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Abstract:

From Kant to postmodernism the idea of the sublime was always tied with questions of ethics and politics. Kant saw the sublime as a proof that rationality triumphs over nature, validating law and judgement through the subjective experience of pleasure and pain. Lyotard saw in the sublime a symptom of a crisis, at which rationality reaches its limit, and subjectivity is confronted with its own collapse. As this chapter will show, both these approaches are inadequate to account for the sublime in 21<sup>st</sup> century. The failure of liberal democracy and the rise of populist and fascist ideologies calls for a re-evaluation of the sublime as the dissolution of the symbolic order and the coming face to face with the alternative reality of the death drive. This chapter names this reality ‘The Diogenes Complex’, after the homeless beggar who made his form of existence the manifestation of his philosophical creed. Through his performative actions Diogenes has shown that reality is sublime because it is irreconcilable with rational logic and warned against the futility of trying to act rationally in irrational times.

Bio:

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## The Diogenes complex: sublime living in irrational times

In memory of Nily Mirsky

Introduction

There are two main ways by which the sublime contributed to political theory, and possibly to the practise of politics itself. For brevity’s sake, the first can be

name checked as the Kantian sublime, and the second as the postmodern sublime. In this chapter I will briefly outline these approaches before suggesting that both versions of the sublime cannot quite measure up to the experience of living in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While it might be tempting to come up with a new sublime that is more fitting for our times, such as an ecological sublime or a corporate sublime, I would like to suggest that the renewed interest in the sublime risks to appear as old wine in new bottles, unless it is taking seriously the ending of liberal / neo-liberal ethics and finally breaks with the contemporary critical discourse that still moves within the Enlightenment paradigm. The problem, to put it succinctly, is that in the age of viral social media, our fascination with smartphones and other industries of instant gratification means that both political representation and aesthetic perception are managed through technologies of speed, 24-7 news channels, always-on immersive media and modes of expression that privilege instantaneity. To misquote Antonio Gramsci, the problem is that the old sublime is dead, but the new sublime is not born yet.

This chapter will elaborate an altogether different way of looking at the sublime, broadly defined as a leap from the sensible to the supersensible, as that which happens when there is a ‘glitch in the matrix’ - when the symbolic order is breaking down, revealing the phantasmagorical abyss that is lurking beyond the ostensibly smooth surface of social normativity. It is the moment in *The Truman Show* when Truman (played by Jim Carrey) sails towards the horizon in a boat, until the boat strikes a wall, and he realises that the sea and the sky are not real, and that the world he lived in all his life is a fiction constructed in a television studio.

Because this sublime is a tear in the fabric of reality, it is simultaneously an ethical and an aesthetic event; it reveals reality as an ideology – something constructed and artificial, rather than the natural and organic entity it purports to be. Understood through the dual viewfinders of performativity and ideology, the sublime is an ethical stance because it exposes reality as a fiction, a cover-up so successful that we no longer see it as such. As Lacan is at pains to point out, the sublime is a revolt against the tyranny of the reality principle, because it refuses to accept the given as the only conceivable form of reality (Lacan, 2016). As I will go on to show, Diogenes the cynic - a homeless drifter, wandering tramp and a philosopher of great renown – provides an alternative response to the perennial question, ‘What is to be done?’ Diogenes answer is that especially in moments of great danger it is important to remember that reality is not all that it purports to be, that an alternative, virtual reality is sometimes the only saving grace, for it announces that the real too, is work in progress. The alternative reality principle here is not a form of escapism, but a reminder that the irrational cannot be overcome by rational means.

## I. Categories of the sublime

There are three ways by which the sublime is defined as an ethical experience. First, Edmund Burke conceived of the sublime as a bodily and spiritual experience of horror that is being mitigated by the sense of one's safety. The sublime is what happens when the drive for self-preservation clashes with fear that results from encountering something mighty, confusing, and threatening and is mitigated through the feeling of physical security.

Second, Immanuel Kant, in *Critique of Judgment* revisits the question of representation (*Vorstellung*), that was central to the *Critique of Pure Reason* as activity of the mind, but he approaches it in terms of aesthetic judgement. The experience of the sublime reaffirms human nature as rational through its ability to conceive of immeasurable formlessness. (Kant, 2007, pp 75-96) The subject determines him/herself by claiming superiority over nature. In this way Kant attempts to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical reason by placing the aesthetic experience of the sublime as a mediating mechanism between the sensible and the analytical. Kant distinguishes between mathematically sublime and dynamically sublime but asserts that in both cases it is the power of reason as the supersensible force that triumphs over nature. (Kant, 2007, pp. 145)

Third, in *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard identifies a shift between the modern, i.e. Kantian, and the postmodern sublime: in modernist aesthetics the sublime is explored at the level of content leaving the form of the artwork intact; while the content can be transgressive, the form is reassuringly traditional. In postmodernism, however, the denial of solace is precisely the political point of the sublime, as it is the identity - manifest through representation - that is being shattered through the operation of the postmodern image, putting forward 'the unrepresentable in presentation itself' (Lyotard, 1984, p. 81)

Lyotard's view of postmodernity highlights the fractal nature of the unrepresentable experience that refuses to become part of a totalising system or be subjected to the operations of rational logic that establishes some kind of reciprocity between reason and experience. Lyotard seems to imagine a work of art that is constantly striving to expose the diagram of its own foundation and push through its limits by perpetually using the work against itself and by undermining its own mode of production. While the Kantian sublime still holds on to the certainty and clarity of form, it is this very clarity that is not self-evident and problematised in the postmodern discourse.

Lyotard draws a further distinction between the Kantian sublime and the postmodern sublime, whereby in Kant the sublime exposes the failure of representation to reach out to ideas that cannot be represented, such as 'the idea of the world' and 'the idea of a simple (that which cannot be broken-down and decomposed)' (Lyotard, 1984, 78), but the postmodern sublime goes further, exposing the structure of representation itself as the will to mastery over all

things. This encounter with the immeasurable and the irrational is sublime not because of the magnitude of the experience but because it causes subjectivity to realise the error of subject/object relations. In the sublime, subjectivity is dissolved. Neither language nor visual representation can encompass these moments of total dissolution of identity, which for Lyotard makes the sublime into a political problem as it shows the desire to categorise, identify and classify as a form of political control.<sup>1</sup> For Lyotard the sublime is a tool of radical politics because it points to those aspects of social life that cannot be adequately accounted for through representational schemas that rely on rational logic. The sublime becomes the refuge of the misfit, the mentally ill, the deviant, the immigrant and the political radical.

For Lyotard, the ‘postmodern sublime’ is symptomatic to the sense of crisis that envelops both the contents and the structures of knowledge, i.e. an epistemological crisis caused by breakdown and loss of trust in the foundations of rational knowledge. In the sublime, reason is reaching its limit and entering a domain of the incomprehensible, the monstrous and colossal. In our own time, the crisis of knowledge in all its forms is manifest in the current dismantling of the institutions of liberal democracy, against the background of climate emergency.

What this leads to is a need for a way of thinking, questioning, and doing that does not rely on the same values that feed the industrial-entertainment complex otherwise known as life. Naming this modality of being ‘Diogenes syndrome’ I want to draw attention to what Foucault called ‘the aesthetics of existence’ – a sublime moment in which the ethical and the aesthetic are one and the same, where truth is equated not with the rational or the real but with the beautiful, the striking, and the memorable. (Foucault, 2011, p. 163) Getting to this remarkable place requires a tripartite move. First it will be shown how postmodernism tried and failed to provide an alternative to the logical-rational foundations of Western civilisation. In the second, it is necessary to show how the principle of identity plays out in the field of politics and what are the consequences of mistaking it for the real. In the third part Diogenes the cynic is shown to find a way of truth telling (*parrhēsia*) that does not rely on logical reason and the correspondence of ideas with reality. In so doing Diogenes might be proposing a way of life of radical and political activism, that is itself sublime.

## II. The lament over postmodernism

It is strange to live at a time when political liberalism and democracy are seeking new and more imaginative ways of damaging and even destroying themselves. Key preoccupations of liberalism are being employed specifically to undermine and discredit cultural pluralism and to advance new forms of nationalism and racism aimed at repressing the very ‘other’ that is the focus and

the concern of progressive politics. One by one all of the staples of liberalism – such as class, gender, sexuality, race, faith, the body, diversity and identity – are being weaponised not to advance inclusion and communitarianism but in order to promote intolerance, bigotry and racism through insisting on the right for self-determination of specific groups, whether these are white supremacists, misogynistic gamers, autocratic nationalists or pro-life activists. In this hall of mirrors, the ‘other’ is no longer the LGBTQI, the black, or the woman, rather it is the defender of white masculinity, the protester against the demolition of confederate statues, and the born-again Evangelical Christian.

What is even more worrying, is that a number of people who are leading the charge against pluralism, are themselves not reactionary, but due to the strange twists of the Mobius Band of the politics of identity, find themselves in favour of censorship, non-platforming, and ‘safe spaces’ where the right not to be hurt or offended trumps free speech, experimentation and curiosity are deemed public relations liabilities, and the fear of social media backlash to provocations operates as an effective tool of self-censorship.<sup>2</sup> This is a paradoxical situation, in which the Left’s traditional struggle for communitarian unity is replaced by a demand for recognition not as the ‘other’ but on the basis of difference from all the other ‘others’. (Kruks, 2001, Brown, 1995)

For its part, philosophy does not fare any better than politics. Contemporary reality is saturated with postmodern traits and antics because the philosophical project of postmodernism failed to make its mark on it. Postmodernism’s daring ambition was to produce a genuinely secular philosophy, that does not take its bearings from the idealistic foundations of Western philosophical standard. The goal of ‘overturning Platonism’ (Deleuze, 1983), was not the tantrum of self-indulgent *les enfants terribles* (although it did become the playground of some terrible children) (Sutton, 2018), rather it was an urgent and deeply political attempt to hold rationalism and humanism to account for their role in the barbarisms of the Twentieth Century. Because rationalism seems to be an equal opportunities employer in terms of mass-murder, concentration camps, nuclear bombs and other raptures of technological progress, dividing them fairly equally between the Left and the Right political extremes, Postmodern philosophers explored alternatives to the dominant narrative that makes reason and logic the cornerstone of Western philosophical world view. (Golding, 2010) Their goal was to by-pass the Cartesian *I think therefore I am*, because the *I* of the *I think* somehow always happens to be White, Western and male, who, due to his exceptional thinking prowess, is simply destined to assume the role of Top Gun, the conqueror of nature, women, indigenous populations, and everything else that happens in his war path.

This promise of a pluralist, non-binary philosophy that challenges the established political order on both sides of the political divide, came crushing down with the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001.<sup>3</sup> In the ensuing global war,

that is marketed as the West's righteous struggle against the Muslim antichrist, atheism and the 'end of grand narratives' (Lyotard, 1984) came to be seen as dangerous and unaffordable luxuries. The promise of a philosophy that is free from the metaphysical anchorage in the logic of identity, had to be quickly abandoned. When the declared enemy are the elusive Taliban tribesmen on Honda mopeds and balaclava-clad islamists criss-crossing deserts in armed pickup trucks, sympathy for the nomad becomes a dangerous game.<sup>4</sup> And when the President George W. Bush declared after 9/11 'you are either with us or with the terrorists' (CNN.com, 2001), the creative possibilities of becoming-other seemed dangerously close to treason. The war effort required total mobilisation of intellectual resources, and said mobilisation did not bode well for the tantalising promises of becoming-sunflower, and of the paradoxes of libidinal economy and desiring machines.<sup>5</sup>

### III. The principle of identity and its discontents

During these hazy, dot.com years between September 11, 2001 and the financial crash of 2007-2008 a new alliance was forged among the political class and the representatives of a newly minted philosophical school known as 'speculative realism'.<sup>6</sup> For the speculative realists, the excesses of postmodern philosophies of Deleuze, Derrida, Heidegger, Irigaray, and Lyotard have gone too far in challenging the basic premises of rational thought and scientific positivism, undermining the presuppositions of logic and dialectics, and even blurring the boundaries between science and myth. (Heidegger, 1978) Speculative realism returned philosophy to the rational-scientific foundations that first Freud than Heidegger thought to undermine by aligning it instead with art, poetry, music, Eros and the libido. Politically this was a smart move, as in the bonfire of the universities that followed from the global recession, the dialectical and analytical departments fared much better than their continental and postmodern counterparts. Politics without philosophy is nothing more than ideology, (Boyer, 2001) for that reason aspiring politicians read PPE (Philosophy, Politics and Economics) in Oxford and Cambridge, and every new turn of the austerity screw is accompanied by the stoic sigh 'it was the right thing to do'.<sup>7</sup> Speculative realism, with its foundations in scientific certainty, truth and dialectics, was the fitting background music to the zero sum war game that followed on from September 11. Instead of paradoxes it offered certainty, instead of the postmodern condition it offered truth, instead of rhizomatic becoming, deterritorialization and nomadic war machines it offered the logic of identity as the linchpin of science and the rational basis of the state.<sup>8</sup>

The question of identity fuels the fiercest arguments on both sides of the political divide, as the conservatives seek to articulate identity as the fulfilment of

individual destiny, and the right to consume goods and services, while the liberals seek to enlarge the notion of identity to encapsulate growing number of ethnic, sexual and racial norms. (Rose, 1996)

In its simplest form, the problem of identity can be expressed in a formula  $A=A$ , where  $A$  can be anything you like, a table, a Stradivarius violin, a molecule of hydrogen, the universe or you. To say that the  $A$  is equal to  $A$  means that it is not, and can never be anything other than  $A$ . For that reason,  $A=A$  means that  $A \neq B$  (known since Aristotle as the principle of non-contradiction). (Irwin, 1990) The power of identity lies in its ability to divide the world into autonomous, separate and clearly defined entities: a table is a piece of furniture with a flat top and one or more legs for eating, writing or working, a violin is a stringed musical instrument played with a horsehair bow. (Webster, 2016) So far so clear cut, yet a problem immediately arises when we imagine a table with strings stretched over its surface, and a bow moved across them: while it is not a Stradivarius, can we be certain that the table is not at the same time a little bit of a violin? And what becomes of a violin when I place it on a leg and eat my dinner from it? If a table and a violin present such unsolvable epistemological problems, how much more complex the situation becomes when the  $A$  is not a piece of furniture but a person who is not-quite-white, not-quite-straight, not-quite-black and not-quite-fe/male. Trying to force identity into the rigid framework of scientific certainty can be extremely injurious to one's health, as can be evidenced by anyone who was ever told in no uncertain terms that they are a filthy  $B$  who has no place among the pure breaded  $A$ 's. It is a bitter irony of the identity argument, that one of the most sophisticated lines of reasoning against identity comes from Heidegger, who certainly was no stranger to indulging in a bit of racial purity himself.

Everywhere, wherever and however we are related to beings of every kind, we find identity making its claim on us. If this claim were not made [...] there would then also not be any science. For if science could not be sure in advance of the identity of its object in each case, it could not be what it is. [...] Thus, what is successful and fruitful about scientific knowledge is everywhere based on something useless. (Heidegger, 2002, pp. 26–7)

As Heidegger tersely explains, identity is simultaneously science's greatest achievement and the very limit beyond which it cannot go. Without identity there can be no science, as behind every definition lies the assumption that  $A=A$ . Equipped with this formula science can go about its business:  $\text{water}=\text{H}_2\text{O}$ ,  $\text{zebra}=\text{an African wild horse with black-and-white stripes and an erect mane}$ ,  $E=MC^2$ . Yet, the universal reach of the identity principle is also its fundamental weakness, for while there is nothing that cannot be expressed as  $A=A$ , this all-powerful mechanism relies on the notion that the '=' (equal sign) represents an objectively given reality. For were it not the case, no scientific argument could

make a claim for universal validity. Yet, what is the '=' if not a mental construct, something we can think of, but find it impossible to pinpoint its whereabouts. And if the '=' is something that exists only in our minds (and does it really mean the same thing for each and every one of us?), can we really trust it to base the whole edifice of science and culture on it? Could there be a miniscule, teeny-weeny chance that our mental image of '=' is simply wrong? It certainly can feel that way when we look at the melting ice caps, the pollution of air and water, the plasticisation of the oceans and Ku-Klux Klan marches, for the infallible logic of identity operates behind the scenes in all these manifestations of the power of positive thinking. Behind the certainty of the '=' lies an image of the human mind as this infallible synthesiser from which all other images are emerging. (Colebrook, 2014, p. 22) It is hardly surprising therefore, that Postmodernism's challenge to the domination of the logic of identity received such a short shrift both from scientific and political quarters.

The animosity towards postmodernism united the proponents of the Left and of the Right, suggesting that they might not be so different after all. For the Left, postmodernism always was defeatist and a-political not only because it denied the existence of an objective reality that could be manipulated at will, but also because of its rejection of class-struggle as the universal engine of progress. On the Right, postmodernism was seen as anti-state, anti-science and anti-capital, an epistemological strategy aimed at rescuing the left after the bankruptcy of Marxism and the breakdown of socialist states that flowed from the collapse of the Berlin Wall. (Hicks, 2011)

This state sanctioned condemnation of all things postmodern found further succour with the scandal of Heidegger's Nazism and antisemitism, (Oltermann, 2014), while Derrida, along with his followers and inspirations was accused of dangerous nihilism, for deconstruction seemed to erase the distinction between Nazism and non-Nazism. (Wolin 1993) The result of this intolerance towards ambiguity, and the renewed demand for clarity, rigor and coherence hastened a return to the certainty of dualistic thinking and to binary oppositions in which all grey areas, equivocations and complexity are erased.

However, this rejection of postmodern equivocation and the return to the dominant discourse of binary oppositions did not succeed in driving out fascist and Nazi ideologies, rather the expulsion of ambiguity ushered in a new age of ostensibly clear-cut distinctions between 'truth' and 'post-truth', and a host of other debates over fake news, populism and contempt for parliamentary democracy. Crystallised around the figure of Donald Trump in the USA and Brexit in the UK, the binary opposition between 'leave' and 'remain' or 'globalists' and 'nationalists' has never been more explicit, yet despite the clearly drawn battle lines these warring factions have a lot in common, as they both operate from



within the same proto-rational structure known as the principle of identity, which they are unable to see and to critique, because doing so would require them to abandon the very foundations of their positions.

#### IV. The Diogenes cure

Caught in between these antagonistic positions are illegal immigrants, snowflakes, pussies, walking wounded, passport-less and stateless, citizens of nowhere, artists, anarchists, dreamers. Those who - like the inhabitants of the Gaza strip - look at the world through gaps in barbed wire fence, those who - like Europeans living in the UK, have no voice in deciding their future. Also caught in between are the misfits, the non-binary and the whistle blowers, those for whom the bell tolls, the fifth column, enemies of the people, and those who - for whatever reasons - are still attached to the notion that hope comes not from choosing between truth and post-truth but from asking whose interests are served by the idea of truth in the first place. And then there are those who have felt in their bones long before 'fake news' became part of the imperial language, that 'news' is always fake, for when was there anything new in the if-it-bleeds-it-leads news cycle?

For those who are still clinging to a conviction that there is something that escapes the binary opposition between the enemy and the foe, and that this something might actually be the key, or at least a lucky charm, hope comes unexpectedly from the words written two hundred years ago by Søren Kierkegaard who, in his own dark night of the soul, found encouragement in the kindred spirit of Diogenes 'the dog'.

Diogenes was a cynic philosopher, famous throughout the ancient world for his uncompromising personal conduct. As a firm believer that actions speak louder than words, during cold winters he hugged marble statues in order to harden his body, (Laertius) an exercise that he probably found useful after being captured by pirates and sold into slavery. When he finally settled in Corinth, he enthusiastically adopted a lifestyle of extreme austerity, living in a barrel (according to some sources in a big jar), begging for his food, defecating in the open and masturbating in the marketplace. When the good people of Corinth chided him for pleasuring himself in public, he replied 'But why are you scandalized, since masturbation satisfies a need, just as eating does?' (Laertius, p 47). From the surviving fragments of Diogenes' life and teachings, an image emerges of a way of being that nowadays is more readily associated not with philosophy but with performance art. As Foucault observed, the tradition of cynic philosophy lives on in the practices of those contemporary artists who adhere to the idea that artist's life should constitute a testimony of what art is in its truth. (Foucault 2011, p. 187). Marina Abramović allowed the audience of her performance *Rhythm 0* (1974) to cut her with a knife, and a loaded gun was

pointed at her head. In another performance, *Rhythm 5*, she set herself on fire. In Bas Jan Ader's performance *In Search of the Miraculous* (1975) he attempted to cross the Atlantic in a small boat, his body was never found. Paul McCarty's 1976 performance *Class Fool* included self-injury and self-molestation in a ketchup splattered classroom. Tehehing Hsieh spend one year (1978-1979) in a 3.5 by 2.7 meter cage (*Cage Piece*). In another performance, *Time Clock Piece* (1980-1981) he punched a time clock every hour on the hour for a year. By using violence and self-mutilation as a rebellion against the 'symbolic', these artists testify that the role of art is one of reducing existence to its basics, blurring and even removing the boundaries between art and life. Like many contemporary performance artists, Diogenes made his body the site and the object of his art, believing that the philosopher must establish a relation with reality that is not based on logic, discourse or argument, but on the practice of living as a form of truth-telling.

According to Kierkegaard (who got this story from Lucian):

When Corinth was threatened with a siege by Philip and all the inhabitants were busily active—one polishing his weapons, another collecting stones, a third repairing the wall—and Diogenes saw all this, he hurriedly belted up his cloak and eagerly trundled his tub up and down the streets. When asked why he was doing that, he answered: I, too, am at work and roll my tub so that I will not be the one and only loafer among so many busy people. (Kierkegaard, 1985, pp. 60–61)

Picture the scene: a bustling metropolis is urgently preparing for an impending catastrophe, whether natural or man-made: a fast-approaching devastating tsunami, a ballistic missile, or the inauguration of a democratically elected dictator, whatever it is, it is not turning back, the doomsday clock's hand is pointing to few seconds to midnight and counting. Everyone is doing what people do in such circumstances: some amass provisions, some stockpile weapons, others barricade the door, pray, make love, get high, cuddle the children, or whatever else people do to take their minds of the fact that in a day, month, or even a year, everything friendly, homely and comforting will be taken away, and what will come in its place does not bear thinking about.

And in the middle of all this commotion, Diogenes, who of course cannot be trusted with a useful task, is busily rolling his barrel up and down the street. What does he think he is doing, and how can this be of any help to us, if our job description does not include the ability to make fire by rubbing two sticks together? Before answering, one thing has to be made clear. Diogenes is not what is usually called 'mad'. He is not insane, which literally means unhealthy. On the contrary, contemporaries report that despite the hardships of his life, or perhaps precisely due to the severe restrictions he placed on himself, Diogenes was of vigorous and radiant health, his body fit and trim, his eyes bright, his skin clean

and supple. He is in good physical condition both on the inside and on the outside. As Epictetus explains, Diogenes *must* be fit and good looking because true to his philosophical method he is teaching how to live a good life not by analysing syllogisms, but through instructing by example:

It is also necessary, however, that the Cynic should have the right kind of body, because if he comes forward looking like a consumptive, all thin and pale, his witness would no longer carry the same weight. For he must not only prove to laymen, by displaying the qualities of his mind, that it is possible to be virtuous and good without having the things that they set such store on, but he must also show through his bodily qualities that a plain and simple life lived in the open air has no deleterious effects even on the body. 'Look, both I and my body bear witness to that truth.' That was the way of Diogenes, for he would walk around radiant with health, and would attract the attention of the crowd by the very condition of his body.(Epictetus, 2014, pp. 651–2)

On one level, Diogenes' rolling his barrel up and down the high street is an activity like all others: someone else might be at the same time dragging home a shopping trolley full of cat food, for even this is preferable to starvation, and besides, others are less likely to be tempted by it. Another might be joining the queue at the train station, as the latest rumour is that some trains are still running, someone else might be searching for a working cash machine with money, as all life's savings are in the bank, and it is closed. Like so many others, Diogenes too is frantically active, but unlike the rest, his activity is knowingly and demonstratively futile. He is not looking for a solid wall to shelter himself behind it, he is not trying to find a place to hide, as he clearly knows that in this life there is nowhere to hide, and he is also not trying to attract attention to his vulnerability, and extract pity from the passers-by.

On the other hand, he is not assuming the role of a street preacher, the one that stands in the middle of the highway proclaiming that the end is nigh, that time has come to focus on the things that matter in this moment of reckoning - finding God, confessing sins, and in general saving one's soul from damnation. In the midst of the binary choice between saving one's body and saving one's soul, Diogenes chooses neither, he refuses to accept both dominant narratives, the first that says that in this dog-eat-dog situation, fists and bullets speak louder than words, that the fittest will survive and all others will perish in agony, but he also rejects the opposite narrative that we are all doomed, that the only thing worth saving is the soul, because everting physical, material and carnal is about to be comprehensively annihilated.

To make things even more puzzling, Diogenes also does not adopt the so called 'philosophical' attitude, the one that would require him to say with a sigh 'well, it

was fun while it lasted, but now that the world is coming to an end, I will calmly await my destiny. What matters to me is not that I am about to die, but that I will not give in to fear and remain serene and at peace with myself to the end'. Not for Diogenes is this form of passivity, he is not giving up on life, he is not prepared to be lead to his death like a lamb to the slaughter. No, man, he is right there, in the midst of things, with all the other people, running around like a headless chicken.

What is remarkable is that in this moment of reckoning, Diogenes refuses all the available choices, and yet, out of this black-or-white situation, where one either tries to save the body or the soul he manages to carve another dimension, that pinches something from both the prepper-survivalist and the preacher-philosopher, without giving in to neither.

In rolling his barrel in the middle of all the panic and desperation, Diogenes not so much participates in this event as he *imitates* it. His path is not one of the man of action, but it is also not a rejection of action. Perhaps it could be described as counteraction, or as performative action that challenges the established consensus around the 'proper' way to react. He is neither for survivalism nor against it, he is not so much ridiculing the other people, as he is *reflecting* them to themselves. By witnessing, reflecting and imitating Diogenes shows his love of humanity as fearless truth telling.

By rolling his barrel Diogenes performs a kind of public broadcasting service; when everyone else is losing their heads, he is holding up a mirror that reflects back, to those who can see it, that there is another way to deal with the situation. Diogenes demonstrates philosophy as practical action. When he starts to roll his barrel, it becomes a form of truth-telling, truth as performance, a form of live art, of life as a manifestation of truth. If Diogenes is sending a message, it is a sublime message, that life is a reality show in which Diogenes is the star, and that this show is being shown live; simultaneous recording and broadcasting from a city under siege. After all, as Freud taught, beyond the reality/pleasure principle lies the domain of the death drive, which is also the domain of the sublime. What this means is that the task of art (and of philosophy) is inseparable from a resounding rejection of the symbolic order. (Ruti, 2012) By pursuing his lifestyle choices beyond social limits, Diogenes rejects accepted norms of behaviour, breaching the reality principle and letting laughter and jouissance enter a situation that is clearly not a laughing matter.

Both the survivalists and the preachers are rational people, both respond to the unfolding situation in the way that seems most logical to them. When the proverbial shit hits the fan, trying to save one's soul is not less (or more) rational than trying to save one's body. And this is precisely what concerns Diogenes,

namely, that if the choice is between two rational responses, then this is not a choice at all, it is a choice in name only, a simulacrum of choice. Diogenes communicates this not by trying to stop people in their tracks to teach them the errors of their ways, but by creating a simulacrum of his own, one that mimics the survivalist's attempt to outsmart destiny by producing a tongue-in-cheek version of it. He is not criticising rational decision making, but holding a mirror to rationality, holding it to account, exposing its futility in the face of a situation that has nothing rational about it. When everyone else is following the logic of identity that asserts that force will be met with opposite and equal force, Diogenes draws attention to the fragility of the equal sign.

The key question that the Cynic philosopher elucidates in his performance-provocation is the question of humanity's response to the sublime. It is precisely at a moment of grave danger, when the sea level is rising, the bushfires are raging, the nuclear warhead is armed and the dark clouds gather, that it is urgent to ask how and why we are human. Running away from danger, or baring our teeth and claws, are natural, but not specifically human responses. Wild horses run away when they are ambushed, and antelopes lower their antlers to face an attacking lion. Other animals, of a more philosophical disposition, choose to remain completely still, hoping to be mistaken for a stone or a twig. All these are rational responses to a threat, but they are not specifically human.

It might be, as common sense wants us to believe, that this is indeed the way of the world, that we are the descendants of antelopes and lions, that we must eat or be eaten, and this is all there is to it. But not for Diogenes this kind of evolutionary positivism. Because if it is really the case that our destiny is to fight or flight, why then this overwhelming sense of dread, why are we clinging so anxiously to the newsfeed, to MSNBC, to the latest scoop, why aren't we simply going about our business like the deer, peacefully munching grass until such time when the wolfs pounce? Yet on the other hand we are also not made of spirit alone, as the evangelists and the Buddha make us believe, for we so dearly love this sack of skin and bones, that we feel reluctant to part company with it despite the promises of eternal life in God's bosom.

According to Diogenes the siege of the city is a privileged moment when these questions come into a sharp relief, and all rational beliefs are severely tested and found wanting. For as we have seen, lions and deer are capable of rational decision making, and in a moment of danger they exhibit the same responses as the industrious people of Corinth. What is it then, that makes humans different from deer? What is it that makes our situation so specifically tragic and what, if anything, can give us hope in such time?

What Diogenes seems to be saying through his performance, is that rational logic is only good for dealing with situations that are themselves rational, but when the perimeter of rationality is being breached, when the avian flu is spreading like wildfire and robotic militias are given their marching orders, the rational response is not the one to reach for, as right now the main problem is not how to survive, but what is it to be rescued.<sup>10</sup>

For Diogenes, this is not food, water, gold bullion or assault rifles, not even the loved ones and your own skin, but the uniquely human ability to make a record, to create an image, a picture, and in this way to produce alternative reality that sidesteps the lion/gazelle binary, this reality is sublime because it is irreconcilable with rational logic, and because it reminds us of something that was lost when this logic became the iron law of nature. What matters here is that Diogenes pursues his calling of philosophy and of truth-telling beyond the norms of ordinary behaviour. He is showing what is possible to achieve when one is prepared to step out of habitual self-interest and to create a room for transcendent truth. (Ruti 88) Diogenes demonstrates the concrete possibility of revolutionary action by showing how truth demands one to break free from the norms and conventions of society.

By rolling his barrel Diogenes transforms the situation into an image of the situation, suggesting that it, too, is an image. The situation was not of his choosing, because it is, like everything else that is external, outside his sphere of influence and not in his power to change. In the words of Epictetus, who respected the teachings of Diogenes,

Some things are within our power, while others are not. Within our power are opinion, motivation, desire, aversion, and, in a word, whatever is of our own doing; not within our power are our body, our property, reputation, office, and, in a word, whatever is not of our own doing. (Epictetus 2014, p. 571)

There is no point in asking why me? Why now? Who will win? As none of this has any bearings on the outcome. We can just stop signing online petitions, going on marches and composing snarky below the line comebacks, not only because these are all futile, but also because these are exactly the responses we are programmed to have. This is how we are being kept busy, with one eye on the Twitter feed, as if the euphemistically named smartphone is our own little private war room, and the other eye permanently rolled in indignation. This is how the conman is tricking us every time: we had to watch the right hand, but we were busy watching the left. So outraged we were about racism, sexism, and lies, that we forgot to notice that it is our own staring down the screen that is changing society more rapidly than any single political movement driven by hate or greed ever could.

For Diogenes it was already clear that the greatest danger lies not in the armies of Philip as they lay siege to the splendid city of Corinth, but in the city's dwellers conveniently forgetting what is in their power to change and what isn't. While the disaster cannot be averted, humanity does not need to be surrendered so easily. Rolling his barrel, Diogenes is not making survival his goal, rather he is mimicking the human response to danger, and in so doing allowing us to take a break from pressing 'refresh'. With the only recording device at his disposal being his own body, he makes himself into a *living sculpture*. From time immemorial sculpture is a technology that transcends identity by allowing to contemplate the heroic deeds of the past, and in this way to come a little closer to an understanding of what being human might actually entail.

What kind of production is Diogenes engaged in? He is not producing fortifications or food supplies. These actions, while important, have a clear goal in mind: surviving the siege, defeating the invaders, not going down without a fight. But precisely because they are goal oriented, they put the human actor in the service of the goal, and a human being who is in the service of anything that is outside of their own sphere of influence is already enslaved. To be a slave of Philip's soldiers or to be slave to the principle of identity (the equal sign) is the same thing. This is a point that bears repeating: slavery does not begin when the invaders tear down the door of your house, put you in irons and make you watch your children being led away. No, slavery begins before the first gun is being fired, when you are still free to choose, and you choose to obey the fight or flight instinct that makes you no different from an animal. The production Diogenes is engaged in is of an entirely different order. He is labouring not to resist the external enemy, but to resist the internal voice that tells him that  $A=A$ .

If, as Clausewitz has taught, war is the continuation of politics by other means, then the military preparations of the citizens of Corinth are political labour. (Clausewitz, 2006) But for Diogenes, the ostensibly pointless act of rolling the barrel demonstrates that there are two forms of political agency: labour whose goal is politics and labour that is itself political.<sup>11</sup> It is the later form of labour, that has no political goals because it is itself a purely political act, that Diogenes offers to his fellow citizens as a lesson in what it means to be *bios politicos* - a political, rather than a common animal. In so doing, Diogenes complex gains the role of the political in the forming of the sublime as a therapeutic-political agency.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The political implications of the non-representational are developed by Lyotard in relation to questions of law and language-based schemas in *The Differend*, and in relation to the politics of the other in *Heidegger and 'the Jews'*.

<sup>2</sup> See for instance: "Philosopher's Article On Transracialism Sparks Controversy (Updated with response from author) - Daily Nous." <http://dailynous.com/2017/05/01/philosophers-article-transracialism-sparks-controversy/> (accessed April 16, 2018)

<sup>3</sup> Terry Eagleton argues that postmodernism was caught off-guard by the emergence of a new grand narrative - fundamentalism - in the wake of 9/11. "What's Next After Postmodernism?"

<sup>4</sup> On nomadism see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.

- 5 On Becoming Sunflower see Golding, Johnny. 2010. *Fractal philosophy, trembling a plane of immanence and the small matter of learning how to listen: Attunement as the task of art*. For Libidinal Economy see Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Continuum, 2004). Desiring Machines is a concept from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R Lane (London: The Athlone Press, 1996). On paradoxes see Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, ed. Constantin Boundas, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (London: Continuum, 1990).
- 6 See for instance: Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Many SR materials are available online, for instance "Brief SR/OOO Tutorial | Object-Oriented Philosophy".
- 7 See for instance a tweet of the Prime Minister (2010-2016) David Cameron, "David Cameron on Twitter: "It Was the Right Thing to Do... """, Web, [https://twitter.com/David\\_Cameron/status/969260789776486401](https://twitter.com/David_Cameron/status/969260789776486401) (accessed April 13, 2018).
- 8 On Rhizomatic becoming, deterritorialization and nomadic war machines see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*.
- 9 On existential dread see Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling*.
- 10 "Leading AI researchers boycott Korean university over its work on "killer robots" - The Verge."
- 11 On the difference between 'political art' and 'making art politically' see Bishop, Claire. 2004.