

Figures of abstraction

Kristof van Baarle

Introduction

*Merkst du jetzt daß du
Auch nur ein Rädchen bist und eine Schraube
In unsrer Sowjetordnung ...
Und neue Wunden geschlagen mit Papier
Mit Schreibmaschinen und mit Kaderakten
In unsern Ämtern und Büros im Namen
der Sowjetordnung
Heiner Müller, Wolokolamsker Chaussee II¹*

Radical elaborations of utopias can result in their opposites. In 1913 Kazimir Malevich designed the costumes for a Futurist opera entitled *Victory Over the Sun*.² The characters called *Strongmen of the future* wore suits and masks that were constructed of geometrical, monochrome shapes. These strongmen represented the Futurist faith in a new era of technological and artistic progress. Fifteen years and one disenchanting world war later, Stalin's first five-year plan had started to cause severe famines. In these years (1928-30) the violence of the Stalinist regime began to unfold. Malevich, who had in the meantime developed and abandoned his own Suprematism, began a new phase of intensive painting activity. He returned to an important theme in his early work: the peasant image. However, the figures in his "Second Peasant Cycle" had undergone fundamental changes. The geometrical shapes of his 1913 costume-designs reappeared in a new political context, where they no longer expressed faith in the future. They became an image of the absence of humanity in a perverse and violent totalitarian regime. The strongmen of the future had become the abstract individuals of the present. The utopian malleability of society that was proposed by Futurism had resulted in a dystopian outcome. Many artists who were part of avant-garde movements in Russia were impeached and imprisoned. Because of collectivisation and rationalisation, being a peasant in Russia had become something dramatically different from the beginning of the twentieth century. Furthermore, the political climate had transformed as well. The Stalinist regime was very ambitious in its desire to exhibit its power and to reshape reality with radical measures that reorganised society.

The five year plans that were supposed to modernise the Soviet Union were inspired by the fantasy of creating a perfectly calculable reality. The consequences can be seen as emblematic of modern man's hubris: in order to live up to the expectations that were set by the plan, the results of production were forged from the lowest to the highest level. This created a situation in which on paper, and thus officially, everything went "according to plan" – even better than expected – while in reality, people were starving to death. Instead of bringing the proletariat to power, the population was proletarianised.

¹ Heiner Müller, *Wolokolamsker Chaussee II*, in *Texte*, 9, *Shakespeare Factory 2* (Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1989), 235-236.

² It is not my intention to interfere in the Malevich scholarship with this essay. His work is, however, an inspiring starting point to discuss the notion of abstraction in relation to socio-political and economic contexts.

The apparatus of abstraction

The abstract – calculated and reified – nature of the concepts, notions and measures of the Stalinist regime remained distant from reality, but this did not make them affect reality any less. The disastrous consequences of the five year plans embody this. Today, abstraction has proliferated through both scientific and capitalist discourses. In the introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1857), Marx stipulates that the concrete is a result of abstractions or abstract concepts. This means that what appears as being abstracted, taken away from the concrete, is actually produced by an abstraction. Something that would have previously resulted from human or non-human interactions and relations is then produced by an abstraction, which could also be formulated as a process of separation, a notion I will return to later.³ Communication, for example, now mostly goes through abstractions, systems that order and steer our utterances through their form and structure. Twitter reduces communication to 140 signs, and orders it through the hashtag principle. The abstractions become reality once they start to produce the real in their turn. They are performative processes that re-create the real. These abstractions are the concepts and ideas that govern our everyday lives and thus influence more profoundly our reality, due to the dominance of economic logic and the assumed precision of scientific discourse. “Abstract quantifications have a habit of becoming seemingly concrete qualities.”⁴ This is “the specificity of contemporary, post-Fordist capitalism, which is precisely to be found in the abstract connections, or real abstractions, that make society cohere.”⁵ Apart from asking ourselves what is rendered abstract, we should also – and maybe more – question the reality produced by abstractions. “Abstraction does not so much liquidate as liquefy and transform the concrete from within.”⁶

Italian philosopher Matteo Pasquinelli draws a connection between Marx’s abstractions and Michel Foucault’s normative systems. The latter’s notion of the dispositive gathers “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions.”⁷ Dispositives shape societies and identities and in this sense function as abstractions.⁸ Another Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, has widened Foucault’s already capacious concept of the dispositive to include basically every object, technology, system, language or concept that interacts with living beings.⁹ Agamben’s apparatus¹⁰ might be a lot closer to Marxist abstraction than Foucault’s dispositive.¹¹ The mechanics of the apparatus presuppose a process of subjectivation and de-subjectivation,

³ Alberto Toscano, 'The Open Secret of Real Abstraction,' in *Rethinking Marxism* 20:2 (2008), 277.

⁴ Sven Lütticken, 'Inside Abstraction,' in *e-flux Journal* 38 (2012), 1.

⁵ Toscano, 'The Open Secret of Real Abstraction,' 282.

⁶ Lütticken, 'Inside Abstraction,' 6.

⁷ Michel Foucault, 'The Confession of the Flesh,' in *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1980).

⁸ Matteo Pasquinelli, 'The Power of Abstraction and Its Antagonism: On Some Problems Common to Contemporary Neuroscience and the Theory of Cognitive Capitalism,' in *Psychopathologies of Capitalism. Part 2* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2013), 2.

⁹ The interactivity of new devices such as smart phones, tablets, watches and computer or digital television can in this sense be interpreted as a way to increase and intensify the interaction with apparatuses.

¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, 'What is an Apparatus?,' in *What is an Apparatus? And Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 14.

¹¹ To avoid confusion between all these close and similar concepts, I will use "dispositive" in reference to Foucault and "apparatus" in the context of Agamben.

giving and taking, or merging and separating.¹² The apparatuses that have been the most influential over the past decades, however, take more than they give. They separate more from us than they might possibly add and this causes an imbalance in our relation to them.¹³ The reason for this is that the most powerful apparatuses are those of capitalism and democracy – two systems that produce very complex abstractions that tend to absorb everything and order (or capture) everything according to their own logic. Defining commodification, money and law, capitalism and democracy produce most of today's global reality. Guy Debord connects this process of separation by political and economic apparatuses to the power of the image, or more generally, the power of representation.¹⁴ Together, economy, politics and image form the spectacle. The society of spectacle is characterized by massive processes of separation into the realm of representation, leading to economic dominance over and a generalized proletarianisation of the population.¹⁵ Spectacle alters relations between humans themselves and their world. It both produces and infiltrates in the real to such an extent, that the difference becomes difficult to tell. In *Il Regno e la Gloria (The Kingdom and the Glory)* Agamben builds on Debord's connection between economy and spectacle. He describes the background of democracy and economy as theologico-political machines.¹⁶ The comparison with providence and the hierarchic structure of the angels – which resembles the maze of bureaucracy – helps to explain the sense of inevitability and powerlessness one experiences when confronted with these mighty apparatuses. In Christianity the topos of the divine hand indicates how providence orders the world in all its details. Similar to the presence of a Christian divine hand in all that happens, neoliberalism and law have ordered humanity in a structure that seems beyond us. Adam Smith, one of the seminal economic thinkers of the eighteenth century even secularised the divine hand as “the invisible hand of the market” in the *Wealth of Nations* (1776).

Another important apparatus of these politico-economic machines is media. The media generate affirmation (“glory” in Agamben's account) for what they broadcast.¹⁷ The relation between the spectator and the medium is one of a tautological feedback loop. To give some blunt examples: many reality stars are only famous for being famous without any personal quality or act. They are famous for being real on TV. Apart from the willingness to expose their selves, they have no other quality that places them in the spotlights. News-websites and papers often place a polemical question in the title of an article, only to deny their question in the article itself. This is called click-bait. Likewise, opinions and political issues arise because of their mediatized appearance. The number of non-problems that are treated as if they were real and affective is startling. Furthermore, media are closely connected to commodification (think about the sell-out of human emotions in the experience-oriented economy, sports, and reality shows) and politics (remember Rancière's distribution of the sensible which states that visibility is power) and have become one of the most important means of enticement within the politico-economic apparatus. In addition to the press, news, PR and advertisement, media are increasingly present in our everyday environment thanks to new devices and new media, social media, wireless internet, etc. Devices, software, applications, news, they all belong to the big media web. The consequences of this are not easy to grasp, but a first general evolution is that abstractions generate and influence the concrete in all its details.

¹² Ibid., 20.

¹³ Ibid., 22.

¹⁴ Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel éditions, 1967).

¹⁵ Ibid., 21.

¹⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Il Regno e la Gloria* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri Editore, 2007), 114.

¹⁷ Ibid., 10.

Technological and scientific developments are an essential part of the capacity for a more detailed apparatus. The atomization of behaviour, of bodies, of interaction, of work and of communication into bits and bytes, for example in the field of cybernetics, has made these elements and the environments in which they are researched or created, controllable. The French anonymous philosophical group The Invisible Committee has argued that cybernetics, a field of theory which considers everything (object and subjects) as systems with in- and output, striving for equilibrium and control, is the new method by which governments align politics and economy through media.¹⁸ This way of government leads to “unlimited rationalization [...] a police of individual qualities and [...] social production of society.”¹⁹ It is thus a combination of control and production of reality that functions by considering everything as information, by making interactions, properties, abstract. This is an extreme consequence of the dominance of the apparatuses of democracy and capitalist economy and their use of new technologies and media. This “anthropotechnology” combines the extortion of information or the separation into representation with the connection through communication.²⁰ This brings to mind Agamben’s apparatus and its processes of separating and merging, enabling communication in order to extract the data. We can chat and share on Facebook and Twitter, but what do we actually get in return apart from customized advertisement and spam-mails? Individuals are thus asked to represent themselves with images, data, likes, preferences, etcetera, through all kinds of accounts. The account is both a membership and a profile, a narrative. Bank accounts, Amazon accounts, PayPal accounts, Google accounts, Facebook accounts and so on, represent who we are in these abstractions. They will even inform on us to third parties, but also to ourselves, like the Facebook application generating the story of a year in your life in an annual review. Our biography is commodified.

Apart from capturing us in the apparatus by attracting our attention, extracting information and stimulating our consumption, abstractions (through media) influence the way we think. Cognitive capitalism, which focuses on mental processes such as attention, steers the mental abstractions we use to think, remember and act.²¹ This “colonisation of cognition” as Alberto Toscano calls it, is the next big thing in marketing and attention economy.²² Toscano, a Marxist philosopher of the Italian post-Fordist movement called Operaismo, refers to Whitehead who warned “to be vigilant in critically revising your modes of abstraction.”²³ The first important aspect of this warning is actually quite hopeful. It suggests that we can be aware of the modes of abstraction operating in our society and psyche. I believe that awareness and understanding are a first step of a resistance to or subversion of these modes of abstraction. So before I try to formulate some tactics, it is necessary to go a bit deeper into the negative consequences of abstraction and the alienation through separation effected via media. This concerns the reduction to the abstract individuals of the present, Malevich’s abstracted peasants. As I suggested above, reality still exists but is produced through abstractions. Peasants and farming still exist, but have become abstract categories. What is the position of the subjects absorbed in these abstractions?

¹⁸ The Invisible Committee, 'The cybernetic hypothesis,' in *Tiqqun* 2 (2001), 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

²¹ Theoreticians of capitalism have also attested this omnipresence of the capitalist logics – neoliberalism – to capital’s lack of definition, of origin (Finelli, Agamben). This enables it to attach and contaminate all areas. Again, this is another way to formulate the *real abstractions* of capitalist society. See Toscano, 'The Open Secret of Real Abstraction,' 277.

²² Toscano, *ibid.*, 285.

²³ Alberto Toscano, 'The Culture of Abstraction,' in *Theory, Culture & Society* 25:4 (2008), 66.

Accounts of separation: simulacra and remnants

The tension and complex relation between the abstract and the concrete, or between the abstract and its influence on the real, is also present in Jean Baudrillard's notion of the simulacrum. Starting from Borges's story of the map and the territory, he postulates the split between the real (the territory) and the sign of the real (the map). The sign of the real, its abstraction, has become predominant in the second half of the twentieth century. Moreover, simulacra and abstractions strive not only to replace the real, but also seek to penetrate it, and change the real, creating copies without originals. This last process of copying is not to be neglected, since it stipulates how reality is produced. It does not evolve from the real but rather from its abstraction, the hyperreal. Although the notion of an original or a real is up for debate, the movement of simulacra towards reality resonates with the real abstraction discussed above. What remains then of the real, or rather: what *is* the real in such a constellation? Again, Marx and later Agamben might provide us with some answers. "Individuals are now ruled by abstractions, whereas earlier they depended on one another," Marx indicated in his 1858 *Grundrisse*. The real in this sense can be understood as the immediate, direct contact between people; a contact that in the era of abstraction becomes rather scarce and has undergone radical transformation. Returning to the notion of the apparatus, we can see a similar divide of modes of production of the subject: through interaction between living beings and through interaction with apparatuses. In the age of abstraction, or of the hyperreal, subjects and to a wider extent, reality, are not produced through inter-human relations, but through apparatuses or abstractions. Our relation to apparatuses can be understood both literally as interaction with devices, and more conceptually as interaction with a system. The predominance of apparatuses over social interaction, especially of those apparatuses that separate more than they add to the subject, create human figures or so-called "larval subjects,"²⁴ that are kept alive and functioning (shopping) for the apparatus' sake.

Larval subjects are the consequence of the separations created by the de-subjectifying apparatuses (or abstractions) of commodification and technocratic politics. The separation consists of the transformation of a certain element from the sphere of human interaction to that of the apparatus. Communication is one of the most important constituents of society – and for a strand of language philosophers of humanity as a whole. Its capture or separation by apparatuses needs to be considered carefully. Language and communication are the tools that enable political action, but if these are separated from the individual or the collective, their capacity to act and influence reality is reduced radically. Not only will words become empty signifiers, they risk being recuperated by the existing abstractions and might only reaffirm – and thus unwillingly glorify – the reality-creating discourse. Indeed, the dominance of abstractions today is a dominance of signifiers, of representations, of symbols and of language. The bios, the collective and political layer of the human, is rendered impotent and the vanity of language reduces the biological life (*zoè*) to a vulnerable bare life.²⁵ The separation created by abstractions produces a split, not between the abstract and the real (since this would imply the abstract to be less real, something we have seen to be incorrect), but between a reality governed by abstractions and bare life. This bare life is what remains after a series of separations and keeps on being separated from itself.²⁶ Paradoxically, abstract power finds itself to be powerless

²⁴ Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 21.

²⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *The Sacrament of Language, an Archeology of the Oath*, trans. Adam Kotsko (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

when confronted with bare life beyond the split of life and death. This point of indifference and inability of power to respond to bare life's indeterminate state is very exciting and deserves more attention.

Agamben offers several radical cases of bare life as paradigms for the conditions of a life reduced to a mere plastic shape, such as the vegetative coma patient and the concentration camp prisoner. An interesting notion in his discussion of these paradigms is the figure. It is known that the guards of the Nazi concentration camps called their prisoners *Figuren*, both to produce and to describe their dehumanized state. Figure refers to number, image, geometrical shape and gestalt, four abstractions that can each operate separations from their subjects. They cluster together in an interesting verbal play with figuration and abstraction. The figure is not figurative: it is a gestalt, a silhouette without a face like Malevich's 1928 peasants and girls in the fields, and can become as abstract to its onlooker as a black square. The context that produced the figures on Malevich's canvas had changed between 1913 and 1928. Objectification and automation might have seemed an answer to corruption and subjective power, and in ideological terms it could have been a way to a more egalitarian society and progress. However, once the Stalinist regime reigned in the thirties, the ratio of the machine had turned into abstract rationalisation: "the application and technical diversion of scientific reason." Rationalisation "engenders an immense social and psychic irrationality, that is, a massive alienation of mind and spirit."²⁷ Here again it is a matter of producing these abstract persons: the subject-formation happens in such a way, that only a larval, figural subject is formed. From this point of view, we could consider Malevich's return to figuration in his later paintings as reflecting the victory of the abstract over the concrete during the Stalinist regime: even a very personal face has lost its individuality and is itself wholly produced by abstractions.²⁸

In our hyper-capitalist times, the reduction to a number, a figure, happens through fingerprints and all sorts of numbers that are allotted to us (bank accounts, social security, PIN, PUK, etcetera) and evokes an uncanny reminiscence of the Nazi's paradigmatic dehumanization through radical reification and disciplined bureaucracy which enabled the organization of deportations and destructions. The digital (r)evolution pushed this computerization to a next level, with research that is now developing an identity control through heartbeat, tongue scans, lip scans or the pores of the nose. These abstractions produce identities that are no longer developed through social contacts or roles in society. A number is a mere set of information, and has no connection to what one actually does or who one is. Paradoxically, we have arrived at a time in which we are asked to express our own identity and are free to be whoever we are, but it does not matter anymore, since any property has been separated by abstractions of commodification and law. Our bare life can take on any form, because the form has become fully generic. This is the result of the radical split between abstractions and bare life, the map and the territory, the hyperreal and the real, signifier and signified. If the map has become predominant, the territory does not matter anymore and can look like whatever it wants to.

This is also the subversive character of the figure of the Bloom, as it was called and theorized by the philosophical Invisible Committee. The Bloom was the true abstract human and as such a consequence of the "extrême abstraction des conditions d'existence que façonne le Spectacle,"²⁹ However, what characterizes the Invisible Committee's Bloom is that it acknowledges its

²⁷ Bernard Stiegler, *What Makes Life Worth Living. On Pharmacology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 15.

²⁸ As a matter of fact, one could consider the whole of social realism as abstract since it operates as a political tool, a medium of the political-economic apparatus.

²⁹ The Invisible Committee, *Théorie du Bloom* (Paris: La fabrique éditions, 2000), 52.

abstract state of being and has no desire to hide it or act against it. Referring to Bataille, the only affirmative phrase the Bloom can utter about its being is "I am nothing."³⁰ The Bloom has "appropriated its own impropriation," its incapability to belong to itself because it is fully produced by abstractions.³¹ It is indifferent towards this state of being but nevertheless is very aware and – most importantly – at home in it. The Bloom understands how abstraction works and does not resist it but seeks the possibilities that arise, it seeks the failures of the abstract.³² The Bloom is truly whatever, its randomness and indifference making the Bloom ungraspable and useless for the operating abstractions, while being the most radical result of them. It is a perversion of abstraction.

Freedom in abstraction

This opens up opportunities that call for some reflection. The separation created by abstraction evolves towards a radical split between bare life and abstracted reality. Within this abstracted reality our identity is composed of elements and experiences that are no longer the result of relationships and contact with other living beings, but with and through abstractions and apparatuses. But the symbol, the copy has replaced the original which leads to an existence within representation. We live *in* the map, not in the territory. Not the face, but the mask becomes more important. This can be taken quite literally in the sense that Agamben sees the mask as social role or persona as opposed to the individual's own identity.³³ In contemporary society, the mask no longer corresponds to a certain social position in society, but is fully disconnected from the identity of its carrier – now determined through numbers and data. Furthermore, the proliferation of apparatuses or abstractions not only forces individuals to be continually donning different masks, but also enables this taking on of a variety of *personae* precisely because the face, the mould or template, has become so generic and devoid of properties. So on Facebook there is one identity, but on Twitter, Instagram, Youtube, Second Life, LinkedIn, e-mail, blogs, etcetera, there are many others. The abundance of masks we adopt creates a network of personae, in which a solid or, fixed conception of the subject is dissolved. Moreover, in addition to all sorts of make-up and other accessories, easily accessible Photoshop-applications make it possible to change our appearance, to the extent that few people know what we might actually look like. Everyday life has become a continual performance of representation that can completely alter the perception of the larval subject underneath.

If the processes I described are already so drastically designing our common, daily existence, then how forceful must they rule over the celebrities that are the regular subject-matter of the tabloids? It seems as though every step they take is covered in real time by magazines, blogs and websites. The Paris Hiltons and other reality stars of our times seem victims of paparazzi that constantly try to capture their life. But what about the PR-agencies behind them? How can we be sure that whatever leaks out in the media is not carefully planned? A celebrity or media personality can control the way in which public and private relate by actively playing the field of representation, namely the representation of their selves. To reach this new type of freedom, one has to allow the media to show things to a very intimate degree. Angelina Jolie, Princess Kate, Demi Moore, amongst others, all organized photo shoots to show themselves with their

³⁰ Ibid., 124.

³¹ Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 44.

³² Sven Lütticken, 'Inside Abstraction,' 6.

³³ Giorgio Agamben, *Nudities*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 46.

newly-born children. We could interpret this as an exhibitionist gesture, or as a protective gesture: giving the tabloids something, but under control, so they will leave you alone. The abstractions of commodification and media that need and simultaneously create these celebrities can be kept quiet by feeding them some information. Keeping the "plane of abstraction"³⁴ or representation satisfied means creating a shield of representation around yourself. It could also mean that we can move more freely through this plane of representation. If we know how to master it, we could be whoever we want to be. Is this really as easy as it sounds? Or do we have to sacrifice more than some intimate moments and body parts? The identity transformations of, for example, Hannah Montana to Miley Cyrus, suggest that there is more to it.

Miley Cyrus's case is extremely interesting because it shows how far one has to go in order to attain this being in abstraction. She can do and be whoever she wants to be but this comes at the cost of her own self. There is no real Miley: everything she does and shows of herself is part of her identity-creating machine that understands the tricks of media. She can be or look like a person of flesh and blood with real feelings, but all remains in the plane of abstraction, there is no discernible real level. Even the way she uses her body as sexualized commodity object suggests that her physical body no longer belongs to herself, but is separated into the realm of abstraction. Her body belongs to the product of representation "Miley Cyrus." She has found her reality in abstraction. Below the different masks she puts on, no residue remains. "The movement" is what she has called the creation of her new self, all in support of a new album, a new persona, a new artificial "me." Cyrus corresponds to the Bloom and represents "l'essence humaine générique, qui est précisément privation d'essence, pure exposition et pure disponibilité ... une figure sans réalité."³⁵ The example of Miley Cyrus shows that being in representation can be taken to such an extent, that there is no real face left: it has all become image. Her case is exemplary for the Bloom. Still, there remains a freedom to it: if she plays the game well, she is free to do what she wants at the cost of her privacy – but isn't this the case for all of us nowadays?

To be able to play with abstractions and to seek the fissures and caesura that leave some free space, is a first step in the struggle with abstract reality which requires a profound knowledge of these abstractions. Agamben calls the process of profanation the opposite of that of separation.³⁶ To profane something means to bring it back to the worldly sphere, to bring it back to use. Some profanation tactics that are suggested by Agamben include play, innovation, deconstruction and changing the context. We need to profane the existing systems, take media in our hands and learn how to deal with them. Only by knowing how to infiltrate, parasitize and play with these abstractions can we render them inoperative. Media, as the most important connection between the apparatuses, have a key position. They are in constant transformation, hence our methods of profanation have to adapt. However, this does not mean that we can turn back time. That which has been profaned has fundamentally changed. Objects and habits will be haunted by their history. Cultivating your own vegetables in the desire to be active, to produce something concrete and to be connected to one's own food might resemble old practices from before supermarkets and globalized food production, but it is not the same. Tactics of profanation work not only against the alienation of production, but also seek to take things back in our own hands

³⁴ I use "plane" here in the deleuzian sense of the word in his notion of the "plane of immanence," which (very briefly summarized) implies an existence within immanence: everything exists in the same "field" or "plane."

³⁵ The Invisible Committee, *Théorie du Bloom*, 39-40.

³⁶ Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?*, 24.

given the circumstances. Profanation goes against an ideology, but within the context of this ideology. Things will never be as they used to, but at least we can find a new way to live *in* and *with* abstraction.