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The "harpsdischord" in Finding a New Way of Saying Things

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The act of writing or speaking, just the act of saying something, has lately seemed to carry a sick feeling that I cannot pin down or identify. It is too faint and latent to have come to full consciousness, but it is nevertheless present almost any time I attempt to write something that pertains to the world. Ironically, it was the recent murder of Charlie Kirk that helped to make the problem clear. With the murder of Kirk, the usual engines of social noise blew up. Everyone was racing to lay hold of the event as quickly as possible in order to steer it all in the service of whatever it is they are pushing. I mean this about absolutely everyone who maintains on online presence—left, right, centrist, Marxist, anarchist, you name it. Every social media account I follow, and all the accounts followed by those I follow were clamoring to claim the event for their purposes, and what rose to the top was something adjacent to it all that came into focus after reading a short X post by Ian Alan Paul, the author of *The Reticular Society*. Paul does not typically pontificate about things. His posts are short, and they tend to articulate ideas that pertain to specific types of cultural phenomena and ideas that relate to the spectacular phenomena that attend his work.

On September 12, Paul wrote: "In spectacular society, the image of the assassination overrides its actuality. It's circulated by all sides in the service of this or that end, viewed again and again as a confirmation of every fantasy, and will quickly be made obsolete and replaced by whatever image comes next." The murder exists purely as an image, and the stampede to appropriate the image is for the sole purpose of exploiting the image, which is the sole purpose of all images, and the exchange value of the image will be fully extracted within days if not hours. Nothing about the murder matters at all, and the image of the murder will only matter for a brief moment in time after which it will be forgotten with all other images. Paul's observation may not necessarily be a blinding flash of insight, but it is an important observation within a cultural moment in which people are clamoring to be heard (or read, as the case may be), and it led me to begin to reflect on that vague sick feeling that comes with writing about things like this. The problem is that I had somehow made a distinction between images proper and the things we say about images; that there is a difference to be found in the photographic and video images of a murder and all the statements generated and made about the murder. My writing sickness stems from the fact that I can no longer make this distinction. The statements about the image are also images, and this creates a profound problem with making statements, any kind of statements.

We have all read Foucault's great book about Magritte, *This is Not a Pipe*. The ideas in this book are perhaps old-hat, and not worth discussing anymore except for the fact that in our current world of the 21st Century, the problem of the difference between words and a picture

of words seems to be bubbling back up again. One feels a profound unease about making statements because we have lost confidence in the possibility of ever making a meaningful statement. I have begun to doubt that my statements, the concatenation of words arranged in a grammatical form toward the conveyance of ideas are achieving that goal, the conveyance of ideas, that is. Everything I say, everything everyone says, now appear in a flood of images on screens all over the world in the form of digital images so that statements, written statements, are now “images of words.” All we have is “The image of a text... a figure in the shape of writing” just as Foucault described about the words “This is Not a Pipe” (Foucault 1982. 23). What exactly is the difference between my words flashing on a digital screen on an iPhone and the words painted along the top of the canvass in Magritte’s painting?

That the statement is the image then places the statement squarely within the dynamics of the society of the spectacle. It is helpful to remind ourselves of precisely what this means. The spectacle is not a hypnotic light in the tunnel of capitalism, it is capitalism, and the way we are oriented toward and within the spectacle determines the whole of what we perceive as reality itself: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 1994. 12). Our social relationship with each other and our world is a function of the collection of images which are the representation of our world. We have no access to reality except as it comes to us through the mediation of the vast network of images of our world. Again, Debord is extremely careful, and we need to take a moment to emphasize what is meant by mediation. Debord uses this term through the text in the strictly Hegelian sense. We have no access to our senses, for example, except as the perceptions of our senses come to us as *ideas* of our sensory experience in the form of the Hegelian dialectical negation. The sensory experience is negated by the idea of the sensory experience, and this negation is negated within the mind or spirit as the full concept and awareness of a sensory experience. The moment in which we experience our world is never in the form of a direct experience but always as this experience is negated by the image of the world which is negated in the mind or spirit toward the creation of an idea or concept of our world. Consequently, the world, my world, is never a direct awareness of the material realities of the world. It is an understanding of the world as it is experienced through the mediation by the mass of consumer images which condition how we experience and know our world. If all statements are fitted into this problematic, then my statements, my written statements are nothing more than reproductions of images of statements which no one can ever access except as one of an infinite constellation of images. The concatenation of words fits next to the image of words along with a Big Mac, a TikTok account, images of a murder, and a long list of images

of statements about images of a murder, and so on *ad infinitum*.

If my statements are no longer statements but images of statements, they necessarily partake of the full range of the functions of the society of the spectacle. As images, statements are part of the process whereby all of society is separated from all forms of power. The spectacle is self-regenerating as spectacle and becomes an external object of contemplation in the manner of religious spectacles of contemplation. In this way, the spectacle can operate as a distinct realm of images for contemplation in the service of "hierarchical power evolving on its own, in its separateness" which facilitates the production of a society in which "all community and critical awareness have ceased to be" (Debord 1994. 20-21). The conditions for a meaningful sense of community are denied and made to whither in the face of the realms of external separation that is the spectacle. This separation and decay of community and critical awareness then creates the conditions within which any sense of unity is utterly lost. There can be no unity in a world in which no one has access to the world or each other except via images which by definition produces a rift between individuals, their worlds, and each other. This isolation is the very condition of modern technological capitalism which "is founded on isolation" wherein "(i)solation underpins technology, and technology isolates in its turn" (22). This is a self-regenerating system which is meant to continually reproduce the kinds of subjects who function toward the endless reproduction of the technological means of production of the spectacle and spectacular culture. Finally, it is Ian Alan Paul himself who extends the analysis and critique of the spectacle to the digital age and observes that the power of isolation and separation of the spectacle is exponentially accelerated in the digital "reticular society" by "cutting the world into and circulating the world as data so that a more legible, useful, profitable, trackable, policeable, calculable programmable, and controllable world can be born." The digital reticular society is "the informatic foundation of *a separate power* and *a power of separation*" (Paul 2024. Thesis 14). The world becomes more legible not by rendering written statements more legible but by rendering written statements as more easily consumable images for the purposes of making them more useful, profitable, trackable, policeable, calculable programmable, and controllable in a world that is otherwise illegible. All statements meant to explain the world with some degree of nuance and complexity only render the world as more illegible. As consumable and exchangeable images, these statements become useful ways of making the world legible again.

This is the critical point. Written or spoken statements do not and cannot exist in the digital world as written statements. They must be images of written statements and consumed as images of written statements. To be used toward the production of profit, everything must

exist as a unit of exchange. The meaning of a statement might be a profitable unit of exchange, but it might not be. As an image, it can circulate within systems whereby images are exchanged for profit. In this case, the meaning, the substance of a statement is of no consequence. The simple existence of a statement in the form of an image of a statement is the only thing that matters. The last thing Foucault tells us in his long essay on Magritte explains: “A day will come when, by means of similitude relayed indefinitely along the length of a series, the image itself, along with the same it bears, will lose its identity” (Foucault 1982. 54). This is followed by the reference to Andy Warhol, but what Foucault could not have known was that a system of infinite relay would come, and the infinite relay hinted at by Warhol would exist in the most literal way. The digital world is infinite, and it relays statements as images of statements infinitely.

I am writing this just days after the murder of Kirk. On any social media app, there are an infinite number of statements meant to extract some kind of meaning and message from the murder, so many statements that they instantly become illegible and incoherent. There is no way anyone could form a single line of logic from the number of statements and the infinite array of interests these statements are meant to serve. The rush and flood to extract meaning from this murder defeats itself from the outset so that the only thing one could do is to simply decide ahead of time which statements one prefers and choose the ones that serve that preference. At this point, no one but no one is “reading” or “comprehending” anything. They are shopping for points of view that reinforce a thought or idea they have already formed. The circulation of images of statements which relate to the murder of Charlie Kirk are not meant to “mean” anything. They are meant to reinforce an already existing set of ideas and opinions so that those who hold those ideas and opinions feel a sense of satisfaction that these ideas and opinions are correct. They are correct because there is a digital ecosystem in which images of statements circulate with the same level of interest. This is not simply a matter of prejudice or a biased reading. It is a matter of choosing images according to a preference from a vast and infinite array of images, all of which are equally useful as sources of information but not as useful images. All of the statements which form the illegible and incoherent morass of statements circulate easily as images. All images are ultimately (and immediately) rendered as data, numerical equivalents, and circulated in a digital zone of immateriality. Statements and the meanings they are meant to convey are lost in the circulation of images of statements so that questions such as the truth of the statement, the evidence which stabilizes the statement and renders it a source of truth, all of this becomes immaterial and inconsequential. One chooses a set of images of statements to stand up for a position in the digital zone of the reticular

society wherein the society of the spectacle is enacted.

All statements, my statements, everything written and published or posted in this digital zone of immateriality, all of it exists as meaningless images and digital sequences within a global system of exchange which is not interested in things like rhetorical strategies and situations, evidence and reasoning, rational exchange of propositions toward meaningful understandings. The reticular arrangement of isolated dividuals thoroughly alienated from each other and their worlds and who are only ever engaging images even when they insist they are engaging statements and ideas—all of this constitutes a world of blind sewer rats eating the shit of the indeterminate flow of whatever comes down the sewer pipes. As much as one is deeply committed to formulating a meaningful thesis and a set of propositions which link together using logical conclusions and evidence, the fact that one uploads this onto the digital realms instantly transforms everything one has done into a facile image of what one has done. Words are no more valuable than their exchange value on the market of images. Yet, given all this, language persists, and the fallout from the recent shit-show has shown us that certain kinds of words matter a lot to the fascists. They are in fact desperately afraid of certain kinds of language. The crackdown has come on language itself.

It helps to remind ourselves that Deleuze and Guattari observed a long time ago that “(c)apitalism is profoundly illiterate” (Deleuze and Guattari 1977. 240). Capitalism has no need of language in any meaningful sense since all that is required is a simple unit of exchange. Anything will do, “whether it be phonic, graphic, gestural, etc., no flow is privileged in this language, which remains indifferent to its substance or its support” (240). This is one reason why the triumph of American capitalism in its current fascist iteration is found in the corpulent body of a completely illiterate and inhuman capon. If we consider that the cult which is formed to celebrate this capon is equally founded upon an illiteracy borne of the undifferentiated flow of shit-images, there appears something which stands out and becomes immediately inaccessible. Drawing on Lyotard, Deleuze and Guattari explain: “In language and in writing itself, sometimes in the letters as breaks, as shattered partial objects—and sometimes the words as undivided flows, as nondecomposable blocks, or full bodies having a tonic value—constitute asignifying signs that deliver themselves over to the order of desire” (243). Within the flows of shit-images, small blocks of signification are detectable; they stand out not as images but as signs, as textual instances of meaning. These forms of meaning are available to anyone, and they offer themselves in ways that are not controllable. This is to say that what escapes image formation is unpredictable. Sometimes units of signification escape which are to the advantage of fascist power, sometimes these units escape to points unknown and unknowable. The entire

cybernetic system was conceived, created, and implemented to control the unforeseen and the unanticipated, but a feature of probability is that improbable things still happen. The closed system is never fully closed. Insects teach us this every day. The man-baby king and his court have had one meltdown after another over what they have insisted is inappropriate language. The problem is that it has all been their language. While some have been successful in getting people fired for celebrating the murder of Charlie Kirk, anyone would be fired for quoting him. It is not that a callous indifference to murder is inappropriate. This kind of callousness has been and remains a central feature of fascist discourse. The problem is that it is all now being deployed from the wrong direction. The language that has escaped the image machines has functioned not as images but as mirrors held up to the fascists, and they are repulsed by it. It terrifies them. Thus, everyone is now a terrorist. At the same time, language is escaping in ways which remain useful toward things other than explosiveness and the impotent rage of a capon.

What remains of words and signs within capitalism is something like a subterranean network of signifying functions; a network within but external to the network. This is analogous to the observation that some signifying functions "break through" the "wall so as to set flows in motion, and establish breaks that overflow or rupture the sign's conditions of identity, and that cause books within 'the book' to flow and to disintegrate" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977. 243). Deleuze and Guattari cite Mallarmé as the pioneer in this kind of language experimentation, but another example would be James Joyce. In his discussion of *Finnegan's Wake*, Samuel Beckett made reference to the mirror described above, but in his understanding of what was then known only as the *Work in Progress*, the mirror is put to a different purpose: "On turning to the *Work in Progress* we find that the mirror is not so convex" (Beckett 1984. 26). For Beckett, the mirror is not meant to give a reflection of the other. It is meant to disorient the other, to redirect the view toward something that has been deliberately set beyond them and outside their fields of understanding. This is why Beckett so angrily denounces those who are unable to penetrate Joyce's project and dismiss it out of hand. For us, this dismissal is a gift. Beckett emphatically explains that the *Work in Progress* is to be taken in a way that is not accessible to the reader who looks at language in terms of cause and effect. Language is not used to convey meaning, language is meaning, and in this, the image engines are reversed on themselves. Language and words are not converted into images, language and words are images but not in the sense of the circulating images of the spectacle and the reticular society: "Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*" (27). The language

that escapes the spectacular devaluation of language and makes its way into spaces between the reticular society is language which remains within both these cultural configurations while operating outside them as the simultaneous coincidence of form and content. As the form-of-life is the living body in their becoming-toward communities-in-process, so the language of these forms-of-life functions as the *something itself* of what is written and read.

We are not exactly interested in a literary study here, and a full exposition of the ways Joyce's text performs what Beckett claims is not the point. For anyone interested in *Finnegan's Wake*, you could choose almost any page to test Beckett's thesis, and you will find that it checks out. Just taking one short example, "They will be lichening for allof. They will be pretumbling forover. The harpsdischord shall be theirs for ollaves" is enough to see how the signifiers point to more signifieds that anyone could follow, and the point of these linguistic mirror disruptions is not the precise conveyance of meaning but the performance of meaning. The "harpsdischord" is the harp of Ireland, the harp of the bard, the harp of ancient Greek Myth, the discordant harp of the discord of modern life, etc. For our purposes, we should choose an example that appears to confront fascist power while working its way through and around the systems of capture that are meant to redirect language toward the image of language. In Nanni Balestrini's *Blackout*, the lines resemble simple statements or theses. They are not ambiguous and clearly lay out challenges to fascist power. However, Balestrini repeats lines almost in the manner of a digital sequence, one which we know from our own use of digital media have the tendency and capacity to evacuate language of its meaning. Balestrini's strategy is to space out the lines and alter them in ways that are nearly imperceptible in order to make them simultaneously fade away and become more emphatic. On a single page, in stanza 21: "namely the problem of power as the fundamental problem/ the relationship has become a relationship of power." Then, further down the page: "in the first place the definitive collapse of the state's ability to mediate power by law." (Balestrini 2017. 35). Balestrini repeats and changes so that the repetition is not the content but the difference in content. To this end, he enacts what Deleuze called the repetition of difference in the Nietzschean eternal return of the same in which what is repeated is not necessarily the same content but the difference in the content. "The eternal return affirms difference, it affirms dissemblance and disparateness, chance, multiplicity and becoming" (Deleuze 1994. 300). Without digressing too much, this kind of repetition is a way to slip the binds of the digital mechanisms of capture which instantly convert all words into images of words. It is not that this process does not occur, rather, it is a case in which the words, the linguistic elements get passed through these mechanisms as linguistic elements in the same way that the offending terms pass through toward the rage of fascist power centers. In this case,

the terms are meaningless to anyone but to those who are tuned in to the music of language that Beckett insists is the point of certain types of literary language. Balestrini’s poetry, at least in this case, is indigestible. And yes, I am talking in terms of shit because this is what passes through the digestive tract of global capital as the fibrous elements of language which are not amenable to the conversion toward all meaningless and illiterate objects of exchange.

The goal here is not to formulate a language so obfuscatory that only a literary/cultural elite can penetrate it. The goal is to force some forms of language out of the hyper-abstraction of contemporary economic, political, and cultural life and into the world of living beings, into the realms of forms-of-life who act in the world around them. Bifo explains that the current global capitalist machinery, Empire, “has no attachment either to territory or to material production, because its power and wealth are founded on the total abstraction of digital finance. This digital-financial hyperabstraction is liquidating the living body of the planet and the social body of the workers’ community” (Bifo 2012. 51-52). To mobilize the devastated masses around them, fascist power and Empire foster further abstractions in the mythology of nation, blood, people, race, etc.—all the age-old mythologies which work easily with the age-old racisms. This divides and sets people against each other which is an ideal set of conditions for a fascist system of absolute and violent state control. This is all the grand wet-dream of the man-baby king. The linguistic/poetic methods of someone like Nanni Balestrini slip through this performance without disrupting it. What is retained is what Marx called the general intellect. This is what Bifo is talking about when he explains: “The prospect open to us is not a revolution. The concept of revolution no longer corresponds to anything, because it entails an exaggerated notion of political will over the complexity of contemporary society. Our prospect is a paradigmatic shift: to a new paradigm that is not centered on product growth, profit, and accumulation, but on the full, unfolding power of collective intelligence” (64). Collective intelligence can be taken to mean Bifo’s re-imagining of the general intellect. This general intellect which is the intellectual and imaginative power of living human minds that is not colonized and controlled by the imperial machines of the society of the spectacle and the reticular society. Before we are hypnotized with images of words, and before we are isolated as alienated users of the digital interface which gives us our desire then backfills with objects, we are the living breathing human bodies in possession of our minds, and we are able to form living connections of becoming forms-of-life in communities-in-process. The tonic for a sickness in the face of writing is the purgative of a different kind of writing.

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