The Scarcity Aesthetic: Art, Design, and Population When Systems Fail

INTRODUCTION

The symbiotic relationship between systems and population is undeniable. Well-nigh biological in its configuration, it is an interdependence that has been with us at least since early modernity, when in 1798 Reverend Thomas Robert Malthus warned, "population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio," which is to say, "the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power of the earth to produce subsistence for man."[1] Systems thinking is present here in Malthus's boding of scarcity, in particular in the way he makes legible a simple logic that a rising population of what is implicitly the poor threatens the well-being of their collective countrymen and the state. It is also evident in the stylistics of language—his use of precise and pithy verbiage and his invocation of the measurable. He deploys a "geometrical and arithmetical ratio," or the language of objective science, to presage the problems of a crowded and unmanageable state, making overpopulation tangible, real, and threatening. From this we may deduce that the counting of humans has been a defining element of the modern; systems, furthermore, are a fact of modernity. While systems bear a certain diversity of detection (some are more visible than others) they are typologically large and tentacular. Many systems are overt, such as the nation-state, its legal systems including the poor laws of Malthus's time and welfare states of our own, infrastructural elements such as roads and highways, and the greater prison complex made up of both private and public penal regimes. Many are subtle, almost invisible, such as those that make up the industrial debt complex, including the greater stratagems of predatory debt, mortgages, student and payday loans, and credit cards.

Building on the symbiosis between systems and population, this study identifies a scarcity aesthetic within literature, contemporary art, and design that emerges as a response to such systems and their failures. It unfolds around the physical body: the human figure, which is preyed upon by invisible systems of financial liability and made passive without a voice due to technological distraction and physical exhaustion. I identify the scarcity aesthetic in a broad corpus of creative form the raw stuff of which is human

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detritus, the tumbledown shards of the built landscape, and their reformation as recycled matter. The linchpin here connecting systems to population is *technics*, a word used by Lewis Mumford and, more recently, Bernard Stiegler to refer to the tools and cultural effects of technology.[2] Here I take foundational influence from Mumford's open and elastic thinking on technology as it is rooted in the Greek *technke*, his manner of following the evolution of the word across time and bringing it to bear on urban practices. I am however more interested in Stiegler's sense of *technics*, his will to fuse together epistemology and technology in order to reveal how knowing does not so much come from technology but is bound with it at emergence.[3] It is not simply that shifts in technology affect the systems-population machine, enhancing or detracting from quality of life, but that, more precisely, each of the works of art at hand at once reflects and embodies an epistemo-technological jig of the system of which it is a part. Each rejiggering marks the world existentially—as an expression of the bizarre, ugly, confused, absurd, dismayed, or resolved affectivity of systems failure.

In part one of the essay, I focus on Malthus's seminal 1798 treatise on overpopulation and poverty, *An Essay on the Principle of Population,* and Malthusianism in the 1973 film *Soylent Green* and the 1966 book by Harry Harrison on which it is based, *Make Room!* Make Room! Building on Malthusian population theory, in part two I elaborate a definition of "systems" based on the work of Jack Burnham, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, and Kenneth E. Boulding, three systems thinkers of the mid-twentieth century. I look to their writings to explain the greater logic of organizational structures and their failures as evidenced in the urban interventions and design of Theaster Gates, RE Gallery and Studio, Team Better Block, and Jon Rubin. In the third and concluding portion, I bring Giorgio Agamben's writing on *homo sacer,* an idea rooted in Michel Foucault's population-based theory of the "bio-political," to bear on the work of the Dutch design firm Atelier Van Lieshout.

SCARCITY: A DIALECTIC OF CRISIS AND HYSTERIA
Systems provide something of a temporally inverted backdrop for the turn our discussion takes now. Twentieth-century general systems theory is an intellectual infrastructure, here used to trigger a backwards glance to a time before the technocratic optimism of mid-twentieth-century systems thinking. While not yet explicit in the time of our next protagonist, Thomas Robert Malthus, technocratic systems were present as seeds in the standardized systems of money, the Panopticon, in the language and thinking of Malthus himself, and in the ensuing discourse on over-population which we now call Malthusianism, ready to emerge as the malleable grillage of the general system within a later stage of unfolding modernity.

If in the 215 years of modernity that Malthus's writing on population has been in circulation it has been the forebear of a variety of political positions, there is one that has been consistent throughout: It is a sourcebook for conservative politics. In existence since 1601, the English Poor Laws were perhaps the most important motivation of Malthus's foreboding of the problems of population. He vehemently preached against them, thereby in

part catalyzing their reform and rebirth in 1834 as the diminished and more punitive Poor Law Amendment Act.[4] For Malthus, helping the poor only kept them unemployed, inactive, and prone to procreation. Reciprocally, he argued that "evil exists in the world, not to create despair, but activity," meaning work.[5] It is an earlier form of conservative logic that resonates well with the anti-welfare ethos coursing through both political parties in the United States today. Published in 1798, Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* must also be seen in light of the French Revolution, which by this late hour had devolved into a radicalized Jacobin bloodletting of dissenting voices, be they of the court or bourgeoisie. For Malthus, as with Edmund Burke, the wilds of the French Revolution seemed the perverse but inevitable culmination of the bright-eyed idealism of late Enlightenment *philosophes* espousing man's perfectibility. This sentiment would materialize in his first treatise on population through sustained philosophical attacks on William Godwin, early English anarchist, husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, and father of Mary Shelley, and the Marquis de Condorcet, a noble French mathematician and social contractor who believed in rational progress and, like Godwin, the perfectibility of mankind. The revolutionary mayhem which brought Condorcet to death by his own hand in a Clamart prison cell in 1794 had already inspired the Irishman Edmund Burke to take a stance against the revolution some four years prior in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. It is to the conservatism of Burke that the otherwise somewhat singular Malthus is often linked and compared.[6]

Yet to see Malthus solely in this light is to not give full breadth to the word "Malthusian," a term that in its most current instantiation might refer to an expert on conservation, the global ecological question of overpopulation, and the scarcity of raw materials, including food, water, and oil. Malthusians in this light include, among others, C.P. Snow, the British scientist and fiction writer most famous for his lectures in 1959 on the stubborn gap between the "Two Cultures" of the humanities and sciences, and Paul Ehrlich, the Stanford professor who, from a far more liberal stance, teased out the ecological repercussions of Malthusianism in many books, the most famous of which is the 1968 best-seller *The Population Bomb*. Today, whether ecologically conscious or not, many of us are Malthusian if we use birth control and choose to marry later in life, following unwittingly Malthus's advice to curb population growth and avoid "early marriage" at all costs.[7] This prism sets in relief the aforementioned politically diverse Malthus—whose writing advocates a harsh conservatism and counter-intuitively much more. Indeed pro-status quo and against both early modern and current forms of social security, his writings today might however inspire movements for ecological conservation built on natural preservation as well as population control and a surprisingly progressive politics of gender rooted in birth control and late marriage.

Unfortunately, most modern Malthusianism has been the radix of a politics of crisis and hysteria. We see this in heightened form in the 1973 film Soylent Green directed by Richard Fleischer and to a lesser degree in Harry Harrison's 1966 novel *Make Room! Make Room!,* on which the movie is based. Before delving into the scarcity aesthetic at work in the film and

book, I would like to cross-examine the politics of crisis and hysteria present in this aesthetics in order to identify a functioning dialectic. The scarcity aesthetic which materializes in works of film, fiction, art, and architecture embodies this politics of crisis and hysteria while, at the same time, standing outside of it in a logic that is mimetic as Theodor Adorno defined the term. For Adorno, mimesis is not imitative but at once interactive and distance making: it points to the absurdity and injustices of the present order so as to set in motion a shift through it toward a different set of circumstances. The scarcity aesthetic metabolizes the magical fantasy of catastrophism that so often fuels Malthusianism in order to live with the waste that is disenchantment. Adorno identifies this movement as art's rousing skirmish. "Art is motivated by a conflict," Adorno tells us. "Its enchantment, a vestige of a magical phase, is constantly repudiated as unmediated sensual immediacy by the progressive disenchantment of the world, yet without its ever being possible finally to obliterate this magical element."[8]

In the scarcity aesthetic, the swing between enchantment and disenchantment pivots on what Iain Boal calls the tendency toward "omnicide" and "catastrophism" within Malthusian debates.[9] With this at its core, the scarcity aesthetic seems to participate in a political economy of hysteria in order to set it in relief, ape, and then move beyond it.[10] Boal claims such catastrophism functions politically as a kind of demagoguery and pernicious social Darwinism:

> The basic, Malthus-style, argument is simple: overpopulation creates competition for the resources available, and favors those offspring better adapted to exploit local conditions and resources. So this is the scenario on which economics and Darwin's account of natural science are founded—a kind of anti-Eden, with too many organisms locked in a war of all [10] against all.[11]

The social Darwinism of *Soylent Green* sounds a fear-mongering tocsin about the depletion of natural resources in 1973, three years after the first Earth Day, a year after NASA beamed home the most famous and striking satellite image of the whole earth appropriately titled "The Blue Marble," and five years after the first Whole Earth Catalog appeared. Earth consciousness was not simply in the air: it was fashionable. A tale of overpopulation in future New York City (2022 in the film, 1999 in the book), the filmic narrative also distills a declining city of 1973; an overrun, deteriorating, crimeridden city very similar to actual New York at the time: the real and mythic place that almost went bankrupt, was experiencing "white flight," suburban expansion, and cohesion no longer as a city but as part of megalopolis.

Distinct from the book, cannibalism is the subtle narrative goad of Soylent Green. While the book bears greater character development and deeper and more drawn out descriptions of depravation, novel and film together keep percipient rapt through the scarcity aesthetic—scenes of piled-up people sleeping in stairways, fights over food and water in crowded city streets, energy shortages, and parking lots of abandoned cars. Each moves along according to the logic of a typical gumshoe story: a private eye or policeman in search of the murderer of a roguish man who falls in love with said

dead man's marginal but beautiful girlfriend. If themes of crisis and hysteria motivate the reader and viewer to consume each form up to completion, then, in keeping with the dialectic at work in the scarcity aesthetic, any fear of the problems ensuing from over-population in those themes gives way to acknowledgment, even pleasure, but most certainly a knife-edge awareness. It is as though the antics of what Naomi Klein called the "shock doctrine" trigger a jolt of the familiar followed by a simultaneous pleasure in the fictive romance of scarcity and a rejection of its manipulation. Like the catastrophism about which Boal writes, the shock doctrine is Klein's name for American intervention in weak foreign economies in order to weaken and control them further through laissez faire neo-liberal economic policies.[12] As within the scarcity aesthetic, economic crisis and panic create vulnerabilities. Beyond the basic problems of impoverishment—job loss, mortgage foreclosure, family disintegration, hunger—the shock doctrine makes way for the infiltration of global deregulation. Taking advantage of vulnerability atop vulnerability, economic crisis upon scarcity, the "shock" in the shock doctrine is the same as the hysteria in Malthusian catastrophism.

In *Soylent Green*, the process of shock-awareness-resistance takes place at the end, when Detective Thorn watches his roommate and best friend Sol Roth, played by Edward G. Robinson, die and be processed as greyish-green chips of soylent green, food for the masses. In the final scene, Thorn fights almost to his own death. He is memorably carried out of an old church full of sleeping people on a stretcher screaming, sounding the tocsin of awareness, "Soylent Green is people!"

SYSTEMS, SYSTEMS FAILURE, AND THE COMING OF SPACESHIP EARTH

While present in early modernity as we have observed above, systems thinking arose in full form during the mid-twentieth century as both trend and promise: a field of problem solving, open possibility, and new ways of thinking the machine-human interface. Largely an occurrence of the post-WWII period, systems thinking would not simply explain phenomena but order them according to open and closed feedback loops, setting forth new ways of understanding meaning-making and interaction as the exchange of information within mass systems, such as government, education, the economy, and art.

At the end of the 1960s, curator, art historian, and artist Jack Burnham published two seminal essays on the last topic, that is, the fusion of art and systems, with "Systems Esthetics" in 1968 and "Real Time Systems" in 1969.[13] In both essays, Burnham wrote in response to a radically morphing landscape of contemporary art, linking "the new art" of dematerialization and concepts to systems, ecology, and emergent digital technology. For Burnham this new post-formal non-object art, much of which we refer to today as conceptual art, would be best understood transactionally, according to the interactions of and relations between people, and with an eye to the organizational principles of computer software and hardware. Burnham brought the ideas and energy of the mainframe into the gallery, curating *Software, Information Technology: Its New Meaning for Art* at the Jewish Museum in New York in 1970. In the pamphlet for the show, Burnham

set forth a new terminology for art, inscribing "'software' as parallel to the aesthetic principles, concepts, or programs that underlie the formal embodiment of the actual art objects, which in turn parallel 'hardware'."[14] Software from this perspective is thus the theoretical discourse and transactional and social lineation that unfolds around the art mechanism, which is the hardware, all of which create an ecological matrix of art. In like terms Burnham explained "systems esthetic"[15] according to shifting perceptual norms and a changing set of ecological priorities:

> A systems esthetic is literal in that all phases of the life cycle of a system are relevant. There is no end product which is primarily visual, nor does such an esthetic rely on a 'visual' syntax. It resists functioning as an applied esthetic, but is revealed in the principles underlying the progressive reorganization of the natural environment.[16]

While Burnham references a panoply of thinkers in his writing on systems aesthetics, ranging from the economist John Kenneth Galbraith and RAND Corporation and military analyst E. S. Quade to light artist Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and conceptual artist Hans Haacke, the most prominent figure to come directly from the field of general systems theory is Ludwig von Bertalanffy. A Viennese biologist, Bertalanffy wrote of systems theory as the "new science" that could be identified "everywhere," meaning that the systems apparatus was more of an approach to given material circumstances than anything else.[17]

Using the language of scientific bureaucracy with assuredness and persuasion not unlike Malthus in 1798, Bertalanffy explained the systems approach requires, "elaborate techniques and computers for solving problems far transcending the capacity of an individual mathematician."[18] Like Burnham's exhibition at the Jewish Museum in 1970, the new systems approach beckoned "both the 'hardware' of computers, automation and cybernation, and the 'software' of systems science represent a new technology."[19]

Bertalanffy's voice, like Burnham's in the same years, resounds with a triumph borne on the positivism and celebration of new technology and the *thinking* of new technology (i.e. systems). The systems approach could be the source of efficiency, greater productivity and social order, offering a malleable planning strategy to manage, for example, urbanism, population, and housing. The stakes were more exegetical and heuristic in the realm of contemporary art in the late 1960s. Systems offered Burnham an open, intellectually bountiful paradigm of art that was better tuned to the current time than past, conventional structures. In art, systems thinking—or "system esthetics" to be more precise—promised to open new vistas of ideas and form as well a new means of looking onto the present and past of art history in order to see not a teleological narrative of grand styles but of a cross-temporal web of actions and responses. In this broad spectrum, systems as a process and mode of thinking only succeed; systems do not fail.

Today, by contrast, artists do not look upon systems with such halcyon feelings. Systems promise to create order and more fluid social relations; in

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reality systems simply order, re-order, and thwart, if only temporarily, ongoing processes of entropy. There has been in recent time a spate of urbanconceptual works the seedbed of which is, in contrast to Burnham's great hopes for systems, systems failure. We look briefly to urban interventions by Theaster Gates, RE Gallery and Studio, Team Better Block, and Jon Rubin's Waffle House and Conflict Kitchen for evidence of the obstruction, wear-down and collapse of systems and systems thinking at the level of vast urban infrastructure and space in the new millennium. Social-practice artist Theaster Gates' Dorchester Project (2009), for example, is an urban reuse project in which the artist rehabilitated a two-story house in Chicago, transforming it into a public library, slide archive, and soul kitchen. Gates re-uses the material of urban blight, a house and its urban context, to comment on the failure of a socio-spatial system made up of interlocking forces—urban planning, private property, racism—on Chicago's South Side. His reuse breathes life not so much into the system but creates an oasis on the edges of that system, since the neighborhood in which it sits is virtually derelict. In short, Gates works inside of a dead system.

Similar public action undertaken by the Dallas-based RE Gallery and Studio and Team Better Block in cities around the Southwest mark a cycle of disuse and reuse coupled with weak but present citizen-agency. Reuse becomes intervention with RE's annual Parking Day event in downtown Dallas. The stowaway zone of a car becomes social space for people as pedestrians take back the city. With the Brownsville Project, Team Better Block oversaw a transformation of the disused downtown into a temporary festival site with outdoor lighting, seating, and pop-up shops. Wrapped in a certain cheeky irony, Jon Rubin's Waffle Shop and Conflict Kitchen opened in the mid-noughts in large old buildings in a deserted area of Pittsburgh close to Carnegie Mellon University. The Waffle Shop is a restaurant run by students serving waffles and hosting a live Internet talk show, which anyone can host and on which anyone can be a guest. Located next door, Conflict Kitchen serves only recipes from countries with which the United States is in conflict. Distinct from the many-headed though "dematerialized" works of conceptual art that struck for Burnham a "systems aesthetics," these urban interventions are borne on the wounds and scabs of old urban centers. They bear the scarcity aesthetic of failed systems. They are works of art—urban interventions as art—in which the artist-actor socially reconnects by returning and assimilating to zones of blight and marginalization, from Main Street downtown as with RE and Better Block, to areas of disuse and abandonment as with Gates and Rubin. Catalyzed by systems failure, they are works coming to fruition by way of an overdeveloped landscape and its underemployed architecture. Collectively they use the fall-out of past workable matrices in the creation of new ideas.

Years before these artists and designers redeployed the scraps of urban civilization in the face of creeping to massive systems failure, the poet, economist, and systems scientist Kenneth E. Boulding warned of the coming dis-equilibration of the system known as planet Earth. In "The Economics of the Coming Spaceship Planet Earth" (1966), Boulding urged

that society move away from the open system of planet Earth, in which the "reckless, exploitative, romantic, and violent behavior" of the "cowboy economy" reigned supreme, to the closed system of a "spaceman economy" in which the Earth evolves like a hermetic spaceship, according to a sealed loop of sustainability, reuse, and recycling.[20] Perhaps even more pressing than the systems failure ensuing from a planet Earth driven by the cowboy consumerism, was the problem of negative psychic capital. In a world of systems failure so too fails capitalism—its circulation and exchange of goods as well as the psychic energy of its people. In Boulding's systems writing, psychic capital is a mental state that weighs in as the existential, subjective, and *immeasurable* response of humans within the system. William Bostock explains how psychic capital functions in Boulding's economy of community survival:

> Exchanges involving increases and decreases of psychic capital can occur at any time, either through decision or through the turn of events. However, fear, insecurity and terror, through memories of failures, disasters, atrocities, or perceived injustices and indignities … can lead to a depletion of psychic capital, which could also be called negative psychic capital. Negative capital and fear of it can also be a powerful motivating factor.[21]

The urban intervention works by Gates, RE Gallery and Studio, Better Block, and Jon Rubin wreak havoc with the psychic detritus and ruins of a different manufacturing age. Yet at the same time they are performative works unfolding in time that do not simply 'make hay' from failed systems but carefully work through them, folding the failure back onto itself as a public measure, indeed a public act, for all to see. In wreaking havoc they simply mirror systems run amok.

HOMO SACER, POPULATION, AND ATELIER VAN LIESHOUT

Let us now segue from film to architectural design, *Soylent Green* to the work of Atelier Van Lieshout, as we focus on a philosophical take on population in which the individual qua individual exists inside of a system uniquely formed by the exclusion and extermination of the other. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben identifies this other, external figure—*homo sacer*—as he exists prima facie as an outsider and thus as someone who can be legally eliminated from society, that is, executed with impunity. For Agamben though, his condition of externality is the bedrock of the internal and official: the excluded one that is the foreigner, homeless, prisoner, refugee, gendered other, and minority that gives identity and form to core political power, yes in a structural sense, by simply being outside and its other, but more profoundly, by catalyzing a managed system of profit and control called the State which bears within it the "voluntary servitude of individuals."[22] In terms of the outsider-other who is external yet systematically integral, think here of a wide range of identity-forming panoptic institutional architectures, from refugee holding facilities, work camps, prison systems, universities, and churches to the more elusive architectures of driver's licenses, social security cards, mortgages, credit cards, and student loan debt.

It is a systematic paradigm of inclusion/exclusion, inside/outside that describes the circumstances of the figure of Sol Roth, Detective Thorn's friend, roommate, and the wise old man in the film Soylent Green. Roth is a citizen of an expendable community, as he is old enough to be a member of senior's collective in the book called Eldsters of America, a group that demonstrably struggles for their rights by demonstrating in the streets. Ultimately he is rejected from inside the community where life hangs by a thread through his own death, from a deadly case of pneumonia in the book and, in a more macabre set of circumstances, suicide at a public hospital in the film. The processing of his body following his suicide in the film into the food product soylent green will nourish a starving concitoyen of New York, making him not so much a sacrifice as the Latin term sacer might suggest, but one simple instance of legal elimination among many. His body is part of a system of protocol, factory-like death and food production. His life is an example of bare life, to use another term of Agamben's—the dispensable but material, the superfluous yet consumable. He is part of a matrix of waste and food management that is circuitous and configured something like a feedback loop.

Rotterdam based Atelier Van Lieshout [AVL] works with a related trifecta of ideas—technocratic management, population, and the absurd—in their creation of dystopic microworlds. AVL's "Slave City" is one a series of interrelated projects unfolding over several years in which the driving theme is the national and corporate State. According to Sabine Maria Schmidt, "the series makes reference to historical forms of extreme and absolute slavery, exploitation, and annihilation such as the European concentration camps of the Second World War."[23] With "Slave City," AVL is, in short, interested in the management of humans as bioproducts. Made up of many components, including drawings, models, sculpture, and full-fledged build-outs, the primary philosophical ethos of "Slave City" is Agamben's inside/outside binary of the sovereign who determines the future of bare life. Jennifer Allen writes, "Whether anticipating the dangers or exploring the freedoms in the state of exception, AVL has created planning and architecture for a community life based on bare life."[24] Housing, feeding, totalizing, and systematizing a large population: these are the concerns in minutiae of "Slave City."

From full-scale slave barracks to maquettes of universities, the components of "Slave City" are projections of what Agamben has called "the triumph of the management, the administration of the absence of order."[25] In this phrase we are brought back to the dialectic at work in the scarcity aesthetic wherein Atelier Van Lieshout points to the anarchic hysteria of Malthusianism in order to, in this instance, deflect our attention toward management, enumeration, and inscription, three words which give further play to Foucault's "biopolitics." Hysteria, as we have discussed above, is the necessary ingredient for creating a society of docile beings from which a very powerful few profit. As in the crowded and chaotic yet tumbledown New York City of *Soylent Green,* the spaces of "Slave City" are the determinedly well-designed enclaves of a confusingly innumerable population that must be fed, ordered, then cordoned off and held back. In the exhibition catalog for the 2007 show Bare Life at the Museum on the Seam in

ENDNOTES

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Jerusalem, Agamben describes a manmade yet *laissez-faire* logic behind a similar bedlam. Looking to the early modern capitalists Quesnay and Turgot, both of whom were physiocrats, Agamben explains, they did "not mean the prevention of famines and catastrophes, but meant allowing them to happen and then being able to orientate them in a profitable direction."[26] Capitalism in an earlier phase of agricultural and land management, viz. physiocracy, was, in so many words, also driven by the shock doctrine. Chaos must ensue, opening a path for messianic manipulation and economic development.

Foucault identified this yawning gap of chaos followed by the rationalization of species as symptomatic of biopolitics, the turn in history from the "territorial State" to the "State of population."[27] We should understand here the "bio" in "biopolitics" to mean physical life that is given a number, penetrated, impinged upon, maintained, cut off, and, simply put, allowed inside or banned by any one of the manifold powers of the national-cum-corporate State. Think here of the ambiguous legal condition of a person a priori citizenship. She is but a sack of protein without rights; then, if lucky, she enters the system, gains rights, and becomes a number. She is enumerated and the biopolitical individual. In "Museogestor," a museum as intestinal track that is part of "Slave City", AVL makes the fusion of the biological and institutional humorously literal. A gurgling and bulbous vertical passage for contemporary painting gives way to sculpture on the left and a bookshop on the rear right. So many bodies as buildings, we are slaves to the institutions of the corporate State. The scarcity aesthetic is thus both body and lack, a reminder of the indeterminate but ever present logic of the dialectic between the citizen of limited action and the invisible but omni-present, multi-layered State. ◆