

This Thesis is Dedicated to the Brave Mujahideen Fighters of Afghanistan

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Abstract

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This thesis applies methods of historical revision to trace the connective tissue between the fascistic linear power structures and the way cameras and cinema historically played the major part as the chosen art field of the status quo. This thesis parses out queerness as a redemptive iconoclastic way out through gender abstraction and identity anarchy, while also focusing on the manner in which queerness has been coopted and commercialized in the world of late-stage capitalism.

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Chapter I. Camp Ukraine.

Several kilometers from the Boma goldmines of Sierra Leone in February of 2022 has been opened a new gold mining camp Nimikoro which houses nearly 1000 people. No one calls the camp Nimikoro by its official name, instead using a curious nickname Ukraine. A lot of people in Ukraine die either in the mines or from malaria. Journalists are not let into the camp, and the officials of Sierra Leone do not disclose what makes its citizens compare their lives with those of the Ukrainian people.

Even a month ago there were excavators next to the mine, but because of the gas shortage and the increase in prices, the machines are staying idle forcing women to do the work by hand. Hundreds of women who live and work at the camp repeat the same motions over and over. After digging a hole next to the stream they fill up their plastic bottles to filter out sand and tiny stones and then pick out tiny gold specks on the bottom of the bottle. All the work happens in the water, under the sun and they get two euros at the end of the day (around ten euros a week). Many women fall ill from the heat and moisture of the jungle. The camp has no electricity or running water. Many of the women are widows who lost their husbands either from the Ebola epidemic (4000 deaths in the period of 2013-14 years) or from a tragic death in the mine. They get buried in the same soil they dig holes in looking for gold.



A woman digging for gold in Sierra-Leone

Elena Ceausescu, Deputy Prime Minister of Romania, minutes before her execution



Gold from Sierra Leone goes to the world market, a big chunk of it will go through the Emirates, India, and China, and from there it will be exported to the West. I can confidently say that when you buy a golden ring, a portion of that gold came from the exploited women and men of Sierra Leone. Part of this text was taken and translated by me from a Russian language Telegram channel “алло, макрон” (translation — hello, (Emmanuel) Macron) that concentrates on the news in French speaking parts of the world from the leftist perspective. Just like the above-mentioned Telegram channel, this paper is written from the radically progressive perspective, the point of view that pushes against the status quo and criticizes any ideologies for their dogmatism, yet is most loosely aligned with the current Western definition of leftism. Yet even after aligning with progressive thought and making concrete connections between the exported gold and the exploited women in Sierra Leone, the purchase of a new iPhone and coltan mining in Congo that is slowly turning the country into a sacrifice zone, what we can observe is the phenomenon of hypernormalisation — knowledge that the systems we live under are failing yet an inability to offer an alternative to the status quo pushes us to pretend that we are living in a functioning society. The term hypernormalisation was coined by the professor of Anthropology from former Leningrad, and now St Petersburg, Alexei Yurchak, and was brought into the mainstream by the British filmmaker Adam Curtis in his BBC documentary HyperNormalisation. Curtis makes connections between antidepressant drugs and social media, he jumps from Jane Fonda workout videos to the execution of Nicolae and Elena Ceausescu by the people of Romania (before getting shot Elena screams that she was the nation’s mother to which the nation replies, “Then why did you kill your sons?”), he analyses the way Vladislav Surkov used propaganda and constructed ambiguity to turn the Russian political scene into a Brechtian piece of theater. Just like his documentary, this paper uses multiple, seemingly disconnected nodes and bonds them together in an attempt to trace the ways capital and war assimilate art and identity formation as tools of violence and consumption.



A shot depicting Burundi coltan mines from “Neptun Frost”, an Afrofuturist science-fiction musical, directed by Saul Williams and Anisia Uzeyman



A shot from Adam Curtis docu-series “HyperNormalisation”

Chapter II. Love is the Desire to Eat Other People But to Swallow Them Would Be Selfish.

Mark Fisher, a British political and cultural theorist, in his seminal work “Capitalist Realism” proposes that capitalist system is capable of integrating and perverting the DNA of literally anything — as with anything else in the world from the most well-intended political slogans to the image of Jesus Christ himself, queerness has also been appropriated by the capital and has been used to the status quo’s benefit. Queerness does not necessitate transcendence, it is a particular performance and modality of queerness that allows ascendance and prohibits it from being consumed and repackaged by an oppressive societal structure. Paul B. Preciado, a Spanish philosopher and gender theorist, muses on his transmasculine gender transition in the speech “Can The Monster Speak?” he gave at a Freudian conference in Paris (and was subsequently booed off-stage) and how ideas of “passing” in transition could have allowed him potential safety and security but also would have consumed him in the prison of rigid categorization, not dissimilar to the same unyielding categorization of the cis-world. In another book “Testo Junkie” Preciado muses on the deceitful yet alluring dreams of safety and societal acceptance that his transition could offer him, in this way queerness works in the appropriative sense pushing the assigned female at birth individual lower on the trajectory promising the privileges of the men’s world. “The first thing I learned as a trans person was how to walk down the street and be seen by others as a man. I learned to look directly ahead and slightly up rather than looking sideways or down. I learned to look other men in the eye, without turning away and without smiling. But the most important thing that I discovered is that, in the patriarchal-colonial system, being a so-called ‘man’ and so-called ‘white’, I could accede for the first time to the privilege of universality. A peaceful and anonymous place where everyone leaves you the fuck alone. I had never felt universal. I had been a woman, I had been a lesbian, I had been a migrant. I had known otherness, not universality. If I did not publicly announce myself as

‘trans’ and accepted being acknowledged as a man, I could shrug off the burden of identity once and for all.”



A shot from John Carpenter's body horror "The Thing" portraying the character of Bennings transforming into the monstrous entity



Spanish philosopher, gender theorist and a transmasculine individual Paul B. Preciado

If queerness is something greater than gender piracy or belonging to the less dominant sexual practice, if queerness is a gradual yet persistent deconstruction of identity and origin, then we could postulate that queerness does not equate gender/sexual variance, in short — not all LGBTQ+ people are queers and not all queers are LGBTQ+. Dissecting the iconography of the Time Magazine cover image of Pete Buttigieg and his husband, Chasten, standing in front of the white picket fence of their house in South Bend, Indiana, the symbols in it represent — whiteness and North American middle class with the neocolonial architecture behind the men, masculinity and presentable homosociality in the stern looks of Pete and Chasten, buttoned shirts, just a hint of a familiar touch in the way Chasten leans against Pete's shoulder. Compared to this photo drunk sports fans in Moscow on the subway at midnight are raging sexually-unhinged homosexuals. But Buttigieg with his 100 tours to Kabul is an easy target. It is paramount not to fall into a morality argument here, to claim that queers have to perform their identity in an idiosyncratic manner. Queerness is inherently immoral. It is counterculture. It is a glitch. It has no neatly packaged Miriam-Webster definition of what it entails. It can not be broken down into a bullet-point list.

It is much easier, as negatives always are, to define what queerness is not, or rather when it starts morphing into something different when queerness becomes the aesthetic rather than the modality of being or a tool for identity formation. Returning to Fisher's "Capitalist Realism", he compares capitalism to the dangerous alien in John Carpenter's sci-fi body horror "The Thing", "a monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolizing and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact". Identity politics fall prey to capitalist consumption as easily as anything else, inspiring terms such as "pinkwashing" and "rainbow capitalism". Anything that comes in contact with capitalism gets diluted into an array of easily digestible slogans, sweatshop commerce, and palatable aesthetics and gets ravaged by culture vulture corporations. Returning back to Fisher, "Walk around the British Museum, where you see objects torn from their lifeworlds and assembled as if on the

deck of some Predator spacecraft, and you have a powerful image of this process at work. In the conversion of practices and rituals into merely aesthetic objects, the beliefs of previous cultures are objectively ironized, transformed into artifacts.”



The poster of a satirical black comedy “Triangle of Sadness” by Ruben Östlund showing ultra-rich white people on a luxurious yacht schmoozing, vomiting from sea-sickness, falling into their own feces before plunging to their death when the yacht sinks

The cover of Time Magazine featuring two white conservative homosexuals happily married — Chasten and Pete Buttigieg



In the same vein the Cameroonian historian Achille Mbembe in his magnum opus, “Necropolitics” points at the hypocrisy of the democratic societies and introduces the uncanny parallels between those and the authoritarian regimes exposing the pervasive hand of capital and oppression that rules both states. “According to the official story, democratic societies are pacified societies. This feature is held to be what distinguishes them from warrior societies. Democratic societies have thus if not banished brutality and physical violence, then at least brought them under control. (...) This new form of the government of bodies, conducts, and affects is alleged to have led to the pacification of social spaces. Allegedly, then, the force of forms has replaced the violence of bodies. Regulating behaviors, governing conducts, preventing disorder and violence—all this is now achieved, as it were, by means of fully recognized rituals.” Although democratic countries of the global North pride themselves on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion workshops, Pride parades, and affirmative action, there has been a little public reckoning of their histories based around the slave trade, to say nothing of the carceral system and the privatization of the prison industrial complex. Democratic duplicities are further explored by Shane McCrae in his book “Forgiveness Forgiveness” where he dissects the symbol behind the Little Brown Koko children’s books created by a white Floridian, Blanche Seale Hunt. The stories depict the adventures of a “lazy, gluttonous” black boy named Koko with his “little dog Shoog” and his “good, ole, big, fat, black mammy” (the quotations are taken from *The Semi-Weekly Spokesman Review*, Spokane, Washington, July 1940) for the cheap entertainment of the white audiences. In his poem “They Title the Postcard “Just Singing a Song”” McCrae creates a phantasmagoric scenario where the writer and the illustrator of Little Brown Koko sit down with Koko himself, two white people in a seemingly post-slavery American South with the specter of an imagined black body in between them, yet the social dynamic has not changed with abolition — these two white people are still the masters of the narrative because they are the ones who engineered its genesis, “Little Brown Koko says he is a song / more grating every time it’s sung / They string him up / they stuff his severed penis in his mouth”.



Women at the Hilltop Unit in Gatesville, Texas, sewing face masks while making from 40 cents to 4 dollars a day in a video produced by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice



Angels on stage. The lingerie brand is famous for using prison labor to sew their garments

Chapter III. Death Is a Salesclerk from Target, Juanita.

Aesthetics are troubling.

“At every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity,” Fisher writes in “The Weird and the Eerie”.

Here Fisher juggles the term “the eerie” not as an aesthetic category as an aesthetic is always a vapid manner in which the capital absorbs the substance, but as a way of seeing and as a lens of representation. Tracing the preoccupation of the queers with the horror genre, it is impossible not to see queer experiences concerning corporeality and bodily transformation as a perfect example of Fisher’s definitions of the eerie. Body dysphoria (typical, yet not mandatory for a trans- or genderqueer individual) is not about the realistic materiality of the body, but about physical attributes, body parts or traits that are not supposed to exist yet are present in our reflection in the mirror such as, seeing the body and not finding things that you would have expected from your body (“the eerie” when I looked at my face before starting Testosterone as part of my transmasculine transition and did not see stubble). “The eerie, by contrast, is constituted by a failure of absence or by a failure of presence. The sensation of the eerie occurs either when there is something present where there should be nothing or is there is nothing present when there should be something.” The eerie plays not just with our perception or the absence that our gaze plunges into creating the gut-wrenching vacuous emotional effect, but it also plays with chronology abstracting time itself.



A shot from a science-fiction film "Under the Skin" directed by Jonathan Glazer depicting the protagonist taking off her human skin suit and revealing her alien origins

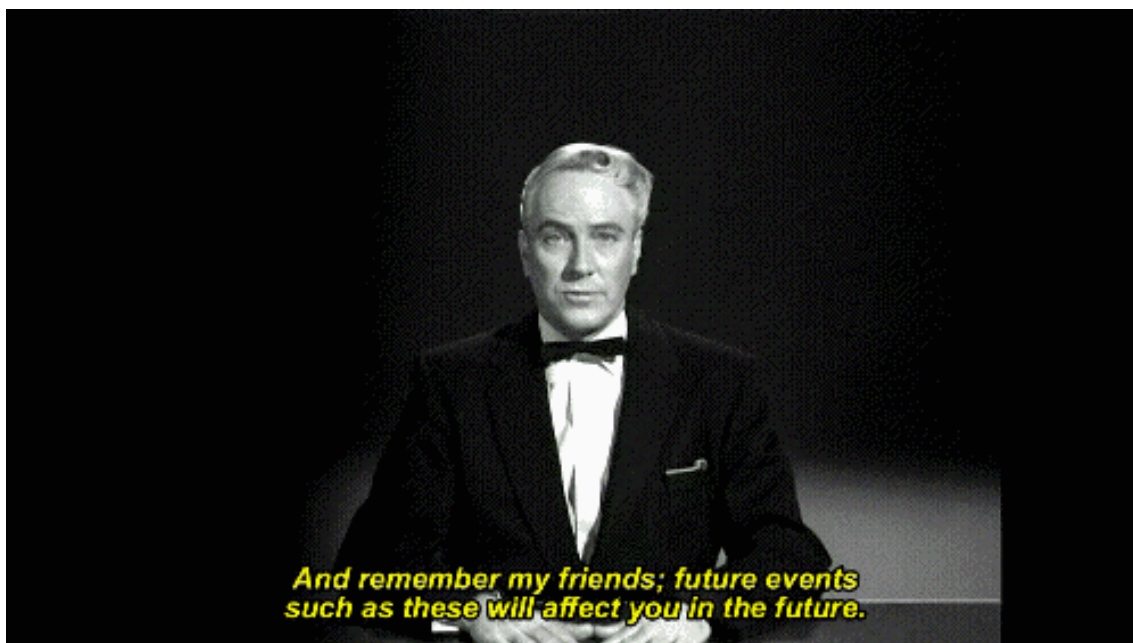


My pre-mastectomy self-portrait depicting my eerie trans body.

Philosopher and queer theorist, Jasbir K. Puar, in “Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times” traces the connections between the USA’s homonationalism and its weaponization of neoliberal gay rhetoric in scapegoating queers, especially queer Muslims and Middle Easterners, brings up ideas of hauntology and queer temporalities, “Here, “ghostly matters” signal the primacy of the past and our inheritance of the past: its hauntings, its demands, its present absences, and absent presences. However, in part what I mean to highlight through an antecedent temporality are the ghosts of the future that we can already sniff, ghosts that are waiting for us, that usher us into futurities. Haunting in this sense defuses a binary between past and present—because indeed the becoming-future is haunting us—while its ontological debt to that which once was nevertheless cautions against an easy privileging of the fetish of innovation, of what might otherwise be demeaned as an unthinking reach or for that which is trendy or cutting-edge.” Hauntology, first introduced by Jacques Derrida in “Specters of Marx”, pertains to the return of ideas, memes, and symbols from the cultural and social past that return to us and stick to the present in the manner of a ghost.

In her poem “The Masters’s House” from her book “Customs” Solmaz Sharif brings the ideas of hauntology forward in her haunting exploration of the place of the utmost tension — her Iranian ancestry and her English/American oeuvre, “To lament the fact of your lamentations in English, English being / your first defeat” while several lines down writing, “To know, for example, that in Farsi the present perfect is called the / relational past, and is used at times to describe a historic event / whose effect is still relevant today, transcending the past / To say, for example, *Shah dictator bude-ast* translates to *The Shah / was a dictator*, but more literally to *The Shah is-was a dictator*”. Here Sharif denies the linearity of time progression marrying past and present introducing time as a cauldron sizzling with generational trauma. There is no other time but the war-time where the

wailing of the sirens echo through history and the entanglement of geo-politics is as thick as the walls of the bomb shelters it begets.



An American psychic, The Amazing Criswell, narrating Ed Wood's 1957 film "Plan 9 from Outer Space", largely considered the worst film ever created



An illustration from W.G. Sebald's novel "Austerlitz" that is largely considered the best novel from the later half of the 20th century. The novel tells the story of a Jewish man whose family died in the Holocaust and he is seeking to find their origins. His nanny gives him this photograph depicting two unidentified people, a woman and a man, on a theatre stage. The nanny initially assumes that these figures are the parents of Austerlitz, but negates the assumption later on

Chapter IV. The Love Poem a Robot Recites to Another Robot.

In the award-winning video work by Hito Steyerl “How Not to Be Seen” a robotic feminine voice talks to us, “Love is invisible. War is invisible. Capital is invisible” fusing intangibility of love used as a shield by politicians in waging proxy wars for the profit of global war economies. Vladimir Putin called Syrians “our Syrian brother and sisters” while sending troops from the biggest Russian PMC Wagner to uphold Bashar al-Assad’s dictatorship (that is not so secretly sponsored by the Russian Ministry of Defense) in the same breath that Wagner soldiers posted on Telegram a snuff video of an execution of Mohammad Taha al Ismail Abdallah of Deir ez-Zor that showed soldiers breaking Mohammad’s head with a sledgehammer, cutting his limbs off with a shovel and setting his dead body on fire. It only makes sense that in the quid pro quo gesture among seven countries that supported Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 is ravaged by al-Assad’s brutal regime in Syria. Love, war, and capital become the ingredients for the most infernal Molotov cocktail that the state can conjure. In her essay “If You Don’t Have Bread, Eat Art!: Contemporary Art and Derivative Fascisms” Steyerl argues that, “Derivative fascisms try to fuse all-out free trade economics with (for example) white nationalism by promoting survival of the fittest for everyone except themselves. Authoritarian neoliberalism segues into just authoritarianism” while talking about the complicity of art markets in further division and fragmentation and art spaces as “bank vaults inside gilded, gated compounds”. In the battle for the common citizen cinema with its mass appeal and gargantuan budgets becomes the manipulative tool of further oppression.



A shot from Hito Steyerl's "How Not to Be Seen" short film



Spc. Sabrina Harmon of the 372nd Military Police Company smiles in front of the body of Manadel al-Jamadi, an Iraqi who was tortured and murdered in US custody at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq

The camera's violent history is well publicized and discussed. Kodak's Shirley Card that allowed lab technicians to calibrate colors according to the complexion and hair color of a white woman and the subsequent creation of film stocks such as Kodak Gold Max that gave a chance to brown and black people to have their bodies captured favorably in analog photography but only after complaints from furniture and chocolate companies expressing that their dark wood and confectionaries do not have their true rich brown tone; the iconic National Geographic cover of the twelve year old "Afghan Girl" Sharbat Gula whose story and likeness was hijacked and manipulatively altered by the photographer Steve McCurry in order to play into the American white savior ideas about the victimhood of Middle Eastern women; the images of black people in chains who got into the USA through the Transatlantic slave trade depicted as exotic animals; the Nazi Germany's Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels postulating that, "People were to expect the National-Socialist movement [to] intervene in the economy and in general cultural affairs, and that includes film" while pumping large budgets into Leni Riefenstahl's projects ("Olympia" and "Triumph of the Will") that upheld myths of Third Reich moral superiority; the language of filmmaking itself where cameramen "shoot" the subject, "capture" the scene, "kill" the lights while dividing the roles on a film set in a gendered way where a script supervisor is commonly known as a "script girl" and a lighting technician is a "best boy".

In his writings, Gilles Deleuze claims that cinema in the post-Second World War period degenerated altogether "into state propaganda and manipulation, into a kind of fascism which brought together Hitler and Hollywood, Hollywood and Hitler." As a Russian observing the genocide of Ukraine that has started on February of 2022 and knowing that this war is the most documented war of all time, it is impossible not to fall into the vortex of connections between cinema and fascism, watching films and watching violence and all the meta-commentary that comes out of it from the global philosophy of film to the caustic sadomodernist works by Michael Powell and Michael Haneke. In

Powell's thriller "Peeping Tom" the villainous protagonist, an aspiring filmmaker, redesigns his camera as a literal killing machine, murdering women while capturing their image. The first scene of the film is shot from the perspective of a camera viewfinder as a cheeky commentary on the two mightiest drives of filmmaking — the divinity of keeping the subject's image in time and the unavoidable violence that comes with such power. Haneke has even more bravado in "Funny Games" in which a duo of young men dressed in all white force a middle-class Austrian family to play their torturous games. The scene right before the tragic finale shows the mother of the household shooting one of her captors dead and then in a total break from reality the second murderer takes the TV remote control and rewinds the moment right before the death of his accomplice that implicates the audience of the film into the crimes on-screen simultaneously shaming us into the voyeuristic pleasure.



Time Magazine cover from 1995 after the USA bombed Yugoslavia



Then-US Vice President Joe Biden shakes hands with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem on March 9, 2016

Chapter V. The Master's House.

In Daniel Borzutzky's award-winning book "The Performance of Becoming Human" the poet takes us on an apocalyptic ride of the intersections of his Jewish and Chilean identity, the collateral damage of capitalist machine and world citizens as its debris through homages to the German Jewish poet Paul Celan in "Memories of My Overdevelopment", "Death is a salesclerk from Target, Juanita / She swallows us in the fruit of the vine / She buries us on time", anguished and bitter satires of love poems in "Eat Nothing", "My love, says the authoritative body, you must realize that if I slice off your hand in an act of ungovernable aggression it doesn't mean I don't love you" and the exploration of flesh as the sight of trauma in "The Private World", "The bankers sand: We are your brothers / Take these bones and suck on them / (...) / Do you want to know a secret / There is a machine in my mouth that spits and eats and spits and eats and spits and spits and eats / (...) / The machine wants to do something to your body / It wants to exterminate its empire." Borzutzky revises his biography where state violence is as mundane as everyday bodily activities, while also creating a global history revision where time and geography merge into each other just like "Lake Michigan Merges into the Bay of Valparaiso, Chile."

In the same dystopian gesture of history revision Peter MacDonald's action flick from 1988 "Rambo III" was shot during the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan and features macho and ridiculous Sylvester Stallone on his journey to save his combat brother from the clawing hands of a villainous Russian commander while with a generous dollop of white saviorism helping out local Afghan rebels from having their village destroyed. The film starts with the plastered on screen "This Movie is Dedicated to the Brave Mujahideen Fighters of Afghanistan", only to be erased and switched to "This Movie is Dedicated to the Gallant People of Afghanistan" years later after siding with the Mujahideen stopped being expedient the USA invaded Afghanistan in 2001 in the guise of

defending the nation against the al-Qaeda terrorists. What happened in the next twenty years is total dwarfism of the Afghani economy incinerating every industry except the opium trade, pummeling of money (1,4 billion dollars) to Louis Berger Group under the pretense of construction of schools and hospitals on the Afghani soil while only 12 percent of the budget went to the Afghani government, and of course, a series of war crimes including prison torture at Bagram Theater Intermittent Facility (the autopsies showed that the beatings were as severe as being run over by a bus), a spread of vocal cord parasites by XOF (a covert Cipher's strike force) from Ngumba Industrial Zone in Central Africa to Kabul, support unit an airstrike at Kunduz Hospital that was operated at the time by the Doctors Without Borders, widespread of white phosphorous condemned by human rights organizations as inhumane due to the severe burns it causes on the victim's bodies.

Now, Afghanistan is ruled by the Taliban and is considered to be the number one most dangerous country in the world.

Just like in Borzutzki's poems where the grotesque meets the absurd meets the surreal, we have been always living in the post-apocalyptic future we allegedly feared.

“Sorry, sing the bankers to the proletariat, you don't really exist right now

A glitch in the system

Nothing that can't be fixed

By a full-scale overhaul

Of absolutely everything”



The first scene of Peter MacDonald's action film "Rambo III", original edition

The first scene of the same film with the dedication changed sometime after the September 11, 2001 attacks

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