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Guardiola-Rivera, Oscar (2017) The people are missing; concerning violence, part 1. *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in media and Culture* 39 (2), pp. 155-176. ISSN 1522-5321.

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# **The People Are Missing: Concerning Violence, Part 1**

**Oscar Guardiola-Rivera**

## **Preface: The Apotheosis of War in Colombia**

Not even God would bother coming to look in here. During afternoons like this the city was lost to me. Turning its back, the city closed itself to my gaze as well as to the eyes of any of its inhabitants, humans and not. It surrounded me but never faced me. The surrounding solitude imposed upon me a background of meaning: “the city was human but cried like a caged animal.” It had become a black box. If so, I was the cat within it.

The city was Bogotá, but could have been any other city; a city in Germany, for instance. Many years ago I was a kid in Colombia who spent long afternoons during summer break doing work at his Aunt Clara’s shop to buy himself a bicycle. The shop sold colors, creams, and slimming girdles that promised passersby all sorts of magical effects. In they came, dead city dwellers, to this small cube fitted with transparent shelves exhibiting alchemical potions; out they went, feeling made up, alive.

In most cities, reality is defined by whether you are alive or dead. Not in Bogotá. Certainly not back then. To begin with, it rains too much. The city turns gray and you can’t see, for it rains lead and heavy metals. The real vanishes in front of your eyes. Then there is the apotheosis of war. I use the term in two senses: first, deification. Ever since war became our true religion no one in this city could be certain whether to count oneself among the living, or for how long. Life and death are now matters of probability, not so much in the sense of a game of chance or a throw of the dice but rather in the aesthetic sense that invented

fables provided us with as much conviction as historical examples, if not more. Second, I use the term apotheosis to mean quintessence. My reference here is to an 1871 painting by Basil Verestchagin that he dedicated to all conquerors, past, present and to come. That image, more real than reality itself, evokes the quintessence of our reality. Like the painting, the reality of our war-torn cities consisted mainly of a pyramid of buried boxes with no remains piled high like a massive monument in the central square or like an artwork of the future memorializing the zombie apocalypse. But the people are missing.

That is what happens above, on the surface. But if you turn that surface upside down, you will see that the whole country was and still is a mass grave. Was our reality ever something other than a horde of destructions? This horde of destructions is a picture of ourselves, now, as Wallace Stevens says, an image of our society.<sup>1</sup> Let me call the subjective effect of a landscape torn apart by war and indebtedness, which becomes parallel to and more real than the objectivity of violence and plunder, “the upside”, with a nod to Verestchagin and the 1980s nostalgia of the Duffer Brothers.

That summer in the upside was a long, lonely, silent season. Customers were rare, friendly visitors more so. Boredom set in, an uninvited, speechless companion. During a hunting expedition to the back of the shop, prompted by boredom, I found a stack of books. Crime stories by Raymond Chandler and Edgar Allan Poe; Dashiell Hammet’s The Maltese Falcon; a newspaper edition of Mike Hammer’s series; two spy thrillers by John Le Carré; and a compendium of mysteries penned by one Horacio Bustos Domecq. The summer of solitude was about to be saved by pulp fiction. Then my cousin went missing.

## **The People Are Missing**

It is common sense and logic to think that a missing person is either dead or alive. We call them desaparecidos, the disappeared. There were plenty of those during the **apotheosis** of the war in Colombia; my cousin Hugo was merely one of them. His mother, my auntie, came to the shop and told me that in the morning, when she was still in bed, a bird flew in, mistaking a huge painting of a forest for the real thing, circled the room, saw his error and flew back out the window past the orange trees to alight on a high voltage wire. Were those the real trees or the painted ones? My aunt didn't say, but she believed the bird was her boy. For her, Hugo was neither dead nor completely alive.

In Nostalgia for the Light (2010), documentary filmmaker Patricio Guzmán tells the story of the mothers and wives of the disappeared who perpetually search for the bones of their loved ones, left behind in Chile's Atacama Desert by President Augusto Pinochet's genocide. That genocide inaugurated the world we live in. In this same barren landscape, astronomers from all over the world gather atop gigantic lunar mountains to observe the distant stars. The sky there is so translucent they can peer through their telescopes right into the very limits of the universe. Back on Earth, the harshness of the landscape and the heat of the sun keep human remains almost intact: those of pre-Columbian indigenous peoples; those of miners who have been extracting copper and rare earths from the **upside** since at least the nineteenth century; and those of people disappeared, tortured, and killed by the Chilean Army at the behest of their industrialist masters, among them Hoescht Chemical and ITT Communications, after the coup of 11 September, 1973.<sup>3</sup>

Melding the sublime quest of the astronomers and the earthly one of the women searchers, Guzmán points out that if for grand physics reality is defined by the logic and common sense of either/or, then when it comes to light, be it the light that addresses us from the depths of the cosmos or that which my auntie saw on the morning when the swallow came in through the window, such physics are insufficient. For the mothers of the

disappeared, their loved ones are both dead and alive, and remain so as long as they continue to await the moment when they find out what happened to them; that is, as long as they lack a point of focus.

Is it not the same when it comes to the enigmas of crime novels? Is it not the case that, lacking a point of focus, the hardboiled detectives of these thrillers must invent one; invent an object for their quest, which is often imagined as kept within an enclosure of some kind, for otherwise the proverbial cat in the black box will remain both dead and alive, spectral? If this is so, then the only literature that could describe their cases is neither factual nor fictional; the only normative practice for their cases would be one that takes into account the unidentifiable in the register of human beings and human rights alike; and the only critical theory, if any, a visual one of the unfocused and invisible.

It is among such anomalous forms of writing that the charitable reader should inscribe the register of this piece. Neither fact nor fiction, it dabbles in metaphysics, it deals with fetishes and monads (“living mirrors of the universe,” Leibniz called them), with visuals and what cannot be seen, as well as with states of entanglement that are by definition ambiguous, transformational, or transitional. This essay explores the ambiguous nature of these specters born of cosmic dramaturgy and the **apotheosis** of war, and the objects as well as the landscapes with which they’re entangled or that they occupy and invest, from where they address us. If so, if it deals with the missing and their sublime objects, with the **apotheosis** of war and a landscape’s address, then this is also an essay about transitional justice; or better yet, about justice transitional.

But isn’t the theory of transitional states of entanglement also known as quantum theory? So much for metaphysics! I am of course not the first one to suggest an analogy between the insidious scenarios of Erwin Schrödinger’s 1935 thought experiment with cats and black boxes and the real nightmare of those of us whose children, husbands, and cousins

were erased by the storms of lead and heavy metals that fell upon the cities we inhabited at the end of the twentieth century and that continue to fall in this one.

The quantum physicist imagined a box with a cat inside, let's call it Theodor to honor an actual philosopher as well as an Argentine writer, a cat that could be killed at any moment by radiation or a lethal gas or not killed at all. Both outcomes were probable. Furthermore, according to the theory there wasn't just one Theodor inside the box, but two: one dead, one alive; superimposed or copresent; in transition and materially entangled with one another as long as the box remained closed. More disorienting is the fact that when the box is opened the entanglement and the transitional state of the dead and the live cat come to an end, not because Theodor actually dies or lives but because we peer into it. It is the act of observation that actively shapes reality, in the sense that seeing, describing, and measuring provoke the second death of the cat, the one that ends its time in purgatory. Euclidian geometry and physics, mainstream biology, legal determinacy, as well as Aristotelian geopolitics and rhetoric seem of little help when, as visual artist and essayist Hito Steyerl says, "the state of the missing speaks of a paradoxical superimposition that cannot be understood" with the usual conceptual tools, for it perhaps "reaches out to an impossible coexistence of life and death," one between the stars above and the mass graves in the **upside** below.<sup>4</sup>

Steyerl connects entanglement and the state of paradoxical superimposition issued in by Schrödinger's thought experiment with the status of the missing; with legal and political philosophy arguments concerning genocide as well as the thought image of the two bodies of the King; with Leibnizian monadology; and perhaps more interestingly, with the position of institutionally-authorized observers vis-à-vis less than evident evidential objects. She points out that the invisibility or archaic originality of these objects "is politically constructed and maintained" by epistemic as well as military violence, by the fog of war, by political twilight and class warfare as well as death from above (140-1). Shouldn't we then add that these

objects are not merely pushed into but may be the very mark of the establishment of our modern cities and societies as (she calls them) zero-probability zones? If so, then the point of studying these objects between archaism and technology, between philosophy and phot-electric analysis as well as the legal, biopolitical and dramaturgical architectures that manage their determinacy and resolution, their performance and appearance or articulation at the limits of meaning, is to draw a cartography of zero-degree or zero-probability zones and institutions.

Such a cartography would no longer depend on the reference to phenomenological accounts of intentionality, the constancy of will, and the act of promising, or any notion of continuity for that matter. But would instead relate to what I've previously called, following John Berger, a landscape's address.<sup>5</sup> As we will see, in a world in which the iterations of capital depend as much on the speed and invisibility of algorithms as it does on epistemic, dramaturgical, and military violence, the very idea that the constancy of popular will or the performative force of the legal-linguistic act of promising suffice to ground or establish our societies of privatized social contracts can no longer be maintained.

Instead, we must explore the way in which structural, legal, and physical as well as psychological violence, which is repeated again and again (so that history and geography become a piling-up of corpses subject to high-speed betting), thereby interrupting the reciprocity and continuity of recognition and intentionality, get compressed in the objects that Steyerl calls "low-resolution monads" and the landscapes within which they're found and which they produce. These low-resolution monads become, as she says, arche-fossils and diagrams of the creative destruction visiting our cities from above. They are the less-than-evident evidence of the re-foundation of our cities and the world along the lines of a mortifyingly repeated death drive.

She writes:

These indeterminate objects are low-resolution monads, in many cases literally materially compressed objects, fossilized diagrams of political and physical violence—poor images of the conditions that brought them into being. Even if they cannot show the extrajudicial executions, political murders, or shootings at demonstrations that they might have recorded, they bear the traces of their own marginalization. Their poverty is not a lack, but an additional layer of information, which is not content but form. This form shows how the image is treated, how it is seen, passed on, or ignored, censored and obliterated. . . .

Through their material composition, these poor images reach far beyond the sphere of representation and into a world where the order of things and humans, of life and death, and identity is suspended, and “all is plenum (and thus all matter is connected together). . . . And consequently every body feels the effect of all that takes place in the universe, so that he who sees all might read in each what is happening everywhere, and even what has happened or shall happen, observing in the present that which is far off as well in time as in place”<sup>6</sup>

Back when I was a kid in Colombia, we were haunted by the cross between the disappearance of our loved ones and the images of mass graves and gas oven chambers in the Guajira, Yará, and Cauca regions, all of them potential or actual oil and mining regions near the ancestral lands of Nasa, Kogi, and Kívara indigenous peoples, which were beginning to circulate thanks to the work of anthropology teams digging up the **apothecosis** of the war from the entrails of the **upside** for all of us to look at it as one peers into a black box. Right now, as I write, I’m haunted once more by the images coming out of North Dakota. As the oil boom



goes bust, the bankers and speculators get behind the Dakota Access pipeline, and the latter crosses the sacred lands of Native Americans at Standing Rock. Images come of Dakota Access protesters inspecting charred vehicles and signs in front of law enforcement barricades, grainy jpegs of military-grade vehicles lined up against native women and men on horseback, raw footage of mass arrests of protesters accused of rioting and trespassing, news snippets telling of Republican candidate Donald Trump's close financial ties to the pipeline operator, and so on. It's a mortifying repetition.

Do the natives have the slightest chance now that Trump has been elected president of the USA? Can the images coming out of the North Dakota "last stand" in late 2016, as well as the ones that haunt my childhood, be an example of the low-resolution monads described above? As I ask myself these questions, a text from my friend Drucilla Cornell, with whom I'm co-writing a book on hope in these hopeless times, pings and pins down these thoughts of monads, death, and repetition.

She observes:

It is going to be nightmarish times. We are doing a masterclass on our book [hers and Stephen Seely's The Spirit of Revolution] and then Luce Irigaray is coming, and then public lectures. But obviously what we say has to take into account what has happened [Trump's election]. I'm shaken to the core. So our book [hers and mine on hope] is more important than ever. [Ernst] Bloch [who wrote The Principle of Hope] did write a book about fascism.<sup>7</sup>

I believe, together with Drucilla and others, that Bloch's ontology of hope, what he termed not-yet-being, holds a key to how to act in hopeless, nightmarish times. In a nutshell, if neither knowledge nor reality are fully constituted, if neither nature nor our established

institutions represent fullness—which is another way of saying that the last word on justice, truth, or function has not been uttered yet—then they’re transitional and thus can be unfrozen as well as opened to retroactive transformation. What comes to mind is the way a landscape addresses us in, say, the southernmost parts of Latin America: “patches of grass and wild hedges are intersected by barren raw earth or gravel with cracks from which sulphuric steam and fire gush out. . . . Chaos is still able to penetrate the cracks of the imperfectly constituted/formed reality.”<sup>8</sup> Cinema, too, is populated by this medium of the “undead” image. What comes to my mind isn’t Alien Resurrection as much as the Atacama desert in Guzmán’s Nostalgia For the Light, but the point remains: arche-fossils and anticipatory technical objects function like perpetual living mirrors of the universe. The strata of crystallized time in every monad capture and conserve a specific relation to the universe (“as in a long exposure photograph,” to repeat Steyerl’s characterization) but also condense the forms of observation, anticipatory and retroactive, that produce them as indelible moments and objects powerful enough to save the present come what may.

That is also what a protest does and why we protest in places like North Dakota or Bogotá: to save the present moment, this land and this water, whatever the future holds. To protest is, in this sense, to refuse being reduced to a zero by the establishment, by reducing the established institutions to their zero-degree. That is, drawing a line in the sand that displays certain architectural representations of society and the cosmos so as to evidence their inter-transformability. The resulting diagrams, like the images invoked before, relate to each other transformationally. The archaisms and technologies that we find through our own acts of drawing and digging, or protesting, become inward-growing and properly interminable. They renew institutions, time and space again.

At least in that respect, we find ourselves exactly in the same position in which Claude Lévi-Strauss found himself when he came upon the objects, cosmographies, and

morphological configurations quite common among Amerindian and other “tribal” societies: the act of drawing, digging, or protesting isn’t simply a matter of dividing friends from enemies, or actors and painters from their audiences. Rather, it suggests another way beyond such dualisms and the polarization that is characteristic of our nightmarish times: to get closer and closer to what is being redeemed from the present within the hearts and minds of those of us who refuse to accept that the current logics of predation are anything other than contingent. This entails a perpetual perspectival alternateness of the self and the other, friend and enemy, painter and model, nature and artifice, which involves a radical normative investment and results in a radical or incommensurable dimensionality.

In accordance to such radicality, other worlds aren’t merely possible but certain. Lacking a point of focus, when I was a kid back in Bogotá during the **apotheosis** of the civil war, the landscape began addressing my imagination. I am referring to geography in a specific sort of way: the city and its violence affected me internally but also externally. It would not be right to say that this affect was either inside or outside; it was both or neither. I have just said: “it would not be right.” In doing so, I have invoked the image of the law, of what is right and truthful, justice and correction, a vertical movement of ascent or exteriorization that allows good violence to overcome bad violence. In yesteryears this was the space and the function of myth and the sacred—as in the old stories of blind justice, veiled justice.

### **The Color of Law and the Economy is Gray**

In the modern world, which we are told is fated to disenchant, the new regime of good and bad or winners and losers has been established between the gray disciplines of law and the economy. They fill the vacant place left by the withdrawal of the sacred, and just as the

latter did before, aim to contain violence. This term is plagued by ambiguity: to contain means both to keep at bay and to conserve within. Economy and law erect a wall around the city to expel violence and keep it without, against violence, with the means of violence. So you see, the city affected me in the very precise sense that its violence came from within and only from within it came out and up; then it came crashing down, it came upon us. In, up, out. Crushing us.

This peculiar self-transcendence of the city and its violence allows for distinctions between “bad” or impolitical violence and “good” violence, the kind judges and the police use on a daily basis; but also ordinary economics. Observing it, Adam Smith, Immanuel Kant, and many others concluded that a new kind of faith could be placed in trade and commerce, which they saw as capable of ending religious bickering, the first Thirty Years War, and remake the world in the moral image of everlasting peace. But we know, we knew it already back then in Colombia, that good violence and bad violence may very well be one and the same. Call it a second disenchantment, a loss of faith, and a failure of promise, for we remain at a loss to see and imagine what should be put in place of law and economics.

The city looks empty, a barren landscape punctuated by a pile of corpses in the **central square** and mass graves in the **upside**. There is no concept for this affect that colored for me and many others our perspective on the whole of reality, the world, life; and so, as it happens in every culture, what escaped the province of the concept was handed over to long-term work in images. The image of a city rained upon by lead and heavy metals, the image of a cat in a box, of empty buried boxes, and that other one, perhaps the oldest, of being adrift at sea. It encompasses ground and anchorage as well as the imaginary drawing of a horizon line, storm and calm, disaster and shipwreck, barely surviving (my cousin did not) and merely looking on—not a victim, let alone a martyr, just a spectator.

After that summer of solitude and pulp fiction, of slow trade and fast violence, in Bogotá I became theoros, the spectator. The spectator who has survived catastrophe and is therefore able to provide an oral testimony of what he or she has seen is the key persona in the drama of law and human rights. I want to suggest that the truth-value of testimonies in human rights reporting be seen as visual and geographical—a sort of speculative geography—in which the term “speculative” qualifies geography in a sense larger than what is usually thought. Becoming the spectator on that summer of solitude returned me to an earlier topographical experience, a way of seeing before geography became science: something more akin to the experience of peasants, of nomads and Amerindians, of hunters and cosmonauts.

This, again, is what novelist and art writer John Berger, whom I just paraphrased, calls “a landscape’s address.”<sup>9</sup> I wish to locate his sublimely visual notion within a much longer and venerable tradition known to us as Speculative or Philosophical Geography and push the latter to the limits of meaning where a new articulation of the visual, the performative, and the dramaturgical might intersect the failure of logics of promising and the **apotheosis** of war that continue to haunt, like the missing people and the corpses they keep piling up, our lived time.

I have started to see geography as the representation of invisible origins, an artform lodged between the ascending impetus of Miltonian poetry and the descending conatus of documentary filmmaking. On the one hand, the poet seeks the highest standpoint that would allow him or her the position of a world spectator. Not actually or historically, of course, but only in the pictorial or dramaturgical sense: as a device of representation, a perspective or projection that results in a world image as ground. On the other hand, although the documentary filmmaker also accepts the role of vanishing points and imagination, in contrast with the poet she or he testifies of having nowhere to fall because of already having fallen.

The Hawk-Hunter combat jets have already initiated their descent upon the city, the palace in Central Square is in flames, and the Promethean president and his utopia burn within it. All that remains are the bones of the missing deep in the **upside** of the Atacama Desert. Those bones are made out of compressed stardust while also functioning as fossilized diagrams of political and economic violence. Furthermore, the act of perpetually searching for them and perhaps one day digging them out marks time and space, making the moment of their redemption indelible, whatever the future may hold. Time and space multiply n-fold, and indexical modality of this dimensionality is no longer possibility but certainty.

From the high perspective of the poet one could come up with a moral image of the world conceived as the ultimate unity of our differences and competing interests in a kingdom of ends, an additive compilation of views toward the ultimate purpose of nature and history's course, or the kinds of principles that equal, rational people would choose for themselves in practice, for instance. Something like imagining what would the voice or the will of the people seem like. My aunt's shop in Bogotá was connected to Germany by a crime story. Ideas of justice, peace, and war lay beneath that story. Although unknown to me at the time, this was the beginning of a lifetime journey dedicated to understanding where our ideas of justice come from and why we hope to realize them.

I discovered the Berlin-Bogotá connection from another source of reading material that summer, the advertisement literature that accompanied the shop's cosmetic products. There I read that in the mid-nineteenth century, standardized colors, cosmetics, and anti-ageing or slimming products, made out of the same stuff with which one can make fertilizers but also gunpowder and bombs, gave origin to the world beyond dreams we all live in. The world of images. The world of spectacle. The world that, either because it has turned into an image itself or has been exhausted by the spectacle of trade and production, now faces the end. Think about it: the end of the world, what a crime story that would be.

It is no wonder that the little shop had so very few clients. After all, we sold lies made out of chemical magic, Farben, which in the German language means “colors.” I would like to think people knew they were being cheated and refused to buy into the lie, which explains my summer of solitude and pop fiction. However, that was not the case. The real reason why sales were few and far between at the shop is that the bulk of the business in plastics and colored chemicals took place by telephone. This was before the Internet, remember; and yet, in that sense at least, we were true successors and path-breaking entrepreneurs. That is, my aunt Clara, who was the businesswoman with ideas, my uncle Ulysses and my cousins. Not me. I was just bored to tears that summer before discovering Poe, Hammett, and Bustos Domeq, a kid, not even a salesman but a numbed nineteen-eighties teenager trying to get his hands on what little money he could in order to fulfil his dreams of buying a BMX bicycle.

Aunt Clara and the cousins were the smaller-scale successors of one of the giants of the century, a German company dealing in plastics and chemicals called Farben. IG Farben, to be more precise, or Interessen-Gemeinschaft Farbenindustrie, a conglomerate that at some point in the second half of the twentieth-century became both the largest company in Europe and the most powerful chemical corporation in the world. The name literally means “a community of interests in the making of colors” or dye-making industries. It immediately calls our attention toward the intertwinement between biography, art and history, technology and trade, Kantian aesthetics and the law, and politics of justice and perpetual peace, which I now teach at a London university. Farben’s story also points us in the direction of a yet-to-come global history and theory of the visible, as well as of the constant that John Berger called a “landscape’s address.”

That would be a grand story, if not for the fact that the history of Farbenindustrie reveals something altogether different about who we are, where we come from, and the ultra-

modern world we live in: how we got here and how it will all end. It is the story of the crime of the century, of all centuries.

The company's pioneers and predecessors, BASF, Agfa, Griesheim-Elektron, Bayer, and Hoescht had been working together since at least World War I. They finally came together in 1925 to form IG Farben. Their scientists and researchers made some of the most important and influential discoveries in the modern history of medicine and materials, from antibiotics to polyurethane, and many of them were awarded Nobel Prizes for their contributions to the advancement of humankind.

Following the rise of the Nazi Party in Germany, however, the company became one of the government's principal contractors and a willing executor of its policies. During World War II, IG Farben established a factory adjacent to the concentration camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau and another at Mauthausen-Gusen. Using forcibly displaced labor, the factory made everything from toothbrushes and cosmetics to plastics, such as the ones my aunt would later adapt to be sold as slimming girdles in Colombia.

IG Farben also purchased prisoners from the camps, to be used as guinea pigs in the testing of new, developing compounds that included a sleep-inducing drug in gas form. It later reported that all of its test subjects for that drug had died. Ominously, IG Farben invested in and owned a shareholder majority of over 42 per cent in Deutsche Gesellschaft für Schädlingsbekämpfung, a subsidiary of the Degussa group, known as Degesch for short. Gold dental fillings removed from the mouths of inmates were sent from the concentration camps to be processed by Degussa, while Degesch used front companies Testa and Heli to produce and sell to the Schutzstaffel-Totenkopfverbände (the infamous SS) and the Wehrmacht Army the cyanide-based pesticide known as Zyklon A and B. Zyklon B was used to kill at least a million people in the final solution chambers of Auschwitz, Majdanek, and Dachau.



Primo Levi worked there, as a slave for the Chemical Komando stationed in one of IG Farben's factories at Auschwitz. An Italian chemist himself, Levi is best known as the author of If This Is a Man, his harrowing memoir of captivity and survival in the concentration camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau.<sup>11</sup>

It is said that on one occasion the American novelist Philip Roth suggested to Levi that such a period of captivity had been, in some strange sense, a gift. The former chemist and author replied with these words:

A friend of mine, an excellent doctor, told me many years ago: "Your remembrances of before and after are in black and white; those of Auschwitz and of your travel home are in Technicolor." He was right. Family, work, home, these are good things in themselves, but they deprived me of something I still miss: adventure.<sup>12</sup>

Years after reading Levi's memoir I found the paragraph quoted once more, together with a reference to Farben's story, in a book written by a famed anthropologist I met while at university in Colombia. His name is Michael Taussig. Miguel, as his friends call him, has been described by The New York Times as a sort of real-life Indiana Jones who divides his time between a classroom at Columbia University and the Amazon jungle in Colombia. "He's like a rock star," wrote The Time's Emily Eakin, citing one of his students; "he's the professor that all the students think is cool."<sup>13</sup> Some of his colleagues might think otherwise, given the unconventional nature of Taussig's work, dealing with as varied a set of topics as the devil, cocaine, fetishism, critical theory, global warming, and the Western discomfort with vivid colors.

**Fetishes: Law in a Lawless Land**

Back in 2001 I invited Taussig to come to Bogotá to take part in a conference titled “Politics and Law in a Lawless Land.” The title was not meant to be ironic—that is, identifying with while also keeping a safe distance from views that fetishized and sexualized Latin America as both fascinatingly exotic yet infantile; as if our guests were privileged viewers of both the modern civic state and some reputedly primitive state of nature able to guide us on. Instead, the title was a straightforward and self-critical: we were questioning our own ambiguity, involvement, and complicity with such views, including these seemingly pure “academic” conferences. We wanted to play with the ambiguity of academic and critical practices that place critics and experts in the position of privileged viewers who promise to give us the real thing instead of the appearance or the bad copy. The gathering, part academic and part activist, also included a famous American critical lawyer; the doyen of British political and legal realist philosophy (inspired by American realism and anthropology); a renowned Portuguese sociologist active in the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre and the alter-globalization movement of the time; and a young philosopher working in North Carolina who was an expert in French and Italian post-modernism, soon to become famous worldwide for his work on American constitutionalism and empire. It felt weird and even risky to have as varied a collection of guests travel from places like Britain, Portugal, and the United States to talk about politics and law in a country branded as failed and lawless. But perhaps that was why they all accepted, in spite of the protestations of their friends and partners. Back then, Colombia was in the midst of the cruelest and most dangerous part of its 60-year old civil war.

For the opening event at the conference, I had proposed a debate between Michael Taussig and Harvard critical lawyer Duncan Kennedy. On that memorable occasion, Taussig came on stage posing as a fisherman from the Caribbean carrying a heavy load of creatures

from the sea on his way to Sunday market. Without saying a word, he wandered around the stage in his magenta-coloured guayabera shirt, an imaginary fishing net on his back, for what seemed like a very long ten minutes; as if waiting for the pescador caribeño to complete his performative transformation into a character from one of Samuel Beckett's monologues.

In retrospect, it occurs to me that Justice herself was among the creatures carried by the fisherman on his net; after all, according to the stories of old the veiled goddess of the scales rose up with the Fates from the springs and the foam of the encircling world-ocean.

Besides lecturing on philosophy and law, back then I spent a lot of time writing poetry as part of a group whose work focused on the links between high modernism and ancient, specifically Amerindian, Hellenistic, and Egyptian mythology. Stories of the veiled goddess of justice, war, and wisdom presided over our poetry sessions as well as over the law and politics event. In our minds, those stories linked Athens and Saïs with the Vaupés and the Amazon, the theater of the war in Colombia.

The poetry group was being mentored at the time by an indigenous palabrero from the Amazon, a wordsmith named Jesús Martínez, and the poet Otto Ricardo Torres. Together they taught us how to read and interpret the myths, comparing Greek and Egyptian allegories of nature and art to the Yuruparí cosmology of the Amazonian Tikuna and the Kívara. This included a comparative reading of the stories of Neith, Isis-Athena/Artemis, and the Kívara priestess Tayira-Inírida. The stories revolved around the duality between nature and artifice, truth and justice, as well as ways to gain knowledge of and access to reality, whether through technology or through what we saw at the time as the dual aspect of poetic images and the fetish.

To assist with our study of archaic cosmologies, some of us engaged with and benefited greatly from a comparative reading of 19th-century natural philosophy and poetry, especially Schiller's The Mission of Moses (1790) and his On the Sublime (1801), which we

found particularly apt given the climate of violence and war that surrounded us; Kant's Critique of Judgment (1790); the work of John Milton; and, in particular, von Humboldt's Essay on the Geography of Plants (1807), the result of the famous German geographer and naturalist's travels through South America. We read the 1985 Colombian edition of Humboldt's essay, which included two appendices of commentaries by Francisco J. Caldas and a relevant dedication to Goethe, complete with an allegorical image of nature as a polymastic Isis/Artemis, which also appears in the German edition. Now I realize how much the creolized image of the veiled goddess, from ancient cosmologies and allegories to early modern geography and botany as well as German Romantic poetry and philosophy, informed our conceptual framework for the conference: the notion of "a duality made product, a third" belongs to her; what can be termed radical dualism.<sup>14</sup>

The idea for the Bogotá debates was to go beyond any simplistic binary thought in our conceptions of nature and civilization, fact and value, our philosophies of the limit, and our critical theories. In order to achieve that goal, we invited the anthropologist and the lawyer to contrast their views on the allegedly dualist, reversible, and proportionate nature of fetishes and fetishism. Not only the sexual kind but also, and more precisely, the systems that emerge from the curious bond elicited by certain objects and landscapes invested with emotional qualities or magical properties.

These objects are concrete embodiments of the quantitative and qualitative antinomies we come upon as soon as we go thinking beyond percepts and perspecta, in our attempts to grasp reality in its absoluteness within schemas or concepts. But instead of serving purely as limits to the activity of thought, they react back upon us, animating the heart and mind, setting our spiritual powers in motion, "into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end."<sup>15</sup> They can be archetypical, as happens with icons, idols, and ideals, in that they are objects completely adequate to an idea; think of the ideal stoic

person as one who is completely adequate to the virtues of stoicism. In this case, the object is nothing but the projection of a necessary maximum standard of perfection, an aspiration or anticipation.

In other cases, such anticipatory objects, symbolic forms, and metaphoric transfers can be truly world-making in the more fundamental sense whereby how and why they come to exist can be understood by taking them not as givens, but as solutions to an antecedent problem: not simply that there's no good fit between human life and its environment—no given humanity or standard thereof opposed to a supposedly given nature, something that some consciousness lacks and others possesses—that can be relativized, withdrawn and taken, or overtaken (for instance in technology, as some “post-humanists” seem to argue). Rather, the problem would be that such unfitness is itself a reflection of the fact that neither in nature nor in reality itself could we find such good fit or harmony. Reality is out of joint, and therefore a consciousness on the way to humanization would be one that creates its symbolic forms by losing itself in the night of the absolute, of fantasy and myth, in the out-of-joint-ness of reality, in rhythmic affect, or in what Goethe called the flight behind an image.

Only in and through its work on myth, rhythm, and the absolute can consciousness be attained, precisely in order to respond to what Hans Blumenberg called “the absolutism of reality.”<sup>16</sup> Understood in this sense, archetypal objects and metaphoric transfers are not the result of a movement of ascent following descent into the night of the world, but of work in and through it, a negativity that draws its worth “from an almost substantive absoluteness.”<sup>17</sup>

Aren't archaic objects and metaphoric transfers precisely the embodiment of an upsurge of negativity, not only a minor term, but more like a free fall that has nowhere to fall? If so, then rather than falling or ascending toward the universal, the very point of archaic objects, metaphoric transfers, and symbolic forms is to “crash-land”—in the case of Frantz

Fanon in June 1950, for instance; in a hotel room in Paris that refuses to rent rooms to nègre visitors. “Why?” Fanon asks, “purely and simply because their Anglo-Saxon customers (who are rich and who, as everyone knows, hate *nègres*) threatened to move out.”<sup>18</sup>

Notice that this “absolute reality” is, for the racialized black person as well as for the abnormalized sexed being, tantamount to death, as Fanon expresses in the last two lines of his unfinished play Les mains parallèles: “To no longer see mute whiteness/ To no longer see death.”<sup>19</sup> This being so, then the way to survival and liberation is to build a room of one’s own, as Virginia Woolf said, but such a room would be a space in which one not only refuses in imagination and practice one’s amputation of being—confronting reality rather than escaping from it as that which normatively forecloses one’s future—but also in which one is pushed or sped up by transformative iterations of the abyss of the past one is obliged to dive into, beyond the normative field that closes off hopeful time.

In that space of refusal, acceleration, and play, one’s soul can feel as vast as the earth and the seas. This is the feeling of the sublime, the sea theater in which the paradoxical distance and closeness brought about by farce and laughter or Brechtian Verfremdungseffekt leads to breakthrough: first, to catharsis (a medical or purgative treatment in therapy and theater, for instance using “savage” music to cure “savage” interior rhythms, or crucially and more generally the purgation of supposedly antisocial elements), as both Milton and Kant put it when considering the meaning of tragedy and play since Aristotle, and second, to iteration and play; that is, the repeated confrontation of archaic origins, leading to and through a reality that has been so far too much to bear.

### **Acceleration, Funk & Play: In Defense of a Poor Dramaturgy**

Play must be understood here as technique and technology, a structure consisting of the successive repetition of previously veiled or archaic origins that reveal new layers of and create new spaces for meaningful action in relation to the cyclicity of life. In that structure an (Orphean) story is retold and understood at different levels, so that the effect is not merely cathartic but a renewed and accelerated (Promethean) understanding of the point of reference and origin, which speeds up the process of self-transformation and is also transformative of the environment.

Notice how this structure is not being described here as either one or the other, but rather both Orphean and Promethean. Put simply, a normative social or “naturalized” field that is racist or sexist closes off the future for the racialized, gendered, or colonized designated as inferior subjects: slow and lazy or backwards and deviated. In this aspect of what one can call staged face-to-face relations, which is an aspect of relations of production rather than occurring outside of it, the very stage and framework of recognition fails.

Consider, for instance, understandings of culture and science that are now as widespread as they are rife with social Darwinism, emboldened by conceptions of progress that presume the superiority, supremacy, or developed status of certain societies as an inevitable feature of linear history. In that framework, indigenous people brought to a brink of extinction by dispossession, pandemic, forced displacement, and genocide, together with kidnapped populations brought under slavery, are represented as less developed and thus features of the natural world that would be left behind in modern practices forging a path to the future of a superior humankind. This is clearly a distortion of natural selection. For there’s nothing natural about that staged narrative: there is at no instance a group or a culture that is not being affected by others, and no reciprocity without alterity; in other words, there is no condition of nonhuman factors to which the human beings involved couldn’t otherwise adapt, and there has never been one.

As Lewis R. Gordon says, quoting Franz Boas, “such teleological claims have no business in a theory that simply argues that what survives at any moment is what is enabled by its environment. Further, surviving today does not entail doing the same tomorrow. Thus everything that coexists at any moment is equally evolved, for the environment,” which is never a given, “sustains each organism.”<sup>20</sup> Ditto, this is not because there is some harmonious relation between a given organism and a given environment in which the latter provides the former with its proper place, but precisely the opposite: because there is no transparent fit between human and nonhuman factors or within nonhuman reality; there’s no great chain of being. “Comparisons in which certain groups are relegated to the status of primitive (that is, belonging to the past) don’t work, then,” Gordon explains, “because the fact of their existence means that they’ve evolved into the present time. The move to culture doesn’t change this fact.”<sup>21</sup> Such unwarranted comparisons proceed as if those represented as slow, backwards, developing, or deviant were in effect peoples of the past.

The subjected group is in this way forcibly displaced out of the lived reality of cultural life; “they suffer a living death” and are zombified, as Gordon, channeling Fanon, observes.<sup>22</sup> This zombification can be examined as itself an established set of rituals of cultural performance, with peoples’ ways of life displayed as museum pieces or as “factual” evidence in courts and tribunals as well as global economic institutions, with the conditions of the organization of such displays and relations—the stage or establishment of recognition—in the hands of the colonizing, racist, sexist, and classist group. Crucially, as he points out, given the previous arguments there is no reason why there could not be Indo- or Afro-modernisms, as well as futurisms, simultaneous with Euromodernisms or indeed other forms of manifesting that which is modern or futurist, such as in the case of the contemporary Gulf- or Sino-futurisms critically dissected by visual artists and writers like Sophia al-Maria, Stephanie Bailey, and Usma Rizvi.<sup>23</sup>



Their insight is that these more or less retro-futurist, archaic, practical, and artistic objects produce spaces or fields of play, within—for instance—sexual difference. Play must be understood in this sense as a new choreography or a new dramaturgy that can be shared just like dance or a theatrical play: “rooted in known dances and yet always offering the possibility of creative innovation” or succession.<sup>24</sup> The crucial point here—to continue with the example of sexuality—is that just as neither of the two normalized sexes, heterosexual masculinity and femininity, can be totally constituted in themselves, hedged, foreclosed, or completed, reality itself is incomplete. Our multiple sexual differentiations are not deviations from a certain norm or rule but artful and ethical in the sense of being a proper response to an antinomic reality. Therefore nothing is “natural” in the sense of being completely and absolutely given, and nothing is “civilized” or artificial in the sense of being normalized, ruled, or legalised. As Schiller puts it, in the midst of the kingdom of natural forces and in the midst of the sacred kingdom of laws an impulse to form (which he calls aesthetic) is at work, unnoticed, to build a “third joyous kingdom of play and of semblance, in which man is relieved of the shackles of circumstance, and released from all that might be called constraint, alike in the physical and in the moral sphere.”<sup>25</sup> Jacqueline Rose, in turn, describes in similar terms the questioning of our sexuate being as a matter of justice:

“The requirement . . . that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone,” writes Freud in Civilization and Its Discontents, “cuts off a fair number from sexual enjoyment, and so becomes the course of serious injustice” (Ungerechtigkeit). And yet as he himself puts it only a few pages earlier, for a law to be just (Gerechtigkeit) it must be universal, that is, broken in no-one’s favour; although this tells us nothing, he adds about the ethical value of such a law.<sup>26</sup>

Rose concludes that this paradox is not simply internal to a universal right to live and enjoy one's sexuality. The paradox of freedom, sexual freedom if you like, is that it demands a political-moral space that does not normalize the content of sexuality itself. Ditto, this can be generalized: Schiller, for example, teaches us that aesthetic play helps free us from the over-seriousness of revolutionary politics, which can easily degenerate into self-righteous authoritarianism and violence. This notion entails achieving a balance between percepts and perspecta, on the one hand, and the demands of morality, normativity, and politics, on the other. "Sense herself," Schiller argued, "must, with triumphant power, remain mistress of her own domain, and resist the violence of the mind that, by its usurping tactics, would fain inflict upon her. In a single word: personality must keep the sensuous drive within its proper bounds, and receptivity, or nature, must do the same with the formal drive."<sup>27</sup>

Fetishism in sexual practice may be an example of autopoietic systems, but so is also the self-organization of matter as sublime nature, as well as sublime art, master/servant relations, the market in commodities and money, and the law and politics that accompany such trade.

We understood these landscapes and objects as becoming the focus of our illusions and desire while also playing a central role in the everyday theater of our imaginations, exchanges, and institutions. On that stage we act out our deepest dramas and let loose our most unspeakable fantasies, but may also let go of them. Here the specters of the past haunt us just as we dream up utopias for the future: "What to seek! What to flee!" In such words, the riddle we attempted to solve finds its best expression. This is the question of the fetish, the central problem involved in what it means to generalize a will, to become human, or animal, or something other, something else.

Thus it fell upon the radical anthropologist and the critical lawyer to speak at length of magical objects and physical as well as legal geographies in our Bogotá debate. That

seemed quite apposite. After all, Colombia is supposed to be the country of magical realism. But, as said before, for over sixty years it has also been the theater of a war in which so-called “violent actors” have done truly unspeakable deeds. What humanity might become in such a context was, and still is, both a potential and an urgent question. And so, we wanted then as we do now to draw attention most urgently and concretely to the contradictions and equivocations of being addressed by the sublime landscape of this country in a state of war, which beckoned and hovered over us.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace Stevens, “The Man With the Blue Guitar”, accessed 26 December 2016 <http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~afilreis/88v/blueguitar.html>, and “Relations Between Poetry and Painting”, *The Necessary Angel. Essays on Reality and The Imagination* 159- 176 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951) 161. Stevens is quoting Picasso. See also Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. by R. Savage (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press) 97-8. And for the sources of my references to zombie apocalypse, zombification and the upside see Lewis R. Gordon, *What Fanon Said* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015) 86, and Ivan Ascher, *Portfolio Society. On the Capitalist Mode of Prediction* (New York: Zone Books, 2016) 124-7 and the tv series *Stranger Things* (Duffer Brothers, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> See my commentary on the Chilean genocide in Oscar Guardiola-Rivera, *Story of a Death Foretold: The Coup Against Salvador Allende, 11 September, 1973* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Hito Steyerl, “Missing People: Entanglement, Superimposition, and Exhumation as Sites of Indeterminacy,” *The Wretched of the Screen* 138-159 (Berlin: e-flux and Sternberg Press, 2012), 140; subsequent references cited parenthetically.

<sup>5</sup> John Berger, *Portraits: John Berger on Artists* (New York: Verso Books, 2015), 123.

<sup>6</sup> Steyerl, 156-7, quoting G. W. Leibniz, *Monadology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), 251.

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<sup>7</sup> Drucilla Cornell, email message to the author, November 9, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Slavoj Žižek, “Preface: Bloch’s Ontology of Not-Yet-Being,” The Privatization of Hope: Ernst Bloch and the Future of Utopia, ed. Peter Thompson and Slavovj Žižek (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), xvi-ii. Zizek, too, refers to quantum theory.

<sup>9</sup> Berger, 123. “Many different things can fill the foreground with meaning. . . . All these, however, occur against a common constant background which I call the landscape’s address, consisting of the way a landscape’s ‘character’ determines the imagination of those born there.” Berger is recovering the ancient legacy of speculative geography for the era of acceleration and the Anthropocene. See also John Berger, The Shape of a Pocket (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), especially 3-32.

<sup>11</sup> Primo Levi, If This Is a Man, trans. Stuart Woolf (London: Folio Society, 2000).

<sup>12</sup> Primo Levi, Survival in Auschwitz, trans. Stuart Woolf (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 185, quoted by Michael Taussig in What Color Is the Sacred? (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Emily Eakin, “Anthropology’s Alternative Radical,” The New York Times, April 21, 2001, accessed December 20, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/04/21/arts/anthropology-s-alternative-radical.html>

<sup>14</sup> O. R. Torres, “Prologue,” in Jesús Martínez, Razas Perdidas: Viajes y aventuras por el misterioso Vaupés y el Amazonas 100-10 (Bogotá: Editorial Andina, 1985), 10 (my translation). Torres describes the cosmology of the region as the result of Afro-Amerindian creolization. See also Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Radical Dualism: A Meta-Fantasy on the Square Root of Dual Organizations (Kassel: Hatje Cantz, 2012). On creolization, see Jane-Anna Gordon, Creolizing Political Theory: Reading Rousseau Through Fanon (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 2-3. For the cited Spanish-language edition of Humboldt’s essay on the geography of plants, see Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland, Ideas

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para una geografía de las plantas. Más un cuadro de los países tropicales (Bogotá: Jardín Botánico José C. Mutis, 1985), available at <http://www.banrepcultural.org/blaavirtual/geografia/geoplan/inicio.htm> (accessed December 20, 2016). For the English edition of this work, see Alexander von Humboldt and Aimé Bonpland, Essay on the Geography of Plants, ed. Stephen T. Jackson, trans. Sylvie Romanowski (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> Immanuel Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment, trans. Paul Guyer & Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 192, par. 49, 5: 313.

<sup>16</sup> Hans Blumenberg, Shipwreck with Spectator: Paradigm of a Metaphor for Existence, trans. Steven Rendall (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1997), 2-13, and Work on Myth, trans. Robert M. Wallace (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 3.

<sup>17</sup> Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Wiedenfield, 1967), 133.

<sup>18</sup> Fanon, 186.

<sup>19</sup> Frantz Fanon, Oeuvres (Paris: La Découverte, 2011), also quoted by Lewis R. Gordon, What Fanon Said (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 57.

<sup>20</sup> Lewis R. Gordon, What Fanon Said, 86-7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Stephanie Bailey, “Apocalypse Now. Sophia al-Maria,” Leap: The International Art Magazine of Contemporary China, 41 (2016): 84-93, and Uzma Z. Rizvi and Lantian Xie, “The Oracle of Empire,” Leap 37 (2016): 100-107. See also Enrique Chagoya, Palimpsesto caníbal (exhibition catalogue) (Las Palmas: Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, 2013).

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<sup>24</sup> Drucilla Cornell, Moral Images of Freedom: A Future for Critical Theory (Lanham, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 15, 65-6. In the passage cited here, she references Jacques Derrida, "Choreographies," Diacritics 12, no. 2 (1982): 66-76.

<sup>25</sup> Friedrich Schiller, Essays, ed. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), 176; also quoted by Cornell in Moral Images, 17.

<sup>26</sup> Jacqueline Rose, States of Fantasy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 88.

<sup>27</sup> Schiller, 125.