

Janna Graham:
**Love in a Time of Hedging ... Or How
to Break out of an Alien World**

In Jacques Rivette's *Céline et Julie vont en bateau*, two amateur magicians, one a librarian by day, the other a variety magic performer by night, happen upon a parallel universe in a large abandoned house somewhere, it seems, outside of Paris. Upon visiting the house, one at a time, the women experience something. Upon leaving, exhausted and disoriented, they are not sure what that something was. Each time they are, however, left with a small legacy of their experience: a candy that, when sucked, allows them to view their experience in the house.

Each time Julie and Céline 'enter' their memories of the story, by way of their rather loud sucking of candies, they begin at a different point. They soon realise that the story repeats itself. Dissatisfied with the inevitability of its ending (the murder of the young girl), but also with the temporary roles they are scripted to play – either the silent maid or relentlessly sucking viewer (whose candy is always in jeopardy of running out) – they decide to intervene.

I begin with Julie and Céline's desire for intervention as it bears some resemblance to my own in relation to the spaces of Art.

'Culture' as 'Kelly Girl'

Beyond the spaces of Art, this experience of temporal distinction, the production of 'alien-worlds' of trapped narratives can be read in the modes of capitalist subjectivation in the last three decades.

It is by now an oft-quoted fact that in these decades a measured dismantling was staged of the potency of relations between the poetic and the political, i.e. the dispersal of the 'Artistic critique' into many aspects of life: the production of life as a work of art (or rather the art of work),

the privileging of virtuosic and communicative creativity among middle class, first-world workers, the proliferation of ‘creative’ management solutions for an economy made flexible, customised creative lifestyle options in the proliferation of consumer culture and the employment of ‘creative’ workers toward such aims as gentrification and the easing of social tensions. This proliferation of Art and its capacity to re-organise the sensible, it is said, often operates in separation from or even opposition to the elaboration of a *social critique*: a critique of conditions, of inequality in the relationship between the ‘flexible’ lives in the first world and the erratic and unstable lives of those who labour in its name, hiding the contradictions deeply embedded in the use of the terms ‘creative’ or ‘artistic’ for even those metropolitan workers who experience it in coincidence with the move towards homogenisations of space, policing of borders and the confining demands of constant innovation.¹

Here the promise of ‘Art’ in the resistances of the 1960s and 70s is curtailed by the inflexibility of social hierarchies, regimes of property ownership and the drive towards profit. Where space and time appear to become flexible and open up, under the mantra ‘anything is possible’, the tyranny of the creative as ‘new’ (whether found in new products, new management strategies, new mission statements, or new government funding mandates) obstructs avenues through which these movements might find their legacies in the present, just as it blocks a continuity with an imaginable future.

The aesthetic regime habitually operates in the kind of dual motion described by Jacques Rancière of the avant-garde: dissipating ‘art’ into the temporalities of everyday life, while, at the very last minute, erecting a boundary,

pulling back, re-naming this moment as ‘Art’ and in contemporary experience indeed profiting from its separation from ‘real life’.

The figure of the artist-as-temp-worker while presenting the promise of a freer lifestyle, less constrained by the daily regimes of the factory, the ability to enact the ‘new’ in all areas of life, also represents the proliferation of a kind of social anaesthesia, what Bourdieu described in his writing on ‘disinterest’, that has been distributed across social relations.

In this, cultural spaces join a multitude of processes that render life, critique, and experience ‘disinterested’ or ‘unreal’, as aficionados for the temporality of the ‘temp’. Whether it be the temporary worker with multiple options for expression (and little pay), the temporary event, such as the biennial or the art fair or the production of temporary encounters between people thinking about ‘Politics’ and ‘Art’, the ‘temp’ conditions a series of barriers between past, present and future.

For example, orientations to the future such as ‘the project’ or ‘the programme’, prime modes of delivery of cultural experience, divide time into thematic units, into accumulations of events, and modes of thought through which the future is already written.

This orientation to the future coincides with contemporary affective temporalities like crisis, insecurity, panic, depression, uncertainty, fear, and rush, profoundly affecting our ability to imagine possible futures. We become advocates of a ‘hedged’ temporality, whether we are students who must become indebted in order to obtain a professional designation only to find this designation always morphing into another under the illusion of ‘multiple options’, interns who become conditioned through a series of ‘indebted’ occupations, migrant workers in the UK hinged to an em-

ployer who will determine the quality and duration of their stay, sub-sub-contractors whose protean employers work with the migration police to re-structure labour according to economic ebbs and flows, residents of a squat or social housing block who must live in the slipping temporalities of a pending eviction notice.

The ‘temp’, in this time, cannot imagine their future because it is already spoken for.

Thematic proliferation at the pace that cultural production currently requires curtails the emergence of thought that is born of encounters with otherness, whether between those who are separated by current striations of the social, or the otherness derived from rubbing against a future that is unknown. In spite of many opportunities to attend conferences, hear presentations, and write on the topic of “Art and...”, it becomes difficult to consider *the possible* of the present.

Akin to the temporality of imprisonment described by John Berger, the time of the ‘temp’ is then one in which past and future are locked together in experiences of the present, in which ‘events occur, things happen’, but they do not enter ‘life’s time’.²

And themes, without the ability to rupture ‘life’s time’, become what Cildo Meireles once described as ‘sterile flights of fancy’³, rather than potent encounters, in which pasts and futures are liberated in the experience of producing a liberated now.

Beyond the mere instrumentalisation of culture, cultural activity here might be thought of as a kind of ‘Kelly Girl’ (the name given to temporary workers in the U.S. labour force in the 1950s who worked for Kelly Office Services – now a multinational corporation with 750,000 employees worldwide and a revenue of 5 billion dollars). That is,

even more than a pusher of ever-corporate artistic products, ‘culture’ enacts the production of a set of ‘disinterested’, sensible procedures in time, mirrored across many areas of life’s production – be they work, the spaces of art or even, from time to time, the spaces of political organising.

From Theme-Time to Thematic Universe

The importance of understanding the critical need to exceed the trappings of the ‘temp’ and the ‘theme’ building links between the time of the cultural encounter and ‘life’s time’ was poignantly highlighted by the research of Eyal Weizman. His investigation of the use of Deleuzo-Guattarian concepts by the Israeli army, suggests that the conditions in which we think together must exceed those of the production of mere content. Rather than dwell in the pages of the cynic, for whom such investigations only confirm that radical thought has always already been co-opted and for whom the answer to the question ‘what do we do with such information?’ is always a kind of silent shrug. Such an investigation affirms the necessity of drawing powerful lines between the space-times in which we think the thoughts of art and politics together and the spaces and times in which we wish to live.⁴

Recent calls for ‘new languages’ or ‘new grammars’ with which to think ‘Art’ and/or ‘Politics’ together in the spaces of Art do not necessarily produce these lines, unless undertaken through a dramatic revision of the modes of collective thinking production.

What seems necessary here is a move from the production of the theme in the time of the temp (as isolated Subjects), experienced in temporal units of spectacle or

display, that is themes as *thema* (from the Latin, “a subject, thesis” or the Greek “a proposition, subject, deposit”) toward theme as *concept*.

As opposed to the theme in the time of the temp, the temporality of the concept as elaborated by Deleuze and Guattari is always ‘connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges’.

When a proposition is defined by its reference, ‘its relation to a state of affairs’ that ‘...force intensive [non representational or extensive] coordinates into spatiotemporal and energetic coordinates’, concepts exceed current temporal coordinates. They are not the linking of ‘independent variables’ but of *variations* across time, created ‘according to the concept’s neighbourhood’.

A concept then ‘extends into infinity’ and is never ‘created from nothing’.

The movement of the concept is to some extent dialectical. It is infinite, able to enact com-possible co-ordinates of space and time, ‘through its speed’ and its opening up onto others, and finite ‘through its contours’, the means through which it finds its shape.⁵

Methodologically we might find such a conceptual movement in the notion of the ‘thematic universe’, the complex interactions of ‘generative themes’ elaborated by Paulo Freire. In Freire the tensions between the finite and infinite concepts are understood by way of practices of ‘codification’, in which they contract, are given shape in time and decodification in which they are elaborated more fully, rub up against others, extend over time.

Investigative teams, including those from within and outside of a situation (for example, a militant and an artist,

or an artist and a community member) engage in ongoing articulations of problems and the developing of their solutions.

Thematic universes or *concepts* may employ the formal and aesthetic strategies of the artist, even the times and spaces in which ‘art’ is produced as ‘temp’, but only as moments of codification in ongoing temporal cycles of reflection, analysis and action.

Such processes are currently enacted at the edges of art spaces, for example in the work of the hosts of this discussion, the Radical Education Collective in Ljubljana.

They have also been critical of the work of the sound collective Ultra-red, of which I am part. Our project *Dub Curriculum*, for instance, started off from a thematic investigation undertaken by us and a group that includes migrants, social and cultural workers in the rural southwest of England, where new migration controls re-vitalise the historical rhetoric of racism and bureaucratic languages mask anti-racisms past.

Here encounters, while formally articulated through a set of ‘procedures’ (the aesthetic consistency of circular seating, the use of a microphone, scrawls on pieces of white flip chart paper, a scripted protocol that invited people to ‘play a sound of racism from their lives’) were conducted in spaces of art as well as social spaces (an Italian restaurant, a rural bar/meeting centre). Across these sites, the subjectivation of the group coincided with the production of themes: moments of thinking together, and relations over extended periods of time, in which attenuations and frictions could occur.

Far from being abstract, these encounters (which extended from a gallery space in the city of Plymouth to

towns across the region, and most recently to the Tate Britain museum in London),⁶ probed the bureaucratic and physical violence of racism in the region, coding and decoding the theme of racism through acts of recording, listening, and discussion.

Such decoding was again ‘coded’, through a series of ‘words’ selected by each group, written on a page and exhibited along with the sounds of racism from which they emerged. These words were then read aloud over the bass-lines used by dub poets, opening passages from past anti-racism movements in the United Kingdom.

Codifications were then exhibited, and groups were brought together, again to *decode*. Each folding and unfolding of thought produced concepts that found both their problems, in Freire’s words, the ‘limit-situations’ in which the contradictions of racism occur, and the emergence towards solution, such as the coming about of an anti-racism network in the region as well as discussions of ‘Art and...’.

Concepts-as-words and universes here coincided with the a-signifying temporalities of speaking, listening, facilitating and writing that could be found in the sensible choreography of events. They called for us to trace pasts, seek out those specialists who could provide histories for our analysis and enter with us into the resistant time of the future.

While it is increasingly difficult to enact such continuous and cyclical processes, to reach across the brackets of temp time, to make lovers of the oft missed encounters between what we name ‘Art’ and ‘Politics’, in a time of ‘Kelly Girl’ productions, in which the blocking of continuous time finds many seeking micropolitical refuge in the macropolitical manipulations of the extremist Church, the nation, the ‘traditional values’ of the family and the sacrifice-mantras of a military state apparatus, it is here, in the production of

resistant and continuous chronotopes of the present toward which it would seem necessary to turn our efforts.

To do so is not simply to abandon the impossible spaces of Art, but to imagine that they, like the remaining cast of Julie and Céline’s alien-world, might also be released by our gestures of temporal and thematic border-crossing, floating (if a little corpse-like) in the pond alongside the ones who follow their concepts and desires.

1. The terms ‘artistic’ and ‘social’ critique and the historical trajectory of their separation in the response to the disruptions of the 60s and 70s in the creation of flexible labour forces is by now a familiar analysis and indeed lived fact. It can be read about more fully, in Brian Holmes’ *The Flexible Personality* <http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/1106/holmes/en> and Chiapello and Boltanski’s *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Verso, 2007.

2. John Berger and Jean Mohr. *A Seventh Man: The Story of Migrant Workers in Europe*. London: Penguin Books, 2007. The drawing suggests a kind of stranglehold that the past ‘-’ and future ‘o’ on the time of the present, pp.178-79.

3. This concept appeared recently in a paper given at Tate Modern’s Landmark Exhibitions conference by Suely Rolnik titled, *A Shift towards the Unnameable*, translated by Brian Holmes and Michael Asbury.

4. Eyal Weizman. “The Art of War: Deleuze, Guattari, Debord and the Israeli Defense Force” in *Radical Philosophy*. March/April, 2006. Also available at <http://info.interactivist.net/node/5324>.

5. Deleuze and Guattari. *What is Philosophy?* New York: Verso, 1994, pp.21-24.

6. Documentation and recordings of the iteration of Dub Curriculum that occurred at the Tate Britain, titled *We Come from Your Future*, can be found at <http://www.tate.org.uk/intermediaart/ultra-red.shtm>.