

Mediations

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On the Power of the Negative

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So the power of the negative turns out to be postmodernity after all: it is not, according to these splendid essays, the motor power of history Hegel celebrated. Rather, it is history's breakdown, an ominous perpetual present in which no one knows what's coming (the "thing we didn't see") and indeed no one knows whether anything is coming at all. This is truly the realization of queer theory's master slogan "no future," and it justifies the combination of so many disparate topics, from architecture to finance capital (all in one essay), from dystopia to Occupy, from permanent unemployment to irony. The permanent present means that no one can remember what the catastrophe was, and that therefore there can be no thematic agreement about where we are now, and certainly no plausible forecast about futures, except to the degree that in that sense we don't have one. The only remaining topic is time itself, or rather this peculiar temporality of a present without a past or future, which does not look much like eternity and which, despite Paul de Man and the German Romantics, it does not seem to me has much claim on the term "irony" either.

I have always loved the idea of the Rachel Whiteread house (idea, because I have never seen it and now never will): that it should be demolished is however perfectly logical and as it were built into the very structure of the work itself.¹ Here is a row of derelict houses, all to be demolished and without even squatters for inhabitants any longer: this is already the crisis itself and its nothingness—only the ghostly embodiment (or disembodiment) of structural unemployment, as Aaron Benanav forecast it for present-day capitalism, in essays frequently cited in these pages.² But how to make a ghost or a disembodiment visible, how to make it appear? A problem not dissimilar from that of making a present visible in the absence of its past and future. You make a cement cast of its vacancy: some first Hegelian negation, in which absence is negated by materialization, in which absence, reified, is made to be present, to appear. And then, in a second, not even Hegelian negation, you destroy it. Does a memory remain? If so, it is certainly not in the fashion of all those vacuous monuments and memorials which sprang up in obedience to the equally

vacuous slogan of “*lieux de memoires*.” But it is not either the tangible, magnificent gesture of Gordon Matta-Clark’s slashing onslaughts on buildings, hacking a single-family dwelling in half, making holes through old warehouses. That was still the old modernist stroke of genius; this is something else, for which I don’t much like the current notion of melancholy either (although I recognize its relevance), in which affect replaces emotion: this is not a mimesis of the demolition to come; it is its silent presence.

I assume, perhaps wrongly, that Grove Street was then to become the site of a cultural center on the order of Renzo Piano’s rebuilding of the Fiat factory in Turin: immaterial culture as the aftermath of unemployment, demolition, nothingness, some third negation, indeed, in which the “spiritual” negates the material, and reification takes the form, no longer of concrete, but rather of “creativity” and tourism (yet another postmodern simulacrum oddly missing exhibition).³ To connect this “cultural” refunctioning with the emergence of the concept of immaterial labor (which it of course at once historicizes) is surely an impressive methodological gesture, which turns theory into yet another cultural symptom as indeed it indubitably is. This does not mean that theory, as a historical reflexion of a given historical situation, is thereby necessarily untrue: but only that we need to change the way we think about truth. That Occupy itself is a symptom rather than a political program may well mean that the American “middle classes” (itself a euphemism) have no political program (or “future”) right now; but that is itself a valuable historical diagnosis.⁴ (In any case, Occupy was a remarkable success in the way in which it put the issue of the 1 percent and of rich and poor back on the political agenda.)

Still, the ghostly past of older tent cities lingers in Occupy’s present, which is however mightily amplified by its echoes in Seattle, the Arab Spring, and new kinds of IT-driven mass demonstrations/occupations everywhere. It is the form of these movements and their relationship to our perpetual present which is politically interesting, and not their results or consequences in any older revolutionary sense.

Struggling, in the botched ending of *Sein und Zeit*, to find a mediation between the existential experience of the individual and historicity itself (or in other words the collective), in a footnote Heidegger hit on Dilthey’s then-novel concept of the “generation.” In his case, as we know, it was an ominous discovery: the point, however, is that the generational experience is relatively uncommon and contemporaneity (now used in art history as a substitute for postmodernity) is no quick fix: rare enough, said Mallarmé, are those who are even contemporary with themselves.

But the unusual trajectory designed here between *The Road* and *Things We Didn’t See Coming* suddenly struck me as a new and altogether significant symptom: garden-variety dystopias have been with us everywhere for some time (and I wish I didn’t have to confess I think McCarthy’s novel is one of the them), but here, for the first time, I get the feeling that dystopia has become a major genre and that this promotion is itself the sign that we are seeing a new generation emerge: there has not been

one since the Sixties, in my opinion (and I should add that I'm not myself a Sixties person).⁵ But the Sixties formed our idea of what a generation was, and has caused us to lose sight of the fact that what constitutes a generation, among other things, is a new idea of the generation itself, which is say, of time.

The concept of time that was already working its way out during the modernist period is what I will call retroactivity, its first full enunciation already reached by Freud in his notion of *Nachträglichkeit* (or in other words how a later event like puberty could reach back into childhood experience and transform the latter into psychosis). Here the present rewrites the past or even constructs it as though for the first time (as in Proust, for example); and tradition becomes invented.

The new concept of time I see emerging in these papers now revises this one in a new way, consistent with the displacement of the traditional conception of dystopia by what seems to me a new version of dystopian time. It is as if the past, having been "deconstructed" (into the positing of its own presuppositions), now slowly faded away, leaving only two dimensions of time behind it.

It has, for one thing, no cause: it may be post-catastrophic, but the catastrophe is not registered, not even remembered or forgotten. (Indeed, McCarthy's trace of it—"The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" is the mark of his failure to break with the older, traditional dystopian genre.)⁶ No future either, but not in Edelman's sense of the repudiation of Utopia and politics itself: rather, simply a lowering of Husserl's "protensions," a weakening of the time sense and the obsessive-compulsive worry ("Sorge"!) about what to do next, and what to do after that, and after that. This is truly a reduction to the present; but Amsterdam's book makes it clear that it is a present quite different from what we might have imagined (and indeed that my own thought that it constituted a "reduction to the body" is also probably not right either). "Bare life" it is certainly not; but his hero might well have wandered through the tents of Occupy at some stage. The external forms of social power come and go here like the weather, too high up in the stratosphere to be observed directly. Is it political? The question is poorly articulated, and it should rather be phrased, How is it political, the fact being that we simply do not know yet (nor does the opportunistic hero have anything much to tell us in this respect; he is closer to the picaro, to Lazarillo de Tormes, than to the anonymous hero of *The Road* or to *Mad Max*). At any rate, all these essays seem to me to end up here, in the contemplation of this enigmatic new temporality, the time of the desert of unemployment so to speak.

Notes

1. See Marija Cetinic, "House and Field," in this issue (35-44).
2. See Brent Ryan Bellamy, "Figuring Terminal Crisis in Steven Amsterdam's *Things We Didn't See Coming*," in this issue (19-34) 19, 27; Cetinic, "House" 36; Sasha X, "Occupy Nothing: Utopia, History, and the Common Abject," in this issue (61-70) 62-65.
3. See Jeff Diamanti, "The Cultural Work of Architecture: Fixed and Social Capital at FIAT," in this issue (45-60).
4. See X, "Nothing."
5. See Vincent Adiutori, "The Road is Mapped: Cormac McCarthy's Modernist Irony," in this issue (3-18), and Brent Bellamy, "Figuring."
6. Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage, 2006) 52. See Adiutori, "The Road" 11, and "Figuring" 22.