



*Horea Poenar*

## **Bad New World**

# **The (Relative) Rebirth of the Commons**

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**Abstract:** The state of the world is depressing. Neoliberal policies are global, while identity politics is returning with a vengeance. In such a context, the existence of the commons is under threat, and so is the idea of community. This paper investigates how art responds to this return to barbarism, as Alain Badiou describes our world. It firstly investigates what images of the current crises tell about us. Then it presents three examples of artists engaging with the current world, resisting its neoliberal and even fascist tendencies: the Syrian group Abounaddara, the Ukrainean-Russian Femen and the Hungarian Two-Tailed Dog Party. In all of these cases, what is effective and emancipatory is the courage of a new conception of temporality. In the neoliberal world that claims we live in post-history, the simple statement that history exists is courageous because it implies that history could be transformed.

**Keywords:** Community; Commons; Art; Ideology; Emancipation; Temporality; Courage.

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### **Bad New World**

According to Bertolt Brecht, the aim of the historian (and of the artist) should not be to study the good old days, but the bad new days: “It is not linked to the good old days, but to the bad new ones.”<sup>1</sup> The phrase appears in an essay that Brecht writes about Lukács, to whom he reproaches his focus on the past and, particularly, his preference for traditional and comfortable techniques, in contrast to the exploratory risks of contemporary ones. For Brecht, the solution is not to go back and learn from the Old Masters and their techniques, but to confront the present and dare to invent: “it does not involve undoing techniques, but developing them. [...] It is the element of capitulation, of withdrawal, of utopian idealism which still lurks in Lukács’s essays [...] it gives the impression that what concerns him is enjoyment rather than struggle, a way of escape rather than an advance.”<sup>2</sup> In the face of a reality on the move and especially in the face of defeats and setbacks for an emancipatory project (and politics), the task of an artist is to invent. The solution is never in the past, not even in an idea from the past. At all points, reality is to be thought in relation with invention; its rapid evolution must be



reflected in an ability to deconstruct and engage, and all these strategies can and should define what realism means: “discovering the causal complexes of society/ unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power/ writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up/ emphasizing the element of development/ making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.”<sup>3</sup>

Each epoch can be understood first of all (and most of the time the analysis is caught and limited to and within these frames) through its ideological apparatus.<sup>4</sup> There is no doubt that for us – especially after 1990 – the Western media, the institutions of capital and the political forces have aligned themselves to create not only a *new* world, but at the same time a *final* one. It all began with the assumption of an end to history<sup>5</sup> and a holy alliance between liberal democracy and free market. The victory cry was however very early challenged by Jacques Derrida: “is not what we have here a new gospel, the noisiest, the most mediatised, the most ‘successful’ one on the death of Marxism as the end of history?”<sup>6</sup> More than two decades later and in spite of the continuous hegemony in the media and the Western political discourse (amplified to hysteric levels in the anti-communist countries of Eastern Europe) of these ideas, they have long since been proven wrong. The main victim of these frames of understanding history (which envelop everything in an opposition between the triumphant present and the worrying past, especially the Revolutions) has been the (idea of) community. Constantly under attack from the gospel of individualism,

it has been put to death at the same time as the concepts that in the past have tried to configure it were relegated to the dustbin of thought: class, proletariat, collective identities, communism, etc. But this ideological purification has had its dark side: “The ‘farewells to the proletariat’ are thus not just the expression of a risky sociological diagnosis. They also contribute to a political and moral debacle. On the ruins of class solidarity, what flourish are identitarian panics, the herd instinct, myths of origins, sects and tribes.”<sup>7</sup> Solidarity has been reduced to its fascist forms: the hatred of the other, visible in the renewed policy of building walls and the enclosure of the privileged upon themselves. The refugee crisis (and the depressing performance of many intellectuals with regard to it, from the predictable anti-totalitarian French philosophers to conservative Romanian intellectuals like Gabriel Liiceanu or Ana Blandiana), Brexit or the election of Donald Trump reveal the triumph of old forms of hatred and the reduction of the global order to an imposed opposition between Western civilization and the enemy from outside or from within. We have of course seen it coming. Contemporary to the Fukuyama-style celebrations, the (first) Iraq war was already putting into practice the new forms and laws of the world: “The Kuwaiti people became completely absorbed into a purely utopian function in the Western imagination, with strict identification on a map between rights to a place and a corresponding part in global stability. They became a hostage people, an invisible people, whose rights served to identify the cause of the right to overlegitimation – to a frenzy of legitimation and, by the same stroke, a hail of bombs falling on the other



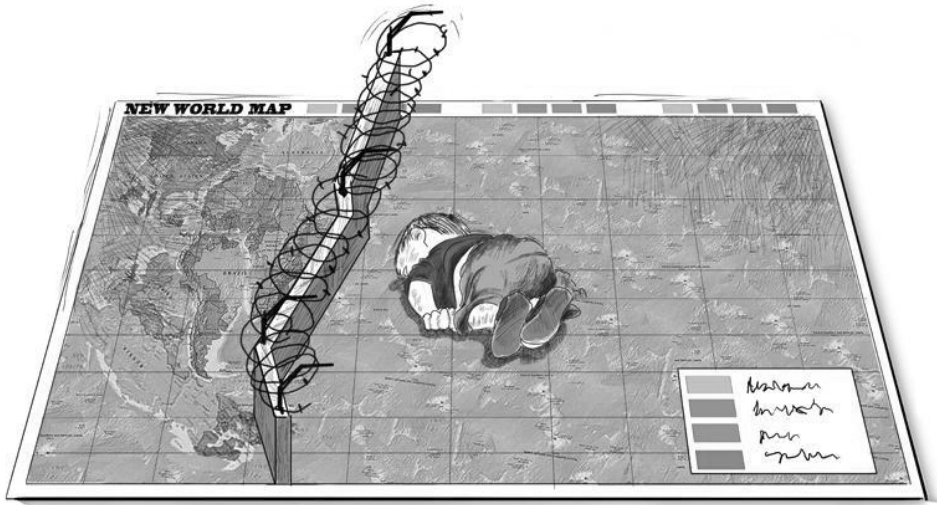
side, on an invisible and discounted Iraqi people.”<sup>8</sup> Communities are nowadays perceived through simplified images. The commons are not only under attack, they are also pushed outside or under the visible. The simple existence of communities is denied: “public transit, social security, public hospitals, and public schools symbolize the ability of those who are nothing to traverse the city, receive medical care on equal terms with those who are something, and acquire an education. It is precisely this – the rendering visible of an equality constitutive of our universe – that is increasingly unacceptable to the masters of our world.”<sup>9</sup>

In such a context, one of the key questions for contemporary theory is: what are the images of our new world? Given that the media is ideologically inclined to hammer home the same few neoliberal slogans that protect the status quo and prevent a serious analysis, one has to look at different areas. There is a case to be made (again) for the responsibility of art in relation to the world we live in. If in the 90s most of the artistic work was inclined to parallel what was called postmodernity, restricting itself to forms of satire or even a delight in the new forms, without too much care for the key elements of the art of the 60s and 70s (engagement, critique, deconstruction, etc.), the situation seems to have changed in the new millennium. Nicolas Bourriaud considered the strategies of art at the end of the 20th century to be a *relational* aesthetics and a focus on postproduction.<sup>10</sup> An artist that captures this spirit is Damien Hirst. In his art, many of the precepts of the (neoliberal) society are accepted: the strict relationship between art products and money, the museum as an institution regulated by marketing strategies

(search of the new and of the shocking, dependence on donors and advertisement) or the clever use of mass-media as an ideology apparatus. It is this conception of the museum (and of the art that it prefers and promotes) that comes under new forms of critique after 9/11 and especially after the disastrous Afghanistan and Irak wars. Hal Foster<sup>11</sup> believes that the functioning of museums after and under market rules has severely curtailed the power of art to confront and depict the tensions and contradictions of reality. There are, however, more and more artists who challenge this direction (of commercialization, fetishization and consumerism), among them, in Foster’s view, names like Thomas Hirschhorn or Iza Genken.

What is then the status of art images in our world? How far can they differ from the ideological mechanism of the media with its forms of presumed knowledge and neoliberal assumptions? Is there a way that a critique (both in its Kantian and its Marxist sense)<sup>12</sup> could still be made? Perhaps an introductory answer (or at least a new perspective) can be suggested by a drawing made by the Jordanian artist Rafat Alkhateeb during the refugee crisis of 2015, that is before political measures were put in place to limit the flow of refugees and thus make them and their suffering invisible to the Western public eyes. The drawing (entitled “New World Map”) appeared on September 3rd, 2015 on the site [cartoonmovement.com](http://cartoonmovement.com), one day after the body of Aylan Kurdi was found on the shores of Turkey.

An analysis of the drawing (and what it means for the world) by Vijay Prashced<sup>13</sup> revisited the poem by Emma Lazarus that is engraved on the Statue of Liberty



in New York: Both Europe and the United States want to build walls to prevent the free movement of people. The Statue of Liberty in New York harbor bears the words, “Give me your tired, your poor; your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” This is Emma Lazarus’ poem from 1883. No longer do these words make sense. There is no exhortation to send the tired, the poor, the huddled masses to safety. There is mostly the State-led jingoism that sets up barriers and threatens deportations. The more appropriate song is by Woody Guthrie, “Deportee,” from 1961: “They chase us like outlaws, like rustlers, like thieves. We died in your hills, we died in your deserts, we died in your valleys and died on your plains.” He would have added, “we died on your shores.”

The Lazarus poem is entitled “The New Colossus” and was written in order

to raise money for the construction of the pedestal for the statue. In a sense, it was meant to seduce and manipulate. But this could only be done by appealing to sentiments that the community shared. As Prashed observes, we are far from the same view or sentiment in relation to immigrants nowadays. The *New World Map* is not only an exposure of the new cartography, an unveiling of the desired cartography that the Western world wants but has difficulties in enacting because of geographical and physical obstacles. It is an invitation to meditate on what community, common and commons mean today. The body of Aylan is not a romantic figure of the individual opposed to the world. It represents the excluded, the unwanted, the *homo sacer* of Giorgio Agamben<sup>14</sup> that has nothing left (no citizenship, no rights, no identity) but his humanity. Refused entry,



care or any kind of help, Aylan stands not for the proud rhetoric of Western political parties, but for the simple, yet powerful humanity. There is no community in the part of the drawing that is protected by the impressive wall. The only being that has a right to stand for community (to portray its absence, to expose the falsity of rhetoric in the Western world guided by new forms of chauvinism and the dehumanizing mechanism of the market) is the dead body of the child. So, in a sense, everything that is related to the common or could legitimize a true form of the commons is left wandering in the ocean, in the grasp of tempests and death. The Lazarus poem ends with an indirect definition of community that suggests that there is no commons unless it is with the excluded ones. Just like there is no ethics unless in relation to the unbearable other, any community is based not only on the acceptance of the excluded one (as a generous opening of the one that excludes) but fundamentally it is a reordering of the world in reference to the excluded one<sup>15</sup>: “Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,/ I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Suffice to say that we live times in which the lamp is not lit.

### Three Examples

The Syrian group Abounaddara was created in 2010 and has been active ever since the revolts started in the first half of 2011. Its Vimeo channel presents the group as “a collective of self-taught and volunteer filmmakers involved in emergency cinema.”<sup>16</sup> Each week, the anonymous members of the group post a short video ranging from a few seconds to a little more

than ten minutes. The films vary a lot: they can limit themselves to a few words on the screen or they can explore the mechanisms of cinema and documentary with various degrees of courage and invention. The name of the group means in Arabic “the man with glasses,” which is a clear and respectful nod to Dziga Vertov’s 1928 movie *The Man with the Movie Camera*. The group re-enact in many ways the principles of the Soviet Cinema of the 20s: it is a cinema of the people, beyond the frames inside which the (mainly Western) media captures them. It is at the same time a cinema that tells the story of the present in its myriad manifestations and without limiting the aim of the image to its capacity of portraying a reality that remains specific in its context. One of the most powerful clichés that Abounaddara challenges is the portrayal of the Syrian conflict as embedded in and restricted to its Oriental coordinates. It is also refusing to reduce reality to the simplifying Western language of a fight between the Al-Assad dictatorship and the rebels, usually presented with a worrying degree of voyeurism and arrogant forms of victimization. What is lost in these (Western) readings of the conflict is the community. Its voice is either heard through the Western alphabet (its politicians, humanitarian interventionists, media or movies) or completely lost. There is also a third feature that relinks Abounaddara to the Soviet cinema and that is its engagement. It supports once again a militant cinema, unafraid to treat images as more than just surfaces which by their claim to escape politics are caught in deeper forms of ideology.<sup>17</sup>

In an interview given in 2015 to the French *Cahiers du cinéma*, the members of



the group point that the key aim is “ouvrir nos films à tous les possibles. Ce qui importe, c’est qu’ils soient insaisissables, percutants, dérangeants, comme des cocktails Molotov jetés à la face du monde qui nous regarde crever.”<sup>18</sup> This implies, on the one hand, a new understanding of what copyright means, thought as a form of resistance. The videos are free to access on the internet channel Vimeo and they can also be projected for activist purposes but they cannot be used for commercial purposes. On the other hand, one of the targets of the group is the historical Western portrayal of Syria through colonial and imperialist lenses: “on risque de passer définitivement pour des braves cinéastes opposés au tyran, alors que ce qui nous importe par-dessus tout, c’est de déconstruire la figure du Syrien héritée de l’histoire coloniale et relayée par l’industrie culturelle.”<sup>19</sup> In spite of the armed conflict and contrary to the Western readings of it, Abounaddara tries to focus on the community in its complexity and many nuances: “la Syrie apparaît d’abord comme un fantôme de voyageur orientaliste, et le Syrien comme un corps abject qu’on se plaît à exhiber. Ces images ne s’estomperont pas tant qu’on n’aura pas vu la société syrienne avec ces gens ordinaires et toutes ses nuances.”<sup>20</sup> It is no surprise that the group legitimizes itself by returning to one of the key texts in the history of cinema: Jacques Rivette’s “De l’abjection”<sup>21</sup> which delineates the necessary relationship between art and ethics. Analyzing the last shot of Gilles Pontecorvo’s movie *Kapo*, Rivette is incensed by the focus on aesthetic means and beauty in the representation of the Holocaust. He calls such an accent abjection: “Voyez cependant, dans *Kapo*, le plan où Riva se suicide en se jetant sur les

barbelés électrifiés : l’homme qui décide à ce moment de faire un travelling avant pour recadrer le cadavre en contre-plongée, en prenant soin d’inscrire exactement la main levée dans un angle de son cadrage final, cet homme n’a droit qu’au plus profond mépris.”<sup>22</sup> Abounaddara, in its search for the correct images of the community, re-enacts an ethics of representation: “notre travail d’artisans cinéastes consiste à construire un cadre esthétique capable d’intégrer les divisions de notre société, de sorte que tout un chacun puisse se retrouver dans nos films anonymes et irréductibles. Il ne s’agit donc pas d’ambiguïté, mais plutôt d’une éthique de responsabilité. Parce qu’on n’a pas le droit de représenter les uns aux dépens des autres en fonction de ses convictions, surtout lorsque la société se trouve au bord de l’abîme. Les histoires de héros et de méchants, de bourreaux et de victimes, c’est fait pour bercer les enfants et berner les téléspectateurs.”<sup>23</sup>

There is another important aspect, in tune with the possibilities offered by the current technological developments. The Abounaddara clips are not gathered together in a single film, dominated by a narrative or a thematics. The clips are to be traversed and connected by the viewer or following the recommending function that the Vimeo channel proposes. The traditional linking of images (in a film or a documentary or a piece of TV journalism) is not possible. The viewer has to make do with the fragmentary reality of images, their disconnectedness and the non-totalizing effect of any option. The age of the Internet offers different modes of making a connection and it demands different modes of reading. Perhaps the appropriate manner is one of reflection



and meditation, an active participation of the viewer through her ability to construct a vision upon the world, a vision protected from the dominant ideologies of mass-media or traditional cinema.

Thus it can be said that the cinema of Abounaddara strongly reaffirms the necessary resistance to all forms of domination and all ideology based on particular identities. It also considers the image from the aesthetic as well as the ethical point of view. Images work when and because they can make a difference. And more importantly it is always and in spite of all the risks a question of the image in relationship with a community: "il est toujours risqué de s'en servir sous couvert d'anonymat pour proposer un idéal, un désir ou une perspective commune."<sup>24</sup>

The second example refers to the feminist movement Femen. Formed in 2008 in Ukraine by Anna Hutsol, Sasha Shevchenko and Oxana Shachko, it has also been active in Russia and Belarus and, later, because of the enforced exile of its members, in France. The leader of the movement is artist Oxana Shachko who conceives, imagines and carefully prepares every intervention, from the choice of costumes and slogans to the theatrical structure. Known mainly for its choice of topless protests and the writing of slogans on the naked body, Femen has rocked the establishment both in Eastern and Western Europe. Accused by politicians and the Church of lack of morals, the movement has protested against mass prostitution, gender inequality, authoritarian politics and religious intolerance. Oxana Shachko finds her inspiration both in the Russian avant-garde movements from the first half of the 20th century and the Russian

Revolution: "J'ai été surtout intéressée par le futurisme russe: Lissitzky, Kandinsky. Ce qui s'est passé juste avant la révolution m'intéressée beaucoup. La révolution russe a voulu créer une manière totalement autre de voir les choses. C'est la première fois que la Russie a parlé de droits de la femme, que les femmes ont pu voter. Je suis inspirée par le marxisme. Je ne veux plus utiliser le mot communisme, qui ne veut plus rien dire, mais je m'inscris dans cette pensée dialectique."<sup>25</sup> Art and politics are mingled in a project that also involves first and foremost the body. A body that is both private (and thus its exposure shocks) and public (it affirms the equality of everyone with each one beyond any particular cover). As such, in the case of Femen, the engagement (political, ethical, artistic) cannot be disconnected from eroticism. The formula permits the group to have much more power than an ordinary critique. In front of Russian oligarchy or in the face of Marine Le Pen, Femen can expose – in much stronger terms and with a lot more courage, something that is severely lacking from the mediatic or academic analyses – the sheer violence and the worrying danger of both Eastern forms of dictatorship and Western right-wing ideology. According to Stéphane Delorme, Femen "est un exemple d'occupation de l'espace public sans peur, afin de montrer que n'importe quel citoyen ou citoyenne peut manifester son mécontentement, son ironie, sa colère."<sup>26</sup> It is essential that this courage couples nudity with confidence, something that is not always understood by Western commentators, quick to question the movement's political act. Once again, Delorme is able to distinguish what is the correct relation between eroticism and political subversion:



“L'érotisme est politique parce qu'il donne un exemple d'autres attitudes, d'autres manières orgueilleuses d'occuper l'espace et de défendre ses idées. Les Femen, telles que les incarne Oxana Shashko, ne sont pas érotiques par calcul, pour attirer l'attention des médias. L'érotisme est une subversion parce qu'il expose les cadres: les Femen troublent parce qu'elles ne tiennent pas en place, elles donnent le tournis. Le nu ne suffit pas. L'érotisme est dans le geste: un geste d'insolence, de fierté et de défi.”<sup>27</sup> There is a Deleuzian politics at work: nomadic gestures and acts can and do shatter the State apparatus. The revolutionary power is to be found in explosions of artistic creativity (although the Western media rarely notices the intricate *mise-en-scène*, the detailed costumes or the intertextual references, blinded as it is by the exposure of nudity), political engagement and what can be called deconstructions-in-act of ideologies, forms of consensus or good (aka bourgeois) manners. On this last point, Oxana Shashko is quick to show that the movement is far more complex than what it is usually reduced to: “notre originalité, c'est d'avoir utilisé l'image de la *nice girl*, et soudain cette gentille fille se dénude et proteste. Cela a surpris parce que ce sont deux choses différentes qui ne se connectent pas dans l'esprit des gens. Et trop de gens oublient qu'il y a aussi des filles de 100 kilos dans le mouvement, qui créent leur propre *story* pour leur performances.”<sup>28</sup> There is also a focus on the necessary revolutionizing of the movement itself. Its different forms, the fact that the strategies are never the same and the fact that every act is a *performance* (both in the artistic meaning and the micropolitical ability to change reality or at least to deconstruct the symbolic

understanding of the real) are well captured in the two documentaries that exist so far about the movement: *Je suis Femen*, directed by Alain Margot, and *Nos seins, nos armes!*, directed by Caroline Fourest. Again, the Deleuzian characteristics of the nomadic war machine are here well understood. In Oxana Shashko's words: “un mouvement doit toujours bouger. Le mouvement doit rester en mouvement.”<sup>29</sup>

The third example comes from Hungary and represents one of the most clever and efficient attacks on the right-wing government of Viktor Orbán, a spearhead of the fascist dimensions of the neoliberal Western consensus currently *en vogue*. The Two-Tailed Dog Party appeared in 2000 as a group focused on street humor and performances under the leadership of Gergely Kovács. After the 2015 hate-campaign of the government of Orbán aimed at the refugees and the subsequent building of walls at the borders of Hungary, the group felt obliged to react and concentrate on politics. According to Kovács, “it really made us angry that the government uses the people's money for a campaign that tells them who to hate.”<sup>30</sup> In response to an unprecedented national campaign of anti-immigrant billboards<sup>31</sup> organized by the government, the group started a funding campaign that through donations allowed it to initiate its own billboard campaign. The accusations from the government were immediate and predictable: the Two-Tailed Dog Party was accused of being funded by foreign sources and of trying to destabilize the government and bring the country into disrepute. The counter-billboards aimed at the electorate of Orbán and its extreme-right party Fidesz. One invoked the Constitution: “If you are Hungary's Prime-Minister, you





have to obey our laws.” Another cited the laws that forbid hate-speech. A third one reminded the fact that many Hungarians are themselves immigrants in Western countries: “Come to Hungary by all means, we’re already working in London.” Most of the counter-billboards of the campaign were in English (and thus addressed to foreigners) and they cleverly reveal the real mechanisms of the neoliberal dogma: “Sorry about our Prime Minister! He is trying to distract us from seeing the money stolen.”

One other campaign that increased the attention accorded to the group was the distribution across Hungary of a spoof edition of the conservative (and Orbán-cheerleading) newspaper *Magyar Hírlap* that subtly revealed the ideological mechanisms of producing news that assure that the interests of the government are well protected and that its ideology is naturalized. Once again the torrent of accusations from the government and its acolytes focused on the foreign sources that most likely would act behind the group. The move is again symptomatic: any critique of the right wing is perceived as an attack against the Nation and its security. It also thinly veils the fact that for the Hungarian electorate, just like the Western one, one rule remains unchallenged: what Alain Badiou names the policy of “my standard of living first and foremost.”<sup>32</sup>

The aim of The Two-Tailed Dog Party is political in the broadest sense. First of all, it does act inside the political system and although it is far from having the ability to destabilize the hold on power of Fidesz (the members of which treat the group with contempt and try to minimize its effect) “it has thrust a defiant paw in the closing door

of possibility and dared the powers that be to kick it aside.”<sup>33</sup> Inspired by Czech satirist writer Jaroslav Hašek, who in 1911 formed the Party of Incremental Progress within the Limits of the Law, the Two-Tailed Dog Party started by using humor as a deconstructing weapon. It exposed the consequences and the implied messages of the worrying transformation of the country by its embracing of the neoliberal ideology (a metamorphosis achieved with the majority obtained in Parliament by Fidesz in 2010). During the 2010 campaign its slogans were unconventional, but also highly critical of the new dogma: “Are you tired of people? Give another species a chance!” or “We’ll introduce the Euro in 2005!” The absurdist dimension reaches its point of political critique not because anything has changed on the artistic or performative side, but because the political world has been severely affected by the uncontested rule of international finance and the disappearance of any community projects that do not rely on identity politics of hatred. On the one hand, the increasingly powerful domination of economics over politics (in fact the servitude of the latter to the former) and, on the other hand (especially in Eastern Europe), the anti-communist hysteria have squeezed any emancipatory ability out of politics. One of Orbán’s models has been – with a depressing predictability – Nicolas Sarkozy. Politics (or the mechanism that the name of Sarkozy stands for but is not restricted to him – for example it is unabatedly continued by the Hollande-Valls pair) assures the impotence of the electoral system and the generalized corruption of capitalist-based democracy. According to Alain Badiou, “electoral democracy acknowledges the extent to which



it is a site where impotence is the rule. Everyone can see that electoral democracy is not a space of real choice, but something that registers, like a passive seismograph, propensities that are quite different from an enlightened intention, and have nothing in common with the representation that a real thought can have of the objectives that the will pursues.<sup>34</sup> This absence of real choice assures the smooth functioning of the system: “Corruption is not something that threatens the functioning of democracy. It is its genuine essence.”<sup>35</sup> *The Guardian* points to one side of this problem when it explains Orbán’s rise and subsequent ability to change the Hungarian constitution by reference to Fidesz running without any meaningful opposition from the left.<sup>36</sup> One should go one step further and admit that what is currently called the left in the liberal democracies of the West has ceased to represent anything else but another rhetorical facet to the same servitude to the market and whenever a true choice is possible (like in the election of Jeremy Corbyn to lead the Labor Party in the UK), even left-leaning media like *The Guardian* start to defend the establishment.<sup>37</sup>

The political relevance of The Two-Tailed Dog Party should however be extended. Its aim is to challenge the dominant way of talking about and even defining the commons. Faced with rampant individualism and the reduction of any understanding of community to identity-politics, the deconstructing work of the group could not only question the legitimacy of current practices, but also instigate new ones. The group has the courage to de-legitimize the image of the Hungarian community invoked and reaffirmed by Orbán and his acolytes. Their legitimacy is the electoral

system of counting which would thus signify that the truth (or the correct interpretation of what the Hungarian community is) is on their side. The subversive and at the same time inventive acts of the Two-Tailed Dog Party are movements towards a different understanding of truth which questions its limitation to counting or to the support of a majority. The truth of the commons is always partial. It is not the mirror of a majority, and it is never identitarian. It is also something that should be counterposed to opinion. In a world in which politics is reduced to the electoral play of opinions and the community is protected against the perceived violence of any truth or Idea, it is up to artistic events and performances to reconnect politics to truth. As Alain Badiou observes, “those who maintain that there is no Truth in politics would not dream of arguing that in science, art or even philosophy there is nothing but opinions.”<sup>38</sup>

### The Aesthetics of Courage or the Courage of Aesthetics

According to Slavoj Žižek, events nowadays “are not constitutive, but regulatory in the Kantian sense. Their status is subjectively mediated, they are not discernible from any neutral objective study of history, but only from an engaged position.”<sup>39</sup> The meaning of contemporary events should be judged from a point of view that is situated in the future, not in the space of the dominant opinions of the day. In this sense, the opposition to the current functioning of the world by the three groups described above (and other examples could be added) is not impotent although the immediate results may be depressive. The



system is indeed not in peril and the understanding of community that prevails is captured inside the rigid frames of electoral counting and identity-politics. The economic principles of Milton Friedman and the School of Chicago amazingly still dominate unchallenged, while the distance taken from such ideas by Nobel-Prize winners like Paul Krugman is ridiculed in right-wing media. For Žižek, “in today’s post-political democracy, the traditional bipolarity between a Social-Democratic Center-Left and a Conservative Center-Right is gradually being replaced by a new bipolarity between politics and post-politic,”<sup>40</sup> namely the administration of the state in relation to the demands of the market and the articulation of the discontent of the population. The key question for the Slovenian philosopher is “who will articulate this discontent? Will it be left to nationalist populists to exploit?”<sup>41</sup> The gloomy state of our world (led by figures such as Victor Orbán, Recep Erdoğan, Theresa May or Donald Trump) seems a clear answer to these questions. The key, however, is to challenge this experience of reality through what Alain Badiou calls courage as “endurance in the impossible.”<sup>42</sup> The French philosopher distinguishes between courage and heroism: “courage is distinct from heroism because it is a virtue, and not a moment or a posture. It is a virtue to be constructed.”<sup>43</sup> Some of the acts of Femen can be called heroic. The same could be said of – taken individually – most of the risks taken by the members of the Abounaddara group. To a certain extent, in the context of the growing movement towards a police state in Hungary, the activities of the Two-Tailed Dog Party can be connected with heroism. However, in all of

these cases (and to limit ourselves to these examples), their political relevance and the possibility of an emancipatory effect is related to their invention and construction of courage: “a virtue is displayed in practices that construct a particular time, regardless of the laws of the world or the opinions that support these laws.”<sup>44</sup> The essential element – and what these examples share in relation to an image of the commons – is time. They work against the horizon of a different temporality from that imposed on the world by the purified ideological space of neoliberalism. “What demands courage is holding on, in a different duration from that imposed by the law of the world. The raw material of courage is time.”<sup>45</sup>

We see more and more in the Western culture a phenomenon that is often described as *ruin porn*. It exposes an understanding of time (and history) that is more and more pervasive of popular culture while being the effect of the new gospel of Fukuyama and the neoliberal strategies of pushing communities (and commons) in the past and beyond the reach of our visibility and frames of understanding. Two understandings of history and time are opposed and they can be described by a comparison between different cinematic forms of exposure of the ruins. More and more blockbusters and even independent movies are obsessed by ruins: *2012*, *Skyfall*, *The Dark Knight Rises* or *Only Lovers Left Alive* are just a few examples traversed by the same ideology of reification and museification of history. A gloomy past is thus done away with, unless it has the ability to come back, to haunt, and this haunting becomes the new danger that affects the civilized world protected by imposing walls. The figure of the zombie is thus, on the



one hand, the sign of a past (and an understanding of time) that is still dangerous. On the other hand, it represents the new monster and it needs no stretch of imagination to read in the plethora of zombies on the screen (but also in computer games) the popular representation of refugees, the way popular culture translates the neoliberal dogma. People and communities (and especially the unbearable other) are relegated to the realm of the barely visible. The aesthetics of the ruins that ruin porn proposes (even in the case of smart directors like Jim Jarmusch) is to be understood in the same terms that Jacques Rivette treated the aesthetization of the Holocaust in “De l’abjection.” This aesthetization works towards an immobilization of time and a taming of the ghost and monsters. In other words, on one side another celebration of the end of history, and on another side a reduction of the viewer to a passive consumer. We watch the spectacle of the past (and of its specters) from the comfortable other side of the screen or wall.

Such images restrict history (and the understanding of time) to a secondary element. When history becomes a detached object of study, as Serge Daney knew so well, it is because it has stopped working the present. According to Olivier Scheffer, who cites Daney in his article, this form of ruin obsession is far from the forms through which romanticism regarded the past: “dans le romantisme pictural des 18<sup>e</sup> et 19<sup>e</sup> siècles, les ruines d’églises et de cathédrales sont indissociables d’une réflexion sur la crise révolutionnaire et la déchristianisation de l’Occident. Notre pornographie des ruines nous renverrait plutôt au vide sidéral de notre vision historique.”<sup>46</sup> Courage, according to the theory of Badiou described

above, means resisting this aesthetization that, in fact, uncouples the relationship between the bad reality and the mission of art (in the frames in which Brecht understood it) and reduces all understanding to the time of the opinions and mechanisms of the current world. The key is in finding the possibility of a new reference, the invention of a time that is also a truth-procedure. Olivier Scheffer proposes a way out of the ruins (and a way of dealing with them) by referring to the work of the artist Jean-Luc Vilmouth and this example – along with the other ones presented here – will allow us to conclude. Between 2011 (shortly after the Fukushima disaster) and 2014, Vilmouth conceived and realized a project that is best captured in his documentary *Lunch Time*.<sup>47</sup> The district Yamamoto Cho – situated fifty kilometers away from Fukushima – is currently a waste land. Formerly a community of thousands of houses, it was destroyed by the tsunami and all is left is an empty space with ruins in the neighborhood. Vilmouth gathers the former occupants of the destroyed houses (now moved by authorities into temporary constructions far away from the place) around a table for a strange lunch: based on their memories, the food that they were about to eat on March 11th, 2011 is remade and served. The artist films this meeting of the survivors, “une Cène sans Christ ni apôtres,”<sup>48</sup> which allows them to reconnect and thus an image of community is created. Each individual trauma is related to the collective one and the patience and humility of the artist allows the participants to invent something that otherwise could have seemed impossible: a courageous connection between the traumatic past and a new future: “une sorte de travail sur la mémoire dans le présent,



sans réponses... et la question qui semble en suspens: qu'est ce que l'on fait maintenant?... pour un 'éventuel meilleur futur.' Ce qui m'intéresse dans ce projet c'est de reconstruire la possibilité d'existence, ou de continuer à exister.<sup>749</sup> A courage to reaffirm that *there is history* and thus the possibility of a better world.

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## NOTES

1. Bertolt Brecht, "Against Georg Lukács," in Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, New York and London, Verso, 1977, p. 69.
2. *Ibidem*.
3. *Ibidem*, p. 82.
4. The concept is defined and discussed in Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, New York and London, Verso, 2014. The original essay was first published in French in 1970.
5. The idea is presented in the 1992 book by Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, which proclaims the good news of the triumph of capitalism and liberalism and the end of any emancipatory narratives.
6. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, New York and London, Routledge, 1994, p. 70.
7. Daniel Bensaid, *An Impatient Life*, New York and London, Verso, 2015, p. 313.
8. Jacques Rancière, *Moments Politiques. Interventions 1977-2009*, Seven Stories Press, 2014, p. 29.
9. *Ibidem*, p. 46.
10. See Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, Dijon, Les Presses du Reel, 1998.
11. Hal Foster, *Bad New Days*, London and New York, Verso, 2016.
12. For Kant critique would mean the ability to expose the functioning of knowledge, its forms of legitimations, its principles and its mechanisms, while for Marx it would mean the possibility of deconstructing the ideological forms that pervade our surroundings.
13. Vijay Prashad, "Regime Change Refugees: On the Shores of Europe" to be found at <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/09/04/regime-change-refugees-on-the-shores-of-europe/>.



14. The concept traverses the entire series of Giorgio Agamben's books.
15. In order that he or she ceases to be excluded, which does not mean a simple inversion of values or principles, because the excluded is no longer defined by any values, except her humanity.
16. <https://vimeo.com/user6924378> (accessed on Sept 26th, 2016).
17. Ideology at its purest appears exactly when there is a pretension of neutrality.
18. "Fragments d'une révolution," entretien avec Abounaddara réalisé par Cyril Béghin et Dork Zabunyan in *Cahiers du cinéma*, nr. 712, juin 2015, p. 71.
19. *Ibidem*, p. 72.
20. *Ibidem*.
21. First published in *Cahiers du cinéma*, nr. 120, june 1961.
22. *Ibidem*.
23. "Fragments d'une révolution," p. 73.
24. *Ibidem*.
25. "Erotic Power," entretien avec Oxana Shachko in *Cahiers du cinéma*, nr. 713, p. 43.
26. Stéphane Delorme, "Femen: érotiques et politiques," in *Cahiers du cinéma*, nr. 713, p. 41.
27. *Ibidem*.
28. "Erotic Power," p. 44.
29. *Ibidem*.
30. Interviewed in Holly Case, John Palattella, "Dog Bites Demagogue," *The Guardian*, January 6, 2016, p. 27.
31. The messages on those billboards were of the type "If you come to Hungary, you may not take jobs away from Hungarians" or "If you come to Hungary, you must respect our culture." It is essential to note here that the billboards were, of course, in Hungarian so the real target was the Hungarian electorate, and the strategy of addressing it indirectly is symptomatic of how the messages should be read (for example: "we know that there is a problem with jobs and that it is the result of the government policy or/ and the system, but of course we cannot admit that, so why not blame it on the Other").
32. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, London and New York, Verso Books, 2012, p. 119.
33. Holly Case, John Palattella, "Dog Bites Demagogue," p. 28.
34. Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, London and New York, Verso Books, 2010, pp. 30-31.
35. *Ibidem*, p. 90.
36. Holly Case, John Palattella, "Dog Bites Demagogue," p. 29.
37. On the campaign against Corbyn inside the Labour Party and in *The Guardian* or *The Observer*, the reader is invited to consult the excellent essay by Richard Seymour, *Corbyn. The Strange Rebirth of Radical Politics*, New York and London, Verso Books, 2016. Incidentally, the author's definition of neoliberalism is relevant here: "a crony relationship between state actors and privileged businesses, involving the state more deeply in making life easier for business, while reducing its democratic capabilities" (p. 72).
38. Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, p. 86.
39. Slavoj Žižek, *The Year of Dreaming Dangerously*, New York and London, Verso, 2012, p. 129.
40. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times*, London & New York, Verso, 2010, p. IX.
41. *Ibidem*.
42. Alain Badiou, *The Meaning of Sarkozy*, p. 72.
43. *ibidem*.
44. *Ibidem*.
45. *Ibidem*, p. 73.
46. Olivier Schefer, "Ruin porn: que fait le cinéma?," *Cahiers du cinéma*, nr. 716, pp. 63-64.
47. The documentary is on the Vimeo channel and more information can be found here: <http://www.jeanlucvilmouth.com/lunch-time.html>.
48. Olivier Schefer, "Ruin porn: que fait le cinéma?," p. 66.
49. Quoted from the presentation by the artist on the internet site of the project.