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The new, horror and art

In 1979, the poet and playwright Heiner Müller ended his guest speech to a debate in New York on postmodernism by saying: “Fear is the first image of hope, horror the first image of the new”.

Müller’s axiom may be a good way of going straight to the matter in hand, and expressing my perplexity at the feeling that art is losing its ability to inspire the emergence of the new. Or rather, the new appears to be emerging not in the field of art, but, fundamentally outside it. I would therefore like to allude to two burgeoning trends in the contemporary world that are occurring outside the sphere of art but which amaze and horrify us: I am talking on the one hand about the process whereby capital anticipates the future and, on the other, the intensification of the war on terrorism as a basic feature of the new world order, which is gaining more ground every day.

Let’s look at the first of these trends. As we know, the alliance between techno-science and global capital is leading, ever faster, to a restructuring of work, a reprogramming of nature, the recombination of life and the reconfiguration of language, based on the concepts of information and innovation. The enormous enterprise of this alliance has barely begun, but the outlook already suggests that techno-science and global capital overall aspire to transform what exists into raw material for them to appropriate. Moreover, this alliance allows techno-science and global capital to concentrate increasingly on the virtual dimension of reality and to map it and exploit it intensively and extensively in order to take control of that part of the virtual that needs to be brought up to date. The question thus arises, “how is artistic creation left, in the face of a process that encompasses even the creation of life and reserves even the right to conquer human nature itself?” One gets the impression that techno-scientific development is beginning to ride roughshod over art and, through its emphasis on innovation, to sequester its prerogative for creation...

The suspicion that something along these lines is occurring is confirmed if one makes a quick comparison with what is happening in other fields. At a recent seminar on civil society and public space, I discovered that political scientists are feeling quite peeved. Until the mid-1990s, they say, the concept of civil society was seen as the expression of an emancipating force expressed through a confrontation with the market and the state; in that sense, the concept had a positive, promising, even utopian value. Since then, however, this force has begun to be debased, because both the state and the market have proved themselves capable of appropriating the concept, and the dynamics that it appointed, and of utterly distorting them: civil society is now called on to collaborate with the state and the market in implementing policies which are in themselves delimited and determined. Thus, what was an emancipating process has become a regulatory procedure. Sociologists tend to call this type of “recovery” a “rationalisation of utopias”; but what these political scientists had discovered appears to extend even further: While they were busy theorising on the possible role of civil society as a new social force, the state and the market had already anticipated its potential, channelling it not towards opposition, but conversely towards a consolidation of the status quo. The

result was that political scientists, desperately trying to make up for lost time, were now obliged to urge a criticism of the concept of civil society.

Shortly after this insight, I attended an international seminar on *Cities and Utopia*, where I learnt that the specialists there were faced with the same problem. They had thought up the idea of the sustainable city as an alternative to the global city that capital had erected as its ideal and role model. But even before the concept of the sustainable city took shape, state and market had already begun to transform it into a new means of “selling cities” and thus “resolving” the crisis in which they were immersed. Once again, it seemed that the logic of the market had anticipated the potential and capitalised on it, and that the state, “forgetting” its public role, had limited itself to adhering to that logic and fostering it.

The anticipatory power sketched in these two examples might also apply to the terrain of the arts, and the issue thus becomes a crucial one for creators: if global capital and techno-science are capable of making us believe that they control the virtual dimension of reality, the very process of creation will be compromised, since it will be those forces that decide what potentials need to be updated, and in what way. The art system, then, would not appear to be immune from this dynamic: until recently the art market’s main interest was in works that were acclaimed or likely to form part of the history of art; for some years now, however, there has been a growing prospective interest in contemporary art, even in the echelons of high finance. Given that this kind of art often does not produce saleable objects, and indeed disappears once the exhibition is over, how then can we explain this move? I suspect that the interest may be due to the fact that such sectors have come to understand that art is a means of exploring the interface between the virtual and the actual and, as such, it is a medium that must also be controlled and appropriated—in short, tamed—using its own matrix.

But, if art involves the invention of new futures, as Deleuze and Guattari said, and not the reiteration of a programmed future, it would be reasonable to ask: What can be one to resist? How can we transform that trend, how can we give it a new direction, how can we make a change?

The other trend that creates horror and amazement is, obviously, the world into which we were thrust after 11 September 2001. First the event in itself, which in everyone’s mind marked a turning point, and which was to prove so decisive as to lead the composer Stockhausen to remark: “What happened there is — now all of you must adjust your brains — the biggest work of art.... That spirits achieve in a single act what we in music cannot dream of, that people rehearse ten years long like mad, totally fanatical for a concert and then die. This is the biggest artwork that exists in the whole universe... Just imagine what happened there. There are these people who are so concentrated on a performance, and then, 5000 people are blown to Resurrection, in one moment. I couldn’t match it. Against that, we—as composers—are nothing”.

And then, in answer to a journalist who asked whether he thought art equals crime, Stockhausen added: “it’s a crime because the people did not give their consent. They hadn’t come to the ‘concert’. This is evident. And nobody had told them that they might

die in the process. But what happened spiritually, this jump out of security, out of the self-evident, out of the every day life, this sometimes also happens in art...or it is worthless.”

Stockhausen’s controversial, disturbing—even intolerable—statement gives the measure of the event, or rather, it expresses the immoderateness of that “absolute work of art”. What the terrorists dared to do is inadmissible: to claim some portion of the monopoly on violence and to return it, in an absolutely totalitarian way, bringing death to the centre of the system and smashing its aura of invulnerability and infinite superiority. Here an interesting question arises. It is currently possible to find among the administrators those who invoke the Deleuzian notions of the war machine and the apparatuses of capture to designate the relations of conflict between subversive public art and the socio-economic, political and cultural institutions that seek to bring it to heel. But what would those artistic uprisings be if they were faced with the real nomad war machine armed against the imperial state?

Challenged by the supreme sacrilege of terrorism, the empire has been forced to show its cards—reacting to this “threat against civilization”, it declared total war on the “barbarians”, demanding blind allegiance from all countries. And the worst thing is that with every passing day, we see how more and more **examples of resistance**, struggles and oppositions of all kinds are translated into the Manichaean language of terrorism. It is as if language were “shrinking”, as if only the language of terror—state terror or contra-terror—made any real sense... to such an extent that Bush recently remarked: “I want to make this war more peaceful”.

Clearly, then, that the world is engaged in a state of martial law, and language itself is being violently affected. The field of art is not immune from imperial administration’s declaration of “unlimited war” and “preventative war”. On the contrary, if a state of emergency has been declared everywhere, if we are in the midst of a process of total mobilisation, to use Ernst Jünger’s expression, the field of art also becomes a minefield and aesthetic questions in turn become reconfigured. The questions that urgently need to be answered, therefore, are: Will art be up to the complexity of the new times? What type of language is needed to recover the potential of words? How can we regain that potential through aesthetic expression?

I suspect that, in order to meet the challenges of the new times, it will be necessary to intensely politicise art; paradoxically, as its area of scope loses ground as a result of a combination of the two trends outlined above.

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