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Between cosmopolitics and decoloniality

MISCHA TWITCHIN

¹ Attia refers this ‘major focus in my artistic research’ back to reflections on ‘a simple piece of African cloth that a friend gave [him] in 1997’, a ‘traditional loincloth’ the life of which had been extended by the addition of ‘small patches of Western fabric’. As he comments: ‘The patches are actually signs of both an aesthetic and ethical act: it is a repair. From then on I spent my life looking for such signs. It enabled me to discover the complexity of fixing, in traditional extra-Western societies and in modern Western societies as well’ (Attia and Gauthier 2014: 223). For examples of this strand of Attia’s work see this link to one of the many iterations of the *Repair* project (here from 2012): <https://bit.ly/3rjBzzw> (accessed 10 July 2021). A current iteration (2021) can be seen at BAK (basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht): <https://bit.ly/3rjCpYc> (accessed 10 July 2021).

² Among diverse strands of Attia’s *Repair* project, this slide montage has been exhibited by itself, as when I first encountered it in an exhibition (‘The White Hunter: African memories and representations’) at the FM Centre for Contemporary Art in Milan (2017); and it is also the principal subject of a book publication (Attia 2014). This juxtaposition of images is also discussed in a previous essay of mine in *Performance Research* (Twitchin 2019a).

Shake the cosmic order and the order of politics will be shaken as well. (Latour 2020: 13)

The liberation of part of humanity from the yoke of colonialism constitutes a key moment in the history of our modernity. That this event left almost no mark on the philosophical spirit of our time is in itself hardly an enigma. Not all crimes necessarily engender sacred things. (Mbembe 2021: 2)

Both of these epigraphs address the cultural politics of an image of ‘humanity’ viewed through the lens of decolonising practices of knowledge, where the cosmological is displaced by reference to the historical. Adopting a term from the contemporary French-Algerian artist Kader Attia, this essay will reflect on what the sense of ‘repair’ offers for a reading of such politics. Attia’s ongoing project under this title has had many iterations – including photography, sculpture, film, installation, seminars, publications, and (as will be cited here) both concept and montage.¹ As both a thought-figure and a cultural strategy, Attia’s artistic-conceptual advocacy of ‘repair’ engages with the different material conditions of visibility of what Walter Mignolo (after Anibal Quijano) historicises as ‘the colonial-modern matrix of power’; or, more particularly here, of what Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez have called the ‘colonial wound’ (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013: n.p.).

Attia’s exploration of colonial-modern visibilities is perhaps most explicit in a slide show in which he presents images of the repair of cultural artefacts (particularly those associated with the material cultures of former colonies, not least with the example of masks) juxtaposed with photographs of the *gueules cassées*, whose faces were disfigured during World War One. This offers a disturbing montage of the colonial-modern, in terms

of what used to be conceived of as its global ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’.² Equally concept and artwork, Attia’s manifold project offers a critique of understanding repair ‘in modern Western cultures where the stake of this act of repair is the disappearance of the wound as well as of the repair itself’ (2014: 115). The following discussion, then, explores the resonances of this conception within an iconology of decolonialism, where the conceptual potential of repair connects with a cultural politics of what one might call ‘demodernism’ – addressing a correspondence, rather than simply a break, between pre- and post- in the historical self-definition of the ‘modern’.

In contrast to the ‘modern Western’ expectation of the work of repair, Attia advocates the Japanese aesthetic philosophy of *kintsugi*, in which repair, far from being made invisible (along with the damage done to an object), is even highlighted with gold dust – an illumination of fracture that foregrounds an object’s transformation through the visible simultaneity of both the damage and its repair. This co-existence of (or correspondence between) the break and the mend transforms the meaning of the integrity or wholeness of the object, undoing any simple sense of a state before and after, or of pre- and post-, especially as this is thought of – as with Attia’s own example – in terms of colonial-modernity.

Repair, here, is a thought-image of and for an anti-essentialism, challenging a cultural politics of ‘identity’ in which claims of and for an ‘original’ status that has been lost could be (ideally) redeemed or restored. In the appeal of – and to – the opposition between the pre- and post-colonial, for instance, investment in an idea of the ‘irreparable’ is often an unspoken (or even disavowed) premise. With its fractured sense of temporality, repair – for Attia – offers, rather, an enduring recognition of what is broken (in

its potential), whether this is already visible (and conceivable) or only becomes so by and as ‘art’. One might see in such a potential, then, an instance of that ‘renewing [of] transversal solidarities’ that, for Achille Mbembe, underpins ‘the invention of an alternative imaginary of life, power, and the planet’ (Mbembe, 2021: 230).

This does not mean a passive acceptance of damaged life, as if to occlude questions of responsibility – and, thus, of justice – but, rather, the critical affirmation of an anti-essentialist potential.³ The scar, for instance, is a transformation of the wound. In its becoming, the condition afterwards is a transfiguring memory of the beforehand, not simply its replacement and still less its ‘cosmetic’ erasure. Repair as the co-existence – and incompleteness – of past and present is also resonant with a Warburgian conception of ‘history’, the golden highlighting of which can be seen here, for example, in a commentary on the iconology of melancholy (to which we will return), where (as with the doctrine of the four temperaments) ‘although new meanings emerged, old meanings did not give way to them; in short, it was a case not of decay and metamorphosis, but of parallel survival’ (Klibansky et al. 2019: 3).

A further echo of this ‘demodern’ cosmopolitics – in its conceptual dynamic of ‘parallel survival’, re-signified here as a ‘subsistence of the future’ – is offered, for instance, by Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in discussing the relation of indigeneity to globalisation, when they write: ‘Maybe it is impossible historically to go back to being indigenous. But it is perfectly possible – more than that, this is actually taking place – to experience a *becoming-indigenous*, local and global, particular as well as general’ (2017: 122). Indeed, as they further note (citing an article by Stinne Krøijer [2010]):

Amerindian collectives, with their comparatively modest populations, their relatively simple technologies that are nonetheless open to high-intensity syncretic assemblages, are a ‘figuration of the future’ [Krøijer 2010], *not a remnant of the past*. Masters of technoprimitivist bricolage and politico-metaphysical metamorphosis, they are one of the possible chances, in fact, of a *subsistence of the future*. (2017: 123)

This potential of ‘repair’ between past and future (of ‘politico-metaphysical metamorphosis’, distinct from being simply restitution) can be read through an array of iconological instances – with their attendant iconoclasms – in an understanding of decoloniality that Attia’s work exposes to its own presuppositions. As an example of this, the following reflections will consider an iconic figure of and for ‘the human’ through the overlaid lenses of a decolonial and a Eurocentric viewpoint, highlighting what might be presupposed in their apparent contradiction.

In what follows, then, ‘repair’ is understood as a form of critical reflection on the cosmopolitics entailed by a ‘narcissistic and anthropomorphic monism’ (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2020: n.p.) characteristic of a colonial-modern vision of ‘humanity’, nonetheless distinguished from a decolonial iconoclasm that remains (at least potentially) invested in such monism. Writing in dialogue with Sylvia Wynter’s critique of the myths of ‘1492’, for instance, Walter Mignolo proposes ‘to crack the Vitruvian circle’ (2015: 120).⁴ This iconoclastic thought-figure of and for a decolonial challenge to an emblematic ‘humanity’ – associated with what he and Wynter call ‘Renaissance Humanism’ – refers us to Leonardo da Vinci’s drawing of Vitruvian Man, which was realised (as a visual condensation of the artist’s years-long research into the

³ For Mbembe, for instance, ‘inventing this new imaginary requires us, at the same time, to reflect on the question of revolutionary violence’ (Mbembe 2021: 230).

⁴ The year 1492 is associated with the start of the European conquest of what would become known as the Americas, as well as with the expulsion of both Jews and Muslims from Spain, and has been ‘foundational’ for the iconology of pre- and post-Columbian historiography in the colonial-modern period.

■ The repair of a ceramic plate. Photo by Misha Twitchin.



Vitruvian ratios) around 1490 (Lester 2012: 199–200). This now ubiquitous iconic image was originally drawn on a page in Leonardo's notebooks and did not become publicly accessible until after its first publication in 1784. This latency in the cultural history of Leonardo's image – much like that of the text of Pico della Mirandola's so-called *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (Copenhagen 2019) – underlines the ambiguities of its retroactive identification (including by Mignolo) with 'the Renaissance'.⁵ Anachronistically 'given' as the emblem of a Eurocentric humanism, Mignolo takes the image as a projection of and for a colonial-modern conception of 'Man', the breaking of which would expose what it masks – the history of 'the colonial wound' (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013: n.p.). Indeed, Wynter herself cites Mignolo in suggesting that 'the performative enactment... of this [European] mode of being human in the history of the species... was to be effected only on the basis of what Quijano identifies as the "coloniality of power", [and] Mignolo as the "colonial difference"' (2003: 263).

There is, however, an interesting paradox in this example of decolonial iconoclasm, with its proposed striking at the Vitruvian cosmogramme's ratio between celestial macrocosm and human microcosm, as if pre-empting any question of repair. In the 'performative enactment' of conceptually breaking the relation between a circular whole and a bounded human figure (albeit seemingly the paradigm of a European male individual), what the iconoclast invests in the image is testimony to their own demands of it. The Vitruvian cosmogramme becomes a retroactive icon for a cultural heritage called 'Renaissance Humanism' that itself remains curiously unquestioned in its own terms whilst, supposedly, being challenged from without. Its 'universality' remains, effectively, supposed, as occluding those modes of 'parallel survival' that make reference to the Eurocentric more complex.

Although offering a thought-figure of and for 'universal humanity (Man)' – or of what Wynter (2003) calls the 'over-representation' of the latter (Man) for the former (humanity) – the Leonardo image is rather more ambiguous than first appears. What, for example, has already

been supposed in wanting to decide between a reading of (European) 'Man' here as the measure of, rather than as being measured by, the cosmos? Or, indeed, what is supposed in wanting to think each of these possibilities in their difference, rather than their mutuality? It is, furthermore, conspicuous that Mignolo's iconoclastic gesture ignores the square that is a key counter-point to the Vitruvian circle, which evokes (if only in the abstraction of these two geometrical figures) the fourfold of the elements (and their associated temperaments) in relation to the closed perfection of the circle.⁶ This counterpoint entails a cosmology that supposedly belongs to a 'pre-modern' understanding, with respect to which the self-defining sense of the 'modern' – as if breaking with what is 'pre-', rather than recognising a 'parallel survival' – promotes a cosmopolitics that ignores the colonial conditionality of its own history. As is manifest in the contested understanding of 'the Anthropocene', modernity proves no longer capable of defining, in its own terms, the becoming historical (and thus political) of European cosmologies.

Cracking the Vitruvian analogical circle, as if to break the framing of a polarity between the colonial-modern and its 'others' (or, rather, as if to break the reproduction of that framing), occludes the fact that Leonardo's image of the ratio between microcosm and macrocosm is already symptomatic of an ambiguity (if not itself a repair) in the relation of what we now understand as the colonial-modern with itself, not least in its understanding of the supposed possibilities of the rational and, thereby, its own irrationality. These oscillating dynamics, that take us back to the Pythagoreans, are hauntingly evoked in the twentieth century by Samuel Beckett's constant return to the simultaneous presencing and absencing of light, for example, in the coming and going of the visible between perception and imagination.

This is beautifully condensed in the opening lines of Beckett's poem *neither*, evoking the passion of 'gently light unfading':

To and fro in shadow from inner to outershadown
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way
of neither... (Beckett 1995: 258)

In Beckett's writing, it is not just ambiguous whether it is the thought of a subject or of an

⁵ Toby Lester suggests that Leonardo's Vitruvian image only became popularly disseminated through its appearance in Kenneth Clark's 1956 book, *The Nude: A study in ideal form* (Lester 2012: 219–20), in the wake of which it has since proliferated in multiple variations through diverse media. As Lester comments: '[I]n Leonardo's time, and indeed for centuries afterward, the drawing remained almost entirely unseen and unknown' (2012: 219).

⁶ We might note that this counterpoint of square and circle is also fundamental to both Confucian cosmogrammes (Suzuki in Latour 2020: 297) and Buddhist Mandalas, as well as to medieval mystical traditions, as seen, for example, in Hildegard of Bingen (Tresch in Latour 2020: 63).

object that is being narrated in relation to the world; this distinction becomes itself the site of ambiguity (playing with the lures of both solipsism and belief). As with the very title of the poem, the relation ('to and fro') between an external inner world and an internal outer world (their 'shadow') suggests an oscillation that is irreducible to a mode of existence conceived of as either-or. This also resonates with the dynamics of melancholia that are ciphered in Beckett's last prose text, *Stirrings Still*, with its evocation of the iconic seated figure, head in hand, and the sense of continuing 'on unknowing and no end in sight' (Beckett 1995: 263).

One might, indeed, compare Leonardo's Vitruvian emblem with its near contemporary, Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia* (1514), where the two images relate to the 'closed world' of both the European pre-Christian era and that of the medieval Church Fathers, distinct from the 'infinite universe' that was to come (Koyré 1957). The different pathos of experience evoked in these two European icons retain their fascination – even in a world of nuclear energy, of the Internet, of climate change, and of all that is now critically conceived of as 'the Anthropocene' – because they are haunted by what is already broken (cosmically and temporally) in and for a European imaginary; at least, in so far as this imaginary still speaks Greek (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017: 112).⁷ After all, these contrasting images are not 'relics' of a past that is no longer comprehensible, but continue to inform an understanding of what is now relativised (rather than universalised) as 'Eurocentric'.

Both images also contrast with the crucifixion, the enduring icon-totem of what, through colonialism, has become a globalised form of monotheism. The bowed-head image of 'Man' (as the 'Man of Sorrows'), bound to the cross and crippled in pain, is supposed to pre-figure redemption from mortality (and 'human' separation from the divine) following the Fall. Rather than offering an assertion of human freedom and pride in this world, the tortured state of the 'Saviour' implies the restoration of an immaculate condition (at least for those who are 'saved') in a world to come. (The role of this iconography in the legacy of colonialism

is itself complex, not least with respect to its 'wounds'.) The fleshly immanence of mortality (and the 'broken' condition of its temporality) is simultaneously affirmed and denied by the transcendence of an eternity that nonetheless retains a sense of the 'irreparable' in the figure of original sin. The iconography of the ascension and transfiguration could, perhaps, be brought back down to earth, however, with Attia's thought-image of *repair*. As Serge Gruzinski, for instance, has observed in connection with Attia: 'The *Repaired* is opposed to the *intact* just as the *hybrid* is opposed to the *authentic*' (2014: 216), offering an iconology of repair (the 'hybrid') in diverse images of 'humanity' as a potential of decoloniality.

Crucially, the anthropometry of Leonardo's example of a restored Vitruvian analogy between macro- and microcosm also offers a contrast to the figurative analogies of Zodiac Man, as explored in the correspondences drawn out by the distinctive European cultural history of Aby Warburg's *Mnemosyne Atlas* (2020 [1929]). In Panel B, for instance, a conceptual montage is presented that contrasts the emblematic Vitruvian and Zodiac cosmogrammes of 'the' human body, which Gertrud Bing glossed with the following introductory note: 'Different degrees in the application of the cosmic system to mankind. Harmonic correspondence. Later reduction of harmony to abstract rather than cosmically contingent geometry (Leonardo)' (Bing in Warburg 2020: 26; and Papapetros in Warburg 1929).

It is precisely the 'different degrees' (my emphasis) that already challenge the monological 'mankind' that are interesting here in and for a European cultural politics, for which Attia's iconography of repair engages not only with distinctions between past and present but also between the necessary and the contingent. The enduring legibility of each term within the other – from which it is, nevertheless, distinguished (or, even, excluded) – suggests that the past is never simply what it was—at least as conceived of in its present understanding. The phantoms of 'damage' that this provokes can be widely seen in the iconoclasm directed against statues today and the reactionary lament about 'rewriting history' that accompanies it. The

⁷ This can also be compared with the history of the concept of 'the planet' in Dipesh Chakrabarty's account of it as 'an emergent Humanist category', in which 'ESS [earth system science] is business-as-usual positive science made up of observed and simulated data and their analyses, but a certain moment of scientific-poetic intuition, such as the moment when the idea later named Gaia flashed through Lovelock's mind, always haunts it' (2019: 16). In contrast to Chakrabarty, however, one might note that Indigenous peoples hardly needed to wait for twentieth-century space exploration to understand sustainable human habitation of the earth (2019: 17).

protest against advancing a minority or partial viewpoint in place of a national or canonical one occludes the fact that a majoritarian view is itself a partial one, where what is feared is not so much the possible truth of a counter-narrative as the initial lie of refusing to admit the very possibility of such a truth.

This does not mean concurring with an inane claim about ‘alternative facts’ (Conway 2017) but, rather, recognising the potential of fracture in the dynamic sense of repair. For the question remains as to what kind of repair – or, perhaps, correspondence – becomes manifest in the symptoms of such anachronism, through what Warburg called their ‘dynamograms’. The afterlife of the past is significant, for Warburg, in the sense of its energising charge in the present, through a polarisation that undoes the suppositions of canonical readings (or, in the case of artworks, pastiche): ‘It is only the contact with the new age that results in polarisation’ (Warburg quoted in Gombrich 1986: 248). This suggests a dynamic of decoloniality concerning the ‘modern’ that is not reducible, for instance,

to a distinction (as if it were descriptive) between pre- and post-colonial histories (as in the ‘myths of 1492’).

While the highpoint of what is construed as ‘Renaissance Humanism’ may correlate historically with the destructive expansion of European power (the so-called ‘voyages of discovery’ and the coming into being of a ‘global’ world view), the anachronism of the Vitruvian iconology in its own time (never mind its latency for our time) is already suggestive of problems with ‘universal’ claims about (and within) a Eurocentric understanding. As Warburg’s citation of Leonardo’s image indicates, the temporal and cosmological sense of ‘the’ Renaissance is profoundly problematic. It is not necessarily obvious (despite Bing’s synoptic interpretation) that the emblem of Vitruvian Man offers a proleptic image of and for an identification with what Wynter calls an ‘ethnoclass’ (the ‘Western bourgeoisie’ (2003: 260)) and its ‘ethno-astronomy’ (2003: 271-2). After all, as with any decolonial reading, it is worth noting what is written out of a synopsis

■ The repair of a ceramic plate. Photo by Mischa Twitchin



(including Wynter's), where the image of power remains that of the powerful (eliding the power of images themselves with its hegemonic examples). Rather than exposing the colonial-modern to – and by means of – its own phantasmata, then, such a reading runs the risk of reproducing its metaphysics-as-mythophysics (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2017: 6).

Wynter's frame of reference ignores, for example, the potential of an 'ethno-astrology' in the Western imaginary (such as the Zodiac Man) and with it oscillations between historically differentiating concepts of knowledge. Such oscillations are key to Warburg's recognition that the possibility of and for critical distance within Eurocentric cultural reflection is in constant tension with the very sources of its fascination. For instance, in his own recuperation of Warburg for an enlightenment self-understanding of 'irrationality', Gombrich gives Dürer's *Melencolia* as an example of the 'human' genius of and for such expressive sublimation: 'The way in which Dürer humanised the fear of Saturn into the image of meditation represents this act of genius' (Gombrich 1986: 249). While it is surely the case that 'any attempt to unsettle the coloniality of power will call for the unsettling of [the] overrepresentation' of (Renaissance) 'Man, as if it were the Human itself' (Wynter 2003: 260), it is surely also the case that the Vitruvian Circle is an analeptic attempt at the repair (in the return) of a Ptolemaic cosmology that had long before been broken (albeit subject to forms of repair by Patristic theology); and that was on the cusp of being shattered once again (in the shift from a geo-centric to a helio-centric understanding of the universe) by the incipient 'Copernican revolution'.

This Eurocentric cosmopolitical narrative of an epochal displacement from the shelter of closed spheres into the void of space entails what Alexandre Koyré called 'the destruction of the Cosmos and the infinitisation of the universe' (1957: 2); or, in John Tresch's evocation: 'bound and concentric when we were mediaeval, and aimlessly scattered when we thought we were modern' (Tresch 2020: 58). The disenchantment of correspondences – or, with Attia, 'correlations' (Attia and Gauthier 2014: 223) – within modern colonial mythophysics, which are universalised

in terms of progress, development or growth (re-inscribing providence into extractive economics), might seem to render the Anthropocene beyond repair.⁸ But such a narrative, again, reproduces the very myth of modernity, exposed by – and to – the survival of what it sought to deny, for example, in terms of animism (Twitchin 2019b); even where (as Latour notes): 'Most enlightened people today still believe that this play ["the scientific revolution"] is not a staged drama but the real movement of history!' (Latour 2020: 14). Perhaps, then, the force of decoloniality will only be recognised once modernity is itself recognised in terms of its own myth ('demodernism') – as suggested, for instance, in the potential history of *repair* in Attia's montage.

Indeed, the cultural sense of the modern (with its historiography of the irreparable, defined by a vector passing from 'pre-' to 'post-') is perhaps only meaningful when qualified by a critical understanding of the colonial. As Mignolo himself acknowledges, 'the dark side of modernity' is not simply its 'logic of coloniality' (2011: xiv) but includes the shadows that its enlightening ambitions cast as their own superstitions (2011: xi), unsettling European cultural politics from within and not simply from without. As an engagement with modernity's fictions – principally concerning its disavowed identification with colonialism – the project of decoloniality remains informed by Mignolo's sense that there is 'no outside' of the colonial power matrix: 'decolonially speaking there is no outside' (Mignolo and Walsh 2018: 114). After all, we may suppose that Mignolo does not intend to advocate, by the thought-image of releasing 'Man' from an encompassing (if Eurocentric) cosmos, some sort of Ayn Rand fantasy of a libertarian homunculus, sustained by the pseudo-philosophical steroids supplied by Chicago School economics. The fact that the Bensedrine-fuelled 'objectivism' of Rand's unbound *homo economicus* has made the long march through the globalised education system and now informs decision-making by political classes, with literally devastating consequences for life on earth, is itself part of the very colonial power matrix that oppresses us all (even those who are privileged to benefit from it).

⁸ Another example of this can be seen in the adoption of a new buzz word – 'Humaning' – in the marketing strategy of the multinational company Mondelez International (which owns Cadbury, amongst other brands), turning the noun into a verb (Poole 2020). Capitalism's attempts at sublimation are always revealing of an even worse truth than what is supposed, thereby, to be masked.

The sense that decoloniality is something to be applied to (rather than derived from) the ‘Western code’ (Mignolo 2011: xii) by those seeking independence from it – that this code requires simply to be broken to make possible a different future – occludes the anamnesis of that code itself, which would reveal it to be a mosaic composed of diverse fragments, in which claims to understanding are only ever partial (in both senses). The repair work of a Eurocentric decoloniality – as, precisely, a seeming oxymoron – would undo attempts to suture the pre- and post-colonial (as if to erase the ruptures of colonialism), recognising modalities of Occidentalism that are already open to the potential of and for thinking their own genealogies through a concept of ‘repair’, to which they have always been subject.

With an epistemology of history as montage (in the form of ‘repair’), Warburg, for instance, developed what he called a ‘critique of pure unreason’ (Sprung 2015) – in which the cultural politics of what might be meant by reference to ‘the Renaissance’, especially in the twentieth century, is key. It is the contradictory potential of relations, distinct from any pre-established harmony between them, that animates the possibility of correspondence (or analogy) in Warburg’s sense of cultural dynamograms. In the modernist self-image, the principle of montage is one of critical understanding, which nonetheless also allows for a sense of hermetic meaning without this being necessarily condensed into symbolism. Offering correspondences between terms that suspend the vector of temporal explanation as passing, irreversibly, from one state to another, montage is premised on an enduring difference between terms. Might not Attia’s concept of ‘repair’ occasion a shift, then, in understanding historical suppositions in the relations between cosmopolitics and decoloniality?

The European ‘anthropos’ of the Anthropocene (or, better, the Capitalocene (Moore 2015: 169-192)) may have been made of clay or of marble, coal or plastic, matter or spirit; it may be an organic machine or a fallen angel that may or may not have a soul, and that may or may not exercise free will; but its professed ‘emancipation from Nature’ has proved as

mythical as its modernity. Indeed, its own vision of ‘the’ human is as foreign to self-declared moderns as any that is dreamt of in their anthropologies. Such recognition of enduring relations between macro- and microcosm offers a reversal of the Eurocentric pretension ‘to impose a provincialism as universalism’ (Quijano 2007: 177) – by seeing, precisely, the claimed universalism of this cosmopolitics as symptomatic of its own historical provincialism. Eurocentrism’s ‘others’ are not only external but internal, the ‘rehabilitation’ (Mbembe 2021: 59) of which demands pluriversal conditions of and for a living futurity. Indeed, as Mbembe writes (echoing both Frantz Fanon and Dipesh Chakrabarty), ‘coming out of the great darkness before life would require an approach conscious of the “provincialisation of Europe”’ (Mbembe 2021: 225).

Hegemonic narratives are exposed to – and by – their own fracture in Attia’s images for conceiving of repair. And, to return to the work of Mignolo and Vazquez, such repair offers a question concerning the modes of recognition that decoloniality admits of:

The decolonial names the empowerment and affirmation of those dignities wounded under racial classifications, under the logic of the disposability of human life in the name of civilization and progress. Decoloniality becomes a process of recognizing the colonial wounds that are historically true and still open in the everyday experience of most people on the planet. (Mignolo and Vazquez 2013: n.p.)

Attia’s thought-figure of repair appeals not to a post-colonial condition, as if to erase the colonial past (or ‘wounds’) from the present, but, rather, to a decoloniality that exposes the neo-colonial present to a future in which historical and ethical fault lines, ruptures and anomalies, are recognized and worked with. These remain ‘potential’ (Azoulay 2019) rather than being denied through a sense of restoration that is conceived of, however virtually, as completed or completable in and as ‘the past’—as no longer a fracture in and of the present. The latter (the fantasy of this fracture’s disappearance) is the aim of those for whom reparations are the price to pay for retaining the privileges derived from colonial violence in the first place. By contrast, as Ariella Azoulay proposes:

Reparations are part of the incessant labour of repair. Asking the question ‘what are reparations?’ again and again, with others, is not an attempt to find one ultimate answer – to finally be able to pay, in Truth’s terms – but to affirm that it is through the potentializing of history that the labour of reparations could yield the recovery of a shared world of common care. (Azoulay 2019: 567–68)

Decoloniality in the sense of restorative justice, after all, implies a transformation of the past through an understanding of its possible future, as distinct from the restitution of what might otherwise be conceived of as irreparable in the cultural politics of the present.

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