-designated and most often resigned victims will be forced to recount utterly far-fetched things? Who would ever believe that throughout their whole lives

people like Zinoviev and Bukharin were Japanese spies, Hitler's puppets, hirelings of the counter-revolution, and so forth? What is the point of this gigantic sham? Of course, rational hypotheses can be formulated about the need, in Stalin's eyes, to eliminate all these people. One can also try to reconstruct the political landscape during the great purges.<sup>26</sup> But it is far more difficult to establish the necessity of the trials, especially since a large number of high-ranking officials, particularly among the military, were eliminated in the basements of the secret service without the slightest public performance. For these trials are pure theatrical fictions. The accused themselves, who had been carefully prepared, by torture if necessary, had to conform to a role whose performance had been rehearsed and pretty much scripted in the punitive corridors of the regime. In this regard it is very instructive to read the transcript of Bukharin's trial,<sup>27</sup> in which a significant slip momentarily unsettled the entire *mise en scène*, as though the real of semblance had come to perturb its functioning.

It seems that the absolute violence of the real (here, the terrorist Party-State) is indeed obliged to go through a representation which nevertheless is only capable of convincing those people (numerous, it's true) who've already decided to be convinced. But on the whole, these people – the convinced communists – would just as easily have sanctioned the straightforward liquidation of the 'enemies of the people'. They didn't need a trial to offer their endorsement. Their passion for the real, it seems, would have saved them this laborious semblance, especially since most found it quite difficult to explain to sceptics the mechanism of the trials. We are therefore left with the following enigma, which touches upon one of the great questions of the century: What is the function of semblance in the passion for the real, this passion that places politics beyond Good and Evil?

I think the crucial point (as Hegel grasped long ago with regard to the revolutionary Terror)<sup>28</sup> is this: the real, conceived in its contingent absoluteness, is never real enough not to be suspected of semblance. The passion for the real is also, of necessity, suspicion. Nothing can attest that the real is the real, nothing but the system of fictions wherein it plays the role of the real. All the subjective categories of revolutionary, or absolute, politics – 'conviction',

'loyalty', 'virtue', 'class position', 'obeying the Party', 'revolutionary zeal', and so on – are tainted by the suspicion that the supposedly real point of the category is actually nothing but semblance. Therefore, the correlation between a category and its referent must always be publicly *purged*, purified. This means purging subjects among those who lay claim to the category in question, that is, purging the revolutionary personnel itself. Furthermore, this must be carried out in accordance with a ritual that teaches everyone a lesson about the uncertainties of the real. Purging is one of the great slogans of the century. Stalin said it loud and clear: 'A party becomes stronger by purging itself.'

I would not want you to take these somewhat bitter reflections as yet more grist to the mill of the feeble moralizing that typifies the contemporary critique of absolute politics or 'totalitarianism'. I am undertaking the exegesis of a singularity and of the greatness that belongs it, even if the other side of this greatness, when grasped in terms of its conception of the real, encompasses acts of extraordinary violence.

To cut short any anti-political interpretation of these dark deeds, bear in mind that, among other things, purging, or purification, was also an essential slogan for artistic activity. There was a desire for pure art, an art in which the only role of semblance would be to indicate the rawness of the real. There was also a call to purify – through axiomatics and formalism – the mathematical real, to purge it of the entire spatial or numerical imaginary of intuitions. And so forth. The idea that force is attained through the purging of form was by no means monopolized by Stalin. Or by Pirandello. What all these attempts have in common, I repeat, is the passion for the real.

Let's go back for a moment to the Hegelian anticipation of this theme. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel tries to explain why the French Revolution was terroristic. His thesis is that the Revolution presents the subjective figure of absolute freedom. But absolute freedom is a freedom that is not bound by any objective representation of the Good. Therefore, it is a freedom without criterion, a freedom whose efficacy nothing can ever attest to. One is always justified in thinking that such and such a subject is about

to betray it. Ultimately, the essence of absolute freedom within concrete experience is given only as freedom-that-must-be-betrayed. The subjective name of true freedom is Virtue. But it is impossible to put forward a shared and reliable criterion of virtue. Everything suggests that what reigns is the opposite of virtue, the name of which is 'corruption'.<sup>29</sup> In the end, the essence of real freedom is the struggle against corruption. And since corruption is the 'natural' state of affairs, everybody is a possible target of this struggle, which means: everybody is *suspect*. Freedom is thus enacted, in an entirely logical manner, both as the 'law of suspects' and as a chronic purge.

What matters for us is the following: we are in the realm of suspicion when a formal criterion is lacking to distinguish the real from semblance. In the absence of such a criterion, the logic that imposes itself is that the more a subjective conviction presents itself as real, the more it must be suspected. It is thus at the summit of the revolutionary state, where the ardent desire of freedom is incessantly declared, that the greatest number of traitors is to be found. The traitor is both the leader and, ultimately, oneself. In these conditions, what is the only certainty? Nothingness. Only the nothing is not suspect, because the nothing does not lay claim to any real. The logic of purification, as Hegel astutely remarks, amounts to bringing about the nothing. Ultimately, death is the sole possible name of pure freedom, and 'dying well' the only thing that escapes suspicion. The maxim – all in all a rather simple one – is that strictly speaking, and despite the theatre proceeding *a contrario*, it is impossible to seem to die.

This why our century, aroused by the passion for the real, has in all sorts of ways – and not just in politics – been the century of destruction.

Yet we must immediately distinguish two orientations. The first assumes destruction as such and undertakes the indefinite task of purification. The second attempts to *measure* the ineluctable negativity; this is what I will call the 'subtractive' orientation. Destruction or subtraction? This is one of the century's central debates. What is the active figure taken by the negative side of the passion for the real? I'm particularly sensitive to the conflict

between these two orientations since it has played a decisive role in my own philosophical trajectory. An important section of my *Theory of the Subject* (1982) bears the title 'Lack and Destruction'. At that time, an altogether prophetic phrase of Mallarmé served as my banner: 'Destruction was my Beatrice.' In *Being and Event* (1988), I formulated an explicit self-critique on this point, showing that a subtractive thinking of negativity can overcome the blind imperative of destruction and purification.

Art provides the first guiding thread for our attempt to think the couple 'destruction/subtraction'. The century experienced itself as artistic negativity, in the sense that one of its themes, anticipated in the nineteenth century by a number of texts (for example, Mallarmé's *Verses in Crisis*, or farther back still, Hegel's *Aesthetics*), is that of the end of art, of representation, of the painting, and, finally, of the work as such. Behind this theme of the end there obviously lies, once again, the question of knowing what relationship art entertains with the real, or what the real of art is.

It is with regard to this point that I would like to call on Malevich. Malevich is born in Kiev in 1878. He arrives in Paris in 1911. By then, his painting is already organized geometrically. Then, around 1912–13, with Mayakovsky's collaboration, he moves to another doctrine, suprematism.

Malevich affirms the Bolshevik revolution. He returns to Moscow in 1917, and is appointed professor at the University of Moscow in 1919. In 1918, he paints the very famous *White on White*, now at MoMA in New York. In the twenties, as the situation for artists and intellectuals becomes increasingly tense, he is relocated to Leningrad and more or less forbidden from exhibiting his work. In 1926 he publishes, in German, an essay that bears a decisive title: *Die gegenstandlose Welt* (The World of Non-Representation). He dies in 1935.

*White on White* is – within the field of painting – the epitome of purification. Colour and form are eliminated and only a geometrical allusion is retained. This allusion is the support for a minimal difference, the abstract difference of ground and form, and above all, the null difference between white and white, the difference of the Same – what we could call the vanishing difference.

We find here the origin of a subtractive protocol of thought that differs from the protocol of destruction. We must beware of interpreting *White on White* as a symbol of the destruction of painting. On the contrary, what we are dealing with is a subtractive assumption. The gesture is very close to the one that Mallarmé makes within poetry: the staging of a minimal, albeit absolute, difference; the difference between the place and what takes place in the place, the difference between place and taking-place. Captured in whiteness, this difference is constituted through the erasure of every content, every upsurge.

Why is this something other than destruction? Because, instead of treating the real as identity, it is treated right away as a gap. The question of the real/semblance relation will not be resolved by a purification that would isolate the real, but by understanding that the gap is itself real. The white square is the moment when the minimal gap is fabricated.

There exists a passion for the real that is obsessed with identity: to grasp real identity, to unmask its copies, to discredit fakes. It is a passion for the authentic, and authenticity is in fact a category that belongs to Heidegger as well as to Sartre. This passion can only be fulfilled as destruction. Herein lies its strength – after all, many things deserve to be destroyed. But this is also its limit, because purification is a process doomed to incompleteness, a figure of the bad infinite.

There is another passion for the real, a differential and differentiating passion devoted to the construction of a minimal difference, to the delineation of its axiomatic. *White on White* is a proposition in thought that opposes minimal difference to maximal destruction.

This opposition within art relates to a conviction about beginning. The passion for the real is always the passion for the new – but what is the new? And, as Brecht asked, when will it come, and at what price?

To end on this question of the new, I would like to quote for you a poem by Malevich, written immediately prior to the composition of *White on White*:

Try never to repeat yourself – not in the icon, not on the  
 canvas, not in the word;  
 if something in its act recalls an ancient deed,  
 then, the voice of the new birth tells me:  
 Erase, be quiet, stifle the fire if fire it be,  
 so that the corset of your thoughts may be lighter  
 and not rust,  
 so that you may hear the breath of a new day in the desert.  
 Cleanse your hearing, erase the bygone days, only thus  
 will you be more sensitive and more white,  
 for like a dark stain these days sagely  
 lie upon your vestments, and in the breath of the wave  
 you will find the furrow of the new.  
 Your thought will find the contours and stamp them with the seal  
 of your advance.

We have done enough work for you to be able to grasp immediately two things that this poem intertwines.

The first, typical of the century's prophetic stance towards the real, is that thought must interrupt repetition. There must be, and there will be, a new act, a 'new birth' which it is the century's task to invent. It is a question of responding, once and for all, to the imperative: 'Erase the bygone days.'

The second concerns the hearing that must be cleansed in order to find the contours. Attentiveness is realized as the invention of an outline, the seal of an advance, and not by grasping a pre-existing ideality.

Finally, Malevich tells us what the act of subtraction is: to invent content at the very place of the minimal difference, where there is almost nothing. The act is 'a new day in the desert'.

..... • **DESTRUCTION, NEGATION, SUBTRACTION - on Pier Paolo Pasolini •**

..... **Alain Badiou**

..... **Graduate Seminar - Art Center College of Design in Pasadena - February 6 2007**

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• **THE CONTEMPORARY FIGURE OF THE SOLDIER IN POLITICS AND POETRY**•

UCLA - January 2007

The abstract contents of my lecture is a very simple one. I can summarize it in five points:

1. All creations, all novelties, are in some sense the affirmative part of a negation. "Negation", because if something happens as new, it cannot be reduced to the objectivity of the situation where it happens. So, it is certainly like a negative exception to the regular laws of this objectivity. But "affirmation", affirmative part of the negation, because if a creation is reducible to a negation of the common laws of objectivity, it completely depends on them concerning its identity. So the very essence of a novelty implies negation, but must affirm its identity apart of the negativity of negation. That is why I say that a creation or a novelty must be defined paradoxically as an affirmative part of negation.

2. I name "destruction" the negative part of negation. For example, if we consider the creation by SchŃnberg, at the beginning of the last century, of the dodecaphonic musical system, we can say that this creation achieves the destruction of the tonal system, which, in the western world has dominated the musical creation during three centuries. In the same direction, the Marxist idea of revolution is to achieve the process of immanent negation of capitalism by the complete destruction of the machinery of bourgeois State. In both cases, negation is the eventual concentration of a process through which is achieved the complete disintegration of an old world. It is this eventual concentration which realizes the negative power of negation, the negativity of negation. And I name it destruction.

3. I name subtraction the affirmative part of negation. For example, the new musical axioms which structure for SchŃnberg the admissible succession of notes in a musical work, outside the tonal system, are in no way deducible from the destruction of this system. They are the affirmative laws of a new framework for the musical activity. They show the possibility of a new coherence for musical discourse. The point that we must understand is that this new coherence is not new because it achieves the process of disintegration of the system. The new coherence is new to the extent that, in the framework that the SchŃnberg's axioms impose, the musical discourse avoids the laws of tonality, or, more precisely, becomes indifferent to these laws. That is why we can say that the musical discourse is subtracted from its tonal legislation. Clearly, this subtraction is in the horizon of negation ; but it exists apart from the purely negative part of negation. It exists apart from destruction.

It is the same thing for Marx in the political context. Marx insists on saying that the destruction of the bourgeois State is not in itself an achievement. The goal is communism, that is the end of the State as such, and the end of social classes, in favour of a purely egalitarian organization of the civil society. But to come to this, we must first substitute to the bourgeois State a new State, which is not the immediate result of the destruction of the first. In fact, it is a State as different of the bourgeois State as experimental music of today can be of an academic tonal piece of the 19th century, or a contemporary performance can be of an academic representation of Olympic Gods. For the new State - that Marx names "dictatorship of the proletariat" - is a State which organizes its own vanishing, a State which is in its very essence the process of the non-State. Perhaps as for Adorno the "informal music" is the process, in a work, of the disintegration of all forms. So we can say that in the original thought of Marx, "dictatorship of the proletariat" was a name for a State which is subtracted from all classical laws of a "normal" State. For a classical State is a form of power; but the State named "dictatorship of proletariat" is the power of un-power, the power of the disappearance of the question of power. In any case we name subtraction this part of negation which is oriented by the possibility of something which exists absolutely apart from what exists under the laws of what negation negates.

4. So negation is always, in its concrete action - political or artistic - suspended between destruction and subtraction. That the very essence of negation is destruction has been the fundamental idea of the last century. The fundamental idea of the beginning century must be that the very essence of negation is subtraction.

5. But subtraction is not the negation of destruction, no more than destruction has been the negation of subtraction, as we have seen with SchŃnberg or Marx. The most difficult question is precisely to maintain the complete concept of negation from the point of view of subtraction, as Lenin, Schoenberg, or Marcel Duchamp, or Cage, or Mao Zedong, or Jackson Pollock have maintained the complete concept of negation from the point of view of destruction.

To clarify the very complex interplay between destruction, negation and subtraction, I propose to read with you a fragment of a magnificent poem of Pier Paolo Pasolini.

Pasolini is well known as a filmmaker; in particular he has directed during the sixties and the seventies profound contemporary visual readings of the two great western intellectual traditions: the ancient Greeks with movies like *Medea* and *Oedipus*, and the judo Christianity with *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew* and a very complex script about the life of Saint Paul. All that constitutes a difficult thinking of the relationship between History, Myths and Religion. Pasolini was simultaneously a revolutionary Marxist and a man for ever influenced by his religious childhood. So his question was: is the revolutionary becoming of History, the political negativity, a destruction of the tragic beauty of the Greek Myths and of the peaceful promise of Christianity? Or do we have to speak of a subtraction where an affirmative reconciliation of Beauty and Peace becomes possible in a new egalitarian world?

Pasolini is also well known for the relationship between his private life and his public convictions. Not only he was gay, but this was a part of his political vision, many years before the beginning of the gay and lesbian movement. He perfectly knew that the desire - and in its own case, the desire for young poor workers of the suburbs of Rome - is not independent of our ideological choices. Once more, the question is to inscribe sexual desire in the political negativity not as a purely subversive and destructive feature, but as a creative displacement of the line which separates the individual subjectivity from the collective one.

Pasolini has been murdered in November 1975. He was 53 years old. The circumstances of this horrible murder are still obscure today. But certainly they are exactly at the point where political determinations are linked with sexual situations. It is this point which has been for Pasolini a constant source of new truths, but

also an existential tragedy.

Marvellous movies, political commitments, critical essays, great novels, new existential style... Beyond all that, Pasolini is the greatest poet of his generation. We can distinguish three major poetical collections.

1. The poems written when Pasolini was twenty years old, in a specific Italian dialect, the Frioulan one. Here we have the attempt to subtract poetry to the authority of official Italian language and to use a popular language against the State language. It is a characteristic example of what Deleuze names "minoritarian politics" in Poetry.

2. The great collection published in 1957, the heart of which is the magnificent poem, *The Ashes of Gramsci*, a complex meditation concerning history, Marxist ideology, Italian landscape and personal feelings... The title is in itself a metaphor of melancholic negation. Gramsci, the Master, the Father of Italian Marxism is here like dissipated in the History's dust.

3. The two collections of the beginning of the sixties: *The Religion of My Time* (1961) and *Poetry in Form of a Rose* (1964). We have here the context of the fragment I shall explain today. Fundamentally, it is the bitter disappointment of Pasolini, concerning the practices of the Italian left. And more precisely, two very serious failures of the Communist Party, first, an infidelity to the armed struggle of thousands of young men, against fascism and Nazism during the war. Second, the Communist Party is unable to organize the revolt of thousands of young workers in the suburbs of Italian towns.

So we have here a double negation of popular young people. In the past, where their fighting is forgotten; in the present, where their revolt is despised. But Pasolini has two very important reasons for being passionately interested in the existence and the struggles of young people. First his younger brother, Guido, has been killed in fighting during the war as a partisan, a resistant fighter. And the terrible problem is that he has been killed not by fascists, but by communists of another country, Yugoslavian communists, because of the rivalry between Italians and Yugoslavians concerning the control of some border regions. Second, as a gay, Pasolini has always had real and constant relationship with very poor young workers, or with unemployed of the suburbs. That is why many poems of Pasolini speak of the contradiction between History, politics and concrete existence of proletarian youth.

We shall first listen to one of these poems. It is a fragment of a very long poem, *Vittoria*.

"All politics is Realpolitik," warring

soul, with your delicate anger!  
You do not recognize a soul other than this one  
which has all the prose of the clever man,

of the revolutionary devoted to the honest  
common man (even the complicity  
with the assassins of the Bitter Years grafted

onto protector classicism, which makes  
the communist respectable): you do not recognize the heart  
that becomes slave to its enemy, and goes

where the enemy goes, led by a history  
that is the history of both, and makes them, deep down,  
perversely, brothers; you do not recognize the fears

of a consciousness that, by struggling with the world,  
shares the rules of the struggle over the centuries,  
as through a pessimism into which hopes

drown to become more virile. Joyous  
with a joy that knows no hidden agenda,  
this army-blind in the blind

sunlight-of dead young men comes  
and waits. If their father, their leader, absorbed  
in a mysterious debate with Power and bound

by its dialectics, which history renews ceaselessly-  
if he abandons them,  
in the white mountains, on the serene plains,

little by little in the barbaric breasts  
of the sons, hate becomes love of hate,  
burning only in them, the few, the chosen.

Ah, Desperation that knows no laws!  
Ah, Anarchy, free love  
of Holiness, with your valiant songs!

To have an overview of this fragment we can say something like that: Everybody is saying that politics must be realistic, that all ideological illusions have been proved dangerous and bloody.

But what is the real for politics? The real is History. The real is the concrete becoming of struggle and negation. But how is it possible to understand or know History? We can do that if we know the rules of History, the great laws of becoming. It is the lesson of Marxism.



But are not the laws of History the same for us and for our enemies? And if it is the case, how can negation be distinguished from approval?

We are in the situation where destruction being suppressed, the subtraction itself, the opposition, if you want, becomes complicity. As Pasolini writes: we recognize that we are going exactly where the enemy goes, "led by a History that is the history of both". And political hope is impossible.

So, if the young dead of the last war could see the present political situation they would not agree with this complicity. Finally, they cannot accept their political fathers, the leaders of Communist Party. And they become by necessity barbarian and nihilistic people, exactly like the young unemployed of the suburbs.

The poem is a manifesto for true negation.

If subtraction is separated from destruction, we have as result Hate and Despair. The symbol of this result is the fusion of the dead heroes of the last war with the despised workers of our suburbs in a sort of terrorist figures. But if destruction is separated from subtraction, we have as result the impossibility of politics, because young people are absorbed in a sort of nihilistic collective suicide, which is without thinking and destination. In the first case, fathers, who are responsible for the emancipatory political orientation, abandon their sons on behalf of the real. In the second case, sons, which are the collective strength of a possible revolt, abandon their fathers on behalf of Despair.

But emancipatory politics is possible only when some fathers and mothers and some sons and daughters are allied in an effective negation of the world as it is.

Some remarks.

1. The whole beginning: under the idea of "Realpolitik" we have something like a negation without destruction. I define this: "opposition", in the common democratic sense. Like democrats against Bush. We find two excellent definitions of this sort of negation: "the prose of the clever man" and "protector classicism". You will note that in both cases, the comparison is with artistic conservative style.

2. The "bitter years" are the years of the war, which have been also largely, in Italy, a civil war.

3. The heart of "opposition" is to substitute some rules to the violence of the real. In my jargon, I can say: to substitute rules of history, or rules of economy, to rupture of Event. And when you do that, you "share the rules of the struggle" with your enemy. And finally you become "slave of your enemy", a "brother" of your enemy.

< So opposition is in fact the death of negation. And it is the death of political hope.

4. In this context, Pasolini has a sort of magnificent and melancholic vision. The army of dead young men of the last war, and among them certainly his younger brother Guido, is coming to see their father, their leader. That is in fact the revolutionary leaders of today. This army, "blind in the blind sunlight" comes and waits "in the white mountains, on the serene plains". And they see their father, their leader, absorbed in the very weak form of negation, the dialectical negation; This negation is not apart from the power. This negation is only an obscure relationship to the power itself. It is "a mysterious debate with Power". So the father is in fact without freedom, he is "bounded" by the dialectics of power.

5. The conclusion is that this father "abandons them". You see the problem, which is clearly a problem of today. The army of dead young men was on the side of destruction, of hate. They existed on the hard side of negation. But they wait for an orientation, for a negation which, under some paternal law, reconciles destruction and subtraction.

But contemporary leaders abandon them. So they have only the destructive part of negation. They have only "Desperation that knows no laws!"

6. And the description of their subjectivity is quite an expressive one. Yes, they were on the side of hate, of destruction. They were "angry young men". But now, it is a very striking formula, "hate becomes love of hate". This love of hate is negation as purely destructive; Without an access to subtraction without fathers, or leaders, we have to face the nudity of "the barbaric breasts of the sons".

7. Great poetry is always an anticipation, a vision, of the collective future. We can see here that Pasolini describes the terrorist subjectivity. He indicates with an astonishing precision that the possibility of this subjectivity among young men or women is the lack of any rational hope of changing the world. That is why he creates a poetical equivalence between Desperation (the nihilistic consequence of false negation), Anarchy (the purely destructive political version) an "free love of Holiness", which is the religious context of terrorism, with the figure of the martyr. This equivalence is certainly clearer today than it was forty years ago, when Pasolini wrote *Victory*.

We can now conclude: the political problems of the contemporary world cannot be solved, neither in the weak context of democratic opposition, which in fact abandons millions of people to a nihilistic destiny, nor in the mystical context of destructive negation, which is an other form of power, the power of death. Neither subtraction without destruction, nor destruction without subtraction. It is in fact the problem of violence today. Violence is not, as has been said during the last century the creative and revolutionary part of negation. The way of freedom is a subtractive one; But to protect the subtraction itself, to defend the new kingdom of emancipatory politics, we cannot radically exclude all forms of violence; The future is not on the side of the savage young men and women of popular suburbs, we cannot abandon them to themselves. But the future is not on the side of the democratic wisdom of mothers and fathers law. We have to learn something of nihilistic subjectivity.

The world is made not of law and order, but of law and desire. Let us learn from Pasolini not to be "absorbed in a mysterious debate with power", not to abandon millions of young men and women neither "in the white mountains", nor "on the serene plains". "

[Alain Badiou's Bibliography](#)

