

STEPHEN SHUKAITIS (2009) *IMAGINAL MACHINES: AUTONOMY & SELF-ORGANIZATION IN REVOLUTIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE.* LONDON/NYC/PORT WATSON: MINOR COMPOSITIONS /AUTONOMEDIA. ISBN: 9781570272080

Jack Z. Bratich

A book called *Imaginal Machines* demands an approach that evaluates it *as* machine. What is it capable of doing? Of connecting with? Of producing? While the review will focus on certain components of the book (chapters, key concepts), it is its relation to the outside that ultimately matters.

Imaginal Machines opens by dispelling our presumptions about just what imagination is. Shukaitis quickly dispenses with the modern notion of imagination tied to mental representation or visual imagery. This will not be another book on why the Left needs 'vision' or more utopian rhetoric. In the opening pages we are told to begin beyond the mind/body split and to think of imagination as arising from the social interactions among bodies (in the Spinozan sense). Imagination not only emerges out of these particular encounters; like an evoked entity, it 'affectively contaminates' other events and projects. The concept is indebted mostly to a mix of Cornelius Castoriadis and a Peter Lamborn Wilson riff on Deleuze and Guattari. Each recognizes (with differing degrees of sobriety) the indispensable quality of imagination in political struggles.

The particular type of politics also matters greatly here. The analysis of the book proceeds from the autonomist hypothesis and perspective, which maps history as a series of actions provoked from below, by struggles and resistances rather than by top-down programs, structures, and control mechanisms. To this austere class analysis Shukaitis adds aesthetics, or the experimentation in formal arrangements to test the limits of the possible. Conversely, thinking

aesthetics through production processes prevents an all-too-common hermetic formalism in art culture by continuously opening the aesthetic to its outside.

Aesthetics and politics converge in the notion of 'composition', whose meanings involve political organization, chemistry, and music. Or, as the author puts it, 'to understand composition not just in terms of the quality and form an intervention or piece might take, but also as part of the aesthetic dynamics of political antagonism and organizing' (24). *Imaginal Machines* thus begins its process as a connecting machine, finding patterns of resonance across struggles and programs. The book sweeps up elements in a textual whirlwind and then begins to identify emergent objects, experiences, and sensations. And all of this is done with an eye towards making political organizing more effective, or as the playful title of one chapter indicates, more *affective*. Each chapter weaves a dense web of these compositions.

The first, 'Of Imaginal Machines', introduces the reader to most of the key concepts in the composition: minor politics, autonomy, compositional analysis, and resistance. It provides an excellent primer on the autonomist analytic perspective, especially how capital reacts to the innovations and provocations of workers. How can this economic perspective be extended to the cultural sphere? The chapter lays out the dynamics between aesthetics and class struggles, with specific attention to how capitalism turns the energy of insurgency against that insurgency.

Chapter Two, 'Plan 9 from the Capitalist Workplace', continues to provide an excellent discussion of some key terms: primitive accumulation (especially in the current age), the autonomist approach to the activity of culture, and Antonio Negri's distinction between constituent and constituted power. Shukaitis adds an insightful passage on how constituent power relates to Agamben's notion of the state of exception. Using the figure of the zombie (in which creative capacities return as undead), Shukaitis gives a poetic account of the contemporary relevance of these political concepts.

'Revelation Vertigo' begins to take activist logics to task, something that periodically appears throughout the book (which primarily seeks to make connections and examine capital's exterior attempt to capture and subvert insurgency). Under the microscope here is the drive to found political action on a will-to-reveal in the name of truth. Revelation, blindly pursued, is easily recuperated and leaves its

social actors in a self-deluded position of an ‘outside’ at the very moment it fuels new capitalist techniques.

The next chapter, ‘Dancing amidst the Flames’, is the most salient for readers interested in the politics of popular culture. We hear about the Industrial Workers of the World’s nascent form of culture jamming (detourning Christian hymns rather than ads), the Diggers, and Billionaires for Bush (specifically their work with the IWW in recent Starbucks’ unionization efforts). We also learn about how the Martha and the Vandellas’ song ‘Dancing in the Streets’ provoked consternation as well as political booty shaking. Culture’s significance here is not primarily counter-ideological or representational; it operates not as consciousness-raiser, but as connector, a ‘minor composition’.

Importantly, in this chapter we learn that critical pop culture analysis was happening in the mid 20th century outside of academic circles or pundits’ discourse. This was a kind of U.S. cultural studies from below: not institutionally recognized or administered, but circulating laterally as a bulwark against the culture industries. Along with C.L.R. James’ *Correspondence*, these examples allow us to enrich work inspired by British cultural studies, especially by shedding it of what Richard Day calls the Gramscian ‘hegemony of hegemony’.

Chapter Five, ‘Space is the (non)Place’, documents a range of mid-to-late 20th century texts and projects devoted to outer space as cultural metaphor. Like many cultural analysts, Shukaitis finds utopic impulses in these science fiction imaginaries. He also finds more explicitly political mutations in Afrofuturism as well as the Association of Autonomous Astronauts. The latter figures in crucially to another theme in the book. The AAA’s willful self-dissolution is an example of a key element of imagination and composition—the ability to know one’s limits and dissipate when necessary. Strategies of disappearance to pre-empt the specter of recuperation.

‘Anaesthetic Refusal’, the sixth chapter, directly focuses on art and questions of resistance. Shukaitis introduces his term ‘affective composition’ to understand the production of publics and common spaces. He provides an excellent critique of ‘relational aesthetics’, the art world’s version of this interactional practice. Shukaitis finds that this approach eviscerates the political while depending upon it (e.g. institutional and market support). Also embedded in this chapter is a compelling account of the role of marching bands from

their origins in state military formations to their connective, convivial role in recent street demonstrations. This chapter raises an interesting question, namely how do imaginal machines leave traces even after the concrete projects disappear? An event vanishes but what is its residue? How do these ancestors haunt future events? Perhaps the book's menagerie of supernatural figures ought to include ghosts.

'Labor of Imagination' is arranged around a fascinating organizational autoethnography of the author's time working in a DIY music label. Shukaitis draws on his experiences at Ever Reviled Records to understand the repetition of capitalist tendencies within DIY experiments. An account of the work distribution, the emergence of authority and the tendencies towards self-exploitation leads him to pose questions to alternative modes of organizing collectives. How is it possible to prevent self-organization from becoming a mode of capitalist recomposition? Worker self-management ultimately is not enough of a panacea, as it can transform into a 'management of its own misery and exploitation, gladly taken on and exalted as a positive thing' (128). Instead, projects need to be situated in 'broader-based social reorganization... a self management of constant self-institution, of the collective shaping of the imaginary (both collectively and individually) in ways that create resources for expanding radical forms of social movement' (135). Shukaitis, in a provocative twist, finds hope in the Sisyphean task of futilely developing modes of worker self-management only to find them recuperated. The inventing subject can overcome its position through resilience and the 'capacity to find joy and possibility in walking back down the hill' (137).

Speaking of capacities, Chapter 8, 'Questions for Affective Resistance', begins with the body, specifically a first person account of the author's affective state. What do exhaustion and trauma inflict upon the imagination? How can joyful resistance arise from a tired, decomposed state? After this opening, the bulk of the chapter constitutes a superb introduction to various elements of autonomist feminism, with a focus on two campaigns: Wages for Housework and Precarias a la Deriva. Questions of value take on profound significance when based in networks of care and affective support, and this chapter reminds us that the body is marked differently in these imaginal compositions.

'Precarious Politics', the ninth chapter, is a tour de force that lines up a parade of events, actions, and groups comprising the newest social movements of the 21st century. Of interest here is how political composition encounters obstacles, not least of which are the attachments to one's own project, 'moving beyond the existing forms of networks, connections, and compositions found within a movement, to find ways to be self-expanding and create waves and cycles of struggle' (176). In addition, the chapter highlights some of the contemporary blocks to organizing, especially the fractalization of work time and the creeping temptation to replicate State forms of thought within movements. More than other chapters, the *decompositional* moment is highlighted here.

The penultimate chapter, 'Dance Dance Recomposition', presents a disjuncture between its title and content. There is little dancing in this chapter, or much free movement at all. Instead it is a tightrope walk through a hall of mirrors around the concept of *recuperation*. It's an enlightening walking tour, to be sure, as it reveals that recuperation was at stake throughout the book. The Situationist International, a refrain throughout the text, returns here to provide lessons on the nuances of recuperation vs. co-optation. Shukaitis also takes on the limits of some contemporary analyses of resistance, delivering nuanced and devastating critiques of Heath and Potter as well as Boltanski and Chiappiello.

The conclusion, 'Collapsing New Imaginaries', argues that recuperation does not mark the end of the story in a capitalist triumph. Recuperation is a process within composition (de- and re). Recuperation in this sense is reactive. Its ambivalent status poses the questions: where is the body or the encounter among bodies? What is a body capable of? Shukaitis opens up a search for the nonmessianic presence of multitude, one that even existed before the advent of capitalism. The author's final move is to portray a recomposition that taps recent work on infrapolitics as the management of visibility. Drawing from the writings of Roger Farr, James Scott, Guy Debord, Alice Becker Ho, and others, Shukaitis looks to the occulted realm to find exit signs. The shadows are where experiments in openness can take place more readily. Shukaitis ends well by talking about ending well; namely, the art and necessity of a project's self-abolition and dissolution.

For readers of *Culture Machine*, the book provides a number of excellent summaries and introductions to key concepts in recent social theory, especially autonomist ideas. Lively wordplay (e.g.

incorporation) and humor abound. Shukaitis puts imagination back on the agenda without getting mired in the realms of the psycho-visual or ideological. He contributes much to a post-representational turn in social theory and cultural studies. Few texts are analyzed here for more than a sentence or two. Instead, the gathering of elements contributes to an *emergent zone* for our attention.

Studying the emergent, even if that emergent has a long historical tail, presents challenges. We cannot expect the same level of coherence we find in texts taking the form of an argument. And rather than a Benjaminian fragment that crystallizes an experience while shattering that very experience, this work has an airy element to it, picking up pieces (sometimes detritus) and sweeping them along in an spiraling wind. It is a type of research militancy, but one that surrounds rather than confronts.

These same readers who come from a cultural studies background should be aware that the book barely addresses the popular. Shukaitis primarily associates culture with art and aesthetics rather than a notion that 'culture is ordinary'. When it comes to finding minor cultural compositions, it's Sun Ra not Gaga, Joseph Beuys not Justin Bieber. For many readers, this will be a departure from a cultural studies commitment to the practices of everyday life in favor of the marginal and avant-garde. One could envision another minor cultural politics; one that would inhabit the *dominant* forms differently (à la Kafka), rather than seek out the enclaves.

But readers of *Culture Machine* can overlook this and find ways that their *own* work does or does not contribute to the production of another imagination. They will be forced to think about recuperation again in an age that seems hell-bent on avoiding such questions (in the notion of convergence culture, for instance). While popular culture doesn't make much of an appearance here aside from being a resource for metaphors, the machinic quality of culture in all its forms is brought to light.

Shukaitis conveys an animist thought populated with a variety of figures, characters, and ancestors: music, philosophy, cultural pranksters, mystical traditions, radical marching bands all find temporary residence here. The book avoids the twin traps of coherence *über alles* and of what Foucault called a 'soggy eclecticism'. The title page photo — a humanoid made of junkyard debris — captures this tension well. The subsequent question for this ramshackle figure involves agency — what *animates* it?

Shukaitis's book begins answering it by starting with the imagination, what Spinoza called the 'lowest degree of understanding'. *Imaginal Machines* proceeds to give us adequate ideas of these imaginal relations so we can move towards the next stage of developing common notions. Specifically, we get a better understanding of recuperation, of an exteriority that is never far away.

As Shukaitis programs into the introduction and conclusion, machines fail, and this failure is a necessary regenerative component. The limits of the book open up to an exterior that cannot allow the book to remain as such. The true test of a book-machine is how it connects to its outside. These outsides are many, including those yet-to-come, which is how the work will eventually be evaluated. *Imaginal Machines* is the work of a machinic intellectual, writing to create tools for transversals. As toolbox, map, and parade, the machine that is *Imaginal Machines* opens to this future with a light step and an enticing vortex.