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When the Migrants Amass: Notes from the New Territories

“Thus, a certain type of shopping mall, a certain means of marketing, a certain architectural style, a certain product trend, a certain mode of arranging space, a certain concept of leisure and the production of their corresponding facilities, a certain network of transportation, a certain eating culture, a certain mode of dress, mannerism and persona...were mass produced and duplicated with their pre-fabricated parts in the newly-developed, tax-levied land of the New Territories. As shoddy begets shoddy, humanistic lives, as well as the relationship between people and their place can only prove to be “broken” or “nonexistent”.

Being in Sheung Shui, the conflicting relationship between the preprogrammed life and the violent effort used to maintain it is becoming more and more distinguished. People are preprogrammed and placed in the city’s ever-expanding logistical network. They are never allowed breaks nor given the opportunity to acknowledge the presence of their fellow people.

This colossal pitch-black crowd rages unceasingly like the flowing tides of day and night – the fact that they could be orderly and not cause accidents, that they could silently repress their urges, that they could maintain a certain tension and not explode, that they could rub shoulders and quietly bear the toil of being trapped in a cramped train car, silently living a manic life that has lost all semblance of human sense and balance. Apart from work, commuting, and filling their stomachs in between, there is only shopping and sleep, or only sleep. There is no aspiration to speak of.”

Link: [When the Migrants Amass: Notes from the New Territories](#)

This is a translation of an essay originally titled “No Aspirations on the City Outskirts – Scattered Remarks of a Migratory Person in New Territories.” Published in *Ming Pao* in October 28th, 2007. The present version appears in Lee Chi-Leung’s *A Room Without Myself. A* (Hong Kong: Kubrick & 29s, 2008; Kubrick, 2017). *Room Without Myself* is about the experience of a mental patient in Hong Kong who is driven crazy by architectural structures and urban planning in Hong Kong. It is translated in the summer of 2017 and is due to be published on [Asymptote Journal](#).

I decided to translate the article because he captures my feelings about Hong Kong very well. Segregated from each other in narrow apartment buildings, where sites of memory are constantly being demolished, growing up in Hong Kong was an experience filled with alienation. In Hong Kong, most spaces are allocated either to commercial or residential use. There is very little communal space where people can experience human contact without being invaded by commercial culture. It’s very hard to find peace in the city without paying money to sit somewhere (like a cafe), as our homes are so cramped. Sometimes, I am fed up with people who fetishize Hong Kong’s architectural density and think that it is an artistic spectacle worthy of admiration.

Lam Wing Kee's Ordeal - In His Own Words

“In the beginning of the Chinese calendar year, it snowed. As I gazed at the soft, floating snow, I couldn't help but feel uplifted. Before Shi left to spend his Chinese New Year holidays, he handed me a notice granting me bail. I would be able to leave soon. And yet the terms were that I could not leave China. I was happy, because I would be outside. This was way better than being imprisoned. In the afternoon, the doctors measured my blood pressure. I asked whether Ningbo snowed every year. He shook his head and strapped the wristband around my arm. I said I had never seen snow before, and yet I could not touch it. “It is so beautiful,” I said again, “it is way more beautiful than the rain.” “What is so beautiful about it?” The doctor smiled as he looked at the blood pressure meter while controlling the rubber bulb. I said, “rain can only fall vertically, and yet snowflakes can dance. If you fix your gaze at them, it makes you feel like you're inside a dream.” He probably felt that I was being childish. He glanced outside. Then the snow was still coming down heavily. Everything was white. As he took down the wristband, pressure lifted from my arm. You must have touched women. How can you have not touched snow before, if you had touched women? He smiled as he packed away his equipment and left.”

Link: [Lam Wing Kee's Ordeal - In His Own Words](#)

This is a full translation of previously missing bookseller Lam Wing-kee's own account of his disappearance from Hong Kong and detention in China. Lam, the founder and later manager of Causeway Bay Books, was one of the five booksellers who went missing last year. It is published on Hong Kong Free Press, and is the longest articles ever published on the website and has been quoted extensively on PEN America's report on the incident. I translated this ten thousand word article took about two and a half weeks upon its publication in August 2016 after I read his account and was shocked by what he described.

Colonialism Was Hong Kong's Exit

“On the 19th of September, 15 editors of *Third World Quarterly's* editorial board resigned, protesting that Bruce Gilley's article *The Case For Colonialism* had not been revoked despite violating COPE publishing guidelines and the peer review process. As Nathan Robinson of Current Affairs wrote, it is true that Gilley, “excluded mention of every single atrocity committed by a colonial power.” While the Daily Nous, The Sooty Empiric and others have made structural points and rebuttals, others denounce him as racist. I, on the other hand, would like to step away from the arena by thinking about colonialism in one specific case — Hong Kong, where Bruce Gilley himself has lived and worked for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and witnessed its handover from Britain to China, which has no doubt influenced the writing of his article.

With “colonialism's” historical background, many see ethnic difference – and therefore racism – as a requisite for colonialism. But by doing so, ethnically homogenous instances of colonialism are airbrushed out (e.g., mainland Chinese colonizing Hongkongers). If non-European powers do not qualify as colonizers, then what to make of the actions of Asian powers like China and Russia? Africa's natural environment is being torn to pieces by China, which is currently buying up swaths of the continent and sucking up its natural resources. Critics of colonialism devote their time to excoriating “Western imperialism” but turn a blind eye to China, which ought to count as a “colonizer” by any reasonable definition.”

Link: [Colonialism was Hong Kong's Exit](#)

This article is published on September 23, 2017 in *Jacobite* following the controversial article *The Case For Colonialism* Bruce Gilley published. In this article, I explore Bruce Gilley's points with the history of colonialism and politics in Hong Kong as well as contemporary “left plastic” politics. Published anonymously under the pseudonym Laika, I did not intend to endorse Bruce Gilley's racism nor right accelerationism, but rather hope to draw attention from international audiences to Hong Kong's unusual and complicated political dynamics. I can confirm my pseudonym with my [PGP key](#). I have also discussed the article on Gabriele de Seta, Dino Zhang, and Joshua Cader's [podcast](#) about popular Chinese internet culture. On the podcast where I discussed this article, we also talked about Yuk Hui's political writings in Chinese and other interesting political phenomena in Hong Kong.

The Circularity of Melancholia: On Memory and Forgetting in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*

In *The Rings of Saturn*, Sebald composes a travel narrative with anecdotes from little known pasts and forgotten archival material, attempting to find meaning in painful but obscured traumas. Why does he use such a structure to convey historical trauma? In my essay, I first identified the historical and philosophical influences at play that shaped *The Rings of Saturn*, which are Adorno's and Walter Benjamin's philosophies of history, as well as the Freudian concept of melancholia - the inability to locate a lost object. Particularly relevant to my investigation is Adorno's conclusion that historical meaning can be restored by the artistic technique of allegory, as it takes a finite part of the concrete whole to articulate the past. This results in a melancholic representation of the past, as shattered pasts and memories would be left out of the picture. Secondly, I identified techniques the Sebald used to convey melancholia: uncanny images, photographs, and quote-based personalities. What these techniques share in common is that they make the reader aware of absence - of resolution, a bigger historical context, and subjectivity.

In the second part of my essay, I build on the notion that Sebald's techniques articulate the structure of melancholia, which is circular. Unable to "remember", Hamburger dwells obsessively on his present déjà-vus. Trapped in melancholia, time ceaselessly winds back to the past, stagnating in a circular motion. Hamburger cannot leave this circular structure of time and "move on". Comparing metamorphosis with the shedding of memory, Sebald suggests that there is a the possibility of forgetting the past and gaining a new life. However, life is just another cycle, where experience pain and trauma, die again and begin anew.

Link: [The Circularity of Melancholia - On Memory and Forgetting in W.G. Sebald's *The Rings of Saturn*](#)

This essay is condensed from my senior thesis, which is written between February and May of 2017. I became intrigued with Sebald because he is a very popular German writer, who wrote originally in German, but personally approved the English translations of his work, and is more well known in the anglophone sphere than in the German speaking sphere. I find his literary interpretation of exile very intriguing because I often think about what would happen to Hong Kong in the future after 2047. In the future, many Hongkongers might emigrate. No doubt, like the current state of cultural preservation in Hong Kong, cultural artifacts unique to Hong Kong will not be well-preserved. Sebald's work is also often studied by scholars who work in fields of urban studies, art history and museum studies, as his work engages intensively with architecture and space. My interpretation of *The Rings of Saturn*, however, takes on a more philosophical angle and tries to identify the structural form of melancholia within.

Notes of a Desolate Man as an Act of Mourning

Chu T'ien-wen's (朱天文) *Notes of a Desolate Man* is a montage of vastly different cultural differences, where the authenticity of the floating, west-originated signifier repeatedly comes into question in its oriental context of Taiwan. The novel repeatedly includes names such as Eliot, Goethe, Montaigne, Foucault, Fellini, Levi-Strauss, Satyajit Ray, Ozu Yasujiro, the Bible, and references to Mao's poetry. In my essay, I aim to answer the question: amidst the litter of references and quotes, where do we locate the author in the text, who seems to have created an inscrutable work of pastiche, and in which the different elements don't seem to unify? Given the numerous intertextualities, it is very easy to interpret the intertextualities in a Barthesian frame – the kaleidoscopic cultural references as the promiscuous expression of the main character's homosexuality. Furthermore, Chang suggests that Chu's textual practice aims to “negotiate Taiwan's cultural identity through the aesthetics of hybridity, giving the postcolonial Taiwan its vitality with the erotic potential of varied interpretations.

However, I disagree with this reading, for Chu Tien-Wen's conservative politics seem to disagree with the vision of an utopia of hybridity. For her, the identity of Taiwan is not fluid - she sees it as broken. Rather than advocating a concrete political vision or practice, I argue that *Notes* is about nostalgia and mourning Taiwan's nationalistic past, as she emphasizes the importance of Walter Benjamin's Angel of History in the epilogue of the book (not in the English translation of the book). With writing, Chu T'ien-wen attempts to metaphorically reconstitute Taiwan's the past through fragments, but also laments that futility of her attempt.

Link: [*Notes of a Desolate Man as an Act of Mourning*](#)

I wrote about *Notes of a Desolate Man* by Chu T'ien-wen as the final project of my literary theory class at May 2017. I originally read *Notes of a Desolate Man* in Chinese, and was dazzled by the amount and variety of cultural references that the book was drenched in. With the vast amount of references, the book exudes a cosmopolitan charm - reading it feels like walking in a foreign city dazzled by exotic neon signs. Born into a family of writers and coached by Eileen Chang's lover Hu Lancheng, she is a literary genius versed in Japanese, Chinese and western literature. While the book can be described as nothing but stylistically flamboyant, I couldn't help but be attracted to the sense of melancholy in her book. One of my favorite recurring images in the book is the image of the pillar of salt, taken from the biblical story of Lot's wife, “I heard Ah Yao calling out to me from behind...I couldn't help but turn around to take a look, and the instant I saw the smoke rising about the place like a blazing kiln, I too turned into a pillar of salt.” The main character evokes this image to express his devastating love for his homosexual male lover.

Wittgenstein and Heidegger's Interpretations of Existential Angst

(Existenzielle Angst bei Wittgenstein und Heidegger)

In my essay, I have highlight the difference between the responses of Heidegger and Wittgenstein to existential anxiety - the condition of feeling lost, as one is unable to find meaning. While the two philosophers deal with the same condition, they arrive at the condition from different starting points – Wittgenstein from the incommensurability of reality with philosophical statements, Heidegger from the inability of the subject to distinguish himself as an individual with his calling from the world of “das Man” - the masses. The way they deal with their existential crises is thus different. As suggested by Cavell, the Wittgensteinian subject, upon realization that his philosophical statements are meaningless, falls into philosophical grief, but the realization of the emptiness of his statement propels him back to the ordinary, where he regain meaning by reattaching desire to his words. On the other hand, Dasein, disclosed by metaphysical anxiety, finally becomes truly alone to rethink his place in this world as a limited individual, and thus throws himself back to engage with the world of das Man resolutely, despite the risk of being inauthentic. The difference between Wittgenstein and Heidegger in confrontation of meaninglessness is that Heidegger ultimately does not find a way to realize real “authenticity”, for Dasein is trapped in the world of technology where he would be constantly experience metaphysical doubts of anxiety, in which he vacillates between the void of subject and object, being neither of them. While Wittgenstein's philosophy seems to be fulfilled, having dismissed the problem of “authenticity” together, both Heidegger and Wittgenstein's philosophies seem to have converged in the Kierkegaardian notion of repetition, where meaning, propelled by man's need for meaning, is recreated and fortified by repetition.

Links: [*Existenzielle Angst bei Wittgenstein und Heidegger*](#)

Instructor Comments from [Dr. Alexander Brödner](#)

I wrote this essay for a course taken at Freie University in Berlin on Heidegger at the Winter Semester of 2016/17. The class was conducted in German, and thus the essay too. I wanted to explore the relationship between Heidegger and Wittgenstein because my research was focused on Wittgenstein, and Wittgenstein is often compared to Heidegger because they stand at the crossroads between analytical and continental philosophy. Heidegger and Wittgenstein have very interesting perspectives on culture. While Heidegger is culturally conservative, Wittgenstein, according to Stanley Cavell, advocates a very Spenglerian view to culture. The paper was an entry point in which I examined how their philosophies converged and differed. To be able take a class on Heidegger in German is one of the most intellectually rewarding experiences of my life.

“Grammatical Seeing” in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and Anatoly Gladilin’s *Tomorrow’s Forecast*

In my essay, I will explore the differences and similarities between American and Russian Literary Postmodernism, a variety of literature characterized by the use of unconventional narrative techniques such as an unstable narrator, paradox and fragmentation, with Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and Anatoly Gladilin’s *Tomorrow’s Forecast* (1972). As *Tomorrow’s Forecast* has not been translated into English, my analysis will be based on the German translation. I will first trace the different historical circumstances and literary movements that have given rise to these works which share similar characteristics. A literary movement reacting against the socialist realist aesthetic by breaking literary conventions, Mauvism, a movement associated with *Tomorrow’s Forecast*, is similar to postwar Literary Postmodernism in America. Yet, Mauvism is dissimilar to American Postmodernism in that it operates on explicit aesthetic principles, whereas American Postmodernism is characterized by thematic concerns for Cold War paranoia and the impact of the rapidly developing media. Then, drawing from literary techniques and plot structures, I will show that protagonists in both works use linguistic techniques to construct a realites to take refuge from listless and repetitive lived realities. Finally, I will conclude by drawing literary examples from Fin-de-siècle Europe to show that Oedipa and Martynow’s confusions can be seen as an epistemological problems – namely, the failure of language to commensurate with reality. I will conclude by suggesting that this phenomenon can be dealt more exhaustively in the philosophy of language or skepticism.

Links: [German Version](#) / [English Version](#)

Instructor Comments from [M.A. Clemens Günther](#)

I wrote this paper at Freie University Berlin for a course about post-communist literature in Russia. To write this essay, I analyzed Gladilin’s *Tomorrow’s Forecast*, which was translated to German and not English. The process of analyzing the book was thus quite challenging, but it helped me consider Katherina Clark’s Deformation Model, which suggests that Russian literature is unique because it bypassed modernism by going through the Soviet era. I presented my paper comparing *Tomorrow’s Forecast* with Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* at the European and Eurasian Undergraduate Research Symposium at University of Pittsburgh, April 2017, where other undergraduate presenters presented their research on Russia.

The Ethics and Limits of Understanding Literature

This essay aims to understand how literary texts can be read in relation to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In my essay, I will argue that understanding literary texts requires an approach akin to understanding a fellow human being - not with the scientific attitude of cold rationality, but with our full sensibilities. Like how literary texts amaze us, we are often astonished by our fellow human beings – by their depth and incomprehensibility. To illuminate my point, I will evaluate the work of three scholars: Guetti's approach to literary interpretation based on Wittgenstein's conception of philosophical grammar, William Gass' method in *On Being Blue*, and Stanley Cavell's reading of *King Lear* in his essay *The Avoidance of Love*. With the help of Wittgenstein's concept of "Aspektwechsel" as embodied by his famous duck-rabbit, I will evaluate the named approaches and compare the act of "understanding" with the intuitive act of seeing. In my conclusion, I will reflect on these approaches with the help of excerpts taken from Hofmannsthal's *The Letter to Lord Chandos* and Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*.

Link: [Die Ethik und Grenzen des Verständnisses von Literatur](#)

Instructor Comments from [Dr. Frederik Gierlinger](#)

[Conference Abstracts](#)

My interest in Wittgenstein was triggered when I read Stanley Cavell's work, who is a Wittgenstein scholar. His unique approach on analyzing literature with Wittgensteinian lens prompted me to dive into the fragmented and very difficult texts that Wittgenstein has written. I am fascinated by how Cavell's uses Wittgenstein to resist philosophical doctrines in understanding human life. I presented this paper with a hand drawn [poster](#) at Harvard National Collegiate Research Conference, January, 2017, and the paper at 40th International Wittgenstein Symposium, August 6–12, 2017, Kirchberg am Wechsel.

Poverty as Philosophy of Community in Andrei Platonov's *Soul*

In this paper, I describe Plato's philosophy of poverty by examining Platonov's *Soul*. In my essay, I will show that Platonov's philosophy of poverty shapes his idea of the Soviet community. In contrast to the civilized inhabitants of Moscow, the people of Dzhan in Turkmenistan, a tribe to whom the protagonist Chagataev belongs to, are portrayed as wild creatures. They are depicted as a species of animals and form part of the natural ecology with other living things. In contrast to the inhabitants of Dzhan, the residents of Moscow, the center of Soviet civilization, try to live independently of each other. By comparing the two ways of life, I will show that Platonov ironizes the intellectual and industrial culture of the Soviet Union. *Soul* shows that the civilization and independence in this culture imprisons the soul of man instead of liberating it. Instead, freedom can be gained through poverty and interdependence from other living beings when humans are considered as an animal species.

Link: [*Armut als Philosophie der Gemeinschaft in Platonows Soul*](#)

Instructor Comments from [M.A. Clemens Günther](#)

This paper is again written at the Freie University of Berlin in a course on Soviet literature. In this course, I was amazed to find that in contrast to the often uninteresting Chinese Communist literature, which revolve around similar themes of romantic relationships hindered by class difference and the cruelty of the government, that Soviet culture and literature is extremely fascinating. The Soviets had a very strong culture of science, and founded the first avant-garde architecture school VKhUTEMAS. Soviet intellectual culture is full of contradictions, and I think this can be seen in Platonov's writing. Platonov's writing and politics is loved by writers such as John Berger, who is fascinated by his notion of utopia and has similar politics as him. While Platonov is seen to be very humanist with his preoccupation with animals and the fragility of human beings, he hides a controversial and positive, assessment of collectivization in the description of his utopia. Despite his preoccupation with nature, Platonov is also fascinated by Fyodorov, who is known for his Philosophy of Physical Resurrection (or more commonly known as the *Philosophy of the Common Task*), ideas on scientific innovation that would extend human life, as well as space exploration.

Rebels

“We grew up learning about the Florida triangle, the mysterious loss of signal, Mayan calendars and biblical verses that foresaw the end of the world. We are taught to suspect the seeming security we are born into. Teachers at school tell us about our relative safety, the small port where the terrain of warmth and comfort extend into midnights, how small female journalists walked home with a steady heart rate in early mornings, basking in the sentinel watch of police patrol, the labor force too big for the small space. The DJ chats with security guards in the car park before the sky turns fish belly white. We are wired to the static of information overflow, but what are the statistics when corrected to the nearest transparency error? Are we trusting a massive conspiracy? Who is to guarantee that the sunspots will not lead to an explosion by the end of the decade? Whose debt do we owe? Is there anyone owning our debt?”

Link: [Rebels](#)

This is a piece of creative writing published in my own creative journal in 2012 before my unrestrained imagination and creativity was culled by formal academic writing. In this piece of writing, I try to describe poetically what it feels like to be a rebellious student trapped in the stifling education system in Hong Kong. Trapped in the system, the narrator in this story is filled with strange and psychedelic thoughts about the outside world. It is unrealistic, mixed with references to western culture, and does not attempt to depict realistically what happens in a public school in Hong Kong. From my writing, you could perhaps detect my love of Don DeLillo's prose.