Global Thought and its Ghosts

I: Global Thought vs Global Theory

If, by 'Global Thought,' we mean the philosophical project of positing a 'Global Theory,' the 'discovery' (or production) of transcendent ideas which structure (or tell an overarching story about) reality and unite one (human) world out of many worlds, we are right to feel hesitant and maintain critical distance. We could consider the production of such a world-encompassing theory the drive of pre-modern philosophers, if by 'modern' we mean a renewed criticality and awareness of the historicity of thought, a scepticism about 'grand narratives' and the application of a-priori conceptual categories to the past and its heterogeneous socio- cultural traditions. Whether it is Spinoza's demonstration of a mono-substance, Kant's 'science' of metaphysics and morals, Hegel's world-spirit dialectically moving toward 'absolute freedom,' or Marx's science of history which culminates in the flower of socialism, 'global thought' in a rationalist key posits a predetermined theory of history which is working itself out in space-time, requiring only empirical adjustment on the part of human societies in order to 'clear the way' for 'Reason,' 'Nature,' 'History,' or even God to incarnate itself. Often, in reading global theory of this sort, we are assured that "Reason 'realises' itself in human history," (Castoriadis 1997, 38-9) and this theoretical optimism has constituted what today we understand as the hegemonic narrative of 'Progress' within which all human history, its revolutions and its massacres, its genocides and its artistic-cultural achievements, the development of technology, capitalism and the forces of production, colonialism and imperialism are subsumed into a coherent 'world-view' or Weltanschauung.

This world-view, which posits a collective, theoretically unified world, is predicated on the elimination of many other worlds. In Nick Hunt's short story Loss Soup (2009), the protagonist sits down at a fictional banquet in a dining hall "located, it seems, in an abandoned subway tunnel… Lit by dim, recessed lights that give the room an atmosphere of twilight. Walls dustily cluttered with half-completed objects, broken bits of statuary that appear familiar at first glance, and at second glance unrecognisable." As the hooded and anonymous diners sit, a ritualistic intonation of all the lost species, cultures, traditions, lifeways and worlds is monotonously recited in an inversion of the Onondaga 'Thanksgiving Address' (translated more accurately as 'The Words That Come Before All Else') which, in its long-form oratory asserting the ontological equality of all other beings, acknowledges the world-creating processes of all forms of life, a populous, diverse world of teachers and kin; Kimmerer comments that "part of its power rests in the length of time it takes to send greetings and thanks to so many. The listeners reciprocate… by putting their minds into the place where gathered minds meet" (2020, 110). Ideally, it is here where 'gathered minds meet' that any theory could hope to arise which integrates the diverse ways of being and traditions of thought and practise. Contrastingly, in Loss Soup, as the exhaustive list of lost worlds are intoned, each recited extinction adding new material added to the 'soup,' the protagonist hurries to write down, journalistically, each species, culture, tradition, history, and world which is added to the cauldron. His anxiety builds:

> You halt your hopeless scribbling – already you have skipped dozens, scores, perhaps hundreds have not been committed to paper, you will never recall them now… They have no features, no identifying markings. They have reverted to a

monotype. Ethnically, sexually and culturally dilute. It's as if every race in the world has been boiled down to its component paste and stirred together into a beige-coloured blandness.

Instead of these lost worlds adding a rich and diverse depth to the soup, it is instead a "sewer- stinking broth." The protagonist is stunned: "Perhaps you imagined them swimming down there – shades of the Kipchaks, the wisents, the grebes, the canopies of long-extinct trees, intimations of dead Aboriginal tongues, the auroch and the Neanderthal, Homo floresiensis, the glaciers, megafauna…" What this Gothic short-fiction evokes is the unaccountable loss that history guided by a unifying theory of progress leaves behind it - the rich, diverse, countless worlds that once existed have been reduced to a tasteless gruel solemnly acknowledged as the precondition for the present which can proclaim itself as the 'end of history.' Within the dining hall, faced with collective loss, it becomes grotesque to assert world-encompassing theories of Progress.

Both Castoriadis and Jameson, in their own language, characterise the postmodern age as one of 'conformity,' an epoch "in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, where all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (Jameson, 1982). While for Jameson this is a remark on aesthetic and cultural production, Castoriadis levels the charge equally at theorists and intellectual production: he remarks that "a grave concomitant and related symptom is the complete atrophy of political imagination... Eclecticism and the recombining and reprocessing of the achievements of the past have now gained pride

of program… in philosophy, historical and textual commentary on and interpretation of past authors have become the substitute for thinking" (1997, 39, 41, 40). In this he means thinking in the strong sense - of theory. Their critical call for emphatic thinking - theoretical thinking - is in response to a shared perception of what Mark Fisher has called 'capitalist realism,' the globalising, seemingly impenetrable hegemony of neoliberal capitalism and its forms of production and consumption, socio- political relations, and attendant narratives (of which 'Progress' is one of its central myths). He says that Fukuyama's 'end of history' thesis "may have been widely derided, but it is accepted, even assumed, at the level of the cultural unconscious" (2009, 6).

Conditions of capitalist realism renders 'theory' understood in its etymological sense of Theoria - 'to see' - critically important. As Han says, theory "represents an essential decision that causes the world to appear wholly different - in a wholly different light" (2017, 49). Theory, as a primary decision, determines what matters and what doesn't, what is or should be. Ultimately theory is highly selective narration. As Han articulates, "theories and ceremonies (i.e rituals) share an origin. They confer form on the world" (Han, 50). Yet we know theory is dangerous for precisely this same quality: moral theories, theories of history, any theory which cites its origin from 'authoritative' sources (whether the logos, God, 'Nature,' 'Reason,' logic, and so on) have paved the way for 'just wars,' imperialism, colonialism, capitalist development, the formation of nation-states, and the reification of hierarchies and forms of discipline and control which,

standing outside of Eurocentric theoretical traditions, appear not legitimate or justified, but insane.[1]

The fictional ceremony of Loss Soup articulates that each dead tradition has lost their theoretical potentials; the many worlds have been reduced to a 'monotype,' the waste-product of present reality which, whilst it 'consumes' the dead, is not enriched, does not embody them or continue their histories in any fashion. They are tastelessly metabolised. We can, therefore, surmise two operative projects for 'Global Thought' by those who practise it within the hegemony: the responsibility of theory, art, culture and literature to reveal not only the form of the 'reality principle' - what Castoriadis calls the social imaginary - but also to uncover the 'Real,' which for Lacan is that which any 'reality' (or social imaginary) must repress - such that encounter with this atopic Other can penetrate the hegemony of the reality principle and deliver that gift of alterity which allows the world to appear 'in a wholly different light.'

Returning to Jameson, Castoriadis' and Fisher's critique - the sense of "malaise, the feeling that there is nothing new" (Fisher, 4) which has prompted a 'recycling' of past forms, thoughts and cultures - we can perhaps salvage some value in this postmodern

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[1] Such is the perception of countless theoretical traditions which stand outside of the globality of the ascendant, hegemonic theory of history and progress. Consider Jeanette Armstrong's Okanagan grandmother, looking down to the valley where "the angry sounds of cars honk[ed] in a slow crawl along the black highway and the grind of large machinery from the sawmill… rose in a steady buzzing overtone"; "the people down there are dangerous, they are all insane" (Armstrong 1996, 462). The rest of Armstrong's essay - 'Sharing One Skin' - articulates the old Okanagan ontology of the Self, body, heart and mind which, as a living theoretical tradition that has informed generations of Okanagans, situated sustainable human communities for thousands of years. Part of why she articulates Okanagan theory "is to try to bring our whole society closer to that kind of understanding, because without that deep connection to the environment, to the earth, to what we actually are… confusion and chaos enter. We then spend a lot of time dealing with that confusion" (462)

condition of global thought. As Fisher himself acknowledges, "one strategy against capitalist realism could involve invoking the Real(s) underlying the reality that capitalism presents to us" (18) which entails a sensitive revisitation to the ruins, wreckages, and histories of the past to recover their fate as mere ingredient in the 'loss soup.'[2] This was Walter Benjamin's strategy, who in his time described the 'reality principle' as a 'collective dream' which it was the critics task to awaken the population from, much as Hume's theories awakened Kant from his 'dogmatic slumber' into a critical, 'modern' consciousness. As Benjamin recognised in his "anthropological approach" (Turl 2015) these 'ruins' must be excavated and their energies released before they are blanketed over in a hegemony constantly attempting to self-repair and innovate itself into a state of perfection.

Whilst this past-facing thought is perhaps opposed to the anxious, future-oriented desire for emphatic theory to restructure and 're-story' the world, it is the spectrality of the past which continues to haunt the hegemony of capitalism, which as a "monstrous, infinitely plastic entity, capable of metabolising and absorbing anything with which it comes into contact" (Fisher 6) ultimately cannot eliminate its ghosts, which refuse ultimate metabolization: "a ghost never dies, it remains always to come and to come-back" (Derrida 2006, 2). The ceaseless acceleration of Capital and its swift outmoding of old forms creates Gothic pasts behind it at every stride. Spectrality is growing in numbers and strength. The factories and ruins of its industrial period now haunt post-

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[2] Doubtless, a continuing threading together, amplification, rediscovery - the creation of common ground and shared imaginaries across subaltern and 'nomadic' traditions which survive, and even now come into existence - is our constantly renewing task

industrialism. The critiques and unrealised political futures of modernity have strewn

haunted wreckage as they "crashed against the shores of neoliberal consensus" (Turl

2015). The imperfect hegemonies which characterise postcolonial nations has left

subaltern cultures and political forms which defy the blanket-bourgeois socio-political

order which Capitalism is imagined to institute, largely giving rise to Subaltern Studies

as introduced by Rahajit Guha (Chibber 2013). As Derrida points out: "haunting belongs

to the structure of every hegemony" (Derrida 37). The spectres of both the repressed

present and the past linger on the outskirts of the shell of the reality principle, where

both the critic and the artist create pathways and mediums for their expression such

that their many-faced alterity can 'awaken us from the dream' of the singularly

imagined-Real, the hegemony of a 'global theory.'

II: Emancipatory Spectres

In 2008, Chris Anderson, co-editor and founder at WIRED, published an article titled

"The End of Theory." In it, he stated that hypothetical theoretical models have been

outmoded by "the inconceivably large volumes of data" available to corporations like

Google, Facebook and the custodians of 'Big Data'; he declares "Out with every theory

of human behaviour, from linguistics to sociology. Forget taxonomy, ontology, and

psychology. Who knows why people do what they do? The point is they do it, and we

can track and measure it with unprecedented fidelity. With enough data,

the numbers speak for themselves." This represents a weak and simplistic conception

of theory. Strong theories, like Plato's doctrine of Ideas or Hegel's Phenomenology of

Spirit, are not models that can be replaced by data analysis. Equally, we are awash with statistics speaking to the severity of both a mental health crisis endemic to post-industrial society and ecological breakdown. This data does not, in itself, posit new theories of human behaviour or reveal the sources of such crises. Rather, the facts speak to the demand for theory which can resituate human societies and provoke re-cognition of our historical situation. Data and information is merely 'positive' in the sense that it is additive, cumulative, changes nothing and announces nothing: information in-itself is inconsequential (Han, 51). In contrast, re-cognition arrives as insight - the function of theory, and even discourse, since the time of Socrates' dialogues. Insight, as Han describes it, is a negativity: "it is exclusive, exquisite, and executive. An insight preceded by experience is capable of shaking up the whole status-quo in its entirety and allowing something wholly Other to begin" (Han, 51). Re-cognition is imperative to achieve for those living within oversaturated hegemonies which enable unsustainable ways of being that considers extinctions, the eradication of cultures, communities and thought traditions as more 'data' to be accumulated; nominal ingredients of the 'loss soup.' Theory which engenders recognition of our ecological and psychic situation is therefore more critical than ever.

Fisher targets three aporias within capitalist realism where an invocation of the repressed 'Real' offers emancipatory potentials within the hegemony: ecological catastrophe, mental health and bureaucracy (18-20). The latter we shall leave aside for the moment; the first he considers already contaminated, with ecological catastrophe featuring as "a kind of simulacra, its real implications… too traumatic to be assimilated

into the system" (18). This leaves mental health. Fisher proposes an amplified

politicisation of mental health - a "politicisation of much more common disorders" (19) -

following from the radical theory of Laing, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari where

schizophrenia, particularly, was shown to be a political category and not a

'natural' one that identified the individualised bourgeois subject as 'mad' or unfit for

society. Modifying psychoanalysis from a bourgeois science to a theoretical lens reveals

the socio- structural causes of endemic mental illness, reveals capitalism as a

pathological system, or one that entails mass psychosis as a byproduct of its

functioning. Fisher, noticing the proliferation of depression, anxiety, BPD and ADHD

within late-capitalism, believes that this troubles the 'end of history' thesis that liberal-

capitalism is the fulcrum of human striving where freedom is finally achieved for the

individual subject.

Yet, since Fisher's time of writing (2009), we can observe how Capitalism has

incorporated discourse on depression, trauma and mental illness too: the proliferation of

'corporate mindfulness,' 'Zen' techniques and the normalisation of counselling and

therapeutic services have emerged to console this otherwise subversive discourse.

Indeed, an eclectic mixture of Japanese Zen and Chan Buddhism - the traditions which

gave rise to what is called 'mindfulness meditation' which were originally practised as

spiritual techniques to obliterate the self - have been widely appropriated into neoliberal

culture. Incorporated into capitalist realism, such techniques are used therapeutically in

order to maximise self-achievement. They are self-medication for the auto-exploiting

subject who must continually have resources available to succeed in conditions of

individual free-market competition. Therapeutic practices are inherently progressive in

character (Schonfeld 2020, 284): therapy involves a teleological trajectory from actuality

to potentiality. Any therapy which is not rooted in a movement away from the socio-

structural sources of psychic harm merely works to adjust the subject more fully to the

system itself, leaving hegemony unquestioned. This appears to neuter a Gothic fear

of 'repressed' contents rupturing the present; the politics of mental illness is subsumed

into the 'reality' of a hypercomplex modern economy, which responds with new medical-

pharmaceutical-therapeutic commodities and techniques to stave off whatever political

threat the uncovering of mass mental illness might pose. Equally, radical theory is

therapeutic in the sense that it both reveals the source of harm and envisions a

potentiality beyond it, whilst, ideally, providing the conceptual and material tools

necessary to work towards such a future. Theory is conformist when it provides

conceptual resources for therapeutic adjustment. Capitalist realism is happy to

incorporate therapy (and theory) of the conformist-dogmatic type: techniques that the

population can practise to resolve capitalism's own aporias where mental health

epidemics threaten the rate of production, innovation and the profoundly unsettling

transformation of the world.

We turn then to what Fisher sidelined as a source of the 'Real' which could rupture

capitalist realism: environmental catastrophe. He de-emphasises this in 2009 because it

is not 'repressed' so much as incorporated into advertising and marketing (18);

'sustainable' commodities are to climate crisis as 'mindfulness' apps are to mental

health. Both mental health and climate crisis, through this incorporation and reflection in

the "desiring-production machine,"[3] lose their subversive edge, their spectrality or

alterity. Yet in both cases they are imperfectly incorporated and their reality is not

entirely subsumed into the capitalist Real; indeed, both promise to incarnate more

frequently and violently as time moves forward unless the hegemony mutates into a

new epoch to reformulate its repression or is infiltrated and transformed by its ghosts.

Climate change, in fact, emerges as perhaps the most powerful spectre of all - the

vengeance of 'Nature,' once thought tamed and domesticated by the expansion of

'rational mastery' which converted it to sheer 'standing reserve,' returns to

reassert its ontological primacy over its Promethean children. Malm describes the

unique temporality of climate change as "the rolling invasion of the past into the present"

(2016, 10), the Gothic unravelling of repressed contents which flows into a monstrous

external Other which all-the-while has been accumulating above our heads and swelling

the atmosphere of the planet. Rampant wildfires, smoke-blotted skies and blood-red

suns mark just one dread image of the world which once again wears the face of alterity

in its unpredictability and growing hostility to hosting human life.

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[3] As Fisher describes Capitalism, it no longer simply incorporates materials that possess subversive potentials, but instead precorporates them (9); anticipates them - the "pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture." Deleuze and Guattari effect a post- Marxist shift of focus to 'problems of desire' which they see as 'part of the infrastructure' (D&G 2013, 104) in order to illuminate the folding-in of libidinal drives into the economic-productive sphere. Ultimately, desiring-production renders everything consumable, which through a dose of excessive positivity neuters the Otherness of the object; no matter how subversive, 'oriental,' 'foreign,' or ambivalent the original content, production shall produce a consumable object of it. Indeed, the machine of desiring-production is perhaps the most formidable appendage of Capitalism which theory, for all its revelatory powers, struggles to lay siege; as Castoriadis notes: "the system holds together because it succeeds in creating people's adherence to the way things are [ce qui est]" (1997, 241). Castoriadis uses the word adherence; we could perhaps go further and say the system holds together - and innovates itself - because it succeeds in keeping-pace with the horizon of desiring-production.

[Eric Thurber i](n Boise, Idaho, captured a reddened sun due to wildfire smoke on July 19, 2021
(https://earthsky.org/earth/red-suns-and-moons-from-wildfire-smoke/).

The recurring visitations of this spectre offers the ambivalence of a symbol which cannot

be reduced to something either positive or negative and therefore resists metabolization

into hegemony. Marx described how the gaze of historical time "weighs like a nightmare

on the brains of the living" (1852) (which is never more true than for climate crisis) yet,

at the same time, this spectrality is generative in its inspiring (literally: 'to breathe

in'/'divine guidance') gift of visions of a utopic future-to-come. The spectre of a changing

climate exhibits this 'angelic' quality, where it visits those of ailing hope to rejuvenate

them with fresh visions; Fisher returns to environmental catastrophe as an

emancipatory Real when he says it "provides what a political unconscious totally

colonised by neoliberalism cannot: an image of life after capitalism" (2014, 228). The

spectre of climate change (not its statistical representation) delivers the long-sought for 'transcendental,' yet utterly material axis point upon which all future theories must come to rest: ecological sustainability - which regenerates our political will and practises of global thought. Yet its negativity casts an arguably longer shadow: we are haunted by apocalyptic dreams of a world on fire.

The spectrality of climate crisis is perhaps nowhere better embodied in global thought than in music. Particularly I would draw attention to Leyland Kirby's most recent work, We are in the shadow of a distant fire, released 5th March 2022 through V/VM Test Records.[4] In this twenty- minute recording, a reverb-laden sample from a choir singing an excerpt from St Luke's Passion - To save our souls from bitter, shame, and mourning / Thou bearest, Lord, base treachery and scorning / From lure of gain or gold save us / We pray Thee, Lest we betray Thee - is looped, cyclically, until the last minute where the sample fades and we are left only with the crackle of vinyl. Kirby's music often attends to the liminality of the past: entropy, fading memories, the attrition of time; here, the looped intonation of the choir slowly breaks down as the circular form of the sound disintegrates the longer we listen to it. In this quality, the music resembles the state of a doomed hegemony as it reckons with the spectrality of climate crisis: repetition of itself even in a state of decay, entropy and forewarned death. The choir, intoning through the hiss and crackle of the vinyl, which itself reaches us through modern digital mediums, is laden with the spectrality of the past, the kind which creeped up on Eliot in the Wasteland: "at my back in a cold blast I hear / The rattle of the bones,

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[4] Available to listen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqULTNqcKro

and chuckle spread from ear to ear" (2002, 44). Eliot himself would have been sensitive

to the recurrence of religious, eschatological messages included in postmodern music

which have only accumulated historical gravity, prophesy, and messianic connotations

as time progresses. The eschatology in Kirby's music, however, resembles what

Derrida calls "messianic without messianism… a nonteleological eschatology" (Cheah,

2003: 390). Cheah comments: "Unlike teleology, which always involves a return to self,

messianic affirmation is the sheer loss of self through exposure to an alterity that cannot

be anticipated" (390). The mournful, haunting, decaying repetition of Kirby's music acts

as a primer for this sheer loss of self, as we stand before the alterity of "the shadow of a

distant fire" which, in a final inversion of the telos of Progress, has no promise of a

benevolent end. As Jeffers writes in his poem looking at the archaic grave of a long-

dead Scottish King: "We used to wonder at the world, and have wished / To hear some

final harmony resolve the discords of life / - Here they are all perfectly resolved." (1987,

42) In accordance with this poetic perception, and the substance invoked by Kirby's

music, I imply that music, poetry, fiction, cultural and aesthetic production can not only

expose the mortality of 'global theory' and its narrative of Progress, but situate our own

mortality – our relationship with Time and Death – in such a way as to provide solace,

and insight, into our historical situation. The very nature of Time and Death require this

to be a past-facing thought. This is not therapeutic in the sense that we teleologically

transcend what is our unavoidable historicity – as Landauer articulates, we each are

"instants of the eternal community of ancestors" (2010, 103) – but 'radical' in the sense

of 'returning to our roots.' The spectrality in Loss Soup, climate change, Kirby's music,

Eliot's and Jeffers' poetry deploy symbols which express/embody the ghosts of the past,

to provide avenues for the repressed Real – left amidst ruins and 'wasteland' – to incarnate itself, resisting any political-hegemonic narration, unsettling hegemony but also providing the gift of alterity: insight into who and what we are. Such artistic-cultural creation stands as one of the most important avenues of global thought. Particularly, music like Kirby's perhaps evokes the nostalgia of lost worlds; nostalgia, etymologically, denotes the acute desire to 'return home' (nostos). Of course, nostalgia can be transfixing, paralysing, apolitical, or even reactionary in its content; "conjuring up the spirits of the past" to perform reinterpreted service in the present should also make us wary, as Marx articulated in 1852. Yet 'home,' in the sense of a shared world or process of worlding, is precisely what global theory sets out to build, and what global thought continues to construct both inside and outside capitalist hegemony amidst both the ruins of the past and the potentials of the present.

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