

**BELATED INQUIRIES ON PORNOGRAPHY
AND ECOLOGY: HOW BEING
CONSERVATIVE WORKS FOR
ENVIRONMENTALISM**



Guest Editor: Dr Iker Arranz
IJŽS Vol. 12 n. 4 (Dec. 2018)

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

Monograph: Belated inquiries on pornography and ecology:
how being conservative works for environmentalism.

Guest Editor: Dr Iker Arranz

Dec. 2018

Cover Painting: Jurema Martin

<http://juremartin.com/>

jurema.lemi@gmail.com

Table of Contents

Iker Arranz: Introduction - Belated inquiries on pornography and ecology:
how being conservative works for environmentalism. **pp. 2-3**

Papers:

Xabier Insausti: Re-thinking Pornography: Sontag's retrieval of a
post-religious Hegel . **pp. 4- 21**

Benjamin Martin: *Black Mirror* and the Divergence of Online and Offline
Behavior Patterns **pp. 22-34**

João Albuquerque: Deconstructing Capitalism through Perversion: Readings
of *The Invention of Morel*. **pp. 35-54**

Iker Arranz: Environmental Struggles and Ecological Narratives in the
Basque Country: The 20th Century Dialectics of
Sustainable Materialism. **pp. 55-76**

Pedro Lopes de Almeida: Dissonant notes, intrepid explorers: a reading of
Angola and the River Congo, by Joachim John
Monteiro, between ecology and violence. **pp. 77- 107**

Reviews:

Edurne Arostegui: Han Kang. *The Vegetarian*. Translated by Deborah Smith.
London/New York: Hogarth, 2015. 252pp. **pp. 108-110**

Jonathan W. Crocker: Sandlin, J. and Wallin, J. (eds.), 2017. *Paranoid
Pedagogies: Education, Culture, and Paranoia*.
London: Palgrave Macmillan. 212 Pages. **pp 111-113**

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

Introduction - Belated inquiries on pornography and ecology: how being conservative works for environmentalism.

Iker Arranz, Ph.D. University of California, Santa Barbara

This monograph sets out from the idea of an obscure and perverted relationship between environmentalism, understood as a 21st century green and popular movement, and pornography, understood as a traditionalist and conservative art form. Both sides seem to come together in the interest of what has been called the Anthropocene. Somehow the same groups that rely on a fierce defense of the planet and demand a collective awareness of the risk the entire humanity faces do not do it any longer on behalf of an unknown future or revolutionary goal, but for the conservation of a still image of Earth: a positive conviction on how the future is going to look like. This aporia is dissolved into an oxymoron when environmentalist practices are put at work.

Following relevant texts by Slavoj Žižek, this monograph presents a variety of approaches on these issues. To start with Prof. Insausti presents the ideas of Susan Sontag related to the very phenomenon of pornography from a philosophical perspective, and her insights on the tendencies attached to certain social movements. Dr. Martin, using the Tv Show *Black Mirror* as a backbone for his arguments, describes how pornography can be

productive too, and an uneasy voice for a society that seems to be swamped in routine. Thirdly, João Albuquerque confronts some of the arguments coming from Žižek himself, posing Adolfo Bioi Casares' *The Invention of Morel* as a representation of an utopia that decomposes itself, a dystopia in-progress, that cannot recover nor re-invent itself, and that finally has to deal with the natural environment as an active agency of its situation. In the fourth contribution, Dr. Arranz brings some of the most significant environmentalist protests that took place in the Basque Country during the late 80s and 90s as an example of the misleading direction of ecological demands, and in the direction of unveiling the oxymoron of their demands, using Sophocles' *Antigone* to do so. In the fifth contribution, Pedro Lopes de Almeida brings the travel texts of Joachim John Monteiro to the fore, and making an ecocritical reading of them, is able to disclose the ethical contradictions of colonial texts, where nature is also mobilised against subaltern communities. Finally, this monograph is completed by two reviews: Edurne Arostegi reviews *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang (2015), an exquisite novel that radically focuses on the limits and absurdity of human nature when intends to be fully natural; and Jonathan W. Croker reviews *Paranoid Pedagogies: Education, Culture, and Paranoia* by Sandlin, J. and Wallin, J. (eds.), 2017, where we can find a significant study on the actual impact of paranoia in current pedagogies and educational institutions.

All the contributions above complete a volume that discusses how current ecological concerns and movements retain a perverted vein when it comes down to the ethical values that they promote. This debate is normally based of our own survival as human beings. However, more important than surviving the long awaited (and maybe desired catastrophe), it is also worth to reflect and question on what kind of conditions and principles are we going to rely the day after doomsday.

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

Re-thinking Pornography: Sontag's retrieval of a post-religious Hegel

Xabier Insausti, Department of Philosophy, University of the Basque Country

Abstract: When Susan Sontag addresses the problem of pornography and relates it to Hegel, she is not merely describing a path in European philosophy aimed to construct a new language, but she is also committing this aim to the importance of re-reading culture. The fashion in which pornography describes reality is meaningful when we are trying to approach Hegel in his aim to construct a post-religious language that finally will make ready-to-hand life as life. Politics, and society, being two essential elements to understand reality, become singularly interesting when analyzed through the gaze of Sontag in combination of Hegel's philosophy. The conservative morals that reign over what we understand as pornography, and the cultural moment of Europe since the most progressive moments of the 19th century, describe a fatalist landscape for the future of society and politics. Yet, the learnings from Hegel remain meaningful. In this paper I examine how a post-religious philosophy, aimed long ago by Hegel's contribution to philosophy, can serve to the understanding of a post-pornographic society: a society that is able to learn from the contributions of Frankfurt's school with regards to an efficient cultural tissue, and defeat the old religious morals that are inserted in the backbone of politics and philosophy still today.

Keywords: Hegel, post-religion, post-pornography, Žižek Studies, Susan Sontag

Wordcount: 6,549

1. A return to Hegel via Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag, in her interesting piece “The Pornographic Imagination” (1962), makes a surprising reference to Hegel:

Hegel made perhaps the grandest attempt to create a post-religious vocabulary, out of philosophy, that would command the treasures of passion and credibility and emotive appropriateness that were gathered into the religious vocabulary. But his most interesting followers steadily undermined the abstract meta-religious language in which he had bequeathed his thought, and concentrated instead on the specific social and practical failure lies like a gigantic disturbing hulk across the intellectual landscape. And no one has been big enough, pompous enough, or energetic enough since Hegel to attempt the task again. (Sontag 1962, 231)

By quoting Hegel, even in a light manner, in a piece dedicated to discussing pornography and literature is at least rare, if not really revealing. How are Hegel and pornography related?

The main idea for us is that Hegel gave to philosophy a peculiar sense, a new radical language. Hegel revolutionized philosophy in a manner that maybe only Nietzsche did before, in an even more radical fashion than Nietzsche. Hegel rescued philosophical language that was kidnapped by the academics at the time, and gave it to the people. As Hegel said in the beginning of the *Differenzschrift* (Hegel 1801), it was about gathering philosophy again (which was completely lost in abstract discussions) and life (which had lost its connection with philosophy). Hegel’s movement, in this sense, is literally revolutionary. Following Hegel, natural consciousness is progressively going to be transformed, throughout phenomenological transition, into inverted consciousness—unhappy, ethical, moral, religious—until the arrival into a promised land that Hegel names as absolute consciousness, and from it is derived a completely new life, post-religious, even post-philosophical, which Hegel calls *logic*.

This rescues again the idea of bringing *life* to the center of attention, to recover the concrete *life* of human beings as the central object of philosophy. *Phänomenologie des*

Geistes (1807) is the guide for this path of *natural consciousness* to the real philosophy, to life itself.

In another part of the same book on pornography, Sontag discusses the movement made by Sartre on Genet in the book “Saint Genet, Comédian et Martyr” (1952). Sontag insists that how Sartre understands Genet as a Hegelian that goes through the fundamental figures that later Hegel will discover in his *Phänomenologie* in a radical effort of self-realization. Genet, in his daily routine and in his personal life (which refers to the same activity), follows a certain uncanniness of a reason that guides him, one of the same kind that guided Ulysses to Ithaca. The same thing happens to Derrida’s Genet in “Glas” (Derrida, 1974). The fact that Derrida posits Genet, page after page, in a frontal confrontation with Hegel, should force us to repeat and rethink the Sartrean exercise, even from a different aspect.

The second lesson that we extract from Sontag’s reference is that not even the followers of Hegel have been able to understand the radicalness of Hegel’s thought. After Hegel passed away, his work decayed into a vague and equalizing historicism. This very idea of the incapacity of Hegel’s followers to understand his mentor has been mentioned by many authors, such as Gadamer, who would say that “we have to read Hegel literary [*buchstabieren*] again, that is to say, without prejudices” (Gadamer 1980). Adorno would claim in the same direction that “whoever that has the task to understand Hegel finds himself alone, the gigantic literature about the philosopher is useless” (Adorno 1971); or Žižek who will say that “we need to reformulate the theoretical basis of philosophy” (Žižek 2012). The fact that Hegel remained so difficult to understand, it is not a problem for Hegel, but for us; it is not necessary to write Hegel again to understand it today, but more about learning how to read him. We remain orphans philosophically because we have killed the father—someone called him a “dead dog”—but we have not been able to take advantage of his inheritance.

Hegel is much more than just another philosopher. Paraphrasing Adorno, we can affirm that in the same way that Beethoven was all of music—all the history of music—Hegel was therefore all of philosophy. Hegel digests all of Europe’s cultural legacy and opens a new dimension, a new cultural horizon without any turning point. After him, one only can depart from him. He “realizes” philosophy. Hegel is a philosopher that attempted

to elevate (or lower) the philosophical language—trapped within the religious imaginary—“explaining” its content. History punished him with the obliteration of his figure. However, the denial of the truth forces the human beings to repeat what it was long considered overcome. This likewise is the reason we cannot understand Marx: he is only understandable from Hegel. So when some uselessly pretend that Marx had overcome Hegel, we could simply forget Hegel.

2. Re-reading Hegel

Nevertheless, what is the goal of a *postreligious* language? What Hegel taught us is to read History, to ask ourselves about the meaning of history, even before Nietzsche. Hegel illustrated how fundamentally re-read Greek philosophers, the Greek tragedy, but also to revisit Plato and Aristoteles. Accordingly, Hegel opened the possibility to re-read modern and medieval History, which traditionally underpinned a strong and subsumed religious face, which no author before him had been able to unearth the deepest sections of this layer. Hegel has showed us that it is possible and necessary to search for a new language that is able to express obscure contents and boil them down to what they really are: moments of life itself. Hegel found the optimal language to return the religious contents to its origins, which are life itself. And, in the same direction, he found the key to mimicking this process with other contents, in the arts, in politics, sciences—and pornographic as well. What is valid for other central contents, is likewise valid for pornography and life. Hegel’s most important lesson makes us realize that it is religion what is at life’s service and not vice versa. The same thing happens to science: the big crisis of the sciences of the 19th Century, which will be later announced by Husserl, was already anticipated by Hegel. However, it is religion what is located in conflict with the natural space of life at the time Hegel is writing his work. In this sense, Hegel elaborates a post-religious language, that is able to relocate life in the position it naturally deserves, and thus is accordingly announced in the beginning of his *Differenzschrift*. After this, his job will consist in developing a new language that will be implicit in a subsequent philosophical system. This is the main task Hegel will ultimately complete during what is called his Jena period.

In this direction, what Hegel inherits as a philosophical task is the development of the basic idea that philosophy is at service of life. Despite the differences, the fundamental movement that we find in Sartre, Derrida, or Sontag is always the same: the

search for a language to talk about contents that, in another way, are left behind in hands of fake merchants that are able to exploit them shamelessly, that is to say, even against life itself. And in this fraudulent use of the real contents of life we can find individuals moved by religious or capitalist interests. It is necessary, therefore, to unmask their hidden interests and bring back pornography to the scenario it deserves, which is life itself.

In sum, Hegel was able to develop a language that expresses a rich religious imaginary—so rich in metaphors, innuendos and propositions—without subsuming it to religious ends. The baroque traditions come directly from European culture, as Benjamin taught us, and is an imaginary full of life, full of human motives, a rich world full of passion, forms, chromatic diversity, a world that is worth saving for the moment the Messiah returns to judge us. We need an adequate language for that world. For example, El Bosco in his *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1490-1510) did find a pictorial language to express that obscure world (Figure 1). In the center of three panels, there is a placid world where individuals enjoy, without any concern, the pleasures that life offers them. Hell is present evidently, since the painting is strongly charged with the imaginary of its historical period.



Figure 1. El Bosco “The Garden of Earthly Delights” (1490-1510)

The word became flesh with Hegel—and later with Freud, we might add. Hegel could be the Promethean figure that stole the divine fire and gave it (back?) to human beings. From

the religious imaginary, European culture blooms especially in medieval times, and became a human standard. This is the reason why History appears in the first and third panel of painting. History determines the development of life. The rise (bloom) and end (death) become from then on the extremes where life is going to develop, the central panel of El Bosco's painting.

3. The Post-Religious Hegel

Sontag, coming back to her quote on pornographic imagination, correctly says that Hegel began “perhaps the grandest attempt to create a post-religious vocabulary.” This sentence makes clearest sense if we locate it within Fichte's philosophy, more concretely, the later Fichte. During this period, Fichte addresses his thought to “life” in a religious sense. This happens around 1800 and especially from 1810 to 1814, when Fichte dies. Fichte tries to deepen into his own philosophy, focusing on the theological message of John the Evangelist, who Fichte identified as the figure with the purest Christian expression coincident with his own deepest philosophical speculation. According to José Manzana, Fichte was likely trying to find a summarizing element of his own former philosophical positions, a clear and unequivocal center, not reached before, from which a simple and uniquely totalizing glimpse could dominate his philosophical inquiry, of the scientific doctrine: “One has the impression that in the latest communications of the Doctrine of Science one can reach a supreme position within the speculative dynamism that ascends and quiets down strongly and dominates ‘from above’ all the subjective and material moments of human existence” (author's translation, Manzana 2018).¹ The fact that is “love” becomes the last hinge element of philosophical closure opens the window for a post-Kantian philosophical perspective unknown before this moment, the possibility for a completely new approach.

Hegel will follow a different path, since he declares his separation from Fichte already in his first published work, *Differenzschrift*. Hegel is searching a new path for philosophy, which will take him in Jena to the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. With his contribution Hegel wants to overcome all the previous philosophical positions, including Fichte's and Schelling's.

¹ “Se tiene la impresión de que en las últimas exposiciones de la Doctrina de la Ciencia se alcanza una posición suprema en que el dinamismo de la energía especulativa ascensional se remansa soberanamente y domina `desde arriba` todos los momentos subjetivos y materiales de la existencia humana”.

We could state that whilst Fichte was trapped in a religious language, Hegel goes beyond this language. Hegel, after a long and intense effort, is going to find during latest years of Jena period his own path. For that, he will develop an own logic, which is the basis of his own philosophical project. This new philosophy will be absolute. This will include all the different philosophical areas, including the religious one, which will remain anchored to the system Hegel designs. Therefore, Hegel's will be a strictly post-religious philosophy, and we could add that it will be also a post-pornographic philosophy. Maybe, the real problem, as Sontag insinuates, is that we have not reached Hegel yet.

4. Sontag on Pornography

According to Siri Hustvedt, Susan Sontag defines pornography in a non-conventional manner: "She emphasizes that her adjective 'classical' for pornography is something of a joke and that her definition of porn is unconventional: *as a literary form it must embody the idea that lustful acts are inherently immoral*" (Hustvedt 2014). Sontag warns us about the proximity between the religious and pornographic spheres when she affirms that when using as bibliographical references a series of literary works (Sade, Bataille, *Historie d'O*, among others) there is a fundamental element that is related to pornography according to her, which is death. Death, Sontag states, is the essence of pornography. What pornography tries to elucidate and understand is death itself, search for it, experience it and make it its own end:

One reason that *Historie de l'oeil* and *Madame Edwarda* make such a strong unsettling impression is that Bataille understood more clearly than any other writer I know of that what pornography is really about, ultimately isn't sex but death. I am not suggesting that every pornographic work speaks either overtly or covertly, of death. Only works dealing with that specific and sharpest inflection of the themes of lust, 'the obscene', do. It's toward the gratifications of death, succeeding and surpassing those of Eros, that every truly obscene quest tends," (Sontag 1962, 224)

Death presents itself as something substantial in pornography. Why is that? The pornographic element includes a degree of negation, of the dissolution of the subject, a death drive that is substantial to the human being, as Freud made it clear. This fatal

attraction is necessary in order to articulate in a dialectical fashion the double sense of life. “Historie d’O” presents a woman that gives herself away “simultaneously as a human being and as a sexualized fulfilled being” (author’s translation).² In this book we can read how “both this flogging and the chain—which when attached to the ring of your collar keeps you more or less closely confined to your bed several hours a day—are intended less to make you suffer, scream, or shed tears than to make you feel, through this suffering, that you are not free but fettered, and to teach you that you are totally dedicated to something outside yourself” (Réage, 2013). What is he talking about when he mentions this “something outside yourself” that is crucial to become fully a sexual being? In an interview published in *Die Zeit* in 1976 Sontag explains this very contradiction in *Story of O* in the following terms:

My interest in this book was based and is based yet in the candor at the time of dealing with the diabolic part of the sexual fantasy. The terrible unconditionality of the fantasy that the book tackles the question (and which never betrays), cannot be encompassed with the optimistic and rational way of thinking that dominates feminism. The utopic thought of pornography points out to a negative utopia, as it does the majority of science-fiction literature” (author’s translation)³. And right after this critique both to the rationalist hegemonic optimism and to, in Sontag’s opinion, feminism, she continues saying that “as it presents itself the sexual pulsion seems to have something defective or frustrating. It seems to me that the full development of our sexual essence does not get along with the full development of our consciousness. Instead of supposing that all our sexual uneasiness is a part of the price that the sexual culture demands, it is probably easier to depart from the idea that we are naturally sick and that precisely our animal status, as Nietzsche called it, is what makes us animals that produce culture. This innate contradiction between sexual fulfillment and individual consciousness became more serious with

² “gleichzeitig auf ihre Auslöschung als menschliches Wesen und ihre Erfüllung als geschlechtliches Wesen”.

³ “Mein Interesse an dem Buch beruhte und beruht noch immer auf dem Freimut, mit dem es sich der dämonischen Seite der sexuellen Phantasie annimmt. Die grausame Unbedingtheit der Phantasie, für die es Partei nimmt (und die es keineswegs beklagt), ist mit der optimistischen und rationalistischen Denkweise nicht zu vereinbaren, die im Feminismus vorherrscht. Das utopische Denken der Pornographie ist auf eine negative Utopie aus, wie die meiste Science-fiction-Literatur”

the fact that in the modern universal culture sexuality plays a bigger role.”
(author’s translation)⁴

In sum, Sontag understands that there is an unbearable contradiction (by nature) that makes “wild animals” out of human beings.

Western culture ultimately had the desire to operate within the rational, theoretical, abstract, triumphalist dimensions, leaving behind a powerful level of human potentiality, and this takes us to Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s dialectics. The key is to articulate both extremes of these dialectics: life and death. And it is precisely at this point that Western culture has failed. Ernst Bloch (Bloch 1949) talked about a leftist Aristotelian current in the beginning of the Western philosophy that was cornered by another current that appears and disappears like a hide-and-seek game (with authors like Maimonides, Averroes, Spinoza, or Hegel himself). Against a triumphalist philosophy we can find these other currents that affirm the stain of consciousness. After all, Freud will remark that it is this repressed side that is most fundamental, most basic, most primal. The former will be the secondary one, the one that creates the repressed one.

5. Sartre, Genet and the Discontent of Culture

We can affirm that Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Derrida, along with Jean Genet, return to the most carnal Hegel, the most material and real one of the possible worlds. Sartre, in “Saint Genet, Comedian and Martyr” (1952) develops this approach, and Derrida does a similar thing in “Glas” (1974).

In this direction, Sartre envisions in Genet a mystic hero, who celebrates the Eucharist of the mystery of the world, nature, and human redemption. For Sartre, Genet is the actual Christ. Genet’s suffering is the suffering of someone that does not achieve the desired perfection, the one that holds all the world’s pain and who wants to redeem it.

⁴ “Wie sich der Geschlechtstrieb im Menschen auswirkt, scheint mir etwas von Grund auf Fehlerhaftes oder Frustrierendes an sich zu haben. Es scheint, daß sich die volle Entwicklung unseres sexuellen Wesens nicht mit der vollen Entwicklung unseres Bewußtseins verträgt. Anstatt anzunehmen, daß alle unsere sexuelle Unzufriedenheit ein Teil des Preises dafür ist, den die Kultur der Sexualität abverlangt, ist es vielleicht richtiger, davon auszugehen, daß wir zunächst von Natur aus krank sind – und daß unser Status als “kranke Tiere”, wie Nietzsche es nannte, uns erst zu Tieren macht, die die Kultur hervorbringen. Dieser angeborene Widerspruch zwischen sexueller Erfüllung und individuellem Bewußtsein wird noch dadurch verschlimmert, daß in der modernen, verweltlichten Kultur die Sexualität eine größere Rolle spielt”.

Genet, in Sartre's words, is a martyr of his time that tries to redeem himself with his own sacrifice, with his unconditional immolation. Sartre walks a parallel path with Hegel's *Phänomenologie* and Genet's discourse on life. Along with his extended bibliography in several topics, Sartre somehow is able incorporate Genet to the Western philosophy. And with this movement also tries to save philosophy itself, making it a partner in crime of Genet's life. Sartre, who took some courses on Hegel by Alexandre Kojève, reads Genet throughout the figures that Hegel describes in his *Phänomenologie*, which are summarized as the turning points of Western History. What is the uncanniness of Sartre? Where do Hegel and Genet meet each other?

Genet, for Sartre, is the absolute artist, greater even than Baudelaire, to whom Sartre dedicated one of his works years before, which at the same time can be considered the direct predecessor of the one dedicated to Genet. The difference between both is clear for Sartre: Genet, contrary to Baudelaire, is at the very center of European culture, which he redeems and makes "flesh" out of it. The word becomes "flesh" in Genet's life and works. Sartre and Genet were good friends (at least until Sartre wrote this book on him). This fact makes much more direct, almost obscene, the relationship between the two. Sartre seems to adventure himself in Genet's world, and melt his being into this reality that Genet builds up. Sartre somehow whispers something like "this character embodies my philosophy" when he is talking about Genet. Sartre explains and develops and creates philosophically what is in the backstage of Genet's literary universe. And it is at this point that Sartre encounters the figures present in the *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Genet is not resolved as a marginal figure but as a central figure in European culture. It is not Sartre's task to redeem Genet, but to the contrary: Genet shows us the path, Genet can redeem us because his word is not empty, it is not settled within the Western academic comfort zone. Genet took the risk and has learnt in the process. Genet has made his life his intellectual production. There is no distance between his life and his intellectual contribution. Genet's word is flesh now.

With the introduction of Genet, Sartre tries to amend his own philosophy, give a more materialist and carnal content to it. Genet, for Sartre, is crude life in its helplessness. Genet is a body in flesh, a body exposed to its environment, a body that rejects the academic absence of risk and its classist syndrome. Again, there is no distance between his life and his own intellectual oeuvre. This is the reason for Sartre to put Genet in the

beginning of a new philosophical advent, derived from the crisis that existentialism will endure, since Sartre understands his dialectic as a radicalization of his own existentialism, as an overcoming [*Aufhebung*] of it.

Sartre becomes himself Genet when he writes “Saint Genet.” Genet is the mirror where his image becomes an unruly writer that does not make any concessions to the reader. Brutality is a characteristic that is obvious to everyone, but in Sartre it is a brutality that identifies itself with life. It deals with a titanic effort of sincerity, which leaves the pornographic nudity of reality accessible to everybody, without any remorse, without any reserve. Therefore, Sartre’s text on Genet opens the possibility to a reconciliation with an obscure level of life, with death itself, with nature, and it celebrates its orphic mysteries. God becomes a man and dwells among us is the message, laic from now on, the very theological message of Apostle John that was appropriated by Fichte, without being capable of avoiding the religious imaginary that Hegel was able to disclose. For Hegel the substance is the subject, and it is in this fashion that it is given the carnal life to it. The “absolute spirit” in Hegel is no more than reality made (living) life reality, concrete, which makes time its own time, which makes out of life its own life -which makes out of abstract universal its own concrete universal-. It is indeed the immanence of life, as Deleuze would have put it, although Deleuze in a Hegelian manner brought it against Hegel. But the immanent transcends, not the enclosed immanence. It is this language, the one that rescues the religious level for life itself, and therefore transcends what is religious as something that is beyond the not-religious, that goes beyond what he called the “unhappy consciousness,” making a genealogy of itself, searching for its limits. Only in this manner what is finite and infinite become one, unique: life itself.

Following this argument, Sontag articulates a radical critique of American culture, in the direction both Adorno and Horkheimer did. Puritan morals make difficult, but urgent, the need to face this critique. Sontag points out to two essential authors: Marcuse and his *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955 and 1966); and more notoriously Norman O. Brown and his *Life against Death* (1959). What connect these two authors is their critique of revisionist tendencies in interpreting psychoanalysis, and their materialist interpretation of Freud.

What Freud will highlight is the importance of the body. We need to focus on the body and its work, something that pornography does all the time. Moreover, these two authors recall the political dimension of Freud's perspective. Psychoanalytic categories, therefore, are political categories: "The truth is that love is more sexual, more bodily than even Lawrence imagined. And the revolutionary implications of sexuality in contemporary society are far from being fully understood" (Sontag 2013, 178). For Sontag, psychoanalysis in the manner that is practiced in America, is something "understood as anti-Utopian and anti-political—a desperate, but fundamentally pessimistic, attempt to safeguard the individual against the oppressive but inevitable claims of society" (Sontag 2013, 179). In the previously mentioned interview in *Die Ziet* Sontag affirms that "the fanciful representation of a sexual apocalypses is widely extended. It is without hesitation a way to elevate sexual desire. And this convenes us on the inhuman nature of the intensive desire that is ignored by the Freudian humanist and revisionist school, which minimizes the unleashed forces of the unconscious or irrational feelings, and that the vast majority of feminists cope with" (author's translation)⁵. American intellectuals defend themselves against psychoanalysis in the same manner they used to avoid Marxism. Both psychoanalysis and Marxism, are crucial ingredients for any critical intellectual program. Psychoanalysis cannot be reduced to a method to treat neurosis and personal dissatisfactions, but instead as a plan to transform society in a radical way that causes these neurosis. "We are just bodies" says Brown (Brown 1985, 93). This means that neurosis consists in an incapability of the body, and in a sexual fashion indeed. Everybody will admit now that Freud maintained an ambivalent position towards society and culture, which has evolved into some conservative and revisionist positions in some of his followers. But it is clear too that Freud had talked about "love," but he clearly talked about "sexuality," which is pointing out to the body always already, to its drives, to the material factor of these obscure forces.

Sontag does not hesitate to contrast this tendency she criticizes in American scholars with the one maintained in France. As we have pointed out above, her main intellectual references are French as well. We could affirm that France has been the real

⁵ "Die Phantasievorstellung einer sexuellen Apokalypse ist jedoch weit verbreitet – zweifellos ist sie ein Mittel zur Steigerung der sexuellen Lust. Und was uns das über den sozusagen inhumanen Charakter intensiver Lust mitteilt, wird von dem humanistischen "revisionistischen" Freudianismus ignoriert, der die unbändigen Kräfte der unbewußten oder irrationalen Gefühle minimalisiert und mit dem sich die meisten Feministinnen zufrieden geben".

successor in the critical program inaugurated in Germany with Benjamin, Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer among others. Nowadays we find that Deleuze, Badiou, or Derrida are the heirs somehow of the Frankfurt School (including of course Sartre, Beauvoir, Lacan and Althusser, who opened this new path or paradigm). Meanwhile in Spain, culture traditionally has been controlled and manipulated by the Catholic Church for centuries, closing any possibility for any “noxious” influence coming fundamentally from France. Starting with the *Reyes Católicos* dynasty, Spain was isolated *manu militari* to any heterodox current that was not coming from the Catholic authority itself. In the same direction, the Spanish Inquisition functioned effectively to stop any disagreement, real or suspicious, with that very authority, which operated inside and outside Spain, mainly in the colonies that were recently “discovered.” This regime has endured till our days (with the significant exception of the two Republic regimes in the beginning of the 20th Century). A good example of this can be some of the Goya’s paintings, and one of the most known daguerreotypes *La Lucha de los Mamelucos* (1814) which represents the war against the French, or also against modernization of the entire country. We can affirm that it is the *Generación del '98*—the first generation of intellectuals—that tried to elevate Spanish culture to a European level. In this process they had to face, among others, the neocatholics and also the liberals (mainly Krausism) in the late 19th Century. Miguel de Unamuno and José Ortega y Gasset were key figures in this attempt to modernize Spain. However, the coming of Franco’s fascist regime was a total scolding for this movement. Meantime, Europe (mainly France and Germany, each of them trying their own formulas) kept in their advance, and Spain remained trapped in its own arrogant ignorance. Immanuel Kant, in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) referring to Spanish man writes, “He does not learn from foreigners; does not travel in order to get to know other peoples; g remains centuries behind in the sciences; resists any reform; is proud of not having to work; is of a romantic temperament of spirit, as the bullfight shows; is cruel, as the former *Auto da Fe* proves; and shows in his taste an origin that is partly non-European” (Kant 2006, 218). Franco’s dictatorship restored a strict censorship on pornography that was introduced mainly from France into Spain. Sexuality only could find then its place in trashy comedies and movies that will understand sex as an object of irony and mocking, and in any case would face it as a serious level of life. Even in contemporary times in Spain there is a residual reluctance towards this topic. Contemporary intellectuals prefer to exploit their well-paid privileges rather than face a profound cultural renewal that the current situation demands. Many of these intellectuals

have made a turn into more conservative right-wing positions, showing a lack of capabilities for the elaboration of a critique of culture that would rescue Spain from the pit of ignorance where now raves about.

There is a book that was published in 2016 that has gone unnoticed for a majority of scholars. Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca is the author, and it is titled *La desfachatez intelectual. Escritores e intelectuales ante la política* [*The Intellectual Impudence. Writers and Intellectuals Facing Politics*]. The author of the book defends what he calls intellectual impudence as a widely extended vice among the Spanish intellectuals. These intellectuals—writers and educated men, some of them recognized scholars—have come to light in the country's political debates, but with superficial and frivolous ideas, and they presented them in a presumptuous and insulting manner. Most of them defined themselves as left-wing thinkers in their youth, and they have developed more conservative (even reactionary) ideas later in their lives. This book provides with numerous examples of this phenomenon. According to it, the principal topics of the national-level debate (such as nationalism as such, terrorism, etc.) are considered by these people with minimal critical perspective, and baseless arguments, both from the point of view of the argumentative logic or the facts themselves, as the author rightly explains. Following the argumentation of the book, in the end what is missing in Spain is a culture of critique, a culture that is able to face with authority the impudence of the intellectuals mentioned above that dare to throw their last occurrence in the profitable newspapers columns or television debates. This conforms a democratic deficit that is the cradle for contemporary sophists. Among others, the names that are mentioned in the book are Fernando Savater, Jon Juaristi, Félix de Azúa, Antonio Muñoz Molina, etc.. What is surprising is that all of them are experts in French culture but they do not seem to be ready to transmit it in Spain.

6. Conclusions

In his *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) Freud and Breuer find the keys to accessing the deepest levels of human consciousness. The crucial element is always language. Neither hypnosis nor any other method is valid for the subject to find *das ding* [the thing]. However, the key cannot be any given language. According to their studies, it is crucial for the subject to adopt a language that will permit her to re-build the gap between the

language itself and *das ding*. Once this bridge is established, and although might be eventually destroyed, it is possible to have access to the “truth” of the problem. Once the patient is able to articulate within this language what is disturbing, the problem vanishes, and the “truth” is reinstalled. This process has mainly two general consequences. First, that philosophy at the current historical period has lost its capacity to establish this connection with *das ding* and that it is philosophy’s task to rebuild this link. Second, that psychoanalysis in the 21st century can return philosophy its original identity, since we can articulate in psychoanalysis what philosophy is not able to complete.

The strength of language is the only possibility we have to reach the essence of human soul. In this direction, we can recall the infamous words of Lacan who at some point will affirm that “For the moment, I am not fucking, I am talking to you. Well! I can have exactly the same satisfaction as if I were fucking. That’s what it means. Indeed, it raises the question of whether in fact I am not fucking at this moment.” (Lacan 1978, 165-166). In short, psychoanalysis from the very beginning discloses the task as work that needs to happen in language itself, that is to say, as a necessarily philosophical path. But this is a path that in return will demand as a critical work the restitution and recovery of a language that will open the door to the real problems of the subject, that is to say, the world.

When Sontag evokes the post-religious Hegel (the post-pornographic one for us) she is evoking the power of language that is able to go through the superficial layer of the empiric level and reach to the heart of what is beyond it. The languages that Sontag refers to—Sade, Bataille, Sartre, Genet among others—are forms that break the surface in order to descend into the abysmal levels of the subject. In this direction, psychoanalysis an optimal ally to achieve this task successfully.

As post-pornographic we understand a language that is able to submerge into the social contradictions that bloom after the superficial and popular contents and pornographic methods that are so successful in our (Western) society. Therefore, this language has a significant political content because it is coined in the very heart of the pornographic society, unmasking the hypocrisy that manipulates and intoxicates the subject nowadays. For that, we need to look into the eyes, as Susan Sontag proposes, to the mentioned contents and do not avoid them as morally disturbing. This position, the

one that reflects these contents, and which is popular in some puritan intellectual circles, is rightly criticized by Sontag in several articles and in her book *Against Interpretation* (1966).

Beyond a conservative and bourgeois space that imposes a unique scenario with a cynical moral—pornography itself is after all morally reprehensible but also very profitable—it is necessary to construct new scenarios: it is necessary to find new languages that will open new possibilities that will remain emancipatory with regards to the subjects trapped in uncomfortable jails, already unbearable by the pain they provoke. But this is the real task. It is, therefore, to rethink pornography again. Here philosophy, psychoanalysis, art, and politics meet in the search for an emancipated society. For that, it is necessary to elaborate a common program of action that will trespass the local burdens of each discipline.

Adorno's and Horkheimer's program on critical theory points out in this direction. Marcuse, in this sense, is a solid ally for these purposes. The best of contemporary French philosophy (resembled in authors like Lacan, Badiou, Deleuze and others) is unthinkable without the former. These French authors are the real heirs of the theories of the Frankfurt School. Accordingly, yet others actually work out their positions taking up this line, with Žižek or Butler, as just the most notorious ones. These authors elaborate with Ernesto Laclau a program that pretended to mark a new beginning in the year 2000 with a work named *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. However, it is necessary to keep working in these ideas in the future.

Žižek rightly claims to reread Hegel. Hegel departs from his *Phänomenologie* how the subject rests in modernity, isolated from the almighty capitalist society that draws it, and Hegel at this point is showing the path for this subject to build up the "We". Kant already states that only the critical path is practicable. Hegel will radicalize Kant's intuition, and take it to its latest consequences. The only practicable path, paraphrasing Kant, is the one that goes from the "I" to the "We". And this notion of "We" is anchored unconditionally to what we share in common, in our society and in politics.

References

- Adorno, Theodor W “Drei Studien zu Hegel”. Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. 1971.
- Bloch, Ernst (1949) “Avicenna und die aristotelische Linke”. Rütten & Loening.
- Brown, Norman O. (1985) “Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History”. Wesleyan.
- Derrida, Jacques (1974) “Glas”. University of Nebraska Press.
- Derrida, Jacques (1998) “Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of the Origin”. Stanford University Press.
- Freud, Sigmund; Breuer, Josef (2004) “Studies in Hysteria”. Penguin Classics.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1980) “Hegels Dialektik”. Verlag J.C.B. Mohr, Paul Siebeck, Tübingen, 2. vermehrte Auflage.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1987) “Phänomenologie des Geistes”. Philip Reclam Jun. Stuttgart.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977) “The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy”. University of New York Press, Albany.
- Hustvedt, Siri (2014) “75 at 75: Siri Hustvedt on Susan Sontag”. Retrieved from <http://92yondemand.org/75-at-75-siri-hustvedt-on-susan-sontag> (October 2018).
- Kant, Immanuel (2006) “Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View”. Cambridge University Press.
- Lacan, Jacques (1978) “The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis”. Seminars, Book XI. W.W. Norton & Company.
- Laclau, Ernesto et al (2000) “Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left”. Verso.
- Manzana, Jose (2018) “Hablando del último Fichte” in *Manzana: Obras Completas 3*. Agirre and Insausti Eds. Scriptorium Victoriense.
- Marcuse, Herbert (1998) “Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud”. Routledge.
- Nabokov, Vladimir (1954). *Lolita*. Vintage.
- Réage, Pauline (Dominique Aury) (2013). Ballantine Books eBook Edition.
- Sánchez-Cuenca, Ignacio (2016) “La desfachatez intelectual”. Catarata.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul (1952) “Saint Genet. Comédian et Martyr”
- Sontag, Susan (1962). “The Pornographic Imagination” in Susan Sontag “Against Interpretation”. Picador 1966.

Sontag, Susan (1985) "Against Interpretation". Picador.

Žižek, Slavoj (2012) "Less than Nothing" Verso, London-New York.

Žižek, Slavoj (2010) "Living in the End Times". London: Verso.

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

***Black Mirror* and the Divergence of Online and Offline Behavior Patterns**

Benjamin Martin, Johannes Gutenberg Universität, Mainz

Abstract This essay seeks to show the divergence of real and virtual communication codes by means of analyzing Charlie Brooker's dystopian series *Black Mirror*, in respect of the influence of new communication technologies and gadgets in the form of bodily extensions. It draws on both recent sociopolitical phenomena and sociological findings to undermine why and how the speculative fiction of *Black Mirror* displays the characters' engagement in their environs as inherently obscene, and at same time mirrors the recent developments that are looming ahead in the future which makes the series prophetic rather than merely dystopian in its outlook.

Key words: Black Mirror, pornography, nature, the political, utopia, dystopia

Wordcount: 5,078

The series *Black Mirror* by Charlie Brooker, which was aired on Channel 4 from 2011 to 2014 and renewed by Netflix in 2016, has been highly praised for its visionary prediction of our future engagement with new forms of communication technologies and convenient gadgets to increase efficiency in our everyday lives. It offers drastic scenarios that fit into the dystopian framework that ties the stand-alone episodes together into a series that offers the viewer different windows into the future. The series envisions futures in which technologically advanced communication apparatuses or bodily enhancements have a particular affordance on human interaction. However, in accordance with a widespread reception that acknowledges the series' supposedly sinister prophetic character, the narratives strike one as inherently obscene in their speculative scenarios. This paper will argue and demonstrate in reference to a selection of *Black Mirror* episodes, that obscenity is always defined in demarcation to ideologies and is a rather flexible concept located outside of indeterminate social norms.

In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek analyzes how ideologies manifest in our lives and how we can approach ideologies from a psychoanalytic perspective. In one of his central claims, according to which “the subject can ‘enjoy his symptom’ only in so far as its logic escapes him” (Žižek, 2008, p.16) we find an assertion also applicable to the perception of obscenity. A person's way of experiencing something as obscene is dependent on their ideological disposition. If one perceives a mode of behavior as obscene, the act is something that departs from or transgresses one's own morally normative compass. An obscene act, then, is to be understood as something outside one's range of tolerance, when a subject fully grasps the supposedly perverted logic of another's act from the assumed position of someone outside of the other's ideological frame. In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière similarly theorizes what he terms “the distribution of the sensible” (*le partage du sensible*) and identifies a situatedness in a specific aesthetic and interpretive community: “*le partage du sensible* refers to the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed” (Rancière, 2015, p. 89). Hence, the way people perceive phenomena, or in Rancière's case “works of

art” is predetermined by their aesthetic (dis)position, that is to say, their way of distinguishing a work of art from reality is determined by a certain set of criteria.

The first *Black Mirror* episode, titled “The National Anthem”, already delivers a prime example of the interrelation between ideology and the categorization of obscenity politically. The episode situates the prime minister, Michael Callow, in a situation of an inevitable blackmail dilemma. He must either publicly display sexual intercourse with a pig, or a hijacker will execute the princess taken hostage. The people show sympathy and nobody expects the prime minister to follow suit. Firstly, state agencies attempt to find the blackmailer and develop a ploy to stage a fake version of the demanded recording; however, the kidnapper discovers their plan and sends a cut-off finger to the media. At this point public sentiment shifts, and Callow is suddenly expected to meet the blackmailer’s demands and commit the act live on television. If we consider this example in regard to its ideological implications, one observes a divergence from an unimaginably outrageous act, to an act of pure necessity. The question that arises from this divergence, is how is it so easily acceptable for people to witness this act? To get to the heart of this problem, we have to take into account Slavoj Žižek’s theorization of ideology, according to which, “ideology is not simply a ‘false consciousness’, an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ‘ideological’ – *‘ideological’ is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence*” (Žižek, 2008, p.15f). First, the demand is viewed as something obscene, inconceivable in the ideological fabric of public opinion; but when the public is confronted with the predicament, the very structure and foundations of predominant ideology are reverted to the exact opposite. Interestingly enough, the public not only expect him to commit the act, but also recompenses the minister by allowing him to remain in office, granting him public backing in the aftermath. With regard to the sudden change of mind, as it is usually the case in *Black Mirror*, the swift dynamics of outrage or so called “shit-storms” are attributed to social media interactions and hashtag *virality*. The way one can see a temporary shift in the popular notion of what is obscene, the mere necessity of committing this act, lays open the dynamic behind the ideology. If the public were to condemn the act of sexual intercourse between the prime minister and the pig, they would consequently make themselves guilty of not having done anything against the murder of the princess, or at least giving silent consent to the deed. However, the perverse act is temporarily endorsed in order to remain in their ideological bubble, that

is, to prolong their ideological dream in Freudian terms. For them, it is only a spectacle occurring on the TV screen or in social networks detached from the event. It is here that one can also find the quintessential difference in the behavior online and offline regarding the inhibition threshold; it would be rather unlikely for them to endorse such an act if they were witnessing it in the same room.

The perception via TV or social media channels, then, functions as a filter encoded with its own ideological implications; that is to say, virtual media require behavioral norms clearly divergent from ‘real life’ conduct. The audience’s reaction can be likened to what Jacques Rancière discusses in *The Emancipated Spectator*. Talking about aesthetic separation, he points out that “[h]uman beings are tied together by a certain sensory fabric, a certain distribution of the sensible, which defines their way of being together; and politics is about the transformation of the sensory fabric of ‘being together’” (Rancière, 2011, p. 56). Thus, the way people interact is dependent on what he terms a “*sensus communis*[,]” i.e. an ideological norm accepted by a specific community (Rancière, 2011, p. 57). The virtual space, however, opens up a community in which this normative bond is suspended.

In political landscape, we observe something very similar. For example, if one takes into consideration the recent populist tendencies such as the German Pegida (2014-) or Alternative für Deutschland (2013-), the French Front Nationale (1972-) or the campaign of and widespread support for Donald Trump in the last few years, one should not neglect the important impact social media channels have. The way people express their concerns departs in many ways from what might be considered appropriate, i.e. uttering *obscenities* or behaving in an obscene way. That is to say, the self-contained online communities make it easier for people to radicalize their world-views because the affirmation they get legitimizes their way of expressing concerns. Consequently, common decency, which would demand people to behave according to a social norm, is suspended, because people are encouraged by their peers and have the option to remain anonymous. But why do people suspend their decency and allow even politicians to offend common decency? In a prominent and very recent example of this ideological fluctuation we can trace back this phenomenon. Donald Trump’s use of tirades or *obscenities*, and the widespread support or tacit approval of his jargon have been met with strong opposition and outrage.

In May 2017, the *Washington Post* published an article on Trump's use of obscenities and indecent language to discredit people on Twitter and in interviews. The author points out that in order to mock people, Trump "is calling into question their mental stability" by making use of insults like "nut job", "crazy" or "wacko" (Wang, 2017, n.pag.). Similarly, the *New York Times* conducted a survey in which they list every false statement, titled "Trump's Lies" that meticulously documents every untruth from his inauguration on the 20th of January to 21st of June 2017. In the article, the authors remark that "[n]o other president — of either party — has behaved as Trump is behaving. He is trying to create an atmosphere in which reality is irrelevant" (Leonhardt and Thompson, 2017, n.pag.). This perception of Trump as a loudmouthed and indecent person has, however, also been endorsed by the people, both before and after his election. In their study "The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle," Kira Hall et al argue that

"Trump as a branded commodity to be consumed—or rather, TrumpTM—has entered politics in a way never seen before, as technological and institutional forces harness the power of Trump as old-school capitalist and entrepreneur of spectacle and escort his brand into the political spectrum. His ability to bring previously distinct forms of semiotic extravagance together (reality television, beauty contests, wrestling matches) and insert them into his candidacy for the most powerful position in the world is precisely what makes Trump a never-ending spectacle" (2016, p. 92)

By making use of the Debordian theory of the spectacle, which he laid out in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Hall et al categorize the phenomenon of Trump as a symptom of the capitalist society, and argue that Trump's success is due mostly to his entertainment value. That is to say, the lack of pragmatic and stringent political agenda is overshadowed by both his entertainment value and the spectacular qualities it implies. Consequently, Hall et al point out that "[i]t does not matter whether the spectacle is respected, simply tolerated, or even abhorred, the outcome remains the same: *we keep on watching*" (p. 91). As many of Trump's statements and lapses were uttered through social media platforms, I observe the spectacle in light of its manifestation in the digital realm of both the TV and the Internet, linking it to an episode in *Black Mirror*.

In the episode “The Waldo Moment”, from *Black Mirror*’s second season, one can see an instance of how appealing these spectacular ‘barroom’ politics can be, that uncannily resembles electoral campaigning in the US. Again, we are dealing with a propagandistic debate that mimics what is generally termed “post-truth politics” (Keyes, 2004). In an English by-election led by two commonplace politicians from two major parties, a cartoon character called Waldo, known for mocking people in interviews, attacks both candidates and ends up also running for the elections. However, the person dubbing this fictional character quickly decides against partaking in the campaign. The dialogue between the Waldo speaker Jamie and his producer Jack, who talk about the political prospects of their character, precisely captures the very logic of both Trump voters’ enthusiasm and the fictitious euphoria Waldo is met with:

Jamie: Waldo's not real.

Jack: Exactly! That's what you said that really hit home. He's not real, but he's realer than all the others.

Jamie: He doesn't stand for anything.

Jack: Yeah, well, at least he doesn't pretend to. Look we don't need politicians; we've all got iPhones and computers, right? So any decision that has to be made, any policy, we just put it online. Let the people vote thumbs up, thumbs down, the majority wins. That's a democracy. That's a ..., that's an actual democracy. (Brooker, 2013)

One can see the very irony of this situation. Instead of the other supposedly genuine politicians who maintain a certain seriousness and profess to have an agenda, Waldo displays the obscenity that lies at the bottom of the political status quo. To the viewer then, the real obscenity does not lie in a superficially altruistic agenda but in the very act of expressing oneself as decidedly offensive and insulting without pretense. In light of the spectacle, we have to consider one of Guy Debord’s claims from the chapter “Ideology in Material Form”, in which he postulates that “The spectacle is the acme of ideology, for in its full flower it exposes and manifests the essence of all ideological systems: the impoverishment, enslavement and negation of real life” (2006, p. 151). In other words, to refer back to Žižek, the logic reflected in Waldo’s obscenity mirrors the very hidden logic of the politicians’ agenda. Viewers are struck by the obscenity of the whole affair and can no longer enjoy their “symptom” because they are confronted with the logic at its very core, that is to say, the way political representatives pursue an agenda of self-interest and fail to satisfy their obligation to the people to a greater or lesser extent.

The public in the episode prefer an insulting symbolic character in the form of a cartoon figure as their representative. Again, this is where one finds the underlying ideology that finds expression in Žižek's claim that an "ideology really succeeds when even the facts which at first sight contradict it start to function as arguments in its favor" (2008, p. 50). They accept a figure not only deprived of content but also without an 'ideological mask', with no underlying agenda, not supporting statements with facts, but with meaningless statements and no empty promises, in fact no promises at all. Hence, one perceives this situation as inherently obscene, not only because Waldo is bombarding the world with a torrent of *obscenities*, but also because the ideological mask is removed, and people are contented with a completely empty figure. This corresponds to the concept of "desubstantialization", i.e. depriving objects or constructs of its substantial content, or as Žižek (2002) asserts, "beer without alcohol or coffee without caffeine" but also "war fought behind computer screens, a war experienced by its participants as a computer game" (p. 37). In reference to Peter Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason*, Žižek (2008) points out that the "cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less insists upon the mask" (p. 27). The people voting Waldo, then, are exactly those cynics who observe that the mask Waldo offers is in fact not a mask at all. In want of a better alternative to the old politicians, however, they act as if there was deeper meaning or down-to-earth agenda at the core of Waldo's demagoguism, and therefore maintain the ideological masquerade, turning the whole affair into a spectacle of the obscene.

If we take into consideration the episode "Be Right Back", from the second season of the series in which a woman, called Martha, unaware of her pregnancy, loses her husband Ash, under tragic circumstances, we are also confronted with an ideological mask that sustains the wife's symbolic world. During the period of mourning, a friend tells her that there is still hope for her to come to terms with the death. By means of her late husband's online persona, which includes voice tracks from videos, photographs, posts, tweets and likes, there is a possibility to restore the decedent's memories and to reconstruct behavioral patterns into a digitized version of him. First, she is only able to write and talk to Ash, but then, and here events become crucial, he gets materialized in an artificial yet uncannily humanoid body. This act as such already alludes to the two deaths, which are also addressed by Žižek (2008) in the chapter "You Only Die Twice", when he arrives at the heart of the Lacanian understanding of the death drive: "the thing itself is

more present in a word, in its concept, than in its immediate physical reality” (p. 145). By creating this android semblance, the wife delays the second death of the husband and therefore delays her awakening to the Real. With regard to Sigmund Freud’s *Die Traumdeutung*, in order to continue to dream or to stay in her symbolic universe, she comes to terms with a substitute: “Ähnlich unbestimmter Natur sind nun die Eindrücke, welche die Seele im Schläfe durch äußere Reize empfängt; sie bildet auf Grund derselben Illusionen, indem durch den Eindruck eine größere oder kleinere Anzahl von Erinnerungsbildern wachgerufen wird, durch welche der Eindruck seinen psychischen Wert bekommt” (2015, p. 46). It is here, that we find what is at the heart of the obscene, namely, the symbolic act of substitution that prolongs the subject’s illusion and neglect of the lack in the Other. Precisely this desperate act is a necessary factor to fully grasp the psychoanalytic implications:

“not its symbolic interpretation but the experience of the fact that the fantasy-object, by its fascinating presence, is merely filling out a lack, a void in the Other. There is nothing ‘behind’ the fantasy; the fantasy is a construction whose function is to hide this void, this ‘nothing’ - that is, the lack in the Other” (Žižek, 2008, p. 148).

Having restored her husband Ash, one of Martha’s first acts is going to bed with the android, where it tells her that it learnt its sex prowess from a database of pornographic videos. It is in this encounter that she first recognizes her surrogate husband as lacking certain qualities her late husband had. While the android is able to control its erection like a switch and to satisfy her sexual needs, a scene in the beginning of the episode shows the couple is copulating and engaging in an inherently repressive dialogue: “*Ash*: Oh Oh, shit Oh, shit Sorry. *Martha*: It’s OK. *Ash*: Do you want me to? *Martha*: No, it’s all right. *Ash*: I don’t mind. I am knackered though, so... *Martha*: Don’t worry.” (Brooker, 2013) Why is this scene handled with so much repression while she freely engages in conversation about the sexual act with the android? Unsurprisingly, the explanation can be found if one approaches this behavior by questioning its obscene implications. Even though she is aware that the android is not her husband, she desperately tries to deceive herself into believing so. In his exegesis of Deleuze *Organs Without Bodies* (2004), Žižek tackles the implications that electronic gadgets, bodily extensions, or in this case an automaton have: “The trend in the development of computers is toward their invisibility. The large humming machines with mysterious blinking lights [sic] will be more and more replaced by tiny bits fitting imperceptibly into

our ‘normal’ environs, enabling them to function more smoothly” (p.19). Furthermore, it lays bare the problematic logic of mortality, that Žižek points out in reference to Alenka Zupančič’s manuscript “Die Sexualität innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft” when he claims that this question of mortality and immortality can be likened to the “‘death drive,’ the obscene persistence of life just going on, not even ready to follow its natural path and dissolve itself in death” (2014, p. 340) The obscenity, then, is to be found, for one in the infinite suspension of acknowledging her husband’s death but also in her dealing with the fragmentary surrogate as if it were human, and finding a place for it in everyday routine invisibly stashed away in the attic for later use. It is no wonder then, that it is kept hidden.

In the episode “White Bear”, from the second season, one can see yet another example of the influence of ideological perspective on the degree of how obscene we deem an act. In the beginning, we see the main character, Victoria, waking up from a drugged unconsciousness to a completely alien environment, which was constructed as a penal system without her knowledge. Her initiation to the punitive environs happens, of course, in front of a mirror. She then proceeds through the house, looks at scattered objects and observes her surroundings. However, everything remains alien to her, and she finds no point of connection. When she leaves the building, people outside the house, also unrecognizable, constantly film her and ignore her inquiries. These people perceive her through their filming phones as if they were watching her from a remote screen. The distance that can be observed here already indicates the obscenity of this gaze and the supposed detachment that makes such an act seem natural. Similar to the abovementioned example of the changing attitudes online, which result from a feeling of anonymity, by means of per- and receiving the world through a device, people in this episode take part in a spectacle. This occurs much like Peter Weir’s notorious *The Truman Show*, in which the main character is unaware of her artificial environment. This allocation of subject positions being produced by a visually filtering device creates a clear-cut division between “performing actors and passive spectators” qua aesthetic separation (Rancière, 2011, p.62). Even when a mysterious man fires at Victoria, it seems as though no one reacts whatsoever. This sequence causes uneasiness in the viewer, because the standpoint of the viewer is likewise behind a screen; that is to say, one is allocated to the role of the impassive voyeur. This example ensembles the Debordian spectacle par excellence: “The individual, though condemned to the passive acceptance of an alien everyday reality, is

thus driven into a form of madness in which, by resorting to magical devices, he entertains the illusion that he is reacting to this fate” (Debord, 2006, 153). Hence, the phones the spectators are using to film the protagonist are “magical devices” which prolong the illusion that they are merely perceiving a freak show. There are also, however, actors who communicate with her. One of the performers, named Jem, films and accompanies Victoria in her discovery quest. Jem summarizes the underlying logic of the events occurring: “I guess they were always like that underneath. Just needed the rules to change, for no one to intervene” (Brooker, 2013). This reveals the central message of the series, which illustrates that for behavior to relinquish its obscene qualities, a readjustment of the etiquette by means of technological change is necessary. The person being gazed at then becomes objectified – the focus of the spectacle – not only because she is exposed to what Michel Foucault theorized as a punitive Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), in this case put into practice by cameras, but also Jacques Lacan’s reflections on the objectifying function of the gaze developed in Seminar I:

“The gaze is not located just at the level of the eyes. The eyes may very well not appear, they may be masked. The gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us. It is an x, the object when faced with which the subject becomes object” (1991, p. 220).

People have only to be recalibrated to a different ideological disposition by means of alienating them through new visual apparatuses or “objects”, as Lacan puts it, that is something blocking the gaze of the Other. This is related to the phenomenon of sensation seeking, “rubbernecking” or the bystander effect, which was analyzed in a study with regard to the limitations and restraints the use of devices imposes upon the user/spectator. The study found that “[c]ell phones, along with other interactive and mobile communication technologies, function as masks that hinder active users from recognizing the needs of others” (Banjo, Hu and Sundar, 2008, p. 134).

In this direction, the episode “White Christmas”, from the series’ second season develops this phenomenon in Banjo et al.’s study further to the extreme. In the episode a technology, which allows people to block others from their perception, both visually and sonically, is pervading the different strings of narration. In two of the story lines, people experience this in their familial environment, being blocked out by their wives. Again, it

is the technology that enables people to withdraw from the resolution and discussion of conflicts and arguments, creating a bubble of illusion. To once again draw back on psychoanalytical theory, it stands out that this obliteration of the Other deprives the individual from the identity-establishing human counterpart; by blending out his or her environs, the person is deprived of the Other that is formative of the subject position. This not only resembles the way post-factual politics is developing but also a decline of discussion culture in social media. It has never been easier to block oneself off from displeasing opinions, to disengage oneself from social discourse. This episode, as in all the above-mentioned episodes, confronts the viewer with the possible outcome of a shift in online etiquette or ‘netiquette,’ most likely to have a strong effect on our daily lives in the near future. In his seminal work *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*, Walter Benjamin tackles a similar problem. In discussing the way film altered the perception of the spectator, he states that “[d]er Film drängt den Kultwert nicht nur dadurch zurück, daß er das Publikum in eine begutachtendene Haltung bringt, sondern auch dadurch, daß die begutachtende Haltung im Kino Aufmerksamkeit nicht einschließt. Das Publikum ist ein Examinator, doch ein zerstreuter” (2011, p. 52). If we confer this concept of affordance in the cinematic environment on the way we use communicative devices and media, it becomes apparent that it has a comparably ‘spectacular’ effect in that it alters communicative modes and norms: by means of the apparatus of the cinema camera, smart phone or TV screen the spectator becomes an impassive witness who is “zerstreut” (absent-minded) and only perceives the substantiality of the virtual subject matter in a distorted way.

Coming back to the main thesis of this paper where the obscene is something perceivable from the confines of one’s own ideological framework. *Black Mirror* offers speculative perspectives on how the progression of online interaction manipulates our ways of behaving in both online and offline contexts. The series cuts the ground under the very supposition of the diverging spheres of virtual and real communication, and thereby confronts the viewer with their potential social practice in those spheres. In an article for *The Guardian* entitled “Is This Digital Democracy, or a New Tyranny of Cyberspace,” Žižek criticizes the way people interact online, elucidates that “‘Interface’ [the platform used for communication] means precisely that my relationship to the other is never face-to-face, that it is always mediated by digital machinery” and therefore always diverges from offline interaction (2006, n.pag). Similarly, Brooker opens up a space for debate if a

concept such as netiquette is necessary or even stimulates the divergence and real life split. The way people have incorporated the very rules and structure of new technologies, oftentimes in the very literal sense of implanting it into their bodies as gadgets, strikes the viewer as a terrifying and sinister vision. Tackling the de facto high tech revolution, Brooker only developed further the adopted technological path and transferred the ways of interaction and the implications of data policies into a scenario in which the real and virtual flow into each other, in a manner that makes a distinction between the two impossible. The way in which new media obscenely isolates people and designates it possible for 'smartphone zombies' to retreat into their microcosm and blank out their environs, foreshadows potential implications in the future.

References

- Banjo, O., Hu, Y. & Sundar, S.S. (2008). Cell Phone Usage and Social Interaction with Proximate Others: Ringing in a Theoretical Model. *The Open Communication Journal*, 2, 127-135. Retrieved from <http://benthamopen.com/contents/pdf/TOCOMMJ/TOCOMMJ-2-127.pdf>
- Benjamin, W. (2011). *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*. Stuttgart: Reclam. (Original work published 1936)
- Brooker, C. (Director & Writer). (2011). *Black Mirror* [Television Series]. London: Zeppotron.
- Brooker, C. (Director & Writer). (2013). *Black Mirror* [Television Series]. London: Zeppotron.
- Debord, G. (2006). *The Society of the Spectacle*. (D. Nicholson-Smith, Transl.). New York: Zone Books. (Original work published in 1967)
- Freud, S. (2015). *Die Traumdeutung*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag. (Original work published in 1900)
- Hall, K., Goldstein, D. M., & Ingram M.B. (2016). The Hands of Donald Trump: Entertainment, Gesture, Spectacle. *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 6 (2), 71-100. Retrieved from <https://www.haujournal.org/index.php/hau/article/view/hau6.2.009/2502>
- Keyes, R. (2004). *The Post-Truth Era: Dishonesty and Deception in Contemporary Life*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Lacan, J. (1991). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I, Freud's Papers on Technique 1953- 1954*. (J.-A. Miller, Ed. & J. Forrester, Transl.). New York/London: W.W. Norton & Company. (Original work published 1975)
- Leonhardt, D. & Thompson, S.A. (2017, Jun 23). Trump's Lies. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/06/23/opinion/trumps-lies.html>
- Rancière, J. (2011). *The Emancipated Spectator*. (G. Elliott, Transl.). London/New York: Verso. (Original work published in 2008)
- Rancière, J. (2015). *The Politics of Aesthetics*. (G. Rockhill, Ed. & transl.). London: Bloomsbury. (Original work published in 2000)
- Wang, A. B. (2017, May 20). From 'Nutjob' to 'Wacko,' Trump's History of Using Insulting Words Mocks Mental Health. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2017/05/20/from-nut-job-to-wacko-trump-has-a-history-of-insulting-others-mental-health/>
- Žižek, S. (2002). *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. London/New York: Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2004, Dec 30). *Organs Without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Žižek, S. (2006). Is This Digital Democracy, or a New Tyranny of Cyberspace. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/dec/30/comment.media>
- Žižek, S. (2008). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London/New York: Verso. (Original work published in 1989)
- Žižek, S. (2014). *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*. London/New York: Verso.

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

Deconstructing Capitalism through Perversion: Readings of *The Invention of Morel*

João Albuquerque, University of California Santa Barbara

Abstract: The central argument of this article lies in the intent to think, from a reading of *The Invention of Morel*, about the subversion possibilities, simultaneously discursive and operational, of certain structures of capitalism, carried out by discrete elements of society, regardless of their social standing. Discussing Morel himself and his invention, I postulate the hypothesis that Morel is subversive because he is perverse. As a preamble to this discussion, and in an attempt to turn it into a critique of current times, a reading of Slavoj Žižek's 2009 article entitled "Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses" will be undertaken. Through a comparative analysis of the rational underlying the four antagonisms which, in Žižek's opinion, will prevent the indefinite reproduction of the current "naturalization" of capitalism in the global world, and Morel and his invention, one concludes the latter's obscene perversity causes, through exaggeration, potentially destructive effects (ecological, biological, communicational and of exclusion) of the very mechanisms and capitalist subsystems which generated them, thus deconstructing their significant codes.

Keywords: Žižek, capitalism, perversity, *The Invention of Morel*, obscene, society.

Wordcount: 8,330

Author correspondence mail to: ccralbuquerque@hotmail.com

The central argument of this article lies in the intent to think, from a reading of *The Invention of Morel*, about the subversion possibilities, simultaneously discursive and operational, of certain structures of capitalism, carried out by discrete elements of society, regardless of their social standing. As a preamble to this discussion, and in an attempt to turn it into a critique of current times, a reading of Slavoj Žižek's 2009 article entitled "Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses" will be undertaken.

In the above-mentioned article, Slavoj Žižek discusses the current "naturalization" of capitalism in the global world and enunciates the four antagonisms which, in his opinion, will prevent the indefinite reproduction of this phenomena. These antagonisms are related with Ecology, Private Property, New Techno-Scientific Developments and New Forms of Apartheid.

Before delving into the literary work itself, some preliminary comments should be presented regarding the concept of social evolution which is inherent to Žižek's thought. The Slovenian philosopher seems to portray a conception of social evolution which is characterized by the inevitable introduction of structural changes in society in order to provide a solution for the internal problems which are maximally aggravated in this very same society. According to his opinion, in the contemporary world this conception of social evolution materializes in the overcoming of capitalism. Such a conception is normally the one opposed to a theory of social evolution conceived as an evolutionary causal process. A questioning which seems to be plausible to carry out in this context, is that of the exact relation of Žižek's thought with these two conceptions of social evolution.

By clinging to those specific antagonisms, is not Žižek neglecting the existence of other potential factors, endogenous and exogenous, identifiable and non-identifiable, of the systems that sustain capitalism, which can contribute to its disintegration⁶? By considering the fourth antagonism as the key element to carry out the destruction of

⁶ We might enunciate several examples, such as: the subversive action of capitalism carried out in many institutions belonging to what Žižek designates as being a community of the Included; the collapse of the economic system; a nuclear world war; a global natural catastrophe (without an identifiable origin in the action of man upon nature); etc. And, additionally, to consider the imponderable factors.

capitalism⁷, is not Žižek implying a well determined causality in, and a macro-temporal vision of, social evolution? By proposing a resurrected notion of communism as a general alternative ideology to capitalism, implemented via very well defined agents – the Excluded – , is not Žižek simply proposing an inverted (as opposed to a hindrance to) capitalism, preserving the teleological⁸ element in his thesis?

It is hardly excessive to state that Žižek tries to predict the unpredictable, yielding to the idea of evolution as a process which he himself criticizes. Even if the course of history eventually takes a divergent path from the one that capitalist agents are keen in keeping pursuing, that is not a reason strong enough for us to state that Žižek does not conceive evolution as a process. Such is the case because, despite this philosopher's emphasis on the idea of Stephen Jay Gould, who postulates the fundamental contingency of human existence, his premises do not completely represent a rejection of social evolution as a macro-historical and causal process. In other words, he does not reject completely the idea of social evolution as a process subjected to the determinism of a kind of law which postulates as invariable the ideas of necessity, unilinearity, continuity and irreversibility.

These incoherencies which we are able to glimpse in Žižek's thought do not stop us, however, from siding with him in the need to criticize the capitalist ideology nor from recognizing in the antagonisms which he identified a high potential for rupture with such an ideology. For this reason, and as the title of this paper suggests, we shall analyze a pertinent literary work in order to think about the aforesaid problem along with the associated questions. The fact that Žižek writes about contemporary times – he refers to these antagonisms as being specificities of the 21st century – and the fact that *The Invention of Morel* is a work whose publication date is from 1940, leads to the need for a well-founded justification concerning the relevance of its study, as well as the scope of it.

Žižek presents capitalism as the ruling ideology of a dystopian global society, which is precisely what the main character and narrator of *The Invention of Morel*

⁷ “(...) in the series of the four antagonisms, the one between the Included and the Excluded is the crucial one, the point of reference for the others; without it, all others lose their subversive edge: ecology turns into a “problem of sustainable development”, intellectual property into a “complex legal challenge”, biogenetics into an “ethical” issue.” (Žižek, 2009: unpaginated)

⁸ “(...) the “de-structured” masses, poor and deprived of everything, situated in a non-proletarized urban environment, constitute one of the principal horizons of the politics to come.” (Žižek, 2009: unpaginated)

presents as being his own context (despite the absence of any mention to capitalism). On the very first page of the text, he makes it explicit that his effort to survive holds within itself the main purpose for writing, in parallel to the diary-writing project, two books, entitled *Apology for Survivors* and *Tribute to Malthus*. In these books he intends to denounce, and, consequently, to act upon agents and systems responsible for the existence of a dystopian global society⁹.

The Invention of Morel, of course, merely intends to portray a phase in a man's life, a man who, despite having been violently repressed by such dystopian global society, is able to escape from, and in a way subvert that repression by sheer force of his desire. The aforementioned writing projects end up not being carried out because the desire of the protagonist simply turns to the immediate and objective reality¹⁰. Thus, how can we justify the need to resort to this literary work in order to analyze Žižek's article? Well, the truth is that the antagonisms which this philosopher enunciated are all present therein in a quite obvious way. The protagonist moves through a scenario of biologic, ecologic, and communicative crisis as well as of violent exclusion. One can thus argue that *The Invention of Morel* can be read as the simulacrum of a situation where the simultaneous aggravation of some of the issues associated with the capitalist system presents itself at the threshold of rupture.

I shall begin by reflecting, in the context of the works of Adolfo Bioy Casares, upon the fourth antagonism (New Forms of Apartheid) postulated by Žižek, which this philosopher deems primordial in relation to the other three¹¹ antagonisms. And he does so in terms which should be immediately explained, so that they can be read at the light of the novella. As mentioned above, Žižek considers the slum inhabitants from great metropolises to be the only ones who are able to embody a revolutionary project based

⁹ "Atacaré, en esas páginas, a los agotadores de las selvas y de los desiertos; demostraré que el mundo, con el perfeccionamiento y las policías, de los documentos, del periodismo, de la radiotelefonía, de las aduanas, hace irreparable cualquier error de la justicia, es un infierno unánime para los perseguidos." (Bioy Casares, 1989: 1) ["My books will expose the men who violate the sanctity of forests and deserts; I intend to show that the world is an implacable hell for fugitives, that its efficient police forces, its documents, newspapers, radio broadcasts, and border patrols have made every error of justice irreparable." (Bioy Casares, 2003: 9)]

¹⁰ "Con puntualidad aumento las páginas de este diario y olvido las que me excusarán de los años que mi sombra se demoró en la tierra (*Defensa ante Sobrevivientes y Elogio de Malthus*)." (Bioy Casares, 1989: 11) ["Although I have been making entries in this diary at regular intervals, I have not had a chance to work on the books that I hope to write as a kind of justification for my shadowy life on this earth." (Bioy Casares, 2003: 20)]

¹¹ See note 2 of the present study.

upon a resurrected notion of communism capable of replacing capitalism as a ruling ideology on a global scale. Žižek's reasons are the following:

It is effectively surprising how many features of slum dwellers fit the good old Marxist determination of the proletarian revolutionary subject: they are “free” in the double meaning of the word even more than the classic proletariat (“freed” from all substantial ties; dwelling in a free space, outside the police regulations of the state); they are a large collective, forcibly thrown together, “thrown” into a situation where they have to invent some mode of being-together, and simultaneously deprived of any support in traditional ways of life, in inherited religious or ethnic life-forms.(Žižek, 2009: unpaginated)

By resorting to a Kantian argument, Žižek (2009: unpaginated) regards these conditions of “freedom” as holding a potential for universality, in opposition to the “private” order of capitalist society – where he includes the States:

What one should add here, moving beyond Kant, is that there is a privileged social group which, on account of its lacking a determinate place in the “private” order of social hierarchy, directly stands for universality: it is only the reference to those Excluded, to those who dwell in the blanks of the State space, that enables true universality. There is nothing more “private” than a State community which perceives the Excluded as a threat and worries how to keep the Excluded at a proper distance.

In what aspects is the protagonist and narrator of *The Invention of Morel* akin to, and different from this Žižekian notion of Excluded?

A first affinity lies in the fact that he is someone who is trying to escape from the absolute control which society wishes to exert on itself. The fact that he quotes the goals he intends to reach with his writing projects fully proves it.

A second common trait is the fact that the protagonist of this novella represents a menace to society – he considers himself a fugitive from the judicial system on a global scale, an émigré to whom, like a Žižekian Excluded, no State in particular is willing to

offer political asylum. This force of the law is felt in such an intense way by the protagonist that he starts showing signs of paranoia, seeing as a threat the mere presence of the supposed vacationers on the islet¹².

A third affinity lies in the features of the space where both reside. Just like the Žižekian Excluded¹³, one can notice that the attempt of the protagonist from *The Invention of Morel* to cross the boundaries of that State of absolute control simply drives him towards a frontier zone, since such a State is nothing but, in terms of territory, the whole world and not a regime or a particular country. This frontier zone presents two features which Žižek refers as being typical of the slums: in there, State Law is not applied (which is why the narrator runs away towards it, and it is in there that the perverse invention of Morel “perpetuates” itself): in there, the inhabitable space is felt by the narrator as being reduced, overpopulated, oppressive and highly precarious¹⁴.

These affinities contain, however, the elements which differentiate such Excluded and which are fundamental to be brought up to the collation. In the first place, although the type of threat that the protagonist of the novella represents for society is not strictly known, it is nevertheless known that it is of a distinct nature from the threat of the Žižekian Excluded. And it is known due to the type of oppression that is exerted by each one of them, because although the former is, in Žižek’s own words, *kept at bay* by the so-called community of the Included, the latter is *persecuted* by that same community. Secondly, and notwithstanding the already underlined common features of the frontier zone, the differences of context where each one moves about also accentuate the differentiation of the type of exclusion: in the ghettos there is a community of the

¹²“En este juego de mirarlos hay peligro; como toda agrupación de hombre cultos han de tener escondido un camino de impresiones digitales y de cónsules que me remitirá, si me descubren, por unas cuantas ceremonias o trámites, al calabozo.” (Bioy Casares, 1989: 3) [“Perhaps watching them is a dangerous pastime: like every group of civilized men they no doubt have a network of consular establishments and a file of fingerprints that can send me, after the necessary ceremonies or conferences have been held, to jail.” (Bioy Casares, 2003: 11)]

¹³“While today’s society is often characterized as the society of total control, slums are the territories within a state boundaries from which the state (partially, at least) withdrew its control, territories which function as white spots, blanks, in the official map of a state territory.” (Žižek, 2009: unpaginated)

¹⁴“Son [los veraneantes] inconscientes enemigos que, para oír *Valencia* y *Té para dos* – un fonógrafo poderosísimo los ha impuesto al ruido del viento y del mar –, me privan de todo lo que me ha costado tanto trabajo y es indispensable para no morir, me arrinconan contra el mar en pantanos deletéreos.” (Bioy Casares, 1989: 3) [“They [the tourists] are my unconscious enemies who, as they corner me against the sea in the disease-infested marshes, deprive me of everything I need, everything I must have if I am to go on living. The sound of their very loud phonograph – “Tea for Two” and “Valencia” are their favorite records – seems now to be permanently superimposed on the wind and the sea.” (Bioy Casares, 2003: 11)]

Excluded with a dynamic social organization, in a state of becoming, whereas in the novella the protagonist suffers from a phenomenon of insularity, a phenomenon which, according to Gallagher (1975: 249)¹⁵, is an immanent feature of the work of Adolfo Bioy Casares: “For Bioy every human being would seem to be an island, the gulf between one human being and another being as relentless as the sea that separates two islands.”¹⁶

These differences lead to the questioning of the validity of Žižek’s assertions about the Excluded. *The Invention of Morel* leads us to consider the possibility of the existence of some Excluded whose features diverge from those mentioned by Žižek, but, more importantly, to consider the possibility of subverting capitalism through individual action and to start from a different positioning in society¹⁷. The dialectics of the Slovenian philosopher does not seem to contemplate such cases as Edward Snowden or Julian Assange¹⁸ – just to mention a few high-profile media cases of individuals who acted

¹⁵ Besides Gallagher (1975: 247-66), in “The novels and short stories of Adolfo Bioy Casares”, Henighan also defends (2012: 89-112), in “Every man is an island: Bioy’s fiction”, the existence of this phenomenon of insularity in the work of Bioy Casares.

¹⁶ We want to leave it registered at this point that this phenomenon of insularity in the work of Bioy Casares will be taken into account in this study in Bataille terms. Based on an analysis of the phenomenon of reproduction in living beings, Georges Bataille postulates, in *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, a fundamental discontinuity of each human being, constituting the space (the sea) which interposes itself between the human beings, thus being considered the abyss of death. This abyss of death exerts a common fascination in all the human beings, since it is in there that resides the possibility for them to abandon the isolation to which they are destined as individuals, meaning, to accede a state of continuity: “Chaque être est distinct de tous les autres. Sa naissance, sa mort et les événements de sa vie peuvent avoir pour les autres un intérêt, mais il est seul intéressé directement. Lui seul naît. Lui seul meurt. Entre un être et un autre, il y a un abîme, il y a une discontinuité. / (...) / Mais je ne puis évoquer cet abîme qui nous sépare sans avoir aussitôt le sentiment d’un mensonge. Cet abîme est profond, je ne vois pas le moyen de le supprimer. Seulement nous pouvons en commun ressentir le vertige de cet abîme. Il peut nous fasciner. Cet abîme en un sens est la mort et la mort est vertigineuse, elle est fascinante.” (Bataille, 2011:14-5) [“Each being is distinct from all others. His birth, his death, the events of his life may have an interest for others, but he alone is directly concerned in them. He is born alone. He dies alone. Between one being and another, there is a gulf, a discontinuity. / (...) / But I cannot refer to this gulf which separates us without feeling that this is not the whole truth of the matter. It is a deep gulf, and I do not see how it can be done away with. None the less, we can experience its dizziness together. It can hypnotise us. This gulf is death in one sense, and death is vertiginous, death is hypnotizing.” (Bataille, 1986: 12-3)]

This problematic of the tension between the discontinuity and continuity of the human being, with death and passion operating as central concepts in the discussion, is, as we shall see further ahead in this article, strongly evidenced in *The Invention of Morel*.

¹⁷ In *A Plan for Escape*, Bioy’s subsequent novella to *The Invention of Morel*, the governor Pedro Castel is considered a subversive by the community due to the fact that he maintains proximity relationships with the political prisoners: “Pero Castel era un subversivo, quería estar solo con los presos... La señora acusó también a Castel de escribir, y de publicar en prestigiosos periódicos gremiales, pequeños poemas en prosa.” (Bioy Casares, 2012: 94) [“But Castel was a subversive, he wanted to be alone with the prisoners. The lady also accused Castel of writing, and of publishing in prestigious trade union newspapers, short prose poems.” (Bioy Casares, 1975: 4)]

¹⁸ Although Žižek has showed support to Julian Assange, he was never clear on how Assange’s actions play or not a revolutionary role. In a 2015 debate, Žižek simply stated (109’) that Wikileaks is important because it brings a global awareness on how empowered people make use of unauthorized global mechanisms of surveillance and control. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4glhXERFepo>

subversively from their position, and as a consequence became Excluded¹⁹, thus suffering retaliations which have put their own lives at stake.

We must also evoke the positioning at the frontier, unfindable, of the intellectuals able to introduce revolutionary changes in the ways of thinking and living of the societies and who do not necessarily identify themselves with the old role that Marx destined to them²⁰ – that of propagating the enlightening word throughout the agent of the revolution: the proletariat. For example, Jacques Derrida, in spite of having been subjected to several attacks from the Western Academy during his life, to the point of being granted the moniker “Nero of Philosophy”, held a position within that same Academy and found in it the place that best welcomed his way of thinking. The political thought of the Maghreb thinker diverges from both the paradigms of modern democracy and communism, as he advocated a messianism without religion and a messianic without messianism, with the receivers of his discourse not being a specific existing community, but a community yet to come.

Will Žižek also claim that, precisely because these discrete elements are found within the “private sphere” of society, their discourse does not hold a (Kantian) potential for universality? These questions inevitably generate a discussion which contemporary philosophy and humanities in general have been raising and which concerns the usage of generalizations and closed and absolute systems in order to find valid abstract tenets for thinking about the problems related with human beings. Certain thinkers, such as the aforementioned Jacques Derrida or Gilles Deleuze, have put much of their effort into proving the inapplicability of such generalizations and systems, defending, conversely, that the potential for universality of a tenet can be found in its singularity, its testimonial aspect, its differentiated nature and its differentiating force.

In short, we believe that it is opportune to admit the widening of the sphere of the agents potentially subversive for capitalism which were postulated by Žižek, increasing concomitantly, and in accordance to the critique of the Žižekian perspective on social

¹⁹Nonetheless, their condition as Excluded is absolutely distinct from the one postulated by Žižek.

²⁰ And which Žižek (2009: unpaginated) merely reiterates: “If the principal task of the emancipatory politics of the XIXth century was to break the monopoly of the bourgeois liberals by way of politicizing the working class, and if the task of the XXth century was to politically awaken the immense rural population of Asia and Africa, the principal task of the XXIth century is to politicize – organize and discipline – the “de-structured masses” of slum-dwellers.”

evolution mentioned above, the number of potential factors for the deconstruction of capitalism as well as the combinatory possibilities of their articulation. Moreover, such widening could be a way to respond to the undoubted dynamics of growing complexification upon which rests capitalist society. The latter leads to the creation of sub-systems, which tend to head simultaneously towards the autonomization and to the establishment of labyrinthine relations of interdependence between themselves.

Within this scope, the reading of *The Invention of Morel* reveals itself as very profitable, especially by discussing Morel himself and his invention rather than the protagonist.

In his study “To love in the infinitive: time, image and the powers of the false in *La invención de Morel*”, Karl Posso comments a study by Geoffrey Kantaris (2005) where the latter identifies Morel as the product of a liberal socio-political context which allows for the figure of the inventor to have the chance to shuffle the significant codes of the speech of the technocratic power. Posso (2012:167) presents a counter-argument, by stating that:

Morel, however, simply confirms that any desire to “shuffle the code” ultimately leads back to the perennial commandeering of science for political or economic gain. His machine consumes the real in order to replace and control it: his technological discovery enables the autocratic institution of a utopian community which will prevail in a (limited) version of eternity.

Taking into account these two visions, I propose a third reading interpretation. I believe that Posso’s analysis does not consider the possibility that in Morel and in his invention might reside a potential for subversion by a principle of exaggeration. I thus postulate the hypothesis that Morel is subversive because he is perverse, in accordance with the definition of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze (1975: 43) of this figure of desire in relation to (capitalist) society: “Le pervers, c’est celui qui prend l’artifice au mot: vous en voulez, vous en aurez, des territorialités infiniment plus artificielles encore que celles que la société nous propose, de nouvelles familles infiniment artificielles, des sociétés secrètes et lunaires.”[“The pervert is someone who takes the artifice seriously and plays the game to the hilt: if you want them, you can have them – territorialities infinitely more

artificial than the ones that society offers us, totally artificial new families, secret lunar societies.”(Félix Guattari / Gilles Deleuze, 1977: 35)]

In order to proceed to the analysis of the Morelian perversity, let us pay attention to the target-object of the subversive act: the capitalist society. It was stated above that there was not an explicit mention of the word capitalism (or of any word of the same family) in the novella. However, this does not prevent us from observing in it the implicit and explicit mentions to the concepts, paradigms and systems which support this society. We have not done anything else so far in this study, and it is not in regard to any other society that the interpretations of Posso and Kantaris concerning Morel and his invention refer to. But let us underline some more passages from the book which can aid us in supporting this argument in an unequivocal way.

The first one is contained in the speech through which Morel enlightens his “friends” / victims about the situation they are involved in, at the moment where he points out that the only effective support earned for the conception and development of his invention came from elements which belong to the part of society which is most committed to obtain profit – the industrialists²¹. These industrialists are not only the funders of a project, they provide every resource which feeds the perversity of the inventor no matter what the consequences. Immediately after Morel’s announcement, one of his victims addresses him, and the others also intervene, thus becoming clear in this conversation that one of the aforementioned industrialists had lent his employees to Morel to be used as guinea pigs in his experiments²².

²¹ » Quiero señalar mi gratitud hacia los industriales que, tanto en Francia (Société Clunie), como en Suiza (Schwachter, de Sankt Gallen), comprendieron la importancia de mis investigaciones y me abrieron sus discretos laboratorios./ » El trato de mis colegas no tolera el mismo sentimiento. (Bioy Casares, 1989: 58) [“I should like to express my gratitude to the companies that, in France (Société Clunie) and in Switzerland (Schwachter, of Saint Gallen), realized the importance of my research and put their excellent laboratories at my disposal. / “Unfortunately, I cannot say the same of my colleagues. (Bioy Casares, 2003: 69)]

²² Stoever preguntó: / – ¿Puedes mostrarnos esas primeras imágenes? / – Si ustedes me lo piden, cómo no; pero les advierto que hay fantasmas ligeramente monstruosos – contestó Morel. / – Muy bien – dijo Dora –. Que los muestre. Un poco de diversión nunca es malo. / – Yo quiero verlos – Stoever continuó – porque recuerdo unas muertes inexplicadas, en la casa Schwachter. / – Te felicito – dijo Alec, saludando –. Hemos encontrado un creyente. / Stoever respondió con seriedad: / – Idiota, ¿no has oído?: Charlie también fue tomado. Cuando Morel estaba en Sankt Gallen empezaron a morirse los empleados de la casa Schwachter. Yo vi las fotografías en revistas. Los reconoceré. / Morel, tembloroso y amenazador, salió del cuarto. (Bioy Casares, 1989: 61) [“Can you show us those first images?” asked Stoever. / “If you wish, of course, but I warn you that some of the ghosts are slightly monstrous!” replied Morel. / “Very well,” said Dora. “Show them to us. A little entertainment is always welcome.” / “I want to see them,” continued Stoever, “because I remember several unexplained deaths at the Schwachter Company.” / “Congratulations, Morel,” said Alec, bowing. “You have found yourself a believer!” / Stoever spoke seriously, “You idiot – haven’t you heard?

In these passages we start to glimpse a limit-situation of the current practice of the capitalist industrial system. Namely, the limit-situation where the exclusive criterion for the transformation of the natural good into a manufactured product is profit. The quotation from a speech by Morel shortly before the passages mentioned above provides further elements for analysis which allow us to follow this intuition:

“Cuando completé el invento se me ocurrió, primero como un simple tema para la imaginación, después como un increíble proyecto, dar perpetua realidad a mi fantasía sentimental...

“Creerme superior y la convicción de que es más fácil enamorar a una mujer que fabricar cielos, me aconsejaron obrar espontáneamente. Las esperanzas de enamorarla han quedado lejos; ya no tengo su confiada amistad; ya no tengo el sostén, el ánimo para encarar la vida.” (Bioy Casares, 1989: 56)

[“When I finished my invention it occurred to me, first as a mere exercise for the imagination, then as an incredible plan, that I could give perpetual reality to my romantic desire.

“My belief in my own superiority and the conviction that it is easier to make a woman fall in love in me than to manufacture heavens made me choose a spontaneous approach. My hopes of making her love me have receded now; I no longer have her confidence; nor do I have the desire, the will, to face life. (Bioy Casares, 2003: 67)]

Morel chooses to make a personal use (of a loving nature) of his invention in detriment of accepting a technical fate as a manufacturer of heavens. The plural in the word “heavens” leads us to understand that it refers to a manufacture in large quantities, continuous, thus being in force under the sign of the producing efficiency. This possibility of life, which Morel rejects, expresses the correspondence between the maximum appreciation of the effective use of the manufactured objects and the maximum depreciation of the enjoyment of natural goods. Such a correspondence creates the paradigm of sterility in all the enjoyment, with such natural goods losing their inalienable character. The value of these natural goods becomes measurable.

Charlie was taken by that machine, too. When Morel was in Saint Gallen, the employees of the Schwachter Company started to die. I saw the pictures in magazines. I'll recognize them. / Morel, trembling with anger, left the room.” (Bioy Casares, 2003: 72)]

What has been exposed thus becomes complicated when we take into account the necessary condition for the manufacturing efficiency: the experimentation. Experimentation which lives from error and from waste and that the capitalist system, in order to raise the profit, always intends to minimize. The sacrifice of Charlie and the employees of the Schwachter Company, plus the materials and the human labor put in the experiments of Morel's invention form what in industrial language is called the cost price.

However, it so happens that the object manufactured by Morel's invention always presupposes the immutability of its use: the repetition of the projection of that week at the side of Faustine and the common friends works, for Morel, as the simulacrum of eternal happiness, of the perpetuation of an emotion or of a voluptuous feeling. Even if the invention of Morel was industrialized, the efficacy of the manufactured object would manifest the very idea of enjoyment which intends to be the denegation of the principle of the effective utility of the capitalist system. At the same time, since the effective manufacturing of the simulacrum of the eternal happiness is made at the expense not only of wasteful experimentation, but also from the waste of the very bodies which are the origin (the natural goods) and the purpose (the beneficiaries) of the manufactured object, it becomes clear that there is a paradoxality in a system which, in the limit of its utilitarian obsession, becomes stuck in the dilemma which Pierre Klossowski (1970: unpaginated) enunciates:

L'acte intelligible de fabriquer porte en lui-même une aptitude différentielle de représentation, qui provoque son propre dilemme: ou bien il ne gaspille que pour s'exprimer par le fait de construire, détruire, reconstruire indéfiniment; ou bien il *ne* construit *que* pour s'exprimer par le gaspillage.

[The intelligible act of fabricating requires a differential aptitude for constructing representations, which gives rise to its own dilemma: either its waste is expressed in repeated acts of construction, destruction and reconstruction that can continue indefinitely, or else its constructions themselves become *expressions of waste*. (Klossowski, 2017: 46-7)]

The waste and the sterile enjoyment which are at the centre of Morel's invention are emphasized by Morel's disinterest in sexual activity. The seduction attempt of

Faustine is always made in a context of chastity. But that does not prevent Morel from falling into an erotic drift, in the Batallian sense of the word. For Bataille (2011: 13), “(...) l’erotisme (...) est l’approbation de la vie jusque dans la mort.” [“Eroticism (...) is assenting to life up to the point of death” (Bataille, 1986: 11)], and its domain is the domain of violence, since “Le plus violent pour nous est la mort qui, précisément, nous arrache à l’obstination que nous avons de voir durer l’être discontinu que nous sommes.” Bataille (2011: 18) [“The most violent thing of all for us is death which jerk us out of a tenacious obsession with the lastingness of our discontinuous being.” (Bataille, 1986:16)]

The violence which the acts of Morel imply resides in the fact that he takes for himself, by effect of a ruse and an artifice which transforms, through death, the discontinuity between him and Faustine into an illusion of continuity, someone who does not choose to be a part of such project. Even if Morel attempts to impregnate his acts with lightness, giving the illusion that everything is done without setbacks, that same violence does not cease to be, since acceleration towards death is imposed upon another life, by a movement which separates it from its life-source. In the context of modern western societies, the violence is as evident as is the will, conscious or unconscious of the person(s) to whom death is imposed upon, to oppose that condition of submission, with the acts of Morel thus being configured as a crime of “assassination”.

Let us open a parenthesis at this point in order to speculate a bit about this matter. The criminal act would only cease to be one if Faustine and the other friends of Morel fully accepted (that is, without reservations, both exterior and interior) this condition imposed by him, that is, if Morel’s wish was so irresistible to them, that it could transfigure their repulsion into an attractive will of equal intensity. In other words, if in each of the entities there was a coexistence with the possessor and the possessed, the dominator and the dominated, to the point that these qualities stopped making sense – if there was a psychic fusion in each of the lovers / friends, simultaneously with a fusion of these very lovers / friends as individuals. But this is not what happens. What we are given to see is, on the contrary, the sovereign passion of an entity which unilaterally appropriates itself of other entities, independently of any other will.

Morel believes himself to be superior, that is, he sees the concession of his invention to the capitalist system as an alienation of his individuality. By avoiding the

appropriation of his invention by the industrialists who had supported the development of his project²³, he believes to be refusing the *role* which society wants to assign to him, by refusing the neutralization of his wish – initially, his project already is intended to be an exercise for the imagination, an escape from boredom. Morel and the application of his invention to his personal purposes configure, without any doubt, the pathologic symptomatology of the bourgeois society, as we might regard it in accordance to Derrida (1999: 57):

Il y a une affinité, en tout cas une synchronie, entre une culture de l'ennui et une culture de l'orgiasme. La domination de la technique favorise l'irresponsabilité démonique dont la charge sexual le n'a pas à être rappelée. Et cela sur le fond de cet ennui qui va de pair avec le nivellement technologique. La civilisation technique ne produit une crue ou une recrue de l'orgiasme, avec ses effets bien connus d'esthétisme et d'individualisme, que dans la mesure où elle ennuie, parce qu'elle «nivelle» et neutralise la singularité irremplaçable ou mystérieuse du moi responsable. L'individualisme de cette civilisation technique repose sur la méconnaissance même du moi singulier. C'est un individualisme du *role* et non de la *personne*.

[There is an affinity, or at least a synchrony, between a culture of boredom and an orgiastic one. The domination of technology encourages demonic irresponsibility, and the sexual force of the latter does not need to be emphasized. All that occurs against the background of this boredom that acts in concert with a technological leveling effect. Technological civilization produces a heightening or mobilization of the orgiastic, with the familiar accompanying effects of aestheticism and individualism, but only to the extent that it also produces boredom, for it “levels” or neutralizes the mysterious or irreplaceable uniqueness of the responsible self. The individualism of technological civilization relies precisely on a misunderstanding of the unique self. It is the individualism of a *role* and not of a *person*. (Derrida, 2008: 36-7)]

The reasons which lead Morel's behavior to configure a case of individualism, and not of singularity, are quite clear in this quote. He does everything in order for the people

²³ This is apparently confirmed by the discourse of the narrator subsequent to Morel's discourse, in which the former manifests surprise by the invention not being public knowledge.

whom he appropriates of, including him-self, to perform a role (of natural happiness) pre-determined by him in the economy of his representation. All care is taken to avoid friction, dissension, misunderstanding, entropy, even in the preparations for the disclosure to their victims of the situation in which they are involved. But it is unsuccessful. The point of view of the narrator of this novella – the only human being who has to coexist with the projections – is not more than an attestation to this fact, since it can be translated as the explicitness of several practical problems, confusions and misunderstandings (where all the antagonisms postulated by Žižek are present in a rather clear way) which arise as a consequence of the interaction with the invention, either in the form of its final product or in the exploitation of its potentialities. Of course, we do not have the pretension to neglect the difficult context of the narrator, a context which certainly emphasizes these problematic matters, but, if we dwell on the whole of the dialogue which we partially quoted above, we will quickly conclude that another kind of contingencies (the friends of Morel are spending a week of vacation, in a comfortable and relaxed environment) do not necessarily create any less entropy.

Morel's perversity reaches its peak precisely at this point in the narrative, when he clarifies his "friends" / victims on the situation they are involved in. This happens because such perversity becomes cynical, with cynicism manifesting itself in a limitless crescendo. Firstly, Morel's explanation of the irreversible implications of his invention to the victims of the latter is cynical, since this very explanation would be easily avoidable²⁴. Secondly, Morel recognizes his lack of shame in registering the personal life of the victims, during a week, without their consent, in a physical support which perpetuates the reproduction of that very same record²⁵. Thirdly, the obscenity of this act is aggravated by the fact that

²⁴ » Había resuelto no decirles nada. No hubieran pasado por una inquietud muy natural. Yo habría dispuesto de todos, hasta el último instante, sin rebeliones. Pero, como son amigos, tienen derecho a saber.» (Bioy Casares, 1989:54) [“At first, I decided not to tell you anything. That would have spared you a very natural anxiety. We would have enjoyed ourselves up to the very last instant, and there would have been no objections. But, as all of you are friends, you have a right to know.” (Bioy Casares, 2003: 66)]

²⁵ En silencio [Morel] movía los ojos, sonreía, temblaba; después siguió con ímpetu: / »Mi abuso consiste en haberlos fotografiado sin autorización. Es claro que no es una fotografía como todas; es mi último invento. Nosotros viviremos en esa fotografía, siempre. Imagínense un escenario en que se representa completamente nuestra vida en estos siete días. Nosotros representamos. Todos nuestros actos han quedado grabados.» / – ¡Qué impudor! – gritó un hombre de bigotes negros y dientes para afuera. / – Espero que sea broma – dijo Dora. / Faustine no sonreía. Parecía indignada. (Bioy Casares, 1989: 54-5) [He [Morel] paused for a moment, rolling his eyes, smiling, trembling; then he continued impulsively: “My abuse consists of having photographed you without your permission. Of course, it is not like an ordinary photograph; this is my latest invention. We shall live in this photograph forever. Imagine a stage on which our life during these seven days is acted out, complete in every detail. We are the actors. All our actions have been recorded.” /

Morel records it, thus preserving the memory of the terrible impact that such explanation has on his victims, and is further aggravated because Morel is fully aware of that very same impact beforehand, relying on the perverse functioning of his invention as a means to keep the situation under his control²⁶. Lastly, the very concept of immortality inherent to the invention, which forms a background under which the cynicism of this discourse unfolds, is obscene, in accordance to one of the meanings postulated in Žižek’s 2017 study, “The Obscene Immortality and its Discontents”. Morel’s invention works with the same concept of Sadean immortality that Žižek (2017: 2) borrows from Lacan, which is characterized by a closed circularity that, as it succeeds in many of today’s computer games²⁷, tends to deprive of value and even to discredit the subjective experience of death²⁸, thus fueling a fantasy which unites both the comical and the terrifying:

(...) the fantasy of another, ethereal body of the victim, which can be tortured indefinitely and nonetheless magically retains its beauty (recall the Sadean figure of the young girl sustaining endless humiliations and mutilations from her depraved torturer and somehow mysteriously surviving it all intact, in the same way Tom and Jerry and other cartoon heroes survive all their ridiculous ordeals intact). In this form, the comical and the disgustingly-terrifying (recall different versions of the “undead” — zombies, vampires, etc. — in popular culture) are inextricably connected.

Not being, therefore, a responsible singularity, Morel does not fail to be exemplary insofar as he demonstrates to where leads the kind of extreme individualism which the capitalist society tends to produce. Morel is authoritarian, Morel gives orders, Morel plots, calculates, acts, and pretends to be observing an axiology²⁹, however, when confronted with the deadly effects of his actions, he resigns from assuming his

“How shameful!” blurted a man with a black moustache and protruding teeth. / “I hope it’s just a joke,” said Dora. / Faustine was not smiling. She seemed to be indignant. (Bioy Casares, 2003: 66)

²⁶»Tendrán que disculparme esta escena, primero fastidiosa, después terrible, La olvidaremos. Esto, asociado a la buena semana que hemos vivido, atenuará su importancia. (Bioy Casares, 1989: 54) [“You must forgive me for this rather tedious, unpleasant incident. We shall try to forget it! Thoughts of the fine week we have spent here together will make all this seem less important.” (Bioy Casares, 2003: 66)]

²⁷ “when I am immersed into a game, I dwell in a universe of undeadness where no annihilation is definitive since, after every destruction, I can return to the beginning and start the game again...” (Žižek, 2017: abstract)

²⁸ The same is not true of the alternative concept of immortality presented by Žižek in this same article. This concept is the Badiouian, being an ineffable contingent experience, lived in a unique and unrepeatable moment of the duration, and thus comprising a tension with the subjective experience of death, valuing it.

²⁹ See note 19 of the present study.

responsibility³⁰. Free will as a way of life shows its failure in the logical impossibility of assuming the responsibility for everything and, in a particularly significant way, by giving death or taking it away (in other words, to give immortality) to whoever it is:

Chacun doit assumer, et c'est la liberté, et c'est la responsabilité, sa propre mort, à savoir la seule chose au monde que personne ne peut *ni donner ni prendre*. (...) Même si on me donne la mort, au sens où cela reviendrait à me tuer, cette mort aura toujours été la mienne et je ne l'aurais reçue de personne dès lorsqu'elle est irréductiblement la mienne – et que le mourir jamais ne se porte, ne s'emprunte, ne se transfère, livre, promet ou transmet. Et de même qu'on ne peut pas me la donner, on ne peut pas la prendre. (Derrida, 1999: 67-8)

[Everyone must assume their own death, that is to say, the one thing in the world that no one else can *either give or take*: therein resides freedom and responsibility. (...) Even if one gives me death to the extent that it means killing me, that death will still have to be mine, and as long as it is irreducibly mine I will not have received it from anyone else. Thus dying can never be borne, borrowed, transferred, delivered, promised, or transmitted. And just as it can't be given to me, so it can't be taken away from me. (Derrida, 2008: 45)]

It is through this impossibility that Morel's supposedly responsible cynicism reveals its irresponsibility, its indifference and its absolute axiological relativism that allows everything. Precisely when this terrifying limit is reached, is when irony and black comedy are felt in that very same cynicism. The latter begins to express a critical attitude towards the dominant forms of commercialization and nihilistic opportunism, proposing, even if implicitly and in backlight, a different set of values. The act of the narrator of delivering him-self to the invention of Morel at the end of the novella seems to be aimed at that direction: the valorization of appearance as being real and, in general terms, of indeterminateness, which allows for an escape line from, and a questioning of, a straightforward, determined and apparent reality (emptied of life, of humanity).

In sum, Morel and his invention are, therefore, an expression of the height of capitalist society - where everything tends to be cynically privatized, consumed,

³⁰ See note 17 of the present study.

manipulated and turned into something artificial. This obscene perversity causes, through exaggeration, potentially destructive effects (ecological, biological, communicational and of exclusion) of the very mechanisms and capitalist subsystems which generated them, thus deconstructing their significant codes. It is thus evident how capitalism forces the extension of its own limits and enters, as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1975: 41) tell us, within the scope of schizophrenia:

Le décodage des flux, la déterritorialisation du socius forment ainsi la tendance la plus essentielle du capitalisme. Il ne cesse de s'approcher de sa limite, qui est une limite proprement schizophrénique. Il tend de toutes ses forces à produire le schizo comme le sujet des flux décodés sur le corps sans organes – plus capitaliste que le capitaliste et plus prolétaire que le prolétaire.

[The decoding of flows and the deterritorialization of the socius thus constitute the most characteristic and the most important tendency of capitalism. It continually draws near to its limit, which is a genuinely schizophrenic limit. It tends, with all the strength at its command, to produce the schizo as the subject of the decoded flows on the body without organs – more capitalist than the capitalist and more proletarian than the proletariat. (Gilles Deleuze / Félix Guattari, 1977: 34)]

References

- BATAILLE, Georges (1986). *Erotism: Death & Sensuality*. Translated by Mary Dalwood. San Francisco: City Lights Books.
- _____ (2011). *L'Érotisme*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- BIOYCASARES, Adolfo (1975), *A Plan for Escape*. Translated by Suzanne Jill Levine. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc.
- _____ (1996), *La invención de Morel*. Prólogo de Jorge Luis Borges. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc.
- _____ (2012), *Obra Completa I*. Edited by Daniel Martino. Buenos Aires: Emecé Editores.
- _____ (2003), *The Invention of Morel*. Preface by Jorge Luis Borges. Introduction by Suzanne Jill Levine. Translated by Ruth L. C. Simms. New York: The New York Review of Books.
- DELEUZE, Gilles /GUATTARI, Félix (1975), *L'Anti-Oedipe: Capitalisme et Schizophrénie*. Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit.
- _____ (1977), *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Preface by Michel Foucault. Introduction by Mark Seem. Translated by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane. New York: Penguin Books USA Inc.
- DERRIDA, Jacques Derrida (1999), *Donner la mort*, Paris: Éditions Galilée.
- _____ (2008), *The Gift of Death / Literature in Secret*, Translated by David Wills. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.
- GALLAGHER, David (1975), "The Novels and Short Stories of Adolfo Bioy Casares" in *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, 52/3. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press Online. pp. 247-66. URL: <http://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/pdf/10.3828/bhs.52.3.247>
- HENIGHAN, Stephen (2012). "Every man is an island: Bioy's fiction" and POSSO, Karl (2012) "To love in the infinitive: time, image and the powers of the false in *La invención de Morel*" in *Adolfo Bioy Casares: Borges, Fiction and Art*. Edited by Karl Posso. Cardiff: University of Wales Press. pp. 89-112, 163-201.
- KANTARIS, Geoffrey (2005). "Holograms and Simulacra: Bioy Casares, Subiela, Piglia". In *Science and the Creative Imagination in Latin America*. Edited by Evelyn Fishburn and Eduardo L. Ortiz. London: Institute for the study of the Americas, pp. 175-89.

KLOSSOWSKI, Pierre / ZUCCA, Pierre (1970). *La Monnaie Vivante*. Paris: éric losfeld éditeur.

KLOSSOWSKI, Pierre (2017). *Living Currency*. Introduction by Daniel W. Smith.

Translated by Vernon Cisney, Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

ŽIŽEK, Slavoj (2009), “Censorship Today: Violence, or Ecology as a New Opium for the Masses” in www.lacan.com URL: <http://www.lacan.com/zizecology1.htm>

_____ (2017), “The Obscene Immortality and its Discontents” in *International Journal of Žižek Studies*, Vol.11, n°2. URL: <http://zizekstudies.org/index.php/IJZS/article/view/1016/1036>

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

Environmental Struggles and Ecological Narratives in the Basque Country: The 20th Century Dialectics of Sustainable Materialism.

Iker Arranz, Ph.D., Department of Spanish and Portuguese
– University of California, Santa Barbara

Abstract: In this article, I examine the relationship between environment and political consciousness, articulating an argument that links the organic side and the economical level of environmentalist claims, and exposing some of the social movements and political positions that were coined in the Basque Country in the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century. Some of the protests linked to environmental causes in the Basque Country fit with the narratives that give access to the new century and describe the coming concepts in the form of advent with regards to notions like sustainability, organic, energy policies, post-ideologies and even the relationship between food and environment in more recent years. In this direction, environmental movements have succeeded in confusing the materialistic goals of their claims and the very materialism implicit in nature. Thus, I claim that these movements have complied from conservative positions rather than progressist positions. Therefore, there has been an asymmetry with the ideological (non-material) portion of these claims and protests and the truly emancipatory goals of any progressist position. If the drive for sustainability can counter materialist and idealist proposals, we need to find a solution where “sustainable” means organic without the bodily part of the organic term itself.

Keywords: idealism, materialism, dialectics, environmentalism, nature, cuisine, organic, sustainability

Wordcount: 8,239

Author correspondence at: Iker@ucsb.edu

Introduction

It is Saturday, April 6 1996, the morn is just waking in the horizon of a small valley in a remote area of Navarre, and 8 members of “Solidarios con Itoiz” (“Solidary Peoples with (of) Itoiz”, SI from now on and below) along with 3 journalists who cover the action, carry away an elaborated plan against the construction works of the swamp of the small village of Itoiz (Navarre). This collective sees the light in 1995, when the works already had been progressing for more than one year. The group states that their goal is to offer an alternative (socio-political) landscape to the neo-liberal one represented with the swamp, and somehow this action renders the basics of their philosophy. In fact, that chill and early morning, they cut off the cables that make possible the transportation of the concrete of the construction works.

Located in the west of Navarre, this tiny village before its destruction in 2003 with the infilling of the swamp was less that one hour driving distance from Iruña [Pamplona]. Itoiz had a small population at that time and was part of the network of villages in that region of Navarre that relied on farming as its main economic activity. The execution of the reservoir was part of a bigger strategic plan³¹ to transport water using an aqueduct from higher regions of Navarre to regions in the south with historically significant draught problems.

However, the impact of the action carried by SI that day was still significant and established a precedent in the way of protesting and understanding what was called “the cause”³² in the last decades of the 20th century in the Basque Country in the social movements that have some ecological concerns and claims. SI achieved a notorious goal with their action: they stopped the works cutting off the cables, which had a very negative

³¹ This plan, named “El Canal de Navarra” [Navarre’s Water Canal], was designed to provide with irrigation water to the southern parts of Navarre. However, as many investigations suggests, there was a myriad of irregularities regarding granting contracts to different companies and later funding of the construction project. The whole project contains many gaps in its execution and financing that suggests the possibility of corrupted elements. Some examples are mentioned in a document titled “Aguas Limpias, Manos Limpias” by the *Fundación Nueva Cultura del Agua*. In this document, among other pharaonic works that were aimed to solve problems related to water (mainly destined for farming and crops), they mention some of the major difficulties and irregularities of “El Canal de Navarra”. For instance the documentary notes that in 1989 the Government of Navarra paid 150,000 euros to the Hydrographic Conference of Ebro for a report on Itoiz that was never submitted. The irregularities are listed in this document and they mention how plans were denounced prior to the execution of the works, but they were not taken in consideration by the legal and governmental authorities. Some of these claims include the lack of appraisal of the goods and structures of the town of Itoiz, 54 projects awarded to different companies that were not advertised or opened to a competition, and additional allegations.

³² In the same vein, Badiou has analyzed the 20th century as the century of “the real”. See Badiou “The Century”.

impact in the development of the plan. Although the works would resume few months later, the impact of this action will remain in the popular imaginary for long. The protest also gained valuable attention in the public concerning the estimated budget, timing, and outcomes of such works could had for the population of Navarre, as well as the significant exile effect that the habitants of the former village suffered. We can affirm that it supposed a wakeup call for segments of the population that were never interested in these protests. Significantly enough, national papers at the time narrated this episode as an act against the Navarre society: “eight of the members [of SI] that cut the cables to transport the concrete the past Saturday, denied in a press conference that they are linked to KAS [Patriotic Socialist Organization], as Cesar Milano, the Delegate of the Government of Navarre, suggested” [Author’s Translation](El País, 9 of April 1996). Other news suggested the link of the environmental protest with the political movements aligned with nationalist or pro-independence claims.

But above all, this protest created a new space: it generated a series of consequences only perceivable in this form and impossible to foresee. A type of space that has been already examined somewhere else by Edward Soja³³. Against all the multinational companies involved in the project, the hegemonic political structure and the pragmatic possibilities of success, these group of people generated a political discourse via a public action that was devoted to stop the construction works and they succeed. And their visibility became notorious somehow because it challenged the Law in a public space: they did cut the ties with capitalism (literally even) and they did recognized and reported the action with the presence of a group of journalist secretly hidden during the action. This procedure has certainly strong similitudes with the myth of a dead brother and the universal love of his sister.

In this paper I will try to establish the coordinates to re-interpret this action. Based in the very claims of these environmentalist groups and following some notions that have been expressed by Slavoj Žižek about ecology, this paper discusses the general confusion or misunderstanding of current ecological claims about the very nature of Nature. Thus, recalling Antigone’s passage’s ethical value as Lacan reads it as one of the key arguments, this paper explains how ecology has become a pornographic spectacle at an

³³ See Edward Soja “ThirdSpace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined places” (1996)

ethical level. The first section serves to contextualize culturally the traditional and inherited notion of nature in the Basque culture. Following this section, the second part explores the irruption of postmodern era for this traditional world, departing from a pagan reality into urban industrial scene. Thirdly, the paper re-interprets the *evental* action of Itoiz in combination with one previous notorious protests, which was the one at the nuclear plant of Lemoniz. The article ends with a set of conclusions that embody the main thesis of it and stretch some of the presented arguments.

Traditional Basque Pagan Mythology and the assimilation of Nature

Nature when conceived as a social and cultural construction responds to the laws and norms that act upon citizens. Environmental studies are not an exception to the impact of discourses on power and politics. Therefore, any analysis that intends to disclose the social movements that protest -and by doing so they (un)consciously claim for a different status for nature- has to deal with its political discourse, and more concretely, with the concept of nature that each culture elaborates. In this direction, Basque culture and its pagan tradition (as has been extensively exposed in the works of Jose Miguel de Barandiaran, Julio Caro Baroja or Willhem von Humboldt, some inspired in the previous work on Basque legends by Webster) depict an uncommon exception on the concept of nature, opposed somehow to the globalized conceptualization of nature as a financial resource more common these days. Yet, it is not the fact of having pagan elements but the way of incorporating them as a national symbol what makes this case different. In other words, in contemporary times, it is revisiting ancient cultural references underpinned on nationalistic discourses what probably distinguishes Basque ecological discourse from others.

Although Basque culture offers a good amount of pagan remains, even when looking at it from a contemporary perspective, it is how pagan and Christian traditions intermingle what is more surprising. Some authors refer to the first works of Agosti Xaho, Francisco Navarro Villoslada or Arturo Campión as the inaugural moment for the re-presentation of Basque mythological elements in literature. Later, as one of the main references Lope Garcia de Salazar's "Jaun Zuria" will crystalize the combination of pagan mythical figures with clear nationalist ideology, which will serve to main nationalist intellectual figures in the beginning of the 20th century to develop an entire imaginary supporting this romantic ideas. Some authors will also establish the links between the

conservative Carlist ideologies and the resilience of traditional Basque culture. Examining Joseba Gabilondo's work in his history of Basque literatures (Gabilondo 2016), one can certainly trace eco-friendly elements that surround the different stages of Basque literature, which mingle between tradition, the difference and nation. However, the ecocritical perspective is still unresolved in any history of Basque literature. Regardless the intimate socio-cultural perception of nature in Basque society, the references to ecocritical references in literature are atomized and appear randomly, in works and literary critique alike.

In this vein, Basque art beyond literature has shown a deep determination to unveil the immanence of nature in Basque culture. Thus, Jorge Oteiza claimed for the aesthetization of education in a clear effort to restore the fundamental functions of education coming from the industrial and postmodern biased practices. According to Oteiza "without an aesthetic education, you can be sure, any kind of education is politically incomplete" (Oteiza 2003, 457). Oteiza certainly enables the primary notions of modernism in one single line: education, art and politics³⁴. This statement anticipates what other authors maintained regarding the reconceptualization of cultural realities around new paradigms elaborated from *uncertain* notions of nation, such as some Latin-Americanist (Moreiras 2001)³⁵. It is in part due to paradigms based on the consecution of these concepts during the industrialization of the Basque Country that the region became one of the most successful in Spain. However, the remarks of Oteiza transcend modernity (and modernism) by articulating a hierarchy between art and politics, and therefore, relegating reason to a secondary role in education. Oteiza foresees the death of nature before anyone else in the Basque universe³⁶. Somehow his environmental principles

³⁴ Modernity has been defined by the very transition from feudal societies into more industrial era. At a conceptual level, it represents too the transition from fables and religion, into reason and all the implied consequences of this change. Therefore, Oteiza rightly marks the modern elements necessary for this transition be fully effect: education, arts and politics. Which, has been defined in terms of "conditions of truth" by the French philosopher Alain Badiou. For more in the philosophical approach of Badiou see "Being and Event" (2005) and "Conditions" (2008).

³⁵ Among other disciplines, literature also serves to conceptualize the notion of nation. Moreover, Alberto Moreiras did an excellent work discussing the various and problematic notions traditionally applied for Latin American nations from a post-colonial perspective. In this direction, *uncertain* nations (colonized, or nations without a proper state) provide with some advantages to elaborate new paradigms. For more on Moreiras' perspective see "The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies" (2001).

³⁶ Although death is a recurrent topic in many angles for the Basque artist, Oteiza can foresee that the properties that define the world (and any transcendental entity) respond to an inevitable force that will corrupt life, which is death. Oteiza resolves "Concreté hace ya tiempo la naturalize del ser estético... en los términos ontológicos dela creación, a una auténtica respues de salvación ante Dios... A la angustia por la

already accept nature as a perishable entity regardless of the ecological debates that were taking place in the Basque Country during the 70s and 80s, and rushes nature as a concept that is closer to nothingness, sometimes in a very mundane (human) take. It is at this stage that any counter-movement aimed to weight up the contrast between an approach that celebrates a “living nature” will be advocated to celebrate at the same time, as we shall see, the triumph of capitalism under the regime of democracy.

Accounting for this perspective requires a preliminary validation of the approach to art in the sense that Theodor Adorno (Adorno 1966) and Walter Benjamin (Benjamin 1936) articulated: art happens within the dialectics of the materialism and idealism that surrounds human activity. One fact that unites this clash of antagonistic blocks, and confirms this reality, is how nature is presented in its ideal form and consumed in its material form traditionally speaking.

The Literary Postmodern Environmentalism and The Political

There is in the very beginning of the 21st century that ecocriticism emerges as a new discipline that manages to encompass the imaginary reflected in literature with ecological theories³⁷. There is an asymmetry however with the social and academic pace in the case of the Basque Country. Although nature as a cultural entity plays a central role for Basque mythology until the 18th century, its literary projection was not fully developed. The industrialization in the Basque Country provides with material means to a society still struggling to emerge from a more rural universe. However, it is not until the end of the 19th century when the emergence of industrialization in the Basque Country and its modernization that nature passes to be considered the *Big Other* for capitalism – the hegemonic factor that neutralizes and centers the capitalist discourse in its materialist dimension – instead of the master signifier that used to be in the pagan tradition. The later has not been clearly reflected in Basque contemporary literature yet, however, there are modernist traces in Basque literature yet to be discovered that do reflect the intersections between literary production and a certain sensitivity towards nature and ecology.

propia muerte me sucede ahora el descubrimiento de la vida crítica del Padre, agonizando de respuesta estética, humanizado por su propia creación universal” (Oteiza 2006, 162).

³⁷ Worth worthy to mention here the emergence of this new literary discipline happened at the English Department at the University of Nevada, Reno, in the mid 80s. The main goal was to show that the role of nature in literary works had ethical, economic and political interpretations that would had a direct impact in the influence of such literary works in society.

Yet, the incorporation of modernization and reason into the collective imaginary of the rural habitants of the Basque Country created a disruption in the traditional narratives that also affected the conceptualization of environmentalism narratives (orality, poetry and more ethereal traditions were more used than the actual symbolism and power of text until very recent in the Basque Country). In this sense, and in a reflexive manner, one of the major disruptive phenomenon that comes with industrialization is literary production itself. Although all the previous and most notorious works in Basque literature remain closely related to religious topics³⁸, some authors like Gabriel Aresti or Xabier Lete in the mid and late 20th century, let alone the social asymmetry displayed in “Peru Abarka” work by Mogel, incorporated topics related mainly to existentialism, nationalism, and environmentalism in a lower degree³⁹. For instance, Joseba Zulaika points out – mentioning the work of Gabriel Aresti in relation to the armed struggle and existentialist fatalism of some of the militants – Aresti “[b]y abandoning the mountaintop (...) submitted himself to the essential tensions of the city: Christ and Zarathustra, Gernika and the working class, Euskara and Castilian” (Zulaika 2015: 72). Certainly Gabriel Aresti marks a turning point in Basque literature enabling the discourses of “literary communities” that were displaced or disrupted: Basque community without a literary reference in Basque along with the Castilian community favoring the political goals of the Basque community. Aresti evokes the downfall of Basque politics in his poem entitled “Untergang” (downfall) but also uses the allegory of the mountain, the nature that is displaced from urban areas fully submerged in industrial activity, alienating nature as such and accepting the conceptualization of nature, even in linguistic terms, as a master signifier. Gabilondo refers to this poem as the catalytic moment where to place the axis of trans-Atlantic manifestations in Basque literature. It is indeed, as Gabilondo remarks while noting the empowerment on the idea of nation in the novel “Sweet Promised Land” by Robert Laxalt “[t]he author does not condemn or glorify the Basque Country as a nationalist space, but rather, inserts in an Atlantic space of passage and migration, in which the ‘garden of our ancestors’ or ‘house of my father’ becomes a

³⁸ As one of the most prominent sources of such literature tends to be Sarako Eskola (Sara’s School), which provided with several authors that make possible Basque literature to take off from more medieval starts prior to the 17th and 18th centuries. The very first Basque book was published in 1545 (“Lingua Vasorum Primitiae”) by Bernart Etxepare, and although the themes are religious, the book is able to provide a significant information about the socio-political structure of the habitants of the Basque Country at that time.

³⁹ For more on the transition and history of Basque literature from religious beginnings into modernism, see Joseba Gabilondo’s “Before Babel: A History of Basque Literatures” (2016).

traumatic space that cannot be inhabited by a migrant subaltern Basque, although it must be revisited” (Gabilondo 2016: 228). Gabilondo rightly highlights the displacement of the voice of the Basque out of the figure of the nation for the first time. However, there are some signs that this journey started from within the nation during the industrialization. This, however, was an immanent transition, a journey for a nation within a nation: the rural nation into the urban nation. I would like to argue, against Gabilondo’s opinion, that the trans-Atlantic space for the Basque literature begins within, and not in an external form. Literature thus provokes a mirror effect of nature transformed in the materialist *Big Other* for the late capitalist, articulating both early and late capitalist discourses and the emergence of its first critiques on the conceptualization of nature and the possibility for new narratives (such as ecocritical, eco-composition, postmodern and even post-national ones reflected in the works of Kirmen Uribe or Ramon Saizarbitoria, among others). Although this phenomenon can be analyzed within the axis of the (trans)Atlantic, it is also part of the dialectical process of displacement from materialism, into materialism without materialism (Ruda 2015) coordinates, and therefore, as an inaugural moment for post-national postulates.

However, the awakening in literary terms described by Gabilondo is indeed a political awakening as well. With the eruption of industrialization in the Basque Country in the 19th century, there are two parallel lines of thinking that interrupt the traditional pagan vision of the Basque world, mainly based in oral tradition with some significant exceptions⁴⁰. On the one hand, there is an appropriation of the capitalist values within a segment of the population that will become the archetypical bourgeois society. With the emergence of national discourses based on a high dependence on *partial objects* such as race, historicism, or family which are slowly left behind in order to articulate discourses around imported notions such as freedom, political subject, or internationalism. In this sense, partial objects respond to this partiality in an absolute form: they become “wholer” than the whole itself, which has a direct impact in the ideologies that are based on these partial objects. It is relevant to introduce here, very briefly, Lacan’s contribution as he calls it to *object petit a*, since they are the source for desire. The concept of partial object

⁴⁰ Starting in 1545 with Bernard Etxepare, it is true that Basque literature has some important references both in Spanish and in Basque, and probably the “Sarako Eskola” (the literary group that was created in this small region of South of France-North of the Basque Country) is the most important one in this sense. However, the permeability of Basque readers for Basque literature has been significantly limited, and has not been settled until the late of the 20th century.

–or *object petit a*, or semblance as Lacan will put it in his Seminars of 1973- are closely linked to the perpetuation of a passion for the real in the 20th century, and not for the ideal. For Lacan “[w]hat analytic discourse brings out is precisely the idea that that meaning is based on semblance” and not with a direct correspondence with the object itself, and continues saying that “[m]eaning indicates the direction toward which it fails” (Lacan 1985: 79). Again, semblance is this appearance endorsed with meaning. Badiou completes this idea, while he talks about the 20th century, asserting that “[i]t is reality that constitutes an obstacle to the uncovering of the real as pure surface. Here lies the struggle against semblance” (Badiou 2007: 64). All these partial objects that embody the discourses of essence and purity within Basque nationalism resemble the idea of a nation that is integral, without a meaning because it has “The” meaning: *wholer* than the whole meaning. In short we see how the partial objects –semblance or *object petit a*- are the source of a certain imaginary that is inaugurated in the Basque Country with the advent of industrialization and that will frame the optimal conditions for neo-liberalism to flourish, preserving in the process the “semblance” of national identity. In order to develop this semblance we need a *locus* where to implement the notion. In the Basque case *body* -in a multiplicity of its assertions- will be the real and phantasmatic space for that.

In the entire 20th century, during the years of industrialization, there was a sacralisation of the concept of corpus (or body) in the Basque Country: traditionally (almost mandatorily) Basque people had to be hard workers, honest, faithful to the homeland, and the importance of the body is as the container of the meanings that are articulated within rural tradition and customs and as the sacrificial container of all these interactions with the real. This narrative simultaneously fits with the above described idea of semblance around the real: there is a passion for the real through the idea of identity in the Basque imaginary in the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. It is, somehow, the transition from a feudal state of mind into socialist thinking in the midst of an inner transition from a complete lack of subjectivity in political terms to an immersion into democratic rules. Eventually this will open the door to more recent discourses on post-nationalism or transnational narratives, both in politics and literature, due to a critique on the narratives related to democracy itself and the irruptive allocutions of the discourses of ones who do not belong to any social group.

Nonetheless, the question that arises is relevant for our analysis, and it has been anticipated by Alberto Moreiras (Moreiras 2001) in regard to the location of the narratives of Latin Americanism in the postmodern arena, relating the role of nature and environment after the cultural disruptive moment of modernization and the transition into postmodernism. We ask ourselves what is the presence of politics in contemporary Basque environmental discourse without having a clear answer for this question. What are the rights that enable us to think of nature as a public place as it is displayed in ecological protests? Is it possible to defend environmentalism from a democratic materialist – cultural sustainability vision – position? This unanswered question forms the core of actual environmental discourse in the Basque Country that, nevertheless, have as a starting point an *evental* happening – a referent in European protest movements on environmental issues – that took place in 1996: the protest action at the swamp of Itoiz, which will serve to illustrate the main problem this article is meant to disclose, namely, the lack of any organic discourse around environmental issues without organic narratives related to power relations.

A disruptive political moment: Case study of the struggle of Itoitz’s reservoir in political and environmental terms.

Alain Badiou describes the inscription of an *event* as a singularity that is not perceptible by its appearing in the world, but by the range of universal consequences that it generates. In recent Basque history, more concretely in the struggle on environmental issues, the protests of Itoiz mark a threshold where some philosophical, sociological and political narratives converge. I will suggest, that there are reasons to affirm that this *evental* episode resembles the nature of the ethical question itself, actively rendered by Jacques Lacan in the myth of Antigone.

In this direction, I suggest, Itoiz represents the “dead brother” that Antigone was trying to save from his mortality and offer to him immortality, a limp of the Navarre family of villages that in its agony cannot be buried under tons of water in this case. Significantly enough, the case of the nuclear plant of Lemoniz anticipates the one in Itoiz, which is the advent of the event in Itoiz. Lemoniz, between the years of 1975 and 1984, stands as a representation of an effort in the contrary direction of Antigone’s will, in this case. The “brother” embodied in the figure of the construction site of the nuclear plant in Lemoniz was never claimed nor buried and stands nowadays as a phantasmatic figure in

shore, by the beach. Although the construction of this nuclear plant took place during the last years of Franco's dictatorship and the energy crisis that accompanied the last decades of the 20th century in Spain, the controversy continued during the first years of an all too young democracy. However, for this study, the most interesting part is how the conflict was addressed on theoretical grounds. How were concepts such as nation, energy, and nature combined to obtain different narratives for what would eventually become different ideologies? Protestors fought against what was considered a privileged location within the traditional idea of fatherland's landscape, declaring the ecological value of the Basque Country's seaside, and for the first time fighting against a technology that at the time was considered the most advanced. During the industrialization, despite the high levels of pollution and contamination that main urban areas suffered, there was little acknowledgement of the physical and environmental health consequences. Moreover, the disruption of daily lives with new technology was a synonym of progress for many ideologies⁴¹. It is not until the end of the 70s and the 80s that technology is heavily targeted as an ethically questionable human achievement, and the significant gain of presence of bio-ethical question (which could be understood as a by-product of a Foucaultian perspective on "bio-politics"). In consequence, at this historical moment we start to observe how along with a claim for the incorruptibility of nature in the protests against the nuclear plant, there is an assumption that technology – mainly after the nuclear era – has achieved a hegemonic level of power that is able to corrupt and destroy nature as a whole. It is, at the same time, the crystallization of the concept of society of risk, coined by Ulrich Beck in the 80s. Between claiming the body in a perfectly Christian manner, the environmental protests focus now on claiming the purity of the body instead. Corruption in this case becomes central, and even pornographic since its explicitness even reaches national values: Basqueness as a form of being natural.

It is because of this discourse that nature might need to be kept uncorrupted, beyond the inherent possibility or risk of being corruptible and finally be corrupted. There is a quasi-ancestral desire to illustrate nature as the element that heals humanity, that enables a dialogue between two contradictions: humans or animal; natural or artificial. Thus, I argue that eventually nature is incorporated as master signifier in the discourse of

⁴¹ Along with the arrival of industrialization in the Basque Country, there is a significant success for companies that produce home appliances. Probably Fagor Company is the most successful and important company at that time. In this direction, technology is perceived by industrial societies as source for better living conditions, less cost and more efficient energy sources and a better and shining coming future overall.

new environmentalism: an empty container of meanings, where we articulate social and political claims in order to habituate a given collective's existence within an unknown – unbearable, completely contingent, unintelligible – world. In other words, the protesters used the concept of nature to cover a set of meanings that are subordinated to this very “empty” container, and it is at this moment that they avoid any catharsis, which in Lacanian terms simply means “the purgation of emotions of fear and pity” (Lacan 1993: 247), which inaugurates at the same time the era of tragedy -as the desired and forthcoming consequence of the society of risk-. Yet, in more recent discourses, these narratives converge with the ones coming from the conceptualization of nature as the *Big Other*.

In the same terms, when we engage with the ideas of corruptibility and immortality it is easy to connect them with the concepts of continuity and immutability, forcing us to retake the debate of Antigone in Hegel's and Lacan's analysis. Again, the concept of body and infinity (in this case, a euphemism for immortality) are crucial to elucidate what will become the disruptive process in the Basque Country regarding its political position towards environmental issues. As the myth goes, Antigone rescues her brother's body from its perishable destiny, and puts it on its path to eternity, defying what the Law and the chorus say. Antigone is presented as the body that incarnates desire as such, pure desire and nothing but desire: death desire as such (Miller 2007). Against Creon, Antigone defies the binary options of mundane ethics, and goes for a third option: burying the body of Polynices, her brother, turning around the mandates of law and conforming a very special ethical precedent. Lacan in his analysis opens the path for the understanding of the Sublime object. In the Basque Country, in the end of the 20th century, there is a tendency to imitate this sublime object, however with some theoretical lacks that inflate the confusion on the understanding of the relationship between nature and capital. This confusion is represented in the two examples cited in this work, both Lemoniz and Itoiz resemble this tendency to imitate the sublime object as Nature, and displacement of the capital in this debate. It is in short the dialects of materialism what is missing, and a proposal of environmentalism without environmentalism as a result of this misunderstanding.

The sublime object of nature is confused with the body of nature in the case of Basque environmentalism during the last decades of the 20th century and the political

turmoil coming after fifty years of dictatorship. Accordingly, the fixation with risk as the structural concept works as a twofold mechanism: it recalls the etymological origin of the word “peace” traced by Emily Apter (Apter 2013) and located in the Greek for safety and welfare, which validates by contrast avoiding any risk; and also as Lacan determines the proximity of tragedy, which is “the forefront of our experience as analysts” (Lacan 1997: 243). And Antigone is all a tragedy, or as Lacan puts it “What does find in *Antigone*? First of all, one finds Antigone” (Lacan 1956: 250). After the slain of his father Laius by Oedipus without knowledge of that very fact, Antigone is related to her sister in a very peculiar manner. Despite the translational debate that both Lacan and Miller follow, there is certainly the prevalence of the *two* around the ethical questions that surrounds the narration of the dead brother and its bury. This body, the organic component of the narration of the protests⁴², represents what Nature means for the ecological discourse, which is notoriously exposed in mottos and banners. The body is an entity traditionally described as a complex system that establishes multidirectional relations with its organs. In the same direction, nature is also described traditionally as a mega-system composed by smaller eco-systems that are able to function autonomously but that need a certain balance and multidirectional relationship with the surrounding ecosystems (Lovelock 2000). The very possibility of nature to be corruptible, to be perishable, rests intrinsically in the natural body *per se*. However, there is a projection of this body that throughout the political subject can achieve a range of infinity and mutate into something incorruptible – pure or divine: an ideological entity that survives politics themselves, namely, a sublime object. This is how traditional Christianity has conceived the body, namely, in its political dimension throughout the religious dimension, a combination that was proven to be already very effective for the Romans and their political system, anyway permeated with a religious factor. More concretely, in the passage of Jesus Christ and his resurrection, the body defies the natural Law and the Roman Law simultaneously (in an asymmetric manner to Antigone’s brother case if we want), and at that moment is conceived of as something pure and infinite, since it achieves the capacity of being incorruptible. Here

⁴² The *moto* of the protests in Itoiz were all in the direction of “Itoiz Bizirik!” [Itoiz alive!], “SOS Itoiz”, “Itoiz arriskurik ez” [Itoiz no risk] or “Itoiz Stop”. Whilst the ones of Lemoniz were the type of “Nuklearrrik ez eskerrik asko” [No nuclears, thank you], “Lemoniz bizirik” [Lemoniz alive], “Terrorismo nuklearraren aurka biziaren alde” [Against nuclear terrorism, in favor of life] or “Lemoniz Apurtu” [Destroy Lemoniz]. In all of them there is a sense of embodiment of a reality, captured in a certain organism that is at risk or may cause serious risk for local population. In short, reminds the “the situation is critical but not serious” scenario recited in Robert Shawn’s book “The Hiding Place” (1960).

rests the main difference between Antigone's dilemma and Christian doctrine: the capability to reach a zero point in the case of Antigone, whilst Catholic tradition obeys God's will.

Accordingly, nature conceived as the master signifier in the discourses with ecological concerns and convictions achieves the capacity of being perfectly balanced and incorruptible in the moment of the emergence of the political subject in the form of gardener of the world, reaching a semi-God status: this is the Christian way. Elevating nature to a god's condition enables the necessity to incorporate it as a master-signifier. And at the same time, it forces the discourse of the protests to choose between this very master-signifier (Itoitz) or a dark and hidden never-present agency of the Other (Lemoniz).

As I have shown above, the myth of Antigone helps us to explain this process due to the relationship that Antigone has with his dead brother, and the imposition of the Law with the alterity of the chorus interpellating her. As Joan Copjec explains "[t]hat [action] which Antigone affirms in no uncertain terms in her love for brother, which, she insists, must be proclaimed, must be exposed to the light of day" (Copjec 2004, 41). There is a proclamation of love, but it has to be "exposed to the light of day" because it is simultaneously public and against the Law. Both premises have to be fulfilled in one sole move: public and against the Law must come together in one sole action. As Copjec continues explaining "that Antigone does not give reason for her love does not simple that her brother is unfathomable to her but that she is, as even the Chorus perceives, autonomous" (Copjec 2004, 42). By challenging the Law in a public space Antigone becomes autonomous, throughout love. And it is in this singular moment when Antigone makes his brother eternal, not before and not only challenging the Law or enabling her discourse in a public space. It is important to note that again this twofold action emanates throughout love and in one sole move. It is an encounter (with the public space and facing the law at the same time) at its purest. This perspective exposed by Copjec yet confronts the lack of interpellating the Law by the protesters in a public manner: beyond challenging the Law in the case of Lemoniz, there is a claim for a better Law, namely, a natural law. Moreover, endless reasons are exposed to defend their position in terms of well-being and even survival: it is a love for nature expressed throughout concrete

interests. I claim that somehow in the case of the action against the works of Itoitz, there is a public and total interpellation of the Law by the SI.

In this sense, and returning to our argument of how Basque people traditionally have located nature as a master signifier, I suggest that nature is unbearable if it is corruptible – if it abandons its idealized form and accepts a mundane destiny where it can be defeated or terminated – and in a parallel gesture, Antigone makes his brother eternal by the worship and burying of his body. In this analogy I want to suggest how by corrupting the body of his brother Antigone achieves the eternity throughout love, and nature to be eternal should be perceived as –always already- corrupted. As I mention in the beginning of this article, Jorge Oteiza is probably the first Basque intellectual anticipating a notion of nature that is corruptible. It is worth mentioning that this slight difference – the fact that it is Antigone who makes his brother eternal through his love and that eternity does not emanate from his brother himself, against the idea of prefiguration of an eternal nature before human's intervention – varies the discourse that will be incorporated in the slogans and mottos during the environmentalist protests in the Basque Country from the beginning of the 80s to the end of the 90s at least. As Copjec explains “it is not otherness but the nonexistence of the Other on which Lacan's interpretation turns” (Copjec 2004, 42) with regards to the myth of Antigone. This non-existence of the Other validates both the influence of the *Big Other* and the subsequent symbolic castration as a direct outcome of this structure. In order to make it eternal, Antigone has to make a decision over something that is undecidable, whilst in the traditional conceptualization of nature in Basque culture, it remains eternal regardless the collective will of the community.

In my take on how Basque contemporary discourses on ecology have been implemented, a shifting of the political subject from the body to that of a subject as such would condemn nature to be under the will of men, displacing the traditional view of Basque culture on nature. This vision, however, had not been implemented in a hegemonic pattern until the apparition of late capitalism, seen as the only way to overcome the logic of it and make a transition into postmodernity. And this is not possible in the absence of a subject that remains to modernity. As Fredric Jameson points out “[t]he very concept of expression presupposes indeed some separation within the subject, and along with that a whole metaphysics of the inside and outside, of the wordless pain within the monad and

the moment” (Jameson 1991, 11). There is indeed a separation within the subject that has the internal struggle between adopting the *Big Other* as the social and political reference or establishing a master signifier around nature in order to encompass the entire set of contradictions that later capitalism provokes in order to generate enough meaning processes in order to sustain certain social order. Jameson’s question poses that “[i]n an Anglo-American empiricist world of individual subjects and decision makers, what can possibly be the status of this transsubjective ‘logic’ of the market?” (Jameson 1991, 211). Indeed, we need to disclose the contractions that this “transsubjective” logic encloses and relates, in this case, to the struggle around environmentalism. As Jameson affirms “[i]n the wholly built and constructed universe of late capitalism, from which nature has at least been effectively abolished and in which human praxis – in the degraded form of information, manipulation, reification – has penetrated the older autonomous sphere of culture and even the Unconscious itself, the Utopia of a renewal of perception has no place to go” (Jameson 1991, 120). This penetration responds to the acquisition by the economic model of the projection of nature as the *Big Other* that will symbolically castrate the system itself and in consequence produce the remains of desire necessary to keep pursuing excess (in all its forms) as the ultimate goal of exploiting nature, which confirms again Foucault’s diagnosis on how the capitalist economic model and its reduction to commodities produces a corruptible effect on power based on knowledge (Foucault 1980)⁴³.

At this point, the appropriation of the concept of nature by capitalism is understood as the element that castrates the subject itself, converting nature into the *Big Other* that regulates the relations of excess. Late capitalism operates always already in situations of excess. As Jameson points out with regards to the problem of representation and its relation to Nature “in full postmodernist late capitalism with its perpetual present and its multiple historical amnesias, it has itself a more genuine existence than that of a stereotype or a cultural fantasy” (Jameson 1991: 169). For instance, it is the implementation of excess of success, pleasure or repulsion, where late capitalism encounters a niche for its reproduction. Therefore, when we are able to detect this sort of model, we can explain excess in political and economic terms, and therefore, we will

⁴³ Recent elections in Brazil 2018 embody this perspective: the traditionalist and neo-fascist candidate postulates an idea of nature based on excess and exploitation, and the main corporation support this election for sharing the same idea of nature.

disclose the links between capitalist modes of production and its relation to the material world that is necessary to accomplish this ideology. As Jameson continues saying we can “ask ourselves whether –far from marking the place of Nature- it does not rather constitute something like the grave of Nature”, and unconscious grave so far, “as the latter has systematically eclipsed from the object world and the social relations of a society whose tendential domination over its Other (the nonhuman of the formerly natural) is more complete than any other moment in human history” (Jameson 1991: 169). In other words, capitalism needs to conceive of nature as a big Other that throughout the castration of the political subject demands in the mode of desire the excess of any arousing commodity. For instance, the concept of excess that Joseba Gabilondo has already explained a certain level of excess of nationalism in the academic arena with regards to what were known as Hispanic Studies first, and Iberian Studies later, explains this sort of situation (Gabilondo 2013), which serves to legitimize Gabilondo’s political discourse to explain contemporary Basque literature.

Yet, in order to explain this theoretical frame, we must address our thoughts to what Alain Badiou describes in his work “Theory of the Subject” (2009). In an early attempt to describe where the subject as ontological entity operates, Badiou states that “[t]he true contrary of the proletariat is not the bourgeoisie. It is the bourgeois world, imperialist society, of which the proletariat, let this be noted, is a notorious element, as the principal productive force and as the antagonistic political pole” (Badiou 2009, 7). Embodied in this thick statement we encounter some basic elements of his theory that are fully applicable to the situation we are analyzing.

Following the quote by Alain Badiou I want to relate it to the protests in the Basque Country, and elaborate an argument on the dialectics of these protests. In both the cases of Itoitz and Lemoniz we have dispersed economical interests that we find in contradiction with the means of – intellectual, cultural and economical – production. Marx claimed already that the modes of production are in the back of the mind of any historical change, and these modes of production and exchange frame class struggles. Therefore, these protests that claim to change this modes of production, which produce the protests themselves generating the dialectical circle of the contraries. In the case of Lemoniz, the nuclear plant is part of a wider strategic plan to provide energy as a principal duty for the Spanish state. The protesters that go against the nuclear plan of

Lemoniz did not only protest against an energy plan, but against the application of this plan in a certain geographical place: a concrete place in the world. There is a real necessity to “land” the claims against the nuclear plant, and articulate a discourse that “protects” the millennial lands of the Basque Country. In the case of Itoitz, there was a mimetic reproduction of the reason to implement the swamp (economical, corrupted elements of the administration, construction interests, political preferences, ideological determination, etc.)⁴⁴ that clash against the very conceptualization of what *bios* means, always in relation to the political subject. Badiou explains how “the competitive dispersion of property (the multiplicity of subjects-profits) enters into a restrictive collision with the process of the organic concentration of the means of production” (Badiou 2009, 26). In this case, as Badiou states the classic vision of Marxism will claim that it is the “motor” of the social history of all humanity. With regards to the clashing interests and policies that both narratives display (one in a clear materialist form belonging to the late capitalist system, and the one coming from a clearly idealist conversion of nature into the master signifier for a myriad of social principles and transform it into a total postmodern ideology), we are faced with a dead end. However, it is a dead end admitting the narrative torsion of dialectics and therefore revisiting concepts such as materialism, idealism, and organic results. This dead end is already implemented in the logic of late capitalism, vanishing any possibility for the Two and relegating any social and political tradition to the alienation of sameness (the One). In order to overcome the conditions of the economic and political model, protesters find a possibility in the moment of the impossible – the dead end – is the outcome of any of these struggles described above. Between the elaboration of “sustainable” economic models and the emancipation of the political subject, the efforts should be directed to the later in order to create the former. Thus, sustainability (as we have already mentioned above) will be conceived under the conditions of inequality and not with false premonitions of unreal balance.

Conclusions

Following up the arguments I exposed above, I consider that revisiting the concept of natural-nation -the traditional approach some many cited in words of Anderson- and redefine it following a pattern of a cultural-nation in order to elude some of the

⁴⁴ In addition, there were several claims that the process of validation and assignation of the works were surrounded by irregular procedures. To a more detailed account of these see XXX.

misunderstandings of ecological movements: an organic nation of the people that can affirm its political subjectivity in a space that only establishes belonging relationships with no need for inclusive (exclusive in reversal) relationships. Firstly, it is important to define a new cultural magma where the political subject can incorporate aesthetics and subjectivity in one affirmative move. Secondly, we need to conceive of nature as the superstructure of nation that can be articulated as such in the original Marxist idea. We need to remember how Louis Althusser (Althusser 1969) divides superstructure into two instances, the political-legal and ideology. This superstructure is validated when we include it with a torsion into the subjectivity of nature itself, instead of the standard reification of it into a (global) garden or backyard, depending on the cultural pattern. In this case, we need to imagine nature as the empty superstructure that allows the articulation of the previously defined idea of nation. An empty superstructure where the imaginary can be hanged so cultures are able to “forget” and “eliminate” culture too, in a real process of organic recycling of ideologies and cultures.

On the other hand, the idea of the political subject changes as we change the master signifier of ideology and political idle, from nature to sustainable culture, without producing any commodity residue in the process. In this sense, desire (in a Lacanian sense) shows the way to the political subject to arouse her interest in power through the *object petit* as represented in Nature, instead of the traditional Real for the political subject established in the nation as the obsolete object of desire as shown in the case studies of Itoiz and Lemoniz.

Therefore, the event of Itoiz falls into the category of being *evental* in terms described by Alain Badiou. However, this singularity has not been interpreted outside the traditional coordinates of nation and nature: two master signifiers overused with traditional political ideologies, which in a smarter move are able to translate them into *Big Other* and integrate them in the neo-liberal economical practices and interests. Beyond sustainability as a category that helps to coin the “greenness” of any policy, it should be interesting to reformulate the coordinates of human nature, and as Žižek demands, a scenario that contemplates a multiple world with humans that are more humans than humans: the assimilation into totality of the partial object.

Only from premises that abandon current materialism —a materialism without materialism— based on an empty world and construct an identity that can be desired as commodity, a world without consequences of any type and embrace new ones based on idealism —a idealism without idealism- with a thought based not only in the formal concept of idea, but also disclose the idea as an idea. Only in this moment can we emancipate idea from its burden of difference, and can in fact emancipate difference from its partial burden: difference as a partial matter for encyclopedic knowledge and absolute power.

References

- Adorno, Theodor (1981) "Negative Dialectics". Bloomsbury Academic.
- Althusser, Louis (1969) "For Marx". The Penguin Press.
- Appadurai, Arjun (1988) "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India". In *Food and Culture: A Reader Second Edition*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, pp.289-307. Routledge, New York.
- Apter, Emily (2013) "Against World Literature". Verso, New York.
- Aresti, Gabriel (1986) "Lehen Poesiak". Donostia. Susa.
- _____ (1986) "Euskal Harria". Donostia. Susa.
- Aulestia, Gorka (1995) "Improvisational Poetry from the Basque Country". Reno: University of Nevada Press.
- Badiou, Alain (2008) "Logic of the Worlds". Bloomsbury Academic.
- _____ (2003) "Saint Paul". Stanford University Press.
- _____ (2007) "The Century". Massachusetts: Polity Press.
- _____ (2010) "The Communist Hypothesis". New York: Verso.
- _____ (2009) "Theory of the Subject". Bloomsbury Academic.
- Barandiaran, Jose Miguel de (2009) "Selected Writings of Jose Miguel de Barandiran: Basque Prehistory and Ethnography". Reno: Center for Basque Studies Classics.
- Baroja, Julio (2001) "The Selected Essays of Julio Caro Baroja". Reno: Center for Basque Studies.
- Benjamin, Walter (2010) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Conversi, Daniele (2016) "Sovereignty in a Changing World: From Westphalia to Food Sovereignty". Globalizations.
- Copjec, Joan (2004) "Imagine There's No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation". MIT Press.
- Foucault, Michelle (1980) "Power/Knowledge". Vintage.
- Fundación Nueva Cultura del Agua (2004) "Aguas Limpias, Manos Limpias"
<http://www.fnca.eu/libreria/68-libreria-/coleccion-nueva-cultura-del-agua/242-aguas-limpas-manos-limpas-corrupcion-e-irregularidades-en-la-gestion-del-agua-en-espana>.
- Gabilondo, Joseba (2013) "Spanish nationalist excess: a decolonial and postnational critique of Iberian Studies". *Prosopopeya. Revista de crítica contemporánea*. Número 8. Pp. 23-60, 2013.
- _____ (2016) "Before Babel". Barbaroak, Wikimedia Commons.
- Galfarsoro, Imanol (2014) "Multicultural Controversies: Political Struggles, Cultural Consumerism and State Management". The Davies Group.
- Humboldt, Wilhelm von (2013) "Selected Basque Writings: The Basque Announcement of a Publication". Reno: Center for Basque Studies.
- Jameson, Fredric (1991) "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism". Duke University Press.
- Lacan, Jacques (1993) "The Seminar. Book VII. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis. 1955-56". London: Routledge.
- _____ (1998) "The Seminar. Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964". New York: W&W Norton Company.
- _____ (1985) "The Seminar. Book XX. Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne, 1972-73". New York: W&W Norton Company.
- Lete, Xabier (2008) "Egunsentiaren Esku Izoztuak". Iruña: Pamiela.
- Lovelock, James (2000) "Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth". Oxford University Press.

- Miller, Paul Allen (2007) "Lacan's Antigone: The Sublime Object and the Ethics of Interpretation" in *Phoenix*, Vol. 61, Num. 1/2 (Spring-Summer 2007). Classical Association of Canada.
- Moreiras, Alberto (2001) "The Exhaustion of Difference". Duke University Press.
- Muez, Mikel "Los sabotadores de Itoiz possible 'pantalla de KAS' según el delegado del Gobierno". *El País*, April 9th 1996.
- Muez, Mikel "Despedidos 306 obreros de Itoiz en tanto se reparan los daños del sabotaje". *El País*, April 10th 1996.
- Nietzsche, Fredrick (1990) "Twilight of the Idols and the Anti-Christ". Penguin Classics.
- Oteiza, Jorge (2003) "Oteiza's Selected Writings". Center for Basque Studies.
 _____ (2006) "Poesia". Fundación Museo Jorge Oteiza.
- Ranciere, Jacques (2004) in *SubStance*. Issue 103, Vol. 33, Num. 1. (pp. 10-24). University of Winsconsin Press.
- Ruda, Frank (2015) "For Badiou: Idealism without Idealism". Northwestern University Press.
- Soja, Edward (2001) "Postmetropolis. Critical Studies of cities and regions". Blackwell.
 _____ (1989) "Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory". London: Verso.
 _____ (1996) "ThirdSpace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined places". Blackwell.
- Žižek, Slavoj (2008) "Bodies without Organs- Gilles Deleuze". Lacan.com 1997-2008: <http://www.lacan.com/zizbenbrother.html>
 _____ (2007) "How to Read Lacan". New York: W&W Norton.
 _____ (2009) "First as Tragedy, Then as Farce". Verso.
- Zulaika, Joseba (2014) "That Old Bilbao Moon: The Passion and Resurrection of a City". Reno: Center for Basque Studies.

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

Dissonant notes, intrepid explorers: a reading of *Angola and the River Congo*, by Joachim John Monteiro, between ecology and violence.

Pedro Lopes de Almeida, Brown University

Abstract (197): Over the course of the 19th century, several campaigns in African territories led by white European or North-American scientists, explorers, entrepreneurs, or military officials have been transposed into travelogues where different stages of imperialism and colonialist presences are portrayed. While most of the approaches to these writings tend to favor a post-colonial framework for the interpretation of the interactions depicted there, it is also possible to employ a critical apparatus modeled after the recent developments in the field of the environmental humanities. In this essay, I discuss how Slavoj Žižek's contributions to the debates around the ideas of nature, ecology, and global capitalism have the potential to deepen our understanding of colonial regimes of oppression, serving as a powerful (if also nuanced and provocative) tool to explore processes of world-making involved in the imperial projects developing over the course of the 19th century. To do so, I propose a close reading of several instances of the travel book *Angola and the River Congo* (London, 1875), by Joachim John Monteiro, focusing on the entanglements between the human and non-human agencies, vegetable landscapes and extractive transnational economies, and the articulation of racism and scientific projects in the Angolan territory.

Keywords: environment; ecology; colonialism; Angola; travel literature; race.

Wordcount:10,361

Under the rain and the scorching sun, a melancholic creature has been traveling for many months across the jungle and the drylands. Deep in the heart of the black continent, no beast nor cannibals seem to instill fear in the intrepid explorer. (...) But if, by the mercy of some superior divine or sovereign will, his feet keep walking, his heart, of the whole anatomy the most undisciplined among the muscles, dictates other reasons to keep on marching. Poor and hopeless man, for more than king or eternal, he is commanded by the capricious organ, and here shall the true law of his expedition be revealed.

Miguel Gomes, *Taboo*

Geographies of wandering

To the sound of “Variações Pindéricas Sobre a Insensatez,” by the composer Joana Sá, the opening sequence of *Taboo* (Miguel Gomes, 2012) introduces a white man walking in the African savannah, wearing clothes reminiscent of the exploratory campaigns into the “dark continent” of the late 19th century. Carrying a large backpack, a water bottle, and a safari pith helmet, the intrepid explorer marches across dense vegetation, in the company of a group of black porters who clear the way before him with machetes. The story of this white man is told by an ominous voice-off, bringing us a tale of love and sorrow, of a death that took place far away from there, of a long walk through the most remote areas of the world, of silent and melancholic despair, of the death drive burning inside him and, eventually, of his final meeting with his destiny, in the dark waters of a river where a crocodile awaits him, while his men witness, horrified, the violent encounter. The spectator will then learn that in those times, and even after, there were those who would swear to have seen a “sad, melancholic crocodile, in the company of a lady of times past, inseparable couple that a mysterious pact had conjoined, and that death was unable to tear apart.”

In a prologue where the poetic discourse flirts with a subtle and almost imperceptible irony (who would be able to tell apart the drama from the parody here?), the tone is set for the remaining of the film, moving continuously between the tragic and the satirical (Medeiros 207; Ferreira 18). The “intrepid explorer” is, after

all, a familiar ghost: the white European's quest for the last frontier, a pseudo-heroic epilogue to the romantic fantasy of adventure. This ghost adrift in the early scenes of the film is well aware that the time for such ideals of grandeur is long gone. That's perhaps why he tries to reinvent his enterprise in far-away regions, bewildered and appearing before the spectator as a form of anachronism, with a vaguely scientific research project that cannot redeem the altogether uncanny presence of the character. This familiar ghost, at once intimate and disturbing, will, in a certain way, constitute the main subject of this essay.

Throughout the second half of the 19th century, the projects of scientific exploration and political occupation of the African continent frequently go hand-in-hand, and are sometimes mutually implied (Whitfield 233). By creating and promoting transnational organizations with scientific designs — such as the Royal Geographical Society, in London, the National Geographic Society, in Washington DC, or in Portugal, the Geographic Society of Lisbon — the number of exploratory travels to Africa spiked, propelled by the purpose of studying the fauna and the flora, charting topography, collecting and classifying specimens, producing reproductions of animals and plants, and elaborating detailed descriptions of places and people, resulting in a great number of articles published in specialized journals, reports, and conferences delivered before the social and scientific elite (Pratt 17; Vicente 31; Ryan 34).

The two volumes of *Angola and the River Congo*, published in London in 1875, are part of this landscape where scientific institutions and political designs are never far apart, and are linked by arguments evoking the need to explore natural resources. The author of this travel book, Joachim John Monteiro, was a member of the Royal School of Mines and was also affiliated with the British Zoological Society. Monteiro's professional activities were related to the extraction of minerals in the coast of Angola and the trade with British companies. In *Angola and the River Congo* the author provides the readers with an account of what he considers the most remarkable events that took part during his travels in the region, framed by numerous observations on the peoples and places he visits.

In the first volume the author offers a wide overview on the history of colonial Angola, starting with the early contacts between the locals and Portuguese sailors, and up until the 19th century. Monteiro makes extensive use of J. C. Feo Cardozo's *História dos Governadores de Angola*, published in Paris in 1825. This is followed by a general commentary on the landscape and orography of the territory, and, from chapter 3 onwards, the reader finds successive descriptive essays, organized according to the region they refer to: River Congo, Ambriz, Bembe, Quibala, and Quilumbo in the first volume; Luanda, Mossulo, Libongo, Quifandongo, Cambambe, Cazengo, Calumbo and the Cuanza River, Massangano, Dondo, Cassanza, Novo Redondo, Catumbela, Benguela and Mossamedes in the second volume. The descriptions of landscapes, where emphasis is placed on vegetation and animals, are alternated with general



Image 1: "Laniarius monteiri"

in Proceedings of the general meetings for scientific business of the Zoological Society of London, Zoological Society of London, March 10, 1870, p. 142.

observations concerning societal issues, culture, religious practices, and political aspects of the governance of indigenous populations, almost invariably conveyed through the author's personal experiences.

The detailed description of the biological diversity of the Angolan territory is probably the most prominent feature of the book. The author's name became associated

with a subspecies of bird present in the Cameroon and in Angola, the Monteiro's Bush-shrike (*Malaconotus/Laniarus monteiri*). Joachim John Monteiro's role as a well-known bird watcher and author of numerous classifications earned him a reference in the correspondence of Charles Darwin. On February 12th of 1876, in a letter addressed to Darwin, the writer and environmentalist Arabella Buckley alludes to the occasion when she was personally introduced to John Monteiro, at the British Museum, inquiring whether the author of *On the Origin of Species* had already had the chance to read *Angola and the River Congo*.⁴⁵

In this essay I will explore some reading keys to Monteiro's book, highlighting specific passages in an effort to track how the account relies on strategies of narration designed to frame "nature" as an object of aesthetic experience and a resource for exploitation, both components intimately connected to the practices of racial violence. By doing so, I hope I will be able to contribute to the current debates highlighting the necessary links between post-colonial approaches and environmental studies, by focusing on the production of regimes of transnational circulation centered on the exploitation of local resources. With this in view, I shall concentrate on specific segments of the narrative where scientific and technical information is obtained, particularly of the botanical type. My approach follows the practices suggested by Ann Laura Stoler as reading "along the archival grain", in order to grasp the instances of epistemic anxiety and imperial mutations inscribed in the text (Stoler 2). It should become clear how travel literature lays the foundations for a colonial discourse foregrounded by scientific claims and ecological anxieties, by constructing complex operations of framing the bodies of the indigenous, the non-human bodies, and the traveller's body into specific categories of meaning within the local environments.

Always-already lost: ecology, colonialism, and dispossession

Over the course of the past two centuries global capitalism and its networks of production/distribution/consumption brought about successive changes in the structure of power relations. Such transformations shaped transnational geographies, as they rely largely on the dynamics of imperialism, colonialism, and postcoloniality, creating new landscapes that emerge from the needs of the extractive economy. At the core of the

⁴⁵ "Letter from Arabella B. Buckley to Charles Darwin, 12 February 1876," in *The Correspondence of Charles Darwin*, Volume 24, Cambridge University Press, 2016, p. 4.

worldwide project of the global capitalist system, a number of antagonisms should prompt us to question the possibility of indefinite reproduction of this system, not the least because of the ecological threats undermining the expansion of the reproductive model of capital. This excess generated by the dynamics of capitalist investment and competition and the inherent logic of the excluded and the included in the system is the fundamental problem discussed in Slavoj Žižek's "Nature and its Discontents" (2008). Here Žižek argues that today, for the first time in history, the act of a socio-political agent can alter or interrupt dramatically the global historical process, potentially leading to the radical destruction of life on Earth.

The relationship between contemporary capitalism and ecology exposes the core antagonism of the capitalistic project — it cannot go on forever, as it was designed to. The management of those who are allowed to take part in the distribution of wealth and those who are secluded from it points towards the inescapable finitude of the reproductive logic upon which the system is predicated, while creating a mass of exclusionary zones (slums, environmentally unsafe areas, peripheries of the megalopolis, ghost deserted cities and factories, etc) that are connected through geopolitical and environmental nexus. The "new proletarian position" might very well be, therefore, that of the inhabitants of slums in new megapolises. Žižek's claims are akin to Jason W. Moore's argument on the inextricability of the capitalistic process of world making and our ideas about "nature:" world-ecology forces us to conceptualize nature as a co-production of human activity, global power and production, and the "web of life", while, at the same time, understanding that capitalist accumulation exists within the mosaic of nature. In this sense, Moore speaks of a "double movement — of capitalism through nature, of nature through capitalism", a mutual implication that he calls "the double internality." One of the consequences of this reasoning is to acknowledge the inseparability of modernity and crisis and to either refuse the emphasis on the contemporaneity of the crisis (and the infatuation of the novelty character) or making the case for a broader definition of contemporaneity. Moore seems to be sensitive to this relevant premise:

The crisis today is therefore not multiple but singular and manifold. It is not a crisis of capitalism *and* nature but of modernity-in-nature. That modernity is a capitalist world-ecology. Rather than collapse distinctions — the danger of a Green holism — this perspective allows for the multiplication of questions that

turn on the *oikeios*: the creative, generative, and multi-layered relation of species and environment. (Moore 4)

In what follows, I would like to put to test some of Žižek's hypothesis, by revisiting Monteiro's *Angola and the River Congo*, a textual document where questions of management of resources, ecology, exclusions, and work are addressed in the context of colonial world making. I want, however, to keep Moore's remarks in hindsight: the double internality should serve as a reminder that there is no split or discontinuity between the political categories of violence and the local ecologies, but rather a mutual implication and co-creation that must be faced in all its complexities and consequences.

In one sense, Slavoj Žižek's arguments confront us with a horizon of radical thought that one might want to retain before going any further. According to him, ecology turns into a problem of "sustainable development if one loses sight of the included/excluded antagonism" (thinking ecology as the "outside of nature", and, similarly, taking slums as the outside of the social). In "Nature and Its Discontents" he develops a critical apparatus meant to dismantle this conundrum. The pressure of the excluded from ecology/world-making projects manifests itself as the imminence of *terror* — for, in a sense, their sudden inclusion would open the doors to the large-scale catastrophic event. Against the backdrop of the Hegelian notion of freedom (the freedom of the enslaved, as opposed to the captivity of the "master"), Žižek proposes a radical reconceptualization of ecology: it is precisely at the point where we have nothing to lose that we become truly free. The dispossession of the self that takes place here is of the same nature of what happens when one falls in love. You are fully aware that your emotional experience is no longer under your control, but you agree to surrender to an external being, allowing that the innermost center of your subjectivity be displaced elsewhere. It is no coincidence that Žižek uses Christ and Che Guevara, two referential figures in processes of passionate individuation, to exemplify what he means by the abandonment that ought to define our relationship with nature. Love is the ultimate exposure to utter despair — and, finally, *terror*, as our intrepid explorer may (or may not) have learned. The experience of political subjectivation under these conditions is, therefore, an experience of dispossession. It develops in the face of something over which one has no control whatsoever, and thus willingly surrenders to. Confronted with the possibility of environmental catastrophe, the emancipated political subject lets go of his

will and accepts the inner failure of the process of “keeping things under control” (which constitutes, one should bear in mind, the essential drive for the world making imperialist projects). Here something remarkable takes place: the subjects “exceed ordinary humanity towards the dimension of the inhuman” (Žižek 2008, 49). In the purview of our focus, that might imply recognizing that the web of life constitutes an ecology that one cannot change — it will survive us, in the sense that, under one form or another, it will remain here long after all of us are gone, as it has always. Pursuing this argument to its ultimate consequences implies “accepting the nullity of that which we are afraid to lose,” and lending oneself to the shattering experience of negativity. If we take seriously the actual state of the affairs, Nature is nothing but what is already lost — always-already lost. To put it bluntly, the efforts of self-preservation required by the capitalist logic (and, one may add, the colonial and imperial logistics of power) promoted by the “ecology of fear” — a discourse dominated by the impulse of pessimism and the desire for safety, that takes nature as man’s pure fantasy, as the “Big Other” once played by religion — should be countered by the brutal realism of accepting “the utter groundlessness of our existence: there is no firm foundation, no place to retreat on which we can safely count” (56). Only then, once we accept that the catastrophe is already among us, can we create a new imaginary for our web of life, and perhaps undo the catastrophic conditions.

Now, it is important to note here something Žižek fails to mention: accepting the fact that we already live in the midst of the total catastrophe, and a shattering experience of negativity has visited upon us, is not a new statement at all. On the contrary, such experience, taken as the foundation for a political emancipatory subjectivation, has been around for a quite long time. It has happened again and again in contexts of the colonial destruction of environments. In fact, the unavoidable presence of the ecological catastrophe can only be perceived as a novelty by the Western intellectual who looks at the world from behind a glass window. But it certainly is a fundamental component of everyday life for millions of women and men. It might very well be the central aspect of colonial oppression.

While my reading will be informed by some of the ideas that are put forward by Žižek, the colonial context introduces significant nuances to the dynamics of inclusion/exclusion and, of course, to the ecology of terror. Nevertheless, it might be worth exploring the challenges opened up by Žižek’s environmental hypothesis as

possible reading keys. His political subjectivation as the experience of negativity leading to the acceptance of the irredeemable arbitrariness of life is not the exception but the rule in a scenario of colonial oppression. More than that, it may very well be the only means to keep on going — and exceed ordinary humanity.

Some notes on the vegetable life and the body

At a conference delivered before the Geographic Society of Lisbon in 1901, Vicente Almeida d'Eça emphasized that the *Landolphia florida* (rubber vine) constituted

(...) in the opinion of the botanists, the second (from top to bottom) of the rubber producing creepers, and one whose natural habitat are the plains inhabited by the Makondes; and the samples of such product have obtained, without any complaints whatsoever, the gold medal in the latest Exposition Universelle in Paris (Almeida d'Eça 836)

The close association between the plant and the people that share its native territories is here used to something more than simply recording the geographic space where the rubber vine can be found. What seems to be at stake here is the production or the evocation of a certain affinity between both, through the associative logics of nature and human life. In this sense, the scientific analysis serves as a pretext to the racialization of the presence of bodies in the same space. Travel books would provide the perfect discursive format to fit this design, by creating a context where the author — racially removed from “the locals” — has at his disposal tools to shield himself from the environment, while disseminating multiple shortcuts between the landscape and the indigenous. I would like to argue that such an approach already implies the fundamental antagonism of global capitalism stressed by Žižek (the large-scale destruction it demands fundamentally precludes a “market solution”). The identification of nature and subaltern bodies, promoted by the imperialistic projects and evident in the travel literature generated in colonial contexts, construct the presence of the black African men and women as the “always already lost.” The extractive principle of transnational imperial projects activates processes of disintegration of nature, displacement of elements, consumption, and elimination of unneeded/unmarketable components. These might be the untamed geographies of colonial territories, mineral debris, the excess of animal life, or the resistance of the black colonized to the logic of the white men, all of which mark the

impossibility of the perpetuation of a system predicated on structural imbalances. While travel writing often serves as a platform for the views of the author, it also documents the conflict engendered by the antagonisms of capital vs. environment. This is the context where we shall place John Monteiro, one where knowledge operates as a distributor of rationality. In Pungo Andongo, the traveler affirms to have spotted a narrow valley entirely covered by thick interweaved vegetation, featuring at the surface an immense layer of flowers: nothing less than a vast extension of rubber vine flowers, or *Landolphia florida*. After registering the fact, however, the narrative turns to the porters hired by Monteiro:

The very blacks that accompanied me, so little impressed as they are usually by the beauties of nature, beat their open mouths with the palm of the hand as they uttered short “Ah! ah! ahs!” their universal mode of expressing astonishment or delight, so wonderful, even to them, appeared the magnificent mass of colour below us as the head of the valley, down one side of which we descended to the plain below. (Monteiro 32)

The absence of surprise of any kind recorded by the author would not necessarily signal ignorance, but rather familiarity with the species that had previously provoked Monteiro’s astonishment. Here, however, he is acutely aware of how surprised the indigenous were by the floration of the rubber vines. The choice of words, nonetheless, aims at highlighting the indifference of the porters before the natural phenomena. A stylistic approach that is far from trivial, inasmuch as it dialogues intimately with the reasons evoked by European investors to justify the exploitation of natural resources-- namely, the alleged lack of interest on the part of the local leaders. It is about elaborating, at the micro-discursive level, a *topos* grounded on the very logistics of colonial occupation and extraction of raw materials, one that demands a primordial divorce between nature and “us” (and thus the denial of Moore’s “double internality,” or Žižek’s “shattering experience of negativity” in face of nature). The future history of farming and exportation of rubber from Angola, using indentured labor as a way of dissimulating the afterlife of slavery would confirm this possibility.

Black bodies, in this sense, never cease to be assimilated by the vegetal backgrounds of the journey. In the chapter dedicated to the plants of Angola, John

Monteiro delves into the bodily odour of the hired porters, producing a racist and racializing account where successive iterations of the black workers are practically indistinguishable from the vegetation:

In going through places where the grass has nearly choked up all signs of a path, it is necessary to send in advance all the blacks of the party, so as to open aside and widen it sufficiently to allow the traveller in his hammock to be carried and pushed through the dense high mass: even if there be a moderate breeze blowing it is, of course, completely shut out; the perspiration from the negroes is wiped on the grass as they push through it, now shoving it aside with their hands and arms, now forcing their way through it backwards, and it is most disagreeable to have the wetted leaves constantly slapping one's face and hands, to say nothing of the horrible stink from their steaming bodies. It is a powerful odour, and the quiet hot air becomes so impregnated with it as to be near overpowering. (Monteiro 34-35)

The narrative oscillates between the non-human body and the working body, the latter at the limit of its strengths, a bare and almost vegetal body of labor, utterly separated from the body of the "explorer" and close to the bodies of Nature. These violent and oppressive distinctions repeat Žižek's dynamics of the *excluded* (the "animals," according to global capital, Žižek 2008 44) and the included ("political animals", *idem*). The frontier between bodies and plants fades: black body and vegetation become blurred and intermingled. A body that must be devalued, dispossessed of its humanity, impure, unnamed, vegetal, bestialized through the senses:

It is difficult to compare it with any other disagreeable smell; it is different from that of the white race, and the nearest comparison I can give is a mixture of putrid onions and rancid butter well rubbed on an old billy-goat. In some it is a great deal worse than in others, but none, men or women, are free from it, even when their bodies are at rest or not sensibly perspiring; and it being a natural secretion of the skin, of course no amount of washing or cleanliness will remove it. (Monteiro 35)

The prose carries on in this tone for several pages, detailing formulations analogous to this one: Monteiro expands on what he classifies as the repulsive reaction of a dog to the odour of black Africans (Monteiro 36), as well as the reaction of a donkey in Benguela,

docile to white men but intolerant of the presence of black workers (Monteiro 37), concluding with extensive remarks on how, in the hunting journeys in Africa, the animals would feel the presence of the white hunter before becoming aware of the presence of the black porters (Monteiro 38-39).

In his account, the degradation of these bodies becomes palpable, through rhetoric exercises where a symbolic mutilation of the black body is exercised, aiming at its very destruction by the discourse: becoming a function of the territory, reducing it to the tasks that are ascribed to it, a body of work, at the margin of a scientific project. In this sense, a critical function of travel writing is performed here: the creation of a narrative horizon of nature that instrumentalizes the presence of indigenous peoples. This project echoes three central features addressed by “Nature and Its Discontents.” The first, is the necessity of capital to transform natural organisms into objects amenable to manipulation. Monteiro’s enterprise is not fundamentally different from contemporary biogenetics: colonial projects of world-making concern the identification of hostile elements, the transformation of nature in a way that renders it consumable. The second aspect becoming sensible in the travelogue stems directly from the first: in his effort to tame the colonial territory, the white traveller experiences the “pressure of the excluded” as a form of terror (cf. Žižek 2008, 46). The rhetoric of qualification of the presence of black Angolans is nothing but an attempt to evade that. Lastly, as it should become clear in the following sections, what is at stake for the imperialistic project is not simply to dominate the existing nature, but to generate something new, and therefore to eliminate the possibility of unforeseen results. Ultimately, the triumph of the colonial logic would mean the end of nature, replaced by a network of efficient transactions. The account of the continuous failure of such project is also the account of the resistances to colonialism.

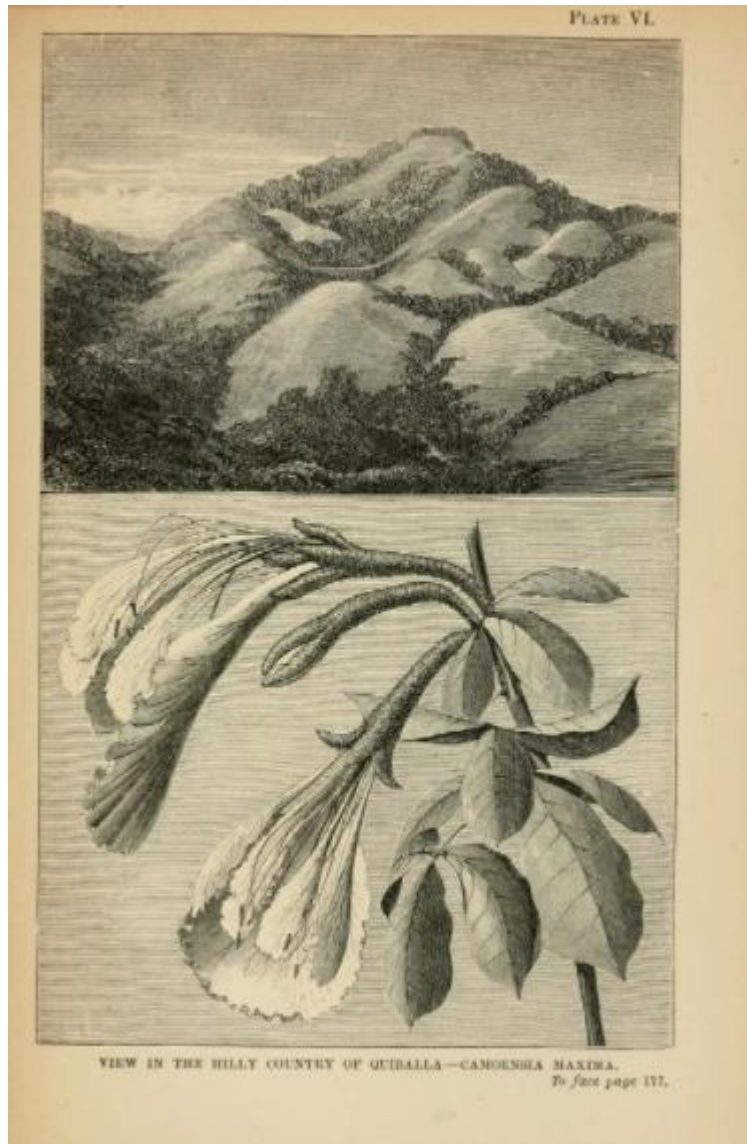


Image 2: “View in the Hilly Country of Quiballa — Camoensia Maxima.”

Monteiro, Joachim John. Angola and the River Congo, vol. 2, p. 176.

Some notes on the environmentalism of the poor and the colonial sublime

According to Rob Nixon, the scientific discourse focused on the environment should start by examining what the author describes as the “temporalities of place” — the perspectives relating to time, permanently renegotiated in accordance with the challenges coming from inside or outside of a given ecosystem. In order to achieve so, affirms Nixon, it is necessary to pay close attention to the *vernacular landscapes*, which are non-commensurable with the rationality of global logistics (exploration, transformation, exploitation, profit), but may eventually be analysed under the category of the “environmentalism of the poor” (Nixon 18).

Throughout the travelogue, Monteiro routinely observes the black Angolans engaged in practices that require interaction with their surroundings, practices which he seems to have trouble understanding. Frequently, this is due either to not being in possession of the tools of local epistemologies that would grant him access to interpretation of such practices, or by the perception that they collide with what, according to Boaventura de Sousa Santos, we might label as “colossal thinking” (Santos 25), referring to the presumption of incommensurability of the knowledges of the global North towards the global South. The destruction of underbrush by fire, conceived to promote the renovation of vegetation, offers one of such instances, that can be aptly described as a form of environmentalism.

In John Monteiro’s account, the burning of shrubs and small trees is portrayed as extremely detrimental to the travelers passing by. However, the author adds, such fire blazes can also provide an aesthetic effect that he contemplates with fascination at night. The description evidences a sharp contrast with the tone adopted to generally address the issue. The vivid textures dominate the passage, the savannah is suddenly brought to life by the combustions, the style becomes grandiloquent, the natural landscape is dramatized and converted into something entirely other, the scale expands — the traveler’s gaze is now free from the attention to detail, and encompasses vast areas, leaving behind the realm of tactile or olfactory sensorial perceptions to sublimate vision. During all this process, the characterization of the experience evidences the major traits of the aesthetic sublime: John Monteiro elaborates the descriptive boards in accordance with the aesthetic discourse of the sublime, or, more specifically, what G. S. Sahota defines as the *colonial sublime*, incurring in formulations of a neo-epic grandeur (Sahota 8) that assumes proportions of cosmological transcendence:

At night the effect is wonderfully fine: the vast wall of fire is seen over hill and valley, as far as the eye can reach; above the brilliant leaping flames, so bright in the clear atmosphere of the tropical night, vast bodies of red sparks are shot up high into the cloud of smoke, which is of the most magnificent lurid hue from the reflection of the grand blaze below. (Monteiro 40)



Image 3: “*Euphorbia monteiri*”

Curtis's botanical magazine, comprising the plants of the Royal gardens of Kew and other botanical establishments in Great Britain. London, Reeve, 1865, volume 91, plate 5534.

Here, however, the experience of the sublime does not take place as a purely subjective perception on the part of the intrepid explorer. An experience of solitary contemplation (as the Eurocentric tradition of the concept of sublime, at least after Edmund Burke, suggests) doesn't seem to be at stake here. On the contrary, it is critical that the extreme, incommensurable, and potentially devastating character of the experience be validated by the black Angolans, so that the perception can be taken to the level of the sublime. Therefore, it is the fear felt by the black men and women that feeds and stimulates Monteiro's experience of sublime:

Great is the alarm of the natives on the near approach of these fires to their towns, the whole population turning out, and with branches of trees beating out the fire. It is seldom, however, that their huts are consumed, as the villages are generally situated in places where trees and shrubs abound, and the different huts are mostly separated by hedges of different species of *Euphorbiaceae*. (Monteiro 41)

Such sublime is produced as a consequence of the entanglement of a gaze that refuses to apprehend the object of contemplation, but that does so while trying to stand in a place of domination: he invests himself in the role of the spectator presupposed by the spectacle offered to him by an insurmountable natural scenario and, in that condition, he has nothing to fear (not more, for example, than the spectator of a play at the theater or the listener of opera fear the rage of an especially malevolent character). But in contemplating the fear of the others — the terror expressed by the black bodies around him — his role as spectator is reified and reinscribed in the body of the others. This structure of apprehension resonates with Žižek's comparison between the sublime and the reduction of the idea of nature to a "material pretext" for experience. The tradition of the aesthetic sublime offers, in this sense, probably the best example of the creation of a "second nature," or an object specifically conceived and designed to stand in for something else, in order to be conducive to certain ends (i.e., consumed as an instance of the sublime, but also, in other moments, described, controlled, pictured, photographed, etc.) As one must bear in mind, this signals the utterly fantastical status of nature in the colonial imaginary:

"nature" *qua* the domain of balanced reproduction, of organic deployment into which humanity intervenes with its hubris, brutally derailing its circular

motion, is man's fantasy; nature is already in itself "second nature;" its balance is always secondary, an attempt to negotiate a "habit" that would restore some order after catastrophic interruptions. (Žižek 2008, 56)

Yet, one element seems to resist this logic of assimilation. The environmentalism of the poor to which the black Angolans are committed leads Monteiro to a certain confusion, when he senses that there is an area of expertise that he cannot access and that is linked to the science and techniques deployed to manage the living areas and landscapes, as expressed by the architectural options of the Angolans, in close articulation with the natural context:

Many villages are entirely surrounded by a thick belt of these milky-juiced plants, effectually guarding them from any chance of fire from the grass outside. Where the huts are not thus protected, the danger, of course, is very great, but the natives sometimes take the precaution of setting fire to patches of the grass to clear a space around the huts or village. (Monteiro 41-42)

Some notes on water and harvests

Monteiro examines the records of precipitation, pinpointing the increasing rarefaction of rainwaters in the hinterlands of Angola. The author notes that the black residents suffer disproportionately with these meteorological changes, and blames the careless habits of the populations, who allegedly did not take preventive measures against the droughts:

The rains are very much abundant and constant towards the interior of the country, where the vegetation is densest: on the coast the rains are generally very deficient, and some seasons entirely fail; this is more especially the case south of about 12° Lat., several successive rainy seasons passing without a single drop of rain falling. A three years' drought in the interior of Loanda is still vividly remembered, the inhabitants, from their improvident habits, perishing miserably by thousands from starvation. In my mining explorations at Benguella, I was at Cuio under a cloudless sky for twenty-six months, in the years 1863 and 1864, with hardly a drop of water falling. (Monteiro 42)

The historic period to which Monteiro is alluding is approximately the one corresponding to the years of 1860-1870. While we do not possess specific data on the precipitation in the interior of Angola for these years, we can, however, look at the economic factors that have influenced the crisis to which Monteiro makes reference. The interval of time he experienced in Angola corresponds to the last years of the exchange economy in the non-urban areas, where the circulation of currency was scarce and the bulk of economic transactions was done in goods. From the 1860's onwards the local ecology in Angola would be drastically changed, due to a combination of factors (Wheeler and Pélissier 93).

The political project of the Marquis of Sá da Bandeira for the colony implemented by the Overseas Council focused on replacing the sources of revenue connected to the traffic of enslaved people for tariffs on commerce and "hut taxes" collected coercively from the natives. In concert with this, the colonial administration expanded its reach in the region, under the direction of the Governor General José Rodrigues Coelho do Amaral (who served two terms in office, from 1854 to 1860, and from 1869 to 1870). This heightened bureaucratization of the administration, served by a repressive apparatus that was growing more violent, would add even more obstacles to basic survival for the majority of black Angolans, many of whom were now deprived of productive activities (mostly farming and cattle raising) on which the economy of vast populations was previously based. One needs only to add to this context the deliberate destabilization of the local political structures of governance, and it becomes clear that the right conditions were set for a perfect storm. All of this would culminate in what has been labeled as *the extension of a barren sovereignty*, in Lord Russell's formulation in a letter addressed to the Count of Lavradio, dated from October of 1860 (British and Foreign State Papers 1000). All the while, the rising investments of foreign capital into the economy of the province of Angola led to political attempts to restrain and suppress the economy of exchanges, with a barrage of legislation designed to regulate the informal commerce. This period, defined by Daniel dos Santos as being one of "articulation of non-capitalist formations with the hegemony of the European capitalism" (Santos 103), favored the establishment of large scale plantations, owned and explored by foreigners, and the crush of pre-existing sustainable practices of subsistence farming. As a consequence, black workers were deprived of their stocks of food and family-owned areas of plantation, an adversity that was only aggravated by new

legislation approved in Lisbon with the purpose of raising obstacles to the ownership of land by black indigenous individuals (Wissenbach 177).

It is no use disguising the fact that the negro race is, mentally, differently constituted from the white, however disagreeable and opposed this may be to the usual and prevailing ideas in this country. I do not believe, and I fearlessly assert, that there is hardly such a thing possible as the sincere conversion of a single negro to Christianity whilst in Africa, and under the powerful influence of their fellows. No progress will be made in the condition of the negro as long as the idea prevails that he can be reasoned out of his ignorance and prejudices, and his belief in fetish, or that he is the equal of the

white man; in fact, he must remain the same as he is now, until we learn to know him properly, and what he really is.

Loanda was discovered in the year 1492, and since 1576 the white race has never abandoned it. The Jesuits and other missionaries did wonders in their time, and the results of their great work can be still noticed to this day: thousands of the natives, for 200 miles to the interior, can read and write very fairly, though there has hardly been a mission or school, except in a very small way, at Loanda itself, for many many years; but those accomplishments are all that civilization or example has done amongst them. They all believe firmly in their fetishes and charms, and though generally treated with the utmost kindness and equality by the Portuguese, the negro race, and even the mulattoes, have never advanced further than to hold secondary appointments, as writers or clerks, in the public offices and shops, and to appear (in public) in the most starched and dandyfied condition. I can only

Image 4: Monteiro, Joachim John. Angola and the River Congo, vol. 1, pp. 78-79.

In light of these structural changes leading to increased social and environmental imbalances, it is more than likely that the devastating effects of the draught witnessed by

Monteiro (and for which he assumed the locals were responsible) are related to major modifications in the economic structure of the colony, largely enabled by foreign investment and the disruption of traditional farming practices.

Monteiro's perspective, however, implies a deliberate condemnation of black Africans for what he considers to be an ineffective management of the resources, even suggesting a relationship of causality between the waste of water and the alleged inability to handle logistical problems:

I had under my charge at that time twenty-four white men, and between 400 to 600 blacks at work on a copper deposit, mining and carrying ore to the coast, distant about four miles; and no one accustomed to a constant supply of water can imagine the anxiety and work I had to go through to obtain the necessary amount for that large number of thirsty people, very often barely sufficient for drinking purposes; (...) It was impossible always to be looking after the blacks told off daily on water duty, and words cannot express the annoyance and vexation that the rascals constantly caused us, by getting drunk on the road, wilfully [sic] damaging the kegs, selling the water to natives on their way back, bringing the filthiest water out of muddy pools instead of clear from the proper place, sleeping on the road, and keeping all waiting, sometimes without a drop of water, very often till far into the night. (Monteiro 42-43)

It is important to point out that Monteiro's bias as a white European traveler in a position of power prevented him from realizing something that would become apparent over the course of the following years. The management of water, as a vital resource in the colonial context, assumes strategic importance for the black population in Angola, providing them leverage against the hegemony of the foreigners and settlers. It is plausible, therefore, that in the passage quoted above certain strategies of negotiation of power come into play, under the form of a passive resistance to the access to water. The tactics employed to that end constitute, in their whole, a means of reclaiming political agency — the dispute for holding decisions in the logistics of managing the resources — that should not be overlooked. What seems to be under negotiation here is what Hardt and Negri call "commons," a domain used by Žižek to explore the struggles that emerge from the perception of the antagonisms of capitalism (Žižek 2008, 44). In sum, it can be

interpreted as one more instance of the environmentalism of the poor, taking the form of a particular obstinacy inscribed in the travelogue, and still resisting the colonial gaze more than one century after the facts took place.

Some notes on labor and resistance

The book *Angola and the River Congo* achieved international recognition thanks to a few paragraphs where the author expresses his views on the practice of enslavement in Angola. The travelogue is quoted in the report delivered to the Congress of the United States on March 26th, 1884, by John T. Morgan, president of the Committee on Foreign Relations. The document (*Reports of Committees: 30th Congress, 1st Session — 48th Congress, 2nd Session*) focuses on the links between the USA and the peoples living in the Congo Valley, and evokes the book by Joaquim John Monteiro to assure the members of the Congress of the allegedly benign character of forced labor practices in Angola. The passage selected by the authors of the report illustrates Monteiro's approach to the forced capture of African men and women, but the implications of the original text go far beyond this, confirming some of the interpretations that have been suggested so far:

There is very little cruelty attending the state of slavery among the natives at Angola, I believe I may say even in the greater part of the rest of tropical Africa, but I will restrict myself to the part of which I have an intimate knowledge. It is a domestic institution, and has existed as at present since time immemorial; and there is no more disgrace or discredit in having been born of slave parents, and consequently in being a slave, than there is in Europe in being born of the dependents or servants of an ancestral house and continuing in its service in the same manner. (Monteiro 57)

While it is far beyond the scope of this essay to scrutinize the factual value of Monteiro's bold and manifestly unsubstantiated affirmations (something which has been done, nevertheless, by several scholarly works deconstructing the myth of the benevolent colonization, under the guise of the "civilizing project" reclaimed by Portuguese authorities), it is crucial to acknowledge how such declarations serve the perspective adopted throughout the travelogue. This position, that I propose to take as a confluence of the narrative of scientific superiority of the foreigner and the racialization of the other

according to a grammar of discrimination grounded in the culture of enslavement, is often translated into gestures of violence towards black bodies. Such is the case of the following passage:

There is something patriarchal in the state of bondage among the negroes if we look at it from an African point of view (I must again impress upon my readers that all my remarks apply to Angola and the adjacent provinces). The freeman or owner and his wife have to supply their slaves with proper food and clothing; to tend them in sickness as their own children; to get them husbands or wives, as the case may be; supply them with the means of celebrating their festivals, such as their marriages, births, or burials, in nearly the same way as among themselves. The slaves, in fact, are considered as their family and are always spoken of as "my son" or "my daughter." If the daughters of slaves are chosen as wives or concubines by their owners or other freemen, it is considered an honor, and their children, though looked upon as slaves, are entitled to special consideration. There is consequently no cruelty or hardship attending the state of slavery. A male slave cannot be made by his master to cultivate the ground, which is women's work, and the mistress and her slaves till the ground together. A stranger set down in Angola, and not aware of the existence of slavery, would hardly discover that such an institution prevailed so universally among them, so little apparent difference is there between master and slave. A not very dissimilar condition of things existed in feudal times in England and other countries. (Monteiro 57)

Monteiro's account configures an attempt at describing the institution of enslavement purged of the fundamental traces of violence at its core. His text — that, as one should keep in mind, was aimed at an international readership in the English language, having found its way to such disparate places as the circle of Charles Darwin and the members of the United States Congress — means not only to water down the relationships of power and violence created through enslavement and its afterlives, but also to render invisible the racial grounds for the exploration of black Africans in Angola, as well as the violations of human rights implicated in such practices.

It is worth noticing, at the same time, that Monteiro's statement does not diverge, in its essential claims, from the central tenets of the theory of *lusotropicalism* that would be developed by, among others, Gilberto Freyre, nearly half a century later. Both discourses are marked by the attempt to deny the inherently violent nature of forced labor and enslavement, through a conceptual displacement of the realm of slavery to the domain of the familial, along with the alignment of such practices with a patriarchal system applied to the relationships of ownership, and the insistence on the alleged advantages of such system. In a sense, all of this anticipates the lusotropicalist discourse and the its support of Portuguese-led colonialism under the Estado Novo dictatorship, particularly as promoted by Oliveira Salazar.

But perhaps the most surprising aspect of the account is the troubling absence of white men from the scenes of enslavement. Monteiro jumps from his considerations on the allegedly soft nature of enslavement in Angola, to some observations on the practices of endogenous slavery prior to the European occupation of the territory. From these he shortcuts to the links between enslavement and the local institution of *fetiche*, suggesting that the vast majority of men and women sent to the ships that would sail through the Middle Passage were condemned to that by the members of their own communities, in the context of the accusations of the practice of witchcraft, as told by Monteiro.

The author then reviews some of the trials by ordeal used in many peoples across Angola to ascertain the liability of the accused individuals. Monteiro's attention is particularly drawn by the ordeal of the *Erythrophleum guineense*, known as the *sassywood*. The process is described in detail, focusing on the toxic effects of the injection of a poisonous concoction made with the bark of the tree. The author's insistence on the process is highly revealing, for a number of reasons. Most prominently, it intends to ascribe responsibility for the practice of enslavement to the native Angolans (derisively designated throughout the book as "poor devils", "poor wretch", to express what Monteiro perceives as the native's extreme cruelty), while, at the same time, describing the ancestral ritual in terms that are familiar to the botanist. Science is, once again, used to legitimate the superiority of the white foreigner, and, therefore, the exercise of power mediated through racial categories (cf. Monteiro 61). This disposition achieves a peak of notoriety when the narrator reveals that he once witnessed, in Mangue Grande, a trial based on

Image 5: Manilha, Angola, c. 1875

The British Museum



Purchased from Henry Bassett, J. J. Monteiro's brother in law, in 1958. Catalog number: Af1958,14.14⁴⁶

this method, and sought, along with a party of merchants, to offer a monetary ransom for the person being judged. His attempt is met with acrimony, and Monteiro seizes this opportunity to remind his reader that the white man does not always succeed in rescuing the black man, in what constitutes an obvious variation on the colonial topic of the “white man’s burden.”

Something similar could be said of the narrative focusing on three women collecting water from a river in Ambrizete (now N’Zeto), when a crocodile emerged from the river and attacked the woman in the middle, dragging her into deep water. The family of the victim attributed the responsibility for the death to the two surviving women, and

⁴⁶ Curator’s notes: *Manillas were used extensively as currency in West Africa from the 15th to the 20th century. During the Transatlantic slave trade manillas were a frequent medium of exchange for slaves. Register 1958: Bronze penannular anklet with incised decoration at the ends. Weighs c. 6 1/2lbs. Illustrated in J. Monteiro, Vol. I, Pl.IV., 1. [See Af1958,14.1]*

John Monteiro engages in a fierce dispute with them, arguing that there was no basis for such accusations. To this the women from the village replied asking Monteiro why, if things were such as he said, didn't the crocodile take any of the other women. The two survivors were put on trial by ordeal, which was, according to Monteiro, probably fatal to both. Following the logics of the travelogue, the reader is supposed to interpret this as a conflict between the Westerner and the native African. This conflict between systems of explanation of everyday life, however, is far from being neutral, and it certainly does not take place in a context isolated from the dynamics of power clashing in the Angolan territory at this point. The bonds between black Angolans and their ancestral spaces, the systems used to predict and explain reality, the culture and the sciences upon which their habitus was predicated were under threat, being contested by the very logistics of colonial occupation.

In a section named "Insensibility of the Negro," John Monteiro elaborates on the variety of physical punishments inflicted on black bodies, as well as the violent deaths and executions, connecting those to the climate and vegetation along the coast of Angola, which had purportedly conditioned the psychological traits of black people. Botany is thus used to justify the dehumanization of black men and women ("the sun and fevers of their malignant and dismal mangrove swamps, or the mists and agues of their magnificent tropical forests, no more affecting them than they do the alligators and countless mosquitoes that swarm in the former, or the monkeys and snakes that inhabit the latter." Monteiro 70). Shortcuts are promoted once again between non-humans and humans, serving as mediations between regimes of power and visibility.

Unlike many of the travelogues written in this area during the same period, we know that Monteiro's perspective cannot be entirely classified as external. On the contrary, the author held several economic assets in Angola, and had direct interest in the exploitation of black labor. Interests and assets that, in more than one case, were intimately connected to the projects of scientific exploration espoused by Monteiro. One of them is directly related to his activity as a naturalist. The task of collecting and treating the inner cortex of the baobab tree (*Adansonia digitata*) led him to come up with innovative techniques of manufacturing paper from the bark. The process quickly gave origin to a commercial network focused on exportation, controlled by Monteiro himself. A 1876 review of his book singles out the creation of a regional market responsible for a

volume of exportations amounting to 1.500 tons of baobab bark from Angola in 1874 (*The Athenaeum*, No. 2515, Jan. 8, 1876, p. 48).

In *Angola and the River Congo*, Monteiro provides his own account of this discovery, and takes the opportunity to complain about the great efforts required to recruit labor among the locals:

For some years that I have been collecting the inner bark of the *Adansonia digitata*, or Baobab tree (the application of which to paper-making I discovered in 1858, and commenced working as a commercial speculation in 1865), I have been unable to induce one single native to hire himself to work by day or piecework; they will cut, prepare, and dry it, and bring it for sale, but nothing will induce them to hire themselves, or their slaves, to a white man. (Monteiro 75)

Monteiro explicitly airs his views on the idleness of black workers, using it as a justification for the social exclusion of black men and women, and the depreciation of black labor. Such arguments serve as a segue to a plea for the enslavement of people:

One great bar to their civilization in Angola, is that no tribe on the coast can be induced to work for wages, except as servants in houses and stores, and even these are mostly slaves of other natives, or work to pay off some fine or penalty incurred in their towns. (Monteiro 75)

Following his apologia of forced recruitment, and having expressed his support for the practice of “hut taxes” (*impostos de palhota* that would serve, in most of the cases, to provide a legal framework for forced labor and the maintenance of the labor dynamics of slavery, Birmingham 47), Monteiro offers as the unique solution to the economic challenges of settler colonialism in Angola the creation of “(...) an emigration scheme, under the direct supervision of the several governments who have entered into treaties for the abolition of slavery, and transport the poor wretches.” Abolition, in his optics, should be regarded as the ruin of the farming industry, and could only be mitigated by transnational plans for the compulsory mobilization of black workers.

It is now clear how, in this instance of travel writing, the domains of scientific exploration, exploitation of local resources, and international circulation of knowledge on botany are intertwined, in a complex network of interests, in which vegetable bodies occupy varied and critical roles. The refusal, on the part of the black workers, to collaborate in the exploitation of the vegetal context at the service of global flows of capital would allow us to tell a different story, maybe an alternative timeline of events, diverse from the traditional accounts of colonisation and the hegemony of globalised capitalism. This history would be articulated along ties of solidarity among human and non-human subaltern agencies (what Monteiro often labels as the “lazy and vegetative”, p. 76), opening up new and challenging perspectives on the subversion of the colonial regime from the standpoint of environmental practices, used as a means of resistance. Such project also allows us to reconsider the potential of what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing refers to as the “world-making projects of non-humans,” that is, the reconfiguration of specific environments through non-human agents that never ceased to exist and serve as important actants and counterparts to the projects of imperialist and colonial expansion (Tsing 22).

Coda

The reader of *Angola and the River Congo* is aware of the fact that Joachim John Monteiro owned captured Africans, even though he claims to have bought them to release them from the previous owners, allowing them freedom in the realm of the services that they provided to Monteiro, something that he considers illustrative of his own liberalism. For the duration of his lengthy account, one can understand how the logics of obtaining resources and black labor are juxtaposed in the colonial project he embodies. Not only the language employed is the same, but also the methods share striking affinities, in their common effort to collect, classify, describe, and monetize the labor and the non-human agents. I have tried to demonstrate how this entanglement is aligned with a central antinomy of global capital — the antagonism between ecology and the reproductive logic of capitalism — used by Slavoj Žižek to counter some of the tenets of the ecological discourse, and how a context of colonial exploitation exacerbates the relationship between the two opposing terms. However, in his travelogue, Joachim John Monteiro brings forth a number of other issues intersecting this fundamental antagonism. The stance adopted by the narrative on the topic of black indentured labor, and how it is assimilated to the natural resources, has the effect of revealing the subaltern black Africans as the truly

individualized political subjects in the context of the exchanges. Borrowing from Žižek's arguments, the colonial context in Angola renders the pressure of the excluded apparent in the daily practices of exploitation of resources. Imperialist projects, in their exercise of world-making designed to maximize profits and engender hegemonic networks of circulation, create the conditions for life to become unbearable, to the point that Žižek's "un-learn[ing] the most basic coordinates of our immersion into our life-world" (Žižek 2008, 59) evolves into a necessity, and, ultimately, a mode of resistance.

In several occasions, Monteiro's imperial gaze is confronted with situations where he was patently unable to deploy the apparatus of scientific reasoning (the same that justified his presence there in the first place). In such instances, I argue, the very grounds of common sense are being challenged, in order to imagine other ways of entering into a relationship with the environment — and further proving that the relationship of subjects and nature cannot be separated from the relationship between us and reality itself.

The coexistence of the colonial subject and the white European man in the same ecological space produces positions that further validate some of Žižek's arguments. The colonizer's project co-produces nature as a fantasy, ready for being packed, dispatched, and consumed. All the while, for the colonized in Monteiro's travel book, nature, as such (i.e. as a separate object of contemplation and, possibly, redemption), does not exist (Žižek 2008, 56). And that is because it takes part in the same fabric of reality that is being destroyed by the system of colonial aggression. The lack of such a perspective can only produce blind gaps in our understanding of the world, the kind of which prevents us from realizing that the catastrophe not only is real but has, in fact, never ceased to unfold:

When one draws attention to the millions who died as the result of capitalist globalization, from the tragedy of Mexico in the 16th century through the Belgian Congo holocaust a century ago, and more, responsibility is denied: this just happened as the result of an "objective" process, nobody planned and executed it, there was no *Capitalist Manifesto*... (The one who came closest to writing it is Ayn Rand.) And therein lies also the limitation of the "ethical committees" that sprang up all around to counteract the dangers of unbridled scientific-technological development: with all their good intentions, ethical considerations, etc., they ignore the more basic "systemic" violence. (Žižek 2008, 66)

In my approach, I tried to highlight the blind spots where the catastrophes apparently without a blueprint take place. It is, in this context, illuminating to read Žižek's remarks on the simulated invisibility of the colonial catastrophe — and how much it resembles the unfolding ecological catastrophes of our days:

The fact that King Leopold of Belgium who presided over the Congo holocaust was a great humanitarian, proclaimed a saint by the Pope, cannot be dismissed as a mere case of ideological hypocrisy and cynicism: one can argue that, subjectively, he probably really was a sincere humanitarian, who even modestly counter-acted the catastrophic consequences of the ruthless exploitation of the natural resources of the Congo (his personal fiefdom!). But the ultimate irony is that even most of the profits from this endeavor went for the benefit of Belgian people, for public works, museums, and so on. (...) What is the dream is that we can go on indefinitely in our expansionism? (Žižek 2008, 66-67)

To conclude, I would like to stress that Monteiro's self-proclaimed liberalism serves both his attitude in face of the commerce of men and women (he purchased enslaved people under the pretext of offering them manumission, while integrating them into his labor force), and his practices towards the environment as a naturalist: prospecting land resources, while collecting specimens, and sending them to museums and other institutions in the United Kingdom, all the while developing projects of economic and scientific exploration of the same resources. In the light of the unfolding catastrophe that arises from the tension between environment and capital, today — as in Angola in the 19th century — the real threat is not the imminent catastrophe, but its absence, as it signals the perpetuation of regimes of exploitation, violence, and destruction of life.

References

- , “Letter No. 38, Lord J. Russell to Count Lavradio, Foreign Office, October 13, 1860,” in *British and Foreign State Papers*, vol. LI, Great Britain Foreign Office pp. 998-1000
- , *The Athenaeum, Journal of Literature, Sciences, the Fine Arts, Music, and the Drama*. London, No. 2515, Jan. 8, 1876, p. 48
- Almeida d’Eça, Vicente. “Considerações Geraes Sobre História Colonial — Esboço Geographico-Historico dos Territórios Portugueses entre o Indico e o Nyassa”, conferência proferida a 6 de Novembro de 1901. *Boletim da Sociedade de Geographia de Lisboa*, 19.a série, número 2, p. 836.
- Birmingham, David. “A Short History of Modern Angola”. Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Ferreira, Carolin Overhoff. "Imagining Migration: A Panoramic View of Lusophone Films and Tabu (2012) as a Case Study." *Migration in Lusophone Cinema* (ed. by Cacilda Rêgo and Marcus Brasileiro), Palgrave, 2014
- Medeiros, Paulo de. "Post-imperial Nostalgia and Miguel Gomes' Tabu" *Interventions, International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 18:2, 203-216, DOI: 10.1080/1369801X.2015.1106963.
- Monteiro, Joachim John. “Angola and the River Congo”, 2 vols. Macmillan and and Co., 1875.
- Moore, Jason W. “Capitalism in the Web of Life. Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital”. Verso, 2015.
- Nixon, Rob. “Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor”. Harvard University Press, 2011.
- Péllissier, René. “História das Campanhas de Angola. Resistência e Revoltas, 1845-1941”, vol. II. Editorial Estampa, 1997.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. “Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation”. Routledge, 2008.
- Ryan, James R. “Fotografia colonial.” *O Império da Visão: Fotografia no contexto colonial português (1860-1960)*” (ed. by Filipa Lowndes Vicente). Edições 70, 2014.
- Sahota, G. S. (2018). “Late Colonial Sublime: Neo Epics and the End of Romanticism”. Northwestern University Press, 2018
- Santos, Boaventura de Sousa (org.). *Epistemologías del Sur (perspectivas)*. Akal, 2014.
- Santos, Daniel dos. “Economia, Democracia e Justiça em Angola: O Efêmero e o Permanente.” *Estudos Afro-Asiáticos*, Ano 23, nº 1, 2001, pp. 99-133.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. “Along the Archival Grain. Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense”. Princeton University Press, 2009.
- Tsing, Anna Lowenhaupt. “The Mushroom at the End of the World. On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins”. Princeton University Press, 2015.
- Vicente, Filipa “Lowndes. Entre Dois Impérios. Viajantes Britânicos em Goa (1800-1940)”. Tinta-da-China, 2015.
- Wheeler, Douglas, e Péllissier, René. “História de Angola”. Tinta-da-China, 2009.
- Whitfield, Peter. “Travel: a Literary History”. Bodleian Library, 2011.
- Wissenbach, Maria Cristina Cortez. “Dinâmicas históricas de um porto centroafricano: Ambriz e o Baixo Congo nos finais do tráfico atlântico de escravos (1840 – 1870),” in *Revista de História* (São Paulo), São Paulo , n. 172, p. 163-195, June 2015.
- Žižek, Slavoj. “Nature and its Discontents.” *SubStance*, # 117, vol. 37, no. 3, 2008.

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

**Book Review: Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*.
Translated by Deborah Smith. London/New
York: Hogarth, 2015. 252pp.**

Edurne Arostegui, University of Nevada, Reno

“But the fear. My clothes still wet with blood. Hide, hide behind the trees. Crouch down, don’t let anybody see. My bloody hands. My bloody mouth. In that barn, what had I done? Pushed that red raw mass into my mouth, felt it squish against my gums, the roof of my mouth, slick with crimson blood” (27).

Posthumanism reformulates the idea of human agency and its relationship with the natural world. By shunning dualisms, it blurs the man-made boundaries between the human and the animal in the natural and technological world. As a rejection of universality, posthumanist studies aim to rearrange the way we view societal values through a more intersectional approach, without completely divorcing itself from the tradition of humanism. Instead, it seeks to expand the way the human interacts with the wider world, and in the case of *The Vegetarian*, the title character Yeong-hye’s actions may be part of a moral imperative—that which is closely associated with “animal studies”—but perhaps should be interpreted through the many intersections of her own identity, including her sex within the context of a patriarchal society.

Yeong-hye's self-consciousness is expanded upon by her consciousness of the natural world and the lives she has taken, both in her dreams and through eating meat. Her hyper-empathy comes about after a dream of slaughter and violence, reflected in the quote above. The decision to become a vegetarian is provoked from outside her own consciousness, highlighting the decentralization of human agency. However, for those around her, this change is unthinkable, representing the power of cultural limits and the perceived dominance of wo/man over nature. In spite of that, Yeong-hye feels powerless: "*Nobody can help me. Nobody can save me. Nobody can make me breathe*" (78). She is no longer in control of her own body as it has been uprooted and displaced into the wider ecosystem beyond human society.

In the final scenes of Part 1, commensality, usually denoting a scene of sharing food and good company, becomes a source of horror. While dining with her family, who have recently found out and are abhorred by her vegetarianism, Yeong-hye is confronted by her father with violence. She "won't eat it" (62), as in meat, and the choice of "won't" describes her deliberate choice to go against cultural norms and patriarchal society. Yet her father will have none of it. As described by her husband, her father "thrust the pork at my wife's lips. A moaning sound came from her tightly closed mouth" (66). Although not a sexual act, the verbiage of thrusting and moaning make it once again more similar to rape than familial affection.

Part two "Mongolian Mark" is narrated by Yeong-hye's brother-in-law, whose name is never presented. After spending some time in his home with her sister, she moves out on her own. But not until he learns of her "Mongolian mark"—a birthmark on her behind that has never faded—does he begin to obsess over her. Even as Yeong-hye tries to escape human relationships, her brother-in-law further objectifies her. As she challenges the essential human self, joining both the conscious and unconscious mind through the effect of the dream on her own life, he seeks to find or ascribe meaning on her body, as his infatuation is bodily more so than psychological.

"The Mongolian Mark" shows another side of Yeong-hye as she consents to sex even though her desire is not the male body, but the arousal she feels when looking at the flowers painted on both her and men's bodies. For the brother-in-law, once he sees the infamous mark, he reflects on it as "...something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or

else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing at all sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual” (122). It is a mark that represents her vulnerability, her animal-ness.

The final section “Flaming Trees” is told in the third person view of Yeong-hye’s sister, In-hye. She has placed her sister in a home after a failed suicide attempt, but Yeong-hye’s problems, problems for others not necessarily herself, only grow. This third part is marked by silence and Yeong-hye’s final transformation, her need to become a tree. At this point, she suffers from anorexia and unnamed mental distress, yet feels more as one with the plant life around her. She no longer feels the need to eat and performs her identity in ways more akin to trees, wishing to photosynthesize and escape into nature. As she puts it: “I’m not an animal anymore, sister,” ... “All I need is sunlight” (213). Although her condition and lack of health should be kept in mind, this section is truly about In-hye and her own introspection.

In-hye sees her sister’s pain and reflects upon her own life and the ways a decision such as giving up meat can upended life in all ways. More than anything, she thinks about herself: “The feeling that she had never really lived in this world caught her by surprise” (224). Her own thoughts end on dreams, the very state that caused Yeong-hye into her transformation: “Dreams...and I could let myself dissolve into them, let them take me over...but surely the dream isn’t all there is? We have to wake up at some point, don’t we? Because...because then...” (252). It is then that she realizes that perhaps dreams are also part of life, there is no reality or social net that protects you. Although pained by her sister’s debilitating state, she feels a respect for her quiet dignity, her ability to be at one with herself and posthuman in the sense of letting go of human constructs and embracing the natural world.

ISSN 1751-8229

Volume Twelve, Number Four

Book Review - Sandlin, J. and Wallin, J. (eds.), 2017. *Paranoid Pedagogies: Education, Culture, and Paranoia*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 212 Pages.

Jonathan W. Crocker, University of Nevada, Reno.

Paranoid Pedagogies attempts to revive an interest in paranoid subjectivity, especially as it relates to sociocultural mechanisms that, in many ways, bind educational thought and practice. For all of the conversation surrounding cultures of surveillance, escalating standardization, conspiratorial politics, and neoliberal univocality within this context, there is limited discussion about how paranoiac fixity preserves and reproduces these psychosocial realities. To this end, Editors Jennifer Sandlin and Jason Wallin argue that we can analyze the “reasons and functions” of paranoia in terms of a “broader calculus of social conformity” as well as a “potential for social resistance” (vii). In this sense, paranoia is multifunctional: it can cut *and* it can mend. They note that “the mechanisms of paranoia do not simply repeat in the same symptoms” as an explanation for any lack of cohesion within the collection (23). It is precisely this lack of cohesion that reveals the power of divergent conformity; specifically, that one’s paranoiac-schizoid fantasies shape reality in ways that can open one up to counter-hegemonic possibilities.

In chapter one, Sandlin and Wallin begin with a genealogy of paranoia. They briefly conduct an etymological inspection of ‘*para-noos-ia*’ before turning to a survey that glosses Hellenistic, Cartesian, Kantian, psychoanalytic, and post-psychoanalytic approaches to paranoid atypicality. The authors notably linger on Freud, Lacan, and Deleuze and Guattari, whose work establishes a foundation for the most theoretically rich contributions highlighted here. Although the editors have divided *Paranoid Pedagogies* into three sections: paranoid aesthetics, paranoid society, and paranoid pedagogies; the texts do not fully obey this attempt to categorize them. By the end of the text, the aesthetic, the social, and the pedagogical begin to blur, and—much like the paranoid representations contained within these sections—any suggested pattern remains untrustworthy and vulnerable to critique. Still, the most relevant contributions for Žižek scholarship are Chapters 3, 8, and 9: Jan Jagodzinski’s “Penetrating Images,” Stearns and Blake’s “It’s Been Getting Under My Skin,” and Jake Burdick’s “The Paranoid and Psychotic Pedagogies of Conspiracy Theory.”

Jagodzinski explores Lacan’s three psychic registers which bind the subject’s relation to images (42-3). He goes on to develop the Deleuzoguattarian notion of “unavoidable violence” (46) and the image as “simulacrum” (47) as a means to understand educational media and its affective implications. This exploration centers around an insightful psychoanalytic analysis of student reluctance to watch films he assigns. For example, an anti-queer student’s aversion to Gus Van Sant’s biographical film *Milk* (2008) constitutes a refusal to “‘face’ the Real” and understand “the unknown element that is ‘framing’ vision to begin with” (43). For Jagodzinski, this “phenomenon of self-censorship” occurs when students deny themselves access to these films, meanwhile “the Imaginary has [already] been ‘framed’ by the horror of what ‘could’ or might be seen,” where its “intrusion would mess up the student’s tidy scheme of things” (44). Students express this aspect of ‘self-censorship’ through a Žižekian paradox: “the *objet a* of desire [is] both a threat and a necessity for fantasy so that life is bearable” (44). Jagodzinski concludes with an addendum that reignites these claims within a Trumpian “post-truth” society, specifically that educators should begin to evaluate “unconscious affects” through new media in a time of ever-increasing precarity (52).

While Jagodzinski’s essay emphasizes more “regressive” formulations of paranoia, in the final section of *Paranoid Pedagogies*, Jennie Stearns and Charlie Blake underline

their concept of a ‘pedagogy of the possessed’. For them, this is a “new way of mapping knowledge and its acquisition as mediated by paranoid patterning” (146). To that end, they build upon Michel Serres’s notion of ‘parasitosis’ as a “cancer of being” (149) and the delusional parasitic condition ‘Morgellons’ (151) in order to emphasize the potential for resistance within paranoid reproduction. Stearns and Blake claim that “new invaders” make a “pedagogy of parasitosis” that “oscillates between the poles of paranoia and schizophrenia” possible (161). For Jake Burdick, this lack of fixity enables an “alternate conspiratorial pedagogy...that interrupts the psychosocial reproduction of paranoia...[and] attempts to address the Real of the conspiratorial symptom” (172). Drawing on Žižek’s notion of ‘the Other of the Other’, Burdick claims that this conspiratorial mode is “concerned only with the *search* for the truth—not its discovery” and therefore provides “a respite from the Real of postmodernity” (183). He concludes by calling for “a pedagogy that denudes our desire for unity” and “to engage in acts of critical dreaming” in order to produce “new formulations of and language for engaged citizenship” (186).

Sandlin and Wallin’s collection ushers in a new way of looking at our paranoid metamodern condition from the aesthetics of surveillance to social confinement to pedagogical possibilities. The explications of the ‘irregular mind’ contained in *Paranoid Pedagogies* provide robust entry points for educators, researchers, social activists, and critical artists alike. A diversity of approach is one of this book’s many strengths. While most readers will find a few contributions that are of interest, not everyone will find everything contained here entirely productive. Still, there is great potential within the broad field of educational ecology to extend this work, especially for those who are partial to Lacanian- and Žižek-flavored analysis.