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REVIEW

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HAL FOSTER, *WHAT COMES AFTER FARCE?*, VERSO, LONDON AND NEW YORK, 2020.

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Hal Foster's essay collection, *What Comes after Farce?* (Verso, 2020), searches through our ideological wasteland with great accuracy and insight. Divided into three chapters, the book dissects the key issues of the contemporary state of despair with forensic precision and asks the big question of our time: "How to respond?" How to respond to the terror of transgressive politics and raging plutocracy, or to the media world that offers to us a viewing seat to the disaster and, through that, as Harun Farocki – to whom Foster dedicates an essay in the book – claims, turns us all into war technicians? Foster wonders "How to belittle a political elite that cannot be embarrassed, or to mock party leaders who thrive on the absurd... in the current regime of war, terror, and surveillance, as well as of extreme inequality, climate disaster and media disruption?" (viii). These short essays on art were conceived during the last twenty years, since 9/11, but ring urgent and true in current times as an account of what has and still is happening to us – with the fact that they were published in the pandemic year only underlining their doomsday quality. Accordingly, in the preface to the essays, Foster states with resignation that "the world has moved, not only politically

but also technologically, beyond our control" (ix).

The reasons for this, according to Foster, are manifold. First of all, the main lens through which we started to view art, but also to a great extent reality itself, is that of our subjectivity. Where earlier we judged the quality of art in comparison to great examples of the past and spoke of its *interest* and *criticality*, we look now for pathos, which, says Foster, "cannot be tested objectively or even discussed much" (10). He suggests that this might have to do, among other things, with the political instrumentalization of kitsch – that "parody of catharsis", as Foster quotes Adorno – and its attempt to hide reality from us in order to secure our obedience. According to Greenberg, kitsch helps the creation of "the illusion that the masses actually rule" (12), thus in reality assisting authoritarian regimes.

Indeed, from old to new forms of nationalism, epitomized in calls for *protection of national values* or *national unity*, kitsch functions as a democratic glue of the collective, a leveling tool of national cohesion. Because of its assumed horizontality and non-elitist qualities, kitsch is an ideal instrument in the current political landscape, where hearts are to be won as equally as minds, within

a *democratic and free world*. Thus, works by artists like Jeff Koons – which once upon a time used kitsch simultaneously ironically and sincerely to reveal the psychological processes behind consumerism – seem all of a sudden like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Koons’ tongue-in-cheek attempt to “liberate people from their judgment and shame” (52) translates today into the freedom to believe whatever, against all facts, and aided by the massive production of political kitsch and sentimentality. The collective mobilization through this über-sentimentality – which has become a mainstay of contemporary politics – makes us not only accept repressive and manipulative political strategies, but also acquiesce to a constant state of exception.

In the chapter ‘Wild Things’, Foster proposes an escape route from all this by seeking the cracks in the symbolic order, which will, he assures us, eventually give in under political pressure. This moment, continues Foster, “doesn’t have to be psychotic, or even a romantic one, but a time of intense imagining of new social links” (31). This is similar to the escape route he offers in his analysis of the William Gaddis’ novel *Agapē Agape*. The Greek word for the highest form of love, *agapē* gestures towards a community united by art, which is “always aghast at its opposite: the herd numbed and silenced *agape* at blood, sex and guns” (106). Even though, Gaddis might glorify *agapē* while observing the widening *gap* between elite art and mass entertainment, claims Foster, he is at the same time fascinated by another Greek word, *aporía*, which he defines as “difference, discontinuity, disparity, contradiction, discord, ambiguity, irony, paradox, perversity, opacity, obscurity, anarchy, chaos”, and then exalts with the cry of “long live!”. Next to *agapē*, he appreciates “other gaps, other

aporias, that open up spaces for experiment and doubt, creative endeavor and critical thought” (106).

After these moments of careful and implicit optimism, in the last chapters of the book Foster returns to the question “how to respond?”. The doomsday language returns too, since the question is posed in “the world of intense alienation, not merely of man from world but also of world from man” (120). Looking at the work of Hito Steyerl, who claims in similar apocalyptic fashion that competence today is about detecting how “reality itself is post-produced and scripted” and about navigating the “networked space” of “the military-industrial-entertainment complex” (122), Foster wonders if this brand of criticism almost craves catastrophe. Steyerl is, according to Foster, too much in awe of the culture of capitalism to effectively challenge it and that, as the saying goes, it is easier for her to imagine the end of the world than the end of the system. He, then, follows Derrida’s forty-year-old criticism of the apocalyptic language of his fellow philosophers and wonders: “Why this apocalyptic tone from critics on the Left when we are surrounded by hell-fires on the Right?” (128)

Foster, of course, asks the right question, but he forgets to include his own language of catastrophe, doomsday and “hell-fires”. Perhaps, this is one of the greatest challenges of our times: to respond in our own tongue with dignity and self-reflection. The possible way out of this looping language of catastrophe might lie in a Latour quote mentioned in the book: “The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles. The critic is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of naïve believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather” (153).