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The article is a constellation of readings and references, which are meant to bring closer not so much the definition of empathy in the context of images as to reconstruct its conditions of possibility; to trace the dynamics of its generation in and through visual works. The hypothesis around which this essay unfolds is the conviction that in every contact with an image, the key role is played by something imageless, which refers primarily to the other senses, but also structurally relates to an experience in which the ethical and aesthetic component are inseparable from each other. By analyzing specific texts that refer to this structural dimension of the empathic experience, the author concludes his argument with an analysis of selected visual works that shed additional light on his deliberations.

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of the Oppressed] (2017), Chaplin. Przewidywanie teraźniejszości [Chaplin. Prevision of the Present] (2017), Lekcje futbolu[Lessons of Football] (2019), Azyl [Asylum] (2022), Wyższa aktualność. Studia o współczesności Dantego [Higher Actuality. Studies in Dante's Contemporaneity] (2022). He also writes a blog: pawelmoscicki.net

Empathy: Primal Scenes

Only the eyes are still capable of crying out.
René Char[1]

the finale of the trembling timpani from the ode to joy
mounts in our eyes in darkness
the frightfully silent rectangle
of the captured image

that's how kobane defends itself
remember
kobane
Szczepan Kopyt[2]

There is indeed something shocking about our gaze. Perhaps not in seeing, which in everyday life appears to be quite subordinated to the obvious, but in something within seeing that is still insubordinate, split apart, peculiar. The simple fact of observation appears easy to describe for those who only take an interest in what may superficially be called cognition. What course does it take? Where does it lead to? What benefits does it bring? These may be assessed, estimated, or described somehow. More difficult to grasp is the number of obstacles that it encounters on the way, how many times – with an object or the subject "at fault" – its rhythm breaks down, how much ignorance it still possesses, blocking access to new truths as much as it arouses the desire to find them.

The gaze also – or perhaps above all – relates to an ethical shock. With every view, we can see something that puts responsibility onto us, confronts us with the realness of the world, even when it reaches us in the form of fiction. Such an experience always also means getting to know oneself, discovering one's limitations and drives, acknowledging hidden proclivities, or bidding farewell to an illusion that may have co-created our reality for a long time. What in the gaze activates sympathy, and

what – on the contrary – allows for indifference? Can ethical sensibility be confined in seeing alone, or is it also necessary to hear or touch something therein? Does the ethics of seeing not begin where the visual experience recognizes its own insufficiency and demands something more real than the image itself? Should the portrayal of these often hidden dimensions of empathy not adopt – like this text – the form of a constellation, in order to pose questions about the status of experience and to respect its meandering and fragile nature?

In one of his books that develop the project of metaphorology, Hans Blumenberg concentrated on the sources and transformations of the figure of the sinking ship, particularly with regard to the moment of looking at a disaster at sea.[3] Among many literary and philosophical references to this motif, he specified an excerpt from Lucretius's *De rerum natura*, in which the philosopher adopts the act of observing a storm as the primal scene of the moral subject:

> What joy it is, when out at sea the stormwinds are lashing the waters, to gaze from the shore at the heavy stress some other man is enduring! Not that anyone's afflictions are in themselves a source of delight; but to realize from what troubles you yourself are free is joy indeed. What joy, again, to watch opposing hosts marshalled on the field of battle when you have yourself no part in their peril! But this is the greatest joy of all: to possess a quiet sanctuary, stoutly fortified by the teaching of the wise, and to gaze down from that elevation on others wandering aimlessly in search of a way of life, pitting their wits one against another, disputing for precedence, struggling night and day with unstinted effort to scale the pinnacles of wealth and power. O joyless hearts of men! O minds without vision! How dark and dangerous the life in which this tiny span is lived away![4]

For the subject, observing the suffering of others in a struggle with an untamed force primarily means training in Epicurean

peace of mind, deriving satisfaction from letting go of passion and following reason, which is associated with distance from the suffering and the passions occurring in the world. And yet there is something completely different that may be discerned in this act, something more disturbing – the experience of the fragility of the human spirit, including the one with which the observer identifies. He remains seemingly unshaken and builds his moral position on it, but at the same time this view compels him to cry out: "*o miseras hominum mentes, o pectora caeca!*" His gaze is therefore entangled not only with the misery of human minds, but also with the blindness that fills human hearts. It leads him to the trope of *tenebris vitae*, the darkness of life, associated not only with the threat of disaster itself, but also – perhaps – with his own blindness to suffering.

An entirely different version of witnessing suffering can be found in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which begins, after all, with the sinking of a ship with most of the drama's protagonists on board. Miranda suspects her father, Prospero, of unleashing the cataclysm. She voices her outrage in a passionate monologue:

> If by your art, my dearest father, you've
> Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.
> [...]
> O, I have suffered
> With those that I saw suffer! A brave vessel,
> Who had, no doubt, some noble creatures in her,
> Dashed all to pieces. O, the cry did knock
> Against my very heart! Poor souls, they perished!
> Had I been any god of power, I would
> Have sunk the sea within the earth, or ere
> It should the good ship so have swallowed and
> The fraughting souls within her.[5]

Here, we are on the antipodes of the reaction mastered by the philosophical subject inspired by Lucretius's poem. Miranda

allows the view of suffering to invade her inner self: "*O, I have suffered / With those I saw suffer*"; the act of seeing causes her own suffering, which rhymes with the suffering she suspects in the other. This conjecture is essentially commiseration, which needs an intermediary in the form of an image. Or rather of something in the image that Miranda calls a "cry": "*O, the cry did knock / Against my very heart*." The image of suffering cries, and the *cry of the image* should be discerned in it, so that the suffering of the people embraced therein can become, at least partly, our business. Miranda herself cries out twice with a sigh, that "O!" whose tragic origin was noted by researchers of antiquity.[6] It is both a cry of sympathy – as in Lucretius, the vocatives refer to pensive reflection – and of wrath, of protest against suffering and opposition to the order of the world which made it possible. Miranda even desires to become God, so as to drown the sea within the earth and thus prevent such tragedy from happening again.

Both Lucretius and Shakespeare depict scenes in which awareness arises of the suffering of others, or even commiseration. At the same time, these are descriptions of the emergence of the position of the witness, who is never a mere bystander, but always – notwithstanding the preserved distance – an implicated subject.[7] In the case of contact with images, this distance is an irremovable, equally positive and negative condition of empathy. We look at people from beyond our current context; we are not participants in the scenes we see. However, entanglement does not disappear altogether, as shown by the examples discussed. What factor turns distance into a source of empathy, and not an obstacle?

Referring to the psychoanalytical category of the primal scene, I seek to give a name to the source component of the experience of images – to what is prior to the actual seeing. While looking at images, we experience empathy due to that source component, which creates in them conditions for such an experience.

Reaching these conditioning elements requires looking underneath the underpinning of images, behind the scenes – where not only the visual is active, but also the various other forces and dimensions that seemingly do not partake in this experience. For now, I call them the cry of the image, although it does not necessarily need to be a cry understood literally, or even something aural. What matters is rather the secondary, surplus element, which – given its affective or ethical impact – turns out to be constitutive for the whole experience. It may be a fragment of an image, its specific movement, a gesture contained therein, or the structure of reception that entangles the subject in a way that causes an ethical shock in them. At the same time, this cry does not operate in and of itself, but rather because it is the cry of this specific image. Neither the philosophical subject in Lucretius nor Miranda in Shakespeare's drama could hear the cries of those drowning, deadened by the distance from which they observed the scenes. And yet, the cry of suffering reached them in other ways, whose shape is the enigma of the experience of empathy.

We may therefore assume that two kinds of originality exist with which the primal scene confronts us. The first is the originality of the scene itself, which determines the register in which relations and dependencies are established that condition the experience of empathy. The second is the originality of empathy, and concerns its peculiar anachronic temporality. For it transpires that if empathy is decided at a level different from the current, punctual vision, it also directs us toward peculiar times that are not necessarily inscribed in the linear order of history.

*

Here is another scene in which the experience of proximity is born from distance, and seeing becomes possible owing to a heard cry. In his memoirs from 1946, Günther Anders, an Austrian philosopher of Jewish descent, who emigrated

from Germany to New York before the war, described a scene – or rather a sequence – of the birth of empathy, set in the recovery room of a New York hospital, where he lay recuperating after a surgical procedure. His starting point is not the safe distance of an observer looking at the suffering of others, but his own illness, which poses the threat of confining him entirely in his own pain, all the more dangerous as this is possible despite the suffering of those around him, against potentially obvious, self-imposing solidarity with others. In Anders' account, empathy is therefore conditioned by liberation from "the prison cell of my own 'self'," [8] in which his experience of pain locks him.

Let us try to recreate the sequence of scenes described by Anders.

> How hermetic the isolation into which my suffering has plunged me! That other beds exist, other halls, and the street, New York and the world – was unknown to me from six in the evening yesterday until five in the morning. I didn't even see, beside me, a man much more in pain than me, who wheezed and cried the same. We cried together throughout the night. No – simultaneously. We were only one meter apart, but the distance between us was greater than between motionless stars. Our two sufferings did not add up. Our two voices did not form a duo. Only the bystanders, in good health, only the nurse working a night shift heard one cry consisting of two voices. Who knows, maybe the same happens on a battlefield: thousands of men scream, but no one can hear anybody else and everyone is immured in the prison of his suffering called 'the body,' as if no other living creature existed anymore in the world. Would not the whole world, with billions of its creatures, be such a battlefield comprising entities isolated from each other by pain? When one suffers, one cannot feel mercy. Compassion is monopolized by those who remain in good health, and the luxury of those who observe. [9]

This miserable constellation of suffering, in which two bodies – akin to two stars in a dark sky – shine the same light of their

cry, but are unable to unite, describes a world in which pain irrevocably wins above any form of socialization. Anders' battlefield metaphor questions any attempt to build a social or political identity on the foundation of suffering. It is precisely the experience in which all bonds, all forms of community, fall into ruin. What remains are the bodies scattered in space, writhing in pain, which no longer have anything in common. However, at the hospital, Anders reserves a potential connection between the two monads of pain – lying side by side but completely closed to one another – for bystanders, who do not suffer similar torment, and are even slightly indifferent to the singularity of individual lamentations.

The situation is not so hopeless, however, and the entire configuration of suffering experiences a sudden shift:

> Something strange happened that broke through the isolation. It was early morning. Five or six o'clock. I heard a sound. A sound that was hardly audible in comparison to my, to 'our,' cries of pain. It was coming from afar, from a different hall. Perhaps even from a different floor. […] But it had the force of a call. What I heard was the silent wail of a baby. Beyond doubt, it had just undergone surgery. It seemed as though that faint complaint was addressed to the whole world, at least to everyone who was there to offer help, to all adults. So it was also addressed to me.[10]

From precisely the same place – from outside, from a distant space hidden from sight – where the point of potential synthesis of two wailing voices was previously located, comes another moan of pain, which suddenly begins to sound like a complaint and, above all, is audible to the one who had appeared completely confined to his own pain. This intervention of an external voice, a child's voice, brings about a radical change to the whole scenery:

> As soon as I lent an ear to the child's complaint, I also heard the wail of my neighbor. […] For the first time I turned my head; for the first time I *saw* [emphasis by P.M.] that man who had been screaming for a few hours only a meter away from me; I saw the face of an old Mexican, strikingly gray, not brown. He also seemed to take notice of my presence at the very same moment. He lay straight, as if inanimate, but he listened attentively, and we both immediately knew that we were listening to the same cry of complaint; and that it was one and the same cry that snatched us from the terrible solitude of suffering in order to give us back to the world. We somehow greeted each other without words, because neither he nor I had the power to speak yet. But it is possible to greet each other while remaining mute. It was our impotence that forged an instant bond between us. His eyes appeared to say: 'Poor souls, our misery is so enormous that we cannot come to the rescue of those befallen by an even greater misery.' We were solidary before we even uttered the first word.[11]

Anders' story continues with bitter disappointment. Having gathered some strength, the two patients attempt to begin a dialogue, but unfortunately it soon turns out that they do not speak the same language; their sudden sense of solidarity dissipates and their friendship vanishes. And yet, this common and silent act of solidarity seems sufficiently interesting and instructive. That is because Anders suggests something far more momentous than the radical critique of empathy he formulated a moment before, according to which it is a kind of charity given to the suffering by the privileged. Here, empathy means solidarity between the suffering, whose acts of compassion address both themselves and those who suffer more than they. The possibility of such an act emerges when a triangular configuration is formed between the hospital patients. Its first version can already be felt with Anders' suggestion that only in the ears of the nurse could the two cries of suffering – issued

simultaneously but alien to one another – sound like two voices that referred to one another in some way. The appearance of the third voice, the weakest, as it comes from a child, suddenly shakes the adult patients from the solipsism of their own pain and allows them to address it in a conscious, and therefore ethical way. A space of possible empathy emerges, in which compassion for the other and compassion for the self are born simultaneously, just as hearing a wail from outside one's room allows one to see the suffering patient beside your own bed. And this co-existence of two affects, their vectors in opposite directions (inside and outside), does not in the least generate conflict between them, but quite the opposite – it mutually strengthens them. Thus, the cry also offers the impulse for pre-linguistic communication between the suffering, a sort of pantomime of gestures, through which they show compassion for each other, just as they jointly sympathize with the suffering child. This is the essence of the actual constellation of suffering, which is a constellation of empathy at the same time.

*

The condition for empathy, however, is not only the cry, but also the triangular configuration that results from it. Henceforward, seeing the suffering of others is already inscribed, implicated in such a constellation, which remains invisible, but conditions what and how we see. The cry becomes a triangular structure, complete with the necessary figure of the third party. This appears in many key contemporary theories concerning the ethical and philosophical aspects of the relation with the Other. It is the third party who – as in the sequence described by Anders – usually functions as the binder, owing to which an ethical bond may be shaped. Using the metaphor from his hospital writings, we could say that the identity of the third party constantly oscillates between the position of the

nurse (the one who perceives) and of the child (the one who also suffers). And it is this movement that generates a range of ethical nexuses within which the movement of the subject takes place, from the one who suffers to the one who notices the suffering of others.

In the writings of Emmanuel Lévinas, for whom the relation with the face of the Other lays a new ethical foundation of philosophy, the figure of the third party appears at a moment of key significance at which the status of this fundamental binary bond seems to be decided. Encounter with the face of the Other is a source ethical experience, in which the Other calls for my response, demanding attention and respect. The relation with the Other offers proximity, but its exclusive nature also holds something ominous: it may become the scenery for violence, absorption, or appropriation. Hence the need for the figure of the third party, who breaks that asymmetry and at the same time guarantees its extension in the expanded space of social relations, where what I do to the Other is a fact of the whole of humanity.

> The third party looks at me in the eyes of the Other – language is justice. [...] The epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger; but this poverty and exile which appeal to my powers, address me, do not deliver themselves over to these powers as givens, remain the expression of the face. The poor one, the stranger, presents himself as an equal. His equality within this essential poverty consists in referring to the *third party*, thus present at the encounter, whom in the midst of his destitution the Other already serves. He comes to *join* me. [...] The presence of the face, the infinity of the other, is a destituteness, a presence of the third party (that is, of

> the whole of humanity which looks at us), and a command that commands commanding.[12]

It seems that the third party is necessary as a guarantee that in my encounter with the Other I will recognize and treat them as a human being, which means that I will agree to their primal equality to me and equal participation in the space of social exchange. At the same time, however, as Lévinas suggests, the third party already appears in the face of the Other; they are contained therein from the very beginning. Ethical experience is therefore founded on something that may be called a double constitution: in order for the relation with the Other to have an ethical character, the third party is needed as a figure of "the whole of humanity," looking at the course of this relation. At the same time, this humanity is already contained in the face of the Other; it is a destituteness proper for its expression.[13] The ethical relation therefore has a double source, because it is conditioned by the mutual conditioning of the figures of the Other and the third party. What corresponds to this differentiated source is synesthesia, characteristic of Lévinas' discourse, which consists in the fact that the visual metaphor related to the epiphany of the face in fact concerns the experience of language, because it is in language that the face appears in a way irreducible to any closed form of subjectivity. Both shifts suggest that the ethical experience is not founded on a single basis, but is a bundle of elements from which justice emerges.

The figure of the third party is also present in different forms in writings by Jacques Lacan, whose theory is often summarized by the statement that desire is always desire of the Other. Desire addressed toward a specific object is in fact addressed to a different desire, since we can truly desire only what is the object of the desire of others. In consequence, we desire their desire rather than the object itself. Furthermore, each desire is actually an attempt to find the lost object that causes it – *object a*. Each object of desire chosen by me is an ersatz of

that primal object, which can never be found. Moreover, its inaccessibility is the condition of sustaining desire, which may be alive only as long as it remains unfulfilled.

In one of his seminars devoted to the "four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis," Lacan seeks to show the way in which the register of desire intervenes in images, how it modifies our gaze. In other words, he tries to teach us how to approach images in order to decipher in them what interests us from the point of view of desire. He writes that:

> In our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by the way of vision, and ordered in the figures of representation, something slips, passes, is transmitted, from stage to stage, and is always to some degree eluded in it – that is what we call the gaze.[14]

The thing that is always contained and conveyed in the image is the gaze – which is imageless in itself. It corresponds – as Lacan remarks – to "the presence of others as such,"[15] that is, their gaze at us, which summons us through the image and arouses our desire, Thus, the Other comes into being through his own gaze, and therefore something that joins as the third element of our relation with the object (image), as a support for our desire, and not its negation or hostile appropriation. However, the French psychoanalyst emphasizes that "what I look at is never what I wish to see,"[16] thus noting that the presence of the gaze introduces an essential disturbance in the field of the image, becoming an element that deforms its unification in perception. The register of vision and the register of the gaze are never one and the same, because the gaze as the object of a drive constantly destabilizes the order of representation to which vision is accustomed. It therefore frequently sends us to the margins of the image, to the places where it breaks or becomes nonsensical, as in Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors*, a classic example of anamorphosis, analyzed by

Lacan in his seminar. Only such a lateral gaze, unjustified in vision, unveils the proper libidinal labor and disturbing content of the image. This is also where the presence of the third party makes itself felt.

In his analysis of the gaze as the object-cause of desire, Lacan turns the subject looking at the painting into an implicated subject, who follows the illusion inherent in visuality and thereby lets themselves be included in the scope of representation. At this moment, the patch that destabilizes the painting causes in them a shock which suggests that they are not merely the one who looks, but also the one being looked at; that a gaze exists which looks at them not so much in the painting, but rather through the painting. So the more the subject is drawn inside, the more the painting demonstrates its exterior, exposes the crack through which the alien gaze comes to the fore.

In an attempt to translate Lacan's categories into the language of cinema, Todd McGowan argued that film images organize the encounter with the elusive gaze that always escapes them but simultaneously looms on their horizon:

> When watching a film, we are constantly reminded of what we cannot see, what the film cannot show us. In this way, film maintains an openness to the gaze as that which cannot be included in the image. [...] The filmic image is structured around this missing object. [...] There is inherent radicality in the cinema that stems from this resistance to closure, a resistance that aligns the cinema with desire.[17]

McGowan's theoretical proposal is innovative because – unlike previous attempts at a Lacanian theory of cinema, in which it was seen mainly as a tool of ideology – he discerns in cinema a way to traverse illusion. The more realistic cinema is, which means without closure, the more it is subordinated to fantasy, and therefore to an encounter with the impossible object-gaze. In every filmic experience, it is the third party – as a rupture in the image or film narrative that refers to external

reality – that implicates itself most deeply in the viewer's desire. In his book, McGowan traces subsequent incarnations of this instance in various dimensions of the film's work and the viewer's experience.

The Lacanian object-gaze obviously requires an ethical reading too. The insolvability of its position in the image (both inside and outside), akin to the insolvability of the subject position (both in and beyond the image), compels a unique answer each time, a responsibility for the relation between my subjective experience of the image and the requirement of the gaze as an object. This "awry gaze," which corresponds to the position that needs to be assumed, for example, to see something more than an amorphous patch in *The Ambassadors*, is perhaps my own gaze, which is also – aside from the one I already have – demanded from me by the image. It requires a change of position each time, thereby taking into account the fact that the image points at a fundamental lack; that various hidden dimensions that transcend it are always present in its viewing, which cannot be simply explained. The distance between these two gazes – traversed in a different way and under different conditions each time – is the proper space of empathy, which does not entail empathizing with the discourse of the subject, but rather in keeping watch over its cracks, inconsistencies, and traumatic dissonances of desire. Images, including filmic images, are often the perfect exercise in such critical empathy.

A triangular model of empathy can also be found in Fritz Breithaupt's book *Kulturen der Empathie*. Interestingly – and the usefulness of this example may be appreciated more in the context of the intuitions summarized above – the main object analyzed there is Stockholm syndrome. Breithaupt argues that the reason why victims of assault or kidnapping direct their desire toward the perpetrator is the triangular structure of the situation itself. "Three instances exist here: the captor, the police, and, finally, the hostage as the third party, which is only a means

of communication between the captor and the police."[18] Being in the middle compels the victim to make a choice, to incline toward one of the vertices of the triangle to which the victim belongs.

> The captor becomes an object of empathy perhaps because they also appear as the victim of a higher authority. In spite of everything, the captor is someone weaker in relation to the police and its forces. On this basis the victim may sympathize with the captor or develop a liking for them, because the captor and the hostage adopt a structurally similar position. (The kidnapper perhaps becomes worthy of fondness or identification because they commit a radical act against the omnipotent world of the police, banks, and the rule of money).[19]

Breithaupt suggests that the source of emotional dependence on the perpetrator should not be traced to some hidden, repressed sadomasochistic desire, but to the very structure in which the victim has been implicated. All other motivations may obviously connect with it and gain resonance owing to it, but it is nothing other than being inside the structure that generates the possibility of transferring the feeling of empathy to the kidnapper. The presence of law enforcement agencies and their detachment from citizens' lives turn out to be more important here than the personality traits of the criminal, because it is the former that potentially establish the perpetrator as a victim in the eyes of the actual victim. One more crucial conclusion follows: empathy is not a matter of identification, but of decision, of taking a position in the real world, in which structurally constitutive social and political forces participate that are impossible to ignore.

Putting Stockholm syndrome aside, I could state that, according to Breithaupt's theory, empathy is born at the point where we make the fundamental choice of viewpoint, which will serve as the foundation of our perception of relations in the world. Watching someone's suffering, we situate it in a certain

context, which always includes the third party: the circumstances, persecutors, or mechanisms that led to the suffering of the Other. As we sympathize with them, we decide that we are – sometimes despite significant differences – closer to that position than to those at the opposing vertex of the triangle. There is a great deal of difference between the victim and the perpetrator, but if the former perceives the forces of the state as more powerful, distanced, and ruthless than the captor, they will manifest solidarity with him or her, contrary to popular expectation. The particular Other – in this case the captor – may become a carrier of justice in this situation, because they break the fake social contract guaranteed by the violence of the police, which isolates individuals from society. He or she may also release the desire to express opposition to this situation against prevalent norms. Finally, as the captor is closer to me than to the state bodies, he or she becomes my guide to the hidden dimensions of social relations, and not a rival, which is why a reflex of sympathy is triggered instead of unambiguous protest.

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In the previous part of this text, following the trope indicated by Anders' memoirs, I concentrated on the cry of the image understood in a structural manner. I suggested that a certain structure hidden in the experience itself bears responsibility for the fact that an encounter with the Other, with a painting, or even a perpetrator is treated by the subject as a call for ethical action. What turns out to be constitutive for experience in each of these cases is something seemingly excessive, marginal, or even alien to what the experience seems to concern. This is the general sense of the third-party figure.

The experience of empathy is a source experience because it demands that its conditions are redefined each time. It does not rest on a single foundation, but – as befits its origin – it is always

displaced, non-identical to itself both in terms of the medium (image and sound) and, more broadly, within the social constellation that conditions it. The origin is the displacement which demands taking a place in the world once again.
This brings to mind Walter Benjamin's reflection, as written in his treatise on *Trauerspiel*:

> Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight.[20]

The experience of empathy in an image is also an eddy in which visual, auditory, metaphorical, and literal elements combine to form a constellation that clashes, in turn, with various socio-political conditions, as well as the limitations of the subject looking at them.

Anders' memoirs contain an as yet unexplored path that elaborates on the figure of the cry of the image. It is a path of empathy understood as a fundamental sensorial experience. Suffering and completely isolated from society, the patients resort at the moment of solidarity to the last (or first) means of communication in order to testify to their own existence in any way. They may be calling for help, although in their experience they almost forget about the existence of the outside world. Their moan is something of a return to the primal state, a regression forced by extreme pain. Soon afterward, the moan turns out to be part of pure bodily expression, independent from linguistic code, as if language was also born out of something that does not belong to it.

This is the argument put forward in the classic "Essay on the Origin of Languages" (1781) by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who sought to trace the process of the birth of language, and concluded that its origin bears relation to something that may be

called empathy. This is because language was born out of passion, a feeling that expresses the willingness to communicate with others whom we recognize as sentient, thinking beings similar to us. At the origin of language, man's "desire or need to communicate his feelings and thoughts made him seek the means to do so."[21] Therefore, this happened not so much on the basis of rational calculation, as on the instinct that pushed the human being toward other creatures representing the same species. Rousseau was hesitant, however, whether this moment should be recognized as the result of natural needs, or as something different or even opposed to them. On the one hand, he noted that "need dictated the first gestures, while the passions stimulated the first words,"[22] but on the other hand he further specified:

> It is suggested that men invented speech to express their needs: an opinion which seems to me untenable. The natural effect of the first needs was to separate men, and not to reunite them. It must have been that way, because the species spread out and the earth was promptly populated. Otherwise mankind would have been crammed into a small area of the world, and the rest would have remained uninhabited.[23]

In other words, language was not born out of the natural need to communicate, but as a countermeasure meant to reverse the negative effects of the dispersal to which humans condemned themselves by satisfying their needs. Therefore, before we started speaking, we were dramatically separated, and our speech both alleviates the pain of separation and testifies to it.

This may explain why Rousseau argued in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (1755) that "Man's first language, the most universal and forceful language, and the only one he needed before he had to persuade gatherings of other men, was the cry of nature."[24] Not only does this concern the distance between people, which compels them to resort to powerful

means of calling others' attention, but also the necessity of coping with pain with the help of others, the socialization of suffering. "This cry was wrenched from him only by a kind of instinct at times of acute urgency, to plead for help in great perils or for relief from terrible afflictions"[25] – Rousseau wrote.

In less extreme conditions, people used two primal forms of language: voice and gesture. The latter initially bore relation to touch, but when the need arose to communicate across greater distances, it was superseded by gesture as a kind of touching at a distance. The primal community that communicated its feelings directly therefore made use of the senses of sight and hearing: "gestures were made to express moving and visible things, and imitative sounds made for audible things."[26] Before language founded on arbitrary signs appeared in the world, people communicated through speech, in which "everything is said symbolically, before one actually speaks."[27] Did that language of onomatopoeia and gestures, founded on feeling and preceded by pain, already contain the powerful – and consistently acknowledged – differentiation between the image meant for the eyes and the voice meant for the ears? Can we not imagine a situation in which the necessity of direct communication circumvents or complicates such differentiation, generating the possibility for a visual voice and aural gesture to emerge? Does the primal character of the cry not consist in its being a gesture and a voice at the same time, in that it conveys the outrage of the whole of human subjectivity possessed by pain that is difficult to express?

Perhaps the cry therefore marks the initial moment not only of language based on voice, but also of dance born of gesture. This suggestion can be found in Pascal Quignard's book *L'Origine de la danse*, in which he writes that:

> Just as a voice exists that is lost during the voice break in adolescents (when their voice, in the depths of their body,

> changes and suddenly deepens), there is also a dance (in a body that is fallen, newborn, disoriented, defiled, wailing) lost by children at the moment of birth.[28]

This primal dance is related to the mobility of the body in amniotic fluid, the idyllic state from before one's beginning, from which we are brutally extracted at the moment of birth. The trauma of this moment has a dual and paradoxical character: it is both a radical intrusion and a radical exclusion. On the one hand, a powerful invasion of air into the body occurs, a primal and destructive inspiration; on the other hand, the body is expelled from its hitherto occupied habitat, exiled from the watery Eden of the mother's womb.

Quignard constantly returns in his book to how this primal dance appears in the reality of fallen life (as he calls life following birth), how it resonates in the experiences of the body and its movement.

> Two dances exist just as two kingdoms exist. The first precedes birth, which marks its collapse. The second reproduces, re-enacts, transposes, reciphers, translates into the force of air, according to the available possibilities, the lost drift in amniotic fluid, the lost bulging in the lost pocket, which preceded the misery of our birth.[29]

It turns out that this primal dance of the body, devoid of gravity and the order of functionality, survives later in moments of breakdown, arrhythmia, or awkwardness. "Beauty bears relation to the awkwardness of beginnings. The first step made by a baby is shaky, uncertain, and it is the most beautiful of steps that can be found in the world under the Moon, in which the sons of mortals seek to survive."[30] Dance is an attempt to find that primal grace, that original awkwardness preceding birth, which characterizes human children. "It refers to the body from before language (the original, ovulatory, embryonal, fetal, natal, infant body)"[31] – Quignard writes. Thus understood, dance

is not tantamount to the subordination of the body to aesthetic models, squeezing it into the choreographic matrix of movement, but quite the opposite – the search for internal rupture, the fragility that refers to the misery of its beginnings. The point is therefore to make the body in dance resemble a screaming human being, who – as in the hospital sequence described by Anders – regresses to the time before language when struck by pain, and finds his own prehistory within himself.

*

In *L'Origine de la danse*, Quignard notes one more important transition from the point of view of the constellation constructed here. It concerns the relation between gesture and image, particularly between the image and its movement:

> *Gestus*, *motus*, *saltus* – all these are called with one word in Greek: *kinesis*. Dance is a body that moves. It is 'cinema' (still photography which, when set in motion, becomes closer to the viewer). The whole cinema is already contained in the hand holding a light for someone who traverses a cave in the dark. It is a train that becomes more and more luminous as it approaches the viewer at the railway station in Marseille.[32]

Gesture understood in this way not only refers to the primal movement of the body, but also lends an archaic dimension – while agitating it and setting it in motion at the same time – to every image it becomes part of. Therefore, it occupies the same position in the image as the cry, and likewise it is responsible for the fact that we are able to perceive certain images as something of an ethical call.

Quignard's thinking is not far removed from the reflections of Aby Warburg, whose concept of "pathos formulae" sought to grasp how extreme suffering revealed in forms of expression something primal and prehistoric, something that may accordingly re-enact itself in different places and at different

times. Warburg held a similar view on the relation between gesture and image, as aptly remarked on by Giorgio Agamben, one of the authors responsible for the modern-day revival of interest in Warburg's legacy:

> Every image, in fact, is animated by an antinomic polarity: on the one hand, images are the reification and obliteration of a gesture (it is the *imago* as death mask or as symbol); on the other hand, they preserve the *dynamis* intact (as in Muybridge's snapshots or in any sports photograph). The former corresponds to the recollection seized by voluntary memory, while the latter corresponds to the image flashing in the epiphany of involuntary memory.[33]

For Warburg, the pathos formula – a maximally intensified form of expressing emotions through the body – is always both inside and outside the image, retaining a position on its threshold. Owing to the intensity of gestures, images can never undergo closure to form a completely autonomous whole, and thus separate themselves from the time that operates within them. This is also the reason why images, no longer understood as representations but as dynamograms – visual loads of energy – can leap across epochs and continents, forming unexpected constellations.

In his manuscripts, Warburg used the category of "energetic empathy,"[34] understanding it as the basis of the movement of pathos formulae in history – the process he called *Nachleben*. It is due to this transmission that old motifs of expression can find new places in the present, living their afterlives in completely new times. Commenting on Warburg, Georges Didi-Huberman wrote:

> The image thus conveys a dialectic of (auratic) distance and of its (empathetic) erasure. In addition to that, it joins together the psychological-temporal process of the *Nachleben* (pagan gods of the zodiacal pantheon appearing in a Christian calendar of the sixteenth century) and the psychological-

> bodily process of *Einfühlung* (sidereal bodies endowed with proximity to, and even the intimacy of, organic bodies). Accordingly, from now on it would be possible to speak of a *Nachfühlung*: a complicated bodily empathy of time, a temporal empathy that could be put to work in the body.[35]

What gestures make every image refer to is nothing less than the history of suffering, a history never told in its entirety, even though it has frequently been adopted as a topic of historical research. It is told by images along with what bursts in them the closed dimension of the *imago*, what constitutes the load of bodily energy deposited in the image and transferred further. Pathos formulae may also carry the burden of time because they have a dimension of dance – Quignard wrote that the body deactivates in them its limitation to a given epoch, taking the style of its expression with it. This fundamentally kinetic character of the experience of empathy allows us to see the co-existence of pathos formulae in a variety of contexts, which means to see on the scale of history something that might also have been noticed by the nurse at the New York hospital described by Anders – that individual sufferings, even if they confine their subjects within pain, may sometimes resonate with each other in the eyes of others.

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Primal scenes do not have to be – and actually never are – a matter of the distant past. They are more archaic and more contemporary, simultaneously structural and sensorial. They are archaic because they provide a foundation, a structural framework into which every past needs to inscribe itself. In turn, they are contemporary because they also determine a horizon for what constitutes our current history; they are an eddy from which the shape of contemporaneity emerges.[36] We surely do not lack scenes around us that – like Anders' hospital memories, like the fictitious scenes depicted in Lucretius,

Shakespeare, and Rousseau – demonstrate the conditions of the possibility of empathy, or – as in the examples offered by Breithaupt – compel the decision to side with victims. They are also eddies that witness the meeting of various dimensions of experience (ethical and aesthetic), various senses (sight and hearing), and various media (film, photography, installation). The above considerations served as an attempt to establish a framework necessary to examine a number of such scenes.

The first is the film *Wonderland* (2016) by the Turkish artist Erkan Özgen. This is a short video work about thirteen-year-old Muhammad, a deaf-mute boy from Kobane, who managed to flee to Turkey after years of civil war in Syria and the region's occupation by ISIS. Using the language of gestures, telling gazes, and the inarticulate sounds he shouts during recording, the boy conveys the horrors of war. With precision and force, he demonstrates machine-gun shelling, grenade throwing, brutal searches, torture, and executions most likely suffered by people around him, perhaps his relatives. Instead of precise facts, we are told a story of the body that remembers the atmosphere of terror, uncertainty, and fear, and still carries within it the cries and turmoil that accompany war activities. It seems that, aside from the gestures themselves, the boy also manages to repeat aspects of the nightmarish kinetics of the experience in question – hence his sweeping, abrupt, and maximally condensed gestures.

Erkan Özgen, *Wonderland* (2016). Courtesy of the artist

Muhammad tells the story via limitation. He wants to say something, striving to keep the viewer's attention on his message. This alone is a call for empathy, enhanced by the boy's aphasia, which renders his task seriously difficult. Yet, at the same time, it is this limitation that generates the form of his expression, shapes its pathos, and fills it with an enormous load

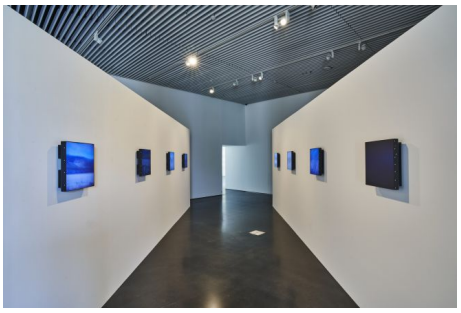
of expression. What we therefore receive instead of a story is a moan that intensifies the necessity and impossibility of speaking, along with gestures that organize the entire space of the image, constantly re-organizing the frame. Extremely simple, limited to a single static shot, the film becomes a highly complicated montage of intensities, producing a shocking effect.

Wonderland also owes its complexity to the fact that the boy constantly hovers between two places and times. On the one hand, we are with him here and now, as he delivers his testimony through gestures and cries. He fills the screen and does not allow us to take our eyes off him. He implicates us in sympathy through his imposing presence. On the other hand, he constantly refers to different, distant scenery from the recent past, which casts a grim shadow over each movement of his body. Gestures function here like pathos formulae, which means that they allow the imagination to recognize atrocities; in turn, Muhammad's cry – although it is a repeated attempt to speak – provides their surprising onomatopoeia. At times it seems autonomous, and partly becomes the cry of the victims, while partly the noise of the event itself. Looming constantly on the surface of the image is the virtual figure of the third party: another victim or perpetrator, or another of us looking at the whole situation from a proper perspective. It is us – the viewers – who bear responsibility for the co-existence of these dimensions.

Erkan Özgen, *Wonderland* (2016). Courtesy of the artist

Erkan Özgen, *Wonderland* (2016). Courtesy of the artist

This synthesis cannot be completed, however, solely in the ethical-aesthetic space if it is not accompanied by a certain political consciousness. In this sense, the empathy demanded by the protagonist of *Wonderland* is as much an act of resistance as an act of compassion, for the boy's gestures call for protest against the world he so powerfully speaks of. Such a reaction would mean that we – viewers watching the work at galleries and festivals – have much more in common with the boy than with those who began the war he reminds us of. It means imagining oneself on the side of those who struggle with the violence of the system and, in this sense, coming closer to its direct victims, instead of passively tapping into its gains, which in rare cases did not result from any cruelty and injustice. Such an inversion is not possible without reference to those who, somewhere far away – in other scenes dormant in the one we watch on the screen – chose to perform an act of resistance. And this may only happen beyond the frame of the image, although not without its participation.



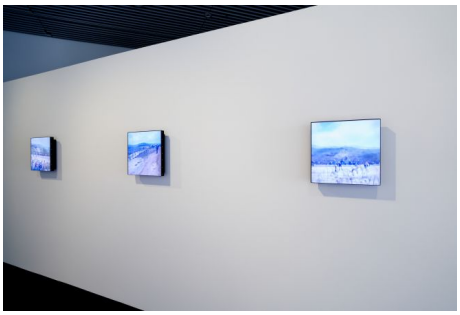
Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *This Whole Time There Were No Land Mines* (2017). Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai. Photo: Brent Galotera. Courtesy of the artist

The second scene: an installation by the Jordanian artist Lawrence Abu Hamdan titled *This whole time there were no landmines* (2017). It concerns a highly specific and tense location: the Golan Heights, Syrian territory annexed by Israel during the Six-Day War in 1967. That act of appropriation of foreign land remains the seed of political conflict today, while also brutally dividing those who live there, families included. The area is mainly inhabited by Druze

people, a minority marginalized in Israel and Syria alike. The border zone was often visited by residents from both sides of the divided territory, who sought to communicate with each other using megaphones and shouting despite the political isolation.

In the work, Lawrence Abu Hamdan makes use of cellphone video footage created by participants of the events in the Golan Heights on May 15, 2011. During the Arab Spring, some anti-annexation protestors managed to cross the border, and four were shot by Israeli border guards. But the films document something completely different: people who, after years of isolation, dared to break the ban, stand against oppression, and now fall into each other's arms, rejoicing in the moment of encounter.

The installation aptly highlights the drama of this event. The films are shown on eight screens, four each on two facing walls. Extremely dynamic, out of focus and blurred, the image appears on them for one or two seconds, after which it disappears for several seconds in blackness. Lending continuity to these fragmented recordings is the "acoustic bridge"[37] – the dominant sound of cries, fragments of conversations, and technological signals. This noisy mix overtakes the images and makes us confront them while attacked by the loud noises. Entering the installation, we find ourselves in the midst of turbulent events which strongly stimulate our senses while remaining rather elusive and indefinite at the same time. They demand something from us, but they do not express their appeal precisely.



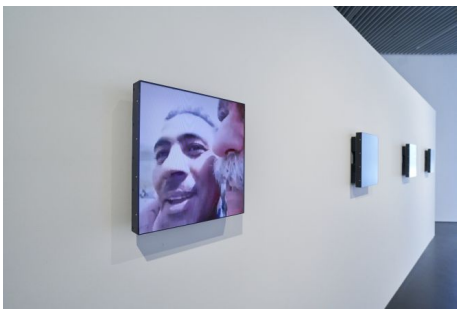
Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *This Whole Time There Were No Land Mines* (2017). Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai. Photo: Brent Galotera. Courtesy of the artist

As viewers, we therefore stand precisely on the border that physically separates the two walls of screens, and symbolically – the two sides of the community divided by occupation. It seems as though we are responsible for the impenetrability of this border. On both sides we see images of revolt, showing people who cross a fence and meet each other in no-man's land, which they make their own regardless of the legal and political conditions. This continuity is emphasized by mixed sounds, which appear to suggest that some things can transcend any kind of border. At the same time, warnings can be heard among the voices: "Stop. There are land mines. Land mines. Stop. Stop." These are not only given by guards, but also by inhabitants on both sides, who usually gathered there not to strengthen, but to weaken the sense of separation. Now, when it transpires that the border can be physically crossed (as shown in the recorded footage), they seem to reiterate the propagandistic appeals that served to discourage people from making such attempts. Standing in the center of the installation, we are therefore at the same time in the center of the separation that indeed exists, although it is partly based on produced fiction. This is clearly emphasized by the very title of the work.

Seven years elapsed between the events captured on the cellphones and the making of the installation. Several things changed during that time: the enthusiasm of the Arab Spring was drowned in the blood of Syrians plunged into an endless civil war, and the office of US president was assumed by a man who recently became the first to recognize the Golan Heights as territory legally belonging to Israel. These are at least two reasons to consider the outburst of solidarity captured in the fragmentary films as the trace of a past that once again failed to

fulfil its utopian promise. By enhancing the expressive force of this bygone moment, the artist seems to put a spell on time and protest against its verdict, but it does not change the fact that this act of resistance is already part of history.

Standing between the walls of images, immersed in the accompanying noise, we experience the moment of protest each time anew. We can once again decide if we are the "acoustic bridge," connecting the divided community against reality, or if we symbolically join those who warn against the occupier's threat and repression. We are actually obliged to make this choice, and this obligation grows stronger with the force with which this visual-aural eddy from the recent past affects us. We can stand there as participants of the present, watching the documentation of a bygone revolution, or as those who, along with its participants, stand in a somewhat different time and, starting from it, wish to return to the epoch that surrounds us and perhaps disobey it. We can take this journey in time only if we stay still.



Lawrence Abu Hamdan, *This Whole Time There Were No Land Mines* (2017). Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai. Photo: Brent Galotera. Courtesy of the artist

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Franz Kafka wrote in his *Diaries*:

> The strange, mysterious, perhaps dangerous, perhaps saving comfort that there is in writing: it is a leap out of murderers' row; it is a seeing of what is really taking place. This occurs by a higher type of observation, a higher, not a keener type, and the higher it is and the less within reach of the "row,"

> the more independent it becomes, the more obedient to its own laws of motion, the more incalculable, the more joyful, the more ascendant its course.[38]

Erkan Özgen's film and Lawrence Abu Hamdan's installation remind us that a kind of observation exists that allows us to leave the ranks of the perpetrators. Such an observation, such a gaze, may already have the value of an ethical act – after all, Kafka writes in this passage about *Tat-Beobachtung*, which means not only the observation of the act, but also the act of observation. Each act of looking may become the beginning of a road whose destination lies behind the reach of murderers, and in this sense it resembles a children's "wonderland" or a borderland restored to common use. It is as if not only the image itself, but also the gesture of looking – which gains perfection in empathy – could sometimes cry out.

1 René Char, "Leaves of Hypnos" (1943–1944), in: idem, *Furor & Mystery and Other Writings*, trans. and ed. Mary Ann Caws and Nancy Kline (Boston: Black Widow Press, 2000), 167.

2 Szczepan Kopyt, "#kobane," trans. Lynn Suh, *Magazyn Literacki biBLioteka*, February 20, 2017, https://www.biuroliterackie.pl/biblioteka/cykle/bunt-wznieci-slowo-poety/.

3 Cf. Hans Blumenberg, *Schiffbruch mit Zuschauer* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997).

4 Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*, trans. R. E. Latham (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 38.

5 William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Rev. J. M. Jephson (London: Macmillan and Co., 1864), 5–6.

6 Cf. Nicole Loraux, *La Voix endeuillée. Essai sur la tragédie grecque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999). On the connection between tragic sighs with the flamenco tradition and the lament present in it, cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, "La blessure à entendre," *Po&Sie* vol. 135, no. 1 (2011), 97–108.

7 I refer here briefly to the discussion on the category of the "bystander" in studies on memory and the Holocaust. The category of the "implicated subject" comes from Mark Rothberg, but I borrowed it from Roma Sendyka's article in which the author exhaustively discusses the state of research on this figure, also detailing a range of Polish scholars who have long explored the complexity of the category of the witness. Cf. Roma Sendyka, "Od świadków do postronnych. Kategoria *bystander* i analiza podmiotów uwikłanych," in: *Świadek: jak się staje, czym jest?*, eds. Agnieszka Dauksza and Karolina Koprowska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, 2019), 61–82. I would like to thank Dorota Sosnowska for showing me this trope.

8 Günther Anders, *Journaux de l'exil et du retour*, trans. Isabelle Kalinowski (Paris: Fage éditions, 2012), 37.

9 Ibid., 38.

10 Ibid., 38–39.

11 Ibid., 39.

12 Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht, Boston, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 213.

13 Cf. ibid., 213.

14 Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London and New York: Routledge, 2018), 73.

15 Ibid., 84.

16 Ibid., 103.

17 Todd McGowan, *The Real Gaze: Film Theory after Lacan* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 77.

18 Fritz Breithaupt, *Kulturen der Empathie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), 105.

19 Ibid. It is noteworthy that, when mentioning captors, Breithaupt refers to politically motivated terrorists rather than common criminals. As the captor seeks to prove something with their action, they create a space for the potential negotiation of meanings and positions.

20 Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London and New York: Verso, 2003), 45.

21 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," in: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder, *On the Origin of Language. Two Essays*, trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 5.

22 Ibid., 11.

23 Ibid.

24 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, trans. Franklin Philip (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 39.

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Rousseau, "Essay on the Origin of Languages," 7.

28 Pascal Quignard, *L'Origine de la danse* (Paris: Galilée, 2013), 36.

29 Ibid., 38–39.

30 Ibid., 55.

31 Ibid., 76.

32 Ibid., 109.

33 Giorgio Agamben, "Notes on Gesture," in: idem, *Means without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 55.

34 Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's Art History*, trans. Harvey L. Mendelsohn (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017), 257.

35 Ibid., 265.

36 On the temporal peculiarities of the primal scene, cf. Jean-Bertrand Pontalis and Jean Laplanche, *Fantasme originaire, fantasmes des origines, origines du fantasme* (Paris: Hachette, 1998).

37 Ina Dinter, "The Voice Before the Law: Introduction," in: *Lawrence Abu Hamdan: The Voice Before the Law*, ed. Ina Dinter (Köln: Wienand Verlag, 2019), 12.

38 Franz Kafka, *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1914–1923*, trans. Martin Greenberg (New York: Shocken Books, 1948), 212.

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