NECRO-CAPITALISM AND COUNTER-IMAGES

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We are still flooded with images. The images that capitalism has of itself — a series of never-ceasing electric pulses travelling at light speed across the globe, perhaps — and the images we have of our relation to it. We might regard ourselves as 'postcapitalist' subjects, as citizens, as consumers, as neoliberalized individuals, or as members of collectives, communes and communities, as members of a religious or ethnic group, a political party, or as geographical beings, or even as members of a certain kind of internationalism, global humanism, or cosmic wholeness. It matters a lot how we understand who we are — as an isolated body, as part of a collective body, as a de-pressed subject, as a worker, a carer — and it matters how we conceive of ourselves in relation to broader abstractions that we have no individual control over. Relatedly, how we respond to the futures that are spoken about in our name, but not necessarily in the name of everyone, give us an image of what is possible. One of the hardest tasks before us lies in untangling what particular images of the world mean — which images of capital come from capital itself, and which from alternatives to it? Which abstrac-tions damage us, and which offer us images of hope? What should we be mapping and how should we be acting? Where do our enemies lie — in front of us, or hidden? When we talk about the future, what are saying we believe in? Dare we talk about the future when so much of the present lies in ruins around us?

Recent left proposals have called for a strong constructive attempt to bring about cer-tain futures — here automation will replace horrible work, Universal Basic Income will ensure that no one (or at least those in particular countries) will be absolutely poor and platforms, from online to governmental, will be taken over by those with a sustainable plan for the future, against those who seek to exhaust the earth and enslave humanity in the name of profit for a small few.[1] 'Postcapitalist' thinkers like Paul Mason attempt to describe new political subjects, following the death of older images (the proletariat, above all else): 'By creating millions of networked people, financially exploited but with the whole of human intelligence one thumb-swipe away, info-capitalism has created a new agent of change in history: the educated and connected human being'.[2] These educated and connected beings lie at one end of the production chain, a kind of canny consumer. What change might these 'new agents' bring about? Must they by neces-sity forget the routes through which the instruments they swipe come about? Is the connected human being immune from reactionary ideas, cult-like thinking or hatred? Franco 'Bifo' Beradi identifies three aspects of what he calls the 'looming war':

> The first front is the neoliberal power that is tightening its grip of governance, pur-suing the agenda of austerity and privatization. The second front is the anti-global Trumpism based on white resentment and working-class despair. The third front,

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1   See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future,* London: Verso, 2015.
2   Paul Mason, 'The End of Capitalism Has Begun', *The Guardian*, 17 July 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jul/17/postcapitalism-end-of-capitalism-begun.

taking place largely back-stage, is the growing necro-empire of terrorism, in all its different shapes of religious bigotry, national rage and economic strategy, that I identify as necro-capital.[3]

Included in this diagnosis is a mixture of governmental power, economic strategy, racial politics, religious impulses, and violence. We are immediately familiar with the 'war' that Bifo describes, and we can point to images, forces and activism that directly seeks to oppose this war with a militant kind of peace: a call for a return to social democratic politics, re-nationalization of public services, government funding of education; anti-racist politics and the 'second civil rights movement' in the form of Black Lives Matter protests in the US, UK and elsewhere; an endless call for tolerance in the face of nationalist and religious violence. But what exactly is necro-capital? Elsewhere, Bifo describes it in the following way:

> Neoliberal deregulation has opened the way to a regime of worldwide necro-economy: the all-encompassing law of competition has cancelled out moral prescriptions and legal regulations. Since its earliest phases, Thatcher's neoliberal philosophy prescribed war among individuals. Hobbes, Darwin, and Hayek have all been summoned to conceptualize the end of social civilization, the end of peace. Forget about the religious or ideological labels of the agents of massive violence, and look at their true nature. Take the Sinaloa Cartel and Daesh and compare them to Blackwater and Exxon Mobil. They have much more in common than you may think. Their common goal is to extract the maximum amount of money from their investments in the most exciting products of the contemporary economy: terror, horror, and death. Necro-capitalism is the emerging economic order of the world.[4]

Bifo's concludes with the stark claim that 'at the end, suicide'.[5] Neoliberalism, itself based on the resurrection of the Hobbesian 'war of all against all', has, according to Bifo, given way to a necro-neoliberalism that seeks to profit off of excitement in 'terror, horror and death'.[6] There is no doubt that war, drugs, sex, trafficking in bodies, terrorism are extremely profitable. The individual and collective corpses generated by these trades are sometimes circulated as images if they are deemed both palatable and shocking enough (think of the image of Alan Kurdi, the Syrian Kurdish boy whose drowned corpse was rendered horribly iconic by international media). But these images do not seem to generate a political depth but merely a kind of brief, horrified, sentimental response. Instead of opening houses to refugees, campaigning for open borders and safe passage, Western populations forget about these images within a matter of days. Necro-capitalism is also the profiting of the images of the dead, and we can talk about necro-capitalism as a kind of visual field as well as an economic tendency. We might also pause here for a moment here and ask a question that crosses economics and aesthetics — why exactly are 'terror, horror

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3   Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility,* London: Verso, 2017, p. 41.
4   Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, 'The Coming Global War: Is There Any Way Out?', *e-flux journal* 69 (January 2016), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/69/60582/the-coming-global-civil-war-is-there-any-way-out/.
5   Ibid.
6. Ibid.

and death' exciting? Why are there markets in these emotions and states of being? How do fictional and real images of violence contribute to the idea made material that these primal fears and forces are in any way something desirable?

Achille Mbembe's work on 'Necropolitics' has been extremely important for thinking about the real relationships at the heart of politics. He writes: '[i]nstead of considering reason as the truth of the subject, we can look to other foundational categories that are less abstract and more tactile, such as life and death'.[7] Mbembe, through a reading of Hegel, Bataille and Foucault that centres upon the relationship between politics, violence and death, points out the central role of slavery in any worthwhile conception of history: 'the humanity of the slave appears as the perfect figure of a shadow. Indeed, the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a "home", loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether).'[8] The slave, Mbembe states, is kept alive, but in a permanent 'state of injury'.[9] Slave life, Mbembe claims, is a form of 'death-in-life'. By combining Bifo and Mbembe's analyses, we can say that necro-capitalism is not simply the profiting from violence and terror, but is predicated upon violence and terror, and the entire history of humanity must be seen in this light if we are to understand how death and life are central to both aesthetics and economics, no matter how much both pretend to beauty or normality.

I am interested in ways of thinking about an anti-necro-capitalism that, in the first place, takes seriously the subjects and the suffering constructed by this kind of economy. I am interested in an aesthetics that recognises the power of violent images, and refuses to accept that all images are equal. We might be cynical, 'open to anything and everything', be worried about censorship, keep our safe search off, pride ourselves on our ability to watch graphic violence, to 'take' the most violent scenes of murder, rape and torture, but if we lose the ability to differentiate between real violence and fictionalized violence, because we have watched too many films and played too many games, then we are easy prey for necro-capitalism. It is difficult to make this argument, though, without appearing to take a moralistic or censorious approach. Yet, we should remember that we already live online in a world in which we are protected from certain images by people paid very little: 'content moderation' workers for Facebook, largely based in the Philippines, must see 'pornography, gore, minors, sexual solicitation, sexual body parts/images, racism' and remove these images and texts before users might also see them.[10] The psychological toll of this work is extreme and many of these workers quickly experience burnout. We may seek out images that horrify and terrorize us, but many workers do not have this choice.

By recognizing our complicity in the production and reproduction of violent words and images, we can begin to think and work with care to undoing the lust for pain that sustains necro-capitalism. But how is this possible when so many revolutionary images are themselves saturated in blood? Perhaps one of the images that most symbolizes

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7   Achille Mbembe, 'Necropolitics', trans. Libby Mientjes, *Public Culture* 15.1 (2003): 14.
8   Ibid., p. 21.
9.   Ibid., p. 21.
10   Adrian Chen, 'The Laborers who keep Dick Pics and Beheadings out of your Facebook Feed', *Wired*, 23 October 2014, https://www.wired.com/2014/10/content-moderation/.

necro-capitalism is beheading/decapitation — used by IS in their videos in particular as a warning to Westerners and other Muslims, as well as a recruiting tool for those whose bloodlust has been triggered. If we concern ourselves with images of beheading — after all, what did peasants do to monarchs, revolutionaries to their enemies — are we contributing to the same 'terror, horror and death' that Bifo identifies as central to necro-capitalism?

Against the violence of video-taped beheadings, I want to resurrect some ideas of positive acephalism, of political subjects that begin without heads. Hobbes's famous frontispiece to *Leviathan*, the sovereign head with the multitudinous body, is perhaps the clearest, and certainly one of the oldest, images we have of the state conceived of as a literal 'head' as well as a metaphorical 'head' of state. We know that, or we are *supposed* to know that, without the head the body will die. But each person in the multitude has a head, and none of these will stop working just because the crown has lost his 'crown'. In *Stasis*, Agamben discusses the various historical readings of the famous frontispiece to Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651), noting that in the manuscript prepared for Charles II, the tiny men that make up the body of the Leviathan were turned outwards to face the monarch, whereas in the other, main, frontispiece they face upwards towards the head of the sovereign. Both editions, in fact, therefore present the 'same' image, just for different readers. Pointing out that the Leviathan in the image appears *behind* the earth, and possibly in or above the sea, Agamben notes that the 'mortal-God' does not then reside in the city but outside it, in a kind of no-man's-land: 'The Common-wealth — the body political — does not coincide with the physical body of the city'.[11] The city in the image is also bereft of people, as they are all making up the body of the sovereign.

These two frontispieces may be 366 years old, but I think it has at least two things to tell us: one, that we should never be too hasty to give up on ideas of sovereignty and the state — even when platform and techno-capitalism seems to present us with models of horizontalism and globalism. States are repressive — the surveillance state, undercover policing, and border control – and privatization and franchising does not diminish the ultimate power of the state. The head in the shape of the ruling class is a false head, a head that pretends we need it when it is in fact parasitic upon the body of those who labor. And there are other reasons why decapitation seems so unpalatable. As Freud noted in a short text, 'Medusa's Head' from 1922, simply 'To decapitate = to castrate'. The fear of decapitation is an intensely sexed question. As Freud continues: 'The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother'.[12] Women, on this analysis, are *already* decapitated, headless. Why not then assume the role of the decapitated, the acephalic (and the aphallic!) from the start? What politics would follow?

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11   Giorgio Agamben, *Stasis: Civil War as a Political Paradigm (Homo Sacer, II, 2),* trans. Nicholas Heron, Edinburgh: University Press, 2015, pp. 27-29.
12   Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head', 1922.

The voiceless head, the head that is removed by force: perhaps is there some power here. How can we take back this always already decapitated and castrated position from those who would seek to behead us many times over? In Bataille's 'Programme (Relative to *Acéphale*)' from 1936, he writes the following: 'Realize the universal accomplishment of personal being in the irony of the animal world and through the revelation of an acephalic universe, one of play, not of state or duty'.[13] The final point in the programme says: 'Affirm the value of violence and the will to aggression insofar as they are the foundation of all power'.[14] Understanding the nature of violence, affirming it even, underpins Bataille's call for a headless universe, one where man war and labour out of duty, guilt or coercion. Bataille begins with the acceptance of destruction and violence — 'Take part in the destruction of the existing world, with eyes open to the world to come'[15] — in a way that might not accord with whatever residual feelings of pacifism, humanism and preservation we might want to hang onto. But, at the same time, it acknowledges the reality of aggression as a fundamental, perhaps the fundamental feature, of human life. Acephalism, understood as the revelation of a headless universe, a universe without rules, despite the need of those who wish to lead to invent them, is a playful, creative endeavour. It loathes the fascist state as much as it loathes the monarchical state, though is profoundly aware of those forces that can lead to the former taking hold.

Capital likes to *pretend* it is acephalic, as if networks are spontaneously generated from markets, but as austerity has shown us, it needs the state to squeeze those without money in order to bail out and redirect finance upwards. Capital pretends to hate the state, but needs it to maintain its own self-image. For many people, the state stripped of any public aspect, is merely repressive: courts, prisons, borders, refugee camps. What would it mean to seriously consider removing these apparatuses, of leading a collective, stateless life? It is necro-capital that makes us immediately conceive of such a decapitated existence as immediately one of scarcity and violence. But it is necro-capital that constructs the conditions for scarcity and violence, that replicates and profits from such conditions, from food to images and everything else. What images do we have of the energy that constitutes such a world? We do not think enough about how various kinds of energy constitutes our economics and our politics, and how our images of technological futures, however they are managed (by the state, or by multinational corporations), depend upon presumptions about what energy is and where it comes from. As Bataille puts it elsewhere:

> Man's disregard for the material basis of his life still causes him to err in a serious way. Humanity exploits given material resources, but by restricting them as it does to a resolution of the immediate difficulties it encounters […] it assigns to the forces it employs an end which they cannot have. Beyond our immediate ends, man's activity in fact pursues the useless and infinite fulfilment of the universe.[16]

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13   Georges Bataille, 'Programme (Relative to *Acéphale*)', *The Bataille Reader*, Fred Botting and Scott Wilson (eds), Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p. 121.
14   Ibid., p. 121.
15   Ibid., p. 121.
16   Georges Bataille, 'The Meaning of General Economy', *The Bataille Reader*, op. cit., 183.

Is necro-capital an attempt, in the most destructive way possible, to pretend that there is control over the material basis of our lives? Is it the excess energy generated by capitalism, fed back into a system that thinks nothing of monetizing pain and slaughter? For Bataille, it is the sun that provides humanity with a model of energy without exchange ('The origin and essence of our wealth are given in the radiation of the sun, which dispenses energy — wealth — without any return'[17]). Does necro-capitalism proceed under the image of a black sun? We forget the sky too often in our political and economic analyses, ceding the language of 'horizons' to dusty philosophies and the heavens to religion. If we imagine instead that the sky is our 'head', we will not need leaders with their heads pretending to look down, all the while dealing in the most corrupt things imaginable. Necro-capitalism is a beast of many heads, all of which start to resemble each other. But they forget where their energy comes from, preferring instead to dwell in the most destructive impulses. Those of us who do not believe in heads can nevertheless turn ours to the sky for an image of the world that understands that one does not need to traffic in violence to understand its power.

But we could also turn to another mythical character, another beast with many heads: the Hydra. As Peter Linebaugh points out:

> From the beginning of English colonial expansion in the early seventeenth century through the metropolitan industrialization of the early nineteenth, rulers referred to the Hercules-hydra myth to describe the difficulty of imposing order on increasingly global systems of labor. They variously designated dispossessed commoners, transported felons, indentured servants, religious radicals, pirates, urban laborers, soldiers, sailors, and African slaves as the numerous, ever-changing heads of the monster. But the heads, though originally brought into productive combination by their Herculean rulers, soon developed among themselves new forms of cooperation against those rulers, from mutinies and strikes to riots and insurrections and revolution.[18]

The horrors of necro-capitalism, the history of human violence, and the making economic of horror in slavery and exploitation, are seemingly insurmountable. Yet we must become better readers of images that neutralize us and make us complicit in this violence, and look and think instead towards images of alternative worlds that do not thrive upon and promote violence. Somewhere between acephalism and the many-headed hydra. This position would not pretend that destructive images and actions do not exist, or must be ignored, but rather understands the temptation and power of such a vision of the world. We should not seek to protect ourselves from horrible images, or rely on others to do the hard labour of image selection, but rather cultivate powerful political images that dialectically reverse necro-capitalist desires. Aggression may be a central feature of human life, but it can be addressed if it is understood, and channelled away from cruelty towards compassion and care.[19]

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17   Georges Bataille, 'Laws of General Economy', *The Bataille Reader*, op. cit., 189.
18   Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic,* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000, pp. 3-4.
19   Parts of this text draw upon earlier work done for the Amsterdam Sonic Acts festival, 2017.

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