Byron Harmon, "Lake Louise, Winter"

INTRODUCTION:

"Between the Exception and the Rule"

IMRE SZEMAN AND SARAH BLACKER

> Historical fact: people stopped being human in 1913. That was the year Henry Ford put his cars on rollers and made his workers adopt the speed of the assembly line. At first, workers rebelled. They quit in droves, unable to accustom their bodies to the new pace of the age. Since then, however, the adaptation has been passed down; we've all inherited it to some degree, so that we plug right into joysticks and remotes, to repetitive motions of a hundred kinds.
>
> —Jeffrey Eugenides[1]

> If the enemy has occupied them before you, do not follow him, but retreat and try to entice him away.
>
> —Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

> The promising political aspects of the Temporary Autonomous Zone did not, however, survive the rapid expansion of the Internet in the mid-1990s…
>
> —François Cusset[2]

The Retreat at Banff

The contributions to this anniversary issue of *PUBLIC* are pieces developed during the second iteration of Banff Research in Culture (BRiC) in August 2012. The aim of BRiC is to bring together senior doctoral students, postdoctoral fellows, junior faculty, independent scholars, visual/sound/performance artists, filmmakers, curators, and cultural critics from Canada and around the world, who collectively undertake an investigation of topics of pressing social, political, and cultural relevance to communities around the globe. BRiC emerged from our strong sense that Canada was in need of a space in which academics and artists could work side-by-side, focusing on their own work while simultaneously building a community with others who are trying to address the political and cultural challenges that we collectively face this century—a century in which the legitimacy of artistic activity and theoretical reflection are increasingly frustrated by the reduction of state and private funding for any endeavour that doesn't immediately speak to the values of the market.

The theme of the second edition of BRiC was "The Retreat." Given our aims and ambitions, and the success of the previous year's session "On the Commons," we must admit to having been uncertain, wary, and even slightly embarrassed about this as a theme for BRiC 2012. The theme was chosen by *dOCUMENTA (13)* director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, who had mapped out in advance how the four sites of *dOCUMENTA* in 2012 (Kassel, Kabul, Cairo, and Banff) would work together to support her overall curatorial aims and intentions. The opportunity for a young endeavour like BRiC to partner with the world-renowned *dOCUMENTA* was one we could not pass up. And yet, against the unfolding backdrop of the Arab Spring in 2010 and 2011, "The Retreat," with all the insistence and specificity generated by the definite article of its title, initially struck us as precisely the wrong theme for an event that we had designed to engage with art, aesthetics, and culture in relation to the challenges of contemporary politics. We had settled on the theme of "The Retreat" in May 2011; by the fall of that year, when we were advertising for participants for BRiC 2012, Zuccotti Park had been occupied, kicking off a chain of urban encampments around the planet. It felt bizarre to be inviting scholars, theorists, and artists to retreat to Banff at a moment when others were taking to the streets to directly confront mechanisms and structures of power. Hard on the heels of Occupy, and only months after Québec students mobilized the largest demonstration in that province's history to protest a government decision to increase tuition fees, a group of us would be getting together in the ludic headiness of the Rocky Mountains to think about retreat. "A retreat about retreat" would become the catchphrase of those weeks. But why were we retreating when the rest of the world was on the attack? Was retreat the right problem to raise amidst what felt like a forward march?

Why Retreat?

It's easy enough to create a justification for thinking about—and enacting—retreat. The text of the call for participants for BRiC echoed Sun Tzu on the importance of retreat as military strategy. When taking on a difficult enemy, retreat doesn't mean defeat, but is rather a tactical maneuver—a decision based on a cogent assessment of the conditions of the battlefield, such that with new information about the enemy gained from an initial encounter the next battle might lead to victory. The need for retreat can at first blush be encapsulated, too, in the terms of the divide between theory and practice. Getting away from the grind of street protests and the daily work of political engagement (at whatever level and in whatever way) can give one the opportunity to think through tactics and approaches, and to conceptualize new strategies. As will be evident in the contributions collected in this issue of *PUBLIC*, it's not the case that all participants were engaged in forms of political or social theory that grew from, or would subsequently influence, organized movements with which they were deeply involved. But all of them were interested in BRiC as a place to take pause and to approach their work—whether scholarly, artistic, or activist—from perspectives engendered by an event whose overall aim was to provide a clearing within which to think new thoughts, and to do so in the company of others interested in similar issues and topics.

But if BRiC constituted something like a place of theory as a step toward practice, our worries about retreating felt confirmed rather than mitigated. There is, after all, a long history of debate and discussion over the divide between theory and practice, which includes not only assessments of the way in which each is related to the other, but perhaps more significantly, challenges to whether such a divide is really useful in the first place. The divide is most commonly associated with the Marxist tradition, and if there is a worry about the separation of theory and practice within this tradition, its origins can be found in its apparent, dangerous affirmation of a separation between material and mental labour, workers and intellectuals, with the latter taking the role of leading the former in a way that troubles genuinely materialist analyses of society. In "The German Ideology," Marx warns against the ossification of a division that, in his analysis, does little more than reflect the final division of labour under capitalism, as opposed to being an effective form of political strategy. The consequence of thinking of mental labour as "something other than consciousness of existing practice" is that it opens up the belief that the work of mental labour can enable consciousness to "emancipate itself from the world" by means of philosophical insight and theoretical speculation alone, instead of through a transformation of society that would (amongst other things) *undo* the divide between the material and the mental.[3] The desire to undo the divide between theory and practice, art and life, has animated revolutionary art as well, from the historical avant-gardes to new forms of collectivism in art production (the first explored in the work of Peter Bürger, the second documented in Blake Stimson and Gregory Sholette's *Collectivism After Modernism*).

And yet, while these warnings about, and prescriptions against, the opposition of theory and practice can appear relevant, it may be that this is not, in the end, the right way to characterize the operations of retreat. Whatever activity one is engaged in, it seems difficult to gainsay the need to think about the structures that animate and legitimate them, that transform them from historical invention (at one point it didn't exist, and it may yet disappear from history) into the ready-to-hand of common sense and quotidian practice. One of the key insights of mid-century left thought was the manner in which all social activity contributes to the constitution of hegemony. Already in "Americanism and Fordism," for example, Antonio Gramsci was describing the process by which control over *all* of workers' lives was part of the system of capitalism; the hopes of various forms of economism that history would solve the political riddle of wage-labour without the need for intervention into the messy, contradictory (and yet still functional) ideology of capitalism were cast further into doubt by an ever-expanding system of media-communication in which even pleasures outside of the nine-to-five became little more than "the prolongation of work."[4] Especially in such a system of life and labour, which has become more intensive and extensive in the Wi-Fi era, the need for even a compromised space of retreat—a step back and away from the main circuits of capital—from which to generate the forms of reflection necessary to produce insight into the structures one inhabits cannot but be important. This is a different claim than saying that hard thinking gets you outside of hegemony, or that a cleverly constructed syllogism engenders emancipation, or that this kind of retreat is a precondition for appropriate political action. It's to say: it's hard to know what you're doing when you're not clear why a structure functions in the way that it does. And it's also hard to know what one is doing when one's body and mind are broken down by the repetition of work, and the work of culture that comes after work, which means that retreat is also a restitution to the body of its forces and a syncopation of time that comes all too infrequently in the hurry-up time of late capital.

The retreat to Banff was meant not just as a retreat, but also as an occasion to think about retreat—an opportunity to ponder its capacities and possibilities in the twenty-first century. Where and how one can properly engage in a retreat that enables (to be blunt) an appropriate level of meta-analysis is not as clear as it once might have been. In the contemporary world, the degree to

which the powers of hegemony intervene into almost every aspect of life is such that openings for retreat are fast disappearing. In *24/7* Jonathan Crary has provided us with a trenchant account of the accelerated tenor of shifts in social and economic organization over the past century. The culture industry about which Horkheimer and Adorno were so nervous, due to the way in which private time became interrelated with the time of work, has transformed over the course of the century into a situation in which private time has effectively disappeared, and so with it, the social and political openings once connected to the bourgeois liberal subject.[5] Crary points out that "the organization of consumer societies was never unconnected with forms of social regulation and subjection, but now the management of economic behavior is synonymous with the formation and perpetuation of malleable and assenting individuals."[6] Indeed, as he makes clear in his account of the drained capacities and political energies of the present, today "it is impermissible for there to be credible or visible options of living outside the demands of 24/7 communication and consumption."[7] The university and the spaces of artistic production might once have been a space in which meta-analysis and critical work could take place. For Crary, in a social world dominated by electronic communication and an entrepreneurial subjectivity, the only such place now left beyond the reach of capital is sleep, one of the few activities that constitute "an uncompromising interruption of the theft of time from us by capitalism"[8] and which itself is coming to constitute a shorter and shorter part of each day. One of the reasons for engaging in a retreat on the activity of retreat is to think seriously about the openings that might yet exist in a capitalism that has extended and expanded itself with a ferocity that threatens to eliminate critical reflection—and so, too, political action—altogether.

…or Occupy?

Even if we could justify the need for The Retreat, as we planned BRiC 2012 we couldn't help but position retreat in opposition to the politics of the moment. Instead of The Retreat, why wasn't BRiC being framed in relation to the innovative energies of global street protest? In other words, instead of Retreat, why not… Occupy? Why speculate about social and political possibilities when it might well be that the possible was becoming actual right before our eyes?

If it is wrong to see retreat as a space of theory that is the other of practice, it is just as much of a mistake to see an event such as Occupy as practice without theory. Occupy, too, constitutes an attempt to open up a new space for thought as well as politics within the limits of contemporary capital identified by Crary and others. One of the many important elements of the Occupy movement was not only its capacity to respond quickly to the pressures of the police and the legal system throughout the world—pressures which were as distinct as the sites of Occupy itself—but also its rapid transformation away from the initial aims suggested in the infamous *Adbusters* blog to which the origins of the movement are traced. Making reference to the occupation of Tahrir Square that led to the downfall of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, *Adbusters*' "Tactical Briefing #26" suggested that protestors use their occupation of Zuccotti Park to "demand that Barack Obama ordain a Presidential Commission tasked with ending the influence money has over our representatives in Washington. It's time for DEMOCRACY NOT CORPORATOCRCY, we're doomed without it."[9] This is classic protest politics, whose intent is to place pressure on governments to change policy. Even a broad demand such as this one wouldn't be impossible for government to address: countries around the world have placed restrictions on private financial donations to parties, and even in the wake of the US Supreme Court's decision that opened the floodgates to the direct political meddling of the moneyed-classes on the right *and* left (of the latter, think: George Soros or Tom Steyer), a government with the right impulses and could work to restrict the sway of corporate interests over party politics.

This is, as we know, *not* the demand made by Occupy Wall Street; nor did Occupy around the world make *any* demand. Rather, as Bernard E. Harcourt explains, "Occupy Wall Street immediately fashioned a new form of political engagement, a new kind of politics. It is a form of political engagement that challenges our traditional political vocabulary, that ambiguates the grammar we use, that playfully distorts our very language of politics."[10] Harcourt describes Occupy as engaging in a form of *political* instead of *civil* disobedience—a form of action that doesn't insert itself into the existing landscape of rights and freedoms ("It does not lobby Congress. It defies the party system"[11]), but that wishes to call attention to the profound limits of the political itself, at least insofar as it is currently configured. The challenge made by Occupy to the vocabulary of the political is not insignificant. If the sole impact of Occupy was to have generated an insistence on the vast divide between the richest 1% and the other 99%, to make it impossible to discuss social problems without attention to the blunt realities of class, then it would already have produced an important (and unexpected) opening in twenty-first century politics.[12]

Some have wanted to assess the success or failure of Occupy in terms of the reforms that it might have brought about (which is more properly what one might expect of a *demonstration* rather than an *occupation*), or whether it produced the outcome some on the left had fantasized for it: revolution.[13] Ian Buchanan argues that there are three models of political change—reform, revolution, and revelation—and identifies Occupy as an example of the last. He writes:

> Revelation is any sudden and widespread political change of heart… I would go so far as to suggest that in light of recent history it is the conceptual chasm between reform and revolution mapped by revelation where all future political thinking will have to operate. The apparent quietism of the Occupy movement was not a failing, therefore, but rather a symptom of our situation – we want change, but we don't know how to achieve it. Those in power appear to be caught in the same paralysing trap.[14]

Though it is morphologically different than the retreat that took place in Banff, the ways in which Occupy deliberately tarried with new forms of the political constitutes nothing if not a form of retreat—and indeed, a retreat *on* retreat, the creation of a space away from the flow of the everyday in which to enact appropriate modes and mechanisms of political action at a time when typical modes seem no longer to have the impact they once did. These older modes include virtually the whole vocabulary of political theory and practice: demonstrations in the street, demands for reform made by groups through spokespersons, and even appeals to oust governments through revolutions (Harcourt points out that "in the United States there is nothing to topple and no one to oust. With political elections every two to four years, the American populace can vote their politicians out of office, but hardly anything changes"[15]).

This might seem like wishful thinking on our part: the idea that the hard activity of occupation, a practice that requires commitment to the difficult conditions of living out in the street in

increasingly cold weather, could be anything like spending time with a small group of artists, activists, students, and scholars in Banff, seems slightly absurd if not offensive. The differences are important and instructive. The communities brought together at sites of Occupy were complicated, and included not only those who commonly participate in street protests, but also homeless people and other marginalized groups; for these groups, *inclusion* into existing publics would have been a welcome starting point. And despite all the ways in which Occupy actively refused the terms of official political discourse, it deliberately cultivated one of modern politics' most troubling and vexed dimensions: that of the spectacle, including the forms and practices of the digital culture that have alarmed Crary and other critics for the depth and speed of the social transformations they have wrought. The Retreat was *not* Occupy. But similar impulses guided both events: above all, a need to figure out where to go from here, charged with that weighty intractability proper to every interregnum or middle time.

Art, Politics, and Retreat

Our exploration of the practice of retreat also considered the unequal distribution and striation of access to the resources and technologies that make retreat possible in the first place, including those that mediate and allow for reflection upon retreat. In the summer of 2014, as this issue is going to press, the World Press Photo exhibition was visited and discussed by vast numbers of Europeans, just as *dOCUMENTA (13)* had been two summers previously. The photos included in the 2014 exhibition document a year of war and political violence, acute refugee crises as well as chronic ones that will last for generations, structures and symptoms of deprivation, and natural disasters. With few exceptions, a sense of the impossibility of escape, of uninterrupted doom, characterizes the exhibition. A meditation on the concept of retreat seems not only irrelevant to this visual landscape representing the political-economic disasters of the past year, but indulgent, and hopelessly out of touch with global material realities. The photo awarded First Prize, John Stanmeyer's *Signal*, is a haunting image of men standing on the beach at night in Djibouti City, illuminated by distant stars, and, more immediately, the electric glow of mobile phones standing in for the prospect of mobility, of migration, of escape. The figures standing on the beach in the darkness hold their phones high above their heads, as far as their arms can stretch, in an attempt to connect to a Somali signal. Standing in front of this photograph, the viewer cannot help but consider the forms of privilege presumed in the ways we have been thinking about retreat. One thinks, too, about the conditions for such reflection that remain elusive for so many, including the means of communication, access to information and media unimpeded by state censorship and attendant forms of violence—not to mention the time and space afforded by economic security as antecedent to retreat.

Midway through the exhibition, Danila Tkachenko's photos of Russian hermits reveal the secret habitat of a community in retreat. These posed photos show men with long beards standing in forest scenes and the remote huts in which they live, completely "off the grid." Viewed alongside photos of the ravaged Philippines post-Typhoon Haiyan, where retreat was impossible, Tkachenko's photos smack of utopianism, and even arouse anger in the viewer. Their presence suggests that we could all choose retreat if we so desired. These Russian hermits seem to belong to a past era in which such withdrawal was more feasible, and accessible. The unlikely context for retreat documented in Tkachenko's photos can helpfully reframe our conceptualization of retreat so that we begin to understand this movement away or apart not as political strategy, but as what should constitute the content of a political right that has yet to be claimed collectively. If we could develop the vocabulary of a "right to retreat" as central to a politics, this could provide a productive vantage point from which to work to improve conditions for all who are prevented from taking time away from work—whether in the context of the myriad forms of slavery that persist today, to the highly restrictive working conditions of Philippina nannies in Singapore, to the North American worker whose labour continues 52 weeks per year without reprieve, to the Bangladeshi workers in Western-owned garment factories, whose lack of access to retreat proved disastrous in 2013.[16]

Embarking upon a "retreat about retreat" in a Canadian mountain resort town can be immediately characterized as an act of both elitism and escapism, and many of the texts and artist projects produced during the Banff residency centre around this question: could it be anything but? Many of the contributions to *PUBLIC* 50 consider how the idea of retreating outside of the "public" *can* in fact constitute a form of resistance and non-compliance, providing access to new openings and possibilities that may only appear and become intelligible outside of the incessant demands of work on body and mind. Other contributors consider the ways in which the very concept of retreat from the many spaces of war, deprivation, and uncertainty worldwide is mediated by a form of technology that ultimately only provides reprieve to very few.

We open the issue with Carrie Smith-Prei's essay on the political significance of retreat in the post-1945 German context—the context in which all of the 100-day *dOCUMENTA* exhibitions have been set—through an engagement with the author Gilda Elsner's political tactics of social and epistemological retreat as a method of demarcating her work from that of her fascist predecessors in her home country. Smith-Prei emphasizes that in the German context, retreat and negation can be modes of attaining agency and building engagement—a step outside of the status quo—rather than a merely cynical or nihilist act.

Other contributions to this volume move away from conventional forms and methods in their art practices as a gesture toward the possibilities for new modes of perception. Some artist projects in the volume retreat from expected chronologies. David Butler's photo essay translates Robert Smithson's 1967 *Artforum* article "The Monuments of Passaic" into the contemporary visual language of Google Street View, imagining that Smithson had anticipated that urban spaces would, half a century later, be primarily understood as a series of merged snapshots transformed into photographic data collections. Other artist projects in the volume employ what Raymond Boisjoly calls "the productive misuse of technology" as method of retreat, including Boisjoly's own piece, which allows Kent Mackenzie's film *The Exiles* to retreat from its original form as film in order to produce a new set of meaning as a series of stills. Joanne Bristol's *The Daily Sleeper* also self-consciously eschews more recognizable art forms in favour of hybrid news media/functional-art pieces (newspapers and postcards) in order to draw attention, and give voice to, multispecies agency. Nico Dockx's piece transforms the postcard into an art object in a project that highlights the centrality of epistemological ambivalence, in-betweenness, and the difficulty of reaching outwards to the public from within retreat.

In "Is Retreat a Metaphor?", Catherine Malabou reflects upon three philosophical forms of negation as conceptualized by Maurice Blanchot, Alexander Grothendieck, and Thomas Bernhard; the ideas articulated by these thinkers have profoundly influenced her work for many years. Malabou considers retreat and the analogous acts of reclusion and withdrawal in both their philosophical and

biological forms. Malabou locates productive possibilities for retreat only in its involuntary form—that is, the unconscious retreat experienced through neurological disease and brain injury. Disaffection, the symptom shared by both philosophical and neurobiological retreaters, precipitates indifference, an indifference that Malabou argues is "the contemporary form of retreat, a retreat which is undecided, unvoluntary, non-chosen." It is this space of undecidedness and involuntary ambivalence that is framed as a space of possibility, one that remains radically outside of existing modes of being and belonging.

Heather Anderson laments what Malabou calls our "indifference to ourselves" as "our strange answer to the world's indifference to us." Anderson's essay, like Kate Lawless', explicitly draws attention to the way that neoliberalism and capitalist social relations more generally have led to a coercive form of retreat from all that is not economically rewarded; this includes non-quantifiable work, "slow" reading, writing, and art-making, spending time with family, leisure activities, and sleep. In her discussion of the normalization of exploitative labour practices in the cultural industries and the art world, Anderson calls for the diminishment of indifference—both towards ourselves as cultural workers, and via structural changes to those institutions that valorize existing forms of production. Discussing the feminist art collective Ladies' Invitational Deadbeat Society's piece "DO LESS WITH LESS / DO MORE WITH MORE," Anderson asks how we can *slow work down*. She considers alternative processes through which to approach cultural production, including the valorization of doing less. If we can re-valorize non-quantifiable work, Anderson argues, so that the importance of the time needed by artists, writers, and curators (which doesn't necessarily result in a quantifiable product) is recognized, then we could spend more of what Annette Kamp calls "slow time" doing good work. In a sense, Anderson looks to an idea of voluntary, everyday retreat as an ideal condition of work, one that we should struggle to bring into existence.

In "A Worldwide Conspiracy Called Movement," Franco 'Bifo' Berardi proclaims that we need to limit the possibilities for retreat, rather than expand them. Looking optimistically to social movements and a rising collective consciousness revolting against exploitation and austerity, Bifo calls for the generation of "a common sphere of sensibility" that will inform a politics that serves the interests of all, rather than just a few. For Bifo, a technology-induced retreat is at least partially to blame: this is the "techno-alienation" experienced by today's cognitive labourers, who are also "the first generation of people who have learned more words from a machine than from their mother." This is a form of what Malabou calls the "involuntary retreat," and for Bifo, the consequences are catastrophic. We are losing our propensity for empathy, and without empathy, we work only for our own interests, unable to detect where the needs of others should be emphasized and foregrounded. To move beyond this, Bifo suggests, we need to retreat back into the commons and work towards "con-spiration": learning to breathe together while we address our collective precarity.

Andrew Pendakis' discussion of Maria Whiteman's photographs in "The Spectre of Form: Letters from an Absent Sovereign," considers the now-naturalized idea that the proper relationship between humans and the natural environment be one of exploitation—and the embeddedness of this assumption within the spaces of infrastructure and architecture, even those that present themselves as "neutral" or purely functional. Whiteman's photographs of the "managed spaces" of "manipulated nature" in both Versailles and Alberta's Tar Sands also offer an opening, Pendakis argues, for a retreat of sovereignty, a "new natural political science" that can lead us away from the well-trodden path of humans' environmental destruction. Ivan Jurakic and Tor Lukasik-Foss' *Beacon* and Emma Waltraud Howes' *Ankyloglossia* also consider the juncture between nature and technology, drawing our attention to the retreat of one into the other. Jason Gomez's *Finding a Fire Before it Flames* provokes the conversation further, asking us to consider how to respond when we are so completely immersed in the context that threatens us, that we cannot even recognize it as a threat, much less think beyond it.

Exploring the potential of art to help us understand the function and effects of ideology, Bruno Bosteels argues first for what he calls "theoretical ideology" as a mode through which art, theory, and criticism can potentially interrupt the naturalization of capitalist ideology. Bosteels notes that aesthetic ideology turns our attention to "the slight dislocations, the effects of a certain displacement or silencing," and that the resulting defamiliarization or alienation can productively interrupt our perception of a totality or uninterruptible order. He makes clear, however, that a single-minded focus on the identification and occupation of these gaps may lead us to another place entirely, toward "the locus of today's supreme ideological identification," which is the neoliberal ideology of freedom. Bosteels' important intervention steers us away from the too-easy theoretical move of suggesting that ideology can somehow be magically dismantled through immersion in its gaps, which is how retreat is often imagined. If dismantling capitalist ideology were this easy, we'd no longer need to consider different tactics. Bosteels leaves us, like Smith-Prei and several other contributors, with the idea that our only certainty concerning retreat as an approach or strategy for thought, politics, or art can be that the intentions, process, and effects of retreat must remain guarded, cautious, and ambivalent.

Imre Szeman's "Ownership in Retreat?" inverts the temporal orientation through which retreat is often conceptualized by asking how we can retreat *forwards* to a more equitable future through the rejection of capitalist ideology, and, more specifically and preliminarily, ownership and property. Properly harnessed creativity and intellectual labour are central to our development of a new commons as a move forward beyond the inequities that besiege us today, Szeman argues. Kate Lawless' essay addresses the tensions between art as a retreat from material reality and the potential of art as a medium through which the "goal of actualizing the latent potentiality of a situation as opposed to representing the already existing order of reality" can be grasped and engaged with.

As Alice Jim writes in her Afterword, retreat does not need to constitute escapism or passivity, and it does not require any physical movement away or apart. Retreat is not the abandonment of the public, its interests and needs, but an "active beholding": a step away in order to see and consider the totality, and so, too, imagine different ways forward.

Retreating Ahead of It

And just how might we move forward differently? In his reflections on political change, Buchanan writes: "To bring about change we need to change how we think about change – if revolution and reform are off the agenda, that does not mean we are condemned to the status quo."[17] It is this *how* that we were collectively trying to puzzle out in our retreat on retreat. The call for participants for The Retreat concluded with a quotation from Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*: "there is only one way left to escape the alienation of present day society: to retreat ahead of it."[18] Is this idea—retreating *ahead*—anything more than a rhetorical gesture? At its worst, the idea of retreating ahead of the present evokes Walter Benjamin's famous and influential description of Paul Klee's

Angelus Novus in "Theses on the Philosophy of History." The angel of history, blown by strong winds into the future, has its face turned backward toward the past. As it is propelled forward, all it can do is watch the wreckage that is being piled up in the "catastrophe" of history: it cannot intervene to change what has happened, nor can it do anything to a future it cannot see. The storm that is pushing Klee's angel into the future is, Benjamin writes, "what we call progress."[19] If retreating ahead of society means to be condemned to another form of inaction and paralysis, then it hardly seems a recommended course of action. What feels like an escape from alienation can in fact be to give oneself entirely over to it, though perhaps with some comforting (if misguided) sense that one has done something few others in the society have managed: to sidestep the world we moderns have shaped for ourselves. The development of a consciousness through which we can begin to imagine stepping aside from the total commercialization of life in late capital, though useless unless accompanied by a genuine politics, would in itself constitute an opening for change that is more elusive and difficult to find than we might ever imagine.

But this would be to misunderstand Barthes' aims, and Benjamin's, too. In his tale of the *Angelus Novus*, Benjamin isn't condemning us to the storm of progress, but cautioning us against a too easy acquiescence to it, telling us to look to other ways in which to map the past and think about it. Without developing into anything like a formal method or system, the theses on the philosophy of history offer up numerous ways of framing and naming the past and speaking to the future, as well as of the consequences of doing so (or not, as the case may be). Though not in a way that might satisfy Adorno—who never thought that Benjamin was sufficiently materialist enough—the theses speak to the stark difference of the history generated by historical materialism as opposed to a historicism comfortable with "once upon a time" narratives of the past and which is so convinced in the underlying reality of progress that it could it only treat crises (most pressingly, the rise of Fascism) as exceptions to the general rule of Enlightenment outlined by Kant in "Perpetual Peace." Benjamin famously cautions us to see things differently:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule… The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are 'still' possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.[20]

The *novus*, the 'new,' forms an important part of Barthes' call for retreat as well, though in a different manner than for Benjamin. His call to "retreat ahead of" present-day alienation comes in a section of *The Pleasure of the Text* called "Modern." It is worth quoting from this part at length so that one can grasp the active possibilities Barthes imagined for retreat in relation to "the New":

> The New is not a fashion, it is a value, the basis of all criticism: our evaluation of the world no longer depends, at least not directly, as in Nietzsche, on the opposition between *noble* and *base*, but on that between Old and New (the erotics of the New began in the eighteenth century: a long transformational process). There is only one way left to escape the alienation of present-day society: *to retreat ahead of it*: every old language is immediately compromised, and every language becomes old once it is repeated. Now, encratic language (the language produced and spread under the protection of power) is statutorily a language of repetition; all official institutions of language are repeating machines: school, sports, advertising, popular songs, news, all continually repeat the same structure, the same meaning, often the same words: the stereotype is a political fact, the major figure of ideology. Confronting it, the New is bliss (Freud: "In the adult, novelty always constitutes the condition for orgasm"). Whence the present configuration of forces: on the one hand, a mass banalization (linked to the repetition of language)—a banalization outside bliss but not necessarily outside pleasure—and on the other, a (marginal, eccentric) impulse toward the New—a desperate impulse that can reach the point of destroying discourse: an attempt to reproduce in historical terms the bliss repressed beneath the stereotype.
>
> The opposition (the knife of value) is not necessarily between consecrated, named contraries (materialism and idealism, revolution and reform, etc.); but it is always and throughout between the exception and the rule. For example, at certain moments it is possible to support the exception of the Mystics. Anything, rather than the rule (generality, stereotype, ideolect: the consistent language).[21]

Anything rather than the rule, though not towards an exception that gives weight to and renders progress coherent (in the way that Benjamin warned against), but an impulse that fundamentally interrupts given narratives, discourses, stereotypes, and generalities. Barthes capitalizes "the New" because he is alert to how difficult it can be to generate a genuine newness: "only the new disturbs (weakens) consciousness (easy? Not at all: nine times out of ten, the new is only the stereotype of novelty)."[22] We should be clear here: we're reading Barthes in many ways against the general tenor of *Pleasure*. Still, the problem that Barthes raises for us, the challenge of identifying "the New" in a world beset by the stereotype of novelty, is one that speaks to the work of retreat, of why one would feel the necessity to retreat, and indeed, of why one would need to reflect on retreat. Any act of retreat can quickly be absorbed into repetition, and even relaxation—with a properly anti-modernist gesture at its core, with an impulse to preservation of the body against the pressures of time; retreat can thus become a demand and an obligation, as it has in the era of 24/7. What distinguishes many of the movements and political challenges of the past several years is their refusal to accept their status as exceptions to the rule of history; what they try to do by confronting the limits of the political is to break through the stereotypes of novelty that endlessly reaffirm capitalism as the primary engine of historical progress. In Banff, we wanted a retreat to "generate new ways of retreating ahead of the limits, aporias, problems, and crises of a century caught between imaginative and conceptual fertility and sterility—not to effect some questionable escape, but to allow for the generation of new spaces of openness, freedom and possibility."[23] We hope that this is in fact what we did, in dialogue with those other forms of retreat that try in their own ways to pose and respond to the major political question of the era: how to produce political change on the scale required to generate *change itself*?

NOTES

1 Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2003), 95.

2 François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 253.

3 Karl Marx, "The German Ideology: Part 1," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978), 159.

4 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1971), 137.

5 The classic account of the importance of the print culture for the development of the bourgeois subject and with it, the public sphere, can be found in Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991). Crary's book describes the subject that comes in the wake of print culture and the disappearance of the public sphere. For a related account of the disappearance of time, reflection and reading, see Rebecca Solnit. "Diary." *London Review of Books* 29 August 2013, 32-33.

6 Jonathan Crary, *24/7* (New York: Verso, 2013), 42.

7 Ibid., 50.

8 Ibid., 10.

9 Adbusters, "Tactical Briefing #26: Anarchic Swarms – The Emerging Model," *Adbusters* (blog), Feb. 28 2012, https://www.adbusters.org/blogs/adbusters-blog/adbusters-tactical-briefing-26.html.

10 Bernard E. Harcourt, "Political Disobedience," in *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience*, eds. W.J.T. Mitchell, Bernard E. Harcourt, and Michael Taussig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 46.

11 Ibid., 47.

12 In the wake of Occupy, it has become common parlance in the academy *and* in the media to address income mal-distribution by drawing attention to the status of the richest 1% of the population. For recent examples, see Bill Curry, "National Household Survey finds top 1 per cent earns 7 times Canadian median," *The Globe and Mail*, 11 September 2013. See also Edward McClelland, "RIP, the middle class: 1946-2013," *Salon* 20 September 2013. The unexpected success of Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* owes a great deal to the shift in the vocabulary of politics inaugurated by Occupy. See Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014).

13 See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Image, Space, Revolution: The Arts of Occupation," in *Occupy: Three Inquiries in Disobedience*, eds. W.J.T. Mitchell, Bernard E. Harcourt, and Michael Taussig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 94-101. Mitchell writes:

"A real revolution is a historical event… material and social conditions have to undergo, we suppose, a substantial change for a revolution to count as the real thing. The main effect of Occupy Wall Street has been by almost universal consensus, to "change the conversation." And this change was anything but radical. It involved a shift in the dominant political discourse from talk about government spending and the deficit to unemployment and inequality."

14 Ian Buchanan, "Change," in *Fueling Culture: Energy, History, Politics*, eds. Imre Szeman, Jennifer Wenzel, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Fordham University Press, forthcoming), n.p.

15 Harcourt, 68. In *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011) Timothy Mitchell uncovers a startling fact at the heart of street demonstrations: its connection to dominant forms of energy. One of social transformations produced by coal was that in industrialized countries the vast majority of people became dependent on energy produced by others. The production of coal at specific sites across northern Europe that then had to be channeled to other sites along narrow railway corridors, with specialized groups of workers operating in large numbers at both ends, generated the material conditions for a form of political agency that could be asserted through the disruption of energy flow. "The rise of mass democracy is often attributed to the emergence of new forms of political consciousness," writes Mitchell. "What was missing was not consciousness, not a repertoire of demands, but an effective way of forcing the powerful to listen to those demands" (21). The ability of workers to effectively and immediately disrupt energy flow through mass strikes or sabotage gave their political demands especial force, and led to major gains for workers between the 1880s and the interwar decades, while also supporting the development of worker's consciousness of their social circumstances. The decline of coal and the emergence of oil as the dominant form of energy has, in Mitchell's view, has made mass action more difficult, as it one cannot impede the flow of oil in the way that one once was able to stifle economic systems by blocking the movement of coal.

16 The collapse of the Rana Plaza garment factory in Savar, Bangladesh on April 24, 2013, killed 1129 people—just one case of many in which the structures and infrastructures of labour dramatically shorten the lives of workers.

17 Buchanan, n.p.

18 Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), 40. Barthes' tactic mirrors the way in which W.J.T. Mitchell describes the trope of *occupatio* that, for him, underlies the actions of Occupy: "the tactic of anticipating an adversary's arguments by preempting them, taking the initiative in a space where one knows in advance that there will be resistance and counterarguments" (102).

19 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.

20 Ibid., 257.

21 Barthes, 40-41.

22 Ibid., 40.

23 "The Retreat." http://www.banffcentre.ca/programs/program.aspx?id=1210.

A Figure of Ambivalent Retreat: *The Case of Gisela Elsner*

CARRIE SMITH-PREI

TO RETREAT COMMUNICATES agency through radical refusal; retreating is a powerful act of turning away from, refusing to engage in, and expressing ambivalence toward the status quo. Understood as such, retreat is a highly personal, individual form of negativity. The subject in retreat enacts a motion that breaks with dominant modes of thinking and redirects energies toward the messy, diffuse, or unpopular. The moment of retreat is thus a political and an aesthetic act, for that motion gives body to a negative emotion that is critically productive. Reading that negative emotion illuminates how "sociohistorical and ideological dilemmas, in particular, produce formal or representational ones."[1] The negative impulse coming from the subject in retreat produces its own figuration that is highly ambivalent. The power in the act of retreating is located in the retreat's indeterminacy, in its neither nor, which forces critical engagement.

The following sketches how German author Gisela Elsner (1937–1992) acts as a case study for the aesthetic and political possibilities of the negative emotion produced by the ambivalence of retreat, both in terms of the self as a figure enacting retreat and in the retreat of her writing.[2] Elsner wrote primarily satirical novels that are bitingly critical of society, and particularly of the normalizing force of middle class consumerism, including consumption of goods and services but also cooption of radical ideals such as free love, which enabled West Germany to bury its violent past. She made her 1964 award-winning debut in West Germany to high praise from the literary establishment, however she never achieved this acclaim again and by the mid-1980s, her publishing house had cancelled her contract and auctioned off the remainders of her works. While her choice of topics as well as her angular prose most likely led to Elsner's fall from favour, a good part of this marginalization was due to her concrete political impulses. Timed with her debut, Elsner went into a seven-year retreat from the Federal Republic, returning only after the government lifted their ban on the German Communist Party (DKP) in 1970. But after finally joining the party in the late 1970s, Elsner repeatedly criticized its leadership and management, marginalizing herself from its ranks. She withdrew from the party in June 1989 only to request renewed membership in October of that same year, when it was clear that the Soviet Bloc was crumbling and one month before the fall of the Berlin Wall. By the time of her suicide in 1992, Elsner was destitute. Her work for the DKP did not improve her financial situation, and indeed might have—at least she suggests—harmed it, for she was never again nominated for literary prizes after winning the *Prix Formentor* for her