

Doubt, Time and Violence  
in Philosophical and Cultural Thought



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in Philosophical and Cultural Thought:  
Sino-Western Interpretations and Analysis

Edited by

Artur K. Wardega, SJ

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

Doubt, Time and Violence in Philosophical and Cultural Thought:  
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This book first published 2012

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-4072-6, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-4072-9

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## NOTES ON THE EDITOR AND CONTRIBUTORS

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She worked in Beijing from 1979 to 1981. Her research interests include filial revenge, mourning, violence, pre-modern Chinese law and Chinese film.

**金絲燕 Jin Siyan** received her Master's degree in literature at the Department of Western Languages, Peking University. On graduation she lectured on contemporary literature and comparative literature and carried out research on modern Chinese poetry. She obtained her doctorate in contemporary literature at the Sorbonne in 1992. At present she is a professor at the Université d'Artois and L'ENA, France. Her current research is on subjectivity and women's literary writing in twentieth-century China. Recent books include: *文學接受與文化過濾 Wenxue jieshou yu wenhua guolü* (1994), *La métamorphose des images poétiques des symbolistes français aux symbolistes chinois—1915–1932* (1997), *L'écriture subjective dans la littérature chinoise contemporaine—Devenir je* (2005), *L'écriture féminine chinoise contemporaine du XX<sup>e</sup> siècles à nos jours—Trame des souvenirs et de l'imaginaire* (2008).

**Wendy Larson**, professor of Modern Chinese Literature and Film at the University of Oregon, received her advanced training in modern Chinese literature, film, and culture at the University of California, Berkeley, and Beijing University. Larson's most recent book, *From Ah Q to Lei Feng: Freud and Revolutionary Spirit in 20th Century China* (Stanford University Press, 2009), compares the models of the mind that emerged from both Chinese tradition and developing revolutionary culture to those put forward by the new psychology of the early twentieth century, in particular the theories proposed by Freud, whose work was widely translated. Larson's earlier research, including *Women and Writing in Modern China* (Stanford University Press, 1998) and *Literary Authority and the Chinese Writer: Ambivalence and Autobiography* (Duke University Press, 1991), interrogates the assumptions of cultural interaction and emphasizes deep critical reading as well as historical genealogy and contextualization. Her current project, *Performing China: National Culture on the Global Stage*, examines the cultural mandate of the nation state, which implies that each nation wishing to join the 'family of nations' must possess, recognize, develop, and express a unique national culture.

**Keith Tester** is professor of sociology at the University of Hull in the UK and at Kyung Hee University, Seoul. He is the author of a number of books addressing questions of morality and identity in contemporary Western society, and his *Humanitarianism and Modern Culture* was



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**Dominique Tyl, SJ**, has a doctorate in sociology and was a contributor to *China News Analysis*, Hong Kong, and later worked in China in various work units; he then taught at Fujen Catholic University, Taipei, where he was appointed director of the Socio-Cultural Research Center, and director of the Graduate Institute of Translation and Interpretation Studies. He was Social Work Programme Coordinator at Saint Joseph University (formally IIUM) in Macau. He is now a member of the Macau Ricci Institute and teaches social sciences.

**João J. Vila-Chã, SJ**, studied in Braga, Frankfurt and Boston, obtaining his PhD in philosophy from Boston College. At this institution he taught from 1992 to 1996 in the programmes ‘Philosophy of the Person’ and ‘Perspectives on Western Culture and Civilization’. From 1998 to 2008 he taught History of Contemporary Philosophy, Philosophy of Religion, and Philosophical Theology at the Portuguese Catholic University in Braga. He was Director of the *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* from 2000 to 2009 and president of the European Association of Jesuit Professors of Philosophy from 2002 to 2008. In 2007–08, he was visiting scholar at Boston College, Fordham University and Santa Clara University. In November of 2009 he became (acting) president of COMIUCAP—Conférence Mondiale des Institutions Catholiques Universitaires de Philosophie. Since 2009 he is professor of Social and Political Philosophy at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. Among many other publications, he is the author of *Amor Intellectualis? Leone Ebreo (Judah Abravanel) and the Intelligibility of Love* (Braga, 2006).

**Tudor Vlădescu** completed his undergraduate studies in philology at the Faculty of Letters in Bucharest (English and Romanian Language and Literature), followed by an MA in Romanian Contemporary Literature at the same university, a second MA in Cultural Anthropology and Community Development at the National School of Political Sciences in Bucharest and a teaching scholarship in the UK. While preparing his PhD on negative emotions in socialist propaganda literature (defended in 2007), he taught modern and contemporary literature at the Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest and collaborated with both mainstream and fringe Romanian literary magazines. He has also translated into Romanian

humanities and social science books by Clint Bolick, Christophe Charle and Casamayor and translated drama from French and English works by Howard Brenton, Alan Bennett and Eric Bogosian. After teaching for three years at the University of Saint Joseph in Macao and becoming an affiliate researcher of the Asia Research Institute, National University of Singapore, he is currently lecturing on European history and civilization at the Culinary Institute of America, Singapore Institute of Technology.

**黃念欣 Wong Nim-yan** is assistant professor in the department of Chinese Language and Literature at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Her primary field of research is Hong Kong literature and modern Chinese women's literature. She also works on the relationship between media and literature and is currently completing a study on material civilizations and women's literature in republican China. She is the author of 晚期風格：香港女作家三論 *Wanqi fengge: Xianggang nü zuojia san lun* [The late style: Essays on three Hong Kong female writers; 2007] which was awarded the 10th Hong Kong Biennial Award for Chinese Literature (Literary Criticism section) 2009. She is also the translator of *Axel's Castle: a Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* by Edmund Wilson (埃德蒙·威尔逊《阿克瑟尔的城堡：1870年至1930年想像文学研究》；2007) and *The Introduction of Western Literary Theories to Modern China, 1919–1925* by Bonnie S. McDougall (杜博妮《西方文论与现代中国（1919-1925）》；2012) and the editor of a series of Hong Kong literature anthologies.

**伍曉明 Wu Xiaoming** is senior lecturer in Chinese at the School of Languages, Cultures and Linguistics, University of Canterbury in New Zealand. His primary field of research is Chinese thought and comparative philosophy. He also works on Chinese and comparative literature. His publications include five major books, 吾道一以貫之：重讀孔子 *Wu dao yi yi guan zhi: Chong du Kongzi* [Rereading Confucius] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2003), *Filozofija I Zhexue: put k drugome I nazad* [Philosophy and zhexue: The Way to the Other and Back] (Zagreb University, 2006), 有（與）存在：通過「存在」而重讀中國傳統之「形而上」者 *You (yu) cunzai: tongguo 'cunzai' er chong du Zhongguo chuantong zhi 'xing'ershang' zhe* [The Western concept of 'being' and the Chinese concept of you] (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2005), 天命：之調性！——片讀《中庸》 *Tian ming: zhi wei xing!—pian du Zhongyong* [Heaven commands—which is what is meant by human nature: A limited reading of the Doctrine of the Mean] (Beijing: Peking University Press,

2009), and 文本之「間」——從孔子到魯迅 *Wenben zhi 'jian'—cong Kongzi dao Lu Xun* [Between the texts—from Confucius to Lu Xun] (Beijing: Peking University Press, forthcoming). He has had a special issue of *Contemporary Chinese Thought: Translations and Studies* dedicated entirely to his work on Confucius's *Analects*. He has also published extensively in many English and Chinese academic journals.

**朱壽桐 Zhu Shoutong** was formerly professor of Nanjing University and Jinan University. At present he is the head of the Department of Chinese, University of Macau. He has worked for many years on New Literature in Chinese Language (including modern and contemporary literature, and overseas Chinese literature), and his publications include 情緒：創造社的詩學宇宙 *Qingxu: chuangzaoshe de shixue yuzhou* [Emotion: Poetic Cosmos of the Creation Society] (Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1991), 中國新文學的現代化 *Zhongguo xinwenxue de xiandaihua* [The Modernity of Modern Chinese Literature] (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 1992) and 新月派的紳士風情 *Xinyuepai de shenshi fengqing* [The Gentlemanly Manner of the New Crescent Society] (Kaohsiung: Han Lin Culture and Education Foundation, 2003). Recently he has researched the influence of Irving Babbitt's New Humanism on modern Chinese culture and literature in a book entitled 新人民主義的中國影跡 *Xin renmin zhuyi de Zhongguo yiji* [The Trace of the New Humanism in China] (Beijing: China Social Sciences Press, 2009).



## PREFACE

C'est la certitude et non le  
doute qui rend fou  
—Nietzsche

No siempre lo peor es cierto  
—Calderón

*Doubt, time and violence* are the keywords which accompany human history from the very beginning until now. However, nowadays these three nouns seem to match perfectly such adjectives like *vague, fast* and *efficient* which are watchwords of the *post-modern* economy of our globalizing world. The daily life of many is immersed in the social system which endorses the strategy of a *fast* and *optimal* result in action, production or consumption.

Daily local news and mass information coming from various sectors of the global economy, finance and politics have a great input into human comportment and reasoning, but as the philosopher Fabio Merlini has said, it is a time to understand better what such thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Nietzsche or Kierkegaard had in mind when they were talking about mutilation and life that was obsolete and unsuited for producing sense.<sup>1</sup> Why? Because the common thinking based on the interest of the social classes has been replaced by the common sense of affection, and humanity has entered into the world of globalized emotions.

How can such alienation modify our keeping up with the times? In this way, the crisis of the individual and collective memory can easily result in the appearance of the numeric memory, in fact an amnesiac memory, which makes people inefficient in preserving their identity, which demands some appropriate and thorough work. However, if the crisis of memory leads us to the historical process of 'dis-subjection'—it produces at the same time the appearance of numerous 're-identifications' of the self, a subjective substitute produced *ad hoc*.

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<sup>1</sup> Fabio Merlini, 'L'époque de la performance insignifiante: Réflexions sur la vie désorientée', tr. from Italian by Sabine Plaud, (Paris: Cerf, 2011).

Our manner of living, our relationship with time, expresses itself by the flattening of perspectives, by a ‘space’-oriented person-time relationship and in consequence by the hegemony of the present, which prevails over past and future. Such an everlasting present can deprive our life of its true objective and can also make us unable to establish our long-term or medium-term life orientation.

A long time ago, in the early seventies, Jacques Lacan<sup>2</sup>, the famous French psychoanalyst, predicted the arrival in our lives of such phenomena as *communitarianism*, *ignorance* and *apathy* in regard to rational thinking, a loss of the preponderant role and privileged position of masculinity, as well as an excess of feminism, the advent of depressive society, a battle between science considered as religion and religion considered as a discourse on science<sup>3</sup>. All aimed to contain the aggression and sexual urges of men, something that might eventually lead him to self-destruction.

As the title of the present publication suggests, the ten essays of this book try to approach an inconvenient trauma of global human reality and uniformity of media and cyberspace in which human lives suffer harm, loss of inner identity and of broader meaning. Indeed, our *postmodern* and *post-identity* times are characterized by a flux of rapid social changes, uncertainty, vague and shaking moral values, by violence and frightening information with its contradictory truths and genuine ambiguity; finally by the violence of unpredictable climate change resulting in various and frequent calamities and devastation of life.

According to Keith Tester’s observations, humanity seems to live in the times of an *interregnum* where human basic beliefs are systematically betrayed. The vacuum produced by that results in a great variety of *symptoms of morbidity*, deepened by media advertisements and consumers’ unrestricted search of pleasure and fulfilment of their desires.

The release of the pleasure can be seen (among many others) in the emergence of *extreme sports*, in *medically risky sexual practices*, or in *fast-food consumption and unhealthy habits*, where immediate sensual gratification becomes more important than any concern for *sensu stricto* biological survival (衛慧 Wei Hui’s 上海寶貝 *Shanghai baobei* [Shanghai Baby], or Michel Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires* [The elementary particles]). These social phenomena of *interregnum reality* manifest their poisonous effect on people’s *depressive, infantile* and *cocoon-shaped* lives.

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<sup>2</sup> Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Lacan, envers et contre tout* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XIX ... ou pire* (1971–1972) (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

*Doubt* and *time* are the central concern of modern philosophy and remind us that *violence* is inherent in the human condition and that reflection on it, regardless of different cultural sensibilities, is *ipso facto* part of the mainstream of our individual and global concerns.

In the above respect, João Vila-Chã's essay brings Levinas's radical criticism of Western ontology to the discussion on the *logic of violence*, which in Levinas's opinion functions as a *force fatale*, a kind of an inner aversion towards the *alterity* of the 'Other'. In responding to what he calls the *ontology of war*, Levinas insists on the idea that the 'I' and the 'Other' cannot be integrated because the *transcendence* of identity cannot be absorbed in the *immanence* of a system (the two of them are not the same). The 'Other' is an absolute *stranger* to me, the one who never fits with my *subjectivity*. Therefore nothing can make them relate to each other with the exception of *language* and *conversation*. Since human *speech* is never neutral but always *magisterial* when carrying moral choices and exigency, therefore human openness with the Other could take the form of *hospitality* that *in fine* could enable the subject to *welcome* the other. This concept of *self* and *alterity* is demonstrated in a masterly way by Wu Xiaoming in his philosophical analysis of Lu Xun's poetic play based on his philosophy of life entitled *The Passer-by* (過客 *Guoke*), which literally can be translated *the passing of the guest*. Apparently the passer-by's journey is Lu Xun's own path of life. Here, Wu Xiaoming considers at length the word life (生命 *shengming*) which in Chinese combines the double meaning of *my life* (生 *sheng*) and of *command/destiny* (命 *ming*) and thus stresses one's responsibility for one's commanded life (to be lived in relationship with the Other). In considering this Lu Xun goes even further by stating a constant 'worry' of the Other and for the Other. In assuming this he knows well that he must carry the Other to his death and grave, and then his concern for the Other might eventually enable him to transcend his own death as a final fulfillment of his command of life or destiny. Jin Siyan, in her contribution focused on the 1970s *Today School* of Poetry and the 'Stars' paintings in China, continuously points to the Western cultural 'interference' in Chinese traditional values and in the communist ideology that was in force, and she shows how this had the effect of an *alterity* of universal freedom of artistic creativity claimed by the young and courageous 'Stars' group, something that was inconvenient to the regime. While exploring the New Literature and New Culture movements, Jin brings to the attention of the readers some of less known anti-utopian writings and writers' manifestos produced in contemporary China. Also reflecting on the New Literature and its period, Zhu Shoutong deplores the fact that the proponents of New Literature uncritically

embraced science as an element of literary creation and criticism, something that has greatly misled later generations and pushed them to consider science as an intrinsic part of the New Literature movement and humanistic rationality.

Alison Bailey's essay investigates the mainstreams of violence, disorder, filial piety and acts of filial revenge in Chinese literature and culture of the late Qing and early Republican periods. The phenomena of *fear* and *distrust* are revisited consecutively by the authors of two essays; one by the Romanian literary historian and critic Tudor Vlădescu and the other by the French sociologist teaching in China, Dominique Tyl. The present selection of essays ends with two very original contributions coming from the field of the seventh art; one written by Wong Nim-yan who gives us insights into an inconvenient historical fact of Chinese and Japanese modern history, and another one, written by Wendy Larson, brings to the surface recent Western and Chinese cultural confrontations, and Chinese nostalgia of the country's cultural centrality and the ambitions for a bigger role to be played in global world affairs.

These and many other fascinating topics from Western and Chinese history were explored and brought to light by a learned forum of distinguished scholars and experts whose contributions are contained in this publication.

It is my hope that a closer examination of these essays based on literary and philosophical history will contribute to the readers' understanding and knowledge of this particular subject in both Chinese and Western praxis and culture—and that they will reveal the inner challenges of the new intellectual and cultural trends which will require an adequate ethical and humanistic response to the aspirations of our globalizing and unpredictable times.

Artur K. Wardega, SJ 萬德化  
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# CONFUSING WORLD, VULNERABLE PEOPLE: ON THE CONDITION OF MEDIALIZATION

KEITH TESTER

Except for those happy few whose intellectual frame is closed and resilient to time and tide, anyone trying to understand the contemporary human situation must ultimately confront confusion. The imminent environmental catastrophe is well known, yet perhaps because of the magnitude of the crisis nothing really changes. Local solutions to this global disaster are not enough, but they seem to be the most we are presently capable of developing. Global financial markets have been revealed to serve only the wealthy (sometimes simple Marxism continues to apply), and yet everyone still looks for the good investment which will bring wealth. We work hard in our jobs in order to deserve what we have, yet we also play national lotteries on the chance of getting rich quick, effortlessly. Religion has become popularly linked with violence or ridiculed as superstition, and yet the religious fail to get the message of love across, and the despisers are allowed to peddle their banalities without much engaged critique. The human body is under attack by poisonous food, and consumption of known dangers increases. We seek love but get consistently distracted by sex. Politicians prevaricate or simply lie about why they prosecute wars, and the self-proclaimed leaders of the 'international humanitarian community' condone torture—where their own agents are not carrying it out.

What's going on? There are two logical answers. First of all, perhaps things really are as confusing as they seem to be. There is confusion because the times are, quite simply, confusing. Maybe these are actually the first rays of bloody light at the dawn of the last days. Second, perhaps it isn't that everything is confusing because of the size of the problems but, rather, because of the absence of a framework of understanding which might enable things to make sense. In other words, maybe the problems are *hermeneutic*. Without wishing to downplay the importance of the first answer, this paper concentrates on the second answer to the question of what is going on. The contemporary human condition is marked by

confusion and all its consequent social, cultural, political and psychological pathologies, on account of what in no small measure is a *crisis of interpretation*. And so another question needs to be addressed: what is the source of the crisis?

One important dimension of an answer is provided by Hannah Arendt's crucial image of 'dark times'. In the middle of the twentieth century, she says, disorder, hunger, massacre, injustice and hatred were all known to be rampant in the world. Yet there was little or no outrage thanks to the work of 'official representatives who, without interruption and in many ingenious variations, explained away unpleasant facts and justified concerns'. These dark times bred confusion through the deliberate degradation of 'all truth to meaningless triviality'.<sup>1</sup> Dark times prevail when the light of publicity cannot be shone on events. Their truth cannot be unravelled because their meaning is purposely complicated, and so it is difficult to know why the hunger exists (natural disaster or result of war?), why the massacre took place (were the perpetrators justified in some way?), what justice might mean (*whose* justice exactly?), or whether the haters might have a point (after all, their ancestors were doubtless the victims of some ancient atrocity). Arendt's image was developed in the specific context of looking back on totalitarianism, but it continues to have an enormous analytical pinch. It points attention to exactly how outrages and disasters are explained away and, more importantly, precisely *who* is doing the explaining away and *why*. These days, our days, are indeed dark times in Arendt's sense<sup>2</sup> and her approach points to a solution which is easy to state although considerably more difficult practically to achieve. If the confusion and uncertainty are simply the result of political expediency, the transformation of political circumstances will lead to a casting of the stark light of clarity. Arendt's image of dark times is ultimately confined within a political sphere, but the contemporary confusion is of a much more fundamental sort. Maybe the princes of darkness do not really understand what is going on either, and perhaps this is one reason why they spread confusion; they are trying to disguise their own perplexity. What if the light bulb has broken and cannot be replaced? Confusion today

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<sup>1</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Here is an example of darkness from Mark Regev, spokesman for the Israeli Prime Minister. He is responding to a scrupulous United Nations report accusing the Israeli armed forces of criminal acts during the January 2009 war in Gaza: 'The report was conceived in sin and is the product of a union between propaganda and bias'; quoted in Rory MacCarthy, 'Israel rejects UN criticism over Gaza war', *The Guardian*, 17 September 2009, 16.

is not merely (although it most certainly is partly) a deliberate production. It also reflects a drastic collapse of understanding and interpretation.

An alternative explanation comes from Milan Kundera, the novelist. He has identified ours as the time of the *terminal paradox*. Modernity corroded all values except reason. 'But just when reason wins a total victory, pure irrationality (force willing only its will) seizes the world stage, because there is no longer any generally accepted value system to block its path'. As an example Kundera gives the dream of the unity of humanity. It has been achieved he says, but by war and the threat of destruction as opposed to the peace of reason.<sup>3</sup> For Kundera the way out is to be found through a recovery of the tradition of the novel, which he links to embrace of the flux of all things human. In other words, if the contingency, accident and unruly desires of things human are emphasized, a humanist bulwark of values can be put up to stop the tide of pure irrationality. A suspicion emerges as soon as Kundera's solution to the reign of terminal paradox is stated in this way. As a novelist *he would* emphasize the ability of his kind of novel to play a part in the recuperation of humanity in the world. The novel stops the paradox being terminal. Although Kundera's identification of the terminal paradox is exceptionally rich and of analytical value, there is the suspicion he might have used the answer (the novel) to frame the question.<sup>4</sup>

I want to try a different approach, one at the level of a sociology of understanding and the human consequences of the failure of interpretation. I want to explore the hypothesis that the contemporary crisis of interpretation reflects the dissolution of an *object* of interpretation. These times are confusing, and these are times of confusion, because in a very real sense it is impossible to know in what they consist. The hypothesis is derived from the work of Antonio Gramsci. From his prison cell in Mussolini's Italy, as a victim of the dark times of European fascism, he identified the conditions of an *interregnum*. We have become detached from our old ways of making sense of the world and no longer believe what we used to. But we do not know what to believe instead because things have not 'solidified' into an object capable of being interpreted. It is

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<sup>3</sup> Milan Kundera, *The Art of the Novel*, tr. Linda Asher (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), 10, 11.

<sup>4</sup> Terminal paradoxes are not just fictional devices. They are also very similar to Zygmunt Bauman's analytical procedure. For an exploration of this contention see: Keith Tester, 'Bauman's Irony' in Anthony Elliott, ed., *The Contemporary Bauman: A Critical Reader* (London: Routledge, 2007). These comments are not to be read as a critique of Kundera's novels. They *wound* the dark times and *lever* the paradoxical. They are profound statements of human values. Kundera is vital.

like standing on the edge of a volcano; you know the lava will cool and coagulate into rock but at the moment the eruption is continuing and it is impossible to understand what kind of rocks will form. They have not yet become objects which can be studied. The *interregnum*—the condition of being between one condition and another without knowing what the new one might possibly involve—creates a crisis which ‘consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this *interregnum* a great variety of morbid symptoms appear’.<sup>5</sup> *The contemporary confusions with their pathologies are symptoms of a crisis of understanding, and the crisis of understanding is a symptom of the contemporary interregnum.*

In these terms, the first step towards overcoming confusion, and thereby of identifying the pressing problems and getting rid of the extraneous ones, is to look at the *interregnum* and to try to identify what is appearing in its eruptions. If things can be made a little more solid it might be possible to begin to think *critically* and not merely *uncertainly*. The first part of this article attempts to identify the condition of the *interregnum*, and the second part turns to the level of the life strategies of social actors trying to negotiate a way through all the confusion.

## The Condition: Medialization

Globalization has become the dominant conceptual key to unlocking the present, and there is good reason for this. Although commodities and people have moved around the globe for pretty much as long as there has been transport, the complete global interconnectedness of economic transactions is something new. Whereas in the era of European imperialist hegemony it was possible to identify with relative ease the centres and the peripheries of the world (and of course a significant part of the power of the centres derived from their economic and technologically reinforced ability to define some places as peripheral, as less important than the centre), the situation is no longer quite so clear. The places defined as peripheral by European hegemony have established themselves as central points in the contemporary traffic flows. Europe is one player amongst many, as is America, Asia, Australasia, everywhere. Through the prism of globalization it is possible to get an intellectual grip on the changing situation and to begin to understand it in its own terms. But this very ability to use and apply to the world a concept of globalization proves two

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<sup>5</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1971), 276.

related things. First of all, globalization and the *interregnum* cannot be identical. Since it involves confusion, there must be something more about the contemporary *interregnum*, something to which globalization is blind. Second, whatever else globalization might mean, it does not of itself mean a crisis of understanding. Talk in terms of globalization makes sense of things, whatever our take on globalization might be. Consequently, if my opening conjecture is valid and these are times of confusion, the confusion must be due to something other than globalization precisely because it *is not confusing*. Globalization might be unpleasant, worrying, disastrous, but even to make those admissions is to deny it is confusing. So the confusion must be due to something else. What?

*The contemporary interregnum is not a reflection of the birth pains of globalization. It is instead a consequence of the condition of medialization. Medialization is the condition of the collapse of interpretation and therefore of the contemporary confusions.* All of which begs the question: what is medialization?

Just as it has become a cliché to call our world globalized, it is also obvious to see it as dominated by the media. Media institutions are significant capitalist concerns, the media have colonized many leisure practices and media technology penetrates all spheres of social and cultural life. The media are everywhere.

But when I talk about medialization I want to make an argument at the level of hermeneutics. *Medialization* is about how what is confronted as the world is—and can only be—understood within parameters (however broad they might be) established by and in the media. Indeed the media have themselves become the necessary and natural precondition and context of understanding the contemporary world. The media are now necessary for the social, cultural and political interpretation of the world created for actors positioned as audiences by the media.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, *medialization* also points to how all systems of understanding are with, in,

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<sup>6</sup> The circularity of the formulation is deliberate and reflects the point I want to make about medialization. In terms of *interpretation* there is no outside. The absence of an interpretative outside is the root of the ease with which safe and prosperous Western academics can question whether the suffering they know about thanks to the media actually happened. Here I am thinking about the disgusting questioning about whether an event like the Srebrenica massacre really happened. The extreme case of denial of course focuses on the Nazi Holocaust. Yet there is an outside of medialization—it is suffering humanity. See David Rohde, *Endgame: The Betrayal and Fall of Srebrenica, Europe's Worst Massacre Since World War II* (New York: Basic Books, 1998); Deborah Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: The Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994).

and through the media. It concerns the death of the old categories of understanding. Let me give an example of the point I am trying to make. When I talk about medialization I am not asking about how political positions, say, are formulated in ways designed to secure media profile. To put the question in this way is to imply a distinction between the political and the media. Such a distinction might have existed once, but it doesn't anymore. With medialization politics as presently practised is utterly indivisible from the media; the media are its precondition, condition and circumstance. To put it in Arendt's terms the media are at once the source of the darkness, the origin of the light and, furthermore, in control of the switch turning the light of publicity on or off.<sup>7</sup>

To some degree, and as with the globalization of commodity flows, there is nothing new about recognizing how the media underpin understanding of the world. After all, any understanding beyond the very small sphere of the experiential requires media of one sort or another. What is new is how medialization establishes the world as an object beyond the limits of the action of any and every particular media audience. The world becomes an object to be consumed, not changed. At the obvious level this happens because particular audiences are confronted with events far beyond the limits of their finite action<sup>8</sup>. More deeply it happens because the medialized world is independent of human categories and yet by its penetration through social, cultural and political life it demands to be understood. The medialized world cannot be ignored, but it does not therefore follow it can be made to make sense.

According to Anthony Giddens, modern technologies—which of course include the media—have 'disembedded' time and space from local

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<sup>7</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition: A Study of the Central Dilemmas Facing Modern Man* (New York: Doubleday, 1958).

<sup>8</sup> Hans Jonas pointed to the conventional assumption that the ethical universe was restricted only to 'contemporaries' and how the actor did not need to consider effects beyond those spatial and temporal contemporaries. But, he says, thanks to technology 'our powers to act are pushing us beyond the terms of all former ethics' (p. 21). For Jonas this power enjoins an ethics of 'metaphysical responsibility beyond self-interest' (p. 136). The ethical demand is compelling but two sociological questions immediately surface. First, has *our* power to act expanded or has the power of technological systems to act expanded? Second how can an ethics beyond self-interest be established except through appeal to self-interest? There is another point: the power to know about effects beyond the sphere of the contemporaries has increased, but it does not therefore follow that the power to act has increased too. See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility. In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*, tr. H. Jonas and D. Herr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

places. Consequently social actors operate on a terrain stretching far beyond the local; time and space have been ‘stretched’ and we all have encounters beyond the local places in which we are physically present.<sup>9</sup> It is actually a lot more complicated than Giddens allows. His argument about disembedding presents time and space as *linear* (and in ignoring questions of power, competence and facility he assumes equal access to the stretched time and space, equal disembedding from the local). They are both like pieces of elastic, stretching in a straight line from an anchoring point called the self. Furthermore, when Giddens talks about time *and* space he is identifying them with the same piece of elastic: the disembedding of one means the disembedding of the other. Conventional physics might well establish the correctness of such identification, but medialization entails the separation of time and space. They cease to have any necessary hermeneutic connection. To this extent medialization suspends the physical laws of time and space.

In order to draw out this claim the first question needing to be asked is: what is the time of medialization? Rowan Williams, now the Archbishop of Canterbury, once made an excellent point. Thanks to the media, he said, ‘so far from guaranteeing that we are aware of what is currently going on in the world, we end up with no clear apprehension at all of a real present moment’.<sup>10</sup> Medialization brings together events and processes without any necessary connection other than their appearance in the media at more or less the same time. Yet they do not come together because of their intrinsic importance or value; the key point is whether or not the event takes place within the purview of media institutions and so ‘what goes on’ in the world as established through medialization is contingent. The events are then packaged together and broadcast to audiences which are, thanks to technology, predominantly to be found in privatized domestic spheres which are temporally structured according to mundane everyday life patterns (work, leisure, rest for example).

The ‘real present moment’ dissolves in a kaleidoscope of juxtapositions. First, any given moment in what is broadcast itself dissolves into the wider context of what was happening at more or less the same time in front of media institutions. *This* happened *and* this *and* this ... As such no particular event is too important in the wider picture. Appearance is contingent and significance is contextual. Second, the time of the present moment appearing through medialization is put alongside the time of the present moment of everyday life, and there is no necessary connection

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<sup>9</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Rowan Williams, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles Our Judgement* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), 89.

between them. They can jar and there can be a split between medialized and everyday time. For example, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center were timed to hit New York at the beginning of the working day, but in Europe they happened in the early to mid afternoon. Consequently, when did they happen? And did anything else happen on the day? Third, because medialization is shaped by capitalist struggles for profit by different institutions, each trying to secure a market share, the audience is encouraged to *choose* precisely what the moment will contain. Will time be spent with this media institution or with another one? And does each institution deal with the same events and indeed attribute to them the same meaning? Do they all associate the 'real present moment' with the same contents? There is no reason to assume the answer is 'yes'. There is no single definition of the 'real present moment'; different media institutions will define it differently and perhaps even give it varying content in terms of attempts to secure an audience. Consequently, the very sense of a real present moment becomes dependent upon techniques of persuasion. Medialization demands an attention which is changeable and not too fixed on anything in particular. As such there is no *real* present moment, no present with any integrity of its own.

Medialization dissolves the meaning of time and thereby complicates what it might mean. The same happens with space and with the sense of being in a definite, reliable, place which can be called 'here'. In the condition of medialization space is both centrifugal *and* centripetal.

It is *centrifugal* because the experiential validity of the 'here' of the audience is undermined. It is made to be smaller than the wider context which is broadcast to it. The 'here' is diminished even though it is the place in which audiences are located and within which specific audiences are sought by institutions. In other words, we live nowhere terribly special, or at best we live in a 'here' which is very similar to all other attractive 'heres'. This centrifugal tendency is illustrated especially well in coverage of environmental issues. Although the 'here' is invariably identified as a place of local action, there are always reminders of the relative insignificance of what local efforts can achieve in the wider context.<sup>11</sup> Space is centrifugal because medialization makes the 'here' relative to a variety of 'theres' without being capable of establishing any chains of

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<sup>11</sup> 'If the new power plants that China is building between now and 2020 alone will produce about 25 billion tonnes of carbon over their lifetime, what is the point of me saving one tonne by not flying to Málaga on holiday?' asked a British journalist. His answer: 'small signals can matter, even to very big countries'. He did not explain exactly how. See Ian Katz, 'The World Waits for Beijing', *The Guardian*, 17 September 2009, 28.



action from the one to the other, or indeed any necessary connections at all between them. As such ‘there’ stands apart from ‘here’. It is one thing to know about what is going on, but it is another thing entirely to be able—or indeed to want—to do anything about it.

Space is centrifugal because the world moves away from the ‘here’. But space is also *centripetal* because medialization centres the world on the pivot of a very precise ‘here’. At the most obvious level this is because of the technology of medialization. They are designed to be used in the space of the domestic sphere, and indeed there has been a process of the domestication of previously public technological areas. For example home cinemas combined with the availability of DVDs obviate the need to visit movie houses, and even make visits slightly problematic.<sup>12</sup> This is one of the main reasons why blockbuster movie releases experiment with 3-D visuals; for the moment at least domestic technology cannot handle them, and so cinemas are able to add both financial and experiential ‘value’ to the film. But eventually even this technology will be brought down to a domestic scale if there will be a return on the investment, and once again the ‘here’ of the home will become the naturalized place in which media technology is located and used. In this way the home is a contextualizing ‘here’ in which social actors positioned as audiences engage with medialization. This is to concentrate on medialization as *form*, but there is also a matter of the centripetal force of medialization as *content*.

Through medialization the ‘here’ is definitely made to be nowhere special through its juxtaposition with lots of ‘theres’. Nevertheless, the ‘here’ is the pivot around which the world turns. But this has serious interpretative implications. Quite simply, the ‘here’ of the domestic sphere becomes the space in which acts of interpretation are required to occur. But what medialization puts into the domestic sphere is beyond its independent hermeneutic resources. And in the first instance the resources of interpretation are independent because the domestic sphere is privatizing.

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<sup>12</sup> Indeed the naturalization of the domestic sphere as the ‘here’ of media consumption, even of formerly public media such as film, is indicated by the appearance of etiquette guides for cinema audiences. Debrett’s has published a guide to deal with the matter because: ‘Over the past few years we have noticed an overall decline in the nation’s cinema etiquette’. In other words, people have started to do in public what they do at home and, to put the matter the other way around, there is an assumption that expectations met in the domestic sphere will also be met in public. See Lucy Cockcroft, ‘Debrett’s release guide to cinema etiquette’, *Daily Telegraph*, 18 August 2009. Available at <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/6049764/Debretts-release-guide-to-cinema-etiquette.html>>

In other words, 'here' cannot make sense of the content of medialization. This has three consequences. First of all, because independent resources are swamped, the domestic sphere becomes dependent upon 'experts' to explain what is happening. There is a collapse of confidence in independent interpretative competence. Second, the domestic sphere seems to become the target of a violent world and therefore it has to be protected from the outside. Third, as part of the defence the domestic sphere needs an ability to shut out the world, and one of the best ways of doing this is, precisely, through the consumption of the products of medialization. This is because they offer in 'here' compensations for, or distractions from, what happens out 'there'. Furthermore, as the case of cinema suggests, the products of medialization can also lessen reasons to go out 'there'. Therefore the intended answer to medialization is actually a reinforcement of the problem.<sup>13</sup> The centripetal force of medialization consolidates the experience of 'here' through a hermeneutic of anxiety. 'Here' becomes the hoped for solution to the confusions out 'there'. But the hope is misplaced.

The upshot of all this is *the subordination of knowledge to information*. The distinction is taken from Walter Benjamin who said: 'Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling: almost everything benefits information'.<sup>14</sup> According to Benjamin storytelling leads to knowledge because it transforms the event into something making sense; knowledge exists when the event can be reconciled with experience through the story. But medialization, and of course Benjamin was writing at a relatively early stage in its process of development, dissolves the present moment and undermines the sense of being in a particular 'here', except when 'here' is threatened by what it seeks to keep outside. As such the interpretative resources and competence of social actors as audiences is prejudiced. Only information remains and information does not of itself have meaning.

This is perhaps the key point of the *interregnum* generated by the condition of medialization. Neither simply stretched nor disembedded, time and space are instead juxtaposed and undermined. They are thus

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<sup>13</sup> But of course this creates an existential desire for improved technology, thus rendering previous advances obsolete because of their failure to keep 'there' outside of 'here'. There is a cycle of needs creation and needs satisfaction which pushes the technologies of medialization beyond the spheres of desire and want. For one discussion see Giles Slade, *Made to Break: Technology and Obsolescence in America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, tr. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana, 1973), 89.

independent of the chance of knowledge, and instead generate only information to be consumed. In this way the world becomes an objectified 'out there', which is beyond action or any experience capable of being mapped onto human interpretative competencies. The world and social actors as audiences pull apart from one another. The result is confusion. The institutions of medialization exploit the confusion by turning it to opportunities for profit generation through the technological consolidation of the domestic sphere. Yet the domestic 'here' is compromised through the medialization which is consumed in order to bolster it, and so the process of confusion-escape through technology-confusion begins all over again.

How can social actors positioned as audiences—how can men and women—live like this?

### **Life strategies of the *Interregnum***

Medialization is the condition of a collapse of understanding because it complicates the compass points in terms of which social actors might have a sense of where they are in the world and, of course, in what the world consists. Time and space alike become juxtapositional, kaleidoscopic. They stop being qualities in which it is possible to have any measure of confidence. Confidence can only be developed around the point of the domestic sphere, which is evidently capable of reconciling time and space and, moreover, making them experientially valid. Yet thanks to medialization the domestic sphere is also interpreted as under threat. There is a *hermeneutic of threat* which is revealed most obviously through an *emergent cultural dominant of humiliation*.

Richard Rorty saw humiliation as one of the main causes of pain and suffering. After all, he said, 'the best way to cause people long-lasting pain is to humiliate them by making the things that seemed most important to them look futile, obsolete, and powerless'. A similar argument can be found in the work of the sociologist Zygmunt Bauman. He said: 'nothing humiliates more than poverty, and no poverty humiliates more than poverty suffered amidst people bent on fast and accelerating enrichment'.<sup>15</sup> In these terms it is reasonable to identify medialization as amounting to a *humiliation generator*. First of all, a dominant reason why media are consumed in the domestic sphere is in order to provide a distraction from

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 89; Zygmunt Bauman and Keith Tester, *Conversations with Zygmunt Bauman* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 153.

the confusions outside and, admittedly somewhat counter-intuitively, to provide information about the confusions in order to justify the turn to the domestic sphere. However, precisely because of its dependence on medialization, the domestic sphere is permanently confronted with its *powerlessness* to avoid confusion, the *futility* of the struggle to keep the confusions outside (for instance, advertised foods can cause obesity thus destroying the body) and the *obsolescence* of its certainties. Second, medialization generates the humiliation of *relative poverty* because its advertising and programming (in other words, its connection to capitalism) are invariably aspirational. For example, property make-over programmes establish the principle of enrichment through speculation, and national lotteries only sell tickets because of their promise of quick riches.<sup>16</sup> In this way, whatever one has now is made poor relative to what one aspires to have, and what everyone else seems to have.<sup>17</sup> Poverty becomes relativized rather than absolute. It becomes an almost generalized humiliation to be overcome.

Humiliation is a hermeneutic of the contemporary *interregnum*. It is a prism through which uncertainty is confronted and indeed made intelligible. Feeling humiliated is a way of making sense of everything. Humiliation also leads to certain practices. The social actors of medialization are more or less openly hostile towards the absolutely poor. First of all, the absolutely poor are identified as the embodiment of humiliation and, therefore, they are precisely one of the causes of confusion needing to be kept outside of the domestic sphere. Second, whereas wealth becomes a target of aspiration and the wealthy are to be emulated, the destitute

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<sup>16</sup> 'Home has become instrumentalised: those who can choose, live where there are jobs, where the house prices were right or the schools good': This quotation is from Madeleine Bunting's article, 'After my father's death, I went north, and deep into the politics of home', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2009, 31.

<sup>17</sup> One example of this tendency is the wide gap in the UK between what the average salary actually is, and what it is believed to be (for an insight into the confusion about what constitutes a 'good salary' in the UK see Finlo Rohrer, 'Just what is a big salary?', *BBC News Magazine*, 15 July 2009. Available at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8151355.stm>>.) The gap is a reflection of aspiration, and aspiration itself is a sign of the desire to escape from what is felt as the humiliation of relative poverty. When people on the average salary believe the average salary is higher than what they earn, they are also consigning themselves to relative poverty. For a discussion of the perception of poverty see Michael Blastland, 'Just what is poor?', *BBC News Magazine*, 31 July, 2009. Available at <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8177864.stm>>. For a wider, albeit populist, treatment of this issue, see Alain de Botton, *Status Anxiety* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2004).

become threats who are interpreted as aspiring to have what the medialized domestic sphere contains. I might be humiliated by your riches, but my affluence humiliates the absolutely poor. From this largely valid argument it is but a small step towards identifying the absolutely poor as desirous of what I have and, thereby, making them dangerous to my well-being. But there is a third point, one focusing on what it means to live with humiliation. Poverty ‘means being excluded from whatever passes for a “normal life”. It means being “not up to the mark”. This results in a fall of self-esteem, feelings of shame or feelings of guilt’. The argument is taken from Bauman, who continues: ‘Poverty also means being cut off from the chances of whatever passes ... for a “happy life” ... this results in resentment and aggravation, which spill out in the form of violent acts, self-deprecation, or both’.<sup>18</sup> These are people who do not possess the material resources to respond to the aspirations created by consumer capitalism, and who are consigned to live in the knowledge that, even according to their own desires, the things they possess are ‘futile, obsolete, and powerless’ (to recall Rorty). They are put into a situation of being humiliating even to themselves.

Yet why does humiliation and especially the humiliation of relative poverty possess this charge? The answer is because it reveals the inescapable facts of the human condition. Arne Johan Vetlesen identifies ‘certain given, irremovable, and hence non-optional conditions of human being-in-the-world—namely, dependency, vulnerability, mortality, the frailty of interpersonal relationships, and existential loneliness’.<sup>19</sup> These conditions are inescapable precisely because existing as a human being in the world is, first of all, being with others and, second, embodied. Nothing human is entirely sufficient unto itself or alone in the world (witness the stereotypical identification of the domestic sphere with the nuclear family regardless of the number of single-person households<sup>20</sup>), and the non-optional conditions all emphasize the boundaries and limits following

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<sup>18</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor* (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1998), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Arne Johan Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency: Understanding Collective Evildoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 10. Vetlesen perhaps fails to stress adequately the most compelling of the non-optional conditions of human being in the world: the knowledge of death. Then again, as the figure of Death says in Bergman’s *The Seventh Seal*, people do not think about death very much until the time comes, and then they discover their utter helplessness.

<sup>20</sup> According to one estimate, by 2020 40 per cent of all UK households will be single occupancy; Richard Watson, *Future Files: The 5 Trends That Will Shape the Next 50 Years* (London: Nicholas Brearley, 2008).

from the presence of others and physical embodiment. We (as individuals and groups) are limited in our actions by our *dependency* upon others; we are *vulnerable* because our existential and even physical well-being is dependent upon others over whom we only have a limited control at best; we are *mortal* because we are embodied; our interpersonal relationships are *frail* because they are always to some degree contingent, and not least they are rendered more or less doubtful because of the mortality of the other;<sup>21</sup> and we are existentially *alone* since our dependency upon others means we possess no self-knowledge without them, and yet upon them ultimately we cannot depend.

Just as the hermeneutic of humiliation leads to certain practices, so does recognition of the non-optional conditions of human being in the world. According to Vetlesen, stark recognition leads to the perpetration of evil, where evil can be defined as an action concerned, ‘to *intentionally inflict pain and suffering on another human being, against her will, and causing serious and foreseeable harm to her*’. Vetlesen says the perpetration of evil is an attempt to negate or transcend the boundaries and limits implied by the conditions, and evildoing is a kind of action, ‘carried out in the form of a *protest against such givens*; recognizing their realness for others ... but denying their realness for oneself’.<sup>22</sup> Evil is a denial of dependency, and the denial is bolstered all the time the dependency of others is enforced. Through this argument it is possible to explain the extraordinary violence of deeds such as war through rape.<sup>23</sup> The rapists are struggling to prove, primarily to themselves, how the non-optional conditions of human existence in the world do not apply to them in the way they apply to the victims. In turn, this means the rapists can believe themselves to be morally superior to their victims, and most certainly possessed of a greater humanity than them, precisely as the quantity and torment of the raping is exacerbated. To paraphrase the point: We rape, therefore we are able to transcend our limitations; you can be raped, therefore you are incapable of transcending your limits and you deserve to be treated evilly because you are inferior to us and of a lesser humanity.

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<sup>21</sup> But the frailty can also be deliberate. The best account of the frailty of relationships is provided by a story intended to celebrate freedom from constraint: Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992.

<sup>22</sup> Vetlesen, *Evil and Human Agency*, 2; original emphasis, p.10.

<sup>23</sup> See for example: *Sudan, Darfur: Rape as a Weapon of War—Sexual Violence and its Consequences*, a report published by the International Secretariat of Amnesty International in 2004.