

Interview with Todd McGowan: Politics of Moviegoing

Agon Hamza &
Frank Ruda

1. Could you tell us what in your mind is the task and function of film theory—in difference for example from the theory of literature or of painting? What kinds of particular and singular demands does film confront a theoretical approach with—maybe demands and requirements that only film raises? And in what way does psychoanalysis especially help film theory (maybe it does help the theory of literature, too, but is there a conceptual connection that singles out the link between film and psychoanalysis)? Is the unconscious structured like a movie (or vice versa)?

I think that each artistic medium has a specific object. That is, it has an object that it treats as impossible within the field of experience that it depicts. The works of art within this medium attempt to show this object as impossible. Both cinema and painting share the gaze as their object. But what's different about cinema—and what makes it more appropriate for a psychoanalytic account than any other artistic medium—is the way that it figures the gaze. The static nature of painting makes it very difficult to engender an encounter with the gaze in this medium. Jacques Lacan draws our attention to Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* and Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* as examples of paintings that do facilitate this encounter. However, there is a temporality to the encounter that paintings, even paintings as impressive as these, cannot enact. That is what cinema can do. Because it shows a visual field unfolding in time, cinema comes close to the structure of fantasy. And it is in and through fantasy that we can encounter the gaze as a traumatic interruption of a narrative unfolding. The interruptive nature of the gaze occurs only in cinema. It enables us to experience the shock of seeing our desire where we didn't expect to see it because our desire is unconscious. In this sense, cinema, at its best, can almost work like a psychoanalytic session. I wouldn't say that the unconscious is structured like a movie but more that movies allow us to see the unconscious in a way that no other art form does. Perhaps this is why psychoanalytic film theory has been the only fully developed film theory. There has never been a fully worked out Marxist theory, and others—such as feminist film theory or queer film theory—primarily work through the foundation of psychoanalysis. I know that there are exceptions, but I believe that film theory is either psychoanalytic or it isn't. It can be something else on top of this, but first and foremost it must be psychoanalytic.

2. To follow up, you write that many psychoanalysts argue that cinema offers a public version of dreaming. This is something you endorse as well (we are thinking in particular of your *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema*, 2011). Perhaps a parallel can be drawn to the cinematic critique of ideology. You've

written extensively about both. For instance, in the same book you say that “ideology works on the basis of a masculine logic of exception because it must create the illusion of a whole—a whole society and whole identities—in order to provide a sense of social stability.” Does the psychoanalytical ideology critique of cinema, or the cinematic critique of ideology, work precisely by suspending the idea of a consistent totality or by privileging antagonism over the whole? If so, what consequences can we draw from this?

I think that’s exactly right. Ideology in film works by creating a sense of healing and social stability. Even the most ideological film has to present a rupture or cut in order to create some interest for the spectator. Ideology occurs in the manner that the film responds to this rupture that it creates. The critique of ideology in cinema has to proceed by focusing on the falsity of the wholeness that films produce as they cover over the ruptures that they depict. The point is that the whole is always only illusory. There is no need to deconstruct the whole because it undermines itself, which is what a psychoanalytic ideology critique makes manifest. But this suggests that no film is purely ideological. Because film follows the structural logic of fantasy, it always provides an opening to antagonism and contradiction. Even a film such as *Forrest Gump*, which I view as an ideological nightmare, still has moments where the contradictions it contains in the end become apparent. The point is, I think, to reveal these contradictions through analysis and to make clear how the film betrays them through a recourse at the end to an imaginary whole.

3. Film theory based on Lacan often emphasizes or begins from a reading of Lacan’s mirror stage. This can certainly also be said about Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation, which was based on the same theoretical concept and has influenced some contemporary theory of film. One representative of this current is undoubtedly Jean-Louis Baudry, with whom one can draw a clear parallel to Althusser’s claim that “ideology interpellates individuals as subject”, since for Baudry “cinema constitutes the subject by the illusory delimitation of a central location.” You are clearly opposed to this “synthesis”, if we can use this obscene word, this strange bringing together of Lacan via Althusser and film theory. What would be the alternative or the best, or, say, the most productive way of approaching Lacan’s oeuvre for the purpose of formulating a film theory?

I think that we should probably throw away all copies of “The Mirror Stage” essay. I’m not exaggerating. I think that this essay has done so much damage to how we should conceive of psychoanalytic film theory that getting rid of it totally is almost the only recourse that we have. The real shame is that this is the first introduction that most people get to Lacan’s thought. It primes one for a misreading of the concept of the gaze because it theorizes looking as an act that creates an illusory wholeness through the apprehension of the bodily imago. The theory of the gaze that Lacan develops in *Seminar XI* runs counter to this. There, Lacan envisions the gaze as the object that disrupts the visual field. It is an object that shatters one’s sense of wholeness instead of helping to establish it. So the best place to approach Lacan’s thought, in my view, is starting with *Seminar XI*. One should leave “The Mirror Stage” aside. I see the film theory that Baudry and others developed on the basis of this essay as a massive misstep that could easily have been avoided. The result of it is that film seems like an ideological trap due to the functioning of the apparatus. But this completely leaves out the possibility of films working formally in ways that disrupt our ideological interpellation.

4. You have argued that film can disturb the spectator when something in the filmic object irritates the stable role distributions of the spectator watching the movie from a distance, gazing at the film that does what it does independent from her or him. In what way does film productively disturb us? Could one say there is a filmic alienation effect at work, in the sense that Brecht gave this term in theatre? Is this irritation a subjectivizing effect in your understanding (does film create “visitations”, to use Badiou’s term, not of an idea but of a subject)?

Film can disturb us by eliminating the distance that separates us from the screen. The most radical filmmakers, as I see it, are the ones that create moments when we can metaphorically touch the screen. In this sense, I would contend that radical filmmaking works in the exact opposite way from Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. Instead of alienating spectators, the most important films lure spectators in to an encounter that they would otherwise consciously avoid. Because watching a film deprives the spectator of agency, it can follow the logic of the unconscious. The only thing that a spectator can do is to turn away or walk out. Otherwise, the encounter is going to take place, as long as the film directs the spectator to the point of its occurrence. The encounter with the disruption of the gaze or voice—the elimination of safe distance—happens in a variety of films. We can think of David Lynch’s films as examples. While watching *Blue Velvet*, we see Dorothy Vallens walking naked in a suburban neighbourhood. When she

becomes visible in this otherwise typical scene, she acts as a figure of the gaze forcing us to become aware of our investment in what we see. The psychic disturbance that she creates reveals our unconscious desire to us, thereby eliminating the safe distance from the events on the screen. Lynch doesn't have a monopoly on such moments. We can see them even in relatively straightforward recent Hollywood films such as *Motherless Brooklyn* or *Knives Out*, both of which I highly recommend. We shouldn't be fooled by their mainstream status.

5. Who are for you directors who should be considered true embodiments of *contemporary* film-making—if there are any (you wrote monographs on Nolan and Lynch, so maybe they are on the list)? And if there are, why these? We are implicitly asking the old question of how to distinguish between a “good” and a “bad” film / director.

I tend to write about directors that I like and find to be politically proximate to me. So these would include David Lynch, Christopher Nolan, and Spike Lee, to whom I've devoted whole books. But there are certainly others: Jacques Audiard, Jane Campion, and Christian Petzold, just to name a few. For me, the way to distinguish between leftist directors and conservative ones concerns the relationship that they take up in their films to the gaze (or in a few cases, to the voice). The filmmakers that try to obscure disruption of the gaze are conservative, while those who make this disruption evident in some way are on the side of emancipation. I understand that this is pretty reductive. But it serves for me as a handy way to think about the politics of the cinema. Some leftist critics hate all auteurism because they think that it stresses the individual to the exclusion of the collective necessary for the creation of any film. Of course this is true, but I see auteurism as a handy shorthand for understanding the politics of cinema. Filmmakers tend to make films that work in the same way relative to the gaze. It is in this sense that I believe it is reasonable to talk about an auteur.

6. To follow up on this—in what ways do you see political proximity between you and Lynch?

I would say that Lynch's films share my political position completely insofar as they are concerned with the importance of the rupture. In each of his films, we see a rupture within the signifying space of the film take place, and this rupture has the effect of producing a political revelation. For instance, *The Elephant Man* concludes with John Merrick doing what he cannot do. He lies down to sleep on his back in a normal fashion. This is a radical rupture. The entire film highlights his abnormality and his desire to live a normal life, but it shows this to be impossible. Whenever he begins to feel normal, an event comes along and reminds him of his abnormality. At the end of the film, he achieves normality by simply lying down. While it does kill him, it also shows how he must be part of humanity. His final act is an assertion of his humanity, an indication that we must account for the abnormal within the normal. In this way, the film asserts the politics of equality, but it asserts equality in a new way. It proposes that John Merrick and figures like him cannot be excluded. And it is his act that makes this clear for us. Insofar as Lynch illustrates a politics of such acts, he and I are in sync politically. But I should add that I have heard from someone who knows him that he completely rejects my interpretation of his films. I think that he is not a fan of psychoanalytic theory or a psychoanalytic politics. But my contention would be that his films know more about his politics than he himself does.

7. Your book on him (*The Impossible Lynch*, 2007) is very helpful in contrast to the standard interpretation of Hollywood plot-lines, from the setting wherein the impossible becomes possible and heroes accomplish impossible tasks to the fundamental ideological purpose of almost any Hollywood movie: the creation of a new couple. Against this predominance, your book confronts us with the status of impossibility in Lynch's cinematic world. The impossible is not overcome, it remains. It is not resolved. The terribly disturbing aspect of his work lies precisely therein. What is your reading of the impossible in Lynch and would you agree that it runs across his entire work—it allows to understand its inner consistency?

Yes, I think this is the main through-line. What I find most fascinating about Lynch is that he explores the radical potential of fantasy. That's where he locates the impossible being accomplished. He doesn't disdain fantasy or try to find a way to escape it. Instead, he tries to go fully into it in order to discover its political implications. I think that this

first becomes completely apparent in *Fire Walk With Me* (which is for me Lynch's absolute masterpiece). It's the figure of Laura Palmer who is able to accomplish the impossible when she breaks out of the trap of patriarchal violence, even though this costs her her life. But Lynch doesn't just confine himself to depictions of the impossible. What makes him a great filmmaker is that he forces spectators to experience the impossible happening while it nonetheless remains impossible. This is especially evident in the two films subsequent to *Fire Walk With Me*—*Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive*. These films are demanding for spectators because they violate not only the usual cinematic logic but also the rules of everyday life. Although the idea of the impossible happening becomes clearest in the later films, once it is apparent it is easy to look back at the earlier films and see this same structure animating them.

8. Lynch's last film was *Inland Empire* (2006). When it was released, some of his critics argued that this would be the last film of his career, that is to say, that with it Lynch exhausted his means as a director and *Inland Empire* would be the culmination of his entire career. Do you have a reading of this film? In *The Impossible Lynch* you claim that the great achievement of Lynch is to break down the distance between the spectator and the screen. He disturbs the safe distant position of the viewer by forcing him or her to realise how the film itself takes into account his/her desire. Lynch is "weird", as you claim, because he changes the spectator's experience of cinema. Can you explain this a little?

Even though *Inland Empire* came out after my book on Lynch, I nonetheless went back and wrote an essay on it that came out in a collection on Lynch. Although I did write on it positively, I think it's safe to say that this is Lynch's worst film in large part because it doesn't allow the spectator to touch the screen in the way that his other films do. In his films, Lynch creates moments where we must recognize our involvement in what we see. The paradigmatic scene of this effect is the moment when Dorothy Vallens appears naked and bruised on the suburban lawn in *Blue Velvet*. All of these people are around ready for a fight to take place, and her sudden appearance stops everything. What's amazing about the scene is that no one thinks to cover up her naked body. As a result of this failure, the spectator experiences the impulse to cover Dorothy, which is our experience of our involvement in what we see. At this moment, the distance separating us from the screen collapses. Our investment in keeping the repressed repressed becomes apparent. I don't see any moments like this in *Inland Empire*. The film breaks down the barrier between fantasy and social reality, but the elimination of this barrier portends the aesthetic failure of the film, I would say. The problem with

the film is that we go into the fantasy and don't clearly come out on the other side. His great masterpieces all have this other side of the fantasy, a world stripped bare of phantasmatic depth, that *Inland Empire* lacks.

9. A classical understanding of the art of cinema is to say that, in cinema, we are dealing with a genuinely temporal art (different from sculpture or painting for example, but closer to music in a certain sense). You wrote a book about "atemporal cinema". Can you tell us a little about how this concept sits with regard to the former understanding of the film?

I do agree that cinema is inherently a temporal art. But where I depart from Deleuze is the direction that I think it goes from there. For Deleuze, temporality is in some sense the end point of cinema. It gives us access to temporality that philosophical concepts do not, which is why Deleuze credits cinema with being a philosophy in its own right—a competitor with what we think of as philosophy. My contention is that cinema thrusts us into temporality in order to make evident the atemporal structure of our subjectivity. The paradox is, I would say, that it is through the thoroughly temporal art that we can best apprehend our inherent atemporality. Our everyday life hides this atemporality by creating the sense that we are constantly moving forward toward new objects. But cinema, in its most accomplished articulations, can arrest this forward movement. In my book on atemporality, I single out films such as *2046*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *The Constant Gardener*, among others, for their ability to immerse us in an atemporal structure.

10. Some philosophers, like Deleuze, argued that cinema is able to make visible something that we otherwise never see: time. Cinema as an art of time; an art-form that present us with a temporal flow that delights everyone, because it enables us to see what otherwise remains invisible. In someone like Heidegger there is a connection between our relation to time and our relation to ideology. Ideology penetrates and dissolves the standard understanding of time and arrangements of the society and its subject. Or, as you have elaborated, it permeates the subjects to evade the constraints of temporality. Could we say that the goal of cinema is to establish a new temporality, or would that be too radical a thesis?

I would say that the goal of cinema is to allow us to accede to our atemporality rather than to a new temporality. As you say, capitalist ideology distorts our perception of time. But I would go even further and

say, contra Heidegger, that it tries to convince us that we are temporal beings. Ideology doesn't try to obscure our temporality but rather to interpellate us as temporal. I believe that we are atemporal subjects that never fit within time. Time is always external to us. Time is not the form of our intuition (as Kant has it) but rather the external structure that obscures our own fundamental atemporality. This atemporality stems from our basic drive: we turn around a single impossibility without moving forward. We stumble up against the same obstacle again and again. But we constantly mistake the sameness for difference, failing to see our atemporality because we are caught in the trap of the illusion of temporality. We see different objects of desire instead of the same impossible object that blocks and impels our desire. It is cinema—the most temporal of the arts—that enables us to experience this. This is what I tried to work out in *Out of Time*, but I don't think that I went far enough in that work. I didn't separate subjectivity from temporality to the extent that I should have.

11. In your book on Spike Lee, among other things, you qualify him as “a political film maker.” This makes him quite a unique character in the cinema world, but not because there is lack of politics among movie directors or actors/actresses. Perhaps there's even an over-abundance of a certain form of politics. What would be your take on the politics of film that Lee paradigmatically incorporates?

For Lee, politics resides in film form, not directly in the content of his films. Even though he makes films that have an overtly political content such as *Do the Right Thing* and *Bamboozled*, the political force of his filmmaking stems from his formal inventiveness that is separate from any political content. This is why his most significant political film, *Summer of Sam*, is actually one of his films least concerned with politics in its content. The two great montage sequences in this film—set to the songs from The Who, “Baba O'Reilly” and “Won't Get Fooled Again”—are political moments almost on par with Eisenstein's epochal montage sequence showing the massacre on the Odessa steps. When watching these two sequences, we witness Lee exploding the logic of paranoia that defines so much of contemporary conservatism. By forcing the spectator to see the obscene enjoyment inhering in the paranoid position, Lee makes that position uncomfortable and ultimately untenable. These sequences expose what's at stake in paranoia and how easy it is to fall into its logic. In this way, they help to break the hold that this logic has over us, even or especially when we don't recognize it.

12. Could you tell us something about the political capacities and potentials you see in the movies? Slavoj Žižek once spoke of a “Hollywood Left” (he meant Zack Snyder and his film “300”). Is there something that can be characterized as left popular (and not populist) cinema in your view?

I definitely think that there is a left popular cinema today. It includes figures like Spike Lee, Michael Mann, and David Fincher. With apologies to Slavoj, I would definitely not include Zack Snyder, who is responsible for the unbearable *Man of Steel*. While leftist filmmakers outside of Hollywood are able to make all types of leftist films, what characterizes the figures that I single out here is that, because they operate within the constraints of Hollywood, the only political path open to them is the path of formal excess. That's what Lee, Mann, and Fincher all have in common. The formal excesses reveal sites of political opportunity. It's fascinating that Lee and Mann use formal excess in diametrically opposed ways. For Lee, excess exposes the stain that accompanies figures of authority or people acting in a racist way. Lee reveals excess in order to combat it. Mann, on the other hand, celebrates excess. His films focus on the excess of the ethical act. The formal excesses of his films express the ethical acts done by characters in the film. Oftentimes, Mann links the ethical act to someone who is morally very dubious, such as Neil McCauley in *Heat* or Frank in *Thief* (Mann's early and paradigmatic masterpiece). But these characters remain true to their desire, which enables them to break out of the situation that they find themselves in. Mann then illustrates this break through some cinematic excess. For instance, in *The Insider* he explicitly violates the 180 degree rule at one point to show us how Jeffrey Wigand's act has disrupted his entire world.

13. Todd Philipp's *Joker* caused quite a stir. With a few exceptions, the film was either read as pro-Trumpian neo-fascist nihilism, or it was understood as a plea for the revival of the proletarian rebellion. We do not find either of these readings very convincing, they rather seem to be too simplistic and articulate a strange fake sense of subjective urgency. Did you see the film and what do you make of it?

I agree with you that neither of those positions is satisfying. If one actually watches the film, what is clear, first and foremost, is that it is very bad. The figure of Joker is completely unappealing. I understand that this could be the way in which the film disturbs the spectator's ideological assumptions. But what's happening with *The Joker* is, instead, that the figure of Joker acts as a symptom for all those destroyed by contemporary capitalist society. His deformation is symptomatic. This is what the

champions of the film love about it. But I think he's a terrible version of the symptom, a misunderstanding of what is symptomatic today. The working class and the excluded are not driven to psychosis, as the film suggests. Joker's response is utterly singular and idiosyncratic. The broken promises of contemporary capitalist society create predominately neurotic responses rather than psychotic ones. The fact that Joker is a totally unappealing character, the fact that he is psychotic rather than neurotic, indicates the film's failure. Even the most ideologically distorted character must still retain a point that can hook the spectator. Without that, the character—and this is true of Joker—leaves the spectator cold. Those interpreters that celebrate this coldness fail to see, I believe, that some connection with characters is requisite for any political effect. The best films depict something appealing even in those figures that we despise. The fact that *The Joker* fails to do this indicates, to my mind, its abject failure as a film.

14. For some time, we have been flirting with the idea to do an issue of the journal on superheroes, especially since both of us have some sort of fascination with the Superman. You distinguish between him and Batman by saying that the latter is strong but only endowed with human capacities and that this makes him stand out from the set of superheroes, precisely because he doesn't have superpowers (even though in the newer generations there are many of this kind: think "The Punisher" for example). But Batman is here clearly distinct from Superman who has this false identity (as Clark Kent), so pretends to be part of ordinary life, even though he is clearly separate from it. But, the cards were shuffled, so to speak, with Sam Liu's 2009 *Superman/Batman: Public Enemies* and maybe also with Snyder's *Batman vs Superman: The Dawn of Justice* (2016), where Superman is killed by Batman—who in the same act becomes a revenge driven super-surveillance figure who in the name of "democracy" and "mankind" seeks to destroy everything that exceeds ordinary human capacity (and Superman, the *Man of Steel* (2013) as the prequel is called, so: Stalin, is not unproblematically the good one here, too). What do you make of these reversals of the role and function of a fighter against crime and injustice, into the defender of the ruling order, corruption, crime, etc.?

The superhero, as I see it, is always on the edge of slipping into corruption because of the inherently exceptional status that this figure has. It's not surprising that superheroes are constantly moving back and forth between supporting the law and undermining it. The superhero of some sort is necessary because law must deal not just with ordinary criminality but also with an excessive criminality tied to the excesses of law itself. Without some superhero—that is, some figure of excess—there will be no way to combat this. There are moments when a figure of exception is needed. But this figure is always dangerous. This is one thing that I like about Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*. He has Batman destroy the surveillance mechanism that he uses to locate the Joker after he has successfully located him. He understands that the exception can only be temporary, or else it will lead directly to a corrupt extension of authority. But this isn't a universal solution. I think that the superhero's exceptionality will remain a problem that we must constantly confront.

15. Let's move to your book on Hegel, which was published last year, and is entitled *Emancipation after Hegel: Achieving a Contradictory Revolution*. Therein you provocatively classify Marx as a Right-Hegelian. Could you say a word about it?

I have had several Marxists become very upset with me about this statement. I have a tendency to hyperbolize, and this is certainly one instance of it. My point is just that Marx does have something in common with right-wing politics and that is his belief that we can ultimately find our way out of contradiction. I find this a very dangerous position to hold because it licenses one to do whatever is necessary to advance one's political project. So there is a way that Stalin emerges out of Marx insofar as Marx promises a world free from contradiction, both explicitly in *The German Ideology* where he (and Engels) describe an unalienated future communist life, and implicitly when he labels capitalism the last alienating mode of production. If this were possible to achieve, Stalin would be right to go to the end of the line to try to realize it. That's for me the central problem. Once one puts overcoming contradiction on the table, there is no limit to what one should do to get to that point. So this is the political problem I see with Marx. But on the other hand, his analysis of the economic contradictions of capital is something that Hegel could never have accomplished. In this sense, I remain within Marx's basic trajectory, despite associating myself much more with Hegel in political terms.

16. Freedom plays a very important part in your book and reading of Hegel. In your reading of his theory of freedom, you do not refer much to being-with-oneself-in-one's-other (*bei sich selbst sein im anderen*), which is something Hegel refers to time and again, as a formula of freedom. What are your thoughts on this?

That's a terrible oversight on my part. I absolutely accept that being oneself in absolute otherness is the real definition of freedom. Maybe there are unconscious reasons why I don't refer to this that often—perhaps out of desire to undermine my own argument. My way of articulating this same idea is to say that freedom is reconciling oneself to the necessity of contradiction. This is, to my mind, exactly the same thing as being oneself in absolute otherness. I think I shied away from this latter formulation because of the way that otherness and difference have been fetishized today. So much of the impulse behind my writing the book was to critique this apotheosis of the other. I didn't want Hegel's conception of freedom to risk being understood as acquiescing to this apotheosis. But it's still a lapse on my part that you rightly identify.

17. And all this was just a trick to lure you into the following question: Eisenstein, as you know, once wanted to make a film with Marx's *Capital* as his script (an idea that sounds as if Fredric Jameson travelled back in time and convinced Eisenstein to come up with a filmic aesthetic of cognitive mapping). Would you say Hegel ever went to the movies? Is there something like a Hegelian cinema—a cinema that is deeply Hegelian, either in the sense of his *Phenomenology* or of his *Logic* (the latter certainly being even more complicated)?

I have written that Christopher Nolan is a Hegelian filmmaker. But I think the better example is Orson Welles. I think Welles stands absolutely alone in the history of cinema. The novelist John O'Hara said of *Citizen Kane* that not only is it the best film that has ever been made, but it's the best film that ever will be made. I think that this is 100% correct. But I would apply it to everything that Welles did. The fact that every film he made besides *Citizen Kane* was in some way damaged by Hollywood only indicates further his greatness. Hollywood tried to undo what he had done because it recognized the absolute challenge that he posed to their business as usual. If we look at his films, we see the closest thing to a Hegelian cinema—or, to put it in your terms, Hegel going to the movies. His films move us from an opening where everything seems unclear and up in the air—what one might call sense

certainty—to an ending where we see the connections between all the disparate elements and thus are able to conceive the whole as contradictory. The ending of *Citizen Kane* is exemplary in this regard. We see that the privileged object that the entire film has revolved around is nothing but Kane's childhood sled. The disappointment attached to this insignificant object is akin to the moment of absolute knowing in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. We recognize that the absolute is nothing but the necessity of contradiction. There is no great realization, no end point outside the dialectical movement engendered by contradictions. This is the point to which Welles leads us in *Citizen Kane* and in all his films. My personal favorite film is his *Mr. Arkadin*, which goes, I think, even further than *Citizen Kane* in depicting the devaluation of the privileged object. This film sets up a riddle in which the solution lies within the riddle itself—a perfectly Hegelian structure.

18. Another question, which is unavoidable in our present situation: COVID-19. Many philosophers have written on the topic and the possible effects. Economists are already foreseeing a big economic recession, if not a new period of depression. Do you have a take on the eventual effects of COVID-19, as well as the current situation of self-isolation, quarantine, limitations of public and social life, etc.? In other words, does the Foucauldian conceptual apparatus come in handy in this situation?

I think now is the precise time not to be tempted by the Foucauldian or Agambenian analysis of biopower. Let's use this time to throw them out once and for all. I find Agamben's analyses of our contemporary situation risible. Now is the time to denounce this position as loudly as possible. I would feel that way even if I wasn't someone highly at risk from the virus, someone who benefits from the public efforts to block its spread. What the coronavirus exposes, I would say, is the bankruptcy of the notion of biopower and the corresponding concept of bare life. We can see now that there is no such thing as bare life. All life is politicized. Even the attempt to protect or promote life is part of a political form of life, to use Agamben's terms. The reluctance of conservative leaders to impose strict regulations reveals that regulating life is not inherently a conservative or ideological operation. The logic of capital demands the flow of commodities so that nothing gets in the way of accumulation. The outbreak interrupts this flow, thereby exposing how protecting life puts one at odds with the logic of capital. This means that we can see how the state—in its role of protecting life—is not just the servant of capital. If it were, we would not see the arrest of the flow of commodities. The catastrophe shows us that the state can be our friend, not just our enemy. The great revelation of the coronavirus catastrophe is the

emancipatory power of the state, the ability of the state to serve as the site for collectivity rather than acting as just the handmaiden of capital. This is something that the theory of biopower can never accept. The anarchic tendencies behind this theory need to be shown as fundamentally libertarian, not leftist. This is what the virus has demonstrated to us.

Berlin/Vermont/Prishtina, April 2020

C
R
I
S
I
S

&

C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/

Volume 7.2 /
Issue 2