

## BOOK REVIEW:

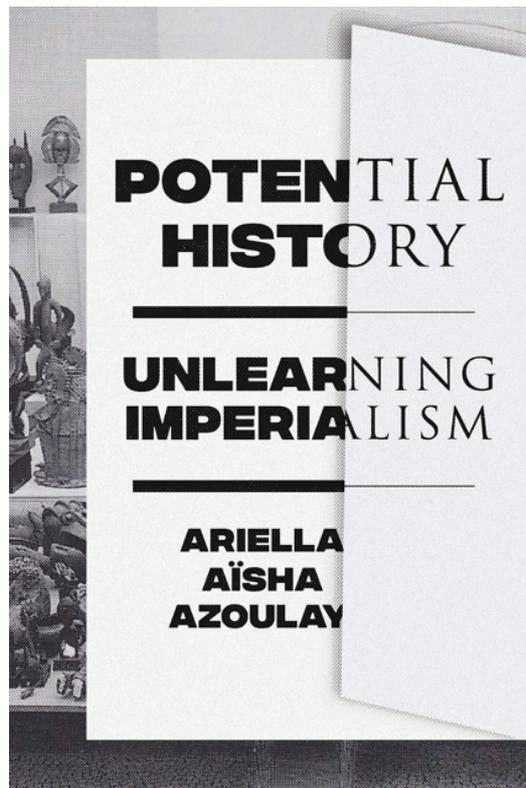
### Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*

Guy Mannes-Abbott

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* is almost double the size of my copy of Edward Said's *Orientalism* and about half the size, in turn, of Karl Marx's first volume of *Capital*. There are many nuanced differences across such a crudely mapped zone but the quality that all three share is a

burning desire to change, to radically redistribute the world as it is, or appears to be. Azoulay's six-hundred-page-long *Potential History* offers a liveable commonworld through exacting reparations and ends with a very short but insistent affirmation: 'The potential is there'.<sup>1</sup>

In October 2018, I spoke about the totalising of the visual and its integral violence at a symposium entitled 'The Violence of Images', hosted by Camera Austria in Graz, to advocate for the non-violent image as a site and practice of resistance. Jainism supplied me with a rigorous clarifying yardstick for non-violence, extending its care to the eggs of fleas that might lurk in a droplet of water falling from a leaf or blade during monsoon season. This is the ethos behind the exceptional fixity of the Jains' Rains Retreat, amongst other observances with regard to 'tiny creatures'.<sup>2</sup> It proved easy to invoke visual potentialities with my coming-in-to-land images of nocturnal Dubai in which connective pathways between labour camps and western cultural institutions left by enslaved migrant workers are obscured in blacked-out zones.<sup>3</sup> It was also not difficult to distinguish almost-but-not-quite non-violence in a range of formalist images by Jean Baudrillard, Wolfgang Tillmans and Walid Raad – all significant in other ways.



<sup>1</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Verso, London, 2019, p 581

<sup>2</sup> *Kalpa Sutra*, Jain text about the lives of their twenty-four *tirthankars*: 'There are these eight classes of small things which a mendicant ought diligently to perceive, observe, and inspect, viz. living beings, mildew, seeds, sprouts, flowers, eggs, layers, and moisture', from a translation found here: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/jai/sbe22/sbe2291.htm>

<sup>3</sup> See Guy Mannes-Abbott, 'Utopian Dust Versus Perfumed Amplification: Object Lessons from Saadiyat Island and Gehry's Guggenheim, Abu Dhabi', in *Future Imperfect: Contemporary Art Practices and Cultural Institutions in the Middle East*, Anthony Downey, ed, Sternberg Press, Berlin, 2016, pp 292–308

To engage non-violence within-the-droplet, as it were, I resorted to discrete images that performed one or more constitutive quality of non-violence, love, gift or inclusive care. They included a self-portrait that architect Balkrishna Doshi left on my digital camera after months of growing intimacy in 2002–2003, risking that his undeclared ‘gift’ might not be noticed or simply deleted. For ‘love’ I used a recently discovered image of my late mother as a girl of twelve, offering a unique and astonishingly elemental smile to her grandfather during a creatively inspiring interlude in a less-than-happy childhood. For ‘inclusion’ I used an image of high-Modernist formalism: a blank square in the writing of Maria Gabriella Llansol,<sup>4</sup> text only recently translated to reveal it to be more of a generous footnote of explicatory care than poetic ‘hatred’.

Other speakers, questions and conversations at the symposium gradually made ubiquitous reference to Azoulay’s influential work of distinguishing the event of photography from the photographic image, in her *The Civil Contract of Photography* (2008) and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography* (2012). Tom Holert, whose elegant talk grew into an excellent essay entitled ‘Epistemic Violence and the Careful Photograph’ for *e-flux journal*, wrote that ‘the “situation” in which a photograph is taken is replete with presences and subjectivities, visible and invisible’ in infinite series.<sup>5</sup> ‘Ariella Azoulay’, he added, ‘famously coined the term “the civil contract of photography,” a fundamental relationality in which the “civil imagination” is to be recuperated from the ruins of a citizenship bound fatally to the nation-state.’<sup>6</sup> In the book named after the term, Azoulay described the ‘unique form of temporality’ engendered by this event,<sup>7</sup> anticipating the broader project she has been developing over the last decade here in *Potential History*. I will return to my own humble care for worlds glimpsed in non-violent images that took root in other times and places, but in my view *Potential History* represents Azoulay’s major theoretical landmark.

‘I found myself changing scales’, Azoulay writes in the introduction, following her tenured move to Brown University in the United States in 2013 after being stymied at Bar Ilan University in Tel Aviv for her rigorous ‘commitment to the return of Palestine’ (p xv). The change in scales ‘helped me to further elaborate the political ontology of photography... and to account for it as a central part of imperial technology’. That is, her thinking about the action of the shutter in photography, in which a world is radically delimited but remains present and resistant in various ways nevertheless, expanded to the imperial realm more promiscuously. Here, she is eager to clarify that a developing imperial infrastructure post-1492 – that ‘marker of reversibility’ (p 22) – generated technologies that included the camera and its mechanical shutter

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Gabriella Llansol (1931–2008), *Geography of Rebels*, Audrey Young, trans, Deep Vellum, Houston, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Tom Holert, ‘Epistemic Violence and the Careful Photograph’, *e-flux journal* 96, January 2019 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/96/243357/epistemic-violence-and-the-careful-photograph/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, Zone Books, New York, 2008, p 26

in the early nineteenth century to further consolidate it. In fact, ‘the camera made the potential for freedom visible’, she concludes (p 581). *Potential History* keeps these shutters open, stimulating our ‘as-yet-incomplete project of freedom’ – in Saidiya Hartman’s phrase – to actualise.<sup>8</sup>

While the civil contract of photography recovered the worlds, contexts and event of photography as such beyond the apparently finite photograph itself, Azoulay’s new scales require the unlearning of imperialism itself – along with all the ‘political terms, structures, institutions, concepts and laws commonly identified as modern’ (p 24). It requires the recovery of imperialism as event, and a civilising recognition and recovery of an existing homely world before the differential epistemes, modalities and hierarchies of imperialism’s regime took its place with such staggering violence. I will come to more precise definitions, but it is crucial to say that this is not a redemptive return to an original scene, but a restless and concrete extension of the ‘messianic time’ that remains of Walter Benjamin via Giorgio Agamben.<sup>9</sup> Exactly how and why will require explication.

*Potential History* is authored, you may have noticed, by someone else too: Ariella Aïsha Azoulay. The Aïsha – ‘Aïsha, Ai-sha, Aieeee-shaaaa’ (p 14) – marks and embodies this change of scale, a significant gesture with which I have an uncanny association. What’s in a name, you might ask? During the writing of this book, Azoulay discovered that Aïsha was her paternal grandmother’s name, the worldliness of which her father denied in shifting from Algeria to Palestine, especially after the state of Israel took its place in 1948. Her mother’s ancestors were expelled from Spain in 1492, settling latterly in Bulgaria, while her mother ‘had been born in Palestine’, becoming ‘an “Israeli”’ at nineteen. ‘My mother did not talk with me in her mother tongue, nor did my father in his’, both adopting the lingua franca of the ‘last’ imperialist state. In this lies Azoulay’s need to begin her book with a ‘refusal to be an “Israeli”’, and remark that ‘there is no community to which I truly belong’ (p xiii).

Azoulay’s father erased associations with the ‘Arabness’ of his Algerian ancestors (p 13), thus betraying them in a land cleansed of the majority of its people. Azoulay’s lack of community relates to serial erasures and expulsions of Jewish communities over centuries, and yet I have my own ‘Aïsha’ who inhabits the expanded scale of this book sufficiently to mention, and anyway stand with. My paternal great-grandfather denied his great-grandmother and her ‘Afghan’ Muslim identity from eighteenth-century Bengal. Like Azoulay’s father, he understood the dangers of such ancestry in his own world on the fringes of the imperial court in Simla where he

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<sup>8</sup> Azoulay, *Potential History*, op cit, p 543; quote found in Saidiya Hartman, ‘Venus in Two Acts’, *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, vol 12, no 2, 2008, p 6

<sup>9</sup> As sketched here by Leland de la Durantaye, quoting Agamben on Benjamin: “‘the sole possibility we have to truly grasp the present is to conceive of it as the end (das Ende). That was Benjamin’s idea, and his messianism is to be understood above all after this fashion”. For Agamben, Benjamin’s messianism, like his own, is an attempt to grasp the potentialities of our present situation.’ Leland de la Durantaye, *Giorgio Agamben: A Critical Introduction*, Stanford University Press, California, 2009, p 376. I am not entirely convinced that this construction of end times is free of regular messianism, or why it is useful to retain the paradigm.

was a surgeon in one of the hospitals. He took his secret to an Old Delhi grave in 1941, but I stumbled upon the lacunae in an inherited multi-generational map in my late thirties and pursued it eagerly. The queering potentialities of the ‘name’, which ‘disappeared’ in the Persian records of an Islamic marriage, are related if not identical in resonance to ‘Aisha’. However, Azoulay and I are both ‘citizen-perpetrators’ of a violence she demands we all take responsibility to ‘unlearn’ here, by ‘reclaiming a non differential, worldly form of cocitizenship situated in a shared world in need of repair’ (p 51).

Azoulay’s style and the theoretically speculative scales engaged here generate much iterativeness, even in the book’s introduction, itself fifty-seven pages in length. Early on in this tautly rendered introductory section, she offers this link:

Thinking about imperial violence in terms of a camera shutter means grasping its particular brevity and the spectrum of its rapidity. It means understanding how this brief operation can transform an individual rooted in her life-world into a refugee, a looted object into a work of art, a whole shared world into a thing of the past, and the past itself into a separate time zone, a tense that lies apart from both present and future. (p 6)

Thus, ‘Unlearning imperialism aims at unlearning its origin, found in the repetitive moments of the operation of imperial shutters’ (p 7) and a ‘violence that presumes people and worlds as raw materials, as always already imperial resources’ (p 8). It will also ‘involve different types of “de-”, such as decompressing and decoding; “re-”, such as reversing and rewinding; and “un-”, such as unlearning and undoing’ (p 10), aimed in part at ‘the restitution of the right to participate differently’ (p 9).

*Potential History* proceeds over six further sections to perform these and other things, shifting between overlooked particulars to more familiar generalities:

Unlearning becomes a process of disengaging from the unquestioning use of political concepts – institutions such as citizen, archive, art, sovereignty, and human rights, as well as categories like the new and the neutral, all of which fuel the intrinsic imperial drive to ‘progress’, which conditions the way world history is organised, archived, articulated and represented. (p 11)

Azoulay opposes commonworld traditions to imperial revolutions; she sides with the ‘undocumented’, ‘infiltrator’ and ‘illegals’ unhomed by imperial regimes to make way for the citizen. Azoulay is interested in modalities and detail; her book is enriched with concrete examples from a very broad temporal and physical spectrum in which her surest references remain Palestine and those destroyed, dispossessed and displaced from it. ‘Palestine’ is paradigmatic because it remains an event of ongoing resistance to a crime that must be undone

as part of broader reparations. It is, or, as she writes, can still be ‘a source of hope, hope for the entire world’ (p 268).

Let me break this down a little, firstly through Azoulay’s recapture of hundreds of agreements drawn up in post-World War II Palestine between Jewish and Palestinian communities in neighbouring villages, including Deir Yassin,<sup>10</sup> to ‘protect their communities from outside militants’ (p 440) or ‘Jewish militias’ (p xv). She calls these a ‘model of sovereignty that extends care to all’ (p 441). Secondly, the work of unlearning the archive includes unlearning the document, as well as ‘unlearning photography as ... an attempt to replace alleged absences controlled by one party to the event of photography, by presences, whose existence can be proclaimed by the photographed persons and spectators’ (p 370). Azoulay returns to the International Committee of the Red Cross’s photographic archives in Geneva and images that capture the expulsion and deportation of Palestinians from their home but which are labelled with the faux-neutrality of the phrase ‘repatriation’ (p 206). Azoulay was refused permission to exhibit these images with her own descriptions. She drew them instead, reproducing them in exhibitions and pamphlets, and again here in their optimal context. Drawing these images highlighted otherwise missed details, she writes, exhibiting a ‘within the droplet’ care for commonworlds. Thus I was mistaken in Graz; these redrawn photographs (including life before this book)<sup>11</sup> qualify as the best example of deliberately made non-violent images that I can think of.

Here I must further concretise the concretion, and engage a further un- within the unlearning, to focus on one of the radical applications of Azoulay’s approach. This is her notion of an ‘untaken photograph’, which ‘can take many forms: a verbal description, a testimony, a drawing or a photograph of a re-enactment of the unphotographed event’ (p 370). She uses the notion of an untaken photograph in her chapter on archival imperialism to reject an axiomatic silence regarding ‘the massive rape of German women by Allied soldiers at the end of WWII’, as well as to foreground ‘the inscription of the rape in the archive’ (p 371) in a complex but radically refreshing argument. It is an argument she made in her essay ‘The Natural History of Rape’, published in Okwui Enwezor’s catalogue for ‘Postwar: Art Between the Pacific and the Atlantic, 1945–1965’, that used more images but which is again optimised here.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Deir Yassin was the site of a signal massacre on 9 April 1948, in which houses were blown up with people inside, while others were lined up and murdered in cold blood, as survivors have attested. In *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oneworld, Oxford, 2006) Ilan Pappé lets the fact that ‘30 babies’ died speak for itself (p 90) and argues that this was one of the warnings that went out across Palestine to encourage people to flee coming massacres as the same Zionist militias went from village to village, ‘cleansing’ between 4 and 500 of them. ‘The Deir Yassin massacre took place when around 120 fighters from the Zionist paramilitary groups Irgun and Lehi killed hundreds of Palestinian Arabs in Deir Yassin, a village of roughly 600 people near Jerusalem’, states the ‘neutral’ Wikipedia [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deir\\_Yassin\\_massacre](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deir_Yassin_massacre)

<sup>11</sup> See p xi; Azoulay acknowledges Jeff Khonsary and the longer pamphlet version of these images in Ariella Azoulay, *Different Ways Not to Say Deportation*, Filip Editions, Vancouver, 2012

<sup>12</sup> See Ariella Azoulay, ‘The Natural History of Rape’, in Okwui Enwezor, ed, *Postwar*, catalogue of the exhibition at Haus de Kunst, Munich, in 2016, Prestel, 2017

Untaken photographs of Berlin in April–June 1945 show the mass rape of women, as documented in women’s diaries and the fact that ‘at least 90,000 women sought medical aid after being raped in Berlin alone’ (p 240). Exact figures are unknown; Azoulay writes that ‘a few hundred thousand to 2 million German women were raped’ (p 236), including ‘at least 190,000 women raped by American, British and French soldiers’ according to one research project (fn, p 255). Detailed contemporaneous testimony brings ‘countless trophy photographs’<sup>13</sup> of ruins to mortifying life: ‘In these perforated and porous dwellings, women lived with no windows, no doors, no water, no gas, no electricity, and very little food. The women moved from the upper floors to the basement and back, depending on the data they could gather on the behaviour of their rapists.’<sup>14</sup>

Azoulay concludes this chapter with radical clarity: ‘Visual documents of violence perpetrated in the open ... should be located within available images that are falsely declared not to be images of rape, even though they were taken in the same place and at the same time as the rapes’ (p 246). Instancing one seemingly silent and mysterious trophy image of rubble-strewn courtyards with gaping architectural orifices, she concludes ‘This is a photo of an arena of rape’ (p 246). In this way Azoulay is not filling gaps in the archive, but redistributing it amongst other participants. It is a manoeuvre she repeats in the section on archives themselves: ‘potential history reads records of destruction as proof of persistence and right to survive’ (p 187), which is part of ‘a different modality, that of reversal, rewinding, repairing, renewing, reacquiring, redistributing, readjusting, reallocating’ (p 56).

Throughout *Potential History*, there are shifts in scale from the concrete instance to a half-millennium of imperialism, but the scope for a wholly different understanding of those centuries and their current settlement is thrilling in potential, which here means obscured presence. The imperialism that we must and *are* unlearning is the European, english-language, Atlantic worldview produced by the winners and wondrous of our commonworld. The temporalities of this are crucial, and I don’t only mean overlaps with theories of the Anthropocene, Capitalocene and variously nominated extractive regimes of carelessness. Nor is it a simple matter to use the word ‘potential’, but in this project and book Azoulay restores world-recovering efficacy to it. Imperialism violently delimited worlds of possibility in a series of ‘unforgivable’ crimes, while potential history recovers the post-extractive leavings – ‘distanced, bracketed, forgotten, suppressed, ignored, overcome, and made irrelevant’ (p 3) – resistances, realities and enduring commonalities.

So what does Azoulay mean by potential history? An eponymous chapter begins with ten assertions, which multiply through it: ‘Potential history is not an attempt to tell the violence alone, but rather an onto-epistemic refusal to recognise as irreversible its outcome and the

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, p 249

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*

categories, statuses, and forms under which it materialises'; '... is a commitment to attend to the potentialities that the institutional forms of imperial violence – borders, nation states, museums, archives, and laws – try to make obsolete or turn into precious ruins', and 'allows Palestine to be and to have always been possible' (pp 286–287); '... strives to retrieve, reconstruct, and give an account of diverse worlds that persist'; '... requires inhabiting the position of a cocitizen, looking for and joining those who did not give up even when they were under threat' (p 289). Lastly, 'potential history is the transformation of violence into shared care for our common world' (p 57).

A host of applications riddle *Potential History* on multiple registers, even as they build towards a call for worldly reparations, along with very concrete trade-ins by the perpetrators of their/our/my privileges, powers of judgement and liberal identifications, in pursuit of what Azoulay calls 'worldly sovereignty' in place of 'imperial sovereignty'. Azoulay is not short of ideas and ways to do these things. In between each chapter are segments that begin with, for example, 'Imagine going on strike' (p 328), or just stop doing the same things, modelled on W E B Du Bois's ascription of a general strike to the mass withdrawal of slave labour at the beginning of the American Civil War.<sup>15</sup> After the chapter on worldly sovereignty, she writes: 'Imagine our mouths going on strike, refusing to speak the imperial language that reduces our cocitizens to the "refugee", the "undocumented"'. Researchers and academics should 'refuse to relate to (these political figures) as objects of study' (p 446). Elsewhere, for example, she untangles tradition from conservatism to argue for worldly caring: 'Tradition is the most persistent struggle against imperialism, sustained through intergenerational transmission and preservation of some worldly knowledge of being in the world' (p 321).

Examples of potential history in action include the Great March of Return in Gaza, which 'makes these claims present, ensures that they have not and can never be buried, even as many bodies are buried' (p 128). She instances Walid Raad's work in the archives of the Louvre in Paris on the three hundred objects loaned to the branch in Abu Dhabi, built under conditions of forced labour to refinance a declining imperial institution,<sup>16</sup> in which the objects became 'unruly' (p 154), morphing between epistemic regimes, foregrounding ontological instabilities. She applauds the work of Amin Husain and Nitasha Dhillon at the Brooklyn Museum, campaigning 'to reverse the conditions under which art and art objects are perceived as separate from the active life of communities. Decolonising museums is essential to rewinding the imperial condition.' (p 100) Further campaigns to delink visual arts benefactors and cultural institutions from direct association with arms manufacture and supply include Decolonise This Place's work to remove Warren Kanders from the Whitney Board (p 498).

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<sup>15</sup> See W E B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: 1860–1880*, Free Press, New York, 1992 [1935]

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, the book of the campaigning group Gulf Labour, *The Gulf: High Culture, Hard Labour*, Andrew Ross, ed, OR Books, New York, 2015 [www.gulflabor.org](http://www.gulflabor.org)

Behind these actions lies the simplest of links between ‘unlearning’ and ‘potential’, how and what it applies to, especially with what is typically meant by talk of restitution. ‘The initiative of restitution of objects held by French museums was described by Achille Mbembe as paternalist and legalist ... The loss, insists Mbembe, is not of the objects but of the world of which these objects were the carriers’ (p 141). Azoulay writes repeatedly about rights being inscribed in looted objects, not the shuttered human rights of imperial regimes, but rights ‘put out of action with the destruction of the physical worlds in which they were effective; they are the rights of the dispossessed and their lost worlds, the rights validated not by state papers and documents but through objects, architecture, ceremonies, rituals, orders, genealogies, habits, skills and traditions’ (p 452). It is meaningless to return a bowl or figurine without the ‘politico-material world’ destroyed to loot and reclassify it.

‘Rights, then, imply claims to take action – to desist from perpetrating crimes, to give back what was taken, to acknowledge a plight, to compensate a damage, to equalise status, to change rules, and to enable the people involved, perpetrators and victims alike, to inscribe their rights in a shared world again’ Azoulay writes (p 529). The most basic right of all, she says, is ‘the right not to act against others; in its positive formulation: the right to act alongside and with one another. Accepting this right in its two forms as fundamental is necessary in order to imagine reparations’ on the appropriate scale (p 566). This is what she refers to in the phrase ‘worldly rights’, which require a notion of cocitizenship to enact the radical scale of reparations now needed.

Reading *Potential History* in 2020 means running every theoretical exercise, acute deconstruction and proposed action through a hastening climactic crisis, almost to test for relevance as we are overtaken by its global consequences. Azoulay’s analysis is entrained on the same worlds, and her prescriptions address those issues with remedies that apply both to the unforgivable crimes of imperialism; imagine what all its ‘triumphs’ would look like if the anglo-centric western world had not ‘won’ World War II, and the extinction horizon entrained by its extractive logic. We will all have to think like the earth or like a river to bring on the kinds of ‘bliss’ (p 566) that Azoulay’s commonworld proffers. Of course, it existed and exists, but it is both only, as well as actually, potential.

Azoulay describes the ‘tedious work’ involved in ensuring that ‘all monuments must fall’, adding that ‘Israel’s state apparatus, to take one example, is a monument that must fall’ (p 573). Meanwhile, pointing to the abject failure of ‘international legal discourse’ to deliver on its own declarations of human rights and UN resolutions, Azoulay points out that Palestinian ‘rights are dormant in the trees, valleys, dishes, fields, seeds, objects, structures, ruins, norms and traditions that still subsist’ (p 478). Our creaking, discredited zombie-regime gets splenetic at such ideas, while happily trading arms, building walls, mining borders and watching migrants drown in neighbouring waters.

Today we will survive only in a very differently experienced though immanent commonworld. This potential – in the active, optimistic, totemic sense – is brought to rigorous as well as animated life in *Potential History*. Azoulay has produced a unique handbook for the 2020s that details how, why, when and where to say no in the affirmative. Her greatest achievement is that, against the foreshortened horizons of a despoiling barbarism, she makes all our tomorrows thinkable.

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