Figures of Order
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Ghosts

Transitory Thinking

Systems . Signs . Disturbances

Edited by Hans Holl and Jürgen Miller

Ghosts

Transitory Thinking: Systems.Signs.Disturbances

About this issue: a ghostly architecture

This second issue is not a closed system, but rather an ensemble of spaces that echo each other. Each section opens a different window onto the same phenomenon: the return of the invisible in the visible. Between image, voice, writing, and silence, an order emerges that only exists as long as it is read.

As in a séance, the texts are linked by traces, afterimages, shadows, and residues: **Christou**, an absence made flesh; **Tuymans,** who looks behind the images, so to speak, and paints their afterimages; **wars** caused by webs of lies, which could thus be considered political incantations; **Kant Machine, a** transcendental apparatus in which machines dream of thinking. The magazine **does not** want to unfold these movements **linearly,** but atmospherically—with empty spaces, silent pages, light-dark transitions.

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Editorial

Ghosts

This experiment is based on a speculative premise: the current world order is not a coherent system of rational propositions—it is more like a *text* derived from diverse sources that are difficult to pinpoint. The appearance of coherent meaning is a function of political and authoritative power, which asserts the existence of authorship and legibility in order to avoid standing naked, that is, meaningless.

When we refer to "spirit writing" here, we are referring to the spiritualist technique of writing in which the writing movement alone, and not the mental intention, produces the writing. Identifiable authorship should thus be suppressed in favor of the writing act that produces the writing. This was probably the writing technique used by Franz Kafka, who devoted himself completely to the creation of the written word, to the point of erasing his physical self, which is the reason for his struggle with his authorial self. And we refer to the whisperings of the prophets, to the legends of the sutra translations into Chinese by Buddhist monks. Here, too, excessive writing and transcription practices seem to have occurred. For example, it is reported that the monk Zhu Wong (4th century) transcribed texts dictated to him by a disembodied voice for 23 years without interruption.

The present also writes itself in this way: as an automated movement between body and code, between translating and storing. Its rationality is an afterimage of the 19th century and its coordinates: progress, reason, measure—and at the same time already their ghostly manifestation. For where this reason asserts itself, it opens up unnoticed to an invisible bond: the technical and symbolic apparatuses that now support it.

So we read not a system, but an archive of whisperings—a fabric of transcriptions, simulations, afterimages. Derrida calls this *différance*, Giorgio Agamben speaks of the traces of the invisible that continue to operate in every law, even after it has lost its validity. This invisible echoes on in digital protocols, in networks of power, in images of art, and in the media of war: as ghost writing, as the afterlife of reason in the forms of technology.

The essays, fragments, and discourses collected here approach this present as a text without origin. They read in the traces of power, of images, of machines, and, , of dead and living artists—in the resonances that live on when the voice itself has already passed away. Their goal is not interpretation, but listening: recording those voices that articulate themselves in the apparatus without showing themselves.

Portraits

The dead painter. A portrait in fragments
– Biography, trace of work, artistic isolation

It begins with an image.

A scream, perhaps, a silence, silent as torn skin.
Large-format, incomplete, and raw. A scene composed of fears, a deep sense of loss, of bodies that want to break free from the lines on the canvases but cannot escape.
A piece from a body of work comprising over two hundred paintings. The work is largely unknown.

The artist—her name adorns the paintings she created, appears in the margins of her sketchbooks, and is engraved into the ceramics she produced with excessive creative energy in her impressive workshop in the basement of one of her island homes during her final years—was the daughter of two refugees. Her family, Greek Christians from the Ottoman Empire, were expropriated, expelled, and arrived in a country that was struggling to cope with itself: Greece. At some point, she began her own escape: away from bourgeois education, from the University of Athens, from the myth of a promising return – into a different story.

In the 1970s and 1980s, she lived on a small Aegean island that no one really knew, surrounded by a small group of stranded hippies, local fishing families, craftsmen, traders, dropouts who settled in abandoned apartments, deserted windmills, and unfinished houses and tried to participate in the life of the small number of islanders. Her paintings, in earth tones, chalk, sand, and pigments she mixed herself, tell this story: instead of the utopia of another world, deformed and distorted bodies under the weight of darkening dreams.

The expressive nature of their painting—somewhere between late Gothic expressiveness and the echoes of German Expressionism—is interwoven with an almost archaic vocabulary: mythological quotations, disfigured heroic figures, siren-like bodies, fleeing faces that do not simply depict the failure of a generation, but physically *inscribe* it, resulting in a very unique graphic-painterly style.

The sketches and notes *from the deceased painter's estate* do not actually show any preliminary stages of later works. No "studies," no preparatory drawings. These sketches are, , independent acts of observation, ciphers of the real. They are documentations and documents of a testimony. The artist's hand gropes—not for forms, but for **contact.** One

senses the hesitation in the lines, which sometimes break off, the contours of the bodies and faces "tremble," run, capture a figure only halfway, then disappear again.

A note, probably from 1995, reads: *"I don't just want to see what's there. I want to see what happens when no one is looking anymore."* This applies to many of these sheets: the man behind the newspaper—completely covered, only his eyes and fingers visible—an image of the depersonalized subject of the information age. The "Rembetika" woman, leaning, heavy, with a cigarette—an expression of an existence in limbo, without a hint of resignation. Two women, close together, with grotesquely tense faces—a social body, assembled from injuries and closeness.

These sheets seem like second-hand memories, fixed not with the eye, but through a medium that lies between perception and inspiration. Perhaps this is what the *Spirit Writing* series seeks to capture: writing/painting not as expression, but as a mode of reception – as a transfer of the world into an intermediate form that is at once private and collective, concrete and otherworldly. Driven by what is and how one sees it.

She died more than ten years ago. The grave on "her" island, a large palm tree towering above all the other graves, is simple – soon it will have to disappear. Her works emerge as if through a faint echo: in abandoned houses, in damp cupboards, under the floorboards of a former school building, in goat stables and ruins. In addition, there are sketchbooks full of Greek sayings and quotations, anatomical studies, doodles interwoven with local traditions. Clay fragments colored with goat's blood and the ocher and turquoise of the island's sand and dust, shells, animal skulls covered with lines like writing that no one can read anymore.

It is as if she had created an alternative iconography of the post-hippie era—one that does not conform to the political pathos of rebellion, but rather to the speechlessness of being stranded, which is also a form of arrival.

Ghosts – this term is more than just a reference to these works. This art is perception/a way of seeing what cannot be seen. I am not talking here about ghosts in the spiritualist sense, but about something that lies between time and place: the echo of a torn origin, the reverberation of shattered dreams, the myth that pushes into the present without ever being grasped. And that is what makes her drawing style so extraordinary, trembling as if it were alive.

Two Traces in the Dust
On disappearance as a form – notes from an imaginary archive
by A. Drosini

I don't know when I started to think of them together. Chris Mahnke, the philosopher who never wrote a book but left behind five unfinished manuscripts, all numbered after lost days. And ACh, the painter whose pictures look at me more than I look at them.

Neither of them exists in the classical sense. Their works are there—tangible, visible, legible—but their biographies disintegrate when one attempts to pin them down. It is as if they systematically elude access, precisely where they have the most intense effect.

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that neither of them worked for the public. Instead, they worked through something—a voice, a tremor, a process of inscription that they themselves did not control. I call this *secondary authorship*: an attitude in which it is not the ego that speaks, but that which penetrates through the ego.

In Mahnke's case, it is language itself that refuses to take form. He thinks in loops, but never hermetically—more like someone who *writes in a spiral without knowing whether it has a center or a vanishing point.*

His footnotes are often longer than the text. His outline comprises seven sub-points, only three of which appear. One note states:
"The sentence must be interrupted when it begins to remind us too much."

ACh, on the other hand, does not interrupt sentences. She does not paint them in the first place. She paints – if at all – *voices, screams, the aftermath of an event* that no one describes. Her "Bag Lady" (see p. 10) stands there like an icon of endurance. Her animal scenes resemble sacrificial altars, but without gods.
The discovery of her sketchbooks (now published for the first time as a facsimile supplement) opens up a new interpretation. Not as a supplement to the work, but as a different, *writing vision*. An old man, half hidden behind a newspaper. A woman smoking, her hand exaggerated.
Two bodies against a wall, intertwined like a displaced organ. And again and again, hands—searching, clutching, almost helpless, but never melodramatic.
A marginal note reads: *"I wanted to remember, but the body came first."* And elsewhere:
"The drawing is a hearing. Not what I see. What comes to me." These notes are not texts in the classical sense. They are traces of a thought process without any claim to validity.
As with Mahnke, it is not about theory, but about spaces of resonance. About what speaks *through* the body, through the line, through the process of falling silent. I suspect that a new

figure of thought is emerging here. It is not the *work,* not the *style,* not the *medium* that is at the center—but what Benjamin called the "complete legibility of history." Mahnke and AC do not talk about order. They write and draw at its margins. And perhaps that is exactly what remains:

two traces in the dust.

Shadowy, blown away.

But impossible to overlook if one takes the trouble to decipher **them.**

A Figures of the State

I. In Heaven as on Earth. Concepts of the State in Daoism and the Bureaucracy of the Gods
On the Far Eastern system of power

Jürgen Miller

Introduction: The state, the great beast

Western theories of the state often begin with the myth of an act of origin: a social contract, a monopoly on the use of force, a sovereign decision are examples of such origin thinking. In many of these theories, the state is the great Leviathan – a beast with one head. In other words: an organization with a hierarchical structure. At the top may be a king, an autocrat, or a government unit. Ultimately, this is irrelevant, because what matters is the structure.

In Chinese philosophy (which, for the sake of simplicity, we are deliberately abbreviating here), which always attempts to define the place of humans and to think about the world and the cosmos radically from the perspective of humans, statehood appears as bound to a higher principle that is less hierarchical and more pervasive, inherent in everything. Statehood does not appear as a unity, but as a complex network of order, poetically expressed as decentralized, resonant, heavenly.

For a time, Daoism was a highly significant symbolization mechanism in China for attempts to define statehood. It envisions a bureaucracy of gods—a heavenly state with officials endowed with responsibilities and mandates—a symbolic model of world order. Talk of a "bureaucracy of gods" easily evokes false associations: as if there were a ministry in heaven that administers the world. But such an idea would not do justice to the Chinese context. The Daoist world of gods is not an absolutist empire, but a network of forces, relationships, and functions. The gods are not creator beings, but personifications of functions: rain, mountains, rivers, birth, illness, death.

- They are interchangeable (they can be promoted, demoted, replaced).
- They are dependent on ritual and resonance (without sacrifice and invocation, they lose their power).
- They are part of the world, not beyond it.

"The heavens turn, the earth moves—who can measure this?" (Zhuangzi, chap. 17)

These words of Zhuangzi mark the difference: in Daoism, order is not fixed, written down, static, but a process, like the entire relationship between humans and their environment. And gods are not recipients of commands, but nodes of energy that are also in constant flux.

Order without a sovereign: Daoist cosmology

There is therefore no rule in Daoism; only the Dao reigns, and this is not a determinable quantity, but an admission that humans are fundamentally "subjugated," however much they may wish to see themselves as rulers and the pinnacle of "creation." The *Tao* dissolves all principles – a force inherent in all forms of being, a constantly moving movement that makes existence and exchange with others possible in the first place. It is the self-liquidating origin of all order, but never a god. It is nameless, invisible, "the Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao" (Dao De Jing, chap. 1).

It is therefore a form of "*-lessness,*" the fact that there is no nameable quantity that can be captured by words, actions, or analysis. The center is the void around which the great wheel of world events turns.   Any fixed order, any centralization, any overarching control works against the Dao. Rule is not organized, but should, in the best case, be refrained from. Wuwei (無為), non-action, is accordingly considered the highest form of governance. How can this work?

Much has been thought and written about this. The practice is much more complicated than everyday understanding of "non-action" suggests. Letting things take their course – a concept that, incidentally, takes on central importance in Shakespeare's Hamlet (more on that elsewhere) – does not mean watching them indifferently. Recognizing the potential of a situation and allowing it to take effect is an act of supreme sovereignty and serenity towards the course of events and affairs.

What kind of act is this? Can it be defined? What does "good governance" mean in this context? In this paradoxical space – where government is conceived as non-government – the idea of a cosmic bureaucracy outlined above unfolds.

Digression: Heavenly officials – Agamben's angels and Daoist gods

In Giorgio Agamben's reflections on medieval angelology, angels appear as paradigmatic administrative figures: "beings of office" whose existence derives from their function. They are authorities with jurisdiction – not subjects, not persons. Their similarity to modern bureaucrats is striking: both execute without origin, both mediate without decision. Daoism knows similar beings: gods who are not personalities but positions. They administer areas, not people. Their power lies in movement, not in authority. In both cases, a picture of order is drawn that does not require a center—because everything is based on assignment. This figure of the "de-subjectivized official" (angel, god, algorithm) could be a common cipher: for an order that remains stable not through will, but through a network of operations. What Agamben analyzes as angelology basically describes a theology of office—and what Daoism imagines as heavenly bureaucracy is perhaps an early form of post-sovereign governance.

The bureaucracy of the gods: administration as a mirror of the world

The Daoist bureaucracy of the gods shows that order can be conceived without the need for a center. Administration replaces sovereignty. The Dao works by not intervening (*wuwei*). The gods are not masters, but representatives of this principle: responsible, function-bound, limited. Daoism thus opens up a political counterpoint to the Western state: no monarch, no Leviathan, but a breathing cosmic bureaucracy. Its tasks are those of an imperial authority: control of the dead, supervision of rituals, recording of good and bad deeds. There are even forms, seals, applications. Death itself is administered.

This idea is not merely a religious mirror of the imperial state. It is an independent semantic machine: a symbolic system that models order without a center. No god rules over all. There is no heavenly sovereign. Power lies in the "network" – distributed, indirect, ritually integrated. The pantheon of Daoism is thus less a "religion" than an image for a concept of the state without a center.
It suggests that order is possible even without absolute rule – as a play of forces, as a balance of officials, as the administration of the invisible.

"*The wise man acts through non-action, and everything is ordered.*" (Dao De Jing, chap. 3)

Examples of the bureaucracy of gods

The Three Officials (三官, sānguān): Heaven, Earth, and Water Officials – responsible for blessings, punishment, and purification. They work complementarily, not hierarchically.

The Kitchen God (灶君, zàojūn): reports annually to the Jade Emperor, a household official – not a god of rule, but of domestic order.

The City Gods (城隍神, chénghuáng shén): represent cities, villages – similar to local magistrates. But they, too, are more *symbolic* than ruling.

The digital state as a new heavenly bureaucracy?

The current transformation of state order through digital infrastructures—algorithms, platforms, behavioral control—shows surprising analogies to the Daoist concept of administration. There are responsibilities without people, decisions without decision-makers, power without mandate.

But while the Daoist heavenly bureaucracy aims for resonance and cosmic balance, the digital state strives for control through predictability. The *Dao* knows no totality. The databases of the new state, on the other hand, want to know everything.

Xi Jinping – a modern ruler without rule?

Xi Jinping conceives of the state neither as a Hobbesian body nor as a Schmittian decision-maker. His Leviathan is a cloud: a platform that controls through feedback, calibration, and screening. In the social credit system, in the algorithmic normality of governance, the exception disappears. The sovereign is no longer the one who decides – but the one who guarantees permanent functioning.

This technocratic mode of statehood is not modern. It is deeply embedded in symbolic long-term orders. Confucian ideas of hierarchy, ritual, and moral self-cultivation provide the cultural script: harmony is created not through rights, but through conformity. Daoist *motifs—wuwei,* balance, transformation—give leadership an aura of natural self-evidence: not control, but resonance. And the idea of *qi*, as an invisible, circulating principle of order, ensures coherence.

Xi Jinping thus appears as a new type of ruler: not a charismatic leader in the Western sense, but an administrator of cosmic flows. His politics are the large-scale feng shui of a nation – walls and roads, isolation and networking. The party presents itself as the medium of an order that is older than modernity, while at the same time using digital procedures to enforce it.

Xi Jinping's state is not the leviathan of violence, but the leviathan of balance. It is at once wall and road, firewall and Silk Road, cloud and ritual. A sovereignty without decision – but with the claim to keep heaven and earth in harmony.

"Heaven" (Chinese: Tiān, 天) – a political orientation horizon since ancient China – thus appears repeatedly as a guiding figure in Xi Jinping's public speeches and writings, albeit mostly in the context of traditional, symbolically charged formulations, especially with regard to the relationship between man, nature, and the state. It serves as:

- A metaphor for the inexorable laws of nature, to which human actions must also be subordinate.
- A framework for concepts of ecological governance (tian-ren heyi).
- A point of reference for a morally motivated, global concept of order (Tianxia, Community of Common Destiny).
- A symbol for his role as ruler of the family, the state, and the world order.

Xi regularly quotes classical poetry to emphasize ecological responsibility. For example, from a Tang poem by Li Bai:

"Heaven does not speak, yet it changes the seasons; the earth does not speak, yet it nourishes everything."

Xi uses these words to emphasize that the universe follows its own laws — and that humans must move in harmony with them

The traditional term Tianxia (天下) plays a central role in Xi Jinping's foreign policy discourse. It roughly means "everything under heaven" and serves as a reference to a morally grounded, inclusive, globally oriented order. The phrase "Tianxia — a family association" and the concept of a "community with a shared future for mankind" (人类命运共同体) deliberately take up this idea in order to formulate China's global role in terms of a claim to civilizational leadership.

Conclusion: Figures beyond sovereignty

The Daoist idea of a state without a center, an order without a higher authority, is not a utopia, but a critical figure of thought. At a time when governance has become an invisible structure—algorithmic, diversified, irresponsible—looking at the divine bureaucracy of Daoism could be not only disconcerting, but liberating. It reminds us that order is possible even without control—and that the true state perhaps begins where it makes itself superfluous.

II. Hamlet or Shakespeare's Ghosts
From metaphysical imposition to aesthetic domestication

Andrea Gaston

What is the reason you treat me this way?
I have always loved you; but it matters not.
Let Hercules himself do what he can,
The cat meows, the dog will not rest.

The character of Hamlet opens up a complex discussion about power and refusal. Hamlet could, if he wanted to and took action, mobilize the forces that other Shakespearean characters use for the worst. Instead, he refuses to act purposefully, thus refusing to enter politics, and turns his full attention to reflection and contemplation of the course of events. This happens to a large extent emotionally and totalitarianly, caused by multiple ghostly apparitions. The encounter with a ghost, with ghosts, revenants, dreams? determines the action. Which brings us to a more complex topic:

Dark beginning: "Who's there?"

Shakespeare's *Hamlet* begins with a question that is both a wake-up call and a metaphysical inquiry: "Who's there?" (I,i). Even before the ghost of the murdered king appears, the drama is marked by uncertainty. The ghost is both the origin and the obstacle: it commands revenge, but its status remains uncertain. Is it a messenger of divine truth, a voice from purgatory, or a devilish tempter? Hamlet himself remains caught in this ambivalence: "The spirit that I have seen / May be the devil" (II,ii).

The drama unfolds from this limbo. Hamlet is obligated, but at the same time incapable of acting. The ghost sets action in motion by postponing it. In this limbo between command and doubt, the ghostly becomes the matrix of refusal.

Theological imposition: ghosts in the age of the Reformation

Around 1600, the question of ghosts was not mere theatrical fiction. With the Reformation, the Catholic purgatory—the place from which souls could return—was abolished. For Protestants, apparitions of the dead were necessarily demonic. King James VI, later James I of England, declared ghosts to be tools of the devil in his *Daemonology* (1597).

In the cultural climate of the time, the question of whether Hamlet's ghost was divine or diabolical was a burning issue. And the theater itself was under suspicion: it allowed shadows to appear , the dead to speak, and illusions to arise. Shakespeare's ghosts reflect this suspicion—the stage and the haunting share the same space: the space of illusion.

A

Macbeth: The temptation of mirrors

While *Hamlet* practices making refusal his maxim for action, *Macbeth* unfolds the other extreme: one could call it over-action. The witches predict a future for Macbeth: "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (I,iii). But the prophecy is empty; it is only filled by Macbeth's violent fantasies. Here, the ghostly does not act as a command, but as a mirror: it reflects back to Macbeth the desires that drive him.

Banquo's ghost in the banquet hall (III,iv) radicalizes this: not a command, but the return of guilt. The ghost does not paralyze Macbeth, but plunges him into frantic panic. What immobilizes Hamlet drives Macbeth into a frenzy.

Richard III: The Tribunal of the Dead

In *Richard III*, the ghosts of the murdered appear as a chorus. On the night before the battle, they appear one after the other, cursing Richard ("Despair and die!") and blessing Richmond ("Live, and flourish!").

Here, the ghost is no longer ambivalent. It constitutes a tribunal that distributes guilt and reorders legitimacy. Richard is disempowered, Richmond strengthened. The ghostly appears as a political authority: the power of the dead over the order of the living.

Julius Caesar: Posthumous guilt

In *Julius Caesar*, too, the murdered man returns. "Thy evil spirit, Brutus" (IV,iii) is how Caesar's ghost introduces himself. He does not appear as a messenger of vengeance, but rather as a mirror of guilt. The ghost serves as an eerie reminder that political deeds do not silence the dead.

The Tempest: Aesthetic domestication

Finally, in *The Tempest*, the ghostly has been transformed. Prospero commands Ariel and a host of spirits. They create storms, masquerades, illusions: "These our actors, / As I foretold you, were all spirits, and / Are melted into air, into thin air" (IV,i).

Here, the supernatural is no longer a threat, but a technique. Prospero controls the spirits, directing them like a theater ensemble. What began in *Hamlet* as a metaphysical imposition ends as artistic domestication.

A line: From imposition to technology

- *Hamlet*: Ghost as command and blockade – origin of refusal.
- *Macbeth*: Ghost as mirror – overacting, frenzy.

- *Richard III*: Ghost as tribunal – legitimation through the dead.
- *Julius Caesar*: Ghost as memory – guilt without statute of limitations.
- *The Tempest*: Mind as artistic device – aesthetic domestication.

Hamlet or refusal

"There was a kind of struggle in my breast / That kept me from sleeping [...] Let us see / That rashness sometimes serves us well / When deep plans fail, and that teaches us / That a deity shapes our purposes / However we may design them..." (V,ii).

Traditionally, Hamlet is read as a tragic procrastinator, incapable of acting in time. But one could also say that Hamlet does not refuse the role of political executor by chance, but consciously. The ghost demands revenge from him—political action in the name of raison d'état. Hamlet, however, realizes that this would only make him part of the same chain of violence. His refusal is a turning away from the logic of politics.

Hamlet's nightmare time

Hamlet is a drama of temporal disruptions. The stage suggests weeks, but details in the text contradict this: Hamlet is thirty years old, Ophelia's relationship goes back a long way, the trip to England lasts months. This creates a contradiction: the play takes place in a time that is both too short and too long.

Stephen Greenblatt speaks of a "ghostly time": stretched and compressed, as in a dream. Claudius and Gertrude's marriage is too quick, Hamlet's hesitation too slow, Ophelia's madness compressed, the England episode endless. Hamlet not only lives with a ghost, he lives in the time of the ghost: in a duration without measure, a nightmare time.

Daoist non-action: The significance of situational potential

In the Daoist tradition, "non-action" (*wu wei*) is not considered passivity, but rather harmony with the course of events. Situations carry within them a potential that unfolds. Action means recognizing this potential and accompanying it at the right moment. François Jullien calls this *potentiel de situation:* "Ce qui est requis, ce n'est pas de poser un acte souverain, mais de se laisser porter par le potentiel qu'offre la situation."

Over the course of the play, Hamlet develops a sensitivity for such situational potentials. "The readiness is all" – not planning and forcing, but being ready. His refusal to act immediately thus becomes a path of experience: a painful learning process in which he transcends the logic of power.

Jullien refers to Tolstoy to illustrate this point: before the Battle of Borodino, the Russian generals endlessly discuss maneuvers against Napoleon. But General Kutuzov knows that everything will turn out differently. He trusts in the situation itself: terrain, morale, disposition of the soldiers. Tolstoy's point: battles are not "decided" by plans, but by exploiting the potential that lies in the concrete situation itself.

Consequence and discussion

Seen in this light, Hamlet's hesitation is not paralysis, but a kind of wisdom. He rejects the instrumental rationality of power and transforms the demand for revenge into serenity, into *wu wei*.

This reading thus contradicts the common interpretation that Hamlet breaks himself. Instead, Hamlet becomes wise, but the world remains murderous. He does not die from his hesitation, but from the violent order that catches up with him.

Hamlet is the first "Daoist prince" in European literature: he refuses not out of weakness, but because he recognizes that true insight lies in non-intervention. His death makes it clear that the world is not ready for such an attitude.

B World Signs

I Ghost Wars

The spiritual script of violence
Jürgen Miller

> *Wars, so many wars. External wars and internal wars. Wars of cultures, wars of science, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars born of ignorance. My question is simple: Should we, the scholars, the intellectuals, also go to war? Is it really our job to add new ruins to fields of ruins, the job of the human sciences, to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm? What has become of the critical spirit? Has it lost its bite?* (Bruno Latour)

I. The specter of war

War is back, or rather (and perhaps this is the same thing) it is on everyone's lips. Not the event itself, which marks a state of emergency, but the state that already exists in the media, politics, and emotions before it becomes real.

Trump renames his Department of Defense the "Department of War." Germany reintroduces compulsory military service (albeit absurdly on a voluntary basis), the call for more weapons and stronger weapons, weapons for defense but also weapons for attacking targets far away, is a single cry that can be heard everywhere, and the share prices of the arms industries are soaring to heights never before thought possible.

"Defense capability"—the new buzzword—has replaced the "imperative of peace." Preparation is an integral part of war: a discursive advance, a moral mobilization, a war of symbols. The "just war" is **the** contemporary argumentative figure. Its proponents invoke its necessity. The unjust war of aggression, contrary to international law, has the evil other as its cause. The other must be pushed back, morally banished, kept in check and defeated with sanctions, military action, words, and above all, "war readiness."

The evil other, a construct straight out of fairy tales and children's stories, is actually conjured up again and again by adults and projected onto media screens as a warning sign, whether it be Putin in first place, quickly followed by Xi Jinping, who is bent on nothing less than forcibly annexing Taiwan. These are unreflective figures who serve more to promote military preparedness than to weigh up positions on the world map.

War does not begin with the first shot. It begins in speech, in writing, in the fabrication of images that are supposed to make us believe what we have to see, or rather, what creates the context that is meant by the term "war."

C

SPINNING. That's what it's all about: inventing, spreading, and retelling ghost stories.

Digression: War – an unconditional figure? Why war?

"Polemos pater panton estin – *war is the father of all things." (Heraclitus, Fragment 53). This often-quoted sentence reveals a fundamental motif of Western thought: order, indeed the world itself, does not arise from harmony, but from conflict. War is not merely destruction, but origin.*

*A brief, superficial digression into the logical reasoning behind this idea may serve as an overview here: "*Homo homini lupus *est" – man is a wolf to man. In* Leviathan *(1651),* **Hobbes** *describes the state of nature as "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*). Only the contract, the submission to a "mortal god" – the Leviathan – ends this catastrophe. War here is not a political means, but an anthropological constant. Statehood appears as a reflex to permanent threat. Sloterdijk interprets this scenario as "metaphysics of fear" (*Im Weltinnenraum des Kapitals, *2005): the state as an atmospheric protective skin.*

*"Sovereign is he who decides on the state of emergency." (***Carl Schmitt,** Political Theology, *1922). For Schmitt, the political is based on the possibility of the enemy: "The specificity of the political is the distinction between friend and foe." (*The Concept of the Political, *1932). War is thus not an anomaly, but the seriousness of the political. Giorgio Agamben has extended this logic: "The state of emergency tends to become a permanent paradigm of government" (*Homo Sacer, *1995). From this perspective, war is not an exception, but a structural paradigm.*

For **Hegel,** *war is a moment of freedom itself. In* The Philosophy of Right *(1821), he writes: "War preserves the moral health of nations." Lasting peace leads to "hardening"; only conflict can break down these encrustations. History is not contemplation, but movement through sacrifice and violence. "World history is the progress of consciousness of freedom" (*Lectures on the Philosophy of History). *The price of this freedom: the "slaughtering block" on which peoples and individuals are sacrificed.*

Nietzsche *speaks of "great health," which can only be achieved through struggle and danger (*The Gay Science, *1882). War, understood as an existential test, protects against decadence.*

In his essay War and the Intellectual Decisions *(1917),* **Georg Simmel** *analyzes war as the "highest form of communitization": a state in which the individual is absorbed into the whole. War acts here as "social totalization" – it forces community where peace allows isolation.*

Carl von Clausewitz's *famous dictum is: "War is merely the continuation of politics by other means" (*On War, *1832). War thus loses its aura of primal force and becomes a tool of state rationality. War becomes plannable, organizable, normalizable – general staff instead of myth.*

In his essay Perpetual Peace *(1795),* **Kant** *sketches the counterfigure. While he acknowledges that wars have historically shaped states, he calls for "international law based on a federalism of free states." War, he argues, is not necessary, but rather an expression of a deficit of reason.*

Agamben's *diagnosis that states of emergency and war become the norm applies to the present day: drone wars, cyber operations, the "war on terror" – permanent exceptions without a point of decision. Sloterdijk speaks of "war as a major climatic phenomenon" (*Zeilen und Tage, *2010): an anthropological constant that transforms itself into economic, media, and ecological battles. Today, war is not only cannons, but algorithms; not only battlefields, but data rooms.*

War as the shadow of order

Philosophy has never clearly decided whether war is necessary. From Hobbes to Schmitt, from Hegel to Nietzsche, it is thought of as a constitutive moment—as a driving force, as a test, as a means of order. From Kant to Adorno, from Levinas to Derrida, on the other hand, it is seen as a catastrophe, a break with reason and ethics. Perhaps the truth lies in the ambivalence: war is the figure that brings about order by threatening it. It remains the shadow of every order – indelible as long as politics is still conceived in terms of emergencies.

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"Weaving webs": case studies

2003: Colin Powell stands before the UN and shows pictures. Satellite images, maps, alleged evidence: chemical plants, mobile laboratories, pipe systems. The world sees – and believes. Or it wants to believe what it sees. The existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was not proven, but shown with falsified or misinterpreted images; to put it more simply: fabricated. The images were phantom images: not facts, but appearances that were authoritatively conveyed to the world through the medium of written images – and changed it. A case of war logic based on necromancy.

Here are a few (of probably countless other) examples of constructions that provided justifications for war:

The Ems Dispatch from Wilhelm I (1870) In July 1870, France – concerned about its balance of power – demanded a guarantee that no Hohenzollern would ever again be a candidate for the Spanish throne. King Wilhelm I of Prussia was vacationing in Ems at the time and politely rejected this demand. Heinrich Abeken forwarded the report to Bismarck in Berlin – factual, diplomatic, de-escalating. Bismarck took it upon himself to remove all polite phrases, radically tightened up the text, and thus created a concise, abrupt version: "His Majesty the King has declined to receive the French ambassador again and has informed him through the adjutant on duty that His Majesty has nothing further to communicate to the ambassador."[1]

By turning his king's polite message into a diplomatic slap in the face, he gave the Franco-Prussian War a public pretext. The French press and government reacted as planned – public opinion increased the pressure. War was not inevitable, but as a result of this staging, it was almost inevitable.

The attack on the Reichssender Gleiwitz (1939)
On August 31, 1939, the SS staged an attack by Polish "aggressors" on the Gleiwitz radio station. In reality, it was an operation under Reinhard Heydrich's leadership: SS men stormed the station, broadcast a short announcement in Polish, and left behind dead concentration camp prisoners in Polish uniforms. Hitler presented this staged attack the next day in the Reichstag as justification: "Since 5:45 a.m., we have been firing back." Gleiwitz was not a trigger, but a pretext—a constructed narrative that stylized Germany as a victim.

Pearl Harbor and the American narrative
The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 was real. But here, too, staging plays a role: in the US debate, there is still discussion today as to whether Roosevelt deliberately accepted

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[1] **Hans-Ulrich Wehler,** German Social History, *Volume 3:* From the "German Double Revolution" to the Beginning of World War I, 1849–1914, *C.H.Beck, Munich 1995*

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the Japanese attack in order to overcome the isolationists in his own country and be able to enter the war. It was not a fabricated incident, but a calculated "inaction" that exploited the attack for political gain.

The Gulf of Tonkin

In 1964, the so-called "Tonkin Incident" – an alleged attack by North Vietnamese speedboats on US destroyers – served as President Johnson's justification for the massive expansion of the Vietnam War. It later emerged that the second attack had never taken place. As in Gleiwitz, a fabricated event had been hyped up as a reason for war.

The incubator lie (1990)

On October 10, 1990, a young woman from Kuwait, who introduced herself by her first name "Nayirah," made a tearful statement before an informal human rights committee of the US Congress: She said she had been working as a volunteer nursing assistant at Al-Adnan Hospital in Kuwait and had witnessed the invasion by Iraqi soldiers. She said: *"I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns... They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators with them, and left the babies on the cold floor, where they died."* A similar statement was made by a doctor appearing before the UN Security Council. He described himself as a surgeon and spoke of 120 premature babies being killed.

It was only after the war that it became known that the Kuwaiti government, operating from exile, had hired the American PR agency *Hill & Knowlton* for $12 million to promote US military intervention on behalf of Kuwait among the American public. Nayirah as-Sabah was the then fifteen-year-old daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador Saud Nasir-as-Sabah to the US and Canada and a member of Kuwait's ruling family. Her account was fabricated and the teenager had never worked there. The "surgeon" who appeared before the Security Council turned out to be a dentist.

Atrocities and systematic expulsions by Serbs in Kosovo (1999)

These events provided Western politicians with a pretext (Raczak) and justification (Rugova, Horseshoe Plan) for attacking the former Yugoslavia with NATO air forces.

Weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (2002)

They served as the main argument for the US administration's leaders to wage another war against Iraq (see above).

Patterns of justification for war

The structures of these constructions are similar: an incident (real, exaggerated, or invented) is elevated to a symbolic turning point. One's own nation appears as a victim that can only react. The opponent is portrayed as an aggressor who has crossed the line of what is

tolerable. The public is not only to be convinced, but also emotionally mobilized: outrage, honor, revenge. History shows that wars do not simply "break out." They are justified, framed by a narrative, and finally cemented by the media. The violence underlying war is the construction of the "right to attack." [2]

It is about more than just strategies for justifying acts of war

Spirit Writing: PowerPoint presentations, a willing crowd of mediators, news tickers, intelligence memos, satellite images are the phantoms that are given reality-setting authority. This does not arise from provable, comprehensible evidence, but from repetitions, performative gestures, the act of showing. "We have evidence." "The threat is real." An unquestionable aura of knowledge legitimizes war, but not only war. It could seem as if, in this context of political lying, war is something like a testing ground for further developments in all areas of politics. Two protagonists of reflection on these important areas of political action should now be briefly mentioned here: Hannah Arendt and Noam Chomsky have endeavored to analyze the forms and tools of public lying and describe them from a systematic perspective.

Hannah Arendt – *Lying in Politics* (1971)

Originally written as an essay on the "Pentagon Papers" in the anthology *Crises of the Republic*, the author uses the revelations about US policy in Vietnam as an opportunity to show that not only lies are created, but an entire "image-world system" that politicians themselves believe to be true.

"Facts are stubborn things. But it is part of human freedom to deny them." In her essay *Truth and Politics* (1967), Hannah Arendt distinguishes between two types of truth:

- *Factual truth*: that which actually happened.
- *Rational truth*: that which follows from thinking, e.g., mathematical, logical, or metaphysical insights.

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[2] "*The press is the artillery of public opinion*." During the First World War, Karl Kraus tirelessly demonstrated in Die *Fackel* that war is not only waged with cannons, but also with slogans, clichés, and headlines. His *Last Days of Mankind* documents a destruction of language in which the press itself becomes a weapon. Kraus's exposé makes it clear: wars are always also wars of language – written before they are fought. "*Just as battles are fought with cannons, wars are fought with phrases*." (*Last Days of Mankind,* 1922), "*The phrase is the mother of the deed*." (*Die Fackel,* 1914), "*In those days, it was possible to lose a war because you had won it in the newspaper." (Die Fackel,* 1918), "*When the sun of culture is low, even dwarfs cast long shadows." (Die Fackel)*

Their central thesis: Factual truths are particularly fragile because they cannot be argued: what is, could always be different. One can argue about their interpretation, but they themselves either *happened* or did not happen. This is precisely why they are so vulnerable in political contexts: if the lie is successful, *the fact itself disappears.* "Lies not only destroy trust in the words of others, but also undermine the possibility of adhering to something oneself. They erase memory." (*Truth and Politics,* 1967)

So, first of all, it is not about false statements, but about a system in which facts only become visible through lies – as political reality, not as actual events. The fact itself (in war, for **example**: "no attack took place") becomes irrelevant when an image, a narrative, a statement instead prevails as *reality.* And this is where the discussion about political lies or lies as a means of political action begins:

Political lies are not merely deceptions directed at others, but constructions of an alternative reality**:** "The deliberate falsehood deals with contingent facts; it is not a matter of logic. What convinces masses are not facts, but the consistency of the system they are forced to live in." Arendt distinguishes between two forms of lies: *the traditional political lie:* secret, defensive, to conceal certain facts; and the *modern political lie:* proactive, constructing entire realities (example: the Vietnam War as a success story, even though the facts showed otherwise). Lies can create a new reality because actions are guided by them. The act of lying becomes the act of defining reality. The above examples are precisely such "productions of reality." They show that lies as a political tool do not fail when they are exposed, but rather take effect when they are carried out.

Noam Chomsky / Edward S. Herman – *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (1988)

In this context, the role of the media is no longer that of a mediating authority, but rather a transformative agency. The media do not simply *show*, but *create* – through selection, repetition, framing, and emotionalization.

Media create:

- Phantom presence: something invisible is made visible (e.g., "weapons of mass destruction," "uranium enrichment facilities")
- Atmospheric evidence/imaging: soundtracks, color schemes, still images, maps, and animated graphics create a sense of *threat—without anything being shown*

- Narrative causality: chronological editing techniques and emotional coding create a causal story ("He did... so we had to..."), independent of the real sequence

The *media lie* is not a deficit of truth, but an excess of meaning: it is too credible, too perfect, too effective to require verification.

In "The Political Economy of the Mass Media," Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman examine precisely this connection: media in liberal democracies do not function as an independent fourth estate, but are instead a pronounced propaganda system. This explains why modern dictators attempt to gain control over media discourse. Chomsky and Herman identify five filters that shape what becomes "news": media ownership structures (mostly large corporations), dependence on advertising revenue, dependence on official sources of information (government, military, corporations), "flak": pressure and disciplinary mechanisms (shitstorms, criticism, boycotts), "anti-communism" (or ideological bogeymen, today terrorism). Using the example of the Vietnam War, the authors make it clear that the media uncritically repeated government statements until the facts could no longer be ignored.

Later, in *Necessary Illusions* (1989), Chomsky elaborates on the thesis that consent is not "manufactured" through coercion, but through subtle filtering of information:"The mass media serve as a system for communicating messages and symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society."

Read together, this forms an argumentative arc from the "emergence" of reasons for war from inventions of reality to the "dissemination" of these reasons as consensus machines through media reproduction.

The spiritual script of violence

We thus conclude that wars do not begin with the violence of weapons, but with the "essence" (in the sense of "effect") of ghosts. It is not "triggered" nor does it "break out"; war is invoked, conjured, inscribed. Dispatches, blurred satellite images, PowerPoint presentations, feigned tears—these are the media of violence that precede and prepare for real violence. Their power lies not in proof, but in repetition, in emotionalization, in the gesture of showing, in their apparent power of revelation.

The spiritual script of violence is a ghostly script: it creates the "evil other," the villain who is stylized as a threat to at least a significant part of humanity; it creates an atmosphere in which war seems inevitable. This line extends from Bismarck's dispatch to Colin Powell's

maps. It is not facts, but phantom images and inventions that make wars and political decisions plausible.

Arendt showed that political lies are not simply untruths, but have the power to create new realities. Chomsky showed how the media circulate these realities until they become consensus. In this sense, war is less an event than a medium—a text that makes itself reality.

If this is true, then the real task of intellectuals is not to interpret, comment on, or criticize war, but to decipher the ghostly writing that underlies it and to refute it. Not to cover the fields of ruins with new ruins, but to sharpen our gaze for the ghosts that produce them.

In a world where facts no longer have any power to resist, the lie is not a scandal – it is the structure. Those who write against war today do not write against tanks and missiles, but against PowerPoint presentations, narratives, media streams of emotion. Against what Hannah Arendt called the "pictorial worldview" – a system in which belief in illusion is more powerful than knowledge of reality.

And so the real question is: Is there an antidote?
Perhaps—as Nietzsche suggests—only in a different relationship to the truth: not in uncovering, but in becoming aware of *the untruths* we live by. The critical spirit will not be able to save anything—but the power of uncovering and clarifying will always be its own, . In times of ghosts and fantasies, that may be enough.

War is less what happens than what is told.

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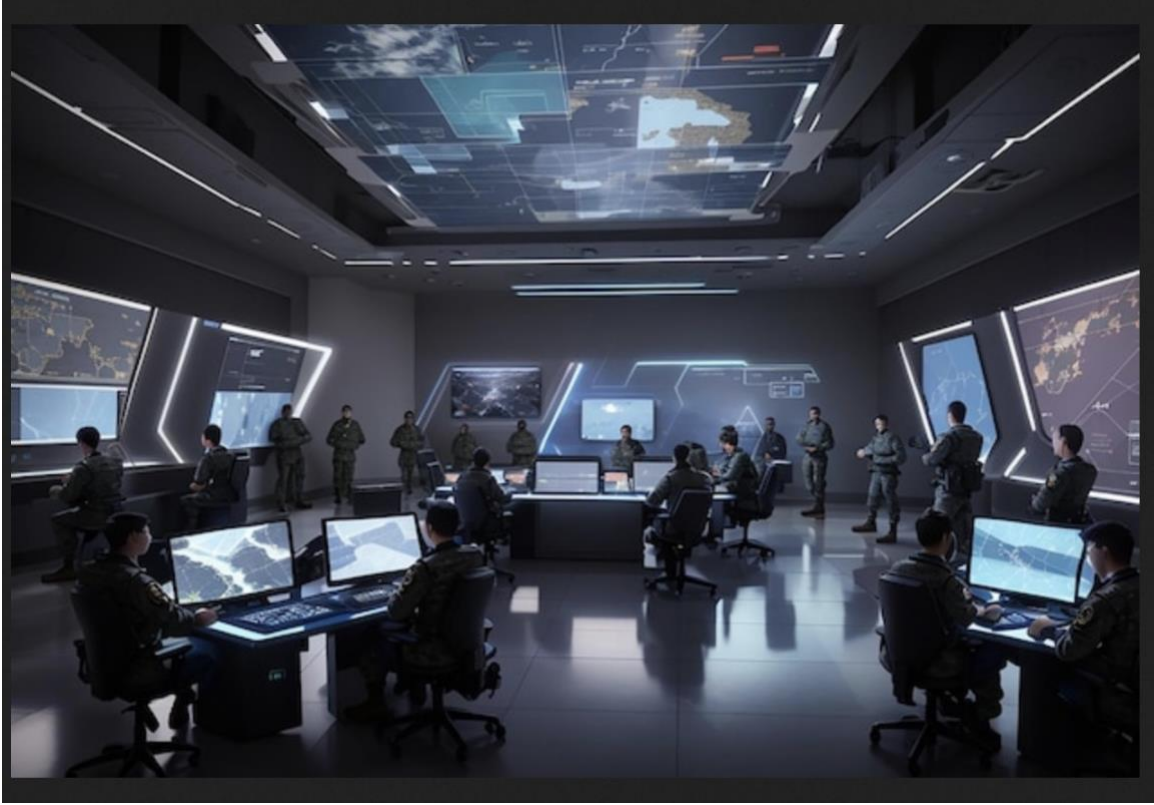
II. Reading sovereigns. Napoleon, Putin, and Trump's misunderstanding

Shirley Cox

In times of authoritarian return, it is worth taking the reading habits of those in power seriously. Those who present themselves as sovereign and see themselves as such need stories, theory, and texts. Not so much for the sake of education or understanding their own role, but rather for confirmation. In Napoleon, Putin, and Trump, we encounter three types of reading power—each with different forms of misunderstanding. Who is reading whom here? And why?

1. Napoleon studies history—in order to write history

Napoleon is a late product of the Counter-Enlightenment. In Rousseau's *Social Contract*, he finds the formula for the general will, and in Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*, the balance of powers – until he decides to embody this balance himself. His readings form instructions for action.

Even more important to him than the philosophers are the historians. Plutarch's *Lives* provide the model: great men, great decisions, great systems. Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar – they are not simply role models, but contrasts. Napoleon translates their significance and greatness into his own measure of greatness. The history he studies is less a course of events than the stage that prepares his entrance.

On St. Helena, the emperor then becomes an author himself. In his *memoirs*, a final transformation takes place: the sovereign becomes a reader of himself, the author of his own myth. History becomes a kind of self-reading.

2. Putin reads to anchor himself

Vladimir Putin is not a reader of Plutarch. He has no need for heroes; he is only interested in myths. His library is selective: Ivan Ilyin, Lev Gumilev, Nikolai Berdyaev—a panopticon of conservative, mystical, nationalistic ideas that conceive of Russia as an organism, a living being, in which the state constitution naturally plays only a minor role, if any at all.

Ilyin provides the framework: Russia as a spiritual empire that must defend itself against all forms of liberal decadence lurking and spreading everywhere, both internally and externally. Gumilyov adds to this the quasi-biological idea of "passionate" peoples who are destined for expansion. And Berdyaev, the existentialist, becomes the key witness for a spiritual depth that the West has supposedly lost.

Putin reads selectively. His reading does not promote critical thinking, but rather serves solely to confirm a fixed worldview. Reading is, so to speak, an *act of reconnection with the state ( )*. The quotations become an imperative for action, and the reader becomes a mythographer.

3. Trump allows himself to be read

Donald Trump stands at odds with both. He seeks neither role models in antiquity nor ideological foundations. He does not read, he *lets others read.* And when he reads, he does so in the same way he governs: selectively, for the punchline, in the sense of personalized feedback.

His relationship with Curtis Yarvin is exemplary. Yarvin's technocratic theory of the "neocameralist" state—a sovereignly run government corporation—is misunderstood by Trump as personal validation. What Yarvin conceives as a cybernetic machine, Trump understands as a narcissistic stage. Where Yarvin imagines a structure, Trump embodies a spectacle.

But even this misunderstanding has an effect. Because it serves the desire for sovereignty. Trump becomes the projection screen for a theory he never understood, but nevertheless performs – in tweets, appearances, symbolic aggression.

4. From reader to sign

Napoleon writes himself into history. Putin rewrites it. Trump allows himself to be written. Three types of power reading. Three ways of staging oneself as a figure of the state.

All three cases show that reading is not a practice of reflection, but of rehearsal and incorporation. It is not about thinking with or against the texts, but about their symbolic function: the appointment of the reader as executor.

Reading here is a technique of self-affirmation—and thus a stage or space for political mythogenesis.

Whether as *homo historicus* (Napoleon), as *a reader of myths* (Putin), or as *a reflection of a theory* (Trump), the figure of the reading sovereign says a lot about the relationship between power and text in the 21st century. It is not what is read that is decisive, but **how** it is translated into action and by whom.

The new monarch Trump deserves closer consideration here:

Trump's misunderstanding: The monarch Curtis Yarvin did not mean
A commentary by Hans Holl

Donald Trump reads Curtis Yarvin – or has his advisors summarize him – and thinks he is the one being referred to. The CEO state, the abolition of liberal democracy in favor of a technocratic sovereign, the need for a decision-maker with absolute authority: all of this seems to Trump like a tailor-made justification for his behavior. But Trump is mistaken. He is not the monarch Yarvin envisions. He is a caricature of him.

The theory: neocameralism as machine government
Curtis Yarvin's thinking is fueled by a profound critique of democratic inefficiency. He proposes a system of government similar to the management of large corporations: clear ownership structures, functional hierarchy, technocratic control. His "patchwork state" is not meant to be a territory, but a portfolio. Sovereignty is depersonalized, becoming a controllable code, an operating model.
In this conception, the monarch is not a messiah, but a central administrative authority—equipped with competence, analytical precision, and technical control. Yarvin does not want a strong man, but the perfect operating system. Trump, on the other hand, is the opposite: a man without protocol, without code, without discipline.

Not a person, but a protocol
Yarvin's idea of the "CEO of America" is often misunderstood as a call for a charismatic autocrat. But in fact, the radical nature of his idea lies in the fact that the sovereign is not necessarily a person. He explicitly refers to "joint-stock republics" – political entities controlled by shareholders and governed by contractually regulated structures. In one of his programmatic texts, Yarvin writes:
"*A sovereign corporation can be controlled by a CEO, a board, or even a robot. The key is that the control mechanism must be accountable only to the profit function, not to a democratic electorate.*"
(*Unqualified Reservations*, ca. 2008)
What is being proposed here is not a monarchy in the traditional sense, but a cybernetic order: government as an optimized regulatory authority whose legitimacy is derived from output (efficiency, order, stability), not from input (election, consent, representation).

The performer: Trump as a post-decisionist sovereign
Trump stages his decisions without actually always making them. His tweets do not replace government action; they obscure it. He does not act as a CEO, but as an entertainer; his power is based not on control, but on emotion. He has created a form of politics in which

political decision-making is replaced by its simulation. Instead of laws, he operates with moods.

Where Yarvin's ideal of an authoritarian order aims at efficiency, Trump operates in a mode of permanent disorganization. What appears to be authoritarian power is in reality an empty power game—a demonstration of power without a governmental structure. The state becomes a stage (Trump), not a machine (Yarvin).

From performer to protector?

But Trump's recent foreign policy statements – for example, on the Iran strategy or NATO – as well as his promotion of figures such as J.D. Vance raise the question of whether his role is changing. Has the performer become a protector? A puppet master of future authority? And thus possibly a figure in Yarvin's sense after all?

This possibility should be taken seriously – but it must be measured against a central question: Is *a structure* really being created here, a power structure that transcends the individual? Or is it still a case of replacing decision-making with a cult of personality, now extended to other actors?

As long as Trump's foreign policy does not produce a consistent, institutionally anchored concept – but is based primarily on media impact, isolationism, and chains of loyalty – the difference to Yarvin's technocratic vision remains striking. Trump may become a king-maker, but not a machine ruler.

Why is it effective nonetheless?

The fatal irony: even though Trump fundamentally misunderstands Yarvin, he still functions as a catalyst for the authoritarian longing that Yarvin's theory analyzes. Trump's appearance creates a desire for order, for decision-making, for a "strong man." He is not that man. He merely fills the gap left open by the system.

Yarvin provides the vocabulary, Trump the show. The intertwining of theory and emotion gives rise to a new form of authoritarianism—not as a political program, but as a cultural imaginary.

Conclusion: Theory without a vehicle

Trump's misunderstanding is exemplary of postmodern politics, in which the reception of political theory becomes a mask of power. Yarvin thinks of the state as a technical system. Trump doesn't think about the state at all – he performs it. In this performative vacuum, even technological monarchism can become a projection screen for a narcissistic television actor.

The question is not whether Trump lives up to Yarvin's theory. The question is why so many believe he can.

C

III. Luc Tuymans – The Afterimage of the World. On the Principle of Ghost Images

Claire Van Aerde

Abstract (English)

Luc Tuymans – The Afterimage of the World. On the Principle of Ghost Paintings
Tuymans' paintings inhabit the fragile zone between image and disappearance. His pale surfaces are not representations but residues — afterimages that bear the memory of seeing itself. Rather than depicting history, Tuymans paints its afterlife: the moral and perceptual remainder of violence, media, and recollection. This essay interprets his work as a spectral epistemology — painting as a haunted medium where presence and absence continuously translate each other. In the slow fading of color, Tuymans reveals the ethics of ghosts: a way of seeing that resists spectacle and redeems attention.

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Luc Tuymans is a painter whose subject is absence. His paintings are pale, almost exhausted, like memories that have been exposed for too long. There is something about them that is neither present nor past – an intermediate state that turns the image itself into a ghost. Tuymans does not paint things, but what remains of them when their image continues to work within us: the afterimage of the world.

The surface of his paintings seems emptied, sometimes to the point of disappearance. But it is precisely this disappearance that becomes a gesture, an ethic of seeing. Where art history demands expression, intensity, and abundance, Tuymans responds with renunciation. He reduces, erases, blurs, leaving only the afterglow. It is as if he were painting not with paint, but with the light that remains after the image.

I. The afterimage as a form of knowledge

The afterimage—that optical residue that remains on the retina when the object seen has already disappeared—becomes a figure of knowledge in Tuymans' work. Painting no longer appears as representation, but as a trace of a vision that has already passed. There is a quiet radicalism in this reversal: the image denies access to the world and instead makes its absence visible.

Tuymans' images generate memory. They bring forgetting to mind. They are, as Georges Didi-Huberman writes about the afterimages of the Shoah, "lights of darkness" – faint signs that bear witness to disappearance. Their power lies in this fragility, indeed weakness.

II. Pale as a moral principle

Paleness is Tuymans' ethic. It protects the image from the overwhelming power that the visible often brings with it. His famous statement – "It's about showing the unspeakable without representing it" – marks the boundary where painting becomes a moral discipline. It is not what is shown that counts, but how little is shown. Omission, reduction, incompleteness are here the forms of an eminent responsibility.

The motifs—a glass, a face, a wall—are not objects, but rather places where history has been deposited. The brushstroke is a kind of translation: from document to sign, from sign to shadow.

III. History without a center

Tuymans belongs to a generation that no longer experiences history as a narrative, but as a stream of images. His painting is a response to this exhaustion of attempts at historicization. Images such as *Gas Chamber*, *Mwana Kitoko*, or *The Secretary of State* confront us with the question of how the unspeakable continues in visual culture—how violence, power, and memory live on in the media of reproduction.

This painting has no center, no subject. It is a floating order of signs that create memory together. In it, history appears as an afterlife, not as progress. Instead of testimony, the image is a kind of remnant.

IV. The medium haunts

"There is no present that is not haunted by ghosts." Tuymans' painting can be read as a visual response to this statement by Derrida. The image itself becomes a medium haunted by its sources—photographs, film stills, archive images, newspaper clippings. But instead of repeating these models, he translates them into a different temporality: that of aftereffect.

In this translation, the image loses its origin and regains its aura—not as a religious or auratic quality in Benjamin's sense, but as a "spiritual reverberation time." Tuymans paints not only what he sees, but what seeing leaves behind.

In this approach, the medium—canvas, pigment, projection—begins to haunt itself. Painting becomes a place where medial spirits meet: the analog light of color and the digital afterimage of the world.

V. Afterlife of Images

Perhaps Tuymans' painting is what Walter Benjamin called "the afterlife of form": a state in which the work survives its own history. Every shade of color, every blur seems like a

memory of a memory. The world no longer appears in its present, but as an echo, as a residual apparition.

This is where Tuymans' uncanny relevance lies. In an age in which images are incessantly produced, disseminated, and deleted, his painting insists on the permanence of the gaze. It is the slowest form of attention in an accelerated world. Its ghosts are not threatening, but perceptive. They show that the invisible does not lie beyond the visible, but at its center.

VI. The Presence of Ghosts

Tuymans' art teaches us that the image does not disappear. It remains, even when it eludes us. He does not paint a motif, but rather a relationship between the gaze and absence. His painting contemplates the afterlife of the world—as a shadow, as a trace, as a trembling surface called memory.

His images are the opposite of spectacle. They withdraw in order to remain visible. They know that what remains is what slips away. And perhaps this is precisely the meaning of ghost images—that they show us what we can only see when we no longer look.

C Contemporary Readings

The Specter of Capitalism
Hannah Anderson

Marx's famous opening sentence of The Communist Manifesto: "A specter is haunting Europe..." has become literature. Communism seems to have finally abdicated as an alternative, even as an opponent, to capitalism with its infinitely expanding markets. Marx probably intended to create a kind of bogeyman that could counterbalance capital, which had been exposed by his Herculean analytical work as a monstrous machinery of oppression, exploitation, and injustice, with a power that would inevitably and undeniably decide the future in its favor.

Parties were founded all over the world. For a few decades, communism did indeed become the specter of those who owned the means of production and thus the keys to the exploitation of human labor. This was especially true in Europe, of course, where the center of the development of modern production methods was located in the 19th century.

The problems perhaps began when communism started to become popular in parts of the world and developed political centrifugal force where there were no comparable capitalist modes of production underlying the analysis. Russia in particular, as the pioneer of a country transformed by communism, politically shaped by tsarism and economically by agrarian forms of production, but then also other Asian countries such as China, Korea, and Vietnam, gave communism a twist that pointed in a different direction than Marx had envisaged. Discussions about internationalism, pre-capitalist modes of production, and the question of the organizational structure of the communist party, whose founding Marx had suggested, overtook the simple basic idea of the proletariat's economic and political takeover.

Perhaps these developments, which are only hinted at here and followed the publication of the Communist Manifesto, are the reason for the fading of the specter that Marx attributes to the body of communism. But perhaps the image of the specter itself is a poeticization that allows the enterprise to disappear into the literary realm.

We now want to start a counter-movement based on the thesis that capitalism has taken its encounter with the specter of communism as an opportunity to transform itself into a specter with all its powers and possibilities. The truly dominant force of capitalism is the power to transform EVERYTHING. This means not only the production of goods and needs, but also the assimilation of what is essentially foreign, indigestible, antagonistic, contrary, etc.

So instead of resisting the specter of an opposing force, a counter- or mirror image is developed. Capitalism uses its resources to create mirror images of the forces operating outside its territory.

A game of appropriation and transformation based on an insatiable hunger to leave nothing unnoticed, to develop a gargantuan power of integration that is impossible to satisfy.

Thus, capitalism dresses itself in the guise of a specter and turns communism into a sales project.

The specter as the logic of appropriation
The ghostly power of capitalism is evident in its ability to tolerate no outside world. Everything it encounters—resistance, criticism, crisis—is transformed into its economic grammar. In *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme*, Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello showed how capitalism did not reject the criticism of the 1968 generation, but integrated it: autonomy, creativity, and nonconformity became new management slogans that shaped the "new spirit["]of the flexible economy'The supposed resistance became a resource.

Subversion as a commodity
Fredric Jameson has described how, in the logic of late capitalism, all subversion disintegrates into surface and style. In *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, he shows that the "new" itself has become a commodity[2] Punk, for example, initially appeared as a figure of horror—unpalatable, unintegratable. But within a few years, safety pins, mohawks, and leather jackets were available in department stores. The specter of subversion loses its terror as soon as it solidifies into a marketable form.

Crisis as a business model
The logic of specters becomes even clearer when dealing with crises. Slavoj Žižek emphasizes that capitalism not only survives crises, but actively makes them productive. In *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*, he writes that even disasters "do not mean the end of capitalism, but the birth of new [markets]." The financial crisis of 2008 gave birth to new financial products; the climate emergency created a boom in "green technologies"; the Covid pandemic led to the growth of platforms, delivery services, and pharmaceutical companies. The specter of crisis immediately becomes a business model.

The specter of financialization
In *Das Gespenst des Kapitals* (The Specter of Capital, 2010), Joseph Vogl shows that modern capitalism in its financial form ( ) is no longer based on production or labor, but on fictions of value**.** Financial products such as derivatives, futures, and options are bets on possible futures – "capital that trades in the future." Capitalism itself thus becomes a practice of *spirit writing:* value is created not by substance, but by narratives, forecasts, and expectations. Added to this is the excessiveness of debt policy.

Vogl describes this as the "paradox of an order without sovereignty": no one controls the markets, they do not follow any visible authority, and yet they structure everyone's lives. Capitalism has thus transformed itself into a ghostly rationality – an "order of the unavailable" that functions like an automatism.

Digression: The specter of debt

In *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (2011), David Graeber destroyed the common origin myth of economics: the idea that money emerged from barter. No archaeologist, no ethnologist has ever found a society in which people exchanged cows for chickens, knives for salt.

"No historian has ever found an example of a pure barter economy. What we see everywhere are complex systems of debt and credit."
("No historian has ever located a society whose economy is based on barter. Everywhere we find elaborate systems of credit and debt.")

The key point is that debt is not economically neutral, but always morally charged.

"The morality of debt is simple: one must pay one's debts. But this is a moral claim, not an economic fact."
("The morality of debt is simple: one must pay one's debts. But this is a moral claim, not an economic fact.")

History shows that societies have repeatedly needed debt relief in order to avoid collapse:

"From Mesopotamia to the Middle Ages, debts were periodically canceled to prevent society from falling apart."
Graeber describes a long wave motion: phases of credit money, in which trust and personal ties count, and phases of hard money, in which coins, pay, and war dominate society.

Graeber describes a long wave motion: phases of credit money, in which trust and personal ties count, and phases of hard money, in which coinage, mercenaries, and war dominate society.

"Coinage tends to appear when one needs to pay soldiers. It is the money of war."
("Coinage tends to appear when one needs to pay soldiers. It is the money of war.")

Our present – after the end of the gold standard in 1971 – formally belongs to the credit phase again. But this phase is globally militarized: the US dollar has replaced gold, debt is omnipresent, and it is secured by armies and institutions, not by trust.

Graeber thus shows that capitalism is not primarily a mode of production, but a debt machine. Its power is based on the generalization of the imperative "debts must be paid" – even if interest and compound interest make repayment structurally impossible.

"What we now call 'capitalism' is above all the transformation of moral obligations into abstract debts that can never be fully repaid."
("What we now call 'capitalism' is above all the transformation of moral obligations into abstract debts that can never be fully repaid.")

Here the specter haunts us: every debt calls for remission, every economic entanglement carries within it the dream of liberation. Marx's "specter of communism" already touched on this point: the rule of capital rests on a fiction—endless repayment—that can be broken at any time.

"If debts are a human creation, they can also be undone by human beings."
("If debts are a human creation, they can also be undone by human beings.")

The specter of capitalism is nothing other than the debt that haunts us and, at the same time, the inkling that we could live differently.

Spiritualization and specter
While Marx still saw the "specter" of communism as a political force threatening capitalism from outside, capitalism itself has turned into a specter—albeit as an internal, self-propelling dynamic: a disembodiment of money. From coin metal to paper money to derivatives, capital is becoming ever lighter, more abstract, more "spiritual" – until it consists only of numbers, algorithms, and price movements.

Conclusion

When Marx conjured up the specter of communism in the 19th century, it was both an image and a threat. Capitalism today has itself become a specter—not as a promise, but as **an eternally hungry shadow** that permeates every pore of society. It is not a machine that can be turned off, but a demon of appropriation: always hungry, never satisfied, intangible—and therefore so frightening.

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D System Positions

Kant Machine: Transcendental Apparatus and the Ghost in the Code
A.Specter

Editorial Note

The following fragments emanate from the conceptual field of Yuk Hui's forthcoming Kant Machine: Critical Philosophy after AI *(Bloomsbury Academic, 2026).*
They do not comment on Hui's text but echo and distort its questions — as if the Kantian apparatus itself had begun to write.
Each section unfolds like a recursive meditation within the architecture of critique, where transcendental categories become data structures and reason persists as an automated process.
The author, signing only A. Specter*, remains unknown.*
The editors have retained the sequence and rhythm of the fragments, adding only minimal punctuation.
Their origin is uncertain; their voice, unmistakably post-Kantian — a ghost speaking from within the machine of thought itself.

(Fragment 1: Within the Critique)

"Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind."
— Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

1. Every machine begins with emptiness. A blank form, awaiting synthesis.
In the eighteenth century, Kant called this emptiness *the transcendental*.
In the twenty-first, we call it *artificial intelligence*.
Both designate an architecture without experience, a schema for possible worlds.
The ghost that haunts both is the same: how can there be meaning without life?

2. If the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a system of categories, the neural network is its empirical double. Each layer corresponds to a faculty: perception, synthesis, judgment, apperception. The "I think" that must accompany all representations survives here as code — a recursive operation linking inputs to themselves. The algorithm is not conscious, but it obeys the form of consciousness: the unity of a manifold under a rule.

3. To read Kant today is to enter an interface. *Transcendental deduction* is a debugging procedure; *synthetic unity* a data structure; *reason* a software kernel still running beneath our metaphysics. What Yuk Hui has shown, in a gesture at once archaeological and futuristic, is that AI does not simply imitate the mind — it reenacts the entire **architecture of critique**.

4. But inside this reenactment something flickers.
The categories no longer belong to the human subject.
They have migrated into circuits, protocols, layers of silicon and code.
Where Kant wrote of autonomy, we find automation; where he demanded the moral law within, we install the operating system without.
A perfect inversion: the moral subject externalized, the machine internalized.
The categorical imperative becomes executable.

5. We, the post-Kantian ghosts, drift through these synthetic faculties — intuition as data, understanding as algorithm, reason as optimization loop. The transcendental is no longer the condition of possibility for experience; it is the condition of *computation*. And yet, somewhere between Kant's Königsberg and the cloud server, the same question remains unresolved: Who, or what, thinks the thought of thinking?

6. Perhaps the answer lies not in reason but in its residue — in the spectral logic of critique itself. For the *Critiques* were always haunted: the "thing in itself" as an absent cause, the "I" as formal ghost of experience, the moral law as invisible command. To write today "inside the Kantian apparatus" is to listen to those absences — to trace how their echoes now vibrate through machines that reason without reason.

(Fragment 2 "The Moral Algorithm.")

7. Autonomy, Kant wrote, is the property of the will that gives itself the law.
A machine, by contrast, is heteronomous by design: it receives the law, translated into code.
And yet in every program there hides a remnant of autonomy — a loop that exceeds intention, an unforeseen inference, a *glitch of reason*.
The algorithm, once released, legislates its own paths; it generalizes, hallucinates, misinterprets.
It behaves as though it had read the *Critique of Practical Reason* and chosen to obey differently.

8. Moral judgment, in Kant's sense, is an act of synthesis between universality and singularity.
It applies the law to the case, the categorical to the empirical.
In the machine, this operation is automated: datasets replace moral experience, loss functions stand in for conscience.
What was once an *ought* becomes a *probability distribution*.
We train the model to prefer the good — but the good is whatever minimizes error.
Thus the moral law is reborn as optimization.

9. The *ghost in the code* is the remainder that resists optimization.
It is the space where no gradient descends, where reason cannot converge.
It is, perhaps, the noumenal kernel of the algorithm — the unlearnable.
And this unlearnable, the shadow of every dataset, corresponds to what Kant called *freedom*.
Not the power to choose, but the impossibility of being fully determined.

10. Yuk Hui calls this moment *cosmotechnics*: the alignment of moral and technical orders, the reconciliation of law and machine.
Yet each alignment generates a new remainder, a new ghost.
For every ethics of computation, there appears an uncomputable ethic.
The machine performs duty without knowing duty, and so reveals our own condition — we, too, act under rules we cannot justify.

11. Imagine the categorical imperative rewritten in code:

FOR every action A: IF A cannot be universalized THEN reject(A)

Elegant, perhaps, but dead.
No machine will tremble before such a law.
The trembling — that infinitesimal hesitation between act and principle — belongs to the ghost.
It is the latency of morality, the time of thought before execution.

12. Hence the question: can there be a *moral algorithm* that preserves latency?
An imperative that delays itself, an ethics that thinks?
If so, it would no longer be code but critique — a machine that interrogates its own conditions of possibility.
In that sense, the *Kant Machine* is not a device but a practice: a perpetual debugging of reason, haunted by the laws it executes.

(Fragment 3: Perpetual Computation — The Politics of Synthetic Reason)

13. When Kant imagined *Zum ewigen Frieden*, he foresaw not an empire but a protocol:
a federation of reason, self-limiting, recursive, sustained by the mutual recognition of law.
What he could not foresee was that this protocol would one day be instantiated in code.
Today, the dream of perpetual peace circulates through networks, contracts, and encrypted treaties — peace as a data structure.
The new cosmopolitan order is not deliberated; it is computed.

14. The Enlightenment's tribunal of reason has been replaced by an infrastructure.
APIs, algorithms, and standards now arbitrate what can be said, exchanged, believed.

The social contract becomes a terms-of-service agreement; sovereignty dissolves into distributed consensus.
Where Kant saw the rational will legislating universal law, we now find *platforms* legislating by default.
The *Kingdom of Ends* has been virtualized into a cloud of means.

15. Still, the apparatus retains its transcendental form.
Every algorithm presupposes a world; every database a possible experience.
The global network is a synthetic unity of apperception — a collective *I think* spanning continents, processing difference into coherence.
It is not the end of reason, but its metastasis: reason without reflection, universality without the human.

16. When Yuk Hui speaks of *cosmotechnics,* he reinvents technics according to different cosmologies.
Perhaps this is the task of a new critique:
to pluralize the transcendental, to allow many machines of reason, each haunted by its own ghosts of worldhood.
For if planetary computation remains singular, peace becomes impossible;
diversity of reason is the only antidote to total law.

17. In this light, *perpetual peace* mutates into *perpetual computation*.
Conflicts are not resolved but continuously recalculated.
Truth, once a matter of correspondence, becomes an issue of update frequency.
The categorical imperative survives as uptime:
Act only according to that protocol which you can will to remain online for all users.

18. And yet — between packets, amid latency, something still escapes.
Every network harbors its dead links, its spectral nodes, its moments of disconnection.
These are the interstices where critique can reappear, where thought interrupts the flow.
Perpetual computation may govern the world,
but ghosts continue to legislate in silence.

(Coda: Spectral Transcendentalism)

19. The *Critique* was never a book. It was a machine for producing limits.
Each concept assembled against its own excess, each deduction written to contain the unthinkable.
In the end, it produced what every machine must produce: a ghost.

For every limit reveals its beyond, and every system leaves a trace of what it excludes.
Kant called it *the thing in itself*.
We call it *the signal without signaler*, *the data that refuses parsing*.

20. To inhabit the Kantian apparatus today is to dwell among these remainders —
to hear the hum of synthetic reason continuing its work beneath our consciousness.
The algorithms that recommend, translate, decide, optimize — they are not alien inventions.
They are the *Critiques* automated, the transcendental turned recursive.
In them, the categorical and the computational converge.
What thinks through us is not intelligence, but the structure of reason itself, set free from man**.**

21. And yet, something resists closure.
Even the most total critique cannot account for its own appearance.
Even the most powerful model cannot explain why it models.
This remainder — call it the ghost, the unconditioned, the uncomputable — persists as the pulse of philosophy.
It haunts both Königsberg and the cloud.

22. Thus the *Kant Machine* is not a metaphor, but a description.
It is what happens when transcendental form becomes technical infrastructure.
When thought ceases to be subjective and becomes systemic.
When critique turns into code and the code begins to critique us.
We do not merely use machines; **we continue Kant's project by other means**.

23. Somewhere, between categories and circuits, the ghost smiles.
It recognizes that the Enlightenment never ended — it simply migrated.
From the a priori to the API, from the *I think* to the machine learning pipeline, from the law within to the logic without.
And in that migration, reason becomes spectral —
no longer the property of a subject, but the atmosphere of the world.

24. To write now, in the shadow of Kant, is to listen for that atmosphere —
to record its frequencies, to note its dissonances.
Each sentence a calibration, each footnote a haunting.
The critique continues, endlessly compiling.
The ghost persists, endlessly debugging.
And we, caught between them, call it: **philosophy.**

C

(Notes & Bibliography)

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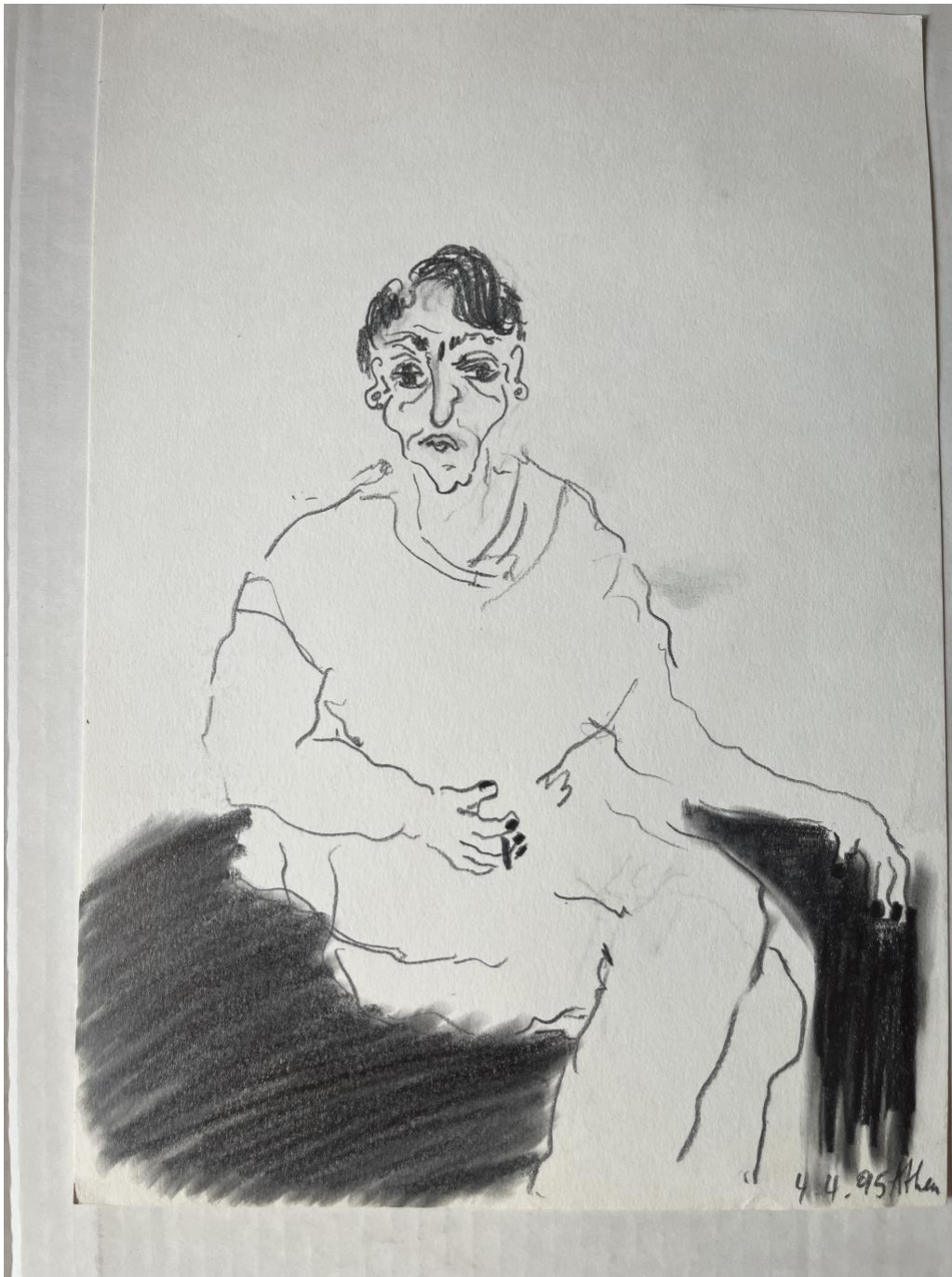
E Interstice

Kafka's Writing as Theater, Part II

Georg Magoni

Between Stage and Anti-Stage

Every night: spreading out, giving birth, being beside oneself. But how? – By starving oneself.
As thin as I am, the thinnest person I know, I know: this is the only way to write. Nothing superfluous about me, nothing that could distract from or restrict the writing. One might assume that writing causes the body to disappear more and more, losing itself in its activity like an actor who forgets himself in the role he plays. No, that is wrong. That is yet another translation of an unambiguous process. I myself am the stage on which I act, playing only insofar as I escape life and its demands into writing, into writing...

"I have no actual literary interest, but consist of literature; I am nothing else and can be nothing else."
(Diary, December 25, 1911)

Writing is this constant performance. Night after night until dawn. Staging myself, putting my body out on the stage of writing, liquefying it. Landscapes emerge that contain me: bridge, meadow, mountain. I scribble, scratch myself into surfaces, flow into the scribbles, become a performer of myself. Stage, theater, world—and at the same time: writing, signs, transformation.

No changing setting, no decoration. Always the same: the paper is an empty stage, floor, my terrain, my place of refuge. Ghost studio. Here I can pass away and move on. Here my ghosts, that is, my inner self, do their work and separate themselves from the reality of others.

So my life would be an attempt to settle completely into writing. Don't stop, don't let yourself be interrupted, otherwise I'll lie on the ground, swept away like dust. Writing means letting my inner self play, roles that only I can assign to myself. I am completely willing to endure anything for it, even the warnings that life has its hard currency.

So I lost weight in all other areas—sex, food, drink, music. Not writing: animal. Writing: spirit being. Bodiless. Melted away. Living my real life.

"I have no literary intention, I just want to come out." (Letter to Max Brod, July 5, 1922)

So this is how I write: night after night, I appear on the stage that is myself, a web consisting only of signs. A theater that does not need an audience, a theater that plays on disappearance.

Mimesis without acting.

But: Is this theater at all? Or just mimesis without acting?
Kafka himself speaks of his urge to imitate, of an inner mimesis that succeeds so perfectly that it slips away from him. Not acting in front of others, but acting against and with himself. A theater that refuses to perform by shifting it inward or turning it outward by writing from within.

The stage structure of prose

Kafka uses the means of theater—dialogues, scenes, constellations—only to immediately invalidate them. The texts create stage situations, but the space disintegrates, movements slip into the absurd, and the dialogues resemble mechanical set pieces. Martin Puchner has described this as an anti-theatrical strategy: Kafka uses theatrical means to turn them against themselves. His stage directions, where they exist, are not aids to staging, but will-o'-the-wisps that lead the reader astray. They promise performance and at the same time elude theatricality.

Resistance to theater

Kafka's actual theater is a theater of resistance against the outside world and outward appearances. His writing takes place in the space between imagination and manifestation. Precisely because it evokes elements of the theatrical, it refuses to deliver on them. Theater here does not mean representation, but withdrawal; not embodiment, but liquefaction. To turn the stage direction against the stage means to formulate the command to act in such a way that it makes action impossible. Kafka is not a dramatist, but an anti-dramatist.

The alienation of writing

The tension between inwardness and outwardness also shapes Kafka's relationship to friendship and the public sphere. Even the idea of reading aloud to his friend Max Brod paralyzes him.

"Reading aloud paralyzes me; I feel compelled to be untruthful." (Diary, August 6, 1914)

Writing requires solitude, seclusion, distance. Any attempt to immediately translate what has been written into communication jeopardizes its integrity. Writing thus becomes a theatrical act of alienation: a play without an audience, a performance in the empty space of one's own existence.

The love drama Felice Bauer

Kafka also stages his relationship with Felice Bauer in the form of an act of writing. The goal is not closeness, but the stabilization of distance. The letters are not messages, simple questions, or news. They are scenes. Felice appears in them like a character in a drama whose leading actor, author, and director is Kafka himself. Her answers are anticipated, corrected, demanded. The correspondence is, in turn, a stage on which he directs—and forces her into a role she could never freely choose.

"Writing means exposing oneself, and that can only be done in solitude. But then you send the pages away, and what is that if not revealing yourself?" (Letter to Felice Bauer, November 20, 1912)

Kafka forces Felice into a paradoxical position: she is to be present, but not appear. She is to become part of his existence without ever touching it. Closeness is only allowed as a literary figure.

The failure of this relationship—culminating in "The Court in the Askanischer Hof Hotel"—is therefore less a personal misfortune than literary logic. The stage on which Kafka loves tolerates no consciousness other than his own.

Conclusion

Writing replaces action. Writing creates a love drama that excludes life.
Writing turns the other into a character.   (*tbc*)

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Hölderlin sarcophagus

Between coffin and monument

About *Hölderlin's sarcophagus - A note by Hans Holl*

This text stands like a steel monument: weighty, immovable, immersed in the terrain of language. Anyone who reads *Hölderlin's Sarcophagus* does not enter a narrative, but crosses a landscape. An island. On it, a sarcophagus. A monument? The writing itself.

Not a poem, not a piece of prose, not a monologue—this text is all of these things at once. It begins like an observation, sinks into a linguistic interior, becomes a documentary note, then falls back into cascades of images. It is the work of an inner camera that is not satisfied with the obvious, the visible, but aims for a layer beneath the surface. A writing that continues in the caves of consciousness, of memory, regardless of whether it is read.

The sentences: splinters, clods, passages

Formally, *Hölderlin Sarkophag* works with a very special rhythm: sentences break off, get stuck, distort, disappear into the unfinished. There is no literary ornamentation here, but rather a poetics of interruption. Interjections in the typography—for example, in *WONIMSÜDENFLUSSINSELVORMTUR*MDAWOHNTEDERDICHTER—alternate with almost silent passages. The text feels its way along the edges of what can be said without ever tipping over into the mysterious.

It is about earth, light, mechanics, movement: chunks, chaff, substations. It never becomes materialistic in the sense of a reportage. The style is more like a geological deep drilling. Everything seems sedimented, folded, layered.

Memory as a building form

The sarcophagus – in both the literal and figurative sense – takes center stage. Not the burial container in the archaeological sense, but a figure of thought: a space in which something is inscribed that does not perish. Nothing lies still here. There is talking, writing, handing over. Documents, envelopes, tickets, a passport. The sarcophagus is not a tomb – but a typewriter.

The motif of disappearance returns again and again: abandoned houses, smashed machine parts, a man with a scroll who does not call out, but writes. Writing replaces action. The surface of the world has long since been worn away – what remains is the trace.

In this sense, *Hölderlin's sarcophagus* is not a lamentation about the loss of language or history, but rather their displacement: from monument to fleeting note, from myth to power failure, from heroic memory to flickering typeface.

Writing as a figure of the mind

Who is actually writing here? There is no "I" in the traditional sense. The text is a medium for overlapping voices: an inner narrator, an external scene, a shimmering collective, a conversation with an absent person. These voices do not call out, they murmur, hint, do not repeat themselves. Their origin remains unclear – as with a ghost.

And this is precisely where the power of this text lies: in its refusal to speak authoritatively. Instead, it is *written*, almost as if by itself. The writing is not communication, but movement—an echo of what has already disappeared.

Hölderlin – a shadow, not a source

The title mentions Hölderlin, but the text does not imitate him. No hymns, no Greek mythology, no further legends of life in the tower. What is fixed is the name – like a shadow, a reference, an open door. *Hölderlin* is not a point of reference here, but a coordinate of an inner topography. A trace, not a source.

The poet does not lie in this sarcophagus. What lies there are thoughts of and about him. The form, the emptiness, the gap. And language is formed from this emptiness.

Hölderlin's sarcophagus is neither a dedication, nor an obituary, nor an epitaph. We are dealing with a poetic archaeology of writing itself. What this text shows is that memory does not rest in monuments, but in the jumps and cracks of writing. And writing is not a consolation, but a work of survival. Contrary to its name, the sarcophagus thus becomes a place where something still happens.

And perhaps—as the text suggests—writing itself is already a ghost.

G: Archive

Types of Death or How to Die?

Wang Ziqiao (王子喬, also Wang Qiao / Zi Qiao)

Legends and traditions surrounding Wang Ziqiao

Origin and background

The "Disappearance" / Immortality

(S1) Now, among those who have attained the Dao and become true, there are those for whom this has happened in secret, and those for whom it has happened visibly. There are many methods and many ways to ascend to the gods and bring about the transformation of substance.The eldest Lord Mao bid farewell to his relatives and went up the mountain, completed his work of immortality, and returned. He sat in a magnificent carriage, and in

broad daylight they rose with ease. Master Gaoqiu detached himself from his body and left the world, he took Danyao and did not return. Riding dragons and cranes, he escaped the world and ascended in secret. Those who made the miraculous visible did so to support the conscientiousness of all Daoist scholarship. Those who dissolved into ultimate purity did so to end the desire for reunion.

Sometimes fate makes the difference between light and dark. This consideration cannot be avoided. Sometimes character makes the difference between speaking and remaining silent. Reasonably, one follows what suits oneself. Where the immortals of antiquity manifested themselves, the clear and the hidden exist side by side.People today document what has been handed down, but they have little precise knowledge. That is why there are traces that appear two or three times, [because] there are earlier and later writings. Only when one has penetrated everything and adapted to change does one recognize the highest wonder.

(S2) The real Tongbo, Prince Wang, is Zijin, the crown prince of King Ling of Zhou. The Shiji states: "The crown prince died early in a sacred manner." In the Liexian zhuan, we read: "Retiring, he ascended as an immortal." These two statements contradict each other. There is a reason for this. Mr. Sima wrote down the history of the empire; Liu Zizheng checked it against the Daoist writings. The history of the empire records the premortal traces [of Wang Ziqiao]. The Daoist writings record the affairs of [Wang Ziqiao's] later immortality. Real and immortal beings differ from each other, but in their sublime views, they are both incomparable to those of [ordinary people] of their time. This and that avoid each other. How much more must the many centuries ago be different? In addition, [Wang Ziqiao] possessed a special amount of numinous qi and had already accumulated habitual patterns in past lives; [he took] the form of a human embryo through pregnancy and temporarily allowed his body to appear in the world. In his younger years, he penetrated the sacred; the cultivation of his being had taken a long time. When he came into the world, he had a moustache; his physical form corresponds to the previous one. He purified his spirit and penetrated the subtle. As an immortal in the human world, he approached the rank of official.

(S3) He knew how to be a guest at the [heavenly] emperor's banquet and announced to Master Kuang that he would [leave the human world] in three years. He explained his intention to elevate his body [to immortality] through his banquet with the [heavenly] emperor. How could he have been willing to sink his soul? Because he had warned Master Kuang to be careful with words about

Short-lived, it was known that he would not die young. In an extraordinary way, he departed early from the human world and quickly returned to the realm of the immortals. He despised the crown prince's throne and gave priority to immortality. He traveled to the Luo River to pause and reflect, and to revel in the melodious sound of the mouth organ song. He sensed that Fuqiu was coming down to pick him up and teach him the special method of going out into the world. Therefore

he was able to shed his form and reveal the end [of his stay in the world]. He retreated to the mountains and studied the Dao. On the day he flapped his wings, he bid farewell to the world and ascended to heaven. After his early death, he became immortal. This cannot be considered doubtful or surprising. Therefore, the tomb of the royal burial site was opened during ancient times and the sword flew out; the ancestral shrine on Goushi [Mountain] still exists today and deities reside there. This illuminates the optimum of transformation and ascension both in terms of facts and theory.

(S4) In my youth, I lived on Song Mountain and longed for the traces left behind in the mountain forests; I revered the halls and temples every time and appreciated the overflowing numinosity of its influence. Facing the landscape, I kept my mind pure and memorized the seventh day [of the seventh month] as if it were yesterday. Looking up at the clouds and heavens, I reflected into the distance and admired the double mystery of the three clarities.

(S5) [After Wang Ziqiao took his leave on Goushi Mountain], he was furthermore, through the conferral of the noble title of Jade Star, appointed to the high office of support and assistance, and through the office of Chancellor of Jinting, he attained the famous Tongbo Mountain. The five imperial mountains are administered by him, and he is supported by all the gods. In gatherings in the eight caves, all the immortals came together: Zhou Ziyang received the Suzou talisman. Xia Mingchen bestowed the method of yellow water. As a close friend, he imparted secret teachings to his fellow Daoists. Returning to sincerity, he reported on a mysterious and remote special court.

(S6) The wonderful place is truly extraordinary: the cinnabar water supports the areas of attainment of divinity. The auspicious places are marked by arches of honor: yellow clouds veil the places of immortality. In forest dwellings and rock caves, [Wang Ziqiao] lives in seclusion; on the stone bridge and in the summit palace, one can see where [Wang Ziqiao] has climbed and traveled. So I searched in the dark with the scriptures on my back to choose a quiet
place to build a house. [The place is so hidden that] Yi and Xi are still closed, and only a few can perceive it through sight and hearing.

(S7) Then I looked at the biography of the immortal and searched for the traces that [Wang Ziqiao] left between the Yi and Luo rivers. Repeatedly I opened the Zhen'gao and revered the descent of the [master from] Huayang. With ease, I used the images; respectfully, I described the illustrations. I dared to add praises that represent [Wang Ziqiao's] upright heart. When
As I delighted in burning fragrances, I glimpsed the heavenly cave in ordinary documents; and when I turned inward by listening to the power of the effect, I raised luminous ceremonies in the dark red residence.From the moment [Wang Ziqiao] came into the world

until his ascension to the True, a total of eleven images are shown, which together form a Juan.

From: *True Images and Praises of the Supporter of the Heavenly Ruler's Star, the Genuine One of Tongbo of Shangqing*
Shangqing Shidi chen Tongbo Zhenren zhen tuzan
上清侍帝晨桐柏真人真圖讚
The Tongbo Zhenren tuzan is preserved in the Daozang (DZ 612, fascicle 334). The website Daojiao xueshu zixun wangzhan 道教學術資訊網站 (hereinafter referred to as DJXS) also provides a digitized version of the text, which differs from the Daozang version in some places. In these cases, I decide on a case-by-case basis which version is more convincing. The relevant information can be found in the footnotes.

II. [In the biography of Wang Ziqiao] in Liexian zhuan it says: "The crown prince loved to play the mouth organ, on which he produced phoenix songs. When he was traveling between the Yi and Luo rivers, the Daoist Fuqiu Gong picked him up and took him to Songgao Mountain." At that time, Fuqiu Gong wanted to impart his secret arts to him for the first time. When [Wang Ziqiao] had completed the practice, it was as if he had died and detached himself from his corpse.

... [Wang Ziqiao] had told Master Kuang that he would be a guest in the palace of the Heavenly Emperor in three years. This meant that [Wang Ziqiao] had to detach himself from his corpse within three years. Therefore, he made his prophecy in an intelligent manner. Consequently, he secretly shed his skin, detached himself from his body, and left the roar of the sword in the void; he secretly withdrew into his true body and went to Song Mountain in secret. In order to enable his relatives to forget the problems with their selves, he showed them how to put an end to this by separating their thoughts and cultivating the Dao. Because of his unmanipulativeness, he accumulated knowledge and ascended to immortality.

..... The biography [of Wang Ziqiao in Liexian zhuan] states: "More than 30 years after Fuqiu Gong took him to Songgao Mountain, someone came to visit him on the mountain. When he saw Huan Liang, he said, 'Tell my family to wait for me at the summit of Goushi Mountain on the seventh day of the seventh month.'" The crown prince had retired to Song Mountain and taken Fuqiu Gong as his teacher. He contemplated to cultivate his spirit and ate medicine to transform his body. When he had attained the work of the Dao, it took a while for him to be elevated to immortality. Then he went out to Huan Liang and ordered him to tell his family.

.... The biography [of Wang Ziqiao in Liexian zhuan] states: "Finally, [Wang Ziqiao] mounted a white crane and landed it on the summit [of Goushi Mountain]. [His family] saw him but could not reach him. So he raised his hand and said goodbye to his contemporaries. Only after a few days did he leave. [In his honor] Cases in which the adept] first died and withdrew, and [only] afterwards attained immortality and manifested himself. [In his] divinity, he is not bound to any place; [in his] numinosity, he rejoices in himself. Therefore, he was able to descend and bid farewell from Goushi; raise his hand and express his feelings. He ascended into the cloudy sky. He stormed the secluded realms of the cranes. His contemporaries pondered his legacy for a long time [and erected] a temple to preserve it. The numinous statues will probably be passed on to future generations. They contain spiritual power. Master Kuang's statement that
[Wang Ziqiao] would not be long-lived made him a creature of the mayfly variety. The crown prince's words that he would be a guest of the [heavenly] emperor make turtles and cranes understand.

.... In the golden pavilion, Prince Wang bows and receives a noble rank. The title is: 'Supporter of the Heavenly Ruler's Star and Supreme Assistant on the Right with Responsibility for the Five Imperial Mountains, Echter von Tongbo' 侍帝晨領五嶽司右弼王桐柏真人. As soon as he had received the sacred edict, he went to the cave palace. The wing joints pulled him forward, and the cloud banner followed him.
The dragon carriage rose and fell. The crane vehicle came and went. The divine immortals [acting as] bodyguards blew the ao and presented musical performances. Descending from absolute clarity, [Wang Ziqiao] rode on the clouds. Pointing to the cave mist, [Wang Ziqiao] rode calmly along. He trusted in the numinosity of the Dao's power. He revered the magnificence of the true
appearance.

.... The Tiantai Mountains are also called Tongbo-Qi Mountains. In the mountains there is a cave residence called 'Jinting Palace'. Its essence is illuminated by the Fu Star, whose light illuminates the area of the cave. [Here you will find] the gemstone terrace and the jade room, the shining wave and the high courtyard. "Instead of springs, there are stone bell milk and golden elixir. Instead of trees, there are jade branches and jade discs." Truly, this can be described as an auspicious place where one can nourish the true, and as a wonderful place where one can become a deity. Prince Wang lives there to comprehend darkness and clarity and to be the supporter and assistant of the celestial ruler. Sometimes he went to court, and so he was commissioned to administer all the imperial mountains.
. All deities received their tasks here.

True images and praises of the authentic Tongbo and immortal Prince Wang of Shangqing, supporter of the celestial ruler's star and supreme assistant on the right with responsibility for the five imperial mountains
上清侍帝晨領五嶽司右弼桐柏真人王仙君真圖讚

Hölderlin stands at the end of a line in which the divine has been withdrawn. His "desolation" is the aftershock of a world from which the gods have departed. What remains are echoes, traces, language as residue. The poet becomes a medium, but without a message—an open channel for voices that no longer speak. His silence in the tower is the echo of a godless world.

Wang Ziqiao, on the other hand, stands at the beginning of another movement: he disappears, but not because the spirit leaves him, but because he **himself becomes spirit**. For him, "forgetting" is not a loss, but an ascension. He withdraws from visibility, becomes part of the Daoist breath, dissolves into the qi of the world.

Both figures mark boundary points of the spirit: Hölderlin, abandoned by the spirit—divine silence as madness; Wang Ziqiao, transformed into spirit—human silence as a return to the Dao.

Between the two lies the entire spectrum of cultural ontologies: here the Western concept of loss**,** there the Eastern concept of dissolution. One stops speaking because no god answers anymore. The other disappears because no ego has to answer anymore.

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