Necropolitics and Visuality: Remembering 'Speculative Fictions' in Hong Kong after Rancière and Mbembe

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Abstract: In his article, "Necropolitics and Visuality: Remembering 'Speculative Fictions' in Hong Kong after Rancière and Mbembe," Anthony Siu examines images from *Defiance.Voices*, a two-volume collection that gathers photography and art illustrations about the Hong Kong Protests. He studies how paintings from the second volume register politics and events, arguing that visual art can be viewed as a new form of "speculative fictions," a material ontology that historicizes modes of sovereign violence in postcolony. The introduction situates the debate of aesthetics in Hong Kong, conjoining Rancière's thinking on "the people" and Achille Mbembe's philosophy on "necropolitics." The first cluster of images looks at the polemics of visibility in tear-gas consumption. The second questions the disposable bodies and the endurance of "cruel optimism" in the younger generation. The third figures Hong Kong as the node of deadly econometrics in the Sino-American network. Despite their individual differences, "speculative fictions" in the three clusters are all entangled with the politics of economics.

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Formation of the Political Subject

In *Nostalgia: When Are We Ever at Home?*, the French philosopher Barbara Cassin forces us to rethink the meaning of the word "nostalgia." Correcting the common misconception about the word's Greek background, she maintains instead that it's a Swiss-German invention. Rather than a conjunction of nostos ("return") and algos ("pain," "suffering") as it is conceived in Greek, nostalgia is a word like myalgia ("pain in muscles") or neuralgia ("intensely intermittent pain of nerves, especially in the head or face"), as it is designated by the German-speaking Swiss medical professionals. This insistence on etymological clarification, Cassin explains, is meant to suggest that the origin of nostalgia has nothing original or originary about it. "It is," she writes, "fabricated, historically crossbred (and since an origin is precisely not a fact of history, we should say here 'historically,' to borrow a term coined by Heidegger) and serves, as do all origins, a retrospective finality" (6).

Cassin's "deconstruction" of nostalgia is what underlies the more recent debate between Ackbar Abbas and Carolyn Cartier over approaches to Hong Kong culture and the city's politics. It captures Abbas' methodology in his often-cited book, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance*, which argues for the possibility of a retroactive establishment of the city's identity in the arts. For Abbas, nostalgia is a critical gateway to approach the city's culture, particularly its cinema. The unrequited love affairs in the cinema of Wong Kar-wai, for example, provide a convenient refuge for the massive desire to locate, retain, and savor a vanishing identity in the postcolonial juncture.[1] Even if it is a retroactive, prelapsarian gesture, a hermeneutics of nostalgia sheds light on the disorientations in space and time brought about by the two colonial rulers, British and Chinese. Cartier's "Among Greater Issues of the Day: Hong Kong in China: 2003-2013," in ways that move away from Cassin's point about "retroactive finality," launches her critique of Abbas' interpretation. In rejecting the discourse of nostalgia arising from the general sense of an ending and the disappearance of a distinctly colonial identity, Cartier views this nostalgia as a backward gesture that is time-bound and coagulating. Nostalgia's enmeshing of time and space, most significantly, leaves no room for "rhizomatic affinities" and "subaltern sensitivities," which her argument suggests are central to Abbas' formulation. Resisting this "dominant hierarchical imaginary," she turns to Rancière's idea of "post-democracy" to stage the "contending core values" between Hong Kong's long-standing democracy and the socialism of the Chinese Communist Party. "Post-democracy," in her own words, "trade[s] the politics of representation for recognition and countability, valorizing identity in façade-managed maldistributions of political and economic power" (668).

Informed by Abbas' argument about nostalgia and disappearance, my article delves instead into the ambiguous losses and unspoken discourse around the time of the Hong Kong Protests. As a result of what is arguably denied, obscured, and displaced by the political tactics of an Orwellian sovereign, many events – from the use of toxic tear-gas to the mysterious death of protesters, for instance – are presented as "innocent" narratives or as things that are simply misrepresented or misunderstood by the general public. Within the local context, when people are told repeatedly that the truth about these events is unavailable or completely different from their negative experiences, the majority of the public begin to refer to "facts" as that which are made to disappear, "*bei siu sat*" in Cantonese. Put differently, where disappearance in Abbas is a matter of political affectivity, disappearance in my argument is a matter of ontology. In exploring three clusters of images, this article demonstrates that these dubious events, as opposed to the "naturalness" the sovereign ascribes to them, are fabulations, ideological and otherwise. They puzzle or are meant to puzzle the scientifically driven and the gullible public. Thus, although images are by nature representations, I argue that, in the case of Hong Kong Protests, they are formal re-presentations that ontologize what is otherwise placed under erasure by postcolonial governance.

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[1] In his talk entitled "Posthumous Socialism," given at Lingnan University, Hong Kong, Abbas spoke of China not in socialist terms. Calling China a society of "posthumous socialism," he explains that the country's socialism is only a capitalist, neoliberal market economy in disguise. See our-global-u.org/oguorg/en/ackbar-abbas/.

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Beginning with a critique of Cartier's misappropriation of Rancière's idea of "postdemocracy" and "demos," I offer my own interpretation of the concepts to illustrate that they are germane to understanding the specific political conditions and the structure of the antagonistic frontiers that counter those who centralize authority. In elaborating on the complex structure of the dēmos, I conjoin Rancière's philosophical concept with Mbembe's notion of "necropolitics" as an attempt to show how the increasing violence exposes the protestors to regimented controls and authoritarian disposals. Against this theoretical setup, I then turn to a visual collection, *Definant. Voices*, to contextualize these philosophies and politics in visual and historical terms. I demonstrate the "necropolitcs of the dēmos" through three clusters of images: tear-gas consumption, the "cruel optimism" of the bodies, and deadly econometrics. As "speculative fictions," historical witnesses that ontologize what lacks factual verification, all of these images are also shown to be entangled with an unspoken politics of economics.

To begin with, let us revisit Cartier's argument. Without further clarifying if Rancière's "postdemocracy" signals a political regime or *longue durée*, Cartier leaps to chronicle a plethora of street arts, positioning them as giving rise to a new sensible world comprised of "the people, the workers, and the citizens" (680).[2] While referencing Rancière's critical term, her critique has a Deleuzean undertone that celebrates performance-art practices as "rhizomatic," dissenting praxis of the ordinary folks, slighting the image economy of cinema as carceral aesthetics in Plato's cave. She also slights the significance of the overall mourning of good old colonial days, which she sees as situated behind the popular imaginations that Abbas emphasizes.

My main reservation about Cartier's rich urban study is that, in oversimplifying the processes of the political in Rancière's philosophy, she embraces performance art and its creators with alacrity when they are more carnivalesque than re-presentational of core political predicaments. The term "postdemocracy," Rancière reminds us in *Dis-agreement*, should not be confused with a condition in which democracy celebrates its vanished power. Instead, it is a "government practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy" that has eliminated the "dispute of the people." It is "an identifying mode […] for making the subject and democracy's own specific action disappear" (101-02). In excluding political antagonisms, postdemocracy retains liberal-democratic institutions as mere tokens of democracy. Elsewhere in "Politics, Identification, and Subjectivization," Rancière makes clear that his arguments on the political subject must not be equated with or reduced to an individual or an identifiable group within a liberal society. Quite the contrary, it is people "who are denied an identity in a given order of policy" (61). This is quite different from Cartier's investment in the specific political identity and the new sensible world that the artists create.

Derived from the Athenian "dēmos," which designates the entire citizen body rather than just the citizens, Rancière's "people" refers to "a part of those that has no parts" and "the political" designates the ongoing desire to essentialize "the people" (*Dis-agreement* 36).[3] It would be too humanist to think that the constituents of what makes "people," "workers," and "citizens" stay the same, as the Hong Kong Protests revealed. It would also be simplistic to imagine that performance art is reflective of the conflicting values inherent in "One Country, Two Systems," a political promise made during the handover of Hong Kong to China whereby the British system would remain under China's rule. For what counts as legitimate is altogether arbitrary, subject to the dictates of the sovereign. In other words, the issue is neither one country nor two systems. The issue is that nothing counts under fascist dictates. If we look deeper at the logic of Rancière's thinking, we can see how the changing formations of "the people" make counting irrelevant. If we also recognize that not a single life counts under the new regime, we can also begin to see why aesthetics during the protests frequently picture instances and issues of mortality but not values.

In his overall scheme, Rancière's philosophy of the "political" is comprised of two key dimensions. The first has to do with governance, which persistently demands consensus to maintain hierarchy in policies. It shows itself as wrong when it fails to recognize that equality is in the people. According to Todd May, this equality is not something given by the sovereign or police order but rather shown, through collective action, to the sovereign that such universal quality is denied (May, "Wrong, Disagreement, Subjectification," 75). This act of verifying is the foundation of emancipation, not as a final end but something commanding regular inspections. As the diagram below demonstrates,

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[2] There is, however, no demonstration of the philosopher's "political subject" that is non-social, non-economic, non-political, or even non-ontological. See Žižek's glossary in Rancière's *The Politics of Aesthetics* for how such notional terms as people, worker, and so on connote differently for Rancière.
[3] Apart from Matthew Landauer's account of the political dimension of "dēmos" and democracy in *Dangerous Counsel*, Wendy Brown also discusses it in *Undoing the Demos* in terms of neoliberalism.

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verification by the people is where politics arises. "The people" who perform the verification are in fact what Rancière refers to as "the anonymous many," which I take as a multiplicity that resists identity labels. They are "the people" who come together "not so much to unify but declassify" (Rancière, *On the Shores* 32-33).

Hierarchy
Governing — Policy
Consensus
POLITICAL "Wrong" (distribution of parts, roles, sensible bodies)
Dēmos (the people)
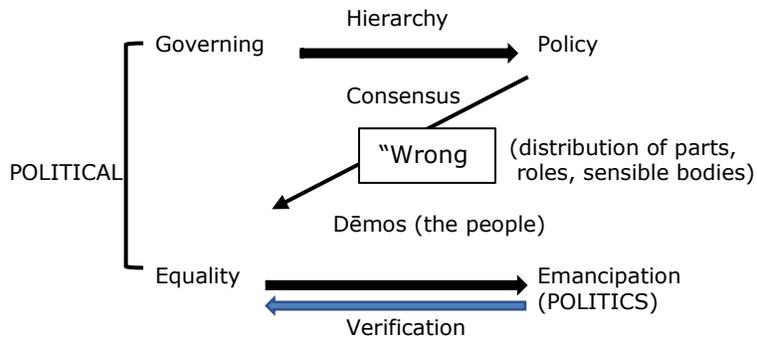Equality — Emancipation (POLITICS)
Verification

Figure 1. Rancière's political scheme

The political, which designates the tensions between and across these dimensions, is what the prefix "post" of "postdemocracy" truly connotes: that is, what follows if societies brandish their democratic nature while people are still struggling to verify equality? "What is to be done?" as Rancière's teacher Althusser asks, a question not dissimilar to Lenin's concern when he questions the insurgent capacity and efficacy of the Russian workers.[4]

Going far beyond the Umbrella Movement in scale and impact, the Hong Kong Protests show that the formation of political antagonism continues to resonate with Rancière's logic of "the people." The two predominant but aleatory protest communities—"*yung mo*" (the courageously combative) and "*wo lei fei*" (the peaceful-rational-non-violent)—are initiated by "the people" from a diverse array of backgrounds, each acquiring its name after their momentum escalates. Generally, they go against the wrongs through lobbies, artworks, demonstrations, and verbal confrontations with the establishment. They are ideologically brought together under what might be called "empty signifiers." That is, the names designating these communities are "empty of meaning" but they serve as a hegemonic frontier to accommodate different demands in "little" groups across a chain of equivalences (Laclau 67-128).[5] But where "*yung mo*" opts for more direct confrontations, "*wo lei fei*" turns to memes, leaflets, public art, and spontaneous human chains across the city to counteract the twisted logics of the sovereign.

The contingency of the community denominators can be seen in the first image (Figure 2) here. "*Yung mo*" is the streetfighter who wears a 3M mask with a pink filter that makes him ready to face tear-gas assaults. Meanwhile, "*wo lei fei*" is the less militant woman with a simple black mask. That they hold hands together references not to some wartime romance, as in in *Casablanca* (1942), but the fluidity in the formation of the political subject. On some occasions, tourists from the mainland would join "*wo lei fei*" on the spot. Although the self-identified delegates of the two communities do cross over and the "dēmos" or people keep signification afloat, it is "*wo lei fei*" whose appeal to non-violence attracts the majority initially. Unlike allegorical representations, Figure 2 is one of the images from the start of the Hong Kong Protests that takes up historical significance. Its importance lies not only in capturing the "dēmos" that we have been discussing, but also serves as a kind of witness to a moment in time that the sovereign seeks to deny or even erase. I shall come back to this argument about

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[4] Althusser notes in *What Is To Be Done?* that this has to be a question of "the political consciousness of the conditions for knowledge," something beyond self-consciousness (14). For Lenin's original text in English, see www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/witbd/. Accessed 29 Aug. 2021.

[5] The major difference between Rancière and Laclau, as I see it, lies in the notions of demand and the particular articularity of the latter when speaking of "a stable dichotomic frontier" that allows the different demands to be brought together. I use Laclau here simply to emphasize the fluid nature of the two communities. In addition, one peer reviewer's challenge mentions my disregard of the pro-governance camp, but it becomes evident by now that many of these supporters of CCP also escape to the UK for a better political environment while superficially complaining that the protesters who relocate to another country are traitors. The so-called "blue ribbons," the pro-governance frontier, is no less "empty" than the "yellow ribbons," the anti-governance frontier. See Laclau's *On Populist Reason*, page 123.

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witnessing towards the end in this article when I explore the political burden of art's ontology. attracts the majority.[6]

Figure 2: Bitter Boy. Untitled. 2020 (*Defiance. Voices*, 119). The Chinese reads, "No Differentiation between Wo-Yung. Hot Summer Cold Winter."

Meanwhile, the changing treatment of "*wo lei fei*," however, is what demands a revision of Rancière's understanding of the political, one that foregrounds violence. At first, spontaneous art practices were limited to photography and condemnations voiced on social media. But when more students walked out onto the street, tangible shoving, cornering, and organized profiling descended upon the protesters. Processes of "verification" no longer caused mild disdain, but were met with escalating violence. In one case, posting political lampoons in a public space has led to the slashing of a young person's belly wide open in the Taipo area. In another case, the judge assessing the case of slashers in the Tseng Kwan O area even calls the attacker's behavior "highly virtuous."

Such violence, with its infiltrative presence in the "event" that are now labelled the "Hong Kong Protests," has changed its form variously, such that Rancière's political aesthetics is best supplemented with what Achille Mbembe calls "necropolitics."[7] Drawing from Michel Foucault's biopolitical lesson, Mbembe's "necropolitics" encapsulates the sovereign's power over its subjects by stressing the former's capacity to decide if the political subject should be let live or subjected to death. Pertaining to our argument here is how Mbembe's understanding of "the generalized instrumentalization of human existence" impacts "the *nomos* of the political space in which we continue to live" (68).

A case of political aesthetics that is symptomatic of this "dēmos-necropolitics" can be found in a two-volume dossier of artwork entitled *Defiance. Voices* (2020). In my analysis, however, I will not be discussing the journalistic photos from *Defiance*, because they are largely straightforward, *Life* magazine kind of photos that capture the important moments in the protests. Rather, I will be focusing on the various images from *Voices* that deal with politically debatable issues, which the sovereign readily denies or eliminates. These images also provoke questions of art's ontology and responsibility as the events they portray are tactically (mis)construed by the sovereign as something altogether different.

Compiled by an artist who calls himself Childe Abbadon, the first volume, *Defiance*, is mostly a photographic record of the more militant confrontations enacted by the community of "*yung mo*." It comprises photos taken by sixty photographers from across the world, accompanied by photography from studios and newspapers. They testify that aesthetics and politics are not opposed but forge a

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[6] Judith Butler's latest work (*The Force of Non-Violence*) maintains that "a life has to be grievable—that is, its loss has to be conceptualizable as a loss—for an interdiction against violence and destruction to include that life among those living beings to be safeguarded from violence" (58).

[7] In *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, Badiou writes, "an event opens up a subjective space in which not only the progressive and truthful subjective figure of fidelity but also other figures every bit as innovative, albeit negative—such as the reactive figure, or the figure I call the 'obscure subject'—take their place" (lvii).

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political ontology, a "civil contract" that brings together "the event of photography," and the "photographed event," as Azoulay maintains (21).[8] The second volume, *Voices*, gathers together visual illustrations from numerous artists (under pseudonyms) that mock the various forms of violence that the general public in Hong Kong have endured. Originally gargantuan posters that were spontaneously placed in the Kwai Chung area (Figure 3), many of these illustrations, particularly because of their historical implications, are immediately removed by the police and their supporters. People nevertheless began to feel empowered, as I observed, that history was articulated through the potency of visuality.

Figure 3: A huge poster in the tunnel in the Kwai Chung area that I photographed during the protests.

More specifically, the Chinese name for *Voices*, "*naap haam*" (outcry), is in fact taken from the title of a collection of stories by Lu Xun, the leading figure of modern Chinese Literature, who Fredric Jameson analyses in detail.[9] Lu Xun's collection is later supplemented in its contemporary Hong Kong edition with art illustrations from Feng Zikai, the pioneer Chinese cartoonist who is known for satirizing archaic Chinese mores and social assumptions.[10] In many of the examples from *Voices*, moreover, a number of images indicate that forms of economic complexes are knitted closely with necropolitics. Together, *Defiance* and *Voices* not only archive the insidious encroachment of deadly biopolitics, but historicize the economic entanglement underlying the sovereign's attempt to smother civil negotiations of all forms.

   In what follows, I will offer a cartography of "necropolitics of the people" in accordance with three major motifs along the axis of economic entanglement: tear-gas consumption, "cruel optimism" of bodies, and deadly econometrics. Because of political dismissals, silencing, and distortions, much of the subject matter in these graphic illustrations is undocumented, non-scientific, or even unverifiable data and events, only conceivable in speculative terms. They are nonetheless frequently referenced in people's public discussions and condemnatory updates on social media, understood immediately locally as the sovereign's tactics so that people are unable to show proofs of their malicious acts. As such, I borrow from Kirk Combe's formulation of "speculative fiction," a reference to films and fictions that combine political satire, sci-fi, and monster tales to challenge the neoliberal regime, to frame these graphic illustrations in *Voices*. Doing so helps to underscore how these graphics illustrations can still register political reality in an oblique way when the sovereign tries to make most forensic evidence unavailable. While "speculative" refers more to the exceptional difficulty of proving certain repressive acts and crackdowns, "fictions" refers more to the re-presentational rather than representational nature of works themselves. Unlike Cartier's samples, they take on the role of pure witnessing, the being of aesthetics. I try to keep their aura and re-formulate some for discussing the dearth of formal proof of

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[8] Azoulay argues that civil discourse "is not a fiction. It strives to make way for a domain or relations between citizens on the one hand, and subjects denied citizenship by a given regime on the other" (3).

[9] Fredric Jameson's famous analysis of Lu Xun gives more insight on the significance of his work as allegorical of the nation.

[10] Francesca Tarocco's *The Cultural Practices of Modern Chinese Buddhism: Attuning the Dharma* illuminates more on Feng Zikai's place within the genealogy of Chinese painterly aesthetics. Also, see Shelley Drake Hawkes on Feng's work in *The Art of Resistance: Painting by Candlelight in Mao's China*.

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events that happened or might have happened in the postcolony, a space of temporal discontinuities whereby events reverse and interpenetrate one another in an entanglement.[11]

Tear-Gas Consumption

The first cluster of images (Figures 4 and 5), in recording how the sovereign's biopower is exercised, addresses the impact of tear-gas consumption. The speculative fiction that it creates narrates "necropolitics" by imploding the demarcation between what is visible and invisible. "*But ding kei to ah*" ("Irregular Graffiti") (Figure 4) shows a rather banal phenomenon in nature. Here, a dead bird is lying on the street, with its head covered by a leaf. It does not even have the foreboding that Andrew Wyeth's famous crow in *Winter Fields* (1942) conveys. Within the context of Hong Kong's postdemocracy, it recalls the many dead creatures spotted across the city when over ten thousand rounds of tear gas were fired during the first six months of the protests. Stuart Heaver, a journalist from *The Independent*, recollects, "[t]he dead birds littering the streets of Hong Kong are an apposite symbol for the broken state of the city." In his comment, we can note that the word choice—"littered"— underscores disposability and the uselessness of the animal other. In still more visual terms, as our focus to the upper right, we find the leaf that covers the bird's eye marking the very limit of seeing itself. The usual potency associated with the term "bird's-eye view" is entirely lost. The deprivation of "sight," while certainly a result of the chemical impact of tear-gas, reveals more about the end of violent means: insofar as death is its mission, tear gas is species-blind. All-consuming, necropolitics is presented in this image as a willful disregard for the ecological crises created by the Anthropocene. Its sole aim is to put, by any means, all unrest under control and hence, animal lives do not matter if the end is achieved.

Figure 4's Chinese title "*but ding kei to ah*" ("Irregular Graffiti") also reveals the obscurity that necropolitics assumes in its violent origins. In the juxtaposition of "*but ding kei*" (irregular) and "*to ah*" (graffiti), the painter reverses our usual notions about the protesters' spontaneity. The title reminds us that if tear gas is fired, it is as sporadic as graffiti. It does not require confrontations to have taken place. That way, tear gas, being the sovereign's "synecdoche," helps to keep its malevolence nebulous.[12] Its job is achieved, as Mbembe has it, by "dissimulating and occluding the violence of its origins" (*Necropolitics* 16). The "invisibility" of the violence, worded differently, is here a reference to the poisonous element in the air that caused the unexplained deaths of many animal creatures. The sovereign simply denies their use of lethal weapons by explaining that the birds died naturally. In this way, the painter is attentive to the deadly presence of the invisible, keeping in line with this sense of the non-appearance. The shooters are not merely what is left outside of the visual frame. They are not the repressed. They are what occupies the same space of the visible. As Mbembe observes, "the reverse of the world (the invisible) [is] supposed to be part and parcel of its obverse (the invisible)" (*Postcolony* 145).

Figure 4: Anonymous, "*But ding kei to ah*" ("Irregular Graffiti") (*Defiance. Voices* 219).

[11] Mbembe's term "postcolony" refers to the complex temporalities of Africa. I find that his distinction between "age" (events visible and perceptible) and "*durée*" (events intermingling of reversals and folds) sheds much light on the many discontinuities of the political situation in Hong Kong; hence *durée*'s suitability for the former British colony.
[12] Mbembe's modern democracy, though different from Rancière's postdemocracy, converges on the point of the category of the uncounted. Where Mbembe calls it "category of the nonfellows" (*Necropolitics* 17), Rancière calls it "the people" or "dēmos" (*On the Shores* 31).

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Figure 5, ironically entitled "Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Restaurant," reveals that Figure 3's straightforward portrait of necropolitics is complicated by the debate over the issue of innocuity. Accounts of tear-gas assaults from the sovereign are altogether different from the public's actual experience and reports that journalists put out. Figure 4 underlies, for example, the evasions or equivocations by the Secretary of Food and Health, Sophia Chan, and the indictment by Martin Williams, a PhD in chemical physics from Cambridge University. Where Chan dismisses the danger of tear gas, Williams condemns the downplaying of health risks by the health officials.[13] Their drama is pictorialized by the waiter's reassurance of food safety, despite the customer's horrible culinary experience.

Figure 5: Liu, K.S., "*heung kong dak bit hang jing kui chan ting*" ("HKSAR Restaurant")(*Defiance*. *Voices* 214). The Cantonese reads, "Wanna vomit after eating … stomach hurts like it's burning, what's been added?" "We won't disclose the food components. But all in all, the food is absolutely safe."

The composition in this image stresses the knowledge gap between the waiter's awareness of the food's poisonous constituents and the customer's right to fundamental inquiry. When asked if the food has been adulterated with gastritis-causing irritants, the waiter's nonchalance and refusal to discuss further is quintessential of Chan's every public appearance. Necropolitics is "literally," albeit paradoxically and ironically, on the table, but its existence is suspended as invisible.

A more subterranean discourse is at work when one relates Figure 5 to the conceit of consumption. Here the necropolitical has taken an anthropomorphic turn different from the dead-bird scenario. The customer is reminded of his fundamental need for food. The lost object, understood as the toxic element that causes bodily nausea, is not as critical or damaging as the object cathected by the political economy, namely, the poisonous component denied. On the surface, both are the same object; they are two sides of the same coin. But the cathected one carries a political valence more so than the actual chemical. The customer here is, in this sense, the remainder of what Althusser would consider as a latent "anthropology" that keeps ascribing "the economic character of the [given] phenomena" to human needs. As opposed to the terms of "a 'naïve' anthropology, as Althusser explains, the needs are only such if they serve the nexus of production ("The Object" 314-315). The restaurant, in other words, functions only if the customer compromises the object of desire for the speculative object of the political economy.

The "Cruel Optimism" of the Bodies
Focusing on the disposability of bodies, the second cluster of necropolitical images, Figures 6 and 7, explores the mystery of deaths. Plausibly the most controversial amongst the three clusters of "dēmos-

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[13] Williams' warning is summarized in his 2019 op-ed, ""Health Officials Must Come Clean."

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necropolitics," it looks at images of mortality as a "speculative fiction," understood here as the dystopian depository divested of database, that circulates in the discursive space of the postcolony. In other words, these images are ontological registers of the dystopian condition of the city of Hong Kong but registers that nonetheless store information that are understood only through non-scientific means or a familiarity of the cunning tactics of destruction and violence practiced by authoritarian regimes. In doing so, it attempts to argue that rumors are existent attributes belonging to these 'speculative fictions,' which render Hong Kong's young generation transfixed in what Berlant refers to as "cruel optimism."[14] Our attention will be given to '*When the Absurd Turns Quotidian*' (Figure 7), a painting that appropriates Magritte's *Golconde* as an aesthetic object that haunts the surface economy of the postcolony.

A brief "historical" recap informs us that, although verifiable death counts are absent, social media fills in the gap with speculative death knells. For instance, Wong He, a pro-protest actor who used to work for the Royal Hong Kong Police before the city's handover, noted on his social-media account(s) that more than eight thousand bodies were found during the protest, and many were declared unsuspicious, presented by the police as "accidents" or having died from "natural causes." However, comments as such were often challenged as to the source of the data and while they were accepted by the pro-movement public as real, they were removed from social media and Google search, particularly when the National Security Law is now in place. But of the recognized deaths of protesters, and in particular the demise of Alex Chau and Yin-lam Chan, is what continues to garner debates and spontaneous mourning. In contrast to Chau's fall from a carpark, Chan's death was difficult to understand. A professional swimmer herself, the fifteen year-old's naked body was found in the sea near her campus in the Yau Tong area. Despite attempts to investigate surveillance cameras at the school, the coroner's inquest concluded with the jury all opting for an open verdict, after homicide and suicide were ruled out as a result of insufficient evidence.

Chan's death is simply visualized in Figure 6 as a naked female figure sinking all the way deep into the ocean. The Chinese words "*bit yeung jan seung cham mut*" ("Do Not Let Truth Drown") send out a clear message that keep demanding that the public retain their fidelity to truth.
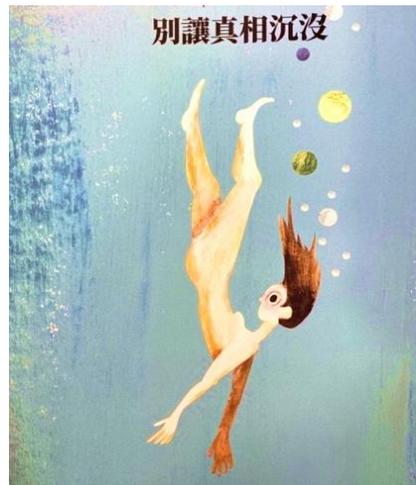
Figure 6: John Ho, "*Bit yeung jan sheung cham mut*" ("Do Not Let Truth Drown")(*Defiance. Voices* 182).

A more surrealist treatment of Chan's incident is presented in "*dong fong mau lun wai yat sheung*" ("When the Absurd Turns Quotidian") (Figure 7). Modifying Magritte's *Golconde*, the painting makes a mockery of a ruined city in Telangana, India. Once famous for its diamond trade, the ruined city was a former capital of two successive kingdoms, sharing Hong Kong's two major sovereignties and its legendary status as a trading center.

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[14] This idea is derived from Aristotle's point about "being qua being" in metaphysics. Simply put, it is the study of attributes of a thing insofar as they exist.

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Figure 7: Pon' Seed, "*dong fong mau lun wai yat sheung"* ("When the Absurd Turns Quotidian")(*Defiance*.
Voices 181).

Looking closely at the details, we can see that the setting has been changed from Golconde to Choi
Hung Estate (literally, "Rainbow Estate"), a public-housing estate for working-class people that was once
visited by President Richard Nixon in 1964 (Figure 8).

Figure 8: President Richard Nixon visiting Choi Hung Estate in the Sixties.[15]

A present-day Instagram favorite for tourists, the public estate is figured in the painting as a *topoi* of
necropolitics in which multiple naked bodies of men and women are hovering in the sky. Instead of the
bowler-hatted figures in Magritte's original, we have replications of almost identical figures, with varying
complexions. On the left, where we see a cellphone dripping with blood, the painter conjures our memory
of how images of dead bodies thrown directly out of residential buildings were accidentally captured by
mobile phones ("Video Shows Suspicious 'Suicide' in Hong Kong"). While the necropolitical conspiracy

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[15] The photo is still available at Hong Kong Housing Authority website ("Richard Nixon, the former President of the
United States, plays badminton").

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is unsubstantiated, the the treatment of the general public and the sense of mortality can be summarized in David Sylvester's delineation of Magritte's painting: "they are part of a pattern like a wallpaper pattern, infinitely repeatable and extendable. They seem like a sample of an infinity of identical helpless beings" (Sylvester, "Golconde by Rene Magritte" 216).[16] Although Sylvester's delineation is descriptive in nature, his words help us situate "When the Absurd Turns Quotidian" in necropolitical terms, as the protesters were held by the sovereign as identical, disposable objects.

Beyond the all-too-easy reading of criminality into the painting, my analysis is concerned more with the disposability of the bodies. Numerous occurrences during the protest period all point to the dominant public discourse that constantly refer to young people as "*fai ching*," a Cantonese catchword that means "useless youths." Long before the protests, young people had been sabotaged, openly and otherwise, for their failure to produce meaningful work, while they are also encouraged to work extraordinarily hard if they wish to have their own place to live. It is this whole idea of "*fai ching*" that enslaves the young people to a form of "cruel optimism." In Berlant's explanation, this demand is indifferent to one's real desire, which is replaced by "the endurance of an object" that supports a production-driven society. A mind-forged manacle, "cruel optimism" forces Hong Kong's youths to "compromise conditions of possibility" and leaves them stuck with the "sense of what it means to keep on living" and "to look forward to being in this world."[17] This accounts for why, in removing the suitcases and umbrellas, the naked bodies suggest that death is the end result if work is removed from their lives. In Margritte's *Golconde*, the stultifying regimentation of their appearance reflects the boring routine of their work life. In Figure 7, the stiffness of the individuals points to the nonconforming "*fai ching*," "whose value is extra-economic, the only equivalent of which is the sort of death able to be inflicted on it" (Mbembe, "In the Postcolony" 38).

In paintings where bodies are laid beside one another without leaving any space for the past and future, Jean-Luc Nancy believes, negativity can be sublimated through "the infinity of finitude" (85).[18] "When the Absurd Turns Quotidian" is not a piece about Freudian or Lacanian sublimation. It confronts necropolitics of the dēmos by emphasizing the surplus of carcasses, a surplus that was reported by numerous independent news groups on Facebook which are no longer in operation now due to the introduction of the National Security Law. The many unaccounted-for and non-official deaths of protestors continuously mourned by Hongkongers make sublimation a question of representational aesthetics capable of redemption, rather than speculative fiction refusing to purify. In fact, the relentlessness of people in mourning unofficial deaths makes it futile and unnecessary to elevate the work of art to the level of dignity that characterizes sublimation. The connection between cadaver and homicide thus remains as an openness, demanding the need to find out if Chan's death is part of a larger schema. Although the specks of blood on the buildings make the ruinous architecture seem like *lettres*, connotative of the corporeal aspect of actual necropolitics, the conjectural demises are here to stay afloat in the "aletheia," an opening to presence.[19]

Deadly Econometrics

Our last cluster of necropolitical images (Figures 9, 10, 11) consists of a series of counterfeit money called "Hell Bank Notes." Presented here blurred, I retouched the original images to screen out anything that might be vexatious to the authority figures in the government and the police force whose mugshots are shown (Figure 9). Almost identical in layout, these notes present these political officials as ghostly figures from an earlier historical period, paradoxically resembling the real fake ones sold in the market during ancestral days, commemorations, or the annual Hungry Ghost Festival (Figure 10). As a Chinese ritual, burning these counterfeit notes for the dead is a way to pay tribute to the ancestors. Contrary to Han Byung-Chul's belief in ritual's disappearance, which he argues is a result of the deterioration from symbolic (endurance) to serial perception (short-lived) in contemporary society, this ancestral practice is still pervasive and is used as a curse or in the form of burlesques in this painting (*Disappearance of*

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[16] Praised as the finest writer of art in the second half of the twentieth century, Sylvester took twenty-five years to put together Magritte's *catalogue raisonné*. He was known for his promotion of the work of Lucian Freud, the grandson of Sigmund Freud. Comments cited in Oswald.

[17] Berlant's analysis of Charles Johnson's "Exchange Value" is also telling for understanding the blame placed on the youths' futility to produce valuable values for Hong Kong.

[18] Nancy's notion of "being nude" speaks precisely of the collapse of time in naked bodies placed beside one another. While it fits the temporal collapse in postcolony that we have been developing here, the negative dialectics he ascribes to the image places him more in the realm of redemption found in political theology.

[19] Like his notion of Dasein, Heidegger changes his notion of "aletheia" throughout his oeuvre. Here it refers more to the unconcealment of being. See Krell for a detailed account.

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Rituals 7).[20] It has been used to ridicule unquestioned values such as filial piety.[21] Ricky's series of "Hell Bank Notes" (Figure 9) certainly give shape, aesthetically, to the death wishes that "the dēmos" harbor towards the sovereign. They also serve as a reminder of the unarticulated greed for wealth that is behind the political decisions of those who are in power. In my view, however, the painting is a 'speculative fiction' of a potentially deadly econometrics within the network of Sino-American relationality.

Figure 9: Ricky, "Untitled" (*Defiance. Voices* 155).

Figure 10: Lazer Horse, "Chinese Hell Money." Lazer Horse's blog shows the "hell bank note" market for the deceased, a business whereby one uses money to purchase fake bank notes to be burned, believing that the ancestors can "receive" them and use them in a non-human realm.

In econometrics, statistics and calculus are used to analyze finance and theories of, say, frequency and correlation distribution. For example, the American sociologist Linton C. Freeman introduces a "betweenness centrality" that measures the extent to which a node lies on a path between other nodes, quantifying the number of times a node acts as a bridge along the geometric path between two other nodes. Whether in the form of money-liquidity or physical goods, a node lying on that path has higher "betweenness centrality" and influence on the whole network.[22] In this econometric context, Hong Kong is that node between China and America. Fluctuations aside, the "betweenness centrality" of Hong Kong is reflected in the Report to Congress in 2020 (mainland firms raised $143 billion of their foreign inflows in Hong Kong) and the Office of the United States Trade Representative (Foreign Direct Investment [FDI] in Hong Kong stock in 2019 reaching $82 billion). The Sino-American trade war has affected each country's yield around this "speculative fiction" that everything is real but subjected to repositioning in this economic tug of war.[23]

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[20] Byung-Chul's thinking is that symbolic perception of rituals (endurance) is replaced by serial perception (short-lived) in contemporary society (7).

[21] Blake is observant (451) about the carnivalesque politics in Bakhtin, which Mbembe applies to African dissensus (*Postcolony* 102-72).

[22] Freeman's model is a living proof that equality ascribed to all vectors in Bruno Latour's actor-network model is hypothetically juvenile (Latour, *Resembling*).

[23] See report to Congress at https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-12/2020_Annual_Report_to_Congress.pdf (521) and US Trade Representative https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/hong-kong.

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Within this framework, the more provocative disobedience that this fake currency ontologizes is the violence arising from the resolute stance that China and America adopt.[24] There is no denial that Cold War 2.0 has begun. Graham Allison's classic trope of Thucydides's War, which postulates the probability that an established power is likely to respond with violence when challenged by the rising power, recognizes just these deadly econometrics with the dollar. Allison is equally panoramic in observing how a peaceful version of the "necropolitic" was in place from the American standpoint. In his reminder, President John F. Kennedy's sudden affirmation of Americans' stance "to live and let live" in the face of the Soviet Union is a mathematics that is transcendental: it is Russian roulette.[25] Kennedy stopped short of a truly dead war. Yet the artist who puts JFK's face on the "Hell Bank Note" might be telling us that, whoever the sovereign is in Hong Kong, the gentleman's agreement that worked before will not work in this new econometric network, and it might cost lives in unimaginable ways (Figure 11). We should pay heed, instead, to Mbembe's warning that the beginning of "another long and deadlier game" (*Necropolitics* 110) has dawned, with the new Leviathan:

> The main clash of the first half of the twentieth century will not oppose religions or so-called civilizations. It will oppose liberal democracy and global capitalism. It will pit, in ways we have not seen before, the rule of finance against the rule of people. It will oppose what we used to refer to as 'humanism,' on the one hand, and, on the other, technomillenarianism and its corollary, nihilism in all its many accents and dystopian forms of expression. (*Necropolitics* 110)

Figure 11: Lazer Horse, "Chinese Hell Money."

On the Clouds of Political Promises
Starting out originally as a revaluation of Rancière's applicability to Hong Kong's aesthetics, this inquiry has spun out to become a kind of Bermuda triangle that draws from African political theory, European philosophy, and American econometrics. In this triangular fabulation, the *topoi* of Hong Kong are nothing but a 'speculative fiction' in a zero-sum game. Neither real nor unreal, they are what ontologically engages with the irreversible disturbances that took place in the postcolony.[26] By moving in and out of these three nodal points,[27] my sojourn adumbrates how sovereign violence percolates into the everyday and how "the people" historicize their existence using visual artifacts.[28] The three notional exemplars—tear-gas consumption, "cruel optimism" in relation to dead bodies, and deadly econometrics—are just "accidental" emblems of how necropolitics work against corporeal existence, as the latter is caught in stratagems of economic entanglement.[29]

An aesthetic journey as such will surely be met with challenges relating to the value—use, exchange, or surplus—that art possesses. Rancière, in his most recent interview, contents that his aim is not to attribute any "messianic role to art," but he is unambiguously supportive of its ability to enrich our

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[24] Allison's metaphor of Thucydides's Trap is more than apt as a means to picture the trade war once China tilts the scale in the network (*Destined for War*).

[25] See Allison's account of American politics in *Destined for War*.

[26] Of the many questions raised by Levi Bryan, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman, I am more drawn to whether the "subject" of an inquiry and the inquiring "subject" can be explained, if not exonerated, by the institutes of phenomenology or psychoanalysis, particularly when we are aware of the survivor's guilt.

[27] They are nodal points because even Africa is an arbitrary postulate that must be seen "as a China question," Mbembe argues in his latest collection of essays on decolonization, *Out of the Dark Night*.

[28] Note that just the people's definition also shifts in the way Rancière's phrases it. He even claims, "'the people' does not exist." For an elaboration of this non-existence of the people in the dēmos, see Racière's "Attacks on 'Populism' Seek to Enshrine the Idea That There Is No Alternative." Reposted on Verso's website.

[29] Catherine Malabou posits the accidental as a negative possibility that is neither an affirmation nor a lack, but a sheer witness to "a power that *forms*" (85).

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experience of the world.[30] The "dēmo-necropolitics" in Hong Kong's art are quite different from the function of art that Rancière discusses. While some are appropriated for counter-insurgence, some are more conjectural pieces for "historizing" or ontologizing the protest-event. Art, particularly visual art, turned out to occupy a much more controversial space than Rancière's projection. In the era of National Security Law, art strives to remain as it "is." Witness a high-school teacher being sacked and having his teaching license revoked as he shared political lampoons on social media. Witness, also, five people getting arrested on suspicion of seditious materials simply by likening "the dēmos" to sheep pursued by wolves in children's books (Linburgh and Liu, "Hong Kong Arrest"). Necropolitical images from *Voices* cannot offer plebeian dissensus in the traditional sense; instead, they simply "*are*."

In existing as "pure" witness, the aesthetics borne by *Voices* is given the burden of proof regarding political promises. Hannah Arendt's faith lies in the miraculous ontology of action, Slavoj Žižek offers an education on the causality of violence, and Eric Swyngedouw the re-politicized techne of governance.[31] For Mbembe, his gambit is located in seeing life's very struggles as political aesthetics, reflecting on what resists death (*The Critique of Black Reason* 174).[32] I think it would be luxurious to ask if the question of aesthetics in Hong Kong delivers "the future of the image," as Rancière phrases it, but I am in tandem with Mbmbme on visuality in decolonial times.[33] "The time after," a phrase Rancière uses to describe Bèla Tarr's cinema, should be posed as the art of *being* necropolitical, that "harsh glare where all language loses its power."[34]

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[30] Rancière affirms in his interview "Jacques Rancière: The Issue Is to Manage to Maintain Dissensus" that: "I don't believe at all in the great narratives of art standing up against power, art standing up against capital." https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/5132-jacques-ranciere-the-issue-is-to-manage-to-maintain-dissensus. Accessed 29, Aug. 2021.

[31] Speaking of Arendt's belief in his introduction, Kohn writes, "the 'miracle' of action is ontologically rooted in humankind" (xxxii). Zizek's paternal offer is a lesson on "what causes this violence" of the "mediatic images of violence" (8). Swyngedouw urges for an "reassertion of the political" (xxii).

[32] In Mbembe's words, it is "the struggle to live, to stay alive, to survive" themselves that form the most important political-aesthetic question (*Black Reason* 174).

[33] Rancière's image still follows Auerbach's mimesis, although it's not necessarily a faithful copy but a good-enough stand-in (*Future* 6). My notion of "speculative fiction" does not make such a distinction.

[34] Temporality in Rancière's philosophy gets a more elaborate treatment in his study of visuality than politics alone (*Béla Tarr*). Saint-John Perse, "Snows," qtd. in Mbembe's *Out of the Dark Night* (1).

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