

**Experiencing Contingency:  
Towards a Political Theory of Images**

by

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## Declarations

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this thesis is to explore the relationship between modern political thinking and aesthetic image-making through the conceptual framework of contingency. The focus on contingency takes account of the ambiguity and indeterminacy of visual perception and offers a language to describe the political potency of visual images in various historical contexts. The political potency of images is understood in terms of their affective intensities and material presence rather than ideological suspicion or propagandist seduction. In so doing, a case is made for reconsidering the traditional image scepticism (or indifference) in political theory and for recognising visual aesthetic practices as distinct modes of political thinking. I interpret political images as gestures towards the complexity and vulnerability of our social arrangements, indicating that the way we see the world, and show it to each other, could always be otherwise. Drawing on rulers' portraits, war photography and essay films, from the French Revolution to the present time, I show how visual aesthetic practices can reflect, complement and challenge the way we think about political concepts such as sovereignty, accountability or collective agency in different historical moments. Instead of following a modernist belief in the power of art to induce profound social change, this thesis describes the potency of the visual as micropolitical intensities that potentially modify habitual ways of thinking (and acting), provided that aesthetic experiences can connect to already existing moods or dispositions. This micropolitical potency of visual images does not necessarily constitute a particularly strong or reliable politics, but it is exactly its indeterminacy, as well as its constant risk of failure, that harbours the potential to generate new sensibilities towards the world. Taking visual images seriously, not only as worthwhile objects of political research but just as much as distinct modes of thinking, can therefore help us to stronger acknowledge the vital role affective, imaginative and speculative elements have always played for the understanding and justification of our social arrangements.

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## **Introduction: Political Theory and Images**

### **I. Research questions and objectives**

The aim of this thesis is to articulate a theoretical framework, based on the notion of *contingency*, through which the political potency of images can be described. I propose a theoretical understanding of the political dimension of the ‘visual’ that addresses three central questions: first, how can the political efficacy of images be described in a nuanced manner beyond clearly defined and predictable positions? Second, what political effects emerge from the contingency of aesthetic experience? And third, how does political theory benefit from adopting a more differentiated, open, and ultimately sober, attitude towards the strengths and weaknesses of visual images? These questions lead directly to two core aims of the following investigation. The first one is to consolidate the political relevance of images by establishing the visual arts as an insightful object for politico-theoretical research. The second is to recognise artistic image-making as a form of political thinking and critical enquiry in its own right.

I claim that the moment of contingency, which presents itself as both affective intensity and cognitive ambiguity, is particularly important for the political understanding of images since it links the spontaneity and unpredictability of aesthetic experience to the absence of any ultimate metaphysical or ideological certainties. Contingency thus characterises modern pluralistic societies and makes political thinking both possible and necessary.<sup>1</sup> My approach to the political implications of contingency is situated between the agonistic dimension of critique and resistance on the

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<sup>1</sup> My use of the notion of contingency focuses mainly on its historical, aesthetic and political implications rather than treating contingency as a purely ontological category or as the conceptual basis for new forms of philosophical thinking. For the latter, see the work of Quentin Meillassoux, in particular *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008) and “The Contingency of the Laws of Nature,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no.2 (2012): 322-334. I will outline my own approach to the concept of contingency at some length in Chapter 1 of this thesis.

one hand and the unruly dimension of affective energies that operate beneath a conscious politics on the other. I claim that the encounter with visual aesthetic objects opens an ethical position of sensibility and curiosity rather than providing instructions for emancipation, critique or resistance. The politics of images I propose in this thesis is subtle, risky and fragile. My discussion of the following case studies will show that visual contingency does not necessarily result in progressive politics and, by default, always contains uncertain and unpredictable moments. Thus I describe the political dimension that contingency opens up as stimulating or productive risk - a phenomenon that I discuss in greater detail in chapter 1. Through my investigations I want to contribute to an improved *political visual literacy* that is active rather than passive and that engages with the question how meaning is created and conveyed in the visual world. For that purpose, this interdisciplinary investigation provides a theoretical framework by which the political potency of visual images - as well as their limitations - can be analysed with a conceptual and terminological breadth that political theory alone could not muster. This includes a nuanced concept of images that goes beyond representations, signs or symbols and that regards images as gestures, appearances and intensities with a focus on their phenomenological and affective dimensions. In so doing, political theory is brought more into line with recent debates in visual studies and art history. The political visual literacy this thesis proposes contributes to an understanding of the various modes and effects of image-making and the vital parts they play for the democratic process. However, I claim that the political implications of the contingent nature of images are not exhausted in the perpetual strategies of pluralistic or agonistic forces that seek to establish and challenge temporal formations of social order.

In accordance with the risky politics of visual contingency, I propose a political concept of images that goes beyond ideological suspicion or semiotic decoding and instead describes the political potency of images in terms of their intensity, vitality (or even 'desire') as well as their socio-material presence. The political dimension of images emerges from the subtle interplay between their social function and the material presence of the visual object. Because of their material presence images are

capable of affecting a viewer in manifold ways: images shape and express thought; images evoke feelings and trigger emotions, capture the imagination, they confirm or challenge viewpoints, they fascinate and disgust, they comfort, raise questions, etc. Even though none of these effects are guaranteed or predictable, images play important roles in political discourse by presenting particular modes of ‘argument’ that unfold through the interplay with other forms of verbal and textual communication.

This thesis further promotes the relevance of visual images for political theory and regards visual aesthetic practices as effective means of political reflection. Therefore, the present study focuses on visual artistic practice as a form of *political thinking in images* emphasising the speculative and imaginative implications of artistic image strategies as a form of political reasoning. In this regard a case will be made to rethink the disciplinary boundaries between art and politics as modes of critical enquiry and interrogation by problematising a merely scientific approach to political thinking that founds its epistemological validity exclusively on empirical evidence. Political thinking denotes an ongoing intellectual process and a collective endeavour that constantly seeks to negotiate the legitimacy of social practices and political order. The processual character of political thinking, which cannot be solely confined to the medium of language, is based on the assumption that all social constellations are contingent, which means that they could just as well be otherwise. Consequently, this thesis promotes the view that if the acknowledgement of social contingency is the general precondition for political thinking, then political thinking in images is characterised by the visual reflection of the contingent nature of the social world. Visual aesthetic practices qualify as distinct forms of critical enquiry and social commentary based on their capacity to stress the speculative, subjective and imaginary elements of knowledge that are often marginalised by the rigour of scientific research methods. Visual aesthetic practices constitute modes of thinking that recognise the multilayeredness, embodiedness, positionality and centrality of sense perception, and the inevitable partiality of all knowledge production. Instead of regarding the insights of aesthetic experience as deficient, unreliable and overall flimsy, they should be regarded as integral and vital components of political knowl-

edge. The present research project makes a case for a more consolidated approach to modern political thinking that not only recognises the political potency of creating and perceiving images but also acknowledges the power of art and aesthetic experience to transform the ways in which ‘the political’ is conceived.

The visual engagement with contingency, its aesthetic acknowledgement as it were, also has an important historical dimension that reflects changing experiences of uncertainty, ambiguity and possibility characterising perceptions of the modern world. Political image-making is therefore both an indicative aesthetic response to the sociopolitical sensitivities of a particular historical moment as well as a critical engagement with that moment’s prevailing conventions of seeing and showing the world. Taking this historical dimension into account, the present study undertakes a theoretical investigation into the relationship between political thinking and the generation of visual imagery from the period of the French Revolution at the end of the 18th century up to the present day. Through a close reading of the visual-aesthetic work of, amongst others, Jacques-Louis David, Shepard Fairey, Simon Norfolk, Trevor Paglen, Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki, this thesis interprets the political potency of the visual experience of contingency as the seismographic capacity to record and indicate various affective shockwaves that run through a political community at specific points in history. The political potency of images thus unfolds on a micropolitical level that ultimately remains uncertain, unpredictable and unreliable. However, it is exactly this unpredictability of the experience of contingency that has the capacity to change our attitude towards the world by tapping into the affective, visceral and subconscious dimensions of individual and collective being.

## **II. Why does political theory need an improved visual literacy?**

The improved political visual literacy I suggest in this thesis is important for it helps to understand the effects and performances of pluralistic or agonistic forces that are no longer confined to the traditional sites of political debate and contestation (parliaments, media outlets, public spaces, factories, etc.) but are increasingly staged on

the large and small screens of everyday life. A more refined understanding of images therefore includes an awareness of the interpretative skills we use to perceive and approach those images that show a world whose current arrangements all too often appear so inconspicuously as being ‘natural’, self-evident and without alternatives. By disclosing the contingent nature of our social relations and political arrangements, an improved political visual literacy can heighten our sensitivity towards affective energies that run as barely perceptible needs, desires or concerns across a political community. These energies might be too vague and unspecific to enter articulate and ‘rational’ discourses but they are concrete enough to be discernible in the realm of aesthetic experience.

I am certain that this interdisciplinary dialogue is not only beneficial for students of political theory but also for the disciplines of visual studies and art history. In the same way as I hope to introduce a more nuanced understanding of images to political theory, I equally believe this thesis contributes to a more refined comprehension of the concept of ‘the political’ and its relation to contingency in the fields of visual studies and art history. This is to say that the experience of contingency in the encounter with the visual arts cannot be fully correlated with an agonistic politics of emancipation or resistance. I emphasise the uncertain, ambiguous, risky and yet stimulating effects of contingency that are never exhausted in preconceived ideological positions. The debates around the political dimension of art which were dominated in recent years by concepts of ‘relational’ and ‘agonistic’ aesthetics should then be extended by an emphasis on micropolitical aspects based on affect and inter-subjective transformation in order to evaluate the political relevance of aesthetic experience in contemporary times.<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that the present investigation into the relation between visual aesthetic practices (visual arts, photography, film, etc.) and political thinking floats in a scholarly vacuum. Far from it. The field of research that stresses the importance of the visual for our understanding of the political is steadily growing. I return to this in the next section.

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<sup>2</sup> For the debate about ‘relational aesthetics’ see Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 2002) and Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110, Fall, (2004): 51-79.

In the present thesis I contribute to these existing debates by connecting more closely the political interest in images with positions in art history and visual cultures. In so doing, I develop a theoretical framework that provides a language to evaluate the political potency of images with due regard to their historical contexts. That being said, the historical dimension of the political engagement with the visual experience of contingency should be considered a contribution to a better long-term conceptual understanding of the relationship between image-making and political thinking rather than the knee-jerk response to an academic fashion. I therefore contend that a more nuanced operational concept of images can achieve three things: first, to foster a better understanding of the versatile roles images play for the political self-understanding of a society; second, to recognise artistic image strategies not only as worthwhile objects of political research but also as effective modes of political reflection in their own right; and third, to recognise the political potency of visual images through the concept of contingency also means to be more aware of their political limitations. The power of images cannot be analysed without simultaneously emphasising their unreliable and fragile nature. Despite their stimulating and affective character (in the literal sense that images are capable of affecting a viewer) their political efficacy must not be overestimated. Even though this thesis makes a case for the relevance and efficacy of visual images for our understanding of politics, it hesitates to allocate the realm of aesthetic practices and visual arts any privileged position. This rather cautious attitude towards the political power of the visual also distinguishes my position from many existing approaches.

### **III. Literatures and existing approaches**

Broader academic interest in the nature of the image and its implications for the production of social meaning has been triggered in the past decades by the recognition of the fast progress and proliferation of communication technologies. Various technological developments have facilitated the visual self-representation of society through popular culture, art practice and mass media in a historically unparalleled

manner. Consequently, the ubiquity of visual images as well as the technologies and economies that enable them, also press hard for a more refined and comprehensive understanding of the broad range of their political potency. If political theory is not to ignore a crucial and powerful domain of public life then it has to catch up with the conceptual advances and methodological instruments of the various fields of image studies. This perceived ubiquity of visual images culminated in 1994 with the proclamation of a paradigm shift in the humanities for which W. J. T. Mitchell coined the term “pictorial or visual turn”.<sup>3</sup> However, this is not to say that the problem of pictorial representation is an exceptional phenomenon of the contemporary world.<sup>4</sup> It is rather the contemporary variety of images that makes the visual so important for the social production of meaning and that ultimately asks for a broader academic engagement willing to reconsider traditional disciplinary boundaries. It will therefore come as no surprise that an early impulse for this research project was provided by the field of visual studies rather than the traditionally image-indifferent political studies. The intellectual programme for a political image theory had effectively been formulated more than twenty years ago, again, by W. J. T. Mitchell.

In his influential work *Picture Theory* (1994) Mitchell states: “What we need is a critique of visual culture that is alert to the power of images for good and evil and that is capable of discriminating the variety and historical specificity of their uses.”<sup>5</sup> And elsewhere he writes: “The political task of visual culture is to perform critique without the comforts of iconoclasm.”<sup>6</sup> Although those statements do not offer any new theoretical insights they still provide an important starting point for the

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<sup>3</sup> For Mitchell’s account of the ‘pictorial turn’, following Richard Rorty’s proclamation of the ‘linguistic turn’, see W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994), 16. For the concept of the ‘linguistic turn’ see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 263. A similar observation to Mitchell’s ‘pictorial turn’ was made independently by German art historian Gottfried Boehm who at the same time introduced the concept of the ‘iconic turn’ (ikonische Wende) in his seminal essay “Die Wiederkehr der Bilder,” in *Was ist ein Bild?*, ed. Gottfried Boehm (Munich: Fink, 1994), 13. For similarities and differences between Mitchell’s ‘pictorial turn’ and Boehm’s ‘iconic turn’ see Gottfried Boehm and W. J. T. Mitchell, “Pictorial versus Iconic Turn: Two Letters,” *Culture, Theory & Critique* 50, no.2-3 (2009): 103-121.

<sup>4</sup> See W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 348.

<sup>5</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 2f.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *What do Pictures want?*, 344.

present investigations into the possibilities of a political understanding of images. If we are to follow Mitchell and perform a political critique of visual cultures which is not to be an iconoclastic act then we have to understand images as an intrinsically political medium whose effects and implications can be analysed through attentive and observant ways of seeing and through socio-historical as well as conceptual contextualisation. Any political critique of visual aesthetic practices based on the experiences of contingency, however, can never be reduced to the mere contestation of conventional forms of appearance and representation for it always includes moments of creativity and spontaneity that can bring new modes of feeling and thinking into the world. As I show throughout this thesis, performing political critique of visual images means acknowledging their sceptical, uncertain and creative potential.

In order to get a better comprehension of the role images play for political thought the crucial question is not only ‘what is an image?’<sup>7</sup> but also ‘what do images do?’<sup>8</sup> James Elkins and Jacqueline Lichtenstein have related these questions to the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions of thought respectively. Whereas the first question reflects Plato’s profound scepticism towards the visual, in his theory of knowledge that draws its notion of the image mainly from painting, the latter reflects Aristotle’s more positive knowledge-enhancing notion of the image drawn from poetry.<sup>9</sup> Through an affective response to both visual art and poetry (tragedy in particular) the audience engages in a process of recognition and comprehension. David Downing and Susan Bazargan have pointed out that these two accounts of the image, a sceptical one derived from Plato’s politics, and a more assertive one derived from Aristotle’s poetics, constitute the oppositional system of Western metaphysics.<sup>10</sup> This dichotomy between an ideological image that conceals a hidden truth and an ahis-

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<sup>7</sup> For a comprehensive discussion about various approaches to images see James Elkins and Maja Naef, ed., *What is an Image?* (University Park/PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Instead of “what do pictures do?” W. J. T. Mitchell famously asks “what do pictures want?” suggesting “that pictures are something like life-like forms, driven by desire and appetites.” Mitchell, *What do Pictures want?*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> See Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Malcolm Heath (London: Penguin, 1996), 6f.

<sup>10</sup> See David B. Downing and Susan Bazargan, “Image and Ideology: Some Preliminary Histories and Polemics,” in *Image and Ideology in Modern/Postmodern Discourse*, ed. David B. Downing and Susan Bazargan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 4.

torical image that harbours the potential for a transcendental truth points to the core problem of the relationship between the ontological and political status of the image. Here a set of new questions arises: can this opposition between the Platonic question of ‘what is an image?’ and the Aristotelian question of ‘what do images do?’ be considered separately from each other? How can we ask what images do without knowing what they are? Can we approach the political dimension of the image without interrogating its ontological status, that is, without understanding its specific nature or being?

Even if a clear cut separation between the ontological and political dimension is difficult, let us approach these questions from an ontological angle first. The emphasis on the ontological status of the image is important in order to recognise the medium-specific presence of the image. That means, as Keith Moxey has pointed out, “paying heed to that which cannot be read, to that which exceeds the possibilities of a semiotic interpretation, to that which defies understanding on the basis of convention, and to that which we can never define, ...”<sup>11</sup> Moxey thus suggests that if we want to gain a more nuanced understanding of the efficacy of images we have to shift our focus away from the discursive ‘meaning’ of images and aim our attention towards their material ‘presence’. We have to acknowledge that the experience of the physical properties of an image always exceeds its predefined meaning or conventional social function. The question concerning the ontological status of the image, one that focuses on the physical nature and structure of the medium, has therefore also important implications for its political dimension. In this regard, I follow Moxey’s critique of the still popular approach to images claiming that “(i)t is the content of the visual object, its role within schemes of cultural and political ideology that is deemed more meaningful than the nature of the medium.” (141)

This argument, which differentiates the ontological from the political status of the image by considering the former as ‘presentation’ and the latter as ‘representation’, as suggested by Keith Moxey (132f.), needs to be put into perspective. If the

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<sup>11</sup> Keith Moxey, “Visual Studies and the Iconic Turn,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no.2 (2008): 132. Subsequent references are made in the text.

visual object is considered to have political effects elicited by an experience of contingency then the material presence of the work has important political implications, too. It is not only the aspect of representation but also the aspect of *presentation* that bestows political efficacy to the visual object. We thus have to assume that images have a unique way to generate meaning that cannot be reduced to a semiotic relation or symbolic gesture. An image is more than just a ‘text’ that can be ‘read’ but rather, as suggested by art historian Gottfried Boehm, the image is a ‘deictic event’ (‘deiktisches Ereignis’) which unfolds in dialogue with the beholder.<sup>12</sup>

In this process, according to Boehm, pictorial meaning is non ‘predicative’, and does not involve categories of truth and falsity but rather of clarity and obscurity. Images ‘speak’ to the viewer without saying ‘this is’ but by opening up an access to the world which ‘presents’ itself. This visual self-presentation of the world, however, is always ambiguous and contingent for it is never self-evident or obvious and its efficacy is always dependent on multiple variables. The political significance of the image therefore emerges from the intensity of the cognitive and perceptive response of the viewer when encountering a visual object. The argument that the political dimension of the image can be defined through the beholder’s experience of contingency is not so much interested in any ideological agenda ‘behind’ the appearance of the image in the tradition of Cultural Studies (image as representation) but rather in the political implications presented by the image’s materiality as perceived by the beholder (image as presentation, intensity or gesture). Consequently, the experience of contingency is the result of the encounter between the viewer and the image whose facticity shows itself as cognitive and emotional effect and whose materiality appears as lucid meaning. Gottfried Boehm has conceptualised the specific character of pictorial meaning as ‘iconic difference’ (ikonische Differenz), a visual discrimination between figure and ground, that results from the interplay between the material disposition of the iconic artefact and the temporal unfolding of its perception. The iconic difference is not a difference in the linguistic sense but a deictic gesture that

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<sup>12</sup> Gottfried Boehm, “Ikonische Differenz: Glossar: Grundbegriffe des Bildes,” *Rheinsprung 11 - Zeitschrift für Bildkritik* 01 (2011): 174.

opens up portals to the world - portals that show themselves (sich zeigen) or come to pass (sich ereignen).<sup>13</sup> Against this backdrop, I suggest that a closer exchange between political theory, visual studies and art history fruitfully expands the political understanding of images. Consider for instance the recent interpretation of the frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* by Johan Tralau and Magnus Kristianson who argue that we should pay more attention to the relationship between images and political theory and become "more sensitive to the role played by images and visual representations in political thought."<sup>14</sup> And further they write: "Systematic interpretation of the physical images employed in works of political philosophy would be a vast, promising enterprise and a new kind of history of political thought."<sup>15</sup> Even though I fully agree with this statement, I suggest not only to look at images *in* political thought but also at *images as political thought*. Should we not also regard works of visual art as effective modes of political thinking in their own right that convey meaning and ideas that exceed text based reasoning?

If we regard image-making as a distinct form of political thinking then political theory would benefit from a concept of images that is not reduced to a logic of representation. Interestingly, even though Tralau and Kristianson advocate a more serious engagement with the relation between images and political thought, their own interpretation of Hobbes' frontispiece, which tries to detect the monstrous leviathan behind the body of the sovereign, is very much informed by a concept of images that ranges between an iconographic riddle that has to be solved and a semiotic sign system for which we have to find the right referent. Either way, the image of the frontispiece is regarded as a mode of visual representation that is understood to hide its 'true' meaning. I propose that if we are to take images seriously, not only *in* political thought but also *as* political thought, then the theoretical focus on images should shift from representation towards presentation and experience as outlined above. Images should not be regarded as signs that stand in for something else but as events,

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<sup>13</sup> See Boehm, "Ikonische Differenz", 174.

<sup>14</sup> Magnus Kristianson and Johan Tralau, "Hobbes's Hidden Monster: A New Interpretation of the Frontispiece of the *Leviathan*," *European Journal of Political Theory* 13, no.3 (2014): 300.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

gestures or intensities that enable spontaneous affective and cognitive responses. Such an understanding of images therefore inevitably involves the recognition, as well as the appreciation, of their ambiguous and contingent nature. Even though my suggested conceptualisation of images is neither new nor original, the example of Tralau and Kristianson shows that political theory, despite a growing interest in the visual, still relies on a limited approach to images.

A more nuanced understanding of images would thus not only be beneficial for political thinking *about* images but also for political thinking *in* images, the latter describing aesthetic practices which emphasise the imaginative, speculative and affective elements of knowledge that are often sidelined by the rigour of scientific research methods. It is important here to recognise the ambiguous and unreliable role contingency plays for the political efficacy of visual images. A dimension which is largely ignored in Tralau and Kristianson's account of Hobbes' frontispiece. The political implications of contingency in modern aesthetic practices are comprehensively explored by Jacques Rancière. His take on aesthetic contingency, however, mainly focuses on contingency's agonistic dimension. In recent years Rancière also responded to the conceptual demands of the 'pictorial turn' and developed a comprehensive theoretical interest in the connection between (visual) art and politics that now so frequently and ubiquitously appears as "the distribution of the sensible".<sup>16</sup> The position Rancière takes up towards Mitchell's proclamation of the important semantic role of images is somewhat ambiguous though. Even though Rancière shares Mitchell's conceptual interest in images he does not share his 'vitalist' approach that attributes images with their own desires, needs and lives. Rancière regards images as being rather indifferent and sees the main political virtues of images in the fact that they "do not want anything".<sup>17</sup> Even though Rancière's aesthetic interests do not

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<sup>16</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> For Rancière's account of the pictorial turn see Jacques Rancière, "Do Pictures Really Want to Live?," *Culture, Theory & Critique* 50, no.2-3 (2009): 123-132, 131. In his response to Rancière, Mitchell claims that essentially Rancière's work contains more 'vitalist' interpretation of images than he acknowledges. See W. J. T. Mitchell, "The Future of the Image: Rancière's Road Not Taken," *Culture, Theory & Critique* 50, no.2-3 (2009): 133-144.

seem to theoretically privilege the realm of images, some recent publications were almost exclusively devoted to the visual arts.<sup>18</sup> For the following investigation however, Rancière's work is less relevant in terms of his engagement with the visual or his conceptualisations of images but rather in terms of the emphasis of contingency in the context of aesthetic experience and political emancipation.<sup>19</sup> The present thesis shares Rancière's acknowledgement of the radical contingency of all social constellations and human artefacts as well as the assumption that aesthetic experience is an integral part of political agency and subject formation.

However, the argument I set forth in the following chapters differs from Rancière in that I limit my scope to visual images and the visual arts and that I focus on works of art that explicitly emphasise their own contingent nature. In that sense, I am regarding image-making not only as a source of experience but also as a politico-aesthetic operation by which the artist presents a mode of political analysis that qualifies as visual political thinking. Furthermore, I approach the alleged emancipatory character of the experience of contingency, as celebrated by Rancière, in a more circumspect way. As I show throughout this thesis, the aesthetic experience of contingency, which may have an emancipatory character, is itself contingent and always at the risk of failure and nonappearance. I claim that the risky and unreliable nature of contingency makes it an unstable basis for a progressive and clearly definable politics of critique, resistance or emancipation. Consequently, contingency can never fulfil a reliable antagonistic or subversive function since its effects are by definition transient and indeterminate. We shall therefore have a close look at the various, subtle and uncertain political implications the experience of contingency is capable of inducing. The probably most explicit formulation of an aesthetic politics that emphasises the agonistic political potential of contingency can be found in the work of Chantal Mouffe and her concept of critical art as "agonistic public spaces"<sup>20</sup>. In her

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<sup>18</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Batista (Oxford: Berg, 2006); *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007); *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, "Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces," *Art & Research* 1, no.2 (2007): 4.

account, the experience of contingency through aesthetic practices generates critical political potential by disrupting a hegemonic symbolic order. Since Mouffe's work can be regarded as the paradigmatic agonistic approach to contingency I analyse her theoretical work in greater detail in chapter 1. The prevailing agonistic approach to contingency's political implications in the context of aesthetic experiences is also pertinent in Davide Panagia's recent account of the relationship between film and democratic thinking. Panagia has a tendency to reduce the political implications of contingency to agonistic movements of resistance and struggle. He emphasises a quality of film that he calls "stochastic serialisation", an experience of discontinuity to which he attributes a capacity to resist authoritative power and established hierarchies. I discuss Panagia's work on cinematic thinking in greater detail in chapter 4. Moving images are presented as a form of thinking that can change conventional patterns of perception that facilitate a more egalitarian distribution of the sensible. Influenced by Rancière, Davide Panagia takes sensual and aesthetic experience as the starting point for his theory of political communities and subject formation. The concept of contingency, including its potential limitations, however, is not made explicit in Panagia's work.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast to the rather agonistic dimension of contingency that is emphasised in the aesthetic politics as formulated for instance by Mouffe, Rancière and Pangia, we also have to consider the affective and material dimension of contingency, matter and corporality when it comes to the encounter with visual images. Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin argue for a reevaluation of the concepts of politics and the political that takes into account the various human and non-human relations on which our understanding of politics is based.<sup>22</sup> Thrift and Amin contribute two important aspects to the present investigation: first, a concern regarding materiality and the irreducibility of the political to the activities of human beings; and second, the

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<sup>21</sup> See Davide Panagia, "Why Film Matters to Political Theory," *Contemporary Political Theory* 12, no.1 (2013): 2-25 and Davide Panagia, *Impressions of Hume: Cinematic Thinking and the Politics of Discontinuity* (Lanham/MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> See Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political: New Openings for the Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 40.

important role of the affective and emotional relations that constitute the field of the political. The dimension of affect, inherent to all processes of political decision-making and subject-formation, is vital to the realm of images where affective energies are passed on and individual emotions steered. Taking images seriously as potent if undetermined political agents also means that it is necessary to rethink the dichotomy between the 'rational' and 'irrational', 'objective' and 'emotional' elements of thought, emphasising the role of feeling in political thinking.<sup>23</sup>

Following Thrift and Amin, I claim that the realm of images suspends the very dichotomy between rationality and affect presenting itself as a medium through which affect translates into emotion. Consequently, images gain political significance through their capacity to absorb and bundle individual feelings of hope, grief, expectation, anger, shame, etc. and, like prisms, emanate those emotions into the collective discourses of public spheres. Images present a chiasmic structure in which abstract and seemingly rational concepts such as democracy, history, identity, solidarity, etc. are always connected to affective intersubjective states that pre-structure them.<sup>24</sup> The affective dimension of contingency is also responsible for the risky and stimulating character of contingency, capable of producing unprecedented modes of thinking and feeling that are not easily deployed for preconceived political ends. Affective politics, in which images play a crucial role, thus constitute a micropolitics, as Brian Massumi and William Connolly argue. Massumi points out that our encounter with visual images always exceeds merely discursive or semiotic forms of meaning. Instead, it is affective energies circulating through visual aesthetic practices and individuals that carry a potential for interaction.<sup>25</sup> This affective perspective on contingency shows that contingency is unpredictable and unruly; that it operates not only on the macro political level of agonism, struggle and resistance but also in rather subconscious, visceral and embodied registers. Equally important in this context is

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<sup>23</sup> See Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political*, 157.

<sup>24</sup> See Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 187.

<sup>25</sup> See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 26. See also Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge, Polity, 2015), 47f.

the work of William Connolly and his concepts of micropolitics and layered thinking. Connolly regards contingency as an ontological political force in its own right capable of constantly creating new social realities. Here the concept of affective and cognitive contingency takes centre stage but does not engage with concepts of images or artistic practices in greater depth. I discuss the political role of contingency in Connolly's aesthetic politics in greater detail in chapter 1. The tension that arises between his affective take on contingency as micropolitics and Mouffe's agonistic approach to contingency constitutes the central theme of the present thesis.

#### **IV. A need for further exploration**

Against the backdrop of those existing literatures two aspects need further exploration. First, despite the increasing interest in the visual amongst many political scientists and political theorists, there is only rudimentary engagement with different concepts of images. Second, and closely related, the political interpretation of the aesthetic experience of contingency is often reduced to tropes of agonism and struggle. A more nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of images as well as of the political implications of their contingent nature will help to establish a serious political interest in the realm of the visual without overestimating or overrating the political capacity of visual aesthetic experiences. Due to the growing interest amongst political theorists and political scientists in the realm of the visual, moving and static images are increasingly recognised as integral and insightful elements of social and political self-representation.<sup>26</sup> Simultaneously, there is an increasing engagement in contemporary (visual) arts with the political potency and efficacy of

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<sup>26</sup> See for instance Magnus Kristianson and Johan Tralau, "Hobbes's Hidden Monster: A New Interpretation of the Frontispiece of the *Leviathan*," *European Journal of Political Theory* 13, no.3 (2014): 299-320; Rune Anderson and Frank Möller, "Engaging the Limits of Visibility: Photography, Security, Surveillance," *Security Dialogue* 44, no.3 (2013): 203-221; James Johnson, "'The Arithmetic of Compassion': Rethinking the Politics of Photography," *British Journal of Political Science* 41, no.3 (2011): 621-643; Davide Panagia, "Why Film Matters to Political Theory," *Contemporary Political Theory* 12, no.1 (2013): 2-25. These are to be considered random samples of recent publications that engage with the relationship between politics and images. I will provide a more systematic analysis of individual theoretical positions in the sections below.

aesthetic practices.<sup>27</sup> These developments, however, seem to occur largely unconnected with only few points of intersection. As a result, the notion of the image in political theory does not reflect the recent conceptual developments in art history, image studies and visual cultures. Following current debates in art history and visual studies, this thesis makes the claim that the understanding of images as (potentially flawed or distorted) representations of the world, which still seems to haunt many political science disciplines, has to be profoundly revised in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of the efficacy of the visual in the context of the political.

Conversely, the theoretical engagement with politics in art history and visual cultures seems to be often limited to notions of criticism and resistance. What is therefore lacking is a more refined and systematic theoretical framework regarding the political potency of images that includes both political theory as well as image studies and visual cultures. The present thesis thus suggests that a closer dialogue between both disciplines would not only expand the conceptual understanding of images in political theory but also provide a more nuanced grasp of the political potency of images - both in terms of their strengths as well as their weaknesses and limitations. It is thus this lack of a common conceptual framework that necessitates the tentative formulation of a political theory of images.

The risky and uncertain politics that characterises the aesthetic experience of contingency that I propose in the present thesis is informed by two theoretical perspectives: On the hand, Chantal Mouffe's concept of critical art as agonistic public spaces and William Connolly's work on micropolitics and layered thinking, on the other. Whereas Mouffe's approach attempts to direct the affective energies of aesthetic experiences towards preconceived political positions thus sidelining the unruly effects of affect, Connolly dissolves all embodied experience and perception in a fragile mode of becoming and sensitivity. The moment of risk, inherent in any encounter with images, thus shows that the openness of any affective politics or micropolitics contains the potential for failure. I explore in greater detail the political

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<sup>27</sup> For a recent collection of various artistic approaches to 'politics' see Anthony Downey, *Art And Politics Now* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

implications of contingency in both Mouffe's and Connolly's takes on aesthetic politics in the next chapter.

## **V. Case studies and objects of analysis**

In order to analyse a politics of images that is stimulated by the experience of contingency, the focus of the present study is on various visual works of art - including painting, photography and moving images. I decided to analyse works of art because of their high level of self-reflexivity and their experimental nature. The most innovative forms of image making and visual aesthetic practice can be found in the art world. I have chosen *The Death of Marat* (1793) because it is the first modernist painting that deploys a moment of contingency for political ends. The Obama hope poster was chosen for it is probably the most prominent political icon of the 21st century. As a campaign poster it is simultaneously a political instrument and a work of art. Its popular appeal and global efficacy as a democratic symbol of hope results from its visual and political ambiguity.

The photographic work of Simon Norfolk, Richard Mosse and Trevor Paglen, that are discussed in chapter 3, can be subsumed under the term "aftermath photography" that is characterised by an aesthetics of radical openness and contingency. It is this radical openness that demonstrates that contingency is not exhausted in a politics of images defined by clear political positions of resistance and agonism. I also chose those three photographers, who are all part of the contemporary art circus, in order to show that the radical openness and contingency of their works do not automatically present an effective critique of dominant conventions of visual representation. Rather, those examples show that the openness and visual ambiguity can turn into a somewhat tokenistic politics that caters to an art market that values politically 'relevant' artistic practices - as the award of the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize for Richard Mosse suggests. Contingency as risk appears here as a tension between the visual aesthetic innovation of these photographs and the difficult politics of their conditions of production and exhibition. Having said that, the main focus of my

analysis will be on the visual artefacts themselves rather than on the site of their production.

In chapter 4, I turn towards the political implications of contingency in the genre of the essay film. Similar to aftermath photography, the essay film is a genre that celebrates its radical openness and the radical politics that emerges from its contingency. However, this politics is subtle, unreliable and goes far beyond ideological critique that is often attributed to it. Here I present a historical genealogy of contingency in seminal examples of essayistic filmmaking that reaches from Dziga Vertov over Jean-Luc Godard to Harun Farocki. I have chosen those films because they constitute canonical works of political filmmaking whose political efficacy is mainly described through agonistic interpretations.

What all cases studies have in common is an explicit political engagement with contingency. All of them have more or less precise political agendas formulated by their producers which are not necessarily followed by the images themselves. The political intentions of the artists are often clearly articulated and documented but chafe at the effects of the visual artefacts themselves. This discrepancy further demonstrates contingency's risky and unreliable political potential. The present study does not provide a comprehensive examination of a particular historical period, artist or visual aesthetic practice but rather attempts to develop a conceptual framework through a series of 'scenes', in a Rancièrian sense<sup>28</sup>, that can help to understand the political potency of images (as well as their limitations) in a broad spectrum of socio-historical circumstances. The next section introduces the main focus and modes of analysis that I use to explore the contingent effects of visual artistic images.

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<sup>28</sup> Rancière writes: "The scene is not the illustration of an idea. It is a little optical machine that shows us thought busy weaving together perceptions, affects, names, and ideas, constituting the sensible community that these links create, and the intellectual community that makes such weaving thinkable." Rancière, *Aisthesis*, xi.

## VI. Method

I propose an approach towards images in political theory that regards images as appearances, gestures and energies rather than signs, representations and symbols. Consequently, the main focus of my analysis is on the images themselves rather than on the site of their production or the site of the audience. The moment of risk reflects a tension between contingency as agonism that presents clearly defined political positions of resistance and critique and contingency as affect that appears as unruly and visceral forces. This micro and macro political tension of contingency that is triggered in the encounter with images requires two different levels of analysis. Therefore I look at my case studies from two perspectives.

First, in order to explore the efficacy of an image I engage in a close reading of the visual object itself that I call with Gillian Rose “compositional interpretation”.<sup>29</sup> *Compositional interpretation* allows for a “careful attention to the image”<sup>30</sup> that facilitates a close account of its material properties and thus of the micropolitical dimensions of its immediate effects. This formalistic interpretation of images allows for a close reading of their content, composition and materiality and therefore helps me to explore how the specific nature of an image contributes to its contingent effects. When looking at film, compositional interpretation also includes an analysis of the spatial and temporal organisation of moving images. Different technologies of film editing such as montage, double exposure or jump cuts generate an experience of visual ambiguity and uncertainty that provoke a response from the viewer that differs from an encounter with photography or painting. In this regard, it is also my own personal experience when looking at images that allows me to describe their affective impact. Compositional interpretation is therefore an appropriate method to explore the unruly and affective dimension of contingency in the encounter with images. In order to explore the risky political potential of contingency, however, I do not solely rely on my own experience and a close reading of individual im-

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<sup>29</sup> See Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies* (London: SAGE, 2012), 51f.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

ages. A more comparative and relational approach is necessary that links the micro level of subjective experience to the macro level of cultural meaning and political efficacy.

Thus the second level of analysis takes a broader look at the social modalities of images, at their intertextual relations as well as the discursive formations they are part of and embedded in. The close reading of individual images is complemented by *elements of discourse analysis and semiology* that focuses on the intertextuality and interconnectedness of images. The social meaning of images depends not only on a singular image but also on the meanings carried by other media. Thus I compare different images and texts and relate the close interpretation of singular images to other visual artefacts and written documents. Discourse analysis as the interrelation between images and texts is particular pertinent in the first chapter when analysing the political implications of contingency in rulers' portraits and its related discourses on sovereignty. This allows me to compare and relate images and texts in an eclectic way and to show the complex and difficult politics that contingency generates. The agonistic dimension of contingency relies on a more semiological approach aiming its attention to the cultural codes that are inscribed into the images. This is important to explore the relational character of contingency, which means to analyse the contingency of images that emerges in contrast from more conventional modes of image making.

It is this combination of different modes of analysis and different methodological approaches that reveals the tension through which the productive riskiness of a politics of images becomes discernible. The political implications of contingency in the context of the visual are not limited to a single modality of images. Painting, photography and moving images require different types of analysis and a combination of methodological approaches. Consequently, I follow Roland Bleiker who points out that the versatility of images cannot be appropriately approached by a single 'method' or 'theoretical framework' alone but requires the most broad and nuanced

analysis.<sup>31</sup> Considering different methodological approaches and theoretical concepts thus helps us understand the potency and efficacy of images not only as the result of clearly identifiable causal relations but rather as uncertain affective and cognitive encounters between various agents.

## VII. Chapter outline

The concept of contingency constitutes the central theme of this thesis, which recurs in varying visual forms and historical contexts, and that strings all chapters together. *Chapter 1* provides an introduction into the concept of contingency as a historico-philosophical phenomenon that illuminates its historical, aesthetic and political significance. My focus on contingency as stimulating or productive risk reflects a tension between the aesthetic politics of Chantal Mouffe and William Connolly. Whereas Mouffe understands the political relevance of aesthetic practices in their capacity to create agonistic public spaces, Connolly argues for the relevance of art as a micropolitical gesture towards intersubjective transformation. I suggest that even though both thinkers engage deeply with the experience of contingency as an important political category, the political capacity of contingency is not exhausted by their existing conceptual frameworks. The notion of contingency thus works as a hint that the notion of the political, as well as the political efficacy of aesthetic practices, can never be conclusively determined. I then go on to demonstrate my argument by analysing a wide range of contexts and image forms, ranging from painting, over photography to film. *Chapter 2* offers an account of contingency in rulers' portraits that reveals theological elements in contemporary political thought. Starting with an analysis of Jacques Louis David's famous painting of the dead revolutionary Jean-Paul Marat, which T. J. Clark has characterised as the first modernist painting<sup>32</sup>, I argue that the contingent moment in this portrait illustrating the shift from monarchy

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<sup>31</sup> See Roland Bleiker, "Visual Assemblages: From Causality to Conditions of Possibility," in *Reassembling International Theory: Assemblage Thinking and International Relations*, ed. Michele Acuto and Simon Curtis (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 75-81.

<sup>32</sup> See T. J. Clark, "Painting in the Year Two," *Representations* 47, Summer (1994): 13.

to popular sovereignty remains ambiguous and never manages to rid itself entirely from its metaphysical origins. The ambivalent role of religious sentiments is further shown by example of the Obama hope campaign poster. In *Chapter 3*, I turn to documentary photography and the ambiguity and unreliability of the photographic index. The analysis of contemporary war photography by Simon Norfolk, Richard Mosse and Trevor Paglen shows that the engagement with the limits of the visible constitutes a risky way to engage the viewer with the partiality and fragmentation of what she sees. The radical contingency of those photographs avoids using photography as the mere illustration of preconceived opinions and statements but unleashes unpredictable affective energies. *Chapter 4* then turns to political filmmaking reaching from early Soviet cinema to contemporary essayistic films. I discuss the changing political significance of contingency that has evolved from utopian vision and ideological scepticism into a self-reflexive analysis of the contemporary conditions of visibilities - including their entanglements with the optical technologies of industrial production and military developments. All these visual presentations of contingency, however, are always limited in their political efficacy since they are always subject to the historical conditions from which they emerge. The thesis ends with a brief conclusion where I sum up my main arguments regarding the political implications of visual contingency and state the positive accomplishments of my explorations. This includes my contribution to an improved political visual literacy and my more nuanced and cautious attitude towards the political potency of visual aesthetic practices.

After having introduced the theoretical background on which this thesis is based, defined some key terminology, and clarified what I hope the thesis will contribute, let us now delve into the exploration of the relationship between political thinking and image-making by illuminating the central theme of *contingency*. The following chapter provides an introduction to this versatile and iridescent term with a particular emphasis on its historical, aesthetic and political dimensions.

# Chapter 1

## Contingency as Stimulating Risk: Indeterminacy and Ambiguity between Agonism and Affect

The central theme of this study, against which the political implications of the visual are defined, is the notion of contingency. The political potential of images, so my central hypothesis, emerges from a moment of contingency that is broadly defined as “the condition of being free from predetermining necessity in regard to existence or action” as well as “the being open to the play of chance, or of free will.”<sup>1</sup>

Following W. J. T. Mitchell’s claims that “the political task of visual culture is to perform critique without the comforts of iconoclasm”<sup>2</sup> and that the image is an “autonomous source of its own purposes and meanings”<sup>3</sup>, I suggest that the encounter with an image constitutes itself a disruptive moment from which a political theory can emerge. Such a theory, which can only be processual and tentative, has three important dimensions that this chapter will examine. First, I argue that the political efficacy of images and visual aesthetic practices can be explored through the concept of contingency. Contingency indicates that all social relations can be otherwise and its radical openness offers experiences of possibility and alterity. My second point is that if we take images seriously as autonomous political agents, following Mitchell’s claim above, we have to acknowledge and appreciate their unpredictable and unruly nature. That includes the affective dimension of contingency that operates beyond discursive meaning or symbolic representation and thus challenges any predictable and clear political implications. Consequently, and this is my third point, we should regard the experience of contingency and its resulting politics as *stimulating risk*. I will return to this later. The encounter with a visual material object and the experience of contingency that such an encounter unleashes stands at the centre of my ap-

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<sup>1</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 344.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

proach towards a political theory of images. Contingency helps us to describe a political efficacy of images that cannot be predetermined by ideological goals and so resists “a kind of iconoclastic critique which imagines that the destruction or exposure of false images amounts to a political victory.”<sup>4</sup>

If I say ‘we’ in this context, I refer to contemporary political theorists with an interest in visual aesthetic practices. But the first person plural also includes theorists in the field of visual studies and art history with a conceptual interest in contingency and its critical political implications. This is important because all too often contingency is attributed a progressive politics of critique, emancipation or resistance. This leads not only to rather predictable interpretations of the political potency of visual aesthetic practices, but also ignores the versatile and subtle experiences the encounter with images can offer. Instead, the politics of images I describe in this thesis is not about clear ideological positions or the formation of political subjectivities. The politics of images I propose here is a cautious and nuanced one that aims towards ethical sensibility rather than resolute action. Taking images seriously as autonomous political agents also means to consider their unruly nature as well as the unpredictable and unreliable affective responses they can elicit from a viewer. Due to this unruliness of contingency the politics of images constitutes a productive and stimulating risk. A politics of images that results from the experience of contingency is risky because contingency does not automatically entail a progressive politics in terms of emancipation, critique or resistance. Contingency may elicit undesired or even unpleasant reactions from the viewer, too. The politics of images is therefore often difficult, complex and subtle. Yet it is stimulating and productive for it has the power to create new modes of thinking and feeling, to encourage the viewer to explore unfamiliar emotional and cognitive territories and to open up to the ‘other’. The appreciative engagement with contingency thus presents an ethical dimension. Such a politics of images, resulting from contingency and presenting itself as stimulating risk, is not exhausted entirely in the polarities of agonistic struggle and micropolitics. In this regard my take on contingency differs significantly from two approaches to the politi-

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<sup>4</sup> Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 351.

cal implications of the aesthetic experience of contingency in contemporary political theory. My proposal does not reduce contingency to agonism as Chantal Mouffe suggests, nor to a micropolitics as described by William Connolly. The condition of stimulating risk rather exemplifies this tension between contingency as possibility for ideological struggle on the one hand and contingency as a micropolitical mode of becoming on the other. The moment of risk shows us the precarious relation between political purposes and aesthetic experience. It demonstrates further that the political needs contingency but contingency does not need the political. The moment of risk is implicitly present in both Mouffe's and Connolly's account of aesthetic politics in different ways but is often disavowed as a gesture in its own right. Whereas Mouffe offers a rather macro-political perspective, where aesthetic experience supports a larger agonistic political project, Connolly focuses optimistically on contingency's micro-political dimension. Here, the resonance between different experiences, affective energies and modes of thinking all have radical democratic consequences. I argue that a stronger focus on contingency as productive risk allows us to see the shortcomings of their interpretations of the role of contingency in visual aesthetic politics and expand our grasp of how images can be said to 'work'. This includes an expansion of the concept of images in political theory: away from signs, symbols or representations and towards gestures, intensities and appearances. After having provided a brief overview of my argument, the discussion in this chapter follows three main steps.

I start off by sketching out my interpretation of contingency as stimulating risk. Subsequently, a brief historical overview explains why contingency is a useful concept that helps us understand the modern and political character of visual aesthetic practices. I then continue by showing how contingency as stimulating risk offers a more nuanced understanding of the political efficacy of the visual arts than Mouffe's concept of agonistic public spaces and Connolly's concept of micropolitics.

### Contingency as stimulating risk

The encounter with visual images constitutes a moment of risk. This might not be a big, dramatic risk (although there might be exceptions) where someone's existence is at stake but a notable risk nevertheless. A viewer invests cognitive and emotional effort in order to establish a dialogue with an image. This investment, however, does not guarantee any gains. The viewer does not know in advance what impact an image has on her, what thoughts and feelings such an encounter may trigger or if there will be any response at all. The moment of contingency that appears as risk, is unpredictable and uncertain. But it is this unpredictability and ambivalence that harbours stimulating and promising potential. Therefore, risk has to be distinguished from mere uncertainty. A famous distinction is offered by American economist Frank H. Knight: "It will appear that a *measurable* uncertainty, or 'risk' proper, as we shall use the term, is so far different from an *unmeasurable* one that it is not in effect an uncertainty at all. We shall restrict the term uncertainty to cases of the non-quantitative type."<sup>5</sup> But how, in the context of the visual arts, could we talk about risk as 'measurable uncertainty'?

I suggest that the experience of contingency as an element of risk means to embrace ambiguity and uncertainty whilst emphasising its stimulating and productive qualities. Of course, the uncertainty of aesthetic experiences or creative processes is not measurable in the sense that its potential effects can be precisely calculated. Contingency can, by its very definition, not be fully measured, quantified or determined but one can take into account its potentially qualitative and productive effects. The moment of contingency cannot be accurately located for it is always out of place. It is situated somewhere between two interlinked dimensions. On the one hand, we can only 'measure' the implications of contingency in relation to prevailing expectations and experiences. The viewer sees something familiar but in a form that is disruptive. On the other hand, the moment of contingency is an event that suddenly opens up or gradually unfolds with unpredictable effects and without a discernible

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<sup>5</sup> Frank H. Knight (1921), *Risk, Uncertainty and Profit* (New York: Kelley, 1964), 20.

cause or relation. The moment of contingency creates a force field that emerges between the viewer and the material presence of a visual object like electric voltage between two points. This can happen in the cinema, in an art gallery, whilst flicking through a magazine or browsing the internet. This moment can lastingly shock the viewer or have no enduring effects at all. The producer of an image can attempt to elicit a moment of contingency in order to reinforce a viewer's response. Take as an example the use of hand-held cameras and jump-cuts in Jean-Luc Godard's film "À bout de souffle" (1960) that challenged the viewing habits of cinema goers who, until then, were used to the smooth transition of movie scenes and their sequential organisation. Or the photographs by Simon Norfolk that show traces of war and violence but leaving it to the viewer to fill in the cultural and historical blanks.

By the same token, the viewer can knowingly expose herself to the unpredictability and uncertainty of aesthetic experience in order to intensify cognitive and emotional insights, or simply for aesthetic pleasure. The contemplation of abstract paintings may have such an effect. Everyone who has been to the room with Mark Rothko's 'Seagram murals' at London's Tate Modern has probably experienced the unpredictable, yet undeniably powerful effects of pure visual contingency when facing those wine-red and maroon paintings. It is exactly the lack of clear meaning, causal relations, predictable outcomes or tameable energies that can make the experience of contingency productive and stimulating. I suggest that in a political sense, this highly unreliable, yet productive, tension of contingency has the capacity to encourage an opening to the unfamiliar, the uncomfortable, the 'other'. This tension of contingency may be too weak and ambiguous to forcefully strike sparks of resistance and emancipation but it produces a politics nevertheless. The political efficacy of contingency emerges from its fully appreciated uncertainty. It is this backdrop against which I define the political experience of contingency as stimulating risk. If we take images as autonomous sources of meaning seriously, as agents with their own efficacy and intensity, then their political relevance cannot be defined by predetermined ideological fault lines. The political significance of contingency that is unleashed in the encounter with visual images does therefore not lie in their ideological

use as instruments of power, nor as agents of mystery or spirituality. Instead I suggest a more sober and nuanced approach to images corresponding to W. J. T Mitchell's claim that "(i)mages are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think."<sup>6</sup>

To regard the encounter with images as a moment of risk-taking means to acknowledge images as autonomous agents whose efficacy always exceeds clearly discernible manifestations of signification and meaning. Exceeding the realm of discursivity implies further that contingency does not necessarily lead to a precise programme, to 'political action' or 'raised consciousness'. I argue that we can only make a claim to the relevance and power of images in the context of political thinking, which they undisputedly have, by simultaneously acknowledging the volatile and unreliable responses they elicit from a viewer. Rendering the visual experience of contingency as stimulating and productive risk allows us to formulate our positive expectations regarding the encounter between a subject and a visual object but simultaneously appreciate the radical uncertainty of its outcome. Concomitant with the ambiguity and unruliness of contingency is an inevitable risk since the effects of a visual art work, or any visual aesthetic practice for that matter, do not necessarily correspond with the intentions of the producer or the expectations of the viewer. Therefore, the political efficacy of the experience of contingency through the encounter with images cannot be sufficiently conceptualised without recognising, and appreciating, an inherent element of risk. As Mark Rothko aptly put it: "(A)rt is an adventure into an unknown world, which can be explored only by those willing to take the risks."<sup>7</sup>

But my intention here is not to resuscitate an elitist, avant-garde notion of risk that only allows the daring few to explore and enjoy novel forms of aesthetic experience and expression. Rather, taking risk here means to allow artworks, and images in particular, to surprise us, to disappoint us, even not to speak to us at all and ulti-

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<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, *What do pictures want?*, 33

<sup>7</sup> Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman (1943), "Statement," in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (ed.), *Art in Theory 1900 - 2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 569. Originally published in Jewell's column in the *New York Times*, 13 June 1943.

mately to acknowledge the possibility of ‘failure’. I thus follow Anna Dempster when she writes: “(T)he willingness to take risk relates to the artist’s conscious opening up to the possibility of failure on the one hand, but the greater opportunity for success on the other.”<sup>8</sup> I want to add that the willingness to take risk is not restricted to the artist but is equally required from the viewer. The risk of the latter results from being exposed to unexpected affective reactions or cognitive responses when encountering a painting, a photograph, a film, etc. The viewer takes the risk of being moved and touched by an image in unexpected and surprising ways which opens up the possibility to reflect or even transform her existing thoughts and feelings. I argue that the importance of contingency, as experienced in the encounter with visual art, arises through its capacity to challenge conventional modes of seeing and thinking as well as to trigger unpredictable affective and cognitive responses to the world. The political efficacy of visual images is not only derived from opening up contingency on the terrain of struggle, agonism or possibility but also from the acknowledgement of its excessive character, which means that the experience of contingency always exceeds any strategic, goal-oriented utilisation. The experience of contingency in art does not simply open up “agonistic spaces” for political struggle and the formation of new subjectivities but invites us to expose ourselves to various unruly affective intensities that potentially open up new cognitive and emotional portals to the world.

So far, I have introduced contingency’s risky dimension in the context of aesthetic politics. Before further engaging with agonistic and micropolitical approaches to contingency in the context of the visual we have to ask the following basic question: Why is contingency a useful concept that helps us understand the modern and political character of visual aesthetic practices? A closer look at contingency’s historic trajectory and aesthetic dimension will answer this question and further explore the progressive political qualities attributed to it. Let’s turn towards the historical shift in the theoretical attitude towards contingency: from a negative connotation of threat and chaos to a more positive sense of possibility and becoming.

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<sup>8</sup> Anna M. Dempster, “Perspectives on risk and uncertainty,” in Anna M. Dempster (ed.), *Risk and Uncertainty in the Art World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 38. (25-45)

## I. The historic and aesthetic dimensions of contingency:

### On the modern experience of contingency and political attempts at its closure

In the present context, the concept of contingency is not to be confused with ‘contingency theory’ referring to behavioural approaches that analyse decision-making processes in large organisations and companies.<sup>9</sup> Rather, the term contingency is here understood as a *historico-philosophical phenomenon* of the modern period in Europe characterising an era of continual loss of evident substantial foundations of reality.<sup>10</sup> But contingency also operates in affective and material registers beyond the modern disintegration of traditional symbolic orders. I will return to this aspect below. The tendency to identify the present day as “liquid modernity” or an “age of uncertainty” seems to indicate that the loss of all social foundations is a phenomenon that is unique to contemporary times and a paradigmatic feature of the so called ‘postmodern’ period.<sup>11</sup> However, the contemporary condition of contingency as a fluid and fragmented state of being, without any engagement to neither past nor future, has to be regarded as part of a wider historical genealogy. Thus the present investigation into the concept of contingency has to start earlier with the historical period we refer

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<sup>9</sup> For a behaviouralist perspective on contingency see Richard M. Burton and Børge Obel, *Strategic Organizational Diagnosis and Design: The Dynamics of Fit* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 2004). For a comprehensive overview of dominant debates and research methods in the field of structural contingency theory see Lex Donaldson, *The Contingency Theory of Organizations* (Thousand Oaks/CA: SAGE, 2001).

<sup>10</sup> The historico-philosophical perspective on the concept of contingency is guided by Michael Makropoulos’ use of the term. See in particular his insightful studies *Modernität als ontologischer Ausnahmezustand? Walter Benjamins Theorie der Moderne* (Munich: Fink, 1989) and *Modernität und Kontingenz* (Munich: Fink, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> “Postmodernity is the condition of contingency which has come to be known as beyond repair. Nothing seems impossible, let alone unimaginable. Everything that ‘is’, is until further notice. Nothing that has been binds the present, while the present has but a feeble hold on the future.” See Zygmunt Bauman, “Morality in the Age of Contingency,” in *Detraditionalization: Critical Reflections on Authority and Identity*, ed. Paul Heelas, Scott Lash, and Paul Morris (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 51.

to as ‘modernity’.<sup>12</sup> In political thought the beginning of the modern period is often understood to have started with the work of Niccolò Machiavelli in the 16th century. The focus of the present study, however, starts somewhat later with the events of the French Revolution when the ideas of democracy and republicanism challenged the dominance of absolutist monarchy.<sup>13</sup> In aesthetic terms, the modern period is dated even later and is famously associated with Charles Baudelaire’s essay *Le Peintre De La Vie Moderne* (1863) where he describes an urban experience of contingency and transition that requires a new understanding of art. “La modernité, c’est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est éternel et l’immuable.”<sup>14</sup> Art historian T. J. Clark writes accordingly: “Modernity means contingency. It points to a social order which has turned from the worship of ancestors and past authorities to the pursuit of a projected future - of goods, pleasures, freedoms, forms of control over nature, or infinities of information.”<sup>15</sup> The experience of contingency, the problematising of normative universalities and epistemological foundations, therefore is not an experience unique to contemporary times. What is

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<sup>12</sup> The debate about the distinction between ‘modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’ as suggested by authors such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck or Jean-François Lyotard are here of subordinate interest since the idea of contingency is a shared feature of both concepts. However, Gianni Vattimo has characterised the modern period as “dominated by the idea that the history of thought is a progressive ‘enlightenment’ that develops through an ever more complete appropriation and re-appropriation of its own ‘foundations’”. In this context thinkers such as Martin Heidegger and Friedrich Nietzsche who have rejected the possibility to ‘found’ thought on “solid certainties” have to be regarded as ‘post-modern’. The questioning of the ‘foundational’ character of Western thought constitutes the basis for “post-foundational” debates in political theory, which revolve around the notion of contingency as the essential precondition for the concept of the ‘political’. See Gianni Vattimo’s introduction to *The End of Modernity: Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Post-modern Culture*, trans. Jon R. Snyder (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988), 2f. For a philosophical defence of the enlightenment ‘project of modernity’ against the ‘postmodern’ and ‘poststructuralist’ legacy of Nietzsche and Heidegger see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> For a concise account of Machiavelli’s impact on the modern understanding of politics see Maurizio Viroli, “Machiavelli and the Republican Idea of Politics,” in *Machiavelli and Republicanism*, ed. Gisela Bock, Quentin Skinner, and Maurizio Viroli (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 143f.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Baudelaire (1863), *Le Peintre De La Vie Moderne* (Paris: Éditions du Sandre, 2005), 11. However, Christine Buci-Glucksmann dates the origins of modern aesthetics in seventeenth century absolutism and baroque culture as her interpretation of the work of Baudelaire and Benjamin shows. See Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Sage, 1994), 10f. Bryan S. Turner’s introduction to the English edition also provides an elaborate discussion that addresses the difficulties in categorising the ‘modern’ and ‘post-modern’ periods in a transdisciplinary way. See *ibid.*, 11f.

<sup>15</sup> T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 7.

new, however, is the *quality*, *scope* and *ambiguity* of this experience that today permeates almost all sections of human existence. From an anthropological point of view, the experienced loss of traditional certainties during the modern period has not simply heralded the start of a new age of uncertainty but has also created an unprecedented sense of possibility.<sup>16</sup> In his symptomatically unfinished novel *The Man without Qualities* (*Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, 1930-42) Austrian writer Robert Musil emphasised the ambiguous nature of contingency as the idiosyncratic attribute of modern life.<sup>17</sup> Contingency reveals itself as ontological indeterminacy oscillating between new forms of freedom and fields of uncertainty in which past experience does not necessarily provide guidance for future actions. Here, the divergence between past experience and future expectation not only constitutes the modern concept of temporality but characterises the entire modern period.

German historian Reinhart Koselleck has pointed out how the experience of contingency affected the modern conception of time through a separation between the “space of experience” (*Erfahrungsraum*) and the “horizon of expectation” (*Erwartungshorizont*).<sup>18</sup> According to Koselleck, the concept of ‘modernity’ (*Neuzeit*), which is based on the acceptance of its contingent nature, can only be understood against the background of these two divergent categories. Koselleck thus claims “that *Neuzeit* is first understood as a *neue Zeit* from the time that expectations have distanced themselves evermore from all previous experience.”<sup>19</sup> Such a perception of temporality implies that tradition as the practical accumulation of past experi-

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<sup>16</sup> Herman Melville aptly described this experience of uncertainty in his novel *Moby-Dick* where he contrasts the narrator Ishmael’s perception of a contingent and versatile lifeworld with Captain Ahab’s grim determinism. Ishmael thus observes: “The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course - its every alternating vibration, indeed, only tending to that; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions modified by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events.” Melville describes a world in which old necessities have lost their guiding powers and the presumed certainties of tradition and free will are exposed to the forces of indeterminacy and chance. Herman Melville (1851), *Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 234.

<sup>17</sup> See Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins and Burton Pike (London: Picador, 1997), 11.

<sup>18</sup> See Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 255f.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

ences no longer offers instructions for individual and collective future actions. The changed understanding of temporality and history has also significant political implications in regard to the continuity and legitimacy of social organisation. Since the socio-historical continuum is no longer taken for granted, it becomes the task of politics to bridge the gap between past and future. Sovereignty and the legitimacy of political rule becomes subject to negotiation and contestation as both are no longer firmly grounded in traditional practices and religious beliefs.<sup>20</sup>

It should be mentioned, however, that even though contingency became one of the main characteristics of the modern period it is far from being an exclusively modern phenomenon. I do not suggest a sharp modern/premodern binary that depends on a modern way of conceiving contingency; neither is my aim to promote a simple truth by establishing allegedly clear conceptual dichotomies. I only suggest that in premodern times the acknowledgment of contingency was of different quality, including the discourses and social practices in which the experience of paradoxes was articulated. In ancient Greece contingency was perceived as *contingency of agency* embedded in a world that was itself not contingent.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, the problem of *modern contingency* cannot be reduced to mere contingency of agency. In modernity all social realities are contingent. The consequence is a world that has lost its coherence and a subject that was deprived of the certainty of its existence. Helmuth Plessner locates the beginning of the modern era after the Renaissance period in the 17th century when the “dimension of consciousness” emerged and the corrosion of the geocentric worldview called for a new entrenchment of the individual in itself.<sup>22</sup> According to Plessner, consciousness is the dimension from which such an immanent

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<sup>20</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>21</sup> The line of argument in this paragraph follows Michael Makropoulos’ afore mentioned book *Modernität als ontologischer Ausnahmezustand?*, 23f. For an ancient Greek approach to contingency see Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. J. A. K. Thompson (London: Penguin, 1976), 206. “No past event is an object of choice [...] because nobody deliberates about the past either, but only about a possibility in the future; and it is impossible for what has happened not to have happened.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> See Helmuth Plessner (1965), “Über die gesellschaftlichen Bedingungen der modernen Malerei,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. X, Schriften zu Soziologie und Sozialphilosophie, ed. Günter Dux et al. (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1985), 273.

stabilisation of the world had to be achieved. The world can only be conceived as coherent if it is *described as coherent*.

One of the ways that the world was described as coherent was through visual arts. I will come back to this argument in chapter 2 where I provide a more detailed discussion of the social function of rulers' portraits by example of the portraits of King Louis XIV. As I will show, certain forms of visual representation have to be considered as an attempt to *enclose* the experience of contingency and to withdraw the notion of contingency from discourses around sovereignty and political legitimacy. The experience of artistic contingency was considered a *harmful risk* that could potentially confuse spectators and stir up undesired sentiments. The use of images served to guarantee the acceptance of social hierarchies and to create a collective narrative that places the individual firmly within the solid frameworks of a transcendent world order. This should not come as a surprise given the fact that effectively all artistic image production was commissioned by those who had a vital interest in the maintenance and smooth continuity of the status quo. As I show in chapter 2, in traditional societies the realm of the visual arts was not a site where the experience of social contradictions or paradoxes could officially be expressed.

Whereas premodern artistic practice is mainly characterised by a denial of contingency, in the modern period the visual arts began to depict an increasing experience of epistemological shifts and social transformation. However, that is not to say that the growing awareness and acknowledgement of contingency was automatically embraced as a sense of opportunity or as productive openness to the world. On the contrary. Up until the early 20th century contingency was first of all perceived as a threat or existential risk to the traditional social order. In his essay *Political Romanticism* from 1919 Carl Schmitt uses a critique of Romanticist aesthetics to foreground the 'problem of political form' in modern society.<sup>23</sup> The temporal and occasional character of both Romanticist aesthetics and democratic deliberation is perceived by Schmitt as highly problematic yet symptomatic for the modern world.<sup>24</sup> Georg

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<sup>23</sup> See Carl Schmitt, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, 19.

Lukács also linked his political concerns regarding the modern experience of contingency to Romanticist aesthetics such as imagination, fragmentation, irony and self-reflexivity. In his early text *The Theory of the Novel* (1919), written before his conversion to Marxism, Lukács describes the phenomenon of social formlessness as an implicit political problem that is aesthetically reflected in the literary form of the (Romantic) novel.<sup>25</sup>

Lukács' essay is important in this context because he illustrates the aesthetic reflection of the fundamental epistemological shift of modernity in artistic practice. Contingency has thus to be understood as a concept that links the political to the aesthetic and vice versa. The problematic experience of contingency was paradigmatically discussed not in the visual arts but in literary studies. For Lukács, as much as Schmitt, the modern period and its political and aesthetic expressions were characterised by a loss of traditional certainties that used to guarantee a coherent life world in ancient times. In the modern period, however, this totality and homogeneity of the world has gradually been lost.<sup>26</sup> It should be pointed out that the transcendent totality of the Greek cosmos mainly existed as aesthetic representation (i.e. the Greek epic), since the ancient world was no less contingent than any other time in history. Thus the important question is not whether there is an increasing sense of contingency but rather in which social practices and self-descriptions it is expressed and appreciated. The modern period is of particular interest for my argument because it is the first time that art was not used as a vocabulary to describe the world as transcendent totality but as a reflection of a problematised subject in a contingent world. Contingency reveals its double character of uncertainty and possibility in the encounter with works of art.<sup>27</sup> The world as possibility and openness links the visual experience of contingency to epistemological concerns, it allows artistic practice to reflect on the

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<sup>25</sup> The following quotes are taken from Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1978). Orig.: *Die Theorie des Romans: Ein geschichtsphilosophischer Versuch über die Form der großen Epik* (Berlin: Cassirer, 1920). In the German original the term *Roman* (novel) is etymologically linked to *Romantik* (Romanticism).

<sup>26</sup> See Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, 33.

<sup>27</sup> See Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. Anna Cancogni (Cambridge/MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 103.

way we see the world and how we bestow meaning to it.<sup>28</sup> The potential of contingency is here not simply characterised by self-reflective critique, or the destabilisation of traditional certainties, but by productive creativity that can bring new modes of feeling and thinking into the world.<sup>29</sup> It is this recognition of contingency as stimulating intensity and a field of possibility that constitutes the juncture between artistic creativity and political thinking.

Jacques Rancière has elaborated on this juncture in his politics of aesthetics. The historical and epistemological developments of modernity that revolve around the acknowledgment of social and aesthetic contingency thus constitute the nodal point that links both dimensions together. Rancière, who rejects the notion of modernity, has described this development as the “aesthetic regime of art”<sup>30</sup>. The aesthetic regime of art is characterised by an openness that requires constant negotiations and legitimation regarding what qualifies as art since it is no longer embedded in a totalising metaphysical cosmos. Similar to Lukács’ discussion of the novel as modern form that reflects the condition of a de-centred subject in an uncertain world, artworks in the aesthetic regime of art no longer have the capacity to describe the world as coherent and embedded in a transcendental order but rather reflect the contingent nature of all human artefacts. According to Rancière, this is where contingency conflates its aesthetic and political dimension. The cognitive and affective experience of contingency through the aesthetic perception of an artwork are eventually conferred

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<sup>28</sup> The relationship between perception and knowledge as a specifically modern challenge to artistic practice has been paradigmatically described by Swiss-German painter Paul Klee: “Formerly we used to represent things which were visible on earth, things we either liked to look at or would have liked to see. Today we reveal the reality that is behind visible things, thus expressing the belief that the visible world is merely an isolated case in relation to the universe and that there are many other, latent realities. Things appear to assume a broader and more diversified meaning, often seemingly contradicting the rational experience of yesterday. *There is a striving to emphasise the essential character of the accidental.*” Paul Klee (1920), “Creative Confession,” in *Paul Klee: Creative Confession and Other Writings*, trans. Norbert Guterman (London: Tate Publishing, 2013), 11. My emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> The indeterminacy, unpredictability and openness of aesthetic experience has thus become a key feature of modern art. Allen Sekula writes accordingly: “The meaning of an artwork ought to be regarded [...] as *contingent*, rather than as immanent, universally given, or fixed.” Allan Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation),” in *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972-1996* (Normal/IL: University Galleries, Illinois State University, 1999), 118.

<sup>30</sup> See Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (London: Verso, 2013), xii.

on *all* human artefacts including social hierarchies and social arrangements. It is the contingent nature of aesthetic experience provided by the artwork that ‘teaches’ the individual the contingent nature of all political arrangements.<sup>31</sup> Rancière thus argues that the encounter with the ‘aesthetic regime of art’ generates emancipatory and egalitarian potential that is stimulated by affective as well as cognitive aesthetic experience.<sup>32</sup>

What is not sufficiently taken into account in Rancière’s approach is precisely the moment of stimulating or productive risk that I regard essential to any form of aesthetic experience. I argue that the experience of contingency through the encounter with aesthetic practices should not be burdened with too high-wrought political expectations. For instance, my proposal to regard the contingency of visual aesthetic experience as stimulating risk therefore hesitates to see in film “an experience of resistance and change” through the “stochastic serialization of moving images” and ultimately of actions, as Davide Panagia suggests.<sup>33</sup> The political implications of the contingency of moving images are more fragile and subtle and never exhausted in confident agonistic gestures. In chapter 4, my analysis of the ‘revolutionary cinema’ of Jean-Luc Godard in the late 1960s and its ultimate failure to establish cinema as an effective site of class struggle will analyse the political risk of a ‘stochastic serialization of images’ taken to the extreme.

The political or ethical potential that is linked to contingency as stimulating risk avoids such confident assumptions towards aesthetic practices by allowing an artwork to ‘fail’. That means recognising that contingency does not necessarily open to convenient and clear political categories. Neither does contingency easily fit into set political agendas of emancipation or resistance. The experience of contingency can also occur on an unconscious or subliminal level that does not necessarily create

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<sup>31</sup> “The foundation of politics is [...] the lack of foundation, the sheer contingency of any social order.” Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 16.

<sup>32</sup> For a critique of Rancière’s political claim to the emancipatory effects of art see Hal Foster, “What’s the Problem with Critical Art?,” *London Review of Books* 35, no.19 (2013): 14-15.

<sup>33</sup> See Davide Panagia, “Why Film Matters to Political Theory,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 12, no.1 (2013): 2-25.

the relevant distance between artwork and spectator in order to generate emancipatory power. Instead, I suggest that the political potency of contingency as experienced in the encounter with the visual arts can be better conceptualised as a moment of risk-taking, meaning a willingness to be emotionally or cognitively transformed by the encounter with a visual object; but also to recognise the contingent character of that encounter in its full sense by equally accepting unexpected and undesired responses - or even none at all. I therefore part with Rancière here by emphasising the intrinsic fragility and precariousness of all forms of contingency - the potential political efficacy of which is always at risk of 'failure' - of not resulting in a clearly discernible progressive politics. If we take seriously the autonomy of images and their powerful yet unreliable effects, the political implications of contingency are not exhausted by categories of emancipation, critique or resistance as advocated by agonistic approaches to contingency. I will discuss this aspect in more detail in the next section.

So far, I have shown that the political efficacy of images can be articulated through the concept of contingency in historical and aesthetic terms. I pointed out that it was in the modern period that the gradual recognition of contingency was decisive for both aesthetic practices and political thinking. The historical development of a positive conceptual attitude towards the political implications of contingency does not automatically entail clear applications to the realm of the visual. We therefore have to explore further the political implications of contingency in the context of aesthetic politics. In order to get a better idea of this risky tension of contingency in the context of the visual arts, let us have a closer look at the agonistic approach to contingency and its strategic opposition to fixed ideological meanings. Prominent here is the work of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe.

## II. Opening contingency to possibility, agonism and struggle

Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe define political discourse as a “field of contingent variations as opposed to essential determination.”<sup>34</sup> Laclau and Mouffe draw on the work of Antonio Gramsci in order to show that power relations (ideologies) are not simply enforced in a one-dimensional way but rather emerge from contingent social constellations. According to Gramsci, ideologies “‘organise’ human masses, and create the terrain on which men move, acquire consciousness of their position, struggle, etc.”<sup>35</sup> Gramsci points out that ideologies are not fixed meanings but “arbitrary” since “they only create individual ‘movements’”.<sup>36</sup> The notion of contingency opens up possibilities of social transformation that do not depend on a privileged and predetermined social agent. Thereby the concept of ‘the political’ (as distinct from mere ‘politics’) becomes the indicator for society’s contingent nature. For Laclau and Mouffe, the political is the “dimension of antagonism” which is under constant threat by politics, the “ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions” that seek to establish a certain order and to cover up the conflictive nature of social relations.<sup>37</sup> The political is thus defined by its capacity to reactivate dormant social practices and to prevent the forgetting that ultimately all social arrangements can be otherwise. The agonistic dimension of contingency unfolds in contrast with ‘the social’ which delineates the field of “sedimented forms of ‘objectivity’”.<sup>38</sup>

According to Laclau, social ‘sedimentation’, a term he borrows from Edmund Husserl, describes ‘routinised’ practices which have forgotten their (contingent) ori-

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<sup>34</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001), 99. This position ties in with thinkers associated with the British Cultural Studies tradition such as Stuart Hall who, in an essay with the paradigmatic title “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees”, suggests replacing “the notion of fixed ideological meanings and class-ascribed ideologies with the concepts of ideological terrains of struggle and the task of ideological transformation.” See Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees” in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 41.

<sup>35</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 377.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London: Verso, 2005), 101f.

<sup>38</sup> See Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on The Revolution of Our Time* (London: Verso, 1990), 35.

gins and thus appear as ‘objective presence’. The political dimension of image-making, accordingly, is not only the institution of conventional modes of vision, that is the ‘objective presence’ of how things are perceived and made visible (or invisible), but also the gesture towards their contingent nature. The political dimension of images is understood as an encouragement for new ways of seeing and the critical reflection of traditional conventions of visual representation. The experience of contingency offers the possibility of learning to see ‘anew’. This ‘reactivation’ of social practices, which gains political significance against a background of unquestioned conventions, is based on an understanding of the political as *difference*.<sup>39</sup> Whereas the social refers to the everyday routines of social practices, the political serves as an indicator of their conflictive nature and absent ontological ground.<sup>40</sup>

Similar to Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe also employs the trope of political difference by distinguishing between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ as two ontologically different yet intertwined dimensions.<sup>41</sup> The political difference as used by Mouffe helps us understand the political as an affirmative gesture towards the contingent nature of all social constellations. This political gesture towards contingency is not limited to the discursivity of language but also proves effective in the realm of the visual. Furthermore, the chiasmic logic of the ontological difference between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ makes clear that the experience of contingency has a relational quality whose political potency primarily takes effect against the backdrop of the

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<sup>39</sup> See Oliver Marchart, “Politics and the Ontological Difference,” in *Laclau: A Critical Reader*, ed. Simon Critchley and Oliver Marchart (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 54-72. The ontological dualism between politics and the political that Oliver Marchart has described as “ontological difference”, will be referred to in the following as ‘political difference’.

<sup>40</sup> This distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ parallels Heidegger’s ontological difference corresponding, with reservations, to the distinction between being (*das Sein*) and beings (*das Seiende*). In his *Heidegger Dictionary* Michael Inwood emphasises the important meaning of the term ‘difference’: “The word *Differenz*, from the Latin *differre* (lit. ‘to carry apart’), implies that beings and being are somehow carried apart from each other, separated and yet related to each other, - and of their own accord, not just on the basis of an act of “distinguishing” (‘*Unterscheidung*’).” Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 46. The ontological difference thus marks not simply a distinction between two different ontological dimensions but also marks them as an intersection which simultaneously brings them together and keeps them apart. The political potency of the experience of contingency can thus only be examined in its relationship as difference, that is, in its relationship with conventional, sedimented or doxic practices, on which it depends, and against which the indication that things can be otherwise generates political friction.

<sup>41</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, *On The Political* (London: Verso, 2005), 9.

non-contingent - the objective, the natural, the self-evident. According to Mouffe, the agonistic dimension that emerges from the tensions between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ is constitutive of the political project of democracy including “the creation of a vibrant ‘agonistic’ public sphere of contestation where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted.”<sup>42</sup>

For both Laclau and Mouffe, the political, as the indicator of society’s absent ground, is not identical with the routinised social practices we describe as politics. Rather, the political is attributed a superior quality, since it is the moment that institutes all social routines in the first place. The instituting function cannot be made permanent because the moment of contingency (temporarily) retreats in the very moment as it instigates a new social order. The political is thus the irruption of society’s contingent nature and its immediate effects remain unpredictable, undetermined and unexpected. One can therefore never say in advance which form the political is going to take in a given historical constellation. Thus, in Laclau’s and Mouffe’s concept of the political, formulated as irruptive moment, the agonistic quality of contingency is also linked to a moment of risk, which is not further explored. The intrinsic uncertainty of the political is here related to its form and not to the unpredictability of contingency in general. From an agonistic perspective on contingency, the same applies to the political qualities of visual practices, where the political moment challenges established forms of seeing or constitutes new ones. This potential to reactivate a political ‘essence’ in all social practices, renders the political as a category of intensity rather than normativity. That means that the political is not tied to specific issues or topics but can potentially arise from all dimensions of social life and consequently defines all practices (or discourses) as potentially political. This political potentiality makes it difficult, however, clearly to categorise and separate different dimensions of contingency as the visual experience of openness, uncertainty and indeterminacy. It seems therefore more appropriate to gradually distinguish different

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<sup>42</sup> Mouffe, *On The Political*, 3.

modes of contingency by virtue of the varying and drifting potencies of images.<sup>43</sup> The visual experience of contingency is thus not only a matter of conceptual difference between politics and the political but just as much of cognitive and affective intensities. The experience of contingency through the encounter with the visual arts also operates on various material and affective registers beyond the realm of the political - a crucial aspect to which I will return below. The potency of images is closely linked to the affective responses they trigger in the viewer, to the intensities these responses create, and the feelings and thoughts they make possible. The experience of contingency potentially always exceeds the realm of political discourse or action and also operates through visceral and emotional states on various subjective and inter-subjective levels. The potency and affective intensity of images strongly depend on the interplay between different media such as images, text and sound, defying any 'pure' conceptualisation of visuality or 'visual media'<sup>44</sup>. The political efficacy of contingency varies widely from painting and print, photography to moving images.

Intensity can range from the symbolic oscillation between immanence and transcendence in the conceptualisation of political sovereignty, the experimental engagement with the limitations of photographic indexicality, to cinematic utopian visions and critical reflections on the conditions of possibility of image-making themselves. I return to these aspects for instance in chapter 2 when analysing Jacques Louis David's portrait of the dead revolutionary leader Jean-Paul Marat. Here the moment of contingency that emerges from the 'insubstantiality' of Marat's body is not just a matter of political representation and signification but just as much of a divided feeling of awe and physical attraction. The intensity of the painting is thus different from the experience of contingency in Godard's essayistic films that I ana-

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<sup>43</sup> See also Emmanuel Alloa, "Intensive, Not Extensive," in *What is an Image?*, ed. James Elkins and Maja Naef (University Park/PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), 150.

<sup>44</sup> For a more detailed elaboration of this argument see W. J. T. Mitchell, "There Are No Visual Media," *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no.2 (2005): 257-266. In regard to moving images, Laura Marks emphasises the multi-sensory quality of perception as well as the embodied nature of all images. I will return to the political implications of such embodied perception in my discussion of essay films in Chapter 4. See Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 41f.

lyse in chapter 4. In the latter case study, it is cinematic montage, jump cuts and the interplay between images, sounds, text, and spoken comments that create a stimulating but difficult encounter between viewer and film. The ambiguous feelings unleashed by this encounter are not clearly articulated political positions but rather constitute seismographic reflections of diffuse social discomfort. All those manifestations revolve around the notion of contingency that not only reveals the ‘absent ground of the social’ but also produces new ways of seeing and feeling about the world. But if we take the unruliness of images and their autonomy as political agents seriously, then we have to accept the risk that the efficacy of images cannot be reduced to the intentions of the producer or the expectations of the viewer. The political relevance of contingency in the encounter with visual images lies in the opening towards the unknown and unexpected and not in their strategic use for preconceived (ideological) purposes. This emphasis on contingency’s stimulating risk and affective unruliness distinguishes my approach to the political potency of visual aesthetic experiences from Mouffe’s concept of political art as agonistic public spaces.

### **Chantal Mouffe: Political art and agonistic public spaces**

According to Chantal Mouffe the political recognition of contingency means the acknowledgement of society’s conflictive nature. Modern democracy, a political system characterised by the institutionalisation of conflict, has therefore the task of taming existential antagonisms into forms of legitimate agonism which do not seek consensus or reconciliation but recognise the validity of different political positions.<sup>45</sup> By recognising the legitimacy of a political antagonist, the opponent is turned into a legitimate adversary. It is therefore essential for a pluralist democracy, where antagonism can never be eliminated but only restrained, to create spaces where legitimate dissent and disagreement can be articulated. Such spaces of disagreement and agonistic dissent can be created through artistic practice and aesthetic strategies, which

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<sup>45</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political* (London: Routledge, 2005), 20.

Chantal Mouffe calls “agonistic public spaces”.<sup>46</sup> There, sedimented social assumptions can be challenged and passions mobilised that potentially lead to the creation of new subjectivities. Public spaces play a crucial role for political debate not because they constitute arenas where potentially a deliberative consensus between conflicting parties could be reached but because the public space “is the battleground where different hegemonic projects are confronted, without any possibility of final reconciliation.”<sup>47</sup>

Those spaces of contestation are crucial since they provide arenas where antagonistic positions and alternatives to a hegemonic system can be articulated without complete radicalisation, that is, without denying the legitimacy of the political opponent. According to Mouffe, creating such spaces of contestation is the critical function of public art.<sup>48</sup> Public art is thus not so much the creation of altered sensitivities, novel modes of seeing and thinking, but rather the provision of a platform for the presentation of already existing but marginalised positions. The central political function of art in the context of ‘the radical democratic project’ is the creation of a critical ‘space of agonistic confrontation’ capable of challenging the hegemonic symbolic order of a given society. Changing the symbolic order of the social can lead to the creation of new collective identities and political subjectivities. Mouffe’s argument of art’s agonistic potential relies on a concrete formulation of alternatives which renders her understanding of the political potency of contingency relational rather than ontological. The former means that contingency is perceived as the tacit precondition to challenge and contest ‘hegemonic articulations’ and not as a political category per se such as Connolly’s notion of ‘becoming’<sup>49</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces,” *Art & Research* 1, no.2 (2007): 4.

<sup>47</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space,” *Open* 14 (2008): 10.

<sup>48</sup> See Chantal Mouffe, “Which Public Space For Critical Artistic Practices?,” in Cork Caucus, *On Art, Possibility & Democracy* (2005), 152 and Mouffe, “Art and Democracy”, 12.

<sup>49</sup> In the context of Connolly’s work, the notion of becoming describes both an ontological state of movement and flux as well as a temporal dimension of time subdivided in periods of stability and disturbances. See William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 150.

For Mouffe, any experience that invites the thought that things can be otherwise is linked to the construction of agonistic public spaces which are constituted through articulations of clearly defined ‘counter-hegemonic positions’. As Mouffe puts it: “Properly political questions always involve decisions which require us to make a choice between conflicting alternatives.”<sup>50</sup> The political potential of contingency is to destabilise and challenge an existent hegemonic constellation of power relations. In short, agonistic spaces are needed within the democratic framework in order to legitimately articulate opposing viewpoints, and to challenge already established ones. According to Mouffe, the rationalistic and individualistic tendency of today’s “neo-liberal” political forces, however, promotes a politics of consensus that limits the institutional spaces where fundamental opposition can be expressed and alternative politics formulated. The critical character of artistic practices is accordingly defined “as counter-hegemonic interventions whose objective is to occupy the public space in order to disrupt the smooth image that corporate capitalism is trying to spread, bringing to the fore its repressive character.”<sup>51</sup> In light of the above, I am sceptical at the assumption that (visual) aesthetic practices have the capacity to significantly disrupt society’s symbolic order by means of conveying an experience of contingency - an assumption that still seems to bear the marks of a modernist understanding of avant-garde art featuring an aspiration to transform society through new modes of aesthetic experience. Instead, I suggest that the political relevance of contingency as experienced in the encounter with an art work, lies not primarily in its critique of a hegemonic order and disruptive capacity but in the opening towards the unpredictable and the unknown. Rather than the purposeful creation of new subject positions, contingency offers the possibility of (inter-)subjective transformation but is always at risk of failure.

In Mouffe’s account of political art, the risky and uncertain dimension of contingency plays a rather subordinate role. Mouffe limits the notion of contingency to a discursive play of meaning and signification whereas the realm of affect and emo-

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<sup>50</sup> Mouffe, *On the Political*, 10.

<sup>51</sup> Mouffe, “Artistic Activism and Agonistic Spaces”, 5.

tion, which is key to the efficacy of all aesthetic experience, is subjected to a lesser degree to the volatility and unpredictability of contingency. Mouffe's assumption regarding the critical or disruptive capacity of contingency in the face of the smooth self-evidence of neoliberalism's capitalist logic presents us with other problems. First, corporate capitalism and the state system that supports it do not function so smoothly after all, revealing high degrees of uncertainty, vulnerability and risk amongst many parts of the population. At the same time, and this is the second aspect, capitalism has also shown a remarkable capacity to rearrange and resurrect itself after every economic slump or period of political instability.<sup>52</sup> I return to this later. Mouffe's main focus in this context is the 'repressive character' of neoliberalism in regard to the formation of political identities which are always constructed as "difference" and therefore inherently conflictive.<sup>53</sup> The political passions that have to be mobilised in order to create collective identities are muffled in order to establish a "false consensus" and ultimately repress political passions in mainstream political debates. What remains somewhat unclear in Mouffe's account of the political efficacy of aesthetic practices is what exactly she means by 'passions' and how desires (in distinction from passions) are "mobilised" by the "neoliberal system" in order to maintain its "hegemonic position".

Mouffe's theory focuses predominantly on the macro level of competing political positions and pays less attention to more subtle nuances of subjective aesthetic

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<sup>52</sup> For a recent comprehensive discussion of this argument see Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (London: Verso, 2013). One could ask further whether this phenomenon has consequences for the agonistic capacity of aesthetic practices and the political dimensions of contingency more generally. The concept of contingency also plays an integral part for liberal thought in both its political and economic dimensions. In the context of neoliberalism, contingency as a social and political force is manifest not through the absence of any metaphysical certainties but through the assumed presence of an 'invisible hand' (Smith) or a 'spontaneous order' (Hayek), conjured up by the logic of 'the market'. See Friedrich Hayek, "The Results of Human Action but not of Human Design," in *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), 98f. Broadly speaking, the deficiencies in terms of knowledge and communication of each individual market participant prevent participants from gaining a comprehensive understanding of the market's workings as a whole. Based on this individual deficiency, the market is best left to its own devices and not tempered with in terms of external (state) interventions. The impersonal rationality and self-organising capacity of the market will then provide the best possible results for all members of the market. In other words, under the conditions of neoliberal hegemony, the market seems to claim the monopoly over the social and political capacity of contingency.

<sup>53</sup> See Chantal Mouffe (2002), "Politics and Passions: The Stake of Democracy," in *Chantal Mouffe: Hegemony, Radical Democracy, and the Political*, ed. James Martin (London: Routledge, 2013), 184.

experience. In so doing, she neglects the complex interplay between internal and external factors of perception and cognition that have the most crucial impact on the creation of those new subjectivities. I therefore argue that Mouffe's concept of agonistic public spaces could be conceptualised more comprehensively by taking into account the individual as its point of departure. The unruliness of affective responses cannot be easily 'tamed' or 'directed' along preconceived ideological fault lines. In other words, Mouffe's take on the political efficacy of aesthetic contingency sidelines its essential risk of unexpected or undesired effects. This does not demand we reconfigure Mouffe's concept of agonistic public spaces but, rather, we can expand it further. Although Mouffe herself points out that "public spaces are always plural and the agonistic confrontation takes place on a multiplicity of discursive surfaces"<sup>54</sup>, I shall suggest it is necessary to explore the pre-discursive and subjective aspects of agonistic politics as discussed by Connolly. To the same extent as Mouffe recognises the *horizontal plurality* of public spaces as well as the agonistic confrontations they host, it is also necessary to take into account their *vertical plurality*. That means paying more attention to the subjective and intersubjective resistances, experiences and imaginations that enable public spaces to materialise at all. However, the political effect of such spaces inevitably starts with individual responses that work on cognitive, emotional and sub-conscious registers. In order to better understand the political potency of visual-aesthetic practices the intertwining between both dimensions is vital.

Even though Mouffe identifies the role of 'passions' as crucial for the understanding of politics, she does not engage with them in greater depth. Passion defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as a "strong and barely controllable emotion" and "an intense desire or enthusiasm for something" vaguely oscillates in Mouffe's thought between an inevitable constituent for the creation of political identities and a potentially dangerous force that needs to be domesticated.<sup>55</sup> The site for such a mobilisation are agonistic public spaces where antagonistic passions of hostility can be

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<sup>54</sup> Mouffe, "Art and Democracy", 10.

<sup>55</sup> See Mouffe, "Politics and Passions", 186.

turned into expressions of agonistic dissent. However, can the political potency of visual-aesthetic practices be sufficiently grasped with a notion of passion reduced to a sentiment of strong antagonism, ‘tamed’ and ‘mobilised for democratic ends’?

If we take seriously the experience of contingency through the encounter with a visual aesthetic object, we have to acknowledge that the risk of contingency can never be entirely tamed and that it is the very risk of unpredictable and unreliable responses from which its political efficacy ultimately emerges. Is not the unpredictable, transitory and eventually untameable nature of affect its greatest political strength (as well as, admittedly, its greatest weakness)? I want to answer in the affirmative and that is why I have described the efficacy of contingency as *stimulating* risk. That also means, however, that we have to shift our expectations away from great disruptive gestures against a ‘hegemonic discourse’ and towards an appreciation of contingency as a singular opening towards the unfamiliar and unexpected. Furthermore, can the political role of affect and the experience of contingency be limited to identity politics, as Mouffe suggests? I argue in the next section that it cannot and that it should be located within a much broader existential context of intersubjective experiences, affective exchanges and material encounters.

Rather than reducing the contingent effects of encountering a visual aesthetic object to an agonistic gesture against a hegemonic constellation, contingency as stimulating and productive risk grasps the tension between the political level of agonism and ideological struggle, on the one hand, and the realm of affect and materiality that exceeds the political, on the other. This political riskiness is pertinent for instance in essayistic filmmaking. The contingent character of this genre that emerges from the ‘unorthodox’ nature of essayistic thinking is all too often attributed a politics of subversion and ideological critique. As I show in chapter 4, however, the politics of contingency in essayistic filmmaking are more fragile, subtle and unreliable and are not exhausted in agonistic gestures. Essayistic filmmaking as a mode of political thinking is multilayered for it operates on cognitive as well as affective registers, it is both embodied and intellectual, it constitutes a form of thinking as well as a form of action. It is this involvement of various registers of subjectivity that estab-

lishes its unruly character and that makes it ultimately impossible to tame its multiple energies and to strategically direct it towards clearly defined political ends. I return to this argument in greater detail below when I explore the role contingency plays in the aesthetic politics of William Connolly. After having shown the rather reductive and predictable role of contingency in the context of post-marxist political thinking in general, and aesthetic practices as agonistic public spaces in particular, and before turning towards Connolly, let us have a closer look at the experience of contingency as unruly affective and cognitive intensities.

### III. Multiple registers of contingency: materiality and affect

The affective dimension of contingency corresponds to what Kathleen Stewart has described (with reference to Roland Barthes) as the “third meaning”. According to Stewart the “immanent, obtuse, and erratic” character of ordinary affect has to be distinguished from the ‘obvious meaning’ of semantic message and symbolic signification.”<sup>56</sup> The unruly and unpredictable forces of affect put into perspective the mainly agonistic interpretations of contingency as discussed in the previous section. To better understand the efficacy of images we shall also take into account their materiality and their resulting autonomy as political agents. Following Jane Bennett, to pay attention to the material dimension of images is to recognise their “thing power” which is “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.”<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, this understanding of “thing materialism”, which Bennett uses to challenge ‘historical materialism’ in a Marxist tradition, can also be applied to an understanding of images that does not regard images with ideological scepticism but instead recognises their “energetic forces”.<sup>58</sup> This ‘thing power’ bestows on images a certain autonomy and renders their efficacy ultimately unreliable and untameable. It is exactly that unruly material quality that sits

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<sup>56</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>57</sup> Jane Bennett, “The Force of Things: Steps toward an Ecology of Matter,” *Political Theory* 32, no.3 (2004): 351.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 367.

so awkwardly in Mouffe's concept of agonistic spaces and that contradicts contingency's ideological determination of alterity and struggle. The riskiness of contingency that emerges from aesthetic experience results not only from floating signifiers and shifting meanings but just as much from the unruliness of affective intensities. Even though the realm of affect might be as allusive as the political energies it unleashes, some attempt to outline the intensities of affect is in order. Gregory Seigworth and Melissa Gregg suggest the following useful description:

Affect, at its most anthropomorphic, is the name we give to those forces - visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally other than conscious knowing, vital forces insisting beyond emotion - that can serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability. Indeed, affect is persistent proof of a body's never less than ongoing immersion in and among the world's obstinacies and rhythms, its refusals as much as its invitations.<sup>59</sup>

We have then to assume that the recognition of contingency that constitutes the basis of political agency, is not a purely discursive process of deliberation where the choice between alternative courses of action is contemplated. Instead the political defined above as intensity capable of reactivating dormant social practices just as well emerges in more visceral and emotional states. Intensity has here to be understood as the key term that links affect to the political.<sup>60</sup> Whereas the political is based on the notion of contingency, affect has to be recognised as the ultimate contingent

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<sup>59</sup> Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>60</sup> See again Alloa, "Intensive, Not Extensive", 150 who suggests to describe images in terms of their intensity.

moment - a vibrant energy between activity and passivity that cannot be directed towards “practical ends in a world of constituted objects and aims.”<sup>61</sup>

I propose that the political implications of affect help us to understand that contingency cannot be entirely subsumed under the structural trope of political difference. Particularly so in the context of the visual, where the politics of affect operates beyond the field of linguistics and discursivity. Massumi writes accordingly: “Approaches to the image in its relation to language are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level, however that level is defined (linguistically, logically, narratologically, ideologically, or all of these in combination, as a Symbolic). What they lose precisely, is the expression *event* - in favor of structure.”<sup>62</sup>

The engagement with visual aesthetic practices shows that contingency is more than just an indicator of metaphysical absences or conflicting political interests. It also operates on more subconscious, affective and visceral levels thus opening up “virtual synesthetic perspectives” and generating “potential for interaction”.<sup>63</sup> Contingency presents itself not only in moments of crisis, when, as Oliver Marchart claims, “the groundlessness of signification”<sup>64</sup> is experienced. But also in everyday affective encounters when it reveals itself as “incipient action” or “bifurcation point” that not only opens up potential for interaction but also connects different levels of experience.<sup>65</sup> Interpreting the political implications of contingency as productive risk takes into account the stimulating quality of affect, its resonance with the world and its ‘potential for interaction’, but also its erratic and unruly nature that cannot be easily directed towards preconceived ends. In opposition to Mouffe’s concept of contingency, affect has to be regarded as both untameable and intersubjective. The perception and interpretation of images can thus neither be confined to public ‘discourse’ nor to a strictly personal experience. This in-between status of affective energies and their effects has been described by Kathleen Stewart as ‘public feelings’:

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<sup>61</sup> See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 26.

<sup>62</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 27.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>64</sup> Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 28.

<sup>65</sup> See Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 32f.

They work not through ‘meanings’ per se, but rather in the way that they pick up density and texture as they move through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds. Their significance lies in the intensities they build and in what thoughts and feelings they make possible. The question they beg is not what they might mean in an order of representations, or whether they are good or bad in an overarching scheme of things, but where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance.<sup>66</sup>

Stewart points out some key aspects that are relevant for the political efficacy of contingency. The efficacy of visual art is understood through an intensity that enables feelings and thoughts of alterity and change. I suggest, however, that these feelings of alterity and change, unleashed through the encounter with images, are not necessarily counter-hegemonic as suggested by Mouffe, but rather an openness to the unknown and a readiness to accept new thoughts and feelings towards the world - even if these novel forms of attending to the world are unexpected, undesired or indeed unpleasant. I return to this aspect in chapter 3 when discussing the work of photographer Richard Mosse. His multi-screen installation *The Enclave* about the war in Eastern Congo, for instance, creates a highly ambiguous multi-sensual environment that immerses the viewer into disorienting soundscapes and moving infrared images of overwhelming beauty and disturbing violence.

Furthermore, the articulation of agonistic positions and the affective dimension that enables and triggers it is always a multifaceted process rooted and embedded in what Nigel Thrift has described as “‘inhuman’ or ‘transhuman’ framework in which individuals are generally understood as effects of the events to which their body parts (broadly understood) respond and in which they participate.”<sup>67</sup> In the context of the visual, the relation of what is private and what public, individual perception and collective experience cannot be regarded as neatly segregated fields but as

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<sup>66</sup> Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 3.

<sup>67</sup> Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (Oxon: Routledge, 2008), 175.

inextricably intertwined dimensions. The political efficacy of images thus materialises from unpredictable affective dynamics that move between individuals, between private and public spaces, material as well as non-material agents. Affect is a potent force whose political effects have not yet materialised, characterised by an unknown semantic and social destination. The volatility of ordinary affects that always contain an element of contingency that may, or may not, result in a political manoeuvre, shows that no conceptualisation of the political can fully exhaust the moment of contingency. It again demonstrates that the political needs contingency, but contingency does not need the political. My description of the political efficacy of contingency as stimulating risk attempts to capture this paradox. Any intention to strategically direct the experience of contingency towards clearly preconceived ideological purposes, e.g. a strong ‘disruptive’ gesture against a hegemonic constellation, is potentially doomed to fail when recalcitrant affective energies do not run dutifully into the already provided political moulds of agonism, struggle or emancipation. As William Connolly puts it: “Affect consists of relatively mobile energies with powers that flow into conscious, cultural feeling and emotion; yet these effective energies also exceed the formations they help to foment. Affect has an element of wildness in it.”<sup>68</sup>

This element of ‘wildness’, which is inherent to the experience of contingency as affective intensity, represents an invitation to take a risk when encountering an image: the risk of affective energies exceeding conscious feeling, the risk of not being able to establish an effective dialogue between beholder and visual object. In terms of the political potential of images, the unreliability of affective intensities is at once their greatest strength and their greatest weakness. The contingent moment presents itself ‘in a state of potentiality’ whose ultimate effects and semantic destinations remain, by default, uncertain. The contingent moment, tangible through the affective forces and intensities of aesthetic practices, oscillates between powerful impingement and ineffective failure. As Stewart writes: “At once abstract and concrete,

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<sup>68</sup> Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 151.

ordinary affects are more directly compelling than ideologies, as well as more fractious, multiplicitous, and unpredictable than symbolic meanings.”<sup>69</sup>

My claim to recognise and appreciate the fragility of images, and the contingent moment when encountering them, thus echoes W. J. T. Mitchell’s comment, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, that “images are certainly not powerless, but they may be a lot weaker than we think.”<sup>70</sup> Whilst recognising the versatile and unpredictable character of iconic efficacy, I suggest, however, that the strength of images results precisely from the unexpected and unfamiliar affective and cognitive portals to the world they open up to the viewer. In order to fully appreciate the strength of images, both viewer and producer have to equally accept their fragility and thus the risky nature of contingency. Let us now turn more closely to the work of William Connolly and his engagement with contingency as a creative force that operates on multiple affective and material registers. Whereas Mouffe conceptualises contingency as a strategic force for political struggle, Connolly dissolves the moment of contingency in a multiplicity of micropolitical relations and experiences. As I will show in the following sections, the productive moment of risk that characterises our encounters with visual aesthetic practices is present in Connolly’s work but not explicitly articulated.

### **William Connolly: Visual arts as micropolitics, layered thinking and the new pluralism**

Instead of Mouffe’s approach to passions as uncontrollable, unconscious forces that need to be tamed and directed towards democratic ends, William Connolly turns, amongst other things, towards neuroscience, film studies and complexity theory in order to extend his pluralist project into the realm of individual cognition and perception. This shift is relevant in the context of political thinking in images for it emphasises the multiple dimensions of subjective being that constitute aesthetic experi-

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<sup>69</sup> Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 3.

<sup>70</sup> Mitchell, *What do pictures want?*, 33

ences, the embeddedness of those experiences within a broad web of interrelated human and non-human actors and the political importance of contingency as a creative force that has the capacity to bring new modes of feeling and thinking into the world. Connolly describes this inextricable web of intersubjective experiences and perceptions as ‘micropolitics’. Let us explore this further.

### **Micropolitics**

According to Connolly micropolitics “applies tactics to multiple layers of intersubjective being. Because it is often practiced in comparative settings, it contains an agonistic element.”<sup>71</sup> Micropolitics takes into account the often diffuse and volatile, but nevertheless powerful, role of perceptual sensations for the formation and expression of political interests and desires.<sup>72</sup> As I will show in later chapters, the campaign poster, the photograph or the essay film all contribute to a complex intersubjective process of political thinking whose cognitive potency and intensity far exceeds the conventional understanding of decision-making processes as rational deliberation. By the same token, the ‘vitality’ that W. J. T. Mitchell attributes to visual images always generates a ‘surplus value’ of meaning, of new forms of thinking and feeling about the world that cannot be exhausted in a merely ‘counter-hegemonic intervention’. The micropolitical dimension of visual art is embedded in a broad array of aesthetic experiences, social practices, daily routines, personal desires, imaginations, memories, etc.<sup>73</sup> The political outcome of the visual aesthetic experience of contingency is therefore itself contingent. It cannot be completely controlled and its outcomes predicted. It may or may not gradually inform personal modes of thinking and judgement and subsequently permeate the perceptions and ideas of a greater community.

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<sup>71</sup> Connolly, *Neuropolitics*, 108.

<sup>72</sup> See Morton Schoolman and David Campbell, “An Interview with William Connolly,” in *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition*, ed. David Campbell and Morton Schoolman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 308.

<sup>73</sup> See *ibid.*, 311.

However, if we are to fully appreciate the contingent nature of images and the political efficacy they evoke, then I suggest a middle ground between using affective energies for preconceived purposes (as suggested by Mouffe) and dissolving the uncertainty of visual images into the delicate complexity of micropolitics (as presented by Connolly). Even though Connolly's concept of micropolitics is key to understand the multidimensional nature of political thinking and visual perception, his highly pluralist perspective breaks down our encounters with images into so many tiny processual and material elements that the autonomy of images as political agents, with their own purposes and meanings, becomes indiscernible. Of course, the efficacy of images always depends on their embeddedness within broad cultural and material networks, our sensual perception is the result of highly complex neurological processes but, as W. J. T. Mitchell aptly points out, images want to be seen "as complex individuals occupying multiple subject positions and identities."<sup>74</sup> I thus propose that despite the inextricably intertwined dimensions of micropolitics we treat images as such complex individuals that enter into constantly changing relations with beholders, producers and each other. If we want our engagement with images in political theory to become more sensitive to their strengths *and* weaknesses, then we should open ourselves towards the uncertainty and risk that each singular encounter between a beholder and a visual object inevitably involves. That allows us to recognise the political potency of images without overestimating their power in terms of ideological utilisation or dissolving their efficacy entirely in the detailed complexity of micropolitics.

By formulating the experience of contingency as productive risk, we can characterise the production and reception of visual images as an invitation to open ourselves to the unexpected and unfamiliar, to not being afraid of the unknown and to take a productive attitude towards new modes of thinking and feeling. The price for this invitation is the acceptance of undesired or surprising responses that may leave us frustrated rather than inspired. Contingency as risk may not be expressed explicitly in Connolly's work but often it is present implicitly, for instance in the

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<sup>74</sup> Mitchell, *What do pictures want?*, 47.

multi-sensory quality of visual perception that operates on a broad array of different cognitive and affective registers.<sup>75</sup> The ‘visual’ perception of static and moving images is never a purely uni-sensory experience but by default multidimensional and layered. As a consequence, the modes of thinking that are triggered by an encounter with images, have to be regarded as multi-sensory or multi-layered, too. This plurality of perception and experience makes it even harder to steer its affective energies along preconceived ideological fault lines or to tame those energies altogether. The pluralisation of experiences manifests itself in a ‘layeredness’ of thinking whereby Connolly distinguishes between *thinking* “as an active process that essentially involves language but is not exhausted by it” and *thought* defined “as past thinking stored in vocabularies, dispositions, and beliefs.”<sup>76</sup> Drawing, amongst others, on the work of Friedrich Nietzsche, Antonio Damasio and Ilya Prigogine, Connolly defends the act of thinking from its reduction to pure deliberation, logic intellectualism and cognitive processes. Connolly ‘pluralises’ the common understanding of thought processes by fanning out the complex intertwining of various cognitive, affective, perceptive and intentional processes that all occur simultaneously, or become gradually interrelated.

### **Layered thinking**

I follow Connolly in his emphasis of the layeredness of thinking and perception, even though I am sceptical of dissolving the experience of contingency, triggered by the encounter with visual aesthetic practices, in the vast complexity of micropolitical relations. Connolly reminds us that the experience of contingency is layered and multidimensional too and cannot be reduced to a structural interpretation of shifting meanings or an absent ontological ground. For it is this multidimensionality of think-

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<sup>75</sup> See Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 49. Connolly’s take on perception can be linked to W. T. J. Mitchell’s remark that the term ‘visual media’ is misleading since all media are hybrid media. Mitchell writes: “There are no purely visual media because there is no such thing as pure visual experience in the first place.” See W. J. T. Mitchell, “There Are No Visual Media,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 4, no.2 (2005): 264.

<sup>76</sup> Connolly, *Neuropolitics*, 99.

ing that accounts for the cognitive as well as affective elements in our attitude towards the world and that, by default, contains unruly and untameable intensities that operate on affective and material registers beyond the strategic and deliberate use of politics. I propose that taking into account the multilayeredness of perception and thinking makes the political potency of visual-aesthetic practices less predictable. This unruly multidimensionality of thinking, feeling and perceiving contains an inevitable risky dimension in regard to preconceived political purposes. It can therefore not be sufficiently grasped with a notion of passion reduced to a sentiment of strong antagonism, 'tamed' and 'mobilised for democratic ends' as Mouffe suggests.

The layeredness of thinking is the acknowledgment of thinking as a multidimensional process that is not only an analytical response to the world but testifies to thinking as a multi-faceted mode of becoming. Layeredness correlates with the concept of images as a phenomenon situated on the threshold between rationality and irrationality, logic and affect. Thinking in general, and political thinking in particular, can neither be reduced to cognitive processes nor can it rely on the persuasive power of argument alone. The perception, interpretation and cognitive processing of visual images depends on a huge array of various subjective and inter-subjective factors. Previous sensual experiences, memories, imaginations and perception all influence the way we 'see' and interpret an image. Whereas the vertical dimension of images describes the multiplicities of individual perception, memories and imagination, the term 'horizontal' layeredness relativises the act of thinking as an immanent and exclusively individual process. Rather, thinking is described as intersubjective operation that emerges as a response to modes of perception, memory and imagination that are both deeply embedded in, and constitutive of, different cultural practices which always already pre-structure the field in which individual thinking occurs.

(Visual) aesthetic practices is one of many different dimensions of experience capable of modifying an individual's sensibility. In order to have discernible effects, however, the experience of visual art and the perception of images has to correspond with other already existing ideas, opinions and judgements against which the experience of contingency can unfold its transformative potential. Consequently, any at-

tempt to change social relations or collective modes of thinking requires more than the force of the better argument.<sup>77</sup> If visual aesthetic practices are to be effective in their capacity to modify existing subjectivities or to create new ones, they have to work on multiple registers of perception by triggering surprising, unfamiliar, uncanny, etc. responses. Contemplating images may elicit visceral or unconscious responses but any desired or expected effect that corresponds to clearly defined political purposes can never be guaranteed.

By describing the political potency of contingency as stimulating risk I propose to refrain from assuming any causal relationship between the configuration of individual perception and its immediate translation into tangible action or subject formation. The timeframe within which such a translation takes place, to what extent and with what intensity this translation might occur, or whether it occurs at all, remains ultimately unpredictable. I therefore suggest that this unpredictability should be appreciated as risk and not relegated to the depth of micropolitical workings where various intersubjective experiences and affects may or may not resonate with each other in productive ways. My suggestion to regard an encounter with an image and its contingent effects as a singular opening towards the unfamiliar and unexpected thus differs from Connolly's more generous understanding of the political effects of aesthetic experience. According to Connolly, artistic practice and aesthetic experience "are all pertinent to the energy of a critical movement. They sometimes encourage new thoughts to surge forward as if from nowhere and then to become infused into critical action."<sup>78</sup> It is crucial, however, to put emphasis on the little word 'sometimes' for it reflects the very moment of stimulating risk regarding the political potency of aesthetic practices. The multidimensional nature of thinking and perceiving as well as the interweaving of cognition and affect reflects the complexity of experi-

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<sup>77</sup> Connolly's use of contingency as a potentially subliminal, unconscious and fugitive energy also offers an addition to Rancière's argument regarding the emancipatory and egalitarian effects of aesthetic experience. Connolly's consideration of individual experience and political introspection thus opposes Rancière's claim "that what people have in their head holds no interest. The only thing of interest is what they do with their thought, the way in which they conduct it materially." See Jacques Rancière and Oliver Davis, "On Aisthesis: An Interview," in *Rancière Now: Current Perspective on Jacques Rancière*, ed. Oliver Davis (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), 215.

<sup>78</sup> Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 192.

encing contingency that cannot easily be steered towards predetermined political ends. Connolly's apt description of sensual perception and thought processes as being layered and plural already alludes to the moment of risk that is integral to the aesthetic experience of contingency.

However, in Connolly's work the productive element of risk is implicit rather than explicit. The different 'registers of subjectivity', which feature so prominently in Connolly's work and which are somewhat sidelined in Mouffe's concept of agonistic public spaces, multiply the complexity and unruly energies that constitute visual perception. Just consider sitting in a cinema and watching a movie. Through the encounter with the flickering screen various affective energies surge through the audience. Those affective energies may trigger similar responses across the audience but differ widely in individual reactions. Some people burst out laughing while others keep a straight face; some people are touched by one particular scene without exactly knowing why; some get sweaty hands at a moment of great suspense; others shudder or have goose bumps. In addition to these bodily reactions people have different associations and memories, divergent habits of seeing, skills of interpretation or factual knowledge that lets them experience the film in different ways. And all these responses might be entirely different next time they watch the same film. Therefore, the interplay of different 'registers of subjectivity' make it even harder to purposefully direct affective energies towards preconceived political ends. The interwoven dimensions of affect, cognition, perception, intention, etc. represent a multiplicity of potentially deviant and contradicting forces whose energies are too exuberant and multifarious to align with a singular political cause. My proposal to interpret contingency as stimulating risk claims that the unruliness and unpredictability of contingency harbours creative and, potentially political, efficacy. But what exactly is the political relevance of interpreting the contingency of aesthetic encounters as stimulating risk? And why are visual aesthetic practices and their contingent effects politically relevant at all?

An answer is provided by the 'new pluralism', which is not only a project that concerns different modes of being, acting and thinking politically, but also a theoretic-

cal and methodological project that attempts to rearrange politics as academic discipline and reevaluate conventional conceptions of what constitutes political thinking.<sup>79</sup> Visual aesthetic practices qualify as distinct forms of critical enquiry and social commentary with the capacity to stress the speculative, subjective and imaginary elements of knowledge that are often marginalised by the rigour of scientific research methods. Visual aesthetic practices constitute modes of thinking that recognise the multilayeredness, embodiedness, positionality and centrality of sense perception, and the inevitable partiality of all knowledge production. The unpredictable insights aesthetic experiences can provide should be recognised as integral and vital components of political knowledge rather than dismissed as deficient, unreliable and overall flimsy. With this in mind, the pluralist call to include “practices from outside the well-governed territory of established political theory”<sup>80</sup> should encourage us to acknowledge visual aesthetic practices as effective and distinct modes of critical political thinking. This is not to say, however, that the contingent encounter with images offers convenient or predictable political positions. The politics of images is never easy, it is multilayered, stimulating but also potentially confusing and frustrating. Let us now return to the unanswered questions raised above regarding what critical capacity the concept of contingency can still develop, when uncertainty, possibility and creativity seem largely absorbed by a neoliberal veneration for the self-regulating capacities of market mechanisms. How can agonistic moves of ‘destabilisation’ and contestation against corporate capitalism be articulated, as Mouffe suggests, when the hegemonic neoliberal project itself is already founded on the unpredictability, uncertainty and contingency of market processes? Or in more general terms: what political potential does the visual-aesthetic engagement with contingency hold in the current historical moment?

I claim that aesthetic practice is not so much an articulation of dissent but rather a mode of creative engagement with the complexity and fragile dynamics of

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<sup>79</sup> See Morton Schoolman and David Campbell, “Introduction: Pluralism ‘Old’ and ‘New’,” in *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition*, ed. David Campbell and Morton Schoolman (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

the world. The visual experience of contingency is no longer capable of presenting profound disruptions of a hegemonic symbolic order in the modernist tradition (if it ever was) but instead opens up affective and imaginative avenues through which the complexity and uncertainty of the world can be accessed and experienced. Contingency's stimulating risk has the power to create new modes of thinking and feeling, to encourage the viewer to explore unfamiliar emotional and cognitive territories and to appreciate the ambiguities and contradictions of our daily thoughts and emotions. Take as an example the Obama hope poster that I discuss in greater detail in the next chapter: The ubiquity of the poster during the Obama electoral campaign in 2008 stirred considerable affective energies and created a positive atmosphere of national hope. The iconic surface was ambiguous and open enough to be charged with all sorts of political expectations and desires. The ambiguity of the poster was thus its greatest strength but simultaneously always at risk of appearing empty and superficial. None of these stimulations, of course, results necessarily in the big political gestures of resistance, critique or emancipation. Consequently, I suggest that the politics of contingency is not effective in contesting the hegemonic position of the 'neoliberal system' but rather in making tangible its fragile and uncertain constitution. By the same token, the politics of contingency in visual aesthetic practices does not automatically constitute a micropolitical "work on the infrastructure of perception", as Connolly suggests, that contributes to "a militant politics of the democratic left".<sup>81</sup>

Such a 'militant politics of the democratic left', expressed in the multilayered realm of visual aesthetic practices, cannot be expressed in terms of predefined ideological positions. Neither should it attempt to reveal a social truth behind an allegedly deceptive appearance or expose vested interests behind a dominant scopic regime. Instead, if we are to take images as autonomous agents seriously and truly appreciate their contingent nature, every encounter with images has to be regarded as a moment in which a yet uncertain relation between beholder and a visual material object can be established. This encounter is potentially productive for it can touch or

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<sup>81</sup> See William Connolly, "Materialities of Experience," in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 198.

move the beholder in unexpected and unprecedented ways, it can trigger modes of feeling and thinking that previously did not exist, were subdued or ignored. But I suggest it is a politics that is cautious and sensible rather than militant. It is an opening to the unknown, it is a readiness to be transformed, to think or feel in different ways, rather than a decisive, clearly articulated political position. And of course, it involves the risk that none of the above happens, that the encounter with an image has no enduring effects at all. There might be effects but none that register beyond the moment. But it is the viewer's awareness of the potential of disappointment or frustration that enables the greater gains of affective, speculative or imaginative insights that an encounter with images potentially holds. The political surplus of contingency results precisely from both its overflowing and underwhelming character. Aesthetic experience and artistic practice potentially have effective individual and collective effects but do not constitute privileged positions for political criticism, structural insights or social change. Without such great expectations and ideological pressure the visual arts and aesthetic experiences open up unique affective, imaginative and speculative portals to the world.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have argued that the political efficacy of contingency unfolds as stimulating and productive risk. I provided a framework to describe the political potency of visual aesthetic practices without overestimating their power or instrumentalising their volatile affective energies. By emphasising the risky rather than the agonistic quality of contingency, we can acknowledge images as singular political actors without attempting to direct their energies towards preconceived ideological ends or to dissolve their unique efficacies into the all encompassing complexity of micropolitics. Rather than creating political oppositions, the risky dimension of contingency in the encounter with the visual arts provokes us to open ourselves to the unknown and unexplored as well as to accept unexpected, and potentially transformative, modes of feeling and thinking. Experiencing contingency thus also means to

heighten one's ethical sensibility and self-reflexivity, as well as to accept emotional overpowering or a sense of uneasiness rather than a strategic ideological gesture.

In the following chapters, I will now discuss different aesthetic modes of image-making in order to illustrate the theoretical claims developed so far. In so doing, I will show that, historically, the visual engagement with contingency and its political potential has continuously involved a moment of risk. This is so, regardless of whether or not the radical contingency of images, and the affective energies they are part of, were consciously recognised. As we will see, all three perspectives briefly presented in this chapter - a historical perspective that regards contingency as a harmful risk in need of enclosure, an agonistic approach that opens contingency towards agonism and struggle, and an affective approach that dissolves all sense perception into a vague and complex micropolitics - fall short in honestly appreciating the visual aesthetic experience of contingency. Therefore, the next three chapters explore contingency's productive moment in painting, photography and moving images. In my case studies - ranging from 18th century portrait painting to 21st century photography and video installations - the question regarding the risky dimension of affective intensities and visual representation is inextricably intertwined with theoretical political concerns regarding political sovereignty, democratic legitimacy and collective agency.

## Chapter 2

### Contingency and Theology in Modern ‘Rulers’ Portraits’: The Mystical Image of the Sovereign Body

The previous chapter began to explore visual image-making as a potent form of political thinking that emphasises the imaginative, speculative and affective dimensions of engaging with, and critically responding to, the social world. I suggested the notion of contingency as a useful term in order to conceptualise the political quality of visual art and to formulate a visual critique of image production that does not simply succumb to the temptations of iconoclasm or ideological suspicion.<sup>1</sup> I described contingency’s political efficacy as stimulating or productive risk, that is, as a productive tension that oscillates between ideological instrumentalisation and micropolitical dissolution. The political effects of experiencing contingency are risky because they are unreliable and unpredictable. Contingency’s unruly nature always has an excessive character that exceeds the realm of the political understood as agonism, possibility or struggle. Yet contingency is productive because it opens up new portals to the world and allows for multilayered and repressed modes of thinking and feeling to emerge. Furthermore, I have argued that the conceptual recognition of society’s contingent nature is a specifically modern phenomenon that finds palpable expression in the fields of history, aesthetics, and politics. “Modernity”, writes Serge Guilbaut, “emphasized the difficulty of knowing, of signifying or of synthesizing the divisions and contradictions of the modern world.”<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the moment of contingency is

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘ideological’ reflects the Platonic heritage of image-scepticism which Marx has lent its present meaning as a name for ideas and beliefs that are blind to the (material) conditions which produced them. Ideology associated with “illusion, false consciousness, unreality, upside-down reality” corresponds to a concept of the image that is regarded as an instrument to conceal an assumed truth of society. See Raymond Williams, *Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 156.

<sup>2</sup> Serge Guilbaut, “Preface - The Relevance of Modernism,” in *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Solkin (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2004), xiii.

perceived as both an experience of uncertainty as well as a sense of possibility resulting from the waning of traditional, metaphysical or ideological certainties. It is thus necessary to base any assessment of the political quality of artistic image-making on such a reflection of the loss of metaphysical certainties in order to conceptualise the notion of 'the political' as distinct from that of mere 'politics'. However, the political quality of contingency is not only formulated as structural difference between politics and the political but also on the unpredictability and unmanageability of the affective energies so central to the visual arts.

In the present chapter, I will pick up on the historical dimension of contingency as outlined in chapter 1 and focus on an example of early modern painting and its unruly and contingent character. The experience of contingency in a premodern context was described as *harmful* risk, since the idea of possibility in regard to social order and political legitimacy should officially not be experienced in the realm of the visual arts. Rather, commissioners as well as producers of paintings were often keen to reduce the viewer's experience of contingency in order to support the status quo. Of course, this is not to say that the actual cognitive, emotional and intellectual responses to those paintings could be reliably predicted or steered towards preconceived ends. In the following, I focus on the visual depiction of political leaders (rulers' portraits) and the relation between those depictions and the ideas of political sovereignty and legitimacy they represent. Jacques Louis David's painting *The Death of Marat* (1793) constitutes the pivot point of the present chapter around which all other discussions of rulers' portraits will revolve. David's painting occupies a central place because of its status as the first European modernist painting that directly addresses the concept of contingency and links it to the challenges of popular legitimacy and sovereignty in modern political thought.<sup>3</sup> The acknowledgement of social contingency, including its openness, uncertainty and indeterminacy, constitutes both the defining feature as well as the very precondition of modern political thinking. But

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<sup>3</sup> The assessment of David's painting as the 'beginning of modernism' is taken from art historian T. J. Clark whose account of *The Death of Marat* will be discussed in greater detail below.

if we regard an image as an “autonomous source of its own purposes and meanings”<sup>4</sup> and take seriously its contingent effects, then we cannot reduce its political efficacy to the dimensions of agonism or opposition. In other words, the experience of contingency cannot be reduced to a moment of crisis when conflicting social forces indicate the absence of any ultimate certainties or induce a sense of possibility; neither can contingency’s political dimension be reduced to the experience that society can always potentially be ordered in a different way and social hierarchies renegotiated. The experience of contingency in David’s work, however, also triggers strong affective and visceral responses in excess of the political: some viewers were struck by shock and horror when beholding the violent murder scene; others overwhelmed by religious sentiments when drawing parallels between the dead revolutionary and traditional depictions of the Lamentation of Christ. I return to this aspect in greater detail below.

I further contrast the moment of contingency in David’s work with earlier portraits of King Louis XIV, which attempt to enclose any suggestion of political contingency, as well as the more recent ‘Obama hope’ poster by American artist Shepard Fairey, which presents contingency as a (transcendent) promise of political agency. David’s and Fairey’s portraits have in common that the experience of contingency they induce in the viewer can be described as stimulating risk. The experience of contingency gains political significance because these portraits are capable of inducing multiple responses in the viewer thus creating a space where new modes of feeling and thinking can emerge as well as cognitive and emotional contradictions be presented. However, an element of risk always remains since an experience of contingency is never fully exhausted by political implications. As I will show, contingency as productive risk that is triggered by these portraits oscillates between political signification and theological sentiments. In both examples, the contingent moment presents itself in the uncertainty of its outcome as well as in the ambiguity of its message. I thus argue that the visual presentation of the body politic and its contin-

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<sup>4</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 351.

gent nature, capable of blending immanence into transcendence, still plays a central role for our contemporary understanding of democratic sovereignty. The analysis of these rulers portraits, which show a conceptual transformation from a divine model to a self-reflexive image, will help us to clarify the inextricable connection between political potency and its (aesthetic) forms of representation, which not only played a central role at the court of Louis XIV but remains relevant to the democratic systems of our time. The aesthetic realm of visual images proves to be an effective site of political thinking where metaphysical certainties as well as uncertainties can be experienced in a way that exceed oratorical persuasion or textual cogency. Having said this, images are not reliable political agents that can be deployed at will for preconceived political ends. Rather, the potency of those images emerges from their unruly autonomy that is neither captured as the choice between clearly defined political alternatives nor as detailed micropolitical workings. In this regard, contingency always bears a risk of not contributing to a progressive politics of possibility, emancipation or resistance. Contingency can equally betray the viewer, frustrate her, or not having any enduring effects at all. In the following sections, I illustrate my argument by example of the role of contingency in the visual presentation of different concepts of sovereignty.

The portrait of Louis XIV, so I will try to show by example of paintings by Hyacinthe Rigaud and Charles Le Brun, stands for a concept of *absolutist* sovereignty which assumes the existence of a social order identical with its modes of representation thus denying the existence of any form of social contingency; in contrast, the political dimension of *democratic* sovereignty, as illustrated by Jacques-Louis David, emanates from the discrepancy between the model of sovereignty and the image of the sovereign emphasising the loss of traditional political certainties formerly located in the king's body. My argument is mainly structured around the art-historical interpretation of the work of Charles Le Brun by Amy M. Schmitter<sup>5</sup> and her account

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<sup>5</sup> Amy M. Schmitter, "Representation and the Body of Power in French Academic Painting," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63, no.3 (2002): 399-424.

of French academic painting as well as T. J. Clark's seminal analysis<sup>6</sup> of David's *The Death of Marat*. The authors' interpretations can be fruitfully linked to discussions in contemporary political theory, in particular to Wendy Brown's investigation into the theological dimension of sovereignty, as well as to Claude Lefort's thought on democracy, representation and the symbolic order of the social. Being less concerned here with an in-depth formal analysis of singular pictures, my principal objective is to analyse the intrinsic relationship between image-making and modern political thinking. In the present context, the term *modern* is broadly understood as *secular* and refers to a historical period in which the ancient transcendent foundations of social order were called into question. However, the equation between modern and secular is not a very precise one, since up to the present day theological residues of transcendence are very much alive despite the modern democratic promise of political immanence and self-sufficiency. With references to Claude Lefort, I thus suggest that the theological aspect of sovereignty has never entirely vanished from the democratic stage but finds its recurrent appearance and conjuration, amongst others, in the aesthetic realm of the visual.

Formerly involved in the constitution of royal power through acts of display and pictorial representation, the visual arts now face the challenge of depicting sovereignty in a society where the ultimate 'place of power is empty'. However, despite the democratic attempt to present the place of power as empty it seems unable to completely rid itself of theological and metaphysical allusions, as I will demonstrate by example of the so called 'Obama hope' poster created for the 2008 democratic election campaign by Shepard Fairey. I argue that the encounter with the 'Obama hope' poster induces in the viewer a plurality of cognitive and affective responses that cannot be directed into a single direction. The contingent moment in the Obama hope poster does not unfold political significance through the visual presentation of a clearly defined agonistic position of possibility but rather through a multiplicity of affective responses that allow to merge the political with the theological. A closer analysis of Fairey's 'iconic' image of then senator Barack Obama illustrates the

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<sup>6</sup> T. J. Clark, "Painting in the Year Two," *Representations* 47, Summer (1994): 13-63.

complex interplay between the material, affective, institutional and theological elements that constitute the political potency of images in a historical trajectory up to the present day. The historical perspective is necessary in order to gain a better insight into the simultaneous rupture and continuity between modern and premodern understandings of political sovereignty that are particularly discernible in the modes of visibility that have always accompanied them. Furthermore, this historical perspective allows us to recognise the concept of vision as a “cultural paradigm” that produces a shared knowledge of the world at specific historical moments.<sup>7</sup> Visual representation and the production of images thus always articulates social beliefs and values even if they are not always fully discernible. In order to gain a better interpretation of the beliefs and values the ‘Obama hope’ poster may reflect, I will thus draw on W. J. T. Mitchell’s famous inquiry asking ‘what do pictures want?’ and link the visual ambiguity of Fairey’s icon, its “vitality and desire” as Mitchell would put it, to Wendy Brown’s argument regarding the theological rendering of sovereignty in the face of its political decline.<sup>8</sup>

I thus argue that the ‘desire’ of the ‘Obama hope’ poster, its theological vitality and internal life, “provokes a sense of lack”<sup>9</sup> regarding political autonomy and supremacy at a time of global capitalism’s increasing dominance. I suggest further that ‘rulers’ portraits’ in a modern democratic setting still play with the ambiguity between the immanence and transcendence of political authority as became evident in Barack Obama’s electoral campaign of 2008. Shepard Fairey’s ‘Obama hope’ poster thus reflects consciously or unconsciously a desire for political autonomy at a time when the global economy challenges national claims to political sovereignty. This desire for metaphysical comfort might be too subtle to generate an emancipatory attitude on the side of the beholder, but the multi-referential aesthetic experience of the

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<sup>7</sup> In recourse to Heidegger’s concept of the artwork, Hubert Dreyfus describes visual artefacts as ‘cultural paradigms’ that are not merely a representation of or symbol for a given community but an aesthetic practice that produces a shared knowledge of the world. See Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 289-316.

<sup>8</sup> See W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), in particular part one “Images”, 1-106.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

poster has to be regarded as a form of micropolitics that deliberately works on several socio-cultural levels. Again, the point is not to convince with a strong argument but rather to aggregate affective intensities and to channel them towards collective feelings of optimism and confidence. Here the experience of contingency gains a positive connotation associated with the hope for, and diffuse anticipation of, social change. However, before discussing Fairey's contemporary example of a political icon in the light of political theory and "the persistent, seemingly indestructible function of images as politico-religious agents"<sup>10</sup>, I will start my deliberations with a brief genealogy of the concept of political sovereignty, followed by an analysis of the political role of contingency in the portraits of Louis XIV and Jean-Paul Marat as depictions of the sovereign body. Before analysing contingency as a politically productive risk, let us first have a brief look at a concept of sovereignty, and the visual representations that accompany it, that would interpret the risky effects of contingency as harmful rather than productive.

### **I. Supreme authority and the body of the king**

On the 11th of December 1831 John Quincy Adams, the sixth president of the United States, wrote in his diary: "Democracy has no monuments; it strikes no medals; it bears the head of no man upon a coin; its very essence is iconoclastic."<sup>11</sup> Adams' comment on the image of popular sovereignty can be regarded as the paradigmatic reflection of a modern understanding of political representation that was always eager to distance itself from any form of metaphysical idolatry. But is the 'essence' of democracy really iconoclastic and is democracy free from any need to visually represent a body politic, to invoke its agency and authority through the image of a corporate entity? Have images ever lost their 'indestructible function' as 'politico-religious agents' in modern democracy and how do they reflect a society's understanding of

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<sup>10</sup> Diarmuid Costello and Dominic Willsdon, ed., "Introduction," in *The Life and Death of Images: Ethics and Aesthetics* (Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 36.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams: Comprising Portions of his Diary from 1795 to 1848*, VOL. VIII (Philadelphia/ PA: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1876), 433.

sovereignty and legitimacy in present times? These questions will guide us through the present investigation into the political role of images in the context of democratic thinking and direct our focus on the particular political potency that emerges from their iconic ambiguity and contingency. However, before trying to answer these questions, let us take a step back in order to gain some historical perspective on the role of images in modern democratic thinking.

Forty two years prior to Quincy Adams' diary entry, the question about the form of sovereignty and the source of its legitimacy had become a question of life and death in the political turmoil of revolutionary France. The assault on the Bastille on the 14th of July 1789 marked a turning point in recent history - the transcendent foundations of the absolutist social order having crumbled and fallen within a few years. The fierce dispute in the 18th century about the nature of sovereignty was historically unprecedented. The radical upheavals also had a profound impact on the visual arts of that time which, until then, had played an important role in the constitution of royal power (at least in the institutionalised form of the French academy). In particular the portrait of the sovereign can be regarded as a significant document to understand the legitimacy of social order at an extraordinary and momentous point in Western history. In his widely influential study *The King's Two Bodies*, medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz famously describes the far-reaching transformation in the concept of political authority over the course of the Middle Ages.<sup>12</sup> Kantorowicz sets forth how the modern understanding of sovereignty as "supreme authority within a territory"<sup>13</sup> has emerged from a political theology.<sup>14</sup> According to him, the concept of the

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<sup>12</sup> See Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton/NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957).

<sup>13</sup> Daniel Philpott, *Revolutions in Sovereignty: How Ideas Shaped Modern International Relations* (Princeton/NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 18.

<sup>14</sup> It should be stressed that my use of Philpott's definition here does not do justice to the complexity of current theoretical debates. Wendy Brown, amongst others, emphasises the ambiguous and paradoxical nature of the modern concept of sovereignty and has described it as "an unusually amorphous, elusive, and polysemic term of political life." I will come back to sovereignty's paradoxical nature in regard to its simultaneous use as a "name for absolute power and a name for absolute freedom." For a more detailed discussion of this problem see Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), Chapter II, 48 and 53. In a similar fashion, Jacques Derrida addresses the potentially conflictive relationship between democracy and sovereignty in contemporary world politics. See Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford/CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

king's two bodies is rooted in the ecclesiological understanding of the church as the mystical body of Christ. Christ's body consists of a *corpus mysticum* and a *corpus naturale*, a mortal and an immortal body, a body personal and corporate, individual and collective. In his comprehensive analysis of the term *mystic*, Michel de Certeau has defined the mystic discourse in medieval Christian theology as a "quest for a body" guided by the essential question 'what is the body'?<sup>15</sup>

The theological search for the mystic body of Christ finds its political analogy in the mystic body of the king with the 'hidden essential' behind his appearance corresponding to a metaphysical claim to worldly sovereignty.<sup>16</sup> Analogous to the theological-political understanding of the body of Christ, which initiates the Roman Catholic Church through the sacrament of the Eucharist, the earthly king was attributed two bodies as well: a *body natural* which is mortal and a *body politic* which outlives the king's physical existence.<sup>17</sup> Thus the king belongs simultaneously to two different spheres: the first is the sphere of timely presence as attributed to his individual person; the second designates the mystical dignity and justice bestowed to his office and the institution of kingship. His two bodies enabled the monarch to mediate between the profane sphere of society and the transcendent sphere which represented the divine legitimacy of the social order. In summary, the concept of sovereignty relies predominantly on two conditions: first, the holder of sovereignty "is superior to all authorities under its purview" and, second, this supreme authority must be derived "from some mutually acknowledged source of legitimacy"<sup>18</sup>.

Starting from the assumption that "state power requires recognition to exist"<sup>19</sup> one has to ask how this recognition, the acknowledgement of legitimacy, is achieved.

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<sup>15</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable: Volume One. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 80.

<sup>16</sup> Drawing on medieval Italian jurist Baldus de Ubaldis, Kantorowicz describes this phenomenon as the visible and invisible crown: "There was a visible, material, exterior gold circle or diadem with which the prince was vested and adorned at his coronation; and there was an invisible and immaterial Crown - encompassing all the royal rights and privileges indispensable for the government of the body politic - which was perpetual and descended either from God directly or by the dynastic right of inheritance." Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 337.

<sup>17</sup> See Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Schmitter, "Representation and the Body of Power", 411.

In the case of Louis XIV, the legitimacy of absolute state power, as represented by the king's body, was derived from a divine mandate while still needing the recognition from his subjects. Amy Schmitter points out that the "pictorial representations" of the king had significant impact on the constitution and execution of absolute state power which was ultimately located in the king's body. I suggest that the concept of representation helps us understand the difference between the *model of sovereignty* and the *image of the sovereign* - not only understood as mental concepts but also with respect to their material realisations. I argue that this shift from 'model of sovereignty' to an 'image of the sovereign' reflects a broader recognition of social contingency by way of conflating its aesthetic and political dimensions. Whereas the 'model of sovereignty' constitutes a pre-modern attempt to enclose any sense that things can be otherwise, the 'image of the sovereign' deliberately elicits an experience of contingency in order to indicate the possibility of social change. But the implications of experiencing contingency reach even further. If we recognise the autonomy of images as well as their unruly affective energies the effects of contingency cannot be reduced to the possibility of social change. If we regard the efficacy of contingency as a moment of stimulating risk then we have to point out two important fault lines. The first being that the experience of contingency in the encounter with an art work can never be entirely eliminated and its effects determined. So even the portrait of the king may elicit feelings of contradictions between the king's natural and political body, his mortal existence and immortal power. Viewers might also be confused by iconographic metaphors, overwhelmed by the sheer size of a painting, its composition, colours, details, etc. But even if the risky moment of contingency was experienced, it was dismissed by the commissioners and producers as harmful rather than productive. If we contrast the portraits of the king with the portrait of Marat, which deliberately addresses the role of social contingency as the foundation of modern politics, then we recognise a second tension. Here the moment of contingency is presented as an experience of political possibility in regard to new concepts of sovereignty and political representation. However, the potency of contingency is not only effective in a predefined realm of the political understood through aspects of

signification and representation, possibility and opposition. I argue that the experience of contingency is always at risk of exceeding the realm of the political. It is this excessive character though that makes it politically productive for it not only generates new forms of thinking and feeling but also makes those affective energies and intellectual residues tangible that already exist and circulate across individuals but that are sidelined, ignored or subdued at a given historical moment.

## II. "The portrait of Caesar is Caesar"<sup>20</sup>

In *Portrait of the King* Louis Marin shows the complex enmeshment of King Louis XIV's absolutist claim to power, including its numerous dimensions of artistic representation, and proposes the following interpretation of the king's portrait: "The king is only truly king, that is, monarch, in images. They are his *real presence*."<sup>21</sup> Thus, the portrait of the king, his painted picture, grants us access to a complex network of ideas woven around the nodes of religious beliefs, political power, historical determination and aesthetic experience. As indicated above, the king derived his earthly power from his divine descent which grounded his person in a metaphysical sphere beyond space and time. The king himself, as it were, was a portrait of God: his sovereignty legitimised by divine mandate and his visual representations an attempt to close down contingency. It is thus no surprise that in King Louis XIV's glorious self-understanding Apollo, the Olympian deity of light, truth and the sun, was the preferred role model of *le Roi-Soleil*. Whereas the image of Christ constituted a reference to the general theological-political authority and the absolute power of Louis XIV, the image of Apollo served as personal allegory expressing an enhanced understanding of his individual grandeur. Louis XIV understood the sun "as another version of the king himself"<sup>22</sup> and adopted the sun as his symbol.<sup>23</sup> Louis XIV took on

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<sup>20</sup> Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans Martha M. Houle (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>22</sup> See Nannerl O. Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton/NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 251.

<sup>23</sup> See Louis XIV, King of France and of Navarre (1662), *Mémoires for the Instruction of the Dauphin*, trans. Paul Sonnino (New York/NY: The Free Press, 1970), 103f.

the form of the sun not only in a metaphorical way but as a self-aggrandising comparison to God.<sup>24</sup> The portrait of the king functioned as an instantiation through which the abstract property of godly power could be exemplified and materialise. The identification with a divine image allowed for the amalgamation of the king's *corpus naturale* with his *corpus mysticum* thus rendering visible the invisible foundation of his sovereignty. Conceived as a model of God, the king's authority was grounded in a transcendent realm which could only be accessed by means of aesthetic experience. Consequently, any experience of alterity or ambiguity would have constituted an heretic doubt of the concept of a divine cosmological order. From the perspective of the powerful, the experience of contingency was thus considered a moment of risk that was harmful rather than productive. The portrait of the king seeks to overwhelm the viewer with the grandeur of its subject as well as with the mastery of its technical composition and narrative allusions. The viewer is supposed to be enchanted by the king's glory and the painting attempts to shut down any experience of contingency that opens up on the political terrain of possibility, agonism and alternative forms of legitimising power. The imagination of the king's godly nature was expressed through the *mise-en-scène* of his individual person, and his claim to supreme authority was conveyed ubiquitously through the aesthetics of spectacle and artistic representation. Take as an example Louis XIV's portrait by Hyacinthe Rigaud, one of the most influential portrait painters of his time.

Rigaud's huge painting [*fig. 1*] shows the sixty-three-year-old king in his coronation robes, the royal sword at his side and holding the royal sceptre. On his right-hand side, slightly in the shadow, the crown is presented on a stool. Even though the king is of advanced age, the picture shows a vigorous and healthy-looking middle-aged man with muscular, almost athletic legs, strong enough to support his heavy and precious robes and to carry the insignia of royal power. The texture of the king's luxurious clothes and the flamboyant drapery in the background are painted in great

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<sup>24</sup> In his description of Versailles, André Félibien, the official court historian to Louis XIV, wrote accordingly: "Le Ciel, qui a répandu dans V.M. tant de graces & de tresors, & qui semble avoir entrepris en la formant, de faire un Chef-d'œuvre de son pouvoir, en donnant à la terre un parfait modele d'un grand Roy; ..." André Félibien, *Description Du Chateau de Versailles, De Ses Peintures, Et D'Autres Ouvrages Faits Pour Le Roy* (Paris: Chez Denys Mariette, 1696), 73.



Fig. 1: Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Louis XIV*, 1701

detail and with a strong sense of accuracy. However, the portrait was anything but realistic. At the time when the portrait was made Louis XIV had already weathered various diseases, his body was gout-ridden and his face ravaged by the loss of teeth.<sup>25</sup> It thus seems plausible in this context to interpret Rigaud's painting as an highly idealistic depiction of the king's natural body expressing an apotheosis of his mystic, immortal body. From a modern perspective, the distinction between a 'realistic' and 'idealistic' representation of Louis XIV corresponds to what

Claude Lefort has described as the "theologico-political formation"<sup>26</sup> reflecting the relationship between the *particular* and the *universal* dimension of the sovereign's body. The idealistic depiction of Louis XIV emphasises his absolute claim to power but it shows simultaneously that only through the process of (aesthetic) representation the division between the realistic and idealistic, between the particular and the universal, between the human and the divine, can be overcome. Whereas the physical body of the king is visible, it is his invisible body that constitutes the source of his power and ultimately the integrity of the body politic.<sup>27</sup> The symbolic order of the

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<sup>25</sup> See also Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), 35f.

<sup>26</sup> Claude Lefort, "Permanence of the Theologico-Political?," in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 249.

<sup>27</sup> As Bernard Flynn puts it: "The 'body politic' with the king as its head is not a convenient metaphor or a manner of speaking; rather it is the phantasmic means by which the nation effects its own unity, the manner in which it becomes one nation. Through the image of the king's body, the societies of premodern Europe presented themselves to themselves." Bernard Flynn, *The Philosophy of Claude Lefort: Interpreting the Political* (Evanston/IL: Northwestern University Press, 2005), 110.

social, which is instantiated by the image of the king and guarantees political unity and coherence, is grounded in an imaginary and elusive place. Rigaud's portrait thus symbolises the veneration for the king's physical body merging with his transcendent body to such an extent that the picture was treated in the same way as the actual king. For Louis XIV, who had perfected the aesthetic staging of his daily routines, this meant that the portrait served as a substitute for him at the court of Versailles during his absence and the courtiers had to pay the same respect to the king's portrait as to the king himself. The identification of the king with his visual representations went so far that "some French jurists proposed the right of asylum for the 'holy' statues of the king, and injury done to royal statues and images counted as treason."<sup>28</sup> As witnessed by such practices, the portrait of the king has become a placeholder of divine glory, a mimetic model of transcendent authority, an image of the 'unmoved mover'.<sup>29</sup> The portrait did not constitute an individual pictorial representation of the king's physical body but rather an allegory of his transcendent body and the institution of monarchy. The image of the monarch was conceived as allegorical representation of the organic unity of the body politic. An idea which has probably never been summed up in a more poignant way than in Louis XIV's laconic utterance: "L'état, c'est moi."

The organic unity of the body politic was also accomplished through a logic of temporality depicting the king as simultaneously timeless existence and historical figure.<sup>30</sup> It is the institution of royal power beyond time, I will discuss next, and therefore turn towards the work of perhaps the most important artist in 17th century France and at the royal court in Versailles: Charles Le Brun. In his paintings, Le Brun not only apotheosises the body of the king as belonging to a sphere outside society but also the perpetual body of the king situated beyond time. In Le Brun's allegorical

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<sup>28</sup> Schmitter, "Representation and the Body of Power", 414.

<sup>29</sup> For Wendy Brown, the unmoved mover represents the God-like characteristics of political sovereignty. "As a power, it is supreme, unified, unaccountable, and generative. It is the source, condition, and protector of civic life and a unique form of power insofar as it brings a new entity into being and sustains control over its creation. It punishes *and* protects. It is the source of law and above the law." See Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 58.

<sup>30</sup> See Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies*, 171.

paintings *The Triumph of Alexander/Entry into Babylon* (1661-65) and *The Conquest of the Franche-Comté* (1674) Louis XIV is depicted as the most glorious ruler of all time dominating the course of history. The first painting [fig. 2] shows Louis XIV in the guise of Alexander the Great as he enters the conquered city of Babylon in a golden chariot drawn by two decorated elephants, the royal cloak, his opulent helmet and sceptre referring to the glory of his reign. The second portrait [fig. 3] depicts the king in similar but somewhat more individualised fashion. Situated in the centre of the picture, Louis XIV is depicted in antique-like robes and as surrounded by emblems of national power (the lion of Spain, the German eagle, etc.) and mythological figures (Hercules, Minerva, Mars). According to Schmitter, the symbolisation of the picture even indicates the precise date of the historical event.<sup>31</sup> In both paintings *narration* had an important function for a historical discourse that revolved around the king's body. The depiction of a battle, a mythical scene or the portraiture of the king all served the purpose of creating history, a great narration dedicated to the glorious nation and its absolutist sovereign. Marin describes this as the transformation of the "paradigm 'history' into a particular *narrative*" constructed around the king, which eventually turned into "a universal *model*." Marin elaborates: "Louis XIV makes history, but it is his history that is made in what he does, and at the same time his historian, by writing what he does, writes what must be written."<sup>32</sup>

The same can be said about the visual portrait: the painter paints what must be depicted and, consequently, in Le Brun's portraits history is perceived as a predetermined script staged in the honour of the king. Tracing back the course of history to the king's body is, from a modern point of view, not only a means of extending and representing royal power but also of curbing the uncertainties inherent in the conditions of history, a covering up of the contingent nature of political representation.<sup>33</sup> Needless to say that this attempt to close down contingency can ultimately never be

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<sup>31</sup> Schmitter, "Representation and the Body of Power", 420.

<sup>32</sup> Marin, *Portrait of the King*, 41f.

<sup>33</sup> The portrait of the king thus fulfills a similar function than the Greek epic as mentioned in Chapter 1 in the context of Georg Lukács. The Greek epic constituted a form of aesthetic representation that should guarantee a coherent reality embedded in a transcendent cosmological order.



Fig. 2: Charles Le Brun, *The Triumph of Alexander/Entry into Babylon*, 1665



Fig. 3: Charles Le Brun, *The Conquest of the Franche-Comté*, 1674

successful since the unruly character of affective energies unleashed and relayed by visual images can never be entirely tamed or instrumentalised. Sentiments of uncertainty, contradiction or doubt that emerge when beholding the portraits of the king were obviously possible but not officially acknowledged, let alone appreciated. The recognition of contingency on the level of the political constituted a harmful risk that needed to be kept at bay and avoided at all costs. It is equally important to stress that the experience of contingency is not an exclusively modern phenomenon. As mentioned in chapter 1, the experience of (social) contingency also existed in premodern times but the articulations and practices in which this experience could legitimately be expressed were rather limited.

Oliver Marchart points out that the discussion of contingency in early European thought was experienced in the form of paradoxes which posed a potential threat to society's normative foundations and were only articulated in mystic, theological or philosophical discourses.<sup>34</sup> Even though contingency was experienced in various ways, it was not generally acknowledged as a social factor and remained "a manoeuvring room within the framework of a solid order."<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, in absolutist France the representation of the king as incarnation of divine authority was not part of a discourse in which the paradoxes of social foundations should be experienced and the depiction of the king's power had to be cleared of any indications of his temporal and social conditionality. When on the 21st of January 1792 the guillotine of the National Convention separated the physical head of Louis XVI from his mystical body, it also cut the link between society and its transcendent foundation of legitimacy. The place of power, formerly inhabited by the king's body, turned out to be empty.

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<sup>34</sup> See Oliver Marchart, *Die politische Differenz: Zum Denken des Politischen bei Nancy, Lefort, Badiou, Laclau und Agamben* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 74-81.

<sup>35</sup> "Kontingenz blieb in der Vormoderne ein Spielraum im Rahmen einer festen Ordnung." Markus Holzinger, *Kontingenz in der Gegenwartsgesellschaft: Dimensionen eines Leitbegriffs moderner Sozialtheorie* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2007), 46. My translation.

### III. The image of the people or society without a body

The radical shift from the idea of the king's absolute power during the *Ancien Régime* to the popular government of the *Première République française* marks the beginning of a new understanding of sovereignty and political thinking. Furthermore, these changes in the conceptualisation of society and political formation are accompanied by a new understanding of portraiture and visual representation. The portrait of the king thus constituted what Hubert Dreyfus has described, in recourse to Heidegger's concept of the artwork, as a 'cultural paradigm', that is, an artwork that is not merely a representation or symbol for a given community but an aesthetic practice that produces a shared knowledge of the world.<sup>36</sup> The portrait of the king as the guarantor for the unity of the body politic was thus a cultural-aesthetic paradigm, whose authority could never be fully 'rationalised' but only 'imitated', as Dreyfus points out.<sup>37</sup> Consequently, the attempt to rationalise visuality, that means not to take traditional practices of visual representation for granted, has therefore to be considered as an indicator for profound social change. It therefore comes as no surprise that the events of the French Revolution were accompanied by what we may call a 'visual paradigm shift'. A shift from art forms seeking to close down contingency on the level of social order to those seeking to open up contingency on the terrain of agonism and possibility.

Consider, as a complement to the work of Rigaud and Le Brun, a very different portrait of sovereignty: *The Death of Marat* (1793) by Jacques Louis David [fig. 4]. The portrait of Jean-Paul Marat shows the dying body of the Jacobin leader after being fatally stabbed in his bathtub by Charlotte Corday on the 13th of July 1793. The revolutionary, who was affectionately called 'ami du peuple'<sup>38</sup> (friend of the people), is shown in the final moments of his life, breathing his last breath, in a scene that

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<sup>36</sup> See Dreyfus, "Heidegger on the Connection between Nihilism, Art, Technology, and Politics", 289-316.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>38</sup> *L'Ami du Peuple* was also the name of the newspaper Marat edited and published during the French Revolution. The last edition of this journal was published one day after his death.

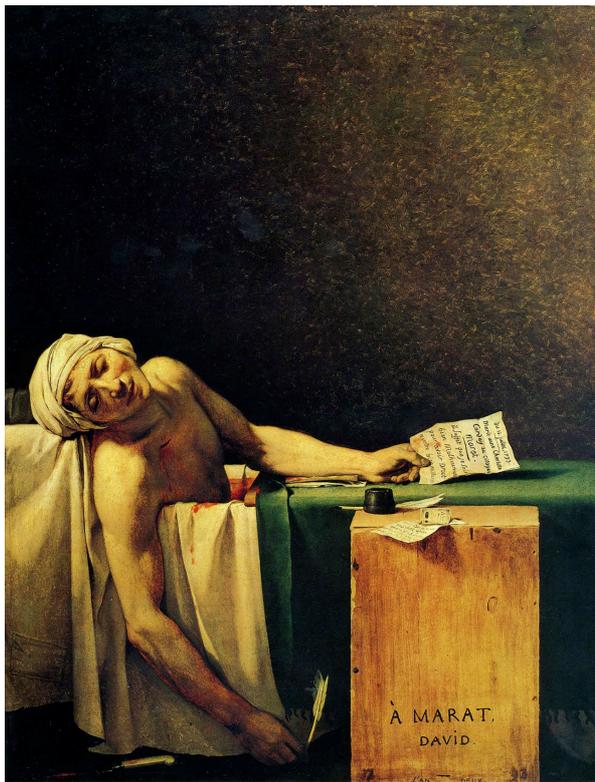


Fig. 4: Jacques-Louis David, *The Death of Marat*, 1793

combines the sublime beauty of a religious icon with the graphic horror of an eyewitness account. Against the backdrop of a dark wall one can see Marat's upper body leaning on the backrest of his tub which is covered with blood stained cloths, still holding a quill in his right hand and a letter in his left. The inkwell, quill and papers on the wooden box next to him are attributes to Marat's work as a journalist. The red coloured bathwater presents a stark contrast to the revolutionary's green desk in front of him.

The murder weapon, a large pointy knife with a white handle, lies on the floor. Despite this abundance of stylistic and symbolic details in David's painting, as well as the intriguing drama of the murder's historical circumstances, I will limit my focus here on the depiction of Marat's body and the elusiveness that surrounds it.<sup>39</sup> In his seminal interpretation of David's portrait of Marat, *Painting in the Year Two* (in particular paragraphs §40-§44), T. J. Clark develops a number of core theses around the political implications of contingency.

Clark identifies *The Death of Marat* as the first modernist painting precisely because of its deliberate engagement with contingency. I suggest, however, that Clark's rather structural approach to the political efficacy of contingency in David's painting is not exhaustive and should be complemented by a stronger recognition of

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<sup>39</sup> For a comprehensive account of the historical circumstances of Marat's assassination including detailed descriptions of the political lives of Jean-Paul Marat, Charlotte Corday and Jacques-Louis David see William Vaughan and Helen Weston, ed., "Introduction," in *David's 'The Death of Marat'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-33.

the strong affective responses to Marat's portrait. Clark focuses mainly on the agonistic dimension of contingency by emphasising its challenges in regard to questions of political representation and signification. I therefore suggest to regard the efficacy of contingency in this painting as stimulating or productive risk whose potency is never fully exhausted by issues of discursive signification and political representation. I argue further that a stronger recognition of the affective and material dimension of contingency helps us to acknowledge the efficacy of contingency that operates in the realm of quasi-religious sentiments and voyeuristic awe in excess of political categories such as possibility and struggle. The affective dimension of contingency through the encounter with an art work allows us to access all those unruly feelings and emotions that are often sidelined in official political discourses but that often constitute their affective foundations. I will thus first sketch out a rather structural account of the portrait's defining moment of contingency that focuses on aspects of signification and representation. In a second step, I complement this reading with greater emphasis on the painting's affective and material dimension in order to demonstrate the efficacy of its contingent character as stimulating risk.

Clarks's starting point is the quintessential novelty that characterises the political meaning of the French Revolution: "the People's entry onto the stage of power."<sup>40</sup> The political appearance of the people is accompanied by the emergence of a "new image of power" which revolves around the "question about representation", raising issues such as: Who are 'the people'? Who can speak on their behalf and what legitimises their sovereignty? Clark points out the challenges of replacing the image of the absolute king whose power is inseparable from his own pictorial representations by a new image of power, being an image of the people. The important aspect is that the image of the people cannot be identical to the image of the king's absolute power as the ultimate representation of himself. The linchpin of both Clark's characterisation of *The Death of Marat* as modern painting and his analysis of the painting's political dimension is his interpretation of the *moment of contingency* that has entered

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<sup>40</sup> Clark, "Painting in the Year Two", 49.

“the process of picturing”<sup>41</sup>. Furthermore, the contingent moment becomes explicit in Clark’s description of Marat’s dead body, as being “maneuvered into a state of insubstantiality.”<sup>42</sup> The “insubstantiality” of the sovereign’s body stands in clear opposition to the eulogising depictions of the godly Louis XIV discussed above. This is not simply an aesthetic problem but indicates more profound theoretical implications for the understanding of society and its foundations of legitimacy.

The awareness of contingency, which is the experience of openness, uncertainty and indeterminacy, can be regarded not only as the defining feature of modern political thinking but must be understood as its very precondition. Contingency derives its political dimension from the experience that society can be ordered in a different way and that sovereignty can be achieved by means other than divine mandate. The experience of contingency emerges, for instance, in a moment of crisis and conflict when the clash of opposing social forces creates an awareness of both uncertainty and opportunity. The moment of contingency, however, is not exhausted in an agonistic dimension indicating the possibility for an alternative social order. On the level of the political, the contingent moment in David’s painting may indicate the conflictive nature of society that prevents it from being presented as totality. If we regard contingency as stimulating risk, however, the experience of contingency also operates on more visceral and affective levels that exceed clearly defined political positions. The experience of contingency induced by the insubstantiality of Marat’s body opens not only to the uncertainty of conflicting political interests but also to the ambiguity of religious sentiments and the simultaneous repulsion from, and attraction to, the graphic depiction of the dead body.

Niccolò Machiavelli might have been the first philosopher who recognised the clash of social actions as being the driving force behind all political thinking and who described politics as an uncertain field of conflicting interests. What makes this idea modern is the assumption that the state itself is based on a perpetual struggle between *virtù* and *Fortuna*. A century after Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes famously

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<sup>41</sup> Clark, “Painting in the Year Two”, 16.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

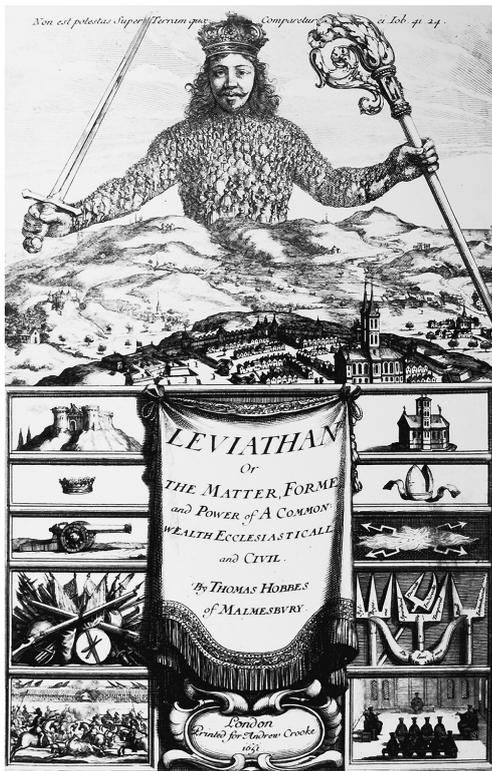


Fig. 5: Frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, 1651

sought to legitimise political sovereignty and institute a “common-wealth” through a social contract that concentrates all state power in the hands of the Leviathan. By virtue of his unchecked power resulting from the individual rights ceded by each citizen, the Leviathan represents the unity of the body politic. “For it is the *unity* of the presenter, not the *unity* of the represented, that maketh the person *one*.”<sup>43</sup> [fig. 5]

However, the process of representation in Hobbes' view does not initiate political society but rather *terminates* it through the attempt to eliminate the contingent and conflictive nature of the social. The image of the Leviathan, the absolute sovereign, does not address the condition of its constitution but incorporates all his subjects (or contractual partners) into his own body.<sup>44</sup> The gap between the represented and their respective mode of representation, which is the place from which all political dynamics emerge, is closed. In distinction from the Leviathan, the portrait of Marat representing the people, thus providing a new image of power, draws attention to this particular gap and shows that modern political society is constituted upon its own reflection. Clark seems to pick up on this when he writes about “the accident and tendentiousness of politics” that was now included in David's “picture of the world” and “in its conception of what ‘showing’ now is.”<sup>45</sup> *Showing* here no longer means a *display* of

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Hobbes (1651), *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 109.

<sup>44</sup> Magnus Kristianson and Johan Tralau have recently argued that the Leviathan's body in the frontispiece does not simply consist of individual subjects but in fact of ‘scales’ alluding to the Leviathan's monstrous features (indicated in his name) lurking behind the sovereign body. See Magnus Kristianson and Johan Tralau, “Hobbes's Hidden Monster: A New Interpretation of the Frontispiece of the *Leviathan*,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 13, no.3 (2014): 299-320.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, “Painting in the Year Two”, 16.

absolute sovereignty but a *reflection* of its procedural and historical conditions - an awareness or experience of its contingency. The historical conditions of sovereignty reveal themselves in an event of crisis indicating a moment when, as Oliver Marchart puts it, “signification breaks down and the groundlessness of ... society as the (impossible) totality of all signification ... is experienced.”<sup>46</sup> The portrait of Marat addresses such an event of crisis, a moment of social upheaval, when the absolutist model of sovereignty is called into question but a new social order has not yet been installed.

However, I argue that the moment of contingency in the portrait of Marat is not exhausted in the ‘breakdown of signification’ as a post-marxist reading of the painting might suggest. The experience of contingency when encountering the painting, and the affective energies that such an encounter can unleash, has a “wildness” (William Connolly) to it that must not be ignored. This unruly character of affect that plays an integral role for the experience of contingency is somewhat sidelined in Clark’s approach to contingency. Clark writes: “‘Contingency’ is just a way of describing the fact that putting the People in place of the King cannot ultimately be done. The forms of the social outrun their various incarnations.”<sup>47</sup> The recognition of the impossibility of an ultimate representation of the people (or the social) has now become commonplace in poststructuralist political theory, where the social itself is understood to have no essence but to exist in an unlimited field of discourses.<sup>48</sup> Accordingly, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe emphasise the partial character of every form of social meaning (nodal points within the openness of the social) which results from “the constant overflowing of every discourse by the infinitude of the field of discursivity.”<sup>49</sup> From a post-marxist perspective, the visual experience of contingency is not only a mode of destabilising traditional meaning but also a reflec-

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<sup>46</sup> For the discussion of the concept of contingency in contemporary political philosophy see: Oliver Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>47</sup> Clark, “Painting in the Year Two”, 50.

<sup>48</sup> Essential for this discussion is Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

tion of modern society's political and aesthetic challenge of (national) self-representation. Clark argues accordingly that not only the body of Marat but any body would be inadequate to stand for the people as a whole and that the process of representation appears to be the predominant technique of politics.<sup>50</sup>

Claude Lefort's line of argument goes into a similar direction. According to Lefort, what characterises democracy *as a social form* and differentiates it from the Ancient Régime is exactly the fact that "democratic society is instituted as a society without a body, as a society which undermines the representation of an organic totality."<sup>51</sup> As Lefort argues further, the impossibility of representing popular sovereignty as totality results from democracy being "instituted and sustained by the *dissolution of the markers of certainty*"<sup>52</sup> and the 'missing ground of the social'. As a consequence, society's non-identity with itself will always require a form of self-representation. Lefort accentuates the point that there is no society without a symbolic dimension and that no society is identical with itself since its very essence is what he calls a "self-division". The achievement of the democratically institutionalised society is the acknowledgement of this self-division and, as Oliver Marchart dramatically puts it, "the fact that, at the place of society's ground, the only thing we discover is an abyss."<sup>53</sup>

From a structuralist perspective, the encounter with the abyss obtains a prominent position in David's portrait of Marat. The ambiguity of the depiction of Marat's body and its dual function as historic martyr and representative of the people does not refer to an already existing political reality but addresses the question of representation and the new image of power itself. From a structuralist point of view, the body of Louis XIV in the portraits by Rigaud and Le Brun embodies the *endpoint* of all signification, the ultimate signifier so to speak. The body of Marat on the other hand represents the *collapse* of any ultimate signification. The signifying ambiguity

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<sup>50</sup> Clark, "Painting in the Year Two", 50.

<sup>51</sup> Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), 18.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>53</sup> Marchart, *Post-Foundational Political Thought*, 101.

of his body, oscillating between the individual person and popular sovereignty, cannot ultimately be determined. Here the interpretation of contingency and popular sovereignty focuses exclusively on questions of signification and representation. Accordingly, Clark's interpretation of the upper half of the picture relates it to "the concept's emptiness"<sup>54</sup>, the empty notion of 'the people', which is the exact phenomenon that Lefort describes as the defining criterion of modern democracy:

Power was embodied in the prince, and it therefore gave society a body. And because of this, a latent but effective knowledge of what *one* meant to the *other* existed throughout the social. This model reveals the revolutionary and unprecedented feature of democracy. The locus of power becomes *an empty place*. (Le lieu du pouvoir devient un *lieu vide*.)<sup>55</sup>

The constant attempt to fill this empty place of power, to find an adequate image to represent the sovereign can be understood as the quintessential task of modern democracy. However, the ongoing search for the adequate representation of the people also problematises the very concept of popular sovereignty as depicted in *The Death of Marat*. The 'empty place of power' in David's painting demonstrates that, in the words of Frank Ankersmit, "political power has its origin neither in the people represented nor in the representative but in the representation process itself."<sup>56</sup>

The attempt to temporarily fill the 'empty place of power' has become the core characteristic of modern democracy based on the recognition of the contingent ground of the social. The contingent moment has entered David's picture of Marat in the guise of the insubstantiality of the sovereign's body reflecting the challenges of politics to navigate through an ever changing field of conflictive interests. The portrait of Marat is not a model of sovereignty; it has turned into its own image, a reflec-

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<sup>54</sup> Clark, "Painting in the Year Two", 51.

<sup>55</sup> Lefort, "The Question of Democracy", 17. Original: "La Question de la Démocratie," in *Essais sur le Politique. XIXe - XXe siècles* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986), 28.

<sup>56</sup> Frank Ankersmit, *Aesthetic Politics: Political Philosophy beyond Fact and Value* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 53.

tion on the concept of sovereignty as it were. In opposition to the portraits of Louis XIV, where the model of transcendent sovereignty and the concept of the body politic collapse in the image of the king, the portrait of the dead Marat demonstrates a different image of the political. The image of the sovereign is no longer identical with the model of sovereignty and does no longer represent the organic unity of the people. Instead, the image of the sovereign shows its non-identity with the model of sovereignty. Whereas the portrait of the king was an attempt to close down contingency in the realm of the political, our interpretation so far has shown that the portrait of Marat links the experience of contingency to categories of political representation and possibility.

If we take the experience of contingency seriously, which is triggered through the encounter with a visual object, then we have to regard its effects as stimulating risk with uncertain, uncontrollable yet potentially productive consequences. The portrait of Marat has shown that after the death of the King (both historically and conceptually) following the events of the French Revolution, the body politic could no longer be presented as transcendent wholeness or as indisputable authority. The elusiveness of the revolutionary's body set against the obscurity of a black background conveys to the viewer a moment of uncertainty and hesitation that reflects the ambiguity between immanence and transcendence of political authority in the modern period. In the words of William Connolly, the experience of contingency came to the fore as a moment of 'disequilibrium' after a long period of 'relative stabilisation'.<sup>57</sup> Embedded in the wider public political debates of its time, the sight of David's unconventional and challenging portrait may have elicited conscious or unconscious responses to the rekindled question regarding the legitimation of sovereignty and the symbolic as well as political reordering of the French Republic. I therefore suggest that the experience of contingency, triggered through the encounter with Marat's portrait, far exceeds a general sense of the 'openness of the social'. The political needs contingency but contingency does not need the political. The experience of contingency that David's painting facilitates cannot be reduced to an experience that things

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<sup>57</sup> See Connolly, *A World of Becoming*, 150.

can be otherwise or an abstract acknowledgement of the ultimate impossibility to represent society as totality. The experience of contingency when encountering the *Death of Marat* is not just a matter of artistic depiction or a question of political representation but also the effect of affective energies and visceral responses. The experience of contingency always includes the risk of exceeding the political realm of possibility, representation and alterity and of unfolding in much more immediate, bodily and subconscious ways.

The contemporary reactions to David's paintings show that the experience of contingency triggered by the *Death of Marat* also consisted of rather visceral and preconscious responses of shock and awe - way beyond any abstract political considerations. Upon the first display of the *Death of Marat* in the Paris Louvre 1794, together with David's (now lost) portrait *Les Derniers Moments de Michel Lepeletier*, showing the assassinated French politician reclining under a dangling sword, responses to both paintings were strong. But the portrait of Marat was perceived as particularly disturbing: "Quoique ces deux tableaux soient chacun dans leur genre ce que l'on peut concevoir de mieux, les artistes admirent plus particulièrement le tableau de Marat. Il est effectivement difficile d'en soutenir longtemps la vue, tant l'effet en est terrible." And one art critic compares the two portraits thus:

Lepelletier [*sic*] appartenait à la haute classe de la société dont il avait conservé les manières. Il est facile d'apercevoir cetter différence au simple aspect des deux portraits. Celui de Marat, qui représente une nature hideuse et grossière, est heurté; tandis que celui de Lapelletier est modélé avec plus de finesse; on y trouve une grâce et une délicatesse de pinceau qui n'existent pas dans l'autre.<sup>58</sup>

The portrait of Marat was perceived by its contemporaries as being so "terrible that it was difficult to look at" for very long. It was regarded as "hideous and coarse" in

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<sup>58</sup> Both quotes from René Verbraeken: *Jacques-Louis David Jugé Par Ses Contemporains Et Par La Postérité* (Paris: Leonce Laget, 1973), 71.

comparison to the more delicate picture of Louis-Michel Le Peletier de Saint-Fargeau, as his full name reads. The insubstantiality of Marat's body challenged the viewer not only in regard to questions of political representation but also in its sheer physical presence as well as the graphic depiction of a dead body. The moment of contingency in Marat's portrait triggered feelings of repulsion as well as attraction, as Charles Baudelaire's appraisal of "the divine Marat" shows. Baudelaire writes: "Tous ces détails sont historiques et réels, comme un roman de Balzac; le drame est là, vivant dans toute sa lamentable horreur, et par un tour de force étrange qui fait de cette peinture le chef-d'œuvre de David et une des grandes curiosités de l'art moderne, elle n'a rien de trivial ni d'ignoble."<sup>59</sup>

For Baudelaire it is the painting's drama and its 'pathetic horror' that makes the image so powerful and 'one of the great attractions of modern art'. The moment of contingency, represented by the insubstantiality of Marat's body, contains the risk of repelling the viewer by the graphic and brutal murder scene yet induces in the viewer an eerie fascination. Exposing oneself to the sight of a dying man, who lies in his own blood, drawing his last breath, means taking the risk of being captured by the picture with unpredictable outcome. As much as the brutality of the scene shocked the viewers, it is the sheer beauty of Marat's body that fascinated and attracted them - up to the present day. When we stand before this large painting in the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium in Brussels, the ambiguity of its subject matter is still striking. The black background of the painting and the fading naked body of Marat in the foreground give the scene a very intimate atmosphere. The viewer feels like she sees something she is not supposed to see. We want to turn away not only in horror and repulsion but also in shame and embarrassment as if caught in an act of voyeurism. At the same time, the dramatic illumination, the rich details, the gaping wound on Marat's chest, the still dripping blood, his athletic torso, all capture our attention and arrest our gaze. The sheer physicality, and even eroticism, of the painting presents a crucial counterweight to the abstract contemplation of political sovereignty. It is this

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<sup>59</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Le Musée classique du Bazar Bonne-Nouvelle", *Le Corsaire-Satan*, 21 January 1846; reprinted in *Oeuvres complètes*, Vol. 2 (Paris: Galimard, Pléiade edition, 1976), 410.

feeling of tranquility, beauty and intimacy that the painting induces in the viewer that make it in a literal sense 'iconic'. After all, the initial purpose of the painting was to commemorate the committed and tireless revolutionary leader Marat. I thus argue that the political efficacy of contingency in this painting does not simply result from its agonistic qualities that reflects the insight that the body politic can no longer be depicted as totality and thus challenges traditional conceptions of sovereignty by divine mandate. Rather, the reason why the painting fascinates its viewers and triggers such strong reaction are various emotional and cognitive levels that the moment of contingency opens up. It invites different and seemingly contradicting sentiments to merge without trying to steer affective responses into a singular direction. Of course, this is not to say that the painting does not address the challenges of political representation as the core task of a democratic constituency, as discussed above. But the strength of the contingent moment are its overflowing affective energies that have the potential to trigger a broad range of feelings including aesthetic admiration, visceral repulsion, shock, awe, revolutionary zeal, religious veneration, etc.

The political potency and aesthetic appeal of David's painting thus results from an experience of ambiguity and uncertainty that cannot be steered in a singular direction, nor can the emotions it unleashes be tamed at will. The efficacy of the picture thus results from its capacity to subject the beholder to a moment of cognitive and emotional risk-taking with uncertain outcome. To expose oneself to the unruly effects of the painting means to open oneself to reflect the conceptual challenges the events of the French Revolution pose to the question of sovereignty and political representation. But it also means to recognise in the insubstantiality of Marat's body, the body of a martyr who died for his beliefs, a Jesus like icon that allows the viewer to project religious sentiments of a transcendent body politics at a time of modern disenchantment. But the beholder also takes the risk of being repelled by the image, of not being able to look at it for long, as the contemporary reactions showed. It is thus the potential overflow of various affective responses and the 'surplus value' of the image way beyond the 'field of discursivity' that make the painting so effective. It still remains to ask whether "the people's entry onto the stage of power" and the alleged

immanence of sovereignty was able to discard the moment of transcendence from political thinking as reflected in Marat's portrait. Edward V. Gatacre and Laura Dru have pointed out that David's painting of Marat was derived from a wax portraiture made by Madame Tussaud which showed the revolutionary's body after his violent death - "presumably in effigy".<sup>60</sup> This would imply that the effigy of the dead Marat, a three-dimensional model of his body, would have served as a model for a painting which problematises the ambiguity of the universal and particular dimension of the sovereign's body. The effigy of Marat and the adoration of his physique, still present in David's painting, join in in the cult of Marat that likes to compare the revolutionary to Jesus Christ and the image of his dead body to the depiction of the Pietà.<sup>61</sup> Clark has located this veneration for Marat "at the intersection between short-term political contingency and long-term disenchantment of the world."<sup>62</sup> The comparison between the revolutionary Marat and Jesus Christ indicates a compensation for "the loss of the sacred", contributing to a political-theological discourse in which a transcendent energy penetrates the secular fabric of the French Revolution. David's painting shows the myth of society's democratic self-foundation as well as the concept of popular sovereignty still bearing the marks of a theology that early modern thought was so determined to remove from the political stage. The continuation of a transcendent element in the modern concept of sovereignty, however, does not just exist in iconographic metaphors that compare the portrait of Marat to depictions of Jesus Christ but also in the very 'substance' of the body politic.

In his recent work, Eric Santner argues "that crucial features of modernity can be grasped by following the transformation of the complex tensions belonging to the political theology of royal sovereignty into the biopolitical pressures of popular sovereignty."<sup>63</sup> For Santner, the moment of contingency in David's painting reflects

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<sup>60</sup> Edward V. Gatacre and Laura Dru, "Portraiture in Le Cabinet de Cire de Curtius and its Successor Madame Tussaud's Exhibition," in *La Ceroplastica Nella Scienza E Nell'Arte*, Atti Del I Congresso Internazionale, Firenze, 3-7 giugno 1975, Biblioteca Della Rivista Di Storia Delle Scienze Mediche E Naturali, Vol. XX (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 1977), 621.

<sup>61</sup> Clark, "Painting in the Year Two", 22.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>63</sup> Eric Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xi. Subsequent references are made in the text.

“the vicissitudes of the flesh” (98) in the uncertain moment when the dignity of the King’s dual body is conferred to the people’s physical multiplicity. However, the king’s flesh, “that sublime substance” (ix), is not lost in the act of secular transition but passed on to the new sovereign, that is, to the multitude of the people. Thus Santner suggests “that the bodies of the citizens in modern nation-states take on a surplus element, one that actually challenges the entire ideology of disenchantment and secularization and that introduces into immanence an excess it cannot fully close in upon.” (98)

Whereas Santner uses the notion of the ‘flesh’ to constitute a link between modern sovereignty and biopolitics by arguing that the concern and care for the flesh of the citizen “never ceases to be a political theological matter” (99), I will focus here on this ‘surplus element’ of transcendence that lives on in popular sovereignty. I would like to point out that this ‘excess’, which challenges the ideology of disenchantment and secularisation, does not only manifest itself in biopolitical operations but also in the realm of visual aesthetic practices where the surplus of transcendence presents itself in the contingent nature of political images. Walter Benjamin has famously made a similar argument by reminding us that art has its origins in “the service of a ritual” or a cult and “that the existence of the work of art with reference to its aura is never entirely separated from its ritual function.”<sup>64</sup> That means that even in modernity the art work continues to serve as an agent of religious transcendence in an otherwise secular and ‘enlightened’ world. However, I am not subscribing to the claim of images or art being purely theological and ritualistic residues of a totalising world view. Rather, I argue that the political icon as the representation of popular sovereignty still contains a contingent ‘surplus element’ that oscillates between immanence and transcendence in the context of contemporary democracy beyond, or rather prior to, any ‘field of discursivity’. Thus, Santner’s notion of a transcendent ‘surplus element’ that lives on in the modern body politic, corresponds to Mitchell’s concept of the ‘surplus value of images’ that becomes manifest in the overdetermina-

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<sup>64</sup> Walter Benjamin (1936), “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 223f.

tion of images that are believed to have special value as 'living things'. Mitchell writes: "But perhaps the most interesting consequence of seeing images as living things is that the question of their value (understood as vitality) is played out in a social context. We need to ponder that we don't just evaluate images; images introduce new forms of value into the world, contesting our criteria, forcing us to change our minds."<sup>65</sup> I thus argue, that the experience of contingency in the encounter with visual images unfolds its productive and overflowing character when it operates in different affective registers. The uncertain yet productive quality of contingency opens up a political dimension that may link criticism and agonism to vague feelings of optimism, confidence or hope. In other words, the experience of contingency prepares the affective ground from which more clearly articulated political positions can emerge.

In the following, I will have a closer look at the marks of transcendence, which not only still exist in democratic modes of self-representation, but, furthermore, seem vital to the democratic promise of progressive social transformation. Lefort's concept of democracy as a social form that "undermines the representation of an organic totality"<sup>66</sup> still oscillates between the political recognition of social fault lines and the hope to transcend them in a unified body politic. It seems that the immanence of democratic sovereignty cannot be presented without drawing on transcendent elements that link the particular to the universal. In that sense, the visual presentation of popular sovereignty has always remained a moment of ambiguity between immanence and transcendence. The symbolic contingency of the ruler's portraits since the French Revolution, the insubstantiality of the body politic, continues to be a projection surface on which the theological origins of all modern political concepts of immanence occasionally reappear. I therefore suggest that the political potency of rulers' portraits in contemporary democracy results not so much from the reflection of society's absent ground and the immanence of its political legitimacy but rather from eliciting religious sentiments and feelings of transcendence. In order to illustrate this

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<sup>65</sup> Mitchell, *What do Pictures want?*, 92.

<sup>66</sup> Lefort, "The Question of Democracy", 18.

point I shall take a daring historical leap from the revolutionary turmoil of 18th century France to the 21st century USA and its presidential election campaign of 2008. This manoeuvre reveals that the image of the body politic still changes back and forth between the poles of the actual and the metaphysical. The historical comparison allows for a closer analysis of the visual vocabulary of modern democracy that displays a significant continuity. Rather than a decisive rupture between the theological and the secular, the use of images, which has proven so central to democratic communication, still oscillates in its most defining moments between immanence and transcendence. As I will show in the following section, the experience of contingency, as a sense of not yet actualised social reality, plays a key role in the visual proclamation of the democratic promise. For the immanence of democratic progression and political agency strongly depends on aesthetic strategies that make the transcendent promise of sovereignty tangible.

#### **IV. The *Barack Obama 'hope' poster* and the quest for the missing body**

The probably most prominent and iconic 'ruler portrait' of recent times is the so called *Barack Obama 'hope' poster* designed by American illustrator and street artist Shepard Fairey for the election campaign of senator Barack Obama in 2008 [fig. 6]. Fairey rose to fame in the late 1980s with a project called *OBEY GIANT* that combined agitprop aesthetics with anti-capitalist slogans and the distribution of products such as T-shirts, stickers and baseball caps. In his work, Fairey draws aesthetically on early Soviet propaganda art and ironically modifies images used by mainstream media outlets. The 'Obama hope' poster, too, was created in this context. The poster is a stencilled silk print that shows Barack Obama in three quarter profile rendered in blue, red and white tones. A bold logo at the bottom of the poster reads the word *HOPE*. In reference to a broader visual political language of the 20th century, reaching from Russian propaganda posters of the 1920s and 1930s to the collages of Robert Rauschenberg in the 1960s and Andy Warhol's coloured silk prints of the 1970s, Fairey created probably the first genuine political 'icon' of the 21st century. In its



**Fig. 6:** Shepard Fairey, *Barack Obama 'hope' poster*, 2008

iconicity the portrait of Barack Obama is often compared to photographs of President John F. Kennedy who carefully constructed an image of himself as “a purveyor of visionary progress and democratic social change.”<sup>67</sup> Unlike the portraits analysed above, the iconic character of Fairey’s poster does not emerge from its uniqueness, let alone imagined identity between portrait and portrayed, but from its immediate recognisability. The viewer recognises the person portrayed due to a wider circulation of mass mediated images that are strategically used for shaping public opinion. The democratic representative of a modern pluralist so-

ciety does not present himself as a unique and mystic figure with a privileged access to an invisible place but rather as a ubiquitous personality of the present. In marked contrast to Jacques-Louis David’s painting of Marat, however, the unsubstantiated character of Obama’s depicted body, and the experience of contingency elicited by his portrait, is not achieved through figurative dissolution but through visual multiplication. Furthermore, the image presents contingency through an optimistic affective intensity that suggests the possibility of change and social transformation; through a desire for alterity, and from conveying “a sense of how the world might be different.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 227.

<sup>68</sup> Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift, *Arts of the Political: New Openings for the Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 186.



**Fig. 7:** Robert Rauschenberg, *Retroactive I*, 1964

The experience of contingency that Clark has described as “a state of insubstantiality”, and Santner as the “vicissitude of the flesh”, presents itself in Fairey’s poster as a vagueness and ambiguity that results from the icon’s flat surface. The flatness of the picture is further emphasised through its material multiplicity and ubiquity in the election campaign. The appearance of a representative of ‘the people’ cannot be confined to secluded spaces or exclusive institutions. The democratic nature of a president’s political legitimacy, as well as the plurality of his constituency, is reflected in the (technologically reproduced) omnipresence of his image(s). The aesthetic reflection of the mediated omnipresence of politicians has its prominent origins in 1960s pop art. In her interpretation of the ‘Obama hope’ poster, Lisa Cartwright therefore compares Fairey’s print to Robert Rauschenberg’s collage *Retroactive I* from 1964 [fig. 7].<sup>69</sup> The collage, which was created after Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, shows the president in a determined oratorical pose surrounded by other images taken from news outlets and entertainment media. The collage of ‘found’ media images as well as the serialisation of images can thus be interpreted as an aesthetic response to the mass circulation and iconicity of ‘rulers’ portraits: recognisability through constant and varied reproduction.

Probably the most prominent example of reproduced visual iconicity can be found in the work of Andy Warhol. His silk prints of Mao Zedong, Jackie Kennedy or Jimmy Carter reflect the desire of a mass media audience for icons and idols. Needless to say, in the context of pop art the image is not the guarantor for a metaphysical duality of mystical and natural body but has been reduced to mere surface. However, it is exactly this superficiality that elicits in the viewer an experience of

<sup>69</sup> See Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 227.

contingency that emerges from the semantic ambiguity of the icon and that inspires complex modes of political thinking. A striking example for this ambiguous iconicity is Warhol's silk print of Richard Nixon, which has been produced as part of the 1972 presidential election campaign for the democratic senator of South Dakota, George McGovern [fig. 8]. Warhol's print shows a stencil portrait of the then incumbent president Richard Nixon with the simple slogan "Vote McGovern".

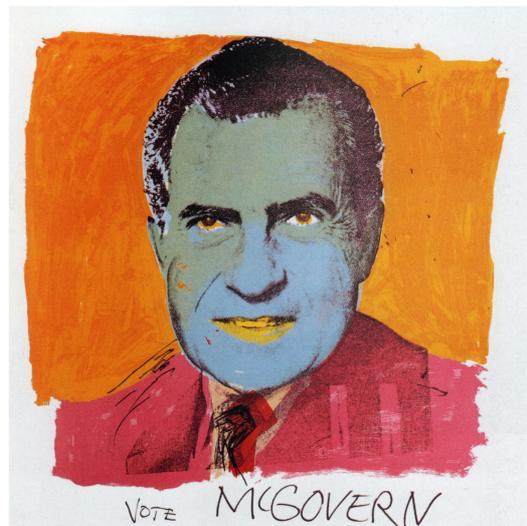


Fig. 8: Andy Warhol, *Vote McGovern*, 1972

Nixon's portrait is presented undistorted in its correct proportions but rendered in loud, toxic colours. Against a bright orange background, we see a demonic looking Nixon with a green and blue face, yellow lips and fiery eyes. This picture seems to revert Kantorowitz's logic according to which both the natural as well as the mystical body conflate on the surface of the image. Just as Louis XIV was depicted as God's representative on earth, Nixon is presented as evil incarnate, a devil-like figure that reveals itself on the surface of the image where both the mystical and the natural body conflate. The realm of visual images appears as an effective site of political thinking where latent, subliminal or suppressed sentiments come to the fore. In the ambiguous context of visual aesthetics, theological concepts and affects, usually sidelined in the secular self-understanding of modern democracies, still play a vital role in contemporary political life. In that regard, the political implications of contingency are more complex than a purely agonistic perspective would suggest. Aesthetic manifestations, be they oratorical or visual, that present the people to itself as its own mystical body politics, are thus essential for the belief in democratic objectives and procedures. This belief in democracy's capacity to facilitate legitimate social transformation is simultaneously a conviction of the supremacy of the political. Instantiated in the aesthetic realm of images, this conviction constitutes a complex and mul-

tilayered mode of political thinking that operates, amongst others, on subconscious and visceral registers.

The efficacy of experiencing contingency as productive risk thus presents a middle position between agonism and micropolitics. The contingency of the Obama hope poster is not exhausted in micropolitical becoming or in an affective sensitivity towards the fragility of the world. Neither can we reduce the experience of contingency to a gesture of agonism or struggle. Rather, I argue that it is the unpredictable affective energies, which operate on different registers, that prepare the affective ground for a critique of capitalism's global sovereignty. Instead of a 'disruption' of a hegemonic symbolic order, the contingent moment of the Obama hope poster triggers vague and diffuse sentiments of alterity and hope that potentially set the very emotional ground for an agonistic public space. Its political ends, however, are ambivalent. On the one hand, it is this very openness and ubiquity of the poster that unleashes and relays strong affective forces capable of generating individual emotions of confidence or even motivate collective action. On the other hand, the openness of the Obama hope poster is always at risk of appearing superficial and empty. This ambiguous affective force field shows that the political implications of aesthetic contingency are not necessarily a progressive politics of emancipation or resistance but also disclose sidelined or repressed metaphysical sentiments.

The experience of contingency, emerging from the semantic ambiguity of the portrait, inspires political thinking precisely through an encounter between conventional iconographic forms of representation and some tacit or unconscious affective energies that influence a viewers' perception. The president's image turns into a recognisable surface onto which, despite the secular configuration of the democratic election process, eschatological scenarios can be projected. Whether hell-born or heaven-sent, the visual presentation of political personnel offers the opportunity to oscillate between immanent and transcendent forms of legitimacy; in other words, the visual vocabulary of contemporary democracy thus still bears the residues of Claude Lefort's notion of the "theologico-political". Against this backdrop, one has to reinterpret Fairey's 'Obama hope' poster that, according to Marita Sturken, "em-

bodies this new patriotic aesthetic” that is situated somewhere between “brand culture and political activism”.<sup>70</sup> I would like to argue here that the ‘Obama hope’ poster, despite all its cultural references and its “ironic subtext” taps into the much broader tradition of ‘rulers’ portraits’ as discussed earlier. Obama’s portrait does not only function as the visual expression of a new aesthetics of patriotism, as Marita Sturken claims, but rather as an invocation of the theological dimension of political sovereignty in times of economic crisis and ideological fatigue. Weighted down with weariness of the Bush administration and the shock of the financial crisis in 2008, US voters seemed to long for a courageous and visionary political figure that would bring fundamental social ‘change’ - even if, or possibly exactly because, this term remained fairly vague. The experience of contingency elicited by the ‘Obama hope’ poster turns political thinking into a sense of possibility conveying a feeling of vague optimism rather than a concrete political vision. In consideration of this iconic and programmatic vagueness we should now ask with W. J. T. Mitchell what does the ‘Obama hope’ poster ‘want’ from us? And what is its ‘desire’ in this specific socio-historical context?

Following Wendy Brown, I suggest that the ambiguity and ubiquity of the ‘Obama hope’ poster and its affective assertion of the theological roots of the concept of (popular) sovereignty was an attempt to revive the fiction of the autonomy of the political in response to waning state sovereignty. The challenges of dwindling state sovereignty and national agency in a globalised economy came to the fore with relentless force when the global financial markets crashed in the autumn of 2008 and Obama’s election campaign drew to a close. On the 3rd of November 2008, six weeks after the US investment bank Lehman Brothers declared bankruptcy, the United States Electoral College voted Barack Obama the 44th President of the United States. Obama’s election campaign, based on the broad promises of hope, change and progress, tried to emphasise an imagined supremacy of the political over

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<sup>70</sup> Marita Sturken, “The New Aesthetics of Patriotism,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 8, no.2 (2009): 169. One could ask, however, whether this aesthetic form really is that new or whether it does not rather continue a tradition of political aesthetics that attempts to reconcile the physical with the metaphysical?

the economy, and the global financial markets in particular, whose proclaimed self-regulating powers had failed so spectacularly. In that sense, Fairey's poster is the icon of a progressive form of political thought, which, in analogy to Brown's line of argument, is "caught in the theology of sovereignty" through its presentation and celebration of the "fiction of the autonomy and sovereignty of the political."<sup>71</sup>

The contingency and ambiguity of the image thus suggests the realisation of the autonomy and supremacy of the political, capable of dominating and ordering the erratic nature of the economy, as the primary condition for the achievement of social change. The vague, yet conciliatory, appearance of Fairey's iconic poster constitutes an attempt to trigger sentiments of optimism and confidence that binds the national closer to the religious, or in other words, that renders sovereignty theological in order "to revive the autonomy of the political". According to Brown, political sovereignty is structured theologically, if it is the supreme and unaccountable political power and draws on God for legitimacy and if its theological dimensions enable the conceit of the autonomy of the political vis-à-vis the economic. Whereas David's portrait responded to a political crisis which saw the replacement of royal sovereignty by popular sovereignty, the 'Obama hope' poster can be interpreted as the theological response to the replacement of popular sovereignty by capital sovereignty. The regressive loss of political sovereignty is supplemented by theological sovereignty. Or as Wendy Brown puts it: "As nation state sovereignty wanes, both internal and external performances of it are increasingly and openly dressed in religious regalia."<sup>72</sup>

In the case of Fairey's 'Obama hope' poster, the 'religious regalia' are linked to the contingency and indeterminacy of the icon's surface that oscillates between the mystic and natural dimension of the body politic. Therefore, the visual presentation of an idealised Barack Obama, earnest but not intimidating, visionary but not ideological, progressive but not revolutionary, suggests to the viewer a political theology that is derived from the logic of the king's two bodies as discussed above. The por-

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<sup>71</sup> See Wendy Brown, "Sovereignty and the Return of the Repressed," in *The New Pluralism: William Connolly and the Contemporary Global Condition*, ed. David Campbell and Morton Schoolmann (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 261.

<sup>72</sup> Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, 62.

trait creates an image of the *corpus mysticum* of a potential political leader that is distinct from his *corpus naturale*. Even in the 21st century, the creation of the corpus mysticum, the missing body, resembles the medieval patterns as described by Michel de Certeau: "There is a discourse ... but it lacks a body - social and/or individual."<sup>73</sup> The mystic quest for a body in the 2008 US presidential election campaign, "the task of offering a body to the spirit", of "giving truth a space in which to make itself manifest"<sup>74</sup>, was realised in the realm of images. This quest for a body is so important, because as Wendy Brown has pointed out, "sovereignty promises to convene and mobilize the energies of a body and to render that body capable of autonomous action."<sup>75</sup> The revival of theological sovereignty in terms of political autonomy and agency thus depends on the (visual) aesthetic instantiation of a mystic body politic.

Despite featuring clear lines and contrasts as well as a very effective use of colour, the idealised depiction of the stencilled portrait manages to appear vague and ambiguous in regard to a specific political program. However, it was this openness and contingency that triggered the picture's political potency as an optimistic sense of possibility and alterity. By his own account Fairey stated:

I wanted it to be a portrait that was political in nature and that would deracialize Mr. Obama (by using) a red, white, and blue color palette that was patriotic. I also wanted to capture a pose in Mr. Obama that was a classic political pose, something that would elevate him to iconic status in the vein of people who had [preceded] him and were held in high regard in politics.<sup>76</sup>

But the use of red, blue and white can be seen as more than just an attempt to "deracialize" Obama and turn his face into an abstract icon. It is also a gesture of grandeur and reconciliation that seems to unify the colours of both the republicans (red) as

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<sup>73</sup> de Certeau, *The Mystic Fable*, 80.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Brown, "Sovereignty and the Return of the Repressed", 253.

<sup>76</sup> William W. Fisher III et al., "Reflections on the Hope Poster Case," *Harvard Journal of Law & Technology* 25, no.2 (2012): 249.

well as the democrats (blue). Obama's body has turned into a site where the pettiness of domestic political quarrel is overcome, opposing camps are consolidated, and the internal unity and coherence of national sovereignty is guaranteed. Thus, his gaze is raised, focusing on greater challenges at a distant horizon. According to Fairey himself, the inspiration for the 'Obama hope' poster came from Barack Obama's keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in Boston/Massachusetts on the 27th of July 2004 where Obama first outlined his idea of a 'politics of hope'.<sup>77</sup> In his seminal speech in support of presidential nominee John Kerry, Obama, then state senator of Illinois, propagated national unity and solidarity. In a grand gesture, Obama challenges the voters to overcome social, racial and political differences by claiming that "there's not a liberal America and a conservative America - there is the United States of America. There is not a Black America and a White America and Latino America and Asian America - there's the United States of America."<sup>78</sup>

Obama's speech and Fairey's icon have thus to be regarded as two complementary dimensions of an icon or "vital sign" capable of conveying a sense of internal supremacy and external autonomy. Hence, as Brown writes, "the importance of sovereignty's attributes of unity and indivisibility is that they literally enable the autonomy that is its external sign."<sup>79</sup> Thus the speech's promise of reconciliation and unity is seized on visually in the campaign poster. The image thus stimulates complex and multilayered modes of thinking based on the interplay between image, text and speech as well as on the amalgamation between religious and secular political sentiments. The 'two bodies' presented in the portrait of senator Obama thus seem to belong simultaneously to the profane actualised sphere of US society and to the not yet realised national community of solidarity, equality and justice Obama envisages; an imagined sphere where the autonomy and the supremacy of the political are fully reestablished. The theological dimension of this visual suggestion is further empha-

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<sup>77</sup> See Fisher III et al., "Reflections on the Hope Poster Case", 270.

<sup>78</sup> For a transcript of Obama's speech see: *The New York Times*, "Barack Obama's Remarks to the Democratic National Convention," July 27, 2004. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/27/politics/campaign/27TEXT-OBAMA.html>. Accessed: 06/12/2014.

<sup>79</sup> Brown, "Sovereignty and the Return of the Repressed", 253.

sised by the word 'hope'. In the Christian tradition, Hope belongs to the three 'theological virtues' (alongside Faith and Charity) that describe essential character qualities necessary to receive the grace of God.<sup>80</sup> This interpretation seems justified by Obama's own religious rhetoric. Hope is exclusively directed towards the future, experienced as the fervent desire and confident expectation of salvation, that is, the fulfilment of God's creation. "Christian hope is not gained as a result of looking around in the world for unambiguous grounds for optimism. It is learned by understanding the partiality of all our current seeing and knowing, and by anticipating the fullness of our life in God that is yet to come."<sup>81</sup>

In this regard, hope is a virtue that helps men to endure worldly hardship without falling into despair or cynicism; once the heavenly kingdom is established, hope will no longer be necessary.<sup>82</sup> This promise of a better (political) future is further suggested through a combination of image and text. The iconicity of the highly stylised portrait is complemented by a slogan that underlines and emphasises the theological dimension of the message. Both image and text are inextricably intertwined to invoke the theological belief in the arrival of a heavenly kingdom that is the supremacy and autonomy of the political. Rather than reflecting a new form of patriotism, as suggested by Marita Sturken, I propose that the 'Obama hope' poster presents a new form of secularism, a "secular divination"<sup>83</sup> as Mitchell puts it, that, consciously or unconsciously, flirts with the recollection of its ever-present theological origins. The contingent and ambiguous nature of the 'Obama hope' poster however conveys not only a feeling of optimism in regard to a revival of political autonomy and supremacy but also illustrates "sovereignty's undemocratic core", as pointed out by Brown. The vague hope for recovered political sovereignty and agency appears paradoxically as a promise to disentangle itself from the restrictions

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<sup>80</sup> See Nicholas Adams, "Hope," in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 309-311.

<sup>81</sup> Adams, "Hope", 309.

<sup>82</sup> This dimension of christian hope is probably most famously articulated in the Lord's Prayer (King James Bible, Matthew 6:9-13): "Our father which art in heaven / Hallowed be thy name. / Thy kingdom come / Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven."

<sup>83</sup> Mitchell, *What do Pictures want?*, 26.

and confinements of a narrow political office and to rise above the continuous conflict of pluralist interests. The “unity and indivisibility“ necessary for “autonomous agency” is achieved through the subordination of a diverse public and the creation of internal hierarchies that are at odds with any promise of democratic equality.

As described in the context of the portraits of King Louis XIV above, it is only through the process of (aesthetic) representation that the division between the realistic and idealistic, between the particular and the universal, between citizen and saviour, can be overcome. Whereas in the 18th century the portrait of the king already constituted an actualised political reality, the secular political icon of the 21st century remains a pledge targeted at the future. Paradoxically, however, the contemporary visual language of reviving political sovereignty, as exemplified by Fairey’s icon, appears as a future promise to overcome its democratic core, that is its conflictive, pluralistic and contingent nature. The temptation to overcome democracy’s contingent character and to contemplate the possibility of new certainties and national unity is reflected in its visual-aesthetic re-presentations. Whereas the singularity of the kings’s portraits fostered the unique and divine legitimacy of his political power, the serialised nature of the modern icon functions as an ubiquitous, recognisable and integrative surface of projection that solicits support for the present system by directing the fulfilment of its political promises to the future. The ‘Obama hope’ poster is thus part of a broader rhetoric of unification and reconciliation that Obama advocated since he first formulated his ‘politics of hope’ in his keynote address at the Democratic National Convention in 2004: “Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope! In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us, the bedrock of this nation. A belief in things not seen. A belief that there are better days ahead.”<sup>84</sup> The ‘Obama hope’ poster can thus be considered as a visualisation of this message: a visionary leader that directs a unified people towards a better political future where social, racial and ideological differences will be overcome. The iconic

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<sup>84</sup> *The New York Times*, “Barack Obama’s Remarks to the Democratic National Convention,” (see footnote 90 above). Here, again, the proximity of Obama’s rhetoric to biblical references becomes clear: “For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? / But if we hope for that we see not, *then* do we with patience wait for *it*.” (King James Bible, Romans 8:24-25).

image is not simply a materialisation of the American promise of democracy that, after all, is understood to have divine origins, but it is rather through aesthetic presentations that this promise of a better future can effectively be made. The visual presentation of political potentiality, that is not yet actualised social reality, plays a key role in the proclamation of the democratic promise. The immanence of social change cannot be formulated without reference to the transcendence of hope. The immanence of democratic progression can only be achieved through aesthetic strategies that make its transcendent promise tangible. It is the 'surplus element' of the king's dual body that lives on in the image of the people, the auratic residue of a former 'cultural paradigm', that continues to challenge the democratic ideology of disenchantment and secularisation. In other words, without aesthetic presentations, be they oratorical or visual, that present the people to itself as its own mystical body politics, it would be impossible to "reproduce the idealism essential for democratic continuity".<sup>85</sup> At the same time, this idealism for democratic continuity is essentially an invocation of the supremacy of the political that, instantiated in the aesthetic realm of visual images, reveals its theological origins as well as the paradoxical relationship between the concepts of sovereignty and democracy mentioned above. This is the paradoxical potency of the democratic icon's contingent and ambiguous appearance. The contingent nature of Fairey's icon oscillates between the optimism or desire to revive political sovereignty and the revealing of a lack of political autonomy in which this desire is rooted. The 'Obama hope' poster reflects a desire for the revival of the political through the unifying and orienting capacity of the icon that brings to life sovereignty's theological origins. The image has thus not simply to be read as an illustration of messianic hope but as a desire that results from the perceived lack of political autonomy and supremacy against an ever more powerful global economy.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>86</sup> Consequently, we could ask further what types of images might reflect this perceived lack of political sovereignty in the context of more recent social movements such as Occupy Wall Street. What images might best reflect the slogan "We are the 99%" and its democratic claims to sovereignty?

The mode of democratic thinking that is reflected in, as well as stimulated by, the 'Obama hope' poster operates, in the words of William Connolly, "on several registers of being", oscillating between the immanent and the transcendent.<sup>87</sup> The potency of the image thus lies in its capacity to make tangible the theological sentiments that always lurk behind the secular veneer of our political concepts. Fairey's stencil was from the onset imbedded in a political rhetoric that never offered any specific political objectives, but, more importantly triggered a diffuse vision of optimism and a warm feeling of change for the better. The image, consisting of both Obama's stylised face and the word hope, offers a projection surface that promises to turn uncertainty into possibility. The combination of aesthetic clarity and programmatic obscurity make this icon an ideal surface on which all sorts of affective, unconscious and passionate dimensions of political subjectivity could be projected. By drawing on many different modes of being, this projection qualifies as a multilayered mode of thinking that goes beyond a clear argument and rational deliberation.

Susan Buck-Morss has described this relevance of the image in the context of the Obama election campaign as "a shared experience of public democracy" through the global circulation of images.<sup>88</sup> In her account, Obama himself becomes a politically empowering image that escapes the control of its maker, and is augmented in the process of its reception. The global imagination is triggered by an empowering image that leaves enough space for the spectator to accommodate individual dreams and social aspirations - however varied they may be. With regard to the presentation of the body politic Buck-Morss writes: "The promise of global imagination is to dissolve 'the people' into, simply, *people* - and with the elimination of the conceptual barrier of one small word, the very idea of sovereignty might be transformed."<sup>89</sup> I think, however, that Buck-Morss's interpretation is overly optimistic. Rather than promoting the fiction of an all encompassing concept of global sovereignty, the dis-

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<sup>87</sup> See William Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist* (Minneapolis/MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 148.

<sup>88</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, "Obama and the Image," *Culture, Theory & Critique* 50, no.2-3 (2009): 145-164.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

cussion of rulers' portraits has shown that their political potency is based on the experience of contingency, that, in the context of democratic sovereignty still oscillates between immanence and transcendence. Thus the contingent nature of the political icon contributes to its 'vitalistic status', that is the unpredictability, ambiguity and vitality that characterises the 'social lives' of images.<sup>90</sup>

The picture further shows the political complexity of contingency in the visual arts: the political dimension of experiencing contingency is here more than ideological disagreement or the disruption of a hegemonic symbolic order, as Chantal Mouffe would suggest. Rather the experience of contingency allows for a broad range of sometimes contradicting affective energies and feelings to emerge and to amalgamate. The experience of contingency enables different sentiments to gain political significance. Theological sentiments are to some extent activated in order to emphasise the supremacy of the political towards the economy. The creation of an agonistic position thus relies on an affective groundwork without which the confidence in democratic agency and social progress would not be possible. Yet, these implications remain vague and unreliable. William Connolly argues that artistic practice and aesthetic experience "are all pertinent to the energy of a critical movement. They sometimes encourage new thoughts to surge forward as if from nowhere and then to become infused into critical action."<sup>91</sup> I suggest that the political implications of contingency in the encounter with the visual arts emerges precisely from these unpredictable and fugitive energies whose materialisation in critical action or a critical political movement are fragile and potentially short lived.

As we have seen, the contingent moment in the Obama hope poster could just as well appear as a pop cultural phenomenon that plays with familiar art historical references, turning into an aesthetic gesture without presenting a specific political 'message' of its own. Or, as Marita Sturken argues, it is an 'aesthetic patriotism' that dissolves the boundaries between party politics and brand culture. Either way, the political efficacy of contingency relies on its element of stimulating risk: capable of

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<sup>90</sup> See Mitchell, *What do Pictures want?*, 93.

<sup>91</sup> Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 192.

blending together multiple sentiments and feelings, of generating new affective energies and thought processes and to bring to light those ideas and sentiments that already exist but that are subdued or sidelined. The risk of course is that none of these effects will necessarily result in a 'critical movement' or political action.

### Conclusion

The potency of a ruler's portrait, as "an image that orients a community ... through the perception of its internal life", emerges from an experience of contingency that manifests itself through an oscillation between immanence and transcendence.<sup>92</sup> This oscillation is not simply a matter of signification or representation but testifies to what Mitchell calls the 'vitalistic status' of images. The vitalistic nature of images, their desires and potencies, still plays a key role for the theological understanding of sovereignty at a time when nation-state sovereignty is waning. The contingency and ambiguity of the 'Obama hope' poster enabled the potency to mobilise and direct positive affective energies of hope and optimism towards social transformation, at the same time the image evoked a tantalising image of political sovereignty as supremacy and autonomy vis-a-vis the economic that is at its very core theological. We can thus say that the Obama icon inspires distinct forms of political thinking that emerge from multilayered modes of perception, memory and imagination and, in return, modify and interrelate with the affective force fields in which thinking occurs. The vitality that is attributed to the 'Obama hope' poster is thus certainly not of the same intensity as the one attributed to Louis XIV portraits, but generates political potency nevertheless. Whereas in the latter case, the picture wanted to convey the eternal and supreme glory of *le Roi-Soleil*, the former wanted to revive the autonomy of the political, a desire that corresponds to a perceived lack at a historical moment when nationstate-sovereignty is perceived as being on the wane. The contingent moment lies in the uncertainty of its outcome and the ambiguity of its message. Furthermore, any recognition of the political potency of images that emerge from their

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<sup>92</sup> Costello and Willsdon, *The Life and Death of Images*, 36.

vitalistic status or contingent nature, has to be linked to a “double consciousness” of “the paradox of the image: that it is alive - but also dead; powerful - but also weak; meaningful but also meaningless”.<sup>93</sup> In other words, the political potency of images that is derived from their contingent nature, is always uncertain and cannot be subject to predictability, necessity or causality. The icon has thus the power to orient a community by reflecting changing concepts of sovereignty or conveying feelings of optimism but the vitality of the icon also functions as a signpost that all references to its transcendent dimension are ultimately indicators of democracy’s limitations regarding political agency, autonomy and supremacy. The double consciousness of the image, the acknowledgement of its contingent or even paradoxical character does not only develop political efficacy in regard to its lives and desires, through its oscillation between immanence and transcendence as it were, but also in regard to their uncertain relationship with the ‘outside world’.

In the next chapter, I turn from print and painting to photography and illustrate a different facet of political potency that is derived from the visual experience of contingency. From a genealogical perspective, the invention of photographic image-making produced distinct modes of seeing, showing, and thinking that posed new challenges and possibilities for the political potency of images. With a particular focus on documentary photography, I will show that the political efficacy of photographic images is less rooted in an ambiguous promise of metaphysical salvation but rather emerges from their capacity for doubtful enquiry and uncertain truth claims.

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<sup>93</sup> Mitchell, *What do Pictures want?*, 10.

## Chapter 3

### **Vacillating Images of Violent Conflict: Ambivalence and Uncertainty in Contemporary War Photography**

The experience of contingency in photography does not pertain to the iconic oscillation between immanence and transcendence but rather to the destabilisation of an alleged indexical truth claim and the unpredictable and unreliable affective responses that are related to it. The relational character of contingency is not derived from a differential between an immanent realm of the visible and a transcendent realm of the invisible, but between different modes of image-making and their respective social attributes of objectivity and self-evidence.

Even though over the past decades photography has lost its medium specificity (in particular in its relationship to painting) and a general theoretical conceptualisation of its versatile nature seems impossible, in the present context I follow Rosalind Krauss's widely accepted interpretation according to which the photographic image is "a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object."<sup>1</sup> As I will point out further, it is the indissoluble tension between the photographic poles of icon and index that is tested and used by contemporary photographers to fathom the potential as well as the limits of photographic visibility. Photography's attempt to encourage critical self-reflection and to be aware of its own conditions of possibility thus responds to the still widespread association with photography as a 'transparent medium' and the assumption of its intrinsic interconnection with 'reality'. By the same token, the past decades have seen a reinvigorated academic and artistic interest in the political potency of documentary photography. The media spectacle of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and its turbulent aftermath that has

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America," *October* 3, Spring (1977): 75. For a detailed and elaborate discussion of the conceptual trajectory of photographic representation see Hilde Van Gelder and Helen Westgeest, *Photography Theory in Historical Perspective* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 20-63.

unleashed various military adventures under the auspices of the US ‘war on terror’, reaching from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to the mass surveillance and militarisation of Western societies, has generated new engagement with the possibilities and limits of journalistic coverage and photographic representation. Critical of the allegedly revealing and enlightening capacities of the image strategies of conventional mass media outlets, contemporary photographers have developed new modes of image-making in order to draw our attention to the abstract, secret and hidden nature of contemporary global politics.<sup>2</sup>

The belief in the objective, enlightening and revealing capacities that were associated with traditional photojournalism of the 20th century seems no longer adequate to explore the political events and conflicts of the 21st century. I suggest that today it is no longer the classical iconic photograph encouraging civic identification, asking for humanitarian compassion or promising investigative disclosure, but the emphatic acknowledgement of photography’s ambiguous, partial and uncertain nature that attempts most effectively to prompt reflectiveness, scepticism and new modes of thinking. It is not the photographic icons which were so dominant in the 20th century but the pictorial fragments, distortions and ambiguities, the visual presentation of traces, absences and uncertainty, that have recently gained significant theoretical and artistic attention as prominent ‘political’ photographic practices of the 21st century. I suggest that it is the radical contingency of these photographs that establishes their political character, which is a cautious and nuanced one that aims towards ethical sensibility rather than resolute action. It would therefore be too simple, however, to understand the political implication of contingency merely as a counter-hegemonic gesture that ‘disrupts’ the dominant ‘scopic regime’ of the mass media. All too often the absences, traces and contingencies in contemporary documentary photography are automatically attributed a progressive politics of critique, subversion or resistance. I propose that a closer and more honest engagement with photo-

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive overview of these photographic developments in recent years see Nathalie Herschdorfer, *Afterwards: Contemporary Photography Confronting the Past* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2011); for a collection of different conceptual positions on new documentary approaches to visual media more generally see Julian Stallabrass, ed., *Documentary* (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 2013).

graphic images and their material presence reveals a moment of stimulating risk that might include elements of agonism and opposition but that is not exhausted in it. The visual experience of contingency does not guarantee a progressive politics that prompts debate, raises awareness or motivates action; neither is contingency easily directed towards preconceived ideological purposes. The politics of photographic images is both fragile and productive at the same time for it stimulates novel or unconventional modes of thinking and feeling. Walter Benjamin has called the ambiguity and ambivalence of the photographic image “the tiny spark of contingency”<sup>3</sup>. I propose that it is this tiny spark that ignites the photograph’s political potency by emphasising both the allure and unreliability of the photographic truth claim. Consequently, Roland Barthes has described photography as “an uncertain art” that is “only contingency, singularity, risk, ... .”<sup>4</sup> I follow Benjamin and Barthes here and claim that the element of risk, so inherent to photography’s contingent nature, constitutes its greatest political strength - as well as its greatest weakness. Photographs facilitate strong emotional and visceral connections to the world but our responses might be unforeseen, unmanageable or fail to materialise altogether.

In the following, I discuss the work of three prominent contemporary photographers, Simon Norfolk, Richard Mosse and Trevor Paglen, whose photographs are situated in the border region between photojournalism and artistic practice. This in-between status connects two very different types of images: photojournalistic and artistic photographs. The different internal logics of these photographs reveal, when confronted, the transitive nature of images more generally and the critical potential of images to comment on each other. By so doing, the experience of contingency turns out to be the experience of (visual) flux, of the transformation and metamorphosis of varying modes of seeing and presenting the world. Despite their conceptual and aesthetic differences, all three photographers share a concern regarding the possibilities and limitations of the visual representation of violent conflicts and military

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<sup>3</sup> Walter Benjamin (1931), “A Small History of Photography,” in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (London: NLB, 1979), 243.

<sup>4</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000), 20.

operations that exist and thrive beyond the (Western) public field of vision. In that respect, they grapple with the question as to how these phenomena can be presented in the medium of photography without succumbing to the simplifications and reductions of traditional photojournalism. Instead of providing a general answer to these challenges, Norfolk, Mosse and Paglen have developed different visual aesthetic strategies corresponding to their individual political interests in order to navigate the pitfalls of a naive modern realism on the one hand, and a postmodern relativism of pure subjectivity on the other.

Whilst the photographs of Norfolk, Mosse and Paglen potentially constitute sites where dominant modes of photojournalism are challenged and contested, their (political) potency exceeds a merely agonistic relationship with a hegemonic political project. The political and critical claims of their pictures based on the engagement with the uncertain and unstable quality of the photographic index cannot be completely subsumed under a concept of agonistic public spaces as formulated by Chantal Mouffe. The materiality of these images plays a crucial part for their micropolitical potency: the use of colour infrared film (Mosse), landscape photography (Norfolk) or telephoto lenses and astronomy cameras (Paglen) may induce aesthetic pleasure, cause a comfortable shudder or trigger feelings of confusing uneasiness that do not necessarily present political alternatives. This riskiness of contingency, and the fragility of its politics, should not be ignored in favour of a more confident, more ideological and more predictable interpretation of the political implications of contingency. My emphasis on the risky dimension of contingency thus distinguishes the present chapter from a recent article by Rune Anderson and Frank Möller who argue that the limits of visibility in the work of Simon Norfolk and Trevor Paglen offer an “encouragement for resistance” against, and “critical questioning” of, the dominant regime of surveillance and security that characterises both warfare and state power in the 21st century.<sup>5</sup> Their interpretation of the political implications of contingency in the photographs of Norfolk and Paglen is implicitly aligned with a rather post-

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<sup>5</sup> See Rune Anderson and Frank Möller, “Engaging the Limits of Visibility: Photography, Security, Surveillance,” *Security Dialogue* 44, no.3 (2013): 203-221.

marxist understanding of critical artistic practices. Anderson and Möller present a somewhat preconceived idea of the political purposes of Norfolk's and Paglen's photographs that leaves little room for unpredictable affective responses and that restricts these images as autonomous sources of (political) meaning. My own focus is therefore on the visual emergence of contingency as a precarious gesture of political scepticism that is inextricably intertwined with specific material and aesthetic modes of image-making. The materiality of the images triggers and relays affective energies that exceed preconceived political functions.

Whereas Norfolk depicts the war ruins of Afghanistan in order to invoke a historical tableau of European imperial ambitions that were unsuccessfully pursued by force of arms since the 19th century, Richard Mosse uses (amongst other things) infrared film to photograph the civil war in Eastern Congo. Mosse draws attention to a large scale conflict that has ravaged entire regions and generations but is barely given attention by Western mass media. Mosse's pink and red tinted pictures represent a form of war photography that does not judge and accuse in regard to fault lines, motives and actors but reminds the viewer of the ongoing existence and complexity of a conflict that exceeds neocolonial and humanitarian sentiments. Finally, Trevor Paglen's blurred photographs of classified military satellites and secret military installation do not offer much (geographical) information about the arcane world of secretive military operations, mass surveillance or data gathering but they remind us that there is an invisible world of great political impact and urgency beyond our familiar field of vision. Rather than attempting to present photographs that seem to have a clear causal relation with their referents, the choices of photographic material and technology in all three cases problematise this relationship and weaken the photograph's indexical quality. The material dimension thus emphasises the possible experience of partiality, absence or loss and the acknowledgement that something always escapes our gaze and understanding. This also means that the experience of contingency, which triggers in the viewer a feeling of doubt, uneasiness or confusion cannot be located on any one site alone but is the product of the artist's intention, the materiality of the picture and the disposition of the viewer as well as the external cir-

cumstances that bring them all together. It is therefore the plurality of factors that makes our perception of photographic images plural and multilayered. The interwoven dimensions of affect, materiality, perception, intention, etc. represent a multiplicity of potentially deviant and contradicting forces whose energies are too exuberant and multifarious to align with a singular political cause. The different ‘registers of subjectivity’, which feature so prominently in Connolly’s work and which are somewhat sidelined in Mouffe’s agonistic approach to contingency, multiply the complexity and unruly energies that constitute our perception of the world. It is therefore not only the interplay of different ‘registers of subjectivity’ but also the contingent relational nature of sense perception and the generation of meaning that make it difficult to purposefully direct affective energies towards preconceived political ends. Affective energies are the “visceral forces beneath conscious knowing” that “can drive us toward movement and thought” - and, of course, these forces are unreliable and unpredictable as the auxiliary ‘can’ indicates.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the affective forces, which are potentially unleashed in the encounter with a photograph, are, following Kathleen Stewart, “immanent, obtuse and erratic in contrast to the ‘obvious meaning’ of semantic message and symbolic signification”.<sup>7</sup> Against this backdrop, the uncertainty and risk of photographic images, as described by Barthes and others, does not guarantee any predictable ramifications and may therefore remain politically ineffective when they fail to connect to existing affective dispositions, to trigger new modes of thinking and feeling or to translate into individual or collective forms of action.

The past decades have produced theoretical positions that often focus on the role of photojournalism in relation to citizenship and liberal democracy. Martha Rosler, for instance, argues that documentary photography traditionally was deployed to trigger sentiments of charity and pity which prevented the photographed to take control of their own situation and precluded the necessary social changes of

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<sup>6</sup> See See Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth, ed., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1.

<sup>7</sup> See Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 3.

those conditions that created the sources of suffering in the first place.<sup>8</sup> James Johnson makes a similar claim by criticising photojournalism's "arithmetic of compassion". Johnson follows Hannah Arendt's argument that compassion is a depoliticising response to images of human suffering and violence because it 'can only comprehend the particular, but has no notion of the general'. Instead of pity and compassion, which prevent us from recognising the broader political and social causes of anguish and misery, Johnson demands solidarity with those we see suffering.<sup>9</sup> Solidarity between the photographed and the spectator may also lead to what Ariella Azoulay has called a "citizenry of photography", a global community based on photographic visibility and capable of overcoming national principles of territoriality and sovereignty.<sup>10</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites on the other hand, emphasise the important role of photojournalism for the formation of a "visual public sphere" that "activates public identity as a web of associations rather than a structure of arguments".<sup>11</sup> In their account, photojournalism plays a crucial role in reconnecting "the liberal individual and the democratic public".<sup>12</sup> All these accounts - which see in photography either a source of the formation of political communities or a mirror of collective imagination - pay little attention to the political implications of the image-making process itself. In the approaches mentioned above, photography gains its political significance through acts of disclosure that enable us to recognise and 'see' the agony, suffering or general lives of other human beings. It is the awareness of concrete occurrences of discrimination, the detailed documentation of remote events or the general insight into the human condition that is associated with the political possibilities of photography. In other words, all these accounts are based on

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<sup>8</sup> See Martha Rosler (1981), "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography)," in *3 Works* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006), 61-93.

<sup>9</sup> See James Johnson, "'The Arithmetic of Compassion': Rethinking the Politics of Photography," *British Journal of Political Science* 41, no.3 (2011): 621-643.

<sup>10</sup> See Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 128f.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 301.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 303.

the clear visibility and perception of what Martha Rosler has described as “structural injustices”.<sup>13</sup>

However, I claim that the political strength of the photograph as a mode of visual thinking is to show something that is beyond words, to draw attention to something that cannot easily be described or grasped in a coherent or clear manner. The political potency of the contingent moment of photography is here assessed in the light of photojournalism’s self-understanding as a privileged medium of bearing testimony to violent conflicts. This attribution of visual, cognitive, emotional and even moral privilege to photographic practices based on its seemingly self-evident visibility does not necessarily have the desired effects of solidarity, knowledge or collective identification but can also create the very realities photographs try to depict. This problem has been insightfully addressed by David Campbell, who points out the potentially problematic implications photojournalism can have on global geopolitics.<sup>14</sup> Based on an analysis of news images of the 2003 civil war in Darfur / Sudan, Campbell criticises photojournalism’s “visual performance of the social field” through which preconceived ideas regarding political identities or conflict scenarios are established rather than ‘documented’. Instead, Campbell asks for “visual strategies” that should avoid the reification of identity and in so doing would not “replicate neo-colonial relations of power” (380). Furthermore, he argues that we change our visual conceptions “from an understanding of photographs as illustrations and carriers of information (which a focus on their content could suggest) to an appreciation of pictures as ciphers that prompt affective responses.” (379)

Campbell suggests to turn away from photography’s weak indexicality with its reductive truth claims and connotations of objectivity and instead focus more on photography’s affective energies. A photographic image is not so much a medium of representation but an iconic or ‘deictic gesture’, to use Gottfried Boehm’s

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<sup>13</sup> See Martha Rosler, “Post-Documentary, Post-Photography?,” in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings 1975-2001* (Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 2004), 221.

<sup>14</sup> See David Campbell, “Geopolitics and Visuality: Sighting the Darfur Conflict,” *Political Geography* 26 (2007): 357-382. Subsequent references are made in the text.

expression.<sup>15</sup> Campbell's call for a better recognition of contingency when encountering an image is still characterised by a rather agonistic approach that seems to include a counter-hegemonic gesture against conventional photojournalistic practices; a gesture against forms of photojournalism that tend to illustrate preconceived political arguments and that are subject to the volatile economy of consumer attention and editorial agendas. In his claim to put more emphasis on the beholder's affective responses to a photograph, Campbell does not pay much attention to the unpredictability and riskiness of those responses and the unpredictable politics that are linked to them. The moment of contingency in the form of affective energies seems to be automatically attributed a progressive politics capable of conveying a more nuanced and differentiated view on global conflicts and the concepts of identity that are related to it. I propose that the affective energies and uncertain indexicality of photographic images can stimulate the onlooker's emotional disposition that in return influences the way she perceives and thinks of the world. As William Connolly puts it: "Since thinking operates on several registers of being, and because each register is invested with a set of feelings or intensities, to change your thinking is to modify to some degree the sensibility in which it is set."<sup>16</sup>

When discussing the work of Norfolk, Mosse and Paglen, I show how photographic practices may look like that attempt to elicit affective responses through the visual presentation of violent conflicts by embracing the weakness of the photographic index. In opposition to Campbell, I do not regard the precarious indexical dimension of the photograph as fully corrupted and show that the weak index of photography can open new forms of visual political thinking exactly *through* the ambiguity and uncertainty of the photographic content. It is exactly this limitation of the photographic index where political thinking can evolve, where alleged certainties and self-evident clarities come to an end and conventional or dominant forms of visibility are called into question. It is only through the boundaries and uncertainties

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<sup>15</sup> See Gottfried Boehm, "Ikonische Differenz: Glossar: Grundbegriffe des Bildes," *Rheinsprung 11 - Zeitschrift für Bildkritik* 01 (2011): 174. See also the introductory chapter of this thesis.

<sup>16</sup> Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist*, 148.

of the index that debates about what can be seen, what is shown and what is hidden and, ultimately, regarding the relationship between seeing and understanding, can effectively unfold. The particularity of the index is thus not the political endpoint of photography but its very point of departure. As Mary Ann Doane writes: “The index is reduced to its own singularity; it appears as a brute and opaque fact, wedded to contingency - pure indication, pure assurance of existence.”<sup>17</sup> The political efficacy of the photographic image then emerges precisely from the gap that opens between this “assurance of existence”<sup>18</sup>, or what Barthes calls “a certificate of presence”<sup>19</sup>, and the contingency and obscurity of its facticity. By example of the photographic work of Simon Norfolk, Richard Mosse and Trevor Paglen, I analyse artistic photographic presentations of violent conflict that present themselves in opposition to conventional photojournalism. Even though they openly embrace the contingent qualities of photography, ambiguous indexicality and unruly affects, I show that the contingent moment in their work is always at risk of exceeding political effects that attempt to challenge dominant modes of image-making or to create political subjectivities.

## II. Simon Norfolk: Afghanistan’s imperial history and the work of mourning

Contingency and the limits of visibility in the photographic work of Simon Norfolk do not simply unfold along the predictable fault lines of encouraging “resistance” against, or the “critical questioning” of, conventional photojournalistic practices and their alleged complicity with the political regimes that are involved in the current violent conflicts in Afghanistan. The experience of contingency through the encounter with Norfolk’s photographs elicits in the viewer modes of political thinking that are rather fragile, subtle and unreliable and go well beyond the usual tropes of resis-

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<sup>17</sup> Mary Ann Doane, “Indexicality and the Concept of Medium Specificity,” in *The Meaning of Photography*, ed. Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson (Williamstown/MA: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), 5.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Jonathan Cape, 1981), 87. See also Campbell, “Geopolitics and Visuality”, 379.

tance, disruption or agonistic struggle. Thus, the contingent moment in Norfolk's work cannot be reduced to a counter-hegemonic gesture that seeks to challenge the dominance of conventional documentary photography. Neither does the experience of contingency through the encounter with Norfolk's photographs, present an alternative political position or a point of view that is otherwise marginalised or repressed by a social majority. Instead, I argue that the experience of contingency in Norfolk's work constitutes a work of mourning, that is a multilayered and cautious consideration of an interminable past with ambiguous implications for the present and the future.

My aim is to show that photography and the viewer's experience of contingency constitutes a mode of political thinking that is not fully exhausted by ideas of agonism, opposition and alterity and is probably far from resulting in individual or collective action. It is a politics that recognises the power of affect to set the ground for multilayered and subtle modes of contemplation and that is effective on individual feelings rather than giving a voice to already existing but silenced political subjectivities. Furthermore, the fragile politics of contingency in aesthetic photographic practices is always at risk of failure - of not keeping its implicit promises of offering new perspectives, critical engagement or challenging existing power relations. Thus, photographic contingency presents a rather weak politics. This weakness becomes even obvious as soon as one takes a step back from the analysis of the pictures themselves and looks at the contexts in which those photographs are predominantly shown. Norfolk's pictures, as well as the work of Mosse and Paglen, are treated as works of art and displayed accordingly in the sheltered and relatively exclusive spaces of museums and art galleries. How much disruption and resistance can be expected to materialise in an environment, that can be regarded as the very heartland of appreciating contingency, where the unexpected is programmatically expected? How much politically exploitable fraction can aesthetic experience generate in contexts where the majority of viewers is willing to open up towards the unknown and unfamiliar and ultimately desires the encounter with a visual art work to be a potentially transformative experience? Is the radical contingency of these photographs and the

political implications related to it not simply ‘preaching’ to the choir? I do not want to dwell on these questions for too long since the main focus of my analysis is the site of images, but it deserves some mentioning in order to put the assumed political efficacy of those art works into perspective. Again, this is not to say that the photographs of Mosse, Paglen or Norfolk have nothing to say to political theory or do not qualify as a mode of political thinking in their own right. On the contrary. But I suggest not to overestimate their efficacy. Against this backdrop, I show how the photographs of *Simon Norfolk* trigger modes of thinking that operate on multiple levels of thinking and feeling that induces an awareness of complexity and historicity rather than present a clearly formulated political position. In the following I will describe this ambiguous experience of contingency and its political implications as work of mourning.

### **Experiencing contingency as work of mourning**

“There can be no photograph”, Gerhard Richter writes, “that is not about mourning and about the simultaneous desire to guard against mourning, precisely in the moments of releasing the shutter and of viewing and circulating the image. What the photograph mourns is both death and survival, disappearance and living-on, erasure from and inscription in the archive of its technically mediated memory.”<sup>20</sup>

I suggest that this dimension of mourning becomes particularly tangible through an aesthetic emphasis on photography’s uncertain indexical quality that oscillates between the attempt of preserving, yet losing, a specific moment in time. The photographic experience of contingency as visual political thinking is thus a way of coming to terms with the experience of death and loss as the awareness of the fundamental finitude, fragility and singularity of all human existence. Furthermore, the work of mourning is not just a mode of accounting for the experience of temporality and transience but may also challenge our relation with the past and the future; it

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<sup>20</sup> Gerhard Richter, “Between Translation and Invention: The Photograph in Deconstruction,” in *Copy, Archive, Signature* by Jacques Derrida, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford/CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), xxxii.

turns the photographic commitment towards times gone by into a responsibility for a world to come. In that sense, British photographer Simon Norfolk folds the indexical ambiguity between ‘disappearance and living-on’, absence and presence into a visual commentary on the enlightening potential of war photography.<sup>21</sup> The visual and political power of his photographic accounts of violent conflicts emerge from Norfolk’s engagement with the contingency of war and history, rather than from images of combat action or wounded soldiers in the tradition of conventional photojournalism. [fig. 9 & 10]

It would be too simple, however, to reduce the implications of the experience of contingency to a dichotomy between the contemplative tranquility of the so called ‘aftermath photography’<sup>22</sup> and the urgency of photojournalism’s attempt to capture ‘the decisive moment’<sup>23</sup>. It is also more than a contrast between a snapshot of a violent scene that triggers in the viewer feelings of shock and revulsion and the allegedly more highbrow practice of photographing ruins and traces in order to encourage the viewer to think more comprehensively and more abstractly about the circumstances which made these pictures possible. An attitude Norfolk seems to adopt himself.<sup>24</sup> However, I am more cautious regarding the critical and educational effects those photographs may have and therefore suggest to regard Norfolk’s pictures as

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance Simon Norfolk’s photo project *For Most Of It I Have No Words* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 1998) that ponders on the photographic possibility of representing experiences of violence, death and trauma that exceed verbal testimony. Norfolk visits the sites of genocides such as Rwanda, Cambodia and Auschwitz in order to search for traces and marks of violence in landscapes and architecture. In so doing, the moments of agony and suffering remain visible and invisible, spoken and unspoken of, at the same time.

<sup>22</sup> For a critical discussion of this term see David Company, “Safety in Numbness. Some Remarks on Problems of ‘Late Photography’,” in *Where is the Photograph?*, ed. David Green, (Maidstone and Kent: Photoforum/Photoworks, 2003), 123-132.

<sup>23</sup> Henri Cartier-Bresson famously uses this term in order to describe a photograph’s most effective composition. He writes: “In photography there is a new kind of plasticity, product of the instantaneous lines made by movements of the subject. We work in unison with movement as though it were a presentiment of the way in which life itself unfolds. But inside movement there is one moment at which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it.” Henri Cartier-Bresson, *The Decisive Moment* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1952), n.p.

<sup>24</sup> As stated in an interview with Diane Smyth: “Images of mutilated bodies are, he (Simon Norfolk) says, ‘the simpleton’s option’ because they merely shock and revolt viewers, rather than encouraging them to question what caused the injury, or relate to the dead person. He believes photographs of soldiers in action, are simply outdated.” Simon Norfolk and Diane Smyth, “For most of this I have no words ...,” *The British Journal of Photography* 155, no.7706 (2008): 20f.



**Fig. 9:** Tim Hetherington, AFGHANISTAN. Korengal Valley. 2007. “A soldier from 2nd platoon rests at the end of a day of heavy fighting at the 'Restrepo' outpost. The position was named after the medic Juan Restrepo from 2nd Platoon who was killed by insurgents in July 2007.” See: <http://www.magnumphotos.com/Catalogue/Tim-Hetherington.html>. Accessed: 20/03/2015.



**Fig. 10:** Tyler Hicks/The New York Times, *Afghanistan. Forward Operating Base Tillman*, 2011. “Soldiers fought back as insurgents conducted a coordinated attack on four outposts near the border with Pakistan in Paktika province on the 10th anniversary of the start of the war.” C. J. Chivers, “10 Years into Afghan War: A Thunderous Duel,” *The New York Times*, October 8, 2011, A1.

ambiguous and multilayered modes of thinking whose contingent character may trigger, but are certainly not exhausted by, critical reflection, rejection of mainstream photojournalism and empathy with war victims. Again, the experience of contingency always includes a risk that does not guarantee a critical and progressive politics. It's fruitfulness, however, lies in its multilayered character that focuses on the contingency of time and history.

The photographic images of an exhausted and shell-shocked young soldier or of troops in combat action draw their efficacy from a sense of immediacy and directness rather than partiality and distance. In opposition to the photojournalistic attempt to condense a complex scenario into a single gesture or image, Norfolk offers an aesthetic expansion that uses material traces in order to indicate their larger geo-political and historical conditions of possibility. Hence, his photographs present a historical analysis of war through its inscription in landscapes, architecture and human artefacts that has become particularly prominent in his work on Afghanistan - a country ravaged by changing conflicts for decades.<sup>25</sup> Norfolk's photographs present the various wars in Afghanistan as layers of time and material destruction that are inscribed in a monumental landscape clustered with bizarre ruins and the sculptural wreckage of military equipment. In a first series of photographs, taken shortly after the bombardment of Afghanistan by NATO forces in retaliation for the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, we see, for instance, the facade of a former neoclassical government building with its front columns and portico riddled with bullet holes, the rusted remains of artillery shells and aircrafts or the bullet-scarred skeletons of apartment buildings and military installations. [*fig. 11*] Most of these objects are photographed against the backdrop of the open spaces of the Afghan desert featuring snow covered mountain ranges and dramatic cloud formations on the horizon. The contrast between the archaic beauty of the landscape and the morbid monuments of war and violence is further amplified by the warm hues of golden sunlight that suffuse the scenes con-

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<sup>25</sup> See Simon Norfolk, *Afghanistan: Chronotopia* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2002), n.p. The title 'chronotope' is a term borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin referring to a place that allows for simultaneous movement through space and time; a place where the multilayeredness of history is displayed and where the exploration of space is also an examination of time.



**Fig. 11:** “A government building close to the former Presidential palace at Darulaman, destroyed in fighting between Rabbani and the Hazaras in the early 1990s.” Simon Norfolk, *Afghanistan: Chronotopia* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2002), n.p.

veying the impression of timeless tranquility. Inspired by European Romantic painting and its “fondness for ruins and desolation”, Norfolk visually references the works of Claude Lorrain and Caspar David Friedrich as sublime reminders of the mortality of civilisations and the awesome experience of God’s omnipotence that dwarfs and humbles all human endeavours.<sup>26</sup> Norfolk’s aesthetic choices reflect a contingent sense of possibility and hopeful transformation regarding the political development in Afghanistan that convey his confidence as a warm feeling of optimism. The uncertainty of contingency in this work leans visually towards the “golden sunlight of progress” whilst hinting more generally at the temporality and historicity of any socio-political order.<sup>27</sup> The moment of contingency in Norfolk’s photographs whose politi-

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<sup>26</sup> See Norfolk, *Afghanistan*, n.p.

<sup>27</sup> See Simon Norfolk in conversation with Paul Lowe, in John Burke and Simon Norfolk, *Burke + Norfolk. Photographs from the War in Afghanistan* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2011), 7.

cal potency cannot be reduced to an attitude of critique or agonism constitutes a work of mourning that encourages the viewer to reflect the historicity of violent conflicts and the fragility of social order. Rather than presenting a counter-hegemonic gesture against mainstream photojournalism that emphasises either the decisive moment of violent action or the heroic deeds of Western troops, the implications of contingency in these photographs are unpredictable and risky yet potentially productive. The experience of contingency in Norfolk's *Afghanistan Chronotopia* reflects a work of mourning. This work of mourning, however, cannot be pure or homogenous since the experience of contingency is multilayered and multidimensional and does not operate unidirectional. That is to say that even though I have identified the work of mourning as a core theme of the workings of contingency in *Afghanistan Chronotopia*, Norfolk's images still speak to us in multiple ways that make its political effects less



**Fig. 12:** “Old biplane on a display plinth at the Exhibition Grounds in Kabul. Fighting birds are a source of great pride to Afghan men, but were banned by the Taliban as un-Islamic.” Simon Norfolk, *Afghanistan: Chronotopia* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2002), n.p.

predictable, yet even richer. The experience of contingency as a contemplation of time and space, that is by virtue of its title the core narrative of the project, is itself at risk of being disrupted by various sentiments. The sheer formal beauty of the photograph's composition, for instance, may occasionally overpower the tragic history of its subject. Let's take as an example two portraits from Norfolk's series *Afghanistan Chronotopia*. [fig. 12 & 13]

The first picture shows an older man wearing traditional clothes who stands in front of the remains of a wrecked and dismantled aeroplane. In his right hand he holds a wooden bird cage containing a quail. The caption tells us that it is a fighting bird, a traditional status symbol for Afghan men that was banned under the Taliban regime for being 'un-islamic'. The man's stern and proud gaze is directed straight at the viewer. The entire scene is bathed in the pastel-coloured light of dusk. The second photograph shows a young man further in the background in front of the skeleton of a destroyed pavilion in a former park. The remains of the pavilion loom fragile against a dramatically clouded evening sky like the ruins of an ancient temple. The young man stands next to the decrepit structure with a bunch of colourful air balloons in his left hand and a yellow plastic bag in his right. In both photographs it is the presence of those two men that interrupt our contemplation about the historicity of the Afghan conflict and the complex interrelations of the past and the present. Here the moment of contingency invites us to let our minds wander and to engage with these two men on an individual and personal level. Who are those men? Where are they going with their items? What do they think about the photographer? How did they experience the wars? What was their role in it? We feel our attention drifting away from the big heavy questions of war, history, colonialism, etc. and shifting towards more personal concerns and interests. Maybe we are struck by a flitting feeling of curiosity regarding the tradition of fighting birds in Afghanistan or the familiarity of the sight of balloon sellers from our local fun fair. A touching moment of everyday banality and beauty in an otherwise barren and hostile landscape. Here the engagement with the contingency of those images is at risk of not creating a critical stance towards mainstream photo coverage of the war in Afghanistan, a critique of the



**Fig. 13:** “Former teahouse in a park next to the Afghan Exhibition of Economic and Social Achievements in the Shah Shahid district of Kabul. Ballrooms were illegal under the Taliban, but now balloon-sellers are common on the streets of Kabul providing cheap treats for children. Simon Norfolk, *Afghanistan: Chronotopia* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2002), n.p.

global power dynamics that may work underneath it, or the historical legacy with which it is inextricably intertwined. But this uncertainty is productive for it presents a multilayeredness that offers an engagement with the alleged ‘other’, an opening to the unknown and unfamiliar that does not follow preconceived political fault-lines. The contemplation of the photographs thus allows for a multiplicity and simultaneity of thoughts and feelings that are not easily steered in a single direction but trigger diffuse feelings of optimism.

In Norfolk’s second photo series on Afghanistan, published ten years later, the visual examination of the war’s history takes a somewhat different approach. The golden sunlight of optimism now seems rather inappropriate and has been replaced with sentiments of uncertainty, disappointment and disillusionment in regard to the Afghan situation. The double indexicality of Norfolk’s photographs has connected external material facticity and internal subjective sensitivity in a new way. In 2011,

the trajectory of the war is not only examined through its material inscriptions and spatiotemporal traces, but also through the comparison with the work of a historical predecessor. The photo project *Burke + Norfolk: Photographs from the War in Afghanistan* (2011) is inspired and informed by the early photographs of the Irishman John Burke (1843-1900) who is considered the first ever photographer to have taken pictures in Afghanistan when he accompanied British forces during the second Anglo-Afghan War from 1878-1880.<sup>28</sup> In this “artistic partnership”, Norfolk does not only search for traces of a past that is irretrievably lost but he simultaneously points at recurring patterns of imperial history.<sup>29</sup> The comparative method allows Norfolk to present an image of Afghanistan ten years after the beginning of the war in 2001 which reflects a specific historical moment but simultaneously embeds this moment in a much broader panorama of Afghan conflicts and Western imperial ambitions that can be traced back to the 19th century and beyond. In so doing, Norfolk reminds us of a past that seems almost forgotten (at least in the West) and points at the historical contingency of all military conflicts. The only constant in this ever shifting field of ethnic, ideological and imperial fault lines, however, is the suffering and deprivation of ordinary people who are forced to make a living under the yoke of seemingly endless violence. This negotiation between the past and the present is at the heart of Norfolk’s photographs. In this regard, both photo projects constitute a historical analysis that comes to terms with the past through a ‘work of mourning’.

“Mourning”, Freud writes, “is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal and so on.” The work of mourning, as a mechanism to come to terms with personal loss, is considered completed when the ego has “succeeded in freeing its libido from the lost object” and has successfully redirected its libidinal energies to something else.<sup>30</sup> If the work of mourning fails, however, it can

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<sup>28</sup> See John Burke and Simon Norfolk, *Burke + Norfolk: Photographs from the War in Afghanistan* (Stockport: Dewi Lewis, 2011).

<sup>29</sup> See Simon Norfolk and Paul Lowe in conversation, *Burke + Norfolk*, 7.

<sup>30</sup> See Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV (London: The Hogarth Press and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1957), 252.

turn into the pathological condition of melancholia. According to Freud, melancholia is the “clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis”<sup>31</sup> that is the mental inability to detach oneself from the lost object. Therefore, in the Freudian framework, melancholia is an indicator of a failed attempt to mourn and an unsuccessful, and unwholesome, effort to let go of the past. Jacques Derrida, however, reevaluates this concept of melancholia and argues that mourning as a complete internalisation of the other and a mental incapacity to let go of it, as suggested by Freud, is an impossible task. According to Derrida, “true mourning” in a Freudian sense is impossible since memory and “interiorization” is only possible when “success fails” and “failure succeeds”.<sup>32</sup> In other words, the work of mourning has to fail in order to proceed, since it is the melancholic dimension in the work of mourning that requires an interminable analysis of the past in order to preserve an always incomplete memory.

The melancholic dimension in the work of mourning, the necessary failure of successful mourning, reflected in Norfolk’s photographic experience of contingency, opens up a space of uncertainty and complexity regarding our understanding of the past and the present that encourages the viewer to reflect on the motives and objectives of the current war in Afghanistan and the historical narratives in which it is embedded. In his photographic interpretations of the war in Afghanistan, Norfolk does not offer any precise historical information, he does not try to stir in the viewer sentiments of compassion or pity, or to convey an illustration to a preconceived argument. Norfolk’s images of picturesque ruins of buildings, military installations and wrecks of military equipment that are presented as romantic landscape tableaux shows us the partiality of our historical memory and the fugaciousness of time. Their contingent nature is emphasised through a strategy of double indexicality (as described above) presenting the photograph as a divided construct. The image is torn between an external referent that points outwards at the traces of various social

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<sup>31</sup> Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia”, 244.

<sup>32</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay et al. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 35.

forces that now appear as condensed layers of history; inwards it shows the photographer's affinity to a distinct aesthetic and intellectual tradition employed to convey the political urgency of the project. The aesthetic tradition and image world of European Romanticism is deployed to stage the ruins of human artefacts in order to point at the individual suffering and collective devastation of war that not always leaves visible traces. Furthermore, the dominant ideological framing of the current war in Afghanistan as a legitimate and necessary effort of 'counter-insurgency' and 'nation-building' is located in a wider historical context of Western imperialism and colonialism to which different material traces bear witness. In distinction to the brief news feeds or article illustrations of conventional journalism, which all too often feature short-term memories, Norfolk's pictures remind us of the complexity of the war in Afghanistan and that forgetting its violent imperial history may have severe consequences for the times to come. In other words, the always partial memory of the past has to be nurtured and continued as social commitment to the present and the future. Derrida makes clear that the work of mourning is not simply a psychological activity but an "interminable" analytical method for conceptualising memory and justice.

Norfolk's photographic encounter with the war in Afghanistan represents a mode of justice that not only takes into account a historical and political complexity that is all too often reduced to simple causalities but also emphasises the ethical dimension that lies in the acknowledgement of its contingency. The photographic engagement with contingency as a work of mourning replaces bold dramaturgy with tentative interrogation and encourages the viewer to see the Afghan war within a complex network of historical relations rather than regard its contemporary actors with pity and compassion.<sup>33</sup> For it is the acknowledgement of the partiality, ambiguity and fragmentation of our perception, memory and understanding of this conflict that demands and encourages continuous engagement in order make past experiences fruitful for future decisions. For Derrida, the work of mourning does not belong to

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<sup>33</sup> For an insightful discussion of 'late photography' as a visual critique of traditional war photography that resists 'the trope of pity', see Debbie Lisle's analysis of the 'juxtaposition of leisure and war' in the work of Simon Norfolk and Simon Boulton. Debbie Lisle, "The Surprising Detritus of Leisure: Encountering the Late Photography of War," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, (2011): 873-890.

“the code of negativity” but is an attempt “to preserve memory”, even if that memory will always remain deficient.<sup>34</sup> It is important to emphasise the positive dimension of Derrida’s concept of mourning that cannot be reduced to a gesture of lamentation or bereavement but, instead, to understand mourning as an act of “affirmation”<sup>35</sup>. The photographic image as a work of mourning is the affirmation that our engagement with the past is never completed but, instead, emphasises that the task of comprehending the past always lies ahead of us. It is exactly the acceptance of the uncertainty of the past, our acknowledgement of its partial recollection that allows for meaningful engagement. As Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh point out: “Simultaneously, we accept to let go of our claims to mastery and at the same time to keep and preserve it and give the past a new life. We can never resurrect the past from the ashes of history. But in mourning we still strive to interpret it and make it coherent, to do our best to tell its story and give it the promise of a future.”<sup>36</sup>

Such an acceptance of letting go of our ‘claims to mastery’ and attempts to provide an ultimate and authoritative account of historical events are reflected in Norfolk’s visual presentation of contingency. His visual dialogue with a historical predecessor helps us to understand the recurrent character of the conflict in Afghanistan and the sustaining patterns of imperial aspiration that fuel and perpetuate it. The moment of contingency in Norfolk’s photographs emerges from the partial truth claim of his photographs’ indexicality. The recognition of the limitations of the indexical ‘there is!’ is the moment when the political efficacy of the image is triggered and conventional viewing habits are challenged. Norfolk no longer is the photographer who personally experiences the conflict as immediate eyewitness but the photographer who, like an archaeologist, works his way through the debris of past events by means of forensic investigations in order to present different accounts of history based on the interrogation of material objects. The forensic study of ruins as the spatial analysis of bygone occurrences becomes an aesthetic methodology that analyti-

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<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Dialanguages,” in *Points ... Interviews 1974-1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al. (Stanford/CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 143.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Mark Dooley and Liam Kavanagh, *The Philosophy of Derrida* (Stocksfield: Acumen, 2007), 9.

cally exceeds the practice of mere historical documentation and recollection.<sup>37</sup> The transformation of the photographic work of mourning has changed the photograph as witness and testimony to a form of “forensic aesthetics” that presents the traces of the past in order to construct a historical narrative.<sup>38</sup>

The photographic engagement with contingency, the acknowledgement of the partiality and fragmentation of the photographic account of events questions this process of truth construction and shows that any definite interpretation or discursive closure is ultimately impossible. The photographic image then is never a simple documentation or recording that illustrates already existing arguments or positions, that tells the viewer what to think or to feel, but an invitation to engage with the picture and its conditions of possibility. Norfolk’s work on Afghanistan that embraces the limitations of its own indexical truth claims encourages the viewer to reflect on the contingency and constructedness of our historical narratives, and the political decisions that are based on them. It also allows for more affective and contemplative responses, as reflected in Norfolk’s aesthetic choices of optimistic golden light of dawn in his earlier Afghan photographs to the more subdued use of colour and light at dusk in his later ones.<sup>39</sup> The experience of contingency in Norfolk’s photographs stimulates emotional political thinking, as mentioned above, that exceeds the prefabricated political formulas of ‘disruption’, ‘resistance’ or ‘antagonism’. Instead, these photographs convey ambiguous moods and atmospheres thus modifying the feelings and intensities in which our thinking is embedded.

Despite the recognition of its contingency and the fragility of the index, the ‘principle of evidence’ still haunts photography as reflected in the melancholic inquisition of material objects. Derrida reminds us that despite all aesthetic choices, the

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<sup>37</sup> For a practical application of the forensic study of ruins see Eyal Weizman’s research in the Middle East. Weizman, whose work is dedicated to the study of ruins as evidence for human rights violations in Israel and the Palestinian territories, has paradigmatically conceptualised this practice as ‘forensic architecture’. See Eyal Weizman, *The Last of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza* (London: Verso, 2011), 101.

<sup>38</sup> See Thomas Keenan and Eyal Weizman, *Mengele’s Skull: The Advent of a Forensic Aesthetics* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 67.

<sup>39</sup> These general shifts in political and aesthetic moods become obvious through the comparison of Simon Norfolk’s *Afghanistan* (2002) and the later *Burke + Norfolk* (2011).

photograph always contains an element that is “beyond art” that records a simple spatiotemporal presence, that constitutes a “relation with death” from which any truth claim emerges.<sup>40</sup> But this truth claim is never fully supported since it is always the product between actuality and imagination. It is therefore the task of the onlooker to evaluate and calibrate the relation between document and art, presence and absence. Photography as a mode of political thinking reminds us that this process can never be accomplished and that it is exactly this dual character of photography that makes it so distinct. Furthermore, political thinking in and through photography emphasises the relational and multilayered character of our thought processes that always exceed conscious cognition or rational deliberation.

In Norfolk’s project, the multilayeredness of thought and strategies of truth construction are highlighted further through his juxtaposition of historical and contemporary view points. The contingent nature of his photography is directed towards political ends by radically historicising his own contemporary perspective and relating it to the photographs of his 19th century predecessor John Burke. The pastiche of old morbid ruins and cheerful new constructions is contrasted by the brutal scale of the massive US and UK military installations (Camp Leatherneck and Camp Bastion respectively) that Paul Lowe has called “the architecture of occupation”. These large compounds, home to tens of thousands of soldiers, appear as “bizarre self-sufficient outposts so artificial and at odds with the indigenous architecture and the landscape”, both in Norfolk’s work as well as in the pictures of John Burke.<sup>41</sup> These comparisons allow us to locate the contemporary military operations in Afghanistan within a much broader panorama of British-Afghan relations and Western imperial ambitions. Architecture becomes an indicator of the different social and economic conditions the Afghan war creates today and has created in the past. Thus, the war in Afghanistan becomes also visually represented in Norfolk’s eery photographs of present day Kabul that combine decrepit urban structures with the flamboyancy of Kabul’s new

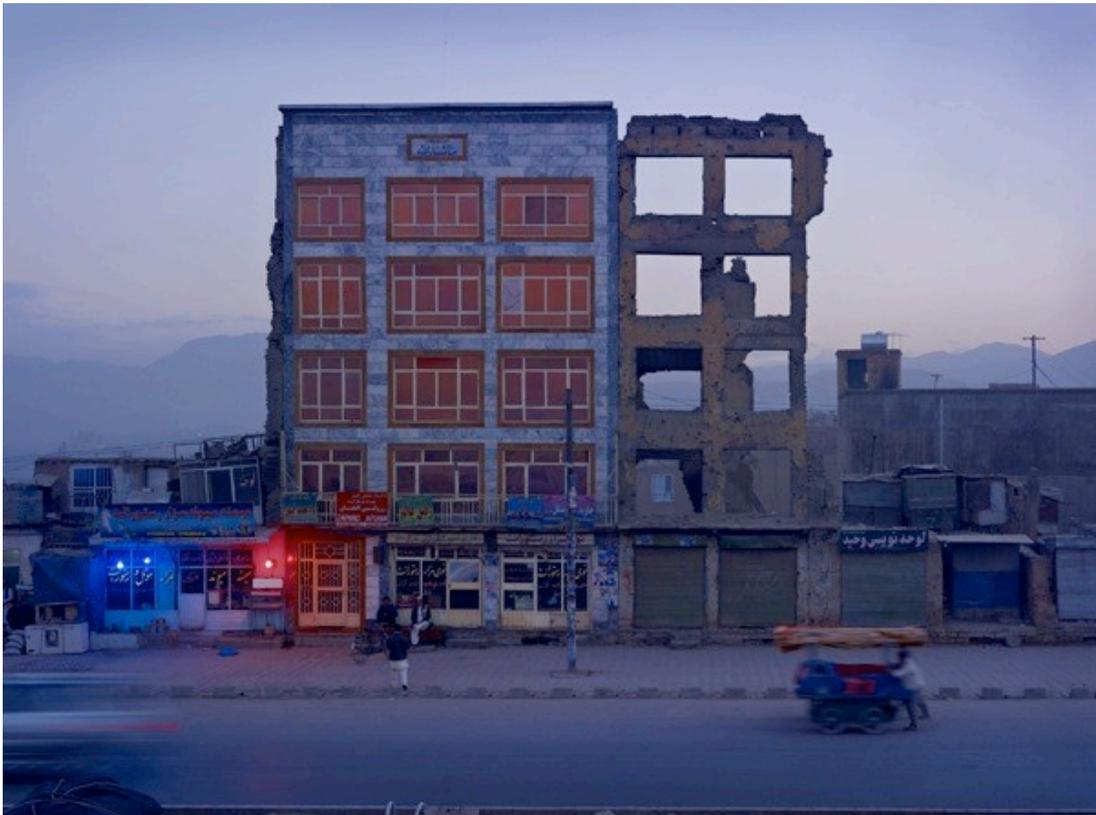
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<sup>40</sup> See Jaques Derrida, *Copy, Archive, Signature*, trans. Jeff Fort (Stanford/CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 9.

<sup>41</sup> Simon Norfolk and Paul Lowe in conversation, *Burke + Norfolk*, 14.

wedding halls, internet cafés and ‘poppy palaces’ featuring elements of Bollywood cinema, Greek classicism as well as eccentric neon signs. [fig. 14] The visual experience of contingency as a political work of mourning therefore unfolds various layers of historical time simultaneously, emphasising the historicity of our contemporary modes of seeing and interpreting the world as well as their inextricable entanglement with the past and the future.

So what does the photographic work of Simon Norfolk tell us about the political efficacy of visual contingency? The example of *Afghanistan Chronotopia* shows that the political implications of contingency in the encounter with photography are too subtle and fragile to constitute decisive aesthetic politics of agonistic public spaces. Norfolk’s work cannot be reduced to a counter-hegemonic gesture against the practices of conventional photojournalism or to an opposition to those photographs that attempt to present the war in Afghanistan as necessary measure of



**Fig. 14:** “Some of the nonsensical property development taking place in Kabul. This district of the city, Karte Char Chateh, is remembered by Kabulis as that part of the bazaar which was burned by the British in 1842 as collective punishment for the killing of the British Envoy. The fires still burned when the British retreated two days later.” *Burke + Norfolk*, 157.

counterinsurgency or legitimate retaliation. The political implication of contingency is here more than a war of position and a struggle among political opponents. The unpredictable responses to Norfolk's photographs, the viewers personal feelings of curiosity and joy, puzzlement or frustration are not accounted for in a purely agonistic understanding of contingency. Such an agonistic approach limits the potential effects of contingency by trying to fit them into the mould of preconceived political fault lines. The political implications of contingency are thus not exhausted by the articulation of a critique vis a vis a hegemonic symbolic order or the demonstration of political alternatives. I suggest instead that the experience of contingency in the encounter with visual works of art follows Connolly's concept of layered thinking that allows for multiple and simultaneous modes of thinking and feeling to arise that goes beyond the linearity of text and discourse. An ambiguity and uncertainty that Mouffe's approach leaves little room for. I argue further, however, if we are to take the efficacy of images seriously, including their political potency, then we also have to take into account their riskiness and unreliability as 'progressive' political agents who guarantee critical attitudes, resistance or struggle. Norfolk's pictures have certainly something to say about the way violent conflicts are visually perceived and presented but their political value should not be measured by their capacity to form new political subjectivities or to disrupt a hegemonic symbolic order. To suggest, as Mouffe does, that every art work is political for it either challenges or maintains the hegemonic social order is to relinquish fruitful nuances of insight and probably to overestimate the political power of visual aesthetic practices.

### **III. Richard Mosse: Congo's invisible war and elusive self-reflections**

Whereas Simon Norfolk is concerned with the presentation of material evidences as a way of coming to terms with history, a work of mourning that connects the past with a future, *Richard Mosse's* interest lies in the engagement with violent conflicts that exist in the shadow of global media attention. Mosse's photographs create ambiguity and contingency that prompt manifold affective responses rather than providing

clear factual information. In so doing, Mosse offers an alternative approach to documentary photography that, as David Campbell suggests, avoids the pitfalls of reifying identities and replicating neo-colonial relations of power.<sup>42</sup> Similar to Norfolk, Mosse's work too conveys a sense of contingency that emerges from the differential between conventional forms of photojournalism that are based on visibility, immediacy and 'documentation'. The contingent character of Mosse's work is a relational one that asks more general questions regarding the possibilities and, more importantly, limitations of the visual presentation of violent conflicts. However, the experience of contingency in the encounter with Mosse's photographs opens up a politics of the image that is not exhausted by a counter-hegemonic gesture against mainstream photojournalism and that is unpredictable, unruly and always at the risk of failing its own political ambitions. In order to illustrate this argument, I turn to Mosse's recent photographic engagement with the war-ridden landscapes of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In his photo project *Infra* (2011), and his related installation *The Enclave* (2013) shown in the Irish Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale and winner of the 2014 Deutsche Börse Photography Prize, Mosse uses colour infrared film, developed during World War II for camouflage detection and aerial surveillance, in order to bathe the green foliage of the Congolese vegetation into surreal, pink and red hues. He uses the specific materiality of the infrared film in order to draw attention to a severe regional conflict that is widely ignored by Western mass media. The resulting experience of contingency, uncertainty and obscurity does not only reflect the elusiveness of Mosse's "impenetrable, ghost-like subject" but also his subjective encounter with a "tragic landscape" that turns into a disorienting "place of reflexivity and scepticism".<sup>43</sup>

In an attempt to make visible what is beyond the limits of language, Mosse shows eerie panoramas of fuchsia coloured hills and forests inhabited by young soldiers, refugees and civilians, in order to offer opposition to our growing indifference

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<sup>42</sup> See Campbell, "Geopolitics and Visuality", 380.

<sup>43</sup> See Richard Mosse, *Infra: Photographs by Richard Mosse* (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2011), 130f.

towards wartime atrocities as the result of constant and relentless media exposure.<sup>44</sup> [fig. 15] The materiality of the medium (Kodak Aerochrome film) creates a sense of uneasiness that results from the visual tension between the psychedelic beauty of the scarlet landscapes and the mute horrors inscribed in them; a sublimity that results from the overlapping sensations of dismay and thrill. The use of infrared film turns Mosse's photographs into what W. J. T. Mitchell has called "metapictures", "pictures



**Fig. 15:** Richard Mosse: *Men Of Good Fortune*, North Kivu, Eastern Congo, 2011 (from the photo project *Infra*)

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<sup>44</sup> It should be emphasised, however, that Mosse is not the first artist to draw attention to the violent conflict in the Congo. See for instance Renzo Martens' controversial film *Enjoy Poverty* (2007) that presents images of poverty as a lucrative export commodity and encourages Congolese photographers to take pictures of war and disaster and to sell them to international news agencies. The film suggests that local people should benefit from and exploit the 'raw material' of deprivation instead of leaving this 'resource' to foreign photojournalists and aid organisations. A very different approach to the war in Congo offers Lisa Jackson's film *The Greatest Silence. Rape in the Congo* (2008) that addresses the issue of widespread rape and sexual violence against women as a systematic military strategy employed by different militia groups as well as the Congolese army. Despite the unspeakable atrocity of these crimes and their devastating effects on local communities, most perpetrators never face legal prosecution and generally go unpunished.

that show themselves in order to *know* themselves.”<sup>45</sup> Self-knowledge here means to show the picture as picture that is not only aware of its own materiality and positionality but also of the necessary failure to adequately convey the complexity of its subject. The experience of contingency that derives from its relation to more conventional forms of photojournalism thus always contains a reflection of its own conditions of possibility. The ambiguity or “multistability” (45) of “pictorial self-referentiality” (56) as presented in *Infra*, has two important political implications. As Mitchell points out, the ambiguity and contingency of the metapicture is not only a critical reflection on the nature of visual presentations but also on the position of the viewer and “the use of metapictures as instruments in the understanding of pictures seems inevitably to call into question the self-understanding of the observer.” (57) The artistic self-reflexivity of the metapicture thus corresponds with Georg Lukács’ discussion of the aesthetics of the modern novel as mentioned in chapter 1: “The contingent world and the problematic individual are realities which mutually determine one another.”<sup>46</sup> In other words, since the modern period, any perceived uncertainty about the world can no longer be presented without simultaneously problematising the enquiring individual.

According to Mosse, the self-reflexive character of his pictures, resulting from his distinct use of photographic material that deliberately avoids any form of natural or self-evident appearance, was inspired by the tradition of the so called ‘Claude glass’.<sup>47</sup> The Claude glass is a small, tinted and convex mirror that was used by 18th century landscape painters (as well as tourists and poets) to reflect their surrounding environments and to see familiar landscapes in a different light.<sup>48</sup> Due to its capacity to modify visual perception, this small ocular device, which received its name from the French painter Claude Lorrain, has been identified as the “first optic machine of

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<sup>45</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essay on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 48. Subsequent references are made in the text.

<sup>46</sup> Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 78.

<sup>47</sup> See Mosse, *Infra*, 132.

<sup>48</sup> See Arnaud Maillet, *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art*, trans. Jeff Fort (New York: Zone Books, 2004), 15f.

modernity” and is considered exemplary for the modernisation of vision.<sup>49</sup> Mosse’s use of Aerochrome film functions as a radically advanced version of the tinted baroque mirror and it may therefore not be surprising that Mosse’s surreal landscapes of lush rolling hills in magenta, ruby and scarlet hues, dotted with trees, huts and cattle, resemble red-tinged versions of the bucolic idylls of Claude Lorrain or J. M. W. Turner. It is Mosse’s material choice of image-making that has the capacity to turn into a political reflection on the visibility of social conflicts and the limits of photographic representation more generally. Here it is the material quality of their work that makes something visible, generates attention and triggers processes of thinking. “Thinking”, Connolly writes, “is often inspired by surprising encounters, either between new events and established thought-imbued conventions or between those conventions and something mute in the world that has not yet been translated (that is, lifted and altered) onto the register of thought.”<sup>50</sup>

The ‘surprising encounters’ of aesthetic experiences that may (or may not) trigger individual and collective thought processes are often inseparable from their material manifestations. It is thus also the materiality of visual objects that disrupts conventional modes of seeing and showing and that may trigger questions regarding the scrutinising and investigatory capacity of traditional photojournalism - as well as its assumed relation between seeing and knowing. It is the potentially self-reflecting capacity of innovative forms of image-making, which not only unsettle sedimented habits of seeing but ultimately unsettle the viewer herself by challenging any presumed or clearly defined distance between viewing subject and photographic object. But of course, the politics of these contingent effects are not exhausted by an artistic visual opposition. From an agonistic perspective one could say that the cognitive sensations triggered by Mosse’s photographs, his aesthetic gesture and ‘pictorial self-referentiality’, constitutes a retort to Rancière’s scenario of the police intervention,

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<sup>49</sup> See Lars Kiel Bertelsen, “The Claude Glass: A Modern Metaphor between Word and Image,” *Word & Image* 20, no.3 (2004): 182-190.

<sup>50</sup> Connolly, *Neuropolitics*, 95.

which “consists in recalling the obvious of what there is, or rather of what there is not, and its slogan is: ‘Move along! There is nothing to see here!’”<sup>51</sup>

Instead of moving along and looking away, Mosse’s images urge the viewer to look again and to look closer, to stop and to realise that there is still something to be seen. Here, the presentation of contingency through a ‘metapicture’ is an attempt to make something visible at all, a reflection of the artist’s struggle to depict complex social relations and human activities that take place in a seemingly arcane and confusing landscape. Mosse’s work thus offers a mode of visual enquiry that combines factual, fictional and imaginative elements. Rather than trying to record specific events within a violent conflict or to create its narrative, Mosse’s pictures reflect the complexity of a political constellation that cannot be squeezed into the logic of Western media outlets whose image economy prefers clear fault lines and simple dramaturgy. The civil war in Eastern Congo sits uncomfortably in such a grid. The current conflict, which has its origins in the so called ‘Great War of Africa’, has devastated a number of countries in the African Great Lakes region from the mid 1990s to the mid 2000s and claimed an estimated six million casualties.<sup>52</sup> Burdened with a colonial legacy that included the relentless exploitation of human beings and natural resources alike, the new conflict still revolves around the immense natural riches of the Congo and sees a confusing and ever changing number of conflicting parties. In contrast to the work of Simon Norfolk, the violence and destruction of the war is not inscribed into the ruins of buildings and human artefacts but in the landscape itself, and even there it leaves “almost no perceptible trace on the land”.<sup>53</sup>

*Infra*’s contingent moment that oscillates between the absence and presence of conflict does not simply adhere to the logic of photojournalism or war ‘coverage’ that tries hard to present comprehensible and easily digestible impressions of events that

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<sup>51</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Ten Theses on Politics,” in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 37.

<sup>52</sup> For comprehensive accounts of the political conflicts in Congo see Gérard Prunier, *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Jason K. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: The Collapse of the Congo and the Great War of Africa* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

<sup>53</sup> See Mosse, *Infra*, 131.

blend in smoothly with the dominant economy of media attention and trigger viewer responses that follow what Debbie Lisle has called “the predictable emotional pathway of shock → pity → compassion → anger → political action.”<sup>54</sup> The visual presentation of ambivalence and hesitation is not simply a moment of counter-visibility but also an acceptance of the complexity of the situation it attempts to render visible and the limitations of any outside knowledge regarding the motives, participants, strategies and goals of this conflict. Therefore, *Infra* makes no efforts to explain, judge or analyse. Instead, it highlights the dire and difficult situation of a region that has fallen under the radar of global media concern. The description of Mosse’s infra-red photographs as “metapictures” does not only pertain to their self-reflexive character or their conditions of possibility but also to their capacity to destabilise the self-understanding of the observer. I suggest that *Infra* challenges the position of the viewer on two different levels.

First, the viewer is challenged to reflect on the role of photography as a visual medium and its capacity to display what is mainly invisible, its capacity to induce affective responses that oscillate between curiosity and uneasiness, perplexity and aesthetic pleasure. Rather than being the illustration of an argument or the factual presentation of an event, photographs organise our attention and demand our response through the evocation of sometimes intense, transient, or contradictory feelings, which do not necessarily translate into cognitive knowledge. This experience may then be related to more habitual forms of media image consumption in the context of war journalism and the viewer may ask how exactly Mosse’s pictures differ from the images we see from other war zones in Africa and other parts of the world. And the viewer may ask further how these pictures disrupt a logic of news images that prefers the reduction of complexity and the presentation of alleged certainties to more cautious or sceptical approaches. Richard Mosse’s pictures induce a sense of contingency in the viewer by questioning individual knowledge acquisition through journalistic images and by challenging the conventional dramaturgy of news coverage and war reporting more generally. Consequently, it is this visual experience of

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<sup>54</sup> Lisle, “The Surprising Detritus of Leisure”, 878.

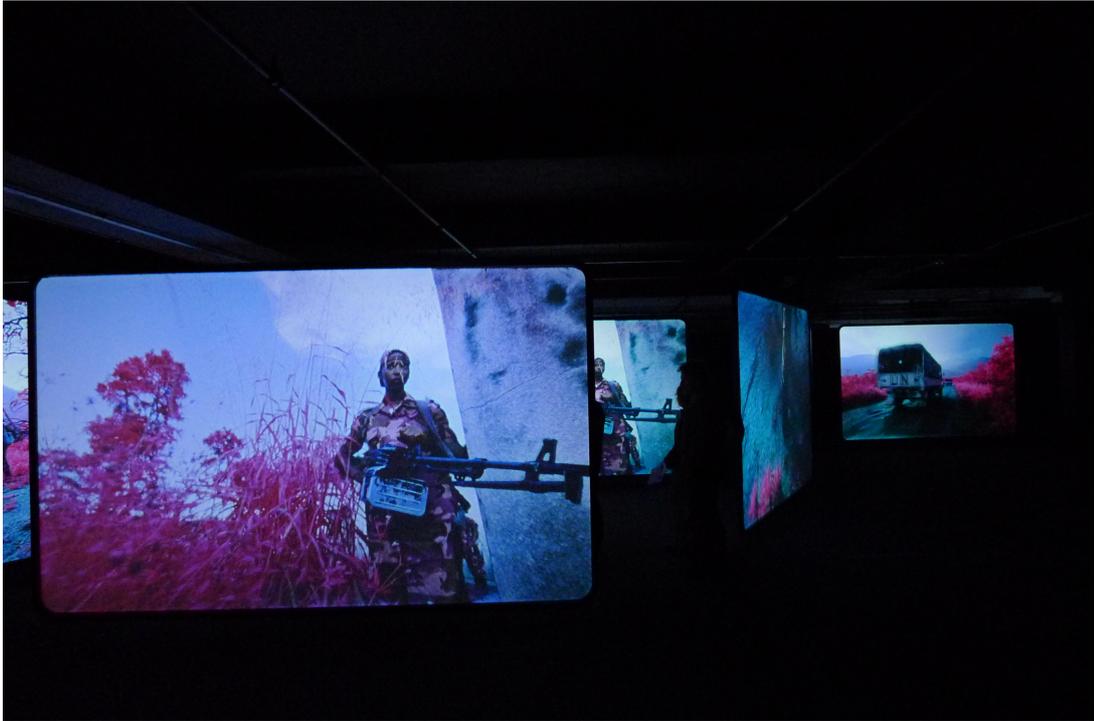
contingency that may encourages critical reflection on the journalistic production, circulation and perception of images as well as the role they play in political discourses and decision making processes.

Second, Mosse's photographs of eerie magenta landscapes on which the fierce conflict has left hardly recognisable scars, also questions the viewer's seemingly detached vantage point, from where the violence and poverty in Central Africa can be neutrally observed and analysed. Instead, the viewer may come to the conclusion that the invisible conflict in Eastern Congo is not least fought over the country's natural riches, fuelled by an insatiable global demand for minerals such as cassiterite, wolframite and coltan (as well as gold and diamonds) that are essential for the production of consumer electronics, such as mobile phones and laptops. Mosse's creation of photographic metapictures, thus contributes to an awareness of the historical, economic and political involvement Western countries have in this conflict. The observer's engagement with these metapictures does not occur, as Mitchell reminds us, "in some disembodied realm outside of history" but is "embedded in specific discourses, disciplines, and regimes of knowledge."<sup>55</sup> Without being reducible to a single political issue, the openness and contingency of Mosse's photographs conjure up a dense and complex net of political and aesthetic associations that may include, but are not limited to, the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda, the atrocities of ethnic cleansing and sexual violence or the traumatic legacy of the Belgian colonial regime. These associations also emphasise that the Congolese war is not simply a remote 'African conflict' but deeply entangled with European politics and history.

This is not to say, however, that emotional and cognitive responses to those images are easily directed towards preconceived political ends. The sensual excitement and affective intensity, the experience of contingency as unpredictable and unruly affective energy is felt even stronger in Mosse's multichannel video installation *The Enclave*. Originally commissioned for the Irish Pavilion at the 55th Venice Biennale (2013), Mosse uses 16mm infrared film to approach the confusing conflict in Eastern Congo. [fig. 16] The installation consists of six double-sided screens, installed in a

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<sup>55</sup> Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 48.



**Fig. 16:** Installation shot. Richard Mosse: *The Enclave* (16mm infrared film transferred to HD video, 39 minutes 25 seconds across six screens. Produced in North and South Kivu, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, 2012-13) Shown at The Vinyl Factory Space at the Brewer Street Car Park in London, 4th - 26th April 2014.

large darkened room to create a physically immersive experience.<sup>56</sup> The screens show in interrupted sequences different scenes and impressions that the viewer is at odds to put together in a meaningful way. The different fragments are accompanied by a mixture of sounds and noises that further intensify the aesthetic experience and the viewer's sense of spatial as well as semantic disorientation. Most sequences consist of long tracking shots that give the viewer a sense of a disembodied presence, of simultaneously being close to and distanced from the shown scenes. When I first saw *The Enclave* at the Brewer Street Car Park in London the immersive experience of Mosse's film was overwhelming and disturbing. On multiple screens I watched confusing and incoherent scenes, for instance, of men patrolling through jungle and surreal grassy landscapes in pink colour, people shouting, eating together, shooting their guns, chasing each other, moving a wooden house through a small village, attending

<sup>56</sup> In a recent London exhibition of *The Enclave* at The Vinyl Factory Space at the Brewer Street Car Park in Soho (4th - 26th April 2014), this experience was further intensified by the underground setting and concrete structure of its surroundings.

a funeral, etc. The shaky hand-held camera of cinematographer Trevor Tweeten and the minimalist soundtrack of Mosse's composer and sound designer Ben Frost further increase the intensity of the experience by making it truly multi-sensual and visceral. The uneasiness and tension that is felt whilst simultaneously watching the various films on different screens overflow any clear or clearly articulable political position. However, the problem I felt here was that despite all its productive ambiguity, there was also a risk of reproducing Western stereotypes of African conflicts as being irrational, barbaric and obscure.

The experience of contingency and the unruliness of its affective intensities in Mosse's work resonates with the aesthetic perception of Africa as an object and construct of the European gaze. Here contingency does not guarantee a progressive politics of critical reflection, self-awareness or challenging photojournalistic conventions but falls prey to cultural associations and stereotyping that Mosse cannot fully escape. His feverish red images of the Congolese jungle and the dark blue waters of the Congo river evoke, whether intentionally or not, references to Josef Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899) and Francis Ford Coppola's psychedelic cinematic adaptation, *Apocalypse now* (1979), which both oscillate between the sublime and the shocking, natural beauty and human tragedy. Mosse's own problematic position as white European male who sets out to draw 'secrets' from an unknown 'Africa' is thus inevitably reflected in his visual work. Like the reflections of a Claude mirror, Mosse's photographs blur the boundaries between nature and culture; the tinted landscapes and crimson forests turn into metaphors of human terror and violence whose dark and impenetrable secrets can only be partially disclosed. By the same token, it is the visceral life of the Congo river itself and the murmuring jungle along its banks that echo Colonel Kurtz's infamous last words at the end of Conrad's novel: "The dusk was repeating them (*Kurtz's last words*) in a persistent whisper all around us, in a whisper that seemed to swell menacingly like the first whisper of a rising wind. 'The horror! the horror!'"<sup>57</sup> Despite all iconic attempts to encourage self-reflection and to 'challenge' the viewer's position, both *The Enclave* and *Infra* create an affective encoun-

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<sup>57</sup> Joseph Conrad (1899), *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 2007), 96.

ter with an impervious and incomprehensible topography that is invisibly yet undeniably haunted by violence and terror.

I claim that the stimulating effects of, and affective responses to, Mosse's images are always at risk of indulging in their mesmerising and surreal appearance without necessarily engaging with the ethical problem that is posed by the visual conflation of beauty and horror. The encounter between a viewer and both *The Enclave* and *Infra* unleashes unpredictable feelings and associations that are largely autonomous from Mosse's intentions and the viewer's expectations. Furthermore, the experience of contingency and ambiguity is so strong that it far exceeds a simple counter-hegemonic gesture or the disruption of a symbolic order. The engagement with contingency goes well beyond an ideological war of position. The affective responses to Mosse's work are too versatile and unpredictable to be exhausted by the struggle between two competing political positions. It is rather a micropolitical experience that occurs on many different levels of perception and thinking that resonates with multiple cultural memories, other sounds and images as Connolly has pointed out. But all those stimulating effects come at the cost of being perceived as detached from any real life events because of the images' surreal character or of reproducing African stereotypes. This is not to say, however, that these psychedelic and delirious images simply show the Congo as a far away place of archaic conflicts, mysterious culture, and unfathomable ethnic constellations that, from a Western perspective, presents itself as sublime aesthetic experience that oscillates between the arranged beauty of Claude Lorrain's landscapes and the visceral horrors of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Rather, the contingency and ambiguity of Mosse's photo series constitutes a risky and fragile gesture towards our own aesthetic and cultural associations as well as the power relations to which they are bound. David Campbell points at the importance of photojournalism for the visual performance of geopolitics and the construction of political identities.<sup>58</sup> In so doing, he identifies two problems. First, he criticises the conventional use of photojournalism as part of journalistic news coverage that, more often than not, merely illustrates preconceived opinions

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<sup>58</sup> See David Campbell, "Geopolitics and Visuality". Subsequent references are made in the text.

and interpretations. Second, in his analysis of the photographic representation of the Darfur conflict Campbell criticises a Western view on ‘African conflicts’ that often draws, consciously or not, on colonial and imperial preconceptions of Africa as a ‘dark’ and mysterious continent, thus contributing to “the contemporary visual performance of ‘Africa’.” (359)

I argue that even Mosse’s innovative and ‘progressive’ method of image making ultimately struggles to fully overcome those patterns. In Mosse’s work, the dynamic and fluctuating identities of the participants in the Congolese conflict are not presented as fixed or reified identities but as elusive combatants that are mainly distinguishable by their sparse topographical traces. The distinction between pastoral and farming ways of life is closely linked to the territorial claims of different ethnic groups that become discernible in the landscape itself. Here, the boundaries between pasture land and farmland signify more than alternative types of agricultural practice but constitute highly politicised fault lines in an intricate, conflictive landscape. [fig. 17] Mosse’s photo series creates a perplexing topography of the events in Eastern Congo in which the viewer follows Mosse’s journey through the rivers, jungles and bushland of the civil war regions. This journey is also an affective odyssey through strange, disturbing and beautiful images whose atmosphere of confusion and uneasiness seems to reflect Mosse’s own subjective experience. The ‘double indexicality’ of Mosse’s work, which points outwards as well as inwards, epitomises the entanglement between recording gaze and productive introspection, aesthetic modification and affective subjectivity whose dialectical relation forestalls any final conclusions or statements. The political potency of Mosse’s photographs, which emerges from its contingent character, also unfolds in relation and contrast to other modes of image-making and photojournalist practices. Thus, the destabilising character of *Infra* in their function as ‘metapictures’ is derived from its reflection on a more general understanding of the political role of photojournalism in the 21st century, its capacity to visually represent violent conflicts and our assumed associations between seeing and knowing. Mosse’s photo project thus meets Campbell’s demand that “we need to depart from an understanding of photographs as illustrations and carriers of information



**Fig. 17:** Installation shot. Richard Mosse, *The Enclave*, The Vinyl Factory Space at the Brewer Street Car Park, London (4th April - 26th April 2014). Left: *A Thousand Plateaus*, 2011, C-print, 65.5 x 120 in. The hilly border between Congo and Rwanda at Kibati, North Kivu. Right: *Of Lilies and Remains*, 2012, C-print, 40 x 50 in. Skull of a victim of the massacre carried out by the FDLR in Busurungi in 2009.

(which a focus on their content could suggest) to an appreciation of pictures as ciphers that prompt affective responses.”<sup>59</sup> These affective responses constitute the ultimate contingent moment, what Brian Massumi called “bifurcation point”, from which thoughts and emotion can unfold in unpredictable ways.<sup>60</sup> Artistic practices can create new types of images whose materiality and temporality generate creative strategies for arranging complexities and stimulating affective responses. Those affective responses that Campbell asks for are at risk to turn into a self-indulgent sentiment that reflects a European perspective on Africa that oscillates between the veneration of its beautiful landscapes and the political horrors that are inscribed into it. Mosse’s photographic project *Infra*, and by the same token *The Enclave*, that both grapple with the impenetrable complexity and arcane invisibility of the violent conflicts in Eastern Congo, come very close to tap into already existing European preju-

<sup>59</sup> Campbell, “Geopolitics and Visuality”, 379.

<sup>60</sup> See Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 32f.

dices of the ‘African crisis’ as being “distant, esoteric, extremely violent, rooted in complex ethnic and historical factors which few understood, and devoid of any identifiable practical interest for the rich countries.”<sup>61</sup> The aesthetic and political risk of making strange, of making use of the sublime, and of making something visible that has slipped off the conventional field of vision, is the partial creation and accentuation of spatial and cultural differences. The effects of contingency in Mosse’s work is therefore more complex as well as more fragile than an assumed ‘disruptive’ gesture against allegedly self-evident and objective photojournalistic images. Mosse’s pictures not simple constitute agonistic public spaces where the hegemonic symbolic order of photojournalistic mass media is disrupted and alternative perspectives of violent conflict come to the fore. Presenting the complexity of the war in Congo is at risk to turn into European navel-gazing that aesthetically reflects the sensitivities of a young white man in Africa. The unruly affects triggered by the uncertainty of the photographs and the aesthetic appeal of the infrared film opens up a broad range of associations, thoughts and feelings. The ambiguous and undetermined character of Mosse’s images might trigger reflections on the European involvement in African conflicts and the ultimate impossibility of capturing the complexity of violent conflicts in the narrow confinement of a single photographic frame. The inevitable risk, however, is that this political momentum freezes in an empty aesthetic gesture and confirms Western stereotypes of African conflicts.

Playing devil’s advocate, one could even ask whether the broader political context Mosse draws on is not simply a tokenistic attribute that adds to the aesthetic appeal of his photographs a veneer of social relevance that gains attraction in the international art market. Mosse’s award of the Deutsche Börse Photography Prize may support that suggestion. Those speculations aside, I do think that Mosse’s work has something to say about the relationship between violence and photography and encourage the beholder to open up to new modes of seeing and thinking about violent

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<sup>61</sup> See Gérard Prunier, *Darfur: The Ambiguous Genocide* (Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 124.

conflicts (its stimulating dimension) but simultaneously we must recognise the risk that comes with its radical ambivalence.

#### **IV. Trevor Paglen: Blurry observations, secrecy and the public sphere**

As a conclusive complement to Simon Norfolk's contemplation on Afghanistan and Richard Mosse's investigation into the war ridden landscapes of the Eastern Congo, I would like to consider the work of human geographer and photographer *Trevor Paglen*. Paglen directs our views from the traces of ruins (Norfolk) and landscapes (Mosse) to clandestine military projects that operate hidden from the public eye. The secret places and undisclosed activities Paglen attempts to photograph, include remote and secluded military installations in the southwestern United States as well as classified spacecraft in Earth orbit. Paglen's photographs investigate secretive governmental and military operations that are deliberately withdrawn from public perception and can only be made visible with the help of optical instruments such as astrophotography and high-resolution lenses. His photographic engagement with contingency is presented through distant observations that show the observer secret objects and activities without actually revealing them.

The 'disclosure' of secrets in Paglen's work questions the wider truth claims of photojournalism and the belief in its revelatory and representative capacity. The contingent character of his photographs results from pointing at something barely visible whilst refusing to provide any reliable or significant information. The viewer's cognitive frustration regarding the photograph's indexical quality is partially compensated by the aesthetic appeal of their iconic appearance. Even though Paglen's blurred images of satellites and military installations do not provide the viewer with any clear information about secret government operations, they make visible a shadow world that exists in the midst of familiar surroundings. The obscurity, indistinctness and uncertainty of his photographs show that there is something out there that the naked eye usually cannot see. Similar to Mosse's work, the camera provides a tool for making something visible. Thus, what the landscape camera is for Norfolk

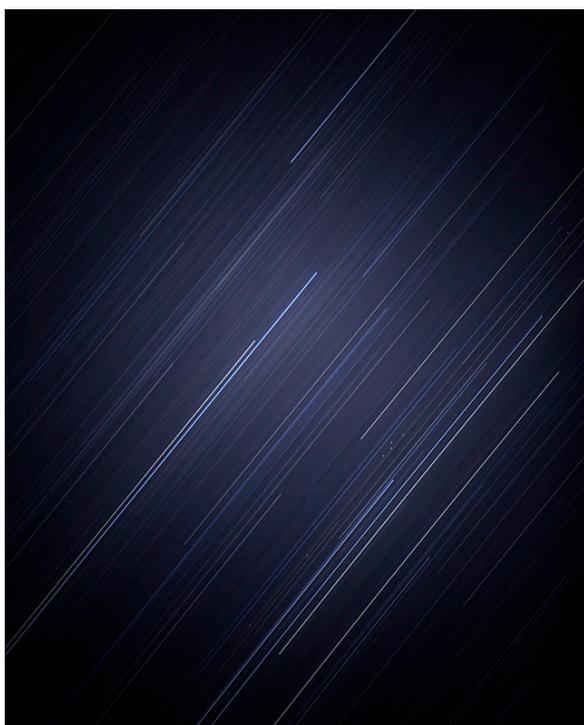
and the infrared film for Mosse, are the telephoto lenses and astronomy cameras for Paglen. In all three cases, the materiality of the images plays a vital part in establishing their political character. Furthermore, what is essential for the present context is the role of contingency in Paglen's photographs both as an experience and as a mode of operation. The political efficacy of his photographs does not emerge from cognitive disclosure but from affective perturbation, that is, from revealing without enlightening, comparable to Mosse's infrared pictures of the war in Congo. Paglen's blurred photographs of distant military installations or the light trails of an orbital surveillance satellite do not provide much detail regarding the secret activities and objects that surround us but they indicate that something is out there; that new forms of power and violence have stealthily crept into the fissures between the visible and the invisible. In contrast to Mosse's attempt to present a complex and confusing violent conflict whose key locations, actors and events the remote viewer struggles to comprehend, Paglen investigates in his work "how the political geographies that structure our everyday lives are becoming more and more abstract, and ... how new forms of domination arise in the gap and limits of our everyday perception."<sup>62</sup> As I show in the following, the experience of contingency in Paglen's work cannot be reduced to predefined political positions of agonism or resistance. I propose that the political relevance of Paglen's photographs rather results from the multiple ways in which they speak to the viewer about militarisation, technology and the public sphere. At the same time, however, the contingent moment in Paglen's work always presents a risk of appearing as too abstract and contemplative to create political subjectivities or to trigger 'critical' reflection.

In his "critical geography of orbital space" Trevor Paglen tries to visualise secret military programs and satellite operations through what he calls "minoritarian empiricism".<sup>63</sup> The term 'minoritarian empiricism' refers in particular to Paglen's methodology in *The Other Night Sky*, an ongoing project that aims at tracking and

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<sup>62</sup> Trevor Paglen, "What Greg Roberts saw: Visuality, Intelligibility, and Sovereignty - 36,000Km over the Equator," in *The Visual Cultures Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (London: Routledge, 2013), 207.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



**Fig. 18:** Trevor Paglen: *PAN (Unknown: USA-207)*, 2010-11

photographing classified satellites and other space-crafts in Earth orbit. [fig. 18] The blurry, almost abstract photograph stands paradigmatically for Paglen's visual research and is described as follows: "This image depicts an array of spacecraft in geostationary orbit at 34.5 degrees east, a position over central Kenya. In the lower right of the image is a cluster of four spacecraft. The second from the left is known as PAN."<sup>64</sup> Paglen states that PAN is a classified American satellite launched from Cape Canaveral in September 2009 but it has

never been officially claimed by any intelligence or military agency. There are rumours amongst space analysts that these satellites are used by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and act as a communications relay for armed CIA predator and reaper drones operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. All this, however, remains speculation.

For his research, Paglen relies on an international network of hobby astronomers who provide relevant data regarding the trajectory, location and timing of the targeted secret objects.<sup>65</sup> These astronomers, who are scattered around the world, collect data and try to detect military aircraft that is not officially acknowledged but that appears in various publicly accessible documents such as military budget reports or as flickering lights in the night sky. The tracking of secret spacecraft, such as reconnaissance, military, meteorological or eavesdropping satellites, constitutes the main

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<sup>64</sup> For detailed information about his work see Trevor Paglen's homepage: <http://www.paglen.com/?l=work&s=othernightsky>. Accessed: 28/06/2015.

<sup>65</sup> See Trevor Paglen, *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes* (New York: Aperture, 2010), 85.

field of interest for the research network of a group of amateur astronomers. Paglen provides a detailed account of the workings, equipment and strategies of these hobbyist satellite watchers in his article “What Greg Roberts saw”.<sup>66</sup> It is hobby astronomers like Greg Roberts who provide Paglen with the information so essential for the preparation of his photographic work. The group of amateurs Paglen collaborates with is only equipped with ordinary binoculars and telescopes but, over the years, has managed to accumulate a comprehensive amount of data that is now catalogued and shared online. Based on these information, Paglen calculates the likely time and position of the objects he wants to photograph. The political efficacy of this project thus results from its inextricably intertwined aesthetics and methodology. The photographer as heroic, creative individual is put in perspective by locating him within a broader community of hobby astronomers. The photographic project of ‘looking back’ at the authorities behind the secretive objects that surround us would be too vast and complex to be organised and executed by one individual alone. In that sense the photographs of *The Other Night Sky* themselves have a crucial yet invisible dimension. They are the product of an international multitude whose combined efforts only are capable of creating these pictures and of bringing them to democratic and artistic fruition.<sup>67</sup> The important aspect here is not so much what can be seen on a particular photograph but that the photograph exists at all. The photograph is just as much a document of the secretive satellites as of the empirical observations, astronomical curiosity and the shared civic uneasiness of a group of people. I claim, however, that the political implications of contingency in Paglen’s work have a strong agonistic dimension but they are not fully exhausted in it.

From such an agonistic perspective on contingency, as represented by Chantal Mouffe, Paglen’s work constitutes a public space or a “battleground”<sup>68</sup> where antagonistic positions and political alternatives to a hegemonic system can be articu-

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<sup>66</sup> See Paglen, “What Greg Roberts saw”.

<sup>67</sup> For the notion of the multitude in contemporary photography see Steve Edwards, “Commons and Crowds: Figuring Photography from Above and Below,” *Third Text* 23, no.4 (2009): 447-464.

<sup>68</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Art and Democracy: Art as an Agonistic Intervention in Public Space,” *Open* 14 (2008): 10.

lated. For Mouffe, creating such spaces of contestation is the critical function of public art. She writes: “According to the agonistic approach, critical art is art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate. It is constituted by a manifold of artistic practices aiming at giving a voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.”<sup>69</sup> From this perspective, Paglen’s photographic gesture of ‘looking back’ at clandestine government and military activities challenges hegemonic power relations - including the regimes of visibility and invisibility that maintain them. Paglen and his supporters would thus be radical democratic activists who challenge a hegemonic order by pointing at their hidden and obscure workings. For Mouffe, critical art is thus not so much the creation of altered sensitivities, unpredictable modes of seeing and thinking, but rather the provision of a platform for the presentation of already existing but marginalised positions. Even though this approach to Paglen’s work might be somewhat reductive for it sidelines affective unpredictability and limits the radical openness of Paglen’s photography, I suggest that an agonistic interpretation of his work still has *something* to say about its political potency. I elaborate on the agonistic dimension of contingency in Paglen’s work in the following paragraphs.

In *The Other Night Sky*, for instance, the limitations of vision and visibility become prominent since even though the pictures show that there is something to be seen, they deny the onlooker any certainties regarding the exact identity or location of what we see. Jonah Weiner writes: “Paglen said that blurriness serves both an aesthetic and an ‘allegorical’ function. It makes his images more arresting while providing a metaphor for the difficulty of uncovering the truth in an era when so much government activity is covert.”<sup>70</sup> I propose however, that Paglen’s pictures indicate even more. Rather than ‘a metaphor for the difficulty of uncovering the truth’, as Weiner writes, the fuzziness and vagueness of Paglen’s photographs show that the very categories of the secret and the public have partially collapsed into each other and the

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<sup>69</sup> Mouffe, “Art and Democracy”, 12.

<sup>70</sup> Jonah Weiner, “Prying Eyes: Trevor Paglen makes Art out of Government Secrets,” *The New Yorker*, October 22, 2012, 56f.

difficulty of ‘uncovering’ the truth is not a matter of the fact that “so much government activity is covert” but that so much information is revealed, leaked and exposed on a daily basis. What does ‘uncovering the truth’ mean in a context where truth claims and secrecy, concealment and revealment are inextricably intertwined? Where both categories coexist in a symbiotic relation in order to conjure the democratic ideal of a critical ‘public sphere’?

Drawing attention to secretive governmental activities does not equal the production of socially momentous ‘information’ and Paglen’s photographs challenge any assumptions regarding the photographic relation between seeing and knowing. Behind the abstract beauty of their surface, Paglen’s pictures harbour a deep scepticism not only against the revealing capacity of images but of the Enlightenment principles of publicity, visibility and political agency in the so called ‘information age’ more generally. The understanding of photography and democracy in Paglen’s work is thus almost diametrically opposed to the rather liberal account of Robert Hariman and John Louis Luciates, who argue for the importance of photojournalism regarding the construction of a visual public sphere. They write: “At some point democracy is a way of seeing, and democratic self-reflection will be incomplete until ordinary citizens are able to discuss whether their habitual technologies and habits for viewing the world are helping them to sustain themselves as a public.”<sup>71</sup> But, as Paglen attempts to show, our ‘habitual technologies and habits for viewing’ will inevitably fail us, since they always create invisibilities and blind spots that indicate the utopian character of a fully actualised, all encompassing public. For that reason, we have to look closer at the relation between the public and the secret and its conceptual implications for democratic thinking.

The relationship between publicity and secrecy in contemporary political theory has been extensively explored by Jodi Dean, who, drawing on the work of Bentham, Habermas and Koselleck, argues that “democratic politics has been formatted through a dynamic of concealment and disclosure, through the primary opposition

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<sup>71</sup> Robert Hariman and John Louis Luciates, *No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 289.

between what is hidden and what is revealed.”<sup>72</sup> As a result of this binary matrix, disclosure and publicity in contemporary democracy are closely linked to normative concepts such as openness, inclusivity, equality, visibility, etc. and have turned into the dominant ideology of what Dean calls “technoculture” - the interplay of entertainment and communication networks that constitute “communicative capitalism” (1). According to Dean, in communicative capitalism, the public sphere is a vital ideological promise because it “provides democratic theory with the reassuring fantasy of a unitary site and a subject of democratic governance.” (9) Dean argues further that the ideal of a “unified public of everyone” displaces antagonism from politics.<sup>73</sup> She writes: “The antagonism reappears, however, in the form of the secret. Protecting the fantasy of a unitary public, a political ‘all’, from its own impossibility, the secret renders as a contingent gap what is really the fact of the fundamental split, antagonism, and rapture of politics.” (9) For Dean the concept of a unified public, or even of a public sphere, is an ideological fallacy that seeks to erase the antagonism necessary for politics. The secret is thus publicity’s constitutive outside that legitimises its existence, yet indicates the impossibility of a wholly accomplished public sphere. “Publicity requires the secret” (16) but at the same time, the secret indicates the impurity of the public, that which has to be revealed in order to fully actualise its normative promises of visibility, accessibility, equality, accountability, etc.

Ten years later, however, Paglen’s work gives Dean’s argument a new twist. When Dean characterises “the secret as the exception to the norm of publicity” (11), Paglen’s photographs revert her claim by showing that in contemporary democracy publicity has become the exception to the norm of secrecy. The blurred traces of classified surveillance satellites and the abstract colour fields of secret military installations show that Paglen’s visual ‘disclosures’ of governmental secrets no longer indicate “the fact of the fundamental split, antagonism, and rapture of politics”, as Dean argues, but rather that the secret has turned into its own aesthetic appearance.

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<sup>72</sup> Jodi Dean, *Publicity’s Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca/NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 16. Subsequent references are made in the text.

<sup>73</sup> See Jodi Dean, “Secrecy since September 11,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 6 (2004) 3: 378.

Pamela Lee points out that the contemporary secret, or the open secret, is essential for our ‘dream of transparency’ regarding the public access to meaningful information and the free flow of knowledge. She writes: “The secret is itself an ideological contrivance; its withholding - its *visible* withholding - is as critical to its power as whatever content we might imagine it conceals. Thus the secret paradoxically possesses something like an *appearance* - an aesthetics, if you like.”<sup>74</sup>

The disclosure of the secret and the hidden is no longer a matter of the production of new and meaningful information that automatically exerts an act of democratic scrutiny. Rather, the disclosure of the secret often teeters on the brink of turning into an aesthetic gesture that expresses a nostalgic sentiment towards the idealised transparency, accessibility and rationality of the public. The open secret is visible in order to remain invisible. In other words, the secret has little antagonistic potential anymore, since it has fully blurred into the logic of the public by becoming an integral part of the daily noise of news alerts, information leakage and whistleblowing. I would like to argue instead that the contingent character of Paglen’s photographs derives its political power not from an investigative disclosure but from an act of visual civic engagement that addresses the limitations of the visible as well as our phantasies of public transparency, democratic scrutiny and political agency under the auspices of the ‘information age’. Paglen’s images are reflections of a society whose high degree of militarisation and secrecy has reached a level that seems far beyond the reach of the traditional institutional mechanisms of democratic checks and balances.<sup>75</sup> The spatial distance of orbital spacecraft metaphorically points at the vast gap between governmental and public interests; it indicates a logic of militarisation and perpetual warfare that floats just as freely as the satellites that represent it - far above the public field of perception and entirely detached from the gravity of po-

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<sup>74</sup> Pamela M. Lee, “Open Secret: On the Work of Art between Disclosure and Redaction,” *Artforum* 49 (2011) 9: 223.

<sup>75</sup> In her accompanying essay to Paglen’s photographs, Rebecca Solnit emphasises the intrinsic militarisation of US society: “War is a stain that has sunk so deeply into the fabric of our society that it is now its ordinary colouring; we now live in war as a fish lives in water. Ours is a society of war, and a society at war with itself. This is so pervasive and so accepted that it is invisible.” Rebecca Solnit, “The Visibility Wars,” *Invisible: Covert Operations and Classified Landscapes* by Trevor Paglen (New York: Aperture, 2010), 9.

litical accountability. In fact, the contemporary role of military secrecy and clandestine surveillance is closely linked to the equally invisible and powerful workings of digital capitalism where the greatest threats to political agency, social participation and democratic accountability are posed by invisible forces that reach from digital data accumulation, governmental eavesdropping, to mathematical algorithm that track and connect consumer preferences or synchronise financial transactions, to name but a few. The visual-aesthetic ambiguity of Paglen's photographs is also the result of collaborative research methods, as described above, the collaboration of a network of astronomers who look carefully at what is supposed to be invisible. Thus the very act of looking back facilitates an effective conflation of political thinking and action that is more important than the disclosure of secrets.

From an agonistic perspective on contingency, Paglen's photographs are critical displays of the hazy utopia of a transparent and accessible public sphere that simultaneously constitutes the basis for political participation and the scrutinising counterweight to governmental power. Image-making as a paradigmatic journalistic practice with the aim to reveal and make public is questioned by Paglen in the same way as the concept of a singular public sphere as the locus of progressive democratic action. For instance in his ongoing project *The Other Night Sky*, as mentioned above, Paglen's 'minoritarian empiricism' constitutes an agonistic impulse against the "inextricable link of publicity and secrecy" that represents the universal claim of an all encompassing public, as described by Dean. In this project, a small international group of satellite watchers reminds us of the power of a vigilant and watchful citizenship that claims its "right to look". Paglen's photographs then represent, what Nicholas Mirzoeff would call a 'countervisuality', a mode of resistance against the contemporary 'complex of visibility', resistance against the contemporary visual aesthetic manifestation of authority.<sup>76</sup>

The problem with such agonistic interpretation of contingency is, however, that it leaves little room for images to meaningful affect the viewer beyond the precon-

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<sup>76</sup> See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

ceived dichotomy of domination and resistance thus limiting the versatile potential responses to images. I therefore argue that if we are to take images seriously and to honestly engage with visual material objects as autonomous sources of ‘meaning’, then we have to appreciate their ambiguity and riskiness too. William Connolly points out that artistic practice and aesthetic experience “are all pertinent to the energy of a critical movement. They sometimes encourage new thoughts to surge forward as if from nowhere and then to become infused into critical action.”<sup>77</sup> But, of course, such a ‘critical movement’ is never certain and the political efficacy of contingency is always at the risk of failing to fulfil preconceived ideological functions. This moment of risk is tacitly present in Connolly’s concept of micropolitics, whereas Mouffe’s concept of agonistic public spaces leaves less room for contingency’s unpredictability and unorthodoxy. Even though the political implications of the experience of contingency in Paglen’s photographic work can be interpreted on the level of agonism with valuable results, I argue there is more to the openness and contingency of Paglen’s work. The experience of contingency proves to be multilayered, simultaneously triggering multiple responses and being volatile and fragile in a way that is not accounted for in agonistic approaches. Different and more subtle aspects will come to the fore if we engage more openly with the experience of contingency and relinquish expectations regarding the predictable dichotomies of dominance and resistance, visibility and invisibility whose friction does not create the sole political implications of Paglen’s work. However, engaging more with the materiality of those photographs and the unreliable relations the viewers may develop with them also includes the recognition of their political weakness and affective energies that not necessarily stir up clearly definable political emotions. Against this backdrop, let us take a closer look at Paglen’s photographic practice.

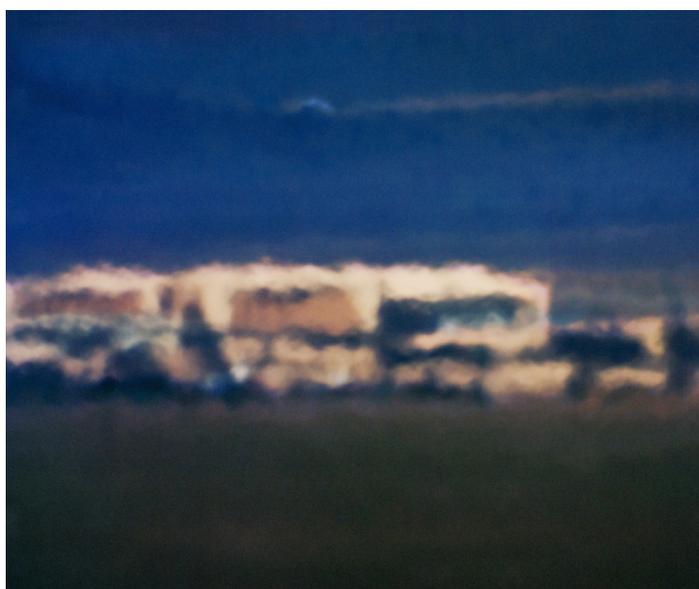
For his project *The Other Night Sky* Paglen uses high-resolution and telescope cameras with long exposure times in order to capture the elusive objects, which eventually appear in the photograph as bright dots, gleaming trails or light swirls against the dark night sky. Also for other projects, such as *Limit Telephotography*,

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<sup>77</sup> Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 192.

Paglen uses professional telephoto lenses in order to photograph secret military installations from great distances. [fig. 19] In so doing, he pursues his interest in the black sites and white spots on the global map of contemporary military operations by looking at remote objects, vertically as well as horizontally. The pictures of military test ranges, chemical and biological proving grounds, surveillance sites, etc. are photographed from distances as far as 42 miles in order to comply with the strict military access restrictions of these areas. The pictures thus created are fuzzy and blurred, bearing more resemblance with abstract colour field painting than with conventional landscape portraits.

Thus Paglen's photographic work sits rather awkwardly between the categories of either landscape photography, documentary or photojournalism. The latter two categories have in common that they are associated with a liberal politics determined to reveal uncomfortable truths or structural injustices.<sup>78</sup> In contrast, Trevor Paglen's work, which is mainly displayed in exhibition spaces and art galleries, is perhaps better



**Fig. 19:** Trevor Paglen, *Open Hangar, 2007, Cactus Flats, NV / Distance ~ 18 miles*

ter described with what Julian Stallabrass calls “fine art photojournalism”, a type of documentary photography that is better known “in the world of fine art than in the mass media”<sup>79</sup>. Julian Stallabrass has introduced this term to describe the work of Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado but it is equally applicable to

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<sup>78</sup> For a critical discussion of this argument see Martha Rosler, “In, Around, and Afterthoughts (on Documentary Photography),” *3 Works* (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006 [1981]), 61-93.

<sup>79</sup> See Julian Stallabrass, “Sebastião Salgado and Fine Art Photojournalism,” *New Left Review* 223, no.1 (1997): 133.

the aesthetically appealing photographs by Trevor Paglen. The attribute of ‘fine art’ has two crucial benefits here: First, it liberates the pictures from any preconceived purpose of revelation, documentation or enlightening. Second, the artistic dimension of Paglen’s work emphasises an element of self-reflexivity that allows for broader and more abstract investigations into the relationship between vision and knowledge; an exploration that goes far beyond the immediate subject matter of individual pictures.

This difficulty to label Paglen’s work, or to put it in neat categories, further emphasises its contingent and ambiguous qualities. The aesthetic fuzziness and obscure content of Paglen’s photographs convey an experience of contingency that stimulates affective moods and cognitive associations rather than providing any self-evident information. Consequently, the paradoxical effect is that the closer we get the less we see, and the secrecy of the objects in Paglen’s photographs ultimately remains. This effect, however, is not only used to present the contradictions and contingencies of political and epistemological visibility, but is also subject to the contingencies of the technological and physical conditions that enable them. As Paglen himself emphasises, the aesthetics of his images in terms of colour, composition or angle are predetermined by the topographic and meteorological conditions he works in, leaving him little leeway regarding his choices of colour, focus or exposure.<sup>80</sup> These conditions create unique images that differ significantly from conventional documentary photography. The use of telescope photography folds an important material dimension into the process of photographic image-making that may elicit in the viewer feelings of uneasiness, threat or aesthetic joy that do not fit easily into a preconceived agonistic “war of positions” but that create an attentiveness in the viewer that may encourage her to engage with the unexpected and the unknown. Rather than encourage the viewer to participate in a radical activist gesture of counter-visibility, as a purely agonistic approach to contingency would have it, Paglen’s images have an important ambiguous and volatile affective dimension too. I argue that it is the affective dimension of contingency in Paglen’s photographs that generate a “produc-

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<sup>80</sup> See Paglen, *Invisible*, 145.

tive uncertainty” meaning that the pictures do not “expose and edify so much as ... confound and unsettle.”<sup>81</sup>

Take as an example Paglen’s photograph *They Watch the Moon* (2010) that shows a classified military listening station deep inside the remote forests of West Virginia. [fig. 20] The station is located at the heart of a so called ‘National Radio Quiet Zone’ where no radio waves including telephone signals, wireless internet or even remote controls are permitted. The listening station is designed to capture radio waves and telemetry signals from around the world that are reflected by the moon’s surface and sent back towards Earth, a phenomenon known as ‘moonbounce’ or ‘Earth-Moon-Earth communication’.<sup>82</sup> The photograph shows a dusky green landscape of rolling hills covered with seemingly pristine forest that features in its distant centre a cluster of tawny glowing dish aerials and parabolic antennas that appear like phosphorescent eggs in a giant nest. In its obscure luminosity and surreal surroundings the image looks more like a scene of science fiction than the site of a science facility. The “science fictional” character of Paglen’s photographs partly emanates from their detachment from an obvious semiotic index and the speculative nature of their subject matter. The science fictional character could be further described by what Roger Luckhurst calls the “technological sublime”<sup>83</sup>, an overpowering feeling of inadequacy or defeat before vistas of nature “fully captured, mediated, or en-framed by technology” (184). Luckhurst attributes a critical dimension to the science fictional and the technological sublime for both are accompanied by modernist sentiments of estrangement and discomfort. According to Luckhurst “the discourse of the sublime allows competing sentiments regarding technological modernity to traverse the frame of the image, allowing us not only to be overwhelmed by the delightful terrors of the sublime affect, but also to begin the work of critique.” (185) I argue that beholding *They Watch The Moon* triggers ‘competing sentiments’ which are not

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<sup>81</sup> Weiner, “Prying Eyes”, 56.

<sup>82</sup> For a brief technical overview see David Schneider, “Moonbounce,” *American Scientist* 89 (2001) 4: 314-315.

<sup>83</sup> See Roger Luckhurst, “Contemporary Photography and the Technological Sublime, or, can there be a Science Fiction Photography?” *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 19, no.2 (2008): 182. Subsequent references are made in the text.



**Fig. 20:** Trevor Paglen: *They Watch the Moon*, 2010

easily steered in a single political direction of criticising secretive military operations or of challenging the utopia of a transparent and accessible public sphere more generally. What Luckhurst dubs the ‘technological sublime’ is here a feeling of eery uneasiness that triggers broader ideas about the modernist human attempt to subdue and master natural processes, or in reverse, the ultimate indifference of natural forces towards human life; or it may indeed trigger thoughts that problematise the reductive dichotomy between the categories of ‘human’ and ‘nature’ and instead reflect on our own precarious embeddedness in various natural force fields. In a final step, these feelings of contingency may stimulate ethical considerations regarding the broader consequences of our interactions with other human and non-human beings. The encounter with Paglen’s photographs then trigger a sense of wonder in regard to our seemingly familiar surroundings that may evolve into thoughts about the ubiquitous and ultimately uncontrollable technologies on which the safety and prosperity of the rich countries increasingly rely. In short, the experience of contingency, and the potential chain of ethico-political considerations it unleashes, shifts from a sense of po-

litical resistance and alterity towards an ethical attitude of respect and responsibility. Paglen's pictures are politically relevant for they create an affective atmosphere capable of modifying our feelings and thoughts in various and unpredictable ways. As William Connolly puts it: "Since thinking operates on several registers of being, and because each register is invested with a set of feelings or intensities, to change your thinking is to modify to some degree the sensibility in which it is set."<sup>84</sup>

It is this appreciation of versatile, erratic and unruly intensities that are missing in a purely agonistic approach towards the experience of contingency in visual aesthetic practices. In the case of Paglen though, the politics of his photographs exceed a mere critical attitude by operating on different subjective registers that are multilayered and subtle. The 'delightful terrors' of the deadly infrastructures shown in his photographs remain mute and their haunting presence seems beyond representation. Instead of limiting the 'critique' in his photographs to the investigative disclosure of secret military installations or to the revelation of the hidden technological mechanisms of contemporary Western societies, Paglen challenges our very assumptions regarding the relationship between vision and knowledge. The undeniable complicity between the technologies Paglen shows in his pictures and the ones that facilitate his own image-making, additionally subvert any ideas of a distanced critical perspective. Ultimately, the aesthetic appeal of his photographs attract and disturb us at the same time, since "the technological sublime, the sublime affect is re-doubled by uncertainty about the indexical or indeed very ontological status of what it is we are looking at."<sup>85</sup> Despite the fact that we can see the geographical location of a classified military installation, the actual objects and its inner workings remain secretive and invisible. Paglen examines the limits of the visible in order to direct the viewer's attention without providing factual information. For Paglen invisibility is not simply the result of topographic, technological and legal restrictions but just as much an aesthetic or even ethical choice in order to express political concerns and scepticism regarding the revelatory use of (journalistic) images and the suggestive relation be-

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<sup>84</sup> Connolly, *Why I am not a Secularist*, 148.

<sup>85</sup> Luckhurst, "Contemporary Photography and the Technological Sublime", 193.

tween seeing and knowing. Paglen's images simultaneously reveal and obfuscate the secretive practices he investigates. He writes:

In all my work, I am interested in the limits of the visible world, in the nature of evidence, and the fuzzy and contradictory relationships between vision, imaging, knowing, belief and truth. I embrace the epistemological and visual contradictions in my work and am most compelled by images that both make claims to represent, and at the same time dialectically undermine, the very claims they seem to put forth.<sup>86</sup>

The work of Trevor Paglen revolves around an engagement with the limitations of our vision, perception and knowledge addressing questions regarding what can be known and seen. Accordingly, Paglen describes his own work as “post-representational photography”<sup>87</sup> meaning photography that is concerned with the material presence of the picture rather than its indexical potential, emphasising that “there is no ‘it’ prior to the image.”<sup>88</sup> The indexical uncertainty and affective unruliness of Paglen's photographs that make them so productive are also at risk of overwhelming the viewer. If the radical openness of the photographs is overstretched, if its iconic appearance becomes too abstract and its indexical reference too vague, the political efficacy is at risk of being indiscernible, of falling far behind agonistic opposition and multilayered thinking. At this moment of excessive contingency the image reveals its fragility, uncertainty as well as its radical autonomy. Take as example Paglen's series *Untitled (Drones)* (2010), where he presents pictures of seemingly empty skies that bear captures such as ‘Reaper Drone’ or ‘Predator Drone’. Instead of any ‘unmanned aerial vehicle’, all one sees are beautiful sky panoramas that resemble in their colour palette the classic landscape paintings of a W. J. T. Turner and Nicolas Poussin or the modernist abstract colour field arrangements of Mark Rothko,

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<sup>86</sup> Paglen, *Invisible*, 151.

<sup>87</sup> Julian Stallabrass, “Negative Dialectics in the Google Era: A Conversation with Trevor Paglen,” *October* 138, Fall (2011): 4.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

Barnett Newman or Ronnie Landfield. Yet, the actual object of the photographs remains mostly invisible (apart from the occasional ghostly trace of a condensation trail) or only appears as a tiny black dot. [fig. 21] When looking at the abstract beauty of those photographs with their painterly tranquility we realise that the political implications of Paglen's photographs cannot emerge from visual indeterminacy and openness alone. The *Untitled (Drones)* series in particular, contrasts and restricts the extreme contingency and blurriness of the photographs with the precise information of the captions. The visual contingency of the photograph can only be perceived as epistemological paradox between seeing and knowing through the enclosure of text. The capture thus deliberately limits the potentially limitless meaning of the picture. Without the capture and the information of the text, Paglen's photographs of drones would lose their political meaning and dissolve into an expression of pure



**Fig. 21:** Trevor Paglen, *Untitled (Reaper Drone)*, 2010

aesthetic abstraction. Here, the stimulating or productive risk of contingency becomes pertinent. The risk of the *Untitled (Drones)* series lies in their radical openness. The pictures elicit from the viewer a sense of beauty and contemplation that might be too weak to enter the threshold of critical engagement with the deadly military instruments hidden in the sky. The relevant subject matter of the picture is thus always at risk of being sidelined by the superficial beauty of its appearance. The pictures are stimulating yet unpredictable. Again, it is this risk of contingency that constitutes both the political strengths and weaknesses of Paglen's photographs. It is not the visual experience of contingency alone that creates the photograph's stimulating risk but the interplay between openness and specificity, image and text. The specific information regarding time and space of the shot stresses the intended documentary character of the photographs and provides the viewer with a cognitive framework against which the affective intensities, speculative associations or imaginary referents, activated through the process of visual perception, can be pitched. The limitations of vision and knowledge reflected in the photographic image can thus only become fully discernible through the interplay of multiple media.

### Conclusion

The above analyses of the works of Simon Norfolk, Richard Mosse and Trevor Paglen have shown that the political potency of photography, which has been characterised by embracing the limits of indexicality, results not from clear visibility or factual immediacy but from iconic ambivalence and cognitive uncertainty. Despite the visual conveyance of contingency, however, the indexical quality of the photographic image shows that something is there even if that something always evades clear definition. In all three examples, the act of making visible is closely intertwined with an emotional and aesthetic experience by showing us something the naked eye does not register or by interrupting conventional modes of seeing. Norfolk's and Mosse's visual critique of war photography by means of the work of mourning or the self-reflexivity of 'metapictures', presents the viewer with a sense of contingency that constitutes

photographic images as catalysts for affective responses rather than mere “illustrations and carriers of information”.<sup>89</sup> Furthermore, by locating violent conflicts within a broader historical framework of imperial and colonial relations, as well as destabilising the position of the distant and benevolent observer as established in traditional photojournalism, the case studies in this chapter present strategies of image-making that avoid classical patterns of viewer responses based on pity or compassion. Those image-strategies, however, reflect the inevitable risk or paradox of ‘political’ photography: on the one hand, its potency based on unpredictability and contingency avoids its reduction to mere illustration or naive representation, but, on the other hand, this potential of stirring new ideas and emotions comes at the expense of being incalculable, unpredictable and unreliable. The radical openness of ‘aftermath photography’, for instance, enables a strong experience of contingency. The experience of contingency in the “fine art photojournalism” (Stallabras) of Norfolk, Mosse and Paglen contains an agonistic dimension vis-à-vis more conventional forms of photojournalism but the aesthetic politics that emerge from their work cannot be reduced to “agonistic public spaces” (Mouffe). A merely agonistic interpretation would not only limit their versatile and subtle politics but also overestimate their potency. To fully appreciate the contingent nature of their photographs, therefore involves recognising the ever present moment of risk to either overwhelm or puzzle the viewer or not have any lasting effects at all. To recognise the autonomy of images therefore involves acknowledging their unruly character that cannot be tamed at will for preconceived political ends. This risk and unruliness of visual aesthetic practices, however, is often sidelined in political interpretations of contemporary photography.

I continue this discussion under different considerations in the next chapter, where I turn from photography to moving images and investigate the moment of contingency as a crucial element in filmmaking as well as a distinct mode of (audio-) visual political thinking. The contingent nature of the photographs discussed in this chapter was described as relational, that is, their contingent character becomes apparent in relation to existing conventions of visual representation, cognitive habits

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<sup>89</sup> See Campbell, “Geopolitics and Visuality”, 379.

and ways of seeing (such as traditional photojournalism). The relational character and ambiguity of moving images, in contrast, is emphasised through cinematic montage that assemblages individual images or sequences in order to create new forms of meaning. The experience of contingency in film is thus not created by emphasising the uncertainty of the index as in the static photographic image but through the suggestive juxtaposition of moving images. I further claim that the political effects of cinematic contingency have shifted their areas of operation from utopian vision in the 1920s, to revolutionary agitation in the 1960s, to technological scepticism in contemporary times. In doing so, the moment of contingency again turns out to be itself contingent, which means, that its efficacies are always bound to concrete historic constellations. The politico-aesthetic form of each shift reflects the promise of new possibilities regarding modes of thinking and acting but, at the same time, admits to its inescapable limitations.

## Chapter 4

### **Moving Images as Theoretical Enquiry: Embodied Vision, Partial Perception and Visual Scepticism in Experimental Films**

The previous chapter has discussed the political potency of visual contingency in contemporary photography as the appreciation of indexical uncertainty. This indexical uncertainty manifests itself in different aesthetic strategies that comprise, but are of course not limited to, what I have tentatively described as photographic work of mourning, elusive self-reflection and blurry observation. The aesthetic engagement with photography's weak indexical referent presents photographs less as carriers of objective facts and information but rather as catalysts for affective responses. Allan Sekula has pointed out that "the most developed critiques of the illusory facticity of photographic media have been cinematic, stemming from outside the tradition of still photography." And he continues: "With film and video, sound and image, or sound, image, and text, can be worked over and against each other, leading to the the possibility of negation and meta-commentary. An image can be offered as evidence, and then subverted."<sup>1</sup>

Even though we have seen that photography itself can develop such a meta-commentary critique of photography's 'illusory facticity', film offers even more distinct forms of critical engagement with the visible world and the present chapter explores the political effects of contingency in the context of moving images. Through a somewhat contrapuntal repetition of the previous chapter on photography, and as the final visual variation of the central theme of contingency, I will build on the concept of a meta-commentary critique as suggested by Sekula but go beyond the distancing and alienating aesthetics of ideological criticism. Instead, I will discuss the critical potential of moving images as an experience of contingency that presents itself as a mode of creative political thinking triggered by cinematic montage and em-

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<sup>1</sup> Allan Sekula, "Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (1976/78)," in *Dismal Science: Photo Works 1972-1996* (Normal/IL: University Galleries, Illinois State University, 1999), 126.

bodied perception. The present chapter focuses on moving images whose contingent appearance is neither achieved through their relation with an invisible transcendent world (Chapter 2) nor through their ambivalent indexical relation with the visible world (Chapter 3) but rather through the juxtaposition and fragmentation of different world views. The present chapter explores the political potency of moving images as a distinct mode of thinking in images whose contingent nature is stressed through cinematic montage, as well as an aesthetic emphasis on subjective experience and epistemological scepticism. By example of the work of three political filmmakers, Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki, I show that the cinematic engagement with contingency has a long tradition in both challenging the status quo as well as visually presenting new ideas of possibility. In so doing, this chapter traces a modernist tradition of political filmmaking whose trajectory reaches from utopian visions of a new society to ideological critique and revolutionary agitation to a general suspicion against visual images and their complicity in the contemporary scopic regimes of spectacle, surveillance, warfare and industrial production. Despite the postmodern suspicion that has been raised against images, their uncertain and ambiguous character still offers unique forms of thought that have the potency to critically reflect on the seemingly self-evident appearance of the contemporary world and the images that circulate, mutate and collide within it. In that sense, the present chapter differs significantly from recent explorations into the relation between moving images and political theory.

The past decades have seen an increasing interest in the general conjunction between cinema and philosophy as well as in the relationship between cinematic practices and theoretical enquiry.<sup>2</sup> This emerging theoretical interest in the moving image has also been reflected in the context of the political sciences and political

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<sup>2</sup> The academic interest reaches most notably from the early explorations of Stanley Cavell, Fredric Jameson and Gilles Deleuze to more recent studies on cinematic epistemology and phenomenological formalism. See here Daniel Frampton, *Filmosophy* (London: Wallflower, 2006) and Hunter Vaughan, *Where Film meets Philosophy: Godard, Resnais, and Experiments in Cinematic Thinking* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013) respectively. For a comprehensive overview of the various contributions to the field of “film-philosophy” see Felicity Colman, ed., *Film, Theory and Philosophy: The Key Thinkers* (Durham: Acumen, 2009).

theory.<sup>3</sup> Lately, Davide Panagia has provided an insightful analogy between the cinematic logic of moving images and modern democratic thinking that mainly focuses on the agonistic dimension of contingency.<sup>4</sup> Panagia argues that the “stochastic serialization of moving images” (2) as presented in film, offers an “experience of resistance and change” (2) that challenges the seemingly causal relations between action by emphasising the discontinuity of political agency. In so doing, Panagia reduces contingency to an agonistic political force without paying much attention to its risky, unpredictable and unruly dimension. In addition to Panagia, I suggest that film is not only an analogy to political theory but functions as its own *mode of theorisation* capable of offering cognitive and affective insights regarding political agency and subjectivity. The experience of contingency that Panagia describes as “stochastic serialization” and “discontinuity” of action (3) should then be further expanded with greater attention not only to the serialisation of individual images but also through the montage of different sequences and perspectives as well as the juxtaposition of different types of images.

Therefore, the focus of the present chapter lies on experimental films which link specific political concerns to innovative visual-aesthetic strategies and at the same time problematise this relation between form and content as well as their conditions of possibility. These experimental films also emphasise the partial, contingent and embodied nature of visual perception and the resulting essayistic unorthodoxy of their approach to knowledge. Film theorist Richard Rushton rejects this formal ex-

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<sup>3</sup> Film has not only drawn recent academic attention as an object of political studies, see Michael Shapiro, *Cinematic Political Thought: Narrating Race, Nation and Gender* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Michael Shapiro, *Cinematic Geopolitics* (London: Routledge, 2009); Cynthia Weber, *Imagining America at War: Morality, Politics and Film* (London: Routledge, 2006); Cynthia Weber, “Popular Visual Language as Global Communication: The Remediation of United Airlines Flight 93,” *Review of International Studies* 34 (2008): 137-153; Alex Danchev, “Bad Apples, Dead Souls: Understanding Abu Ghraib,” *International Affairs* 84, no.6 (2008): 1271-1280; or as a mode of democratic thinking, see William Connolly, *Neuropolitics: Thinking, Culture, Speed* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); William Connolly, *A World of Becoming* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011); Davide Panagia, *Impressions of Hume: Cinematic Thinking and the Politics of Discontinuity* (Lanham/MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013), but also as a tool for political science teaching, see Wesley Leckrone, “Hippies, Feminists, and Neocons: Using ‘The Big Lebowski’ to Find the Political in the Nonpolitical,” *Political Science & Politics* 46, no.1 (2013): 129-135.

<sup>4</sup> Davide Panagia, “Why Film Matters to Political Theory,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 12, no.1 (2013): 2-25. Subsequent references are made in the text.

perimentation that he calls “the discourse of ‘political modernism’”, as advocated by the Althusserian film studies of the 1960s and 70s, and that has “divided films along the lines of the good-real versus bad-illusory dichotomy”.<sup>5</sup> Rushton criticises a modernist understanding of politics that dismantles the formal cinematic conventions of mainstream (Hollywood) cinema in order to ‘reveal’ its illusory and deceptive (ideological) nature. Political cinema, according to Rushton, does not have to be defined in terms of formal-aesthetic antagonism but rather by the ‘mutual recognition of individual freedom’ (26) or what Rancière calls “democratic individualism” (56) as displayed in the performances of classical Hollywood cinema. Consequently, Rushton’s argument focuses on cinematic narration and character performances rather than on image-making processes or visual argument. Even though his ‘post-marxist’ re-interpretation of classical Hollywood cinema offers the possibility of new insightful connections between film studies and contemporary political theory, I think he dismisses the visual experiments of political modernism too readily.

I suggest that modernist politics are more subtle and more complex than the dichotomy between a good materialist truth and a bad ideological illusion. The experience of contingency, celebrated in experimental film, can equally not be reduced to ideological criticism but may contain, apart from an expression of scepticism and doubt, some utopian vision, sense of possibility, perceptual plurality and an appreciation of the world’s complexity. In other words, the experience of contingency is stimulating and risky. The political potency of film is cognitive as well as affective, intellectual as well as visceral, powerful as well as fragile. We therefore have to readjust any modernist political expectations towards visual aesthetic practices from generating large scale social transformation to facilitating micropolitical experiences of social complexity and contingency. It is therefore striking that Panagia does not much problematise the “experience of resistance and change” the stochastic serialisation of moving images is supposed to induce. In that regard my own position regarding the political efficacy of the experience of contingency in moving images is more

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Rushton, *The Politics of Hollywood Cinema: Popular Film and Contemporary Political Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 2. Subsequent references are made in the text.

cautious and I argue that even though it might trigger thoughts and affects of resistance and alterity, the experience of contingency is always at risk of failure. The inevitable uncertainty, ambiguity and incalculability of the experimental exploration of contingency and its political potency will be pointed out through a historical perspective that connects early Russian constructivist cinema with contemporary essayistic film. Whereas in 1929 Vertov uses contingency in order to present a utopian vision of an ideal Soviet community, he regards cinema as an effective revolutionary tool capable of creating a new society. Godard's use of contingency still implies that cinema is capable of inducing social change if one can only find the right audio-visual form to translate Marxist theory into cinematic education. In Godard's work of the late 1960s, revolutionary vision has turned into ideological critique that nurtures a hope of revealing to the audience the intrinsic contradictions of late capitalist society in Europe. Farocki finally goes one step further. Instead of presenting a revolutionary vision or ideological critique, Farocki questions the very role of images for progressive social transformation or reliable individual knowledge. Instead, he shows in his late film installations that images have become powerful material political agents, which often simultaneously shape and constitute the broader military-industrial complexes of seeing and understanding our contemporary world. The political engagement with cinematic contingency has thus shifted its focus from the conditions of social representation or revolutionary vision to the socio-technological circumstances of visibility itself. Before analysing the cinematic engagement with contingency in the films of Dziga Vertov, Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki, we should clarify to what extent film qualifies as a mode of critical thinking and theoretical enquiry.

### **I. Film as a mode of critical thinking and theoretical enquiry**

The idea to consider film as a mode of thinking, theory or even philosophy is by no means an original one and has gained considerable academic traction in the past years. Daniel Frampton's term "filmosophy" claims accordingly that film is potentially a form of philosophy since film can teach us about our relationship with the

world and our position in it.<sup>6</sup> He states further that those reflections regarding our relationship with the world are not only expressed through plots and stories, as Rush-ton argues, but just as much through cinematic form. “Filmosophy”, Frampton writes, “does not just offer a linking of thinking to film, but an analysis of film as its own kind of thought.”<sup>7</sup> In the following paragraphs, I examine how film offers distinct modes of *political* thinking and explore how, and to what end, political thinking can take advantage of the manifold cognitive, affective and epistemological potential that cinematic practices indisputably demonstrate in the realms of visual art and popular culture. How can film as a powerful medium establish, as well as question, the way we see the world and think of it by virtue of mediating between individual experience and collective imagination? Furthermore, this chapter analyses to what extent film not only comprises a form of thought but also constitutes a mode of audio-visual political theory.

Theory in the ancient sense of *theōria*, meaning ‘viewing’, ‘beholding’ or ‘looking at’, corresponds to an understanding of film that not only provides a perspective or worldview but already contains a contemplative and speculative interpretation of its own conditions of possibility. This means that theory always implies an oscillating view between its object and its analytical procedures, between concrete subject matter and abstract generalisation. The critical self-reflection of its own methods and procedures becomes part of the theoretical project itself. Consequently, not all film qualifies as a type of theory, that is, as a methodic engagement with the world; but film operates as a mode of theory when it contains an enquiry into the conditions and possibilities of its own visibility. It is important to understand here that ‘the theoretical’ is not understood as an external attribution to the medium film but rather as a concept that emerges from the directorial arrangements of images and sound. Therefore, film has to be considered as an independent contribution to theoretical discourse based on the distinct interplay between moving images, text and sound. It shows further, that theoretical thought does not necessarily have to take on

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<sup>6</sup> See Frampton, *Filmosophy*.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

a written or linguistic form of mediation but can also be articulated in the visual medium of film. Under these conditions, film can be used as a theoretical research tool in order to make visible a reality that always exceeds the already visible. What is key here is that film as a form of theory already incorporates the conditions of its own production of meaning and declares the creation of meaning its central concern. In other words, film as a mode of theory is not exclusively a matter of content but just as much a matter of form. The juxtaposition of different perspectives of the world and their collision requires a new form of seeing that Volker Pantenburg describes as ‘relational or comparative seeing’.<sup>8</sup> It is the combination of different images and perspectives of a subject matter that creates a situation in which the viewer is challenged to define her own position in relation to what she sees.

A cinematic practice that is fully aware of its self-reflexive form of thinking in images, and therefore constitutes the central focus of this chapter, is an experimental and subjective form of moving images, which, for the lack of a better term, is often described as *essay film*.<sup>9</sup> The ‘essay film’ is an innovative and playful mode of film that uses its cinematic form as a conscious aesthetic decision that explores our affective and cognitive relation to the world. The ‘essay film’ is not only a visual aesthetic practice but also an epistemological project that conflates modes of thinking about the world with modes of describing it visually. My interest here lies not in the attempt to confine a versatile cinematic practice to a rigid aesthetic category but rather to explore the essayistic capacities of film as an audio-visual engagement with contingency and its political potency. The origin of the literary form of the *essay* can be traced back to 16th century France. The term ‘essay’ refers to a tradition of personal reflection and investigation prominently represented in the work of Michel de

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<sup>8</sup> “Das Zusammenfügen unterschiedlicher Ausschnitte der Welt und ihre Kollision führen zu einer neuen Art des Sehens, die man als *relationales oder vergleichendes Sehen* bezeichnen könnte.” (The assemblage of different sequences of the world and their collision lead towards a new way of seeing that could be labeled *relational or comparative seeing*.) Volker Pantenburg, *Film als Theorie: Bildforschung bei Harun Farocki und Jean-Luc Godard* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2006), 72. My translation and emphasis.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent overview of the controversial cinematic debates around the notion of the ‘essay film’ see Andrew Tracy, “The Essay Film,” *Sight & Sound* 23, no.8 (2013): 44-52. For a critical discussion of the hybrid character of ‘essay films’ see Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), 21f.

Montaigne. In the French tradition *essayer* means ‘to assay’, ‘to weigh’, as well as ‘to attempt’, suggesting a surveilling, evaluative, and speculative exploration. In a Montaignian sense the term ‘essay’ means thus a testing of ideas and to fathom one’s own subjectivity against the backdrop of social observations. The essay film as distinct cinematographic practice emerged at the beginning of the 1980s and continued the literary tradition with audio-visual means.<sup>10</sup> The essayistic emphasis on subjective experience, or rather the problematisation of it, is a key element not only in the literary essay but also in its visual counterpart. This problematisation is visually reflected in the renegotiation of representational assumptions regarding objectivity, perception and epistemology.

It should be emphasised, however, that the visual experience of film cannot be reduced to the faculty of vision. In her study on ‘intercultural cinema’, which draws on the thought of Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, Laura Marks emphasises the multi-sensory quality of perception as well as the embodied nature of all images. “Perception”, Marks writes with reference to Bergson, “is always partial and interested, since it is located in a specific perceiver; it is necessarily embodied, located, and contingent.”<sup>11</sup> For Marks it is the acknowledgement and recognition of the embodiment of visual experience, and therefore its always partial and contingent character, that undermines a merely cognitive understanding of film and ultimately disrupts the conventional relationships between vision and knowledge. As she writes further: “Film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole.”<sup>12</sup> It is precisely this multilayered nature of cinematic perception that has stimulating but unpredictable effects that cannot be easily deployed for preconceived ideological purposes. The political implications of those unruly affective energies that emerge between viewer and visual object can never be clearly directed towards singular strategic ends. This unpredictability is the greatest

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<sup>10</sup> Chris Marker’s *Sans Soleil* (1983) is widely regarded as one of the first essay films that presented a form of subjective and self-reflexive filmmaking thus exceeding the classic form of documentary by pondering on notions of personal memory and the perception of history.

<sup>11</sup> Laura Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 41f.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

political strengths of the essay film as well as its greatest weakness. The aesthetic acknowledgement of the partial, embodied and unpredictable dimension of visual perception thus corresponds to an essayistic attitude towards the world that manifests itself in a mode of thinking that diverts from conventional methodological forms of scientific investigation. For Marks, the embodied and located nature of images, and hence image-making, harbours critical potential capable of confronting any dominant and self-evident narratives with the particularity and contingency of subjective experience. In regard to the literary essay this point was similarly formulated by Theodor Adorno who emphasised the essay's quality of 'immanent critique' and its heretic nature that defies any methodological orthodoxy. Adorno writes: "The essay's innermost formal law is heresy. Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy's secret and objective aim to keep invisible."<sup>13</sup>

In regard to essayistic moving images, the heresy of thought, based on the embodied and partial nature of perception, has the capacity to create an excess of visibility and to make something visible that could previously not be seen. In other words, it is the orthodoxy of thought that attempts to enclose the experience of contingency and to hide its contingent character behind the alleged self-evidence of its appearance or objective distance between subject and object. The political dimension of contingency is thus too often reduced to a gesture of ideological critique. Laura Rascaroli argues accordingly that the political quality of essayistic films emerge from their challenging of any ultimate authority of representation through debunking the myth of documentary objectivity.<sup>14</sup> Such an attitude towards visual contingency makes its political interpretation rather predictable and prevents truly unorthodox modes of analyses. Timothy Corrigan makes a similar argument by pointing out that essay films almost invariably practice a distinct form of politics since they constitute an aesthetic practice that constantly negotiates the position of a subject within a pub-

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "The Essay as Form", in *Notes to Literature: Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Sherry Weber Nicholson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 23.

<sup>14</sup> See Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 38f.

lic domain. “In essay films,” Corrigan writes, “the subversion of a coherent subjectivity within the public experience of the everyday may not always be an easily decipherable and clear politics but is, perhaps always, a politics whose core is ideological instability.”<sup>15</sup> But is this really the case?

I claim that the conceptual heresy, perceptual multiplicity and epistemological scepticism of essayistic approaches to film may have the capacity to subvert sedimented practices of seeing and showing the world, but their effects do not necessarily correspond with the political intentions of the filmmaker, nor do they have to translate into discernible forms of collective action. Their political potency is fragile and always at risk of failure. Rather, this aesthetic political potency constitutes a flickering form of ‘micropolitics’ that reverberates affective intensities and political moods at particular historical moments and thus potentially catalyses social dynamics that have been generated elsewhere. I am not disputing that one of the strengths of essayistic films lie in their ability to subvert systemic thought, totalities of truth or the jargons of authenticity. However, I would like to suggest that the political character of the essay film and its potency as a distinct form of political thinking can neither be reduced to the confounding of authority as suggested by Rascaroli, nor to the destabilisation of ideological certainties as suggested by Corrigan. Both authors follow a line of argument that reflects Mouffe’s concept of critical art as agonistic public spaces. Instead, we have to consider the affective intensities of the visual experience that, as Massumi has pointed out, have become crucial for the understanding of “our information and image-based post capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have floundered.”<sup>16</sup> The forces or intensities, triggered by the cinematic experience, can translate into different emotional states potentially creating desires for alterity, driving towards thoughts of disagreement and scepticism or inspiring communicative action, to name but a few.<sup>17</sup> The experience of contingency

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<sup>15</sup> Timothy Corrigan, *The Essay Film: From Montaigne, After Marker* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 27.

<sup>17</sup> For a more detailed discussion regarding the relation between affect and contingency and its role for the political potency of artistic image-making see Chapter 1 of this thesis.

that is celebrated in the essay film in cognitive interruptions, perceptual multiplicities or affective intensities, cannot, by default, be committed to preconceived political or ideological purposes. In that regard, there are some parallels between Laura Marks's notion of embodied vision and Adorno's interpretation of essayistic thinking. For Marks the multi-sensory and embodied image constitutes "a critique of an instrumental vision that uses the thing seen as an object for knowledge and control."<sup>18</sup> Marks locates this dimension of unruly perception in what she calls "haptic visuality", that is, a mode of vision that exceeds cognition and is not bend on mastery. This 'haptic visuality', does not literally require physical touch but refers to a "form of visuality that yields to the thing seen, a vision that is not merely cognitive but acknowledges its location in the body, seeks to escape the attribution of mastery."<sup>19</sup>

This recognition of embodiment and contingency links visual perception to a way of (essayistic) thinking that is deliberately experimental, preliminary and incalculable. Adorno writes: "In the realm of thought it is virtually the essay alone that has successfully raised doubts about the absolute privilege of method. The essay allows for the consciousness of non-identity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character."<sup>20</sup> The subjective, versatile and spontaneous nature of essayistic thinking constitutes a curious and investigative relation between filmmaker, viewer and world whose political potentiality is not restricted by preconceived outcomes or pre-structured fault lines. This said, one can still identify two key political dimensions of essayistic films that are sufficiently discernible to describe, yet indeterminate enough to allow for unpredictable effects. The first dimension is the destabilisation of image-based meaning through the self-questioning of the image-making process and its conditions of possibility. The self-analysis regarding its own conditions of meaning production becomes part of the aesthetic expression. As Adorno has emphasised, the essayistic tradition is a

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<sup>18</sup> Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 131.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>20</sup> Adorno, "The Essay as Form", 9.

mode of enquiry that is programatically non-scientific and does not seek the comprehensive mastery of its subject.<sup>21</sup> Instead, the essay in both its literary and cinematic manifestation, emphasises the subjective experience of the encounter with the world. And here is where the second political dimension comes into play. The essay film is an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the public realm, its perceptions and reactions. The creation of such a speculative cinematic space conveys a sense to the viewer that any social order is not a given set of facts but rather a cognitive and affective web whose nodal points are subject to constant negotiation. This process of negotiation changes the appearance of a common world by laying bare the contingent

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<sup>21</sup> Martin Jay has described the modern visual will to mastery as “Cartesian perspectivalism” in order to “characterize the dominant scopic regime of the modern era.” See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 69f. ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ combines “Renaissance notions of perspective in the visual arts” with “Cartesian ideas of subjective rationality in philosophy.” See Martin Jay, “Scopic Regimes of Modernity,” in Hal Foster, ed., *Vision and Visuality* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), 4. The dominance of ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ in Western modernity is based on the assumption that it expresses best “the ‘natural’ experience of sight valorized by the scientific world view” implying a ‘natural’ order and hierarchy of things. See *ibid.*, 5. Under ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ vision was conceptualised as a pyramid, a geometrical space that allowed for the beholder to look at a fixed world from a distance. This clear separation between subject and object assumes that the world can be observed and described as totality from an outside perspective and “so subtends metaphysical thought, empirical science, and capitalist logic all at once.” Hal Foster, “Introduction,” in *Vision and Visuality*, (Seattle: Bay Press, 1988), x. For those reasons ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ was subject to much criticism throughout the 20th century. See in particular Erwin Panofsky (1927), *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (New York: Zone Books, 1991); Martin Heidegger (1938), “The Age of the World Picture,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 57-85; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. Carleton Dallery (Evanston/IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 159-190; and Hubert Damisch, *The Origins of Perspective* (Cambridge/MA: MIT Press, 1995).

nature of both our sensual perception and our social arrangements.<sup>22</sup> In the following sections we will see what politico-aesthetic manifestations this process of negotiation can have. The various tokens of contingency that have guided this investigation so far, continue to play a vital role. Contingency as a sense of utopian vision, a search for revolutionary form and a mode of relational seeing constitute key features of the political potency of essayistic cinematic practices. As I exemplify by the cinematic work of Vertov, Godard and Farocki, moving images offer a distinct mode of political enquiry that provide alternative forms of visual knowledge production, constitute a conflation of theory and practice and feature a critical reflection of their own methodology.

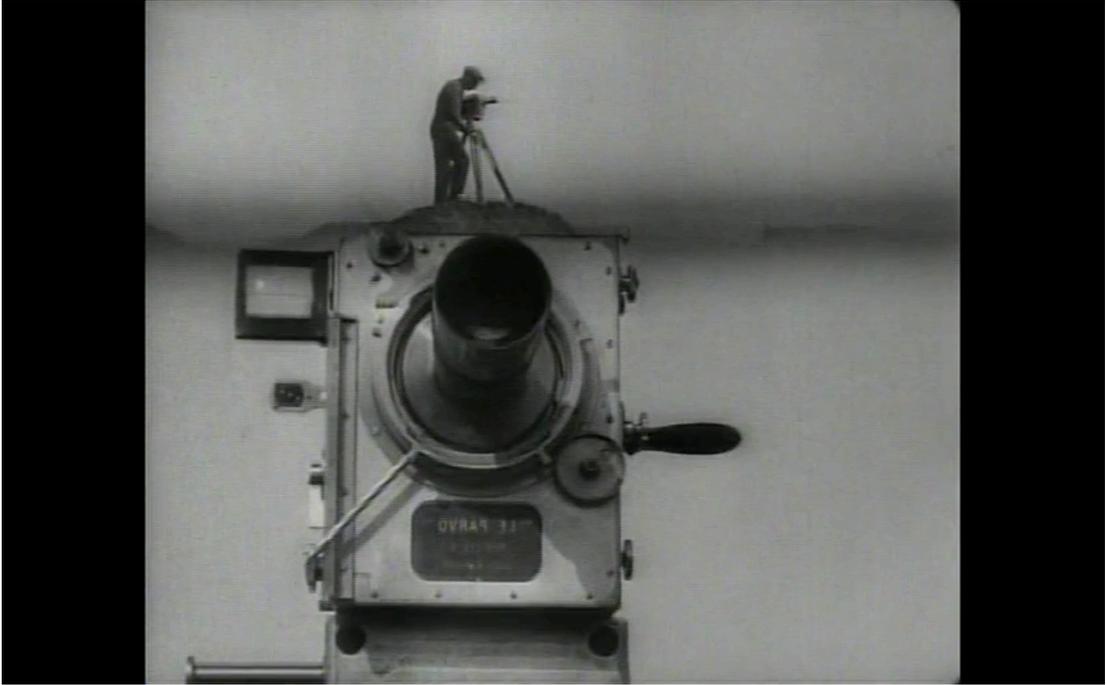
## II. Dziga Vertov: Contingency and the utopian vision of a new society

An early example of essayistic film and powerful visual thinking can be found in Dziga Vertov's seminal film *Man with a Movie Camera* from 1929.<sup>23</sup> As an influential historical precursor to Jean-Luc Godard and Harun Farocki, Vertov's work is of particular interest in the present context and his unique experimental cinematic language that links the experience of contingency to an utopian vision of a new society

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<sup>22</sup> The aesthetic and social efficacy of the cinematic engagement with contingency as a stylistic element has been creatively demonstrated by documentary filmmaker Errol Morris. In his films, however, contingency is reflected in his investigative storytelling rather than his innovative image-making. In *Thin Blue Line* (1988) Morris tells the story of the 1976 US trial of Randall Adams who was innocently sentenced for the murder of a Dallas police officer. By re-analysing the case, and trying to recapitulate the events through police records, interviews and reenactments, Morris successfully questions Adams' guilt and the film ultimately led to a revision of the case and Adams' release from prison. Beyond its criticism of the US justice system, Morris's film reflects broader issues regarding the relationship between perception and memory, seeing and knowing, evidence and judgement. *Thin Blue Line* ponders on the contingency and uncertainty that characterises memory and the construction of the past as well as the existential importance they can gain when a person's life is at stake. As the film particularises, the moment of chance can steer fate in many different directions. Importantly though, Morris does not present the contingent moment inherent in memory, perception and testimony as an impediment to justice but as its very precondition. As Ron Rosenbaum put it: "This is one of Morris' greatest strengths, what Keats called 'negative capability': the ability to hold conflicting perspectives in the mind without 'irritable' reaching after certainty." Ron Rosenbaum, "Errol Morris: The Thinking Man's Detective," *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 2012. See: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/errol-morris-the-thinking-mans-detective-99424163/>. Accessed: 23/02/2015.

<sup>23</sup> All references to this film are taken from the following version: *Man with a Movie Camera*, directed by Dziga Vertov, 1929 (London: British Film Institute, 2010), DVD.



**Fig. 22:** Still from Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929

shall become the focus of the following section. *Man with a Movie Camera* features some characteristics of an ‘essayistic’ film, as outlined above, that negotiates an ‘expressive subjectivity’ (the film claims in its opening credits to be “an excerpt from the diary of a cameraman”) with ‘the encounters in a public arena’ (the cameraman’s city observations as well as the public screening of the film) [fig. 22]. Somewhat at odds with this characterisation and despite its subjective framing, Vertov attempts to develop a pure and objective language of film that is capable of presenting to the viewer an undistorted perspective on life’s daily occurrences. Through a fresh encounter with the visible world, the viewer is not just confronted with a critique of conventional forms of visual representation but simultaneously with the presentation of an ideal Soviet society. Thus, the case of Dziga Vertov offers insight into a cinematic practice that blurs the boundaries between art and politics, theory and practice, aesthetic experimentation and social vision. Vertov states right at the outset of *Man with a Movie Camera* that his film constitutes an experiment that refrains from using inter-titles, scripts or actors. Instead, his new approach to moving images “aims at



**Fig. 23:** Still from Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929

creating a truly international absolute language of cinema based on its total separation from the language of theatre and literature.”<sup>24</sup>

Even though Vertov seeks to clearly dissociate his work from any form of scripted drama, it would be somewhat incorrect to describe *Man with a Movie Camera* as non-fictional, or ‘unplayed’ as the contemporary Soviet term had it. Instead, Vertov himself preferred the term ‘life caught unawares’ (zhizn’ vrasplokh) in order to describe his documentary approach to cinema.<sup>25</sup> Recorded sequences and scenes of everyday life are connected and juxtaposed through cinematic montage thus creating a new perspective on a familiar world. [fig. 23] The plot of *Man with a Movie Camera* follows the pattern of the ‘city symphony’, as famously explored in Walter Ruttmann’s 1927 film *Berlin: Symphony of a Great City* (*Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Großstadt*). Like Ruttmann, Vertov presents in his film buzzing city life from dawn to dusk. In contrast to Ruttmann, however, Vertov combines the lives of three great cities (Moscow, Odessa and Kiev) in order to create one ideal urban scenario.

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<sup>24</sup> *Man with a Movie Camera*, directed by Dziga Vertov, 1929 (London: British Film Institute, 2010), DVD, opening credits.

<sup>25</sup> See Jeremy Hicks, *Dziga Vertov: Defining Documentary Film* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 23.

*Man with a Movie Camera* starts with the view into an empty cinema theatre that gradually fills up with the audience. We then see how the film reel is installed in the projector whilst the cinema orchestra quietly awaits its performance. Now the actual film starts depicting an ideal working day subdivided into labour, recreation and rest. In the early morning, we see an empty city, deserted, with its citizens still asleep. Then, a woman rises from bed, puts on her clothes and washes her face. With blinking eyes, intercut with images of opening and closing window shutters, she literally and metaphorically faces the dawn of a new day.<sup>26</sup> Aeroplanes, buses and trams are moved out of their hangars and depots, the city slowly comes to life, the working day begins. Machines, which previously stood idle, are set in motion under the careful observation of their operators. The rapid cuts and juxtapositions of fast moving machines and manufacturing activities suggest efficiency and productivity. Apart from industrial production, the viewer witnesses a broad array of daily human activities and urban life: a funeral, a woman giving birth, a wedding, a divorce, car traffic, an ambulance on an emergency call.

These sequences are intercut with shots of Vertov's brother and cameraman Mikhael Kaufmann who seems to shun no danger to find breakneck angles and capture spectacular images. The viewer sees Kaufmann on and under a fast moving train, in an open car, on a motorcycle and hovering on a crane above a reservoir dam. We occasionally see Vertov's wife and chief editor Elizaveta Svilova in an editing room, cutting and pasting film material reminding the viewer of the cinematic nature of the visual experience - what we witness is not life itself but life on film. With the working day drawing to a close, the workers finally enjoy their free time with physical exercise, socialising and education. Also Kaufmann himself joins in with the workers' leisure activities and performs some stop motion tricks with his camera.

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<sup>26</sup> This dawn of a new day corresponds to Ernst Bloch's concept of "forward dawning", a pre-conscious state of mind that is opposed to Freud's analysis of night-dreams and repressed consciousness. Bloch writes: "Mental life is always framed both by evening and morning. The night-dream moves in the forgotten and the repressed, the daydream in what has never been experienced at all at present." See Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, Vol. 1, trans. Neville Plaice et al. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), in particular Chapter 15 "Discovery of the Not-Yet Conscious or of Forward Dawning", 115. The daydream as the receptivity for something new is thus the locus of what Bloch calls "Not-Yet-Conscious" and to which I shall return below.

With the last film reel coming to an end, we are back in the movie theatre where the audience watches the final scenes. After a series of fast paced shots of moving traffic and gathered crowds, the film presents a montage crescendo that creates a swirl of images showing alternately the cinema audience, Kaufmann shooting in an open car and the focused eyes of Vertov's wife at the editing table. Eventually, the film ends with a close-up of the shutting camera lens superimposed with a staring human eye.

Vertov's work of the 1920s, and *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) in particular, was aesthetically informed by the Futurist and Constructivist avant-garde movements and benefited greatly from the artistically experimental climate of the time. In this context, the formal aesthetics of the film cannot be separated from its political message of celebrating Soviet Communism.<sup>27</sup> The idea of strengthening 'Socialism in One Country' and promoting industrialisation through a rapid transformation of the economy is therefore always present in *Man with a Movie Camera* and explains why labour, the production of steel and coal, and the increased productive capacity of machines is so extensively explored.<sup>28</sup> Stalin's political vision was realised on film as the construction of a new world. The cinematic experience of contingency should morph into the desire for a not yet actualised world and eventually condense in the conviction that a new Soviet society, a new body politic, was possible through economic development and industrial transformation. In that respect, cinema became the aesthetic forerunner of a new politics which intended nothing less than the fundamental reorganisation of all facts of life. Considering the case that Soviet film served the purpose of winning over a largely illiterate populace to the communist cause, cinema was understood to be a vital tool of class struggle that could provide ordinary people with a glimpse on the just and egalitarian society as envisaged in Marxist-Leninist theory. Against this backdrop, *Man with a Movie Camera* translates social

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<sup>27</sup> Between Stalin's appointment of General Secretary of the Russian Communist party's Central Committee in 1922, Lenin's death two years later and the proclamation of Socialist Realism as the official Soviet aesthetics in 1932, there was a period of intense social transformation that had not reached the monstrous manifestations yet to come. However, Stalin had already developed his theory of 'Socialism in One Country' that replaced Lenin's 'New Economic Policy (NEP)' of the 1920s and that Vertov fully endorsed. Even if Vertov did not share Stalin's sense of aesthetics, he agreed with his political objectives - even though he apparently never was a member of the Communist party.

<sup>28</sup> See Graham Roberts, *The Man with the Movie Camera* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 14.

vision into new aesthetic forms of expression and combines cinematic virtuosity with a deeply held utopian desire fundamentally to change the world. Social change was not the result of sober calculations but the product of an affective aspiration for a better future.<sup>29</sup> Rather than engaging with Marx's abstract analysis of capitalism or Lenin's revolutionary doctrines, the film induces different states of affect which should then translate into politically exploitable emotions and desires. Thus I propose that the political efficacy of contingency in Vertov's film stems to a large extent from his work on affect understood as "a state of suspense, potentially of disruption"<sup>30</sup> revealing itself as force and intensity that enables feelings and thoughts of alterity. Vertov's utopian cinematographic vision that intends to induce in the viewer a longing for the coming of a new society is therefore best understood as "a mode of seeing rather than a specific place".<sup>31</sup> In order to gain a better understanding of the correlation between contingency and utopia in Vertov's film, let us return to Ernst Bloch's concept of the "Not-Yet-Conscious" as mentioned above. Here the moment of contingency reveals itself as the anticipation of a different future that is constructed as difference from a deficient present.<sup>32</sup>

Consequently, the Not-Yet-Conscious is "solely the preconscious of what is to come, the psychological birthplace of the New." Film is an effective medium through which this anticipation or vision of the new can be visualised and communicated. "And", Bloch continues, "it (the Not-Yet-Conscious) keeps itself preconscious above all because in fact there is within it a content of consciousness which has not yet become wholly manifest, and is still dawning from the future."<sup>33</sup> The utopian 'not-yet' therefore allows for the constitution of the future as a realm of possibility, as visualised by Vertov with the awakening and daydreaming woman in his film. With Con-

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<sup>29</sup> See Camilla Jalving, "Utopia in the Eye of the Beholder: A Theoretical Perspective," in *Utopia & Contemporary Art*, ed. Christian Gether et al. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 32.

<sup>30</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 26. For a more detailed discussion of the political significance of affect see Chapter 1 of this thesis.

<sup>31</sup> Jalving, "Utopia in the Eye of the Beholder", 31.

<sup>32</sup> As Karl Mannheim (1936) famously put it: "A state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs." Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (London: Routledge, 1991), 192.

<sup>33</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 116.

nolly I argue “that there are often relevant things on the way that we are not in touch with yet. Drawing upon artistic practices to extend perception and render it more sensitive to incipient processes on the way is thus always pertinent.”<sup>34</sup> The politico-aesthetic engagement with contingency is therefore less an agonistic public space that presents a clearly articulated political alternative, in the sense of Chantal Mouffe, but constitutes a seismographic sensitivity that reflects subtle social tremors and vibrations that run as conscious or unconscious undercurrents through a political community. Vertov’s cinematographic practice does not imagine an abstract utopia that simply compensates for a lack in the present but rather exhibits a concrete utopia that contains anticipatory elements of a fully industrialised and collectivised communist society. In that sense, Vertov seems to forestall Bloch in rehabilitating the concept of utopia as a Marxist category, the idea that human vision precedes any process of social transformation. As Ruth Levitas puts it: “Utopia, as forward dreaming, is neither an esoteric byway of culture, nor a distraction from the real business of class struggle, but a central and crucially important element in the production of the future.”<sup>35</sup>

This ‘forward dreaming’ that is so important for ‘the production of the future’ is reflected in Vertov’s film not only as contingency in the broader sense of an abstract possibility but as a very concrete desire to transform the existing present into a better future as well as the strong belief in its realisation. Vertov’s cinematic practice can thus be read as a direct expression of his political commitment that takes as starting point of his utopian impulse the experience of a present characterised by the ideological enthusiasm and political confusion following the birth of the Soviet Union in 1922. The camera becomes an instrument to make new modes of being visible by reassembling the set pieces of a familiar reality, since, inevitably, as Fredric Jameson aptly remarks, “even our wildest imaginings are all collages of experience, constructs made up of bits and pieces of the here and now.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, the program-

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<sup>34</sup> Connolly, *The Fragility of Things*, 224.

<sup>35</sup> Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (London: Philip Allan, 1990), 94.

<sup>36</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), xiii.

matic content of utopian thought is always also testimony to its own limitations. Therefore, as Jameson further suggests, we should shift our focus from utopian content to its representational form whereby “utopian form is itself a representational mediation on radical difference”<sup>37</sup>. Accordingly, utopian thinking as the radical embracement of contingency is inseparable from aesthetic innovation and cognitive, as well as affective, disruption. Vertov’s vision of a different future is a “Not-Yet” for which the cinematic experience is to prepare the viewer. The political understanding of contingency ties in with both programmatic and diagnostic dimension of utopia by showing that the world could just as well be otherwise. The moment of contingency always presents itself in its dual character as experience of uncertainty and sense of possibility. The aesthetic realm of cinema becomes a site where an alternative vision of the world can be displayed and a new world temporarily actualised. Utopia as a social concept is something “that is experienced affectively in the art encounter and which does not reside in any one site, but in between the work and the beholder.”<sup>38</sup> Utopia becomes an “analytical rather than a descriptive concept ... it becomes a way of looking, a method that locates the utopia more in the eye that sees than in the object of the gaze.”<sup>39</sup>

The contingent moment of utopia presents itself as volatile intensity that cannot be easily located in a particular or singular place but has to be collaboratively produced and maintained in order to develop political significance. In Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera*, it is the mechanical apparatus of the camera and cinematic montage that allows for the fleeting moment of utopian intensity to emerge and in the process to turn the filmmaker into the figurehead of a visionary political future. As Vertov himself put it: “My path leads to the creation of a fresh perception of the world. I decipher in a new way a world unknown to you.”<sup>40</sup> The political dimension of the utopian vision thus arises from the very capacity of imagining a different

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<sup>37</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, xii.

<sup>38</sup> Jalving, “Utopia in the Eye of the Beholder”, 35.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Dziga Vertov (1922), “Kinoks: A Revolution,” in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O’Brien (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 18.

world or, at least, of having a fresh view on what seems familiar.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, *Man with a Movie Camera* seems to playfully bridge social engagement with the then innovative cinematic language that takes revolutionary vision as the point of departure for social transformation. Vertov's attempt to create a "truly international absolute language of cinema" therefore appears as a political manifestation based on a radical visual rearrangement of a familiar world. The visual language of cinematic montage was believed to have the capacity for social change. This effective combination of content and form presents an example of utopian art whose political potential lies, according to Richard Noble, "in its ability to confront its audience with forms or models of alterity that can help to illuminate the dark fog that often envelops our conventional understandings of politics and the possible."<sup>42</sup>

Noble argues further that the political efficacy of utopian art emerges precisely from its middle position between socially engaged art that eludes any evaluation on aesthetic grounds on the one hand and socially irrelevant formalism on the other. However, it should be stressed that it is this middle position of utopian thinking between engagement and abstraction that always constitutes its political limitations and its ever present risk of failure as progressive politics. The political limitations of contingency as a progressive political force present themselves in Vertov's utopian idea of a new society through a contradiction between the openness of his cinematic language and the potential closure of the social form he imagines. The new perspective on the everyday that features in *Man with a Movie Camera* merges communist propaganda with then radically new cinematic techniques. With the help of slow motion shots, double-exposure and split-screens Vertov was adamant to articulate "a theoretical manifestation on the screen"<sup>43</sup> that renders visible his utopian

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<sup>41</sup> Viktor Shklovsky first coined the term 'defamiliarisation' (ostranenie) as an artistic technique in his essay "Art as Device" which became highly influential for Russian constructivism as well as for the Epic Theatre of Bertolt Brecht. See Viktor Shklovsky (1929), "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park/IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 1-14.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Noble, "The Politics of Utopia in Contemporary Art," in *Utopia & Contemporary Art*, ed. Christian Gether et al. (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), 56.

<sup>43</sup> Annette Michelson, ed., *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 83.

vision of a communist society in a modern Soviet Union where men and machine would live in harmony. In an earlier manifesto Vertov writes accordingly:

Our path leads through the poetry of machines, from the bungling citizen to the perfect electric man. In revealing the machine's soul, in causing the worker to love his workbench, the peasant his tractor, the engineer his engine - we introduce creative joy into all mechanical labour, we bring people into closer kinship with machines, we foster new people.<sup>44</sup>

Vertov's cinematic work, as reflected in his theoretical manifesto, flirts in essence with a totalitarian imagination that hopes to find in cinema a form of staging and bestowing meaning to the people as one body. In opposition to democracy's institutionalised social indeterminacy characterised by 'the empty place of power', totalitarianism is characterised by the attempt to represent the people as organic unity.<sup>45</sup> Lefort writes - almost as in response to Vertov:

The distinctly modern feature of totalitarianism is that it combines a radically artificialist ideal with a radically organicist ideal. The image of the body comes to be combined with the image of the machine. Society appears to be a community all of whose members are strictly interdependent; at the same time it is assumed to be constructing itself day by day, to be striving towards a goal - the creation of the new man - and to be living in a state of permanent mobilization.<sup>46</sup>

This 'state of permanent mobilization' is presented in Vertov's film as a form of industrial poetry and creative joy that requires new modes of aesthetic experience. The

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<sup>44</sup> Dziga Vertov (1922), "We: Variant of a Manifesto," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson, trans. Kevin O'Brien (London: Pluto Press, 1984), 8.

<sup>45</sup> For a more comprehensive discussion of the role of contingency in the visual presentation of the body politic see Chapter 2 of this thesis.

<sup>46</sup> Claude Lefort, "The Question of Democracy," in *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 14.

deployment of an experimental visual language that embraced a sense of contingency offered an aesthetic sense of possibility, an audio-visual taste of a world yet to come. Hence, contingency could be experienced as an uncertain aspiration for something different, for ‘what not yet is’, and even a desire for social transformation. This social transformation, however, corresponds to what Claude Lefort has described as “symbolic mutation”, a society that has been deprived of its traditional metaphysical certainties and that is in pursuit of new symbolic forms capable of staging society as coherent and unified. *Man with a Movie Camera* thus represents an experimental search for political form at a time of social transition, an endeavour that oscillates between the modern recognition of “the dissolution of the markers of certainty” and the totalitarian temptation of installing a new symbolic framework that should guarantee the identity of the people.<sup>47</sup>

For Vertov, the experimental form of his cinema is therefore an exercise to employ film as a revolutionary tool capable of transforming the body politic into a coherent and integrated organism whose internal social cohesion should be guaranteed by industrial production and technological advancement. The political potential of contingency is thus twofold: On the one hand, it consists of a disruptive utopian dimension inducing affective intensities which potentially reverberate in the viewer as a desire for future social change. Film was a vital instrument of affective politics designed to prepare the viewer for the profound social transformation processes revolutionary class struggle would eventually achieve. On the other hand, contingency is generated in *Man with a Movie Camera* by way of an ongoing search for an appropriate aesthetic form capable of presenting the people as one. This ambiguity also emphasises the limitations of the utopian dimension of contingency as an element of progressive or democratic thought. One should stress, however, that Vertov worked at a time when the experience of cinematic perception was still in its infancy and the totalitarian catastrophes of the 20th century had not yet fully unfolded. Fur-

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<sup>47</sup> The problem of aesthetic and political form at the beginning of the 20th century was mentioned in Chapter 1 by example of Georg Lukács and Carl Schmitt. The experience of uncertainty, the modern result of the loss of transcendent or traditional foundations, was not only considered problematic but also temporary. Both Lukács and Schmitt were flirting with totalitarian political concepts that should eventually install new political foundations.

thermore, for Vertov the concept of contingency did probably not have much political value in itself but possibly represented a stage of uncertainty that opened up new social possibilities but was ultimately to be replaced with new certitudes.<sup>48</sup> Utopian thinking can be effective in inducing desires for alterity and social change but at the same time it obscures the fact that the full actualisation of any utopian vision is ultimately impossible. The utopian character of contingency feeds on a perceived lack in the present that shall be overcome in the future. Any attempt to fully implement future utopian visions therefore requires the removal of all perceptions of deficiency, difference, or conflict in the present. Consequently, if the utopian vision cannot be completely actualised, if its promises remain unfulfilled, then further obstacles have to be overcome in order to identify society with itself, to make it 'one body'. The ideological core of utopianism is based on the assumption that the causes for an unfulfilled present never lie in the utopian vision itself but in the impediments that prevent its ultimate completion.<sup>49</sup>

### III. Jean-Luc Godard: Contingency and the cinematic search for political form

The revolutionary tone Dziga Vertov struck in *Man with a Movie Camera* was continued by Jean-Luc Godard and his films of the late 1960s. In his so called 'political period' before and after the 1968 May protests, Godard (like Vertov) understood cin-

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<sup>48</sup> See Chapter 1 for a more detailed discussion of the historical development of the concept of contingency as well as the different political responses to it.

<sup>49</sup> The forceful replacement of the avant-garde's formalistic love of experimentation with Socialist Realism, which eventually became the official aesthetics and state policy of the Soviet Union in 1932, constitutes an effort to temporarily establish a 'hegemonic aesthetic discourse' by means of enclosing the experience of contingency and declaring the search for revolutionary form accomplished. Social transformation should no longer be inspired by volatile utopian vision but guaranteed by an indisputable cult of personality. Image-making became a means to legitimise and foster Stalin's claim to totalitarian rule for it was his image that was believed as being capable of bestowing total meaning to Soviet society and representing the people as one (for an insightful study of the role images played in the public worship of Josef Stalin in the 1930s see Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), Chapters 2 & 3). However, it was the combination of experimental form and a revolutionary sense of mission that made Vertov one of the most influential filmmakers of the Soviet era. His explicitly partisan exhortation, as well as his self-reflexive approach towards film that offered a revelation of the persuasive power of the visual, has made a lasting impact on many subsequent political filmmakers. The probably strongest continuation of Vertov's belief in the revolutionary power of cinema can be found in the political films of Jean-Luc Godard.



Fig. 24: Still from Jean-Luc Godard, *Week-end*, 1967

ema as site of class struggle where political theory and film could be united in order to explore new forms of the political. At stake was nothing less than the exploration of new possibilities for a revolutionary cinema - or as Godard himself has famously put it: “The problem is not to make political films but to make films *politically*.”<sup>50</sup> Making films ‘politically’ meant embarking on an aesthetic exploration of (Marxist) political form capable of exposing the internal contradiction of the dominant (capitalist) modes of production, consumption and perception. Cinema should become an instrument through which political ideas and social observation could be brought together in an experimental way.

In opposition to Vertov’s utopian enthusiasm of the late 1920s, Godard’s work of the late 1960s in particular functioned as cultural seismograph that seemed to anticipate the social shocks that would unsettle France and Western Europe in the following years. I will therefore focus on Godard’s films from 1967, *2 or 3 Things I know about Her*, *Week-end* and *La Chinoise* that seemed to anticipate the social and political tensions that loomed ahead. [fig. 24] The visual engagement with contingency in these films reflects a growing sense of unease, scepticism and discontent

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Colin MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics* (London: BFI, 1980), 19.

during the socio-political climate of 1960s France. When Godard's films prior to 1968 functioned as a politico-aesthetic heart rate monitor of an agitated body politic, his cinematic experiments after 1968 should serve as its revolutionary pacemaker. However, these experimentations with aesthetic and political form produced an intensity of contingent experience that ultimately failed to reestablish cinema as an effective site of class struggle in the tradition of Dziga Vertov. The political efficacy of cinematic contingency overstretched itself and revealed its ever present risk of failure. I argue in this section that Godard's films of the late 1960s measure shifting social intensities rather than present a full-fledged revolutionary vision capable of inducing profound political change. The politics of visual contingency constituted a moment of productive risk rather than an effective agonistic gesture. In their attempt to convey a sense of social contingency, Godard's films document a search for political form that could support real social transformation processes. Eventually, Godard's cinematic ingenuity outpaced the political events outside the cinema resulting in an ineffective attempt to aesthetically give form and affectively bestow meaning to a revolution that never fully materialised. In a gesture of modernist nostalgia, Godard still seemed to nurture the hope that film can prove to be a vital tool in the revolutionary process - if only one were to find the right form. The right form, however, was not the utopian vision of social advancement but rather the knowledgable view of 'ideological critique'.

What Vertov has proclaimed as a fresh view on the world, a revolutionary vision of a rearrangement of all facts of life, was turned by Godard into an 'informed gaze' (Althusser) that should be able to penetrate the ideological distortions of the everyday and reveal the inherent contradictions of capitalist society. The experience of contingency in Godard's political films was thus directed towards the ends of ideological critique and still embedded in a modernist conviction that successful social transformation is potentially a matter of appropriate aesthetic form and critical image-making. Godard's films of the late 1960s are eloquent examples for a critical analysis of a historical moment through the experience of contingency that not only critically reflect dominant conventions of moving images but of political action more

generally. I thus suggest that the experience of contingency that Godard's films induce has distinct political implications. It reflects an anticipatory sense of social tensions and political discontent whose actual dimensions could then not be analytically grasped but their intensity was discernible nevertheless. The experience of contingency reflects affective social energies that are transmitted and modified through the viewers' visceral and embodied cinematic perception. Embodied vision harbours political qualities as the negotiation between subjective experience and a public realm. Thus the political implications of contingency exceed any clear sense of political possibility - as the perception that things can be otherwise. On the one hand, it seems as if Godard had already found the alternative to the status quo in the project of Marxism and if cinema itself was assigned the revolutionary role of supporting the class struggle that would ultimately lead the way to a new social order. On the other hand, this linear interpretation of the contingent moment as preconceived ideological instrument is constantly disrupted by the volatility and unpredictability of personal responses. I will return to this aspect below.

Godard's films of the late 1960s are films for political education that attempt to translate and transform social theory (existentialism, Marxism/Maoism, structuralism) into an aesthetic and intellectual experience that pursues distinct communication objectives. Godard attempts to agitate and to realise political theory within film which in turn shall translate into political action on the side of the viewer. Simultaneously, Godard's films reflect their own conditions of production and visibility as exemplified by *Two or Three Things I Know About Her* (1967).<sup>51</sup> Here, the experience of contingency becomes not only an internal critique of moving images but also of the social conditions the film seeks to make visible. In this film, Godard critically addresses issues regarding human isolation, alienation, consumerism and violence by showing twenty-four hours in the life of Juliette Jeanson (Marina Vlady) who leads a bourgeois life characterised by boredom, discontent and solitude. Godard narrates the film himself with a whispering voice offering personal and philosophical reflections

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<sup>51</sup> All references to this film are taken from the following version: *Two Or Three Things I Know About Her ... (Deux Ou Trois Choses Que Je Sais d'Elle)*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1967 (London: Optimum Home Releasing, 2011), DVD.

on the unfolding story. In so doing, the film appears as a close-knit fabric where images, sounds and text are carefully interwoven. The risky moment in Godard's film becomes effective in the multi-sensory quality of visual perception that operates on a broad array of different cognitive and affective registers. For instance, the 'visual' perception of *Two or Three Things I Know About Her*, or any other film by that matter, is never a purely uni-sensory experience but by default multidimensional and layered. As a consequence, the modes of thinking that are triggered by it, have to be regarded as multi-sensory or multi-layered, too. This plurality of perception and experience contributes to the unruliness of contingency in essayistic filmmaking and makes it impossible to steer its affective energies along preconceived ideological fault lines.

Questions regarding the role of images and language as the parameters of social reality and communication are constantly addressed and constitute an underlying but ever-present topic. Godard's political concerns cannot be separated from the formal aesthetic style he employs. In the essayistic sense, the film is not only an analysis of the world encountered but simultaneously an interrogation of the effectiveness and appropriateness of the chosen methods. The experience of contingency conflates the presentation of social relations as contingent with a profound scepticism towards cinematic representation, as Godard makes clear through his use of images. Via the use of jump cuts and extreme close-ups, the images appear unstable and incoherent confirming the unfixed position of the characters in the film as well as provoking disturbances in the remote viewer. Additionally, the voiceover asks halfway through the film: "There is increasing interaction between images and language. You might say that living in modern society is virtually like living in a giant comic strip. Still, language in itself cannot accurately define the image. For instance: how do you describe an event? ... How do you describe exactly what happened? But are these the right words and images to use? Aren't there other possibilities? Am I speaking too loud? Am I too close or too far?" Simultaneously, we watch the same scene shot from different angles, and individual sequences become arranged in changing succession that not necessarily correspond to the chronological order of the unfolding story. These

non-deterministic sequences of individual sequences constitute a visual experience of contingency that exceeds the mere discontinuity of images that Panagia calls ‘stochastic serialisation of moving images’. The enquiring, essayistic attitude of experimental image-making does not attempt to imitate reality but presents an uncertainty regarding the world it encounters and a possibility regarding thinkable alternatives. *2 or 3 Things* is therefore simultaneously a political as well as an aesthetic experiment. The unsettling experience of the viewer results from the disparity between the image as revelation as well as concealment that encourages the viewer to grapple with the world he or she inhabits. The film has no intention whatsoever of presenting any abstract form of reality but rather stages a struggle for the possibility of truth on the basis of the images’ countless facets of reality. The film develops a visual scepticism towards the image and therefore towards all forms of representations and ‘official’ images.

The experience of contingency as inevitable aesthetic phenomenon and political category of Godard’s work not only reflects the general creative and political tensions of the late 1960s but also Godard’s attempt to appropriately visualise his waiting for the revolution. In *Week-end* (1967), Godard addresses the social decay process he recognises as inherent in the capitalist society of 1960s France.<sup>52</sup> The film shows the road trip of a young bourgeois couple (Mireille Darc and Jean Yanne) driving through rural France in order to secure her inheritance from her dying father. Along the way, they encounter catastrophic car accidents, eruptions of class struggle, literary characters and a group of cannibalistic hippies. Godard describes an internal war that results from the intrinsic contradictions of the capitalist system. The social tensions Godard depicts in *Week-end* should give a foretaste of what was to come.<sup>53</sup> Godard’s films of the late 1960s as a form of political thinking in images have to be understood through the mutual influence between his engagement with Marxism/

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<sup>52</sup> All references to this film are taken from the following version: *Week-end*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1967 (London: Artificial Eye, 2005), DVD.

<sup>53</sup> “Godard has always claimed that he was absolutely prepared for the revolutionary break of 1968, and *Week-end* confirms this to be true. It is clearly made by someone who has reached a position of total disgust and rejection of his own society.” Colin MacCabe, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003), 200.

Maoism and his understanding of the cinema as a site of class struggle in the sense of Dziga Vertov. Godard's political position was mainly influenced by Althusser's 'structural Marxism' and his respective reassessment of the concept of the Cultural Revolution as developed by Lenin and infamously executed by Mao.<sup>54</sup> Althusser's attempt to separate Marxism's scientific and ideological dimension reflected his fierce anti-Stalinist position and his attempt to turn the French communist party into a real revolutionary organisation. In the wake of Althusser's interpretation of Marx, mainstream cinema (and Hollywood cinema in particular) was nothing but an "ideological state apparatus" that served to promote the dominant capitalist ideology.<sup>55</sup> Mainstream cinema potentially represents an aesthetic practice that seeks to enclose any experience of contingency in order to preserve the social status quo and was thus associated with a conservative political agenda. Progressive films on the other hand, should challenge any appearance of self-evidence or objectivity. Conventional films characterised by linear storytelling and entertainment were consequently identified as false and distorted representations of reality that should ensure, in Althusser's words, "the reproduction of the conditions of production".

Applied to visual-aesthetic practices, we should be aware, however, that defining political image-making exclusively in terms of ideological criticism relies too heavily on a political understanding of images as 'representations' that either reveal or conceal (distort) their 'real' conditions of production. From this perspective, the political image is always linked to some 'social truth' that it tries to make visible or invisible. However, if we regard Godard's moving images less as 'representations' and more as gestures or experiences, his engagement with contingency develops political implications beyond ideological criticism and revolutionary agitation. That is, even if Godard's films from the late 1960s failed in revolutionary terms, they can still be considered effective as social seismographs of his time and political catalysts

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<sup>54</sup> See MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, 65f., and MacCabe, *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at 70*, 195f.

<sup>55</sup> See Louis Althusser (1970), "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards An Investigation," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2006), 85-126.

for affective responses. Consider here, for instance, the melancholic philosophical reflections of the author in *2 or 3 Things* whose whispering voice, combined with a close up shot of a cup of swirling black coffee, creates an almost hypnotic atmosphere that creates a sense of dizziness. The moment of contingency appears as an attempt to affectively unsettle the viewer so she can ‘feel’, as an empathic experience, the filmmaker’s own discomfort with the (capitalist) world.

For Godard, however, the experience of contingency in his films seems to be guided by a cinematic search for new political forms. The aesthetics of Hollywood cinema, which for the French auteur represented the dominant ideological form and which he rejected as bourgeois for its entertaining and commercial qualities, constituted the backdrop against which he pitched his political films. The opposition to Hollywood, or commercial cinema more generally, was not only recognisable in terms of aesthetic form and authorship but also in relation to the audience. “What was necessary was the disruption of the traditional organisation of Hollywood cinema so as to investigate how images found their meaning within specific articulations determined by ideological and political struggles and to engage the film viewer in that investigation. Only through such an engagement could there be a possibility of making a political film.”<sup>56</sup>

However, I suggest that the political quality of Godard’s films, induced by the experience of contingency, cannot be reduced to a ‘disruption’ of certain visual articulations that are ‘determined by ideological and political struggles’. This conception of a ‘political film’ does not exhaust political thinking in and through images. The latter exactly derives its political potential through a certain ‘unruly behaviour’, through the indeterminacy of the embodied visual experience and the relational and intersubjective character of thought processes more generally. Essayistic films derive their political potency from what Adorno has described as “violations of the orthodoxy of thought”, that is to make something visible that can usually not be seen.<sup>57</sup> Thus, even though Godard tries to direct the viewer’s experience of contingency to-

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<sup>56</sup> MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, 61.

<sup>57</sup> See Adorno, “The Essay as Form”, 23.

wards ideological criticism, where the ‘political’ film disrupts the ideological ‘politics’ that are always lurking behind the conventional surface of mainstream cinema, the political quality of his films exceeds that definition. Rather than in a grand scale modernist belief in the revealing or revolutionary powers of (political) aesthetics, the political quality of Godard’s films lies in its micropolitical capacity to induce in the viewer a scepticism towards conventional modes of perception as well as multilayered modes of thinking about their conditions of possibility. The politics of contingency far exceed the cinematic pedagogy of montage, intertextuality and commentary and, for instance, also include unpredictable elements of humour and satire. Take as an example the long tracking shot of a traffic jam in *Week-end* that could be interpreted as a combined ‘critique’ of both 1960s French consumerist culture and the need for vacation as an indicator of the alienating and exploitive effects of capitalist working conditions. But it is also an anarchic moment that reflects life’s absurdity and banality with a twinkling eye; a scene that triggers a chuckle or timid feelings of *schadenfreude* that fleetingly pinch the viewer without necessarily enter the threshold of deeper political concerns.

For Godard, however, making political films predominantly seems to mean finding a cinematic form that reveals the ideological distortions through which the world was presented in mainstream media. In *La Chinoise*, this critical view on ideological distortions that dominate everyday life is expressed by the central character Guillaume (Jean-Pierre Léaud), who states: “Today is current events. We see them daily at the movies. There is a false idea about current events at the movies.” Godard’s cinematic engagement with contingency constitutes a mode of ideological critique that should cast doubt at the dominant representations of a world that seemed familiar. Once people gained a ‘clearer view’ of the truth behind those images, they would be ready for revolutionary action. Without ideological critique (as provided by the revolutionary filmmaker) the workings of the dominant ideology would go largely unnoticed. Social transformation should no longer be achieved by presenting



Fig. 25: Still from Jean-Luc Godard, *La Chinoise*, 1967

a utopian vision but by critically challenging the “transparent myth in which a society or an age can recognise itself”, to use Althusser’s words.<sup>58</sup>

One of the most prominent attempts to find an effective aesthetic form of translating the ideas of Althusser and Mao into cinematic practice was made in *La Chinoise* (1967).<sup>59</sup> The film depicts a group of students in a Paris apartment who belong to a French Maoist cell passionately discussing the legitimacy of violence in the course of revolutionary struggle. The bourgeois setting of their debates and the play-like interactions between them seems to reflect the contradictions and the discrepancy between theory and practice that characterised the French left in the late 1960s. Here the theoretical difficulties regarding the implementation of Maoist concepts is directly linked to the practice of filmmaking - an aesthetic attempt that Rancière has called “the Maoist theatricalization of Marxism”.<sup>60</sup> When Godard’s opening credits read ‘un film en train de se faire’ (a film in the making) they set the provisional

<sup>58</sup> See Louis Althusser (1962), “The ‘Piccolo Teatro’: Bertolazzi and Brecht,” in *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 2005), 108f.

<sup>59</sup> All references to this film are taken from the following version: *La Chinoise*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard, 1967 (London: Optimum Home Releasing, 2005), DVD.

<sup>60</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables*, trans. Emiliano Batista (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 18.

ground for both the movie one is about to see and the theoretical problems it addresses. Cinema appears as a tool to implement theory or at least to ponder possible implementations: “Il faut confronter les idées vagues avec des images claires.” [fig. 25] Thus, the experience of contingency runs like the literal red thread through the entire film, inducing in the viewer a sense that both political thinking and the perception of (moving) images is always tentative, embodied and ‘in the making’. Accordingly, *La Chinoise* ends with the laconic utterance: “I thought I’d made a leap forward. And I realised I’d made only the first step of a long march.” This admission of political and aesthetic imperfection does not only echo Maoist politics but also reflects the uncertainties of revolutionary struggle and, most importantly, leaves it to the viewer to complement the conceptual vacancies the film opens up. Volker Pantenburg has called this element “productive perplexity” (produktive Ratlosigkeit) in order to illustrate the fraction and gaps in the translation process between theory and practice.<sup>61</sup> In that sense, *La Chinoise* is not only an anticipation of the theoretical debates of the 1968 protests but also Godard’s (temporary) farewell to narrative film that he would abandon the following year in order to further intensify his cinematic search for political form.

With the formation of the ‘Dziga Vertov-Group’ in 1968, Godard’s political films reached a new radical level. The name already indicates the important influence of Dziga Vertov on the work of Godard - in terms of both his artistic and political ambitions.<sup>62</sup> Following the tradition of Vertov’s “theoretical manifestations on the screen”, aimed at attuning the audience to a harmonious communist future, the Dziga Vertov-Group too understood cinema as an important site of class struggle. For Godard, the engagement with the Dziga Vertov-Group, which consisted essentially only of him and Jean-Pierre Gorin, meant the temporary withdrawal from commercial

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<sup>61</sup> See Volker Pantenburg, *Ränder des Kinos: Godard, Wiseman, Benning, Costa* (Berlin: August, 2010), 17. My translation.

<sup>62</sup> As Colin MacCabe explains: “Dziga Vertov was chosen as a name to indicate a break not only with Hollywood but also with the tradition of Soviet film-making identified with Eisenstein. Eisenstein’s decision in 1924 to make a historical film about the battleship Potemkin instead of analysing the current state of class struggle was defined as a decisive moment of defeat in Soviet cinema.” MacCabe, *Godard: Images, Sounds, Politics*, 22.

cinema and a turn towards experimental film-forms that sought more explicitly to convey Marxist and Maoist contents.<sup>63</sup> The cinematic class struggle that was staged by the Dziga Vertov-Group was defined by a tension between visual representation and political abstraction. This tension, however, turned out to be so strong that it tore apart all conventional forms of film pushing the experience of contingency to an extreme. The experience of contingency, as a moment of spontaneous search for new political forms, revealed its operational limitations by failing to provide any discernible message or productive ambiguity that could have been effectively reconnected to already existing political dynamics. The experience of contingency that in 1967 had so aptly reflected the political atmosphere of uneasiness, discomfort and a popular desire for social transformation, proved overestimated and ultimately ineffective in its subsequent revolutionary efforts. We can thus say that Godard's films of the late 1960s are seismographic recordings of social tensions and political shocks that never erupted in the political earthquake he expected. Godard's dialectical use of sound, text and images, the montage of the concrete and the abstract, should help the viewer to see beyond the ideological mirage of capitalist society generated by 'ideological state apparatuses' that make the world appear transparent and familiar. Betrayed by history, Godard's political cinematic language increasingly diverged from the social realities it was supposed to change. Neither did the cinema prove to be an effective site of class struggle, nor did profound social transformation processes take place. Godard's films of the late 1960s and early 1970s became symbolic reflections on a revolution that never came and paradigmatically represent the risk and limitations of the political efficacy of contingency.

However, to reduce a political assessment of Godard's films, through the cinematic experience of contingency, to revolutionary activism and ideological criticism would fall too short. This is because Godard's (political) films never intended to

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<sup>63</sup> The end of the Dziga Vertov-Group and Godard's collaboration with Jean-Pierre Gorin in 1972 marked also the end of Godard's radical political period. The attempt to cinematically reflect the Marxist critique of Althusser and Mao in film experiments made way for reflections on metaphysics and spirituality. However, one should probably be cautious to interpret this move too readily as a rejection or turning away from sociopolitical concerns but rather regard it as Godard's continued search for ever new forms of cinematic political thought.

present an ultimate position or definite statement regarding the social worlds they were referring to but rather attempted an unsettling of those worlds and a processual exploration of the possibilities of critique that inextricably intertwines political thinking with aesthetic practice. In the same way that Godard refuses to take on any orthodox political position, he presents the viewer with a (visual) scepticism towards cinema by demonstrating that the sights and sounds of cinema do not represent us with any self-evident truths.<sup>64</sup> Consequently, all political cinematic messages, be they formal or contentual, induce a scepticism towards sensory evidence and the technologies as well as ideologies that enable or produce them.<sup>65</sup> Thus, cinema can function as a tool to analyse and understand society, to gain insights to it, but, as Godard never became tired of emphasising, cinema has no neutral, outside position.

As pointed out by Laclau and Mouffe, the antagonistic nature of the political is never pure or neutral since it is always bound to the dominant or hegemonic constellation it sets out to challenge and, accordingly, critical films are always products of and entangled with the very logic of the sociopolitical system they try to resist. Even the senses and interpretative skills we use to perceive cinema are always conditioned by the prevailing (or hegemonic) sociopolitical system.<sup>66</sup> Essayistic films as modes of political thinking are thus embodied practices which are at odds with conventional forms of perceiving, interpreting and communicating the world. The filmic conflation between theory and practice manifests itself as a form of visual research that includes a level of self-analysis expressing an awareness of how the object of investigation informs its own methods of research. This critical and reflective position towards one's own "orthodoxy of thought", which Adorno has described as one of the core features of essayistic reasoning, also involves a departure from a merely linear and teleological way of thinking. Adorno writes: "Thought does not progress in a single direction; instead, the moments are interwoven as in a carpet. The fruitfulness of the thoughts depends on the density of the texture. The thinker does not

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<sup>64</sup> See David Sterritt, *The Films of Jean-Luc Godard: Seeing the Invisible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 21.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience, without unraveling it.”<sup>67</sup> The cinematic political thinking of Godard shows that the political quality of his films, based on the experience of contingency, exceeds the ‘single direction’ of ideological criticism and draws our attention to the inextricable entanglement between our political assumptions and the allegedly self-evident perception of the world - an aspect that is further explored in the work of Harun Farocki.

#### IV. Harun Farocki: Contingency and the denaturalisation of the visual world

The engagement with contingency in the work of German filmmaker Harun Farocki, continues a tradition of essayistic films that combines Vertov’s formal virtuosity and technological utopianism with Godard’s political fervour and cinematic scepticism. The result is a form of “cinematic Cubism”<sup>68</sup>, that is characterised by the general attempt to problematise technologies of visual representation and image production in contemporary society. Whereas the work of Vertov responded to the turbulent social transformation processes of the early Soviet Union, and Godard reflected the socio-political shockwaves of 1968, Farocki’s work analyses an era when the boundaries between the image-based operating principles of industry, military and entertainment become increasingly blurred.<sup>69</sup> An era that Christa Blümlinger has characterised as the shift from Foucault’s disciplinary society to Deleuze’s control society.<sup>70</sup> The ex-

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<sup>67</sup> Adorno, “The Essay as Form”, 13.

<sup>68</sup> Ken Johnson, “Unfiltered Images, Turning Perceptions Upside Down,” *The New York Times*, August 26, 2011, C24. *The New York Times*’ review of the exhibition *Harun Farocki: Images of War (at a Distance)* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 29 June 2011 - 2 January 2012.

<sup>69</sup> Paradigmatic for this interest is Farocki’s four part video installation *Serious Games* (2009) where he examines the virtual image worlds, based on video game technology and aesthetics, that are created to train US military personnel for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Interestingly, these same image worlds are also used to treat soldiers after their tour of duty for post-traumatic stress disorder by enabling them to visually relive traumatic experiences. Farocki thus cinematically explores what James Der Derian has called the “military-industrial-media-entertainment-network” that is a system “where made-for-TV wars and Hollywood war movies blur, military war games and computer video games blend, mock disasters and real accidents collide, producing on screen a new configuration of virtual power.” See James Der Derian, *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network* (Oxford: Westview Press, 2001), xi.

<sup>70</sup> See Christa Blümlinger, “Memory and Montage: On the Installation Counter-Music,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmann and Kodwo Eshun (London: Koenig Books, 2009), 108f.

perience of contingency in Farocki's work thus reflects an ongoing concern - that goes beyond ideological suspicion - about the function of audiovisual media in contemporary society and the power of images to simultaneously illuminate and obfuscate the world.<sup>71</sup> As I show in the following, this exploration of the revealing as well as concealing capacity of images is key to Farocki's visual political thinking and his films and installations explore the thought provoking and subversive possibilities of the images' dual quality. Consequently, in his cinematic investigations into the realm of images, Farocki's engagement with contingency is neither based on the presentation of utopian vision, nor on the search for revolutionary form. Rather, the experience of contingency induced by his films is related to the changing socio-material conditions of contemporary modes of visibility. Farocki shows us that the technological developments and ever changing use of images require continuous engagement with the visual world. Farocki writes: "Many things are new, and most of it is in flux. There can be no certain knowledge. Therefore, it is better to (re-)assemble what exists rather than attempt an explanation. It is necessary to put elements or fragments of perception into changing relations."<sup>72</sup>

Farocki's work should therefore be regarded as a mode of visual exploration or political thinking in images that continues his early activist filmmaking by means of an approach that resembles 'militant research'.<sup>73</sup> Militant research describes a meeting point between academia and activism that combines theoretical investigation with practical actions, whereby the term 'militant' refers to persistence and critical

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<sup>71</sup> The question regarding the nature and enlightening capacity of images that is addressed in Farocki's films corresponds to the work of Trevor Paglen as discussed in Chapter 3. Paglen's blurred and fuzzy photographs of satellites and military installation complement Farocki's montages of drone cameras and surveillance footage. Here, the question remains, what do (these) images show us? Fittingly, both artists have shown their work in the joint exhibition *Visibility Machines: Harun Farocki & Trevor Paglen*, Center for Art Design and Visual Culture, University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC), 24 October 2013 - 22 February 2014.

<sup>72</sup> "Vieles ist neu, das meiste in Bewegung. Sicheres Wissen kann es nicht geben. Besser also Vorhandenes montieren, als eine Deutung zu versuchen. Es gilt, Elemente oder Fragmente der Wahrnehmung in wechselnde Beziehung zu setzen." Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki, "Ernste Spiele: Eine Einführung," in *Serious Games: Krieg | Medien | Kunst / War | Media | Art*, ed. Ralf Beil and Antje Ehmann (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 24. My translation.

<sup>73</sup> See *Militant Research Handbook*, New York University 2013, available on Nicholas Mirzoeff's blog at the New York University's department of Media, Culture and Communication: [http://www.visualculturenow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/MRH\\_Web.pdf](http://www.visualculturenow.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/MRH_Web.pdf). Accessed: 02/01/2015.

engagement rather than violence. The goal is to encourage and to practice new ways of acting that lead to new ways of thinking. The artistic production and aesthetic perception of visual images conflates acting and thinking and Farocki's films thus offer a method for exploring the political roles and agency of images in contemporary society based on three central aspects. First, Farocki's interest in *alternative forms of visual knowledge production* is expressed in a scepticism towards the seeming self-evidence of images. Thus, the crucial question here is: What do images show and how can their (re-)arrangements and juxtapositions be used to produce new or changed forms of meaning? The political positions Farocki develops in his films not only emerge from a decentralisation and destabilisation of meaning, a visual contemplation on contingency as it were, but also from a subversive use of images. This notion of subversion, or *détournement* in the Situationist tradition, becomes effective in Farocki's use of archive material, found-footage and sequences from technological films and documentaries which he de- and re-contextualises in order to criticise the social and material conditions they represent.

Second, Farocki's essayistic films do not separate political thought from political action therefore presenting an aesthetic *conflation of theory and practice*. This conflation is also prominent in Farocki's work which offers a two-fold and oscillating view on the examined object and the procedures of examination. The essay film as a mode of visual enquiry denotes a practice which swings back and forth between perception and conception, between concrete object and abstract generalisation. Simultaneously, this oscillation is declared an explicit topic of the work. The theoretical dimension of his essayistic filmmaking is not something that is externally applied but rather something that is developed *through* images. The essay film makes a contribution to a theoretical discourse based on audio-visual communication that demonstrates that theoretical thinking does not necessarily have to choose a written or oral form but can be articulated in the medium of film. For Farocki the main form of this theoretical articulation is the filmic montage through which different types of images become interrelated, comment on and interrupt each other, and eventually construct a

new “fluid material multiplicity”<sup>74</sup>. The essayistic quality of Farocki’s work is not only characterised by a certain ‘unorthodoxy of thought’ but also by the fact that his visual political thinking is not linear and teleological but multilayered and interwoven. Consequently the political potency of essayistic moving images does not lie in a clear, target-oriented analysis but in unfolding an ‘arena’ for intellectual, cognitive and affective experiences.<sup>75</sup>

The third important aspect of essayistic films can be found in their *critical reflection of methodology* which effectively results from the conflation of theory and practice. That means that the focus is not only on the outcome of a critical investigation but just as much on its theoretical processes and aesthetic methods. The critical methodological self-reflection of Farocki’s work is characterised by the unremitting destabilisation and subversion of image-based meaning driven by the impulse “to avoid naturalizing the image”.<sup>76</sup> Farocki’s denaturalisation of the image is primarily achieved through the collage of old and new images, the montage of footage from different contexts, and multi-perspectivity through the use of different monitors or split-screens. Collage, montage, and multi-perspectivity are the cinematic means to reformulate the ‘objective presence’ of the visual and to blur the boundaries between aesthetic practice and political thinking. However, in the contemporary world, all forms of vision have lost their innocence and no longer provide the basis for a clear opposition between authority and resistance or the criticism of ideology. There seems to be no outside to what Mirzoeff has described as “complexes of visibility”<sup>77</sup>, but moving images offer ‘changing relations’ of perception that can then help us to see the world in a different light. Farocki’s overall oeuvre can therefore be characterised by the attempt to problematise technologies of visual representation and image production; he has developed a cinematic form of critical research into the visible and its

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<sup>74</sup> Colectivo Situaciones, “Something More on Research Militancy: Footnotes on Procedures and (In)Decisions,” in *Constituent Imagination: Militant Investigations // Collective Theorization*, ed. Stephen Shukaitis and David Graeber (Oakland/CA: AK Press 2007), 76.

<sup>75</sup> As pointed out above, Adorno writes about the essay that “the thinker does not actually think but rather makes himself into an arena for intellectual experience”. See Adorno, “The Essay as Form”, 13.

<sup>76</sup> Hal Foster, “Vision Quest: The Cinema of Harun Farocki,” *Artforum* 43, no.3 (2004): 158.

<sup>77</sup> See Nicholas Mirzoeff, *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visibility* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5f.

social and material conditions. As D. N. Rodowick puts it: “The simplest and truest thing one can say about Farocki’s work is that it is the product of a life engaged in the critique of images by images.”<sup>78</sup> In other words, Farocki’s cinematic practice is informed by questions around the nature and function of images: What are images? What do images show? And how is the relationship between seeing and understanding in contemporary society?

Farocki’s work thus centres upon an understanding of images in which the ontological and the political dimension coincide. His films can be interpreted as visual theory and modes of political thinking in images where the material dimension of the image reveals a powerful political potential. Farocki’s method of scrutinising dominant forms of presenting and seeing the world by means of cinematic montage, which characterises most of his films, offers a critical attitude towards images and the social and historical conditions they are part of. Images are contrasted with other images, thus exercising a critique of the visual without resorting to iconoclasm. Farocki’s work corresponds to Allan Sekula’s claim that cinematic work offers a “critical meta-commentary” on the “illusory facticity of photographic media”<sup>79</sup> as eloquently demonstrated in Farocki’s film *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (*Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*) from 1988.<sup>80</sup> [fig. 26] As an independent filmmaker, Farocki produces his films mostly without public sponsorship, thus ‘recycling’ ready-made and documentary images, archive material as well as commercial material that he had produced in different contexts. In the case of *Images of the World* the result is a multi-layered montage of moving and static, old and new, found and produced images addressing the role of image-making in modern warfare (photography in particular) and its ambiguous function between concealing and revealing, documentation and destruction, seeing and understanding. Therefore, the film’s image track “implies that the historical purpose of photography - whether sci-

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<sup>78</sup> D. N. Rodowick, “Eye Machines,” *Artforum* 53, no.6 (2015): 191.

<sup>79</sup> Sekula, “Dismantling Modernism”, 126.

<sup>80</sup> All references to this film are taken from the following version: *Images of the World and the Inscriptions of War* (*Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges*), directed by Harun Farocki, 1988 (Berlin: Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 2001), DVD.



Fig. 26: Still from Harun Farocki, *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*, 1988

entific, military, forensic, or aesthetic - has been not only to record and preserve but also to mislead, deceive and even destroy: that is, to aid yet obfuscate vision.<sup>81</sup> Similar to Paglen's photographs, Farocki shows that images make visible and conceal at the same time and that to see something does not mean to know something - as the indexical conventions of photography often suggest. This discrepancy between seeing and understanding is illustrated by a juxtaposition of different types of visual material that, at first sight, seems disconnected but eventually joins to construct a discernible political message. Among footage of flight simulations, drawing lessons, architectural draughtsmen and military commercials, Farocki shows the first aerial photographs taken of the Auschwitz death camp by the American airforce on the 4th of April, 1944. During World War II, allied reconnaissance planes took images of the IG Farben industrial precinct near the Polish town of Auschwitz but failed to identify the concentration camp situated close by. It was only in 1977, more than three decades after the aerial photographs were originally taken, that CIA employees started to

<sup>81</sup> Nora Alter, "The Political Im/perceptible: Farocki's *Images of the World and the Inscription of War*," in *Harun Farocki: Working on the Sight-Lines*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004), 218.

reassess the content of the pictures. In another sequence we see pictures of Algerian women taken by French soldiers in the 1960s. The women are suspected of ‘terrorist activities’ and their unveiled faces photographed for the first time. Additionally, the viewer is told the story of Alfred Meydenbauer, the ‘father of the technique of scale measurement’, who pioneered procedures of photographic survey in order to document and preserve the front elevation of buildings in the second half of the 19th century. Later on, Meydenbauer’s technique was to play a crucial role for the destruction and reconstruction of Berlin townhouses that were demolished in 1937 in order to clear space for the new Reich Chancellery. This highly complex visual montage offers the viewer two central semantic dimensions.

First, *Images of the World* has to be regarded as a visual investigation into the ontological dimension of the image and its political role in modern warfare. Its oscillating function between revealing and concealing as well as its ideological potential emerges between the two poles of vision (‘sight as a physical operation’) and visuality (‘sight as a social fact’) as mentioned above.<sup>82</sup> Farocki shows, however, that there is no clear cut distinction between the two and that it is ultimately up to the viewer to recognise the visible and invisible dimensions of politics. The experience of contingency that is induced by the visual ambiguity between knowledge and obfuscation as well as the changing historical circumstances that make things visible and invisible, make Farocki’s investigations into the visual regimes of industrial production, optical surveillance and aerial warfare highly relevant for contemporary politics. At a time of excessive visibilities including ubiquitous public monitoring, aerial surveillance and remote sensing, machine vision, digital image processing, or computer simulated environments, to name but a few, Farocki’s work offers a form of sceptical seeing that sensitises the viewer to the oscillating practices of revealing and concealing in contemporary Western society.

Second, by drawing our attention to the fact that a given regime of visibility hides something at the same time it makes something visible, it becomes obvious that Farocki himself follows this logic. Farocki’s use of images shows a mode of visual

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<sup>82</sup> See Foster, *Vision and Visuality*, ix.

political thinking that offers critique in images beyond ideological critique, that is beyond the search for any ‘true intentions’ of images. It is therefore important to understand that identifying the political image as the image that reflects its own material and social conditions does not mean the resurrection of the idea of transparent origins. Rather, the political dimension lies in the recognition that there is no true image, that the political nature of the image emerges from its semantic ambiguity and contingent contextualisation. Farocki shows that it is this ambiguity which can be used in a subversive way based on the assumption that images reveal and conceal vision at the same time, that thinking in images always includes that which remains invisible. In contrast to Godard, whose political engagement with contingency was directed at revealing the social ‘truth’ about the inherent contradictions and violence of capitalist societies, the experience of contingency that is solicited in Farocki’s films results from the juxtaposition of different types of images that comment on each other without offering a conclusive educational position. The intellectual platform created by Farocki’s films encourages the viewer to reflect on her own responses to images and the revelatory and enlightening expectations that are potentially invested in them. By the same token, however, the political potency that emerges from the visual experience of contingency always entails its own limitations. Contingency thus presents itself as a moment of stimulating and productive risk beyond a clearly articulated political position. The experience of contingency in Farocki’s films provokes novel modes of seeing rather than an presenting a one-dimensional critique of dominant forms of (re-)presenting the world.

Political thinking in images is not simply an intellectual exchange between medium and viewer, but a cognitive, affective and decentralised process that involves human and non-human agents alike. This thinking process that might be triggered through the contingent encounter with affective intensities is therefore always uncertain and never fully calculable. Nora Alter argues that Farocki’s ‘subversive’ investigation into the visible, driven by the impulse “to avoid naturalizing the image”<sup>83</sup>, can only be successfully communicated when resisting “the over-decentralisation of

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<sup>83</sup> Foster, “Vision Quest”, 158.

(possible) political messages” that would otherwise become “ineffective” and “im/perceptible.”<sup>84</sup> I propose, however, that it is exactly this overwhelming potency of “over-decentralisation” that makes his films so fruitful, multilayered and insightful.

Similar to *Images of the World* (1988), Farocki’s installation *Eye/Machine* (2001-2003) also investigates the relation between seeing and understanding, vision and knowledge.<sup>85</sup> In the three part video installation *Eye/Machine*, made between 2001 and 2003, Farocki explores the complicity between visual technology, industrial production processes and modern warfare. [fig. 27] *Eye/Machine* focuses on so called ‘operational images’ which are the product of ‘intelligent’ machines, capable of performing tasks automatically and relatively independently of human control. Operational images are images that are part of a technical operation. They are products of visual tracking technologies designed to operate without human intervention and thus creating new visual spaces for non-human vision. The experience of contingency results here from the uncertainty of the human gaze when encountering images



**Fig. 27:** Still from Harun Farocki, *Eye/Machine*, 2001-2003

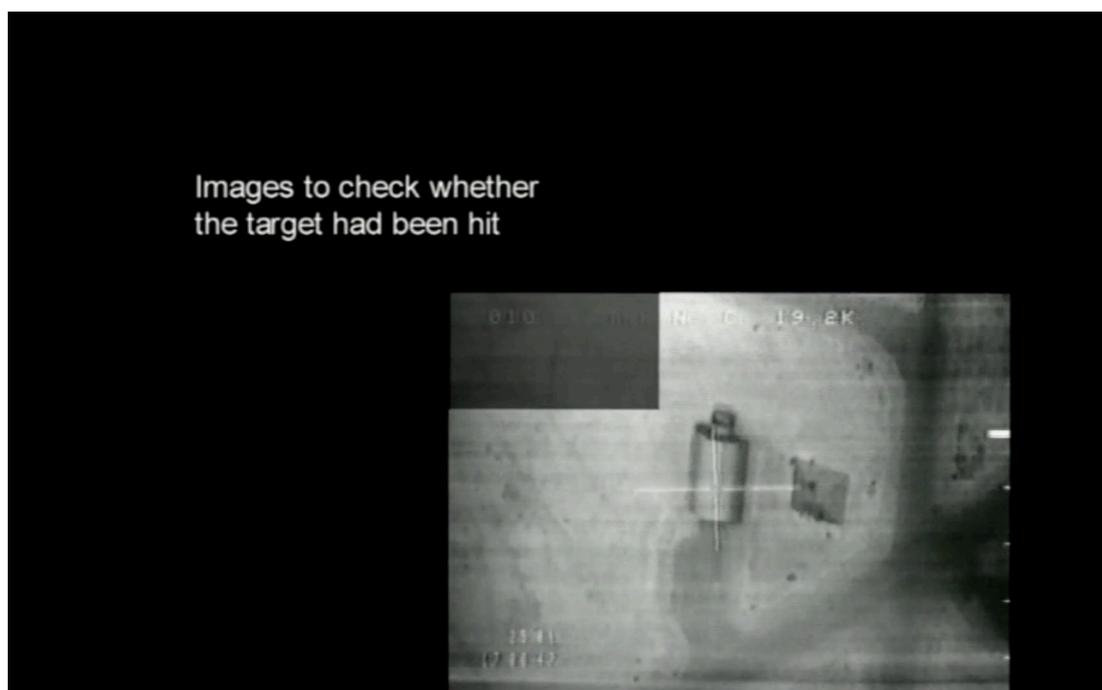
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<sup>84</sup> See Alter, “The Political Im/Perceptible”, 227.

<sup>85</sup> All references to this film are taken from the following version: *Eye / Machine I-III*, single channel version, directed by Harun Farocki, 2001-2003, (Berlin: Harun Farocki Filmproduktion, 2003), DVD.

which are designed to be processed by machines. The installation combines footage from production processes, aerial surveillance images, army instruction videos and historical propaganda films. The material is presented on two screens with on-screen commentary. The conceptual approach of his work is reflected in its artistic form which has changed from linear cinematic film to multidimensional audio-visual installation. Crucial for his analysis in *Eye/Machine*, however, is the use of images in modern warfare. Farocki shows the use of vision guided machines in both industrial production processes and military aviation. Whereas the former increases the effectiveness of fully-automatised industrial production processes, the latter suggests an increased precision in the detection and destruction of military targets. [fig. 28]

Farocki's dialectic between the productive and destructive force of vision revolves around the German notion of *Aufklärung* which means 'enlightenment' as well as 'reconnaissance' - a topic that was already addressed in *Images of the World*. In the light of a new technology-based regime of vision both terms have gained new meaning as illustrated by the use of missile combined cameras, which not only find their own target but also document its destruction. The operational images placed on the heads of so called 'intelligent weapons' in the first Gulf War seem therefore to



**Fig. 28:** Still from Harun Farocki, *Eye/Machine*, 2001-2003

indicate not only a new stage in the history of vision and visual representation but also an image regime that might be able to exist without human agency. Georges Didi-Huberman sees here even a visual critique of Enlightenment principles such as scientific method, self-assertive individualism and instrumental reason in the tradition of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno that Farocki addresses “from the vantage point of specific and intensive observation: all these phenomena of self-destruction today - today admittedly as much as yesterday, yet today more than ever - involve a certain work on images.”<sup>86</sup>

Even though the contingent and sceptical nature of Farocki’s film certainly shares many of the concerns described by Didi-Huberman, Farocki’s visual critique does not attempt to dismiss or demonise the image as an instrument of distorted insight and deceptive knowledge altogether. Instead, *Eye/Machine* shows that thinking in images can never be accomplished by non-human agents alone but ultimately requires human involvement, however marginal it might be. This new regime of machine-based vision is thus reflected in a distinct cinematography which constantly reflects the conditions of its own possibility under the omen of the automatic use of images. The experience of contingency as a mode of visual scepticism as discussed above in the work of Godard, is developed further in Farocki’s film and reassessed in the light of advanced visual technologies and their deep embeddedness in industrial, military and security operations. In doing so, Farocki’s arrangement of visual material revolves around the question regarding what images can and do show. *Eye/Machine* cannot ultimately answer this question but it creates a visual space where it can be addressed. Again, the notion of *Aufklärung* is key here. What is the role of the image in times of advanced optical technologies? Do images still have an enlightening function in a humanist tradition which takes man as the departing point for all epistemological endeavours? Or has the use of images simply become part of an ‘industrial-military complex’ based on visual surveillance and machine vision? More importantly than any attempt to answer these questions, Farocki’s installation, dis-

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<sup>86</sup> Georges Didi-Huberman, “How to Open Your Eyes,” in *Harun Farocki: Against What? Against Whom?*, ed. Antje Ehmman and Kodwo Eshun (London: Koenig Books, 2009), 45.

played as a split screen structure, creates a different kind of machine vision and a new infrastructure for a cinematic practice that simultaneously presents and destabilises image-based information. Sharing Farocki's interests regarding the conditions and limitations of the visible, Trevor Paglen aptly points out, however, that Farocki's "dramatic exploration of the emerging world of operational images is now anachronistic" since the past ten years after the completion of *Eye/Machine* have seen an ever more sophisticated, ubiquitous and secretive use of operational images that already goes far beyond the footage Farocki uses in his film.<sup>87</sup> However, being one of the first artists to have drawn attention to the increasing importance of the operational use of images in contemporary society, Farocki also focuses on their materiality and their function as political agents. As Paglen argues further, the political agency of images in times of comprehensive military surveillance and drone warfare has become an increasingly lethal one since images "have their fingers on the trigger."<sup>88</sup> Farocki's installation thus visualises the potency of images as non-human political agents, aesthetically demonstrating what Jane Bennett would call their "thing power".<sup>89</sup> The political 'thing power' and agency of operational images Farocki addresses in his work, is not limited to the images he explores but is also pertinent in the new relational vision he creates himself. The multi-medial character of essayistic films thus opens up a space where visual, aural and textual elements offer a description of the social world which is not only based on subjective experience but furthermore declares affective, imaginative and speculative exchanges in a 'public arena' as essential components of political knowledge.<sup>90</sup>

I have related the filmic work of Harun Farocki to a form of 'militant research' that aims for alternative forms of visual knowledge production, a conflation of theory and practice and a critical reflection of methodology. The efficacy and insights that this form of visual political research generates, results from its radical en-

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<sup>87</sup> See Trevor Paglen, "Operational Images," *E-Flux Journal* 59, November (2014), n.p.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> See Jane Bennett, "The Force of Things: Steps Toward an Ecology of Matter," *Political Theory* 32, no.3 (2004): 348f. In Chapter 1, I have defined the term "thing power" as "the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle." Ibid., 351.

<sup>90</sup> See Timothy Corrigan's definition of essay films as discussed above. Corrigan, *The Essay Film*, 30.

gagement that disavows any ‘objective’ distance between thinker and world and instead emphasises the embodiedness of all cognition and perception as well as the positionality of our modes of thinking more generally. Farocki’s video installations thus offer a complex and multilayered form of political thinking in and through images that corresponds to William Connolly’s “micropolitics of perception”.<sup>91</sup> In the context of Connolly’s thinking we have to ask accordingly what role can visual aesthetic practices play for the modification of individual and collective sensibilities that allow for new ways of seeing and thinking?

Farocki’s “work on the infrastructure of perception” responds to this question with a two-pronged strategy for it constitutes simultaneously a mode of thinking *in* images, as well as *about* images. His films not only emphasise the partiality of our perception as well as the deep embeddedness of our perceptual habits in disciplinary practices, but also the contemporary role images play in enabling and maintaining those same practices. When Farocki shows the function of images in the contexts of surveillance, reconnaissance, or military simulation, the viewer can ‘see’ how deeply “power is encoded into perception”<sup>92</sup>. In his film *Images of the World* (1988) or the video installation *Eye/Machine* (2001-2003), Farocki does not seek political answers or analytical explanations, but creates an aesthetic forum where the contemporary role of images is explored through the use of images, offering what I have described with the words of Volker Pantenburg as ‘relational or comparative seeing’.<sup>93</sup> The experience of contingency is here presented as a form of political scepticism against the use of images and visual practices in contemporary society and the political interests with which they are inextricably intertwined. Farocki’s films therefore correspond to Connolly’s political appeal for “more subtle media experiments that expose and address the complexity of experience in a media-saturated society.”<sup>94</sup> In a time when the production, consumption and circulation of visual images are omnipresent and

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<sup>91</sup> See William Connolly, “Materialities of Experience,” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 198.

<sup>92</sup> Connolly, “Materialities of Experience”, 190.

<sup>93</sup> See Pantenburg, *Film als Theorie*, 72.

<sup>94</sup> Connolly, “Materialities of Experience”, 192.

taken for granted, a sceptical modification of our visual sensibilities and habits of perception seems more relevant than ever. The visual experience of contingency and the encouragement for relational seeing thus constitutes micropolitical work on the perceptual habits and affective registers which lay the ground for the various dimensions of (political) thinking.

In Farocki's work, the early enthusiasm of Dziga Vertov's machine vision, which celebrated the 'poetry of machines' and the 'new electric man', has turned into a deep scepticism towards the omnipresence of image technologies and the instrumental use of visuality. In the 21st century the political efficacy of image-making is no longer the utopian vision of a new man or the informed gaze of ideological criticism but resides in an instrumental use of visuality that links industrial production to military destruction, surveillance to object recognition, computer simulation to empirical knowledge, etc. The camera as machine eye, praised by Vertov as the objective recording tool capable of manufacturing social change has turned against us. Surveillance, reconnaissance and virtual simulations, not the unobstructed vision of revolutionary filmmakers, have eventually changed the way we see the world and act in it. The political potency of Farocki's films is not targeted at revolutionary transformation but at a changing awareness of our conventions of looking at the world and the roles different forms of images play within it. In accordance with this mutation of the image, the role of the cinema has changed as well. Instead of presenting a particular truth in the modernist understanding, for Farocki, who exhibits his films and installations predominantly in museum contexts, cinema (in the widest sense) offers a space for what we have called above with Volker Pantenburg 'relational or comparative seeing' (*relationales oder vergleichendes Sehen*), a form of seeing that allows for new and unexpected connections between different image regimes.<sup>95</sup> Offering such novel modes of seeing, Farocki's visual investigations can be regarded as a form of 'militant research' as mentioned above, not only on the basis of their persistent scrutiny of the changing historical appearances and social function of images, but also on the basis of their critical engagement that refrain from constructing an

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<sup>95</sup> See Pantenburg, *Film als Theorie*, 72.

‘objective distance’ between image and viewer. Farocki’s cinematic work thus recognises its own enmeshment with the image regimes it tries to expose. Even though images are no longer harbingers of a privileged artistic truthfulness, Farocki’s films can help us to ‘see’ their operative and political role in the management of post-industrial societies.

### **Conclusion**

The deliberate engagement with contingency in film, from Vertov’s utopian vision of an ideal communist society, to Godard’s cinematic search for political form and Farocki’s visual gestures of destabilising meaning, highlights an important aspect about political thinking in images. The experience of contingency presents an experimental, playful and enquiring attitude towards the social world capable of inducing new affects and insights but, at the same time, its visual aesthetic language is often very subtle, abstract and at risk of going unnoticed. The political implications of the contingent nature of moving images therefore exceed what Davide Panagia has called the “stochastic serialization of images” and the “discontinuity of action”. These tropes may lead to an “experience of resistance” and an indication that things can be otherwise, but I suggest that the contingent effects of moving images are much more fragile, precarious and fugitive than Panagia seems to acknowledge. Furthermore, the capacity of resistance that emerges from the experience of contingency in moving images cannot be reduced to a discontinuity of political agency but can also be located in the ambiguous material nature of images and the processes of image-making themselves. The example of essay films has shown that moving images do not simply have to say something to political theory but constitute a mode of thinking in their own right that challenge as well as pluralize prevailing conventions of seeing and understanding the world.

Despite its precarious nature and its constant risk of failure, the experience of contingency in the work of all three film-makers constitutes an insightful seismographic reflection of the social, cultural and political shockwaves that carry unset-

ting as well as creative energies through their respective historical periods. Thus Vertov's involvement with Stalin's Soviet transformation, Godard's anticipation of the 1968 protest (in particular in his films *La Chinoise* and *Week-end*, both 1967) and Farocki's observations of the profound and far-reaching technological transformation processes of the present, aesthetically reflect shifting political thoughts and feelings at different historical moments. The experience of contingency indicates both the processual character of the rapid technological changes of our time as well as the uncertainty of their outcome. In that regard, the contingent moments in Farocki's work still contain a quantum of humanistic optimism. By questioning the inevitability of the current visual regime and its connection to military and industrial interests his films seem to suggest a residue of human agency and that, if we really wanted, things could be otherwise. This also shows that the 'political modernism' of experimental film, as criticised by Rushton, is not exhausted by the dichotomy of self-reflective truth and ideological illusion. Instead, experimental cinematic techniques offer new forms of seeing that connect different forms of image-making and engage with the sociopolitical roles of images in contemporary society. Farocki's films and installation thus continue a tradition of 'political modernism' in the sense of challenging dominant modes of visual representation but at the same time detach from it any large scale vision of profound social transformation. In this regard, the contingency of his films exceeds a purely agonistic political gesture in the sense of Chantal Mouffe. The political potency of Farocki's films cannot be reduced to a visual-aesthetic space where counter-hegemonic positions are presented. Rather, the political relevance of contingency has shifted from the macro-perspective of far-reaching social-transformation towards an uncertain micropolitics of cognitive, affective and embodied reflection as the potential starting point for further thought and action. This critical engagement with the contemporary political role of images problematises the use and function of images without demonising them. In so doing, the critical reflection on the contemporary material conditions of image-making comply with W. J. T. Mitchell's demand for a "critique of visual culture that is alert to the

power of images for good and evil”<sup>96</sup>; a critique that is performed “without the comforts of iconoclasm”<sup>97</sup> as mentioned in the introductory chapter. Such a critique uses visual aesthetic practices not merely as illustrations, analogies or metaphors for political thinking but recognises images as ambiguous, unreliable but productive material political agents in their own right.

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<sup>96</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Visual and Verbal Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>97</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 344.

## Concluding Remarks

After having analysed various case studies in the realms of painting, photography and film I now conclude my explorations into the relation between political thinking and visual images by summarising my positive accomplishments. The present thesis provides an interdisciplinary language and conceptual framework through which the political implications of visual aesthetic practices can be described and evaluated. The notion of contingency, on which this framework is based, proves to be effective for it helps to openly assess singular encounters with a visual material object without relying on a rigid ideological framework. My discussion of the political implications of contingency in the encounter with multiple works of visual art thus offers an original contribution to an improved *political visual literacy*.

This literacy comprises an understanding of the different political roles images can play in various socio-historical contexts as well as the capacity of images to comment on, and relate to, other images. The political potency of images was characterised through their critical and destabilising, as well as creative and sensitive, approach to the visual presentation of the social world. I have described this tension between agonism and affect as productive or stimulating risk. This emphasis on the risky nature of contingency distinguishes my own take on aesthetic politics from Chantal Mouffe's and William Connolly's. Whereas Mouffe's approach attempts to direct the affective energies of aesthetic experiences towards preconceived political positions thus sidelining the unruly effects of affect, Connolly dissolves all embodied experience and perception in a fragile mode of becoming and sensitivity. Rather than being an ideological agent, which either tries to 'naturalise' the arbitrariness of social relations or, in reverse, tries to reveal some social truth behind their appearance, I have established the political potency of the image as an experience of contingency that results from the unpredictable encounter between the viewer and a visual object. The political potency that emerges from the visual experience of contingency thus always includes an important ethical dimension that is defined by an opening to the 'other'. The political engagement with contingency can therefore not be reduced to

the brief disruption of a conventional status quo, which appears as natural or self-evident, but has to be regarded as a persistent mental outlook that is curious and sensitive towards the unfamiliar and unexplored. It is this engagement with contingency through the visual arts that facilitates an undetermined encounter with the external world, as well as with the worlds inside us, and ultimately requires the constant recalibration of our individual and collective identities. The visual experience of contingency then generates an active and continuous reflection on our relations to ourselves and to each other.

I have further emphasised the important historical dimension of the notion of contingency in many different contexts, reaching from 18th century painting to film installations of the 21st century. This admittedly broad perspective allowed me not only to stress a changed political attitude towards contingency, from the bemoaning of the loss of old ontological certainties to the celebration of a new sense of possibility, political agency and democratic pluralism, but also to highlight the conditionality of contingency's political effects. This is to say that the political potency of contingency is itself contingent and often depends on other images and texts as well as on the expectations of the viewer, the intentions of the producer and the tensions that emerge in between. The framework of contingency helps us to articulate the politics of visibility of the present historical moment and to ponder what political relevance the visual experience of contingency still holds today. The range of images discussed in this thesis, from the symbolic-theological to the military-industrial, has shown that contingency unfolds political potential by challenging tacit assumptions regarding objectivity and self-evidence, by evoking transcendent sentiments in the secular context of liberal democracy, or by emphasising the unruly elements of subjective experience.

It is needless to say, that this broad eclectic list of political manifestations of visual contingency is not intended to be exhaustive and should rather be regarded as an indicative illustration in need of further exploration. Having said this, the conceptual framework I outlined around the notion of contingency still helps us to recognise the use of, and the exposure to, images as constitutive parts in the multidimensional

processes of pluralist thinking. Visual arts present us with artefacts capable of generating different affective states and directing our awareness in ways that do not necessarily translate into clear political arguments or discernible political goals. For it is precisely the unpredictable, uncertain and fragile politics of contingency that harbours a potential for novel modes of feeling and thinking. It is therefore important to break away from an understanding of images as clearly decipherable representations, as it is still all too often used in political theory, and instead regard images as gestures and appearances which have their own ambiguous, affective and material presence. In this thesis I proposed a more nuanced concept of images, beyond ideological suspicion and semiotic decoding, that is more in line with current debates in visual studies and art history. To understand images as ‘deictic gestures’ (Boehm), ‘intensities’ (Alloa) or ‘presentations’ (Moxey) is crucial to recognise their risky and unruly politics as well as their political limitations.

This thesis demonstrated further that images are not simply aesthetic ornaments at the fringes of political thinking and political theory but insightful prisms, through which multiple dimensions of our understanding of the political are bundled and become discernible. Our political engagement with images requires opening up conventional strategies of enquiry and taking into account the material, affective, and embodied elements that, consciously or not, are always part of our understanding of the world. Political visual literacy thus not only involves an ongoing interrogation into what images are, but also a deeper understanding of the way we reflect on our thinking through the encounter with images. Political thinking in images cannot be reduced to a pure process of intellectual analysis but has to be regarded as an embodied experience that pre-structures our cognitive field for a variety of possible associations, memories, and emotional responses. The presentation and perception of images helps us understand the act of thinking as the result of a complex interplay between internal and external factors whose effects on the cognitive outcome can ultimately not be determined. Thus, political thinking *in* images and political thinking triggered and inspired *through* the encounter with images is not necessarily the same phenomenon. Both modes have in common that thinking in and through images is inevi-

tably multilayered for it comprises different registers of subjectivity. But it is exactly this multilayered character of visual perception and artistic practice that makes it so difficult to channel aesthetic experiences and affective energies towards preconceived political ends. It is this tension of visual contingency that I have attributed both a productive and risky quality. Consequently, even though this thesis made a case for the unique and relevant political potency of images, I hesitate to attribute to the realm of the visual any privileged role in regard to an understanding of everyday politics. Rendering aesthetic image-making as a form of micropolitics, that is, to locate it within a much broader network of collective and individual activities, chance encounters, sensual experiences and varying affective energies, also means curbing any modernist belief in the profound transformative power of aesthetic practices. Yet, despite the subtle, unreliable and interdependent efficacy of images, their political potency is both effective and discernible. I therefore argued throughout this thesis that image-making has to be taken seriously as both an insightful object of theoretical investigation as well as a distinct political practice in its own right.

The political potency of images can only unfold in correspondence with already existing social moods or modes of collective thought and action; or when the novel ways of feeling and thinking generated by images are carried on, developed further and eventually contribute to either a heightened awareness, closer scrutiny or new emotional access to the social world. The political potency of visual aesthetic practices based on the experience of contingency can neither be defined as pure contestation and critique, nor as pure becoming or creativity. This consolidating framework does not intend to present any universal blueprint for understanding the political potency of image-making but it constitutes an effective and nuanced framework through which different historical scenes can be located and analysed. The uncertain political potency of visual aesthetic practices can thus never be evaluated or anticipated in advance, since the interlocked experiences of aesthetic perception and social contingency always exceed their actualisations and are never exhausted by any existing conceptualisations of politics or the political. This also means that all investigations into the political potency of the visual are inevitably processual, partial and in-

terminable. So even though the concept of contingency provides us with a useful theoretical framework to examine the political potency of visual aesthetic practices, it requires additional work in many different contexts in order to gain a more nuanced idea about the myriads of appearances in which contingency presents itself, unfolds its political potential and reaches its limitations. At a time when increasingly violent political fault lines emerge around allegedly incompatible cultural attitudes towards images and image-making, a more refined intercultural understanding of the political potency of images appears more relevant than ever. That is, only if we recognise image-making as an insightful and effective practice of a society's ontological self-description, can we develop a nuanced and critical understanding of the role images play for the way we see the world and think of it politically. The notion of contingency thus proves crucial for the interpretation of the values, norms and world-views that are constructed and conveyed through the production, circulation and perception of images, reminding us of Michael Makropoulos' apt remark that what is and is not regarded as contingent in a society is its most significant characteristic.<sup>1</sup>

My cursory and preliminary reflections on the relationship between political thinking and visual image-making are therefore, inevitably, work in progress and should be regarded as a point of departure for further explorations. Future research on the relation between visual images and political theory could shift its focus away from the material conditions and social function of images towards images as political agents that reflect more strongly the unconscious, irrational and repressed elements of political discourse. Such a study of the political potency of visual images, informed, for instance, by psychoanalytical approaches, could help to further recognise and accept the subtle, visceral and impassioned elements of political thinking that can never completely be communicated or absorbed by text and language. Ensuing investigations into the relationship between image-making and different modes of political thinking could then also raise different sets of questions regarding the po-

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<sup>1</sup> "Was in einer Gesellschaft als kontingent betrachtet wird und was nicht, gehört zu ihren signifikantesten Charakteristika." See Michael Makropoulos, "Möglichkeitsbändigung: Disziplin und Versicherung als Konzepte zur sozialen Steuerung von Kontingenz," *Soziale Welt* 41 (1990): 409. My translation.

litical potency that emerges from the visual experience of contingency. As Griselda Pollock puts it: “To study anything psychoanalytically involves asking ourselves: what do we desire? Repress? Fail to see? Need to find despite ourselves? What do we want? If we adopt the analytical position proposed by psychoanalysis, we neither aim for an answer nor seek mastery. We engage in the ceaseless *work* of interpretation, critical and dissolvent of final certainty.”<sup>2</sup>

Such a ceaseless interpretation of a broad range of image-making and disparate regimes of visibility, in particular in different conceptual, cultural and historical contexts, may eventually develop a more elaborate and ramified approach to the political potency of images. This is not to suggest, however, an attempt at any grand political theory of images but rather a continuous contribution to a better understanding and recognition of the vital, multifarious, elusive and subtle role images play in various political scenarios.

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<sup>2</sup> Griselda Pollock, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Visual Politics of Psychoanalysis: Art and Image in Post-Traumatic Cultures*, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 12.

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