

Times Out of Joint 1: The Inventory

TEMPI SCARDINATI 1: L'INVENTARIO

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I am carried by the new stretchiness of time. I read Heraclitus who reminds me you cannot swim in the same river twice. I plunge into the past and resurface in accidental episodes. The chewing-gum time carries me to 1920. I watch *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* and my dreams become angular. Ominous. The sky stays red. Ants colonise the sink, seeking a new domesticity. I bake things that remain un-eaten, inedible. Baking is made out of fresh ingredients - routine, habit and memory. As if ingrained in a lost ribbon of DNA, I grab these ingredients with studied gestures - the mixing, the folding, the sieving, the parsing, the licking - and I do not let go. These gestures are mine now and they save me from an alternate non-baking horizon. I water random flowers in the street imagining that the few cars passing by will retain in their field of vision the imprint of an urban babushka in apron, clogs, headscarf, facemask. I turn myself into an intentional hieroglyphic to merge with the palimpsest of these times out of joint. Nothingness appeals. Sequences bewitch. I search for ways to be besotted - rather than submerged - by the everyday. The time is out of joint, the world is upside down, something is forcing its way in.

I devise an inventory to collect what I can see is already seeping through.

CALIGARISM

Expressionist representation of a world verging on the hallucinatory, populated by shadows, expressing anxiety, disquiet, foreboding. The sky is red.

CATASTROPHIC SPELL

'Everything must metamorphose into a thing in order to break the catastrophic spell of things'.¹



*Fig1. Stairs to NowHere.
Off Essex road, Islington, London*

CHEWING-GUM

Time has turned into chewing gum. Super stretchy and juicy and then wrapped up into a hard ball that hurts your jaws.

CONSTELLATIONS

Reaching out, weaving, spidering, retreating, nesting, waiting. The building of constellations is what I do. It demands a formula. I follow what works. I steal what heals.

I crave the shock-thought.



Fig.2 The Cabinet of Dr Caligari' 1919. German silent film. Director: Robert Wiene. Cesare (Conrad Veidt) making off with Jane (Lil Dagover). CREDIT Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group.

DETONATION

Thunderous shockwave. Sensing earthquakes. Feeling the tremor. What makes me think.

DOMESTIC

One solace these days is made of anchoring to the domestic. Retaining control of what can effectively be controlled, the garden, the cooker, the oven, the cupboard, the fridge - but it barely holds. My domestic space becomes a new stretchy ecology - like this time out of joint, it is infinitely malleable. The house itself dilates, expands, becomes angular. New rooms are found, new corners explored. Home is the uncharted territory. It moves, like the earth, it has its own tremors. It stretches and compresses. It expands and springs back. It is a chewing gum too. But it barely works. The little that does work, does so because it has no meaning. It is largely un-eaten. Inedible.



Fig.3 Family heirloom: a gift my parents received on their wedding in 1965. Now on my sideboard in London

¹ Theodor W. Adorno (1955) 'A Portrait of Walter Benjamin', in *Prisms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1983 p 233

LIFE IS BEAUTIFUL

My uncle Luciano was 81 years old. Born in 1939, he grew up inside the war. His body never forgot. He never had a fixed abode, nor a bank account, or possessions, choosing to live as he could, helped by charitable priests, friends or social services, sometimes in a garret in Genova with a multitude of cats, sometimes in a cabin in the Ligurian hills. He was diagnosed schizophrenic and painted, most of his life, meticulous, detailed, hyper-realistic oil paintings of what he saw. Vivid canvas, bursting with colour. He never signed them. He never sold them. They were always gifts. Every time he stopped painting, we knew something was not right. When I was a child his strangeness was used in the family as threat, blame and dark forecast against me - 'you will become like your uncle'. He never spoke much, but there was a sentence he repeated incessantly: 'how beautiful life is'. He was my unspoken guru. I do hope I am a little bit like him. He is the first person in my family to die from Covid-19.

RIP 25/07/1939 – 6/04/2020

GRIEF.

I find out that the word grief comes from the Latin gravare 'make heavy', which comes from gravis 'weighty', all from the same Proto-Indo-European root *gwere. One possible hypothesis (and my constellation-building formula tells me why not), is that this root is connected to the Sanskrit guru 'heavy, weighty, venerable'. So it is true. Grief is here to teach. The novelty of being at home dissipates quickly. I spend Week 3 of lockdown submerged by darkness, bent under its weight. Grappled by a new form of grief - grief for what I no longer have, for what I may never have again, for the waiting, for the chewing-gum time, for the loss of

brain power, for having to contend with my bare self with no scaffolding – all those daily routines that seemed trivial then (coffee and a chat and a carefree hug) but so deeply structuring and identity-forming. I am carried by a tumultuous tide of grief and death and fear, orbiting around me as in a loop. I plunge into a eddy of unnamed grief – the unnamed grief of never seeing my people again, which I can contemplate only by dissolving my own self from all attachments, by abandoning the loop, by turning the direction of the vortex, or else it devours me, gnawing my cerebellum at night, and then I am truly naked, my self exposed, raw, howling at the shadows.



*Fig.4 Sakura Grave.
St John's Churchyard, Hackney*



Fig.5 Luciano, my uncle (on the right) with his brother Giulio, my dad, probably early 1950s, unknown location. They were both born on the same day, the 25th of July, three years apart: Giulio in 1936 and Luciano in 1939.

*If you perceive the entire universe as phantasmagoria,
an ineffable joy will arise in you.²*

PROPENSITIES

I extend my feelers across the spine of hundreds of books. Standing still, I listen to the cacophony of whispers to guide my hand. Chance drives me to divine whichever thought is swimming through me. I take refuge in this aphonic propensity for something around which a nameless, imageless thought can coalesce. What needs doing is here already.

'Because chance plays a part in how the items in a collection gravitate into one's hands, a collection can be used as an instrument of divination, since chance is the flipside of fate'.³

I make piles of books and scatter them in the sun. I inhale them. I know what needs doing.

SEEDS

I find a bunch of seeds I brought back from the Himalaya 16 years ago. They are from flowers which in that region are traditionally grown interspersed across lush vegetable patches, in the most vivid cacophony of colours and species. An explosion of beauty indifferent to any biological taxonomy. Just Flora. The seeds were lovingly nestled in a velvet pouch embroidered with swastikas by Ladakh women in Leh. I religiously check the seeds tray each morning. I take their sprouting as an omen. Through this I can believe my prayers are loudest.

SHADOWS

Shadows permit the construction of what Deleuze calls the 'any-space-what-ever' (espace quelconque) unhinged from the coordinates of the human, not here, not there and yet populated, traversed, crossed by our body. The body itself is nothing but layers of frozen shadows.



Fig.7 Ghosts. Lower Clapton, Hackney

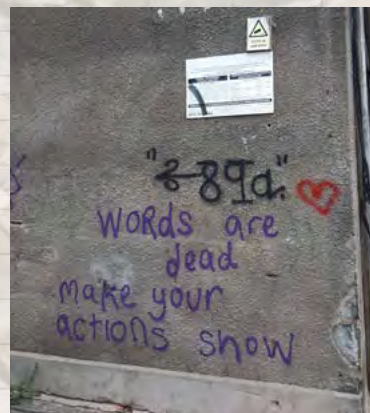


Fig.6 Words Are Dead. Shacklewell Lane, Dalston

The daily practice has the true purpose to dissolve them in a spiralling dance.

'The infinite force of light is opposed to darkness as an equally infinite force without which it would not be able to manifest itself. It opposes darkness in order to manifest itself. This therefore is not a dualism and neither is it a dialectic, since we are outside any organic unity or totality (...) Light's role, effectively, is to develop a relationship with black as negation = 0, as a function of which it is defined as intensity, as intensive quantity'.⁴

² Daniel Odier (2004) Yoga Spandakarika. *The Sacred Texts at the Origins of Tantra*. Rochester, Vermont, Inner Tradition.
Appendix 1: Vijnanabhairava Tantra p.158
³ Michael Taussig (2011) *I Swear I saw this. Drawing in fieldwork notebooks, namely my own*. Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press p. 104
⁴ Gilles Deleuze (1986) *Cinema 1. The movement-image*. Minneapolis, The University of Minnesota Press p. 49

STASIS

Stasis is civil war. It encloses the ambiguity of both oikos [home] and polis [city]. The Greek verb istemi, from which stasis derives, means 'standing up still', but also 'making an oath'. It is the indifferent threshold between the domesticity of the family and the public space of the city, between blood and citizenship. It is where the political and the non-political coincide, where the inside and the outside meet.⁵ Stasis is what tends to balance the opposite forces of home and the outside-of-home. Another spiralling dance to do by the window. At the threshold of this very personal civil war. The personal is political.

STEREOSCOPIC UNIVERSE

A stereoscopic universe: where space is given a new voice. 'Space now dwindled to a flat plane, now augment-

ed its dimension'.⁶ Siegfried Kracauer borrows this expression from film critic Herman George Scheffauer to discuss the film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920). The triumph of the shadow is also the dilation of space to its n-power. A cascade of thresholds. A phantasmagorical eddy to lose myself in. Looking for ways to augment space's dimensions, I mostly succeed. The micro becomes macro, cosmic, universal. I bring back my learnt fractalitude to make home fractal, again.



Fig. 8 Bird cage. Off Shacklewell lane, Dalston

TACTILITY OF KNOWING

One of my Italian aunts is called Augusta. She is 81 years old. Born in 1939, she grew up inside the war. Her body remembers it. We speak on the phone and with the lucidity of someone who traversed hunger, fear and bombings as a child, she tells me two things.



Fig.9 The Illusion of Democracy. Dalston Junction station, Hackney

⁵ Giorgio Agamben (2015) *Stasis. La Guerra civile come paradigma politico*. Bollati Boringhieri p. 30
⁶ Siegfried Kracauer (2004) *From Caligari to Hitler. A psychological history of the German film*. Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University press p. 69

The first is the description of the procession of un-named, flower-less coffins taken away on military trucks in the north of Italy. She has seen the images, in photograph in newspapers and magazines, and on screen, broadcasted by all the news channels, over and over. Too many corpses. Ovens at capacity. Rituals trampled. The horrors of the plague.

Funeral rites are replaced by an abject stream of unescapable images that travel through the ether and imprint themselves in everyone's retinas. Surface hieroglyphics. Psyche modulators. This faculty of reproduced images to force themselves inside the molecular architecture of bodies is what Michael Taussig describes as the 'shocklike abutment of dissimilars'.⁷ What is discharged forcefully by the technological image rests upon our human eyes. Eyes touch the image and are touched in turn by images - enchantingly, unbearably, abjectly. Unescapably. This tactile optics dwells in the intermediate space between wake and dream, fantasy

and hope. Another threshold. Some have called it the 'optical unconscious'. Others 'physiognomic aspect of visual worlds'.⁸ Vision is rewired as tactility. That touch and sight are provoked by the same stimulus is what philoso-poet Lucretius wrote in the De Rerum Naturae in the mid first century BCE.⁹ Here's a way to augment dimensions: Plunge into the river of time and re-emerge at random intervals carrying an unsigned gift.

The second thing my auntie Augusta tells me is 'this is a police state'. Pervasive territorial control. Drone surveillance. Army in the streets. Monitoring of bodies. Self-regulation. Self-imposed curfew. The biopolitical at its splendour. I braid together the new shock-rhythm of desolated images with the tactile knowledge they impress on our own bodies. I add the distraction that these images, like a virus, are made to carry. The useful distraction of collective clapping at regular intervals, ushering in, unmonitored, the shadow-less surveillance of Covid-19 Year 1.

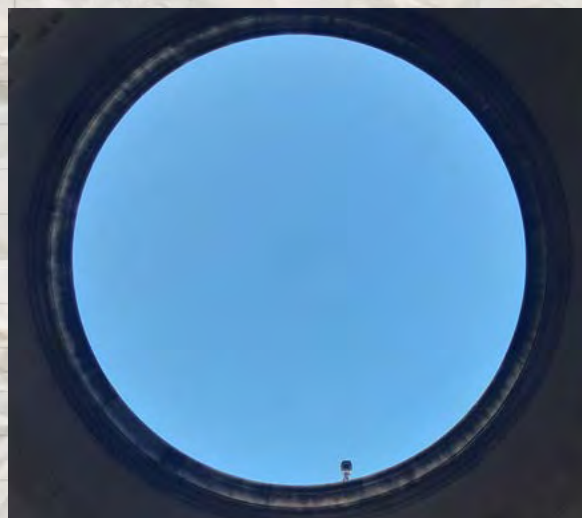


Fig.10 CCTV. The Bank of England, London

VIOLENCE

Thought is trespass and violence.¹⁰ It hurts. It is like unexpected grief. Deleuze says 'Do not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, count upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think (...). Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter. What is encountered may be Socrates, a temple or a demon'.¹¹

⁷ Michael Taussig (1992) *The Nervous System*. New York and London, Routledge p. 44

⁸ Walter Benjamin. Michael Taussig. Rosalind Krauss. Franco Vaccari

⁹ Lucretius De Rerum Natura (On the nature of things or On the nature of the universe)

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze (1994) *Difference and repetition*. London, The Athlone Press p 139

¹¹ Ibid. p 139

What I encounter - garden, grief or chewing-gum time - is what I sense. It can only be sensed. It is what moves me, 'perplexes' me: the physicality of this action is in the word itself (literally, 'folded through and through, entwined, braided'). I keep on braiding. It is the braiding of what I encounter on my path that forces me to think and makes me come up for air. Breath. Whatever I encounter, it bears a problem that I face by braiding and breathing. I take its violence and turn it into grace, repetitive gesture and patience. Here's another way to augment dimensions: Embroider thoughts with senses with tactile innervations. The compulsion to think is an arrow, 'spreading from the nerves and being communicated to the soul in order to arrive at thought'.¹² It goes through thresholds, only to dissolve them.

VIVIDNESS

The air is cleaner, everything is more vivid, the self is at its rawest. The vividness of the bare self. It is an hallucination too.

WAKE

With no wake, no funeral, no way of being together for real, even the grief of losing someone becomes an impossibility. It is suspended animation, a frozen state of bewilderment, which all the virtual reaching out barely appeases, and yet in its mundane glitchy way (I cannot hear you, are you there, I can see you now but the audio is bad, hang on I move to the window etc etc) they are the only way. I light a candle. I tend the seeds.

I stay awake. I listen to the tremor. I am the tremor.

Dispel Time and you will dispel Fate.



Fig.11 'Dispel Time and you will dispel Fate'.
My beloved Jack who died during lockdown n.3 on the 11 March 2021.

¹² Gilles Deleuze (1994) *Difference and repetition*. London, The Athlone Press p. 147