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# Encircling the Real

*Yahya M. Madra*

## Scratching the Surface . . .

In February of 2003, South African artist Minnette Vári began a lecture at Smith College's Brown Fine Arts Center with a fast-paced slide show of images from news footage on Western network television channels.<sup>1</sup> The footage was indeed recognizable as a generic form; one was quite sure that these images of politicians, social unrest, media pundits, and talking heads were taken from the news-based network channels. Nevertheless, when sliced down to stills and shown in a fast-paced stream, the particular referents of these images (the concrete events that they refer to) were almost impossible to discern. The two video animations that were screened in her exhibition at the Jannotta Gallery of Smith College are computer-generated manipulations of these images: for instance, in *Oracle*, Vári, fully shaved and naked, is rabidly biting, chewing, and trying to swallow the piece of meat that serves as a screen for these projected TV images. The curator, John Peffer, suggests that "the look of the video is that of Goya's horrific *Saturn Devouring His Children*." He continues, "but this is clearly a woman's body devouring—so much more horrific then, this image of a mother swallowing, and coughing up, her children. It remains ambiguous whether she is being force-fed or whether she is hungrily devouring whatever the televisual serves up (even if it is her own children). The figure is disgusting to watch."<sup>2</sup>

The gray and blurry images superimposed onto the piece of meat that Vári devours in *Oracle* look as if they are the archaeological remnants of the glossy and fast-paced images from the aforementioned slide show. Nevertheless, these two layers of images relate to one another in a peculiar manner: it is as if Vári, by devouring them like a piece of flesh (her own?), is trying to render the true referent of these indefinitely repeated news images. In order to make sense of their peculiar relation, we may need to invoke Freud's model for the analysis of dreams: as Slavoj Žižek

1. The presentation was on the occasion of her exhibition *Media Work* at the Jannotta Gallery of Smith College Brown Fine Arts Center, February 17 to March 5, 2003. Curated by John Peffer, the show featured two video animations: *Alien* and *Oracle*. Vári participates in *Global Priority* with a different work: *Sentinels*.

2. John Peffer, "Mistaken Media," in *Media Works: Minnette Vári* (Northampton, MA: Smith College Brown Fine Arts Center, 2003), 16.

reminds us, “if we seek the ‘secret of the dream’ in the latent content hidden by the manifest text, we are doomed to disappointment.”<sup>3</sup> The *unconscious desire*, the traumatic kernel of dreams, can only be found “in the *form* of the ‘dream:’ the real subject matter of the dream (the unconscious desire) articulates itself in the dream-work, in the *elaboration* of its ‘latent content,’”<sup>4</sup> but not directly in its latent content.

Indeed, one would search in vain in their particular content for the truth of the dreamy stream of images that we are force-fed by network television. Their truth cannot even be found only in their repetitive, mind-numbing, almost anaesthetic form. This repetitive form is only a screen, a protective shield that prevents us, the viewers/consumers of these images, from an unbearable encounter with the traumatic monstrosities of our times and, maybe more chillingly, our very own culpability—as the consumers of these images—in the continuing atrocities around the world: yesterday, Johannesburg, Beirut, Sarajevo, New York City, Serbia, Kurdistan; today, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, Baghdad, Rwanda, Chechnya; the list goes on. It is as if, once one scratches the surface of this infinitely looped river of images, one is going to encounter a disgusting and unbearable yet fascinating primordial ritual of sacrifice. The obvious Lacanian reference here is, of course, to the lethal *jouissance: Oracle*, with its ominous soundtrack, stages for us, the supposed viewers/consumers of these images, our own intimate, unconscious desire for reaffirming the safety of our home(land) by continuously re-learning that violence, monstrosity, disaster, and conflict could only happen elsewhere, out there, behind the screen of the television. Indeed, viewers do not need to be the source of these libidinal investments, these passionate attachments: given the ex-centricity of the human subject, the unconscious desire may as well be a performative product, a structural effect of the repetitive form taken by the televisual apparatus itself.

Vári seems to propose that these televisual images should not be read as mere ideological distortions of the truth of what they purport to represent. Without doubt, as all representations are, these too are partisan representations. But no new insight into to the libidinal economy of the media apparatus can be gained by merely documenting the particular political investments of media conglomerates. The truth of these images is not in what they distort but in the particular function that their repetitive and generic form serves: they protect us, the viewers, from encountering the real of our unconscious desire for fantasies of fear to be consumed in the comfort of our secure and safe living rooms. The real horror of the spectacle of media is not the ubiquity of ideological distortions and manipulations that it manufactures, but our complicity with it.

### Sense and Nonsense

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the real is both “the basis, the foundation of the process of symbolization” and “the excess which escapes symbolization and is as such

3. Slavoz Žižek, *Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1989), 12.

4. Žižek, 13 (emphasis added).

produced by the symbolization itself.”<sup>5</sup> Bruce Fink also proposes a similarly paradoxical definition of the real. According to Fink, the real is both that which precedes and is progressively symbolized by the symbolic and that which remains and re-sists in the form of “impasses and impossibilities due to the relations among the elements of the symbolic order itself.”<sup>6</sup> While acknowledging the epistemic implications of the former, pre-symbolic definition of the real, I would like to interpret a number of works from *Global Priority* as a series of attempts to encircle the real in its post-symbolic (non-)sense, as the impasses, impossibilities, and (social) antagonisms that continuously (de)structure the field of the social by disrupting its smooth functioning.

By definition, it is impossible to directly represent social antagonisms; one can only encircle them. Just like unconscious desires, they cannot be represented through conscious and rational discourse. The unconscious reveals itself only in slips of tongue, in everyday jokes, and in paradoxes of language where the nonsensical erupts and disrupts the sense and rationality of everyday discourse.

In a rather minimalist fashion, David Opdyke’s *You’re Either With Us Or Against Us* demonstrates how non-sense can emerge as the truth of the seemingly sensible. President George W. Bush has launched the US Administration’s “war against terrorism” with these ominous words. With these seven words, the Administration has declared that it will permit no criticism of its actions. In other words, under imperialism, there will be no room for communicative rationality, democratic deliberation, or self-reflexivity. Nevertheless, the realm of sense, the realm of symbolic interaction, is based on the possibility of communication, debate, listening, and compromise—in short, on the dialectics of inter-subjectivity. In contrast, in this uncompromising threat, there is room neither for sense nor for engagement; in seven words the two opposing sides of the (inter-) imperialist antagonism are spelled out: US versus them. In Opdyke’s installation, as the seven units rotate at different speeds, the truth of this ominous threat reveals itself not in the accidental coming together of “You’re,” “Either,” “With,” “Us,” “Or,” “Against,” and “Us,” in that order, but rather in all the other senseless combinations of these seven words. It is almost a textbook example of Freud’s theory of slips of the tongue. According to Freud, these nonsensical eruptions are the moments of truth when unconscious desires reveal themselves. Similarly, in Opdyke’s installation, the truth of Bush’s threat, that he and his cabinet desire nothing less than the complete suspension of all democratic deliberation and all sense, reveals itself mechanically in the nonsensical combinations of the words: the nonsensical real of social antagonism is once more marking the limit of discursivity.

### Representing the Impossible . . .

Precisely in this sense, conceptual art, because it deals with metaphors that operate on several levels at once, because it can rally a wide range of media, and because

5. Žižek, 169.

6. Bruce Fink, *The Lacanian Subject: Between Language and Jouissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 26-27.

it has become interdisciplinary, is in a privileged position "to encircle the limits [that the real] poses to signification and representation."<sup>7</sup> Without doubt, it is impossible to touch or render the real. Nevertheless, "it is possible to encircle its impossibility, exactly because this impossibility is always emerging within a symbolization"<sup>8</sup> as its *extimate* other.

Such an impossibility or impasse is encircled in Emily Jacir and Anton Sinkewich's fragile yet defiant installation. A row of books on Palestine and its people are squeezed between two walls; if one attempts to pull a volume out (maybe to read and learn about Palestine), the rest of the books will fall down, as nothing other than the compression between the two walls holds them up. Is this a metaphor for a curse on the land of Palestine that makes it impossible for outsiders even to try to understand its culture, its history, its people? Is this curse a performative effect of the impossible state of emergency that the Palestinian people are forced to inhabit? Aren't Palestinians, in order to exist under the Israeli occupation and oppression, forced to maintain a solidaristic self-closure, a homeostatic togetherness, an anti-colonialist nationhood that cannot afford to allow any one to stray? Doesn't this state of homeostasis make it impossible for Palestinians to question and criticize the Palestinian national identity as a totalizing construct that erases all internal differences and homogenizes all particularities?

These questions can be generalized beyond the particular case of Palestine. What are the contradictions of nationalist ideologies? When are they progressive? When are they regressive? Under the rule of the colonialist Israeli Defense Forces, do Palestinians have the luxury to question the identitarian discourses of nationhood that are constitutive of their resistance to oppression? Do colonized nations in general have the luxury to criticize and question the essentialisms and contradictions of their own liberatory nationalism? Compressed between two walls, the *fragile* yet *sublime* state of the books encircles the contours of this impossible state.

## Sublimation

According to Yannis Stavrakakis, because sublimation "raises an object to the dignity of the Thing (*das Ding*), it is thus directly related to the real. This is because here the Thing is the lost/impossible real whose place is reoccupied by imaginary or symbolic objects without, however, any of them being able to compensate us or cover over this loss which is a product of this same symbolization."<sup>9</sup> In this sense, through sublimation, artists can encircle the unrepresentable real without obliterating it. Indeed, sublimation "does not provide a total representation of the lost Thing, the impossible real; it only 'recreates' 'the *vide* left by this loss, which is structurally unrepresentable to us'."<sup>10</sup>

7. Y. Stavrakakis, *Lacan and the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 83.

8. Stavrakakis, 83.

9. Stavrakakis, 131.

10. Stavrakakis 132, quoting John Rajchman, *Truth and Eros: Lacan, Foucault and the Question of Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1991), 74.

And it is precisely such a strategy that one can find in Pia Lindman's *Gestures of Mourning*. In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Lindman has collected a number of images from *The New York Times*. These images depict grieving women of various nationalities (American, Palestinian, Russian, Israeli, and so on). Lindman extracts the image of the woman from each picture, creating a ghostly and diagrammatic representation of their gestures. Without referring to their original context, she re-enacts these gestures in live performances. In this process of aestheticization, these gestures are intentionally de-contextualized. At first sight, such aestheticizations, or any de-contextualization for that matter, may seem to have humanist undertones: it may seem as if Lindman is making an ideological gesture by concealing the particular historical conditions of the events that have led these women to mourn the loss of their loved ones and thereby evoking the "universality" of such sentiments. Nevertheless, Lindman's work accomplishes the exact opposite effect: it aims to resist the obliteration of the losses of the mourners through the opportunistic and ideologically motivated appropriation of their grief. Since these found images are always already ideologically appropriated (by *The New York Times*—their original context), by de-contextualizing them, Lindman's work aims to dis-appropriate them. As a result of this dis-appropriation, Lindman creates both a pictorial and a metaphorical void. While encircling the *loss* by way of tracing the contours of the material gestures of grief, these diagrams do not permit themselves to be read as total representations of the *lost*. By de-contextualizing them, by turning them into cold diagrams of gestures, she sublimates these images without falling into humanist sentimentalism.

### State of Fear (or "A Nation Challenged")

Rutherford Chang's post-September 11 newspaper-based works, on the other hand, are not dis-appropriations. They may more appropriately be described as mis-appropriations. Chang literally deconstructs and reconstructs the front pages of *The New York Times*. The uncanny feeling of these re-constructions arises because, even after Chang's manipulations, one still gets the message. In one version of these works, Chang re-constructs the whole page word by word: the end product is a senseless stream of words that ultimately still insists on making sense: the repetition of words like "administration," "anthrax," "allies" and so on enables the viewer to re-configure the message on her own. Moreover, this senseless reorganization of the whole page betrays an uncanny, almost manic state of emergency, a state of fear. The effect is even more chilling when, in another version, Chang slices the whole front page into thin strips and proceeds to reconstruct the page from them. Despite being reduced to a dadaist abstraction, one still gets the message: We are in a state of fear/emergency!

It is important to note that we are not engaging this labor of processing the message simply because Chang, through his mis-appropriations, has reduced them to dadaist nonsense: we always do this work of (secondary) elaboration. The only thing that Chang's mis-appropriations have accomplished—and this in itself is already a major feat—is to enable us to take a minimal distance from the fantasies of state

of normalcy/emergency that frame our daily (and normalized) practice of “reading” the newspaper.

Despite their numerous differences, Chang and Vári share a common concern. Their main interest is not in the particular content of cultural representations. Rather, both are concerned with the relation between the fantasy formations and the *unconscious desires* elaborated through their form. While Vári’s work is actually staging a traumatic scene of devouring, Chang is encircling the real of the front page of the New York *Times* (the ultimate fantasy screen for the Western liberal subject, if there ever was one) through his re-constructive mis-appropriations. Both works seem to suggest that the mainstream media (whether television or print) is productive of unconscious desires for fantasies of fear to be consumed in the safety of our home(land).

### Network of Appropriators

Without doubt, because they persistently engage with various discourses produced by, in, and through mainstream media outlets, these works have political-economic implications. The political purchase of these engagements may be verified by visiting *theyrule.net*, a website designed and maintained by Josh On & Futurefarmers. This website is a library of numerous maps documenting the network-like interconnections among various boards of directors of multi-national corporations, including those media conglomerates that Vári, Lindman, and Chang are critically engaging in their respective works. The basic tenet of this website is that “they”—that is, the members of the various boards of directors—and in some cases, an individual may sit on several different boards at the same time—rule. This blunt assertion is substantiated beyond doubt when the visitor browses through the maps, each representing a set of intricately interwoven networks among the boards.

The bluntness of this web project is especially daring, as it brings forth a long-repressed Marxian concern pertaining to class antagonisms. Class analysis, understood as the contextual analysis of different forms of production, appropriation, and distribution of surplus labor, is the key contribution of the Marxian tradition to political-economic analysis.<sup>11</sup> In *They Rule*, the moment of appropriation, in its exploitative, capitalist form, is represented as a system of networks. While “they” do have proper names, what is represented here is not particular individuals, but rather “they” as a *collective* of appropriators. It is their connectivity that makes them a powerful entity that “rules.” One map depicts the marriage of Coca-Cola and Pepsi, the quintessential business school textbook case of duopolistic competition. In this map, one director of the Coca-Cola Company shares a board-table of a third corporation with a director of PepsiCo. Even in their competition, “they” cooperate.

11. Stephen Resnick and Richard Wolff, *Knowledge and Class: A Marxian Critique of Political Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

## Coke or Pepsi? No, Thanks!

David Opdyke's *Taste Test 2000* (not included in this exhibition) traces the metaphorical and political implications of the Pepsi-vs.-Coca-Cola rivalry. Close up, what we see is a map of the United States covered with small houses, some red, some blue, some white. Indeed, when looked upon from a distance, one can discern the image of two familiar logos interlaced with one another: this is a post-election map of the US, the Pepsi territories representing the states won by the Democrats and Coca-Cola turf the states that voted Republican in 2000. This map of election results was already in itself a symptom of a social antagonism, a cultural conflict that divides the nation. In this election, Al Gore could only win in the states of the Northeast, the North Midwest, and the West Coast. The rest of the country, with the exception of the ambiguous case of Florida (and New Mexico), voted for the Republican candidate. Is this a split between "town" and "country" that has come to eclipse the class antagonisms? Is this map a symptom of the culture wars that have split America among liberals and conservatives? Could these cultural antagonisms function as a fantasy screen for occluding, maybe more traumatic, class antagonisms? Opdyke's *Taste Test 2000*, in its candid homage to Pop Art, may simply be a commentary on the impossibility of making a choice between Gore and Bush. (And for what it's worth, by insisting on this point, Ralph Nader of the Green Party did make a significant intervention in this election.) Nevertheless, I would like to read Opdyke's work as an attempt to create a chain of equivalence between the political parties and their lifestyles, on the one hand, and the capitalist corporations on the other. If read together with *They Rule*, *Taste Test 2000* seems to suggest that the "competitive battles" among two corporations, two political parties, two lifestyles, take center stage at the expense of the class antagonisms that take place within capitalist corporations like Pepsi Co., between those who produce the surplus and those who appropriate it.

## Disastrous Capitalism

If the beautiful maps of *They Rule* focus on the moment of appropriation of surplus labor, Mark Lombardi's gigantic drawings trace the byzantine pathways through which the spoils of the already appropriated surplus is distributed/disseminated. Lombardi, by only referring to public information, constructs octopus-like maps of high-profile international scandals of money laundering, arms trade, and financial speculation. These circuits of financial and trade flows not only show how various functionaries are connected with one another, but also document their legal predicaments. Without doubt, the enormous size of these drawings and the intricacies of the networks that link numerous functionaries fosters a sense of defeat. It is indeed impossible to master or totalize this network. Overwhelmed by its complexity, one doesn't even know where to begin. Nevertheless, one may also wonder: If the viewer cannot master this network, how will each node within this structure be able to make sense of the machine in which it is only a cog? If anything, Lombardi offers us a map.



Each node, on the other hand, does not have an access to a map like the one offered to us by Lombardi.

And Lombardi's sublime drawings are sobering precisely in this sense—not because they offer us the anatomy of the machinations of the military-industrial complex, but because they remind us that there is no center, no over-arching logic, no single mastermind that governs the totality of capitalist surplus flows.<sup>12</sup> It is important to note that these drawings are maps of scandals. These criss-crossing flow-charts are difficult to comprehend not because they are beyond our cognitive capacities but because they trace the trajectory of networks that collapse under their own weight. Lombardi's works are not about the glory of an invincible capitalism. They are about its disasters.

### Sculptures of Trauma

At first sight, Walid Raad's *My Neck is Thinner Than A Hair* may seem also to engage with the disasters of capitalism and traumas of war—definitely not unrelated to each other, as demonstrated by Lombardi's maps—in an “objective” and matter-of-fact manner. In Lebanon, between 1975 and 1991, there have been 245 cases of car bomb explosions causing “unspeakable carnage” in densely populated Lebanese cities and towns. Raad joins the exhibition with a selection of photographs of the remaining parts of the exploded cars (mostly the engine or the front end). The Atlas Group, a fictitious foundation for documenting the contemporary history of Lebanon, is the source of these photographs. Without doubt, these sculpture-like figures of demolished car engines and parts are emblematic of the devastation of Lebanon. Nevertheless, just like Vári's televisual image streams, if taken simply as journalistic images, they cannot escape being too familiar, too normal, too homely. But what makes them uncanny/unhomely is their presentation as ready-mades: once sublimated as an artwork and presented in a gallery, their kinship to Warhol's pop-traumatic car crash paintings becomes chillingly clear.

These twisted and deformed engine parts can also be read as sculptural metaphors of the economic devastation of this Middle Eastern country. This set of pictures of ruined car parts should not only be read as a symptom of social antagonism gone berserk, but also as witness to the demolished productive capacities of a country once considered to be the most affluent and promising economy of the region.

### Back to Basics . . .

The disasters generated by the acephalic movements of capitalism are not limited to financial scandals, regional wars, and criminal networks—capitalism is just as ruinous even when it is functioning “normally.” Left to their own devices, the

12. J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

processes of capitalist exploitation and commodification may threaten the livelihoods of the multitude of peoples who have difficulty providing for their basic needs such as water, food, health care, and so on. Liz Miller, in her *Water Postcards*, stages the different ways in which socio-economic antagonisms may take shape around the question of water. Is access to water a basic human right or a commodity? In one postcard, with a picture of a desert in the background, a brief anecdote, possibly a newspaper clipping (one cannot help but wonder if this is from *The New York Times* as well), provides one such script:

“Water,” she said, “is a Gift of God.”

Olivier Barbaroux, the president of Vivendi’s water business, agreed—but only up to a point.

“Yes,” Mr. Barbaroux said, “but he forgot to lay the pipes.”

If Miller’s postcards directly stage the socio-economic antagonisms that structure the provision of water, Susan Jahoda invokes another set of antagonisms, here those pertaining to rights to patents on genetic codes of rice as the background for her photographic abstractions. Jahoda reminds us that three billion people eat rice every day. These photographs are replete with rice. While the abundance of rice seeds that overflow these abstractions remarks on rice’s status as an indispensable staple of billions of people, especially in the non-Western world, their amorphous, almost ghostly, shapes invoke the menacing plans of multinational corporations to take total control of global rice production. Contemplating these abstractions, and rice as a highly politicized and charged metaphor, one is tempted to recall the Vietnam War or even the Chinese Revolution as authentic revolts against the imperialist domination of the East by the West. Their ensuing degeneration notwithstanding, I nevertheless believe that Jahoda’s work invites us to redeem what was genuinely revolutionary in these anti-imperialist reflexes.

### Priorities or Priority?

In relation to its title, the works in this exhibition may be read in many ways. They may simply document the priorities imposed by the hegemonic imperial order. They may, on the other hand, signal the urgent need for a radical and global redefinition of these priorities. They may not only refer to particular and concrete priorities in plural, but also to a singular and global priority to rethink our relation to the hegemonic imperial order. I do believe that the existing global order is in dire need of a democratic, egalitarian, and solidaristic renewal of priorities (in plural). Nevertheless, I also believe that such a pluralistic renewal can only be accomplished if we recognize the different ways in which our most intimate fantasies (of “home”, of “safety”, of “grief”, of “a glorious and invincible capitalism”, and so on) plug our subjectivities right into the networks of the imperial order. A global priority, therefore, should be to expose the libidinal economies that sustain the ideological hold of the imperial order and to attain a minimal distance from these libidinal investments. Only then can democratic, solidaristic, and non-exploitative futures

emerge as immanent possibilities. The works discussed here do provide a formidable beginning point for initiating the difficult and painful analytical process of dis-identification. The joyful task of imagining and enacting communist futures, however, remains to be taken up.

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