

The Poetics Seminar

3. The Fugitive (Notes: November 22, 2017)

We've been approaching poetics not only in terms of poetry and language; instead, I'm looking to emphasize poetics as a larger framework that can supply us with a creative discourse: poetics as I'm imagining it is a way of being, doing, and talking – it is a paradigm or model for performing subjectivity and knowledge: how we live and work as people, and how we can deepen that living and working according to a “creative attitude”. If art is the practice of freedom, as Judy Chicago states, then we must find ways to practice that freedom as well as pose it as a discourse – a language, a culture – to argue for it.

It is my feeling that poetics is an expression of freedom: freedom from a prescriptive form of rationality and reason (the fool), and freedom from the restrictions of identity as a singularity (the monster). Instead, stupidity and not knowing, cultivating one's body and drawing resources from the hidden, these relate us explicitly to the borders of our social order: they are *lines of flight* (as Deleuze would say), that ultimately expand precisely the limits of freedom: to enable the crafting of subjectivity as a multiplicity.

Today, I want to turn to the figure of the Fugitive: the fugitive is in a sense defined by “lines of flight”: by forms of escape – a running away, the fugitive is searching for a way out. In doing so, it develops and generates an array of methods; from secret codes to smuggling operations, camouflaging to hiding out, the fugitive becomes skilled at disappearance, and at surviving outside the law or the normative.

In this way, we can appreciate these methods as poetic in so far as they must work in and around the proper and the powerful; the boundaries of law and order. In other words, the fugitive is always carving out new paths that explicitly unsettle borders. Here, we can think about a general relation between poetics and wandering, drift and travel: the wish for movement, for moving toward unknown places: to be dislocated, or to relate to the conditions of displacement. This seems to be a primary drive of the imagination: to be captivated by the possibility of the foreign and the far away: to leave the familiar and to come into contact with the unknown: to extend one's physical borders.

Here, the Fugitive leads us to what we can call “the art of escape”, or the escape artist.

Night

Escape becomes a form of practice, especially for those in danger, under threat, or driven by certain needs; yet, we might also appreciate smaller forms of escape, for instance, found in the cultures and experiences of nightlife.

Let's consider the night as a particular time and space that is often populated by fugitives: we might say, runaways are able to move undercover at night; it provides a cover, as well as a framework for escape.

I would propose that the night forces another orientation; it is immediately another temporal and spatial experience: when the sun goes down we enter a space of ambiguity; everything hovers: background and foreground grow less distinct, bodies

seem to appear suddenly, out of nowhere, and then disappear again; our understanding shifts – we must look to be sure we're not being followed; the night requires another way of approaching others; conversations change, identities bend – we can't be sure who someone is, or what they may become at night.

We hide in the night, and we lose ourselves; we fear and tremble, as well as search for a new sense of freedom at night.

*We might consider this in relation to questions of labor. The working day, as that time period of productivity, of attending school, visiting offices and institutions, and where we perform on a rational level – the structures of work demand productive behavior – these are deeply contrasted by the night; once work is done, we perform other modes of conduct and contact. The night becomes an opportunity for having fun, for getting drunk, for experimentation and for escaping the reasonableness of production.

*the Night Club / architectures of disorientation and pleasure

We can therefore understand how a sense of freedom is supported through what we can call a “logic of the nocturnal”: this logic is defined by a remaking of subjectivity, a kind of “dressing up” and “going out”, of becoming other and which is often expressed through forms of “erotic behavior”.

*Here we need to understand the erotic as a “life-force” / a vitality of being a body: a desiring expressivity deeply connected to pleasure.

*Audre Lorde / “the erotic” as the “sharing of joy”; which leads us into forms of “commingling”; an intensity of contact and interaction.

“From such a condition”, she writes, “we begin to feel deeply all aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of.”

It is because of this that we might understand why the night is also deeply suspect; it is the time of criminals and illegal or immoral behavior – the night in a way spills over into crime: robberies and muggings, fights, smuggling operations and secret rendezvous find their ultimate opportunity at night; shadows immediately become a safe haven for enacting forms of misconduct, in support of irrational and socially disruptive actions.

Therefore, the night is also fully occupied by the police. The two meet and occur at the same moment, on the same street: the erotic force of bodies and the agents of control. Law and order are challenged by the conditions of the night and the logic of the nocturnal; liminal subjects, liminal knowledge, liminal relations shaped by violence and the unseen – these give challenge to the dictates of productive labor and rational ordering.

Invisibility

We can elaborate the poetics of the night by thinking more about invisibility: the night in a way reorders our sense of sight and appearance, turning us toward the hidden, the secretive, and the unseen.

Invisibility is also deeply poetic: I think artists often have a strong relation to the invisible, if we think of the ephemeral and the immaterial, to what is not quite apparent, but instead moves in traces, shadows, sounds.

*Invisibility seems shaped by a poetic imagination, for poetics is often relating us to the edges of the visible: to what lies in between things, to what passes away, to what moves in ghostly forms.

*we might say: poetics speaks the invisible.

Invisibility is a complex and paradoxical thing – already to name it as such, is to enter this paradox – which challenges conceptions of subjectivity, materiality as well as notions of truth. It therefore provides an extremely unique platform for thinking and for cultural expressions that appear by disappearing.

I want to start by referencing a text by Camiel van Winkel, and what he calls “the regime of visibility”: immediately Winkel proposes that contemporary culture demands images:

He writes: “Life in a world dominated by visual media is subject to a permanent pressure to furnish the missing visuals; to visualize practices and processes that do not belong to the visual. This is the regime of visibility”. (Camiel van Winkel)

Winkel captures what we might call “the imperative to visualize”: the very idea of being present as an individual, for instance, is fundamentally based on the act of “appearing”: to stand before another, to be accounted for.

As van Winkel further states: “my identity is no longer located in the inner regions of my selfhood, but in my expression of them – in the way I design my personality, in the signals that I send to my environment. ...that which is invisible does not exist.”

I might suggest, that what Winkel points to is how the regime of visibility produces subjectivity, locating us within the field of appearance, which today is governed by a technical structuring.

*as Snowden has revealed, our visibility is no longer about the face, but rather our digital movements, allowing us to be seen in so many new ways.

In focusing on invisibility then, I wonder if it might provide a means by which to unsettle the regime of visibility – to disrupt the imperative to be visual – while to also search for other ways of appearing and of looking:

*to recover a space, a scene, a material, to the side of the politics of the gaze.

What is interesting about invisibility is how it is present *as* a negative; the invisible is what we do not see, but also, what we are not allowed to see; in other words, what is hidden from view; this might be a form of unlawful action, a mechanism of surveillance, or the undercover dealings of nations; to be invisible is to operate beyond accountability; it is a space for secrets, and for secret exchanges; invisibility can be about silence, as well as the silenced; about erased histories, or erased people: the disappeared; it can also be about taking back power, by going underground, forming secret societies, or sub-cultural movements; or by demanding the right to be visible according to one's own terms.

Might invisibility be a way of generating opportunities for escape; for finding ways around the demands of the visible; for new relationships and cultural practices?

What we might call: invisible practices.

One early example of invisible practices can be found in the establishment of the Invisible College, which consisted of a group of natural philosophers who gathered in London in the mid-1600s. The group was essentially dedicated to investigating forms of knowledge through experimental means; with links to alchemy, the occult, and mysticism, the College operated in total secrecy.

What the Invisible College points to is of course the phenomenon of secret societies. Secret societies operate as invisible cultures; they keep themselves hidden, and they do so in order to pursue things often at odds with established culture and the normative patterns of exchange.

There are many such examples, but one in particular can be found in the work of Ivan Jirous, and the related Plastic People of the Universe, a band that Jirous managed. Operating in former Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and 70s, the PPU was a psychedelic rock band heavily influenced by Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground, and that formed around a greater wave of resistance culture in the country at this time; their work and general attitude was specifically related to what Jirous theorized as “second culture”.

*rather than oppose the totalitarian system directly, Jirous and the PPU sought to nurture a second culture, one lying underneath the first; this took the form of gatherings in the countryside, with music and poetry, but also, the production of a type of language and lyrics that often bordered on the mythological, drawing upon references to Kabala and Jewish mysticism, as well as Celtic mythology; even John Lennon and Yoko Ono feature as mythological beings.

Going underground for Jirous was a type of spiritual home for creative resistance. Through “second culture” the “real aim is to overcome the hopeless feeling that it is of no use to try anything and show that it is possible to do a lot, but only for those who are willing to act and who ask little for themselves, but instead care a lot for others.”

*what type of poetics can be found in the underground? A poetics of resistance? Of working together?

*Forbidden Journals / samizdat

Another example of invisible practice is found in the secret movement known as the Mexican Perforation, a group of underground explorers living in France. One action performed by the Mexican Perforation was the mounting of secret film screenings directly underneath the Cinémathèque Française in Paris.

Discovered by the Police in 2004, the underground chamber contained film projectors, a library of various films from the 1950s, as well as a collection of horror films, a kitchen, and other appliances powered through appropriated electricity lines. As Lazar Kunstmann, spokesman for the group stated, “The Mexican Perforation is a group of urban explorers whose members have more than 20 years experience. Transforming places is what they do everyday, so making a cinema was an easy thing to organize.” Located underneath the Cinémathèque Française, the underground cinema operated as a counter-space to the official aboveground cinema: to literally occupy and amplify the subterranean territory of the Cinémathèque.

*form of “squatting” / “smuggling”

We might describe such an approach, as a form of critical echo; while the Mexican Perforation is a secret society, they consciously address the cultures aboveground; this was expressed in the Mexican Perforation's film programming, which was organized as a comment to the films being shown in the cinema just overhead. The underground cinema, in echoing the world above, aimed to subvert established culture, carving out a space for alternative viewing: for a critical visibility.

I wonder if we may understand practices of invisibility as an attempt *to be* present through absence; to carve out a place especially when one has no place, or access to self-determination; to find a way of escaping through acts of echoing, shadowing, smuggling and camouflaging.

*Invisibility enables a form of practice so as to operate undercover from the law of the visible; from the idea that knowledge is only in what we see; and from the imperative to visualize.

Creole Poetics

Finally, I want to turn to the work of Édouard Glissant, a Caribbean theorist working on issues of post-colonialism.

The creole, in this sense, specifically relates to the colonial histories of the Caribbean, and those descendants of immigrants born on the islands, and at times, from mixed parents, usually of European and African descent.

*The creole as the emergence of local languages that mix European, African tongues, and indigenous Caribbean languages. In this regard, we can use the notion of the creole as an expression of escape. As Glissant emphasizes, creole, or *creolization*, is the production of a cultural, linguistic politics by which to overcome the relation between master and slave, between a linguistic school and a mother tongue, between ideas of the cultured and the savage.

He writes: “Multiplicity has invaded vehicular languages and is an internal part of them from now on, even when they seem to resist any centrifugal movement. What does this multiplicity consist of? The implicit renunciation of an arrogant, monolingual separateness and the temptation to participate in worldwide entanglement.” (Glissant)

Glissant argues for a *creoled* position, and ultimately uses the term “a poetics of relation” to describe this: for him, poetics specifically draws disparate things into contact, joining what otherwise may not generally meet into a form of relation, *collision*. The creole is not only a simple mixing, but the production of a poetic relation, one that specifically unsettles the idea of homeland, and of origin – the creole is necessarily a form of stranger that ruptures the colonial project of language and national meaning by introducing an ambiguity of origin, a broken tongue, a language of escape. The Creole provides the possibility for a future; it promises a flight toward new horizons; it is always introducing the possibility of new languages and new narratives.

We can appreciate Glissant’s idea of poetics by looking at another term he proposes, that of echo-world.

*a world of echoes that shifts from ideas of origin to that of relationality, for we may never know for sure from where or whom an echo first began. Instead, the echo passes

from one to the next, expanding as it goes, and dizzying the certainty of any singular perspective with a voice that is out of place.

*Reggae / practice of:

“versioning” / songs are basically for continual remaking:

“mixing” / working with the constituent parts; studio remix

“doubling” / *I and I* / I and this other; the seen and the spirit of oneself; and all humankind

*all these point to a condition and subject position of “displacement”, which unsettles the notion of “origin” and “original”: all things are but versions and mixes.

Reggae is fundamentally a music of the displaced and the colonized; from this, it produces a poetics of echoes and delays: it says – *you may capture my body, but you never have my soul*: Reggae is an art of escape.

Works to consider:

Gordon Matta-Clark / cuts; the work of the negative: to reposition architecture

Office Baroque (1977)

Splitting (1972)

Days End (1974)

Bas Jan Ader / falling, disappearing, wanderer: poetic disappearance

Fall Series (early 1970s) / failure; disintegration

In Search of the Marvelous (1975)

Lui Bolin / camouflage; to “hide in the light”

“the invisible man”

Julius von Bismarck / the image that isn’t there; covert projections

Fulgurator

Theaster Gates / fugitive materials:

“Sanctum” (2014) / discarded materials from religious and labor sites

“The Minor Arts” (2017)

*roof of a decommissioned church

*library of Ebony magazine

*gym floor from a disused high school

“My Labor is My Protest”

Bracha Ettinger / “the exile”: trauma, memory that is not one’s own; carried in the body; drawing as “withdrawing”: a drawing with the other / the page as a container for lost souls; a binding gesture:

I turn to look back and I never find what is always there: absence