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Origins

My search for these forms began with my research on the Paris Commune. How to write an opera about the Paris Commune? This was an especially challenging topic, as the Commune has been dominated by capital "C" Communist mythology. This is something that the Communards themselves would have been disgusted with! The Communards were notorious for

destroying and defacing monuments and commemorative markers in Paris. The most famous of these iconoclasms was the tearing down of the Vendome Column (upon the orders of Gustave Courbet). Most people assume this is because of *who or what* the monuments commemorated, but this is not really the case.

What is lesser known is what Courbet wanted to put in place of the Vendome Column. The Communards wanted to construct what he called a "Monument of the Accursed"[12], a kind of negative monument, that I see now as a kind of presaging of Brecht[13]. Rather than constructing a monument as a commemoration of those who had sacrificed themselves for a greater good, or to those who had achieved a god-like eternity through their actions (like Napoleon), Courbet wanted a monument to the scum of history, the enemies of the future, to serve as a

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[12] Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p.790.

[13] for those unfamiliar with Brecht's devices, I will discuss them at length in the the *Allegory* chapter.

reminder that one must always be vigilant. This would also not be a dominating column, but rather, a text in the middle of the square. It would be something that inspires though, like the bronze *Stolpersteinen* that lead us to think of the holocaust when we stumble over them *interrupting* our unconscious daily routines, in a way that could be seen as Brechtian.

But this frustration with the commemorative and monumental made me think about the nature of commemoration and memorialization more broadly and try to understand what was so problematic about it. Concisely expressed, one of the major paradoxes of Western "death-art" since the classical era is its assertion of meaning over death. The requiem sees man's finitude and death as an occasion to assert God's eternity and ultimate meaning. The requiem mass may begin with a request for eternal rest [*Requiem aeternam dona eis*], but the majority of the text, from the Sequence to the Communion, begs God to *save people from death.* The Requiem celebrates triumph over death, the triumph of light, or *clarity*, over or darkness, or *obscurity*. This is quite a contrast to Baroque funeral music, whose texts often focus on mortality and human finitude. The commemorative also asserts the "meaningfulness" of one's memories and the importance of one's relationship to the deceased, and the memorial uses death to transfigure the deceased into a symbol which exists across time.

All of these actions either ignore or actively fight against the notion that death is ultimately *loss* and that the dead are absent from our world. If we're thinking about it in a materialist sense, death is not "absence within life", but rather, the dead are absent *from* life. Representing the non-existent is a limit-function for the traditional linguistic frameworks of western thought, which has viewed words as a signifiers for objects which exist in the world, even if abstractly. To summarize the basic paradigm of language up to that point in history, Ludwig Wittgenstein famously opens his *Philosophical Investigations* with Augustine's theory of language:

"These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. It is this: the words in language name objects   sentences are combinations of such names.   In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated

with the word. It is the object for which the word stands. Augustine does not mention any difference between kinds of words…"[14]

This idea, that language represents objects in the world, and that language offers us a picture of these objects, or a picture of the world in general, was dominant in linguistics through Wittgenstein's "Tractatus[15]" and even, in a sense, through structuralism, and it is still the underlying assumption of an uncritical western view of language. These systems of language cannot tolerate death, the existence of something that doesn't exist in this world — the dead should reveal the limit of these systems. Moreover, as manuel abreu suggested to me these forms of language are not just innocent bystanders unable to deal with death, they are killers themselves. If language becomes a "representational system", then it becomes a kind of sacrificial action which reduces lived experience to the communicable, leaving what manuel calls an "incalculable loss". For abreu, this linguistic sacrifice and loss is closely linked to the West's sacrifice and subsequent hiding away of incalculable numbers of black lives and experiences.

Attempts at commemoration compound the problems that already exist in representational language. As manuel arturo abreu says about their *LIST OF CONSONANTS*: "the commemorative… is seen as the payment of respects but in fact incurs more debt to the dead, debt which is ultimately unpayable"[16]. When one uses the dead to make meaning in the world of the living, this incurs an unpayable debt. Since one cannot repay someone who no longer exists, the debt will remain outstanding forever. In honoring someone as a martyr or sacrifice, for example, we try to reveal meaning in their death, but this martyr is now owed an unrepayable debt. Even mere tributes represent a claiming of the dead as one's own. The fact that someone knew Lee Konitz, or Pierre Boulez, for example, is through a dedication, transformed into the author's cultural capital at the expense of the dead. An expense which, again, cannot be repaid.

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[14] Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte. ed. Hacker and Schulte. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. §1-3.

[15] Philosophical Investigations is Wittgenstein's repudiation of his Tractatus and all of the linguistic thought before it. I should add that there are many alternative theories of linguistics, and I recognize that my invocation of Augustine and Saussure is a totally inadequate representation of what I call "traditional linguistics," but the restrictions of this paper do not allow a more in depth analysis.

[16] abreu, manuel arturo, *Incalculable Loss,* (Seattle: INCA press, 2018), 50.

abreu draws attention to the fact that exploitation and colonialism don't end when one dies. In addition to problematizing commemoration, abreu highlights other Western religious/colonialist practices that claim black "lives" even after they are dead.[17]

And so my attempt to find forms which could tolerate the dead and deal with death in a non-exploitative way, both in general and in relation to the Paris Commune, became an attempt to solve a linguistic problem, or rather, it became a search for alternative languages and alternative linguistic paradigms. Over the past two years I have researched, among others, the work of Jacques Derrida, Gayatri Spivak, Roman Jacobsen, and the late work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. But it was an essay by Gershom Scholem called "On Lament and Lamentation," ["Über Klage und Klagelied"] that really set me on my course.

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[17] For example, Mormons literally *convert* the dead, which is why they have the world's largest genealogical database.