

# **Signaling through the flames**

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It is hardly a coincidence that the twentieth-century playwright Bertolt Brecht, whose epic theater influenced the postdramatic tradition in its refusal to elicit an emotional response from its audience, often focused on what we now call “emotionally triggering” entanglements, most notably the relationship between mother and child<sup>1</sup>—a locus that long before the advent of psychoanalysis, perhaps even in mythological times, was identified as the root of all suffering. Distance has no effect unless proximity has first been established.

The paintings by Lukas Quietzsch under the title *dstryr* lend themselves to a plethora of entanglements but perhaps most evidently to a series of pairings. Duplicates are interchangeable whereas pairs have something in common; duplicates are substitutional but no matter how close, there will always be an absence present between pairs: their difference. In the daunting task of delineating such an abstract unknown, relief is found under the somewhat looser category “group,” with each painting containing parts of the other through recurring and interlocking elements—an ongoing synthesis arrested in the here-and-now of their specific appearance of in-common-ness. There is a terrifying comfort in the fact that the circle of subsumption can always be widened, in the automatic inscription into larger social forms that ease the anxiety arising in the moment when that which is closest to you appears the most alien.

The difference between duplicates and pairs might be analogous to that of transcription and inscription. To transcribe is to record; to document; to transfer information without omission or addition—a task performed by an idealized and objective witness or infallible machine. To inscribe is to give something a name and place, and as in the case of the historical ready-made or in the appropriations by Pop artists and the Pictures

Generation—mass-produced objects and images brought into the realm of art through displacement and language—the nominal act follows a moment of recognition; it is a *rendezvous* rather than an encounter with the new. “A is like B because in B, I can see A,” is the metonymic movement central to montage, based in association and contingency rather than substitution, and therefore capable of sustaining both difference and sameness while resisting signification. It is the place of desire from which the signified can masquerade. It is the stuff of dreams.

The phrase “this reminds me of...” seems to lie dormant in the paintings of Lukas Quietzsch until spoken with that familiar dissonance of wonder and frustration when a thing of the past is partially recalled. While some of the compositions appear archetypal, almost primordial in their oscillation between the cellular and interplanetary, with each attempt at pinpointing a singular element, the frame of association narrows into a jerky time-travel across the last decades of the twentieth century. “This reminds me of '90s CD covers; this of '80s fashion; this of '70s psychedelia, and here, socialist interior design.” This reminds me of a paisley-patterned pillowcase in my grandmother’s house, softened by harsh detergents; the polyphonic sound of the ice cream truck; bare skin against a smoke-infused leather chair; the T-shirt of the skate brand Zero that I still wear—stolen from an ex who stole it from someone older or maybe bought it on Etsy. Rhinestone stickers.

Consumer goods and vernacular culture are ephemeral phenomena and therefore recognizable only within a specific timeframe and by a certain demographic. They are furniture, clothes, graphic design, flavors, consistencies, haircuts, textures, opacities, moods, smells, ambiances, and ultimately signifiers of cultural identification and

disidentification—ideology materialized; history concrete. They are both impersonal and private, subjective and collective; they hold the power to narrate autobiographies through shared and individual memories, and to encapsulate larger political ideas or the “Zeitgeist” in its original meaning. “The eternal, in any case, is far more the ruffle on a dress than some idea,” Walter Benjamin famously stated,<sup>2</sup> pointing to the fact that the genealogy of an isolated part, a fetishized cut-out, the particular detail forever tied to a specific time and place and therefore to a whole world of habits delineated by a particular socio-economic condition, might serve as a more apt vehicle for a historical analysis than any ideas of the past.

Through a process of reversals—of tearing up the canvas and sewing it back together; of applying layers of gouache that are washed out and then reapplied—the pictorial montages in the paintings of Lukas Quietzsch appear to have surfaced as if by absorption. The figures and shapes are not forcefully ripped from the world, nor directly appropriated or transcribed; they emerge like the remains of the day in a dream, displaced and condensed. They drift across your eyes like flickering images in the moment of falling asleep: repetitive, mutative, hypnotic. Their recurring elements speak of habit, of re-inscription rather than inscription; of the unconscious relationships that govern us, those formative memories and patterns that imminently recede at the brink of recognition—into the general, the unspecific. In epic theater, which Brecht referred to as a new form of realism, it was precisely these unconscious relationships that were brought to the stage through connecting performances to a specific social context via the “realistic detail”—in German  *Merkmal* , from the verb  *merken* : to notice, to mark, to remember. When Mother Courage collects payment for her goods, she habitually bites the coins to ensure they are genuine.

As if to fix this particular group of paintings in time, Quietzsch has sutured and stretched the numerous color tests on canvas produced and used in their making—a strikingly theatrical gesture in a practice where the painterly gesture otherwise goes unnoticed. The resulting two paintings, with overlapping horizontal and vertical strokes systematically laid out, come to resemble two large-scale, luminous photographic contact sheets. While this pair might form an archive of the artist’s process, even a trace, their relationship to the other paintings in the group is not indexical: the remaining ten paintings could not be reimagined from these color tests alone. The information is partial. Quietzsch here operates with the impossible objectivity of an anthropologist in their own life. The area currently worked on might be under local anesthesia but the patient is awake and speaking. We might call it a  *dissociative Störung*  necessary to access what is absent, or a stress reaction to the illusion of always having a choice.

The purgatory of late capitalism is characterized by the ceaseless return of the new. Visual culture is defined by an overwhelming stream of deconstructions, appropriations, mutations, and rehashings in an ever-expanding photographic archive for use. Re: the eternal is the ruffle on a dress. Under these conditions, the impulse to destroy what is recognizable hardly comes as a surprise: kill whatever presents itself as imposed by an authoritarian other; do not accept the Trojan horse—as conqueror or conquered. However, it is precisely at the moment when one recognizes the ideological apparatus, and is seized by the impulse to destroy it, that the ideological conception is fully realized.<sup>3</sup> Simply put: the institution is never as powerful as when under so-called “institutional critique.” Actual destruction, as in significant change rather than the subsuming incorporation of critique

through reformation, will persistently elude us until accounts on lived experience no longer serve primarily as vehicles for individual visibility. Such a shift would entail the refusal to assert oneself against the reflection that collective history projects onto the screen of individual memory; to rush towards the end that everything ultimately bears within itself, towards what we do not recognize.

Just as the image of the world violently reappears, day after day or with each blink of the eyes, the paintings in *dstryr* are opposing forces temporarily at a standstill. They are structurally located in the metonymic signifying chain of desire and the unconscious death drive; in practice, they are events of dream-like associations, authority issues, and self-sabotage. As spatial reiterations without clear linear progression, *dstryr* offers no escape, no rehabilitation, no way out except for maybe a tender gap or an anxious delay analogous to the space that is brought into presence when an actor steps onto the stage. Realism is not found in skillful imitation or convincing likeness but in the difference between the individual and the role, the autobiography of the actor and the scripted part. While "realism" is a dauntingly wide scope, Quietzsch's method—an approach to painting that aims for a decoupling similar to the disassociation of scenic action and spoken word in postdramatic theater—has its material limitations; the stage has delineations. What passes through—drifts across, floats by—is an incomprehensible amount of time within time. It is a little bit like starting the day by hitting snooze.

- 1 *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (1924); *Mother* (1931); *Mother Courage and Her Children* (1939) (...).
- 2 Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), N3, 2.
- 3 I am using the philosopher Louis Althusser's definition of ideology as "the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence," and in which interpellation is a central concept. Interpellation describes how ideology "hails" individuals, transforming them into subjects who recognize themselves within prescribed social roles. For example, when a person responds to being addressed as a student, worker, or citizen, they are interpellated into that role. Another central concept is the material existence of ideology, so-called "ideological state apparatuses," which perpetuate ideology through their practices and functions. Contrary to repressive state apparatuses such as the police, military, and courts that function primarily through coercion and violence, ideological state apparatuses are instances such as schools, family, and religion that operate mainly via interpellation.

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