

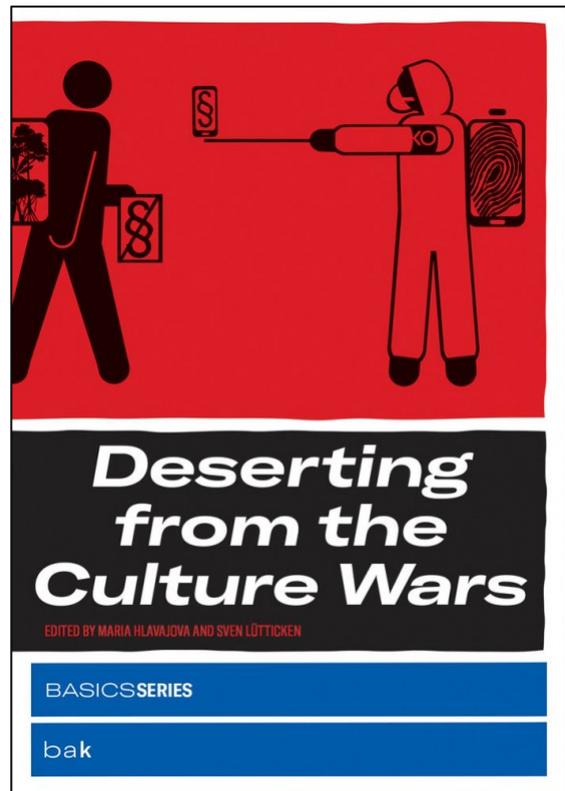
BOOK REVIEW:

Deserting from the Culture Wars

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Cultural battles have been going on for decades: Chapman and Ciment's encyclopaedia of manifestations of culture wars runs into some 1,200 pages.¹ Nonetheless, the overtly partisan manner in which major events of the past few years have been represented and critiqued in the public sphere could lead one to understand that culture wars are a relatively new phenomenon in democratic politics. The election of Donald Trump or the Brexit referendum are habitually read as turning points that confirm a new and now seemingly unbridgeable social and political division.

How such rifts are represented in and created by culture itself has been the subject of lively debate. *Deserting from the Culture Wars* is an intervention in this fraught landscape that is not only timely but highly necessary. Maria Hlavajova's foreword describes a landscape torn by 'battles around civil rights, social and ecological justice, health equity, racial hierarchies, gender identities, and, to be sure, *truth* floods public discourse with a toxic brew of bewildering language, maximist slogans, manipulative rhetoric, inflammatory imagery, conspiracy theories, and militarized posturing' (p 12, emphasis in the original). Sven Lütticken's project 'Deserting from the Culture Wars', run with BAK (basis voor actuele kunst) in Utrecht, weighs in on the discourse with a 'training manual' of contributions from the likes of Bini Adamczak, Diana McCarty, Jonas Staal, Natascha Sadr Haghghian, Tom Holert, Geert Lovink and Dan McQuillan. The project's manifesto is therefore alluring: it proposes a 'tactical desertion' of the culture wars in an attempt to find a way towards 'being together otherwise' and away from the battlefield.



¹ Roger Chapman and James Ciment, *Culture Wars in America: An Encyclopedia of Issues, Viewpoints, and Voices*, 2nd edition, Routledge, New York, 2014

Sven Lütticken, 'Performing Culture Otherwise'

Lütticken's opening 'Performing Culture Otherwise' sets out his proposal for 'desertion', describing culture wars as a series of emergencies fabricated by conservative politics in the US since the 1980s. At the outset, Lütticken situates these events at the extreme far right of the antifascist–fascist axis, a position that enforces a binary reading of all phenomena. He suggests that the 'left' has developed a habit of responding to such cultural attacks in reactive, Pavlovian ways that are wholly inadequate. Since by the 1990s a true Marxist alternative to neoliberalism seemed implausible, the 'Cultural Marxism' that replaced it was not a considered defence but, in fact, a caricature bogeyman invented by the 'right' in pursuit of further ideological gains (p 24). When it becomes apparent that the rules of engagement are determined by the aggressor and that the object of the battle is not only culture but survival itself, Lütticken suggests, why not look for ways to avoid this conflict altogether?

To imagine how this might be possible, Lütticken points out that culture wars are waged *between* cultures but not *for* them. Contrary to the Marxist conception of culture power struggle rendered visible, the 'right', culture is the culture of the majority (white, Christian) collectivism. That conservative culture is necessarily at odds with the superstructures of the media and academia understood to have been hijacked by the Cultural Marxist enemy. Lütticken cites Jordan Peterson's vocal opposition to the neo-Marxist tendencies of the academy as skilful exploitation of the shortcomings of Jürgen Habermas's universalist conception of democracy which inevitably leads to a strengthening of exclusionary cultures.

If Lütticken's thesis is that warfare-by-culture is the preserve of fascism, then this unravels in his consideration of historical avant-garde artistic movements. Through Herbert Marcuse's analysis of the social changes leading up to the French strikes of 1968, Lütticken concludes that culture was no longer an arena in which struggles were represented, but a bona fide site of conflict. The logical necessity which the text overlooks is that such war-like engagement requires at least two protagonists, although Lütticken describes the damage that the artist group Situationist International suffered in becoming a 'proper' political avant-garde (rather than a 'merely' artistic one), perhaps as an illustration of the unfairly configured battlefield (p 33).

Lütticken's proposal is ultimately not one of reckless desertion. In contrast with Peter Osborne's proposal for withdrawal in pursuit of autonomy, Lütticken wants to embed solidarity in a co-ordinated mass exodus. He points to the successes of 'left' cultural collectivism that led to the UK's Tate galleries severing their relationship with BP, or to William Kanders' resignation from the board of New York's Whitney Museum. These are, of course, commendable, although Lütticken's reading of actions and phenomena through the prism of antifascism may render him less sensitive to the non-cultural forces at play. In what reads like a hot-take, Lütticken appears to compare MoMA's sacking of its freelance educators in the first stages of the pandemic with the same museum's call for equity and justice after the

killing of George Floyd. Lütticken acknowledges that the question of how ‘to forge ties of solidarity and build autonomy’ is crucial, but it is not clear that the apparatus of withdrawal inherited from Osborne, and twinned with an antifascist orientation, is adequate ‘in an economy designed to either prevent it or instrumentalize it’ (p 38).

This desire for desertion, as well as Lütticken’s insistence that a strict antifascist critique is its best chance of success, is maintained through much of the volume. This is not surprising given that *Deserting from the Culture Wars* resulted from a long-term collaborative project convened by Lütticken. The myopic inflexibility of these parameters, however, does little to enhance the other contributions in the volume, preventing them from engaging with a wider gamut of issues and artefacts of the culture wars.

Tom Holert, ‘Transfixing the Fascist Episteme’

Tom Holert’s contribution, ‘Transfixing the Fascist Episteme’, focuses on the formal characteristics of knowledge as a way to understand pervasive fascist cultural subterfuge. Holert’s masterful analysis of what he calls the epistemisation of culture will be familiar to readers of *Third Text Online*,² and his examination of culture’s vulnerability to right-wing ideas is compelling. In the waning shadow of Marxism, Holert argues, the plurality of knowledge narratives on offer has served to legitimise the cultural claims of fascist movements such as *Alternative für Deutschland*, whose rhetoric of the state, nature or the people owes much to the epistemological work of the French extremist philosopher Alain de Benoist.

Holert observes the ‘right’s’ skilful appropriation of the lessons of 1968, notably the shift of its above-the-surface politics away from facts to emotion. The emergence of *truthiness* (the term coined by the satirist Stephen Colbert to describe the kind of truth that is *felt* rather than known) as a mode of political discourse may appear in line with the Foucauldian turn against the rigid Modernist episteme, and is, in fact, portrayed as emancipatory. However, as long as the memefied episteme is underpinned by fascist mechanisms like algorithmic message distribution, Holert suggests, it can only serve to corrode the liberal consensus.

Holert remains aware of the practical difficulties of such a critical position, given that not all fascist knowledge is simply false (Adorno) and that truths are inherently arbitrary in nature (Arendt). The defining feature of a fascist episteme, therefore, is that it deploys truth out of its interpretative context in the service of untruth. Here, Holert nods to the possibility of applying such epistemic analysis to a broader spectrum of cultural claims than Lütticken’s project set out to; however, the antifascist orientation of the ‘manual’ prevents him from addressing these explicitly.

Referring to the philosopher Alexander Koyré, Holert suggests that what characterises fascist epistemology is a relentlessly goal-oriented reason, the type of instrumental reason that,

² See Christoph Chwatal’s review of Tom Holert’s *Knowledge Beside Itself: Contemporary Art’s Epistemic Politics* (Sternberg Press, 2020), *Third Text Online*, 12 October 2020 www.thirdtext.org/chwatal-holert

according to Max Horkheimer, strategically corrupts practical reason (p 64). To avoid this issue, Holert calls on the critic Keller Easterling to observe that ideological declarations are no longer reliable indicators because they are easily corruptible. Since ‘a simplistic disavowal of the fascist episteme’s violence’ is not enough, Holert suggests that a culture wars deserter should engage ‘in the production of a set of critical skills and aesthetic language that would enable actual transfixing’ (p 70). While part of the ‘training manual’ stops short of offering a lesson in practical epistemology, Holert’s text closes with some optimistic examples of artistic practices (Forensic Architecture, among others) that in his view operate within robust and critically effective epistemes.

Holert’s analysis is damning because it points to no easy solution. If the truth claims based in antifascist epistemic alternatives (for example, in the rejection of ‘evidence’ characteristic of many emancipatory movements) can no longer be taken at face value, which epistemic paradigm should they be evaluated in? With this in mind, the volume’s programmatic refusal to engage with any of the artefacts of the ‘left’s’ culture seems like an own goal.

Jonas Staal, ‘Contagion Propagations’

Jonas Staal’s ‘Contagion Propagations’ expands the perspective laid out in his recent analysis of contemporary propaganda art.³ In what, at points, reads like a political op-ed, Staal exposes the Covid-19 outbreak as an inevitable outcome of capitalism’s globalised excesses. He sees the pandemic as a profoundly partisan affair that serves the capitalist economy and ideology *by design* and merely highlights pre-existing injustices that are under normal conditions tolerable through the production of narratives of what Herman and Chomsky refer to as ‘unworthy victims’ (p 128).

Staal traces the pandemic front lines to an earlier conflict between ‘ultranationalist and hard right parties and... the globalist capitalist elite’ (p 129). Given the anger that clouds the text and which seems more suited to a rally speech than a critical essay, this reads as one step in political rhetoric too many, until Staal deploys his well-developed toolkit of propaganda analysis on an oeuvre of mainstream films such as *Contagion* (2011), which models the SARS epidemic, and television series such as *Outbreak* (1995) that features the Ebola crisis. Such propaganda artefacts that portray the virus threat as a ‘foreign agent’, Staal argues, also lay the ground for an ideological and cultural war for the eco-fascist myth of overpopulation.

Staal’s text concludes with a surprisingly detailed and practical ‘Organizational Art Training Manual’, a blueprint for artist-driven propaganda creation that includes instructions such as ‘identify a common objective for change’ and ‘consider the means of representation’. As welcome as this intervention is, it points to Staal’s belief that artists should take an active role in the culture wars, rather than desert them.

³ See Christoph Chwatal’s review of Jonas Staal, *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century* (The MIT Press, 2019), *Third Text Online*, 16 January 2020 www.thirdtext.org/chwatal-staalreview

At this point, the willful blindness of Lütticken's project to the very possibility that the culture wars are bilateral is visibly at odds with Staal's proposal. The enforced reading of culture wars as a solely fascist phenomenon strips Staal's propaganda artists of autonomy and surrenders them to that Pavlovian stimulus. Lütticken's parameters explicitly forbid engagement with social justice warrior culture – which is regrettable, because Staal's framework could have lent itself to a more productive understanding of the tools and techniques already available to the would-be culture war deserter, particularly in the light of the substantial damage that the 'left's' internal culture wars are already inflicting on the antifascist cause. If the key lesson of Staal's propaganda studies is that 'it's all propaganda', why not examine the propagandas of 'woke' or 'cancel' cultures, for example, to ensure that they remain loyal to their stated antifascist cause?

While one can only guess at the reasons for such reluctance to engage with the 'left's' internal cultural inconsistencies (or, in Lütticken's opening words, 'the fascism in all of us'), this decision has profound practical implications. For example, it renders unproductive Staal's astute analysis of Steve Bannon's cultural propaganda war so effectively deployed elsewhere. More importantly, where the project sees the culture of culture wars as a series of artefacts appropriated by fascism, it fails to account for the culturally-generative role of artists and cultural institutions in the production of cultures and countercultures.

Christopher Newfield's account of the twentieth century culture wars points to a more economic than cultural effort to dismantle the liberal public sphere.⁴ Contending with the significant gains that the cultural institutions and the 'far right' have independently made in the twenty-first century, what could have been worthy of consideration here is the stark asymmetry of resources harnessed by the parties. While the 'right' boasts easily memorable messages, masterful isolate-and-control tactics and an army of teenage 4chan ideologues,⁵ the 'left' could claim extensive networks of artists, activists and institutional infrastructures, and a wide-ranging theoretical apparatus. Is Lütticken's proposal, in stark contrast with Holert's compelling recommendation, that artists and institutions like BAK withdraw from cultural production and engage in as-yet unspecified activities, rendering themselves deaf to the fascist gunfire? It is clear what the desertion is *from*, but *to* where?

At the risk of labouring the metaphor, one would do well to remember that in warfare, deserters are usually punished by their own side. If, in the words of Steve Bannon's ally, the populist ideologue Andrew Breitbart, 'politics is downstream from culture', turning away from the culture wars is easier said than done. In the light of the recent tectonic shifts brought about by cultural progressivism's insistent antifascist work (for example, the school curriculum reforms in the US that explicitly root mathematics instruction in ethnic essentialism in the name of emancipation, or the empirically counterproductive extreme readings of critical

⁴ See Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2008

⁵ **4chan** is an infamous social network, home to armies of anonymous trolls and source of most of the internet's memes (www.4chan.org)

theories by those such as Robin DiAngelo), culture's retreat would be at best lazy and irresponsible.

The market of culturalised politics is, in fact, alive and well. An example of the selective embrace or rejection of such market freedoms comes in Staal's analysis of Michael Moore's documentary *Planet of the Humans*, directed by Jeff Gibbs (2019). Moore, until now almost universally applauded by progressives for his popular activist journalism, in the recent film took the false step of condemning not only 'big oil' and 'capitalism' for the inevitable ecological disaster but all humans for their naïve desire for easy solutions. Moore's film is pessimistic and mistrustful of good news, enough so for Staal to label him an eco-fascist. Surprisingly, Staal's rebuttal relies on undermining Moore's data. Was Moore's evidence robust in films like *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) because the motives were antifascist, but became corrupted two decades on? To be crude: if Moore can this easily be rendered a fascist, what fundamental characteristic of the 'left's' own antifascist culture safeguards it from engaging in fascist behaviours? Either it is the antifascist lens that is wholly critically unproductive, or it is its selective application to phenomena that is prejudged as hostile and means it is hypocritical.

The fundamental challenge to the limited scope of Lütticken's proposal is that the anti-fascist orientation fails to satisfy the challenge posed by Easterling. That is to say that the volume's repeated assertions of antifascist intent cannot be read as sufficient, or that the rigour with which the volume classifies all phenomena as either fascist or antifascist is in itself a by-product of a culture war. Bini Adamczak's contribution is an example here, even if it is perhaps the volume's most defined proposal for an alternative cultural future. Adamczak is a passionate proponent of communism,⁶ and as much as her text is eloquent, the targets of its critique are rather predictable and their relationship to culture left underexplored.

One possible escape from this bind comes from Slavoj Žižek, whose infamous pronouncement that everything is ideology uncannily mirrors Staal's. Žižek is keenly aware that under the conditions of ever-present ideological warfare, even oppression is adorned with the hallmarks of freedom, and that in turn makes him sceptical of any freedom-making claims. Žižek's favourite dialectician, G W F Hegel, even suggests that 'Evil resides in the very gaze which perceives Evil all around itself'.⁷ Žižek's critique is a pragmatic one and its tone seems apt as a response to that part of Lütticken's proposal that purports to extend practical tools towards building antifascist cultural relationships because Lütticken's project is, in fact, inherently divisive by its desire to split the world into fascists and antifascists. Žižek has made

⁶ See, for example, Bini Adamczak, *Communism for Kids*, Jacob Blumenfeld and Sophie Lewis, trans, The MIT Press, 2017 – without doubt an artefact of a culture war

⁷ Hegel, cited in Slavoj Žižek, 'Against an Ideology of Human Rights', in *Displacement, Asylum, Migration: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures 2004*, K E Tunstall, ed, Oxford University Press, 2006, pp 56–86

himself unpopular by pointing out this very propensity of emancipatory projects to fall foul of their ideological logics with a ‘puritanical zeal’. Perversely, while Žižek is a rare survivor of the ‘left’s’ ‘cancel culture’ (perhaps owing to his earlier Marxist allegiance), Jordan Peterson’s practically indistinguishable observations (he speaks of the ‘zeal’ with which the Bolsheviks routinely denounced their enemies as bourgeois for their own advantage) rendered him a public enemy. More perversely still, in Lütticken’s framework, any reference to Peterson in near-neutral terms is likely to be classified as fascist, disqualifying any of this review’s arguments. But as Adorno and Arendt would have it: who is right and who is wrong should not depend on political sympathies alone.

The Radical Flu

There are, thankfully, spaces of disengagement between the repetitive denunciations of fascisms in the book. Amongst the critical essays are also presented artistic contributions, which appear to be scripts for performances or lectures.

‘Remembering the Future’, Kader Attia’s touching analysis of today’s political culture notes the disparity between the nostalgic, past/ghost/phantom-driven relationships that inform our everyday lives, and the technocratic, emotionless nature of the ‘left’s’ discourse. If culture, and therefore politics, no longer offers catharsis, Attia’s call is for the reappropriation of emotion, affect, desire and fear, with all their uncertainty and unpredictability. Attia calls on examples from his grassroots project ~~La Colonie~~ to demonstrate the productive potential of this approach.

Johannes Paul Raether’s intriguing collective work ‘From ReproModernism to ReproTechnoTribal’ offers a perplexing yet alluring account of a live project that is peppered by phrases like ‘I-as-us’, ‘MetaMothers’ and ‘Off Body – social – In-Body – local – In-Body’, and appears to be a diagrammatic design for a new culture, one that repurposes the ubiquity and banality of algorithmic instructions for living (our ‘Ikeality’) into a disruptive, yet sustainable form.

The most experimental and the most intriguing of those contributions is by Rose Hammer, a twenty-artist collective constituted on the occasion of osloBIENNALEN. Their ‘The Radical Flu’ is a treatment for a play that charts the outbreak of the Spanish Flu in 1918 Oslo that would structurally mirror Roberto Gerhard’s adaptation of Camus’s *The Plague*. The cast of characters includes a fictional doctor (atheist, reasonable), a religious fool preacher (refuses to be seen by the doctor), a choir (*Dies Irae*), the sick child (a redeeming death) and historical political figures (including Norway’s first female member of parliament), good Samaritans (nurses) and artists (Munch, Vigeland).

Imagining the arc of the opera, which sees Christiania under lockdown (from the UK’s third Covid-19 lockdown), is oddly uplifting, perhaps because Rose Hammer’s deployment of a cast of two-dimensional characters productively encourages perspective-taking. Much like

the best commedia dell'arte was able to convey morality tales by engaging audiences in a role-play game whose outcomes were not necessarily fixed, 'The Radical Flu' proposes a simulation in which, yes, fifteen thousand people die, but their society's ethics are laid bare for analysis. By some estimates, the Spanish Flu killed three per cent of the world's population; it is nothing short of astonishing that this event's cultural mythology has not been excavated more thoroughly in light of today's struggle with a pandemic. Rose Hammer's play is no mere thriller or instruction manual because it is not the epidemiological strategy that is opened to scrutiny, but it does raise questions, rather, about the disease's place in the public and private psyche as an internal or external enemy.

Geert Lovink, 'The Invisible Culture Wars'

Also notable in the volume is the interview with the media theorist and critic Geert Lovink, whose activities span four decades of culture wars. Despite the interviewers' attempts to hit the by now predictable antifascist talking points, Lovink is capable of the kind of analytical nuance which would have vastly enhanced Lütticken's project. As a seasoned media activist and tactician, Lovink is aware of the ambiguous ambivalence of emergent technologies and does not condemn, in contrast with Holert, the 'networks without a cause' themselves for the politics they reproduce.

By way of context, Lovink points to the Gramscian belief in the power of ideology as an emancipatory tool that pervaded his practice in the 1990s – the very idea appropriated so successfully by Steve Bannon. If in the culture wars every message can be ideologically targeted and adjusted to individual recipients, as Lovink suggests, then art's preoccupation with the visible is its own downfall. Are art and its institutions ready to desert from the culture wars and engage, in a refrain to Attia's suggestion, with the subconscious? 'There are many places ... that need to be occupied', Lovink replies, 'but the museum is not on the list.'

Deserting from the Culture Wars, edited by Maria Hlavajova and Sven Lütticken, is published by The MIT Press, 2020, ISBN 9780262362955

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