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**The atmosphere of thought, the dreams of matter and the hormones of the imagination**

hormones (signaling molecules)  
from Greek ὀρμῶν, "setting in motion"

On rêve avant de contempler.  
Bachelard, *L'Eau et les rêves*, 11

What is there to say? What a hard task to write a position paper, when the mess of the world is rushing ahead. I can see Benjamin's angel of history turning her head, and - horrified, as she may always have been - looking at the gigantic muddle of violence, confusion, stupidity, and misfortune unfolding each day. No one can be exempt, but we are all in it so differently. So far removed from each other. Every morning I get up and again, like the day before, there's hardly hope or joy, and time is flying. What is there to say, in this June of 2022 about critique and transformation? But pause this and let me start again...

I think back to the spring of 2012, when Kathrin and I started raising some comparatively small funds for the first workshop of what was to become *Terra Critica*. We responded (with what I remember as a sense of purpose) to a growing postulation of "capitalist realism" – to use Mark Fisher's term (2009). Not only the bail out of banks in the wake of the 2008 Leeman Brothers collapse, but also the subsequent budget cuts in public spending, including university budgets, were largely said to be without alternative. We were outraged that claims to the intrinsic value of knowledge, critical intervention and education for democracy were rebuffed as no longer in step with the realities of the world. Angered that research funding was increasingly shifted from universities into research councils and competition for grants praised as enhancing quality of research. "Capitalist realism," Fisher writes, "cannot be confined to art or to the quasi-propagandistic way in which advertising functions. It is more like a pervasive atmosphere, conditioning [...] the regulation of work and education, acting as a kind of invisible barrier constraining thought and action." (Fisher 16) Ten years on, the limitations of that claim on reality and the system-relevance of selected sectors have become somewhat more visible, with the Covid19-pandemic exposing the vulnerability of bodies, defunded health care systems, global delivery chains (and much more). But I have grown tired. And we are also ten years on with the climate catastrophe, ever more deeply in it. Also here, the limits of growth have become increasingly tangible through climate extremes - and also this "emergency" proves to be, among other things, a crisis of the imagination: on the one hand, because it still seems easier – once again Fisher – "to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism" (2); but also, on the other hand, because in the face of mass extinction and planetary uninhabitability all that can be envisioned – as Donatella Meadows put it in 1994, fifteen years prior to Fisher – "is the avoidance of catastrophe. [...] That is a failure of vision" (2). Yes, it is - but I am very tired.

"The tired no longer prepares for any possibility (subjective). She therefore cannot realize the smallest possibility (objective). But possibility remains, because you never realize all of the possible, you even bring it into being as you realize some of it." (Deleuze, 3)

So, we got up and thought ahead to our meeting, our so cherished *Terra Critica* meeting. If the challenge is one of vision, of imagination and possibility remaining, we thought: let's read a wild combination that might get us going again. Half-exhausted, half-excited, we picked the readings, combining speculative Caribbean fiction touching on the elements (Hopkinson) with reflections on material imagination, air, and movement (Bachelard), a demonstration of the tragic-ridiculous short-comings of the Enlightenment idea that insight and knowledge leads to (a will to) action (McKay), and the reminder that modern culture and science is far more comfortable with skepticism and cynicism than with visions and imagination (Meadows). In view of the questions that we hope to ask together – Can critique help imagine less destructive collective transformations? What would “critique” look like if its motivation (Lat. *motivus*, *motus*, moving) is transformation, not judgment? How does it move “us”? – this seemingly disparate set of (visual) texts might serve, we hoped, as springboards to think together about critique as a moving force, as a movement tied to an imagination of other possible futures. As a force to inflect or defect from present ways of doing. A little bit along the lines of Nesrine Malik’s recent claim that *We Need New Stories* (2019).

When eventually sitting down to do the readings properly, I was intrigued by Bachelard’s idea of material imagination and its links to microscopic movement, because it made me realize a hesitation I feel when embracing the call for new stories – although I do fully embrace the need to deconstruct modern and fabricate different myths. I'd do it every day if I wasn't this tired and distracted. But Bachelard's work on the microphysics of movement prompted by poetic images ("We must become involved in our images." [264]), made me think that despite the need for new stories, different narratives and visions might not suffice. New stories promise difference but can also continue (even if critically) the story's arrangement of time, character, visual presentation on the page; remain a little too close to our current habits of ordering events. "[H]abit is the inertia of psychic development" (11). Stories lure me into different worlds (good!), make me picture e.g. Hopkinson's dystopic world of glass storms, not all too far from contemporary climate catastrophe; yet it might be more those worlds that disturb or entice and less the experience of change *in situ*. The "imagination is primarily a kind of spiritual mobility" (Bachelard 2), not to be conflated with "kinematic" motion or "movement perceived visually" (8). Real movement might be minuscule, induced by an "imagination that dreams of the matter beneath forms" (264) - and the genre of story(ing) might be prefigured in familiar ways, too informed by grooved habits of narration. It is just a worry and one that I - to say it again - articulate here all the while fully affirming storying. And as I am writing this, I can feel the tiredness lifting ever so lightly...

I begin to explore Bachelard a little more and see how careful he is to distinguish between reverie that "merely takes us elsewhere, without our really being able to live the images we encounter along the way" (3) - what he calls "escapist imagination" (3) - and imagination, where "our inner being gets a gentle push with throws us off balance and sets in motion a healthy, really dynamic reverie" (3). The qualification of "healthy" might require more thought, but I understand him to stress the corporeal, psychic-physical dimension of such change occurring here and now, rather than transporting an existing 'me' elsewhere. Whereas the latter is kinematic (even if imagined), the former type of change is in strangely intimate correspondence with the materiality of the four elements. I hear myself thinking about which element is closest to my dreams (and cannot settle on water or earth) and I start feeling a little refreshed by the sense of water and earth both running through my veins. I am wondering about the five elements in Eastern thought and whether my veins might hold more elements than I can imagine. Be that as it may, Bachelard holds that material imagination - the dreams of/with/through the four elements he pursues in his four volumes on the imagination (or psychoanalysis) of fire, air, water, and earth - can mobilize "really dynamic" reveries. Such reveries can host change that takes effect materially, in ourselves, in/by/as the fire, air, water and earth that we are. Tying such reveries to the alchemy of material transformation, Bachelard calls the four elements "the hormones of the imagination" (11) - with (imaginary) air (the example we read for the workshop) being the "hormone that allows us to *grow* psychically" (11) - to lift up, to get light, to change weight, to ascend and descend. I have to think of Alice, where things grow as they shrink. I also sense a sudden resistance against affirming hormones, those little beasts, but given that I feel quite pleased by now to be thinking about micromovements and the imagination, I let that go.

Material imagination then seems a type of psychic athleticism that challenges the inertia of habit and that can "prepare the integration of the will to move and the experience of motion" (255). Underneath (or next to or beyond) the storying of other worlds, material imagination points to the preparatory maneuvers required for an openness for change to take place. It is this preparatory (non)doing that starts to interest me in view of critique and transformation. It might take a wiping clean of the canvas (thinking of Deleuze) for other dreams to materialize; an undoing of the dreams that are in place, a preparation to be prepared to undo them before anything can happen. But who has the time? Who has the patience and stamina? I am still quite tired, I realize. And yet, seeing the painful blockages of practically all players in the drama of McKay's *Don't Look Up!*, the preparatory moves might be 'unskippable'. The film makes us choke-laugh at the fact that no one is prepared to move. The persuasion of scientific fact is hardly effective (or always had other imaginations by its side to do its work of persuasion when it did). The scientists in the film are as stuck in their ways as all others: the media, the politicians, the public. Thinking of the practices of critique, we might have to realize that a change of habit does not follow from insight or enlightenment. Before any move, Bachelard knows, we must get involved in our *images*; in order to change aggregate, we must first get involved in what our dreams are made of (for the past centuries, gold and steel might be more

prominent than the elemental materials we are). If gold weighs us down, it is hard to get light enough to become ready to move. To lift the head and get up.

The stress on the preparatory reminded me of Spivak's aesthetic education, which is also a training of the imagination; it is not yet the attainment of alternatives, a stepping toward new registers, but more - so it seems - the (infinitely slow, too slow? again, who has the time??) unlearning of habits and a "cognitive tuning" ("Supplementing Marxism" 201) to educate ourselves; Spivak's main concern being an education of the senses toward responsibility for the social.<sup>1</sup> Where Spivak stresses the epistemic preparation required to get ourselves to act as if we thought of the other (the social) first, Bachelard stresses the dynamic, psychic mobility enabled by an alignment with the material-elemental imagination that poetic images can foster. The task would be "to become in our imagination matter suitable for the development of our present duration" (259). He calls this - in his study on air - the "process of lightening our inmost being" (259). Bachelard's poetic image is not the stereotype, the fixed, reductive image; nor is it the visual image - two of the most prominent current uses and discussions of the image. These are *poetic* images made of language; valuable in their newness, or their potential to strike and tap into psychic-material traces of the elemental dreams of "us" modern western people. Again, who has time for this, in the face of the urgencies to halt the rise of temperature, the bio/necropolitics of racialized capitalism, and so much more? But I must confess to myself that I feel a little less tired after the journey of this short paper. I hear myself think of Césaire and realize that I feel a sense of fresh air blowing through my brain, feeling literally inspired to think more about Césaire's poetic image of mud in his *Notebook*. About earth, clay, *la boue* that echoes through the poem from its first line (*au bout*) to the end that literally lifts the speaker and all readers to be *debout*. I will have to leave that for another time. But I can feel myself getting ready for it, ever so slowly. The preparatory as a dwelling might be the place I can occupy at this moment – not as a stage of inertia and waiting, but as a nano-move of airing brain, spine and guts, slowing down my breath despite the rush and ...

"To move with a motion that involves the whole being in the developing stages of lightness, is already the transformation of any moving being." (259)

## References

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<sup>1</sup> In her (very affirmative) critique of Marx, she notes that Marx's ultimately humanist, Enlightenment trust in reason made him assume that once the workers understand themselves as agents of production, their public (social) use of reason must lead to revolution. But "[w]hat Marx left uncalculated was the epistemological burden of training the socialist subject" ("Supplementing Marxism" 185) – or the question why "an epistemically unprepared population" (185) should opt for socialism, rather than for improving their capitalist skills of making money or for fascism. It might take preparation to move otherwise.

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