INTRODUCTION

Repetition, Prediction, Comportment: Visuality, Temporality, and Bodies in Crisis

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The war in Gaza has constantly been on our minds as we composed the editor's letter for this issue. The articles published here cover a range of themes, domains of knowledge, and geographies—a signature of *Public Culture* from its inception to the present. While each of the articles in this issue draws on unique research contexts and questions, we focus on three broad, connecting themes here: forms of temporality, media and visual technologies, and conceptions of the body. Reading this issue with war on our minds, we ask how the discursive stakes, shifts, and ruptures explored in these essays might lift the veil on processes that are quotidian and ongoing even as they appear exceptional under conditions of war, siege, occupation, and violence. In what follows, we explore how these processes circulate between and across normal and exceptional circumstances, at moments in which emergence and emergency intersect.

This idea of relay and circulation across contexts and through time shapes the opening essay of the issue, a Forum essay titled "Legacies of Protest Art in Iran: The Revolutionary Art Workshop of 1979" by Anne Eakin Moss, Niloofar Haeri, and Narges Bajoghli. The authors' focus is on the short-lived workshop and exhibition complex (*namayeshgah*) established by the faculty of fine arts at the University of Tehran during the year immediately prior to the toppling of the Shah's regime and before the consolidation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the late 1970s. Founded by fine arts students as a way of supporting the protesters in the streets of Tehran and other cities in Iran, the *namayeshgah* produced a distinct body of protest art that is allied with but distinct from protest art produced by the Soviet avant-garde, and also distinct from the work developed around the 1968 student protests in Paris. The authors argue that the stakes in revisiting this body of work are crucial to recovering the historical presence of heterogeneity in the Iranian public sphere and to disrupting the monolithic representations of the Islamist revolution that has dominated the study of Iranian society and politics. They ask how one might place the work of

artists whose distinct style and presence merits a name—Group 57—within a historical canon that privileges monolithic narratives and linearity of influence.

The workshop, established at the the University of Tehran, created a space for those protesting against the Shah to express their thoughts and interpretations of imperial and colonial conditions imposed on them by the regime. The workshop specifically provided a creative outlet for artists and students of the arts to play a role in the unfolding history of their nation that was distinct from the space provided by mosques for their more religious compatriots. Artistic training became critical to the circulation of clear and concise messages for a public whose ideological positions were oppositional or at least ambiguous in relation to the Islamist ideologies that dominated narratives about Iran after the Shah.

Through their archival research into the distinct visual styles of the work produced in the workshop and interviews with surviving artists of Group 57 and their younger counterparts, the authors call attention to the tyranny of consensus around national history, which demands the division of protest into neat communist or clerical categories. What happens to secular protest groups whose allegiances are ambivalent? The article approaches the work of Group 57 as an improvisatory practice that was influenced by but reinterpreted the influences of the Soviet avant garde and European modernism, creating a polyglot and cosmopolitan visual language. This language, in a way, reflects and creates a space for groups whose ideological leanings were ambivalent at best, and did not fit into received historical categories. Their proposition has echoes in the recent uprisings in Iran under the slogan "Woman, Life, Freedom," which have similarly created a distinct imagery drawing on heterogeneous visual influences, and perhaps reflects on the heterogeneity of the protesters as well. The authors suggest that in these pregnant moments before the consolidation of power, visual infrastructures allow a glimpse into paths not taken by historiographical accounts of events.

The relationship between potentiality and consensus is central to John Cheney-Lippold's essay "Engines of the Future: On Chess and Temporal Topography," which explores some paradoxes associated with algorithm as a discursive genre. Cheney-Lippold considers the development of chess engines and the position of chess as the "*ur* algorithmic problem," reconciling calculation, prediction, and their influence on action in the present. Reading events that hark back to the apparent triumph of machine over human—the defeat of reigning world chess champions Garry Kasparov and Vladimir Kramnik by chess-playing machines—Cheney-Lippold shows how these events transformed understandings of the game itself. The rise of machine learning and artificial intelligence has long held out the promise of efficiency and clarification of the future, and the development of chess engines seems

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to augur this promise. Yet these promises have translated into greater complexity rather than simplification and clarification, and the article attempts to unpack this paradox through an ethnographic focus on how chess engines work to construct an operable, real-time predicted future, bringing it to bear on the present.

This relationship between sociotechnical infrastructures of calculation and social action is one of correspondence and calibration. It is a topographical one, Cheney-Lippold argues, wherein reality might be viewed as a shape that emerges in the interaction between a calculated future and a calibrated present that corresponds to the pressure imposed on it. Unlike traditional historiographic imaginaries, this pressure does not result in the sedimentation of the past into compressed layers that might be released at moments of crisis to haunt and reshape the present. Rather, the real-time, machine-calculated, and predicted futures saturate the present, almost eliminating the distinction between the linear temporal divisions of modernist historiography. In producing epistemological solutions to the "chess-playing problem," these engines serve as a portal for Cheney-Lippold to explore broader problems of temporality in contemporary culture. As one of the anonymous reviewers of the essay suggests, the author is perhaps attempting to reshape our understanding of time itself as a conceptual question, drawing attention away from the enduring and encompassing relationship between the present and futurity—whether the future is understood as hazy and uncertain, or calculable and therefore actionable. The focus shifts from the machine itself to the encounter or interaction between subjects and machines.

Through the analysis of the ways players use and interact with these chess engines, Cheney-Lippold shows that questions of algorithmic rationality cannot be separated from temporality as such. Time becomes a medium for rethinking expertise and action. In his conclusion, Cheney-Lippold argues that the engines' rationality becomes entangled with complexities of human use—"chess engines may demonstrate how the future arrives onto the present, but their topographic modification of that present is beholden to how they are put to work." He continues that "epistemic hegemony requires more than Gramscian social consensus. It also requires a temporal consensus: an integration not just between machine and human but also between future and present." But it is in this very process of calibration and integration, in praxis, that new "instances of relief, both historical and futurist" might emerge.

Isaac Blacksin's essay "Extermination as Protection: Humanitarian Desire in the News from the Battle for Mosul" offers another take on consensus and epistemic hegemony. Focusing on US involvement in the battle for Mosul in Iraq in 2016 against the Islamic State, Blacksin studies the role of war reporting in producing

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specific kinds of meaning about war for the public. The battle for Mosul was the world's largest military operation since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq (although it is no longer clear whether it will remain so for long) and is explained by the United States as a humanitarian war, with civilian deaths occurring as an unfortunate collateral consequence of a righteous war. Blacksin opens his paper with two assertations: first, that the history of journalism reveals important ruptures in the "social comprehension of the world"; and second, that war reportage has a specific place in that history. "War is a force that gives us meaning"—this quote by journalist Chris Hedges allows Hedges to suture both war and journalism to the ways we apprehend the world. Blacksin goes on to demonstrate how journalism is the "force behind the force," attaching specific meanings to war and through those meanings, privileging certain forms of violence and certain kinds of subjects as worthy of saving.

The rhetoric of the "innocent victim" whose saving is deemed to be the focus of humanitarian wars is abetted by the journalistic focus on the "effects of violence on singular bodies," shifting attention away from the broader political-economic structural conditions that cause war in the first place. An enduring paradox for contemporary thought since the mid-twentieth century is the humanitarian justification for violence that appears to work because of the development of a global governance framework for a peaceful world based on a regime of human rights. Blacksin connects the focus on "somatic suffering" in the reporting on the battle for Mosul with the enactment of "militarized humanitarianism" which aims to transcend politics in its self-justifications even as it operates through a very specific, liberal political frame. War is made comprehensible through the ways journalists report what war is like by focusing on the effects of weapons and tools of violence on individual bodies. This violence may also be inflicted by so-called "savior" armies, but in those instances civilian harm may be explained away through its intention to protect, lending such instances of harm moral and ethical weight even as they cause suffering.

Blacksin argues that this move of inscribing war through a humanitarian lens turns on the depoliticization of the populations in the theater of war and is key to understanding how the "structural features of the war reportage narrative—victims as innocent, violence as the central problem of war, the anti–Islamic state offensive as virtuous—held firm" despite the obvious harm that militarized humanitarian interventions inflicted. In an era of militarized humanitarian violence, when other long-repressed justifications of war are returning to haunt public discourse, we must also think of the complicity of journalism in the failure to enable narratives of resistance and hope amid the impending doom that ideologies of humanism are facing in the twenty-first century.

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The subject of the body, specifically the unbreathing body of the apparently drowned person, faced with extermination and harm is picked up in the following essay, "Be a Doll, Blow a Hero: The Apparency of the Drowned" by Løchlann Jain. Drowning provides the cultural surround to the author's fascinating historical account of the appearance of unbreathing bodies and attempts at their resuscitation by various actors in early modern Europe. Focusing on the appearance of the bodies of drowned persons in art and medicine, Jain argues that from the seventeenth century onward—a period marked by rapidly expanding European colonization of regions across the globe, urbanization, and new forms of government—there is an increasing focus on the figures of drowned subjects and their would-be rescuers. Using a suggestive and poetic form of writing, Jain connects the image of the drowned body and the various methods associated with saving the drowned person with emerging cultural conventions around gender, erotic love, seduction, suicide, and death.

The drowned body and its proxies—painted bodies, mannequins, casts, and masks, among others—provide opportunities for rehearsing responses to different types of human bodies in trouble and "nodes through which community could be practiced through ideologies of rescue and feelings of responsibility." The essay historicizes epistemological shifts in relation to drowned bodies and the troubles they provoked in our relation to corporeality from the early modern period. Each of these shifts is associated with a dominant form of representing the body of the apparently drowned person. In turn these forms of representation provoke a range of sexualized, gendered, racialized, embodied encounters and affective responses. As a formal experiment across visual and narrative registers, "Be a Doll, Blow a Hero" presents suggestive connections through the body, paying attention to the sacralization of biological life, ideologies of rescue and the worthiness of the victim to be rescued. We may ask, along with Jain, how these embodied encounters and the affective reactions they provoke eventually connect to the life of bodies in landscapes of war and ideologies of humanitarian rescue.

The cultural history of drowning outlined by Løchlann Jain finds points of resonance between opportunities to act ethically upon the bodies of the drowned to restore and resuscitate biological life and the militarization of life in the surrounds of war. In her essay "Schlock Value and the Politics of Fiasco," Julie Chu seems to ask, how does corporeal performance work within a culture of willful indifference to growing social unrest, where citizens' subjective experience of routine state violence does not precipitate into widespread revolt against the state? Chu presents the paradox of the political climate in the People's Republic of China, which is marked by the endurance of the one-party system of rule despite recurrent protest. Chu's

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essay explores popular forms of protest, drawing on ethnographic examples from the digital world of Chinese memes as well as non-virtual, live forms of protest that deploy farcical performance as a means of chastising representatives of the state for breaking the very laws made and imposed by them on citizens. The author focuses on "the politics of fiasco" which operates through humor and an emphasis on the absurd, comedic, and vulgar wordplay as the dominant means of political engagement under conditions of censorship.

This resonant and infectious form of engagement is predominantly visible in the digital sphere but is also ephemeral and fatiguing as a form within a public sphere heavily saturated with information and digital content. In this context, Chu argues that the speedy circulation of memes has begun to lose its efficacy as farcical performance in part due to its ubiquity. The state on its part has inoculated itself in different ways from these forms of protest, leading to the emergence of new forms of political performance. In her ethnography, Chu focuses mainly on the story of Mrs. Li, a resident of Fuzhou, who is part of a group of "contentious subjects" or citizens who are fighting against evictions and demolitions of their neighborhoods and against their own displacement. This group of citizens, many of whom are older and have less to fear for their own futures, are well schooled in the subtle, metapragmatic codes through which the law operates, appearing at once to confirm and to depart from its own injunctions. They take on state actors through spectacular performances, fully expecting to fail in their efforts. The goal then is not only to fail in their legal efforts but to "fail spectacularly," thus drawing attention to their cause, no matter how farcical their engagement might seem.

Chu suggests that these actors are producing "schlock value," a concept she draws from the Yiddish term for cheap and inferior merchandise. Describing these forms of protest as having schlock value, she writes "whether described as a coarsened or fake copy of 'better' things or as a gaudy mashup of clichés, schlock points to the distinctive work of repetition-with-a-difference, which in this case has the effect of cheapening and degrading the referential form with every reproduction." In this case the referential form is the legal system of rules itself, and through their demands urging the state to comply with its own laws acted out in loud and absurd ways, these actors are calling attention not only to their behavior but also to the degradation of laws by an authoritarian state. Schlock thus becomes a form of valuable currency in challenging a state at war with its own citizens, pretending otherwise. The central temporal contrast here is between the forms of repetitive copying and circulation associated with the meme form and the forceful reiterations of the performative body against the forces of the law. This deployment of the body to resist authoritarian regimes calls attention to the production of everyday life through the

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repression and suppression of expression. The body then becomes, perhaps, the ultimate tool and weapon of resistance against this form of submerged warfare that maintains everyday order.

The final essay in this issue once again focuses on the body, this time theorized through the lens of comportment. Titled "Notes Toward a Theoretical History of Indic Media: On Elite Comportment and Technological Affordances," the essay proposes an account of how the body is deployed, both discursively and in ritualized practices, to create and sustain the power of elite groups through history. Through an interpretation of debates within the fields of Indology, science and technology studies, and media studies, the authors offer a response to the paradoxical relationship between technology and social inequality in contemporary India. The puzzle they set themselves is to understand not only how technological change has maintained caste inequality, but indeed how it has enabled and perhaps even amplified the aura of the Brahmin, conceived as a civilizational subject. Brahmin comportment is understood as an embodied, transhistorical, cultural disposition that makes "innovation possible without losing" the cultural singularity and significance of the Brahmin subject in covert, non-obvious ways.

The three authors of this essay, P. Thirumal, Narmada P, and Himabindu Chintakunta, deploy a hybrid methodology, which includes direct observation and draws on analytical readings of other scholars on various domains of practices involving technology and technological objects, connecting objects with bodily practices such as literacy, eating, listening, and hearing as they are mediated through technological prostheses. They analyze the "interaction between cultural material and material culture," formulating an original reading of the coproduction, coexistence, and assertion of what appear to be traditional forms of comportment within the framework of modernized everyday life, dominated by technologies that extend bodily capacities while maintaining "Brahminic signification." Reframing familiar tropes of technological determinism, the authors demonstrate how Brahmanic practice and comportment toward technological artifacts or the world of "useful objects, tools, utensils and equipment" in turn produces the significance of technology. They define *comportment* as a concept that allows us to understand the "experience of an unsuccessive temporal flow of being that refuses to be contained within a singular sense of time, place, or mood." In turn, their analysis directs our attention to the "how" of the everyday practice of caste, and the ways that those practices involve technology. In so doing, they offer a way out of the Indological impulse of separating the "sensual from the spiritual" and the "rational-historical from the mythical/auratic" as its core epistemological framework.

Contesting accounts that might assert the timelessness of Brahmin comport-

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ment through a simplified account of power, Thirumal, Narmada, and Chintakunta show that it is precisely through the specific deployment of technology and its manipulation that the civilizational category of Brahmin "escapes both temporal and semantic closure." By contrast, they suggest that the category of Dalit, which is the political and conceptual correlate of Brahmin is a "term borne out of contingent conditions" of secular historiography. With an insistent focus on the intersections between "deep time" and modern technologies, this essay allows us to take measure of the thrall of Brahmanical personhood as it operates across time. Even as it is possible to trace the historical movement of caste groups within the encompassing hierarchical framework of caste as a social ecology remaking that ecology substantively, the authors' unique arguments about the relationship between technology and Brahmanical comportment helps to explain how elite power operates in contemporary India.

Taken together, the essays in this issue trace lines of connection between the body as a tool of domination and resistance, the circulation of aesthetic and epistemological forms—graphic arts, chess engines, journalistic narratives, domestic technologies, bodily proxies—and the ways that these forms reshape the temporalities through which bodies become cultural media. With their focus on the practices that serve as building blocks of civility and social life per se, these essays also introduce fundamental questions around how consensus and influence depend on temporal emphases on repetition and banality, calculation and prediction, and continuity and rupture. How do new technologies—such as chess engines, CPR techniques, media, and graphic designed imagery, among the many discussed in this issue—change our experience of time and thereby create the possibility for new understandings of being together and shared meaning? Collectively, these essays allude to how conditions of war, siege, bodily harm, and their ostensible absence from everyday life are not inversions of each other but perhaps offer different configurations of the lines of connection across technology, corporeality, visuality, and temporality that enable us to create and share meanings across social groups, nations, and regions.

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