

Against Biography

I

Two figures go out into this world and traverse it: the explorer and the imposter. The explorer stands on terra firma, surveying the horizon that magnetically pulls him. Sometimes *Fernweh* (in German, 'yearning for the faraway') produces an explorer who never returns, but his traveling is still made possible by the knowledge that he could return at any time. The image of the explorer appends a few basic corollaries to the nature of the Western image and the way it renders history.

This Western image is weight less, infinitely thin, hovering above everything, including history. It is reproducible on all channels, allows simultaneous viewing by everyone at all times, invites implantation and recall. It endures despite everything that has happened (wars, holocausts, market crashes, austerity measures) and despite everything that will happen (wars, holocausts, market crashes, austerity measures). The image fixes history – it reads the same for most people, on some level requiring no elaborate narrative or explanation, a perfect and permanent citation – it always was, is, and will be. Only a master on the right side of history can produce this kind of image. (Even if he doesn't realize that's what he's doing, it is equally noxious).

The imposter can never go home.¹ Crossing the border and leaving the homeland behind, a person transforms into a deserter, and this deserter is the imposter, bringing with herself a condition of lasting blindness. The blind state is archaic. It is ante-enlightened. From that position of blindness, the imposter renders history orally, and, unlike the (Western) image, this orality is not fixed. In the East and Far East, the South and Deep South, the other side of North and the Far West, history is mostly an oral technique. History is a contact sport. It is told and retold, ever-changeable, interpretable. It can be misunderstood, or disputed, or dismissed. Orality does provide a unified image, but this image has duration: telling takes time. A longer erotic.

¹ All across the migrant spectrum, from slave to refugee, the condition of migration is usually forced by historical circumstances produced by First World economies, their violence and their image worlds.

The Western commodity contacts humans by being seen. The flattening of all sense experience to the optical is its founding logic. If we can render all history through man's relationship with commodities, then the desire created by the Western image presupposes clitoral amputation on a hemispheric scale. The attention span of desire in relation to the commodity gets shorter and shorter, and things are increasingly consumed solely by the eyes. Consumption of things becomes quick and promiscuous.²

In a world with too much to look at and to desire, things come and go almost instantly. The speed of the transition from thing to trash syncs up with the loading speed of that thing's image onto your cosmopolitan digital device. Any culture that cannot recreate itself visually through the dominant image channels will be exterminated. This includes all cultures that pronounce their presence through orality.³

This presents an impasse. We are sure to lose if we operate within the terms of assessment set by the Western image. How do we play against an opponent who is sure to win?

We have to keep another outcome in mind. We must play to lose.⁴

² You cannot consume a thing. If you turn it into trash, you yourself turn into trash. A mirror.

³ Kerry James Marshall declares that the image is everything. Nobody is better aware of the relationship between the image and mastery of history than Kerry James. He is a great painter in a high stakes battle, and he knows it. And it is true, Kerry James has cracked the image code of Western painting. He inserts the black subject into its venerated pantheon of images, from which that subject has been decisively excluded. He is playing to win by matching the production value of the masterpieces of Western painting, and trusting that his additions to this history will be permanent. He predicts that any culture that cannot do the same (recreate itself visually through the dominant channels) will be exterminated.

⁴ In 1996 Garry Kasparov famously played chess against the IBM computer Deep Blue. In the first set of their match, Kasparov offered a model for how to play against an opponent who cannot be beaten. One must disregard the basic motivation to win, and play to lose or play to draw. The opponent, guided by his own motivation to win, cannot simulate your behavior because you are not playing for the same outcome. In the end, Kasparov prevailed; He played to lose.

This position requires the advantages of blindness. Not being able to see establishes a different relationship to the commodity, bypassing the optical and relying on an array of what are today presumed to be secondary senses. Touching is actually the closest to an economy based on productive labor (as opposed to more speculative functions) – closest to the worker’s hand.

In blindness we cannot immediately tell what is in the room with us and whether it is alive or dead. As the blind imposter feels out her surroundings, free from instantaneous visual cues, she comes into contact with the features of a thing by testing it before seeing it. Blindness establishes an equivalence⁵, a loyalty, and a familial solidarity between people and things.

Being equal with things denies anyone the right to draw the line between what is a human and what is a thing. This administration must be refused. Without images, orality thrives. Oral relation is contact, building a bond between people and things. The corporation must be integrated into this solidarity.⁶

The Oral Corporation is born. It must take control of the weather, enveloping the commodity in dense dark, blacking out the whole world, turning everyone blind. In the archaic dark, in blindness, the commodities equal humans and corporations demand the spiritual. In such a place, the enlightened empty desire is torn to pieces, swept up into a dust bin and turned into trash – a destiny it bestows on all.

⁵ Counter-intuitively, the camera is a comrade of blindness. The apparatus similarly knows no difference between humans and things. In this capacity, image-producing apparatuses can be converted back to blindness, and, once converted, interpolate desire into the image they produce. The imposter must have the camera on her side. The oral image must assimilate the optical.

⁶ This has already occurred. Citizens United, Appellant v. Federal Election Commission, No. 08-205, 558 U.S. 310 (2010), is a controversial United States Supreme Court ruling granting corporations constitutional rights usually reserved for human citizens.

The following formula must be brought over
to the side of blindness:

HUMAN
=
COMMODITY

And if the equality relation is carried by the corporation, then:

HUMAN
CORPORATION
COMMODITY

The first agent of this equivalence is the imposter and she must train to reach the invisibility (camouflage) that only equality to things – and a mutable biography – can provide. This enterprise requires corrosion of language⁷ through orality and the abandonment of all fair play: a transformation of all guilt through courage (the West is very good at instilling guilt or debt). For example, the guilt associated with stealing must be replaced by a blank stare in the face of the word ‘property’.

II

The Pink Panthers, an octopus-shaped thief syndicate from the former Yugoslavia, lived through the period of wild inflation in 1990s Serbia – 313,563,558%, cumulatively, which dwarfs the 32,400% inflation rate of the Weimar Republic.⁸ The 1990s taught them where the powers that sanction the good life are located – namely outside of Serbia. Living in unbearably close proximity to this region, they knew that the West was not willing to share any of what it had, apart from its images. These images tantalized the Panthers with visions of wealth and success but forbade them participation and entry.⁹

The Pink Panthers, who are still active today, understand what kind of commodity the West has to offer. Accordingly, they take the value away from a thing by renaming it. For instance, diamonds are renamed glass. The Panthers steal a piece of glass, intending to cut it up and redistribute it. In my conversation with one of the members, he stated that they found the act of cutting intensely satisfying. One diamond – or piece of glass – can sometimes be re-cut into four or five pieces; this

⁷ The corruption of language includes the corruption of computer code. Computer code is an ally of orality. Humans operate through user interfaces and images, whereas code is the language that executes its own computational protocol (Galloway). Things do not require images to interact. In that sense, images are windows into inanimate exchanges of different levels of complexity afforded to human beings.

⁸ David Samuels, “The Pink Panthers,” *The New Yorker*, April 12, 2010. All further facts about the Pink Panthers come from this source or the author’s personal conversations with a member of the Panthers.

⁹ What happened to Yugoslavia is the same thing currently happening on the periphery of the EU and in its southern regions. However, in Yugoslavia, privatization, destruction of the middle class, transformation the country into a source of cheap labor, happened through war, not through a recession or joining the EU. The outcome is the same: criminalization of the state by foreign speculation, debt tricksterism on both national and individual scales (cheap unregulated loans for private individuals to enable confiscation of their private property and austerity measures that force countries to incur more national debt), and destruction of national banks and public infrastructures.

allows more people to have it, cracking the precious object in a minor way, undermining its former exclusivity in the hands of the ultra-rich.

The Panthers' motivation is not greed. Initially, their motivation was necessity. (They were unable to survive otherwise in a criminalized state that was supported and perpetuated by the First World). The group's members, individually, never made more than a standard middle-class salary-earner in the West. They often returned to their home cities to launder the cash by buying real estate. After the first wave of heists they bought Audis, Porsche sunglasses, designer sweatpants, Nike shoes, etc.

The city of Niš in south Serbia is where most of the Panthers came from and return to; this is also where they experienced the limit of the Western commodity. Their loot itself, and what they bought with it, had no lasting meaning. Eventually the act of theft became more meaningful than the act of consuming. This becomes more evident after looking at their targets: mostly Swiss, Belgian, German, French, English, Emirati, and Japanese top-tier jewelry stores. The Panthers could go to Sri Lanka or Congo to rob the glass straight from the source, potentially obtaining much more loot; they have the paramilitary and logistical connections to do so. Instead, they choose to rob the First World metropolises. They often go in with props (fake guns, wigs, costumes) and rob stores in broad daylight, during working hours. They operate with geographical intentionality and they do things in public.

If a Panther is caught, the following code is observed:

1. Do not despair, no jail can hold you.
2. If questioned in a country where you are fluent provide a fictional biography.
3. If questioned in native tongue provide no biography.
4. Never give out the names of your accomplices.
5. Never give up your family name.

III

The First World art institution seizes orality by assimilating biography into the asset market. After artists from the latest market expansion sites are forced into imposterism, they are seized, imported, packaged and delectably consumed. The First World needs the lives of imports because it is in decline. It nourishes itself on the lives it takes, especially when that lifetaking assumes the form of an artwork. This nourishment must be denied.

Some imposters poison the food supply, others burn it. Another approach is to withhold nourishment and enable a wasting to death. The First World needs the life force of imposters to exist. The Western definition of art comes from its treatment of all things, including humans, as the expendable raw material. This is why the West sucks the life out of things to make them art – things must be deadened and drained of all utility (life) to be art. In return, by withholding nourishment, the imposter wastes the West to death. She makes the entire Western tradition into a work of art, a readymade deprived of use, deprived of light, crated and stored in a duty free warehouse.

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