

Drifting in the Cracks: With-For-Against Politics

Kathrin Thiele (Utrecht University)

In a short videoclip on the work pursued in Johannesburg's [The Centre of the Less Good Idea](#), season 5 curators Phala Ookeditse Phala and David Thatanelo April contextualize their artistic approach by reference to the 1998 "Incomplete Manifesto of Growth" (Bruce Mau), in which, as Phala reads out loud, rule number 8 advises to "[d]rift. Allow yourself to wander aimlessly. Explore adjacencies. Lack judgment. Postpone Criticism", just to be followed by rule number 9 which reads "[b]egin anywhere" (see also [An Incomplete Manifesto of Growth](#)). Phala's 'begin anywhere' could easily also be heard as 'begin anyway' – and the proximity of 'where' and 'way' in terms of pronunciation I don't deplore. Rather, introducing my paper this year by such uncertainty helps to even better position it as one of ambivalence, blur(ring), and drift(ing). When thinking ahead to our discussion on 'Critique and Society', seeing us grappling with the question 'Whose Society?', I struggle with the issue of having a "good idea". So instead, and much more in line with the above-mentioned collective art project, I see more relevance in pushing for "the secondary ideas, those less good ideas coined to address the first idea's cracks".¹

The first idea, in a way my imagination of a "crystal-clear good idea"², was to focalize the relation of society and critique as one centrally circling around 'politics'. Right at this moment in time, how not to think of a more articulate politics of critique – both as critique's potential and urgency – when asking questions such as 'Whose Society?' and 'who is speaking to, with and for whom'? The more I read and drifted in the texts, however, the more lost I felt at moments with/in them and in relation to what I witness politically around me every day, the more I sensed this idea's cracks, and uncertainty grew. So, the following is an attempt to begin anywhere – and anyway. Putting hope in the "less good" as a critical wager, this position paper revisits the question that carries me for many years now in Terra Critica: how as critical thinkers to keep critique's potential to speak truth to power as a politics of resistance, without at the very same time falling into the position of a critic who knows and thereby sediments rather than cracks open state power. It is, thus, again the question of how to do critique otherwise: Not a gesture to set things right, but a force to shift underneath, beyond or on the side of the hegemonic order of things: How 'to extricate ourselves' (with Fanon and Wynter), avoiding judgement (with its logic of sequentiality 'to move on'), but cultivating (as in 'keep growing') ongoingness.³

¹ For the curators' video, see [Curators of Season 5](#); for the overall rationale of *The Centre For The Less Good Idea* founded by South African artist William Kentridge, read [The Center for the Less Good Idea](#).

² See above's web-link of *The Center for the Less Good Idea*.

³ Ongoingness I use in the way thinkers such as Donna Haraway or Anna L. Tsing suggest it to their readers. See Haraway's emphasis on ongoingness when explaining her critical practice of figuration as one "to help build ongoing stories rather than histories that end" (Haraway 2004, 1) or also in her recent formula 'to stay with the trouble' (Haraway 2016). And Tsing's (auto)ethnographic/conceptual journey in *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* speaks for itself in this regard (Tsing 2017).

The Politics of Critique and the End of New Times

It was towards the end of “The Meaning of New Times” that Stuart Hall’s use of the word ‘cultivating’ stood out to me when reading this text. With it, Hall seems to suggest the very specific approach needed in order to undo the shortsighted either/or alternatives proposed by the political spectrum of his times and in the face of what he considers as ‘the new times’ (see Hall 1988, 262). While his emphasis on cultivation might be called out directly as one relying too heavily on a taken for granted nature/culture split – even though with the critical awareness how hierarchical and therefore political this categorization is, and what violent consequences it leads to – he can also be read as using it to precisely signal the insufficiency of any simple ‘return to Nature’-approach for the Left in its fight against the market logic of the then heavily growing post-fordist, post-industrial capitalism. So, cultivation is used by him as an expression of and for political resistance – undoing binary either/or, authentic/inauthentic divisions. It suggests the possibility of a different form of co-existence on this earth, one no longer based on the hierarchical distribution of what is considered as culture and nature, and yet – because of its contextualization in and as *political* – one clearly beyond Nature. The cultural in this materially transformative sense, Hall analyses as that dimension of UK society which right at that moment in time undergoes a significant change, and it thus pushes itself into the forefront of the political scene. I would even say, for Hall the changing value of the cultural is *the* sign of the new times he reflects upon. The same emphasis on culture and the cultural is also to be found in Homi Bhabha’s “The Commitment of Theory”, published in the same year as Hall’s text (1988). Bhabha’s argumentation for cultural difference as a material logic, but as that as a matter of articulation and enunciation (and thereby distinguished from cultural diversity as merely an epistemological object as he says (see Bhabha 1988, 18)), is also used to envision a different politics for cultural difference as hybridity and Third Space as ways to ‘extricate ourselves’. Thinking with/in cultural difference allows us, Bhabha suggests, to (finally) leave the exclusivist either/or ideas of self/other, friend/enemy, nature/culture, human/non-human.

It might be now just one of the signs of today’s times that this emphasis on the cultural as the (new) ingredient for a different political positioning struck me so much in my revisiting of their times. Yet, it indeed did strike me, and I believe it did so because right now we live in a time in which the cultural has clearly lost this transformative – critical/political – potential, Hall and Bhabha thirty years ago have been introducing into discourse. Either reified in and for individual consumption or re-essentialized as a mere (empirical/sociological) given, culture and the cultural has today become (again) just an ‘object’, something ‘natural’ – it has, thus, become what Bhabha calls ‘cultural diversity’, and seems to me far removed from being “the changed political and historical site of enunciation [that] transforms the meanings of the colonial inheritance into the liberatory signs of a free people of the future” (Bhabha 1988, 22). The question then is: Are we currently living the very exhaustion of the cultural as political

force and if so, what does that mean for critical thinking as a force of political resistance? Can it be said that we are at the end of those new times in which the cultural became part of the political game because it has been fully inhaled and individualized by this very game? And in view of this: Is my feeling of exhaustion when asking such questions and when registering my affective response to Hall's clear critical voice – a feeling so difficult to specify – then perhaps just the *adequate* expression of our times instead of a resignation in the face of it? What does exhaustion mean? How might it be linked to the liminal/limit space of 'cracking up', in which another breath will have been the next thing to follow?⁴

Still the End of New Times, but in a Different Tune

That we are literally witnessing the exhaustion of the neoliberal time-line of global capitalism (in its intrinsic and systemic relation to racism/colonialism and sexism/patriarchy, i.e. as CPC), is to me a fact (or 'factual truth' in Arendt's sense). Yet, this in no way means something good, let alone salvation from it. Rather, our current reality is the acceleration and intensification of what in "Racism and Reaction" Hall calls the "active fascist political element" (Hall 1978, 147) and what Bhabha specifies as the great "ambivalence" in view of a (new) politics.⁵ And the question that pushes itself to the fore then is, is there still enough air to breathe in the exhausted/-ive climates we live and produce, or has the political machinery sucked it all up in its inherent binary functioning (self/other, culture/nature, true/false, good/bad, 0/1)? Listening (or drifting) to(wards) Hannah Arendt and Alexandre Koyré with this question – and jumping times with them – we might indeed not have much air, time, breath left when also today it seems true to maintain "that there has never been so much lying as in our time, that lying has never had so massive, so total a character as it has today" (Koyré 2017, 143). Or when, with Arendt, we can again see how "the results of a consistent and total substitution of lies for factual truth is not that the lies will now be accepted as truth [...] but that the sense by which we take our bearings in the real world [...] is destroyed" (Arendt 1968, 257). But I need to still drift further or even slide here – space is too limited and I cannot discuss what Arendt makes of the complex relation of truth and politics, because what I urgently need now is to get out of that very frame of thought that presupposes that what is required is a matter of power and politics.... So, drifting further – but still with Arendt, just a few pages later: "Truth, though powerless and always defeated in a head-on clash with the powers that be, possesses a strength of its own: whatever those in power may contrive, they are unable to discover or invent a viable substitute for it" (259). So, at the end of (the new) times, to the side of them, something seems to remain, un-exhaustible?

⁴ To work with 'exhaustion' here is ambivalent for me. While I agree with e.g. Deleuze's characterization of the difference between being tired and being exhausted as one in which "the tired person can no longer realize, but the exhausted person can no longer possibilize" (Deleuze 1997, 152), i.e. that in exhaustion the realm of the possible (Kant's future horizon) has itself exhausted, the overtones of melancholy of 'weariness' are clearly bothering me.

⁵ "How do we construct a politics based on such a displacement of affect or strategic elaboration (Foucault), where political positioning is ambivalently grounded in an acting-out of political fantasies that require repeated passages across the differential boundaries between one symbolic bloc *and an other*, and the positions available to each?" (Bhabha 1988, 14-15)

A different tune, another critical power at work. In our readings, this is what the 'autosociobiographical impersonal we' in Annie Ernaux's *The Years* (2017) and the 'blur' linked with 'breathe' in Fred Moten's *Blur and Black* (2017) generate. Instead of putting their wager on the presentation of images or things as crystal-clear ideas; instead of countering these – our – exhausted times with recourse to judgment or Criticism, theirs is a poet(h)ical response to and a turn of the slowing-down times in exhaustion: Another mode of critical intervention, in which drifting and blurring rather than conceptualizing and prescribing “save something from the time where we will never be again” (Ernaux 2017, 227) and keep ongoing “[t]he continual fold of unfolding's refusal to enfold” (Moten 2017, 269). The ambivalence and uncertainty (with Bhabha again) of Ernaux's impersonalizing 'we' as much as Moten's insistence on the need to depoliticize and attend to the marginal/ized otherwise – because “[w]hat if the political is simply the structuring of societies in dominance?” (256) – could in the registers of classical critique certainly be called less powerful, i.e. “less good”. We're not told here 'what is going on', nor is 'what is happening to us' clearly addressed. Yet, rather than leaving things as they are, this poet(h)ical strategy breaks radically with the dominance of (our) time as sequentiality, with all its detrimental consequences for politics: prescription, teleology, progression. To end then with what I consider Moten's critical shift to be: “The dissolve resolves nothing; there is no easy solution, no phantasmatic melding; but, at the same time, dissolution is not desolation, either. We feel the blur of a general entanglement and the question is, simply, what are we to make of it?” (254)

Bibliography

- Arendt, Hannah (1967). “Truth and Politics.” *The New Yorker*, February 25, 1967. Reprinted with minor changes in *Between Past and Future* New York: The Viking Press 1968, pp. 227-264.
- Bhabha, Homi (1988). “The Commitment to Theory.” *new formations* no. 5 ('Identities'), pp. 5-23.
- Deleuze, Gilles (1992). “The Exhausted.” In *Essays Critical and Clinical* (trans. by Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997, pp. 152-174.
- Ernaux, Annie (2008). *The Years* (trans. by Alison Strayer). London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- Stuart Hall (1978). “Racism and reaction.” In *Selected Political Writings. The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (ed. by Sally Davison et al.). Durham: Duke University Press 2017, pp. 142-157.
- Stuart Hall (1988). “The Meaning of New Times.” In *Selected Political Writings. The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (ed. by Sally Davison et al.). Durham: Duke University Press 2017, pp. 248-265.
- Haraway, Donna (2004). *The Haraway Reader*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Haraway, Donna (2016). *Staying with the Trouble*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Koyré, Alexandre (1943). “The Political Function of the Modern Lie.” *Contemporary Jewish Record* 1945. Reprinted in *October* 160: 2017, pp. 143-151.
- Mau, Bruce (1998). “The Incomplete Manifesto for Growth.” <http://www.manifestoproject.it/bruce-mau/> [last accessed 15/06/2019]
- Fred Moten (2017). “The Blur and Breathe Books.” In *Black and Blur*. Durham: Duke University Press 2017, pp. 245-269.
- Phala Ookeditse Phala & David Thatanelo April (2019). “Curators of Season 5” <https://lessgoodidea.com/#/curators-of-season-5/> [last accessed 15/06/2019]
- Tsing, Anna L. (2017). *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.