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Spectatorial Splitting and Transcultural Seeing in the Age of Pandemics

Josephine Berry

Like the Virus that takes advantage but is not ultimately wedded to the difference between Life and Nonlife, Capital views all modes of existence as if they were vital *and* demands that not all modes of existence are the same from the point of view of the extraction of value.

– Elizabeth Povinelli

The paradox shared by ‘the Virus’ and Capital articulated by Elizabeth Povinelli in this epigraph is, I believe, one that can also describe the emerging spectatorial regime that the COVID 19 pandemic has brought to light within the institutions and practices of western art. The art viewer is increasingly addressed both as paradigmatic Life – the still Transcendent I/eye of western reason – and as less than fully human, namely as the bare life whose thingification¹ has hitherto been reserved for the West’s colonial Others. This conflation of ontological and biopolitical orders of the human within the pandemic museum is triggered by, but also mimics, the behaviour of the virus itself which treats humans and objects interchangeably – while also exploiting the systems and behaviours that uphold these differences. Given how deeply invested western ontology is in such a separation between Life and Nonlife, *bios/zoë* and *Thanatos/geos*,² and the associated universe of semantic, ethical, political and economic values produced on this basis, such a lack of recognition is profoundly destabilising to the social order which presupposes it. Yet, crucially, we must acknowledge, together with Povinelli, that Capital has organised its extraction of value according to the very production of differentials in ‘modes of existence’ which, as a virus-like living-dead entity itself, it is also incapable of sensing or knowing – hence the paradox. The difference between life and death is then, for capital, not an ontological but rather a strategic one. This separation that the discursive and violently practical techniques of colonialism perfected is constitutive of the regime of the racial.

Such a separation of (qualified) Life and (Non)life, *bios* and *zoë/Thanatos*, is also sustained by a way of seeing that western art and its exhibition in public space have helped to produce; a way of seeing exchangeable with the transcendently universal I/eye which is premised on a non-seeing of Others. It is this non-seeing of Others whose devalued labour has created the very production conditions of the universal, I argue, that the pandemic has rendered impossible. Below I consider the role played by western art in co-constructing the racial regime, a political-symbolic order whose ethical justification of the unsustainable extraction of value from all other (Non)life has itself helped to create the destabilised conditions in which the zoonotic transmission of disease occurs. I argue that the virus compels art institutions, and by extension art itself, to address the spectator as the split subject of universal reason *and* bare life thereby creating a rhizomatic link between different ontological states of humanness. While the virus has in so many ways retraced the differentials of race and class, its yoking together of post-Enlightenment and decolonial ways of seeing and being seen is shaking up the western liberal regime of universality which produces such differentials in the first place. We might see in these tremors the prospect of a more truly transcultural perception that could help to dismantle the bourgeois liberal aesthetic regime and its reliance upon the delusion of universality.

Stepping to the Side of the Picture

The weekend before the second UK lockdown, I finally made it out of the house and into the centre of London to visit an actual bricks and mortar museum – the National Gallery – which stands at the tired old heart of this tired old former Empire. We didn't have long inside because one of our party had booked late and so couldn't share the same timeslot as us. In this new dystopia of public space, he had to sit outside in Trafalgar square instead, contemplating Heather Philipson's sculpture *The End* – a fly and drone infested giant melting ice cream that sits on the Fourth Plinth gleefully spoiling the pomposity of Trafalgar Square. 'The End' sounds like a commentary on everything from the dream of endless consumption, to the self-aggrandizing mission of western imperialism embodied in Nelson's Column, to the civic values of publicness, to the political subject of modernity which also corresponds to the aesthetic subject.

Back inside the gallery I felt like I was witnessing another ending, something more than just one more *petit mort* of western art. But why should this be when the gallery has remained relatively unchanged, give or take the Sainsbury Wing, since the 1970s when John Berger used its collection as the main target of his classic book and TV series *Ways of Seeing*? Or how, rather, is it ending in a way that's different from the obsolescence that Berger detected in European oil painting's complicity with patriarchal and racist capitalist power? After contemplating Gainsborough's 1750 double portrait of *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, Berger had concluded:

If one studies European oil painting as a whole ... it is not so much a framed window open on to the world as a safe let into the wall, a safe into which the visible has been deposited ... The relation between property and art in European culture appears natural to that culture.³

This way of seeing that Berger so effectively anatomised required a frontal mode of vision from the viewer. We need to stop in a central position and face the painting to achieve full absorption into its world, regardless of whether it employs single point perspective and the visual pyramid of Renaissance invention, or splinters into modernism's multiple spatialities. If European painting is a scopic regime in which the viewer is constructed as proprietor of the picture space, then this proprietorial mode also requires a model of subjecthood to which it refers. The viewer-proprietor should be upright, static, disembodied, concentrated and easily substituted by another equivalent eye-mind assemblage. This subject is a universal one, just as the structure of the political subject of the liberal West – endowed with rights, reason and self-determination – is also constructed as universal. The universal space of art which the National Gallery aims to embody by placing on display the chronologically ordered single story of civilisational development, its transcendental Spirit, demands an equally universally conceived viewer. But what happens to all this when such a subject of disinterested aesthetic judgement is required to follow a series of arrows stuck to the floor because her body may or may not be the bearer of a zoonotically contracted virus sweeping the global population in a technologically accelerated state of hyper-connection with effects varying from deadly to asymptomatic? What happens when the body of the viewer is addressed explicitly by the art institution outside of their capacity for judgement or even reason? Does the pandemic, like so many underlying fragilities, render explicit a tension within contemporary art's address of the subject as still both the locus of reason and yet also a bodily phenomenon whose interactions

with objects and others are happening below the level of conscious thought? This dual address brings to the surface a tension running through the history of western thought and aesthetics between the philosophical ideal of the freely self-determining subject of reason, and the subsequent scientific description of the human being as externally affected, shaped and determined; an object subject to forces like any other. Such a division, however, between those subjects of self-determination and those who are construed as externally determined and affected also demarcates a relation of power that decolonial thinkers understand to be integral to the production of the West's racial regime.

Needing to get back to our companion sitting out in the cold due to his late booking of a timeslot for entering the space of universality, we began to move at haste along the white floor arrows guiding us to the exit. Unexpectedly, this safety promoting arrow system sent us speed walking through most of the gallery, skimming past Caravaggio's, Titians, Seurat's, Monet's, Manet's, Degas, Gainsborough's, Hogarth's – so many cassocks and buttocks, bosoms and bludgeonings, white bodies engaged in lust, leisure or piety. In this sidelong blurring of each careful composition into a wave of picture-objects the symbolic function of individual paintings started to give way, producing instead the sensation of misfiring representational and ideological stimuli. A new diagram of spectatorship and publicness seemed to emerge in this slightly breathless charge up and down the aisles of Art's scrambling story. While access to the universal had been carved up and booked out, one was nevertheless there to complete the apex of the viewing pyramid, still the privileged surveyor of 'systematic space' first developed in the Renaissance and the dawn of colonial exploration. But now, just as Marx said of the worker in the accelerating industrial age, the spectator 'steps to the side of the production process instead of being its chief actor.'⁴ No longer conceived as a subject of judgement and taste, a disinterested eye-mind, the spectator has become biological and potentially contagious, not to mention distracted, and needs to be acted upon as bare life at one level so she may be granted access to the universal at another. How do these two models of the subject relate to each other, and what does their convergence do to art?

What Marx means by 'stepping to the side' is that due to the development of fixed capital the worker's labour is no longer directly included into the production process which is now built from assimilated general social knowledge that has become a 'monstrously' efficient 'direct

force of production'. Instead, the human labourer is only required to act as a 'watchman or regulator':

No longer does the worker insert a modified natural thing [*Natursgegenstand*] as middle link between the object and himself; rather, he inserts the process of nature, transformed into an industrial process, as a means between himself and inorganic nature, mastering it. ⁵

We can easily see why this section of the *Grundrisse*, known as the 'fragment on machines', is famous for its prescience. Understanding technology as the production of processes, themselves modelled on nature, and the assimilation of general knowledge, rather than the mere automation of tools, is a capacious enough understanding of technology to accommodate our own computationally mimetic times. What I want to ask here is how Marx's image of the worker standing to the side of the machine, engaged in abstract gestures that depend upon the technological mimesis of natural processes, relates to the splitting of subjects of art into flesh and Spirit, *zoë* and *bios*, that we encounter in the pandemic institution. Is there in fact something missing from, or invisible within, this diagram that could help us understand the relationship better?

We are addressed frontally and laterally in the new institution of the zoonotic age, asked to be reasoning subjects, yet acted upon as mere bodies, herded as animals. Seeing pictures sideways on releases something that normally remains hidden within the frontal regime, something it has systematically obscured. This lateral seeing allows the viewer to perceive, perhaps for the first time, the construction of public exhibition space not as the egalitarian setting it purports to be, but as a space conditional upon a certain non-seeing – that of the perspective of a subject rendered bare life, a subjecthood whose creation was necessary in order to pay for the creation of such spaces in the first place. This connects to what Denise Ferreira da Silva has said about the patriarchal subject who always introduces another subject under His authority while claiming to be the only full one, i.e. those less than human Others in contradistinction to which He constitutes himself.⁶ The contemporary split subject of the zoonotic museum is in part still the surveyor of propertied and systematic classical space; a centred and self-transparent perspectival authority whose relations to Others are acquisitive and objectifying. Indeed, European painting's systematisation of perspective is intimately bound up with the scientific, moral and legal tools that enabled its discovery, plunder and

division of foreign territories *over which it held no sovereignty*. Speaking of Holbein the Younger's painting *The Ambassadors* (1497/8) held in the National Gallery's collection, Berger comments: 'To colonize a land it was necessary to convert its people to Christianity and accounting, and thus prove to them that European civilization was the most advanced in the world. Its art included.' (1972, 95) The liberal European subject of politics and rights needed its Other, constructed as affectable, carnal and irrational, against whom to perfect its own embodiment of reason. One might add that the ability of the 18th century couple Mr and Mrs Andrews to embody such an exemplary referentiality between identity and landownership depended not only upon the enclosures of common lands at home, which enabled the creation of the sweeping backdrop of landscape in their portrait, but upon the outsourcing of unsightly and intensively extracted agricultural labour to the colonies. The universal subject, like the increasingly abstracted factory worker, required the looted labour, resources and territories of racialised subjects to establish the global domination of capitalism and its unequal allocation of resources and life chances that continues undiminished to this day.

This capture of labour, reliant on the radical dehumanisation of African slaves above all, was also made invisible as the self-same 'process of nature' referred to by Marx. The re-composition of imperialism's colonial subjects on a sliding scale of sub-humanity rendered their labour a free or devalued input of capitalism, comparable to the fertility of the soil or the energy locked up in carbon deposits. While Marx himself perceives the profound transformation of industrial labour through the assimilation of general social knowledge into fixed capital, as witnessed in the rapidly developing factories of Europe, he fails to acknowledge that what also stands between the worker and the machine at this time is slave labour or imperially extorted and racially devalued labour. We can conceive of this in the material form of the cotton derived from plantation slavery in the Americas and woven by the looms of Lancashire, or as the tea grown in colonised British India and drunk by their proletarian operators. But we can also think about this in terms of the direct subsumption of know-how, craft and cultural knowledge into the processes of capitalist production that facilitates its extraction of value and the acceleration of its technological processes.

Black and colonial labour is missing from Marx's diagram in its manual *and* mental forms and is also a part of what causes the European labourer to stand to the side of the machine, whose head and hands were needed less and less to work materials directly. The standing to

the side of the machines that relies upon the looting of racialised labour in the colonies of the West is connected to the frontal regime of Renaissance perspective that creates the self-transparent subject at the apex of the visual pyramid and uses that self-positioning as an epistemological technique with which to dominate and plunder the rest of the planet. In her book *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* Ariella Aïsha Azoulay traces how the creation of the modern state depended upon the construction of neutral universal forms such as democratic sovereignty, citizenship, universal suffrage, and the archival spaces of knowledge. Yet, in her words, ‘Far from neutral, these imperial devices facilitated the plunder and appropriation of material wealth, cultures, resources, and documents, and generated the establishment of state institutions to preserve looted objects and produce a bygone past [...]’.⁷ It is the very universality of these forms that justifies the disavowal and disappearance of the genocidal violence of colonialism that was the condition of their creation. In a poignant example, she discusses a slave from South Carolina called Dave the Potter who produced exquisite clay pots that have subsequently become highly collectible and are included in a collection at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Dave’s work belongs to a type of handmade sculpted jar produced by slaves in the mid-19th century working in Edgefield, South Carolina, a region famed for its pottery. What is also known, however, is that after the abolition of slavery in 1865, some 170 slaves of Congolese origin were illegally smuggled up the Savannah River by steamboat into the Edgefield plantation owned by a relative of the ship’s owner. In other words, these craft skills were so sought after at the time that the plantation owner risked fine and arrest to procure them by kidnap. This story belies the caption in the Boston museum which states that their ‘early history is unknown’, both because this episode has been written about, but also because, in Azoulay’s words, ‘in order for these pieces to be sold in the late twentieth century, people must have believed that they were valuable and preserved them in excellent condition over the course of several generations to later sell them as “exceptionally rare examples”. The recognition,’ she continues, ‘of Congolese people’s skills as sculptors in materials such as clay or wood was not appreciation of an exceptionally talented individual but of a community where such knowledge was developed and transmitted over generations.’⁸ It seems to be no contradiction for the ‘Transcendental I’ to enslave Congolese people, demean and destroy their living cultures, unsee the quality of their arts and then fill its own museums and workshops with their artefacts and skilled labour.

The nation building propelled by colonial violence drove the universal models of Art and civilisation embodied in places like the National Gallery or the Boston Museum of Fine Arts just as much as this violence helped power the cogs, belts and spinning jennies of factories in Cottonopolis. The extraction of resources and labour entailed the relegation and devastation of world cultures which were condemned to a bygone ‘primitive’ past, a separate temporality denied from co-existing in the same present as the bourgeois modernity that vampirically fed on them, rendering colonial subject worldless and their cultures valueless. This differential production of global subjects was needed to produce the ideal of western modernity and what Sylvia Wynter has called the ‘coloniality of Being’⁹ – a self-transparent and latterly biologised ‘descriptive statement’ of humanness. Yet the western human descriptive statement is but one genre of humanness that sees itself, due to its scientific basis, as outside any genre whatsoever. The imposition of a biocentric Darwinian descriptive statement onto global humanity results in the dismantling of all other origin stories and all other ontologies but its own. Yet the Transcendental I escapes the consequences of its scientifically universalising model that might threaten its privileged autonomous status by fusing the Darwinian model of biological evolution with a naturalisation of western economic domination. The market is thereby construed as an emergent evolutionary force which, like the Christian cosmogony it replaces, is fantasised to be beyond all social control and invested with the power to decide over life and death. It is no coincidence, of course, that the symbolic code of life and death instituted by this biocentric genre of being human and its attendant market logic retraces the self-same colour line drawn by colonialism between the economically saved and the ‘economically damnés’, in Wynter’s paraphrase of Frantz Fanon.

Universal Man and Viral Backchat

The eruption of zoonotic diseases is a direct consequence of the Western colonial construction ‘Man’, this genre-denying, self-transparent descriptive statement that relies upon the systematic degradation of all other forms of being human, not to mention life forms. The history of civilisational and biopolitical separations that produced the National Gallery merely culminate with the white arrows on the floor since, like the deracination of objects from colonised lifeworlds, the modern conception of art itself as the apotheosis of transhistorical Spirit necessitated the extraction of objects and practices from their living cultural milieus. This constitutes the splitting of Spirit from the Life it apparently epitomises

in the form of civilisation's development and which it then comes to judge scientifically through the differential (read racial) comparison of global cultures.¹⁰ As Rancière wrote of the 18th century antiquarian art historian Johann Joachim Winkelmann, he was 'one of the first, if not the first, to invent the notion of art as we understand it: no longer as the skill of those who made paintings, statues or poems, but as *the sensible milieu* of the coexistence of these works.'¹¹ Reason, universality, Man, art and modernity are all synonyms for this sensible milieu, this way of seeing, as Berger called it. But if the modern museum organises samples of deracinated species and cultural objects into teleological series, coronavirus hacks this space of rational combination by threatening humans with an animal pathogen derived from Pangolins in an act of reverse colonisation.

Written shortly after the first successful launch of a satellite into Earth's orbit in 1958, Hannah Arendt's proto-biopolitical work *The Human Condition* speculates: 'The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms.'¹² Accordingly, the coronavirus levels the careful construction of racial hierarchies and sensible milieus by reminding us that 'through life' humans of whatever genre are related to all other living organisms. In the words of Deleuze and Guattari, 'the virus causes us to form a rhizome with other animals.'¹³ Yet, with heavy sense of irony, it is modern society's phobic relation to all other life which triggers its strategies of immunisation, propelling the development of an 'artificial world' that would intensify its incursions into so-called 'primary habitats'. Ceaseless deforestation, industrial farming and trawling of the seas are the effect of the terrible success of the capitalist genre class of being human, one might say. These continuous capitalist expansions, entailing land-use changes, burgeoning human and livestock populations, climate change, global travel, biodiversity loss and habitat fragmentation, combined with random mutation and natural selection, are what cause viruses to get 'chatty', in the words of anthropologist Genese Marie Sodikoff.¹⁴ Chatty viruses are liable not only to talk back but to jump species, including over the cordon sanitaire erected at the boundaries of human civilisation, causing the laying of white arrows in the National Gallery that highlight the split contemporary subject of art.

How should we conceive of this subject of art today and how does this connect to the crisis of the universal subject and the rise of what Wynter calls a transcultural perspective – a perspective from which it is possible to perceive the edges, even the outside, of the culture-

genre we inhabit? She quotes Mikhail Epstein to explain her use of the term: ‘Culture frees us from nature, transculture frees us from culture, from any one culture.’¹⁵ The virus creates a rhizomatic structure that crashes the systematic separations, thresholds and hierarchies produced by and productive of white western bourgeois Man, freeing us from this single genre of life and manifesting our connectedness to all life. The world of artifice is thereby thrown into doubt and the poker face of civilisation slips, at the cost of growing global mortalities. Visitors are addressed as infectable, vulnerable or contagious bodies as much as the universal eye-mind, the peculiarly modern subject of static attention. They are *zoë* as much as *bios*, and it is this politicisation of bodily life and biologisation of the political subject that is what Agamben means by ‘bare life’ or ‘politically qualified life’ (1998). Yet unlike historical modernity’s programme of self-immunisation for which bare life is the inevitable and sacrificial remainder, now all such attempts at immunisations seem to increase death and threaten the conditions of life for everyone – not only the subaltern world. Bare life becomes the new universal.

The conflict between immunisation and infection emerges everywhere. Top Glove, the Malaysian manufacturer of the NHS’s biggest supplier of rubber gloves, which has made a fortune from the pandemic, has been using forced migrant labour, forced overtime, debt bondage and passport confiscation, whilst housing its workers in overcrowded, unsanitary and highly contagious dormitory blocks. The manufacturers of a key component of protective equipment against this zoonotic virus employs the self-same racialised logic that sentences neo-colonial subjects to economic damnation and fracks the environment of the Global South, causing the virus bearing bats to leave their caves. This, in turn, has caused a largescale COVID19 outbreak across Top Glove’s facilities, forcing it to close half of its factories, sending its share price tumbling and causing shortages of global glove supply.¹⁶ Racialised capitalist extraction strategies and zoonotic outbreaks have been revealed to be continuous with each other, but now the circle has become a vortex, breaking apart multiple assemblages of separation. We can also think of these assemblages as including the techniques of systematic perspective that simultaneously produced highly focused modes of viewing and the world as a separate, scientifically knowable object.

Systematic perspective in Renaissance painting, according to the German art historian Erwin Panofsky, corresponds to a wider European understanding of space as universal and objective. In order to register the novelty of its development, he quotes Luca Gaurico (1475-

1558), the Renaissance astrologer to Catherine de' Medici, who said that mathematical space is a 'continuous quantity consisting of three physical dimensions, existing by nature before all bodies and beyond all bodies, indifferently receiving everything.'¹⁷ This neo-Platonic construction of space emerges, in Panofsky's account, with the supersession of 'divine omnipotence', producing a measurable world of continuous extension and objectification. This rationalisation of space corresponds perfectly to what Ferreira da Silva calls the western invention of the 'Transcendental I', the self-transparent subject of racialised modernity. Just as space is conceived as before and beyond 'all bodies', the Transcendental I is likewise self-grounding and thus not only unwilling, but unable to return its gaze upon itself. It presumes itself to be the universal and natural locus of reason, history and science, outside all genre types of being human.

Accordingly, for Panofsky, the price of spatial objectification in painterly representation is the replacement of 'psychophysiological space' with mathematical space, subjectivity with objectivity. If the universality of systematic space comes before *all* bodies, then this must also include the embodied eye of the observer despite the construction of that eye as omnipotent. Self-ignorance, one might say, is likewise the price to be paid by the autonomous subject of reason for rendering all other life as secondary to, or lesser than, itself. It bears emphasising again that this Transcendental I takes on a proprietorial relation to all the fruits of the earth; its peoples and products become so many objects ripe for the taking or the crushing. Berger analyses the correspondence between the rise of colonial capitalism and the representation of new kinds of wealth in oil paintings. 'Thus painting itself,' he writes, 'had to be able to demonstrate the desirability of what money could buy. And the visual desirability of what can be bought lies in its tangibility, in how it will reward the touch, the hand, of the owner.'¹⁸ But while objects are rendered conspicuously textured, tangible and graspable, the subjects of portraiture avoid reciprocating the viewer's gaze, they occupy the non-place of power. In his discussion of *The Ambassadors*, Berger says of the two men: 'There is in their gaze and their stance a curious lack of expectation of any recognition. It is as though in principle their worth cannot be recognized by others. They look as though they are looking at something of which they are not part. At something which surrounds them but from which they wish to exclude themselves.'¹⁹ This is the very definition of the colonial gaze which the viewer necessarily and ideologically completes.

In Sylvia Wynter's discussion of Western ontoepistemology's production she describes the humanist turn in 15th century theology that imagines mankind to stand between the physical and spiritual worlds, the natural and supernatural orders. It was, she explains,

within this syncretized reinscription that the new criterion of Reason would come to take the place of the medieval criterion of the Redeemed Spirit as its transumed form – that the master code of symbolic life ('the name of what is good') and death ('the name of what is evil') would now become that of reason/sensuality, rationality/irrationality in the reoccupied place of the matrix code of Redeemed Spirit/Fallen Flesh.²⁰

The nonreciprocity of the ambassadors' gaze can thus be read in these terms, as the transposition of God's invisible gaze into the new terms of human reason and its dominion over those affectable, fleshy forms of existence ascribed to racialised subjects. Now we visitors to the universal museum of Nationhood and Art are asked to occupy a double subject position – that of the subject of reason who completes and governs the visual/territorial field; and that of the affectable and scientifically knowable object of this same objectifying gaze. *We are both the name of what is good (Spirit) and the name of what is bad (Flesh)*. We are also the subjects of a potentially fixed and productive attention, and those of an unbound, physiological and inattentive vision.

Unbound and Doubled Vision

This notion of weakened or unbound perception begun to be studied by the empirical sciences in the late 1870s as part of a wider decomposition of the perceptual field into units of sensation with the capacity for synthesis. In Jonathan Crary's account of this scientific expansion he focuses particularly on the new pathology of Agnosia that names the impairment of 'a hypothetical symbolic function', producing a 'purely visual awareness of an object'. Agnosia, in other words, is 'an inability to make any conceptual or symbolic identification of an object, a failure of recognition...'²¹ The secularising episteme of the Renaissance, which placed Man halfway between Spirit and Flesh, good and evil, rendering him invisible to himself, had the effect of unleashing the empirical sciences which cause Man himself to appear as the object of empirical study. Man, as such, is subject to this split mode

of apprehension, as both the weak and fallible physiological object of the neutral scientific gaze *and* its transcendent operator who wields the techniques and taxonomies of pathologisation. This paradoxical way of seeing has been accentuated by the pandemic in which we are addressed as law-comprehending subjects of reason and calculation on the one hand, and potentially pathogenic matter on the other. We all become agnosiacs who look distractedly sideways at frontally constructed pictures unable or less able to recognise them symbolically as we follow white arrows on the floor towards the exit. In this moment we have formed a rhizome between Enlightenment and decolonial seeing within the collapsing vision machine of the universal museum. In the words of Wynter, ‘Christian becomes Man1 (as political subject), then as Man1 becomes Man2 (as a bio-economic subject) [...] in both cases, their epistemes will be, like their respective genres of being human, both discontinuous and continuous.’²² When the switching between modes of being can no longer sustain this epistemic continuum, we can start to glimpse something of the transculturalism Wynter requires as a prerequisite for decolonisation to begin.

Unbinding vision has in many respects been the constant work of modernist and contemporary art: from Manet’s hyperreal yet psychologically absent subjects, to Pointillist experiments with the effects of the eye’s physiological mixing of pure colour dots, from Jackson Pollock’s laying the canvas on the floor to allow the gestural mark to relate as much to the manual as to the optical, to post-conceptual and performative experiments of all kinds that deemphasise retinality and incite the reappearance of bodies, material processes, social relations or situations.²³ We might say that this history already comprises the self-negation of the Transcendental I from within art’s own matrix, and in many ways defines the last century of art historical development. Yet for all this, the spaces and institutions of art have been able to reconstitute the systematic negations of modernism and post-modernism into the guise of the public realm and its illusion of universality. This observation includes such direct interrogations of the artwork’s apparent benevolence and the neutrality of spectatorial conditions as we see in a performance piece like Tania Bruguera’s *Tatlin’s Whisper #5*, 2008, at Tate Modern, in which mounted riot police performed crowd control exercises on the largely compliant crowd. As ever with institutional critique, such a challenging exposure of the artwork’s conditions is unproblematically digested back into the institutional success story, strengthening rather than questioning its foundations. So, what has the virus brought that wasn’t already present within art itself? How does it hack universality differently?

For one thing, a virus is also an agnosiac because it doesn't operate symbolically – although it makes copies. For another, unlike the diachronic journey from Man1 to Man2, it does not evolve by going from the least to the most differentiated state. Instead, in the explanation of Deleuze and Guattari, 'it develops a rhizome to jump from one already differentiated line to another'.²⁴ This they call an 'aparallel evolution' which by 'transversal communications between different lines scramble the genealogical trees.'²⁵ In the image of art theorist Filipa Ramos, the COVID19 virus integrated the rhizome of late capitalist globalisation, taking its desire to connect and network everything and running with it. 'Now it believes that you and me and them are us.' She writes, 'That "We" are one. That you and me and them are made of the same stuff.'²⁶ This, for Deleuze and Guattari, is how becoming works through a 'capture of code, a surplus value of code, an increase in valence.'²⁷ Networked globalisation takes on a whole new significance and at last becomes fully legible to itself and to those subjects previously occupying the non-place of power. Those who have long disavowed the black labour that causes western workers to stand alongside, and now sit down in front of, the machine. The Ambassador turns his telescope around and catches a glimpse of his own flesh as determined by the external forces he thought he mastered. The picture has been caught into a new anamorphism adding to that of the skull painted in the foreground which Holbein used to signify the omnipresent spiritual domain that ruled over these *Uomo Universale*. The anamorphism brought on by the virus reveals the underworld of suffering blithely ignored by Man in the comfort of his non-place, as much as it reveals him as affectable flesh. It enables us to see how the virus captures racialised capitalism and crashes its logic of immunisation and exploitation, turning the vectors of its first world sovereignty into the circuitry of sickness and death. In Aimé Césaire's words, 'death scythes widely', and not always along the race and class lines he was speaking of – although the pandemic state has been highly efficient at reterritorializing power along these differentials.²⁸

Of course, racial capitalism itself is one of the most successful viruses of all time and unlike COVID 19, isn't particularly threatened by killing its host. We saw this in 1929 and in 2008 – and no doubt we will see this again, perhaps as soon as 2021. Yet, as decolonial theory teaches us, its white western bourgeois ontology never ceases to require the myth of its own self-determination and transparency. In Denise Ferreira da Siva's summary,

While the others of Europe gaze on the horizon of death, facing certain obliteration, the racial keeps the transparent I in self-determination (interiority) alone before the

horizon of life, oblivious to, because always already knowledgeable (controlling and emulating) of, how universal reason governs its existence.²⁹

This myth requires that all Others appear as lacking reason, as mere bio-mechanisms to be plundered, enslaved, exploited, copied, consumed or destroyed. Capitalism obviates its omnivorous consumption of all other ways of being human or animal, all other ways of living, all other cultures, all other genomes, all other bodies, and all other laws and rights. While abolitionist, civil rights, decolonial, feminist, environmental, animal rights and LGBTQI movements have long confronted the Transcendental I with the reflection of its disavowed violence, the virus addresses it in a language it understands – the non-symbolic form of death. Its symbolic fiction of Spirit/Flesh which creates the all too real sociogenic code of life/death cannot be perfectly sustained because the virus, as a living-dead assemblage of RNA and protein, cannot differentiate between the two. So, while the pictures continue to line the walls of the National Gallery, the body of the viewer has become a vector of disease and potential death; it can no longer complete the ideological and perspectival pyramid. What this shows, and what we/they cannot not see, is that we/they are just as externally determined as the colonial subjects whose living deaths paid for the erection of the museum in the first place.

As already noted, this split subjectivity has plagued western Man since what Ferreira da Silva calls the ‘refashioning of reason as the secular ruler and producer of the universe, as an exterior (constraining or regulative) force, [that] threatened to transform the mind into such an other thing of the world.’³⁰ Yet this potential externalisation of reason from the mind of the Transcendent I precipitated multiple disavowals too various to compress in this brief space, but generally pivoting on some form of differentiation between the human body and the mind it houses. We can find a parallel history in art which, while attempting to negate its boundaries so as to escape its state of autonomy and return to the spaces of common experience, (the bodily, the material, the situation, the libidinal, identity, local power relations) has found its rebellions sublated back into the separate ontology of art. We look at Olafur Eliasson’s melting icebergs at the Tate Modern as art spectacle as much as a fragment of our dying planet and we cannot return them to the continuity of the landscape and climate that made them.³¹ We also cannot see how the differential sovereignty that helps to construct art as an autonomous system participates in their melting. In this sense, Eliasson is reminiscent of Mr and Mrs Andrews, forging a proprietorial circuit between his own

(creative) identity and the (anthropocenic) landscape it requires.³² My proposal is rather that the rhizome slung, or hacked, between Enlightenment and decolonial ways of seeing produced in the museum as an inadvertent effect of the virus triggers something closer to the double consciousness referred to by W.E.B. du Bois in his 1903 book *The Souls of Black Folk*. In his words the ‘American Negro’ has a sort of second sight brought on by a split ontology:

a world which yields him no self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One even feels this twoness – an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.³³

The double consciousness brought on by COVID 19, in which a oneness of the living world smashes through the carefully constructed material-symbolic menagerie of racist separation and vision, gives us a glimpse of the transcultural perspectives long held by colonised peoples that western hegemony has continuously and fairly successfully sought to suppress. While this ‘peculiar sensation’ may be the painful, yet self-seeing, consciousness borne through racial subjection, and while capitalism is doing all it can to prevent this self-seeing from becoming general because it threatens its necessary neutrality, the virus has momentarily shifted our perspective by planting our eyes back in our bodies, by turning the circuits of value extraction into the highways of contagion and by forcing ‘us’ privileged bourgeois subjects to understand how it is to be treated as contagious flesh. Perhaps an aparallel evolution of vision is occurring. What we now see is how truly universal is Life’s relation to all other life, something that the constructed universals of the nation state, citizenship, and its spaces of art and knowledge actively threaten. To have universal validity, the rights of the political subject and the work of art can never be asserted at the expense of another’s rights or an other’s cultural world but, like the virus itself, must constitute and be constituted together with all.

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¹ In Aimé Césaire's original formulation, 'colonization = thingification', ([1955] 2000, 42).

² Not to mention the western ontoepistemological distinction within life itself, between *zoë* (the life common to all creatures) and *bios* (the form or way of life). This distinction is extended spatially within the ages of colonialism and post-colonial globality such that western Europeans are seen as fulfilling the full potential of *bios* or the 'laws of nature' by achieving 'civilisation' while the colonised, whose cultures have been deemed undeveloped within western epistemics, are apprehended as *zoë* or bare life. In this sense the distinction *bios/zoë* can also be said to correspond to the social destiny of life or death. See Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) for a detailed elaboration of this ontoepistemological trajectory.

³ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1977, p.109

⁴ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, Penguin Books in association with the New Left Review, 1973, p.705

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007

⁷ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, London: Verso 2019, p.39

⁸ Ibid., p.111

⁹ "Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves. Because of this

overrepresentation, which is defined in the first part of the title as the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom, any attempt to unsettle the coloniality of power will call for the unsettling of this overrepresentation [...]” Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation--An Argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 257–337, p.260

¹⁰ For an in depth reading of the incorporation and preservation of the western project of reason into the science of life and then subsequently anthropology which effected the transmutation of ‘race’ into the more acceptable signifier ‘culture’, while preserving the stratifications of the racial regime transcoded into the comparative measures of modernity and progress – see Ferreira da Silva (2007).

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul, London: Verso, 2013, p.12

¹² Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998, p.1

¹³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, London: Continuum, 1987, p.11

¹⁴ Genese Maria Sodikoff, ‘Zoonosis’, *Anthropocene Unseen: A Lexicon*, Goleta, California: Punctum Books, 2020

¹⁵ Epstein, cited in Wynter, (2003), p.286

¹⁶ Hannah Beech, ‘A Company Made P.P.E. for the World. Now Its Workers Have the Virus’, *New York Times*, Dec 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/20/world/asia/top-glove-ppe-covid-malaysia-workers.html>

¹⁷ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form* [1927], New York: Zone Books, 1991

¹⁸ Berger, (1972), p.90

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.94

²⁰ Wynter (2003), p.287

²¹ Jonathan Crary, *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*, Cambridge, Mass: October Books and MIT Press, 2001, p.94

²² Wynter, (2003), p.318

²³ For a biopolitical analysis of this historical trajectory see: Josephine Berry, *Art and (Bare) Life: A Biopolitical Inquiry*, Sternberg Press, 2018

²⁴ Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 11)

²⁵ *Ibid.* (1987, 12)

²⁶ Filipa Ramos, ‘What the Virus Needs’, *Artshock*, 28.04.2020

²⁷ Deleuze and Guattari, (1987), p.11

²⁸ ‘Guadeloupe, split in two down its dorsal line and equal in poverty to us, Haiti where negritude rose for the first time and stated that it believed in its humanity and the funny tail of Florida where the strangulation of a nigger is being completed, and Africa gigantically caterpillaring up to the Hispanic foot of Europe, its nakedness where death scythes widely.’

Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* [1955], trans. Joan Pinkham, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000, p.19

²⁹ Denise Ferreira da Silva, (2007), p.30

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.40

³¹ This is a reference to Olafur Eliason’s project *Ice Watch* staged at Bankside, outside Tate Modern, London 2018.

³² Thanks to Dubravka Sekulic for this observation.

³³ W.E.B. du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, (xiii)