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The New Musselman. Figures on the Threshold, Ethics of the Contact Zones and The Renewed Possibility of History

Abstract. The paper will open several avenues for research and reflection by revisiting Marian Crișan's *Morgen*, Tarr Bela's *Werckmeister Harmonies* and Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre musique*. The key element will be the figure of the refugee as a figure-on-the-threshold that enacts essential transformations inside a community. Its contemporary position as the new *musselman* (Primo Levi's definition) redistributes the way history and identities can be defined. The way a society falls into fascism upon a traumatic intrusion (as the whale in Tarr Bela's movie), the ruins of violence and their challenge to ethics and especially the passages and the contact zones will lead us to the concept of *concrete universality* and the possibility of a renewed belief in the possibility of history.

Keywords: testimony, refugee, universality, Event, ethics.

Demeure

In his 1995 conference on a text by Maurice Blanchot (*L'instant de ma mort*), Jacques Derrida analyses the relation between testimony and fiction. Carefully deconstructing the usual clichés about the necessary clear distinction between the two – a distinction that is essential for the possibility of a narrative of history, a clinical psychological portrait or the very existence of the juridical institution –, the French philosopher exposes the intricate and close dependence of one on the other. Not only that an objective distinction between the two is not possible, but the definition (and the possibility) of one is haunted by the other: “in order to remain testimony, it must therefore

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allow itself to be haunted. It must allow itself to be parasitized by precisely what it excludes from its inner depths, the *possibility*, at least, of literature."¹ The Blanchot text that Derrida is investigating – at a conference in Louvain dealing with borders, neighbouring cultures and the passions of literature – is caught in the undecided fictional testimony about one important event during the Second World War when Blanchot himself was close to being executed by the Nazis. The French author chooses this mode of testimony, interposing between the supposed true event and its presentation to the readers several layers that are associated with fiction, not with autobiography or the (scientific) discourse of history. This is exactly the point, the threshold, or the limit that Derrida chooses to explore and where he tries to remain (*demeure*) for although it is an untenable limit (and thus for many an obstacle, a thing to be dealt with), it tells more about both fiction and testimony than their wished-for clearly distinct identities. This undecidable limit is “a chance and a threat, a resource both of testimony and of literary fiction, law and non-law, truth and non-truth, veracity and lie, faithfulness and perjury.”²

In the depths of the Derridean analysis, there is a key aspect that interests us here: the situation of the witness and the problem of survival. How does one survive history? Even more, how does one survive death and/or the atrocities of history (like Auschwitz) and live to tell? How is testimony even possible in relation to such incalculably horrific situations? Always an admirer of the poet, Derrida revisits the verse of Paul Celan: “Niemand/ zeugt für den/ Zeugen.”³ Reading Blanchot’s text, the French philosopher discovers that it is a problem of what an *instant* means in the case of an event and its promise of translatability (or of survival) for someone else. An instant that is exemplary enough to become an instance, to be at the same time *singular* and *universal*. We will return to this. What is important at this point is that Derrida goes beyond Celan and considers that there is a way in which somebody (or something) can testify for the witness. Blanchot’s text (and choice) is proof of that: “what becomes of the witness, or rather the narrator, who is here the witness *for* the witness? No one testifies for the witness, says Celan. Here the narrator testifies for the witness.”⁴ Literature (and we can extend this to art) makes this possible. It works in/ on the undecidable limit that science or an objective discourse cannot solve and to which they both stop. Literature serves as real testimony, because it captures (in the sense of allowing the coming to visibility of what is otherwise kept invisible) the very tension of events, the core of what relates an *instant* to an *instance*, a reality to its narration, an *affect* to its survival. Of course, questions can be added here, repeated, investigated. How does one survive death? Survive Auschwitz and tell? Or, closer to us, survive the death of Europe and tell? We should not lose sight of this important thread that is also the thread on which our text tries to remain (*demeure*): survival, witnessing and universality. In Derrida’s words: “is the witness not always a survivor? This belongs to the structure of testimony. One testifies only when one has lived longer than what has come to pass. One can take examples as tragic or full of pathos as the

survivors of death camps. But what ties testimony to *survivoance* remains a universal structure and covers the whole elementary field of experience. The witness is a survivor, the third party, the *terstis* as *testis* and *superstes*, the one who survives."⁵ Aby Warburg's *Nachleben* comes to mind, obviously related to Edward B. Tylor's *survival*. As does Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the same relation between witness and survival to which we will turn shortly. For the moment, we will close this paragraph by following another key element of Derrida's investigation, namely the fact that the witness is always required to perform two things: to conform to existing criteria *and* to invent new norms. "The witness must both conform to given criteria and at the same time invent, in quasi-poetic fashion, the norms of his attestation."⁶ Invention is another area richly investigated by Derrida, especially in *Psyche: Invention of the Other* where the concept is related, through a demonstration that we cannot follow here⁷, to the figure of the Other. What needs to be retained however is that the arrival of the Other requires a careful preparation through invention: "the initiative or deconstructive inventiveness can consist only in opening, in uncloseting, destabilizing foreclosure structures so as to allow for the passage toward the other. But one does not make the other come, one lets it come by preparing for its coming."⁸ It is this thread that has as its reference the existence and the identity of the other that leads back (or keeps everything in – *demeure*) the area of the literary invention: "there is here the genius of the witness who reminds us that the testimonial act is poetic or it is not, from the moment it must invent its language and form itself in an incommensurable performative."⁹

There is no testimony (in the sense of invention, of carefully preparing for the other – and as such assuming the ethical dimension) that is not literary (or belonging to art, bordering on it, coming out of it). We seem to live in times which constantly (and in fact institutionally) negate that, which are in fact legitimized by the exclusion of fiction from testimony, of literature from law, of art from truth. But in spite of this (or due to it) questions arise (or remain) as to what would be the right (in both senses: true and ethical) testimony for our times. We will test a few possible answers by focusing on artistic examples.

Morgen

In Marian Crișan's 2010 movie *Morgen*, we witness the effects of an intrusive element inside a community. The intrusion comes in the guise of a refugee who finds himself in Salonta, a Romanian town close to the border with Hungary, a border he wants to trespass in order to reach Germany. His character is not however the main focus of the film, which is smart enough to find interest in what this intrusion enacts in the community. The refugee functions as the figure where or upon which the community exposes and tests its limits. It is not so much about himself. The character in the movie is repeatedly identified as a Turk, a gypsy or an Arab, all figures that the community has learnt to exclude and regard as inferior. There is only one char-

acter, Mr. Nelu, that addresses him or talks about him as human (as in “this man needs to arrive at his family in Germany” which reveals the dimension where empathy is possible – family as a coalescing way, the zero degree of a community). But for the most part the character remains a mirror in which we see the reflections of an other. A powerful mirror that shows faces and traits that are otherwise carefully or instinctively hidden. Even Mr. Nelu succumbs to exploiting the refugee (he takes his money and he also uses him for work around the house, not to speak about the way he accommodates him in the cellar). The other people, including the border police at best tolerate the intruder with an arrogance based on racist assumptions but also made possible by the fragility of the refugee: he has no documents, his language is not understandable and most of all he is not yet (in 2010) the exponent of what mass-media would several years later build as the figure of the possible-almost-certain terrorist that under a fragile figure in fact hides a dangerous enemy. The refugee in *Morgen* is not yet preceded by the dogmatic fear of what he could represent. He is more like a zero degree of Alterity, a void upon which the community discovers itself, not a figure that carries all the malignant propaganda that would come afterwards. It is why at this point the refugee can be viewed as a figure-on-the-threshold. The concept is used by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*¹⁰ where it names the 19th century figures that oscillate between inside and outside or between past and present. In a way, these are anachronistic figures, that no longer belong to a certain epoch and thus are capable to expose the intricacies and tensions of colliding times (with their ideologies, transformations and different social phenomena). The key architectural figure for such a concept is of course the arcade itself which appeared and reached its glory in the first part of the 19th century in order to lose all its attraction and be close to disappearing after the violent redesign and metamorphosis of Paris enacted by Haussmann under Napoleon III. The character most associated with the arcade is the flâneur, another product of the changing of times and of the ongoing and brutal instauration of capitalism: he is as much on the margin of this new society as – to a certain extent – in its midst. A wanderer with no specific pragmatic role in the new society, at the same time he finds pleasure in its contemplation. The street itself and especially the arcade are his comfortable dwelling places. The flâneur (and the arcade) is thus a figure that refuses the radical separation enacted by borders and it is for this reason that he is always condemned to disappear or just to become anachronistic. The new society needs to solve this temporary problem of figures, ways of life or even artistic experiences that cannot be clearly integrated in the demarcations of the new forms of social hierarchies, specific ideologies and accepted artistic (and therefore academic) masks. Along with the flâneur, there are two other figures that Walter Benjamin positions on the threshold in the case of the Paris of the 19th century: the collector (who divests things of their commodity character and invests them with connoisseur value) and the gambler (for whom the idea is to give a shock value to events).

We are interested here in the distinction between threshold and borders (or boundaries). In Benjamin's words, "threshold and boundary must be very carefully distinguished. The threshold is a zone. And indeed a zone of transitions. Transformation, passage, flight. [...] We have grown very poor in threshold experiences. Falling asleep is perhaps the only such experience that remains to us."¹¹ There is also another evolution described by the German author that interests us here, namely the slow but important change from the flâneur as individual that roams the streets and arcades enacting experiences that read the new world through forms of perception that often revisit the magical and oneiric dimensions, to the fact that the streets will become more and more the dwelling place of the collective. On the one hand, the modern city realizes humanity's ancient dream of the labyrinth. On the other hand, under the growing exploitation brought by capitalism, the masses try to reclaim the common ground: streets, public places, forms of communication, etc. The flânerie began as an art of the individual. It changes into a necessity for the masses. The collective needs to re-territorialize spaces that have been rigidly bordered by the interest of the market. Barricades, strikes, horizontal and vertical forms of protests, all of these are attempts to retransform spaces into zones, to allow transitions, changes, breaks and lines of flight.

To return to *Morgen*, the character of the refugee is obviously caught in this superposition: he encounters a heavily bordered (even walled) world that he would like (and even humanely needs) to treat as a zone where transitions are possible. There are however no threshold experiences available to him and we slowly understand – as the movie unfolds – that the other characters are themselves just as unable to have such experiences. The life of Mr. Nelu and his family is itself heavily directed by clearly-defined limits: money, property, social status, etc. We are thus presented with a world that – under the appearance of a democracy and a liberal system – allows no authentic liberty, just as it offers no authentic opportunities to escape the regulated flow of allowed moves and gestures. There is no escape in *Morgen*: the refugee does indeed succeed in entering Hungary, but he will only find himself in another clearly-bordered space and even if – were he to reach Germany – he would find out that the Germany he imagines (of prosperity, justice and opportunity) doesn't exist (at least not for somebody like him). There is no escape for Mr. Nelu, in spite of the fact that he is allowed to circulate between bordered spaces due to his legal status of citizen of a country which is part of the European Union. There is no escape for the other characters from Salonta, not even the border police officers, caught in their own flows of corrupted and legal moves that the system – in both cases – needs in order to function. All the moves in the movie are repetitive, caught in the same vicious circles. The only move that could and should escape repetition is the transgressing of the border because in a sense it delegitimizes it. That's why the refugee is here the last chance of a system that evolves closer and closer into a gated-world in all the meanings of the word: an area for a few lucky citizens, a carefully

controlled flow of economic prosperity based on exploitation and a continuous prevention of all possibilities of change. It could look paradoxical that a defenceless refugee could represent such a key danger for a system that has on its side all the legal, military and ideological weapons. And it is because of this that such a paradox proves (and in a sense testifies, poses deposition) for the real and authentic face of the system.

Perhaps it is not a stretch to (re)visit here the concept of *Musselman*. It was first used by survivors of the extermination camps of the Second World War to name those who reach a threshold in which, while not yet dead, they somehow cease to be human. They lose their dignity and because of this they are regarded with a degree of contempt (but also with the fear of being themselves close to that point) by the other inmates. Primo Levi, for example, in *The Drowned and the Saved*, addresses the problem of who is the right witness for the atrocities of places like Auschwitz: “we, the survivors, are not the true witnesses [...] those who saw the Gorgon have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute, but they are the Muslims, the submerged, the complete witnesses, the ones whose deposition would have a general significance. They are the rule, we are the exception.”¹² The *Muselmann* is the non-human who obstinately appears as human; he is the human that cannot be told apart from the inhuman. For Giorgio Agamben, he represents “the fatal threshold that all prisoners are constantly about to cross.”¹³ He is simultaneously a real figure and a specter that awaits all the others. Any prisoner is getting closer and closer to the *Musselman*. A threshold between life and death, a form of life that is already dead or a form of death that lives, he is no longer – as the flâneur or the arcades – the anachronism, the supplement of the collision of two worlds. He is the core, the essence of the new world understood – in Agamben’s terms – as a camp. *Homo sacer*, because he has no other identity left to him but the bare life. *Sans-papier*, as Alain Badiou would put it. No documents and no legal system protects the *Musselman* of our contemporary world, as even the human rights prove to be nothing else but the rights of documented citizens.

We can now return to the problem of the witness. Who has the ethical right to testify for our world? Wouldn’t it be proper to make a case for the figure of the refugee? He is at once *the figure-on-the-threshold* of our times (both in the sense of an individual facing the entire power of the State Apparatus and as a collective mass that tries to break out of the cycle of repetition imposed on it by the same apparatus) and the new *Musselman* (reduced to bare life, outside any jurisdiction, object upon which legal violence can be easily inflicted and at the same time the kernel, the real face of our times). Isn’t the refugee the truth (in Slavoj Žižek’s use of the psychoanalytical terms) of the capitalist order?

Before we go a little bit deeper into the problem of the ethics of the contact zones we will now turn to another cinematic example.

A Whale and an Idiot

There were several (and predictable) tentatives to interpret Béla Tarr's 2000 movie *Werckmeister Harmonies* as an allegory of communism and Wikipedia is a good example for that. It was also easier to go on that road because the movie follows the novel written by László Krasznahorkai in 1989, *The Melancholy of Resistance*. We will however try to make a case here that the movie is far more relevant for how a democracy falls into fascism. The way order is restored and legitimized as a necessary defence towards the intrusion of a monstrous element, *Werckmeister Harmonies* is a movie about how the mass of people falls into fascism. In it the whale (in fact its cadaver, its decaying remnant) acts as an intruder. Jacques Rancière, author of a key book on the Hungarian director, observes that "la baleine est un opérateur d'un partage (...) mettre au coeur du réel un élément fantastique qui le coupe en deux".¹⁴ The effects of the whale's apparition (along with the strange character called The Prince) is intensified by the way community functions before its arrival. As Rancière observes, in Béla Tarr's movies the characters move according to certain patterns. The most present one (and relevant for the fatalistic views on world and society that pervades most of the Hungarian director's movies) is the vicious circle. Characters seem unable to escape the eternal return of the same: the drunkards in *Satantango*, the character in *Damnation*, even the drunkards at the beginning of *Werckmeister*... when the idiot presents them the utopian model of a harmonious universe. In fact this character (Valushka), himself caught in the daily repetition of the same gestures (he acts as a postman, a carer for Mr. Eszter, etc.), survives by reading his gestures through the cosmic pattern (he has a map of the universe on the wall of his desolate room in which he eats and sleeps) of the necessary moves that make the universe perfect. For much of the movie he acts as the eye that interprets reality in a positive way. Even the intruding whale is in his eyes a sign of the great powers of the creator. A monster is thus less of an evil thing as it is a showing-off of what God can do.

But just as zombies in contemporary media are (almost direct) representations of the refugees, the whale is perceived by everybody (except Valushka) as a malignant symptom. It is for this reason that the character of the Prince is narratively needed. He acts as the so-called subject of transference, the one that reads the symptom in the frames of understanding that the mass of people can enact its fury. He embodies a Hitler-like populist that plays the Master by manipulating the people's obscure desires. He is unseen (only heard), mysterious, but followed. It is relevant here that he is in fact a circus character gone beyond the limit of a show, a play or an act. His drama – and this is a symptom that has to be observed and taken into account for the understanding of the movie – is that in his case the distinction between believing that one merely acts and acting as if one believes is no longer functional and in this respect he represents the opposite figure to Valushka, the idiot, who – at the beginning of the movie – embodies the belief in the harmony of the cosmos, the solving of any tension or of any confusion through the hidden – but real – music of the universe. In

fact, we can read the forms and the changes that community suffers between these two points of reference: the Prince as a symptomatic torsion and the idiot as the possibility of resolving the symptom. A symptom obviously provides clues not only for a limited and marginal zone but for the entire space. The intrusion of the whale (and of the Prince) represents, in the view of Jacques Rancière, “un événement étrange divise la communauté.”¹⁵ The strangeness is necessary in order to produce an effect, to unleash forces until then kept under control. In a world determined and controlled through the repetition of the same moves (and this institutionally functions as an image of order), at the point of the symptomatic torsion (where the tensions reach a boiling point), “la destruction est la seule capacité d’échapper à la répétition.”¹⁶ Just as in *Satantango*, there is only one way of escaping the vicious circle: the straight line of Irimias that itself leads to destruction (the villagers are seduced by the promise of the better world only to be once again abandoned and betrayed), and the straight line enacted by the little girl, Estike, after she tortures the cat, which leads to suicide. In *Werckmeister...* the straight line – a collective one now, re-enacting for long minutes the march of a fascist troupe – leads to violence and ruins. What is even more relevant is that the restoration of order is done through a corresponding violence, so that the ruins afterwards are no longer attributable to only one side. In Béla Tarr’s world, violence is always a sign of the impotence of the individual (or the collective) to escape his damnation. Along these lines we can invoke here Slavoj Žižek’s observation, through Lacan, that “a father who is perceived as omnipotent can only sustain this position if his power remains forever a potential, a threat which is never actualized. The full use of force, painful as it might be, makes it part of reality and as such by definition limited.”¹⁷ That’s why *Werckmeister...* is more than an allegory of a totalitarian or simply a conflicting society. The fascist mass on the move (under the influence of the Prince and the derailing effect of the decaying corpse of the whale) is doubled by the show of force of the army under the supervision of an equally strange character, the alcoholic chief of the police. Between populists and corrupted officials the world goes to ruins because in fact – to read the movie in Alain Badiou’s terms – it lacks an Idea. It is not an anti-communist movie. On the contrary, it exposes what it is that the lack, the void created by the putting-to-death of any Idea of the Common leads to. Valushka loses his innocence which in his terms is the reading of the universe as a space in which everything works for the common good: “la ruine d’un univers sensible: le cosmos qui inclut l’excès n’a plus de lieu.”¹⁸ To support this reading of the movie, we draw attention to something that is equally important: the theme of music and harmony. Mr. Eszter elaborates in one key scene of the movie on the underlying corruption at the core of the harmonic system. Just as the capitalist system, the apparent harmony of music covers a lack: it is a constitutive lack, like a wound that is necessary for the functioning of a system or an organism. In ordered times, this lack is not visible. An intrusion however exposes it as a symptom. A symptom is first treated like a local disease, an excrescence, a minor problem (like corruption in the

capitalist system) while it is in fact the exposing of the structural disease of the whole system (corruption thus being not an exception of the capitalist normal functioning, but the very essence of it).

Ruins, Rings and Maps

There is a case to be made for the idea that the world is always in ruins. Even new buildings already contain their status as future ruins. This case is of course convincingly made by W. G. Sebald in his 1995 novel *The Rings of Saturn*. Composed as a thread of meditations of the narrator as he walks along the Eastern coast of England, the novel continuously connects one story with another, one concrete detail with a philosophical question, one ring with a different one. The result is a complex book, plural through lines that apparently run freely and disjointedly and yet they connect and construct a network of an impressive amplitude. History in its many forms is in fact present in the novel, through the intricate interconnection of small history with the *grand narratives* that are never forgotten. The rings presented in the title are in fact the rings of history, that is, what from afar appear as well-structured forms, but at a closer look prove to be clouds of small particles of dust. Just like every new building is already meant or destined at some point to be in ruins, memory works through the revisitation not of clear structures and well-defined facts, but of fragile impressions that never arise beyond the level of noise that deranges traditional historiography. In fact, Sebald's novel pleads for a new understanding of history, one in which there is no progress, but also no dialectics (in its traditional sense of the solving of contradictions). As such this history does not succumb to relativism or nihilism, as a conservative historian (and there are always many of those around) would fear. The book imagines a new understanding of time and its relationship to the contemporary world which is heavily dominated by neoliberal capitalism and which pretends to live in a post-ideological (final) epoch. The new *flâneur* imagined by Sebald holds the key to this archeology of memory. The key element is that there is not a single time, nor a single space. The archeology of memory that the book proposes works with layers of time and space. The continuities are just as important as the discontinuities. That's why memory is something irrational (as compared to the utopia of a rational archive, for example), disordered and fluid. Society protects itself against memory, for certain memories are too difficult to accept and they may derail the functioning of society. Ideology at its purest works as this mechanism of protecting a selective and naturalized view of reality. That's why most forms of collective memory are constructed as ways of controlling that collectivity through a careful selection of the points of reference allowed, a limitation of the creative potential of discourses and a rigid hierarchy of access to the more complex reality of this memory.

In Sebald's novel, the rarefied and clearly-structured reality produced by an ideology or another is deconstructed through a liberation of memory. Archives are fissured, structures are questioned, empty spots on maps are investigated and most

of all ruins are taken not as remains of the past (signs of a different bygone age), but as symptoms of the present. The (contemporary) world in this novel is not the Fukuyama-celebrated world of triumphant liberal capitalism, all resplendent in its glory, but a world entirely in ruins. No glory, no triumph and almost no hope, and yet we are not in front of a pessimistic or fatalist view revisiting Romantic clichés. The key problem that slowly arises from Sebald's novel is an ethical one. If we focus on fissures, thresholds, the plural ways in which things and memories connect and also if we escape the linear narratives that connect violence to certain causes (or ideas), the question that arises – and allows us to return to a problem described earlier in the text – is: what would an ethics of the contact zones be?

Notre musique

The right of distress (*Notrecht*) is described by Hegel in *Philosophy of Right*, paragraphs 127-8 and is analysed by Slavoj Žižek in *Absolute Recoil*: “a conflict inherent to the sphere of rights, a conflict which is unavoidable and necessary insofar as it serves as an indication of the finitude, inconsistency, and abstract character of the system of legal rights as such.”¹⁹ According to Hegel, cited by Žižek, “life as the sum of ends has a right against abstract right (...) To refuse to allow a man in jeopardy of his life to take such steps for self-preservation would be to stigmatize him as without rights (...) his freedom would be annulled altogether”. Žižek consequently considers this situation at the level of a whole class, systematically put into poverty by another one and concludes that, in line with Hegel, “to refuse to allow them to take steps for self-preservation (which, in this case, can only mean open rebellion against the established legal order) is to stigmatize them as without rights.”²⁰ Of course, in our times, this right has not only lost its legitimation but the whole system (and mainly through its ideology) is built to make sure that it cannot take place.

The right of rebellion is also an acceptance of Events, in other words of the very possibility of history. After the decades of post-history or the triumphant neoliberal cry of the end of history (exposed for the first time in Francis Fukuyama's book), the idea that history could (or should) be changed has become an unutterable dangerous idea. What would however the possibility of history mean in our contemporary world? According to writers like Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière or Slavoj Žižek, the era (characterized by the crisis of capitalism and of the liberal system based on representation) calls for support for radical change in the name of the excluded. Those that are marginalized by the system (*sans-papiers*, immigrants, refugees, the poor in general) are the ones that currently stand for universality. Precisely because they are not defended by any rights (except, in theory, human rights, that is essentially because they are just that, human), they can be defined solely as exponents of humanity. Anything else (citizenship, property, culture, etc.) comes above that as an ornament. The capitalist liberal system works according to the mechanism of generalization that must be strongly opposed to universalization. The West tries to generalize (to globalize,

according to a word that is still in fashion) its values, way of life and privileges. All this means that the West tries to define humanity in terms of its own particular identity. Because however this identity is based on exclusion and inequality, in no way it could (or should) be general, and even less so universal. The concept of *concrete universality* (and we will see that it is close to what Derrida finds in the *testimonial exemplarity* of Blanchot's text and in literature in general) could connect figures like the refugee in Marian Crișan's movie to a new idea of universality. To put it shortly, universality should be redefined (through radical changes, if necessary) so as to not exclude anymore. The refugee, the *Musselman* or the *sans-papier* are not only figures that expose the injustice of our world (and the functioning of its ideology), but they are also figures that enact or indirectly demand change. It is at this point that the political dimension of art (mostly contained in the academic frames of the University or the walls of museums after 2000) seeks new areas and new spaces of exploration through a rediscovery of engagement or what Yates McKee defines as *strike art*. In essence it's an art that is able to invent (even to extend invention to itself), based on imagination (exploration, experiment) and to openly assume risk (just as radical political change should).

The alliance between the creative industry and capitalism functioned very well up until the crisis of 2008 (allowing gentrification of areas and the redistribution from the poor to the rich) and it is critically exposed by Yates McKee. Museums and art institutions still remain caught in the capitalist web (as exemplified by the G.U.L.F. action or Occupy Museums or Art Not Oil) while cinema is often either a manipulative mechanism to obtain awards (like in the case of directors such as Michael Haneke) or plainly supportive of the propaganda machine (as in most Hollywood blockbuster movies). Perhaps it is in this context that an example from 2004 could still delineate what art should be. We are referring here to Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre musique*.

Through its form, stylistic options and its overall aesthetics, Godard's movie is certainly a model of imagination, invention and risk. But it is also a key work in what concerns (as it does concern us here) borders, neighbouring areas or contact zones. Its action focuses on Sarajevo, but the city becomes in many ways a *testimonial exemplarity* that stands for (or at least draws attention to) other areas such as Palestine, Latin America, Africa or even the Native American protected areas. It does not in any way portray a harmonious world (in fact the world is – through the metaphor of Sarajevo – in ruins) or envisage a harmonious resolution. The movie is structured in three parts (Hell, Purgatory and Paradise), but the final scene is far from bringing any harmony (through a sarcastic or cynical twist, Heaven is guarded by US Marines). It is interesting to note here, especially as we have focused on the theme of music in Béla Tarr's movie, that the title of Godard's movie returns to the role of music in relation to the commons. What is *our* music? While for Valushka in *Werckmeister...* the harmony of the universe could contain, explain and resolve conflict, we have seen that the Hungarian director points, through the character of Mr. Eszter, to the cor-

ruption at the very core of the Western harmonic system. For Godard, as proven by his own words in a key scene in the movie, *notre musique* refers to the principle of moviemaking: “The principle of moviemaking: to go to the light and to shine it upon our night. Notre musique.” It is of course an emancipatory belief (in spite of all attacks on the idea of emancipation that have intensified after 1989). The world is in ruins (or in the dark as *Alphaville* was already imagining the future of humanity²¹) and film should bring light (hope? change? ideas?) to it. What defines *us* (or the idea of the commons) is this emancipation through music (emancipation, harmony brought through artistic means). Harmony thus reappears, but now it is no longer posited as a foundation (or its absence deplored), it is on the contrary something to be enacted, to be produced. Godard’s demonstration in the scene we are referring to in the movie allows this thread of interpretation. He goes on to point that “we say that facts speak for themselves. Celine said: Alas, not for a long time.” What facts say is always part of a *montage*, the result of an act. Just as an Event retroactively posits its very possibility and conditions, an (artistic and risky) act redistributes the way we understand and act.

There is another key scene in the movie, the one in which Godard explains – in front of a few Sarajevo students – how images should be read. He starts with the famous editing technique of cinema: shot-countershot. He points out, through an example from Howard Hawks movies, that there is a danger to use the same type of frame for two images. This way, the director makes no difference between a man and a woman. The same frame implies the same perspective and the same coordinates. The implied idea is that of course the points of view should not be the same. In the same way the pretended objectivity of mass-media (the same framing for two points of view) is in fact pure ideology: it allows for no break, no discontinuity, no questioning of the system of framing. The correct example in the Godard scene is exposed through two photos of the 1948 taken in Israel. According to Godard, one image exposes how Israelis enter fiction (to be read here as myth and the necessary legitimizing ideology of power) while the Palestinians enter documentary (to be read as the deconstruction of all myths and ideologies). The difference thus not only lies in the existence of two points of view that are in contradiction with each other. It lies in the mode of framing (fiction vs documentary) and through this a different ethical reaction is necessary: it is clear in this example that the correct ethical position is to support the position that deconstructs and even escapes myth (and the State Apparatus that is based on it).

The lessons that *Notre musique* can still teach us may be structured in four areas. With regard to history, it is no doubt that the movie supports the possibility of history (and Events), contrary to the post-historical ideology. Yes, we are in post-history in the sense that the world has been brought to ruins and the system we live in is scared of any affirmative stance. An act is however necessary, even a testimonial one that could contain enough exemplarity to enact a change. In the movie, this act is per-

formed by Olga, who chooses to enter an Israeli cinema under the appearance of a suicide bomber, although her only bombs are books. She asks if anybody is ready to die with her for peace and, while nobody does, she is shot by the police. In the case of ethics, the movie decidedly supports the position of the excluded as the point where concrete universality can be found. Sarajevo itself functions here as such a connection between the particular context of its existence and the universality of ruins. With regard to art (its possibility and its meaning), the movie carefully balances the nostalgia for an engaged art with the deconstructive power of images and especially of the way in which they are edited. In the same way in which music produces *affects*, moviemaking (understood as *notre musique*) is required to leave a trace, to produce effects or enact the possibility of change. Invention, imagination and risk can be regarded as both an artistic requirement and as a philosophical lesson: thought itself should constantly be open to invention and exploration.

We can now resume these threads and return to Derrida. *Notre musique* is a fiction that intersects reality, meditates on it and in many ways it produces a testimony about it. It can be very well interpreted along Derrida's idea that "the possibility of fiction has structured – but with a fracture – what is called real experience."²² There are two essential mechanisms in this fragment: fiction works as a constituting structure (which means that reality acquires its organization and the density of its significations only through fiction, and at the same time that the concept of a reality that would precede fiction is in fact retroactively posited by fiction), but what it actually produces is not simply a well-ordered reality that could be organized in a system. Our everyday experience is always (at least slightly) upset. There is a fracture at work, a deconstructing one. On the one hand, it is an original fracture: fiction and reality cannot be distinguished inside or along the frames of a linear time, just as "the border between literature and non-literature becomes undecidable."²³ On the other hand, it is this fracture that allows particular contexts or figures to act (or to stand for) universality. Sarajevo is the universality of our times, because, in Sebald's language, it requires an archeology of memory that escapes ideology and that understands ruins as (now) primordial. The refugee in *Morgen* is a concrete universality, precisely because he exposes (or enacts) the fracture of all the narratives necessary to sustain the ideology of the West. Both examples impose another way of witnessing, of writing, and understanding history. Blanchot's example works for Derrida as a possible model for such a change: "we can speak, we can read this because this experience, in the singularity of its secret, as experience of the unexperienced, beyond the distinction between the real and the phantasmatic, remains [*demeure*] universal and exemplary."²⁴

It is essential for history to remain *narratable* and it is even more important for narration to be inventive, otherwise it is a simple solidification of an ideology or a dogma. Godard's connection between *musique* and *notre* (in order, let us not forget, to define the principle of moviemaking) is obviously a form of interpellation to our times,

the understanding that *we* have a responsibility. It is however equally important what this connection tells us in aesthetic terms: it has to be *our* music first (it cannot repeat other forms, it has to find/ invent our form) and then it also must be our *music* (it must function for other times, other ears, it must be open towards universality). The principle of history and the way in which a history of the commons could be written should be imagined along the same lines. Events are not enough, and neither are the acts and the changes enacted by or in the name of the commons. Or, differently put, events become Events only when they turn something singular into something universal. The refugee may be the key to our times' rediscovery of the possibility of history. If – and, perhaps, only if – art invents ways to give testimony about him: “this is testimonial exemplarity. This text bears witness to a universalizable singularity. Because this singularity is universalizable, it is able to give rise – for example, in Blanchot – to a work that depends without depending on this very event.”²⁵

Notes:

- 1 Jacques Derrida, *Demeure. Fiction and Testimony*. Translated by Elisabeth Rottenberg. Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2000, p. 30.
- 2 *Ibidem*.
- 3 “No one/ testifies for the/ witness.” There is also another verse of Celan to which Derrida returns several times (although not in this text): “Die Welt ist fort/ ich muß dich tragen” (“The world has ended/ I have to carry you”). See, for example, Jacques Derrida, *Sovereignties in Question: The Poetics of Paul Celan*. Fordham University Press, 2005.
- 4 Jacques Derrida, *Demeure. Fiction and Testimony*, p. 61.
- 5 *Ibidem*, p. 45.
- 6 *Ibidem*, p. 40.
- 7 We however think it is closely related to our discussion here one of the threads followed by the Derrida text: “how can a deconstruction of the very concept of invention, moving through all the complex and organized wealth of its semantic field, still invent?” (Jacques Derrida, *Psyche. Inventions of the Other, Volume I*, edited by Peggy Kamuf and Elisabeth Rottenberg, Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 22). The relation between deconstruction and invention is, to put in terms that would be dear to Slavoj Žižek, *parallactic*: deconstructing invention can only be done by inventing. Similarly, the problem of witnessing in relation to norms works only if the norms are invented each time again. One does not witness according to norms; rather, one's witnessing makes (new) norms possible.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, *Psyche. Inventions of the Other*, p. 45.
- 9 Idem, *Demeure. Fiction and Testimony*, p. 83.
- 10 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*. Translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, 2002.
- 11 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, p. 810.
- 12 Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, apud Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Zone Books, 2012.
- 13 Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*.
- 14 Jacques Rancière, *Béla Tarr, le temps d'après*. Paris: Capricci, 2011, p. 59.

15 *Ibidem*, p. 59.

16 *Ibidem*, p. 63.

17 Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil. Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*. London and New York, Verso, 2014, p. 54.

18 Jacques Rancière, *Béla Tarr, le temps d'après*, p. 63.

19 Slavoj Žižek, *Absolute Recoil. Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 43.

20 *Ibidem*, p. 44.

21 And we should remember here a key scene in *Alphaville* where Lemmy Caution and another character have a dialogue around a lamplight that balances slowly from one to another, drawing attention on how light and shadow create perception.

22 Jacques Derrida, *Demeure. Fiction and Testimony*, p. 92.

23 *Ibidem*.

24 *Ibidem*, p. 93.

25 *Ibidem*, p. 94.

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