

SOME THOUGHTS
ON THE RELATION
OF IDEOLOGY AND
ART (CONCERN-
ING THE PROBLEM
OF NATIONAL-
ISM IN EVERYDAY
LIFE) / Sezgin
Boynik & Minna
Henriksson

On the relation between theory, practice and knowledge

As Mao Tse-tung famously stated in his still important philosophical intervention “On Practice” in 1937: “If you want to know the taste of a pear you must change the pear by eating it yourself”. — 1 What is the most amazing in this simple example of Mao is the notion of *change*. In his article Mao is explaining the relation between empirical knowledge and what he calls revolutionary knowledge by explicitly basing his theory on the transformation that will happen to the object during the process of knowledge. In his exposition he shows that empirical knowledge, which is primarily based on sensory and perceptual knowing, is an ad-hoc, momentary and very limited truth. Most of the time these ‘truths’ are, epistemologically speaking, “obviousnesses” that are false and spontaneously related to ideology. — 2 Empirical knowing is as pragmatic and instrumental in the strict sense as the survival-kit theories of everyday and ordinary intuitions. For example, empirical knowing is that the Roma immigrants begging in the streets of Helsinki do not respect the Finnish psycho-social sentiments of bodily distance (even such an absurd ‘truth’ can find institutional support in the “Rom po drom — the Roma on the Road” project of the Finnish Deaconess Institute — 3). Or another empirical pragmatic truth about immigrants living in Finland would be that they are taking over the business of the

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Mao Tse-tung, “On Practice: On the Relation Between Knowledge and Practice, Between Knowing and Doing” (July 1937), *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung*, Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976, Vol. I, p. 300.

2 —

Louis Althusser, *Philosophy and the Spontaneous Philosophy of the Scientists & Other Essays*, London & New York: Verso, 1990.

3 —

“Useat kerjäävistä eivät hahmota suomalaisten oman henkilökohtaisen tilan reviiriä ja voivat tunkea siksi liian lähelle”, sanoo Diakonissalaitoksen projektipäällikkö Tuomo Leinonen”. [‘Many of the beggars cannot perceive the personal space territory of a Finnish person and due to that they can squeeze too close’, says the project leader of the Finnish Deaconess Institute.] *Helsingin Sanomat*, 16.5.2009.

local proletariat. For example, the local lumpen proletariat might be against the greediness of the newcomers in the business of the collecting of beer cans on which there is a deposit (*pantti*-business). Or Finnish construction site workers will clearly dislike foreign migrant workers coming to Finland to work with less salary and no union agreements in the construction of the Olkiluoto Nuclear Power Plant. — 4

All three examples are not wrong in the empirical sense; the foreigners that beg do come much closer than is customary. They do collect beer cans more effectively and more prudently, and they are a cheap labour proletariat. But what is problematic in these truths is that they only aim at a practical and pragmatic solution of a very acute problem. In order to have a correct knowledge of the situation we have to develop our knowledge from the empirical to the abstract. Abstract, or theoretical knowledge, would allow us, as Mao Tse-tung showed, to develop our knowledge from the one-sided to the many-sided — 5. In this case it would mean also taking into account, while we develop our ideas on immigrants, that they are forced to come to Finland (that this is a global issue), that as a proletariat their common exploiters are the capitalists (that homogenization of class consciousness is wrong) and that patriotic lies are there to hide all these contradictions (that the transcendentalism of nationalism eliminates the antagonisms of society).

4 —
For readers interested in this topic we recommend the book (in Finnish) Anna Kontula, *Näkymätön Kylä, Vantaa: Into, Kustannus, 2010.*
5 —
Mao Tse-tung, *op.cit., p. 296.*

Abstraction, or the leap of knowledge, or the theoretical break, as Althusser calls it, can be described as a qualitative leap, and this could be approximately explained with a proclamation: let me think it over, or bending the stick (as Lenin explained).

Abstraction of knowledge in the sense in which Mao, Lenin, Althusser, Alain Badiou, along with many other contemporary philosophers propose it, is only possible through the practice of change. In the line preceding the sentence on eating the pears Mao is clearly recommending that “if you want knowledge you must take part in the practice of changing the reality (...) that there can be no knowledge apart from practice”.

— 6

We have to keep in mind that Mao Tse-tung’s philosophical interventions in 1937 were against the dogmatist fraction within the Chinese Communist Party. Their empiricism and reduction of the knowledge to sensory, perceptual and immediate tactical and political solutions triggered Mao’s abstract approach to knowledge. As Alain Badiou in his recent article on the Chinese cultural revolution showed, what makes a historical moment revolutionary (in this case Mao’s political and cultural revolution), can be defined with “totally unpredictable” situations, new political statements, texts without precedents. — 7

Mao’s anti-dogmatist approach is unfortunately very much distorted by the popular mass-me-

6 —

Mao Tse-tung,
op.cit., p. 296.

7 —

Alain Badiou,
“The Cultural
Revolution: The
Last Revolution”,
in *The Communist*
Hypothesis, New
York: Verso, 2010,
p. 111.

dia, academia, historical character ‘analyses’ and some leftist ‘self-criticisms’ (one of these is Slavoj Žižek’s mocking introduction to Mao’s philosophical texts, but as a reply to this mockery and jocularity one can read Badiou’s open letter to Žižek). — 8

The usual approach to the philosophy of Mao — and unfortunately to many philosophers — is the approach of anecdotes, particularly those that aim to ridicule the seriously thought theory and practice of emancipatory politics. For this reason, we chose to start our discussion with the process of eating the pear. After this long detour from the process of eating the pear we can draw at least two working theses:

1. Knowledge has to develop itself from empirical, perceptual and sensory ‘truths’ to the abstract and theoretical concepts. This development is also development of thought from one-sided to many-sided.
2. This abstraction is only possible with change, which implies practice. This process is dialectical: “[p]ractice, knowledge, again practice, and again knowledge. This form repeats itself in endless cycles and with each cycle the content of practice and knowledge rises to a higher level”. — 9

What is for us important in this development of knowledge is the philosophical and artistic moment, which could be described simply as a break, rupture or a leap, and which could be also labelled revolutionary knowledge. Mao explains

8 —
Alain Badiou,
“Letter from Alain
Badiou to Slavoj
Žižek: on the work
of Mao Zedong”, in
The Communist Hy-
pothesis, New York:
Verso, 2010.
9 —
Mao Tse-tung,
op.cit., p. 308.

this moment in his other very important philosophical intervention from 1937, "On Contradiction". According to that article this change occurs in terms of: "dissolution of unity that is the distraction of solidarity, combination, harmony, balance, stalemate, deadlock, rest, constancy, equilibrium, solidity and attraction, and a change of each into its opposite, the transformation of one process into another". — 10

Exactly this moment of shifting the grounds is the moment where emancipation not only in politics, but also in art, becomes possible. Especially in this case, dealing with nationalism, as in the abovementioned absurd examples, we have to have theoretical tools in order to think about issues not in one-sided empirical narrow perceptual and sensory terms.

In our readings of Louis Althusser and especially his students, Pierre Macherey, Étienne Balibar and Alain Badiou, we are convinced that art, in order to develop a critical practice, has to break with practical ideologies of instrumentalization and immediate results. It has to break with the obvious, immediate, spontaneous and everyday. That is the reason why we think that contemporary art is a field of knowledge production, where this abstraction could also take place. Especially, when dealing with issues like nationalism or ideology, contemporary art should not base its *concepts* on the tautology of the obviousness of everyday life. To put it briefly, it is possible to think of emancipation in art in terms of

10 —
Mao Tse-tung, "On
Contradiction"
(August 1937), *Se-
lected Works of Mao
Tse-tung, Peking:
Foreign Languages
Press, 1976, Vol. I,
p. 342.*

knowledge and theory production. This is the moment when art can become political. — 11

Critique of transcendentalism as a necessary step toward political art

It is important to mention here that this claim for abstraction in art must not be confused with the notion of transcendentalism. Abstraction aims at bringing us to concrete theory and practice. Transcendentalism, which is synonymous with spiritualism, metaphysics, mysticism, or even with occultism and parapsychology, is, paradoxically, based on empirical knowledge.

The usual assumption about ontology of transcendentalism is that it is in direct antagonistic relation with the empiricism of materialist knowledge. This is partly true, because the philosophy of transcendentalism is against materialism, but its epistemology is empirical, based on the spiritual.

Transcendentalism digs its 'empirical truths' directly from the deep soul, from the high god, from eternal nature and the unlimited being of a nation. This empiricist spiritualism known as transcendentalism has its own rules of knowledge, which are most of the time paradoxically also rational, predictable, and based on a formula (for example parapsychologists' experiments with telekinesis, telepathy and other extrasensory perceptions, occultists' strict categorization of the out-worldly spheres and appearances or the mystics' schematic higher levels of con-

11 —
Another thing we must remember is that Mao Tse-tung wrote these two philosophical interventions during the Chinese national struggle against Japanese imperialism. These two philosophical texts can also be seen as foundational texts for Mao's further anti-dogmatist theoretical elaborations during the Cultural Revolution. Considering the fact that the Cultural Revolution had a significant impact on Jean-Luc Godard - the everlasting love of the art students all around the world - we thought that this meditation on Mao is a pedagogical necessity.

sciousness). What transcendentalism is missing is abstraction. Because transcendentalism, like any other solely empirical knowledge, does not perceive the process of knowledge in terms of its change, i.e. transcendentalism does not have its history. Since transcendentalism is an a-historical worldview, many times the changes, inevitable in any process, are distorted to agnostic and unnameable events. And usually what had been abolished in this transcendentalist process is actually a politics. Since transcendentalism has its own introspective empiricism, it could usually extend its explanatory apparatus to the historical, social and the political spheres as well. This means that there could be political, social artworks, which also consider the notion of history, but their assumptions are transcendental.

This could be easily demonstrated with the simple look of the prevailing topics in contemporary art production, especially when looking at the local (Finnish) contemporary art production flooded with topics of forest, nature, ghosts, witches, spectres, sixth sense, vampires, mythologies, epiphanies and revelations. Because the a-political is inextricable from the transcendental, in order to make political art, our point of departure has to be severe criticism of any manifestations of the transcendental. — 12

Now we will try to explain the scheme of the thesis on transcendentalism and its relation to nationalism with an aleatory example from our

12 —
As Karl Marx wrote in his *Critique of the Gotha Program* that conservative Lassellians recognize one another with the word 'iron', we have to ask here with what words the true believers of transcendentalism recognize each other. (K. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, New York: International Publisher, 1970, p. 14) We can initially say that words such as "being", "phenomenon", "human" and "creation" are the words, but more importantly, the names of some philosophers, such as Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur, Gadamer, and of course Heidegger, are such nominating words.

daily labour of reading. Example: “emerging during the time of crisis for America (Vietnam, race-riots, student sit-ins) Fire Music positioned itself alongside the Black Arts and Black Power movements as a catalyst for change: social, political and spiritual.” — 13

This example is from *Wire* magazine, which is one of the most popular and respected guides to different kinds of modern music, from noise to experimental, and at the same time the only music magazine that art libraries, along other libraries, subscribe to.

At first glance there is nothing unusual in this quotation. It is a typical conglomerate style of music writing reviewing the avant-garde free jazz music of John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Albert Ayler, Archie Shepp, Alain Silva, Arthur Doyle, William Parker and others in the pseudo category of ‘fire music’. The associations of this term, fire music, could be described with the elements stereotyped with the racial representation of Black cultural production in the United States of America. The author himself is doing this, which will become clearer soon. But first we would like to stop and look more carefully at the above quotation. The author of the review text is trying to give a sociological explanation for fire music by explaining that this genre of avant-garde jazz emerged during the crisis “for America”. In this very naive and spontaneously understood expression “for America” we are prompted to think that there is ‘an America’ ex-

13 —
David Keenan,
“Fire Music” in
Rob Young (ed.)
*The Wire Primers: A
Guide to Modern Mu-
sic*, London: Verso,
2009, p. 137.

isting above the dialectics and historical change. More precisely, the readers are invited to observe the phenomenon called 'America', which is ontological and transcendental. At the same time, "for America" is homogenizing the society, which at the time of the production of the so-called fire music was in definite condition of exacerbated antagonistic racial and class relations. Let us look even further at the causes of this crisis. There are at least three mentioned in the review: Vietnam, race riots and student sit-ins.

These causes are ambiguously defined and their function is the de-politization, neutralization and transcendentalization of historical struggles. First of all, the word "Vietnam" by itself cannot explain anything, but could trigger very contradictory associations from the American imperialism to the communist conspiracy. The phrase "race-riots" in a similar manner ignores the historical responsibility for exploitation by white America of the black, which would put this racism into a mutual reciprocal relation. But the third cause, the "students' sit-ins", which is the most naive in its practice and the most neutral in its theory, is described in most detail. The author could easily have failed to specify this factor too by just labelling this cause as 'students'. But the real paradox in this explanation of the review text is about the 'change' catalysed by Black Power in the social, political and spiritual fields. First of all, there is a historical

distortion here since Black Power in its most extremist representative, the Black Panther Party, was on every occasion severe in its criticism any kind of spiritualism. — 14 But more than this, the real problem of the ‘thought’ operating inside this example is its paradox. As we have seen, the spiritual and transcendental are opposites of the notion of change. It is oxymoronic then to talk about the change, which will happen in the spirit (in the same line with the politics and society).

The reason why we stayed so long in this trivial quotation is that these kinds of ‘naive’, obvious, spontaneous, ‘not-so-important’ statements are doing their ideological job of metaphysical manipulation unnoticed. — 15 Here we can clearly see that the transcendentalization of a nation (“for America”) is always in the same constellation with depolitization and neutralization and thus serves to non-materialist (‘spiritual’) ideologies.

Art and Ideology

Now it is time to ask what the materialist existence of nationalism is and what is its relation to art and literature. As Louis Althusser showed in his famous article, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses”, ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence (thesis 1) and ideology always exists in the apparatus, and its practice or practices. This existence is material

14 —
To readers interested in the non-transcendentalist history of Black Power, we highly recommend the book: Bobby Seale *Seize the Time: The story of Black Panther Party*, London: Arrow Books, 1970.

15 —
In the same review we can read the other descriptions such as “sense destroying celestial communion, freely improvised, spiritualised, resolutely militant jazz” (another oxymoron!). “[p]rimal and sensual liberating, genuine transcendence that can go off like a bomb”, “communication beyond words, galvanisation of intuitive and primitive”. We wouldn’t be taking so much of your time if this wasn’t published by Verso, which is also publishing Althusser and Mao Tse-tung.

(thesis 2). If we think of nationalism as ideology we can now conceptualize the materialist existence of nationalism in art. — 16 Since ideology operates in its spontaneous idealist omnipresence in the whole field of society and in our deep psyche, we cannot separate art from ideology. But still there is a certain sophistication of art, or what Étienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey call literature, in these ideological processes. As they wrote: “From a materialist point of view one would analyse literary effects (more precisely aesthetic literary effects) as effects which cannot be reduced to ideology ‘in general’ because they are particular ideological effects, in the midst of others (religious, juridical, political) to which they are linked but from which they are separate”. — 17 Still further, there is a differentiation of this particularity of ideological effects of the art from the others. For example there is a different ideological effect of art and of religion. Whereas religion’s ideological effect is mechanical and imposed, art appears “as if offered for interpretation, a free choice for the subjective private use of individuals, it is the privileged agent of ideological subjection, in the democratic and ‘critical’ form of ‘freedom of thought’”. — 18

By opening up this question of the ideological form of art, we are limiting the idea of emancipation (art as abstraction), on which we have hitherto based our thesis. This might momentarily seem a paradox, but we decided to deal with this first

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Minna Henriksson and Sezgin Boynik (eds.), *Contemporary Art and Nationalism: Critical Reader*, Pristina: Institute of Contemporary Art. EXIT; Center for Humanistic Studies “Gani Bobi”, 2007.

17 —

Étienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, “On Literature as an Ideological Form”, in Terry Eagleton and Drew Milne (eds.), *Marxist Literary Theory: A Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996, p. 291.

18 —

Ibid., p. 292

in order to demystify all the social and other privileges surrounding art, and second, to return to our work on the relation of contemporary art and nationalism. Simply put, our thesis was that nationalism can be materialized in a more sophisticated, subtle and unnoticed way in the cultural field of contemporary art. We were concerned with the subjects of ‘culture’, which were sufficiently ‘cultivated’ not to be interpellated into the ideology of nationalism by mass media and sport. For these subjects, there is contemporary art, which performs the job of ideology. We still occupy this position but with a reserve of the possible danger of the interpretation of this recuperation as some kind of sociological nihilism.

A moment of self-criticism

What is most important in Althusser’s scheme, even if it is very much based on representation, is that in the last instance, ideology has a materialist existence. This material existence and the practices of ideology could be traced in many manifestations of nationalism. For example it is important to ask whether there are materialist existence and practices of nationalism inside contemporary art. We did ask this question in our editorial work on the book *Contemporary Art and Nationalism – Critical Reader*. There we started from the assumption that the institution of contemporary art can be the field where nationalism has materialized. But it would be healthy to

perform self-criticism here regarding the definition of nationalism.

We started the introduction to the book with the sentence: “Nationalism certainly is a cultural phenomenon”. We contrasted this statement to other, antagonistic theses, which claim that nationalism is a biological, archaic and natural phenomenon. Ironically, we can now say that by contrasting our position to a fascist statement on nationalism, we inevitably narrowed down our conceptual frame of the critique of nationalism.

By dichotomizing nature and culture we undermined the fact that neither nature nor culture have their own independent existence, but are both products of ideology. This means that a nation described in cultural or biological theories refers to the same notion. Practically this can also mean that there is a risk that an artist criticizing archaic nationalism ends up in instituting a more sophisticated, cultural nationalism. This was in fact our initial starting point, but by not clarifying the nation as an ideology, we left an open door for ambiguous and problematic interpretations. — 19

In order to demonstrate our position more clearly we have to deal with the extreme cases of nationalism. Our position is clear. We think that criticism of nationalism is only possible with consideration of the materialist aspects of nationalism in the rationalist way.

19 —
“Nationalism of a non-conformist, multicultural, cosmopolitan, progressive, refined, and contemporary white-cube galleries’ kind, is differentiated from the disciplined and populist nationalism only in degrees of sophistication.”
Minna Henriksson and Sezgin Boynik, *op.cit.*

Manifestations of nationalism in extremist situations

One of the most difficult problems of nationalism is its relation to fascism and racism. Here we are speaking about extremist manifestations of nationalism, and since our topic is to do with everyday manifestations of nationalism, we have to clarify this problem area as much as possible. There is a direct and unquestionable relation between fascism and nationalism. Historically fascist movements such as Italian Fascism or German National Socialism invoke national symbols (flag), national territory (which they aim to expand), national tradition (hypothetical and in most of the cases with accelerated invention of traditions) and national unity. The same lineage of national representations is manifested in the neo-fascist organizations from Serbia to Great Britain and from Germany to Russia where the official iconography of these groups, even if it is based on internationalized fascistic mythologies (swastika, blood & honour, machismo, etc.), uses at the same time the main official heraldry of the nation. — 20

According to the generally accepted view, what divides nationalism from fascism is the level of its quantitative consummation; in this gradational theory fascism is seen as the anomaly of nationalism. In brief, fascism is seen in this case as nationalism gone wrong. Then, in order to mount an effective fight against this anomaly, we have to be able at least to recognize the moment

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An interesting aspect of the neo-nazi iconography is their absolute support of state symbolism. This new shift is obscure, because neo-nazism as a sub-cultural and subversive movement is rarely supported by the legal state institutions or apparatuses. In some cases they actually face the restriction from the state apparatuses. Did the neo-nazi movements in the end understand and put to use the aesthetic lesson of Laibach and NSK on the subversive force of over-identification with the official state ideology and its apparatuses?

when this shift starts to occur. This is, as we all know, almost impossible. Nationalism turns to fascism in such a smooth way that its normalization or reconciliation too takes place unnoticed and ‘naturally’, leaving the ashes around for its next reanimation.

In order to answer this question we have to ask an even more difficult question: what is the relation between nationalism and racism? In order not to lose very much time with the populist discourse (from newspaper articles to pop sociologists’ analyses) on the division between nation and race, we have to have a look at the writings of Étienne Balibar on this topic. There are many antagonisms and contradictions surrounding the notion of nationalism; there are always examples of nationalism starting as collective emancipation and in the course of time turning to its opposite of the nationalism of oppression. Do we not think in this way when we sympathize with the Sami people who have been oppressed by the nation (Finnish nation) which also has a past of being oppressed by other nations? Or further, do we not think that homosexuals of the Sami nation are oppressed by a community whose own memory of oppression is still fresh? What about the drug-users inside the Sami homosexual community, are they still further oppressed by the previous oppressors? We can continue with this to *ad infinitum* and end up in mere cynical agnosticism. But we can assume, as Balibar suggested, that “the notion

of nationalism is constantly dividing. There is always a 'good' and a 'bad' nationalism. There is one which ends [*sic*] to construct a state or a community and the one which tends to subordinate, to destroy; the one which refers to right and the one which refers to might". — 21

This ambivalence of nationalism is precisely what has to be explained, writes Balibar, and that "[f]rom this point of view, the analysis of the place of racism in nationalism is decisive: though racism is not equally manifest in all racisms or in all the moments of their history, it none the less always represents a necessary tendency in their constitution". — 22

Balibar's theory is more subtle than our present handling, but what is important for us is that he tries to find the general theory for understanding the ambivalence of nationalism. According to him, the main reason for this ambivalence is the fact that racist tendencies are constitutive of nationalism. Racism, as the 'universalistic' tendency of division is based on the primer dichotomy: "of the difference between humanity and animality, the problematic character of which is re-utilized to interpret the conflicts within society and history". — 23

Then we can easily arrive at the provisional thesis that the ideology of nationalism in its core is based on division between humanity and animality. Since all of our understandings (art, philosophy, science and love, as Badiou would say) are based on the concept of 'the human', we

21 —
Étienne Balibar,
"Racism and
Nationalism", in
Étienne Balibar
and Immanuel
Wallerstein, *Race,
Nation, Class: Am-
biguous Identities*,
London & New
York: Verso, 1991,
p. 47.

22 —
Ibid., p. 48.
23 —
Ibid., p. 57.

can propose further that the main constitutive element of nationalism is the division between the human and the anti-human. Now we have the theoretical possibility of breaking with the moralist discussions on nationalism, and ideology in general, and catapulting ourselves to concrete or materialist historical/philosophical conceptions. Critique of humanist concepts in philosophy, better known as the “theoretical anti-humanism” is the position developed by Louis Althusser in the beginning of the sixties. Theoretical anti-humanism, as a strictly Marxist philosophy, intervenes within the field of knowledge and politics with the premise that all things relating to ‘the human’ in philosophy are inevitably also related to the bourgeois ideology. According to this, from art to philosophy, all knowledge processes have to rid the concept of the human from their theoretical vocabulary and, along with that all its associations, such as pragmatism, practicality and the everyday. Nationalism is certainly the notion of ideology most seriously affected by the concept of the human. And nationalism and racism, through the notion of the human (species) constitute themselves every day in endless possible combinations.

The general assumption is that nationalism is human, and racism is anti-human. This is true only for the *practical* humanist position (for example the extermination of human is synonymous with racism, not with nationalism; or nationalism is

for, racism is *against*). Before going further we have to stop for a moment and explain this anti-humanist racism by referring, again, to Balibar: “the ‘biologism’ of the racial theories (from anthropometry to Social Darwinism and socio-biology) is not a valorisation of life as such, still less an application of biology; rather it is a vitalized metaphor of certain sexualized social values: energy, decisiveness, initiative and generally all the virile representations of domination or, conversely, passivity, sensuality, femininity, or again, solidarity, *esprit de corps* and generally all the representations of the ‘organic’ unity of society along the lines of an endogamous ‘family’”. — 24

What is for us important here is that the division of nationalism and racism as a humanist and anti-humanist dichotomy is a false obviousness, and that we have to ‘think over’ the notion of nation regardless to humanism. This way we will be able to get rid of the moralistic and transcendental approach to nationalism and try to understand nationalism in its quotidian materialistic manifestations.

24 —
Ibid., p. 58.

In order to achieve this, contemporary art should not be blinded by the un-understandable banality of nationalism, or by the unprecedented evil of fascism; on the contrary, its point of departure should be that nationalism (as ideology) is reproduced every day in our humanist practices, which have become our humanist spontaneities. For example, if we have a stenographic look at

the relation of cinema to fascism we can see this problem very clearly. In most cases, films represent fascism as the malady of modern times, and as the malign manifestation of nationalism. More than that, fascism in films has often been approached through psychologism, i.e. through equating it with psychopathology. From Lilianna Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974) to Lina Wertmüller's *The Seven Beauties* (1975), fascism has been explained by sexual, fetishist or sadomasochistic state of minds. And very often, the ultimate evil of fascism (or nationalism gone mad), the Holocaust, is 'depicted' exactly by implying its non-representability, identifying it as the moment of absolute madness, the dark night of humanity, or the diabolic anti-humanism where only silence speaks.

We can here propose a hypothetical and a performative question: what could be the role of rationally formulated theses in the explanation of the monstrosities of nationalism (i.e. fascism)? Or if we ask more directly: is there any logical and rational explanation for National Socialism and the Holocaust? Following Max Horkheimer's warning that "the one who is not willing to talk about capitalism, has to be silent about fascism too" we can re-claim that the bourgeois ideology and its political economy of reproduction are the reason for fascism. Or we can even elaborate this thesis to the point of historical and political departure by saying that: fascism is anti-communism supported by capitalism.

This is at least the proposal to start with, a step ahead from any transcendental humanism or psycho-pathological fetishism. But this proposal also brings us to the question of the relation of nationalism to another so-called extremism, — communism.

This question has many important consequences, one and the most important concerns the ambiguous relation between the nation and class-consciousness, or more acutely between nationalism and the class struggle. Here we have to recall that the only possible way of producing knowledge is by abstraction of empirical 'truths'. This means that any thesis assuming a direct and one-sided conceptual explanation of nationalism is not correct. Any simplification of the concept of class, or the class struggle, is in the same way wrong: it cannot answer the simple question of why the exploited classes are in many cases supportive of nationalism, which in the last instance serves the exploiters to improve their means of oppression. Or how does one explain the national liberation struggles all around the world, which were also social struggles based on class?

A usual approach in dealing with the critique of nationalism from the leftist point of view is to abandon the problem of nation completely in order to develop a more progressive and emancipatory politics. The usual assumption of this approach is that, since nationalism in almost every historical case recuperates to the ca-

cophony of all kinds of reactionary constructs (like fascism, clero-fascism, social Darwinism, etc.), it would be best to abandon the concept and erase it from our vocabulary. The problem with this approach is its empiricism; it draws its theses from the practical and pragmatic knowledge (of what happened before), not political abstraction, which is about the possibilities of what would happen. But a more acute problem in this approach is to when the anti-nationalist and a-nationalist perspectives are portrayed as civilized and progressive positions. In this case a-nationalism transforms itself to an obscure form of ‘cultural racism’, where a dichotomy is constituted between the nationalists and the a-nationalists. What this dichotomy is re-producing is the social hierarchy in a new form: or, the elitist a-nationalism, which is the privilege of the upper, urban, cultivated or cultural strata, as the opposite to the nationalism of the masses, hooligans, primitives and rednecks.

A short and important intellectual digression on the notion of nation in communism is deserved here; our conception of this issue is simple: most discussions available on the relation between communism and nationalism are based on Stalin’s theories on the subject. According to Stalin, the definition of nation is: “a human group which possesses certain definite characteristics. It is a historically stable community of people. It has a common vernacular language. It occupies a single piece of territory. It has an integrated,

coherent economy. It possesses a ‘community of psychological make-up’ (a folk psychology, a national character). And it is ‘a historical category’ belonging to a definite epoch, the epoch of rising capitalism”. — 25

According to this definition, which many neo-liberals as well as social-democrats might agree on, the concept of nation has its compact and finite definitions. The practical aspect of this definition is that the formation of the nation is based on evolution, which constitutes its coherence. In this evolutionist theory, of course, not all the national species reach the form of coherence, or stability to be nominated as such (as nation). So to speak, not all the nations deserve to be called nations. The real implication of this theory is colonization and imperialism, the premises of which can be found in spiritualist theories of Hegel. — 26

25 —
James M. Blauet,
The National Question: Decolonizing the Theory of Nationalism, London: Zed Books, 1987, p. 148.
26 —
Susan Buck-Morss,
“Hegel and Haiti”,
Critical Inquiry, Vol. 26 No.4, summer 2000.

Post scriptum: on the relation between realism and fiction in political art

One of the most challenging problems of political artworks is their content. What should the content of a political artwork be, if, as we propose, it is against transcendentalism and empiricism while at the same time being abstract and concrete? Or to pose the question in a more familiar way: what is the relation of political art to realism and fiction? The general assumption is that realism is the content, which is the main imperative in producing political artworks.

From Lukács to Brecht, and from Benjamin to Adorno, there are very different propositions regarding the role of realism (in the political): the realism of concrete as the necessity of the emancipation. — 27

This is only partly true; the concrete is not necessarily the realist. And another part of this story regards the concept of fiction: it is not necessary the escapism of un-realism.

This division is misleading, because many artworks, experimental or not, in referring to some moment of reality (historical or actual), can reproduce ideology which is actually fiction, representation or fantasy. By contrast, in some cases fiction can bring us closer to the concrete. As it might be obvious for some, we are here referring to the final lines in Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (1967): this is fiction but brings us closer to reality.

We started with Mao, and we will finish with Mao. In the same film Godard has a character, whose lecture goes like this: "They say Lumière made documentaries, and Méliès made fiction. And that Méliès was a dreamer filming fantasies. I think just the opposite. Lumière was a painter. He filmed the same things painters were painting at the time, men like Charo, Manet or Renoir. He filmed train stations, public gardens, workers going home, men playing cards, and the trams. In the same historical moment, Méliès filmed a trip to the moon, the King of Yugoslavia's visit to president Fallières. And now, from this per-

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One example is the Brechtian notion of realism as explained by Frederic Jameson: "The spirit of realism designates an active, curious, experimental, subversive — in a word, scientific — attitude towards social institutions and the material world; and the 'realistic' work of art is therefore one which encourages and disseminates this attitude, yet not merely in a flat or mimetic way along the lines of imitation alone", F. Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion", in *Aesthetic and Politics: Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno*. London: Verso, 1980, p. 205.

spective, we realize that those were the current events. They were certainly re-enacted. Yet they were real events. I'd even say that Melies was Brechtian. We mustn't forget that." — 28

— This is a modified version of the text originally written for the exhibition catalogue *Manifestations of Nationalism in Everyday Life*, as part of the 5th edition of Lens Political Film Festival, Helsinki, November 2010. The exhibition was the result of a workshop with students of the Helsinki Art Academy.



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Jean-Luc Godard,
La Chinoise, 1967.
In our course with
students we tried
to demonstrate
this with two
Finnish films made
in the seventies.
By comparing Jörn
Donner's *Perkele!*
Kuvia Suomesta
(1971) with Erikko
Kivikoski's *Laukaus*
Tehtaalla (1973),
we tried to show
that Donner's
cinema-direct style
subversion was ac-
tually reproducing
what was known as
the 'radical spirit
of the time'; by cat-
aloguing pictures
of an alter-Finland
it reproduced the
idea of the nation
in different, 'more
subversive' form.
In contrast to this,
Kivikoski's fiction
film deals with
the economic and
political situation
of Finnish workers
and the unem-
ployed in a more
realistic and con-
crete way, by show-
ing their struggle
from a historical
and materialist
perspective.