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## Cultural Marxists Like Us

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Installation view  
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point of Jonas  
Staal's *Saul Alinsky's  
Rules for Radicals:  
A Pragmatic  
Primer for Realistic  
Radicals*, 1971, in  
'Steve Bannon:  
A Propaganda  
Retrospective', Het  
Nieuwe Instituut,  
Rotterdam, 2018.  
Courtesy the artist  
and Het Nieuwe  
Instituut, Rotterdam

# Cultural Marxists Like Us

– Sven Lütticken

The notion of Cultural Marxism has become a far-right byword for a sinister conspiracy, masterminded by none other than the Frankfurt School, to undermine 'American', 'Christian' and/or 'Western' values. Infiltrating academia during and after WWII, these 'Jewish schemers' have managed to corrupt the minds of generations of impressionable youth, leading to the current state of moral decay, emasculation and miscegenation. This short account is barely a caricature of the conspiracy theory of Cultural Marxism – a term I shall here use to refer to the discourse rather than to the phenomenon it supposedly denotes (when addressing the latter, I will use scare quotes). In book after book and YouTube video after YouTube video, the same few decontextualised facts, tenuous connections and made-up causalities are peddled over and over again.

Cultural Marxism discourse appropriates, simplifies and perverts serious assessments of the aesthetic and cultural turn in twentieth century Marxism, from Gramsci and Lukács onward.<sup>1</sup> The Gramscian critique of economism and acknowledgement of the agency exerted by ideology and culture becomes the basis for a narrative about a sinister cabal. Realising that the people did not want a communist revolution, the evil Marxists infiltrated culture to corrupt those people and their American/Christian/Western values. Memefied to the max,

the concept of Cultural Marxism is performative rather than constative. Its main aim is to rally and radicalise the troops by giving them a seemingly clear but omnipresent and shape-shifting enemy. Some decide to take aim at the enemy quite literally, like Cultural Marxism believer Anders Breivik.<sup>2</sup>

Though the term has had a certain currency in Jamesonian circles, with the subtitle 'Conversations on Cultural Marxism' of the interview book *Jameson on Jameson* being used by at least one wingnut as proof that Cultural Marxism is a Thing, there are virtually no self-identified Cultural Marxists.<sup>3</sup> While rejecting the dominant use of the term in no uncertain terms, one may wonder if it is sufficient. What if 'we' were to appropriate and *reperform* the term? In fact, are 'we' not Cultural Marxists, albeit in a different sense?

## 1. Culture, or the Media-educational Complex

Though there had been isolated cases within the Left before, the career of Cultural Marxism as battle cry began in the early 1990s in the United States in the right-wing movement founded and led by Lyndon LaRouche. An early use is by a certain Michael Minnicino in a 1992 article titled 'The New Dark Age: The Frankfurt School and "Political Correctness"', published in the LaRouchian journal *Fidelio*.<sup>4</sup> Emerging during the Reagan/Bush era 'culture wars' with their skirmishes over Political Correctness, Cultural Marxism

1 For such an assessment, see, for instance, Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London: New Left Books, 1976; or more recently, Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, London/New York: Verso, 2004.

2 Toby Archer, 'Breivik's Mindset: The Counterjihad and the New Transatlantic Anti-Muslim Jihad', in Max Taylor, Donald Holbrook and P.M. Currie (ed.), *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*, New York/London: Bloomsbury, 2013, pp.171-72.

3 See Dennis Dworkin's book on the British New Left and cultural studies, which was published in Stanley Fish and Fredric Jameson's *Post-Contemporary Interventions* series, *Cultural Marxism in Postwar Britain: History, The New Left, and the Emergence of Cultural Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), as well as Ian Buchanan (ed.), *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 2007). Though the term does not feature in the book itself, the title was referenced in a supremely odd TV debate with Dutch politician Sid Lukassen on the subject of Cultural Marxism, cited in *Buitenhof*, 3 September 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j3-3AOfv4w4> (all websites cited in this essay last accessed on 11 May 2018).

4 Martin Jay, 'Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment: The Frankfurt School as Scapegoat of the Lunatic Fringe', *Salmagundi*, no.168/169, Fall 2010-Winter 2011, pp.30-40, available at <http://canisa.org/blog/dialectic-of-counter-enlightenment-the-frankfurt-school-as-scapegoat-of-the-lunatic-fringe>.

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largely came to function as a code word for the challenging of racial hierarchies and traditional gender identities. The term Cultural Marxism itself can in fact be dispensed with or replaced by a euphemism, as in the case of Jordan Peterson, the Canadian academic crusader against ‘snowflake’ culture in the university who has compared gender theory to Maoism, claiming that they’re essentially ‘the same ideology’.<sup>5</sup> Peterson identifies the enemy as ‘postmodern Neomarxism’ (Neomarxism being a slightly more academically respectable shibboleth), but some of his videos get reposted with ‘Cultural Marxism’ in the title.<sup>6</sup>

Cultural Marxism’s anguishing over the decline of traditional identities and hierarchies is usually traced back to the pernicious influence of the Frankfurt School and the student movement, which is itself traced back to that influence. In 1999, early on in the concept’s career, Martin Jay – perhaps the foremost American authority on the Frankfurt School – found himself instrumentalised in a 1999 right-wing cable “documentary” on the Frankfurt School. Here, decontextualised clips of Jay were fitted into a paranoid narrative about the Marxist plot to pervert American Values through political correctness. The programme is now of course available online, as are dozens of more recent productions, always repeating the same talking points.<sup>7</sup> As a number of observers have noted, Cultural

***As long as people feel they are being made to plead guilty in a moralistic show trial rather than included in an emancipatory project, what passes for the Left will continue to deserve co-producer credit for the alt-right.***

combination of conservative essentialism and cod-Marxist superstructuralism. Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton, among others, have traced how since around 1800, the notion of *Kultur* came to function in the context of a romantic critique of industrial capitalism and of universal Enlightenment notions of ‘civilisation’. Herder already argued that there is a plurality of cultures, and later anthropologists and ethnographers would seek to arrive at an understanding of other cultures, even while establishing hierarchies.<sup>9</sup> The Cultural Marxists take it as a given that American culture would under ‘normal circumstances’ reflect the values they ascribe to the (white) population. For conservatives, culture is the reflection of an organic populace’s values; however, to explain the changes that have taken place since the 1960s, the ‘theorists’ of Cultural Marxism need to graft a schematic superstructuralism onto this organicism.

Marx rarely used the term culture as such, perhaps because of its reactionary-romantic connotations in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>10</sup> In a proto-Freudian register, Marx sought to unmask the supposedly timeless and sacred cultural forms as ‘the legal,

Marxism has overtones of the Nazi phrase *Kulturbolschewismus*. While Lukács and Gramsci feature in many genealogies of Cultural Marxism, the Frankfurt School takes centre stage because many of its key members spent time in the US (and this started out as a US-based and US-centric ‘theory’), and because of its suitability as an anti-Semitic bogeyman.<sup>8</sup>

If Marxism essentially gets reduced to a Jewish conspiracy to destroy white Christian American superiority, what about the qualifier ‘cultural’? The notion of culture that is being used here is an odd

5 ‘Jordan B. Peterson debate on the gender pay gap, campus protests and postmodernism’, *Channel 4 News*, 16 January 2018 (within less than two weeks, the video had more than 7 million clicks), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMcjxSThD54>.

6 See J. B. Peterson, ‘Postmodern NeoMarxism: Diagnosis and Cure’, talk for Students in Support of Free Speech, University of Toronto, uploaded 28 June 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s4c-j0dPTN8> and his ‘Postmodernism and Cultural Marxism’, *The Epoch Times* [blog], uploaded 6 July 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wLoG9zBvvLQ>.

7 Free Congress Foundation, ‘The History of Political Correctness’, 1999, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EjaBpVz0ohs>. See also M. Jay, ‘Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment’, *op. cit.*

8 Under a video with Andrew Breitbart lecturing on Cultural Marxism, a commenter has helpfully added: ‘He doesn’t go into ethnic groups, but you can read between the lines.’ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZI04oSLwK3A>. And elsewhere, on the site Stormfront: ‘Talking about the Frankfurt School is ideal for not naming the *Jews as a group* (which often leads to a panicky rejection, a stubborn refusal to listening anymore and even a ‘shut up’) but naming the *Jew by proper names*. People will make their generalisations by themselves - in the privacy of their own minds’. See <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t633959-3>.

9 See Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (revised edition), New York: Oxford University Press, 1983, pp.87–93; and Terry Eagleton, *The Idea of Culture*, Oxford/Malden: Blackwell, 2000, pp.1–35.

10 Denning remarks on this fact in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, *op. cit.*, p.77.

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political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of [economic] conflict and fight it out'.<sup>11</sup> The theorists of Cultural Marxism see ideological conflict in the cultural sphere as something that is happening not because of conflicts in the productive base, but because *alien elements with a pernicious culture* have infiltrated academia and the media. Culture *should* be the sphere of eternal (and hence conservative) values; such values are, by definition, not ideological. The theorists of Cultural Marxism thus present their own warfare as self-defence against intentional political meddling, which of course can only come from the (Jewish and/or feminist and/or queer and/or decolonial) Left.

Marx's superstructuralism leaves much unsaid. As a lover of literature, Marx was well aware that Balzac's novels are dense aesthetic articulations that can be traced back to, but not reduced to, the author's class basis and economic position. This obviously raises the question of autonomy. Later sociologists and philosophers from Weber to Habermas and Bourdieu have stressed the progressive autonomisation of the constituent parts of Marx's superstructure ('the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic' parts) as a real historical process. Weber argued that in the process of modern rationalisation, several distinct 'value-spheres' emerge, which he identified as religion, the economy, politics, aesthetics, the erotic and the intellectual sphere.<sup>12</sup> Habermas later reworked and reduced this list (invoking Weber) to 'science, morality and art'.<sup>13</sup> On the right, signs of this autonomisation of modern art are framed by the Cultural-Marxist narrative about an assault on traditional values. The preternaturally peppy YouTuber 'Blonde in the Belly of the Beast' attacks modern art's abandonment of traditional standards of beauty and the decadence of contemporary art's depictions of women. This quickly becomes an excuse for attacking Lena Dunham via her father, the artist Carroll Dunham, who 'has so little creativity and talent that even the child that he produced is a worthless piece of shit'.<sup>14</sup>

If the superstructuralist notion of culture raises questions concerning autonomy, the 'differentialist' account of progressive autonomisation has encountered its historical limits. Adorno and Horkheimer's mid-twentieth century critique of the *Kulturindustrie* pinpointed both a capitalist takeover and perversion of art and a particular rationalisation of the production of ideology; still, Adorno continued to defend modernist art against the culture industry. In the later 1960s Hans-Jürgen Krahl, one of Adorno's pupils, came to the realisation that insofar as intellectual and cultural production had become an industry, it needed to be engaged with as a productive sector in its own right.<sup>15</sup> Around this time, the notion of Cultural Revolution came to the fore in the student movement and the New Left. This happened precisely because the sphere of cultural and intellectual labour was seen as part of the productive forces and not merely as superstructure. This went hand in hand with a growing realisation that the industrial working class in the West was not in any shape to play the part of Revolutionary Proletariat.

Here, we have a historical moment that comes close to actually matching the Cultural Marxism narrative. Did these leftists and progressives not indeed move into the cultural field from a disenchantment with old productive spheres? And was there not a hope, in some quarters, that the students or the budding cognitariat could potentially be a new revolutionary class? What needs to be opposed is the suggestion that some academics have an extreme, borderline-magical form of agency. Although in the course of what Rudi Dutschke called the Long March through the Institutions, certain progressive but not exactly Marxist notions have entered into an uneasy alliance with capitalism's exploitation of new desires and subjectivities, one needs to insist that it is 'the requirements of international capital, not the string-pulling of a few sociologists, that has provided history's chief motor these last few decades'.<sup>16</sup>

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11 Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>. This is Marx's most elaborate enumeration of the fields that make up the superstructure.

12 The fullest discussion of Weber's value-spheres is in 'Religious Rejections of the World and Their Rejections' (1915), in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (trans. and ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills), New York: Oxford University Press, 1946, pp.323–59.

13 Jürgen Habermas, 'Modernity - An Incomplete Project', in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic*, Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983, p.9.

14 'The Influence of Poor Gender Relations on Art', *Blonde in the Belly of the Beast* [video blog], available at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y-c59e4\\_IY&pbjreload=10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7y-c59e4_IY&pbjreload=10).

15 See Hans-Jürgen Krahl, 'Thesen zum allgemeinen Verhältnis von wissenschaftlicher Intelligenz und proletarischem Klassenbewusstsein' (1969), in *Konstitution und Klassenkampf. Zur historischen Dialektik von bürgerlicher Emanzipation und proletatischer Revolution. Schriften, Reden und Entwürfe aus den Jahren 1966–1970*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Neue Kritik, 2007, pp.336–51.



Jonas Staal, stills from Steve Bannon's film *Generation Zero*, 2010. Installation view, 'Steve Bannon: A Propaganda Retrospective', Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam, 2018. Image: Remco van Bladel and Jonas Staal. Courtesy Jonas Staal and Het Nieuwe Instituut, Rotterdam

## 2. Performing Classifications

In the 1980s, the US in particular became the site of 'culture wars' between opposing forces.<sup>17</sup> Right-wing cultural activism gained momentum throughout the decade. In a 1989 column, Pat Buchanan called for 'a cultural revolution in the '90s that was to be as sweeping' as the 'political revolution in the '80s.<sup>18</sup> Today's alt-right and fascist outcries over Cultural Marxism and the indoctrination of youth are a classic instance of protesting too much.<sup>19</sup> Andrew Breitbart's insistence that 'politics is "always downstream from culture"' is telling.<sup>20</sup> There are clear continuities between the culture wars of the late '80s/ early '90s and today's, but the changes are no less significant.<sup>21</sup> Instead of culture wars waged by old men such as Buchanan and Jesse Helms, we have armies of trolls who - from 4chan to the *Daily Stormer* - have created an ironic online fascism that goes by the name alt-right. One of the earliest manifestations of the emerging alt-right phenomenon, the Gamergate controversy that was fanned by Milo Yiannopoulos at Steve Bannon's *Breitbart News*, involved a plethora of rape fantasies and threats against female game critics and developers who dared introduce forms of feminist critique.<sup>22</sup>

This genealogy sits oddly with the familiar narrative about Trump's supposed base and the importance of economic issues (the problems of the Rust Belt ignored by elitists, and so on). How do the two relate to each other? In the current culture wars, the signs and symptoms of economic struggle are everywhere, but they are often culturalised in the process of articulation. As I have argued elsewhere, strains of contemporary neo-fascism are successful precisely insofar as they offer a means of identification beyond socioeconomic categories.<sup>23</sup> A meme created by an alt-right gamer may be shared by an elderly Trump fan with a Facebook account. Attempts to identify the exact class basis of Trumpism, or Brexit, or the AfD, tend to be headache inducing. *Education* is a key factor in the emergence of a new class that is less easily defined in terms of income brackets: a cultural class that needs to reflect on its own implication in forms of domination and violence.

Sociologist Cornelia Koppetsch has argued that a new 'transnational upper class' composed of highly qualified workers who move from metropolis to metropolis, who get called 'expats' rather than 'immigrants', has its counterpart in a transnational underclass, a mobile proletariat of un- or de-qualified labourers from the Global South.<sup>24</sup> Hence there is an emphasis on walls and other policies that will keep out immigrants, who are rapists and murderers, or worse: Muslim hordes overrunning the *Abendland*. As Koppetsch also notes, a less mobile middle class that is bound to the 'national economic and welfare space' is increasingly bereft of effective advocacy, while the transnational upper class thrives. Even, we might add, *its precarians thrive* - precariously. There is a real, if limited, trickle-down effect when working in sectors such as tech or culture. This leads to unstable subjectivities; depending partly on long-standing institutional cultures, some identify with progressive and cosmopolitan values while others see those same values as a threat and an attack. The new right clearly draws foot soldiers from a mobile hacker class, just as some of its most influential financiers and strategists, from Peter Thiel to Bannon, come from the upper echelons of techno-capital - with Bannon's tenure at Cambridge Analytica being at least as crucial as his stint at Breitbart.

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- 16 Scott Oliver, 'Unwrapping the "Cultural Marxism" Nonsense the Alt-Right Loves', *Vice*, 23 February 2017, available at [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/78mnny/unwrapping-the-conspiracy-theory-that-drives-the-alt-right](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/78mnny/unwrapping-the-conspiracy-theory-that-drives-the-alt-right).
- 17 The term was canonised by James Davison Hunter in 1991. See his *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*, New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- 18 Quoted in Richard Serra, 'Art and Censorship', in *Writings, Interviews*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1994, p.218.
- 19 Here I cannot go into the whole debate about deploying the label 'fascism' (or post-fascism, or neo-fascism?). The cultural Left's insistence on putting the f-word back on the agenda can be seen as a counterpoint to the right's Cultural Marxism - but in contrast to Cultural Marxism's functioning as a fact-starved conspiracy theory, the analytical cogency of the term needs to be demonstrated.
- 20 Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from Tumblr and 4chan to the alt-right and Trump*, Winchester/Washington: Zero Books, 2017, p.40.
- 21 Milo Yiannopoulos called Trump, 'the first truly cultural candidate since Pat Buchanan (sic)'. *Ibid.*, p.54.
- 22 Ian Sherr and Erin Carson, 'GamerGate to Trump: How Video Game Culture Blew Everything Up', *CNET*, 27 November 2017, available at <https://www.cnet.com/news/gamergate-donald-trump-american-nazis-how-video-game-culture-blew-everything-up/>.
- 23 See Sven Lütticken 'Who Makes the Nazis?', *e-flux journal*, no.76, October 2017, available at <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/76/69408/who-makes-the-nazis/>; and 'The Powers of the False', *Texte zur Kunst*, no.105, March 2017, pp.73-91, available at <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/powers-false-web/>.
- 24 Cornelia Koppetsch, 'Der Trost des Nationalismus', *Der Freitag*, no.38, 2017, <https://www.freitag.de/autoren/der-freitag/der-trost-des-nationalismus-1>.

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For Andrea Fraser, we are dealing not so much with class war as with a ‘classification war’, especially given: that Trump’s victory was not only due to votes from lower-income whites, and that the importance of education as a critical factor in voting behaviour.<sup>25</sup> Fraser invokes Bourdieu to argue that classes are produced through ongoing ‘acts of classification’ where the Left tends to define ‘the elite’ in economic terms, and the right defines it culturally.<sup>26</sup> In the supposed ‘liberal media elite’ the right loves to hate as in the art world, cultural workers have often tended to focus on identity as a *displacement*, rather than as a necessary extension and completion, of issues of social justice. After all the excited media discourse about a black James Bond, Theresa May called for a female Bond – dutifully reported by *The Guardian*, any one of whose clickbaiting columnists could have dashed off such a proposal in their sleep.<sup>27</sup> After the ‘peak *Guardian*’ moment of a columnist who critiqued a selfie with a neighing horse in the background as animal abuse, anything goes.<sup>28</sup> A neoliberal version of capitalism meeting economic, ecological and social limits, in itself is not some kind of magical panacea.

The classification war hasn’t exactly been going great in recent years. At this rate, we’re headed for Waterloo: the fascists may be the others, but casting out the Bad Object will get us nowhere. We, too, are part of the problem, living large in the vanguard of destruction. One might indeed say, with Bourdieu and Fraser, that ‘reflexivity [...] is the absolute prerequisite to any political action by intellectuals’, and that intellectuals, artists and others in culture at large ‘must engage in a permanent critique of all the abuse of power or authority committed in the name of intellectual authority’.<sup>29</sup> But if it is to be truly reflexive, such a critique must entail changes to one’s subjectivity and practice, to one’s performance of one’s professional identity and of the *crisis* of that identity amidst intensifying contradictions. To become truly operative, such a reflexive critique must feed into the elaboration of performative strategies for composing and recomposing collectivity, for a classificatory aesthetics that actually manages to forge new alliances even with those tempted by the cheap thrills of fascism.

Cultural Marxism discourse may not constitute an *illocutionary* speech act, as defined by J.L. Austin and developed critically by Judith Butler in the context of the Reagan/Bush-era culture wars, where the successful speech act literally performs what it says (‘I sentence you to ten years in prison’). It is instead a series of *perlocutionary* speech acts that can have effects through rhetoric and repetition.<sup>30</sup> If the speech acts of the right aim at seducing and cajoling people into a logic-proof and proof-proof worldview, speech acts on the Left can include calling a fascist a fascist and a racist a racist. However, what about those acts that aim at forging alliances and fostering solidarity, even with some who may be tempted by today’s fascisms? A video on a prominent neofascist YouTube channel gleefully notes that the academic Left’s insistence that white students ‘think about their racial identity drives them towards [white supremacist] identitarianism’ – but, the speaker continues, one should never interrupt one’s enemy while he’s making a mistake.<sup>31</sup> How to make sure that invitations to think through privilege (in terms of class, race and gender) don’t fail through performative ineptitude? As long as people feel they are being made to plead guilty in a moralistic show trial rather than included in an emancipatory project, what passes for the Left will continue to deserve co-producer credit for the alt-right.

According to Walter Benjamin’s famous diagnosis, fascism aestheticised politics while revolutionary practice needed to politicise art. In today’s culture wars, in which the mimicry and appropriation of the opponents’ strategies and tactics is rife, opposing the two in clear-cut ways seems difficult. What we are dealing with is not so much an aestheticisation of politics as a *reductive culturalisation of socio-economic issues* that obscures the extent to which the cultural field itself is implicated in these matters. In

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25 See Andrea Fraser, ‘Toward a Reflexive Resistance’, *X-TRA*, vol.20, no.2, Winter 2018, available at <http://x-traonline.org/article/artist-writes-no-2-toward-a-reflexive-resistance/>.

26 See *ibid*.

27 Jessica Elgot, ‘Leading Lady: Theresa May Calls for Woman to Play James Bond’, *The Guardian*, 22 December 2017, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/dec/22/leading-lady-theresa-may-calls-for-woman-to-play-james-bond>.

28 Catherine Shoard, ‘Life Isn’t a Cartoon, and Animals Are Not Our Playthings’, *The Guardian*, 3 February 2016, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/feb/03/animals-photobomb-horse-selfie-thomson-holidays>.

29 See A. Fraser, *op. cit.*

30 See J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962 and Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, New York/London: Routledge, 1992.

31 ‘Civility Is White Supremacy – Seeking Insight’, *Red Ice TV*, 18 December 2017, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wTSZKCMApRo>.

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this manner, culture is treated as a pseudo-autonomous superstructure for symbolic skirmishes, and this clearly benefits the right. Many on the right no doubt feel passionately that traditional gender and racial hierarchies are under attack, but the autonomisation of this in ‘culture war’ terms allows them to disconnect this from the fundamental economic and ecological factors that fuel the changes they oppose. Criminal immigrants prove that it’s all down to racial inferiority; snowfall proves that global warming is a hoax; anything can be made to fit the narrative that feminists are emasculating men. The false concretion of symbols triumphs over structural complexity and contradiction.

Cultural Marxists like us need to insist on aesthetic questions: what about culture as a sphere constituted by institutions and by actual, embodied cultural workers? What is shown, made sensible and represented, and what is occluded, relegated to the realm of the senseless? In *this* respect, the aestheticisation of the political is in fact highly desirable – as a counterpart to a reductive culturalisation. The most painful questions concern the ways in which ‘we’ are implicated, as Cultural Marxists or as cultural workers who are supposedly on the ‘good side’. But are we?

### 3. The Toxic Art

While Cultural Marxism discourse tends to focus on education and ‘the media’, art is included in its indictments. Dutch right-wing politician Thierry Baudet attacks contemporary art as a heinous Cultural-Marxist conspiracy.<sup>32</sup> Inside the art world, the Dutch YouTube-based duo Keeping It Real Art Critics have clearly learned a lot from Breitbart and its Dutch equivalent, *GeenStijl*. Supported by public funding, their trolling tactics include calling the artist Zanele Muholi a ‘spoiled slut’ whose work only gets shown at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam because she’s South-African, lesbian and black.<sup>33</sup> In keeping with Morgan Quaintance’s analysis of an art-world conservatism that ‘performs progressivism’ in ways that don’t hurt its backers, under Beatrix Ruf’s directorship the Stedelijk has used exhibitions such as Muholi’s to rebrand itself as *woke* even while devolving into a clearing-house for the investments made by a group of powerful collectors.<sup>34</sup> Last fall, Ruf stepped down after a number of press reports detailed her all too cosy relations with collectors, and resulting conflicts of interest.<sup>35</sup> The newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* saw fit to draw the conclusion that the problem is not with the financialisation of contemporary art, or conflicts of interest and corruption, but with politically committed art; after all, in the current situation such art is mere hypocrisy. The text functioned as a fancy form of Cultural Marxism discourse, indicting ‘socially committed artists’ for having corrupted art, and calling for a ‘return to aesthetics’, defined in the most banal way.<sup>36</sup>

The functional differentiation and relative autonomy of modernism have turned visual art into a unique investment whose value has skyrocketed along with income and wealth inequality. Trump’s ‘tax reform’, with its further privileging of the already

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32 See Baudet’s tweet on 11 May 2018: <https://twitter.com/thierrybaudet/status/994922341288304641>.

33 Haro Kraak, ‘Gerrit Rietveld Academie annuleert Kirac-debat vanwege “racistische en seksistische uitspraken”’, *de Volkskrant*, 6 February 2018, available at <https://www.volkskrant.nl/beeldende-kunst/gerrit-rietveld-academie-annuleert-kirac-debat-vanwege-racistische-en-seksistische-uitspraken-a4567173/>.

34 Quaintance’s analysis focusses on the situation in the UK; see ‘The New Conservatism: Complicity and the UK Art World’s Performance of Progression’, *e-flux conversations*, 2 October 2017, available at <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/the-new-conservatism-complicity-and-the-uk-art-worlds-performance-of-progression/7200>.

35 See the original slate of articles: Arjen Ribbens, ‘Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam leende vervalste Mondriaan’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 8 September 2017, available at <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/09/08/stedelijk-museum-leende-vervalste-mondriaan-12613425-a1572755>; A. Ribbens, ‘Eigenaar wist dat Mondriaan vals was’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 13 September 2017, available at <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/09/13/eigenaar-wist-dat-mondriaan-vals-was-12977317-a1573387>; Daan van Lent and A. Ribbens, ‘Het Stedelijk schond afspraken en ethische codes’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 6 October 2017, available at <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/10/06/het-stedelijk-schond-afspraken-en-ethische-codes-13366837-a1576365>; Michiel Kruyt and Rutger Pontzen, ‘Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam betaalde 1,5 miljoen voor “geschonken” kunst’, *de Volkskrant*, 8 October 2017, available at <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/stedelijk-museum-amsterdam-betaalde-1-5-miljoen-voor-geschonken-schilderijen-bc87b49d/>; and D. van Lent and A. Ribbens, ‘Stedelijk onderzoekt nevenactiviteiten directeur Beatrix Ruf’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 12 October 2017, available at <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/10/12/stedelijk-onderzoekt-nevenactiviteiten-directeur-13472490-a1577104>. In June 2018, a committee cleared Ruf of the charge of conflict of interest as no ‘smoking gun’ in the form of a brown envelope being handed over in exchange of a favour could be found. Such a narrow focus on demonstrable quid pro quo completely misses the point of the almost grotesque accumulation of instances in which a conflict of interest was all too apparent, which would be a problem even if this were to be ‘just an appearance’.

36 Arnold Heumakers, ‘Geef ons wat meer esthetiek’, *NRC Handelsblad*, 1 December 2017, available at <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2017/12/01/geef-ons-wat-meer-esthetiek-a1583271>.

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privileged, is more good news for collector-driven contemporary art. It is hard to argue with Fraser's dictum that what has been good for contemporary art has been disastrous for the rest of the world.<sup>37</sup> Recalling Carlyle's characterisation of economics as the dismal science, one could call contemporary visual art the toxic art. Like the Ruf affair, Chris Dercon's appointment as director of the Volksbühne in Berlin provided a flashpoint that illuminates contemporary art's status as financial asset and its implication in speculation and gentrification. The imposing of a curator heralding from Tate Modern on a Berlin theatre associated with a distinctly German Left-wing tradition was seen as a hostile takeover.

Contrary to some accounts, it wasn't only the old-school political Left that opposed Dercon while the *Kulturlinke* (the cultural Left) was too focussed on transgender bathrooms and critical whiteness to react.<sup>38</sup> Many *Kulturlinke*, too, were vocal in their criticism of a version of contemporary art that has thrived on the neoliberal destruction of living wages and living conditions; it was the broad and ongoing protest against Dercon, coupled with his disastrous programming 2017/18 season that led to his departure in April 2017. Meanwhile, the transnational über-upper class of blue-chip artists gallerists, megacollectors and the unavoidable Rem Koolhaas staunchly defends the likes of Dercon or Ruf whenever they come under fire; they defend 'public' footholds like the Volksbühne or the Stedelijk Museum like an empire fights for control over its profitable colonies.<sup>39</sup>

For upwardly mobile precarians of the art world, being 'progressive' now often means buying into techno-libertarian scenarios -the Bitcoin hype goes on, critical dissent notwithstanding, and an artist such as Simon Denny embarks on a purposefully ambiguous bromance with Peter Thiel.<sup>40</sup> Techno-libertarianism can also blend into a fascination with Nick Land's accelerationism, which has played a key role in what effectively amounted to a massive art-world infiltration by the NRx/alt-right. The interest in Land, which has also been fuelled by self-proclaimed Left-accelerationists willing to enter into some strange alliances, has been used to normalise the racism of latter-day Land - whose racist 'Dark Enlightenment' philosophy has been pushed by Thiel's business partner Curtis Yarvin. With so-called Left accelerationism increasingly looking like an infantile disorder, Post-internet artists have allowed themselves to be bedazzled by Landian-Lovecraftian notions such as hyperstition (basically: willing a reality into being) and by the Crowsleyesque promises of 'meme magic'.<sup>41</sup> Conflicts around the LD50 Gallery in London and the New Center in New York showed the extent to which certain parts of the cultural sphere have become hospitable to trendy fascism.<sup>42</sup>

To be an actual Cultural Marxist would mean to insist that art becomes toxic when those in the transnational upper class reject those in the transnational underclass to complete invisibility. In this respect DIS Magazine's 2016 Berlin Biennale was disturbingly in sync with the right-wing media sphere: with one of the biennale's slogans being the question 'Why Should Fascists Have all the Fun?', the project went out of its way to purify the world into a post-internet bubble in which refugees, for instance, are remote background noise at best. The spirit of the entire endeavour was perhaps best embodied by Christopher Kulendran Thomas and Annika Kuhlmann's *New Eelam* project, which

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37 A. Fraser, 'Le 1%, C'est Moi', *Texte zur Kunst*, no.83, September 2011, p.122.

38 In response to the *Kulturlinke*'s bad reputation in some circles, Berlin's Kultursenator Klaus Lederer (of the party Die Linke) has allegedly stated that 'the left can only be a cultural left'. See [https://twitter.com/Petra\\_Sitte\\_MdB/status/880795491910508544](https://twitter.com/Petra_Sitte_MdB/status/880795491910508544). See also S. Lütticken, 'Art as Immoral Institution', *Texte zur Kunst* [online], 3 October, 2017, <https://www.textezurkunst.de/articles/sven-lutticken-volksbuhne-occupation/>, a text on which some passages in this article are based.

39 The full-page newspaper ad by 'art-world professionals' demanding that Beatrix Ruf be reinstated as director of the Stedelijk was an impressive case in point. Some of the people who signed it should have known better than to put their name on this list of shame, but with most of the original signatories their interest is clear in an almost comical way. See <https://www.parool.nl/kunst-en-media/oproep-kunstwereld-haal-beatrix-ruf-terug-naar-stedelijk-a4570169/#&gid=1&pid=1b5140b6-7ea9-4ea7-a080-1a411a61ae78>.

40 On Denny and Thiel, see Mark O'Connell, 'Why Silicon Valley Billionaires are Prepping for the Apocalypse in New Zealand', *The Guardian*, 15 February 2018, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/15/why-silicon-valley-billionaires-are-prepping-for-the-apocalypse-in-new-zealand>; on Bitcoin, see Andrew Osborne, 'Chump Change: Decrypting Bitcoin & Blockchain', *Mute*, 27 October 2017, available at [http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/chump-change-decrypting-bitcoin-blockchain#\\_ftnref15](http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/chump-change-decrypting-bitcoin-blockchain#_ftnref15).

41 See Ana Teixeira Pinto, 'Artwashing: NRx and the alt-right', *Texte zur Kunst*, no.106, June 2017, available at <https://www.textezurkunst.de/106/artwashing-de>.

42 On LD50, see O.D. Untermesch, 'Is It OK to Punch a Nazi (Art Gallery)?', *Mute*, 16 February 2017, available at <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/it-ok-to-punch-nazi-art-gallery> and Shut Down LD50. 'Racism as Deep Trolling and Other New Centre Diversions', *Mute*, 4 April 2017, available at <http://www.metamute.org/community/your-posts/racism-deep-trolling-and-other-new-centre-diversions>.

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mimics a proposal for an exclusive Airbnb-type scheme of jointly owned houses in prime locations all over the world; this new form of transnational autonomy for a mobile elite is presented as the more successful successor to the Tamil Tigers' failed attempt to achieve national sovereignty.

If any Left must be a cultural Left, a *Kulturlinke* worthy of the name cannot reduce being Left to a lifestyle and the endless juggling of signifiers while everything else remains the same, or rather: while all real change continues to be dictated by other forces. It's not about bathrooms versus minimum wage, about culturalising the political or vice versa, but about acting in the cultural field in a way that acknowledges its implication in ongoing processes of extraction and destruction. In this process, class as well as race and gender must be seen as shifting and shifty classifications, as categories whose very contradictions each of us performs on a daily basis -with varying degrees of intentionality and control. Here art and literature offer instances of practices that assemble (trans)individual and collective identities and personas, from Wu Ming to Tania Bruguera and the Immigrant Movement International or Jonas Staal's New World Summit and New World Academy; from Johannes Paul Raether's queer shaman personas to Natascha Sadr Haghigian and Forensic Architecture's work with the Society of Friends of Halit coalition, which in a number of public forums sought to oppose a broad social assemblage to the 'NSU complex' in Germany.

The latter case in particular also drives home the point that 'culture' is not the property of a cadre of specialists. Many 'professionals' in activist media art circles - who usually teach at art schools or universities - were quite stunned by the alt-right's successful marshalling of the free labour of armies of disaffected trolls. 'Culture' is no longer exclusively the purview of specialists and experts - as it was both in the 'superstructuralist' and 'differentialist' definitions. Culture has expanded to the point of bursting. More than ever, it is a performative understanding of culture that makes sense today - not as purely linguistic speech act, but as embodied and trans/intersubjective, potentially collective performance.<sup>43</sup> Culture, if we follow this definition, is the *overperformance* of exigencies and double binds, resulting in the constant re-articulation of categories that are not external but lived, embodied, enacted, performed.<sup>44</sup> It remains for the residual professionals in whatever pockets of academic or artistic autonomy remain by accident or design (in other words: it remains for Cultural Marxists like us) to use those frameworks to test tactics and strategies, to reflect on failures and successes, and to de- and re-compose ways of working and collaborating. This involves breakdown and (self) reconstruction. Form matters, and performance is when form matters most: in the moment of formation.

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43 Compare Michael Denning's proposal for a 'labour theory of culture', in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds*, *op. cit.*, pp.90-96.

44 Judith Butler has increasingly supplemented a primarily linguistic notion performativity with a focus on performativity as embodied and collective action. See in particular her *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press, 2015.