

## Voyage from the Unknown to the Unknown

Confined on the ship, from which there is no escape, the madman is delivered to the river with its thousand arms, the sea with its thousand roads, to that great uncertainty external to everything. He is a prisoner in the midst of what is the freest, the openest of routes: bound fast at the infinite crossroads. He is the Passenger par excellence: that is, the prisoner of the passage. And the land he will come to is unknown – as is, once he disembarks, the land from which he comes. He has his truth and his homeland only in that fruitless expanse between two countries that cannot belong to him.

Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*<sup>1</sup>

We (as those occupying the privileged zones of this planet, which still somewhat boldly call themselves democratic) have been told that the system we live in entitles us to certain kinds of freedom: to make our own choices, to move freely across borders, to surf freely on the web and beyond. Now that we experience more and more inner and outer crises, we might also be increasingly realizing that, in Zygmunt Bauman's terms, we are rather liquid than free. We have dissolved firm points of reference into changeable, unstable environments, where individual choices are mostly reduced to consumer choices, while the individuals are the ones to be blamed for what might actually be systemic errors. Even if we make the "right" choices, the reality thus co-created appears just wrong. Our presence makes us anxious, as we define it by our unpromising future. Isn't this situation we find ourselves in a "ship from which there is no escape", are we the "prisoners of the passage"? Are we all passengers on Foucault's ship of fools?

### The Artwork

In her film and installation titled *Sickness Report*, artist Barbora Kleinhamplová creates a setting for a fictional observation of an unspecified but rather hegemonic crew, sailing on a yacht on ocean waters. The observer, most probably an anthropologist, joins the voyage in order to attempt to resolve what kind of circumstances have led the crew to an almost permanent state of discomfort or sickness, symptomatically close to nausea or depression. He documents the daily activities of the crew, their weary attempts to keep a schedule consisting of what vaguely resembles work, leisure, (self)care and social life. Mostly they seem to be killing time and coping with their mere bodily presence. Staring at the horizon, engaging in senseless repetitive activities. Sometimes they get concerned with investigating the ship, as if they were searching for causes and effects, or a possible escape plan. They always find the same old entrails under the polished surfaces, which appear perfectly interconnected, yet unintelligible. The material available thus fails to provide answers to their questions. The sea they sail is rather calm at this point, no storms, no big drama. This condition seems to leave the crew too weak to act. They reach out for medication, to soothe their hardship. Temporary remedies are tiny islands of joy, on this long journey from the unknown to the even more unknown. The observer fails to resolve the puzzle, as he slowly begins to feel sick, too...

### The Vessel

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (New York: Vintage Books, 1988).

In his analysis of the "ship of fools", a both ritualistic and practical tool to rid medieval communities of nonconformist individuals, Michel Foucault associates this intriguing phenomenon, which inspired much later writing, with the "great disquiet, suddenly dawning on the horizon of European culture at the end of the Middle Ages."<sup>2</sup> In late capitalism, the great disquiet seems to reappear. The "dark times" of today, marked by dismal migration, surreal political decisions and the shadow of the probably irreversible climatic changes, seem to lead us to imagining or predicting diverse variations of catastrophic scenarios, rather than to another renaissance. A thorough awakening or revival is what we might need most at this point. Kleinhamplová's present work leaves us in the midst of a situation we might call the dawn of capitalism. When all the theories of the world, scientific, political and economic analyses fail to grasp the complexity of a declining system, when those stemming from within this system often seem as biased particularities that don't offer sufficient explanation or realistic solution of the state we find ourselves in, a great proportion of unreason oozes to the surface: uncontrolled feelings and states of mind, fears and anxieties. Kleinhamplová refers to this condition in her film as the "Big Sickness". However, the word "big" doesn't only signify some kind of epidemic character of the disease, although most individuals living in neoliberal establishments are familiar with at least some of the symptoms. It is the ship itself that is sick, rather than the fools it is carrying. Madness is just another symptom.

### **Making of**

What is the kitchen like where capitalism is being cooked and served as the main course? A part of Kleinhamplová's installation explores the mechanisms of a factory where luxurious yachts are being built. The work environment appears like any other: structured, regulated, to a degree aestheticized. Especially the sectors requiring manual labor only allow for repetitive tasks. There must be some creative work involved, but imagination remains hidden somewhere in the designers' studios. And what is this imagination aimed at? There is surely a vision of the finished product, better, larger, shinier, more cost-effective than the previous version. But are there any higher goals, any values, on top of corporate identity? The workers in the factory are dealing with toxic materials on a daily basis. They cannot build a better ship than one that makes everybody sick.

### **The Ocean**

"Water entangles our bodies in relations of gift, debt, theft, complicity, differentiation, relation,"<sup>3</sup> writes Astrida Neimanis in the introduction to her essay on hydrofeminism that shows how human bodies are connected to other species and even planetary developments through the water they are all composed of. As a result, the more we pollute our environment, the more we pollute ourselves. There is no inside and outside, aboard and offshore, us and them. Since in the end, we all inherently share the microplastic in the water and the drowning bodies of the refugees who reach no shore. The very same waters circulate in our systems, and so we share the responsibility for what they contain. The "hot and acid" ocean, as Donna Haraway attributes it, is a seemingly apolitical territory, where everything we want to hide tends to end up. The heat from the atmosphere, tax-free transactions, submarine cables, and piles of garbage. But it can no longer be thought of as external to the ship of the privileged. It is becoming the very political sphere that this ship is navigating on, the pestering uncomfortable truth, the largest mirror to the vessel we sail on.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Astrida Neimanis, "Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water," in *Undutiful Daughters: Mobilizing Future Concepts, Bodies and Subjectivities in Feminist Thought and Practice*, ed. Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

## The Pharmaceutical Paradox

In an article I'm borrowing this subtitle from, Robert Strain describes the conflicting nature of contemporary pharmaceutical industry, which obediently serves the commercial apparatus, while being expected to resolve some of the world's most aching problems. "We live amidst a global health crisis of the highest degree—one that simply cannot be addressed without the active participation of the pharmaceutical industry," Strain writes. "But what should we realistically expect from these seeming hybrids of humanitarian actors and corporate entrepreneurs?"<sup>4</sup> In today's hierarchies, there will always be higher interests than offering help where it is (most) needed. A majority of essential drugs are too expensive for the developing world, especially due to the controversial nature of patent protection. When it comes to "first world problems," the western-eastern dichotomy of aiming at reducing symptoms versus searching for causes still turns out to be largely in favor of the "western" medical thought, especially in relation to the epidemics of depression and anxiety, and the "miraculous" treatment supposedly hidden inside the antidepressant pill. "They told us our distress is due to spontaneous chemical imbalances in our brains," Johann Hari notes. "This was promoted largely by pharmaceutical company PR departments rather than by scientists. So, neoliberalism makes us miserable by creating a society designed solely for buyers and sellers. Then it uses the pain caused by such a dystopian project as an excuse to tell us our brains are broken and that they're going to have to sell us even more things—drugs—to fix them."<sup>5</sup> If these really aren't purely individual problems to be treated by individual medication, if the system itself is sick and just spreads the disease around, who will now make a profit on developing the right pill for the system itself?

## The Crew

Who are these white, good looking, rather young people on the deck in Kleinhamplová's film? And what are the actual problems they are suffering from? Jonathan Jones wrote a commentary on an image that circulated through the media, a photograph where a luxurious yacht, as some kind of an armored giant, meets a dinghy on which Iranian migrants paddle from Turkey to the Greek island Kos: "We who were born lucky, who live in democracies, with economies that are still among the world's richest, we are all travelling in that slick rich man's ship. We speed past the unlucky as if this were natural and inevitable. We look away."<sup>6</sup> Who are these "we" though, that Jones is referring to, that I am referring to in this text? Barbora Kleinhamplová doesn't depict her crew – her version of the privileged society – in the most stereotypical manner of whom one might expect on such a vessel, as a loud haughty crowd that baths in the sunlight in kitschy robes, crazed by the heat and the booze, concerned only with their own interests. She thinks of the "we" from geographies she herself occupies as privileged yet suffering. Indeed, we are the ones on board, while others, less lucky, are fighting for mere survival on the very same waters. However, the distinction between the "us" and the "them" is in reality perhaps less straightforward than what the image Jones is referring to suggests. The crew in *Sickness Report* truly isn't well, and the way they are observed by the camera invites the viewer not to be well with them, or perhaps even suggests her to realize she herself is aboard. It's not that they don't care about what is happening around them. But they don't have much capacity to do something about it. Either they are too

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<sup>4</sup> Robert Strain, "The Pharmaceutical Paradox: Helping and Harming the Developing World," in Marvin & Sybil Weiner Undergraduate Essay Prizes in the Humanities, Penn Humanities Forum and Penn Library, 2007.

<sup>5</sup> Johann Hari, "Is Neoliberalism Making Our Depression and Anxiety Crisis Worse?," *These Times*, online at <http://inthesetimes.com/article/20930/depressed-anxious-blame-neoliberalism>, February 21, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Jones, "The yacht and the dinghy in the Aegean: a perfect allegory for the migrant crisis," *The Guardian*, online at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2015/aug/17/yacht-dinghy-aegean-migrants-crisis-turkey-greek-island-kos>, August 17, 2015.

apathetic from all they have witnessed and weren't able to change in the past, or too absorbed by the current manifestations of their sickness, too poisoned, or, perhaps, still too comfortable in their relatively advantageous condition. They fail to resolve their own dissatisfaction, and so they can hardly connect to the struggles of others, apart for feeling bad or sorry for them.

### The Cure?

It is not the first time people feel anxious about what they perceive as a closing of an era. History has shown us lots of alterations of epochs, dawns of civilizations and what we might call renaissances, new visions and attempts to put them in practice. It is not surprising that the phenomenon of the ship of fools appears exactly in a moment of passage from one order to another, floating between the unlearned lessons from the past and the unknown challenges of the future. This time though, we are somewhat forced to ask, how do we know which circle is the last, which decadence is the last one? None of the previous changes of eras went hand in hand with an environmental and humanitarian crisis of such scale as we are facing (or anticipating) today. Is our foolish ship accelerating towards the point of no return, as environmental scientists are warning us, or have we even already passed it? How do we empower ourselves to act, despite being sick of it all? How do we turn the tide? It is not easy to find hopeful answers to these questions in science, art, writing, imagination, or politics. Yet, it's high time to get rid of the pills that make us dizzy (ideally not through flushing them down the toilet) and start changing this vessel into one of engagement, solidarity, plurality, and "becoming with"<sup>7</sup> other human and nonhuman beings, with the polluted waters, with all the co-habitants of this planet as well as with all the mess we made here. We will have to give up on most of our luxuries, which anyway don't seem to bring much joy to our society, in order to give ourselves a chance to possible futures. Acknowledge that the true luxury is being alive and feeling alive. This does not mean that we will simply turn to another new age in-harmony-with-the-nature-and-all-together setting. There will surely be much conflict involved, conflicting ideas and strategies, different versions of the "we", with different needs and capacities. As Chantal Mouffe writes on her concept of agonistic democracy, "it is not enough to disturb the dominant procedures and disrupt existing arrangements to radicalise democracy. Once we accept that antagonism can never be definitively eliminated and that every order is hegemonic in nature, we cannot avoid the central question in politics: what are the limits of agonism, and which institutions and configurations of power must be transformed to radicalise democracy? This requires the moment of decision to be confronted and necessarily implies a form of closure. It is the price to pay for acting politically."<sup>8</sup> If we still want to imagine a different scenario than living from one catastrophe to another, then all the "we"s of today need to wake up and perform alternatives. And even if the different strategies for making the world a better place will not be completely compatible, at least we will be sailing towards the unknown with some kind of vision.

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<sup>7</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Agonistic Democracy and Radical Politics," *Pavilion, Journal for Politics and Culture*, online at <http://pavilionmagazine.org/chantal-mouffe-agonistic-democracy-and-radical-politics/>