

**(Dis)placing the Contemporary:  
Violence and Noncoincidence in Our Time**

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**DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY FOR MASTER'S STUDENTS**

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## Abstract

This dissertation will deal with the notion of contemporariness as understood by Giorgio Agamben, which acknowledges the necessity of anachrony. Agamben believes that in order for one to engage effectively with one's present, one simultaneously has to counter it. However, this leads to the aporia of how one can commit to the now if contemporariness entails being outside of one's time. While Agamben's attempt at coming to terms with this matter is through an endorsement of violence, Alain Badiou questions the ethics of this, as to him violence is merely a destructive force, an ecstasy of cruelty. Aside from this primary aporia, a second issue also arises: who, *if* there is such an individual, can be deemed a contemporary in our time?

The first chapter to this dissertation will set the context, as well as engage with the shift towards the now in recent theory and philosophy. The second chapter will revolve around the issue of violence in relation to Agamben and Badiou, a discussion which will then progress into the third chapter through Gilles Deleuze's concept of becoming. The fourth chapter will attempt to identify the figure of the contemporary as portrayed by Agamben, with a special focus on the poet-contemporary. Finally, all the points raised throughout this dissertation will be evaluated in the conclusion, where some options regarding future research will also be mentioned.

*To all those  
who are bold enough  
to counter their time*

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## **List of Abbreviations**

### **Texts by Alain Badiou**

*TC*            *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007)

### **Texts by Giorgio Agamben**

*CN*            ‘What is the Contemporary?’, in *Nudities*, trans. by David Kishik and  
Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp.  
10–19

## Chapter 1

### **The shift towards the now: resisting the ‘to come’ in favour of the present**

It is the contention of this dissertation that the present time abounds in the oppression of people’s abilities to think and act since the dominant forces in society want to retain control, which is why philosophy, art, and literature, and in particular, poetry, are essential to alert the individual to the direness of the present and to provide him with the tools needed to react against collusion with the age. This oppression is evident in the persecution of protesters worldwide in 2017 to date (June), for example. In Russia, thousands of people were arrested following anti-corruption protests in March, including Putin-critic and political opponent Alexei Navalny. Navalny’s blog and YouTube channel, aimed at uncovering the corruption of the Kremlin elite and especially that of President Vladimir Putin, have been welcomed by the public in a country whose media are almost completely controlled by the state.

Shockingly, 92 of those detained in protests held in Moscow were minors, according to TIME.<sup>1</sup> It seems that the law Putin signed in 2014, which criminalises street protests in a bid to give the government possibly absolute control over the public and its freedom of expression, is now coming into full force. It is also not a coincidence that these protests are arising a year before elections are held, in which Putin is expected to be re-elected. Hence, it appears that any attempts at dissidence, which could jeopardise this outcome, must be quashed. Meanwhile in Venezuela, countless were injured and many were left dead in anti-government protests throughout April and May, where people demonstrated against current President Nicolás Maduro amid rising food and medicine shortages. While unrest during the Maduro years can be traced back to 2013, due to the economic crisis, Venezuela’s government has now been likened to a dictatorship in its repeated efforts to block new

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Shuster and Alec Luhn, ‘Putin’s Children’, *TIME*, 19 June 2017, p. 28.



elections, which would probably topple Maduro. In light of these events, it could be said that it has never been more urgent for theory and philosophy – two disciplines that refuse to accept given limits and rather seek to question everything further, promoting thought – to engage with and respond to the political scene, as well as for the individual to reflect on and rethink the received practices and conventions of the epoch through art and literature. As Giorgio Agamben states in his essay ‘Time and History’, it is time that ‘man [...] takes possession of his own condition of being resurrected’ rather than ceding his powers of thinking and enforcing change to those in power and the bright futures they promise, which are only tools used to alienate the individual from the collapse of the present.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one cannot perpetually wait for salvation from the illusions that the structures in power force on the individual, and thus it is imperative that one sharpens one’s capacity for critical thought. One must redirect his gaze from the future, which is often exalted as a fruitful time, as the best time – consider, for example, the bold promises Donald Trump made during the 2016 campaign, where he vowed that America’s greatness could only be restored in a future where he would have been chosen as President – to the present that one is led to forgo.

Thus, this chapter is aimed at trying to comprehend the shift towards ‘the now’ in recent theory and philosophy, and why commitment to the present is of utmost importance in our time. Engagement with the present also invites one to recognise that time might have spatial features besides simply temporal ones, where in the latter case it is merely seen as a sequential organisation of events. In effect, it is a compelling notion that instead of understanding time as sequential and linear, it could be perceived as a space where multiple times can coexist. This is especially pivotal to the period of time one calls the contemporary, since as Steven Connor claims in his essay ‘The impossibility of the present’, ‘con-temporal

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<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘Time and History: Critique of the Instant and the Continuum’, in *Infancy and History: On the Destruction of Experience*, trans. by Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso Books, 1993), pp. 89–105 (p. 101).

being' means being 'alongside others in time, and alongside the other times that abut on our presentness'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, a sequential understanding of time limits one's ability of engaging with ideas and perceptions which are not necessarily from one's historical age, allowing for a fixed and closed perception of time to prevail. However, before outlining what the contemporary consists of and considering how one can partake in it, a few questions must be posed. Why is it being claimed that there has been a shift towards the now, or in other words, what is it displacing?

It appears that in the final decades of the twentieth century, the prevalent orientation in theory and philosophy was towards the future, which was treated as a blank space in which thought could be challenged and innovated. However, whereas at first glance this stance might seem innocuous and perhaps even fruitful, especially with regard to the stimulation of thought that is not weighed down by the demands and limitations of the present, one might wonder whether the present moment is being sacrificed in a quest to radicalise the future.

James Corby elucidates this point further in his essay 'Now', where he posits that

the future [...] is often invoked as offering a blank category that necessitates a *suspension* of what is thought to be known, either in order to fantasise about what the future might be like, or as a mechanism to *suspend* the apparent certainties of the present and thereby clear a space for thinking (emphasis added).<sup>4</sup>

Therefore, what perhaps actually transpires is an indifference towards the present, where the latter is perpetually postponed and delayed and, in turn, the contemporary moment cannot be explored. Indeed, even though the inclination towards the future seems to favour the flourishing of thought without any restrictions, what occurs is the 'bracketing [of] the present

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<sup>3</sup> Steven Connor, 'The impossibility of the present: or, from the contemporary to the contemporal', in *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, ed. by Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 15–35 (p. 15).

<sup>4</sup> James Corby, 'Now: A Post-Romantic Countertextuality of the Contemporary', *CounterText*, 1.2 (2015), 186–206 (p. 187).

state of things in order to reconsider everything by the lights of an unscripted future', in Corby's words.<sup>5</sup> Despite the fact that this leaning towards the future seems to be carried out in the name of a transgression of boundaries, and is subsequently disguised as an ethical concern, it is alarming that in reality it undercuts the possible revolutionary quality of thought by constraining the understanding of the present. Thus, the quest for unconditioned thought opposes its own project, for in its proclamation that it protects 'the potential for true innovation', as Corby states, it not only conditions the contemporary but debilitates it.<sup>6</sup>

It is crucial to reiterate this line of thinking in our time, as indulging in rampant futurophilia and constantly suspending the now for the sake of the future risks threatening one's experience of it, where it is eventually 'cancelled, elevated, and preserved', as Corby propounds.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, rather than advancing thought in the present by provoking the contemporary, one is led to assume that change is only attainable in the near future, that time is not yet ripe for it to materialise. Hence, rather than proceeding from the now in order to envision alternative conceptions of the contemporary, which could then hopefully lead to an improved future, the direction which is being pursued is that of adopting the future as a starting point, where the focus is not on rethinking the now, but instead, on visualising the state of things in the future for its own profit. As a result, the present remains stagnant, and when this assertion is applied to the realm of politics it takes on far more alarming overtones. In effect, as Jacques Rancière comments in his text *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 'politics [...] is not the exercise of, or struggle for, power', but rather, 'it is the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of subjects recognised as capable of designating [common] objects and putting forward arguments about them'.<sup>8</sup> It

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<sup>5</sup> Corby, p. 187.

<sup>6</sup> Corby, p. 187.

<sup>7</sup> Corby, p. 187.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. by Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), p. 24.

follows that if the ability to rearrange and redistribute spaces and experiences is obstructed, then the subjects will only have claim to an inert state of things. Indeed, as Rancière continues in his essay ‘In What Time Do We Live?’,

a ‘state of things’ is a form of [...] ‘distribution of the sensible’: a set of relations between the perceptible, the thinkable and the doable that defines a common world, defining thereby the way in which and the extent to which this or that class of human beings takes part in that common world.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, if the perceptible, the thinkable and the doable are restricted by the fixation with the future, then it becomes impossible for one to contribute to the present common world, for the now would have been erased. As is evidenced by Rancière, the promise for transformation is once again thwarted, for ‘that which a state of things readily declares impossible is, quite simply, the possibility to change the state of things.’<sup>10</sup> What results is apathy, where since one cannot perceive of or act on a different present, one simply concludes that ‘what is, is all that is’, as Rancière asserts in his text *Chronicles of Consensual Times*.<sup>11</sup> Hence, it is essential that the now becomes once again the centre of inquiry and examination, for the subjugation and ‘the consensus governing us is a machine of power insofar as it is a machine of vision’ only, and thus, the contemporary could aid the shattering of these limitations placed on thought.<sup>12</sup> However, what is further distressing is that this consensual stance has also been adopted by contemporary ethics, where as Corby puts forward when discussing Rancière, ‘this generalised consensual dissensus, commanded by the law of the Other, undermines the dissensual conditions necessary for politics, thus effecting a kind of evacuation or nullification of the political’.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, here it would be best to heed Walter Benjamin’s

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<sup>9</sup> Jacques Rancière, ‘In What Time Do We Live?’, in *The State of Things*, ed. by Marta Kuzma, Pablo Lafuente, and Peter Osborne (London: Koenig Books, 2012), pp. 9–37 (p. 11).

<sup>10</sup> Rancière, ‘In What Time Do We Live?’, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, ed. and trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), p. viii.

<sup>12</sup> Rancière, *Chronicles of Consensual Times*, p. viii.

<sup>13</sup> Corby, p. 196.

advice, which he puts forward in his essay ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, where he propounds that ‘in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.’<sup>14</sup>

The disposition towards the future and its hindering of the contemporary is not only apparent in politics, as one can also draw a parallel to art and literature. Undeniably, replacing the now with the future jeopardises the ability of these media to shatter through the boundaries within which they operate. As Rancière posits, art (and by extension, literature) is not political because of the content it adopts, or due to its representation of dissensus within societies, but rather because of ‘the very distance it takes with respect to these functions, because of the type of space and time that it institutes, and the manner in which it frames this time and peoples this space.’<sup>15</sup> Hence, it follows that since it is the very function of art and literature to redistribute temporal and spatial elements, it becomes further apparent that the readiness to discard the contemporary in support of the future, and the conjecture that the latter would allow unconstrained thought to thrive, acts not only to safeguard the future but to paralyse any transformations within art itself, reducing it to a mere repetition of tropes and indifference. Indeed, as Corby maintains, art and literature are here ‘condemned simply to an ongoing reiteration of the present’.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the focus should be reverted to the present, where suspension does not displace the contemporary but rather strengthens it. In effect, Rancière remarks that a real “politics” of art [...] consists of suspending the normal coordinates of sensory experience’.<sup>17</sup> This could be achieved through the notion of the ‘countertextual’, whose target is to ‘[call] literature to account [...] raising the question of how it might be

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<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 253–64 (p. 255).

<sup>15</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Corby, p. 188.

<sup>17</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 25.

otherwise than it is now and has been in the past',<sup>18</sup> as Corby defines it, and in turn, it would counteract the tendency of thinking 'how literature in the future might be otherwise than it is now'.<sup>19</sup>

As aforementioned, being inclined towards the future, maintaining that this position is in effect beneficial for the process of thinking itself, has been increasingly masked as an ethical matter. Here, 'the future [comes to represent] a principle of difference [...] to preserve the present state of things', as Corby upholds.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the contemporary is thus displaced to be able to accede to heterogeneity, a project which doubles as a tool for conserving the uniformity of the now. The bent towards the future seems to be advanced by Jacques Derrida, whose work on the *avenir*, or the 'to come', is centred on vigilance for the future, at the risk of perpetually deferring one's engagement with the contemporary. Derrida's notion of the 'to come' is often intertwined with the discourse of justice, where his focus is on a justice which cannot yet be, and will probably never come to pass. Indeed, if one considers his following remarks taken from his text *Spectres of Marx*, what is marked is his insistence on absence and spectrality rather than presence, or the present:

If I am getting ready to speak at length about ghosts, inheritance, and generations, generations of ghosts, which is to say about certain *others* who are not present, nor presently living, either to us, in us, or outside us, it is in the name of *justice*. Of justice where it is not yet, not yet *there*, where it is no longer, let us understand where it is no longer *present*, and where it will never be, no more than the law, reducible to laws or rights.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, one is once again reminded of the notion of regarding the future as a blank space where one is always left waiting for something to transpire. As Corby continues, this anticipation 'for that which is *not yet*, and by maintaining the possibility of a radically open

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<sup>18</sup> Corby, p. 186.

<sup>19</sup> Corby, p. 187.

<sup>20</sup> Corby, p. 187.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. xviii.

future that is always “to come”, one accedes to an empty and asymptotic horizon of anticipation that resists the inimical closure of the present.’<sup>22</sup> Indeed, speaking in the context of Hamlet and his father’s ghost, whose apparition sets the events in *Hamlet* in motion, Derrida asserts that ‘the anticipation is at once impatient, anxious, and *fascinated*: this, the thing [...] will end up coming. [...] It won't be long. But how long it is taking’ (emphasis added).<sup>23</sup> Thus, here one is not only invoked to wait and be vigilant by some higher power, as is the case with the father’s spectre, but also, the subject is expected to be compelled by, or even aspire to, the condition of the wait. Hence, the tendency toward the future in Derrida should be opposed, for timeless vigilance is not something that should be pursued as it only works towards disabling the contemporary, and its subjects, of its potential. In addition, it is also worrisome that Derrida advances this attitude in the name of the Other, where closure is resisted on the grounds of an ethical responsibility towards those ‘who are not yet born or who are already dead’, in his words. Indeed, those who are presently living find no space in his discourse, and can only be reached as ghosts. It is only the possibility of the future which legitimizes the ghostly present and its subjects, for it is his belief that ‘it can never be always present, it *can be, only, if there is any*, it can be only possible, it must even remain a *can-be* or *maybe* in order to remain a demand.’<sup>24</sup>

In his essay *Force of Law*, Derrida also aligns the discourse of deconstruction and ethics with the future. He begins by connecting deconstruction to law and justice, since as he comments, ‘deconstructive questioning is through and through a questioning of law and justice, a questioning of the foundations of law, morality, and politics.’<sup>25</sup> However, he goes a step further in placing deconstruction on the side of justice, such that they may be used

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<sup>22</sup> Corby, p. 188.

<sup>23</sup> Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 2.

<sup>24</sup> Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority’, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. by Gil Anidjar (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 230–98 (p. 235).

interchangeably. Indeed, for Derrida, justice (and by extension, deconstruction) is based on its distinction to law. In his view, law is founded on ‘interpretative violence’, thus being subject to the constructions which make it so, as it is inevitably composed of text.<sup>26</sup> It is precisely the ‘element of calculation’ found in the interpretation of law which he sees as that which obstructs justice from being carried out.<sup>27</sup> In his view, if a judge were to preside over a trial in a court of law, justice would not be achieved if he merely follows the rule of law; rather, his decision has to stem from a sense of impossibility, where since each case is singular, it ensues that no rule is applicable. Hence, to Derrida, law is but an application of rules and conventions, whereas justice is that which goes beyond the law, which ‘demands that one calculate with the incalculable’ and where ‘the *decision* between just and unjust is never insured by a rule’.<sup>28</sup> As Corby posits, in Derrida’s view ‘the ethical experience would be the willingness to bracket law for the sake of a principle of heterogeneity attested to by the opening of the future, on the basis of which the space of the political is opened.’<sup>29</sup> However, rather than redistributing the political, the impossibility of deciding on justice leads to a suspension, in this case, of the law. As Derrida shows, it is also a suspension of the present, for ‘this moment of suspense, this *epokhē*, [...] always takes place and never takes place in a presence. It is the moment in which the foundation of law remains suspended in the void or over the abyss’.<sup>30</sup>

It is this very idea of the void or abyss that thus facilitates the displacement of the contemporary, for it manifests futurophiliac characteristics of ‘treating the future as a radically vacant and unknowable space’, as Corby states.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, one is again left in a

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<sup>26</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, p. 241.

<sup>27</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, p. 244.

<sup>28</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, p. 244.

<sup>29</sup> Corby, p. 188.

<sup>30</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, pp. 269–70.

<sup>31</sup> Corby, p. 187.



position of anticipation and waiting, since as Derrida continues, ‘the supposed subject of this pure performative would [...] be before a law [...] still undetermined, before the law as before a law still nonexistent, a law still ahead, still having to and yet to come’.<sup>32</sup> However, to Derrida, the suspension of the present with regard to justice and deconstruction is justified as it safeguards difference, heterogeneity, and the singularity of otherness, as he claims that ‘[deconstruction] itself operates on the basis of an “idea of justice” that is infinite, [...] irreducible because owed to the other [...] before any contract, because it has come, it is a coming’.<sup>33</sup> The emphasis on that which is impossible and infinite can also be found in his treatment of democracy, where the present is once more completely renounced. In his essay ‘Autoimmunity’, Derrida maintains that ““democracy to come” does not mean a future democracy that will one day be “present”. Democracy will never exist in the present; it is not presentable [...] But *there is the impossible*, whose promise democracy inscribes’.<sup>34</sup> Although this is postulated to maintain openness towards the Other, this almost tyrannical insistence on the impossible, the infinite, and the absolute encourages nothing but closure. Even though Derrida mentions that anticipating the future could indeed transgress norms, possibly bringing about change, it becomes apparent that this rupture can only be experienced in the extreme, through that which is completely monstrous. Thus, this immediately denies any positive effects which the future could have had on the contemporary. Indeed, as he elucidates in his text *Of Grammatology*, ‘the future can only be anticipated in the form of an *absolute* danger. It is that which breaks *absolutely* with constituted normality and can only be proclaimed, presented, as a sort of monstrosity’ (emphasis added).<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, p. 270.

<sup>33</sup> Derrida, ‘Force of Law’, p. 254.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, ‘Autoimmunity: Real and Symbolic Suicides’, in *Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Giovanna Borradori (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 85–136 (p. 120).

<sup>35</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 5.

Even though the argument asserted throughout this chapter has been that Derrida eschews the contemporary in order to secure the future, it must be said that he further complicates his understanding of the relationship between the present and the future by placing value on the here and now: ‘the pledge is given *here and now*, even before, perhaps, a decision confirms it’.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it could be said that for Derrida, ‘futuraity [is] important precisely *on account of the present*’ (emphasis added), as Corby propounds.<sup>37</sup> Are difference and dissensus in the contemporary safeguarded by the ‘to come’ after all, in the realms of ethics, politics, and art? Albeit this line of thought might seemingly discredit all that which has been questioned so far, it will become evident that Derrida only appeals to the present only to forsake it anew. In *Spectres of Marx*, he asserts that the present is essential on the basis of its anachrony; however, the sole importance of ‘this *non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present*’ lies in the idea that ‘without that which secretly unhinges it, without this responsibility and this respect for justice concerning those who are *not there*’, the future cannot be.<sup>38</sup> Thus, the future always precedes the present and is inherent to it; however, one can only experience it as a wait for that which is to come, which Derrida explains through Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Indeed, Hamlet’s tragedy is set in motion with his father’s haunting, where the prince is then called on to interminably wait for the ghost’s re-appearance. Corby elucidates this point by stating that ‘the future as a principle of heterogeneity is, therefore, temporally imminent (yet, never-to-come) insofar as it is already (or “always already” [...]) spatially immanent within the otherwise timeless contemporary’.<sup>39</sup> It is this chain of reasoning which is being countered in this chapter, for the double bind in Derrida’s thought does more harm than a simple favouring of the future. Indeed, as Corby goes on, ‘the implication is clear: it is because the contemporary matters that it must be put aside,

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<sup>36</sup> Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup> Corby, p. 187.

<sup>38</sup> Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. xviii.

<sup>39</sup> Corby, p. 189.

bracketed for the sake of the possibility of a better – more just – contemporary-to-come’.<sup>40</sup> Finally, then, it must be noted that his ethical concern *does* seem to stem from a worry of how to engage with the now; however, rather than solely rejecting the perpetuation of the current state of things by the present due to its permanence, he concludes by completely dismissing the contemporary: ‘otherwise it would become presence again, that is, substance, existence, essence, *permanence*, and not at all the *excessive* demand or urgency’.<sup>41</sup>

Although Derrida’s call for non-contemporaneity is not completely misguided, for ‘there would be neither injunction nor promise without this disjunction’, his understanding of anachrony is centred on linearity.<sup>42</sup> Propounding that the future should be given more prominence than the now violently alters the present into a past, reinstating a chronological view of events. This sequencing is dangerous for it allows time and history to be manipulated by the dominant forces of society, where ‘the first to arrive, the winner of the battle, obtains as his prize the right to reinvent history to his own advantage’, as the philosopher Michel Serres states in *Conversations on Science, Culture and Time*.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, these forces prey on the subject’s anxiety of belonging, placing the individual in society while numbing one’s power for contribution through notions of the wait and redemption. As Carol Greenhouse explains in her essay ‘Just in Time’, ‘the linearity of time reproduces [...] redemption’s form in its fundamental proposition that the individual can find completion only by participating in a cosmic order – through social institutions that await the end of time’.<sup>44</sup> Consequently, as previously mentioned, this understanding of time works to foreground anticipation rather than engagement, encouraging subjects to wait for a ‘to come’ that will redeem and save them,

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<sup>40</sup> Corby, p. 190.

<sup>41</sup> Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 39.

<sup>42</sup> Derrida, *Spectres of Marx*, p. 40.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Serres and Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Culture, Science and Time*, trans. by Roxanne Lapidus (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 49.

<sup>44</sup> Carol Greenhouse, ‘Just in Time: Temporality and the Cultural Legitimation of Law’, *Yale Law Review*, 98 (1989), 1631–51 (p. 1636).

rather than actively shaping their own time, the result being a displaced present. In addition, restricting oneself to a linear view of time drives one towards the incessant desire for progress, since as Benjamin states, ‘progress [is] regarded as irresistible, something that automatically pursue[s] a straight or spiral course’.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, this linearity also upholds the thrust of capitalism, which is ubiquitous in our time. For all the above reasons, it is paramount that the focus be redirected towards the contemporary and its distribution, to advance the notion that seizing the full potential of the now can only be achieved by altering the perception that the contemporary is that which solely progresses as a chain of events in an orderly manner.

Indeed, there should be a second and more prominent understanding of the contemporary which would yield the necessary tools for engagement *with* the present, *in* the present. As Corby comments, ‘change will inevitably take place along the temporal plane, but the potential for radical change is already established on the principle of spatial distribution’.<sup>46</sup> This is in line with Ranciere’s definition of politics; of being able to rearrange spaces and times and bring them to bear on one another, and of bringing to light that which had been made invisible or concealed. Indeed, it is this understanding that truly safeguards thought and the now, and that makes the contemporary *matter* once again, as the infinite, the impossible, and the absolute are given less importance in favour of presence. This is ‘a move – ultimately for the sake of justice – away from justice and towards law, in full awareness that hands will not remain clean’, as Corby emphatically asserts.<sup>47</sup>

The notion that the contemporary is not only a temporal unfolding but also a spatial distribution then leads one to question *how* one can experience and contribute to one’s own

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<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, p. 260.

<sup>46</sup> Corby, p. 191.

<sup>47</sup> Corby, p. 197.

time in a critical manner, and what qualities are present in the contemporary subject, in order to also be able to envision what a literature of the now might look like. This issue will be dealt with in further detail in the coming chapter, which will focus on Agamben's essay entitled 'What is the Contemporary?', where he states that discomfort is implicit in being a contemporary, for to contribute to one's own time means that one has to simultaneously be close to and distant from it. In effect, simply being in the present does not push forward a critical stance towards one's time, but rather colludes with those forces that seek to annihilate it. Indeed, one must remember that 'our desire to know and understand the present is never far from our desire to consume it as image or spectacle' which in turn violates the now, as Connor maintains.<sup>48</sup> Here one is once again reminded of capitalism, as this desire 'mimes the very accelerations of consumption, in which satiety stops the momentary gaping of desire so swiftly as almost to seem to *precede* it' (emphasis added), as he continues.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, this temporal violence, in which satiety precedes desire, can also be paralleled with Derrida's understanding of the future as preceding the contemporary through spectrality and immanence, which leads to a devouring of the now, always already providing closure.

The aporia of the contemporary being both distant and close to one's time stems from the fact that 'the instant of the "now" always eludes the grasp, can never be self-identical: it is either no longer or not yet present', as Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks comment in their essay 'Hurry up please it's time'.<sup>50</sup> However, as they continue, rather than perceiving 'this effect [...] as a loss, as the impossibility of seizing the present time [...], rendering "lost" temporality in spatial forms as displays of nostalgia or pastiche', which is prevalent in the postmodern, one should aim for a constructive rendering such as Agamben's, where 'the

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<sup>48</sup> Connor, p. 22.

<sup>49</sup> Connor, p. 22.

<sup>50</sup> Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks, 'Hurry up please it's time: introducing the contemporary', in *Literature and the Contemporary: Fictions and Theories of the Present*, ed. by Roger Luckhurst and Peter Marks (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 1–11 (p. 3).

difference at the heart of the “now” can be seen as a constitutive and productive heterogeneity, a circulation of multiple times within the single instant’.<sup>51</sup> This line of argument in favour of disjuncture will be reiterated throughout the subsequent sections. The second chapter will focus more closely on the violence inherent in the suspension of time in opposition to the violence brought about by the contemporary’s anachronous position, as well as evaluate if this latter violence is indeed ethical. This discussion will be continued in the third chapter in relation to the body and Gilles Deleuze’s concept of becoming. The fourth chapter will then delve deeper into the question of who the true contemporary might be, and if the poet can be deemed as such. Finally, throughout this dissertation it will be argued that although the disjuncture present in the contemporary implies a position of violence, it is rather the idea of linearity itself which is inherently and imminently violent, as it is a process that in effect renounces time, stripping it from its innovative capacities.

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<sup>51</sup> Luckhurst and Marks, p. 3.

## Chapter 2

### The ethics of violence

As has been outlined in the first chapter, this dissertation is partly aimed at trying to contest the notion that a deliberate suspension of the present – a move which is often portrayed as ethically motivated by recent orientations in theory and philosophy – is the most promising way of transgressing the limits and bounds of thought in our time, and that postponing participation in and commitment to one's age to the future, where the state of things 'to come' could be better than that of the now, is not only justified but encouraged. The line of argument put forward in the first chapter – a point which will be reiterated here and throughout this dissertation – is that what should be suspended, rather, is a linear understanding of time, as it is that which impedes the present from materialising, since the now will always be trapped between that which has just happened and that which has still not come to pass. Indeed, when solely perceived as a temporal dimension, the present can never be engaged with in the instant, when it just *is*, which violates the subject's ability to contribute to one's own epoch.

Ironically, it seems that this violence is to some extent already implicit in the etymology of the epoch. As the OED states, epoch is derived from the Greek *ἐποχή*, which means 'stoppage'; *ἐπέχειν* defined as 'to arrest'; and *ἐπί + ἔχειν* explained as 'to hold'.<sup>1</sup> Hence, it appears that implications of suspension – of stopping, arresting, and holding off time – are at the origins of the word *epoch*. However, what is of further interest is that *epoch* shares its etymology with that of *epochē*, where the root *ἐποχή* is now described as 'suspension of judgement'; and *ἐπέχειν* now means 'to cease, suspend judgement'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 'epoch, n.', in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, Web [accessed 10 March 2017]

<sup>2</sup> 'epoché, n.', in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, Web [accessed 10 March 2017]

Moreover, its use can be traced back to Greek Scepticism, in the context of which it is defined as ‘(the principle of) suspension of judgement or belief in the face of the impossibility of attaining actual knowledge’.<sup>3</sup> In fact, this latter philosophical understanding of *epochē* has already been referred to in the first chapter in relation to Derrida and law; however, the idea that the deferment of time can also be detected in a more commonplace use of the word *epoch*, and that in its roots this understanding collides with the deferment of judgement and hence, the awaiting for a redemptive force, unlocks a multifaceted issue. Temporal suspension, which as has been shown is at the heart of the epoch, should be rather replaced with a suspension of those learnt ways through which subjects perceive, think of, and act upon the world around them, as indicated by Rancière in the first chapter, if they are to engage with their own time. However, even though this position might do away with the violence inherent within vigilant representations of time, where the future is set to redeem the present, it seems that the contemporary cannot discard of it altogether either. This owes to the fact that, as has been alluded to, being present in one’s *now* firstly implies living in an instant tethered between a recent past and the ‘to come’, and furthermore, it also entails rupturing one’s vision of the present as a spectacle to be mindlessly absorbed and observed, reminiscent of consumerist urges in a contemporary capitalistic society. Therefore, a study of violence must be carried out, in order to assess its implications within the contemporary. What space should violence occupy if it is inherent to the contemporary? And is it ethical to regard it as beneficial?

It is for this reason that this chapter will revolve around Agamben’s essay ‘What is the Contemporary?’, for in his questioning of the meaning of contemporariness, not only to examine the significance of the spacing of time and its untimeliness, but also in his search for that which makes one complicit with the category of ‘those who truly belong to their time’,

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<sup>3</sup> ‘epoché, n.’, in *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, Web [accessed 10 March 2017]



one condition is prominent in his analysis: the contemporary is always and inevitably subjected to violence.<sup>4</sup> However, what might be considered problematic is that rather than approaching the matter of violence as an issue to be explored, where the necessity of violence in the contemporary should be evaluated and debated, Agamben's treatment of violence as almost beneficial is an unquestioned given. This gives rise to another issue: how can one justify the implementation of violence as a tool for engagement with the contemporary state of things, when the social and political milieu in our time is fraught with violence? If one has a look at just the year of 2017 to date (June), it seems that violence has become part and parcel of daily contemporary life. A few examples include the escalation of racial, ethnic and religious violence after the inauguration of Donald Trump as America's President and his executive order banning a select number of immigrants on the basis of their Muslim heritage and faith; the allegations brought forward against President Bashar al-Assad where it has been implied that he released a chemical assault on his own people of Syria; America's retaliation against this attack at the behest of President Trump, which saw the launch of 59 missiles on an air base in Syria, killing at least seven people; and an anti-gay campaign which sanctions the torture of Chechen men on the grounds of their sexual identification as this dissertation is being written. In light of this rampant violence, it is necessary to advance the notion of the contemporary alongside Alain Badiou's investigation of the twentieth century in his text *The Century*. Here he clearly delineates that the endorsement of violence is unacceptable since he believes that the individual is being sacrificed and dehumanised like a beast to satisfy the whims of the epoch. Thus, one of the aims of this dissertation is to scrutinise this aporia through counter-readings of violence, to critically examine the implications and consequences of violence, and to ultimately arrive at the conclusion that

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<sup>4</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?', in *Nudities*, trans. by David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2011), pp. 10–19 (p. 11). Further references to 'What is the Contemporary?' are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.

although violence has always been and still is synonymous with bloodshed, terror, and anguish in today's world, this force is not only inscribed in man but is also the key to engaging with life itself.

To be able to carry out a critique of violence, temporal positioning must be the starting point of inquiry. Agamben's conception of the time of contemporariness flouts linearity, for as he remarks, the sole way through which the contemporary can engage critically with his own age is to dissociate with that which Friedrich Nietzsche regards as a 'consuming historical fever'.<sup>5</sup> In effect, Nietzsche understands that 'we require history for life and action, not for the smug avoiding of life and action', a remark that albeit uttered at the end of the nineteenth century is still as condemning, especially when understood in the context of our own time of political inertia.<sup>6</sup> In fact, if one considers the current state of international politics, two of the most distressing events being Trump's election and Brexit, it seems that this fever has manifested itself through a recourse to a so-called 'ideal' past, where it is argued that this should set the precedent for a utopian future. In effect, Trump's slogan of 'Make America Great Again' indulges in the myth of a once Edenic America, which to his mind has been corrupted by an upsurge in immigration, and that following this the task of the politician now is to rescue this fallen superpower by purging it of the multiple ethnicities and cultures that have taken hold of it, in an America 'to come'. Thus, difference is being marked as divisive even though it has always been upheld as the foundation stone of the USA. Similar to Trump, Nigel Farage, previous UKIP leader and key figure in leading the vote in favour of the UK leaving the European Union, spearheaded the pro-Brexit campaign by targeting immigration. In his view, Britain's acceptance of immigrants signalled its fall from a supposed period of grace, a fabled time when living in Britain was utopian and idyllic.

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<sup>5</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History to Life*, trans. by Peter Preuss (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 1980), p. 8.

<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche, p. 7.

Thus, he claimed that closing Britain's borders would restore it to its inherent place of glory, a place where the white coloniser was master and the rest subhuman, regressing back to the days of the British Empire. Once again, this attack capitalises on British nostalgia for a past in which Britain was sovereign, and romanticises the superiority of the Empire over all other races and cultures. Even though this is already troublesome enough by itself, what is further alarming is that it encourages the possibility of re-enacting this project all over again, as it justifies mastery of others through prejudiced claims that British identity is being corrupted by outsiders. Thus, it must be stressed that this political rhetoric is destructive as it upholds a linear view of time, where, echoing Serres, history becomes a battleground for those who want to manipulate time, and by extent, the dominating narrative.

Moreover, it must be said that history is here being treated solely as a temporal unity made up of ordered events, a totalisation, rather than a space where different times can exist side-by-side, influencing and modifying each other, where this latter view is that which the contemporary notion of time seeks to uphold. Indeed, these efforts at totalisation are dangerous as they advance an idea of time understood as legacy, where the subject's position in the common world has already been assigned and inscribed with meaning, and where any attempts at discontinuity and anachrony are denounced in the name of progress. As Michel Foucault asserts in his text *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, this discourse on continuity and development advances 'a principle of coherence and the outline of a future unity, to master time through a perpetually reversible relation between an origin and a term that are never given, but are always at work.'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, this reversible relationship has already been observed at work in the previous chapter in those orientations that elevate the future above the present moment, where the now is not at the root of inquiry, but is rather only valued as a tool for the

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<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge & the Discourse on Language*, trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), p. 22.

advancement of the 'to come'. In addition, in the cases outlined above, solely focusing on the sequencing of events, which here legitimizes the future by invoking an unspoiled past, not only redirects the attention towards the future rather than on the now, but furthermore works to eradicate it. In effect, succumbing to such illusory dreams depicting a grandiose 'to come' does not make one a visionary. Rather, one becomes an accomplice in the promotion of indifference towards the present. Moreover, one is also alienated from being involved in social issues, which violates the potential for change in every subject. Indeed, here one is reminded of Connor's warning against the consumption of the present as spectacle, where rather than being a passive consumer of violent ideologies and figurations of time, the contemporary subject should aim at assuming an active role in building a state of things that acts as a space where a common world can be grasped and realised. For, as Badiou propounds, if the century has no project, only 'profit will tell us what to do', a notion which is evidenced by the unchallenged acceleration of capitalism in our time.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, as Agamben states, it follows that the true contemporary cannot be a 'nostalgic' (*CN*, p. 11), but rather, has to be the one who can 'despise his time, while knowing that he nevertheless irrevocably belongs to it' (*CN*, p. 11). However, it could be argued that this line of reasoning is precarious, since rejecting one's time can be considered equal to cancelling one's own identity, raising issues of (dis)placement and (non-)belonging. Thus, what does detesting one's own age really entail, if one is also to be a subject in it, and a contemporary of it? It appears that what Agamben's contemporary must oppose, first and foremost, is the projection of time as linear continuity, as it does not allow for a creative engagement with the now, and hence, thought is stifled. In addition, as opposed to escaping

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<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 9. Further references to *The Century* are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.

from his age by envisioning an ideal past or a utopian future, the contemporary as thought of by Agamben chooses to live in a state of noncoincidence, for

those who coincide too well with the epoch, those who are perfectly tied to it in every respect, are not contemporaries, precisely because they do not manage to see it; they are not able to firmly hold their gaze on it (*CN*, p. 11).

Or, it could also be said that they ‘see’ it too well – where sight here acts as a mere biological function rather than a critical faculty and a power for observation – since their gaze is completely synchronised with the epoch to the extent that they end up devouring it as image. In either case, Agamben’s assertion implies that in order for the ties to be broken, a rupture of some order must take place, for proximity to the age will always result in mere concurrence. His view is that the contemporary must rather exist in anachrony to the age, or in other words, to be in one’s own time, one has to be simultaneously out of it. However, here Agamben might be faulted on the basis that his proposition might seem too abstract. How can one both be at the mercy of and against the age? And what is the contemporary really disputing?

It appears that our time is haunted by that which Foucault terms as ‘the crisis... which concerns that theme of the origin, that promise of the return’.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as has been already observed in the first chapter, linear figurations of time unleash violence upon subjects as they promise a redemption which never comes, one which is perpetually deferred at the expense of the present. The idea of the redemption of the subject is advanced by the portrayal of ‘continuous history [as] [...] the guarantee that everything that has eluded him may be restored to him; the certainty that time will disperse nothing without restoring it in a reconstituted unity’.<sup>10</sup> One might wonder why this messianic obsession with restoration and

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<sup>9</sup> Foucault, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, p. 12.

redemption; however, if one keeps in mind that this unified vision of time validates and sustains myths of old, which are exploited through the dominant forces of society, then it becomes apparent as to why discontinuity is targeted as undesirable. In light of this, it must be emphasised that it is dangerous to be led to perceive of one's time in this way, as no effort at engagement will be made by the subject, who will be rendered ineffectual. Hence, what becomes clear in Foucault is that one of the matters which the contemporary has to criticise in his age is 'the notion of "spirit", [...] which allows the sovereignty of collective consciousness to emerge as the principle of unity and explanation'.<sup>11</sup> Thought will not flourish if the subject is at the hands of History, that is, if a sequential understanding of time is allowed to control the modes of meaning through which the subject makes sense of and perceives the world around him. In effect, if this narrative is manipulated to provide systematic explanations for the common world, it is mastery of the subject which is engendered.

Thus, what must be further protested in the present is, in Foucault's words,

the search for a total history, in which all the differences of a society might be reduced to a single form, to the organization of a world-view, to the establishment of a system of values, to a coherent type of civilization.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the challenge which faces each and every subject in one's own time is the temptation to succumb to conceptions that seek to eradicate difference and discontinuity, thereby threatening to homogenise the contemporary. For as Foucault asserts, everyone is accountable for being influenced by notions of temporal continuity 'in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history'.<sup>13</sup> This is due to the fact that time is seen as an intrinsic factor to a subject's identity, where attacking a

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<sup>11</sup> Foucault, p. 22.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault, p. 131.

stabilising temporal force might be perceived as an obliteration of the subject and a dissipation of all meaning attached to one's selfhood. This is the very reason why, as Foucault continues, 'these pre-existing forms of continuity, all these syntheses that are accepted without question, must remain *in suspense*. They must not be rejected definitively of course, but the tranquillity with which they are accepted must be disturbed' (emphasis added).<sup>14</sup> Thus, as he argues, it is the violence of a totalising temporality that must be suspended, where the contemporary's task is to continually question pre-imposed structures and conceptions, for 'we must show that they do not come about of themselves, but are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known, and the justification of which must be scrutinized'.<sup>15</sup> Basing his comments on the twentieth century, Badiou also proposes that 'the century is summoned as the century of the production – through war – of a definitive unity' (*TC*, p. 59), where opposing camps would rather dominate the historical narrative themselves rather than opt to coexist. As he continues, 'antagonism will be overtaken by the victory of one camp over the other. Therefore, we can also say that the century of the Two is animated by the radical desire for the One' (*TC*, p. 59), a statement that is still applicable to the landscape of reductive binaries one finds in the twenty-first century. An example of this can be observed in Malta's partisan politics, where loyalty to one of the two major parties is championed instead of critical thinking, where the latter would instead allow for dissensus. Indeed, it follows that since as has been outlined being in one's own time means that one is automatically part of a collective consciousness, colluding with the spirit of the age, one must also simultaneously question this positioning, rather than accepting it as established fact. Thus, what ensues is a contradictory repositioning, where the contemporary

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<sup>14</sup> Foucault, p. 25.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, p. 25.

places oneself – at the same time – close to and at a distance from the age, in order to safeguard the multiplicities present within the now. As Foucault comments,

The analysis of the archive, then, involves a privileged region: at once close to us, and different from our present existence, it is the border of time that surrounds our presence, which overhangs it, and which indicates it in its otherness; it is that which, outside ourselves, delimits us.<sup>16</sup>

It is only this stance which allows the contemporary to partake fully in his own time, as ‘it breaks the thread of transcendental teleologies’ like those promoted by irresponsible conceptions of the future, and ‘it now bursts open the other, and the outside’ to the present, where subjects are able to contribute to a constructive state of things.<sup>17</sup>

However, this raises further perplexities of how to live and commit to the now if it can only be experienced through a conflicting position of disconnection and disjuncture, where this (self-imposed) banishment from one’s own time will paradoxically render the contemporary ‘irrelevant [*inattuale*]’ (CN, p. 11) through its expulsion from history, according to Agamben. Indeed, Badiou’s conception of the event – even though its objective is to dispense with current patterns in thought in order to provoke new ways of engagement – can also be said to render the subject ineffectual. As he comments in his text *Ethics*, the individual is ‘convoked to *become* a subject – or rather, to enter into the composing of a subject’, from his previous state of animal.<sup>18</sup> The individual can become a subject only when a rupture occurs that will make one aware of the truth. Indeed, as Badiou asserts in his text *Being and Event*, ‘subjectivization is that through which a truth is possible. It turns the event towards the truth of the situation for which the event is an event’.<sup>19</sup> The individual can

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<sup>16</sup> Foucault, p. 130.

<sup>17</sup> Foucault, p. 131.

<sup>18</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. by Peter Hallward (London and New York: Verso, 2001), p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London and New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 393.



become a subject and conceive of the truth through a process that occurs in one of four chosen domains, which Badiou names as love, science, politics, and art. However, as he continues, ‘a truth alone is infinite, yet the subject is not coextensive with it’.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, truth works through the finite that however cannot coincide with it. As Badiou asserts, ‘a subject is what deals with the generic indiscernibility of a truth, which it accomplishes amidst discernible finitude, by a nomination whose referent is suspended from the future anterior of a condition.’<sup>21</sup> Thus, the subject tries to make the truth perceivable even though the decision that could bring it forth is suspended and undecidable, it resides in the ‘to come’. However, according to Badiou, it is through the fact that the decision is undecidable that new forms of thought can emerge, where truth can be recognised in an alternative light. As he goes on, ‘a subject is thus, by the grace of names, both the *real* of the procedure (the enquiring of the enquiries) and the *hypothesis* that its unfinishable result will introduce some newness into presentation’.<sup>22</sup> Once again, the subject has no power to bring about change in the now. In addition, in order for the subject to be faithful to the circumstances engendered by the event, the subject has to ‘move within this situation that this event has supplemented, by *thinking* [...] this situation “according to” the event’.<sup>23</sup> In the summoning of the subject the event disrupts time, and thus Badiou conceives of the contemporary as a ‘temporal interruption’, as William Watkin posits in his essay ‘The Time of Indifference’.<sup>24</sup> However, the subject’s thinking cannot transpire within the time of the event, but rather, only outside of time, as an afterthought. As Watkin continues, for Badiou the ‘subject’s relation to the event is always belated: after the fact, basically [rendered] a historical construct due to the power of

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<sup>20</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 395.

<sup>21</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 399.

<sup>22</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, p. 399.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou, *Ethics*, p. 41.

<sup>24</sup> William Watkin, ‘The Time of Indifference: Mandelstam’s Age, Badiou’s Event, and Agamben’s Contemporary’, *CounterText*, 2.1 (2016), 85–99 (p. 96).

retrospective naming.<sup>25</sup> Hence, once again, the subject is relegated to the sphere of coincidence. Indeed, in Watkin's view, 'in this way, the event is not particularly different from the overall process of epoch-naming that we assumed it would be able to disrupt.'<sup>26</sup>

Thus, it can be argued that it is only through Agamben's idea of violence through displacement that one can discern the shortcomings of the age, since as Watkin postulates, he figures the contemporary as 'an interruption of the idea of the temporal'.<sup>27</sup> This accentuation in discernment is emphasised through his multiple references to the faculties of seeing and perception. In effect, Agamben maintains that true contemporaries are able to 'perceive not its light but rather its darkness' (*TC*, p. 13), a task which requires active effort. Indeed, the contemporary is not swayed by the blinding lights of the century, but instead seeks obscurity and its shadows, for 'darkness is something that – more than any light – turns directly and singularly toward him' (*CN*, p. 14). This is because to be able to perceive darkness is to be conscious that one is unable 'to view one's own age outside the filters of discourse of our own age's intelligibility', which in turn conceal the present, as Watkins asserts.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it is seen how the subject's 'ability amounts to a neutralization of the lights that come from the epoch in order to discover its obscurity, its special darkness, which is not, however, separable from those lights' (*CN*, pp. 13–14), a double and antithetical position that the contemporary has no choice but to endure.

Even though Agamben and Badiou do not conceive of temporality in the same manner, they converge on the notion that within man lies the potentiality for change, that which the latter also terms as 'the political creation of a new man' (*TC*, p. 8). However, contrary to Agamben, Badiou denounces violence as cruelty. He posits that despite the

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<sup>25</sup> Watkin, p. 96.

<sup>26</sup> Watkin, p. 96.

<sup>27</sup> Watkin, p. 96.

<sup>28</sup> Watkin, p. 95.

century being invested in the humanist project of creating its new man or its true contemporaries, this attempt was so radicalised that it unleashed unspeakable acts of violence. Indeed, as he continues, ‘the century was *haunted* by [this] idea’ (*TC*, p. 8, emphasis added), and in fact, ‘this vision of things’ (*TC*, p. 8) was marred and resulted in the destruction of man himself, as attested by the savagery and atrocities committed in the scramble for Africa, the dehumanisation of soldiers in the trenches of the Great War, and the fascist obsession with a pure-blood Aryan race at the cost of the extermination of Jews, amongst others. In light of these abominations, the ethical concern which has been raised throughout must be reiterated: how can one poeticise the effects of violence?

The treatment of Osip Mandelstam’s poem ‘The Century’ (1923) is crucial to both Agamben’s and Badiou’s texts, as it serves to illustrate their understanding of the relationship between the contemporary, time, and violence. One of their pivotal differences lies within their interpretation of the role of the poem itself: whereas for Agamben it is precisely an exercise in contemporariness, defined as ‘the relation between the poet and his time’ (*CN*, p. 11), Badiou regards it as a reflection on the century itself, that is, for him the age is ‘a living composition’ (*TC*, p. 13). Unlike Agamben, it is not so much the thinker that he is interested in, but rather, ‘what was thought in [the century]’ (*TC*, p. 3). In his insistence that ‘we must also see [...] through the eyes of the century itself’ (*TC*, p. 14), Badiou attests to its animalistic aspects. However, the century is not just a beast, but also, ‘my beast’ (*TC*, p. 14), and in this mirroring the boundaries between Life and History are blurred, and as a result, man is no longer an individual, neither a human animal, but instead, a beast. Moreover, man will have to ‘look into [the beast’s] pupils’ (*TC*, p. 14), however, it is uncertain who will be able to do so, for staring the beast-century in the face is an action that requires a tremendous ‘subjective capacity’ (*TC*, p. 15), one that is ‘far superior to the one possessed by someone who simply walks in step with his epoch’ (*TC*, p. 15). For Agamben, this capacity is ‘a

question of courage' (*CN*, p. 14), the courage of 'being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss' (*CN*, p. 15). This action, exhausting in its repetition, testifies to his understanding of the condition of violence as inescapable. Indeed, Mandelstam's poem intensifies this stance, as it posits that the contemporary must 'weld together with his own blood/the vertebrae of two centuries' (*CN*, p. 12). Thus, the true contemporary is not only exiled from his age but this position also implies a double sacrifice, as besides rupturing time, the contemporary must also pay for this fissure with his body, 'imped[ing] time from composing itself and [being] the blood that must suture this break or this wound' (*CN*, p. 12). It seems that Badiou also acknowledges the power of courage within those who do not want to concur with their own time, as they recognise that this threatens the potential for thought. Indeed, speaking in the context of Fernando Pessoa's poetry, Badiou claims that 'for the individual to become a subject, it is necessary that he overcome [...] the fear of losing all identity, of being dispossessed of the routines of place and time' (*TC*, p. 124). As he continues, for it to be possible to contribute to one's age, one must avoid being consumed by 'the fear of no longer [...] having the little one has' (*TC*, p. 124). Even though Badiou does not explicitly suggest it, this could also include clinging to narratives of temporal stability. However, as he argues, the individual is not ready to renounce the familiarity of one's surroundings; in other words, no individual aspires to not belong to one's own time. Even though there is much talk about progress and the emancipation of man, about the innovation of ideas and the transgression of the limits that have been imposed on thought, ultimately what the individual seeks, in Badiou's words, is 'orderliness' (*TC*, p. 124). If the individual is not willing to quit his abode in the realm of linear temporality, if 'nothing is worth us tearing ourselves away from our ordinary cowardice, and especially not the Idea' (*TC*, p. 124), what remains of contemporary life? And is it not this attitude that should be designated as the real violence?

Although Badiou recognises the challenge of not settling for mediocrity and orderliness, and the importance of not colluding with one's own age through fear and cowardice, he also differs from Agamben on his conception of the present. In effect, as has been said, Agamben's main concern in his essay is the meaning behind truly belonging to one's time, and hence, the present, where if change is to be fostered then the contemporary must be able to engage with the time of the now. However, in a chapter on the art and artists of the avant-garde, Badiou seems to be at odds with the present, as he appears to view the immersion in the here and now as a violation of that which could be termed as the sublime. In fact, he states that here 'art is no longer essentially a production of eternity, the creation of a work to be judged by the future. The avant-gardes want there to be a pure present for art. There is no time to wait' (*TC*, p. 134). Thus, in his advancement of the wait, Badiou is once again at odds with that which Agamben is trying to bring to light, namely a productive and immediate commitment to the present. What Badiou seems to reject is the avant-gardist notion of an 'absolute rupture' (*TC*, p. 134), where the present completely breaks with the past and tradition finds no place in the now. Indeed, in his opinion, 'the artist of the avant-garde is neither heir nor imitator, but rather the one who violently declares the present of art' (*TC*, p. 135). Even though one could agree with Badiou's stance on the avant-garde, and acknowledge that a total annihilation of the past is as dangerous as the eradication of the present, his opposition to discontinuity and a total engagement with the present is worrying. Nevertheless, it must be said that even though Badiou is in conflict with Agamben on a number of issues, he does raise a crucial point. In his view, one must beware of depictions of the present that in the end rather become advocates of the future, where even though 'the aim of all these constructions is to devote every energy to the present, [...] the subjectivation of this present sometimes gets bogged down in rhetoric of hope' (*TC*, p. 140). Finally, as he goes on, if the present is not to be held hostage by these futuristic tendencies disguised as

proponents of the now, it is ‘only the recognition of the fabrication of a present [which] can rally people to the politics of emancipation, or to a contemporary art’ (*TC*, p. 140).

In addition, although Badiou’s view on courage is consistent with that of Agamben at the outset, the latter’s insistence on bodily sacrifice is not one that Badiou shares. While he does propound that the individual must not consent to cowardice, he is also aware of how this belief was twisted in the twentieth century. Indeed, what he rejects is the notion of man as an offering, as for him, the confrontation between man and the century is a relationship based on vitalism, where through man’s appetite for ‘confront[ing] History, to master it politically’ (*TC*, p. 15) it is concluded that horrifyingly ‘it may be just to sacrifice the individual’ (*TC*, p. 14). This will to dominate History also inaugurates the century as one of voluntarism, which throws man into a double bind, for on one side ‘history is a huge and powerful beast hanging over us and yet we must endure its leaden gaze, forcing it to serve us’ (*TC*, p. 15). Badiou’s depiction of the century is one of a project of ruthless advancement, where what is foregrounded is ‘a life that gushes out blood and death’ (*TC*, p. 17). Here, the new man fearlessly ploughs through the carcasses of the age, for as Mandelstam writes, ‘so long as the creature lives/ it must carry forth its vertebrae’ (*CN*, p. 12). In effect, the issue of vertebration deeply concerns Badiou, for it attests to the century’s consistency. The century has ‘a child’s tender cartilage’ (*CN*, p. 12), it is a newborn, however, its ‘backbone has [already] been shattered’ (*CN*, p. 13). Furthermore, the century tries to look back, ‘to contemplate [its] own tracks’ (*CN*, p. 13), which Badiou understands as a return to nostalgia, due to the fact that the century’s ‘grandiose objectives’ (*CN*, p. 18) cannot be upheld. In its realisation of its impossibility of movement, its face displays that which Agamben terms a ‘demented grin’ (*CN*, p. 13). Even though for Agamben this detail is just a matter of fact, for Badiou this is the precise moment at which the project of the new man fails, for there is nothing to hold it together. In the absence of consistent skeletal structure, then ‘the century unflinchingly

maintain[s] that life can only accomplish its positive destiny (and design) through terror' (*TC*, p. 16). If, as Badiou comments, 'even the exterminators presented themselves under the sign of promise and of a new beginning [...] they promised the golden age, a thousand-year peace' (*TC*, p. 17), and the project undoubtedly failed anyway, how does one move beyond this impasse? And moreover, how can one endorse Agamben's proposal of the contemporary, which begins in violence itself?

However, a prior question needs to be posed – how is violence defined in our time? Hannah Arendt, in her text *On Violence*, distinguishes it from power, force, or strength, on the basis that in order to be implemented, violence needs tools, such as those used in warfare. Despite this, she concedes that these words 'are held to be synonyms because they have the same function', which is 'to indicate the means by which man rules over man'.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, Arendt worries not only about this dominion over man by man himself, which could be said not only lies within the use of physical tools but also through the shaping of thought and perception, but also on the elevated use of violence, as it is steadily gaining 'reputation and appeal in domestic affairs, specifically in the matter of revolution'.<sup>30</sup> In fact, this is why she criticises Jean-Paul Sartre, as in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* he glorifies physical violence against colonial rule, by asserting that 'violence, like Achilles' spear, can heal the wounds it has inflicted'.<sup>31</sup> In his eyes, then, the recreation of man rests within 'this new violence aroused in [the colonised] by old, rehashed crimes', however, Arendt attacks this idea as an illusion, for a community founded on collective violence can be nothing other than volatile.<sup>32</sup> As she reiterates, 'violence can destroy power; [but] it is utterly

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<sup>29</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Publishing Company, 1970), p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Arendt, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface', in *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), pp. xliii–lxii (p. lxii).

<sup>32</sup> Sartre, p. lxii.

incapable of creating it', and in her debunking of the notion of the new man, she seems to be in agreement with Badiou.<sup>33</sup>

A different conception of violence is propounded by Walter Benjamin in his essay 'Critique of Violence', where he contends that violence has always been portrayed as an undesirable instrument by those in power, for it instantly evokes the relationship between law and justice. Indeed, he posits that 'a cause, however effective, becomes violent, in the precise sense of the word, only when it bears on moral issues'.<sup>34</sup> However, Benjamin is far more interested in violence in relation to the state, where he propounds that 'law sees violence in the hands of individuals as a danger undermining the legal system',<sup>35</sup> and therefore, it follows that it is not violence in itself that threatens law, but rather, 'its mere existence outside the law'.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Benjamin further supports his statement by demonstrating how violence is inherent within lawmaking and law-preserving functions, and hence, there seems to be a 'monopoly of violence vis-à-vis individuals' at work, through fear of a challenge to the sovereignty of the state. It is for this reason that Benjamin condemns violence that operates within the law, which he terms mythical violence, as rather than ensuring the proper functioning of the law it is that which reinforces domination. Instead, he favours divine violence since in his opinion, it operates within the realms of justice. He asserts that it is only this violence, unlike the mythical one of lawmaking, which can usher in 'a new historical epoch'.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, this violence is 'law-destroying', destroys boundaries, 'expiates', and 'is lethal without spilling blood'.<sup>38</sup> However, the notion of a divine violence as rendered by Benjamin can be criticised for its mystical qualities, especially when comparing it to God's

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<sup>33</sup> Arendt, p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Critique of Violence', in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), pp. 277–300 (p. 277).

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, p. 280.

<sup>36</sup> Benjamin, p. 281.

<sup>37</sup> Benjamin, p. 300.

<sup>38</sup> Benjamin, p. 297.



pure power: ‘just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine.’<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, even though he rejects mythical violence on the basis that it unleashes ‘great violence’, Benjamin paradoxically champions an all-encompassing kind, on the basis that it guarantees equality.<sup>40</sup> In effect, for him this type of violence does not raise any ethical concerns, for ‘it strikes privileged Levites, strikes them without warning, without threat, and does not stop short of annihilation’.<sup>41</sup> This paradox is exemplified in the biblical episode of Korah, who was obliterated by God along with his accomplices and their families for rebelling against Moses, buried alive in a quest for divine justice. Moreover, the other 250 men who also conspired with Korah were consumed by a fire sent from heaven, and a plague was sent amongst the congregation for daring to contest God’s rule. How can Benjamin justify this on the basis of a non-discriminatory violence? James Martel, in his essay ‘Waiting for Justice’, claims that Benjamin’s divine violence ‘acts to erase and remove idols, not to replace one set of idols with another. It is not a question of “blood or no blood” but a question of “idol or no idol”’.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, within the context of building a functioning state of things that allows one to engage with one’s own time, this understanding of Benjamin’s divine violence might seem viable. This is due to the fact that in this view, no idols distract the subject from the now, no futuristic notions or narratives of linearity and unity seem to be able to displace it. However, one must keep in mind that this is brought about not at the expense of blood, but rather, of bloodless sacrifice, which can be considered as more violent than the former. In effect, Agamben himself criticises this standpoint, for as he writes in his essay ‘On the Limits of Violence’, ‘it simply places violence within a broader theory of means that justify a superior end; the end is the sole criterion to determine the justice of the means.’<sup>43</sup> Thus, here

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<sup>39</sup> Benjamin, p. 297.

<sup>40</sup> Benjamin, p. 296.

<sup>41</sup> Benjamin, p. 297.

<sup>42</sup> James Martel, ‘Waiting for Justice: Benjamin and Derrida on Sovereignty and Immanence’, in *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts*, 2 (2011), 158–72 (p. 164).

<sup>43</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘On the Limits of Violence’, in *Diacritics*, 39 (2009), 103–11 (p. 106).

violence is justified as long as the end reached is deemed favourable to all, an end achieved for the sake of a common world; however, this line of thought should be carefully approached for in the positioning of something as superior – where all acts are carried out in the name of this final goal – it once again reinstalls a violently linear understanding of time that over and over renounces any change that could advance the present state of things in favour of the absolute.

Indeed, it seems that it is only Agamben who manages to conceptualise violence as an effectual initiation into contemporariness, and a fundamental difference can be observed between his notion of violence and those advanced by Benjamin, Arendt, and Badiou. Whereas the latter three philosophers are focused on its outward manifestations, either as a pure violence whose ‘expiatory power [...] is not visible to men’, in Benjamin’s words, or as an instrument that subjects and dehumanises the individual, Agamben’s theory maintains that the violence that affects the contemporary is directed inwards.<sup>44</sup> In fact, he comments that rather than moving towards mythical violence or divine violence, one should ‘[search] for a violence that needs no justification, that carries the right to exist within itself.’<sup>45</sup> Indeed, returning to Agamben’s understanding of Mandelstam’s poem, it is apparent that the cornerstone of his interpretation relies on the contemporary’s singularity. In effect, Agamben is quick to note that it is ‘not “the century”, but, according to the words that open the first verse, “my century”’ (*CN*, p. 11) that the poet is engaged with. Moreover, it has already been remarked how the contemporary’s awareness of darkness does not stem from passivity, and is neither a universal or ‘privative notion’ (*CN*, p. 13), but rather ‘implies an activity and a singular ability’ (*CN*, p. 13). Indeed, Agamben explains this through biology, where he states that ‘neurophysiologists tell us that the absence of light activates a series of peripheral cells in

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<sup>44</sup> Benjamin, p. 300.

<sup>45</sup> Agamben, ‘On the Limits of Violence’, p. 107.

the retina called “off-cells”. When activated, these cells produce the particular kind of vision that we call darkness’ (CN, p. 13). Thus, darkness, unlike light, is a quality that is created by an individual’s own retina, rather than as a product of nature. Finally, Agamben himself clearly defines contemporariness as ‘a *singular* relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it’ (CN, p. 11, emphasis added).

Hence, it could be suggested that the term ‘violence’ might have to be qualified further, for it is being indiscriminately implemented to refer to both its outward and inward dimensions. Rather than propounding a violence that implies being *subjected to* a physical or unlawful force by someone or something other, as seen in Benjamin, Arendt, and Badiou, Agamben focuses on a ‘revolutionary violence’ that seems to originate from the contemporary’s distress and anguish of *needing* to engage with his time. This violence is one that is not concerned with self-interest, unlike lawmaking violence that preserves the law itself, or oppositional violence that defies law for its own sake, but rather necessitates self-sacrifice. Furthermore, Agamben realises the weight of the task that is imposed on the contemporary, for he acknowledges that enacting violence comes with responsibilities. In his words, revolutionary violence

negates the self as it negates the other; it awakens a consciousness of the death of the self, even as it visits death on the other. Only the revolutionary class can know that enacting violence against the other inevitably kills the self; only the revolutionary class can have the right (or perhaps, the terrible imperative) to violence.<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, what Agamben seems to be proposing here is that revolutionary change must be enacted primarily on an ideological plane. Even though it might still be contested that his definition trivialises the human and also the condition of exile, it would allow one to account for the contemporary’s demented grin as other than a return to nostalgia. This is further

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<sup>46</sup> Agamben, ‘On the Limits of Violence’, p. 108.

strengthened through Agamben's questioning of the abilities of the true contemporary, who he believes can 'read history in unforeseen ways, to "cite it" according to a necessity that does not arise in any way from his will but from an *exigency* to which he cannot not respond' (CN, p. 18, emphasis added). Indeed, this is where Agamben completely opposes Badiou, for as aforementioned, the latter's vision of the century is entirely bound up with the human *will* to conquer. However, it must be said that Agamben still does not outright denounce the spilling of physical blood and bodily sacrifice, especially in relation to Mandelstam's poem. This line of argument will be advanced in the next section.

The revolutionary violence enacted on the level of self-negation and self-sacrifice also appears to be in accordance with Agamben's conception of time, as it 'deliberately refrains from enforcing law, and instead breaks apart the continuity of time to found a new era'.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, Agamben emphatically believes that it is only this type of violence that can serve as a catalyst for change, as he remarks that 'at the dawn of every new temporal order, [...] it shall be written: "In the beginning, there was violence."' <sup>48</sup> As Watkin asserts, 'if, for Badiou, the time of the event occurs outside of time, thus leaving temporality untouched, for Agamben it occurs within history, transforming time as history, our paradigm of temporality, from *within*' (emphasis added).<sup>49</sup> Indeed, as Watkin continues, in his appropriation of Mandelstam's poem, '[Agamben] suspends time in its entirety by making time touch itself as a mere historical construction. Basically for Agamben, time is just a term', and hence, this is why the contemporary is distinct from the century's new man, for rather than trying to consume History in his frenzied 'will-to-live' (TC, p.14), he is able to distinguish the darkness of the discourses of his age.<sup>50</sup> This is why 'The Century' cannot solely be interpreted as an

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<sup>47</sup> Agamben, 'On the Limits of Violence', p. 107.

<sup>48</sup> Agamben, 'On the Limits of Violence', p. 109.

<sup>49</sup> Watkin, p. 97.

<sup>50</sup> Watkin, p. 97.

‘interruption of one’s time through the suspension of the dialectic between vitalism and voluntarism, as Badiou says’, but rather, its message follows Agamben’s ‘suspension of time as such’, as Watkin rightly posits, where spatiality is favoured over temporality.<sup>51</sup> Agamben’s perspective is further strengthened by that of Rancière, where the latter is also interested in time as a construct, as mentioned in the first chapter. Indeed, as he suggests, ‘time is the best medium for exclusion’, for it pushes one into believing that once times have changed, one can no longer go back, suppressing the potential for revolutionary and political change.<sup>52</sup> Believing in the linearity of time gives rise to ‘a “state of things”’, which ‘presents itself as an objective given that precludes the possibility of other states of things’, and hence, displacement is not only discouraged but impossible.<sup>53</sup> However, in line with Agamben, Rancière further posits that time does not only discriminate from the standpoint of History, but rather, it also enforces ‘a principle of *inner* differentiation’ (emphasis added).<sup>54</sup> As he continues,

It is a time that makes those who live in it unable to master it, unable to understand what it makes possible or impossible, always walking too slowly or too fast to be contemporaneous with the intelligence of the process.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, who will be able to master time from the *inside*, in other words, not to subjugate others to violence, but rather, to productively contribute to one’s time? And who can be considered a true contemporary, if, as Agamben claims, ‘contemporaries are rare’ (CN, p. 14)?

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<sup>51</sup> Watkin, p. 97.

<sup>52</sup> Rancière, ‘In What Time Do We Live?’, p. 11.

<sup>53</sup> Rancière, ‘In What Time Do We Live?’, p. 11.

<sup>54</sup> Rancière, ‘In What Time Do We Live?’, p. 20.

<sup>55</sup> Rancière, ‘In What Time Do We Live?’, p. 20.

### Chapter 3

#### **Becoming contemporaries: Gilles Deleuze's concept of virtuality**

As discussed in the previous chapter, Badiou's opposition to the twentieth century's project of the new man stems from his horror at the proliferation of violence that resulted from it. This violence, carried out in the name of man's progress and justified as emancipation, can be observed at work in the treatment of the body, which becomes a vehicle of oppression and exploitation. Indeed, as he asks: 'why is it in effect that today it is never really a question of man except in the form of the tortured, the massacred, the famished, the genocided?' (*TC*, p. 175). It seems like the century is obsessed with the butchered body, which is why Badiou cannot but denounce Agamben's glorification of the contemporary's position, which entails physical sacrifice as evidenced by Mandelstam's poem. In addition, the century's sanctioning of violence as well as the attention it places on the body uncover its hidden agenda: that of reducing man solely to his animalistic attributes, as Badiou claims. To start with, the mutilated body serves our time well in its ability to be consumed. In effect, in this capitalistic era, 'man is no more than the animal datum of a body, whose most spectacular attestation, the only saleable one (and we are in a kind of supermarket) [...] is suffering', which also raises questions about supposedly human traits such as pity and empathy (*TC*, p. 175). Thus, here the body is usurped by economic structures, and furthermore, it is also being exploited by the dominant forces of society. In fact, as Badiou continues, if the century is one without Ideas, or if its only project is to create a new man forged in violence, 'we will necessarily endure a figure which makes man simply into a species' (*TC*, p. 174).

Badiou's assertions, albeit referencing the twentieth century, are still as condemning and troublesome in our age, for as he propounds, 'a species is, above all, *what can be domesticated*' (*TC*, p. 175). Indeed, for the powers that be, man as species can be controlled,

duped, and habituated. Man as species does not need to think; he is relieved of his ability to perceive and his capacity to evaluate and criticise. However, what is more worrying is that this domestication, ‘which subtends the project-less humanism that is inflicted upon us, is already at work in the promotion, as spectacle and norm, of the victimized body’ (*TC*, p. 175). Indeed, this can be seen at work in the relegation of man as species and its link to violence in the Nazi’s racial ideology based on the exultation of the Aryan race and the belief in pure blood. In his essay entitled ‘Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism’, Emmanuel Levinas embarks on a study of National Socialism in order to demonstrate how the evil underlying all the violence that took place under the Nazi rule did not develop out of misunderstanding or defected reasoning, but rather it is an evil ‘into which we can be led by logic’.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, he shows how this evil is aided by the treatment of the body in the project of the new man, where commitment to the corporal gains utmost importance. In fact, rather than being denounced as degrading, this complete submission to the biological is now considered desirable, where Levinas goes so far as to claim that ‘man’s essence lies no longer in freedom but in a kind of bondage’.<sup>2</sup> However, what is deeply horrifying is that this is a conscious decision in favour of subjugation and enslavement. Levinas shows how man does not contemplate ideas since the links of birth and blood prevail, and indeed, ‘chained to his body, man sees himself refusing the power to escape from himself’.<sup>3</sup> Man’s power, which should lie within thought, is denied, and thus, the century rejoices in its bodily chains. As he continues, ‘man no longer finds himself confronted by a world of ideas in which he can choose his own truth on the basis of a sovereign decision made by his free reason’, but instead through the biological ‘he is already linked to a certain number of these ideas, just as he is linked by birth

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<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, ‘Reflections on the Philosophy of Hitlerism’, trans. by Seán Hand, *Critical Inquiry*, 17.1 (1990), 62–71 (p. 63).

<sup>2</sup> Levinas, p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Levinas, p. 70.

to all those who are of his blood'.<sup>4</sup> In naturalising the link between blood, heredity, and nation, the biological is not solely being utilised as a tool through which to control the people, which can be seen on a superficial level, but now the body is also being used to normalise discourses on nature. As Badiou writes, man's nature becomes equal to that of the animal, and by extension, anything that is deemed as occurring naturally. This gives rise to the dangerous notion that all 'things have a nature and must be respected. [...] The market economy, for example, is natural, we must find its balance, [...] just as we should respect the balance between hedgehogs and snails' (*TC*, pp. 176–7).

The matter of the body also raises a further problem, because as Badiou states, in the century man 'could not be his own present without being reduced to the lineaments of the animal he contains' (*TC*, p. 175), thus precluding the engagement of the individual with his own time. If man's present has been transformed into a sole biological one and man has accepted this subjection, how is the contemporary to breach this aporia? It is worth mentioning that this manipulation of biological life by those who are in power is also an issue that Agamben writes about at length in his text *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Although it is not possible for this point to be pursued further here, it must be said that it is due to the fact that there is no longer a distinction being made between *zoē* and *bios*, between mere life and life included in the sphere of politics, that true violence against the individual occurs. As glossed by Agamben, 'when natural life is wholly included in the polis [...] these thresholds pass [...] beyond the dark boundaries separating life from death in order to identify a new living dead man, a new sacred man'.<sup>5</sup> This is why the figure of the contemporary is crucial especially in this day and age, for the controlling of the body by the dominant forces lends itself to a much larger sinister project, where the individual is but a

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<sup>4</sup> Levinas, p. 70.

<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 131.



living dead man, no longer in charge of his own present. As has been mentioned, ‘we can say that the fundamental imperative of animal humanism is “Live without Ideas”’ (TC, p. 177), which is why this enterprise must be resisted. However, the issue of violence still persists. Is the contemporary justified in sacrificing his own body to act as the physical stitch which heals the age back together? As Badiou remarks, ‘animal humanism wants to abolish the discussion itself’ (TC, p. 177), using precisely this logic: the project of the new man has been drenched in inhumanity, and therefore, it must be abandoned. However, even though Badiou himself criticises the century for its rampant violence, he acknowledges that the starting point of address should be the inhuman itself. What needs to be reckoned with is ‘what is dreaded, what must be foreclosed, [...] what is neither natural nor amenable by right alone. In short, what is *monstrous*’, for denying it will definitely not put an end to it (TC, p. 177). Indeed, Badiou urges that ‘our philosophical task, on the shores of the new century, and against the animal humanism that besieges us, [is] that of a *formalized in-humanism*’ (TC, p. 178).

In their text *What is Philosophy?*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari try to broach the issue of animalism through an immersion into Deleuze’s concept of becoming, all the while combining it with a discussion of time. As they explain, the dangers of living in conjunction with one’s own time is that one becomes oblivious to pitfalls in thought that are being perpetuated around oneself, and hence, ‘we do not feel ourselves outside of our time but continue to undergo shameful compromises with it’.<sup>6</sup> However, when the individual does realise that he is being seduced by the blinding lights of the century that are distracting him from committing to his present, it is the feeling of shame that surfaces rather than acknowledgement. They continue: ‘this feeling of shame is [also] one of philosophy’s most powerful motifs. We are not responsible for the victims but responsible before them’, a

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<sup>6</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 108.

notion that Derrida continually propounds.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the cycle is never really broken: the shame of being human is one of the factors that inhibits the individual from being fully aware in the now. Indeed, this shame is then translated into man's desire of simply existing rather than engaging with his time, of being animal, in order to withdraw from one's responsibilities to the present. As Deleuze and Guattari comment, 'there is no way to escape the ignoble but to play the part of the animal [...]: thought itself is sometimes closer to an animal that dies than to a living, even democratic, human being'.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, what Deleuze and Guattari call for is not pity in the face of suffering, which Badiou has also rightly denounced, but for *becoming*. The concept of becoming is structured around the idea that a person does not have to be distorted into anything that he is not, but rather, he is able to engage productively with the world around him through thought. Thus, it could be said that through Deleuze and Guattari's understanding of becoming, the categories of animal and the biological are reclaimed from the vilification that they have undergone. In their words,

we think and write for animals themselves. We become animal so that the animal also becomes something else. The agony of a rat or the slaughter of a calf remains present in thought not through pity but as the zone of exchange between man and animal in which something of one passes into the other.<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, Deleuze and Guattari further comment on the body, and in an interesting move in their attempt to liberate it from contemporary interpretations that seek to disparage it or depict it solely as slaughtered, they shed light not only on the structure of the body but also on structures that are used by the dominant forces to oppress individuals, including time. Thus, in this case, the violence being committed is not on an individual level, but instead by those forces which organise one's life. The notion that Deleuze and Guattari put forward to

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<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 108.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 108.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 109.

counter this in their text *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* is one of a body without organs, which albeit at first glance might appear to advance the forsaking of the physical, in effect ‘the BwO is not opposed to the organs; rather, the BwO and its “true organs”, which must be composed and positioned, are opposed to the organism, the organic organization of the organs’, as they assert.<sup>10</sup> Hence, what is being renounced here is not the body, but the way the individual has been indoctrinated to think of it as a structured machine or apparatus. In fact, they continue by warning the reader of the dangers of viewing oneself as an organism, for this is what those in power want the individual to perceive: ‘you will be organized, [...] you will articulate your body—otherwise you're just deprived’.<sup>11</sup>

The opposition to violence that has been supported by the likes of Arendt and Badiou – who have nonetheless raised important questions and initiated a much needed discussion on violence – and also by the century of animal humanism, has been a hard matter for Agamben to grapple with in his depiction of the figure of the contemporary, since for him violence will always be part and parcel of the contemporary’s position. Indeed, over and over again this dissertation has struggled with the latter philosopher’s assertion that in order for the individual to commit wholly to his age a price must be paid, a physical one nonetheless. Even though it cannot be denied that Agamben’s theory of time as space is definitely one which most affords the individual to be in the now and to effectively react to the present moment, writing poetically about violence as Agamben does must also be challenged on an ethical level. Moreover, his notions on violence also raise questions on how these can be translated from theory into application. Until now, this has been a tough line of inquiry to follow since Agamben’s portrayal of the contemporary is simultaneously assertive and vague. Indeed, while he insists that the contemporary has no choice but to encounter violence, he does not

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<sup>10</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 158.

<sup>11</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 159.

offer a clear explanation of what this might entail on a practical level, in the real world. However, it seems that Deleuze and Guattari might offer some insight into this problematic. In effect, their outlook on violence can be glimpsed through their comments on the organisation of the organism, where they propound that ‘dismantling the organism has never meant killing yourself’.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, even though the individual must go against his time for the sake of *being* in his time, and although this entails sacrifice on the part of the contemporary, this should not entail a complete annihilation. Rather, what Deleuze and Guattari propose is ‘opening the body to connections that presuppose an entire assemblage, circuits, conjunctions, levels and thresholds, passages and distributions of intensity, and territories and deterritorializations measured with the craft of a surveyor.’<sup>13</sup>

Thus, once again, the focus is on becoming, where relations and connections that one might not have even realised existed, since those in power reassert their dominance by enforcing the illusions of the age and alienating the individual, are re-established and strengthened. Indeed, in the search for a proper relation with one’s time, one should never be asked to renounce the body, as Deleuze and Guattari establish, but rather it is a change in distribution and redistribution of structures that must come about. Indeed, their concept is one that focuses on vision, which is also in accordance with Agamben’s portrayal of the contemporary and Rancière’s idea of redistribution. They argue that thought should be the process through which the individual can achieve connection and engagement with the temporalities and spatialities around him, for ‘we are not in the world, [but] we become with the world; we become by contemplating it. Everything is vision, becoming. We become universes. Becoming animal, plant, molecular, becoming zero.’<sup>14</sup> Deleuze’s thoughts on violence can also be seen in his understanding of revolution, where his ideas might help

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<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 160.

<sup>13</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 160.

<sup>14</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 169.

qualify further the sacrifice needed from the contemporary in Agamben's understanding. Indeed, Deleuze's view is that even though historical projects aimed at the creation of a new man or a new era have been bloody and barbaric, it is irresponsible to confuse this with revolutions undertaken by the individual, which occur on the singular plane. As he comments in his text *Negotiations*,

It is fashionable these days to condemn the horrors of revolution. [...] They say revolutions turn out badly. But they're constantly confusing two different things, the way revolutions turn out historically and people's revolutionary becoming. [...] Men's only hope lies in a revolutionary becoming: the only way of casting off their shame or responding to what is intolerable.<sup>15</sup>

Thus, rather than allowing the dominant powers to utilise shame as a tool through which total mastery and violence over the individual and his time is exercised, man can convert this shame into a call for action, to effect change in the now and remake his world.

Deleuze's notion of becoming, his understanding of revolution, and his mentions of territories and deterritorializations are all derived from his concept of virtuality. As the philosopher himself terms it in his essay 'Immanence: A Life', 'what we call virtual is not something that lacks reality but something that is engaged in a process of actualization following the plane that gives it its particular reality'.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, that which Deleuze thinks of as the virtual does not correlate to what one might think of as the imaginary in common parlance, but rather, it is that which opens the way for real experience. As Deleuze and Guattari comment, it is that which 'contain[s] all possible particles and drawing out all possible forms, which spring up only to disappear immediately, without consistency or reference, without consequence'.<sup>17</sup> The virtual is hence that which comes before any kind of

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<sup>15</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations*, trans. by Martin Joughin (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), p. 171.

<sup>16</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Immanence: A Life', in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. by Anne Boyman (New York: Urzone, Inc., 2001), pp. 25–33 (p. 31).

<sup>17</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 118.

formation or identity, it is not dependent on individuals; rather, it is that which provides the conditions for processes which in turn produce identities of the subject. Furthermore, as Deleuze states in his text *Bergsonism*, ‘the characteristic of virtuality is to exist in such a way that it is actualized by being differentiated and is forced to differentiate itself, to create its lines of differentiation in order to be actualized.’<sup>18</sup> Thus, it must be said that his conception of the virtual also reinforces the notion of spatiality, for once again it is seen how through difference, Deleuze favours a perception of the world that is not stable or constant but rather focused on conflicting views and divergence. Indeed, he believes in ‘a chaosmos, a composed chaos’ – a term he borrows from James Joyce – instead of a world, where nothing conforms.<sup>19</sup> The notion of chaosmos will be developed further in the following chapter in relation to art and literature.

Deleuze’s concept of the virtual can also be likened to Foucault’s idea of the actual, both influenced from Nietzsche’s thought on the untimely. As has been said, when discussing the archive of history, Foucault mentions that in order for one to carry out its analysis, one must simultaneously be close to and at a distance from it, to ensure that a transcendental view of time is not adopted. This anachronous temporality is also at work between the actual and the present, since for Foucault these terms are not equivalent. Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari gloss over Foucault’s notion, ‘the actual is not what we are but, rather, what we become, what we are in the process of becoming [...]. The present, on the contrary, is what we are and, thereby, what already we are ceasing to be’.<sup>20</sup> Foucault’s distinction once again demonstrates why it would be more productive if we understood time as a spatiality rather than just a sequencing, which is why Deleuze, like Foucault, denounces order and linearity and portrays

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<sup>18</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Hammerjam (New York: Urzone Inc., 1988), p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 204.

<sup>20</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 112.

the concept of the virtual through mapping, as something that is geographical rather than historical. As Deleuze and Guattari comment, in their understanding

philosophical time is thus a grandiose time of coexistence that does not exclude the before and after but superimposes them in a stratigraphic order. It is an infinite becoming of philosophy that crosscuts its history without being confused with it.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, time and history are allowed to coexist without one oppressing the other, where now time is viewed not as identical to history but instead as something that bears different qualities to it, albeit the latter still being necessary for the world to operate. Indeed, as they emphatically reiterate, time should be perceived as a ‘coexistence of planes, not the succession of systems’.<sup>22</sup> Thus, it could be said that time is now immanent within space and through the change the individual implements as a creator of new ideas, rather than the individual having to abide by time’s demands. As Slavoj Žižek remarks in his work *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences*, ‘in this “stratigraphic” superimposition, in this moment of stasis, it is *time itself* that we experience; time as opposed to the evolutionary flow of things *within* time’.<sup>23</sup> The individual is then no longer a product of time, but rather, becomes in conjunction with time.

Deleuze and Guattari’s work, which is definitely concerned with how change can be realised in the present, and of how individuals can become rather than be, also considers the notion of utopia. Even though they realise that this term might not completely encapsulate their perception of becoming since utopia is usually perceived as a better vision of the world in the future, possibly as something which might never come to pass, or as a project which might undoubtedly end in violence, they still believe that the task of bringing change about in

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<sup>21</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 59.

<sup>23</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: Deleuze and Consequences* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 11.

the world is ‘the Utopian vocation of philosophy’, as Patton affirms.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, they assert that in the same way that works of art and literature challenge a sequential view of time through sensation – a point which will be developed further in the final chapter – philosophy does this through its ‘creation of untimely concepts’, in Patton’s view, shaking the individual out of his illusions rather than enacting physical violence.<sup>25</sup> In effect, they also play on the meaning of utopia to possibly recast the concept and demonstrate how its links are closer to the present than one might think. In fact, in their words, ‘*Erewhon*, the word used by Samuel Butler, refers not only to no-where but also to now-here’, thus juxtaposing the idea of utopia as fictive to its power of revolutionising the interaction between the individual and his situation in space and time.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, it could be asserted that a utopic now-here is far away from a futuristic coming, and is rather ‘the singular moment at which absolute deterritorialization meets the present relative milieu of bodies and states of affairs’, as Patton continues, where transcendence is encapsulated in immanence.<sup>27</sup> As Deleuze and Guattari themselves explain it, ‘to say that revolution is itself utopia of immanence is not to say that it is a dream, something that is not realized or that is only realized by betraying itself’, but rather, ‘it is to posit revolution as plane of immanence, infinite movement and absolute survey, but to the extent that these features connect up with what is real here and now in the struggle against capitalism, relaunching new struggles’ wherever collusion has been enforced.<sup>28</sup>

However, to be able to implement the notion of utopia in our time, the understanding of subjectivity as that which empowers the subject to master and explain the world around him has to be revisited. Indeed, Deleuze, rather than following in the tradition of

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Patton, ‘Future Politics’, in *Between Deleuze and Derrida*, ed. by Paul Patton and John Protevi (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 15–29 (p. 26).

<sup>25</sup> Patton, p. 26.

<sup>26</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 100.

<sup>27</sup> Patton, p. 26.

<sup>28</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 100.



transcendence as that which is beyond or superior to the subject, that which the subject is always trying to reach, and thus, continuously defers living in the now to eventually attain it, rather leans towards immanence, as that which is already found within the sphere of the subject. As Deleuze and Guattari posit, “‘To orientate oneself in thought’ implies neither objective reference point nor moving object that experiences itself as a subject and that, as such, strives for or needs the infinite’, showing how in the process of thought the individual should not be exhausted in always attempting to attain that which lies outside of him.<sup>29</sup> Rather, as they continue, ‘infinite movement [should be] defined by a coming and going, because it does not advance toward a destination without already turning back on itself’, a perception that would allow for confrontation rather than mere coincidence.<sup>30</sup> Thus, as Anders Raastrup Kristensen remarks in his essay ‘Thinking and Normativity in Deleuze’s Philosophy’, through immanence the subject ‘does not exist outside of its creation, which implies that [it] is always at the same time in the process of being created’ and is constantly becoming, which means that the subject is that which must be explained first and foremost, instead of being that which has to explain the world around him.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, as Kristensen continues, ‘it is therefore more accurate to say that “it thinks” than “I think”’.<sup>32</sup>

In effect, as John Rajchman remarks in his introduction to Deleuze’s text *Pure Immanence*, ‘we need a new conception of society in which what we have in common is our singularities and not our individualities – where what is common is “impersonal” and what is “impersonal” is common’.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, if mastery and subjugation of others is to be avoided, after all that was endured in the twentieth century and continues to persist in our time, it is

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<sup>29</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 38.

<sup>31</sup> Anders Raastrup Kristensen, ‘Thinking and Normativity in Deleuze’s Philosophy’, in *Revisiting Normativity with Deleuze*, ed. by Rosi Braidotti and Patricia Pisters (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc., 2012), pp. 11–24 (p. 15).

<sup>32</sup> Kristensen, p. 14.

<sup>33</sup> John Rajchman, ‘Introduction’, in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. by Anne Boyman (New York: Urzone, Inc., 2001), pp. 7–23 (p. 14).

essential to heed Deleuze's message on immanence. For him, pure immanence happens when thought is freed from the traditional notion of fixed subjectivity, or definitions of thought as that which must revolve around the relationship between subject and object, which almost always involve a measure of violence. Thus, thought must be used to deterritorialize those concepts that have been seized by history, and construe them afresh. This helps transform the individual's life into *a* life, where this indefinite life does not act to reduce the individual, unlike animal humanism, but rather frees him from the chains and conditions that bind him to history, order, linearity, and structures. Indeed, as Rajchman goes on, 'only in this way can we escape the violence toward others inherent in the formation of our social identities or the problem of our "partialities"'.<sup>34</sup>

And finally, who might be the one to enact this utopia in the now; who will be the true figure of Agamben's contemporary? Deleuze and Guattari offer some insight into which qualities this individual might need to have. Indeed, as they remark, the contemporary is not the one who seeks to violently master others or history, colluding with the age, but rather the one who works to 'master' himself – not through imposed bodily chains such as those mentioned by Levinas, but instead by way of a reinvention of the self through contact with his time: 'one [should paint] the world on oneself, not oneself on the world'.<sup>35</sup> For the contemporary to be able to bring this change about, Deleuze and Guattari propose that the individual should assume full responsibility of creating possibilities of engagement with that which he is intrinsically a part of, and dispose of any shackles which might be constraining him to blinding lights of the age. These possibilities, which force a crack or a leak in the structures that keep the individual prisoner and help carve a space for experimentation, are termed lines of flight. As they explain, these lines 'never consist in running away from the

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<sup>34</sup> Rajchman, 'Introduction', p. 15.

<sup>35</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 200.

world but rather in causing runoffs [...]. There is nothing imaginary, nothing symbolic, about a line of flight. There is nothing more active than a line of flight, among animals or humans'.<sup>36</sup>

Thus, through these lines the contemporary can be close to the present by effectively acting in the now, while at the same time avoiding complicity through the difference enacted by the devising of new spaces, which is reminiscent of Foucault's remarks mentioned in the previous chapter. This aspect of creation is highlighted by Deleuze and Guattari, who however also draw one's attention to the fact that the ability of invention is not an inherent quality in individuals, by stating that 'we must invent our lines of flight, if we are able, and the only way we can invent them is by effectively drawing them, in our lives'.<sup>37</sup> Aren't lines of flight the most difficult of all? Certain groups or people have none and never will', which is why Agamben discloses that our time is scarce of contemporaries.<sup>38</sup> While the next chapter will explore the idea of who the contemporary might be, or what attributes this figure might need to possess, one thing is clear: our time must acknowledge that which is inhuman, as Badiou has said, for it is only by starting from the monstrous that one can truly engage with the times. Indeed, as Paul Patton remarks in his essay 'Future Politics', Deleuze's 'line of flight or absolute deterritorialisation, is positively monstrous', which allows for creation and invention to materialise.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 204.

<sup>37</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 202.

<sup>38</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 202.

<sup>39</sup> Patton, p. 23.

## Chapter 4

### **The poet-contemporary: art and literature in the now**

It appears that all the philosophers that have been engaged with so far at the very least converge on the idea that the contemporary should be constituted by that which pushes forth the creation and invention of the new, rather than being designated as just another period in a temporal sequence of events. Whether it is Badiou discussing and problematising the project of the new man in the twentieth century and how this can be achieved ethically in our time; Rancière with his notion of a redistribution of time and space for the sake of a productive engagement with the present state of things; Foucault's denunciation of discourses that advance perceptions of continuity, coherence, and order, which stifle questioning and preclude the progress of thought; Deleuze's concept of virtuality and how this is conducive to becoming in the now rather than being fixed in time; and Agamben's portrayal of the figure of the contemporary and the implications of committing to the now in the now, the underlying message is one in favour of change and experimentation, for a move from temporality to spatiality. Indeed, rather than confining oneself to linearity and sequentiality, it is essential that the individual transgresses the lines and boundaries imposed by those in power, because allowing for an otherwise fixed view of the world to prevail will suffocate any attempt at agency on the part of the individual. The dominant forces in our societies undoubtedly want to remain in command, which is why the individual needs to be aware and alert of collusion: our time is one which necessitates anachrony, noncoincidence and redistribution in the face of complacency.

But how does one even begin to redraw lines of power that have been in place for long, and how does one go about creating spaces that aid to advance thought, to be able to transform the here and now? And moreover, from where does one find the courage to commit

to the present by denouncing all that which violates the individual's willingness to act against injustice, and is the ability of tearing oneself from his own time to safeguard the age itself an inherent capacity in all individuals? These are all questions that have been at the heart of this dissertation, and they will continue to steer the discussion in the direction of critical thought, for without this our time '[will] not be worth a fig' (*TC*, p. 175), as Badiou claims. Once again, the starting point has to be Deleuze and Guattari's ruminations on philosophy, for they provide insight into the condition of the philosopher and his possible contribution to the moment of the contemporary. As they comment, contrary to what has been accepted in the past, the philosopher's task is not to elucidate the concepts of others, but instead, philosophy should be a way of advancing creation in the now through the fabrication of such concepts. Indeed, the philosopher should not await for concepts to be formed, thereby colluding with the deferral of the now, but instead ought to embrace an active role in this formative process. Through this, philosophy then inaugurates a space for anachrony, where rather than simply drifting with the times, it becomes an exercise in contemporariness. As Patton notes of Deleuze and Guattari,

philosophy, they argue, is a vector of deterritorialisation to the extent that it creates concepts which break with established or self-evident forms of understanding and description. Philosophy does not create just any concepts but untimely concepts that serve the overriding aim of opening up the possibility of transforming existing forms of thought and practice.<sup>1</sup>

In effect, this is precisely what Deleuze and Guattari are trying to do through the concepts they themselves put forward: they do not follow in their predecessors' footsteps, but rather, put their own concepts to work. As Patton rightly states, 'the concepts that they themselves invent, such as becoming, capture, lines of flight and deterritorialisation, are not meant as substitutes for existing concepts of justice, rights, democracy or freedom.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed, albeit it is

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<sup>1</sup> Patton, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Patton, p. 26.

sometimes argued that in our time it is impossible to create the new since everything has already been thought or done before, even in the domain of art, it must be said that it is presenting ideas through a different perspective and reinventing them as philosophical concepts that supports the enhancement of thought. As Deleuze and Guattari emphasise, if the exercise of thought is to be safeguarded the philosopher is *obliged* to form such concepts even in the face of violence, no matter how ‘disturbing or dangerous [they] may be’.<sup>3</sup> Hence, it could be said that the philosopher seems to identify with Agamben’s depiction of the figure of the contemporary, as someone who lives in his time but also has to be evaluative of it no matter how violent a position this might be, creating ways through which he can engage more fully with the age.

However, it is not only philosophy which encourages the regeneration of thought, and it is not just the philosopher who should be ascribed to the position of the contemporary. Indeed, in ‘What is the Contemporary’, the phrase ‘the contemporary’ seems to be used interchangeably with ‘an intelligent man’ (CN, p. 11), a courageous man, and the poet, where however the latter term is preferred, as evidenced by its multiple applications and Agamben’s immediate recourse to Mandelstam. In effect, Agamben’s description of the darkness of the age, which only the contemporary can be aware of and denounce, strongly brings to the forefront the figure of both the artist and writer. Both art and literature, and the artist and the writer, contribute to the negotiation of space and the framing of the now through calling into question the limits and boundaries of that which is considered to be functioning within the norm, as has been quoted of Rancière in the first chapter. As he claims in his text *The Politics of Literature*, writing does away with all that which becomes stifling and repetitive, inaugurating ‘a different community of sense and of the perceptible, a different relationship

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<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 3.

between words and beings, [...] a different common world and a different people'.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, even though this dissertation has to a greater extent been theoretically- and philosophically-engaged, this has been so in order to set the groundwork to discuss what art, and more specifically, literature and its writers and poets, could contribute to the furthering of thought in this day and age. Indeed, as Rajchman commented in a FORART Lecture he gave in 2006, entitled 'Thinking in Contemporary Art', 'there is no art – and in particular, no “contemporary art” - without search for new ideas of art, of what it is and of its particular relations with thinking itself.'<sup>5</sup> Thus, it must be emphasised that it is both philosophy and art that champion the renewal and advancement of thought, both are engaged in the now albeit through different functions: philosophy with the creation of concepts, art with its focus on sensation.

Indeed, as Deleuze and Guattari posit, the promise of art and literature lies within its ability for sensation, whose function is to thrust the individual into spaces that he is not familiar with. As they comment, sensations are constituted of percepts and affects, which they however distinguish from perceptions and affections. In fact, as they explain, 'percepts are no longer perceptions; they are independent of a state of those who experience them. Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, percepts and affects are that which remain after the noise of the age, sustained by the individual's clinging to everyday perceptions, is cancelled. It is for this reason that Deleuze and Guattari assert that one need only 'keep [...] the saturation that gives us the percept', for this is a complete immersion in that which is real.<sup>7</sup> As they elucidate, because art is composed of sensations, percepts, and affects, it has the power to stand on its

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Literature*, trans. by Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> John Rajchman, 'Thinking in Contemporary Art', *forart.no*, FORART (2006), 1–8 (p. 2). Web [accessed 6 March 2017]

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 164.

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 172.

own. Indeed, these components are free from the individual through their ability to exist autonomously, where they are defined as ‘beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived.’<sup>8</sup> Thus, the work of art is also a becoming, where Deleuze and Guattari claim that ‘becoming is an extreme contiguity within a coupling of two sensations without resemblance or, on the contrary, in the distance of a light that captures both of them in a single reflection.’<sup>9</sup> Once again it is seen how art’s power lies within the interplay between proximity and distance, where difference is confronted by adjacency and similarity by anachrony.

Even though it must be said that art and literature are autonomous institutions and their primary function is not of a political or social nature, through them one might begin to understand that which is still about to happen, envisioning alternate ways in which the present could unfold and act in the interest of social justice. As Rajchman continues on the characteristics of art, ‘for what is new is in fact not what is in fashion, but what we can’t yet conceive, can’t yet see, or have the sure means to judge - which is just why it forces us to think’.<sup>10</sup> Once again, art is here linked to vision and perception, and it could be one of the ways through which the individual can sharpen his ability to think clearly, away from the noise and ‘fashion’ of the age. However, Rajchman also makes a case for art as that which disciplines the individual into thinking about that which is not clear-cut, that which does not adhere to categories of either black or white but rather exists within the various shades of grey, where great art often resides. Indeed, this critical ability of evaluation, of balancing interpretations when there is no sure guide to the truth, could also translate into the individual’s daily life against the powers that be. In fact, it is crucial that the individual practices and hones his ability for thought against being carried away by that which the sleep-

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<sup>8</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 164.

<sup>9</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 173.

<sup>10</sup> Rajchman, ‘Thinking in Contemporary Art’, pp. 2–3.



encumbered mass believes, or by illusions of belonging to the right side of history just because one follows in the footsteps of what majorities think in the twenty-first century's so-called democracies.

If one hones in specifically on writing, one realises that the reader is defamiliarised from the normalised constructs of the epoch through prose and poetry, in order to expose them. In his essay 'On the Limits of Violence' Agamben draws a relationship between revolutionary violence as that which brings about change and language, which in turn can only be understood in terms of their relation to death. In his view, 'every culture aspires to overcome death', and the only way to make one's peace with it is through language, which the writer expertly employs to this end.<sup>11</sup> Hence, 'language [becomes], first and foremost, the power we wield against death, the only possible space for reconciliation.'<sup>12</sup> Indeed, this reconciliatory power of language derives from its ability of allowing opposite concepts to exist in a dialectically antithetical relation, rather than cancelling one another out due to difference. As he continues, it is only through culture that one is 'transport[ed] [...] to a region where "nothing" and "something", "life" and "death", "creation" and "negation" reveal themselves as inextricably bound, bringing us to the very limits of language's possibilities'.<sup>13</sup> Thus, for Agamben, it is here that revolutionary violence comes into action, to burst through the boundaries of language.

One art form which reflects the true meaning of contemporariness and wields language's revolutionary potential is definitely poetry. Poetry can be considered as a move away from collusion through its rejection of order and familiarity, and as an artistic activity which primarily operates through distance. Indeed, poetry, through the complexities of its

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<sup>11</sup> Agamben, 'On the Limits of Violence', p. 109.

<sup>12</sup> Agamben, 'On the Limits of Violence', p. 109.

<sup>13</sup> Agamben, 'On the Limits of Violence', p. 109.

composition and specificity of language, is probably the form that is better suited to equipping the individual with tools of judging that which cannot yet be understood, in line with Rajchman's comment, perhaps more so than the novel. As Agamben notes in his text *The End of the Poem*, poetry itself exists as noncoincidence as it is commonplace that the meaning of a verse is not fully complete before the rhyme ends, thereby creating a 'tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere.'<sup>14</sup> Thus, poetry mirrors the position of the contemporary, who lives in tension to multiple times, bringing them into proximity. Moreover, Agamben notes that this noncoincidence is not resolved in the poem's final line, even though sense and sound here overlap. As he states, 'the double intensity animating language does not die away in a final comprehension; instead it collapses into silence', acknowledging the importance of meaning over communication.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, poetry gives one the tools to experience and react to one's time without colluding with the age, through this disharmonious relationship between noncoincidence and coincidence. Poetry is also that which flourishes as composed chaos, a term already mentioned in relation to Joyce, which suspends all received thoughts and practices and advocates the revival of thought. In effect, this composed chaos is not utter confusion, but instead, yields chaos into a defined vision, away from the chatter and opinions of the people. This is why poetry is 'neither foreseen nor preconceived', as Deleuze and Guattari comment, for it does not rest upon the speculations and impressions of the many in order for it to be legitimated.<sup>16</sup> Poetry *is*, independent of conventions and traditions, and hence, it does not corroborate discourses which support fixed structures and sequentiality.

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<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, trans. by Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1999), p 109.

<sup>15</sup> Agamben, *The End of the Poem*, p. 115.

<sup>16</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 204.

The argument in favour of poetry and its arrangement of chaos is propounded by D.H. Lawrence in his essay ‘Chaos in Poetry’, where as he remarks, ‘the poetry of a regulated cosmos is nothing but a wire bird-cage. Because in all living poetry the living chaos stirs, sun-suffused and sun-impulsive, and most subtly chaotic. All true poetry is [...] outlawed’.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Lawrence draws attention to the fact that it is a world that is obsessed with control and restraint that abounds in violence, often edging closer to a prison rather than a world in which the individual is urged to think for himself. It is due to this that poetry, or rather, *true* poetry, will always be considered as an enemy by those who exert mastery, for it leads one to question the constant insistence placed on uniformity, procedures, and categorisations in a world that is naturally defined by chaos. Lawrence goes so far as to claim that poetry is also that which must remain an outsider, but not just – its existence is undoubtedly relegated to the peripheries of the law. It is forbidden because what it asks of the individual is something without precedent, where it is easier to condemn it as madness rather than to acknowledge and consent to the truths it evokes. Admittedly, Lawrence knows a thing or two about prohibition and censorship – not only were entire passages from his war poems deleted but also, most notably, his novel *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* suffered a ban up until 1960 as it was deemed too obscene for and corruptible of its audience. Due to its strong language and sexually explicit scenes, the Crown deemed it necessary to open a case against Penguin Books, with the intent of portraying Lawrence as a filthy sex-obsessed writer who was out to contaminate the reader. Indeed, these are the trials that the contemporary must bear; of living within a time period that is stifling and denigrating of one’s progressive vision. In Lawrence’s case, this was prudish Britain of the sixties, where the courts felt it was in their

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<sup>17</sup> D.H. Lawrence, ‘Chaos in Poetry’, *theorytuesdays.com*, Session 161 (12 July 2016), 234–42 (p. 240). Web [accessed 2 April 2017]

prerogative to oversee the pitfalls of public morality and steer the people towards proper and moral behaviour, thereby eradicating any attempts at dissent.

Indeed, Lawrence's example demonstrates that even though the case was finally ruled in favour of the publishing company, there were still episodes of burnt copies and outcries from conservative society. Why would individuals seem to resist change at all costs, when the move is one towards a more liberal society? As Deleuze and Guattari point out, ideas are both spontaneous and volatile, emboldening the individual to cling to their opinions and illusions as opposed to being forgotten, even if the result is their own oppression. In fact, as Lawrence claims, man prefers to '[parade] around, [live] and [die] under his umbrella', for the human race has always enjoyed placing itself at the centre of the cosmos, fearing its own inconspicuousness within the universe and its mortality, giving in to fables of continuity and legacy. As they make clear, however, there *should* be a minimum of order to at least guide one's thoughts, although this should not in any way hinder one's ability for creation, but rather enhance it. What poetry does is to renounce any attempts at unity, embracing fragmentation of form and diversity of thought so as to reject 'the curse of the human consciousness', this being the 'homogeneity and exaltation and forcedness and all-of-a-pieceness', of pressuring all into being the same, a monolith, as Lawrence claims.<sup>18</sup> To illustrate the detachment of the people from the reality which surrounds them and their refutation of poetry, Lawrence uses the metaphor of an umbrella, which the individual uses as a convenient tool that provides refuge when the winds of change are blowing. A stark comparison can be made between the umbrella and poetry: whereas the former presents the individual solely with the option of a hiding place from all that which causes fear and discomfort in its unknowability, poetry initiates a space for language and thought, for 'the poem, [...] is itself the place *where* it comes to pass, or the pass of thought', as Badiou

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<sup>18</sup> Lawrence, p. 240.

asserts.<sup>19</sup> Poetry is imperative for the contemporary moment as it makes one look at all that which has grown to be ordinary and commonplace not just through a fresh perspective, but also within new coordinates of time and space. If one is able to welcome the message of poetry, with all its efforts at examination and exploration of that which one thought one already knew, then the individual might just be able to defy the illusions perpetuated by the epoch. As Lawrence states, ‘the essential quality of poetry is that it makes a new effort of attention, and “discovers” a new world within the known world’.<sup>20</sup>

Even though the merits of poetry have been discussed, it is still necessary to ask why the contemporary is exemplified by the poet in Agamben’s text. In his work *The Age of the Poets*, Badiou draws a relationship between poets and communism in its original meaning, which is defined as ‘the concern for what is common to all’.<sup>21</sup> To him, poets are essentially communists because ‘their domain is language, most often their native tongue’, which is a tool common to all individuals.<sup>22</sup> Since it is paradoxically only the poets who are able to name that which others think to be unnameable through poetry, thus working with creations ‘internal to language’, it is their responsibility to share them with all, ‘without exception’.<sup>23</sup> Is it not this that the contemporary does, in being equipped to name the constructs of the age? This unnameable is also reiterated in Badiou’s *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, where he states that poetry’s power is that it is always structured on a mystery, where this enigma is ‘that every poetic truth leaves at its own centre what it does not have the power to bring into presence’. Once again, this is in line with Agamben’s aforementioned comments on the silence of the poem.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Alain Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Lawrence, p. 234.

<sup>21</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Age of the Poets*, trans. by Bruno Bosteels (London and New York, Verso, 2014), p. 93.

<sup>22</sup> Badiou, *The Age of the Poets*, p. 94.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou, *The Age of the Poets*, p. 94.

<sup>24</sup> Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, p. 23.

Furthermore, it is the poet-contemporary who ‘makes a slit in the umbrella; and lo! The glimpse of chaos is a vision, a window to the sun’, as Lawrence remarks.<sup>25</sup> The poet is empowered through a courage that not all can wield, a bravery that empowers his disposition of protesting the delusions of the age and marching against them. He is not afraid of edging closer to the sun, the latter being a motif that Lawrence employs throughout his essay, for the contemporary is one who has already shed his biases and inclinations. Indeed, the sun ‘bursts all the bubbles and umbrellas of reality, and gives us a breath of the live chaos’, which not all will welcome, but which the contemporary has conceded to.<sup>26</sup> Contrary to the latter, rather than being energised by ‘the pang of extinction that is also liberation into the roving, uncaring chaos’, the people will resist this sacrifice by all means necessary.<sup>27</sup> In effect, this is why true poetry is only able to reach the minority, for it can only approach those who are impartial, who are willing to be instructed and open to the new.

Indeed, ours is an age which has dispensed with truth and facts, where the twenty-first century is seeing the rise of buzzwords such as ‘post-truth’ and ‘alternative facts’, and of equating resistance and critique with depreciation, and hence, now more than ever it is time to reiterate the case for the contemporary. If the epoch is to contest the fixity and stasis which have taken control of it, lines of flight must be created by the individual, for when ‘bequeathed to his descendants, the umbrella becomes a dome, a vault’, subduing the voices that vie for change.<sup>28</sup> However, if enough cracks start to surface on the umbrella, perhaps ‘men at last begin to feel that something is wrong’, emboldening the potential for innovation and a pivot in thought, in Lawrence’s words.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the umbrella will not stand forever, at least sustaining a sliver of hope for the contemporary. As Lawrence states, the individual

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<sup>25</sup> Lawrence, pp. 234–35.

<sup>26</sup> Lawrence, p. 238.

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence, p. 238.

<sup>28</sup> Lawrence, p. 234.

<sup>29</sup> Lawrence, p. 234.

will only be able to find shelter behind the umbrella of illusions ‘until some terrific wind blows the [it] to ribbons, and much of mankind to oblivion.’<sup>30</sup> In effect, this umbrella, crafted out of misconception and appearance and coloured by myth, will not be able to withstand the forces of chaos. As Lawrence continues, the individual will eventually have to face the demands of reality, ‘for chaos is always there, and always will be, no matter how we put up umbrellas of visions’.<sup>31</sup>

Nonetheless, it must be emphasised that regardless of how many slits the contemporary is able to slash into the umbrella, the struggle in favour of reform is an endless one. While the individual might manage to give breath to the chaos for a short time, ‘after a while, getting used to the vision, [...] commonplace man daubs a simulacrum of the window that opens on to chaos, and patches the umbrella with the painted patch of the simulacrum.’<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the task of the contemporary is an ongoing one, for man will inevitably latch onto anything that lulls him into a false sense of security, fooling himself into believing all that which supports his opinions. It is for this reason that the position of the contemporary, be it the philosopher, the writer, or the artist, will always be one fraught with anguish and suffering. The contemporary ‘is a seer, a becomer’, moving in opposition to the fashions of the age, where he will definitely become a target to those who conclude that it is the contemporary who jeopardises their beliefs and existence rather than the power they relinquish to the dominant forces.<sup>33</sup> As Gregory Flaxman comments in his essay ‘The Future of Utopia’, ‘the intellectual who sees beyond, who experiences visions of other times and places, becomes the representative of a reality that inevitably indicts our own.’<sup>34</sup> Hence, rather than attuning oneself to the alternatives the contemporary is able to envision, in the

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<sup>30</sup> Lawrence, p. 236.

<sup>31</sup> Lawrence, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup> Lawrence, p. 235.

<sup>33</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 171.

<sup>34</sup> Gregory Flaxman, ‘The Future of Utopia’, *symplokē*, 14 (2006), 197–215 (p. 209).

hope of a better engagement with the now and in turn, an improved future, the people condemn him for decrying the deficiencies of a present they have grown to be comfortable in, that which they senselessly call *their* present. Indeed, Lawrence amplifies this condition by positing that in the people's eyes, the poet as contemporary is the 'enemy of convention', for they believe that it is him who unleashes the chaos, rather than acknowledging that chaos is intrinsically part of the cosmos. The poet merely brings into focus that which has been buried and has eluded the age; nonetheless, in their view, it is he who strips them of the serenity that they are afforded through closing their minds to changes in thought. Pain is inherent in facing the illusions that structure the individual's life, and hence it is easier for one to ignore any threats that imperil the security their bubble grants.

It is for this reason that Badiou's assertions on the nature of poetry in a climate of global complacency with and resignation to the age are timely. As he states, 'poetry, alas, is receding from us. The cultural account is oblivious to poetry. This is because poetry can hardly stand the demand for clarity, the passive audience, the simple message.'<sup>35</sup> Indeed, our time is one where complexity, opposition, and commitment are reviled in favour of uniformity, consensus, and mindlessness. The masses do not want to think or engage; rather, it is much easier to let politicians and dominant forces decide for them. Hence, our times are incapable of appreciating the elaborateness of poetry, and more so, they are unworthy of it. In effect, if one is not willing to be receptive of poetry, in no way will the latter consider to please its audience, for 'the poem is an exercise in intransigence. [...] The poem remains rebellious – defeated in advance – to the democracy of audience ratings and polls', as Badiou goes on.<sup>36</sup> Thus, it must be emphasised that the poem is not democratic – if one understands democracy as a system that panders to the majority and functions on the premise that all are

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<sup>35</sup> Badiou, *The Age of the Poets*, p. 23.

<sup>36</sup> Badiou, *The Age of the Poets*, p. 23.



equal – nor aspires to be. It does not compromise its values to accommodate the people, but instead, enjoys complete autonomy from the obsession of the age, which could be described as the trivialisation of words in an epoch where quantity precedes quality, where meanings are diluted to enthrall the many. Here one need only think of President Trump’s lexicon, which is largely made up of one syllable words such as ‘bad’ and ‘sad’, dangerously simplifying intricate issues into something more palatable for the populace. However, while the disease of our time could be designated as everyone wanting to talk about their opinions rather than hard facts, Badiou reminds us that ‘the poem has nothing to communicate. It is only a saying, a declaration, which draws its authority only from itself.’<sup>37</sup> True poetry does not seek to be considerate towards the reader’s convictions; doing so would be a betrayal of critical thought.

However, poetry can only be impartial if the poet’s writing process is one which stems from violence. In a piece on Antonin Artaud, Maurice Blanchot elucidates the relation between poet, violence, and writing, substantiating Agamben’s remarks on the painful condition of the contemporary. As he comments, writing abounds in ‘the shock of what is without limit or form, “the initial viciousness” of that which [...] never leaves us untouched’, demonstrating that violence is necessary if one is to expunge complacency. He continues by conjuring a graphic image of how this violence works; it is ‘a dismembering violence [...] an absolute morcellation by bursts, tearings, organic and anorgic explosions [...] that is released in the fury – the flesh heap – of writing. Whence this sentence devoid of morality: “all writing is a spilling of guts.”’<sup>38</sup> Indeed, it is not a question of ethics but one of sacrifice, for there is no refuge from the age for the contemporary. Deleuze and Guattari also comment on the contemporary’s relation to violence, and similar to Blanchot they illustrate the effects that

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<sup>37</sup> Badiou, *The Age of the Poets*, p. 23.

<sup>38</sup> Maurice Blanchot, ‘Cruel Poetic Reason’, in *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), pp. 293–97 (p. 296).

this has on him in physical terms. As they contend, ‘through having seen Life in the living or the Living in the lived, the novelist or painter returns breathless and with bloodshot eyes.’<sup>39</sup> Indeed, this stand is not one that can be taken casually, for it requires one to recognise that the ways and conventions of the age and of the majority are not necessarily those which are just and right. For this reason, as has been discussed, the contemporary is compelled to actively forgo all that surrounds him and renounce the particularities of the epoch for the sake of making it better, which exerts a tremendous toll on the individual. Moreover, as they show, art ‘is always a question of freeing life where ever it is imprisoned, or of tempting it into an uncertain combat.’<sup>40</sup> Indeed, this is reminiscent of Lawrence’s idea of a composed chaos, through which one might be liberated from the vault or dome. Furthermore, through the use of the word ‘combat’, they illustrate how art is constantly engaged with violence, for it is in conflict with the perceptions of the people.

The condition of true contemporaries is aptly summed up by Deleuze and Guattari, who state that

what little health they possess is often too fragile, not because of their illnesses or neuroses but because they have seen something in life that is too much for anyone, too much for themselves, and that has put on them the quiet mark of death.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, because the contemporary chooses to be distant from the epoch in the interest of engagement, because he renounces the fashions of the age for the sake of attuning to the realities of his time, he gleans a glimpse of tangible death within life. It might be unbearable, as a life in minority – a life of constant anachrony and opposition – will always be. One might do well to remember Lawrence’s sun image here: while the contemporary is not afraid to approach it or to allow it to explode the bubbles that surround him, the fact that the burn

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<sup>39</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 172.

<sup>40</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 171.

<sup>41</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 172.

marks will always be visible on his skin cannot be disregarded. However, a life without violence to counter the times is impossible. As Deleuze and Guattari observe, the anguish that sickens the contemporary ‘is also the source or breath that supports [him] through the illnesses of the lived’; indeed, were the contemporary not inflicted by the pain brought about by anachrony, he would be subject to a much larger and more dangerous violence.<sup>42</sup> In fact, this real violence is perpetuated by those blind sheep who are too fearful of being separated from the herd, which ultimately proves fatal. As has been observed through Lawrence’s understanding of the chaos, ‘life alone creates such zones where living beings whirl around, and only art can reach and penetrate them in its enterprise of co-creation’.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, art is a co-creator through its competence of composing the chaos, where it gives the individual enough order to hold onto while pushing him to reject the umbrellas of opinion. Thus, finally it must be said that even though Agamben might write about violence and the contemporary in poetic terms, which strikes some as unethical, he never attempts to conceal the painful relationship between them. Our times are in dire need of the violence of art and its contemporaries.

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<sup>42</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, pp. 172–73.

<sup>43</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 173.

## Conclusion

This dissertation's main concern has always been the commitment to the present or lack thereof, and of how the now can be positively impacted in the immediate moment so as to not elude one's grasp. This issue was first introduced through a discussion on the eschewal of futuristic notions of time that draw attention away from the contemporary, which then also progressed to a debate on the advantages that an evolution from temporality to spatiality affords us. Indeed, it is only a collapse of the term 'time', which suggests that the individual can solely function *within* it that will allow for the potential of the now to be seized. While linearity and sequences of time structure people's existences and legitimate their place within historical periods, they have also been the tools used to master the subject and subjugate him to the century's insatiable demands. Indeed, history conditions humanity's capacity for experimentation, ensuring that the truism of history repeating itself materialises in full force. Hence, the individual needs to reconcile himself with the idea that current temporalities should be suspended in acknowledgement that it is anachrony that will truly forge the way for both a better now and future. In effect, what needs to be resisted is not change but the coincidence with the inclinations of the age such as coherence and stability. Thus, the work being presented is a call for action, especially in light of the disturbances of our time both on the political and the social spectrum, and in consideration of the uneasiness and distress they have unleashed. Hence, it would be a mistake to view this dissertation as simply one of a theoretical nature, since it rather appeals for this research to be placed into practice.

While it has been acknowledged that there are a few causes of ethical concern in relation to the individual's decision of forgoing the cacophonies of his time and deflecting coincidence with the age through violence, such as those advanced by Badiou, it must be underscored that if lost to the illusions of the epoch, the individual will have been submitted

to a far greater violence, buckling under the brutalities imposed by time. Indeed, the biggest violence which can be done is to simply stand by while the now is lost to complacency and a future always to come. Hence, to counter these orientations, one of the main arguments that has been put forward is that of a forsaking of being replaced by a move towards becoming, which permits the individual to cast off the chains which keep him bound to fixed interpretations of himself and the world around him. In a Deleuzian framework, becoming is the individual's ultimate goal, and indeed, it is a process which has no foreseeable end. Becoming initiates the individual's journey into distancing himself from the received practices of the times, allowing him to become a stranger to his own being and experiencing all that which he is not. The beauty of becoming is that the individual will no longer be mastered or master the people; rather, what he will be master of is his potential for revolution.

Moreover, becoming also forces one to recognise that it is a shift away from transcendence – understood as something which must be perpetually pursued exterior to the individual – that is needed, and a realisation that it is rather immanence that the individual should seek. Indeed, he should not chase or perpetually wait for a transcendental experience to redeem him, but rather, exteriority needs to be found within. This stance is corroborated by Daniel W. Smith in his essay 'Deleuze and Derrida, Immanence and Transcendence', where he comments that it is 'a transcendence *within* immanence' that the individual should be focused in achieving.<sup>1</sup> Hence, throughout parts of this dissertation, a point that was briefly looked at was why a long philosophical tradition in support of transcendence should be reversed in favour of immanence. It was also questioned how this connects to the individual's project of combatting the myths of his time. This dissertation's conclusions on this issue are that as transcendence focuses on that which is outside of the individual, it constantly forces

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel W. Smith, 'Deleuze and Derrida, Immanence and Transcendence: Two Directions in Recent French Thought', in *Between Deleuze and Derrida*, ed. by Paul Patton and John Protevi (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), pp. 46–66 (p. 52).

him to think of his obligation, rather than of the power he withholds for good, which can only transpire through innovation. Indeed, if ethics is to be cleared of the recent tendencies in theory and philosophy that connect it to the perpetual to come, there needs to occur a shift from that which *must* be done in order to secure the future, to what *can* be done in the present to commit to one's time. As Smith rightly frames this, 'the fundamental question of ethics is not "What *must* I do?" (the question of *morality*) but rather "What *can* I do?" Given my degree of power, what are my capabilities and capacities?'<sup>2</sup> If ethics is intent on working towards transcendence, beginning from an exterior starting point to achieve that which one might call the sublime, then it could be said that it colludes with the futurophiliac orientations of the age in deferring the now for something thought to be more supreme and majestic than the immediate present. Ethics should not be an act of preservation, where the times are stripped of their innovatory power in pursuance of that which is constantly fleeting; rather, it should be an exercise in transgression of boundaries and limits, where the individual is urged to think about how he could contribute to his age. Indeed, as Smith continues, the matter one should focus on is 'how can I go to the limit of what I "can do"?' , where 'the political question follows from this, since those in power have an obvious interest in separating us from our capacity to act.'<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis being placed on an ethics which forecloses change in the present, where the individual is left powerless in the face of 'I must' instead of being offered the possibility of 'I can', is also reflected in the realm of art. Indeed, its potential of bringing about tangible change in the now is being hindered by consistent cries for democracy, where diversity is being ironically hunted down in the name of equality. As Rancière posits, this is 'part of an attitude to art that is stamped by the categories of consensus: restore lost meaning to a

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<sup>2</sup> Smith, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, p. 62.

common world or repair the cracks in the social bond'.<sup>4</sup> These efforts at consensus can be seen as a misappropriation of that which Badiou states on poets and communism as referenced in the fourth chapter, where he believes that poets express the people's concerns through a tool which is available to all, this being language. Rather, our times manipulate the meaning of commonality to forward the improper imposition on art to be placed at the service of politics. As Badiou comments, 'our times are worth more than the label on which they pride themselves: "democracy"'; indeed, resistance should be enforced against democratically-elected autocracies and the dictatorial tendencies they unleash, which are slowly trying to take over the domains of both art and philosophy.<sup>5</sup> This matter cannot be stressed enough: these two champions of thought should not be expected to be democratic, for they are independent institutions. Our time is one which manipulates the equality imparted by democracy into the need for absolute uniformity, expecting these two bodies to function within the same lines. However, art and philosophy both refute catering to the majority, preferring to remain self-sufficient in their quest for creation. Our time will never be one for complete engagement if the people's priority is to align themselves with the majority, disregarding the fact that it is in the interests of the powers that be to indulge the majority, alienating them from what they are capable of accomplishing and pitting them against minorities. As Deleuze and Guattari accurately remark,

Art and philosophy converge at this point: the constitution of an earth and a people that are lacking as the correlate of creation. It is not populist writers but the most aristocratic who lay claim to this future. This people and earth will not be found in our democracies. Democracies are majorities, but a becoming is by its nature that which always eludes the majority.<sup>6</sup>

It was also delineated how poetry is a powerful ally to life through its ability to instruct the individual in noncoincidence with the age; however, it has also been pointed out

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<sup>4</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, p. 122.

<sup>5</sup> Badiou, *Handbook of Inaesthetics*, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, p. 108.

that this will only come about if one is inclined to engage with it rather than as an exertion on the part of poetry. Indeed, it has been observed how through poetry one can create the new from the energies of chaos, trying to seek a path for innovation and reinventing the perceptions of the age through difference. However, it seems that poetry's potential for change is nevertheless doubted by some. Ben Lerner, in his controversial text *The Hatred of Poetry*, recognises that poetry contributes to the contemporary through its effort at creation; however, he claims that it falls short of generating this vision in tangible poems. As he comments, "poetry" is supposed to signify an alternative to the kind of value that circulates in the economy as we live it daily, but actual poems can't realise the alternative.<sup>7</sup> What Lerner appears to be saying is that ultimately even great poetry falls short of the Idea, possibly squashing the chance for radical change. If Lerner is right, does this mean that our times are not yet equipped for a poetry that is a co-creator to life? And would this imply that the poet-contemporary is still to come, as someone who single-handedly stands up to the age? While the views endorsed by this dissertation suggest otherwise, it would be a substantial line of enquiry to follow if the presence of poetry in our time is to be understood more fully. It must be underscored that the research being presented is by no means exhaustive; indeed, further exploration of this subject is needed to put the commitment to the now into practice more effectively.

Due to constraints of space, which led to the worry that texts might only be mentioned and commented on superficially, this dissertation did not delve into specific poets and their poetry (with the exception of Mandelstam and his work 'The Century'). Rather, a strong focus was placed on theory and philosophy, to set the foundations for an urgent debate on the collusion of our time and the vitality of art and literature in countering the orientations of the epoch which attempt to stifle it. Indeed, this dissertation would not have done justice to the

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<sup>7</sup> Ben Lerner, *The Hatred of Poetry* (Melbourne, Australia: Text Publishing, 2016), p. 52.



poems mentioned if there were not a prior engagement with theory and philosophy; however, any attempts at future research should definitely concentrate on the poetry in depth. Hence, a few suggestions in consideration of this next step will be here outlined. Claudia Rankine's powerful collection *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) is a body of work which dismantles the boundaries of the lyric in order to call out the violence and mastery exerted by racism and white privilege. Despite his contentious text, Lerner hits the nail on the head when he comments that a lyric which 'can authentically encompass everyone is an impossibility in a world characterised by difference and violence', as is attempted in Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>8</sup> Thus, Rankine's work is timely in its aversion to uniformity and fixity. In addition, Anne Carson's work *Float* (2016) is also one which denounces order and stability through its truly inventive format. Indeed, Carson subverts the traditional reading experience by having her poems individually packaged in a transparent box, rather than edited as a complete book. This allows for the chapbooks to be read in whichever sequence one pleases, and hence, her work follows no singular direction. And perhaps, one could also say that floating is what the contemporary does in trying to bring anachronous times together.

As the final part to this dissertation is being written, ex-FBI Director James Comey is preparing to testify against President Trump, where most hope that this will lead to the latter's impeachment, whereas on the other side of the globe, the UK has gone to the polls three years early in a bid to keep Theresa May and the Conservatives out of office. Locally, the political scenario has also been bleak. To say the least, the Maltese election results were definitely a surprise to all, even for those on the 'winning' side. Possible corruption in the highest ranks of government was rewarded by an absolute majority of votes, authorising those in power to do as they please. It seems like the domino effect put into motion in June 2016 with Brexit and subsequently with the election of Trump in November 2016 (not

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<sup>8</sup> Lerner, p. 62.

discounting the fact that momentum for such events had been growing from years before), has not been quelled. Critics of political parties such as journalists and reputable broadcasting entities have also been labelled as ‘fake news’, a term that is being applied to anyone who dares critique those in power. In America, polls have shown that 72% of Republicans are suspicious of the news media, preferring to believe statements issued by their President. Moreover, some have also been physically attacked due to asking the hard questions, such as Guardian reporter Ben Jacobs, who was bodyslammed to the ground by Republican candidate Greg Gianforte (who has now been charged with misdemeanour assault) after inquiring over the failing healthcare plan. Worse still, journalists, photographers, comedians, cartoonists and poets are all being persecuted by Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in a witch hunt to crush any dissident voices. Indeed, a huge number of journalists are awaiting their fates in prison, with an estimated third ‘of all the journalists in prison around the world [...] [being] jailed in Turkey’, as TIME reports.<sup>9</sup> Shifting the lens to the local sphere, a Eurobarometer survey has shown that 52% of the Maltese population trust the government over the media, corroborating other international accounts of antipathy towards the media.

A recent trend in political discourse sees the denunciation of negativity (or rather, that which people do not want to hear) in favour of harmony and solidarity, when those in power are the ones who sow the seeds of doubt themselves. Politicians superficially call for unity after elections, camouflaging the fact that what they are really demanding is uniformity. The times are hostile to dissensus, inimical to all those who bother to step outside of the peripheries they have always been indoctrinated to stick to. And yet, this century is still a newborn; this year still far from being over. It has become both progressively surreal and hard to think and write while each and every minute have been turned into breaking news;

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<sup>9</sup> Terry Anderson, ‘Cartoonists and Journalists Jailed in Turkey Need Our Help’, *time.com*, TIME (2 May 2017), Web [accessed 6 June 2017]

however, one must not succumb to the temptation to accept these happenings as normality, a path which proves to be easier. The times make one doubtful, paranoid even; they subject the individual both to mental and physical agony, forcing them to follow and adhere to the age when their visions are ridiculed and their hopes robbed by fellow humans. However, no matter how dismal and chaotic the times might seem, if one heeds Lawrence's comment that life begins in chaos, there is ample potential for the contemporary to carve his way through the illusions of the age. Indeed, as Agamben knows, the contemporary's condition will never cease to begin and end in violence, not in some perverse fascination with self-sacrifice, but because he is always in movement, never bowing to the rules of history or yielding to the demands of fixity. Let us not forget Mandelstam's fate, who was arrested, sent into exile, and a few years later deported to Siberia in retaliation to writing in opposition to Stalin's government. Mandelstam could have chosen to forgo the path of the poet and save his own skin; however, he realised that Russia needed someone to defy the times. A nomad from the start, the contemporary's relationship with his temporal home will always be plagued by the tensions between proximity and distance. Hence, what this century needs are artists, writers, poets, and philosophers who create alternative narratives and routes for the people to remain alert to their now. Will none be courageous enough to rise against the times?

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