

NO CHANGE, PLEASE, WE ARE  
THE ANAESTHETIZATION POST-STUDENTS:  
OF ART AND  
SOCIETY

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*There is a secret protocol between the generations  
of the past and that of our own.*

*For we have been expected upon this earth.*

Walter Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, 1940

Let us imagine the following picture: the year is 1968. The whole world is engulfed by students' protests. Although with regional differences depending on the specific contexts in which they emerged, the protestors have the same demand from those in power: immediate and fundamental changes of the functioning of the existing institutions.

Now the year is 2006. Again, Parisian students are protesting. The news shows images similar to the ones from 1968: again students are out on the streets, frequently clashing with the police and fighting with an energy resembling that in '68. But this time, the only demand coming from the students is: no change, please. For some, this might seem as a legitimate demand directed against the proposed changes in the labor system, advertised as the last attempt to save the national economy. Nevertheless, when put in the perspective of the unrests and protests of the Others who were destroying this proud country's myths of democracy and human rights in the "banelieus" just a few months before, the difference between the youth of the same generation becomes visible. The Others were demanding changes, the unrests were their last cry for help. The burned cars in their own neighborhoods resemble the Indian smoke signals carrying the only message: get us out of here! These two parallel worlds - the youths from the suburbs, and the young students - reveal the existing break in their communication, but unmistakably convey a similar message: there is something rotten in the system. Preferring this paralyzed state of affairs instead of change, the elite of tomorrow seems to have no other option for its own future. As it seems, dreams about changing the world are forgotten and abandoned.

The year is 1974. Marina Abramovic performs her piece "Rhythm 0" in an art gallery in Naples. In it, she stood passively in a museum for six hours with 72 items around her, inviting the audience to use them on her the way they wanted to. In a situation that could easily get out of control, an obviously "disturbed" man has chosen his tool: a loaded gun. He made her put it up to her head, trying to force her

1 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. by Hannah Arendt, London: Pimlico, 1999, p. 58.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 59.

to pull the trigger. She did not resist, but luckily, the other members of the audience intervened and prevented blood from being spilt.

The year is 2005 and in a group show in a gallery in the heart of Amsterdam, a young artist performs his piece.

He is dressed in a clean, white, protective suit, and asks the visitors to shoot at him from a plastic gun with bullets filled with different colors. The situation is completely under control and there is not the slightest risk that somebody might get hurt.

Without going into a deeper analysis of different strategies used by these two artists, instead I would like to pose these two different historical moments as a parallel to the ones of the students' protests in order to define the changes that happened in the forty years in between. At first, it seems that compared to the legendary generation of '68, this new generation has lost its sting, its courage to take risks, courage to be willing to sacrifice one's life for the "higher cause", whether it be art or politics. However, this paralyzed position could also be read as a product of the legacy of the same brave '68: confronted with the failure of the preceding generations that tested all possible methods to produce social change, the new generation feels devoid of any possibility to define new tactics. It seems that all hope is being run over by the galloping force of the global disease called liberal capitalism.

The story that follows is not aimed to be a melancholic reflection on the things past and what has been happening in the meantime, for melancholy is a product of the specific empathic procedure of historians that, according to Walter Benjamin, actually indicates empathy with the victor: "Those who currently rule are however the heirs of all those who have ever been victorious. Empathy with the victors thus comes to benefit the current rulers every time."<sup>1</sup> Rather, I would like to put these two distant periods opposite one other, as two mirrors able to reflect each other's image. The generation of the Sixties had "us" in mind; their every action was directed towards the changes of the present that will bring peace and happiness to the next generations. "We" are this future and we are constantly reminded of the times when "we" were conceived. My aim is not to create an antagonistic situation in which "we" are put in opposition to "them" from the past nor evaluate one period as better than the other, one generation as more courageous than the other, but to test if it is possible to get to know "us" better after seeing our reflection in the mirror of the past and vice versa. Or, coming back to Benjamin, "To articulate what is past does not mean to recognize 'how it really was'. It means to take control of memory, as it flashes in the moment of danger."<sup>2</sup> The moments of danger can be found in every present that comes, and the focus on those who control the memory of past times should be permanent.

#### [FRAMING] THE PERFECT HUMAN

*The perfect human has to eat and drink. We are going to watch a meal. Wine looks great in the glass. And onto the plate – lovely fish, with rice, onions, lemon, and a green sauce. With it, a bottle of Chablis. How does the perfect human eat?*



*The fish is a beautiful sight on a table. It deserves to lie on silver. Dinner is served. Now the meal must go, piece by piece into the mouth. It tastes good and its consistency is good. Bon Appetit! Why is joy so whimsical? Happiness so brief? Why did you leave me? Why did you go away? Very, very, very tasty. (...) Also today I experienced something that I hope to understand in a few days.*

Jørgen Leth, *The Perfect Human* (1967)

One of the concepts that seems to have been rediscovered by the art world at the beginning of 2000 is that of reenactments. This concept was expressed not only in numerous artworks but also through a series of exhibitions with repetitions of performances of the 1960s and 1970s. Berlin in 2001, Paris and London in 2003, Amsterdam in 2004, Rotterdam in 2005, New York in 2006<sup>3</sup>: all offered their own versions of this sudden urge to repeat certain artistic practices in new contexts, almost 40 years after they originally happened. In an interesting visual experiment, one of the leading contemporary filmmakers, Lars von Trier, set a specific experiment in his documentary *THE FIVE OBSTRUCTIONS* (2003): he invited his teacher and idol, Jørgen Leth, to remake his old movie *THE PERFECT HUMAN* (1967) five times. As the one who controls the experiment, von Trier was allowed to set the limitations within which Leth had to work. As the end reveals, the purpose of this special experiment was to “save Jørgen Leth” and bring him out of long-term depression using repetition as a method combined with confrontations with the limitations set by somebody else. Maybe not surprisingly, the method worked and, as a result, we see Leth reviving the strength of his creative potential.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the many layers of this film-experiment, I would like to focus on a specific scene or image created in the remake that was most striking for me<sup>5</sup>. *THE PERFECT HUMAN* is a movie that seems to be completely under the control of its director: set in the perfect and highly aesthetic “white cube” space, it shows a perfect human practising his perfect rituals in a perfect world. This perfect human is perfectly clean, has a perfect beautiful woman next to him, spends his time in hard preparations for his hard task of maintaining his perfection, eats a perfect dinner, listens to beautiful music, asks himself difficult questions about the meaning of love and life, but does not look at all worried when his perfect woman leaves him.

The meal scene in the original movie is its final scene and the closure of the previously depicted narrative. After

<sup>3</sup> *A Little Bit of History Repeated* at Kunst-Werke in Berlin, *A Short History of Performance* at Whitechapel Art Gallery London, performance event *Re-enact* organized by Casco and Mediamatic in Amsterdam, and *Life, Once More: Forms of Reenactment in Contemporary Art* in Witte de With, Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, and the most recent, a series of seven re-enactments of famous performances by Marina Abramovic, *Seven Easy Pieces* in the Guggenheim Museum in New York.

<sup>4</sup> In his book *Ulysses Unbound*, Jon Elster writes about the positive effect of limitations on the creative process. Nevertheless, inspired by the words of his mentor Jens Arup Seip who said that “In politics, people never try to bind themselves, only to bind others” Elster warns us about the danger of applying the same rule on the level of social and political relations. In other words, “Fasting is not like starving”. See Jon Elster, *Ulysses Unbound, Studies in Rationality, Precommitment, and Constraints*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> When I saw *Five Obstructions* for the first time, as the movie was in Danish with Dutch subtitles, my limited knowledge of both languages also restricted my understanding of the spoken and written parts. Nevertheless, there was still enough space for me to follow the “action”: my full attention was on the visual aspects of the movie, and it turned out that there were enough interesting visual elements to keep my attention alive.

working hard on their “perfectness”, this couple is ready for dinner. This meal is a highly aesthetic one; the empty white space will be filled with a table covered with food on silver plates. This extreme aesthetization of everyday life does not provide us with any knowledge about how this meal was prepared and where it comes from: in this perfect world, things just “happen”. Lovely boiled salmon, potatoes, sauce hollandaise, and a bottle of Chablis will end up in these perfect stomachs. With this perfect meal, our perfect man will not be too disturbed when he realizes that his perfect woman has left him. His questions are rhetorical; his concern as to why fortune is so capricious does not really matter; the food is very, very delicious.

In the second obstruction set for Leth, von Trier has formulated the following rules: it has to be filmed in a miserable place, but the place cannot be shown; Leth has to play the role of the perfect human in the scene of eating the perfect dinner. Leth decides to go to the red light district in Bombay, as a place he previously experienced as “hell on Earth”. We follow him while preparing for his role in a Bombay hotel room where he practices falling as a perfect human would, trying to stay calm and under control preparing his table and perfect dinner in probably the poorest place he could go today, but having pills of valium in his pocket “just to be on the safe side”. The result is impressive: we see Leth in his perfect tuxedo eating a perfect meal, drinking perfect wine from the perfect glass, but also figures of Indian women and children curiously standing behind a semi-transparent screen behind him<sup>6</sup>. In this situation, Leth has decided to be a professional; he is capable of playing this role and eating his expensive dinner in front of any background, not believing in von Trier’s romantic idea that there is such a limit, such a situation that could break the human. Cruelty and cold-bloodiness of any military “professional” able to perform whatever he was ordered to do, but having to suffer through similar never-ending nightmares is a good example of how far humans are able to go<sup>7</sup>.

When these two versions of the same story are compared, the scene from Bombay underlines one thing: the change of context or, perhaps more accurately, the changed status of the background. In the course of the movie, Leth described how he sees the function of the transparent screen:

*The transparent screen we stretched out provided an image area, a framing of reality, which was both concrete and incredibly subtle and artful. It was a very elegant response to the whole idea of the project, which involved the distance that had been introduced and which we wanted to minimize during this particular obstruction. We wanted to minimize the distance between the perfect and the human.*

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6 Even though the strict rules set by von Trier were aimed at depicting the same white background, this time with the sounds of the “real” world, Leth decided to accept the suggestion of his collaborator Dan Holmberg to make the screen transparent and make these people visible.

7 Also one of the interesting works at the exhibition *Life, Once More* was a video made by Rod Dickinson, *The Milgram Re-enactment* (2002). This video shows a staged reenactment of the “obedient to authority”, Dr Stanley Milgram’s infamous 1961 social psychology experiment. In the original experiment, participants were asked to give apparently lethal electric shocks to an unwilling victim to test how far they would be prepared to obey an authoritative scientist and inflict pain on a protesting person: 2/3 of the subjects obediently continued to administer the maximum 450 volt shock until they were told to stop.



If the movie had been made strictly in accordance with von Trier's rules, we may have seen Leth with a cold expression on his face, and against a white background. We would be informed that this scene was filmed in a horrible place, but it would mean nothing at all. The scene would be the repetition of the original one with the sole purpose of gauging the expression of shock on Leth's face, purely serving the private desire of the producer/master – von Trier. Deciding to open up the perspective to show this magnificent live painting behind his back, Leth has given us one of the strongest critiques of the contemporary state of affairs depicting the (non)existing relationship between the richest and the poorest. If the perfect humans of the 1960s used to be protected from the real humans in their beautiful, limitless white cubes, today they can allow themselves to watch misery because in the meantime this misery has become highly photogenic. The constant flow of these "miserable" images produced and reproduced in various media and contexts makes the "perfect ones" aware and respectful toward the miserable humans, but allows them to remain behind this new protective semi-transparent screen. The food is still very, very tasty.

In his analysis of the Dogma phenomenon, Jack Stevenson interprets Leth's "lab experiment" as a representation of the ideals of the generation that this attractive couple belongs to, hence using them to criticize the new consumerist society: "It's a biting sociological satire on the shallowness of life among the Danish middle-class of 1967, as well as an ironic comment on the tendency of documentary filmmakers to blindly worship the gospel of objectivity."<sup>8</sup> If the first version on its second level gave the ironic comment on the objectivity of documentary making, than the second one can be seen as a way of commenting on the new normalized practice of the non-ethical use of refugee camps and similar horrible places in creating highly popular journalistic "reality shows" that actually have the effect of making the misery photogenic. The white cube is not pleasant scenery anymore – the perfect human knows he is perfect enough, but likes to rediscover his humanness every morning when he turns on the TV news.

Although *THE PERFECT HUMAN* can be seen as a highly formalistic and aesthetic anthropological essay about human nature, the other elements (language, music, habits, relations and food) demonstrate that it is deeply embedded within the Danish context: it allows Leth to express his ironic position towards the social and political circumstances of that moment. Although pretending to be pure and perfect, every detail is filled with political meaning, expressing the new ideology of the consumerist society. The danger of the pure formalistic position (the doctrine of pure form) is that it is actually just one of the faces of an unchanging totalitarian statehood: the unchanging Soul produces the unchanging State and both of them are "the expressions of the Ideal Order."<sup>9</sup> Being aware of this fact, Leth does not let the "pure form" speak for itself; his film is filled with sketches of meaning on many levels. His black-and-white

<sup>8</sup> Jack Stevenson, *Dogme Uncut: Lars von Trier, Thomas Vinterberg, and the Gang That Took on Hollywood*, Santa Monica Press, 2003, p. 203.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas McEvelly, *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millennium*, New York: Documentext McPherson & Co., 1991, p. 65.

essay shows both how the subject is constructed both by the specific social context and by the “objective” film language. It is not Leth who is the pervert attempting to maintain a distance, as alleged by von Trier. Rather, we are all surrounded by a world of global perversion and forced to perform the role in front of the world he usually keeps hidden behind the impermeable and protective screen, the perfect human needs valium pills as a security blanket.

#### THE SYNAESTHETIC HUMAN

One of the important skills Leth’s perfect human successfully mastered through such insensitivity is that even when the love of his life left him, he felt nothing. He just kept on eating his perfect dinner hoping to understand things at some point in the future. In her essay “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, Susan Buck Morss offers a different and very valuable reading of Benjamin’s famous essay. Buck-Morss’ interpretation is based on the last few paragraphs in which, according to Morss, a dark cloud seems to have covered Benjamin’s optimism concerning the positive influence of technological development on humanity. Here Benjamin warns his readers about the upcoming danger of fascism that succeeded in using the recently developed sensory alienation of people as its tool for domination through the aestheticization of politics: “Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.”<sup>10</sup> The final conclusion, according to Buck-Morss, is the fact that both alienation and aestheticized politics as sensual conditions have outlived fascism, and therefore “the enjoyment taken in viewing our own destruction.”<sup>11</sup> Maybe fascism was successfully defeated after the Second World War, but the basis for its reemergence was not.

In her exploration of the cultural interpretations of the aesthetic experience, Buck-Morss takes us first to ancient Greece to look for the hidden meaning in the root of the word aesthetics: “*Aisthitikos* is ancient Greek for that which is “perceptive by feeling.” *Aisthitikos* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is not art but reality – corporeal, material nature.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, the aesthetic

10 Benjamin, *Illuminations*, p. 242.

11 Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin’s Artwork Essay Reconsidered”, *October*, Vol. 62, Autumn, 1992, p. 4.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

13 “The nervous system is not contained within the body’s limits. The circuit from sense-perception to motor response begins and ends in the world. (...) As the source of stimuli and the arena for motor response, the external world must be included to complete the sensory circuit.” *Ibid.*, p. 12.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

experience is being born in the connection between the external stimuli and neural stimuli that are transmitted through senses disciplined by culture<sup>13</sup>. Nevertheless, although senses are culturally disciplined and the differences between individual perceptions are erased, Buck-Morss sees the possibility of change in the fact that most of the senses still “maintain an uncivilized and incivilizable trace” creating the “core of resistance to cultural domestication.”<sup>14</sup>



Buck-Morss rejects the division on binary oppositions “inside vs. outside” of the “traditional conception of the human nervous system which artificially isolates human biology from its environment”. Instead she offers a new model that she names a synaesthetic system. A synaesthetic system is:

*[an]aesthetic system of sense-consciousness, decentered from the classical subject, wherein external sense-perceptions come together with the internal images of memory and anticipation (...) This synaesthetic system is “open” in the extreme sense. Not only is it open through the world through the sensory organs, but the nerve cells within the body form a network that is in itself discontinuous.*<sup>15</sup>

In its extreme form, in its complete openness and total synaesthesia, our perfect human would not be able to survive the shock of reality. Therefore, s/he has created a system of different buffers and protections, ranging from his ego, as noticed by Freud, to phantasmagoric interiors and arcades, as formulated by Benjamin. The overstimulation of the senses by our modern surroundings has produced its counter effect: the numbing of the senses, transforming the original synaesthetic experience into the anaesthetic one. The danger of this process lies in the fact that this “dialectical reversal... destroys the human organism’s power to respond politically even when self-preservation is at stake.”<sup>16</sup>

How did humanity lose the touch with reality? According to Benjamin, the main alienation happened with the invention of phantasmagoria that, for him, became a synonym of the interiors of the bourgeois home in the nineteenth century. Their goal is “manipulation of the synaesthetic system by control of environmental stimuli. It has the effect of anaesthetizing the organism, not through numbing, but through flooding the senses.”<sup>17</sup>

This human being is constructed as being autogenetic, its own beginning and end, and in effect is entirely self-contained. “If it has any body at all, it must be one impervious to the senses, hence safe from external control. Its potency is in its lack of corporeal response (...) Such an asensual, anaesthetic protuberance is this artifact: modern man.”<sup>18</sup> It has placed itself in a paradoxical position of believing in its invincibility and being in control of its own destiny, but at the same time it finds itself in a vicious circle of having to protect its vulnerability over and over again from the real and invented dangers.<sup>19</sup>

The opposite concept of a human being to this autogenetic senseless body is the synaesthetic one, but today it is still seen as a deformation and anomaly. Although official medicine had diagnosed a synaesthetic condition in the late nineteenth century, until recently it was a highly neglected field<sup>20</sup>. Seemingly the official system of

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 13

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> There are many proofs for the political exploitation of this position: people in power are given a right to control the majority based on this belief that they are the ones able to protect us from all the “evils”.

<sup>20</sup> The first one to document this was Gallon in 1880. See V. S. Ramachandran and E. M. Hubbard, “Synaesthesia – A Window into Perception, Thought and Language”, *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 8, No. 12, 2001, pp. 3–34

medicine did not have the right discourse in which to include a notion of the existence of differences of individual perception. Synaesthesia is defined as:

*a curious condition in which an otherwise normal person experiences sensations in one modality when a second modality is stimulated. For example, a synaesthete may experience a specific colour whenever she encounters a particular tone (e.g., C-sharp may be blue) or may see any given number as always tinged with a certain colour (e.g., "5" may be green and "6" may be red).<sup>21</sup>*

In professional circles, the possibility of multisensory perception is dismissed using different excuses and overall can be read as cultural constructions around synaesthetes:

- 1) *They are just crazy. The phenomenon is simply the result of a hyperactive imagination. Or maybe they are trying to draw attention to themselves by claiming to be special or different in some way.*
- 2) *They are just remembering childhood memories such as seeing coloured numbers in books or playing with coloured refrigerator magnets.*
- 3) *They are just engaging in vague tangential speech or just being metaphorical just as you and I might say "bitter cold" or "sharp cheese". Cheese is soft to touch, not sharp, so why do we say "sharp"? Obviously, one means that the taste is sharp but why is a tactile adjective being applied to taste?*
- 4) *They are "potheads" or "acid junkies" who have been on drugs. This idea is not entirely without substance since LSD users often do report synaesthesia both during the high as well as long after.<sup>22</sup>*

Hence, the official narrative does not allow us to even think about the possibility of individuals having different patterns of perceiving reality, seeing this ability as abnormal or, in its milder form, as having an excessively vivid imagination.

In the next part, I would like to bring into this discussion a specific cultural myth that was used as a tool for the political defeat of those who were thinking differently, a myth that was created around a substance that has an effect on the human body in producing induced synaesthesia. In other words, it is a story about how the synaesthetic condition has been constructed not only as medically but also as socially dangerous.

#### LS D: FROM MIRACULOUS CURE TO HOFMANN'S PROBLEM CHILD

Analyzing the context of the Sixties, it is possible to recognize a difference between the left-wing movements that originated in the United States from those

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

that originated in other countries. In the United States, the left-wing anti-war movement was inseparable from the use of LSD and marihuana, while in Europe, with some exceptions, this was not so



much the case. Maybe the reason for this lies in the fact that European leftists still had the option of believing in communist and Marxist ideas, while their US post-McCarthy contemporaries had to find another way out – a revolution based on the individual change in the perception of reality.

One of the interesting anniversaries that was widely broadcasted by different media in January 2006 was that of the 100th birthday of Albert Hofmann, the chemist who discovered LSD. In the presence of (a still very active) Hofmann himself, the celebration in Basel was followed by the biggest psychedelic conference ever, with over 2000 visitors from 37 countries. Through reading various reports and impressions by numerous doctors, scientists, engineers, artists, etc. one has the impression of a serious party taking place, followed by serious discussions by experts.

The celebration of Mr. Hoffman's birthday shows the importance this man had in the process of realizing the potential of this incredibly strong substance for individual personal development. As a young chemist in the Basel laboratory of Sandoz pharmaceuticals, Albert Hofmann was researching different substances that could be extracted from the ergot, produced by a lower fungus that grows parasitically on rye and, to a lesser extent, on other species of grain and on wild grasses.<sup>23</sup> Its medical use was known from the Middle Ages, especially in childbirth, and Hofmann's scientific curiosity took him further in discovering the medical efficiency of ergot in curing migraine. In 1938, Hofmann produced the twenty-fifth substance in his series of lysergic acid derivatives: lysergic acid diethylamide, abbreviated LSD-25, at this point only for laboratory use. As the first experiments on animals showed no significant effects of this substance, he abandoned any further research. Nevertheless, in 1943 he decided to come back to it and try to test it again, a practice that is not common in the chemical laboratories where, usually, if the first tests show no significant effect of the newly produced substances, research is stopped. It is still a mystery how his body came in touch with LSD, and his presumption is that a drop of it fell on his skin while working in the laboratory, a dose whose absorption was enough to produce a strong change of his perception and feelings similar to some mystic revelations he remembered from his childhood. This personal understanding of mystical experiences became a key element in Hofmann's appreciations of the newly invented substance. As he stated himself in his book *LSD – My Problem Child*

*In studying the literature connected with my work, I became aware of the great universal significance of visionary experience. It plays a dominant role, not only in mysticism and the history of religion, but also in the creative process in art, literature, and science. More recent investigations have shown that many persons also have visionary experiences in daily life, though most of us fail to recognize their meaning and value. Mystical experiences, like those that marked my childhood, are apparently far from rare (...) I share the belief of many of my contemporaries that the spiritual crisis pervading all spheres of*

<sup>23</sup> "Kernels infested with this fungus develop into light-brown to violet-brown curved pegs that push forth from the husk in place of normal grains." Albert Hofmann, *LSD my problem child*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1980, p. 7; available online at <<http://www.flashback.se/archive/my|problem|child/>>

*Western industrial society can be remedied only by a change in our world-view. We shall have to shift from the materialistic, dualistic belief that people and their environment are separate, toward a new consciousness of an all-encompassing reality, which embraces the experiencing ego, a reality in which people feel their oneness with animate nature and all of creation.*<sup>24</sup>

After this first experience and several more of Hofmann's self-tests, Sandoz pharmaceuticals started distribution of LSD to psychiatric clinics where its treatment became very efficient not only in curing alcoholism, but also in speeding up the treatments in psychotherapy.<sup>25</sup>

Many of the participants at the conference in Basel openly recalled their reticence about the events in which they had participated, which they had previously maintained for fear of being ridiculed. Although LSD had become an illegal substance in 1968, this didn't prevent the many generations that followed from experiencing its effects over and over again. After the sixties there was a constant campaign of demonization of this substance, one of the physically least harmful substances for the human body, according to the results of numerous medical experiments, Interestingly, it was only demonized after attempts to use it as a means to change the perception of the existing political and economic systems of control.<sup>26</sup> In the case of LSD, the body in danger was the body of capitalism itself.

It seems that the biggest discoveries of our civilization cannot be seen without their connection to the army, since the military industry is the one most capable of providing the means for research and the necessary tests, and the civil sector is allowed to use these discoveries only after the system is sure that it cannot be used against it. Nevertheless, the story about LSD tells us the story about the invention that escaped the control of the military power.<sup>27</sup>

#### THE AMERICAN TRIP

Ironically enough, LSD was brought to the United States by the CIA at the beginning of the 1960s. In their constant search for a "truth drug", the CIA started experiments with LSD at first among their own employees, and after that by establishing secret – and some would say illegal – laboratories in San Francisco's

24 Ibid., p. 4.

25 Discovered at the time of the most horrible war humankind has ever seen, LSD is interpreted by some as a spiritual antidote to the atomic bomb.

26 LSD has received a status of such a dangerous substance that even laboratory experiments were and still are strictly forbidden.

27 All records on tests on soldiers register one predominant effect LSD had on them: a desire to drop the guns and leave the battlefield.

red light district where they observed the changed behavior of prostitutes' customers. At the same time, two important persons came into contact with this substance: one of them was Dr Timothy Leary, a distinguished professor of psychology at Harvard University, and the other was Ken Kesey, a student of literature at Stanford University. The former was soon to lose his teaching position and became a "high priest of LSD" from the East Coast, and the latter a famous author of *One Flew Over the*



*Cuckoo's Nest* and a populist activist who traveled with his magic bus full of his Merry Pranksters, distributing LSD to everyone on the road.

If we compare the three approaches propagated by Hofmann, Leary and Kesey, we are able to see three different ideologies as well. In the case of Dr. Hofmann, we could see his position as the most elitist one, believing that LSD should be used and experienced in the strictly controlled settings of medical institutions, while Leary

spreads this to a wider intellectual elite; in the case of Kesey, we can say that he went the furthest in propagating the psychedelic experience of LSD to any human being, without paying attention to one's hierarchical position in the existing system of relations. As Kesey stated himself, "The purpose of psychedelics is to learn the conditioned response of people and then to prank them. That's the only way to get people to ask questions, and until they ask questions they're going to remain conditioned robots."<sup>28</sup>

Kesey's approach was seen as "the revolt of guinea pigs" – he had taken LSD out of the laboratory and away from the white smocks and any notion of medically sanitized control of the psychedelic experience. As a result, a newly established Kesey's "scene" attracted a number of people who started the Free Speech Movement, a groundbreaking group of students that decided to organize politically. In their search for political and economic justice, personal authenticity and individual freedom went hand in hand. As Lee and Shalin state in their thorough study *Acid Dreams: CIA, LSD and the Sixties rebellion*:

*Smoking dope was thus an important political catalyst, for it enabled many a budding radical to begin questioning the official mythology of the governing class (...) If any single theme dominated young people in the 1960s, it was the search for a new way of seeing, a new relation to the world.<sup>29</sup>*

Precisely this desire to find new ways of seeing brings us back to synaesthesia and, at this point, I would like to introduce Walter Benjamin's concept of profane illumination.

#### THE QUEST(ION) OF PROFANE ILLUMINATIONS

Being one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century, Walter Benjamin has become one of the first *psychonauts* as well. He tried to formulate the importance of the states of changed perception as a way to fight against the dominant capitalistic way of life and production.<sup>30</sup> His voluntarily self-experiments have even more relevance when seen in the context of the birth of new

<sup>28</sup> Lee, M. and Schlain, B., *Acid Dreams: The CIA, LSD and the Sixties Rebellion*, New York: Grove Press, 1985, p.121.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin had performed numerous experiments with hashish, opium and mescaline for a few decades together with his close friends, leading a thorough record of each session, which was recently published in the form of a book "On Hashish".

aesthetics and politics of bodies under the Third Reich: this new body was not only perfect by its genetic predispositions, but also had to stay clean and healthy through the constant practice of its (an)aesthetization.

German Superman was especially engineered to avoid the seduction of the hyper-animal and hypersexual bodies of Jewish women.<sup>31</sup> The example of the cartoon depicting two male bodies – the German one and the Jewish one – shows the dominant ideological message of that time. The perfect Arian man is opposed to the fat, ugly, and greedy Jewish man with a cigarette.<sup>32</sup> We all know the end of the story when this dirty and carcinogen Jewish body was “cleaned off” from the healthy body of the German nation. Together with the prohibition of the substances that could biologically damage this imaginary body, the Nazis had publicly rejected as “degenerate art” all art produced by Dadaists, surrealists, and expressionists who had introduced the aesthetics of the changed perception of the senses.



31 “By August 1944, over 7 million foreigners were living in the “Greater German Reich.” The majority, which included 1.9 million prisoners of war and 5.7 million forced laborers, had been brought to Germany against their will.” Since November 1939, the Nazis have issued numerous decrees forbidding contacts between Germans and foreigners, especially between German women and foreign prisoners of war. See Kundrus, Birthe, “Forbidden Company: Romantic Relationships between Germans and Foreigners, 1939 to 1945”, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 11, Nos. 1/2, January/ April 2002, 201-222.

32 The rhetoric of Nazi war on tobacco was supported by “racial hygienists fearing the corruption of the German germ plasm, by industrial hygienists fearing a reduction of work capacity, by nurses and midwives fearing harm to the “maternal organism”. Tobacco was said to be “a corrupting force in a rotting civilization that has become lazy” (...) He [Hitler] also claimed that Germany might never have achieved its present glory if he had continued to smoke.” See Robert Proctor, “The Nazi War on Tobacco: Ideology, Evidence, and Possible Cancer Consequences”, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* Vol. 71, No.3, 1997, 435-488.



In her book *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, Buck-Morss underlines the fact that Benjamin didn't use only dreams as inspiration for his work, but went further and "experimented with consciousness-transforming drugs, hashish primarily, but also opium and mescaline". Her interpretation is that even though Benjamin recognized drug-taking as a liberating act, he considered its relationship to political liberation problematic:

*The true, creative transcendence of religious illumination ... does not really lie in narcotics... The most passionate examination of hash-smoking will certainly not teach half as much about thinking (which is an imminent narcotic) as the profane illumination of thinking about hash smoking (...)*<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, she continues to say that Benjamin believed that hashish, opium and whatever else could provide the introductory course for profane illumination.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, in his essay "From 'Rausch' to Rebellion", Scott J. Thompson expresses his disagreement with Buck-Morss interpretation and states that profane illumination does not have to happen *after* the "rausch" experience but can take place within the inebriated voyage itself:

*If rausch is analogous to being adrift in a turbulent sea, then "profane illumination" is like suddenly awakening in the midst of a dream, seizing the helm, and becoming the pilot of one's inner voyage (...)* The autoworkers who smoked pot, dropped acid, and instead of "tuning out" shut down auto-factories in wildcat strikes, understand what Walter Benjamin was describing whether they read them or not.<sup>35</sup>

This sentence brings us back to the Sixties and the USA. Realizing that LSD had become a powerful weapon in social liberation movements, the governing elite has decided to turn the tables and use it as a weapon for their destruction. It was enough to criminalize LSD and make its use illegal together with the consumption of marihuana, and then start police arrests of the main actors of those movements that happened to be, as a rule, the consumers of these substances as well.

Nevertheless, in light of these two interpretations, maybe the solution lies somewhere in between, or even in the combination of both: the thinker who gets inspired by his changed state of consciousness and the worker who stops his work and starts to question the system of exploitation are somehow equal to an understanding of the transformation of existing social relations. But Benjamin's emphasis on the importance of thinking about hash smoking than the act of smoking

33 Benjamin, *Über Haschisch*, p. 202 as quoted in Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p. 126.

34 Ibid.

35 Scott J. Thompson, "From 'Rausch' to Rebellion: Walter Benjamin's *On Hashish* & The Aesthetic Dimensions of Prohibitionist Realism, In *The Journal of Cognitive Liberties*, Vol. 2, Issue No. 1, pages 21-42 (Spring/Summer 2000), pp.9; available online at: <<http://www.wbenjamin.org/rausch.html>>

itself may contain the secret solution that political movements of the Sixties weren't aware of. If the system had regained its power through the prohibition of illuminating substances, it still did not make thinking about alternative states of consciousness illegal. In the present era of the constant disinfection of the Western world, which begins with *rausch* and *rausch*-free areas, continues with the limitation of the "un-aesthetic" and the placing of "dirty" posters in the public space, and which might end up in sweeping away everyone who senses differently, it is our task to re-examine and re-evaluate what we define as narcotics before it is too late.<sup>36</sup>

#### THE AESTHETICS AND POLITICS OF THE NERVOUS SYSTEM

In the current phase of capitalism, it is possible to notice the increase of the elements absorbed by phantasmagoria that create addiction: "narcotics, blogs, sex, work, exercise, love, food, prescription drugs, religion, gambling, shoplifting, stardom, television and videogames crammed in-between."<sup>37</sup> When compared to drug intoxication:

*the phantasmagoria assumes the position of objective fact. Whereas drug addicts confront a society that challenges the reality of their altered perception, the intoxication of phantasmagoria itself becomes the social norm. Sensory addiction to a compensatory reality becomes a means of social control.*<sup>38</sup>

The "secret" history of LSD reveals the truth that the only drug "on the market" that does not produce either physical or psychological addiction had to become strictly prohibited. The benefits humanity gained through individual experiments with LSD surpasses the usual stereotypes of hippy-rock'n'roll bends.<sup>39</sup> In his 1998 autobiography *Dancing Naked in the Mind Field*, one of the most important scientists of today and a Nobel Prize winner, Kary Mullis revealed the story of how he invented a Polymerase Chain Reaction that amplified specific DNA sequences.<sup>40</sup> Like many of his colleagues at UC Berkeley, Mullis engaged himself in serious experiments with hallucinogenic substances:

*PCR's another place where I was down there with the molecules when I discovered it and I wasn't stoned on LSD, but my mind by then had learned how to get down there. I could sit on a DNA molecule and watch the go by (sic) and I didn't feel dumb about that, I felt I could, I mean that's just the way I think is I put myself in all different kind of spots and I've learned that partially I would think, and this is*

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36 "The experience of intoxication is not limited to drug-induced, biochemical transformations. Beginning in the nineteenth century, a narcotic was made of reality itself." Buck-Morss, *ibid.*, p. 21.

37 Alina Clej, "High Anxieties: Cultural Studies in Addiction (review)", *Modernism/modernity*, Vol. 11, No. 2, 2004, pp. 361

38 Buck-Morss, *ibid.*, p. 23

39 Among some of those who had recently "come out of the closet", we find, for instance, Douglas Englebart, the inventor of the computer mouse and Steve Jobs, Apple-cofounder.

40 Another Nobel-Prize-winner, Francis Crick, a discoverer of the double helical structure of DNA also told his friends he received inspiration for his ideas from LSD. See Ann Harrison, "LSD – The Geek's Wonder Drug?" in *Wired News*, [www.wired.com/news/technology/1,70015-0.html](http://www.wired.com/news/technology/1,70015-0.html).



*again my opinion, through psychedelic drugs. If you have to think of bizarre things PCR was a bizarre thing. It changed an entire generation of molecular biologists in terms of how they thought about DNA.*<sup>41</sup>

Many LSD psychonauts who claim that the LSD experience allowed them to see the world “as it really is” do not need a better illustration nor confirmation than these words coming from a man who discovered one of the secrets of organic life itself. At this moment, my aim is not to propagate the use of certain substances as opposed to the ones I do not mention, but to invite re-examination and re-evaluation of real and culturally defined dangers and addictions.<sup>42</sup> In these times of the rise of new body politics or the new tyranny of aesthetics maybe it could be relevant to take a look at what happened to Benjamin’s and Buck-Morss’s surgeon.<sup>43</sup>

Within this newly established medical practice in the nineteenth century, it was not uncommon “for the surgeons to become drug addicts.”<sup>44</sup> It seems that having to perform operations on bodies that could feel contributed to their need to etherize themselves during the parties which at that time were known as “ether frolics”. During these parties, young students noticed that the bruises gained during the intoxication did not hurt, and this is how the medical use of anesthetics started. In this new phase, the surgeon was free again: he was able to easily cut the bodies whose pain was not registered anymore.

The operating procedure has gone through fundamental changes as well. It started as a theatrical performance in amphitheatres but after the discovery of germs and bacteria the procedure had to be transferred into a disinfected space, into an operation room far from the eyes of the public. Nevertheless, in the last couple of years, we are witnessing a new phase in this development: the body on the operating table returns through numerous medical reality shows and makeovers, testing whether we can still feel something.

As Susan Buck-Morss remarks, the important shift that happened in perception after the introduction of anesthetics in medicine was a “tripartite splitting of experience: agency (the operating surgeon), the object as hyle (the docile body of the patient), and the observer (who perceives and acknowledges the accomplished result).”<sup>45</sup> Translated into political terms, “it was the genius of fascist propaganda to

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41 British Broadcasting Corporation, 1997 (27 February). “Psychedelic Science’ Programme Notes.” Transcript available at [www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/psychetran.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/science/horizon/psychetran.shtml). For more details also see Richard Doyle, “LSDNA: Rhetoric, Consciousness Expansion, and the Emergence of Biotechnology”, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 2002, 153-174.

42 It is possible to notice the proliferation of the drugs that stimulate labor performance and intensity and give the fake image of omnipotent self and total condemnation of the “irrational” impulses. For some more insight on the cultural function of heroine and cocaine see Bonnie Blackwell, “The Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Narrative”, *College Literature* Vol.31, No.1, Winter 2004, 1-26, or John Barker, “Intensities of Labour: from Amphetamine to Cocaine”, *Mute* magazine – Culture and politics after the net, 07/03/2006, <<http://www.metamute.org/?q=en/Intensities-of-Labour-from-Amphetamine-to-Cocaine>>

43 This new tyranny of “plastic” aesthetics perhaps not by chance coincides with the recently defined War on Terror and War on Drugs led by George W. Bush.

44 Buck-Morss, *ibid.*, p. 21

45 *Ibid.*, p. 30

give the masses a double role, to be observer as well as the inert mass being formed and shaped.”<sup>46</sup> With this in mind, if one of the effects of this recent proliferation of images of human bodies on the screens is the numbness of the viewers, the other danger is to mistake our own body for that on the screen that needs intervention.

The surgeon as the hero of this story is transformed from the ether-frolic, through the function of having to piece together the causalities of imperialism and industrialization - “fixing” wounded soldiers and factory workers - and has reached his new highly aesthetic role: plastic surgery. His task is not anymore to stitch what is ripped off, but to provide us with a new, perfect body as the key to our eternal happiness. This new shift prolongs the dream of the possibility of the eternal youth and promotes the aesthetic categories of beauty. Nevertheless, it also serves as a cover-up for something else. Offering us the illusion of the bodies of today as complete and homogenized, these images hide the ones of the mutilated bodies of the workers and soldiers of today. With only the first version of reality in view, paradise seems to be just around the corner.

This new media system of buffers for the shocks of reality is expected to contribute further to the process of dehumanization of the perfect human. Or, as Slavoj Žižek formulated it:

*Human is not simply thrilled by the effect of the traumatic encounter – as Hegel said, he/she is able to “live with the negative”, to react on its destabilizing effects with weaving complicated symbolic spider webs. (...) specific human activity is not based on the development of human inherited potentials (...); it is conditioned by the external, traumatic encounter, the encounter with the unreachable desire of the Other (...) there is no inborn “language instinct”. There are, of course, genetic predispositions necessary for the human being to start to speak; but the person actually starts to speak, to enter into the universe of symbols, by reacting on the traumatic strokes – and the way it will react, or the way to overcome trauma through symbolization, CANNOT BE FOUND “in our genes”.<sup>47</sup>*

The potential Benjamin saw in filmmaking was based on his notion of a film director as a surgeon, as someone who cuts without anesthesia and produces shocks. Fearing that most of the artworks enter into the phantasmagoric field as entertainment, as part of the commodity world, he put the higher demand on art: “... to *undo* the alienation of the corporeal sensorium, to *restore the instinctual power of the human bodily senses for the sake of humanity’s self-preservation*, and to do this, not by avoiding the new technologies, but by *passing through* them.”<sup>48</sup> In switching from his role of being a neutral observer in the shape of a director to the active role of the actor, Jørgen Leth needed a bottle of Valium. Maybe the same

46 Ibid., p. 38.

47 Žižek, Slavoj, *No Sex Please, We are Posthumans*, *Prelom* No.1, 2001, p.158.

48 Buck-Morss, *ibid.*, p. 5.

tranquilizer will be needed when the surgeons of today exchange the place with the *hyle* bodies on operating tables. The only fear that remains is that the observer of this shift will not have any senses left to perceive the change.