

Our Opium Wars

The Ghost of Empire in the Prescription Opioid Nightmare

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We must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer; to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism... a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a centre of infection begins to spread, a poison has been instilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds toward savagery.

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*¹

I

Around 15bc Caesar Augustus commissioned the construction of the Temple of Dendur on the upstream banks of the River Nile in the area that today is covered by Lake Nasser.² Augustus had his image prominently engraved on the outer walls of the temple in the garb of an ancient Egyptian pharaoh making an annual offering to the local gods Isis and Osiris, whose marriage symbolised the cycle of fertility of the Nile valley. The Romans knew that power was sustained not merely through military domination and not only by gaining the consent of the governed, but also by exploiting dependencies; in this case, the reliance of the local population on ritual offerings to ensure the annual return of the generative waters to an otherwise arid region.

Two millennia later, on 10 March 2017, that same Temple of Dendur is surrounded by bodies lying prone, empty pill bottles scattered around them.³ We are in the Sackler Wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the world's new imperial capital, New York City, where the temple was re-erected in 1978. It was relocated in 1963 through a UNESCO-facilitated programme whereby the Egyptian government led by Gamal Abdel Nasser awarded many such doomed temples as gifts to nations who had helped Egypt create the monumental Aswan Dam, their ancient sites soon to be submerged by the iconic mega-project.⁴ Aswan defied the ancient gods and brought the Nile's rhythms under human command, and also demanded the forced relocation of countless Nubian villagers in Egypt and Sudan.

¹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2000.

² Arnold, Dieter, and Adela Oppenheim, 'The Temple of Dendur: Architecture and Ritual', *The Met* <<https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/curatorial-departments/egyptian-art/temple-of-dendur-50/architecture-and-ritual>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

³ Walters, Joanna, 'Artist Nan Goldin Stages Opioids Protest in Metropolitan Museum Sackler Wing', *The Guardian*, 11 March 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/mar/10/opioids-nan-goldin-protest-metropolitan-museum-sackler-wing>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

⁴ Serotta, Anna, 'Conserving the Temple: A History', *The Met* <<https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/curatorial-departments/egyptian-art/temple-of-dendur-50/cleaning-and-conservation>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

The bodies that now lie prone are protesting another human-created flood, another empire. The Sackler Wing, like dozens of museums around the world, bears the infamous name of a family estimated to be among the richest in America, generous if narcissistic philanthropists whose fortune derives almost entirely from the privately held company Purdue Pharma: the patent-holder, aggressive marketer and beneficiary of OxyContin, the prescription opioid painkiller that has hooked America.⁵

The honorary leader of the protest is the artist Nan Goldin, well known since the 1970s for her unflinching photographic portraits of those marginalised from New York's booming real-estate and tourist culture – drug users, queer folk, drag queens and, later, those who would be liquidated by the AIDS epidemic to make way for the bold new capitalist Manhattan of the 1980s and 1990s. In late 2017, following a series of revelatory articles about the Sacklers and their 'empire of pain' in *Esquire* and the *New Yorker*, Goldin announced that she too was recovering from a destructive addiction to OxyContin, which had initially been prescribed to her by her doctor for post-surgical pain.⁶ Like so many doctors, hers had been beguiled by the research provided by Purdue and its competitors that promised prescription opioids as miracle drugs: a non-addictive painkiller that could be liberally prescribed. Goldin, like millions of others, became an increasingly desperate addict, crushing the pills to defeat the patented time-

release mechanisms, gaming her prescriptions to access the drug at multiple pharmacies, and replacing or augmenting the drug with street heroin.⁷

Her candid revelations and new photographic series about her addiction helped catalyse the activist group PAIN Sackler, which has joined with other movements in New York, like ACTUP, with experience of targeting the reckless profiteering of the pharmaceutical industry and shaming the Sackler family through performative actions like the die-in at the Temple of Dendur, the jewel in the crown of the family's philanthropic efforts. By demanding that the Sacklers use their ill-gotten wealth to fund rehabilitation programmes, PAIN Sackler has crystallised recent debates on how to approach a contemporary 'artworld', whose most prominent patrons are the corporations and oligarchs of a global capitalist empire.⁸ Protests against the sponsorships of London's Tate Britain by British Petroleum and of the Metropolitan Museum by the far-right Koch brothers⁹ bear witness to precarious arts and culture workers struggling to defy the 'art washing' of corporate images and cast a wrench into the gears of bourgeois vanity whereby the treasures of past, non-Western civilisations become branded monuments to the destruction of today's civilisations and environment in the name of profit.

⁵ Armstrong, David, 'The Family Trying to Escape Blame for the Opioid Crisis', *The Atlantic*, 10 April 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/04/sacklers-oxycontin-opioids/557525/>> [accessed 13 May 2018]; Glazek, Christopher, 'The Secretive Family Making Billions From the Opioid Crisis', *Esquire*, 16 October 2017 <<https://www.esquire.com/news-politics/a12775932/sackler-family-oxycontin/>> [accessed 13 May 2018]

⁶ Walters, Joanna, "I Don't Know How They Live with Themselves" – Artist Nan Goldin Takes on the Billionaire Family behind OxyContin', *The Guardian*, 22 January 2018, section Life and style <[http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/22/nan-goldin-interview-us-opioid-epidemic-heroin-addict-oxycontin-sackler-](http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/jan/22/nan-goldin-interview-us-opioid-epidemic-heroin-addict-oxycontin-sackler-family)

[family](#)> [accessed 13 May 2018]

⁷ Quinones, Sam, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016); Macy, Beth, *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2018)

⁸ See Steyerl, Hito, *Duty Free Art: Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War* (London and New York: Verso, 2017)

⁹ Evans, Mel, *Artwash: Big Oil and the Arts* (London: Pluto, 2015); Bellafante, Ginia, 'When Should Cultural Institutions Say No to Tainted Funding?', *The New York Times*, 6 December 2018, section New York <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/02/nyregion/when-should-cultural-institutions-say-no-to-tainted-funding.html>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

II

‘Free trade is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ is free trade’ announced Sir John Bowring, an acolyte of utilitarian philosopher and inventor of the panopticon prison, Jeremy Bentham.¹⁰ A reputed scholar and reformer who advocated liberal causes during his time as a UK Member of the Parliament, Bowring’s pivotal role as governor of Hong Kong and key player in the Opium Wars came about ironically as a result of his ruin by financial speculation, which led him to take up the Asian post in service to the Empire from 1854 to 1859. His association of free trade with divine providence cunningly combined white supremacist conservative religious values with liberal notions of cosmopolitanism and the progressive rationality of the market: the retrograde Chinese empire must, he argued, be forced to accept the bitter-sweet medicine of British-produced opium at the point of the bayonet if need be, so as to be able to gain the civilising influence of commercial trade. Never mind that the scourge of opium addiction was withering away the lives of millions of Chinese, that its cancerous spread through the Qing Empire was corroding the social and political fabric.¹¹ Never mind that the opium itself was produced under drastic and well-nigh totalitarian conditions by and for the East India Company. It was the fulcrum by which British and other European nations half a world away could exploit and drain the resources of the world’s wealthiest and most populous nation.¹²

Bowring’s slogan became a justification for the Second Opium War of 1856–1860, a reprisal

expedition for the audacity of the Qing Empire (then in the grips of a massive civil war remembered as the Taiping Rebellion) daring to seize a British ship thought to be a pirate vessel. In reality this incident was understood by all parties as an attempt by the Qing to regain some sovereignty and prevent the further importation of opium. In revenge for this affront, British and French forces plundered and destroyed the emperor’s marvellous Summer Palace in what is now Beijing, popularising a word recently appropriated from Hindi during the brutal British reprisal against the Indian population for the anti-colonial rebellions of 1857: *loot*.¹³ The treasures of the Chinese empire were systematically divvied up by officers and crated and shipped to Paris and London, to remain in family collections, to be sold as exotic curios or to be given as gifts to secure political and economic favours. Priceless Chinese artefacts, representing the legacy of four thousand years of Chinese civilisation, flowed steadily out of China in the era of that nation’s ‘great humiliation’ spearheaded by the narco-capitalist Western exploitation of the Opium Wars.

Perhaps the most famous and prolific collectors of these artefacts in the twentieth century were the three Sackler brothers who founded Purdue Pharma. Many are today held in the Sackler Wing of the Met near the Temple of Dendur. Some might be in the galleries that surround the Sackler courtyard at London’s Victoria & Albert Museum, or in the Sackler Chinese collections at the Smithsonian in Washington or Princeton Universities.

¹⁰ Todd, David, ‘John Bowring and the Global Dissemination of Free Trade’, *The Historical Journal*, 51 (2008) <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X08006754>>

¹¹ Sanello, Frank, and W. Travis Hanes III, *Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another*. (Naperville: Sourcebooks, 2004) <<http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=1358571>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

¹² For a brilliant, comprehensive and stimulating portrait of the full social, political and economic scope of the First Opium War, see Amitav Ghosh’s trilogy of novels that begin with *Sea of Poppies*.

¹³ Thomas, Greg M., ‘The Looting of Yuanming and the Translation of Chinese Art in Europe’, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 7 (2008) <<http://www.19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn08/93-the-looting-of-yuanming-and-the-translation-of-chinese-art-in-europe>> [accessed 13 May 2018]

III

The house of Sackler is not in order. In the 1960s the three brothers, sons of Jewish immigrants to the New York borough of Queens who made good as doctors, were unified in their support for the building of the Met's Sackler Wing. A few years later the eldest of the three, Arthur, split with his brothers and his side of the family divested themselves of Purdue stocks before the company introduced OxyContin.¹⁴ This fact is often cited in public statements by Elizabeth Sackler, Arthur's daughter, one of the most prominent patrons of feminist art and a scholar and activist for the repatriation of sacred artefacts to indigenous people in North America.¹⁵ Arthur is nevertheless remembered as the father of modern medical marketing, the high-pressure and seductive sales techniques that companies like Purdue used to popularise branded pharmaceuticals.¹⁶ The infamy of the Sackler name cannot be so easily diluted.

The opioid crisis is arguably the largest human-caused public health crisis in American history, possibly world history. Since its onset at the end of the twentieth century at least half a million people have died from opiate-related causes. The Center for Disease Control explains that

Doctors wrote 72.4 opioid prescriptions per 100 persons in 2006. This rate increased 4.1% annually from 2006 to 2008 and 1.1% annually from 2008 to 2012. It then decreased 4.9% annually from 2012 through 2016, reaching a rate of 66.5 per 100 persons in 2016. That year,

19.1 per 100 persons received one or more opioid prescriptions, with the average patient receiving 3.5 prescriptions.¹⁷

The report also estimates that at least 4.7 of every 100 Americans 'misuse' prescription pain relievers, contributing to the estimate that, in 2015, prescription opioids were involved in 63.1 per cent of the record-setting 52,404 recorded deaths from drug overdoses in the world's richest country. Indeed, it is a prime cause in one of the most startling statistics in recent years: the now steady year-over-year decline in the life expectancy of white women, the healthiest demographic in the country.¹⁸

In 2007 Purdue Pharma was forced to settle a multimillion-dollar class action lawsuit by victims of OxyContin for misleading doctors and other health professionals into believing that the drug was safe to prescribe generally for pain.¹⁹ While the company admitted no wrongdoing, this began a slow turn against what was once trumpeted as a turning point in medical treatment – a non-addictive pain reliever. But as the flood of prescription opioids receded and legal supplies began to dry up (though Purdue continues to market the drug aggressively in 'emerging economies' like India and Brazil), many users turned to illicit street drugs, notably the notoriously potent Fentanyl, which is typically manufactured in semi-legal laboratories in China and is so concentrated that mass quantities are relatively easy to smuggle into the US among the tonnage of other imports along that world-defining logistics route.²⁰

¹⁴ Walters, Joanna, 'Meet the Sacklers: The Family Feuding over Blame for the Opioid Crisis', *The Guardian*, 13 February 2018, section US news <<http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/feb/13/meet-the-sacklers-the-family-feuding-over-blame-for-the-opioid-crisis>> [accessed 13 May 2018]

¹⁵ 'Elizabeth A. Sackler Supports Nan Goldin in Her Campaign Against OxyContin', *Hyperallergic*, 2018 <<https://hyperallergic.com/422738/elizabeth-sackler-nan-goldin-opioid-epidemic/>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

¹⁶ Quinones, Sam, *Dreamland: The True Tale of America's Opiate Epidemic* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2016)

¹⁷ <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/pubs/2017-cdc-drug-surveillance-report.pdf>

¹⁸ McKay, Betsy, 'U.S. Life Expectancy Falls Further', *Wall Street Journal*, 29 November 2018, section US <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-life-expectancy-falls-further-1543467660>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

¹⁹ Macy, Beth, *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company That Addicted America* (New York: Little, Brown and Co., 2018)

²⁰ Knierim, Paul E., *Tackling Fentanyl: The China Connection* (Washington: US Department of Justice, 6 September 2018) <<https://www.dea.gov/documents/2018/09/06/paul-e-knierim->

The active opioid agent in OxyContin did not come from Afghanistan, as one might presume, but more likely from the highly securitised fields of Tasmania, the Australian island where genocide against those deemed savage enemies of progress was completed in 1840.²¹ Still, the abundance of cheap heroin in Afghanistan contributed to the addiction of many American soldiers (mostly poor and working-class kids) stationed there, which they brought home after demob.²² Meanwhile, OxyContin and other prescription painkillers were widely prescribed by army doctors for the same reason that they were to athletes, financiers, surgeons and travelling musicians: they allowed for the continued extraction of skilled and specialised labour-time beyond the body's conventional limits, working through the pain. As Laurent De Sutter notes, capitalist accumulation has always relied on, perhaps even been defined by, the incorporation of narcotics, which dull the pain of its toll on the body and render it ready for ever-greater levels of exploitation.²³

IV

The faces of the opioid crisis are diverse: urban or rural, of all complexions, young and old. It involves bored suburban teenagers raiding their parents' medicine cabinets for a quick high, indebted retirees transformed into drug

dealers when they realise the street prices for their prescribed painkillers could supplement their impossibly low pensions, injured or idled workers seeking disability insurance and opioids to help combat a sense of uselessness and alienation, overworked doctors ignorant of or denied the ability to offer holistic therapies reaching for a panacea or being threatened or pressured by their patients for a fix.²⁴

While those suffering addiction come from all ethnic backgrounds and tax brackets, the story of prescription opioids like OxyContin is usually told about the rot of the American white heartland: the staggering rates of prescription and addiction throughout the deindustrialised Rust Belt and Appalachia.²⁵ The fact that the disproportionate majority of deaths and suffering are exhibited by white people is one reason the political discovery of the opioid crisis in the second decade of the twenty-first century has tended to stress users as innocent victims in need of rehabilitative services.²⁶ This, in stark contrast to earlier waves of opioids like street heroin or crack cocaine, which disproportionately ravaged urban black communities in the twentieth century, or to the height of the AIDS epidemic, which disproportionately affected gay and intravenous drug users. Whereas these groups are, in the cultural politics of racial capitalism, suspected of deserving the plague inflicted

[tackling-fentanyl-china-connection](#)> [accessed 8 January 2019]

²¹ Einhorn, Bruce, 'America's Crackdown on The Opioid Crisis Hits Tasmania's Poppy Farmers', *Bloomberg*, 24 October 2017 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-10-24/the-u-s-opioid-crisis-hits-tasmania-s-poppy-farmers>> [accessed 13 May 2018]

²² Goldberg, Barbara, 'Opioid Abuse Crisis Takes Heavy Toll on U.S. Veterans', *Reuters*, 10 November 2017 <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-veterans-opioids-idUSKBN1DA1B2>> [accessed 8 January 2019]; Felbab-Brown, Vanda, 'Afghanistan's Opium Production Is through the Roof—Why Washington Shouldn't Overreact', *Brookings Institute*, 21 November 2017 <<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/11/21/afghanistans-opium-production-is-through-the-roof-why-washington-shouldnt-overreact/>> [accessed 8 January 2019]. Seal, Karen H., Ying Shi, Gregory Cohen, Beth E. Cohen, Shira Maguen, Erin E. Krebs, and others, 'Association of Mental Health Disorders With Prescription Opioids and High-Risk Opioid Use in US Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan', *JAMA*, 307 (2012), 940–47 <<https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2012.234>>

²³ Laurent De Sutter, *Narcocapitalism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2018

²⁴ Vivid descriptions of these dynamics can be found in Quinones (2016) and Macy (2018).

²⁵ See Macy (2018). See also CrimethInc Ex-Workers Collective, 'The Opioid Crisis: White Despair and the Scapegoating of People of Color', *CrimethInc.*, 2017 <<https://crimethinc.com/2017/10/09/the-opioid-crisis-how-white-despair-poses-a-threat-to-people-of-color>> [accessed 13 May 2018]

²⁶ Keller, Jared, 'How America's War on Opioids Underscores the Racial Legacy of the Crack Epidemic', *Pacific Standard*, 2017 <<https://psmag.com/social-justice/a-tale-of-two-drug-wars>> [accessed 13 May 2018]

Lopez, German, 'The Deadliness of the Opioid Epidemic Has Roots in America's Failed Response to Crack', *Vox*, 2017 <<https://www.vox.com/identities/2017/10/2/16328342/opioid-epidemic-racism-addiction>> [accessed 13 May 2018]

Netherland, Julie, and Helena B. Hansen, 'The War on Drugs That Wasn't: Wasted Whiteness, "Dirty Doctors," and Race in Media Coverage of Prescription Opioid Misuse', *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry*, 40 (2016), 664–86 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11013-016-9496-5>>

upon them, the opioid crisis is presumed to have struck the innocent, hard-working, law-abiding representatives of white American quintessence. Neo-Nazis are even revivifying anti-Semitic conspiracy theories of poison-peddling ‘Jewish doctors’ with reference to the Sackler family heritage.²⁷

The demographic reality is that black people in the US seem to have been spared this crisis, but this is thanks to a dark web of causes that all derive from systemic and structural racism. Many black families lack access to doctors and medical insurance plans that would provide them with opioid prescription, a major influence on the statistics. Several studies have demonstrated that doctors ignored, downplayed or distrusted black patients’ testimonies of pain.²⁸ Some doctors felt that their black patients were more likely to abuse or resell opioids than patients of other ethnic backgrounds. These statistics add credence to broader arguments that the medical establishment is so saturated with racist prejudices that doctors either misjudge the intensity of black people’s testified pain or implicitly believe that black people can (and therefore should) endure greater pain. This presumption inherits the legacy of American medical pioneers like J Marion Simms, the ‘father of modern gynaecology’, who conducted excruciating surgical experiments on enslaved and free black women without

anaesthetic in the nineteenth century.²⁹

Demographer Shannon Monnat’s research has found that the swing of voters from Barak Obama in 2012 to Donald Trump in 2016 was highest in counties that had elevated rates of mortality related to drug and alcohol abuse and suicide: so-called ‘deaths of despair’ germane to poor, deindustrialised, rural and largely white populations.³⁰ Journalists and researchers of the opioid epidemic confirm the trend based on systematic though anecdotal investigations: somehow the opioid crisis is connected to the rise of a kind of vengeful, nihilistic politics highly indexed to the long-standing cultural and material patterns of a white supremacist nation and by the realisation of the death of the American dream for its one-time beneficiaries.³¹

V

In her enlightening rereading of the final passages in Walter Benjamin’s celebrated *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproduction*³², cultural theorist Susan Buck-Morss has convincingly argued that her Marxist predecessor’s concern for the fate of aesthetics under industrial capitalism was not, as is commonly imagined, primarily concerned with art. Rather, Benjamin had in mind the politics of what Buck-Morss calls the ‘capitalist sensorium’: the way rapid

²⁷ I have chosen not to cite the racist toxic bilge that churns about the internet on this topic.

²⁸ Nadia S. Ruta and Samir K. Ballas, ‘The Opioid Drug Epidemic and Sickle Cell Disease: Guilt by Association’, *Pain Medicine*, 17.10 (2016), 1793–98 <<https://doi.org/10.1093/pm/pnw074>>; Lopez, German, ‘Why Are Black Americans Less Affected by the Opioid Epidemic? Racism, Probably.’, *Vox*, 2016 <<https://www.vox.com/2016/1/25/10826560/opioid-epidemic-race-black>> [accessed 8 January 2019]; Ballesteros, Carlos, ‘Racism Might Have Spared Black and Latino Communities from New Opioid Epidemic, Drug Abuse Expert Says’, *Newsweek*, 2017 <<http://www.newsweek.com/racism-opioid-epidemic-blacks-latinos-trump-704370>> [accessed 13 May 2018]

²⁹ Zhang, Sarah, ‘The Surgeon Who Experimented on Slaves’, *The Atlantic*, 2018 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/04/j-marion-sims/558248/>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

³⁰ See Shannon Monnat, cited in Harrison Jacobs, ‘The revenge of the “Oxy electorate” helped fuel Trump’s election upset’,

<https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-vote-results-drug-overdose-deaths-2016-11?r=US&IR=T>, accessed 11 December 2018; Monnat, Shannon M., *Deaths of Despair and Support for Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election*, Department of Agriculture, Economics, Sociology and Education Research Briefs (State College, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 4 December 2016) <aese.psu.edu/directory/smm67/Election16.pdf> [accessed 13 May 2018]

³¹ Quinones, Sam, ‘Donald Trump & Opiates in America -’, *Personal Blog*, 2016 <<http://samquinones.com/reporters-blog/2016/11/21/donald-trump-opiates-america/>> [accessed 13 May 2018]; Jacobs, Harrison, ‘The Revenge of the “Oxy Electorate” Helped Fuel Trump’s Election Upset’, *Business Insider* <<https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-vote-results-drug-overdose-deaths-2016-11>> [accessed 8 January 2019]

³² Benjamin, Walter, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969), pp. 217–51

urbanisation, industrialisation and technological change both depended on and shaped the transformation of proletarian bodies as sensing, feeling entities.³³

She points to the rise of new entertainment technologies, new sonic experiences both artistic (movies, phonographs, radio) and ambient (the din of the factory or city), and the casualised bodily violence of factory work and urban life which took both a slow toll on the labouring body and often enacted swift bodily harm in accidents. She observes that the rise of industrial capitalism was defined not only by new aesthetics in the field of mechanically reproduced culture, but also by the proliferation of pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical anaesthetics: methods by which proletarians could dull their torqued sensing bodies to survive the accelerating mediatic and haptic onslaught of capitalism.

This, for Buck-Morss, is the key to understanding the haunting final lines of Benjamin's essay, where he meditates on the rise of fascism in his time. Fascism, while doing nothing to alleviate the pain and sensory overload of the proletariat, gives bombastic expression to their suffering. The hyperbolic participatory spectacles and maximalist, affectively consuming pageantry of fascism represented the 'aestheticisation of politics'; not just the transformation of politics into hyper-nationalist spectacle, but of a politics calibrated to exploit the fractured, wounded, rewired sensorium of the industrialised, self-anaesthetising body. Benjamin argued that body (and body politic) comes to delight in the spectacle of its own annihilation, eagerly careening towards a self-destructive orgy of

violence, the immolation of the individual in the forge of the vengeful mass.

Buck-Morss ends by reiterating Benjamin's urgent invitation, in the name of the socialism that opposes barbarism, to imagine the politicisation of aesthetics: not simply the creation of avowedly or explicitly 'political art', but the politically considered mobilisation of the aesthetic sensing subject of the new capitalist sensorium. Benjamin rightly worried that nineteenth-century bourgeois theories of the monadic, rational, self-contained subject were inadequate to understand or liberate a mediatic proletariat that had become a very different animal indeed.

Recent neuroscientific discoveries about the plasticity of the brain reinforce his point.³⁴ The task before us, then as now, is to mobilise ourselves as animals capable of rewiring ourselves, just as it is to recognise how deeply and profoundly we have been rewired by the everyday traumas of our economic and social systems, systems whose fractured, accelerated, digitally mediated sensorium makes that of Benjamin's era look almost humane by comparison. Silicon Valley tech firms sell advertisers the knowledge of how much user attention, parcelled by the millisecond, it takes for the brain to recognise a brand image, meanwhile selling data about our most visceral and spontaneous reactions (eye movements, variations in scrolling speeds) to the highest bidder.³⁵ Cambridge Analytica, which allegedly brought Trump to power, is only the tip of the iceberg of this new sensorium.³⁶ It is joined by an increased casualisation and commodification of violence, especially sexualised violence on screens, but also by the

³³ Susan Buck-Morss, 'Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered', *October* 62, 1992, pp 3–41

³⁴ Malabou, Catherine, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. by Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008)

³⁵ Lewis, Paul, "'Our Minds Can Be Hijacked": The Tech Insiders Who Fear a Smartphone Dystopia', *The Guardian*, 6 October 2017, section Technology
<[http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia)

[addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia](http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia)> [accessed 14 May 2018]

³⁶ Cadwalladr, Carole, "'I Created Steve Bannon's Psychological Warfare Tool": Meet the Data War Whistleblower', *The Guardian*, 17 March 2018, section News
<<http://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/data-war-whistleblower-christopher-wylie-faceook-nix-bannon-trump>> [accessed 17 March 2018]

sensory capacities we must generate to survive in a new landscape of work and exploitation in which we are each tasked with leveraging every ounce of ‘human capital’ (skills, relationships, hobbies) to compete in renting our time or assets to fickle micro-employers.³⁷ For millions whose labour is no longer necessary to capitalist accumulation, anaesthetics dulls the pain of essentially being relegated to the status of prematurely dead in the eyes of the system.³⁸ Capitalism needs no surplus army of the unemployed when it has already won the war.

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³⁷ Berardi, Franco ‘Bifo’, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. by Giuseppina Mecchia and Francesca Cadel (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009); Cederström, Carl, and Peter

Fleming, *Dead Man Working* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2012)
³⁸ Cazdyn, Eric, *The Already Dead: The New Time of Politics, Culture, and Illness* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012)