

# <sup>147</sup> In Praise of Heretics, Or: What If Women Ruled the World?

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*Another one burned at the stake!*

Like Copernicus before him, Giordano Bruno—philosopher, astronomer, pantheist and mathematician—argued that the earth revolved around the sun. He further hypothesized that the universe was infinite, containing a multiplicity of worlds. For this, the Holy Inquisition charged Bruno with heresy and burned him at the stake in 1600. Although his theories have since been recognized as foundational to modern philosophy and physics, in the Church's eyes he remains a heretic to this day. Why? Because what really made Bruno a time-traveling heretic was his penchant for *non*-dialectical thought, his ability to intellectually withstand paradox, to think *across* the various disciplines he engaged.<sup>1</sup> Such willful disregard for polemics attends every charge of heresy in every field and epoch because the ability to *work through* cognitive dissonance—to neither reject nor embrace the unknown—is a radical act. What, then, if we were to *court* heretics rather than purge them? What if we were to put them all in one room to set about collectively envisioning a contemporary iteration of Giordano Bruno's heterodox, infinite universe?

A brief digression sets the stage.

In *Capital*, Marx formulates "primitive accumulation" to describe how feudalism's endgame put elements of capitalism into play.<sup>2</sup> Simply, the laborer-producer could only dispose of his person on the free market after he had ceased to be attached to the soil and ceased to be a slave. But this also meant he/she had been robbed of the means of production. The producer's paradoxical existence—his or her empowered disempowerment within modern capitalism—was the *accumulation* of elements from a prior *primitive* state, what Freudians alternately called a *primal scene*. In other words, the primitive conditions *through which* a person is freed from one system are the same conditions that enslave him/her to another. Hence the latent paradox within Marx's dialectical, linear thought.

Enter the heretic movement, a coalition of landless proletariats, impoverished peasants, prostitutes, defrocked priests, and day laborers of 12<sup>th</sup>- and 13<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. In *Caliban*

and the Witch, Silvia Federici applies Marx's concept of primitive accumulation to what his formulation missed: the central role of women. Echoing his producer paradox, advances for medieval women in religious, sexual, and reproductive freedom laid the groundwork for their subsequent demonization by the Inquisition, and later for their condition within capitalism. "In the heretical sects," Federici explains, "women had the right to administer the sacraments, preach, baptize, and even acquire sacerdotal orders."<sup>3</sup> But by the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century the Church had had enough. No longer content to accuse heretics of sodomy and sexual license, the Inquisitors indicted them as devil-worshippers who practiced animal worship, orgiastic rituals, and child sacrifices. "Corresponding to this process, which marked the transition from the persecution of heresy to witch-hunting," Federici recounts, "the figure of the heretic ... became that of the woman, [and] by the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the main target of persecution against heretics became the witch."<sup>4</sup> The subsequent mass burning of women at the stake—a fate Giordano Bruno too would meet—was a consequence of the virulent demonology that continues up through the 21<sup>st</sup> century. On the latter account, we need only look at the sexual demonization of US presidential candidate Hillary Clinton by the so-called "alt-right."<sup>5</sup>

Returning to our proposition—*What if heretics ran our world*—we might now ask how the perpetual witch hunt for non-dialectical thinkers and sexual revolutionaries has accumulated in our contemporary scene. Moreover, given the central role of women in the heretic movement's primal scene, we might further ask:

*What if women ruled the world?*<sup>6</sup>

This is the title of Yael Bartana's forthcoming project (*WiW*) that will begin with the following mise-en-scène. Earth's human population is composed of a ratio—10 females to every male—giving women the upper hand. Accordingly, a group of 10 women and one man—world leaders, activists, intellectuals, and experts—gather in order to experiment and imagine possible solutions to the most urgent matters of today, proposing alternative models to the world's past male-dominated systems. As with the first international Congress of the Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMiP), the participants in Bartana's latest mise-en-scène will be five professional actors playing fictional characters and five professional people playing fictional versions of their selves. In lieu of a traditional script, Bartana will provide her cast with a scenario for improvisation. As I wrote of JRMiP, *WiW* will be tenaciously self-reflexive—an experimental project focused on the decision making process with the aim to find an alternative discursive language to the patriarchal—comprised of endless contradictions and reflecting complex fantasies and desires.<sup>7</sup> And, also like JRMiP, *WiW* will be an "impossible" artwork—both real and intangible—simultaneously a project *about* politics inasmuch as it is a materialist instance of politics. Still a third convergence between the JRMiP and *WiW* exists. Both are an imaginary-real extrapolation of preexisting films. There is a key difference, however. While the first Congress of the JRMiP was a fourth "chapter" of Bartana's own film trilogy, *And Europe Will Be Stunned*, *WiW* will hinge on the canonical denouement within Stanley Kubrick's 1964 absurdist black comedy *Dr. Strangelove, Or: How I Learned To Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).

Let's recall the scene.

The US President and his Joint Chiefs of Staff—a hawkish general, a Soviet ambassador, and an eccentric German scientist among them—are assembled in the Pentagon's underground War Room. Stunned, they watch as the Big Board tracks an array of US nuclear missiles headed straight into Soviet territory, one of which they cannot recall. Russia's automated Doomsday Machine responds by triggering its own nuclear Armageddon. An existential panic ensues. Can it be *un-triggered*? Dr. Strangelove says no. Designed as the penultimate *threat*, once it is triggered it can never be *un-triggered*, as he explains:

*That is the whole idea of this machine, you know. Deterrence is the art of producing in the mind of the enemy the fear to attack. And so, because of the automated and irrevocable decision making process which rules out human meddling, the Doomsday Machine is terrifying. It's simple to understand. And completely credible and convincing.*

But, Strangelove asks the Soviet ambassador incredulously: "The whole *point* of the Doomsday Machine is lost if you keep it a secret ... *why* didn't you tell the world?"

Well, no one had gotten around to it. So the world was ending, and there's no turning back. While everyone else is frozen in abject horror, Strangelove deliriously expounds his post-Armageddon vision. The US could preserve a nucleus of human specimens in a deep mineshaft, impervious to radiation. When asked how long people would need to stay there, Strangelove replies—after a Tourette's "Mein Führer!"—that 100 years should be enough, and with nuclear reactors, greenhouses, and livestock, the mines could house several hundred thousand people. When the President ponders the dilemma of who saves whom, Strangelove has already thought it through:

*A computer could be set and programmed to accept factors from youth, health, sexual fertility, intelligence, and a cross-section of necessary skills. Of course, it would be absolutely vital that our top government and military men be included to foster and impart the required principles of leadership and tradition.*

A veritable Garden of Eden! With selected sexual breeding—at a ratio of 10 females to every male—the new world would be repopulated by polygamous male elites, perfecting the human race racially and sexually. For the likes of Strangelove, the Doomsday Machine did not represent Armageddon. It was a chance to *reboot* the world's fractured network of demihegemonies into a singular global cogito, one in which white patriarchy would be the bottom line, the *final solution*.

*Be careful what you wish for!*

Following Freud, the dreamer's unconscious obsessions always return in various guises and to opposing ends. Like the child's game of whack-a-mole, repress something here and it comes up over there. By analogy, should we think of *Dr. Strangelove* and *What If Women Ruled The World* as two separate but metonymically connected dreamscapes, then Strangelove's polygamous wish fulfillment in one film returns

as an inverted matriarchal wish fulfillment in the other. Connected as such, *Dr. Strangelove* is a specter haunting *WiW*. But, in turn, another specter haunts *both* dreamscapes: the primitive accumulation of the medieval heretic-witch. And it is here that male hysteria comes head-to-head with female heresy.

In *Dr. Strangelove*, the heretic—that interrogative female presence—literally *haunts* Kubrick's mise-en-scène because she is so thoroughly negated by the closed circle of male hysterics driving the narrative, something redoubled—in a Brechtian sense—by the cast's makeup. For the gender ratio of Kubrick's actors inversely mirrors Strangelove's post-Armageddon scenario. There is only one female character to Kubrick's ten male principles, and she is the general's bikini-clad secretary-girlfriend revealed to us only off-site, in the general's bedroom. In *WiW* the heretic's specter is revealed both by Bartana's cast—her gender ratio reflects Strangelove's post-Armageddon scenario—and by what their collective dialogue represents as a counter-punch to the speaking subjects driving *Dr. Strangelove*'s plot. In the language of dreams, if Kubrick's film is thus the *latent* content of Bartana's *manifest* narrative, then the phallic orthodoxy of Strangelove's Doomsday Machine invisibly ticks—like a heartbeat—within the heretical heterodoxy of Bartana's female principles. Naturally, because in *WiW* the phallus is the repressed specter present *only by negation*, exactly the way the heretical female haunts *Dr. Strangelove*.

Suffice it to say, in *WiW* the heretics' dialogue happens in their own "women's time." This was Julia Kristeva's term for the female speaking subject who unconsciously enunciates herself in multiple temporalities: natural time (biological clock), monumental time (maternal clock), linear time (historical clock), and territorial time (imaginary clock).<sup>8</sup> Her multifarious embodiment of discourses associated with these temporalities—ones through which she is *spoken*—stages a disruption *within* the dialectics of paternal thought, the latter of which gives us the time honored, uncontested monoliths of religion, family, truth, and morality. While the paternal clock dialectically ticks down in one direction, the heretic speaking in women's time exists both within and without linear temporality, existing in a kind of *future perfect* world, where an action that *has yet to be* will at some point in the future conjoin the past and the present, when it *will already have happened*.<sup>9</sup> To think all these moments—the past, present, and future—in one instant, action, or utterance vexes the paternal, historicist world because that one prefers that its moments be delivered one *after* the other. In paternal time, once the ball of history gets rolling, one's fate is both unknown and predetermined. Best not to get in history's way. Better to adjust to whatever outcome may prevail vis-à-vis the world's preexisting truth-claims. In other words, no infinite universes or multiple worlds allowed.

*We'll meet again. Don't know where. Don't know when.*

By the time *WiW* is released in 2017, the fears that sparked the US Civil Rights Act in 1964—a global military industrial patriarchy parodied by Kubrick in *Dr. Strangelove*—will have returned under President Trump's Administration with a vengeance. It is another case of historical whack-a-mole. Then, now, and in the future, half the world cries, the other half

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negative female presence because she is of male hysterics and—in a Brechtian ratio of Kubrick's Armageddon scene—Kubrick's ten male uniform-clad secretaries—the general's bed—revealed both by Strangelove's post-collective dialogue and subjects driving of dreams, if Bartana's *manifest* Strangelove's artbeat—within male principles. repressed species the heretical

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149 cheers, amid the saber rattling demagogues colluding with big banks and neoliberal industries to homogenize the world and roll back the hard won civil rights of minorities, immigrants, women, and queers. In this atemporal crisis, critical art production is a *quintessential* means of envisioning the heretical position—the power of the powerless—just when the weeping side of the world fears that they have lost sight of it. Bartana does just this. *WiW* envisions the heretical position precisely by seizing the means of cinematic production—paternal narrative film—and converting it back to women's time. In so doing, a road map to the heretical infinite universe of thought is laid down in an aesthetic world that both draws from and feeds our quotidian political one.

Following Marx's accumulation axiom—that the very conditions through which a person is freed from one system enslaves him/her to another—the phantasy of men's unbridled freedom over women's reproductive self-determination that is played out in Kubrick's *mise-en-scène* sows the seeds of their future demise in Bartana's scenario. In so doing, *WiW* reciprocally returns the repressed content, yet unseen, in *Dr. Strangelove*. How will it turn out in *WiW*? Will Kubrick's scenario repeat in a blaze of Nietzschean glory as the eternal return of the same? We will have to see. But Bartana, the heretical artist *par excellence*, dares to imagine a different world—in women's future perfect time—just as the paternal Doomsday Machine begins to tick down for us all once again.

In the end, should we ask: *Why Dr. Strangelove now?* The answer is another question: *What if women ruled the world?* Neither question is rhetorical, in that *Dr. Strangelove* returns to us as a primal scene for a global future yet unknown. The recent tide of nationalist populism shows us what *might have been* in 1964 as it *has come to be now* in 2016. So, what *will have been* in 2017 and beyond? It all hangs in the balance. That is the future perfect world of Yael Bartana's heretical aesthetics.

1 Ingrid Rowland, *Giordano Bruno: Philosopher/Heretic*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008, p. 42.  
 2 Karl Marx, *Capital. Volume One: A Critique of Political Economy*, VIII. XXXII: Primitive Accumulation, Charles H. Kerr and Co., Chicago 1887.  
 3 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn 2004, p. 38.  
 4 Ibid., p. 40.  
 5 Jay Michaelson, "#Pizzagate is the 'Satanic Panlo' of Our Age—But this Time, the President's Men Believe It," *The Daily Beast*, December 06, 2016, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2016/12/06/pizzagate-is-the-satanic-panlo-of-our-age-but-this-time-the-president-s-men-believe-it.html> (last accessed February 2017).  
 6 Yael Bartana's experimental theater and film project *What if Women Ruled the World* will premiere at the Manchester International Festival 2017.  
 7 Juli Carson, "Art of the Impossible: The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland (JRMIP)," Jeannette Pascher (ed.), *Yael Bartana. If You Will It, It Is Not Poland* (JRMIP), Vienna, Revolver Publishing, Berlin 2013, p. 29–37.  
 8 *A Dream, Secession*, Vienna, Revolver Publishing, Berlin 2013, p. 13–35.  
 9 Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn 1981), p. 13–35 (first published as "Le temps des femmes" in 1979). See also Emily Apter, "'Women's Time' in Theory," *Differences*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2010), p. 3.  
 Alice Jardine, "Introduction to Kristeva's Women's Time," *Signs*, vol. 7, no. 1 (Autumn, 1981), p. 5–12.