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We are all Speculators, Now: A Review Essay

I've seen the future, brother:/It is
murder/Things are going to slide, slide in all
directions/Won't be nothing/Nothing you can
measure anymore/The blizzard, the blizzard of
the world/Has crossed the threshold/And it
has overturned/The order of the soul/When
they said REPENT REPENT/I wonder what
they meant.

- Leonard Cohen, *The Future*, 1992

Es ist Zeit, daß es Zeit wird/Es ist Zeit.

- Paul Celan, *Corona*, 1952

Personal envoi

Since I will be the only one to sign anything here, I might as well begin with a personal statement. I was not sure at first that I ought to sign this review. Don't take me wrong, I wanted to do this review, and when *Culture Machine* asked me to do it, I did not think twice. I thus accepted to do a review of an anonymous manifesto, which claims that anonymity is the author's way to 'challenge the current norms of evaluating, commodifying and institutionalizing intellectual labor' (*uncertain commons*, 2013: 124). But then I wondered: was I to sign my review and thus be guilty of participating in the commodification of intellectual labor?

After some research, I decided to sign nevertheless—in the same fashion Marcel Duchamp once signed a urinal.

Another Tragedy of the Commons

‘Occupy speculation’ could have been the title of this text, at the risk of appearing dangerously close to ‘Occupy theory’. The argument appears to go as follows: 1. ‘speculation as a form of knowledge has been hijacked in its economic realization’ (10); this is what the authors call the ‘firmative’ mode of speculation, one that ‘seeks to pin down, delimit, constrain and enclose—to make things definitive, firm’ (12); 2. at the opposite end of the spectrum is ‘affirmative speculation’ which seeks to ‘creatively engage uncertainty’: this second speculative mode, akin to cognitive rather than economic speculation, affords ‘modes of living that recognize the dormant energies of the quotidian and eventualities that escape imagination’ (13); when ‘firmative speculation’ predates, negates, and encloses, ‘affirmative speculation’ truly ‘embraces uncertainty and, in so doing, remains responsive to difference, to unanticipated contingencies’ (14); 3. this dual relation to uncertainty allows to play one mode of speculation against the other: ‘affirmative speculation unsettles the smooth, abstract, well managed worlds of firmative speculation’ (15); 4. But how? That remains to be seen, but the first step is to question the ‘paradigmatic articulation [in firmative speculation] of risk as an analytic category’ (20).

‘Risk’, it is said, ‘is the obscenity of the present’ (19); it is the new tragedy of our time: a new mode of enclosure that ought to be resisted, fought against, and vanquished. It is this new tragedy that gathers ‘the collective of academics, mediaphiles [whatever that is, my spell checker resents it], activists and dreamers who imagine [them]selves as an open and nonfinite group’ (16), which has called itself ‘an uncertain commons’. There has to be a tragedy, since according to one of the influences of this uncertain commons, Georges Bataille, ‘men are only gathered together by a leader or by a tragedy’ (1985: 210).

The Problem of the Head, Once Again

This uncertain commons casts its net wide: it writes ‘in solidarity with [...] pirates, artists, protesters, hacktivists, environmentalists, sexual outlaws, and utopian of all species [...] with all manners of communitarian practices and maker communities that prioritize being—and building—in common: do it yourself (DIY), free/libre/open source software (FLOSS), eco-communes, biohackers, community networks, locavores, ragpickers, gleaners,

and sustainable urbanists, to name a few' (21). It writes collectively and anonymously, like mathematicians (aka Nicholas Bourbaki), artists, activists and pranksters (aka Luther Blissett), political collectives (aka Tiqqun or the Comité Invisible), but without intending 'to romanticize this form of communal writing', without 'a unifying theme, argument, thesis', without relying on 'consensus—a way of firming things up'. Like Anonymous, they are 'a multiheaded hydra that articulates itself as a collective' (22).

Multiheaded or acephale? Bataille, at the origin of this concept, insists: 'to look for a HEADLESS human community is to look for tragedy' (1985: 210). And Tiqqun rectified, quoting Klossowski, one of Bataille's companions in the Acephale secret society and the *Collège International de Sociologie*, its esoteric counterpart: 'It was very beautiful. But we all had the sentiment of participating in something that happened on the part of Bataille, in the head of Bataille' (2001a: 127).

In the head rather than without head, could that be another formulation of the tragedy of this uncertain commons?

Manifestly Academic

While *Speculate This!* is presented as a manifesto, it must be added that if indeed it can be read as a manifesto—and that remains to be qualified, see *infra*—it is as a strange breed of manifesto: an academic manifesto, which could appear historically as an oxymoron. The uncertain commons describes itself twice primarily as 'a group of scholars'. Their text is indeed written in a scholarly manner: there are 146 endnotes across 125 pages, its references are legion, too many in fact to be accurately listed here, and even too vaguely introduced to be reviewed here. Its wide net of solidarities and models is even amplified by these references: a varnish of post-structuralist cultural studies inspired by French Theory, media studies and philosophy, the whole set, but also a mixed bag where all theoretical conflicts and oppositions have miraculously vanished. How can Žižek (66 n. 26), Massumi (69 n. 37), and Agamben (71, n. 56) be drawn together, without any mention of their sometimes substantial and substantive disagreements? As is often the case with such a seemingly comprehensive and cohesive bibliography, absences speak louder than mere mention: where, apart from one endnote (116 n. 47)—called up by a vague reference, furthermore—are the proponents of this fashionable 'speculative

turn' that has been the talk of the academic town for the past five years at least? Where is, for instance, David Graeber, probably one of the leading (anarchist) influences over the Occupy movement?

If 'affirmative speculation' is supposed to 'unsettle the smooth, abstract, well managed worlds of firmative speculation', should its expression *not* be as smooth and abstract as these so-called *worlds*?

A Fuzzy Academic Manifesto for our Time

Speculate This! might sound a bit dull to some readers, a bit like a too-long preach in an empty church during a rainy November Sunday—the church of yet another *Confraternity of neoflagellants*, anyone? Its tone is clearly *very* academic, even when the uncertain commons pleads for a venturesome and Nietzschean 'gay science': 'the uncertain commons practices the gay science of affirmative speculation: we think and act in the vicinity of something that is not actually there and yet is always latent and incorporated in real bodies and real situations' (120). Thin air? The ether of soft ideologies? Yet, *Speculate This!* is repeatedly introduced as a 'manifesto', a 'step out of our customary intellectual habitus [...] a search for true resistance' (21), the result of six years of 'many lively if exhausting sessions of reading, arguing, and writing, as well as many evenings of repose, hanging out' (120).

It appears manifestoes are fashionable again. They proliferate on the Internet, aspiring to the viral status so many multitudes seem to long for these days. Here, for lack of space, I will stress only two striking aspects of current manifestoes that might make clearer how indeed *Speculate This!* can—and should—be considered as a manifesto: (1) reflexivity, making possible now the once quasi oxymoronic 'academic manifesto', and (2) fuzziness.

A manifesto used to be a reaction against an established order, or, in other words, an academy of some sort. In a founding text for 'meta-manifestary discourse analysis' [*Analyse du discours méta-manifestaire*], Claude Abastado concludes: 'manifesto writing deconstructs the canonic models. An intertextual study recognizes herein masked or distorted quotes, parodic imitations, a polemic that engages the significance of language and aims, more fundamentally, at the linguistic system and the categories of thought. This chipping away prepares and outlines a restructuring of the discursive field and the establishment of new forms of expression'

(1980: 11, my translation). This is why an academic manifesto used to be an oxymoron: academies used to be the custodians—if not the makers—of canonic models (or conservative ‘paradigms’ rather than revolutionary science, in Kuhnian terms).

This might not be the case anymore. In fact, let me argue here that since the 1980s, during roughly what some still impotently refer to as ‘post-modern times’, the proliferation of this meta-manifestary discourse (and I feel the neologism goes well with the *pomo zeitgeist*) has actually made possible, through the prescribed dose of (meta)reflexivity, of such academic manifestoes. Consider for instance Galia Yanoshevsky’s conclusion to her analysis of ‘Three Decades of Writing on Manifesto: The Making of a Genre’: ‘The manifesto becomes a distinct genre owing to academic research’ (2009: 281). A genre, perhaps, but one whose contours have blurred ever more and become fuzzier as the academic cottage industry dedicated to studying it has prospered. ‘Today the existence of the manifesto *qua* genre is indisputable thanks to a series of studies conducted over the past three decades’ (261), writes Yanoshevsky, only to add, ‘to be a manifesto a text need not be dubbed as such as long as it looks and behaves like one’ (265), and finally that the functions (‘violent acts, spectacular acts, a way to sound your voice’), (266) or the types of manifestoes (political, literary, artistic) are as fuzzy as the genre itself. In other words: as far as academic meta-discursive analysis of manifestoes goes, everything goes. *A manifesto is what a manifesto does, or, Death of a genre by over-analysis.*

If you think I exaggerate—and I often do, ‘lack of space’ being my weakest excuse—please consider this specific instance. For its summer 2013 issue, *Contre-jour*, a Québécois literary cahiers, published retrospectively for its tenth anniversary no less than twenty-eight manifestoes contributed by its founding members. But even more interesting than these texts, in spite of their sometimes outstanding literary qualities, are the two introductory texts to the summer 2013 issue. In the first one, ‘Ten years at *Contre-jour*’, Etienne Beaulieu, a member of the editorial committee and its treasurer, explains:

Ten years ago, the members of *Contre-jour* have attempted to agree on a manifesto that would have included the aspirations of all: a waste of time and efforts [*peine perdue*], the nebula was too thick, too rich in ideas and urges sometimes contradictory but powerful enough to lead into

discussions that nothing yet has stopped. A resolution was then adopted to wait ten years before attempting to write again a manifesto'. (2013: 10, my translation)

Ten years later, *Contre-jour* publishes not one but twenty-eight manifestoes, plus the original unsuccessful one (contributed by six of the founding members), exquisitely re-dubbed 'introductory text to the first issue of the literary cahiers *Contre-jour*' (exquisitely because in French, 'introductory' reads '*liminaire*', so dangerously close to 'liminal'). Here is what can be read in this second text (as in the Hebrew alphabet, where the second is really the first, since the first is unpronounceable):

Contre-jour will fiercely take the risk of trust; of an undefined trust that is not the trust in nothingness, with its unconfessed certainty, but thought risked towards its future. ONE could, for a certain time, under the yoke of some political or philosophical terrors, consider that literature ought to refrain from concluding. But it has appeared to us that under the threat of a soft pluralism where everything has a right to truth, and hence where everything risks to convert into error, we ought, with literature, to head for the true, even if it means getting lost and erring during this long quest. (2013: 13, my translation)

Obviously, uncertain commons has chosen a different way to language, or rather, as in the French translation of Heidegger's title, a different *acheminement vers la parole*. Rather than an impossible consensual quest for truth and *aléthèia*, they appear to have 'ventured' into soft self-dissension (cf. 120, 'we disagreed', they write, 'often vociferously. You will find those traces all over the manifesto'), and (relativist?) 'affirmative speculation', at the risk, maybe... of saying close to nothing. Or not?

The Author Function(s) as Institutionalized Slasher

The authors of the thirty something *Contre-jour* manifestoes signed their texts and thus gave us some clues which are welcome to make sense of the anonymity of the authors of *Speculate This!* (if one accepts to extrapolate or 'speculate' this way). Most of them are

slashers, like essayist / prosator / professor / poet / director / critic / psychologist / novelist / psychoanalyst: pick at least two and assemble your own literary identity. Strangely enough, none of them claims to be a ‘theoretician’... maybe not a possible option after theory has been capitalized and thus associated to a certain kind of theory (deconstruction, namely).

Richard Hofstadter noted in his classic *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, ‘the Second World War, like the first, increased the need for experts, not only the sort the New Deal employed but also men from previously untapped fields of scholarship—even classicists and archeologists were suddenly thought important because of their knowledge of the Mediterranean area’ (1962: 421). But experts who were taken up into the matrices of large institutions and organizations thereby sacrificed the self-reliant autonomy that American culture so strongly valorized and that was epitomized by the ‘free intellectuals’ of the Emersonian tradition. And Ross Evans Paulson concurred twenty years later:

The separation of the ‘academics’ from the ‘free intellectuals’ in the late 1930s and 1940s was accelerated by government assistance to higher education. The balance of power in intellectual matters gradually shifted. The free intellectual became the ‘outsider’; academia swallowed the poet, the writer, the playwright, the philosopher. A pervasive anti-intellectualism made the very notion of the free, unattached and critical individual seem somehow subversive. The free intellectual survived, if at all, as an exile, a supplicant for foundation grants and fellowships or as a foundation executive or expert. (1983: 72)

The proliferation of slashes and slashers in contemporary academia could appear as the end point of the post Second World War trend described by Hofstadter and Paulson, leading to legions of resentfully alienated but comfortably institutionalized scholars (‘comfortably numb’, echoes Pink Floyd). As Hofstadter had already noticed,

The battle waged with such enthusiasm by the intellectual generation that flourished between 1890 and 1914 has long since been won: certain esthetic and political freedoms, the claims of

naturalism and realism, the right to deal uninhibitedly with sex and violence and corruption, the right to strike out at authority, have been thoroughly established. But the victories have turned sour. We live in an age in which the avant-garde itself has been institutionalized and deprived of its old stimulus of a stubborn and insensate opposition. We have learned so well how to absorb novelty that receptivity itself has turned into a kind of tradition—‘the tradition of the new’. Yesterday’s avant-garde experiment is today’s chic and tomorrow’s cliché. (1962: 418)

The only way out, it seems, is a rejection of all avant-gardist postures. That seems very coherent to this reader with the tone and feel of *Speculate This!*. Indeed this manifesto often feels like an anti-manifesto (along the lines of an anti-hero). No heroics here are at play, but a play (on words) of a bunch of ‘dreamers’ (6) who, in the name of the good kind of speculation appear entitled to keep on playing with words, worlds, and their own identity. *May legions of slashes bloom!*

At your Own Risk

‘*Speculate This!*’ it is written, ‘emerges from a deep dissatisfaction with the paradigmatic articulation of risk as an analytical category’ (20). This indeed can hardly be considered as an avant-gardist statement anymore, much rather already a *cliché*. As good scholars, uncertain commons knows and pays its dues to its predecessors. Endnote 19 of the ‘prospects’ section of the manifesto refers to Ulrich Beck’s *Risk Society* (1992) and *World at Risk* (2008) first, before listing ‘within the vast discourse on risk’ six other references spanning 1991-2008. The second section, ‘firmative speculation’ is almost entirely devoted to the ‘risk paradigm’ and lists another eight or ten references directly dealing with risk, before expanding and translating the risk society paradigm into their own French-theory inspired breed of post-structuralism: risk societies are no others than societies of control based on ‘firmative speculation’. That too is in no way new, and some other critics—whose own lip services’ are barely paid here— who in turn already went further a good twelve years before: ‘whereas repression has, within cybernetic capitalism, the role of warding off [*conjure*] events, prediction is its corollary,

insofar as it aims to eliminate the uncertainty connected to all possible futures' wrote Tiqqun in 2001 in 'The Cybernetic Hypothesis'.

In fact, in following Beck, this uncertain commons is already involved in the critique of the Cybernetic Hypothesis—that Niklas Luhmann represents for Beck with his slogan 'what cannot be controlled is not real', (Beck, 2009: 8). Beck insists, and seems to call for 'affirmative speculation' before its very inception in the writing of uncertain commons: 'The distinction between possibility and reality also disintegrates in the real virtuality of risk. In other words, anyone interested in a realistic approach to risks must open him or herself up for alternatives' (20). His corollary, however, appears totally at odds with the radical rejection of the so-called 'firmative speculation' proposed by uncertain commons—thus explaining why it/they not only reject(s), 'firmative speculation' but also the very 'paradigmatic articulation of risk as an analytical category'. For Beck indeed,

Thus critical theory of world risk society also means becoming alert to the manifold, real self-critical voices of the developing world risk society [...]. The polarization of risk expands the spectrum of self-criticism from within society. Not to suppress and fail to understand this immediately out of a false evaluative horizon of homogenizing norms – again inspired by the aim of producing a science of the real – constitutes the cosmopolitan realism of a critical theory of the world risk society. (2009: 21)

Either the uncertain commons rejects such a critical theory and its 'cosmopolitan realism' and indulges in some sort of a-critical idealism reduced to its simplest axiom (stay open to alternatives and dream on), or it embraces a radically different form of critique.

A Critique as Fuzzy as Capitalism itself

A short and enigmatic sentence of the uncertain commons' manifesto puzzled me and kept me guessing while I was working on this review. It reads:

But this is not simply a matter of good and bad speculation. (14)

Even if it might appear to be so, again. Then another troubling absent reference jumped to my mind, echoing another sentence, or better said, another word: *obscenity*. I dug and remembered (with the help of Paul Taylor) (2008): Bataille and the obscenity of thought itself, Baudrillard and the obscenity of transparency:

Obscenity is not confined to sexuality, because today there is a pornography of information and communication, a pornography of circuits and networks, of functions and objects in their legibility, availability, regulation, forced signification, capacity to perform, connection, polyvalence, their free expression. It is no longer the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, all-too-visible, the more visible than visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication. (Baudrillard, 1988: 22)

If risk is indeed ‘the obscenity of the present’, it might be, according to this singular reading, because it makes the future appear transparent, like all current forms of ‘*the enterprise of our culture*, whose natural condition is obscene: a culture of monstration, of demonstration, of productive monstrosity’ (Baudrillard, 1990: 34-35). How, six years after the death of the *grand satrape*, could ONE both resist and participate in this very obscenity? No mere revival of artistic or social critique, or a new hybrid of both for a renewed spirit of capitalism as shrewd in its co-optation as its two previous ideations (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999), what if *this speculation* ruled over my failed review like a liberal despot, a viral pharmakon?

The Opening of the Personal Loop

Here in Montréal, two years after our Maple Spring, after having watched so much corruption revealed, part of me is wondering, why, and to what or whom, the fuck should I still say *Ja!*? In the meantime, I learned while writing this review that the Occupy movement has raised fifteen million dollars to effectively erase the debt of some actual living human beings, thereby actualizing David Graeber’s (2011) thesis, *and* is now offering a VISA™ debit card. God bless the disaffected leftist academics, and godspeed (you red emperor)! I would rather side with the Black Blocs on this one.¹

But then, against this adversarial reading, part of me is tempted to find an imaginary solution to the lack of problems *Speculate This!* presented me with. Reading between the lines, between their very scholarly advocacy of playfulness, their gambit without sacrifice, their venture without Kapital, their Nietzschean critique, well, their manifesto without watchwords, injunctions, calls for action, their lack of vision or program without being a program (this is not *This not a program*, nor do they *really* attempt to occupy speculation), their community without *mutuus*, without being too shameful to mention [*inavouable*], part of me kept wondering all along (the watchtower): could it/they possibly have found an uncertain way out of the capitalist co-optation of its very critique?

Appear to say nothing but be creative!: the bride stripped bare by her bachelors, even? *That* could count as an attempt to capture the tragedy inside the head of a creative commons that has no head but uncertainty itself: *ni queue ni tête*, if you pardon my French.

As the same poet once said,

So you can stick your little pins in that voodoo
doll
I'm very sorry, baby, doesn't look like me at all.

Endnotes

¹ According to Wikipedia, 'a black bloc is a tactic for protests and marches where individuals wear black clothing, scarves, sunglasses, ski masks, motorcycle helmets with padding, or other face-concealing and face-protecting items'. 'The term "Black Bloc" is a misnomer' however, writes Claudio Albertani, 'Black Blocs, plural, is more appropriate because no single group with this label has ever existed, the BBs being instead a wide constellation of individuals, organizations and collectives that are generally both libertarian and radical. Therefore, one does not belong to a Black Bloc; rather, one makes a Black Bloc. In fact, Black Blockers are uniquely visible: their actions always stand out for the high level of fighting spirit, fluidity and solidarity that mark them. Black Blockers use masks or ski-masks to remain anonymous, to protect themselves from repression' (Albertani, 2002: 583).

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