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Writing the Future: The Circular and the Transformative in Revolutionary Politics

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A being, any being, comes into comprehensible, representable, communicable existence when it is packaged within a certain form. The being and its form do not correspond with each other *a priori*, but the formal mediation is constitutive of any knowledge. Crucial, then, to any adequate understanding of beings is a constant reflection upon the forms they take and through which we encounter them. A story, likewise, comes into concrete existence through an emplotment that gives meaning to otherwise arbitrary occurrences. How a story is told becomes the site of struggle, for we learn the story through its plot and act accordingly. Plot, therefore, *is* politics.

At a time when past failures and frustrations cast long shadows into the contemporary field of emancipatory politics, it is more urgent than ever to retrace how the story of modern emancipation to date has been written. Among its various plots, revolution is extolled as the most liberating and progressive, for it is conceived as a transformative action that will turn *history* into a new chapter.¹ In revolutionary politics, transformation is underpinned by a fundamental opposition between the present and the future. While the present is charged with discontent, displacement, and dispossession, an authentic future is not merely a better version of the present – that would be *reformation* rather than *transformation* – but is fundamentally different, completely reconstituted, and altogether new. Unlike reformism, revolutionary politics regards gradual improvement not as genuine emancipation but rather as an unwitting accomplice in the perpetuation, if not reinforcement, of the present situation. This belief is justified by the fear that scalable changes will be appropriated into a Sisyphean cycle that is inherently unchangeable, the fear, as Alain Badiou deplures, not of failure but of victory: “we notice that we have won in vain, and that our victory paves the way for repetition and restoration. That, for the state, a revolution is never anything more than an intervening period.”² The plot-politics of revolution, therefore, is constructed by the tension between the circularity of the same and the radicality of the different: the future is authenticated only if it completely differs from the present.

Because of the split between the present and the future, the changeover must be transformative as it *transcends* the present *formation* so as to initiate a new one. Transformation aims to build a skywalk that achieves the difficult balance between

¹ *Histoire* is a French word that means both “history” and “story” in English. Here I invoke the two meanings simultaneously.

² Alain Badiou, *The Communist Hypothesis*, trans. David Macey and Steve Corcoran (London: Verso Books, 2010), 23.

immediate problems and utopian horizons, or between what Seyla Benhabib calls the “explanatory-diagnostic” and the “anticipatory-utopian” aspects of critical theory. Its necessity is justified by the circular hypothesis, according to which the absence of a transformative action induces an irreducible distance between the inescapable present and the unattainable future. However, how do we ever know when transformation has genuinely occurred? Epistemologically speaking, how do we know and verify our knowledge that we are on the other side of the transformation and not simply repeating the history? What happens when transformation is itself a utopia that can be imagined but not embodied, when transition becomes a permanent state of affairs, rather than a bridge? Drawing on the concept of the sublime and related theories, literature, and daily discourse, this paper seeks to examine revolutionary politics in terms of its ontology of change with a focus on 20th century socialism. Contradictions internal to this politics provide an opportunity to return to and deconstruct the hypothesis of a circular present which justifies a transformed future. Revealing this hypothesis to be infused with masculine bias and agendas, I attempt at formulating a different plot-politics of emancipation underwritten by a re-conception of the present.

Dialectical or Cyclical?

The dialectical essence of Marxism is perhaps best captured in the famous passage from *The Communist Manifesto*: “What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.”³ According to Marxist dialectic, which takes its form from Hegelian dialectic, the thesis (i.e., the bourgeoisie) generates its antithesis (i.e., the proletariat), then the antagonism between the two is resolved by means of a synthesis (i.e., a communist society). However, once this theory began to unfold historically, the simplicity that used to be oracle-like seemed comically insensitive to the complex workings, re-workings, and mis-workings of anti-capitalist projects, of which, to make the matter worse, none came to bear fruit. Conditioned and exhausted by the tragedy of the twentieth century, socialist ventures today are either overly cautious, accomplishing no more than nostalgia-seeking, leak-filling, sub-plotting, and alternative-altering, if not merely repeating the old narrative; or overly radical, absorbed into the interiority of nihilism that spasmodically erupts into an equally other- and self-destructive finale of ultimate sacrifice.

³ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (London: Verso Books, 2012), 50.

To assess in a more informed manner what has gone awry in the dialectical scheme of advance, I bisect this phenomenon into what I call *macro-dialectic* and *micro-dialectic*. Macro-dialectic refers to Marxist dialectic that attempts to delineate the general form of historical development, whereas micro-dialectic describes the internal friction, the historical perversion, the to and fro that takes place in the shadow of the macro-structure and subversively dissipates its will to power. In more concrete language, micro-dialectic occurs when the primary antithesis acquires the status of a new thesis and generates a subset of antithetical effects secondary, (and in turn) tertiary, quaternary, and so on. These derivative effects rebound, deflect, complicate, and offset the primary antithetical project and distract it from its intended destination, distorting the linear path towards synthesis into an infinitely zigzagged one. In short, the forward momentum of macro-dialectic is neutralized by its own micro-dialectic effects.

The oxymoron of ‘permanent transitional phase’ articulately depicts the phenomenon of micro-dialectical stasis, for which China stands as an exemplar. In a simplified version of China’s communist history, both its foremost triumphs and sorrows are the loci of micro-dialectical perversion, the pivots where antitheses give rise to their own antitheses. The foundation of People’s Republic of China proudly secured the fruit of communist revolution on the one hand and, on the other, became the very condition for the bourgeoisie to regain strength a few years later. In the summer of 1953, Mao Zedong gave a speech titled “Combat Bourgeois Ideas in the Party” and inaugurated a battle that culminated in 1966 in the Cultural Revolution. Originally aiming to repress elite Party members, this movement failed to contain the power of the people it had awakened and, in the late 1970s, contributed to the turn to capitalism under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, who thereupon rescued the country from imminent disintegration. Today, as capitalism makes an unapologetic parade under the banner of “Socialism with Chinese characteristics,” the micro-dialectical inversion has hit a home run. “[Hitherto] at the heart of the imagined community,” peasants and workers are now plagued by economic and political inequality, barely surviving on the margins of dominant apparatuses.⁴ When workers from Jasic Technology went on strike in August 2018 and were brutally put down by riot police, arrested, imprisoned, and officially charged, the surprising cruelty of which reminds one of the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989, the irony of the recurrence became almost too hard to bear. Not only do they degrade the dialectical to the circular, micro-dialectical effects are further responsible for agglutinating the field of future socialist ventures. That is,

⁴ Razmig Keucheyan, *Left Hemisphere: Mapping Contemporary Theory* (London: Verso Books, 2013), 129.

when the cycle between thesis and antithesis are performed on such a frequent basis without synthesizing that both sides become well versed in the exchange language of antagonism, this very language is legitimized as the ‘official language’ of a game which, as a result, endlessly reproduces itself. In Deleuze’s words, the multiplicity of socialist projects, each intended as a nomadic war machine unestablished and unhindered, thereby radical and liberating, generates a unified space striated by new laws and norms. It eventually constitutes a secondary State apparatus within the primary one (i.e., the capitalist system) it first sets out to disrupt and abolish. In short, in hope of settling the existing entropy, it gives rise to more which in turn constrains itself. The game between revolution and anti-revolution creates its own interiority, perpetuating an equilibrium that devours the revolutionary vigor into a black hole. This deviant creation is in fact the performance of a higher form of micro-dialectic. Not only that the wheel of dialectic was never able to complete its historic spin, it is caught in a thick knot that gradually depletes its optimistic will to power. Precisely because of this condition of powerlessness and entrapment, revolutionary politics continues to search for an ever more transformative, more singular, and more progressive subject of emancipation.

The Sublime and the Future

In Kant’s aesthetics, the sublime refers to natural phenomena the greatness of which overpowers one’s cognitive ability and inspires both awe and terror. Sublimity is achieved when reason triumphs and recognizes the safe position of one’s spectatorship. When applied to the political realm, however, the human subject is remodeled from a spectator of a sublime nature into a *sublime subject*: “Although the viewer may pay homage to such ... overwhelming immensity for a moment, he or she quickly identifies with the vastness of nature and appropriates its magnificence for the empowerment of subjectivity and self-aggrandization.”⁵ When an emancipatory subject identifies with the sublime, it transcends the cyclical *status quo* which is unable to assimilate the sublime subject. In his discussion of Li Zehou’s Marxist rendition of the sublime, Wang Ban remarks, “Social practice is dynamic and arduous and constantly finds itself in sharp conflict with an intransigent reality... Yet in the overcoming of the conflicts and difficulties by human agents we can find the sublime.”⁶ Moreover, precisely because the sublime signifies the limits of the present reality, it is capable of the transformation into a new one. When Kant writes, “*That is sublime in compari-*

⁵ Wang Ban, *The Sublime Figure of History: Aesthetics and Politics in Twentieth-Century China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 189.

⁶ Wang, *The Sublime*, 165.

son with which everything else is small,” it follows that since the sublime is absolutely great regardless of what it is compared with, it remains free from the comparative apparatus that encompasses all other entities within a web of interrelationships.⁷ Taking the form of pure exteriority, the sublime subject of emancipation is the über-strategy to once and for all open up the closed circle of the present reality.

Appearing on the limit of the existing order, the sublime is a component of the present setting and at the same time a sign of its breakdown. It is emancipatory precisely by virtue of its dual existence of inclusion and escape, for it enables the present Self to imagine and conceptualize the future Other. This paradoxical duality of the emancipatory subject is captured in Jacques Rancière’s words as the “part of no part,” or in Badiou’s as the “event” which “*has, as a maximally true consequence of its (maximal) intensity of existence, the existence of an inexistent.*”⁸ The absolute ‘outside’ of the present reality, first imagined in Plato’s theory of Forms, has undergone a spatial shift in the modern politics of revolution wherein the ‘outside’ is positioned *inside*, shaping a topography that harbors the possibility of its own undoing; the *deus ex machina* is already onstage. The synthesis of the transcended and the transcending, of what-is and what-will-be, seems to have fulfilled Che Guevara’s mandate of “Be realistic, demand the impossible!” on the one hand, and on the other Benhabib’s more recent calling for the symbiosis of the explanatory-diagnostic and anticipatory-utopian functions of critical theory.

What underlies this ideal of union is an original trauma between the pre-revolution present and the post-revolution future. Haunted by the fear of a Sisyphean cycle, the conviction that a revolution must bring about something thoroughly new is discernible in numerous works on revolutionary politics. In *On Revolution*, Hannah Arendt contends that a true revolution has to be opposite to the etymological origin of the word “revolution,” which refers to the revolving motion of celestial bodies. History is not short of successful resurrections, but “[only] where this pathos of novelty is present ... where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning ... can we speak of revolution.”⁹ To view the future as “a new beginning” denies the temporal continuum from the present and segregates the two temporalities apart in an irredeemable rupture. Walter Benjamin similarly reasons in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 105.

⁸ Badiou, *Hypothesis*, 166.

⁹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 34-35.

a revolutionary mentality must not view history as the continuum of homogeneous, empty time; rather, it must treat every instance as a possible interruption of that very continuum. In his words, “The awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode is characteristic of the revolutionary classes at the moment of their action. The great revolution introduced a new calendar.”¹⁰ The antagonism between the old and the new is also conspicuous in the Chinese Revolution, as the Chinese communists were preoccupied with demarcating “New China” (*xin Zhong-guo*) against the “old society” (*jiu shehui*) in fear of the contaminations of the old. This hostility is central to the defense against the voracious cycle of ever-recurring changes. In short, according to the revolutionary narrative, the future is the present no more.

In *Phaedo*, Socrates adopts this narrative when he comforts his friends on the day of his execution that he would benefit from death, claiming that bodily existence precludes the perfection of his immortal soul. While an authentic soul is the body no more, the two in fact coexist at the present; similarly, the seed of the future is already contained in the present – in the sublime subject of emancipation. The goal of this analogy is to highlight the fact that to transition from the present to the future, given the two are categorially antagonistic, is to command the death of the present. The question is, how to perform this execution when the performers themselves are a part of the executed? According to the logic of the sublime, this performance is assigned to the sublime subject who simultaneously belongs to and negates the present, who is the walking dead of the present so as to give life to the future. Rancière adopts this logic when he places the mission of emancipation onto those excluded from and nonexistent in the societal apparatus. For him, *politics* proper takes place when the unrepresented present themselves as representatives of the universal society and overthrows *police*, i.e., the established social order that stands for the particular interest of the privileged.

However, is this assignment rightly assigned? Can the privileged Particular and the oppressed Universal be perfectly dissociated from one another? While the antithesis cannot be appropriated into the cycle because of its sublimity, it is, for the same reason, unable to be fully embodied by real-life players deeply embedded in the present reality. To be sublime is to be completely ostracized, but real antithesis is never as clear-cut from power as an *idealized antithesis* that exists in a fantasized self-enclosure and actual non-existence. Foucault cautions that power is not ‘power upon’

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn, eds. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 261.

but universally held and exercised, and there does not exist a pre-political subject completely deprived of and suffering from power. In his reading of Foucault, Torben Bech Dyrberg writes, “There is no essential human nature to excavate, no universal emancipation to pursue and hence no alienation from a primordial purity and innocence.”¹¹ In fact, the very act of excavation reveals the subject to be the product of *police*, within which it is highly involuted and cannot be categorically disengaged. The increasing bureaucracy after the sovereignties of Chinese and Soviet proletariats were established offers sufficient testimony.

The idealization of antithesis and its exile presupposes an impervious subject of emancipation and disregards its historicity. The loss of contact with the effective reality is articulated in Arthur Rimbaud’s impassioned words, “Farewell here, no matter where,” as he vehemently champions for the socialist revolution.¹² As a matter of fact, the more antithesis is idealized, the more it is removed from the domain of real practices; when it is idealized to the extent that its incomparability creates an absolute distance from the existing apparatus, this distance, unlike a relative one, is impossible to be overcome by embodied players. In short, revolutionary politics enshrines the antithesis, making it at once invulnerable and unreachable. “Abstractness,” Wang persuasively reasons, is “the essence of the sublime,” because it “[transcends] the limits of sensory images and [ascends] into the suprasensory realm.”¹³ To embody the sublime requires in the human agent a supremacy of reason over sensations, of ideals over experiences, of collective goals over individual sacrifices. Let us not forget that when Kant analyzes the phenomenon of viewing the sublime, he uses examples such as volcanoes and earthquakes to emphasize that they are viewed from *a safe distance*, the removal of which risks literally losing one’s head. When an idealized antithesis demands such a removal so as to be an abstraction, it poses on humans an inhuman if not godlike challenge.

As such, the future becomes a utopia that defies all gestures of physical intimacy. In truth, the idealization of antithesis which intends for radical mobility gives rise to radical immobility, freezing people in their wait for a hero that will one day arise among them. Under the belief that “every second of time was the strait gate through

¹¹ Torben Bech Dyrberg, *The Circular Structure of Power: Politics, Identity, Community* (London: Verso Books, 1997), 94.

¹² Arthur Rimbaud, “Democracy,” in *Illuminations, and Other Prose Poems*, trans. Louise Varèse (Cambridge, MA: New Directions Publishing, 1957), 129.

¹³ Wang, *The Sublime*, 160.

which the Messiah might enter,” the present is relegated to non-existence.¹⁴ “For a future utopia, the present is sacrificed,” Susan Buck-Morss laments.¹⁵ And whenever the future seems close, the collective imagination is galvanized into an epidemic expression of heroism. Hence the pathos of grandeur and the profusion of poems in a revolutionary age, and also the disregard if not contempt for the ordinary and the everyday. For example, Milan Kundera’s novel *Life is Elsewhere*, originally titled as *The Lyrical Age*, aptly depicts the life of a poet whose romanticism opportunely aligns with the communist revolution in his youth. In *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian*, Xiaobing Tang characterizes the “lyrical age” (*shuqing shidai*) in China, dated from the same year when the ambitious second Five Year Plan (1957-62) was launched, as “apparently an age of great passion and expectations, an age in which the boldest dreams about human happiness were collectively dreamed, and the most ordinary moments in life gloriously poeticized.”¹⁶ The pathos of magnificence was advanced by Chairman Mao’s own production of poems which, in Wang’s reading, “articulate a sublime heroics.”¹⁷ However, the pathos of heroism in literary works and human limitations insurmountable in real life belie each other. Heroes are flawed and fleeting, leaving behind them heroism to be eternally upheld in the waiting masses. The disillusionment following the heroes’ detumescence is remedied by a new level of fantasy and immobility: “It is perhaps in the decision *not to act* that promises a utopia of pure potentiality.”¹⁸

The depiction of heroes increasingly retreats into the realm of fantasy as the wait drags on. Herein lies the reason why the fulfillment of the Messianic fantasy in fictional works, especially in science fictions, is immensely satisfying. In the movie *Sorry to Bother You* (2018), for example, the seed of a socialist future is found in the capitalist system, which, in order to profit, creates a half-horse, half-human hybrid that surpasses human workers in physical capacity. When the equisapiens ‘descend’ into the scene where protesters are in helpless retreat from the riot squad, stopping a moving police van and forcing it backward with their supernatural strength, this moment constitutes the emotional climax of the film. It is precisely in the temporary

¹⁴ Benjamin, “Theses,” 264.

¹⁵ Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 29.

¹⁶ Xiaobing Tang, *Chinese Modern: The Heroic and the Quotidian* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 165.

¹⁷ Wang, *The Sublime*, 188.

¹⁸ Christian Sorace, “Communist Hibernation,” *Made in China* 3, no. 3 (Jul-Sept 2018), 93.

ascent into the magical realm where the dilemma is resolved that the audience feels empowered and has their desires fulfilled in a most gratifying manner. The satisfaction of fantasy, however, is suggestive of its very impossibility. The image of a pure, unbounded, unqualified **über**-power is an enchanted reality, a displacement of desires, a projection into the there-then while the here-now is paralyzed, kept apart at a longing gaze.

A Psychoanalytical Twist

The story of revolution appears to be wrapped in a romanticized emplotment that actually impedes the real advance of the story. The idealized construct of a sublime subject of emancipation breaches the “fine line between acknowledging the extent and seriousness of the troubles and succumbing to abstract futurism and its affects of sublime despair and its politics of sublime indifference,” as Donna Haraway puts it.¹⁹ The present is not so much under a Kafkaesque oppression by the Big Other as it is stuck in an empty Godotian anticipation, entrapped “between the *no longer* and the *not yet*”²⁰:

ESTRAGON. What do we do now?

VLADIMIR. I don't know.

ESTRAGON. Let's go.

VLADIMIR. We can't.

ESTRAGON. Why not?

VLADIMIR. We're waiting for Godot.²¹

We seem to have come up against a binary choice: either to uphold the sublime, which freezes the present, or to discard it, which risks falling into the cycle of eternal recurrences. However, before the conclusion is made, Jacques Lacan's theory of the mirror stage must be included here because it completely reshapes the latter option. There are multiple convergences between Lacan's theory and the politics of the sublime. According to him, when an infant recognizes herself in the mirror, a crucial misidentification occurs: what she identifies with is an idealized *form* of herself rather than her *being*. This description articulates the duality of the sublime, for the ideal

¹⁹ Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 4.

²⁰ Sorace, “Communist Hibernation,” 92.

²¹ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot: A Tragicomedy in Two Acts* (New York: Grove Atlantic, 2011), 42.

image of oneself is essentially a presentation of self and non-self combined. Second, this idealization, “untouched by the phenomenological convolutions of embodied life,” is removed from the present struggles.²² Reading the gap between ideals and experiences, Jacqueline Rose writes, “[the image] conceals, or *freezes* [emphasis added], the infant’s lack of motor co-ordination and the fragmentation of its drives,” identifying the ossifying effect of the sublime on the present reality.²³

So far so good; the theory of the mirror stage mirrors my previous exposition on the sublime. Here comes the twist, however: this theory is strictly descriptive rather than normative. That is, Lacan’s intention is not to consider how the mirror stage can be discarded, averted, or replaced; on the very contrary, he believes that this misidentification is necessary for the formation of subjectivity. The formal fantasy preconditions and persists as a central drive for any development, for it gives rise to a temporal directedness into the future and motivates the infant to ‘assemble’ the fragments of the present into a wholeness rather than varied degrees of fragmentation. In Scott Krzych’s words, “The fantasy garners from the ambivalent *mise-en-scene* (me and not-me) the affective energy central to any subsequent narratives upon which the subject relies to imagine how this division might eventually be overcome.”²⁴ Hence the necessity of sublimation, without which the subject would be completely disoriented – or more precisely, *un*-oriented – in the present. There would be no will to change or to politicize, and the subject herself, in the sense that she has agency to effect and be effected by her environment, would not exist in the first place. Jodi Dean phrases this necessity in the vocabulary of revolution: “The horizon shapes our setting. We can lose our bearings, but the horizon is a necessary dimension of our actuality.”²⁵ In light of this, Badiou’s assertion that “we have to live with an idea, and that what deserves to be called a real politics begins with that conviction” is much more than vapid rhetoric.²⁶

Thus, what we have encountered is not a question of ‘to sublime or not to sublime,’ of which is less damaging, a paralyzed present or the cycle of eternal changes, of whether conformism is more choice-worthy when the only alternative is idealism. Far from it, as the psychoanalytic detour has shown, the absence of the sublime freezes

²² Scott Krzych, *Beyond Bias: Conservative Media and Hysterical Politics* (forthcoming), 15.

²³ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso Books, 1986/2005), 53.

²⁴ Krzych, *Beyond Bias*, 16.

²⁵ Jodi Dean, *The Communist Horizon* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 1-2.

²⁶ Badiou, *Hypothesis*, 51.

the present as much as its presence does. The binary choice does not stand, for both options are in effect identical in their glaring defect.

Revolution as Gendered

It is now clear that the politics of the sublime contains an intrinsic dilemma. An entire subgenre of political theory has been devoted to striking a balance between the empirically experienced and the rationally imagined, aiming to preserve a certain amount of sublimation so that neither the present is un-oriented nor the future over-determined. While there have been plenty fruitful attempts, here, however, I would like to invite us to think differently: in order to contemplate alternative politics of emancipation apart from the sublime politics, it is necessary to investigate whether there *can* be other ways. Since the singular legitimacy of the sublime is directly derived from the circular hypothesis, which views the present as inherently reactionary and static, the project of envisioning alternatives must center on whether the present can be conceived to be other than cyclical. Is circularity a disinterested depiction of the unfortunate yet natural way of things, excluding all other descriptions? What is being masked by its pretense of self-evidence?

As I have argued in the beginning, emplotment is politicization. As Edmund Burke famously associates the sublime with the father, the sublime plot of revolution is in essence a spectacle of masculinity. It invokes the old narrative of ‘man over nature,’ of the cyclical nature succumbing to a powerful, magnificent, and untrammelled human agent. Mao’s poems are teeming with the idea that ‘man’ possesses an invincible power capable of remaking ‘nature:’ “Crimson rain swirls in waves under our will, / Green mountains turn to bridges at our wish. / Gleaming mattocks fall on the Five Ridges heaven-high; / Mighty arms move to rock the earth around the Triple River.”²⁷ In contrast to the eternal recurrence of the same, the sublime subject in its sheer verticality is in effect a phallic construct that penetrates and triumphantly rises above the stubbornly circular nature. It becomes the macho protagonist of old colonial stories of conquer and possession: exploding the cycle, it succeeds when it destroys; when it fails, it collapses into castration anxiety and despairs its powerlessness. Benjamin unsuspectingly pronounces this masculine fascination with power in his discussion of the revolutionary subject: “He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.”²⁸ The circular hypothesis legitimizes the masculine

²⁷ Mao Zedong, “Farewell to the God of Plague” (“Song Wenshen”), in *Mao Tse-tung Poems* (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1977), 35.

²⁸ Benjamin, “Theses,” 262.

desire for a power inimitable in its magnificence and “the insistence that nothing comparable in grandeur and significance had ever happened in the whole recorded history of mankind.”²⁹

The circular hypothesis is the precondition of a hyper-masculine, self-congratulatory politics of emancipation. When revolution is conceived as a clean severing with the present, an authoritative and possessive opening into the future, an unhindered contribution to the advance of history, it disregards if not violently runs over all other projects that pursue diverging goals. “The sublime embodies the abstract telos of history,” Wang argues.³⁰ Jodi Dean contemptuously refers to other projects as “micropolitics,” which manifests a “withdrawal from responsibility” and under which various branches of identity politics are subsumed.³¹ She insists that micropolitical activities are fragmented and myopic, decidedly detrimental to the real revolution because they “[make] thinking in terms of collectivity rarer, harder, and seemingly less ‘fresh.’”³² Deviation from the uniform trajectory and attentiveness to the everyday, embodied, and individualized life is dismissed in Chinese as “*popo mama*,” which literally means grandmother and mother and is used derogatorily to signify the insignificant. Wang observes that, “In the paternal high court of the sublime, where qualities of virility, strength, the Ideal, unity, divinity, and transcendence reign, the feminine is an outcast, an alien, a disrupter, and an intruder.”³³

Extolling a transformative rupture, the circular hypothesis itself is a masculine abstraction of the present condition, a politically invested rendition of the existing raw materials from which a teleological revolution impatiently aspires to break. In other words, only when history is apprehended in terms of a telos, when time is conceived as a vertical temporality leading to a singularly defined future, is the totality of diverse time-making projects in the present regarded as static and unprogressive. Only when macro-dialectic accepts a single synthesis, is the multiplicity of micro-dialectical effects obstructive and reactionary. In short, the positive idealization of the future is sustained by the negative idealization of the present. Rancière urges us to cease all plotting and instead be perceptive to “the time after” in the title and argument of his book on Béla Tarr, a film director from a socialist background:

²⁹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, 34.

³⁰ Wang, *The Sublime*, 192.

³¹ Dean, *Horizon*, 174.

³² Dean, *Horizon*, 13.

³³ Wang, *The Sublime*, 101.

It is the time after all stories, the time when one takes direct interest in the sensible stuff in which these stories cleaved their shortcuts between projected and accomplished ends. It is not the time in which we craft beautiful phrases or shots to make up for the emptiness of all waiting. It is the time in which we take an interest in the wait itself.³⁴

This interest must be taken into account in order to imagine different trajectories of mobility. Real resistance starts with resisting the tyranny of the future, and, departing from the circular hypothesis, an alternative conception of the present.

In contrast with its masculine opposite – to appeal to a binary symbolism – the feminine sensitivity to the present precisely “[takes] an interest in the wait itself.” It is far more tolerant to the painful features of the wait, such as indeterminacies, dispersions, ongoingness, micro-politics, polyvalences, paradoxes, plasticity, encounters, interconnections, and inter-contaminations. Wherein masculinity breaks away, therein femininity stays with. Affirming the latter’s manner of addressing the present waiting, Haraway writes, “[Staying] with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.”³⁵ Dispersed and disunited, the feminine version of the present nevertheless does not encourage a desire to “center and unify the loose contingency of individual experience and heterogeneity of subject-positions in the interest of total control.”³⁶ Instead, its politically subversive power resides precisely in its resistance for individual stories to be neatly categorized, conveniently exploited, and persistently alienated by the abstract telos of history. A parallel can be drawn with Marx who also regards alienation, albeit a different kind, as the kernel of political disruption. The anthropologist Pun Ngai advances a “minor genre of resistance” that “focuses on personal accounts, and its magical power lies not in generalizing individual narratives into a collective enunciation but rather in directly displaying that there is no individual story that is not also a historical narrative.”³⁷

³⁴ Jacques Rancière, Béla Tarr, *The Time After*, trans. Erik Beranek (Minnesota, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2013), 63-64.

³⁵ Haraway, *Staying*, 1.

³⁶ Wang, *The Sublime*, 191.

³⁷ Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 193.

To leave behind the sublime narrative, the structural change is to discard the hostile separation between subject and object and between the future and the present. It is to reject the narrative in which the human subject objectifies and subdues the present so that it can glory in its transcendence. The totalizing control that subjugates the present to a historical telos is replaced with a more horizontal and collaborative approach to the present wherein the telos is not predetermined but continually in the making. Bruno Latour challenges any social ontological theory that is not emergent: “Action is not done under the full control of consciousness; action should rather be felt as a node, a knot, and a conglomerate of many surprising sets of agencies.”³⁸ It is precisely in indeterminacy and multivalence that collaboration is possible between different antithetical projects, specifically a kind of collaboration in the form of mutual contamination and joint becoming. Here, instead of a ‘plot’ used in the singular, countless plots cultivate an unfinished hybridity against oppressive political forms. They collectively tell a story in terms of “patchy landscapes, multiple temporalities, and shifting assemblages...: the very stuff of collaborative survival.”³⁹ It is only after the detumescence of the future and the rebirth of the present that a revolution truly by the *masses* is possible. As opposed to Jodi Dean’s view, a feminine revolution is taking place *within* rather than *without* the landscape of emancipatory politics – and it is fundamentally revolutionary.

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³⁸ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 59.

³⁹ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 20.

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