



## Imagination against the machine

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**review of:**

Stephen Shukaitis (2009) *Imaginal machines: Autonomy and self-organization in the revolutions of everyday life*. Autonomedia: Brooklyn, New York. (PB, pp. 258, £12.99, ISBN: 9781570272080)

‘What I miss the most’, I hear my friend saying from across our table, ‘is the ability we once had to imagine. I feel this has been taken away from us, you know?’ It is an unusually cold Athenian morning in the early winter of 2011, two-and-a-half years from the moment when the IMF, the EU and the ECB came to the rescue of the rapidly faltering Greek economy. Ever since, the landscape surrounding us has kept changing beyond recognition. Excruciating austerity measures, a seething political scene and anger mingled with despair on the everyday level now constitute a reality mostly alien to what any of us would have been used to only a few years ago. This fluidity, one could be forgiven for expecting, should have allowed people’s imagination to run wild. And yet more and more people seem to find themselves in my friend’s position, with the militant optimism during and after the December 2008 revolt seemingly giving way to the cold realisation of an unprecedented series of consecutive dead-ends. Why is this happening?

As I ponder, not long after, I am again sitting by the same table, the book-to-review now resting on it. This is a review that comes inexcusably late, now nearing two years after the original publication date – yet on the other hand, as I want to argue here, this distance now offers a great opportunity to review its contents not as a stand-alone but within the current context instead.

With 2009 as its year of publication, Shukaitis’ *Imaginal machines* was presumably penned either in, or immediately prior to, the wake of the financial crisis that continues to sweep through the global West at the present time. This review (delivered in late 2011) therefore testifies to the book’s formidable quality as a harbinger, as a call-out for us to start seeking out alternatives to the present crisis, a call made even before this crisis had fully descended upon us. But the review also seeks to discuss this book’s quality as a work of legacy, an ever-timely reminder of the struggles that were played (even if largely lost) at times of

overt dominance of spectacle and capital alike. If the book has succeeded in this role, and my view is that it has, it can then also act as a reminder of the dangers and pitfalls facing present and future struggles against spectacle and capital – both of which are at the present time manically reformulating themselves.

Let me start from the obvious and what may strike many as somewhat odd – the book's title. To juxtapose 'machine' and 'imagination' may seem peculiar at first, one concept so close and the other so distant from the world of industrial production. And yet of course it should not be so, as the combination signals a call for us to begin producing alternatives ourselves. Shukaitis excellently discusses the evolution of the use of the two terms together, from Peter Lamborn Wilson (1996), then to Deleuze and Guattari (1977), all the way back to Castoriadis (1975). And this is just a prelude. In the relatively limited space of the book's 255 pages Shukaitis manages to delve into debates on everyday life; on the eternal problem of insurrections and revolutions left incomplete, or even recuperated by the forces of capital (how apt in the case of the Egyptian Revolution, or the Greek Uprising); on the perceived existence, in revolutionary circles, of an autonomous, pure quality of society that only requires the veil removed from the false totality of the present to make itself present in return ('to understand revolution as revelation', [53]); on the role of outer space and extraterrestrial voyage in shaping radical imagination; on affective composition, self-management, the politics of minor composition (creating social movement from within intense, everyday relations); on the question of organisation within the social antagonist movement ('the labor of imagination' [119]); on affective relations and their relationship in creating communities of resistance; all before devoting a chapter to precarity struggles and, finally, a chapter confronting recuperation of radical politics – both as a threat, but even more as a reminder for us to continually recompose our political theory and our praxis.

Clearly a review of all the ideas discussed in the book would be perforce incomplete, confined by this text's allowed length. What I want to do instead is to take a handful of these ideas and use them as a starting point for a discussion not only about the book's potential legacies but also the legacies of the antagonist movement as a whole – and even more so, its potential amidst the current crisis of capital.

'While liberatory impulses might point to a utopian (no)where that is separate from the present,' says Shukaitis, 'it is necessary to point *from* somewhere, from a particular situated imagining' (10). And so he does, delving into his own experiences, among so many others, with Ever Relived Records (ERR, a punk/DIY label under workers' control) in chapter 6. Shukaitis points out that examples such as ERR could be described as a type of 'propaganda of the deed' (125), just as Flynn et al (1997) would do. Such small (in the scale of things) experiments in subversion encountered across the social antagonist movement have indeed offered some invaluable service in keeping the spirit of alternative everyday realities alive through some of the darkest days (or should it be nights?) of capitalist certainties: workers' co-operatives operating in the midst of the capitalist euphoria, breaking away from the everyone-for-themselves mantra. There have of course been some suffocating limitations to these experiments, with the collectivisation of labour

often leading to the subsequent socialization of workers themselves ‘into the role of collective capitalists’ (130). As a result, participants in social antagonist movements have often in the past moved away from seeking alternative ways of envisioning the everyday within their own structures. Many would have reached Shukaitis’ own, seemingly gloomy, conclusion: ‘Perhaps self-management is a fish that is only well suited to swim in the struggles of Fordist waters’ (134).

What space does such a conclusion leave for the social antagonist movement in which to imagine? Shukaitis has a number of propositions, including literally pointing toward space (outer, extra-territorial space) as a ‘pole of imaginal recomposition’ (92). At the precise moment when sovereignty encroaches into even the most intimate of everyday experiences, the cornerstones of people’s existence, centrifugal tendencies of this kind may indeed seem appealing. Yet still, as he too recognizes, it is not at all necessary to look at such exteriorities; there is no need to reach all the way out to the moon (meant quite literally here) in order to free our perspective and to start imagining afresh. If anything, this change of perspective is much easier, feasible and perhaps rewarding even, when we take an opposite, introverted look; when we gaze, that is, inward. Peeking straight into the particles of social activity that comprise the mosaic of everyday life: the gestures, the signs, the smallest of actions beaming solidarity, autonomy and mutual aid – each on its own perhaps too small to decisively contribute toward change on any larger scale, yet in their sum reflecting a myriad of revolutions that are already taking place in the here and now.

In opening this review I declared Shukaitis’ book a harbinger. I did so because essentially, the book describes experiences and struggles of workers disgruntled with capital; meanwhile, in an ironic twist of history, capital got (even more) disgruntled with (even more of) its workers. At this exact point in time, then, the book comprises a handy reference guide to an abundance of key struggles and strands of thought belonging to the social antagonist movement so far; a guide that can prove invaluable for those only now finding themselves exposed to the cold reality of the complete war staged by capital and spectacle against the backbone of the social whole.

The key here is the word ‘now’: the timeliness of this project. Throughout reading *Imaginal machines* I kept returning to another seminal book on the everyday, Henri Lefebvre’s *Critique of everyday life*. The obvious reason would have been the parallels one could draw between the two books’ contents. And yet there is another stunning parallel, which is the swirling ‘in-between’ times in which they were both written. Lefebvre finished penning his *Critique* in the winter of 1945, shortly after the French Liberation and the end of WWII and immediately prior to the beginning of the Cold War. It is impossible to separate content from social context: had Lefebvre allowed, say, another year before completing his book, we may have never encountered the optimism running through it.

Equally, it is impossible to distinguish the content of *Imaginal machines* from its social context. The struggles for autonomy and self-organisation in late capitalism that it lucidly describes could only be a product of their times: Fordist and post-Fordist sub-products, to

be precise. But if Lefebvre's optimism was crushed under the subsequent historical developments, the content of *Imaginal machines* is seemingly vindicated, with the generalisation of social and the economic conditions that had led a handful of deeply politicised, disgruntled workers to seek out alternatives. In retrospect it may not be an exaggeration that these workers had a conceptualisation not merely of their *position* as workers, but also of their *velocity* and *acceleration*. This claim surely requires some explanation!

In physics, there exist two essential quantities that can help you understand how your position is changing in relation to the world, given of course that you have knowledge of your position (i.e. that you know where you stand). First, there is your velocity (the rate and the direction of your motion: how fast your position is changing, and in what direction) and second, there is your acceleration, that is, the rate of change of your velocity. Back in the social sciences: to be able to understand our position and that of society is one thing. But to be able to understand our – so to speak – social velocity and acceleration is an invaluable skill. And there is no field more appropriate to seek out this understanding, I would argue, than in the field of everyday life.

When thinking of everyday life, we will also – perhaps expectantly – bring to mind scenes and actions familiar and close: whether work or leisure, time spent in private or public, the 'everyday life' has this inextricable closeness of an all-too-familiar experience. We are, after all, talking of our own lives. And yet we should not, not quite exactly anyway, because this intimacy, this closeness can lead to a loss of perspective. An inability, in other words, to comprehend that everyday life is bound by its historical circumstances and as such is continuously shifting, while the rate of change in which it is shifting keeps changing as well: as Henri Lefebvre himself put it, 'everyday life is not unchangeable' (2008: 229). It is not a coincidence that the current crisis of capital and the spectacle is a crisis striking at the heart of the everyday, altering the ways in which people live. And it is not a coincidence, in return, that resistance to this enforced change has come from within primary loci of everyday socialising (think here of the role of the mosques in the Arab uprisings, or the closure of youth clubs prior to the English summer riots).

Future ruptures will inevitably be situated in the everyday and therefore *Imaginal machines* hits the nail in recording the legacy of ruptures past. But can we dare to speak of 'revolutions' of everyday life in the future, as the book's subtitle suggests about the past? And wouldn't any future revolutions face the risk of recuperation, just as their predecessors repeatedly did? Perhaps even more worryingly, in very recent times a formidable expansion in sovereignty's capacity for recuperation seems to have taken place. Before, recuperation had been an act that would come retrospectively – that is, only following (and largely thanks to) the passing of a considerable amount of time distancing it from the event. Think, for example, of the recuperation of situationist thought years after the Situationist International had ceased to exist as a group; the May 1968 slogans that were digested and assimilated in the decades that followed by the same power they had aimed at, and so on. Today, a major change in this recuperation process has occurred: it no longer takes place *ex*

*post facto* but simultaneously or even *ex ante* – prior to the occurrence of any act that turns against sovereignty. I am thinking here of David Cameron’s Big Society agenda in the UK encouraging the spread of co-operatives; essentially attempting an integration into state sovereignty of entities that could otherwise grow to threaten it. I am also thinking of certain elements of the global Occupy movement (and this does not signal a dismissal of its extremely hopeful emergence). To an extent, its apparently inherent pacifism has come, it seems, as a prerequisite of its sweeping mainstream media success. Here, a movement comes already digested for the media machine to consume and devour. I am also thinking of the idea of the ‘human mic’, whereby participants at certain Occupy sites (most notably, it seems, in New York City) adopted the following practice to overcome the ban of audio transmission equipment imposed on them by the authorities: speakers at their events would mouth sentences intermittently, slowly and loudly; the crowd encircling them would repeat the sentences after them for the benefit of those further away to listen and to repeat in return. Meanwhile, the entire process would in most cases be simultaneously broadcast online by many of those present. Here we have it then, the preemptive formulation of action and words alike in ways that will allow maximum impact and spread across the media landscape. At the same time, of course, this preemptive formulation could then already contain their pacification and their recuperation: some pacification and recuperation that was therefore prenatal, already coded into the form of this movement at the time of its birth.

I suspect it was something along these lines my friend had in mind when she complained about the stealing away of our capacity to imagine. If reaction to spectacle is as omnipresent as spectacle itself, this annihilates the space in which to create a movement – since a *movement* that is omnipresent from its birth cannot, by definition, *move*; therefore, it cannot exist. Having already hit the wall, the antagonist movement of the Fordist and post-Fordist era as unfolded in the pages of *Imaginal Machines* has a great deal to offer to what is slowly emerging as its successor; with all the necessary disclaimers of course, due to the entirely different social terrains in which the two act.

Currently, the onslaught of capital upon society seems to be accompanied by the encroachment of spectacle upon everyday life and upon social movements – essentially depriving from them the space necessary in which to develop. A culture of the instant and the omnipresent, wherein acts of resistance are instantly formulated to fit the needs of the spectacle, or even come preformulated in order to do so. In the social world, as in the physical, movement is about process. The rule naturally applies to social movements too. ‘What will we be waiting for when we no longer need to wait in order to arrive?’ asks Paul Virilio (2005: 118). Having endured all the waiting to finally arrive at this moment of crisis for capital and spectacle, the social antagonist movement as documented in *Imaginal Machines* presently has an exceptional opportunity to arm emergent movements with the required experience and patience as well as a capability to imagine what it means to succeed.

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