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Outrageous

Defending the Art of Free Expression

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Abstract: This essay makes a strident defence of the art of free expression through a return and rethinking of the poetic spirit of outrageousness. Drawing on the ideas of Oscar Wilde, along with artists such as Frida Kahlo, Francis Bacon, Gilbert & George, Jake & Dinos Chapman and Alexander McQueen, it looks beyond the current attempts in the culture wars to reduce the question of freedom to quintessential liberal tropes. In doing so, the essay both calls for a renewed appreciation of a complete freedom for art by offering a critique of the moral absolutism that's taken over certain sectors of the so-called "radical left", while demanding more political appreciation for creatives and those with the abilities to reimagine the human subject in our hyper-technologized world. Such a critique not only suggests the need to rethink the meaning of freedom beyond the play of libertarians. It also calls forth a new political subjectivity – based on the much maligned and theoretically ignored figure of the infidel, who allows us to break free from all moral entrapments.

Keywords: Outrageous, Frida Kahlo, Oscar Wilde, Francis Bacon, Infidel, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Alexander McQueen.

Introduction

We are living in peculiar if somewhat predictable cultural and political times. While the right now speaks about rights to expression, elements of the left have collapsed into a moral puritanism marked by a performative politics of self-flagellation and calls to censor anything disagreeable¹. Indeed, as both sides assume their entrenched positions in the "culture wars", firing at will at anybody who might have the temerity to say anything original, the need to stake out who is being cancelled has become a defining feature of our digital times. At the heart of the problem is the issue of outrage of communities lost in virtual fields of lament. The world of social media is defined by its outrages. It commodifies differences in its virtual performativity, while dividing its complaints along every single comment, word, and utterance. Every day there is a new scandal to be latched onto. Every day, someone can be guaranteed to have said something so scandalous it demands shaming and exposing. Once there was a time when being outraged – the excess of one's sensory load - truly meant an exceptional threshold had been crossed. And often it took a lot for people to vent such outrage in any public setting, let alone broadcast for the imaginary world to see and feel the pain. Today it seems everybody is at it. Imminently, incessantly, as they queue to buy their decaffeinated espresso. What the lockdown proved was how the internet leads to the hyperarousal of everything. None more so than the addiction to outrage. But this is not some by-product. It is integral to certain strands of identity politics today. Those who fully embraced the narrative of victimhood, identified with the ontologizing of vulnerability, yet woke up to the reality of the nihilism of resilience, had nothing left to hold onto except to shout into the echo chambers of the world.

As learned students of Oscar Wilde and many others, to our minds there is a fundamental difference between what we see today and the spirit of outrageousness that has been fully exorcized from radical politics. Like the word "critical" (which has long since been normalised and stripped of its transgressive

¹ On this see our forthcoming critique B. Evans & J. Reid, "The Religious Left: How the left lost its argument and fell into the moral abyss" (*The Journal of Educational Philosophy & Theory*: 2022)

potentials), does radicality mean anything today? As a dialectic flip to the equally tedious term “reactionary”, so it has become bound to a post-liberal biopolitics which echoes solidarities to all who feel slightly affronted yet is open to none but the congregation. The outrageous and the scandalous has never simply been about negation. It always contained the affirmative. Hence, while the outrageous was something that once invoked a certain romanticism, while resplendently cloaked with its own gothic charm, it was also a key characteristic in the emergence of what we understood to be “the radical” in the most poetic sense. From Wilde to Frida Kahlo and Francis Bacon, onto the 1970s British Punk movement and the flamboyant drag queens who lit up the streets of New York during the same period, the outrageous was something to be admired in terms of its originality and confrontation. What we are invariably dealing with here is the question of taboo². Every single metaphysical claim to truth violently polices its limits. The taboo in fact is one of the most important features in defining the sacred order of things³. But while the taboo is often so violently protected, it remains the unseen, the unsaid, through the very force of its veritable normalisation. Hence it is precisely the purpose of art to expose the illusion of the myth, provoke the infallibility of the sacred claim, while having the courage to transgress the taboo so that its hierarchies of power and its violence be more fully revealed⁴. And yet, what we also know is that when a dominant order starts to fall apart, too often the revolutionary impetus is colonised and displaced by the puritanical. How many times in history have we seen revolution turn into puritanism? This is precisely what’s at stake today, when confronting the collapse of liberalism. Instead of opening onto a new terrain of political possibility, what is taking its place is the erection of so many virtual taboos it’s difficult to keep up!

We see all of this coalescing around the question of free expression and whether there should be limits placed around what is permissible to say, express and do in our contemporary societies. The University in particular has taken centre stage in many of these tensions. But the problem as we see it is not about whether we can retain something sacred about liberal humanism and its social contracts as we watch liberalism collapse before our very eyes. Social contracts and their freedoms well protected were always a deception, which allowed the liberal to police the creative and cultured energies of life. What we are proposing here is to rethink and remind ourselves of the spirit of outrageousness, and how the art of free expression is inseparable from a politics of transgression. Or to put it another way, while the tired and predictable free speech debates ultimately fall back upon classical liberalism and the idea that liberalism is defined by a certain commitment to liberated speech⁵ (with all its evident hierarchical codes that are wrapped around the cloaks of educated civility), we would argue that without transgression, there is no viable conception of freedom, no theory of the creative, no affirmation of life, no future beyond what has already been imagined. Mindful of this, in this essay we return to the work of Oscar Wilde and lessons from other voices from history, which we believe remain central to any debate on free speech today. Not only do they allow us to move beyond the contemporary quagmires that are so heavily policed by puritan theorists on all sides of the political isles. They remain open to the only theory of freedom which matters: *the art of free expression*.

De Profundis: The Spirit of the Outrageous

The greatest recent event – that “Liberalism is Dead”, that belief in the secular god has become unbelievable – is already beginning to cast its first shadows over the world. For the few at least, the suspicion in whose eyes is strong and subtle enough for this spectacle, some sun seems to have set and some ancient and profound trust has been turned into doubt; to them our old world must appear daily more like evening, more mistrustful, stranger, “older”. Students of Nietzsche will know we just paraphrased the opening lines

² Invariably every critical engagement with the taboo needs to begin with Freud. On this see, Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo* (London, Routledge: 1961). In terms of transgression, we would then turn to the provocative anti-spirit of Georges Bataille, notably G. Bataille, *The Tears of Eros* (San Francisco, City Lights: 1989) and G. Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* (New York, Verso: 2006)

³ On this see in particular, Rene Girard, *Violence & the Sacred* (London, Continuum: 2005)

⁴ Brad Evans, *Ecce Humanitas: Beholding the Pain of Humanity* (New York, Columbia University Press: 2021)

⁵ Notably inspired by the work of the late and no doubt formidable Roger Scruton, we see this libertarian position rigorously defended by the likes of Douglas Murray. See in particular his rather predictable *The Madness of Crowds*. It is also apparent in the public statements defending free speech in the thinking of Jordan Peterson, while further promoted in the works of Andrew Doyle’s *Free Speech and Why it Matters*, along with Timothy Garton Ash’s *Free Speech: Ten principles for a Connected World*, among many others.

to Book V of his *The Gay Science* that was published in a revised manuscript in 1887. While this book was not written as an explicit treatise on gaiety, it does nevertheless offer a poignant point of entry into the relations between morality, the joy of existence, the question of truth, transgression, the death of the old and the creation of the new, as well as the power of the image. Like his wider inquiries into the genealogy of morals, *The Gay Science* offers a scathing critique of unrequited moral sentimentality and the search for origins or indeed destinations, which may ‘unmask’ a more progressive truth of being behind the one that appears before us. Such demands belong more to those who arm themselves with honourable sentiments. Key here is the way a certain perspective of the defeated invokes a metaphysical illusion of moral grandeur, which proves to be just as resentful and monstrous as what came before. Nietzsche remarked this work was his most personal, hence its aphoristic style more akin to a diary of thought that reveals what was closest to his sense of being. It is the book which those on the right (who may have tried to find some affinity) find most difficult to appropriate. Its outrageousness, especially concerning morality, the death of God and nihilism, would be impossible for anyone committed to policing the bounds of reason to accept. Indeed, it is precisely because of its personal message to break away from the sacred order of politics that makes it all the more relevant to the world we inhabit today.

Some eight years after Nietzsche wrote *The Gay Science*, an unrepentant Oscar Wilde was being sentenced to serve two years in Reading Gaol for the crime of gross indecency and sodomy. During this time, Wilde famously wrote some 50,000 words of a manuscript on eighty sheets of paper. Whether it was an act of kindness by the prison guards, who allegedly gave him a single page at a time, the result was to be his final work, posthumously published in 1905, titled *De Profundis*⁶. Largely an ode to his young lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, this labour of love appears as concerned with the theological as its title suggests. Yet still, beneath the incoherent ramblings and tragic forebodings of Wilde’s recollections, the book is a profound witnessing to his outrageous and defiant spirit. As Simon Critchley observed, ‘*De Profundis* is the testimony of someone who knows that he has ruined himself and squandered the most extraordinary artistic gifts. Yet the text is also marked by a quiet but steely audacity. Having lost everything (his children, his reputation, his money, his freedom), Wilde does not bow down before the external command of some transcendental deity. On the contrary, he sees his suffering as the occasion for a “fresh mode of self-realisation”⁷. Crucially, for Wilde, as Critchley notes, the answer cannot be found in morality, reason, or religion. It could only be dealt with through embracing more fully and more resolutely the art of transgression. While Critchley for his part keeps his interest here in Wilde’s notion of the “faith of the faithless”, we want to stay true to the original outrageousness for which Wilde was so wilfully condemned. For as Wilde shows, it is precisely through the affirmation of his subjectivity, when the transgressive nature of his very being becomes an outrage to those who police the normative standard, where the political question appears in a way that also makes it inseparable from the question of aesthetics. Outrageousness as such is integral to a transgressive imagination, which exists in direct opposition to morality and reason. As Wilde explained in the last few lines he wrote: ‘I have grown tired of the articulate utterances of men and things. The Mystical in Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature this is what I am looking for. It is absolutely necessary for me to find it somewhere’⁸.

Wilde has undoubtedly become the acceptable face of an all too domesticated idea of intellectual promiscuity and outrageousness today. Often misquoted, rarely truly read, while he has become a fitting pinup for all kinds of commodification, the reasons why his ideas were dangerous are seldom discussed. We might begin here with two of his better-known quotes, the first from *The Importance of Being Earnest*, which reads, ‘The truth is rarely pure and never simple. Modern life would be very tedious if it were either, and modern literature a complete impossibility’⁹, with the second from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* exclaiming, ‘Be always searching for new sensations. Be afraid of nothing... A new Hedonism - that is what

⁶ For an accessible and well-presented version of the text see O. Wilde, *De Profundis and Other Writings* (London, Penguin Classics: 2012). The text is also available online at the Project Gutenberg and can be accessed here: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/921/pg921-images.html>

⁷ S. Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (New York, Verso: 2014) p. 2

⁸ Wilde, *De Profundis*

⁹ O. Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (New York, Dover Publications: 2008) p. 6

our century wants. You might be its visible symbol'. What are we to make of both these statements in the contemporary moment? Wilde's message as we read it is all about the need to recognise how the complexity of truth can be all too easily abandoned by those who fall back upon the purity of their theoretical insights and claimed abilities to see the horizon. What's also clear is society has no taste for the hedonistic today unless it can be made as profitable and commodifiable as victimised regalia. Leaving aside his sexuality, what concerns us however is Wilde's vivid imagination and the way he put the aesthetics of style at the heart of his transgression. Wilde wasn't simply a provocateur. He continually sought to transgress each and every social taboo, putting thought into the act as a way to imagine and create new styles of living. Moreover, instead of fleeing from the conflict, which ultimately both resulted in his downfall and yet consecrated his memory as a man of discernible principled outrageousness unto the bitter end, so his resistance becomes something that cannot be ignored. While we shall also turn to Wilde's ultimate transgression, it is important to recognise here how his poetics inspired a notable collaboration that changed the very nature of art and how the figurative could be perceived.

Oscar Wilde's *Salome* is an extraordinary piece of aesthetic theatre which exceeds the boundaries of its staging. What however made this work truly provocative were the accompanying artworks of Aubrey Beardsley¹⁰. Not only was the art in this collaboration equally as important as Wilde's prose, but it would also be integral to the subversion of representations concerning gendered norms and, in the process, dramatically altered the direction of the graphic arts more generally. Striking out in a way that is reminiscent of what Frederick Douglass called an "aesthetic force", Aubrey's revolutionary style would lead to what was eventually called Art Nouveau. To conjure the words of Wilde from an inscription in a copy of *Salome* he gave to the artist, "For Aubrey: for the only artist who, besides myself, knows what the Dance of the Seven Veils is, and can see that invisible dance". Beardsley would become, through association alone cast out alongside Wilde himself. He wasn't homosexual, though the transgressive nature of his art was seen to be proof enough of his perversions¹¹. Such a reading would endure well into the mid 1970's as his sexually charged images would be associated with a type of "vice" that comes 'with an adolescent intensity which communicated itself through every fold and tightly drawn outline of an ostensibly austere style'¹². Such a Freudian reading, we know, is all too common for those who would seek to police desire and ostensibly connect the aesthetic with some Oedipal narrative regarding the assumed perversions of the taboo operating at the level of sexual desire. Far from adolescent, Beardsley's images were well ahead of his own suffocating time. And he was all too aware of the need to provoke the senses into action in order to reimagine life. "If I am not grotesque, I am nothing", he once claimed.¹³ The impact was lasting.

The work of two other 20th century painters is further relevant to us here: Frida Kahlo and Francis Bacon. Kahlo was a true aesthetic revolutionary. She was committed, defiant and transgressed embodiment with raw sexual energy. Depicting the realities of suffering and the brutalism of her own lived experience, still she managed to also transgress reductive accounts of Marxism through a subversive appeal to the ancestral. That she wasn't so easily assimilated as Diego Rivera was actually revealing of her lasting creative strength. While Rivera propagated the leftist revolution with murals one could imagine those on the puritan left exalting and redrawing in newer contemporary arrangements with all the victims' holding hands and sharing vegan cup-cakes, Kahlo literally opened the body up and offered a critical autopsy on the nature of being. Nowhere was this more apparent than with *The Broken Column* (1944), in which her well-documented wounded torso is exposed. As a Roman column replaced her shattered spine, we see a corset holding together her sensual frame while the body reveals its stigmata. The white cloth she wears so reminiscent of iconographies of sacrifice. But Kahlo manages to undo this iconography through her nakedness. For these reasons, David Halpern noted that she produced a veritable "queer archive" through

¹⁰ The images are available online as part of a British Library collection here: <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/aubrey-beardsley-illustrations-for-salome-by-oscar-wilde>

¹¹ See especially, B. Brophy, *Black and White: A Portrait of Aubrey Beardsley* (London, Jonathan Cape: 1968), L. Zatlin, *Aubrey Beardsley and Victorian Sexual Politics* (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1990), and C. Snodgrass, *Aubrey Beardsley: Dandy of the Grotesque* (New York and Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1995).

¹² <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1976/12/09/the-genius-of-aubrey-beardsley/>

¹³ <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-faith-behind-aubrey-beardsleys-sexually-charged-art>

her various performances of a subjectivity that is 'at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant ... an identity without an essence' that projects a queering of the self which is 'not a positivity but a positionality *vis-à-vis* the normative.'¹⁴ While we have no doubt this work in particular is a phenomenally powerful moment in the history of aesthetics, what Kahlo also reminds us is that the queer aesthetic is more than half a century old. Moreover, she wasn't ontologically broken, it was the fateful contingency of life that shattered her. As she famously recalled, 'There have been two great accidents in my life. One was the trolley, and the other was Diego'. Standing as a defiant counter to the rule of moral law so embodied by the sovereign man (the artwork invariably invites a further aesthetic comparison with the frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan*), one can only wonder what she would have made of the descent into puritanism today. Kahlo was fully committed to the freedom of expression, as shown in a letter sent to the Mexican President Alemán in 1948 following the censoring and defacement of one of Diego's murals. As she explained to him: 'In democratic Mexico...we paint saints and Virgins of Guadalupe, as well as paintings with a revolutionary content, on the monumental staircase of the Palacio Nacional... Let people from all over the world come to Mexico to learn how in Mexico we respect freedom of expression... That type of crime against the culture of a country, against the right that every man has to express his ideas—those criminal attacks against freedom have only been committed in regimes like Hitler's... If you do not act as an authentic Mexican at this critical moment, by defending your own decrees and rights, then let the science - and history book burning start; let the works of art be destroyed with rocks or fire'¹⁵.

When Bacon arrived on the scene he was loathed and reviled in equal measure by the arts and political establishments. Partly inflected by her own racism towards the Irish, Margaret Thatcher later called him a horrid little man who "paints those dreadful pictures". Born in Dublin, Bacon would often recall his own childhood and a deeply traumatic episode when his profoundly religious father horsewhipped him for cross dressing and for his effeminate behaviour. By the time he painted his first real masterpiece, *The Crucifixion* (1933), Bacon was unapologetically homosexual, and would later make Soho a den for his obsessive sexual predations. Very few painters come close to Bacon in his depictions of violence. He had no equivalence in terms of the way he broke with the figurative to reimagine what painting offers as a system of violent and transgressive thought itself. We see this already with *The Crucifixion* which brings a tremendous violence to bear upon sacred representations as the body of Christ is reduced to raw and primitive flesh. There is no theology at work here, simply the ghosted meat left to hang for our viewing (dis)pleasure: 'I've always been very moved by pictures about slaughterhouses and meat, and to me they belong very much to the whole thing of Crucifixion'¹⁶, Bacon explained. 'I know for religious people', he added, 'the Crucifixion has a totally different significance. But as a non-believer, it was just an act of a man's behaviour, a way of behaviour to another... If I go into a butcher's shop, I always think it's surprising that I wasn't there instead of the animal'¹⁷. Long before Julia Kristeva proposed flesh and meat as the basis for a new philosophy of the abject, and long before abjection became *de rigeur* for queer theorists, Bacon was making flesh and meat the subject of art.

Doing so, Bacon would walk the tightrope between the figurative and the abstract to assault the viewer's senses. He would deform things into life through a brutal indiscernibility, which defies categorisation. 'It's an attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly'¹⁸, he would explain. In this regard, the accidental is also openly recruited into the psychotic drama as a way to continually subvert the tendency to represent in accordance with what should be identical or truthful to form. The purpose for art in this respect is to 'open up or rather, I should say, unlock the valves of feeling and therefore return the onlooker to life more violently'¹⁹. Quite evidently, this is a world away from the realm of order so favoured by conservatives and the realm of reason so favoured by liberals, both of which

¹⁴ D. Halpern, *Saint Foucault Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford, Oxford University Press: 1997) p. 62

¹⁵ Cited in A. Gotthardt, "Frida Kahlo on the Dangers of Censorship", (*Artsy*, September 19, 2019). Online at: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-frida-kahlo-dangers-censorship>

¹⁶ David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* (London, Thames & Hudson: 1980) p. 23

¹⁷ Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* pp. 23, 46

¹⁸ Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* p. 12

¹⁹ Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* p. 17

ultimately became continuant elements of liberalism, which for Bacon we might see as illusions that mask the operations of power. As he would note in response to a question on the “imitations of morality”: ‘When talking about the violence of paint, its nothing to do with the violence of war. It’s to do with an attempt to remake the violence of reality itself... We nearly always live through screens – a screened existence. And I sometimes think, when people say my work looks violent, that perhaps I have from time to time been able to clear away one or two of the veils or screens’²⁰. Living today in a world Bacon would barely recognise, our challenge has however shifted to one where the affective itself is now subjected to the literal power of the screen. Yet this may be revealing of his true contemporaneity. For the screen, like the canvas, also tells us just as much about the society through the spectator’s gaze. And after all, was the hysteria of the watchers, those who will look upon the violence of art and shriek with expectant theological repulsion, not that which Bacon was warning us against? And was that which was truly diabolical, not the figures at the base of the Crucifixion, but the mourners who would soon use the suffering of the cross to bring a much more sustained suffering down upon the world?

Like Wilde before him, Bacon was no saint and indeed his psychological violence should also be considered. The brilliance of Bacon was to tear apart the figurative and bring to the fore invisible lines of force. Empty eyes and tormented screams, the artist managed to add movement, intensity and depth to his compositions which ultimately killed off the figurative as conventionally drawn in all its staged and shallow realism. An act which the elitists found equally abhorrent. With eerie similarities to Wilde and Douglas, the relationship between Bacon and the younger George Dyer was fractious and fuelled by conflict and brutal sexual rage. But unlike Wilde who was evidently made to suffer by Douglas, it was Bacon who preyed on the younger Dyer’s vulnerability. In a quintessentially queer move, revealed in the brutal tenderness of the artist’s numerous depictions of his muse lover, he had given over to Bacon precisely the task to expose all his newly manufactured vulnerabilities and even transform himself from his working-class toughness (which initially attracted Bacon) into something he wasn’t, on account of the artist’s seductive persuasion. With Dyer then left fully exposed and his vulnerable effigy open for all to see, the psychological harm proved fatal, as Bacon’s insufferable violence proved too much of a burden for the lover, who eventually took his own life as he escaped from the tortures of Bacon’s vindictive and sadistic demands. Living with a gay artist of such intensity left Dyer a broken and non-subjective body as abject as the exposed meat the artist painted on canvas, and which the artist himself captured in his stunning yet harrowing *Triptych May—June 1973*, a work that confronts the moment of Dyer’s death. Dyer wasn’t ontologically vulnerable. He was broken through the demands of exposure to a suffocating form of love that was emotionally unbearable in all its fragility, and which made him vulnerable and dependent upon an affective state he knew to be a falsehood. It was the embrace of vulnerability, which proved to be his fatal undoing. And if Bacon’s life offers any warning, its not that of the dangers posed by a toxic masculinity, but the *violence of vulnerability itself*.

What we see in Kahlo as well as in Bacon is not simply a creative queer violence concerned with disturbing norms or producing alternatives, but the violence of master iconoclasts aimed at destroying spectacle. A violence which undoes spectacle, a violence which posits itself against all spectacle by a becoming which strips the image of its spectacle as affective currency for a singular propagation. As Gilles Deleuze remarked of Bacon, what is happening, what happens, in Bacon’s paintings is typically ‘not a spectacle or a representation...one discovers in Bacon’s paintings an attempt to eliminate every spectator, and consequently every spectator’²¹. We know, from Guy Debord, that the power and development of capital is heavily tied up with its capacities to deploy and exploit images. Debord’s concept of spectacle famously described ‘the means by which our experiences are constantly mediated by images that produce their own forms of alienated social relations’²². It is not merely ‘a collection of images, but a social relation among

²⁰ Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon* p. 82

²¹ G. Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* (London, Continuum: 2005) p. 9

²² A. Murray, ‘Beyond Spectacle and the Image: The Poetics of Guy Debord and Agamben’ in Justin Clemens, Nicholas Heron and Alex Murray (eds.), *The Work of Giorgio Agamben: Law, Literature and Life* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press: 2011) p. 166

people, mediated by images²³. For Debord the spectacle is aimed at controlling, not the means of production, but the entire social and cultural infrastructure, through the deployment of images; a deployment of images that works to destroy a public's very abilities to see, for it 'concentrates all gazing and all consciousness'²⁴ while finding vision to be the sense through which human subjugation can best be obtained. It is both the affirmation of appearance and the affirmation of human life as mere appearance²⁵. 'It says nothing more than 'that which appears is good, that which is good appears'²⁶. If earlier phases of the domination of capital over human life degraded their being into having, the contemporary phase has led to a shift from having into appearing, 'from which all actual "having" must draw its immediate prestige and its ultimate function'²⁷. The spectacle is by definition immune from human activity, inaccessible to any political intervention. It is the opposite of dialogue. It seduces us into believing we are communing with it and its images yet works tirelessly to prevent us from accessing it and to maintaining a non-dialogical relation between power and audience. Images function for the spectacle to maintain an illusion of dialogue, while our imaginations become the source of our subjection. As such the task of critique, Debord maintained, is to expose the spectacle as the 'visible negation of life, as a negation of life which has become visible'²⁸. Which is to render capital itself into the form of the visible, for 'the spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image'²⁹. That is why we may gesture, the penchant today to not engage in debate, to not engage in disagreement, to not engage in confrontations with the intolerable are nothing but spectacle.

What we are dealing with in the contemporary moment and its concerns with free expression then is in many ways that very same problem which Debord brought attention to in the 1960s and which artists like Bacon and Kahlo were addressing in their work too. Indeed, the power of Debord's concept of spectacle may well have been reinforced over historical time. Consider the proliferation of pictorial images enabled by social media, the 'image-charged' relation with our worlds which we inhabit and have possessed for some time now³⁰, the density of image-environments made a reality by social media, and the endless proliferation of technological devices with which photographic images are now made and circulated. Research into the lifecycle of photographic images conducted by the Hillman Photography Initiative at the Carnegie Museum of Art suggests that the average networked individual encounters around 5,000 photographic images a day³¹. The consequence of these media and their utilization is that the spectacle is no longer a property of states or top-down regimes of economy but an everyday practice which peoples subject upon themselves. Our imaginations are said to be governed by the pictorial images that are circulated through these media, facilitating a sense of false intimacy with our worlds, as we become used to discussing images as if they were realities³². Even our basic capacities for memory, it is said, are being outsourced to digital devices such as the camera phones on which so many photographic images are made and circulated every day³³. Imperceptibly, this works to limit 'our relation to the world and others to that which can be had through images'³⁴. The turning of the world into spectacle represents, the anthropologist Marc Auge argued as early as the 1990s, 'the most perverse trait' of the 'supermodernity' we now inhabit such that 'the only world that we can speak of today is the world of the image'³⁵. Indeed perhaps not only has Debord's concept of spectacle been reinforced by the technological developments that have occurred in the time since he wrote, and by the ever denser image environments which we inhabit. Perhaps it has, as Baudrillard long ago suggested, been surpassed by a new strategy of 'virtuality', one that develops out of that of the spectacle

²³ G. Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, Black & Red: 2010) p. 4

²⁴ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* p. 3

²⁵ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* p. 10

²⁶ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* p. 12

²⁷ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* p. 17

²⁸ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* p. 10

²⁹ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* p. 34

³⁰ M. Auge, *An Anthropology for Contemporary Worlds* (Stanford, Stanford University Press: 1994) pp. 64-65

³¹ Hillman Photography Initiative, (2014), 'About Hillman Photography Initiative' Online at: <http://www.nowseethis.org/about> p. 65

³² Auge, *An Anthropology for Contemporary Worlds* p. 65

³³ NPR (2014), 'Overexposed? Camera Phones Could Be Washing Out Our Memories', <http://www.wbur.org/npr/314592247/overexposed-camera-phones-could-be-washing-out-our-memories?ft=3&f=314592247>

³⁴ Auge, *An Anthropology for Contemporary Worlds* p. 122

³⁵ Auge, *An Anthropology for Contemporary Worlds* p. 122

but which is different, in so far as it leaves no room for critical consciousness³⁶. The technologically enabled image truly has become us. During the era of spectacle we could at least declaim our alienation from the world of images into which we were cast, abhorring our reduction to the situation of being an abject spectator of abject images. But today, as Baudrillard points out, 'we are no longer spectators, but actors in the performance, and actors increasingly integrated into the course of that performance'. The critique of images is more difficult when we are not simply their spectators but actors within the images themselves – especially images of inescapable ruination.

Causing a Sensation

With hindsight, we can now see that the Sensation exhibition of contemporary art held in London in 1997, then New York in 1999, represented a watershed moment in the history of aesthetics and the image as affectively framed. This event arrived at the height of liberal optimism. While Bill Clinton was entering his second terms as President of the United States, Tony Blair would sweep New Labour to power with his own brand of "Cool Britannia", which openly recruited artists and creatives. Put together by the public relations guru Charles Saatchi, who knew better than most the importance and the power of the image, the Sensation exhibition redefined the boundaries of conceptual art and pushed against many existing social taboos. It also arrived in a moment when the transgressive potential for art and the shock of the new fully collided with concerns over the shock of the image, and whose scattered fragments have left us all to wonder whether the purpose for art thereafter should truly be about a commitment to what's simply "good for nothing". While the furore in the United Kingdom focused on the much less interesting but no doubt provocative *Myra* piece by Marcus Harvey (a work that would have zero chance of making a debut in today's sanitised climate), there was an even greater reaction when it arrived in America, notably in response to Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary*, whose depiction of a black mother of Jesus so unsettled white Christian America. One of the most vocal critics was then Mayor Rudy Giuliani, who's notorious three strikes rule revealed further just how structurally discriminatory the Nation was. Set against a shimmering gold background, Ofili's work offered a black depiction of Mary set against images cut from pornographic magazines. For Carol Becker, the reason why it caused such controversy was because Ofili broke away from the sacred and was intent on 'transforming the Holy Virgin into an exuberant, folkloric image... probably most controversial of all, he made his own representation of the Virgin, defiant of tradition'³⁷.

Alongside showcasing works of Tracey Emin, Jenny Saville, and Sarah Lucas, who pushed female sexuality in explicit and powerful ways to offer a direct challenge to the normative basis for acceptability, including the limits concerning objectification and the rightful exposure of the body as imposed by some feminist groups, the event also brought attention to two of the most compelling of all living British artists, Jake and Dinos Chapman. The brothers have continued to creatively expose the limits of normative standards, including the purity of art itself – without being the least bit concerned with normativity and half-baked attempts at manufacturing social disgust. Over-coming was all that mattered. Whether transgressing social phobias concerning genocide, paedophilia, the culture of happiness, or even the untouchable figure of Steven Hawkins, for the Chapmans, art is a horror show. Indeed, the purpose of art is not to present us with cosy feelings or repair the wounds of some past trauma though a naked appeal to the proper or corrective psycho-affective conditioning. Art brings an immense violence to the world, which insists upon the need to confront the intolerable and unleash every single feeling. As Jake explained to one of us, 'there is another form of violence that is creatively destructive. This is the violence I think we can talk about in the context of art, for while art offers a critique of the former, it engages in the latter'³⁸. Working against narratives of human intention, especially the good or bad intentions of one's emotional states, the purpose of art is to provoke an emotional transgression that cannot be known in advance: 'Our interest in making art is not about producing some object that reveals the essence of its maker, nor is it about offering

³⁶ J. Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (New York, Verso: 1996)

³⁷ C. Becker, "Brooklyn Museum: Messing with the Sacred" in M. Gioni et. al. *Chris Ofili: Night and Day* (New York, Rizzoli: 2009) p. 84.

³⁸ B. Evans & J. Chapman "The Violence of Art" (The Los Angeles Review of Books, Oct 5th 2017). Online at: <https://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/histories-of-violence-the-violence-of-art/>

up something autobiographically confessional. It is precisely the opposite. It is about demonstrating a certain refusal or at least critical disruption of the very idea of an authentic anthropomorphic self. And it seeks to unhinge intentionality and all the suffocating rationalities that art ostensibly confirms. So, in that sense art offers a kind of ontological violence — an autonomously destructive energy, which comes alive in the creative process — a process that cannot be mastered by the author'. Thus, seeking to bring about the destruction of all claims to ontological surety and emotional comforting of the self, 'whether it sets out to be violent or not, such a work of art will present itself as an assault upon the identity of any given viewer seeking the confirmation of their identity'. This idea was sensational in 1997. It is truly dangerous in the world we inhabit today.

There is a need however to make a certain qualification here. There's never been a golden age of culture. Culture has always been cancelled. And that is the problem! We've spent enough time working with cultural producers to see first-hand how commissioning processes work and how they continually cancel what is deemed to be too transgressive. Indeed, much of the commissioning of the arts today has less to do with originality than with celebrating identity, while ensuring no offence is caused to certain groups who have now managed to claim a monopoly within the complex identity victim matrix. It is almost impossible for an emerging artist to break into the scene without professing some identity claim of a discernible minoritarian positioning, even if such minorities have been part of the cultural mainstream for decades. Galleries across the world have been full for quite some time of retrospectives and new collectives by artists who can be neatly grouped simply by gender, race, and sexual orientation. Indigenous art is all the rage, so long as it echoes the sentimental expectations of what indigeneity should look like which non-indigenous curators and gallerists impose, often financed by governments with an interest in policing the image of indigeneity today. TATE Modern's "Women and Art" and "Queer Lives and Art" sections are among other obvious though no less unique examples of such curatorial policing. While the former brings celebrated female artists such as the truly sensational Ana Mendieta and the radical Guerrilla Girls of the late eighties together with others far less interesting, the latter celebrates the exceptional brilliance of Cy Twombly, the far more commodified Andy Warhol, onto the more challenging and less fitting Gilbert and George. Indeed, leaving aside the abject protestations of those who advocate a certain affective conformity to their own artistically dubious standards, we have every confidence the latter duo would continue to take direct aim at moral sentimentality and be among the most vocal defenders of the freedom of speech. This commitment to complete freedom for art would be notably evidenced from the 1970's onwards, notably with their *Human Bondage* (1974) series of panels, which blended together the iconography of the Cross and the Swastika. This provocative work appeared at a time in Britain when the Far Right, in the form of the National Front, was far more mobilised and organised than it is today.³⁹ Resolutely committing to undoing the politics of identity, especially as it related to notions of gentrification⁴⁰, one does wonder what the identity police of the left would make of these comments today by the queer artists in an interview with George Burns in 1981 on claims they were fascist:⁴¹

George: It's a life-force. It's a life-force we accept very much.

Gilbert: You could say that Christian goodness is fascist. What people used to believe was good—religion—you could say that is fascist. Many people would say so.

George: I mean, we're only here because of the World War II turmoil of fascism anyway. Life doesn't exist without it ... Without the good works of the people that the extreme left call fascist there wouldn't even be a civilisation.

³⁹ M. Worley and N. Copsy, "White Youth: The Far Right, Punk and British Youth Culture, 1977–87" (*JOMEC Journal* No.9 2016) p. 29

⁴⁰ As they responded in a question regarding this concept: George: "We're very against the term gentrification. We think it's classist and sexist, because you'd never say ladyfication." Gilbert: "Or Jewification." George: "Or blackification. Or Bangladeshification. They've only got it in for white people. It's extraordinary. It's punishing the honkies." Online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2017/nov/15/gilbert-and-george-50-years-interview>

⁴¹ R. Violette and H. U. Obrist (eds.), "Gilbert and George: Interview with Gordon Burn, 1974", in *The Words of Gilbert and George: With Portraits of the Artists From 1968 to 1997* (London, Thames and Hudson: 1997) pp. 68–73.

And perhaps even more challenging still would be the connections they drew between the violence of the skinhead movement and queer culture in the extreme political landscape of 1970's Britain, which notes how the lines between the right and the gay community were never so clearly determined⁴²:

Gilbert: Fighting is rather nice. Do you remember when they broke my nose?

George: They were the skinhead types.

Gilbert: Yes, they kicked us in once.

George: It was fun. It was the early days. This was in Finsbury Park, which is very tough. Such a marvellous style of dress they have, the skinheads. Marvellous. Lovely, really. We were their greatest supporters, you know. It's rather unfair they attacked us. Everybody's thinking about this great wave of violence and there are we walking around the streets admiring this amazing style. Splendid.

Gilbert: You never see it anymore. Not in the East End.

George: It's a style sported rather heavily by male prostitutes. I think that's the last stronghold of skinheads in London. I don't know why. Gentlemen Prefer Skinheads, or something.

Drawing attention to this has nothing to do with sanctioning or licencing cruelty. Nor does it suggest that art can merely sow whatever chaos with the hope that whatever follows can be justified in the name of art. It is however to acknowledge how the complexities of relations between sexuality and violence are never as clear cut as reductive masculine, feminist and queer determinations continue to suggest. And it is also to affirm that without complete freedom for art, freedom itself is an utter sham. In respect to the more complex relationships between sexuality and violence, for example, while in the late 80's the young Mike Tyson was living up to his self-styled image of being the "baddest man on the planet", reigning over the sport as the undisputed heavyweight champion, Jimmy Sommerville in Britain released the ultimate gay anthem "You Make me Feel (mighty real)". What's also striking in the video to the song was an acknowledgement of how Tyson was a gay icon at the time. Somerville could be seen in the video wearing a white t-shirt with the boxer's image and name emblazoned on front, as he sang: 'Cause I know you'll love me like you should'. Having been convicted for heterosexual rape, Tyson would in a number of his uncontrollable psychotic episodes of rage make explicit homophobic and sexist remarks. Yet we cannot overlook how his earlier appearance aroused a certain homoerotic fascination with his brutalism, which is also an unwritten truth of sport and physical prowess more generally. In 2008, James Toback produced a documentary on the fighter, the promotional poster for which is as close to a reworking of an advertisement of a Greek tragedy as could be possible. It is the final scene to this documentary that's striking however as the reflective, yet still defiant Tyson is filmed on a beach reciting the lines from Oscar Wilde's "The Ballard of Reading Gaol":

"And all men kill the thing they love,
By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!"

Wilde himself would have a strange relationship with the world of boxing. His lover Douglas (for whom *De Profundis* was written) was the son of John Sholto Douglas, the eighth Marquess of Queensbury whose published rules in 1865 effectively rescued boxing by making it more "civilised" and "gentlemanly". It was against Queensbury's public accusations of sodomy that Wilde brought his initial charge of libel, which proved to be his eventual undoing as Queensbury's evidence proved the contrary. These indiscernible lines between sexuality and the violence of boxing are something that would no doubt resonate with George Bataille's understanding of pleasure. There is a form of arousal, he argued, to be seen in the punishment

⁴² Violette and Obrist, "Gilbert and George: Interview with Gordon Burn, 1974", 71-72.

people suffer, putting their bodies on the line for our own viewing pleasure, sporting or otherwise, along with its more sadistic and torturous manifestations. Or to put it another way, just as it's absurd to say that the queering of politics today continues to be the standard for thinking about transgression, so it's equally absurd to claim all violence is masculine. This in fact is where art truly comes into its own; rather than licensing violence, it breaks down every taboo and every mythical claim – including and especially the purity of the victim, whose occasional demands to close the political are as audible as the visual screams of any of Bacon's artwork.

Towards a theory of the Infidel

Alexander McQueen was one of the most outstanding aesthetic visionaries of our generation. A master craftsman with an art for the outrageous, his originality and unapologetic style took haute couture out of the doldrums of commodification into the realm of fantasy and its terrifying aesthesis. McQueen's productions were "savagely beautiful" to echo the title of his posthumous exhibition. His flamboyant creations continued to challenge the prejudices and limitations of aesthetic judgement. He was devastatingly outrageous in the best sense of the term. And in the process, he brought his own poetic violence to an otherwise dull bourgeoisie world. Though that you were looking at something that was a work of art with all its theatricality instead of mere fashion was never in question. 'In fashion', he once explained, the show 'should make you think, there is no point in doing it if it's not going to create some sort of emotion'⁴³. And such emotions would always bring together the transgressive with the extreme, the dramatic with the uncertain. In many ways, the designer brought the terror of the sublime into full conversation with a visuality of disturbance, unsettling the realm of appearances – the way things ought to look before us, not to merely invite us in, but to emancipate the spectators through a certain disgust of the intolerable abjectness of the world. As Andrew Bolton wrote, 'Over and over again, his shows took his audience to the limits of reason, eliciting an uneasy pleasure that merged wonder and terror, incredulity and revulsion. For McQueen, the Sublime was the strongest of passions, as it contained the potential for exaltation and transcendence beyond the quotidian'⁴⁴. The runway as such became more than spectacle for promoting the sacred value of fashion. It became a battlefield, where all forces collided, love and hate, past and present, identity and the future.

This is where we find McQueen to be particularly instructive for our concerns. The counter to fascism is not anti-fascism, but the political imagination. McQueen sets the scene where identity is not countered by another identity or even non-identity. Identity after-all can only thrive through clear opposition, dialectics, and mimesis. Asserting the creativity of the artist, McQueen shows how the counter to identity is the future. A vision of art as such whose images rip thought itself from the future to unsettle the present. It is in this moment where we note the proper and true meaning of "originality". Necessarily singular, it makes an enemy of all claims to normalisation and conformity. This didn't mean to say that McQueen disavowed the ancestral. In 1995, for example, he introduced his tartan clad collection, with an evident nod to both his Scottish heritage and the earlier Punk movement, in a show titled *Highland Rape* based on the final battle of the Jacobin uprising. 'What the British did there', he explained, 'was nothing short of genocide'⁴⁵. We are also reminded of the "Rape of Creativity" by Jake and Dinos Chapman, who were understudies to Gilbert and George for a while. With their usual dark wit and provocation, the works again illustrated their desire to transgress the sacred and break the taboo of all representation. A catalogue for their exhibition came with its own health warning that noted: 'The contents of this exhibition may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria and anxiety. If you suffer from high blood pressure, a nervous disorder or palpitations you should consult your doctor before viewing this exhibition'. Behind the Chapman's pessimism and evident provocation of the policing of affective states of being however is a serious message that becomes even more urgent in the moment we are entering. When you engage in a cultural war against transgression, it's only a matter of time before you start waging non-violent violence against the forces of creativity itself. The rape of creativity as such will produce bastard children who are so broken and

⁴³ Pirus, No. 8 June 1996

⁴⁴ A. McQueen, *Savage Beauty* (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art: 2011) p. 11

⁴⁵ McQueen, *Savage Beauty* p. 14

horrified by their own existence, there will be nothing left except piety and total submission to the post-political order. The Chapmans' signature adaptation of the smiling face thus becomes a warning to a state of broken happiness, where nothing original can be produced, and nothing challenging said for fear of breaking further an already broken vision of the world. How terribly nihilistic!

Like the Chapmans, McQueen was a working-class boy who would continually renounce privilege. As Susannah Frankel noted, McQueen 'spent his early career intent on subverting the intricate artifice and anachronistic hierarchy that the fashion world guards so jealously. Even at the end of his life, and height of his fame, McQueen remained magnificently anti-establishment at heart'⁴⁶. There is no industry which expresses more the gaiety of privilege than fashion. It wasn't therefore McQueen's open gayness that made him a pariah or outcast, after-all it was the artform where queerness truly reigned supreme and most revealed its ability to seamlessly marry with the forces of identity commodification and the selling of "lifestyles". It was McQueen's raw imagination that came from a background in which you learn to see the dullness of mediocrity of the privileged, along with their image consciousness that's always bought or generously donated by those creatives who never truly fit in their scene. McQueen's runways thus provide a perfect critical metaphor for all walks of life. By the time *Sensation* was being displayed in London, McQueen hosted his *Dante* exhibition in a church in Spitalfields, which featured models wearing thorn crowns and animal horns, while letting loose skeletons and vampires in a place of Holy sanctuary. 'I know I am provocative', he later said. 'You don't have to like it but you have to acknowledge it'. Indeed, for such acknowledgement to be seen as revolutionary, it 'should never be politically correct'⁴⁷.

Our wager is that faced with this crisis in the art of free expression today we need to reimagine a new conceptual anti-figure who might allow us to break away from the hyper-moralism of the times. This must be more outrageous and untimely than the anti-Christ, who Nietzsche deployed to such devastating effect. The least fleshed out figure in the whole of modern philosophy is the Infidel. In a world that until recently was dominated by the dogmatic analytics of realism vs the Kantian universalists, the concern with explicit categories of the theological were displaced by more technical deliberations. It wasn't that religion ever went away or left the scene to the triumph of secular reason. On the contrary, the sacred found its re-entry first through the body of the hero and the state then onto the body of the victim with the advent of global liberalism and its religion for the masses. Kant would however deal a forceful blow to the critical figure of the infidel through his technical insistence on the rubric of rationality and its fixation with the irrational impulses of the non-conformist mind. Indeed, while the spectre of the infidel would return in relation to the violence of Islam to justify the slaughter of the non-believers, it has continued to be tied to debates concerning orthodox religion and not the problem of moralism and truth. It is here we should purposefully depart from Alain Badiou and his fidelities⁴⁸. As a resistive and poetic subject, the infidel challenges all absolute claims to truth based on an uncompromising morality. The shadow of the infidel never casts a melancholic dawn. Unlike the preachers and their following congregation who continue to look for meaning amongst the metaphysical stars, whose violence rains back down to earth with a sacred moral surety, the infidels looks instead into the black sun of the void⁴⁹. Reaching beyond good and evil remains their unhallowed quest.

The infidels refuse to be crushed by the weight of the negative. They also recognise how the battle over established values merely reproduces the logics of moral servitude. The infidels have no desire to replace God, the angels of history or the authoritarian priest. They have no desire for sainthood, nor do they wish to sacrifice disbelieving others at the alters of truth. Always a pariah, the infidel is not however driven by resentment despite not wishing to be part of the congregation. Their aim is to free thought and free life from every form of policing and banishment. In doing so, they learn to make the wilderness their own. For

⁴⁶ McQueen, *Savage Beauty* p. 18

⁴⁷ McQueen, *Savage Beauty* p. 19

⁴⁸ The idea of a certain fidelity to truth, hence a fidelity to the event is central to Badiou's intellectual project. On this see especially his books *Being and Event*, whereas a more accessible account is further provided in his book *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*.

⁴⁹ On the links between the sacred and the void see Evans, *Ecce Humanitas*

the infidel, life then is not in need of saving, it is not a contradiction to be resolved, nor is it meaningless. Refusing to accept mechanical means to bring about the legislated and normatively determined ends in theories on life, they joyfully stand directly in opposition to the forces of nihilism and its hierarchies of truth. Recognising that thought is not something to legislate against, they are exhausted by the limits. The infidel as such has no desire to join the army of triumphant slaves, denouncing appearances and virtuously correcting bad arguments by misguided demons. Such appeals to bad consciousness merely reduce power once again to an object of representation, while reciting new parables of the negative to indebted others with the burden of guilt. Such objectification remains key to the logics of morality and its conquests. Even Lucifer, after all, has his own statue on public display in the gardens of Madrid. How wonderful would it therefore be to leave the plinth in Bristol that once held Edward Colston aloft empty in dedication to all the infidels, who would refuse to even stand where he once stood?

We recognise that this call to whatever conceptual figure could appear again like some theoretical posturing. That we critique a theory to now invoke our own better theory, which others simply hadn't seen. Nothing could be further from the truth and further removed from our aspiration. The infidel is not some abstraction, even if they understand the explosive power of the abstract. The infidel is not some fiction, even if they understand the power of fabulation. The infidel is simply those who across history, through their own creative defiance have brought the sacred truth of the age into question, haven't bowed down in front of the altars of moral conformism, and have above all else shown through their creative energies there is no more important political force than the art of transgression. The infidel then is the witness of history, not simply of the past or living in the moment, but those who have the courage to put everything on the line. Like Jean Genet, that queer icon which queer theory today is increasingly ashamed of, they refuse to give up on their perversions and refuse to act them out simply in the space of the imaginary or fantasy. For the infidel what is essential is to convert the image to the real. Not that they walked up to the line, then made the decision to cross over into the breach and face the consequences of their jump into the unknown. They were already the exceptional, looking back and through their very transgressions making the line possible in the first place. The infidel is the limit, already surpassed. Infidels are the creative force, already ahead of the moment, who get drawn back into the realm of the tolerable. It is for this reason, they can never be defeated, for their power has always and already exceeded those who wish to clip their wings and turn their flight into a broken lament. Such figures don't need inventing. They invent themselves. And they only have one thing in common. Never part of any cabalistic ism. The infidel forever remains the radically singular.

Every major crisis in a social order results in a crisis of truth. The death of liberalism is no different. What is at stake here is a new risk – a risk of being thrown into a total collapse led by uncompromising puritan actors who claim to be emancipating yet work in the name of the very emerging order of technologically designed power. A danger so evident with the digital masses who focusing on vanquishing symbols from the past, blind us to the technological power that's apparent right before our eyes. Returning to Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, the philosopher specifically deals with such piety by bringing us directly to the issue of deception, which so irks puritan leftists today: 'This unconditional will to truth - what is it? Is it the will not to let oneself be deceived? Is it the will not to deceive? For the will to truth could be interpreted in this second way, too - if 'I do not want to deceive myself is included as a special case under the generalization 'I do not want to deceive'. But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived?'. Crucially, for Nietzsche, those who fall back upon the claims of deception are not the truth Sayers, on the contrary, they operate within a very regimented image of thought that is fully complicit in perpetuating the greatest of untruths about the nature of the human subject. Such a will to truth, especially of those who critique morality, law and identity from a position of weakness in order to entrench themselves even further within the political imaginary, is all too pious and theological in its willingness to sacrifice what it never really denies:

[It] must have originated in spite of the fact that the disutility and dangerousness of 'the will to truth' or 'truth at any price' is proved to it constantly. 'At any price': we understand

this well enough once we have offered and slaughtered one faith after another on this altar! Consequently, 'will to truth' does not mean 'I do not want to let myself be deceived' but - there is no alternative - 'I will not deceive, not even myself'; and with that we stand on moral ground ... you will have gathered what I am getting at, namely, that it is still a metaphysical faith upon which our faith in science rests - that even we knowers of today, we godless anti-metaphysicians, still take our fire, too, from the flame lit by the thousand-year-old faith, the Christian faith which was also Plato's faith, that God is truth; that truth is divine. . .

Saturated by altered images as we are today, it is evidently a falsity to see deception as something that's simply deviant or unreal. Everyone who is "connected" has become a curator of their own image-laden realities. Deception cannot as such be simply reduced to a distorted image in the realm of one's perception. Even the most crude and basic understanding of abstract art would show how deception can actually lead to the liberation of perception and the conditions of the real. To believe another world is necessary, we need to deceive ourselves it is possible. This is not about construing wilful untruths or lies about the human condition. Nor is the art of deception something that is alien to us either. We are always deceiving ourselves, especially in the age of the image. No image we see presents to us the given truth of any situation. Judith Butler understood this better than most. What has changed however are the moral lies now being enforced upon on the deceptions of truth. People know that truth is beyond us, and yet some still demand new absolutes as a matter of selective positioning. We know, as Paul Virilio said, we can no longer believe our eyes, yet still we demand truth in perception and the order of appearances. Again, we can think of this in the context of the University and the position of the imposter. Those from genuinely underprivileged and marginalized backgrounds know all too well what it means to feel like an imposter in the august setting of the university campus. Being outed as poor was just as prescient as being outed as anything else in this site of normative privilege. One of the benefits however of living before the age of social media was the ability to reinvent oneself. It is here we learned how deception wasn't just a coping strategy as you pretended to give a damn about colleagues or self-flagellating others with their fuckwit, boring lives, as well as how to be economic with truths about our own existence. It was all about pushing the boundaries of the self and learning to outlive your past and seize the present, through deception. Such potential for reinvention is fully denied to millennials. But this hasn't stopped the fear of outing, on the contrary, everybody is now subject to its potential gaze. Today, as suspicions reign supreme, everyone is being outed as closet racists, homophobes, transphobes, even if they explicitly recognise fully the rights of each and every person to live a life of their choosing. Being found out as some kind of imposter was once the fear everyone who was underprivileged or outside the normative standard felt. This has now been weaponised, and the very creative potential of deception fully criminalised by those who are unable to recognise the myths they perpetuate and the hypocritical lies concerning ontology, the human condition, the demands for truth, and the moral sureties they preach. Thus, in this world where everyone is set up as judges of their own tribunals, Nietzsche's insistence that "we possess art *lest we perish from the truth*" is more resonant than ever. Or as Wilde might insist, 'What we have to do, what at any rate it is our duty to do, is to revive the old art of Lying'.

Not unrelated, it is common today to demand a return to truth in response to the blatant falsehoods of the likes of Trump. This is as misguided as believing Hilary Clinton would have been any better in 2016 or that Biden represents some kind of return to civility and progress. The alt-right shouldn't be countered with more truth, more science, better reason. What's needed instead is a better fiction that's outrageous enough to make jest of all their hypocrisies. This demands a new fabulation and style for living, which is as deceptive as it is real. In the age of social media, which the likes of Trump have mastered all too well, perhaps deception is now all that we have left in terms of viable resistance. Unless, of course, we opt to fully pull ourselves off the grid, which would be largely tantamount to a nihilistic leap into a system of ex communication whose violence is now all too apparent. This brings us back to Wilde who was a master in the art of deception. He would use it to create a new aesthetic, which was pivotal to how we learned to understand the changing nature of the radical spirit of outrageousness as a creative and resistive strategy.

Wilde was no doubt aware of his position as an infidel, which was inextricably bound to his transgressive infidelities. As he wrote in *De Profundis* on the culture of incarceration: ‘With us [the privileged], prison makes a man a pariah’. But Wilde also understood resistance was never about banning, nor was it easily explained in terms of disavowal. Let’s return to *De Profundis* and his eventual turn in the prose to the question of religion and the role of Christ. In his critical engagement, Critchley⁵⁰ is particularly taken by Wilde’s statement “Everything to be true must become a religion”, which leads, he argues, to a faith of the faithless, which maintains a distinct relationship to truth and yet allows for its veritable transfiguration. Our concern with this reading is ultimately that it is all too theological, as Critchley openly admits, hence, reduces the poetic to the sacred. Wilde undoubtedly leaves himself open to the sacred, never more so than with his recital in *De Profundis* of Wordsworth: “Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark. And has the nature of infinity”. But it was confronting this he imagined the possibility for a new life – the *Vita Nuova*. Wilde is clear here on where liberation does not dwell and what is necessary to bring about his new state of being: ‘Religion does not help me. The faith that others give to what is unseen, I give to what one can touch, and look at... Reason does not help me. It tells me that the laws under which I am convicted are wrong and unjust laws, and the system under which I have suffered a wrong and unjust system. But, somehow, I have got to make both of these things just and right to me. And exactly as in Art one is only concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself, so it is also in the ethical evolution of one’s character’⁵¹.

This desire to bring about what Nietzsche would have termed transvaluation, leads him to a radical conception of love, which is not only non-judgemental, it transgresses the ultimate taboo. As Wilde turns affections towards Christ, reading him directly against the mechanics of history who he explicitly saw as having no time for the ignorant, what appears is less a saviour or sacred object for power than a poet and artist. The “leader of all lovers” as Wilde called him, was then the original individualist with a radical imagination to match. Invariably, given his sexuality, as Wilde humanises the son, the love he now professes is one that dare not speak its name:

I see a far more intimate and immediate connection between the true life of Christ and the true life of the artist; and I take a keen pleasure in the reflection that long before sorrow had made my days her own and bound me to her wheel I had written in *The Soul of Man* that he who would lead a Christ-like life must be entirely and absolutely himself, and had taken as my types not merely the shepherd on the hillside and the prisoner in his cell, but also the painter to whom the world is a pageant and the poet for whom the world is a song... Nor is it merely that we can discern in Christ that close union of personality with perfection which forms the real distinction between the classical and romantic movement in life, but the very basis of his nature was the same as that of the nature of the artist—an intense and flamelike imagination. He realised in the entire sphere of human relations that imaginative sympathy which in the sphere of Art is the sole secret of creation. He understood the leprosy of the leper, the darkness of the blind, the fierce misery of those who live for pleasure, the strange poverty of the rich... Christ’s place indeed is with the poets. His whole conception of Humanity sprang right out of the imagination and can only be realised by it... Christ had no patience with the dull lifeless mechanical systems that treat people as if they were things, and so treat everybody alike: for him there were no laws: there were exceptions merely, as if anybody, or anything, for that matter, was like aught else in the world!... It seems a very dangerous idea. It is—all great ideas are dangerous⁵².

In many ways, perhaps the turn by some in the Black Lives Matter movement onto the authentic image of Christ was expected. That Jesus was darker than Eurocentric representations seems a pretty obvious point.

⁵⁰ See Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*

⁵¹ Wilde, *De Profundis*

⁵² Wilde, *De Profundis*

But the danger here is we simply look again to invoke a new sacred object for power, like the feminine sacred, or the queer sacred, when the very sacred order of the victim has died along with liberalism itself. Humanity has already become the sacrificial object in this new emerging cartography of power, which thrives as it brings together the technological with the puritanical. And on every occasion when the religious left invoke their own digital truth in the hope that it goes viral, joins the congregation in virtually shaming the sinners of the world, demanding that another person gets reprimanded and banned by unknown technocrats, insisting that the undemocratic system learns to police the reasoned parameters of thought, the more they merely feed the abstract machine and show their conformity to the dominant paradigm of post-liberal power, which has been experimenting for decades on how to appropriate radicality, thrive on divisions, profit from a simulacrum of outrage, while slowly but surely creating a new system for control that's as puritanical as it is post-political. This is the future present we now have to confront. The religious left is its confirmation.

“Human beings in a mob
What's a mob to a king?
What's a king to a God?
What's a God to a non-believer
Who don't believe in anything?
Will he make it out alive?
Alright, alright
No church in the wild”

(Kayne & Jay Z)