

# Parallel Seizure

## Art and Culture at the End of Days

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There is a photograph from early on in the spread of coronavirus that shows the basement of a shopping mall somewhere in Asia, seen from above. The tiled floor, framed by two escalators, has been cleared of shoppers, the only vestiges of regular commerce a poster of a woman on a floor stand advertising a mobile network, and beside that, a vending machine. A grid of plastic chairs fills the space, each placed a fixed distance from the others surrounding it. There are men and women sitting upon these chairs, some in a black and green uniforms and some not, all wearing facemasks and most contemplating their smartphones. Several of them have evidently been sitting where they are for longer than the others, contorting themselves into awkward poses to cope with the discomfort of their seats. A lone cleaner moves among them carrying a spray bottle and a sponge.

According to its caption, the people on the chairs are cab drivers waiting to receive their instructions, but they look more like procrastinators in an antechamber of hell. Each of them is a microcosm, a sealed capsule separate from every other. Each is looped out of physical space by the device held up to the eyes, upon which attention is focused, as if the brains of these men and women had been flattened and externalized and placed in their hands with the recommendation that they cling on or die. The grid exerts a pictorial order which is also a socio-political order. It works here as a mechanism for the regulation of appropriate distance. In a world where Silicon Valley ideology has been universally internalized, we have forgotten that a network must first separate before it can connect. It sustains distance in order to simulate proximity. The grid in this image is what makes possible and legitimates the separation between individuals and it also ensures the inviolability of rationalized space. Within this structure, the people in the photograph have been barred from interacting with one another physically, while any subtler mode of communication is stymied by regulation headgear. A facemask not only dampens the voice and conceals the expression,

it also decouples the mouth and nose entirely from direct commerce with the atmosphere. It mediates the breath itself.

If the shopping mall as archetype was once the secular temple to consumerism, the particular instance in this photograph has been reconsecrated as something far stranger and even more sinister. The chairs might be considered a series of abstract isolation cells in which each individual contemplates his connection with elsewhere until the final summons. Our gaze is drawn to the holes in the image: the population is diminishing. Empty seats take on a mortuary significance. Certain individuals have been removed from the grid, struck out of existence entirely. To leave the network is to be called up for extermination.

If there is an allegory in this photograph, it pertains not to the present, but to the recent past. Before the arrival of coronavirus, the space of human life in many of the more affluent societies had already been cleared and reorganized over decades according to an early version of this strict tiling procedure. The model was to space members of a population at a precise distance from one another as nodes in a system defined by particularization. In Europe and America, where the procedure originated, its rhetoric claimed an objective opposite to its means: connection rather than separation. As this rhetoric was more amenable and convenient than its reality, upheld through billions of dollars spent recrafting public opinion, it was generally accepted as an accurate description of what was going on. Nowhere was the claim more thoroughly accepted than in the culture industry. Yet this exchange of reality for the comfort of illusion has led to general confusion now that outputs and channels for physical delivery have been obstructed.

Overnight, lockdown abolished the cultural event and the audience upon whom it could be inflicted. Panic was the first response: a void yawned. Resort was made to this originary rhetoric. Surely virtual space could simply supersede physical space? Production could thereby be reinitiated in a newly mediated form. This was a fundamental imperative since without it culture would simply cease to be. A retrospective understanding was hastily constructed to ballast the proposal. Online forums would be set up where creative communities could “interact” and “discuss ideas as they always had done.” The questions of the mode by which such “communities” previously interacted and of the matter of their discussions were passed over. In order to generate cohesion within the group, assurance was made that archives would be curated in which the work resulting from these forums would be stored, an oddly superfluous measure given the unfortunate ineradicability of anything committed to the web. The plan was hastily put into action.

Samizdat domestic performance exploded. Suddenly artists, performers, and dancers were simultaneously convulsing and shivering as if in some parallel

seizure in rooms stuffed with the detritus of the precariat. The backdrops caught by means of this voluntary smartphone panopticon were far more aesthetically interesting than the bizarre shenanigans of the people in front of them. These videos mapped the true horror of the contemporary urban interior ordained by financial capitalism, with its uniformly identical and self-sabotaging “storage solutions,” its endless spam of worthless objects, its sheer ugliness in form and purpose. The artists seemed oblivious to this prosaic reality. They were engaged in higher pursuits. What was important was “to unite safe spaces under one roof.” To “stay together.” To “create a common language.” The point was to “stay creative,” at any cost, as if mooching about indoors for a few weeks would snuff out the fires of inspiration forever. Emergency “callouts” were issued “to generate conversation on change,” “to invite recipients to join a supportive community so as to increase work,” “to bind audiences and network with other practitioners.” For any reader adrift in this bland fug of language drained of any meaning, the message was regularly reinforced. One “online theatre festival” explained itself as a “response to a rapidly changing world,” adding in parentheses “(Covid-19 pandemic)” in case the agent of change was not immediately apparent. There seemed an underlying unease that the fiction of emergency might not stick.

A useful foundational myth on which all of these new measures could be based was already at hand: the good old days before the coronavirus breached the species divide. These were similar to the good old days before Brexit and the good old days before Trump. Awareness of the state of crisis is one of the reasons cultural producers in general find themselves uniquely well placed to “redefine the way we live our lives.” This awareness simplifies an intractable problem: as the world is ravaged by disease, the artist can focus on a more practical task, which is to “stay creative.” The cultural producer credulously entertains, in tandem with the ideology of consumer capitalism, that the individual lives life, rather than the truth of the matter, which is the reverse. Under a complex and administered social system in which obedience has been fully introjected, it is life that lives the individual, relentlessly and punishingly, rather than the other way ‘round.

But coronavirus has made it difficult for a cultural producer to maintain the fantasy of agency. It has had the effect of an X-ray, shot through the entire culture industry, revealing its products as, at best, of secondary importance. The person of the artist has been similarly irradiated and abruptly revealed as a total irrelevance: utterly disposable, a pointless, purposeless entity. This bracing truth was only precipitated by the action of the virus: it has in fact been definitional of the predicament of the artist at least since modernism. Previously, any single artist could be replaced by any other precisely because each one made the claim of being unique. The only thing that might separate the “artist” from the cultural producer, if carefully discerned, was the fact that the cultural producer was

economically productive in a classical sense. The distinction was not a popular one and so was rarely drawn. But with the advent of coronavirus it now became apparent that the entire set of artists and cultural producers could be set to one side. Rather than understanding this new development as emancipatory, the culture industry moved swiftly and desperately to conceal it, resorting to the rhetorical tactics it has commonly employed in order to justify its importance.

One noteworthy feature of the way the culture industry legitimates itself is in its formal mimicry of the language deployed by those to whom it claims to be inimical. The Disney fascism and zombie nationalism emerging around the world has today become a special target for the ire of the outraged cultural producer. Opposition has been formalized through measures that are repressive, prescriptive, and ideologically neurotic, with the aim of forcing the blissfully inattentive and significantly more powerful evildoer into a dialectical relation. The cultural producer of today assumes a cartoon Maoist duty to simulate the suspension of his or her individual predilections for the projected triumph of the group. Coronavirus has exacerbated this tendency. Hence, it is stated, "as a sector, we're only going to get through this by working together." One initiative to capitalize on the sudden collapse in cultural consumption was to attempt a pyramid scheme structured through corporate imaging sites wherein artists would buy and sell to one another. Given the fact that outside large-scale cultural production, the majority of activity is consumed by the people engaged in it and is rarely a lucrative endeavor, the initiative was flawed from its outset. It could do little to affect the sense of creeping ennui, and it quickly foundered.

Cultural production (like its surrounding environment) has for a long time been haunted by the specter of the real. As virtualization has continued to engulf more and more of the lifeworld, it has become increasingly difficult to distinguish the latter from the former. The advent of coronavirus seemed at first to snap the blur back into focus, as governments around the world half-heartedly followed the lead of the Chinese administration and partially attempted to restrict public movement and interaction. Opinions have varied on the nature of these interventions. Were they a diversionary tactic behind which it became possible for the powers that be to expand their ongoing project of social circumscription, and was coronavirus merely a convenient justification for further divesting the populace of its vestigial freedoms? Or were these desperate measures, an admission of partial defeat before the novel challenge of a lethal micro-organism?

The first opinion has quickly become the marginal one, supported by a strange alliance of socialist philosophers and gun-toting libertarians. The countercriticism leveled at their position is that it underestimates the danger posed by the virus and overestimates the power of government. Less often mentioned is the fact of

its implicit valuation of the “democratic” conditions preceding the arrival of the pandemic. Whatever the circumstances of the present, it seems impossible from a critical perspective to lament the loss of the “freedoms” populations have been asked to surrender. If coronavirus has thrown a world founded upon unfreedom into crisis, then that surely is a fact to be welcomed.

But is it correct to identify the present moment as a crisis at all? There is a third position possible in the debate. What if neither the advent of the coronavirus nor the lockdowns inflicted by governments upon their electorates are crises at all? What if the virus and the response to it do not even constitute an “event”? Deciding these questions is not a simple matter. We are told that what is important is what did not come to pass: the fact that, thanks to lockdown measures and rules on behavior, health-care systems were not overwhelmed by an acceleration in the spread of the virus. But when comparing the actual physical circumstances preceding those following lockdown, it becomes difficult to find specific disjunctions. This is paradoxical, as the consensus is that some aspect of life has fundamentally shifted and will not shift back. Regardless of the fact of the damage they at first appear to have caused to unfettered consumerism and unrelenting circulation, the fact is that the measures put in place by Western governments were carefully designed to preserve the structures of life to the greatest extent possible. The lockdown and its ancillary measures can now be seen for what they really were: conservative tactics generically related to the “disruptions” so beloved of entrepreneurs, controlled shocks designed to intensify the rigidity of the system rather than to weaken it.

Privilege has always been measured by the extent to which a person can remove himself from contact with others. Without global imbalances and the gradient of unilateral exploitation and repression, the white-collar homemaker safely ensconced with sustenance delivered hygienically to his door could not be supported. Another conundrum faced by the cultural producer hoping to generate material about the condition is the fact that the heroism of the figure under lockdown is difficult to maintain. Nor is it really anything new. There is seamless continuity in the isolation of the citizen from everyone around him as aspirational goal both before and after lockdown. Less appealing industries such as food and energy production, manufacturing, and waste disposal have all mostly been moved off-shore: we have been spared not only interaction with the workers in these industries but the mere sight of them for a long time now, especially if domiciled in the more affluent areas of a major city.

In fact, the measures taken soon after the coronavirus outbreak began dovetailed conveniently with systems that had been laid down in preceding decades: increased financialization, increased abstraction, spectralization and

virtualization, and smartphone culture. There is nothing enigmatic in this. Technology and technological proliferation are not just a means to supremacy but also an expression of it. When a system comes under stress, the structure of its hierarchy becomes rigid beneath the shock: the building in the earthquake that remains standing is the one that has been designed with the greatest resources.

One reason the illusion of crisis is so easily sustained is because we have lost the concept of alienation. Alienation, a defining fact of existence under capitalism, has over time been discarded. The problem of alienation, like that of the human condition, was not solved. Rather it was abandoned as a flawed enterprise, put out with the trash of modernism as an artefact from another era. It was discovered that contrary to what had appeared an ineluctable problem, alienation was, like everything else, including one's own mortality, a consumer choice. Bothersome as it might occasionally be, there was no longer any need to be detained by it. One could simply move on. If alienation is mentioned today at all, it is identified as an irreconcilable conflict from yesteryear, one that has not been resolved, because it has simply disappeared.

This disappearance occurred in parallel with the metamorphosis of the mass media into the media mass, a phenomenon in which all can and therefore must participate. The alienated individual estranged from himself in a Marxian sense was superseded by the individual as going concern, as test subject assessed spontaneously through biometrics and performance data. Essential here was the narcissistic self-hypnosis of the individual: entrainment rephrased as voluntary participation. Of course, there are certain hard facts to which the concept of alienation attends which cannot simply be ignored. Accordingly, it has itself become perhaps the great object of contemporary repression, and its disappearance might be considered the central occupation of network technology, part of the function of which is to expedite and maintain that repression. Hence "the cloud": a vast nimbus of unresolved metaphysics from a previous era.

Alienation has been defeated by restoring the individual to himself, virtually rather than actually: "unestranging" him from his labor by making him go to work on himself through mobile technologies, as a diligent producer, a sub-microscopic atom in the immensity of the media mass. All of this takes place through the exchange mechanism that is online communication. By this means, the individual becomes a commercial strategist in which he is but one commodity among others, continually updating himself and recalibrating his own performance in the light of the performance of others. What was essential in this transition from alienation to reconciliation was the Sadean project not only to inure him to it but to create pleasure within the individual bent upon the task of his own self-curation. Nothing exemplifies this tendency more than the artist

with his vitrine of online works and statement of purpose, constantly notating and revising the premature retrospective of a stalled career.

The media mass is essentially the floatation of the entire human population on a transeconomic stock market. Circulation produces value. If the economy is what now provides the model for every sphere of human activity, that is because virtualization is fundamentally about currency, about making fluid what would otherwise refuse to flow. The obduracy of art, its grappling with the awkward solidity of existence, is transformed through currency into something unstable and prone to collapse. Hence cultural production shares with the economy its spectacular fragility. The indices of the stock markets are live electrocardiograms ticking along fitfully and prone to sudden calamitous shifts, which we are assured will reveal themselves in our daily lives. The line on the graph is mysteriously consistent and yet seems always about to plummet unless the system that magically sustains it remains intact. The threat of imminent chaos must not abate. Like a patient on a life-support machine, the economy only survives through the application of frenzied energies.

Shocks can arrive from outside the system, but the important thing is that internal pressure is never relaxed. If exchange or consumption slow even infinitesimally the vital signs of the economy begin to jitter and give out. This is because it must consume everything that surrounds it. It is not omnivorous so much as pantophagous: it eats everything all the time because that is what it must do to survive in any form at all. It must be animated perpetually and neurotically, its outputs accorded the kind of inchoate grandeur possessed by the oracles of old. The stream of gibberish that flows across the screen of the business channel must move too quickly to be read or comprehended. In this sense the economy is the ultimate extremist ideology: inexplicable, irrational, and without benefit to anything beyond its own perpetuation. It is a collective hallucination held aloft by techniques of speed and enforced complicity. A vast priesthood of interpreters keep laymen at a remove and howl down any lone voice that dares to suggest, on the evidence of the most elementary kind of common sense, that the entire spectacle is a shared illusion.

The parallels with culture are multiple. In the same way as the action of the economy can never relent, plays and films and art exhibitions must be driven through the cultural spaces of the urban centers at a rate and with a breathlessness that renders their content irrelevant. Every cultural artefact is adorned with accolades and stars and hustled through to completion by the critical apparatus designed to facilitate the flow. To the extent that cultural production is bound to the market, it too must continue to circulate and to engender itself at the same rate as before, or by the chain reaction subsequent to even minor deceleration,

cease to be. There is no contingency for recess, no way of going into retreat, even for a short time, without also going bust. Indeed, the spasmodic theatre of the stock market floor with its madly gesticulating panic-eyed traders brings to mind nothing so much as the mannered convulsions of the lockdown performance. A problem for the artist of today is that political economy is the new avant-garde. Is the classical theatre of stockmarket trading the ur-theatre of all the performing arts? If so, it has now mostly been superseded by the great archetype of contemporary life: the besuited figure slumped before a bank of screens. Thus, the future of cinema.

Perhaps it is pointless even to distinguish anymore between cultural and economic production, as the former has been almost entirely absorbed into the latter. At the level of international large-scale production this development is well understood. It is at the level of vernacular operation that a fantasy of separation between domains is carefully nurtured. Because vernacular culture is largely produced and consumed by the same community, its function is not overtly driven by the motive of financial gain: rather it serves to iterate an opinion the group has about itself. As a result of this self-isolation, shared social pathology, the notion of a problem or perversion at the center of a society, is no longer considered possible because it has been successfully excluded from among the enlightened by the mantras of solidarity, virtuousness, and positivity. What used derisively to be called Californian virtues have now taken hold universally among cultural producers. "Global perspectives" are celebrated. "The strengths of a city" are itemized. One prominent arts festival promised, before coronavirus put paid to its ambitions, "the joy and power you need."

Art in this understanding is a corrective, an exercise in positive thinking: it has been purged of harmful elements not by censors or bureaucrats, but by the ideological puritanism of its creators. The point is to reflect the ideal community in which we all live affectively. The disjunct between this idealism and reality is acknowledged, since this art is said to be mobilized by injustice. But in its forms and its objectives it magically ejects the injustice it so abominates. Injustice happens elsewhere, somewhere in the outer dark of the wider society to which the enlightened community no longer belongs.

The enlightened community can do this because it has eliminated from its own body the concept of the negative, understood as that which is not immediately present in the positive, that which is not eminently so. This has been achieved in the plastic manner by which photographs are now manipulated algorithmically as they are taken in order to reverse the passage of time or counteract the cruelties of nature. But the banishment of the negative from the body of vernacular art unites it with large-scale commercial production in that both share in the



distorted language of the sale, which works by entraining its consumer base into the fantasy of its own latent perfectibility, into the dream of rendering more fully to itself its own benign transparency. This understanding of the purpose of art has been translated with the advent of coronavirus directly into a virtual mode.

The point is not to undermine but to affirm. Art and culture, which are now as indistinguishable as culture and the economy, are tools to restore normality, measures to reassure the consumer. They quell anxiety, “as well as providing commentary on this new collective experience of mass quarantining.” It does not matter that the point of mass quarantine, like the point of the grid, is to separate, to individualize. Nor that its reality is not experience but the continued attenuation thereof. Nonetheless, as this art comes into contact with the “event” of coronavirus, we are told it will provide a positivistic explanation of it, that it will do work above all to instantiate the fact of the event. It will affirm. It will clarify.

If it is indeed the case that the temporary suspension of cultural production and consumption will lead quickly to its perdition, the advent of coronavirus might yet prove to be an axial moment akin to the 2004 destruction by fire of a silo of works by the now superannuated Young British Artists, perhaps the most energetic cultural event in last fifty years: a moment when some non-human agency perhaps driven mad by boredom saw fit to intervene against the status quo. Certain areas of contemporary practice do now seem doomed. For instance, “socially engaged” art, a relatively recent tendency whereby artists seek to restate class privilege by deigning to inveigle “real people” into their undertakings, will from now on have to be considered literally rather than just morally poisonous. However, it is likely that other areas of activity will be sustained not principally by furlough and state subvention but by the fact of their own prophylactic measures against contamination, put in place far in advance of the arrival of coronavirus.

Culture has incubated itself against infection both through the hygienization of its content and the specialization of its audience. Any art intended to reach beyond its target group is now an impossible throwback to Soviet anachronism. Every circuit of production has its niche and territorial boundaries are strictly observed. Only the presence of a trace element of negativity could destabilize this ecology, could poison its waters. But within each boundary, all negativity is gradually sluiced out of the system until what flows becomes entirely pure, entirely transparent and entirely harmless.

Harmlessness must be the defining fact of our aesthetics today. The history of the process of hygienization is a long one and it begins at the latest with the invention of the museum. Its apogee in the visual arts was unquestionably the white cube gallery, the avant-garde model for the sterilization of cultural space. But

virtualization and now coronavirus have both accelerated the tendency. Strange new practices are emerging. Cinema has already aggressively and quite successfully sought to destroy itself by emphasizing proliferation and penetration over form and content. To go to a cinema before coronavirus struck had become an act of refined masochism, a curiously ornate exercise in humiliation and embarrassment for audience and employee alike, one which seemed to have nothing to do with its purported aim. After coronavirus, cinemas are reopening as bizarre semi-functional mausolea dedicated to their freakish late incarnation. For no apparent reason other than to support their capacity to remain open, visitors are invited to enter these monuments to the past in the guise of invalids as if to experience an artificial reconstruction of one of the field hospitals constructed in the early days of the pandemic. A group of masked and gloved personnel will guide the client through a building's interior by means of specific routes, at a safe distance from other attendees.

Viewers will sit at regulated distances to watch the film, refreshments being offered by means of regularly sterilized apparatus. The ticketholder performs a selfless donation of time and money in an operation maximally purged of risk in order to prop up a critically endangered environment. Peculiar though all this is, similar trends can be expected in other sectors. Freeborn Englishmen are at present triumphantly reclaiming their right not to get too close to one another in pubs. Football matches have restarted, human supporters removed from stadiums and replaced with banks of speakers playing recordings of crowd noise, the logical next step in the graduated expulsion of groups from the public domain and their reconstruction as individualized telereceptive nodes.

The measures of lockdown were introduced not to ensure the survival of individuals but to preserve the habitus as a whole. Yet one element within that habitus was deemed expendable: physical leisure and entertainment, which of course includes any kind of public cultural activity. The reason that producers and institutions alike were entirely accepting of this decision is because they concur in the categorization in which art is an addition to life, and never part of its essence. This notion runs deep. If archaeologists express their amazement that ice age cultures could, despite the challenges of survival, make provision for artists to craft work of great intricacy and skill, that is because they share the mainstream opinion that artistic labor is a luxury, an adjunct to survival, rather than something fundamental to it. Hence as soon as coronavirus took hold it was universally understood that the physical expression of art could be efficiently suspended.

Much hand-wringing accompanied this decision, all of it unseemly and insincere. It was soon realized that the greatest danger to the survival of the culture industry

after coronavirus would be the way the measures taken against its spread might degrade the injunction to put one's body perpetually at the service of consumption. Yet this very injunction is really part of the nostalgia for an earlier phase of capitalism. We may briefly have been relieved of the full spectrum of physical overstimulation, but this is perfectly in keeping with the general trend of increasing spectral overstimulation as performed by virtual and mediated cultural outputs. The fact brings to mind the psychological experiment a few years ago on an American campus in which subjects were invited to sit alone with their thoughts for fifteen minutes or administer electric shocks to themselves. Unable to stand the former, almost half chose to administer the shocks.

What is it that has become so unendurable about private psychological space? To be left to it is to be switched off, to be severed from the mainframe, pulled from the grid, unplugged from the tangle of electrodes that keeps body and mind skittering across a seemingly infinite panorama of diffracted imagery. We no longer have any idea of what stands opposite the screen upon which our eyes are fixed. But for those who were looking for one, there may have been some kind of clue discernable in the early days of lockdown. Even among the concrete and steel of central London there came, almost by implication, the sudden revelation of the vast impassivity of nature, its majesty and distance. Days of still, bright, windless weather. A utopian light fell upon deserted streets. Wildlife made small forays into the clearings in sublime indifference to the rising sense of panic indoors. For the first time a totalized human society faced a non-human threat and in response the cosmos seemed to reorder itself into a bilateral relation across whose divide our gaze could not penetrate. Before we were all forced to live in exactly the same way, our lives constrained by exactly the same technological imperatives, it might have been possible purely through some mismatch of cosmologies to tap into this leakage from elsewhere, to find a seam into the unknown. Yet sealed into our feedback loops, we have lost any language of the alien. We cannot frame the enigma that we could during those days briefly intuit.

How remarkable that rather than any overbuilt and hyperventilating Hollywood disaster movie in which everything still fundamentally makes sense, it is Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* that most accurately predicted what was to come. The array of figures spread out evenly across an artificial landscape, the circularity of their behaviors and disconnections, the broken amnesia of their memories. What has intensified with the arrival of coronavirus in perfect continuity with the past is the key dimension of captivity: the increasing involution of the individual, a sealed microcosm whose connection to a wider world has been pared away to nothing, *homo economicus* retreating ever further inwards into a spectral prison, listless and pacified denizen of a fully colonized lifeworld whose hallucinations he mistakes for his own. Whatever atavistic dreams we might once have had of

ourselves have all winked out like candle flames. There is now only the electric intensity of our video replicas, images of surfaces we never knew belonged to us. We have split our being to the core and cannot make sense of the pieces.

The corruption at the heart of the most affluent and technologically accomplished societies has been laid bare by coronavirus: it is these societies that have seen the largest numbers of deaths. Measures of the most astonishing inhumanity have been meekly accepted, surely none more outrageous than the insistence that grieving families bid farewell to their dying relatives by remote interface. Every human culture has known historically that the only way to survive death is to share it physically, to disperse it across an assembled throng. In this sense, a society that rejects so basic a necessity displays its own fundamentally suicidal impulse, the inevitability of its own extinction, however long that might take.

Capitalism has come up against a novel challenge to the force of its individualism as we grapple with the idea that perhaps oxygen itself can be privatized. The notion might once have been ridiculous but in the warped logic of today seems hideously feasible. We seem with coronavirus to have forgotten that our society, with its mortgages, its wage slavery, its poisonous emissions, its continuous fragmentation of the psyche, is itself a deathtrap. One can only hope now for some catastrophic merging, in which these febrile fantasies and denials are swept away in a flood of contamination.

It is interesting in this context to revisit perhaps the most comprehensively misunderstood figure in the history of the theatre. Antonin Artaud made a famous and now rather prescient comparison a century ago between theatre and the plague. This was an audacious analogy, its implications so disturbing that it has rarely been accepted on its own terms. Artaud thought the effect of the theatre on an audience should be like the effect of the plague on its victims. It should first infect them, and then overwhelm them and finally destroy them. A host of over-schooled interpreters have blunted the edge of his words and suggested that he could not have been serious. He must surely only have meant theatre should “move” or “surprise” its audience, in the way that any dutiful theatre producer in the present day would surely endorse. But this is entirely to vitiate Artaud’s position. The effect Artaud was describing was not emotional, or even visceral: it was somatic and existential. His theatre would affect the organism as an entity, a thing, not just some part of it. He states with unambiguous clarity that a play in his vision should infect first the members of its original audience and then like an epidemic pass through them into those who subsequently come into contact with them.

This was a vision of an art with the capacity to work unequivocal destruction beyond itself: an objective as opposed to the stated purpose of contemporary art as it is possible to be. What Artaud seemed to predict was the process whereby the body politic would purge from itself all inherent sickness, all opacity, anything through which it cannot see: in a word, from negativity. We are told repeatedly today that art will be healthful, uplifting, transparent: in service to reality, whose pathologies if they exist will be corrected through the application of appropriate moral standards. Ethics founded on faith in the given reality will determine aesthetics. In this vision of conscious control, negativity must be hunted down and eliminated. Yet it is in the nature of the negative to evade scrutiny, to disappear in the intensity of the search beam. Hence the popular consciousness becomes divided against itself, choking forth absurd parodies of the negative which everywhere proliferate. But Artaud's concept of an art founded in negation lies outside this dialectic. It is the enemy of all because it opposes reality itself. Like the external shock to the economy or the internal cessation of its mass hallucination, such art denies its own possible audience, completely and irreconcilably. It speaks another tongue: it obliterates. It does not build bridges or unite or explain: it tears down. It simply destroys.

There is nothing arbitrary in Artaud's choice of analogy. Theatre has always been a place of physical infection. It involves exchange of breath, words, and emotions. It is above all an exercise in the risk that comes from social proximity. This is the essence of theatre and by extension of all art. What is paradoxical in Artaud is not that he argues for an art that destroys its audience, but rather that the audience invites it to do so. The true radicalism of Artaud is not his message to the artist, but his conception of human nature: he understands that there is something in an audience that covets destruction, that seeks its own demise. Artaud knows that what drives a person into an auditorium is the illicit appeal of potential destruction rather than any bland restitution. Artaud conceives here an art that is not chosen, that is not an elective option, but rather an infliction, an irruption from another order.

Today the death drive is as much a taboo as the concept of alienation. It has been dispersed across the culture rather than repressed, as despite the claims of the enlightened minority, the wider body politic quietly yearns for the overturning and destruction that never seems to come. Disaster has been alleged as perpetually imminent since the end of World War Two, but in recent years the situation has become especially volatile as the violence of terrorism, which appeared to compensate for the end of the Cold War, seems now to have lost its energy. And so in the past decade, one development after another has been catastrophized

and spectacularized through the compound eye of the media mass. But the mistake is to consider apocalypse an event. It is rather already unfolding in our contemporary way of being, in which all are complicit. It is no surprise that before the virus outbreak, fitness centers across the affluent capitals of the world were offering their members exercise classes rehearsing kitsch scenarios themed around the end of the world. Of course, no end ever came then, nor will it ever come. The only cataclysm is the constant assault of the media mass upon individual consciousness and the violent nothingness that issues from that assault. If there is tragedy, it is that the end has been endlessly suspended: catharsis is impossible. Even today, despite the huge numbers of people who have lost their lives to coronavirus, we are reassured that disaster has once again been averted.

For all the freedom and anarchy promised by the harbingers of semiotic modernity, we inhabit a world of extraordinary rigidity and operative focus. In the superfluid interactions of the media mass, the event itself is in retreat. The chance encounter is a throwback to the olden days. Due to the depth of the mesmeric trance, no one attends to anything unless directed to do so. The forlorn and craven hope of every cultural producer is still the virtual virality whose actual equivalent is the cause of so much anxiety. Resistance to circulation is thus a kind of kamikaze act for the artist of today, and for that very reason one of the only remaining of any interest. In an ethical totality, the fantasy of universal agency can only be subverted by the cultivation of indifference. Self-sabotage becomes the final refuge. The artist without a virtual persona is considered by peers and consumers alike a sort of piffling idiot, a genuine irrelevance. A true exile. This could be a gift: the necessary curse. Art can yet be thrown from the circle of light, but only if it abdicates itself entirely, if it builds destruction into its core so as to begin again. While the culture industry works to crunch the raw data of coronavirus into semantic commodities, here is the possibility of a kind of dark matter that will not be explained in advance of itself. An art that denies the false virtues of coherence and consensus and replaces them with impenetrability and the inexplicable. An art that breaks rather than mends, that fractures rather than heals, that antagonizes and divides. An art that comes from elsewhere: that once again taps the void.

The word "infection" comes from the Latin "inficere," used latterly in a similar sense to our own, but also meaning "to steep," as cloth in dye. This is closer to its etymology: the verb means "to make within." Infection is an inner transmutation, a suffusing. Just as, according to Artaud, there is a way in which art addresses cellular being itself, so there is a mode of infection without a bacterium or virus as its agent: this is what it is to be possessed involuntarily by a force outside oneself, to be touched within, changed within, altered by an alien force that cannot be

explained. Semiotic capitalism denies death, excluding its contamination from the body and transmuting it into the eternally aggregating investment and the cumulatively purified individual. In contrast, the key to life has always been to court death, even to dance with it. Once upon a time the arrival of a plague would have prompted hazardous rites of expiation intended to contain its impact. How we might laugh today at such primitive superstitions! But rather than retreat, such a response goes to meet the threat, engaging clear-sightedly with what it portends. Here then is a test for the art to come: would you risk infection in its primordial sense in order to complete the act it demands of you? If not, then discard it. It can bring you nothing. Let it die: let it go extinct. Let the theatres and the exhibition halls and the cinemas remain shuttered until they crumble to dust. Something new will rise from the ruins.

Without such a test, we remain trapped in a cycle of nostalgia and sentimentality. A film circulated in the early days of the virus displayed an accomplished dancer from the Royal New Zealand Ballet relocated to the Antarctic as she executed a repertoire of carefully honed twists and leaps in a glacial landscape of ice and snow. The makers of the film insisted that their intention was to show human expression in its true home. But the actual effect was the opposite. The language of ballet as one of the great expressions of European civilization is a language of interiority and refinement. Denuded on the floes and exposed to the landscape it made no sense at all, visually or aesthetically. It was pure superimposition, complete antithesis. At times the result was mere bathos, as the dancer grappled in seeming embarrassment and confusion at where she found herself. At others it felt as if at any moment the landscape would flare out into the green screen of the film studio, accomplices rushing into the frame bearing hot towels and energy drinks. The landscape was the reverse of the dance: its absolute other, its cancelation.

As long as we imagine that our benign, transparent, and sterilized productions sent down the appropriate channels can connect us to the reality behind appearances, science will remain the only idiom in which an epidemic can be explained. Our enfeebled metaphysics cannot cope with it: with a force of pure and potentially limitless destruction of the human in the name of the non-human. It might initially have been thought that the arrival of coronavirus could strike a blow for environmentalism. But now the reverse seems likely. The aspect of nature that we may have glimpsed in our silent streets is not the sun over the mountains or the wildflowers of the meadow, but an invisible order in which the vaunted flourishing of the human is as arbitrary as that of any other species, an order with which it has never been possible for human beings to live in harmony, whatever the romantic theorists of the pre-agricultural era might prefer to imagine. The

point is not to deny this aspect but to renew our connection to it. There was once a modality in which our troubled relation to what we do not understand could be probed in such a way as to make it part of us. That is no longer the case. The virus has shown us that we and the world are no longer commensurate. What more might it teach us? We must adjust our eyes. Hence the corona, visible only at eclipse: a halation concealing something much darker and more momentous.

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