

On Future Histories and the Generational Contract
with the No Longer and Not Yet Living and the Pan-Demo-
nium of Irreverent Styles of Nostalgia *Jan Verwoert*

Shortened, illustrated, underlined, and improved.

In april 2016, I attended a lecture by a man called Mohammad Salemy. I remember entering the theater (it was in a theater) and looking for a place to sit in the stands. The stands looked down upon the podium, where Salemy was sitting behind a tiny table with on top of that his laptop, which was connected to a projector, which was projecting a keynote on a huge screen behind him, making him and his table look very small.

Anyway, I entered the theater, and while I was busy looking for a vacant spot I vaguely registered a song that was playing as the audience took their seats. It sounded familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. He later revealed to have been playing Kanye West - *Waves (The Life Of Pablo, 2016)* in reverse, on loop. "The future is all of a sudden hip again" Salemy started his talk "And everyone is talking about it."

Perhaps history is not about the past. At least, not primarily. Perhaps it is first of all about the future. This may be exactly what makes history political. For whoever owns history, owns the future. You could call this the "pre-emptive" power of historicizing. By telling history in one way rather than another, an experienced storyteller will give their listeners a strong idea of how that history is bound to continue and, hence, what the future will bring: more of the same. Powerful accounts of history therefore pre-empt the future. They drain the imagination. They make the future unimaginable and thereby do their best to prevent people from noticing its arrival. As the history they've been taught makes them expect more of the same, they can no longer see the future when it arrives and turns out to be different.

But this is not the only way in which history refers to the future. It also does so in a much more existential sense. You could in fact argue that history itself only happens in moments when people see the possibility of a future. In other words, truly historical moments are defined by the opening up of a horizon of futurity. The French Revolution for instance, is the historical moment when a future democracy seemed a possibility that could be realized. This is the hope on which people acted when they made history. There is a beauty to that moment in history when a different future becomes conceivable. It's like a sunrise. But there is also a terror associated with it. For more often than not *violence* is the medium by which people believe this future should be realized and become their history. Let's not forget that all fascists and colonialists too were quintessentially modernists. Their power was historically founded in their ability to promise a future to the people they were betraying, those they were pretending to lead to victory and those, in case of colonialism, to whom they offered the gift of modernization in exchange for (but effectively as a cover-up of) their unlimited exploitation. More often than not, then, the future that those eager to go down in history promise to the people is nothing but one big strategic lie.



Pocahontas with short hair

This is getting complicated. For as artists, intellectuals and people who feel drawn to art and intellectual discourse, we are the heirs of modernism and therefore, by definition, lovers of history and lovers of the future. Our very existence, professionally, existentially and spiritually, depends on that love of history and the future. This is because the tales of history that we tell and listen to are what we seem to contribute to society and what society seems to expect to hear from us. To recount such tales seems to be our job, our vocation, if you will, and such, the source that legitimates our profession. So we write our manifestos (sometimes openly, sometimes disguised as critical theory) and compile our portfolios to make people believe that we will go down in history because we know how to open up that future horizon of promising possibilities through our work and ideas. We are the future. Invest in us. It will pay off. Because we are writing history and the value of our promising works and ideas will grow exponentially in the progress. It's a lie. You know it. We know it. But it works. The history of the markets shows how strategically propagated promises generate symbolic and monetary capital.

But this is getting way too cynical. As lovers of history and the future, do we not have a pride of profession to defend? For who else would still appreciate these things and care about the questions that history raises? Seriously, there must be more to the telling of history than the power to pre-empt the future, more to the historic emergence of future horizons than the threat of impending violence and more to art and thinking about future histories than strategic interests. If we cling to the hope that there is a chance to envision the future of history differently and so resolve to hold cynicism at bay for the present moment, the most pressing question becomes: How can we tell the difference between:

- a. a tale of history that would pre-empt the future and invoke violence by virtue of being little more than a strategic lie and
- b. a gesture, a work, a thought that would create a historical moment by disclosing the horizon of a possible future which is open for all?

One possible, preliminary way of determining that difference might be to look at the spirit of a historical moment and the spirit of the way in which a tale of a potential future is told. That also means looking to see in whose name the promise of the future is made in a particular historical moment or tale. We are entering the sphere of hauntology here. Because the lore of handling ghosts is in fact the practical art of dealing with spirits and guessing the meaning of names, quickly, intuitively and correctly. It's a matter of life and death. For when you do not grasp what spirit is invoked, and more importantly, in the name of which god, demon or principle this ceremony is held, you might realize far too late that you are being initiated into the wrong religion and there is no way left to leave or kill the beast you summoned. But to come back to the question: How do you then recognize the spirit

and name in which history and the future are invoked and grasp the difference between one religion and another? Experience shows that it's a matter of cultivating your intuitions, in other words it's - in the most existential and political way - a matter of taste and style.

When your love of history and the future grows over time, when you take care of it, you are bound to develop a certain taste for history and the future as well as a style in which your taste shows. When your taste is differentiated enough you will recognize in no time - you will smell it in the air and feel it with the tip of your tongue - when something unholy is cooking, when the spirit and name in which history is told and a future is promised has a bad aftertaste. If you feel it, you know it's time to interrupt the story, stop the teller, or, if that's impossible, to leave the site of its telling as quickly as possible. But taste and style are not just about the desire to interrupt procedures. They are also about creating a moment, a momentum in time and a place where you can celebrate your love for history and the future. Since we are talking here about the invocation of spirits that place is inevitably a sacred site in one sense or another. A place that is designated as a site of appreciation. It may be your studio, your study or, much more likely, the space that the work itself opens up in itself. There are different names for this space of appreciation; canon is one. A history of appreciation can easily turn into a canon of personal heroes and patron saints. There is nothing wrong with building a canon. For again it makes all the difference in which spirit or in whose name that canon is assembled. But maybe we shouldn't even use the word "canon" because it too easily evokes the reactionary spirit of a proclamation of traditional values. Let's look for another name for the architecture of your work in which you seek to house the spirits of your saints and heroes. The classics called that house the pan-theon, the house in which all the gods reside and assemble. Perhaps, being irrevocably modern and wary of ancient gods, we should rather construct a pan-demonium (the city Satan built, as Milton writes, for all outcasts of heaven), and turn our work, writing, exhibitions and bookshelves into a home for the demons of lost and unruly future histories.

This pandemonium is political. Not least because its very constitution implies a generational contract - and that is probably the one contract that most deeply affects the very make-up of our society. It is the agreement not simply between the young and old, but most importantly also the contract between those presently living, those no-longer living and those yet to be born: the contract between all those involved in the making of history - and what the future of that history is going to hold. The pandemonium is the perfect site to devise that contract because it is only here that we, who are presently living, can converse and negotiate with the spirits of those who no longer live - the authors we cite and the artists we copy - and the spirits of those who are not yet born - our future readers, listeners and viewers. Any generational contract that is sealed only between those presently living is unjust because it excludes the dead and unborn. If our society is to truly have a history with a

future that injustice must be deemed intolerable. We will not accept it. Two more touchstones for telling the difference between a bad-spirited and a good-spirited tale of the future of history: does the generational contract implied in this tale do justice to the no longer or not yet living? Who among the dead does it honour? Is it just those who have in the past triumphed and succeeded with their strategic lies about the future, the victors and oppressors? Or are those in the margins always in danger of being forgotten or never mentioned? By asking these questions we will easily find out *in whose name* a history is told.



The amount of pain under foreign invasions lead Poles to develop a romantic mythology of themselves as martyrs of Europe, identifying their homeland with the messianic suffering of the Crucifixion. Their tears made them talented at honoring the ones, among the dead, that did not triumph or succeed; able to celebrate a glorious episode of a failed uprising like the Battle of Racławice (1794), painted here as a panorama by Wojciech Kossak (1893).

This raises the question of violence anew. For how can we be sure that we will not invite the spirits of violence to come and inhabit our pandemonium? Can we even be certain that we are not performing acts of symbolic violence ourselves by excluding certain spirits from our histories who well deserve to be invited but remain forgotten? We can't. Injustice is always committed, it seems, when history is told. This is unacceptable. Still, it might be unavoidable because to write a history that included all who could and should have had a future would be a utopian project. Whose heart would be big enough to house the souls of all these spirits? Would the attempt to do justice to all not effectively entail the failure to do justice to anyone? A host who invites too many guests is a bad host because he or she cannot take care of all guests in the way they individually deserve to be treated. So, in a sense, some kind of partiality seem almost required if we seek to do justice to anyone at all. In other words, if the generational contract at the heart of the pandemonium is based on a love for the future promise of a particular historical moment, person, work or text, for that love to be strong enough to recoup and redeem its object it has to be fully dedicated to the particularity of this moment, person, work or text. In this sense Adorno writes that "injustice is the medium of true justice" and explains:

Those who find everything beautiful are now in danger of finding nothing beautiful. The universality of beauty can communicate itself to the subject in no other way than in obsession with the particular. No gaze attains beauty that is not accompa-

nied by indifference, indeed almost by contempt, for all that lies outside the object contemplated. And it is only infatuation, the unjust disregard for the claims of every existing thing, that does justice to what exists. In so far as the existent is accepted, in its one-sidedness, for what it is, its one-sidedness is comprehended as its being, and reconciled. The eyes that lose themselves to the one and only beauty are sabbath eyes. They save in their object something of the calm of its day of creation.

The crucial dialectical twist in this argument lies in the insistence that it is precisely through the (seemingly unjust) infatuation with the particular that something more universal - maybe the world, its history and future - can be reconciled, because it is in the exclusive love for the particular that an all-inclusive love for the world in a state of reconciliation, the gaze of "sabbath eyes," comes to shine through. It's a beautiful thought.

And it has a critical edge. In her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym in fact proposes an argument similar to Adorno's thoughts to mark out the difference between an oppressive form of nostalgia that helps to establish and consolidate hegemonial ideologies, and a defiant form of nostalgia which challenges the status quo. The difference, argues Boym, lies precisely in the fact that restorative nostalgia propagates an overly generalized idea of the past as having been better than the present in every which way ("back in the good old days we had it so much better"). Defiant nostalgia, on the contrary, is characterized by its dedication to the particular: an emotional investment in one particular historical moment or the idiosyncrasies of certain people, artefacts or stylistic details; it mourns the loss of these particularities and seeks to salvage a potential new future for them, through restaging the objects of devotion in the face of a world that is hostile to or largely oblivious of these things.

Again we are talking about a politics of taste and style. The attitude with which you approach the future of history, it seems, makes all the difference. What is it then about the attitude behind a defiant nostalgia and a love for the lost particular that distinguishes it from the belief in the restoration of hegemonial ideologies? You might say that it is a peculiar stance of irreverence. This word is astonishing because it is truly dialectic; it contains, suspends and sublates its own opposite. Irreverent people are neither simply disbelievers nor disrespectful. They do not lack belief or respect as such. They merely choose to not invest that belief and respect in what is generally regarded as credible and respectable - but instead dedicate it to something or someone else. Like irradiance, irreverence describes a flow of energy. In irreverence, reverence takes a different direction. You give your love to someone or something other than what society deems desirable. Irreverence is a stance you take in the contested field of the politics of desire. It implies the insistence on the right to determine the direction of your desire yourself. But maybe

"insistence on the right" is the wrong expression. It should rather be the "acceptance of the possibility" to let desire determine its own direction and, practically speaking, *let your body decide where you want to go.*



Beeldenstorm in een kerk, 1566, Reinier Vinkeles, after Jacobus Buys, 1786 (detail). See also the paradox of iconoclasm: "It draws us to the very thing it would destroy, inscribing a story and creating an object that is, in certain aspects, richer and more powerful than before."

<http://bit.ly/29YwWwM>

Yes, you could object, but weren't, for instance, the people who joined the nightly torchlight marches and triumphant party rallies that the Nazis so spectacularly staged, also letting their body decide where it wanted to go? Was it not the raw desire to witness a historical moment of potentiality that made them attend? In one sense it probably was. In another sense, however, the style in which this desire manifested itself, or rather the form in which it was staged, can hardly be described as irreverent, can it? On the contrary, there is a rigid choreography underlying these events. In fact, the very presence of this overbearing choreography, I would argue, constitutes a reason to question if these "events" ever were the events they purported to be, or if they were not rather simulacra of the historical moment, cannily designed by a media-savvy party intelligentsia to make people feel as if they were experiencing history in the making.

The monumental blockbusters of the previous decade had at this point already firmly established certain standards of what a historical moment should look like. Most likely, a lot of people got the impression they were writing history simply because marching behind Roman standards, performing Roman salutes in newly built pseudo-Roman stadiums made them feel as if they were actually experiencing just that kind of epic history which they had recently seen enacted on the silver screen in *Ben Hur* (1925).

(The last two paragraphs have been removed)

Not so long ago, the fresh new government of the Netherlands decided it would from now on be mandatory again for children to learn about the Dutch national anthem in school. A rather silly little article compared to other, more weighty matters that were in - or were conveniently left out of - the 2017 coalition agreement. But it made my ears prick up. Maybe because the bill didn't come from a place I expected, namely the populist right wing. Instead it had come from the Christian Democrats, a pretty mellow bunch of pale faced men in my (maybe not so super up-to-date) opinion.

There's something funny about today's Dutch nationalist canon. It's everywhere. It smiles at you from the windows of cake shops, addresses you on train stations & manifests itself in Dutch-DesignWeeks, and is now also forced upon you in elementary school. More parodic than anything else, almost too desperate to still be convincing. It's nostalgia speaking. The oppressive, fear-of-change kind. *It's about longing for a time when you were the center*

of the world, and all the outsiders not complaining so much about you taking up all the space.*

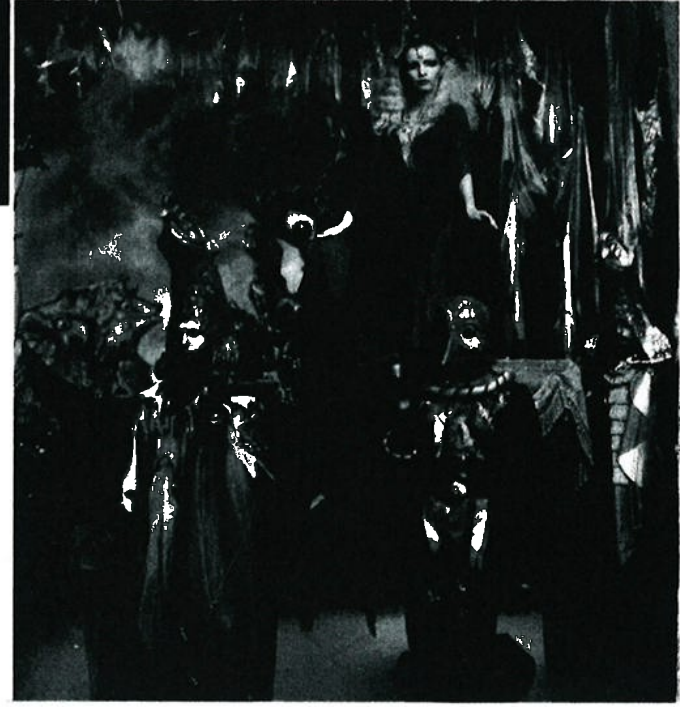
Jan Verwoert's text (the long, unimproved version) landed with me somewhere back in 2014, and I keep coming back to it. Svetlana Boym's argument, the one Verwoert so ingeniously wove into his own, about differentiating defiant and oppressive nostalgia has proven to be a wonderful indicator every time. I haven't read her book. I hope Jan did a good job referencing her.

*medium.com/@suspicious.mails/a-thoroughly-incomplete-unauthorized-unofficial-transcript-of-teju-cole-'tolstoy-of-the-zulus-a-f1e7fd6003883)

The Adorno reference comes from E. F. N. Jephcott translation of *Minima Moralia* (1951), first published in 1974 by New Left Books. The English word "sabbath" is an equivocal word. Its Biblical meaning (that is the meaning upon which Adorno insists, without leaving much space for ambiguity) refers to the day set aside for rest and worship. "Sabbath," however, is also the way Christians would call a satanic gathering of witches in the Middle Ages. And Verwoert is obviously enjoying the double entendre, as it gives Adorno's words a (pan)demonic taste. The ambiguity is less strong in other languages. Joaquin Chamorro Mielke translates them in Spanish as "mirada sabática" (Taurus, Madrid, 1999); Renato Solmi's Italian version says "sguardo sabbatico" (Einaudi, Torino, 1954); Adorno's own words are "sabbatischer Blick."



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Pictures on this page are stills from a variety show called *Stryx*, which ran for six episodes in the fall of 1978 on RAI, Italy's national television network. Described as a bacchanalian, neopagan *varieté* with a dab of satanism, created and broadcasted in a country ruled by the Christian Democracy party, it featured Grace Jones, Amanda Lear, Patty Pravo, Angelo Branduardi, Mia Martini, occult medieval imagery, and the devil himself.

