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Control through neoliberal democracy : in-between the headless (the populist right wing mob attitude) and the thoughtless (the snob attitude)

Histories of the world (that seems to be without a world, as reference to Alain Badiou "worldless world")[i] cannot be read as an excess, or as an error or a mistake to be evacuated as soon as possible. It is a paradox: developing such histories today means linking them to new media technology, and it is becoming obvious that what was very local has to be connected to global migration, to exclusion of bodies, – to migratory transitional bodies that are really pushed to the edge of society. If we are interested in what democracy is, in what are the possibilities of really radically rethinking the perspectives of society – if it's possible to draw a society that is not just a neoliberal economic agreement but a society that can develop a community in which social questions matter and in which social alliances are important – we have to make a turn to real histories. This means that in relation to new media and technology, from Internet on, it became obvious that histories of practices like feminism, like underground, like radicalised theory have to be re-evaluated. It is necessary to substitute the discourse of identity with an analysis of ideology and reflect about contemporary art and culture with regard to biopolitics, capital, class struggle, as well as with regard to new institutional, theoretical, and economical forms of (in)direct expropriation, enslavement and colonization. If we are not to take such a path, then the proclaimed politics will *remain* as just a never-ending *play of empty* sign*s*.

I will make recourse to Paul Virilio's paradigm of the logistics of perception,[ii] and as well to Badiou's logics of the world to develop another *logistics* that is that *of contemporary Europe*, and to describe a possible paradigm of what can be termed as contemporary politics of (anti)agency in the global world. As Virilio gives a detailed technical history of weaponry, photography and cinematography in his logistics of perception, illuminating it with accounts of films and military campaigns, I would similarly like to set out ways of perceiving Europe today. I would like to show that, in the mid-1980s perception and destruction became co-interdependent as argued by Virilio, and in 2006 this co-interdependency is established between anxiety, superego and the paradigm of the snob.

My thesis is that capitalism not only produces different worlds and modes of lives, but also cultural and artistic paradigms through which it is possible to say that wars between different worlds (that is also presented as the "worldless" world) take place on the level of aesthetic, through specific concepts that hegemonize the sphere of art and culture, imposing today a certain way of political (anti)agency of the status quo, that has to be precisely defined.

In short, what we see in the present moment is, giving reference to David Harvey,[iii] a deliberate project to restore upper-class power, through imposing structural mechanisms of neoliberal governance and of uneven world geographical and economical development.

The three tenses of decisive action, according to Paul Virilio's analysis – "the past, present and future – have been firmly replaced by two tenses – real time and delayed time – and meanwhile the future having disappeared via computer programming.[iv] On the other hand, this so-called 'real' time, simultaneously contains both a part of the present and a part of the immediate future."[v]

In the face of such a context, the philosophical questions of plausibility and implausibility override those concerning the true and the false. The shift of interest from space to time, leads to a shift from the old black-and-white, real-figurative dichotomy to the more relative actual-virtual.[vi] As argued by Paul Virilio "In two hundred years, the philosophical and scientific debate itself has thus shifted from the question of the objectivity of mental images to the question of their reality. The problem therefore, has no longer much to do with the mental images of consciousness alone. It is now essentially concerned with the instrumental virtual images of science and their paradoxical facticity."[vii] Furthermore, this is one of the most crucial aspects of the development of the new technologies of digital imagery and of the synthetic vision offered by electron optics: the relative fusion/confusion of the factual (or operational, if you prefer) and the virtual.[viii]

I would like to define what is taking place as a transition from the politics of memory to the memory of that, which used to be a political act. Or if I chose to radicalize this statement, I can ask: What defines global capitalism and neoliberal politics today? The answer is the evacuation of the political with processes not only of confusion and disappearing of borders and precise positions, but with an escalation (using the precise military term of the word) of abstractions, evacuations, empty formalization of protocols of performative politics. It is a continuing war, not only for oil, but for the "world(-less) world," which can only be less, for an ever-expanding territory as argued by Suely Rolnik.

In order to try to think Europe not only as a geographical space, but as a conceptual space, and a space that has a specific history – although after the fall of the Berlin wall it is more and more common to say that "Eastern Europe does not exist any more" – it is necessary to radicalize this space theoretically and politically.

It will be easy to state that – akin to my statement that Eastern Europe does not exist – Western Europe does not exist, either, or that what is even more fashionable in the last period, that Europe does not exist, but I will say Western Europe does exist, and Europe does exist. What does not exist, and I will make a reference to Bruno Bosteels text "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: the Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism," is Europe as a relationship! As Bruno Bosteels writes, and I will paraphrase for the purpose of this text, several years before Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe[ix] would consolidate the Lacanian real, understood as a political key concept, this was already done in Alain Badiou[x] work which argued that the real of psychoanalysis presents the impossibility of the sexual as relationship, and that the real of Marxism states that there is no class relationship."[xi] It exists only as antagonism.

It is possible to state today – after the last events regarding the further enlargement of the Schengen zone to include the new 10 states of the EU, the implementation that was so shamefully postponed in the not-specified future – that Europe does not exist as a relationship! It exists only as antagonism! If implemented, as proposed at the end of 2006, it would allow full mobility not only of goods, but of people at least from these ten new states from the former Eastern European context. That "Europe does not exist as relationship" is testified also by all the other former Eastern European states that will be left "for ever" at the borders of EU!

What is the specific history of this new Europe? What can we learn from this history? We can learn not to think about this history as individual identity politics, but as something that can produce radical political concepts of democracy approaching historically. Capital emancipates unbelievably. It is changing clothes, the way of behaving, if we just think of the

names given to it in the time we are living in: social capital, inventive capital, the capital that has a special social attitude, the capital that is emancipated in relation to culture etc. These names show the unbelievable flexibility of capital in coping with time.

Again, what defines global capitalism and neoliberal politics today? The evacuation of the political. Everything is transferred to art and culture, to some kind of politics of moral, ethics and in the last instance it seems that it is about social help. This is how the political questions of the world are removed not only from art and culture, but from society as well. It's almost impossible to do anything relevant today in the social and political space of Europe and the world because of fierce censorship through funding etc. installed and constantly reproduced relations of hierarchy, economical and structural power's interdependence that demands apolitical projects and (fake) morality. Moreover, the public space is disappearing and private institutions and multinationals that have the money are those who articulate, put in balance and sort public needs, histories and commons.

It is about the allocation of capital. Instead of identity politics, it is important to analyze the ways we are attached/subjugated to the structures of institutional and economical power.

What is the slogan of the day: We no longer work, but create! This is the process of subjectivisation through production in the time of post-Fordist global capitalism. This process employs creation as an activity that re-defines work and literally hides capitalist exploitation. Because of this, the explanation of immaterial labor is of key importance for the explanation of the process of subjectivisation in our contemporaneity. Understanding these processes necessitates the re-connection of creation and the power of resistance, and the freeing from the grip of the pimp, i.e. the capitalist system. As Suely Rolnik explains "...[w]e need to place ourselves in an area where politics and art are intertwined, where the resistant force of politics and the creative forces of art mutually affect each other, blurring the frontiers between them."[xii] This is an attempt to place us in a thoroughly contaminated area, "first on the side of politics contaminated by its proximity to art, then on the side of art contaminated by its proximity to politics."[xiii]

Former Eastern Europe – embraced by the European Union today, or having a new EU "face" – is becoming a place of investments and, therefore a place of different interests. Economical investments, political pressures, and new legislation politics need familiar cultural and artistic contexts. The way these geographical places and mental spaces with their material infrastructures are made visible, accessible, and friendly, who will be seen as the new actors, agents, producers, artists, curators, and last but not least, cultural managers, are all part of power structures, fights, monetary investments and capital issues and branding.

Therefore the only possibility is in the opening of the history of Europe to those questions that was not until now part of "the agenda," from migration to inclusion and exclusion, analyzing politically contemporary strategies of biopolitics and the allocation of capital and finance. France is an excellent example of contemporary biopolitics, all these so-called immigrants who as a second generation born in France were supposedly included, were in fact excluded precisely through a fake inclusion. Slovenia is another shameful case in the matter, with its newly taken measures of "solving" the problem of Roma population in Slovenia. In November 2006, a deportation of a Roma family from a village with a majority of Slovenians took place. Instead of protecting Roma minority rights, the Slovenian repressive state apparatuses, from the police to local social bodies, deported a Roma family from the village (in which the family members lived and owned a property) to an abandoned refugee center;

the "civilised" villagers "had enough" of the Roma family, and therefore in a "familiar" manner of a populist mob revolted group, they attacked the family and insisted that they have to be forever removed. The police gave a "protection" to the Roma family with its deportation!

The regime of the EU – with its laws, acts of trading, allocating, distributing and investing capital, structural funds, etc. imposed upon all the members of the EU, especially onto its new members (through a meticulous system of equality and inequality) – is not only regulating the mobility of migrants and the politics towards asylum seekers, but also regulating strategies of the labor market and the precarious conditions of labor, not to mention the uneven economical development. It would be wrong to think that all of these protocols have nothing to do with art and culture, and nothing to do with freedom of expression and creativity. They are in fact strongly conditioning the field of art and culture, and the ways in which we organize our lives, the ways we perceive and write history / and not histories.

My thesis is that the changes that have to be defined as antagonistic and not as a relationship are attaining on the level of their aesthetical formalization, on the level of their formal representational and performative politics models, a dimension of pure and deadly catastrophe. What do I want to say? This very important and almost axiomatic sentence by Badiou illuminates (reported and commented in Bosteels when he divides Lacan from Badiou, or vice versa): "If, as Lacan says, the real is the impasse of formalization, then, Badiou suggests […] that formalization is the im-passe of the real," which violates the existing state of things and its immanent deadlocks.[xiv] I would like to put clear this process of the impasse of formalization that has to pass through the formalization of the impasse of the real, as what we see today is precisely a formalization of the status quo, of a deadlock of political agency that is effectuated as well through contemporary performative politics.

Let me explain: there is an almost axiomatic work of art by Mladen Stilinovic from Zagreb, Croatia, who in 1997 accurately captured multiculturalism as an ideological matrix of global capitalism with a sentence being the art work: "An artist who cannot speak English is no artist!" This sentence, a work of art of the 1990s, synthesised capital's "social sensitivity" for all those multicultural identities that revealed themselves in the 1990s to the global capitalist world and began to talk to that world – in English, no matter how broken that English was. However, today's performative logic which is in perfect harmony with the abstraction and evacuation processes of global capitalism and its snobbish posture requires the correction of this sentence: "An artist who cannot speak English **well** is no artist!

Jonathan L. Beller[xv] in his attempt to formulate a political economy of vision, also explores the processes of abstraction and evacuation. He connects the growing abstraction of the "medium" of money in capitalism with abstraction procedures in the fields of contemporary art, culture and theory. I can say, giving reference to Beller, that we are mot so much confronted with the abstraction of our senses today (this being a typically modern phenomenon), but with the absolute sensualisation of abstraction, i.e. of the absolute sensualisation of the contemporary neo-liberal emptiness within global capitalism. This is a new turn in the genealogy of capitalist abstraction, it is an alienation that cannot be treated in the old way, in the way that Adorno described as the alienation of our senses.

It is characterised by the full sensualisation of the capitalist processes of emptiness and by exposing the totally formalised values that are becoming emptied of all content in a "historical" sense. We can illustrate this with the sudden popularity of Herman Melville's Bartleby sentence: "I would prefer not to do it." This sentence that appears in Melville's short

story »Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street« from 1853 as a "gesture" of refusal is becoming paradigmatic today, and is elevated within philosophy to be a gesture of the only possible withdrawal from the contaminated and implicated global capitalism. Not just to say NO, but to prefer, in Bartleby style, not to say no, is not so much a refusal of any specific content, as it is just the formal, empty gesture of refusal!

But a series of questions remain; in which spaces and for which reasons, and last but not the least, for who we can just (re)play refusal as a formal gesture?

A good illustration of the sensualisation of abstraction is visible in two art movies that are not ordinary Hollywood blockbusters. One is the *Lost in Translation* (2003), by Sofia Coppola, and *Broken Flowers* (2005), by Jim Jarmusch.[xvi] In both films, the image of white capitalist emptiness, hollowness and a disinterest in any kind of engagement, politics or action reaches a maximum. The white kind (portrayed through Bill Murray, the main actor in both films) is engaged only in elevating its own hollowness to a dimension of sensuous delight, that the Second and Third World will never be "capable" of reaching.

In this process we can observe Agamben's genealogy[xvii] of the human from animal to snob. Using "paradigmatic forms of the human,"[xviii] Agamben establishes the genealogy of the human as an arrangement of figures starting from the animal, proceeding toward (Bataille's) the acephalous, the headless, and ending with a thoughtless figure. The thoughtless figure that is situated at the end of this genealogy is no one else than the snob.

A snob is a person who adopts the world-view that other people are inherently inferior for any one of a variety of reasons including supposed intellect, wealth, education, ancestry, etc. A snob imitates the manners, adopts the world-view and affects the lifestyle of a social class of people to which he either belongs or aspires to. The snob excludes "outsiders" by developing elaborate social codes, symbolic status and recognizable marks of language.

Paradigmatic forms of the human are not just metaphors but (anti)political figures of the human development within the capitalist First World's genealogy, that is administered by the anthropological machine, which is clearly moving in the direction of an increasing emptying, abstraction and formalization of what is to be perceived as the (civilised) human. These figures can also be seen as figures of subjectivisation. In *The Open. Man and Animal*, Agamben writes about such an increasing abstracted formalization within the genealogy of the human, depicting the development of the human towards a mere form or a snobbish gesture without a content.[xix]

With the figure of the snob that is a paradigmatic figure circulating through art, theory and politics, totalising all these spaces of possible action with complete disinterest in anything outside itself, we can describe the deadly process of a complete emptying of a possible violent – and, if you want I can state this – militant theory, process and activity, that is in fact the only one that can restate the rare possibility as emphasised by Bruno Bosteels "of overdetermining the determination, and displacing the existing space of assigned places;" the price "to be paid if one seeks to avoid such violence, whether it is called symbolic or metaphysical, is [the monotonous, repetitive stance of] the status quo."[xx]

I can propose as well another turn: to reread a decade later Paul Virilio's prophetical statement from the 1990s: "The Paparazzo, this is what we are!"[xxi] as "Just the snob that the

white [upper] class has become." The snob is installing his emptiness as the last esthetical paradigm of the time we are living in.

I would like to connect this process of abstraction, evacuation and emptiness that is part of the mechanisms of contemporary performative politics to another process that was identified and precisely described by Paul Virilio.

Today, all methods of proving a statement depend on technological instruments and tools, and the constitution of scientific "truth" is, to a profound degree, mediated by technology.[xxii] Pragmatic acceptance of axioms and specific methods of proof have entered a variety of sciences. Scientific statements have to be effectuated and are thus decisively mediated by technology. Pragmatic performativity is the post-modern sense of truth.[xxiii] Scientific knowledge is possible to be acquired only through its mediation through technology.

Allow me to clarify this process of "seeing through its mediation through technology" by returning for a moment to photography – summarising its inner principle by referring to Paul Virilio. »Everything I see is in principle within my reach, at least within the reach of my sight, marked on the map of the 'I can.'«[xxiv] Photography enables the encoding of a topographical memory by establishing a dialectical loop between seeing and mapping. As Virilio claims, it is possible to speak of generations of vision, and even of visual heredity from one generation to the next. However, following Virilio,[xxv] the perception developed by new media and technologies (called the "logistics of perception") destroyed these earlier modes of representation preserved in the "I can" of seeing. The logistics of perception inaugurates the production of a vision machine and the possibility of achieving sightless vision, whereby a video camera or virtual technology would be controlled by a computer. Today, new media apparatus (from virtual reality to cyberspace) confer upon us a whole range of visual prosthetics which confront us with a deeply changing positioning of the subject. Changes are effectuated within our bodies as well, as we are facing an absence of certainty within the visibility of our world. As Virilio would say, the bulk of what I see is no longer within my reach. We have to ask ourselves: What does one see when one's eyes, depending on new technology, are reduced to a state of rigid and practically invariable structural immobility?

So, on one side we see a systematic production of blindness (this is to what we can compare the naked human eye) and on the other side we see the growing tendency to use increasingly sophisticated electronic technologies, not only in science, but also in the leading ideological and repressive state apparatus (particularly within the legal system and among the police). Virilio speaks of hyper-realist representational models within the police and legal systems, to the extent that human witnesses lose their credibility; the human eye no longer remains an eyewitness. On the one side of the paradigm of new media technology, we are witnessing the systematic production of blindness, and on the other, the frightening hyper-realism of a system of total visibility, which is particularly reinforced in legal and police procedures.

The tendency of the leading scopic regime of new media technologies is to produce blindness, while simultaneously, creating a whole range of techniques to produce the credibility of the presence of objects and humans, rather than trying to demonstrate their real existence. Today, this latter process may be illustrated with military and espionage strategies: "It is more vital to trick the enemy about the virtuality of the missile's passage, about the very credibility of its presence, than to confuse him about the reality of its existence."[xxvi] These characteristics serve as reminders of the dimension of time, which, as Paul Virilio suggests, is under siege by real time technologies. "They kill 'present' time by isolating its presence here and now for the

sake of another commutative space that is no longer composed of our 'concrete presence' in the world, but of a 'discrete telepresence' whose enigma remains forever intact."[xxvii]

It is crucial to understand the intertwined processes, from technology, trough esthetics to philosophy and economy, of at first sight non-connected logistics and logics of contemporary neoliberal societies, in promoting abstraction, evacuation and emptying of any political and social content of a possible agency. This process of evacuation undermines precisely the figure of any consistent and subversive political agency today.

I stated that with the figure of the snob, which is a paradigmatic figure circulating from art to theoretical and political contexts, from exhibition to conferences, we can capture the deadly process of a status quo in art and culture. Here the real is, paraphrasing Badiou, that what is subtracted in a new form that is the snob. I would like to make a further analysis of these new apolitical figures, from the snob-as Bartleby-"Murray" to contemporary hype philosophers to put even more visible this formalization of emptiness (seen in the jargon to be really "sexy"), and the catastrophic proposal it carries to withdraw from every action.

Bruno Bosteels describes, based on Badiou, two possible trajectories of subjectivisation, one is the path from anxiety to superego and the other is the path from courage to justice. In the first trajectory, from anxiety to superego, "the subject occupies an internal exclusion, with regard to the objective structure in which it finds its empty place,"[xxviii] as in *Broken Flowers* (the figure of Bill Murray is at the very center, but he excludes himself from any action, "dead," and in such a way as well protected from the world that he brought to the verge of a destruction); and even more this empty place is now canonised through different strategies from sensualisation of emptiness to formalised performative politics.

We might say with Bosteels and Badiou that in Lacan, anxiety and superego, these two subjective figures point towards an excess of the real beyond its placement in the existing law of things. "Anxiety designates the moment when the real kills, rather than divides the symbolic."[xxix] What else are the new subjective figures, as "Bill Murray," or Bartleby for example, than the figures that kill the symbolic precisely with enthroning, through an almost sensual spirituality, the status quo of the contemporary First capitalist DEAD world ORDER. Between anxiety and superego a subject only oscillates in painful alternation, without the possibility of action. At best anxiety and superego indicate the point where the existing order of things becomes caught only between the headless (the populist right wing mob attitude) and the thoughtless (snob attitude), without allowing any new possibility for radical social and political agency to come into being.

For Badiou, the superego is at the same time the law and its destruction. It is the word itself, inasmuch, according to Bosteels; it is only its root that is left. This is the Bartleby "no I prefer not to do anything," detached in his withdrawal from the world, looking at it from afar, while it is completely falling apart. The figure of the snob, that forecloses any space of activity, from art, culture to theory and finally to politics, and stops any kind of action and change, is the final point, indeed, of this trajectory from anxiety and superego that is today enthroned.

According to the second trajectory from courage to justice, "a subject stands in a topological excess over and above its assigned placement, the law of which is then transformed."[xxx]

Let's come to a conclusion. In the end, it is possible to say that in contemporary philosophy and activist politics the "war" that is going on is indeed about the location of the void,

whether as in Lacan, according to Bruno Bosteels, "on the side of the subject as lack, or, as in Badiou on the side of being as empty set."[xxxi] At the moment we are witnessing to a process of giving being to this formalised performative emptiness (absolutely sensualising it), while completely dismissing that what could open the path for a different politics, that says that "the subject of truth is defined by a lack of being."[xxxii]

[i] Cf. Alain Badiou, *Logiques des mondes. L'Être et l'Événement 2*, Le Seuil, Paris, 2006.

[ii] Cf. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, Verso, London and New York, 1989.

[iii] Cf. David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism, Oxford University Press, USA, 2005.

[iv] Paul Virilio, *The Vision Machine*, British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, London, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1994, p. 66.

[v] Ibid. p. 66.

[vi] Ibid., p. 70.

[vii] Ibid., p. 60.

[viii] Ibid.

[ix] Cf. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe*, Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, Verso, London and New York, 1985.

[x] Cf. Alain Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, Seuil, Paris, 1982.

[xi] Cf. Bruno Bosteels text "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: the Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?," in Slavoj Zizek ed., *LACAN - The Silent Partners*, Verso, London and New York, 2006, p. 140.

[xii] Cf. Suely Rolnik, "The Twilight of the Victim: Creation Quits Its Pimp, to Rejoin Resistance," *Zehar*, No. 51, 2003, p. 36.

[xiii] Ibid.

[xiv] Cf. Bruno Bosteels text "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: the Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?," p. 141.

[xv] Cf. Jonathan L. Beller, "Numismatics of the Sensual, Calculus of the Image: The Pyrotechnics of Control," *Image [&] Narrative*, web magazine on visual narration, No. 6, February 2003, http://www.imageandnarrative.be/mediumtheory/jonathanlbeller.htm

[xvi] Coppola and even more Jarmusch with their film histories are firmly contextualised within the art film scene.

[xvii] Cf. Giorgio Agamben, The *Open. Man and Animal*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004.

[xviii] Ibid., pp. 9-12.

[xix] Ibid.

[xx] Cf. Bruno Bosteels text "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: the Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?," p. 141.

[xxi] Cf. Paul Virilio, "Der Paparazzo, das sind wir," in *Der Spiegel*, Nr. 37, from 8.9.1997. S.220.

[xxii] Cf. Heinz Paetzold, "Definitions of the Postmodern Status of Knowledge," in H. Paetzold, *The Discourse of the Postmodern and the Discourse of the Avant-Garde*, Jan van Eyck Akademie, Maastricht 1994, pp. 14-21.

[xxiii] Ibid., p. 16.

[xxiv] Paul Virilio, *Vision Machine*, British Film Institute and Indiana University Press, London and Bloomington, Indiana, 1994, p. 7.

[xxv] Ibid., chapters 1 and 2.

[xxvi] Cf. Virilio, pp. 43-44.

[xxvii] Paul Virilio, "The Third Interval: A Critical Transition," in Verena Andermatt Conley, ed., *Re-thinking Technologies*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1993, p. 4.

[xxviii] Cf. Bruno Bosteels text "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: the Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?," p. 143.

[xxix] Ibid.

[xxx] Ibid.

[xxxi] Cf. Bruno Bosteels text "Alain Badiou's Theory of the Subject: the Recommencement of Dialectical Materialism?," p. 154.

[xxxii] Ibid, 155.