Thinking as If Already Dead: The Imaginal Life of Gilles Deleuze

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How does one imagine the life of an author? Do we account for the entire corpus of their works? Should we factor in further their lives, transgressions, apprehensions, and misdemeanors? And what of their shameful compromises with power? Should we acknowledge their "errors" in thinking? And should the author be subjected to those critiques from the future, whose lines are already working to condemn them to a past that no longer has any critical purchase? Might we even subject them to their own critical standards and judge them on account of some perceived fallibility? While some of these questions are invariably inviting of all too theological responses, we find our own in the thought and life of Gilles Deleuze. No author since Nietzsche understood better the need to affirm life against the petty dogmatisms and fashions of the times. And no author understood better how power seeks to appropriate what it can from the critical, inverting its energy and taming whatever is singularly creative in it.

But we should make a qualification from the outset. The Deleuze we have in mind is not simply the Deleuze of the event or the Deleuze of becoming. Such an image of Deleuze is now passé. Nor is it the Deleuze who ended up trapped in technical thinking through an altogether autistic affection for the machinic. The machinic in Deleuze is something we never really understood. The way we imagine Deleuze is with a different image. It is an image of Deleuze who understood the importance of the abstract in thought. A philosopher who found just as much critical meaning in the barbaric words of Kafka or the brutal lines of Francis Bacon as he would insist upon bringing a creative violence to all predetermined frameworks. This is a Deleuze whose thought refuses all modes of capture. A Deleuze who makes creativity central to any viable notion of critique.

What a sight it is to imagine Deleuze taking his final line of flight! How heartwarming it is to picture the author not suffering and finding life too unbearable but determined to end the event of his life on his own terms! Like Yves Klein taking that leap into the void, might we not see the

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most literal flight happening to a philosopher for whom movement was everything? And yet was this not also the philosopher who challenged the Platonic vision for philosophical inquiry? A philosopher who in his actual death subverted the Platonic idea that "to philosophize is to learn how to die." We cannot know how to die until it is too late. That much is certain. And yet as Paul Celan showed as he also took his final leap into the Seine, learning how to die is never quite enough. It too has become passé when it comes to thinking about life. What is required and what we find in the thought of Deleuze is an attempt to live as if already dead. Deleuze's image of life is not then some Heideggerian being-toward-death. It had after all already emerged from the void into which it will eventually and eternally return. Having already put oneself on the other side of the threshold, Deleuze's image of life is all about thinking as if one is already dead. It is to embrace the ontology of the void and allow it to throw a blanket over life. It is to welcome the preexistent extinction of being, mind-fucking the resiliently minded, while finding as much joy in the final fall as Alice found in the descent into Wonderland.

Mindful of the affirmation of the fall, the purpose of this essay is to offer a more affirmative reading of the thought of Deleuze than those that work through his concepts of event and becoming. Instead we choose to emphasize Deleuze's theory of images and imagination as central to our concept of freedom. But contra Deleuze, this is not a trite account of the imagination that neatly fits into identitarian frameworks that are proving to be so amenable and yet so suffocating to the so-called radical Left today. And it is certainly not an account of the imagination that finds reasons once again to invoke the sovereign right to ban based on resurrected moral ideals of the common good and sensitized logics of common sense. In fact, it is not an account at all. Working against the nihilistic algebras of death, which keep a body alive as it lives out some catatonic state of imagined being as harmonious as it is dull, as predictable as it is puerile, it is an imagination that faces the intolerable, shatters the representational with the outrageous, and looks upon the future not as some endemic terrain of catastrophe and crisis but as an opening onto an impending death whose threshold is inviting us to cross over into the beckoning void of existence. A philosophy where life and death are but matters of "perspective" and where the fires of death literally become us all.

The Crisis of the Imagination

We can only imagine today how Deleuze might have felt seeing the Left collapse so fully back into the dialectical vicissitudes of identity politics. He might recoil at the realization the Leftist bourgeoisie have

appropriated some of his language on "difference"; yet bound it to an entirely broken notion of species being whose overdetermined narratives of victimization have rendered his notion of subjectivity rather meaningless. Becoming today has become performance. It is not a becoming imperceptible but, on the contrary, the need to a becoming everywhere perceptible and everywhere seen and heard. But if there is a crisis of the Left today, it is not simply a crisis of identity. And it is certainly not about the question of having power. What the Left faces today is a crisis of imagination.[1]

To get through this crisis, we think it pertinent to develop a more aesthetically nuanced theory of the politics of identity, notably of its limits in terms of the imaginary that governs it. Our initial sources for rethinking the politics of imagination at work today take us back to Henri Bergson, who had a notable impact on Deleuze. Indeed, if we follow these two thinkers we can appreciate how images themselves are always and necessarily embodied phenomena. For Bergson there is always an economy of images, such that it makes no sense to attempt to classify them according to one frame of description or make claim to a theory of "the image" as such. Images are neither deep nor shallow by definition, just as the real is neither deep nor shallow by definition. Indeed, the real itself is to be understood as composed of images, nothing more, nothing less, if we follow Bergson's line of thought. Not in the naive ways by which we might speak of ourselves as making images *of* the real as if the real were somehow merely a product of the images we make of it, but a thing itself made up of images, self-existing images as it were (Bergson 2005, 10). Within the economic totality of images that composes the real, there are major differences between the ways in which images can and do affect us. Just take the color white in all its totality as an example. For some it appears as a sign of purity; for us it's more terrifying than the blackest black. Some images are also more powerful than others, or at least their powers are in each case different, and some images thus attain greater importance for us, becoming seemingly more real, on account of their depth. Many images, we do not, in fact, see at all. For images themselves can be present without their being seen, so long as we remain oblivious to them (Lacey 1993, 88–92).

But within this economy of images both seen and unseen, there is a particular kind of image that Bergson regarded as "privileged" (2005, 61). An image that is "perceived in its depths and no longer only on the surface" in contrast with other less privileged and less powerful images of which we see only the "outer skin." Yes, images possess skin, and in possessing skin, bodies, according to Bergson, which we penetrate, more or less, depending on where they stand in the economic totality of images that constitute our worlds. They are as bodies in real space, possessive of the

same stability as any other kind of body while weighing much less and being more agile, conducive to movement, and sometimes easier to deal with than bodies in real space. Within the economy of bodies that constitutes the world of images, the most privileged image of all is that which we receive of our own bodies. "The body," that which we call and think of as our own body, is the image that is always there, the image without which we feel that we cannot live, cannot act, cannot think, or indeed cannot feel as such (Matthews 1999, 126). In this regard we are always "image conscious" in that we are always operating within "images of thought." And it is, you might say, a heavy image, an image we have the sense of carrying around with us, being dependent upon, as well as often bothered by, as well as a source of immense pleasure and utter torment. That which is most real for us—in a sense, our own body—is not distinct from the worlds of images that surround it and to which it is subject but an image among images.

Bergson is important, therefore, insofar as images provide him with an "ontological ground floor" for a theory of the real in ways that were hitherto unrivaled (Lacey 1993, 89). This did not make Bergson an idealist in the ways that idealism has opposed itself to crude realism since the eighteenth century. Bergson's aim was to go beyond both realism and idealism by neither reducing the real to the perceptions we have of it à la idealism nor crediting the real with producing our perceptions of it à la realism (Bergson 2005, 9). Bergson's ontology of the image, therefore, has to be understood in its distinction from George Berkeley's ontology of the idea, whereby the real is merely reduced to its representation. This was also an image of the real that Deleuze, following Bergson, was desperate to shatter. A position the abstract painters had been notably at pains to break with too. Instead, the real is to be understood as an aggregate of "images," and by images, Bergson meant a certain existence that is more than that which idealists call representations and less than that which crude realists call things; an existence halfway between things and their representations. Images are what are, irrespective of debates over the relations and differences between real things and the representations we have and make of them. They are not reducible to real things but different from them. At the same time their existence is different to and more than that of mere representations or surface-level "appearances."

Bergson's influence on the development of philosophy and the importance of his theory of images as a basis for advancing our understanding of the nature of the real would become apparent in the late twentieth century on account of the work of Deleuze, the greatest exponent of Bergson's image-based ontology. While his entire project was committed to interrogating the "image of thought," Deleuze broached the question of the relation between the real and the image most extensively in his

two-volume study of cinema.[2] In fact, these works constitute a profoundly Bergsonian philosophy of the image rather than the theory of movies that their titles and subject matter would otherwise suggest and that, it has to be said, they have largely been read for. There, and in ways that are indebted to Bergson, he argued that the real and the imaginary are to be construed as distinct and yet following each other, "running behind each other and referring back to each other around a point of indiscernibility" (Deleuze 1989, 69). This point of indiscernibility organizing the relation of the real to the image does not affect, he argued, their ultimate and more fundamental difference. They are different. If, or when, we confuse one with the other, we make a simple error of fact (69). This poses a particular problem for us, especially when it comes to *identification*. How do we make sense of a relation between two things, such as the image and the real, that is indiscernible or possibly even absent? And how do we create an image of a relation of indiscernibility, an image, that is to say, of something that cannot be seen or even sensed?

By following Bergson and insisting on the fundamental difference between the image and the real, as well as their relation, Deleuze was able to set out an analysis of the field of forces within which the image and the real interact. Deleuze valorized the force with which human beings are, in exceptional circumstances, he argued, able to project images into the real, images drawn from ourselves and our friends, which in their intensity take on "a life of their own" (Deleuze 1998b, 118). This is what we might think of as imaginal life. For Deleuze, T. E. Lawrence was precisely such a figure, a man, with a disposition and a tendency "to project—into things, into reality, into the future, and even into the sky—an image of himself and others so intense that *it has a life of its own*: an image that is always stitched together, patched up, continually growing along the way, to the point where it becomes fabulous. It is a machine for manufacturing giants, what Bergson called a fabulatory function" (117–18). What inspired Lawrence, Deleuze argued, was this desire and capacity "to be a truly dangerous man" on account of being defined not by a relation to the real or to the imaginary "but solely in relation to the force through which he projects images into the real" (118). Creativity as such is antithetical to identity, for what it seeks is anything but the identical. It is that capacity for force—and that positioning of himself on the side of neither the real nor the imaginary but in between, connected to both by the force with which he projected images into the real—that made Lawrence the dangerous man he was said to be. He was, to use another Deleuzian term, *imperceptible* to the ordinary schematics of identification. Thus, as the Arabs join the Revolt, they are molded on the projected images that Lawrence has made for them, making giants of them (118). Lawrence's projection machine fabulated in that he evoked the collective identity

of an Arab "people to come." His writings and the force with which he projected images into the real, by way of his writing, were inseparable, Deleuze maintained, from the Arab Revolt itself.

Lawrence himself lauded his own ability as a dreamer of great and powerful images. "All men dream, but not equally," he wrote. "Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible" (1997, 7). Such statements will smack to many as vain and elitist. But the argument is an important one in terms of our understanding of the relations between imagination and reason, the powers of the image in comparison with the power of the real. It is true, we might assume, that every idiot dreams. The question, the political question especially, is which image works. We have to learn to redeploy reason, not to simply place limits on where our imaginations can go and which images they give birth to, but to sort through our images and govern, by ourselves, the circulation of cliché in the dream life of the subject, such that it is able to take its place in the real with force. Preexisting normative conceptions of identity are the last place we should look.

Félix Guattari, Deleuze's frequent collaborator, credited a similar force of imagination to the writer Jean Genet. Genet himself, as Guattari explained, challenged the very distinction between the real and the imaginary, or what Guattari labeled "the Real-Imaginary dyad" (2013, 218). What motivated him was the fear of becoming a prisoner of the imagination, someone who has fallen entirely into the imaginary and become the imaginary personified (216). Perhaps this was the same fear that motivated Guattari and Deleuze to become armchair philosophers, purveyors of philosophical images, the existences of which bear no consequences for the real. In Genet's case, this fear led to him becoming involved in the Palestinian struggle in the Occupied Territories during the 1970s as well as working with the Black Panthers in the United States. But, in Guattari's account of Genet at least, this fear generated a different form of engagement with the real than his simply becoming an organic intellectual of and for political movements and struggles. Guattari admired how Genet was able to engage with the "historical realities" of such struggles and problems while at the same time never giving up "his dreams and his infantile 'perversions'" (218).

The imagination itself, following Deleuze, faces two threats; one of being "sullied by reason," the other of being "sullied by memory" (Deleuze 1998a, 158). The task is to make, if possible, a pure image, unsullied by neither: "one that is nothing but an image, by reaching the point where it emerges in all its singularity, retaining nothing of the personal or the rational" (158). The power of an image is to be defined not by "its

content but by its form . . . the force it mobilizes to create a void or to bore holes, to loosen the grip of words . . . so as to free itself from memory and reason" (159). It is to open oneself to the great void of existence and find true meaning in the singularity of being.

If we can conceive of a language of images, then it is not a language of names or voices or even words: "What is tedious about a language of words is the way in which it is burdened with calculations, memories and stories" (Deleuze 1998a, 159). A language of images tells no stories, makes no calculations, evokes no memories. For the pure image stands "apart from words, stories, and memories, accumulates a fantastic potential energy, which it detonates by dissipating itself"; it is an incendiary device, that which brings an end to itself and all that which it affects (160). What counts in the image is not its content but this energy it harnesses and lets loose. There is no art to be invented, Deleuze argues, for the making of images that endure. Endurance is not a property of the image proper. This is not to say images exist outside of time. There is a time for images, "a right moment at which they can appear or insinuate themselves, breaking the combinations of words and the flow of voices" (161). It is a moment "near to the end, an hour close to the last" (161). The energy of the image is thus to be understood as fundamentally dissipative and not constitutive, because it is itself the mean of having done with itself. This is not to say that the image has no life, but quite the opposite. The image "is the spiritual life, the 'life above'" (169). "And as a spiritual movement, it cannot be separated from the process of its own disappearance, its dissipation. . . . [T]he image is a pant, a breath, an expiring breath, on its way to extinction" (170). This is why, we might say, identities are always nullifying, for eventually they will close down. Once consecrated, no identity wants to accept its expiry date or welcome its exhaustion.

So many philosophical and theoretical problems are expressions of the poverty of our concepts, especially the limits of our understandings of the range of concepts and their distinction from as well as with other concepts. It may well be that this rule applies to the philosophy of the image and imagination too, especially when those images offer a continuum in the history of theology and its attachment to the sacred as a way to continually imagine a meaningful life.[3] We would venture to say that the entire history of Western philosophy, its origins and development, can be explained in terms of an unrest concerning the problem of what counts as imaginary and what counts as real, as well, crucially, as what can be understood to be the nature and value of the real versus the imaginary, as well, thirdly, as what the relationships between imaginary and real things are. Practical questions, also, concerning what one should do with imaginary things, how one should comport oneself toward them, arise, of course, following upon philosophical decisions concerning the value

of those things determined as either real or imaginary, as well as the relationships of valuable to less valuable entities, either real or imaginary. Suffice to say, on the whole, we have tended historically, as a philosophical class, to assign value to the real over the imaginary. And this in turn paved the way for the dominance of the technical over the poetic, science over the arts; for in accordance with this script, in order for the real to be real it needs to be verified as such. We value the real insomuch as we value what is verifiably true as seen through a particular prism or filter that shapes perception and tells us in return the truth of what was seen.

But rather than repeat the often now trivial separation between the analytics and the continentals, perhaps there is another space, a third space, other than these spaces of the real and the imaginary, requiring another concept to describe it. A space located in between the real and the imaginary. Perhaps it is a space where human beings actually live in constant appreciation and denial of the void of existence. That in-between is a threshold point, but one without distinct coordinates. It lacks an identity, but that doesn't mean to say it is lacking. On the contrary, it is inhospitably abundant. It would seem obvious that neither the real nor the imaginary is an especially habitable space. No one can bear living in the real without the security of images, as much as nobody can manage living in the imaginary for very long until the real makes its intervention and "the bubble bursts." How often does reality destroy the image of the world we create for ourselves? Perhaps such a third space, one existing between the real and the image, is where the real and the image coalesce in some way. That space where all manner of intensities collide and in which reality avails itself to representation; for what is representation other than the process and the practice by which the real is represented by way of images?

The Life of the Imagination

Representation has its long line of critics. We no longer tend to believe in the classical idea of a disembodied schema of representation, an objectified perspective, productive of a universalizing image, by which the real may manifest its truth to all, regardless of position within that schema. Nor do we believe any longer in the theatrical space that the concept of representation has tended to presume (Lyotard 2004, 21). But from where does this notion that representation occurs as a process akin to the staging of a scene in a theater come? It is not, Lyotard argues, simply some accident of history or an errant failure of epistemology. It is itself a stage, in the temporal and not simply the physical sense, that accounts for the construction of the stage in the spatial sense in the development of human

beings. The formation of the child in the object-mother's gaze means the creation of a specular partition between them and thus in that moment a division between stage and audience (22). The construction of the stage, by the child, is itself the prelude, the necessary prelude, to a lifetime of hurt, loss, and suffering, for only representation of a theatrical kind suffers loss, experiences it as aggression (22). But why does this construction of the world as a stage, the theater of representation, lead to a life of loss and suffering? Why, because the division of the space of the world into a stage, such that representation can take place, means the drawing of the distinction between what Lyotard called "the over there not-this" and the "here the this" (22). What's then being imagined in the drawing of the value distinction, in other words, between the real and the imaginary? It is the beginning of the task of the application of the reality principle, as the child must learn when to spit. Not only, for it is also, of course, the moment in which the child must find its own way onto the stage. For no one wants, or at least should want, to spend a life gazing at images, consuming the image of the over there not-this. One wants to be on the stage, living life, of which others make their images. The stuff from which images emanate. To act and not be the passive consumer of the spectacle of another's theater. In the musical days of Punk, it became a practice for the band to spit down upon the audience. Learning to abide by the reality principle, learning to spit, enables one to occupy the stage and spit upon rather than paying to be where one is spat at.

The life of images is unthinkable other than in its relationship with the life of the real. The question of this relation, between the image and the real, has vexed philosophers throughout the entire history of the Western tradition of philosophy, from its classical beginnings in ancient Greece to the present. In a sense it is the question that founds the entire tradition. Let's just recall Plato's cave and its enduring influence over mimesis and debates concerning the authentic. Exercised by this vexation, we have been taught to associate images with the experience of illusion. Images are that whereby we are brought into contact with illusory worlds that, as for Aristotle, are not really living and the opposite of knowledge (Aristotle 1986, 197). Worlds that lead us astray from the real, existing, as they tend to, far from the true. For acts of imagination are nearly always false, we have been told, in contrast with acts of perception that are held always to be veridical (198). They are a species of "movement" that occur in beings that perceive and in connection with things that are perceived. Movements within movements that give rise to the possibility of the being that is thereby motored by false movement (200). In a sense they are that which give rise to the power of being affected falsely, if we may credit false movement with being a species of power, and thus the multiplicity of ways of being that are entailed in being human, especially (200).

The subject of Western philosophy has lived much of its life in fear of this experience of illusion, anxious not to be deceived or affected falsely and trying to penetrate the real as far as it can go. The invention of science being its final furnishing. But as hard as psychoanalysis has tried to scurry through the depths of the unconscious, the image is that which has stood in its way, blocking its access to the real, leading it down false passages, toward lives where it makes mistakes, errs, and falls. That is why there is always more to be learned in the company of a Rothko than a room full of Freudians.

Mindful of this, it has been said that the arts and other forms of aesthetic practice and experience have tended to explore the powers of the false that images give rise to. The images created by the arts are valued for the very ways in which they allow human beings to stray from the real, in spaces, and into worlds, the value of which is their unreality and imaginary character. The human, we have been taught to believe, gains and develops from the exercise of this freedom to live out an imaginal life, be it as an artist or, in the reception of artistic practices, as an audience. The life of the real, and our sense of the possible, is continually being developed on account of the ways in which our powers of the false rebound upon our understandings of the relations between image and reality. Not least in the sense of what elements of the real can be depicted or captured in imaginal form. The powers of photography, doubly artistic and political, over the last two centuries, have emitted from the ways in which it has consistently challenged conventional understandings of which lives can be "a subject of history and an object of art" and likewise who has the right to be included in "the image of common humanity" (Rancière 2010, 51–52). Or those powers have stemmed from their abilities to capture in an image the intolerability of a reality that would otherwise go unrepresented or recognized; such as the photographic images that came out of Vietnam during the American war there, showing the reality of the violence, destruction, and killing being done to the Vietnamese (84). Such images blurred the lines between art and the representations of the real. At the same time, images created by the arts are systematically questioned as to their origins and ends for the purposes of ascertaining how they each "affect the ethos, the mode of being of individuals and communities" (84) for fear of the ways in which they may, possibly, corrupt the ethical lives of real peoples who continue to fear the power of fabulation.

And yet there can be no question, we have been taught to believe, of the distinction between the imaginary and the real. As the twentieth-century phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty expressed it, "[I]f I am able to speak about 'dreams' and 'reality,' to wonder about the distinction between the imaginary and the real, and to throw 'the real' into doubt, this is because I have in fact drawn this distinction prior to the analysis,

because I have an experience of the real and of the imaginary" (2012, xxx). The philosophical task of the Western subject has been to make explicit what is known primordially of the difference between the life of the image and that of the real, by exercising perception, that power that philosophers from Aristotle to Merleau-Ponty have decreed to be that which distinguishes real from imaginary phenomena, and access truth and knowledge of the world as such (Aristotle 1986, 197–201; Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxx). For it is truth that mediates our perception of the real, as well as being the product of that perception. Reality and truth are different substances, thus conceived, as reality refers to that element of a thing that is not dependent on the truths we can ascertain of it. Truth, on the other hand, is entirely dependent on the real. We cannot make the former without the latter.

If perception is that power that enables us to extract truth from the real, where does that leave imagination? For imagination is different, we have been taught to believe, from perception, even while admitting that perception cannot occur without imagination (Aristotle 1986, 198). It is certainly cheaper—we can be affected by its power whenever we wish, producing an image by choice. Perception on the other hand depends on the presence of something else independent of us, something pertaining to life and its reality. Something that makes an image for us in contrast with those images that appear to us on account of our exercise of imagination; an imagination that creates in ways that we supposed to be independent of reality itself. And yet that which really lives, that which we perceive as being real and not merely imaginary, that which is of real life and not merely imaginal life, requires, for its verification as real and alive, that we see it. In other words, it has never been a problem of the hard-and-fast distinction between the real and the imaginary but of which images give us greater access to the real; which image is more real than that of others. The entire history of Western art—marked as it is by the privileging of geometric perspective, inflecting Western art from the Renaissance onward and, centuries later, the reification of the camera and photography as the principal means through which the real could really be captured—indicates as much (McQuire 1998, 18–26).

It is not just the pictorial images of photography and other arts that are understood to be the means by which we can get closer to the real but the images that our bodies create for us. If we follow Hannah Arendt, "imagination is concerned with the particular darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real" (1993, 322). Imagination is the faculty that, through its provision of images of the real, allows us to catch glimpses of the "frightening light of truth" (322). Such instants of truth are, for Arendt, not the opposite of reason but its most exalted expression, alone enabling us to see the real in its

proper perspective by putting that which is too close for us to see at a more conducive distance or likewise by bringing that which is too far from us closer, such that we can see it better (323). It is that faculty, in other words, that allows us to "take our bearings in the world" and find our balance. Hence, the ability to make an image is fundamental not only to our functional abilities to see the real but also to the real itself. Real objects of every kind can assume an imaginal status at any time because every object becomes an image as soon as it presents itself to our vision (Langer 1953, 47). Every object not only becomes an image but makes an image of itself, as it seduces us into its realities. Our powers of persuasion, our abilities to seduce and command attention as realities, depend thoroughly on the ways in which we are able to deploy ourselves as images in the fields of vision of others. The imagination is a resource of the real, without which the real cannot maintain its status as real. We depend on images, in the most practical sense, to guide our way through the world, to convince us as to what is more or less real, in order to stay close to the true, as much as the real itself is dependent on its abilities to deploy images in order to maintain its mantles of truth.

We might think of this in terms of our continued fascination with spheres and the circularity of life. As Peter Sloterdijk puts it:

> What they [philosophers] do is *imagining*, in every possible sense of the word. They envisage the orb by making it an actually present model: and, by attempting to see in the envisaged orb the existent as a whole, and ultimately the manifesting God, the over-good reason, the supra-essential essence itself, they provide the way of thinking that reaches for the One, whole and universal with an instrument both massive and subtle to objectify the totality of the existent. (2014, 24)

The world is what we live (Merleau-Ponty 2012, lxxx). But in living it we have to live off the life of images. For images are also, in an uncanny way, of this world; necessary resources for us in our quests to penetrate its reality, while not to be confused, we are told, with the world as such. Instead they occupy a "stage" out there "in front of the world" guiding us to the real while forever preventing us from seeing the real as such (lxxiv). We encounter a similar idea, of the errant spatiality of the image, in the philosophy of Guy Debord when he argues that images are not somehow "out in front" of the real but "exist above it" while simultaneously imposing themselves upon it (2010, 36). The life of the real, we must suppose, exists either *beyond the stage* of the imaginary or below it. How can we tell the difference between what is real and what is image when the image is both a necessary resource for guiding us as to the nature of the real and that which mystifies it? We might start to answer these questions

by taking imagination, as did Aristotle, to be the specifically human faculty for the making of images.[4] But there are different ways of making an image. We can make an image of an object that is in our presence. Or we can make an image of an object without its presence. Kant distinguishes the latter from the former as imagination from sense. Then there are those operations by which we make an image of something we have encountered in the past and on the basis of experience, in distinction from those operations by which we make an image out of nothing, as it were.

Key to our concerns must be the continued interplay among the imagination, identity, and the force of moral law, which ultimately reduces things to mere spectacle. The imagination is by definition expansive. It is open to the infinite in thought. By this token it is also abstract and demands a transgression in order for the very alterity of its condition to become part of the real. This doesn't mean to say it is disembodied. On the contrary, the abstract is precisely that which takes us into the intimate depths of the human condition. Moral law, in contrast, is by definition contractive. It establishes and fixes the boundaries, violently policing their limits, while overseeing the normative contours of guilt and shame.[5] Such power is also embodied, but in a way that seeks to sever and castrate the expansive potential of a poetic life. Identity lies somewhere in between these two poles. The history of identity is in this regard rather consistent, and predictably so. What emerges as resistive in the most affirmative sense too often quickly turns back in upon itself to the exclusion of others. Identity, in short, can be useful in the collective fight against a particular injustice, but it is politically devastating when it falls back into a system of authentication and moves away from transgression to imposing its own limit and truth conditions. Moreover, we also need to be mindful here of the links between identity and economy, notably the commodification of identity in the name of progressive liberation. As already mentioned, nationalism was dreadful when it came to regenerating capitalist expansion. And yet capitalism has now realized that it no longer needs the vast majority of the world's population to become active consumers of material goods. The fall back into sovereignty was in fact less about the shoring up of the borders than a realignment in global power through which a post-liberal order could properly emerge and the technological will to rule recast. In this regard, like both the Left and the Right, capitalism has also turned inward as it seeks to profit further from the illusion of democracy and radicality now waged in the metropolitan zones. Let's just take the example here of Colin Kaepernick, who was also systemically "canceled" for having the audacity to exercise his own freedom of expression. The kneeling of Kaepernick was radical and dignified and proved to be a potent spark in the Black Lives Matter movement. But no sooner was he getting to his feet when corporations such as Nike

recognized the marketing potential. We would see the same later with the 2020 boycott of Facebook through the "stop hate for profit" campaign, which could also be seen as an attempt to commodify ethical dissent in a way that is eerily familiar to the fair-trade campaigns that started gaining traction in the late sixties. But what did we really expect in an age where politics is all about the performative, and the performative indistinguishable from the spectacle?

What we are dealing with here is still, obviously, that very same problem that Debord brought attention to in the 1960s and that artists like Francis Bacon and Frida Kahlo were addressing in their work too. Indeed, the power of Debord's concept of spectacle may well have been reinforced over historical time. Consider the proliferation of pictorial images enabled by social media, the "image-charged" relation with our worlds that we inhabit and have possessed for some time now (Augé 1994, 64–65), the density of image environments made a reality by social media, and the endless proliferation of technological devices with which photographic images are now made and circulated. Research into the life cycle of photographs suggests that the average networked individual currently encounters literally thousands of photographic images a day. The consequence of these media and their utilization is that the spectacle is no longer a property of states or top-down regimes of economy but an everyday practice that peoples subject upon themselves. Our imaginations are said to be governed by the pictorial images that are circulated through these media, facilitating a sense of false intimacy with our worlds, as we become used to discussing images as if they were realities (65). Even our basic capacities for memory are being outsourced to digital devices such as camera phones, on which so many photographic images are made and circulated every day. Imperceptibly, this works to limit "our relation to the world and others to that which can be had through images" (122). The turning of the world into spectacle represents, the anthropologist Marc Augé argues, "the most perverse trait" of the "supermodernity" we now inhabit such that "the only world that we can speak of today is the world of the image" (122). Indeed, perhaps not only has Debord's concept of spectacle been reinforced by the technological developments that have occurred in the time since he wrote and by the ever denser image environments that we inhabit. Perhaps it has, as Baudrillard long ago suggested, been surpassed by a new strategy of "virtuality," one that develops out of that of the spectacle but that is different, insofar as it leaves no room for critical consciousness (1996, 27). During the era of spectacle we could at least declaim our alienation from the world of images into which we were cast, abhorring our reduction to the situation of being an abject spectator of abject images. But today, as Baudrillard points out, "we are no longer spectators, but actors in the performance,

and actors increasingly integrated into the course of that performance" (27). The critique of images is more difficult when we are not simply their spectators but actors within the images themselves—especially images of inescapable ruination.

Black Mirror

Let's conclude by bringing this back to the question we set out at the beginning of thinking as if we are already dead. In aesthetic terms the hyperaroused culture of the spectacular image that we now inhabit can be identified with the shift from traditional arts of representation—whereby a given work was displayed, exhibited, or staged for an audience to receive by standing or sitting "in front of"—to that in which the "audience" is invited to participate by standing or sitting inside of, interacting with the work and figures within it (Baudrillard 1996, 28–29). This interpellation of the spectator within the image itself is what distinguishes the present strategy from that of spectacle, such that one is no longer merely spectating or viewing but participating in and acting out. This is not just to assume the role of a living witness. It is to live living to the fullest. Or so it is claimed. But with the technological narrative already set and the ruinous scene already determined—like the cracked glass in Charlie Brooker's *Black Mirror*, which is replete with many wonderful examples of life in a post-liberal age—this acting out is also simply about outperforming those within our networks of affective relations. In short, it is to accept the rules are already stacked against you, assume without question the affective status of the victim, while replacing the ethics of transgression with a new virtual mindset that's as introverting as the devices that literally "capture" one's attention and make one *feel* part of a world in all its spectacular mediocrity and distractiveness. Truly a "world interior" far more observed than the building of the Crystal Palace exhibition center in London over a century and a half ago, which Peter Sloterdijk notes was not only a technical wonder of the world but a conscious attempt at aesthetic immersion whose magical immanence fulfilled the bourgeoise dream, much to Dostoyevsky's revulsion.

"Time and again," Tom McCarthy writes,

> we hear about a new desire for the real, about a realism which is realistic set against an avant-garde which isn't, and so on. It's disheartening that such simplistic oppositions are still being put forward half a century after Foucault examined the constructedness of all social contexts and knowledge categories; or, indeed, a century and a half after Nietzsche unmasked truth itself as no more than "a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms . . . a sum of human

> relations . . . poetically and rhetorically intensified . . . illusions of which one has forgotten that they *are* illusions." (2014, n.p.)

Realism itself, as McCarthy further writes, has always been "a literary convention—no more, no less—and is therefore as laden with artifice as any other literary convention" (2014, n.p.). With this in mind, our interest cannot simply be with the question of death as it appears in the declared death of liberalism. Rather, the real aim is how to interrogate a more poetic analytic of finitude to offer new creative ways for imagining the political, as we imagine our own political death, which never fully arrives, exactly on time, at least. What does it mean after all for our understanding of the life of the subject when the idea of liberalism is destroyed, its experience shown to be truly violent, and its presence exhausted? And more pressing still, how can we be alert to the new priests now on the horizon, who are bringing with them the need for a new confession?

And so we find ourselves today haunted by the specter of Deleuze. But Deleuze is no Virgil. He doesn't want us to start in the depths and then ascend into the light. Deleuze encourages us to take flight across the abyss. He has a vision of the aerialist that belongs to an entirely different kind of transcendence. But we must smile all the same, armed with the knowledge that every threshold can be transgressed. Deleuze often wrote about and engaged in conversations with ghosts from history. As we read him today, we note his poetic sensibility signing through as loud as any musical score. His thought still trembles across the valley floors, and his vision of the possibility for human existence is still yet to be fully grasped in its singular magnitude. We still don't know what a Deleuzian politics looks like as much as we still don't know what a mind can do. But if there is an escape, it cannot be found by collapsing the critical into the clinical and buying into the conceit that embodiment brings us closer to theory. We don't need another biopolitics. It's already exhausted enough. What we need is a theory that, like the imagination, explodes a life, dances with the rapturous stars, and welcomes the cutting shards of the ineffable. What we need is to think thinking as if the thought of life were already dead.

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Notes

1. See Evans and Reid (2022a).
2. See Deleuze (1989).
3. See Evans and Reid (2022b).
4. "Imagination is that in virtue of which we say that an image occurs to us" (Aristotle 1986, 198).
5. See Evans and Meza (2021).

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