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WASTED TEMPORALITIES,
CONTAMINATED SUBJECTS
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On one rectangular wood table a cigarette burns on a shell. Near the cigarette a small glass contains half a cup of sugar. An aluminum spoon sticks upward. From the sugar cup, about the same distance as is between the burning cigarette and the sugar, a white china dish holds salt and a dark green brown spice. A girl sits at this table. The pen in her right hand moves rapidly over a blue-lined page of a spiral notebook. Sitting on the seat of a dark wood chair which is next and similar to the one she's sitting on, whose back holds a copy of *American Heritage*, the open section of a worn-out leather handbag reveals a crumbled piece of white paper. Easy listening Greek music is playing. The girl is thinking that most people are saying that the human world is ending. This landscape is without propaganda or obsession. This landscape

without any given meaning is as present as any statement such as the world is about to end.

Kathy Acker, *Part II of Desire, A Play*

The following text includes excerpts of *Catastrophe as Form: Surviving Yourself*,¹ an exchange with the art historian Kerstin Stakemeier in which we, weary of the current volume of discourse on the end of the world and the crisis of capitalism—often used interchangeably—set out to distinguish between the terms “crisis,” “catastrophe,” and “apocalypse,” and the ideological content they carry. In particular, we discussed forms of narration in relation to the breakdown of narratives of progress and the linear progression of time that is implicated in such narratives. Our discussion departed from a shared understanding that the current conditions and their long prehistories, from colonialization, the transatlantic slave trade, and the birth of financial capitalism to the catastrophes of the twentieth century, call forth forms that shift our perception of what modernist and postmodernist registers are and have been, fundamentally.² It becomes apparent that the history of modernism is not one of thwarted realization, but that the catastrophes we see *are* modernism's realization. A realization in which postmodernism plays the part of its unwilling continuation.

This unwillingness is something that becomes clearly apparent in the postmodern novels of Kathy Acker. In a text from 1995, Acker took recourse to Hannah Arendt by arguing why she continued narrating in “dark times” (then under the Reagan and Bush administrations). Acker writes that:

Hannah Arendt suggests that the meaning of a “committed act,” that is her



phrase, is revealed only when the action itself has come to an end and become a story susceptible to narration. That is, “insofar as any mastery of the past is possible,” thus, insofar as any mastery of suffering is possible, “it consists in relating what has happened.” [...] When Arendt talks about story, about narration and narrative, she is not talking about a master narrative. She is talking about language as it moves from one point to another point. She is talking about meaning as it reveals itself and so is co-equivalent to language. [...] Arendt knows that writing, narration, does not end suffering: writing masters nothing. Narration, writing does something else. It restores meaning to a world which hardship and suffering have revealed as chaotic and senseless.³

But what—and this was the central question we asked ourselves—if the action itself doesn’t come to an end? What if you are still in the middle of it? Or rather not even “still in the middle”—there is no middle, there is no foreseeable end, the next action already overlaps the existing one without ending it, and so forth? And if not “progress” is there such a thing as “irreversibility” (as seen in the news that Earth will be turning into Venus due to a runaway greenhouse effect, the tipping point of which may have already been reached)?⁴

CRISIS

In our work over the last decade, Kerstin Stakemeier and I both sought to de-sensationalize the notion of crisis and to demonstrate that the term does not passively register as merely a periodic feature of capitalist normalcy but rather as the starting point of

an expanding intensification. To quote her from *Catastrophe as Form*:

While in Fordism and post-Fordism crisis was a form of narration, ideologically marked by a (sudden) onset, a dramatic climax and an (improved system reboot) end, within the current period of financialised capitalism, crisis is perpetually dramatised. So the crisis, which has been proclaimed since 2008, by now no longer appears as just another periodic and inherently systemic phenomenon of brutalist capitalist “progress.” Instead the idea of progress seems to have vanished as this crisis has institutionalised itself as a series of climaxes which appear not only in what is defined as the economic and political sectors of society, but has also spread into and mutated all spheres of human and non-human life. The contained modern temporality, within which crisis was but one returning state of the art of human life under capitalism, seems to disintegrate as crisis spreads, multiplies, intensifies and institutionalises itself. One of capitalism’s central features, the idea of perpetual progress—illustrated in the historical spiral of crisis, breakthrough and prosperity—seems to have turned from catalyst to cataclysm. Yet, capitalism is nowhere near vanishing from the face of the earth. How then are we to narrate our desires for exiting a situation in which the forms of narration through which we have been identifying ourselves have to themselves re-materialise in a different order?

We both reject the common and continued use of the term crisis for what has occurred globally since 2008, because, to our minds, it implies two (diametrically opposed) fallacies.

The first serves the dominant discourse by implying that we are dealing with a discreet and passing phenomenon, which obscures the extent to which the developments of the past decade were foreseeable, as well as the extent to which the subsequent “management of the crisis” through, for example, so-called austerity measures, further intensified the downward economic trajectory. The second fallacy originates in a reading of Marx, in which capitalism’s “cyclical crisis” will ultimately, dialectically work toward an overcoming of capitalism itself.⁵ We also reject the accelerationists’ hollow notion that by harnessing the powers of technology, science, as well as science fiction we would be able to somehow “outrun its [capitalism’s] catastrophic sprint” (as writer Oxana Timofeeva remarks),⁶ particularly because this remains so heavily tied to the idea that capitalism can be overcome by intensifying its self-destructive tendencies (but how much more intense can they get?).

APOCALYPSE

So what about “apocalypse”? As critical theorist Benjamin Noys observed in the 2010 article “Apocalypse, Tendency, Crisis”:

We are living in a time of crisis and potential apocalypse, with the overlapping of the financial crisis, ecological crisis and the crisis of movements of resistance. The apocalyptic imagination feeds on this to produce dreams or nightmares of a world “cleansed” of humanity, from 2012 to the History Channel’s *Life After People*. These fundamentally reactionary fantasies can only imagine redemption of our fallen world on the condition that humanity ceases to exist, or is reduced to the “right” number of the “saved.”⁷

In the context of post-2008 art world discourse, this “apocalyptic affect” found particular expression in speculative realism’s assorted attempts at thinking “the world-without-us.”⁸ I hate to quote Žižek, but I will on this:

As Lacan pointed out, this is the fundamental subjective position of fantasy: to be reduced to a gaze observing the world in the condition of the subject’s non-existence—like the fantasy of witnessing the act of one’s own conception, parental copulation, or the act of witnessing one’s own burial, like Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn.⁹

According to Stakemeier (again from *Catastrophe as Form*):

[These theoretical positions are] mostly borne out of academia, performing a seemingly infinite theoretical radicality that knows nothing of its consequences because it is by definition only a mind-game, entirely based on the stable subject position of its (male) authors. [...] What these pseudo-goth writers propose is a fundamental ontology of negativity. Theirs is a negation of all life and thus is first and foremost misanthropic, or to use the more (academically) fashionable term: inhuman.

But, as writers such as Donna Haraway, Rosi Braidotti, N. Katherine Hayles and Sadie Plant have demonstrated, there is an a-humanism that can describe an epistemic (instead of a fundamental) ontology of negativity and thus perceive our present as the *catastrophe* that it is, without opting for an eternal death-wish. Where the pseudo-radical gesture of fundamental negation would rather

die than question its own categorical justification, the epistemic understanding of absolute negativity questions exactly the categorical justifications that our lives are based on as they become more and more impossible.

CATASTROPHE

Here “catastrophe” enters as the third term that distinguishes itself from “crisis” and “apocalypse” and opens up a different ethical and political register that implies neither catalytic cure nor redemption for the chosen. Again Kerstin Stakemeier (from *Catastrophe as Form*):

In Walter Benjamin’s writing, and in a whole lineage of political thought since, the concept of catastrophe has thus signalled not so much the end of the world, but more the emergence of a lived, materialised temporality which emerges through the interruption of oppressive normalcy. Benjamin’s famous dictum that what is catastrophic is that the present reproduces itself, points in exactly that direction. Walter Benjamin in his eighth thesis, “On the Concept of History,” written in 1940, had argued, that “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the state of emergency in which we live is not the exception but the rule” and that “it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency” to enable a revolutionary “leap into the open air.”

A similar revolutionary argument is made by Oxana Timofeeva in her text “The End of the World: From Apocalypse to the End of History and Back.”¹⁰ Timofeeva begins by outlining a more historically specific reading of the Book of Revelations, according to which we

do indeed live in post-apocalyptic times—the Number of the Beast corresponds to the emperor Nero, and the apocalypse to the persecution of the Christians in the Roman Empire. Timofeeva then subsumes this “already past” apocalypse under the category of catastrophe more generally (flood, war, genocide and natural disasters). She does so in order to distinguish the catastrophic from the “merely” traumatic and to eschew any notion of cure that the term “trauma” (in the psychoanalytic sense) evokes. Despite this avowed rejection, she comes however close to psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott’s assessment that “clinical fear of breakdown is the fear of a breakdown that has already been experienced” and that “there are moments ... when a patient needs to be told that the breakdown, a fear of which destroys his or her life, has already been.”¹¹ Timofeeva writes:

Catastrophe is what already happened, no matter how long ago—it happened in prehistory, or it’s happening right now, although people are still expecting some bigger, ultimate catastrophe in the future, as if the previous ones did not really count. I want to make this point as clear as possible. Our collective imagination, overwhelmed by all kinds of pictures and scenarios of a future final collapse—be it another world war, Armageddon, an alien invasion, an epidemic or a pandemic, a zombie virus, a robot uprising, an ecological or natural catastrophe—is nothing but projections of this past-present. We project onto the future what we cannot endure as something which already occurred, or which is happening now. We still believe that the worst is yet to come—it is a perspective, but not a reality, and therefore our reality is still not that bad. A fear of the future and anxiety about





some indefinite event (“we will all die”) is easier to suffer than a certain, irreparable, and irreversible horror that has just happened (“we are all already dead”).

Timofeeva, then, turns this into a rallying cry for a “catastrophic communism” that would “accept the fact of our real-time apocalypse, and take it over as the only true revolutionary situation” for “only when already dead, and facing no future, do we really have nothing to lose.” But what sort of zombie revolution would this produce?

THERE WAS NEVER A COHERENT WORLD IN THE FIRST PLACE

Artist Hannah Black both sidesteps Oxana Timofeeva’s argument and takes it a step further, when, more politically and historically explicit, she writes in “New World Disorder” of 2017 that instead of merely accepting that the “end of the world has already taken place,” we need to accept that there never was such a thing as a “coherent world” in the first place.¹²

What once appeared to me as ancient history giving a shimmer of interest to the family tree—the camp, the ship, the plantation—lately reveals itself as a continual unfolding in the present and the future. No one is inherently safe from the violence of capitalism, and whiteness is a violently upheld dream that safety is real. What once appeared as to-come—the fascist dystopia—in fact lies behind and all around us. Some people are smart or hurt enough to have known since forever how nothing has ever stopped happening, that the genocides and exclusions are ongoing and as urgent as when they were first

enacted. How are the rest of us to grasp this gridlocked time? To understand the nature of capitalist society we must understand its foundational and ongoing violences. To understand our relation to the governments who issue our passports and regulate our lives, we collectively reencounter a deep and long-ago pain, as if for the first time. Though it can feel apocalyptic, this pain or fear of pain is not the end of the world, because there has never been a world: The image of a coherent world, a supplement to the ideology of whiteness, is upheld in the violence of the border, the nation, even the law. Let it go.

And she concludes:

It is too late, but it has been too late for a long time, and everything that happens is fated to happen belatedly, after its time, after its proper use. And yet we will go on finding belated uses for all the things rendered useless by their wrong time.

CONSEQUENTIAL HORROR

This drive to find “belated uses for all the things rendered useless by their wrong time” also resided at the heart of my feature film *Moderation* (2016).

In the opening scene set in the Egyptian desert a “cursed object” unleashes a sandstorm that traverses and contaminates the homes, workshops, and laboratories of the film’s protagonists (a horror movie director and her closest collaborators). This entity-cum-storm destabilizes the fiction of a coherent reality and reveals an expanded kind of horror: a granular, shifting, and liminal state that does not only open onto abjection and death but

is also generative of new forms of becoming. Apperception continues to function even while subjects are no longer stable, and the protagonists use their fictional roles from the past (as post-apocalyptic movie stars and possessed ballerinas) to support their increasingly catastrophic present.

As Kerstin Stakemeier wrote elsewhere:

Only the virtuality of horrors past can shield the reality from the horrors of the present. And this is where Kirschner's horror really lies: by and by the "possible" abandons the setting, because no functional connection is able to keep its form here, the real becomes virtual. This might be exactly why the idea of horror seems so very productive right now—because its form is the form of consequential deviation, it measures out the consequences of affirmative forms of behavior, of the reproduction of the social as a genuinely pathological state. [*Moderation*] doesn't seek out the sensationalism of extremities, the voyeuristic love of catastrophe. What it refers to is rather a consequential simulation that always finds itself gravitating back towards reality, because reality on the most banal level contains so much horror. And consequential horror signifies a narrative structure that today opens up a life form—rather than an infinite death.¹³

NO LONGER SUITABLE FOR ITS ORIGINAL PURPOSE

The film *Moderation* doesn't pretend to know whether we have already seen the worst or whether the worst is yet to come. Rather, I was guided by a notion of waste as something that is "no longer suitable for its original purpose." It stems from a legal definition

I came across in the course of my research. However, over time, this prosaic phrase grew into the consuming question of whether in a post-catastrophic reality anything at all could be saved, and if it could, what fundamental transformations would it have to undergo?

On the search for answers or at least related explorations of destruction, deformation, and mutation, I found myself drawn to directors operating at the fringes of horror cinema in times of rupture and reaction, in postwar Japan, Cold War Europe, the Infitāh era in Egypt, the first decades of the Metapolitēfsi in Greece, and more recently during the subprime mortgage crisis in the US.¹⁴ A common thread among horror films produced during these periods is a presentation of lived experience that is neither naturalistic nor sublimated through the tropes of supernatural horror. Rather the horror genre is used in order to bundle repressed social and political traumas in the figure of the monstrous, and, thus, to re-ground the possibility of agency operating at its limits.

To reinforce this last point, *Moderation* develops (in contrast to conventional horror, which relies on shock) in terms of exhaustion and deceleration. The monstrous settles like a veil of fine sand over the scenes and dialogue. It announces itself not suddenly but insidiously, which is also reflected in the sober choice of title and the low-key, documentary-like shooting style. The camera's mobile and quasi-sentient eye restlessly scans the interiors of the protagonists' homes, but without implying the point of view of an evil presence as in conventional horror films. Its lingering attention to furnishings, landscapes, machinery, and waste, and their elevation to equal status with the dramatic action works counter to the impulse to flee from the scene of horror or to seek it out repeatedly for kicks.

Moderation's motivation, therefore, is neither drawn from an immanent end nor from an assumption that we're already dead. Instead it dilates time for the viewer to dwell in what the artist, psychoanalyst and philosopher Bracha L. Ettinger has called "uncanny anxiety," "uncanny awe" and "uncanny compassion." "Art is generosity in precisely this sense," writes Ettinger, "not necessarily a happy generosity, not a promise of happiness, since its promise is to concern and involve you by anxiety, awe and compassion in trauma or joy alike, tracing and transmitting whatever is transmitted, in horror and grace alike."¹⁵

If there is a sense of finitude, consequentiality, and irreversibility in *Moderation*, it relates to the loss of several, overlapping, once possible, once functionally connected worlds to which these interiors testify. These interiors—in Cairo, Athens, and Rome—were depicted as I found them, but I also searched for them with the interiors of specific horror films from Cold-War Europe, Infitāh-era Egypt and post-junta Greece in mind. They are material witnesses to worlds that were animated by certain kinds of political and aesthetic convictions, evidenced by eclectic mixtures of high art and pop culture, antiques and bric-a-brac, books (in several languages), movie memorabilia and everyday use objects salvaged from the trash—in short, *things rendered useless by their wrong time*.

If by the "end of the world" we also mean "the end of time" and by "the end of time," "the simultaneity of all time" than these interiors are haunted by conflagrations of historically and geographically disparate periods and styles, gathered together according to the sensibilities of a Mediterranean cinema elite, whose aspirations were arrested by political reaction, economic hardship as well as internal contradictions.



These domestic spaces in their dysfunction reach out to Walter Benjamin's accounts of nineteenth-century bourgeois interiors, in which residents sought refuge from the shock of systemic expansion beyond their control. Reabsorbing commodities into sentimental and personal mythologies—here knickknacks, mementos, and photographs—turned into "totemic objects that ward off the future and drag inhabitants back into a past that shelters them" as writer Esther Leslie formulated it.¹⁶

The spaces in *Moderation* equally, in dysfunctional ways, brush against William Hogarth's satirical eighteenth-century interiors—I'm thinking here of *Marriage à la Mode* in particular—in which a newly bankrupted aristocracy meets with a newly affluent merchant class. Together they furnish their parlors in a hideous mixture of styles and adorned them with part-art object, part-colonial loot, part-morally decadent pop culture. Look at that mantelpiece! *That* is the apocalypse!

As Kerstin Stakemeier concluded in *Catastrophe as Form*:

One way of seeking out exits would be by retrospectively estranging one's own pre-histories. If "the past" is "coming apart" we might as well seek out what

is uncovered by its disintegration. If we look at contemporary theoretical de-borderings of European cultural history, like Erhard Schüttpeitz's proposition to fundamentally expand our notion of modernity towards its spatial as well as temporal minorisation, or Siegfried Zielinski's development of what he calls "variantology," digging into deep time tracing back media inventions and their transversal cultural belonging, we find that here it is not least this normalised modern temporality itself whose construction becomes questionable. Not all culture turns towards horror, but ours surely does ...

1. Anja Kirschner and Kerstin Stakemeier, "Catastrophe as Form: Surviving Yourself," in *Animal of the State, Fiction through Reality* (Munich: Akademie der Bildenden Künste München, 2016), 123–32.
2. As is argued, for example, by Achille Mbembe in *Critique of Black Reason* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
3. Kathy Acker, "Writing, Identity, and Copyright in the Net Age," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 28, no.1 (Spring 1995): 94.
4. George Dvorsky, "Earth will turn into a Venuse-like hell earlier than previously thought," *We Come from the Future* website, July 30, 2013, <http://io9.gizmodo.com/earth-will-turn-into-a-venus-like-hell-earlier-than-pre-961194748>.
5. As is argued, for example, by Paul Mason in *PostCapitalism: A Guide to Our Future* (London: Allen Lane, 2015).
6. Oxana Timofeva, "The End of the World: From Apocalypse to the End of History and Back," *e-flux Journal*, no. 56 (June 2014), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/56/60337/the-end-of-the-world-from-apocalypse-to->

the-end-of-history-and-back.

7. Benjamin Noys, "Apocalypse, Tendency, Crisis," *Mute*, February 3, 2010, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/apocalypse-tendency-crisis>.
8. Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Picador, 2007) and Eugen Thacker, *In the Dust of This Planet* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011).
9. Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (New York: Verso, 2011), 80.
10. Timofeva, *The End of the World*.
11. Donald W. Winnicott, "Fear of Breakdown" (1974), in *Psycho-Analytic Explorations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 90.
12. Hannah Black, "New World Disorder," *Artforum Slant*, February 27, 2017, <https://www.artforum.com/slant/id=66897>.
13. My translation. For further considerations see Kerstin Stakemeier, *Entgrenzter Formalismus: Verfahren einer antimodernen Ästhetik*, PoLYpeN (Berlin: b_books, 2017), 237–46.
14. I am thinking here of directors such as Sunya Ito, Andrzej Żuławski, Nikos Nikolaidis, Muhammad Shebl, and George A. Romero.
15. Bracha L. Ettinger, "Uncanny Awe, Uncanny Compassion and Matrixial Transjektivty beyond Uncanny Anxiety," in *Psychoanalysis in French and Francophone Literature and Film*, ed. James Day (2011), 38.
16. Esther Leslie, "Siegfried Krakauer and Walter Benjamin: Memory from Weimar to Hitler," in *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 131.

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