

28 april 2014

Dear Reader,

Please find here a small constellation of ideas I have been chewing on. These short passages can be read in any order, so please don't feel obliged to read them from the beginning to the end. In fact, I'd rather you didn't. Instead, perhaps you can think of them as a collection of favorite places to visit, in sight of one another, yet not linked by a straight line. You are welcome to stop by, stay a while, come back again, or ignore these dwellings as you see fit.

These ideas, or more accurately, the earliest kernels of them, were the beginning point for an exhibition called *Game Theory*, part of the 2nd CAFAM Biennale, *The Invisible Hand: Curating as Gesture*, documented by this book you now hold in your hands. This project was created in collaboration with Constant Nieuwenhuys/New Babylon (NL), Experimental Jetset (NL), Provo (NL), Temporary Services (US), The Yes Men in collaboration with Steve Lambert, Andy Bichlbaum et al (US), and YKON (FI/DE), and the writing you read here is informed and interrelated to these peoples' ideas and activities.

{media, in all its guises}

I've realized that most often I receive "the news" via friends posting links to articles and information on social media websites, right alongside news of a different sort – the arrival of a friend's baby or an announcement of a colleague's new job. The distinction between the means that we communicate information and ideas, in a person-to-person sense and to "the masses" – from the daily news to your ex-boyfriend's Twitter or Weibo feed – seems increasingly blurred, if ever there really was a divide. Perhaps a more interesting example of the contemporary condition of this media mash-up is the documentary film, *The Act of Killing*, which depicts members of an Indonesian death squad reenacting their real-life mass-killings in North Sumatra, in the style of the American movies they love. As the filmmaker, Joshua Oppenheimer explains, "the resulting film may best be described as a documentary of the imagination."¹

On the one hand, the film exposes a global audience to the atrocities of a death-squad operating in 1960's Indonesia. It seems quite straightforward, that from an ideological standpoint, the creators of this film hoped to disseminate knowledge about this atrocity to educate a broader public. In turn, as something of a social truism, we collectively hope that by disseminating this knowledge, it will help prevent these types of atrocities in the future and lead towards a more just and peaceful society. At the same time, the film's protagonists use tropes from blockbuster action films to re-enact the brutal killings that occurred at their behest, or that they themselves performed years earlier. Through this beguiling mixture of reality and fantasy, the film's protagonists share something very profound: they reveal how we see, and how we imagine. In the words of the filmmaker, these are questions of critical importance, to understand and interrogate the "imaginative procedures by which human beings persecute each other, and how we then go on to build (and live in) societies founded on systemic and enduring violence."²

{frames, or the means through which we see}

In her text *Frames of War*, Judith Butler aims to draw attention to the frames through which we apprehend or, perhaps more often, fail to apprehend the lives of others. She argues that the frame through which we see one another is inherently an operation of power; it is, as she calls it, an "editorial embellishment" which implicitly guides our interpretation and delimits the capacity of appearance itself.³

Mass media: the headline, the image, the sound bite, and the meme, traverse the globe with incredible speed and ease. They are tweeted, shared, linked, disseminated, and perhaps printed in a newspaper within less than 24 hours. These delineations of what is seen and unseen, what is heard and unheard, whom is speaking and on whose behalf, and our concomitant capacities to apprehend and recognize one another are omnipresent: in our Facebook feed, the printed papers of major media outlets, in the latest movie at the neighborhood Cineplex, ostensibly in every format of media we consume, infecting our understanding of all that surrounds us, and perhaps even all that we imagine.

We live in an overwhelmingly visual culture. We are inundated with images, and we become ever increasingly astute at interpreting and engaging with visual information: we sniff out a guerilla marketing campaign, we recognize the knock off logo, we slyly appropriate blockbuster protagonists, public appearance gaffs, and of course all manners of cat videos, creating a seemingly never-ending archive of visual puns, as likely to be put to use for our amusement as for political action. If media, in all its various guises, has infiltrated our very capacity to imagine ourselves and our actions, it can also be seen as a set of existing tools, a genus of technologies, which can be used, appropriated, and subverted.

{*utopia, it's not a dirty word*}

Works of mass culture cannot be ideological without at one and the same time being implicitly or explicitly utopian as well: they cannot manipulate unless they offer some genuine shred of content as a fantasy bribe to the public about to be so manipulated... the works of mass culture, even if their function lies in the legitimation of the existing order -- or some worse one -- cannot do their job without deflecting in the latter's service the deepest and most fundamental hopes and fantasies of the collectivity, to which they can therefore, no matter in how distorted a fashion, be found to have given voice.⁴ (Frederic Jameson)

But to limit the utopian to the Thomas More variety, or simply to orientate it in that direction, would be like trying to reduce electricity to the amber from which it gets its Greek name and in which it was first noticed.⁵ (Ernst Bloch)

Coined in 1516 by Thomas More as the title for his book about a fictional island, the term *utopia* has suffered something of an identity crisis in the intervening years. As if mocking the word itself, I recently learned of a reality TV show of the same name currently on view in the Netherlands. Produced primarily for an online audience who interestingly, must pay for access, "Utopia" allows its viewers to watch the participants live at any time of day, as they attempt to live in forced community with one another. And of course, as is the case with reality shows, the audience gets to vote whom will next be removed from the island as the show is actually a competitive contest of sorts. It would be hard to imagine a more dystopic *Lord of the Flies* meets *Big Brother* style reality than this. Clearly *utopia* could do with a bit of re-branding.

Utopia is perhaps an underachiever, a disappointment, to those who have rallied behind it, and it has clearly suffered a "terrible banalization" as Ernst Bloch calls it.⁶ However, it still seems imminently useful and important to name, to find a conceptual vocabulary, for this desire to imagine the world differently. Utopia is not simply an imaginary island that will always be sited in an unreachable, unrealizable future. Since first labeled by More, many thinkers, writers, inventors and artists have aligned themselves with this desire. Some contemporary examples that come to mind include: "temporary autonomous zones," alternative currencies, community sustainable agriculture (CSAs), the Occupy movement, and many other activities aimed at reinvigorating a notion of "the Commons" within civil society. If we shy away from the language of utopia, how

can we trace these activities? As Bloch articulates, the history of these efforts has utility, it is a repository of possibilities, a record and archive for future action, and therefore what could have been can still be. And why can't this be so? Strategies and tactics must adapt as our social and political conditions shift, but surely this repository holds some material that we can poach, steal, appropriate, and re-work for tomorrow, or next year. If you'd rather talk about the desire to "imagine the world differently," that's of course ok. It just seems a bit long – so I'll stick with *utopia*.

{*the games we play*}

What must be changed is the game itself, not the pieces.⁷ (André Breton & Nicolas Calas)

For many years the conviction has grown upon me that civilization arises and unfolds in and as play.⁸ (Johan Huizinga)

At first, perhaps play appears superfluous. Play is to do with children, and dogs. But play, in fact can be very serious (and not serious at the same time). As Johan Huizinga notes, play creates order: "inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns... Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection."⁹ Could it be that play in itself is a manifestation of our utopian impulse? We speak of "gaming the system," or in other words misusing its structure and intentions to achieve different, more desirable outcomes. Though of course the system is also gaming us (see below regarding the sophisticated means by which surpluses are extracted in contemporary art).

Back to the perfect world of play, there is something particularly fascinating to note: as Huizinga explains, all play occurs within a playground marked off beforehand, either materially or abstractly, deliberately or as a matter of course. As play is performed in human culture, there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the 'consecrated spot' for a religious ritual, the proscenium stage for a theater play, and the playground cannot be formally distinguished. These are all sacred spaces of play; they are ostensibly operating using the same procedures. This "world apart," a space away from the "business as usual" of normal life creates what game-makers call a "magic circle." Inside the "magic circle" there is an internal logic, a set of rules, but this logic isn't always logical, it is in fact often *illogical* or perhaps better put, play is open to a broader, more experimental approach to logic or rationale. The rationale can even shift or be reversed within play's structure.

To play, we must suspend disbelief, and inhabit its logic. The outcome of play is not fixed in advance; it is chance and process oriented. When one starts to play a game, unless you are a cheat, you don't know who will win, or how the play will proceed. Play is also manifested in our games of language: one cannot "get" a punch line by carrying out a set of rules or logical steps. It is more like grasping a gestalt. In other words, the listener sees a holistic web of relations between the elements of the joke, and then discovers that it is funny.¹⁰

The "world apart" of play has radical potential, creating ideal conditions for experimenting and privileging other ways of knowing. Play is a slippery thing, it inhabits more than we might imagine. Our desire for ludic experience pervades more than we may realize, despite what our rational thinking might lead us to believe.

{*if this is what we have, let's at least use it*}

Escapology is the science of everyday elusiveness, leakage and doing-otherwise that can really only be described as ‘escape’ once power structures shift to capture its movement.¹¹ (Stephen Wright)

It seems that in the neo-liberal late-capitalist system, every manifestation of culture, visual or otherwise, can be instrumentalized and put to use in service of the creation of further surplus. If, as in 2008, a performative work consisting of a couple kissing in various poses sells for \$70,000, this seems to indicate that virtually all ideas and creative work can be reified on behalf of the market. One can’t help but feel that this has foreclosed nearly all possible routes of escape.

But if this is what we have to work with, let’s at least use it. Perhaps we’ve been looking for tunnels in all the wrong places.

¹ Oppenheimer, Joshua, “Director’s Statement,” *The Act of Killing*, accessed November 24, 2013, <http://theactofkilling.co.uk/filmmaker>

² Ibid.

³ Butler, Judith, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009), 1 – 8.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture,” *Social Text* 1 (Winter 1979): 130-148.

⁵ Bloch, Ernst, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1954-59); trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul Knight, *The Principle of Hope* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 15.

⁶ Adorno, Theodor and Ernst Bloch, extracts from “Something’s Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing” (1964), in *Utopias*, ed. Richard Noble (London & Cambridge: Whitechapel Gallery & The MIT Press, 2009), 50.

⁷ Breton, André & Nicolas Calas, “Profanation,” created as part of *Wine Glass Chess Set and Board*, lost original, date unknown [c. 1944], dimensions unknown. Described in *Newsweek*, December 25, 1944.

⁸ Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949), i.

⁹ Ibid, 10.

¹⁰ Rodriguez, Hector, “The Playful and the Serious: An approximation to Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens*,” *Game Studies* Volume 6, Issue 1 (December 2006), <http://gamestudies.org/0601/articles/rodrigues>.

¹¹ Wright, Stephen, *Toward a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013), 24.