

The Mutability of Freedom

The Aural Horizon of a Liberal Framework and the
Global Art Circuit

Colm Guo-Lin Peare

1. The horizon as hegemony

The horizon, as it stretches out before us, is a flat note. I hear it as constant drone, unsusceptible to the temptations of vacillation and stubborn in its continuity. The land rises up and, for a while, distracts us with its endeavour to undulate the perfect monotony. When finally it is exhausted by the act of interference it falls away and what is left is the ringing of the horizon. This unrelenting stave both grants the footing for its disruption and the security of its fundament.

The horizon provides us with an imaginary for hegemony. The domination of the horizon's curve is normalised so as to be imperceptible, its subtending force so large as to be flattened into reason. What is bestowed is reassurance, a reassurance both beautiful and oppressive. I only need to position myself in an empty expanse to feel the weight of its impossible expectation of my arrival. Hegemony installs ideological presuppositions as naturalised rules of governance and in doing so creates a flattened out horizon encircling its subject. The construction of hegemony entails interlinking the mutating forms of critical validation, economic reason and socio-cultural ideology and puts them in the dynamic business of both generating and extracting their constitutive logics in symbiosis with each other.

2. Liberalism manifests

What I will attempt to do here is to position a certain definition of liberalism as this horizon. I have written this piece as a product of my tenure as the Writer-in-Residence for the 15th Berwick Film and Media Arts Festival in 2019 (BFMAF 2019) and I hope to extrapolate outwards from its internationalised exhibition format to lay bear a certain antinomy that makes liberalism's hegemony problematic. I am outlining a certain definition of liberalism here which, at its core, takes the protection, growth and enabling of a subject's individual freedoms as its motivating energy. When we think about how this energy manifests in the social context of our collectivity, we see the grounds upon which civil liberties, non-discriminatory practices and cultural tolerance are constructed: if I am existing in a society in which my individual freedoms are paramount, then how I identify in accordance to sexuality, race, gender, religion, and any other self-determining characterisation, or how I choose to practice culture, should be protected, grown and enabled by the system's societal structures.

However, if we take these same rights and apply it to the political economy of a liberal society, then this same prioritisation of the right to autonomy equates to the untethered accumulation of capital, in which the subject's freedom to choose how they gain and distribute wealth should also be left unhindered. This motivation produces the conjoined twin snakes of liberal capitalism that we live in today, they form each other out of the shared doctrine of private accumulation. This ideology supposes that there is an inherency in the desire to grow individual capital assets and thus the rule of maximum economy becomes how government is practiced and how we are subjectivated. Taken to its volatile extremity, what results is a neoliberalism in which the rule of maximum economy not only governs the state but the individual's ethics. Maximum economy, once just the technical precondition for rational government, has now morphed from

being a domain of justice to a form of truth, replacing ethical considerations once defined by the social bonds of familial, religious, or citizenry values with market rationality. This leads to the mythologising of labour, promoting the assumptive ideology that work is redemptive, that choice defines a subject's social position and that a subject's placement in any societal hierarchy is deserved. This erases much of the complexities involved in discerning and dissecting the structural complexities that factor how the channels that funnel capitals into certain types of people and not other types of people are carved into our societies.

3. An inherent antinomy

When society is at the whim of the market's exigencies the vast majority are subjugated by an environment of precarity. If morality has become to be judged by how a subject is personally accountable for maximising economy in all spheres of the subject's life, then the incorporation of the worker into an infrastructure that provides certain social securities (that allow for the vulnerability of the human body) does not only seem irrationally uneconomic but actually immoral. Instead of these costs being absorbed by the employer or the state, and thus redistributing the accumulated capital extracted from the exploited labour of the worker that is held by the capitalist responsible, all accountability is burdened onto the individual. This fundamental logic allows the basis on which the ideology of austerity can be built and is exposed by the language of personal responsibility that it is sold by.

The promotion of difference, that manifests from liberalism's social tenet, is used to justify inequality in its economic sphere. This idea of maximum economy can be the only discernible objectivity and so eventually cultural difference becomes superficialised. Identity, like all aspects of sociality, is now an arena defined by the market and thus can be capitalised on. Consequently, it must conform to the liberal economic framework and thus can not actually be truly heterogeneous as it must be characterised by this specific objectivity. So this mechanism takes in cultural difference and forces it to assimilate to a capitalist end. Thus eventually, economic inequality is the only difference that can have true difference. This is the assimilative homogenisation of liberalism, in which its markets can be the only discernible objectivity, thus flattening out cultural differences in service to maximum economy.

Liberalism's social tenet assumes that for co-existence to be enabled, individual autonomy must be privileged. When liberalism is driven to its inevitable extreme by its universalising energy, this tenet stops becoming the precondition for coexistence and morphs into the form of ethical truth that I have laid out above. Atomisation occurs because difference becomes disabled through an economic inequality that disallows certain peoples access to travel, education and work. This is, of course, antithetical to Liberalism's core social values. Here we see the paradox arise from Liberalism's cultural values promulgating difference and then the flattening out or the superficialisation of this difference when the management of its economy also abides by the same ideology.

Our current mutation of liberalism cannot be defined as an aberration of liberalism's original ideals, when what constitutes it is how liberalism is defined in its first instance. Liberalism breeds authoritarianism and

has always existed with and within it. Colonial logics have benefited and benefit from the righteousness of liberal ideology in its cultural form, while using its twin economic form to rationalise its violence. This still plays out today in a slew of settler-colonial oppressions such as the judicial discrimination of indigenous people in Australia, the contestation of Kashmiri Muslims' right to self-identify, or the relentless suppression of political autonomy by peoples in Northern Syria. Identity can only be practiced if it is in the framework of a secularised and liberalised state; other cognitive schemas to this political economy are *too* different and thus difference itself becomes domesticated, superficialised and tokenistic. Social and cultural 'progression' for one society through engaging in liberalism's ideology has always come at the expense of oppression of another societal group, winning the public social mandate of liberal societies through its cultural tenet and rationalising its abuses through its economic one.

So here lies our paradox. I realise that this overview is brief and extremely assumptive, however, my goal here is not to define our environment with a singular term, especially in the scope of this short text. Rather I would try to start a process of visibilising these factors that lie at the heart of the context that we find ourselves in. These factors are also the most obscure since the arc of liberalism's subtending force is so large that its ideology is normalised, much like how the curvature of the horizon seems flat when viewed from our human perspective. This consequently invisibly conditions all of our modes of expression and creates a hostile terrain for resistance.

4. The doubled action

The horizon as an imaginary of hegemony inflicts a doubled action. At once, we see the normalisation of its subtending force as our flattened out enclosure, hear its incessant drone as the inevitable backdrop to our existence. Its second performance is its tactful evasion, or rather the coercion of our belief that results in us formalising it as capable of seizure. It is an ungraspable telos and this is what grants its assimilative drive an unending reserve of energy. Our efforts to finally reach it, to finally pluck the monotonous tone of perfection from the air, will justify its assimilation of difference and the violence inflicted in the name of this progress.

The crutch of ordered structure gives credence to a logic and allows the formulation of an ethic. Its stubbornness, however, leads to banality and to the degradation of thought. For a writer, the linearity of the page and the written word, the reliance on metaphor and allegory, provide sticking posts that allow us to navigate our inhabited landscape. They can be dangerously universal and yet their stubbornness allows for the consolidation of reason.

The curation of any festival exhibition is an act of consolidation: on the most part, the act of programming is an attempt to thematise so that individual works intersect at the point of the festival exhibition. This seems like a presentation of liberalist social values: to coexist in this international exhibition, there must be individual autonomy granted to the artists to express as they wish. However this difference goes through a similar process of pacification that I laid out above due to the fact that, to be allowed entry into this distributive model, it needs to fit within the parameters of an individualistic economy. So although the

content of works may wish, as many are want to do in the contemporary moment, to present alternative strategies to individualism, privilege embodied experience over capitalistic reason, or exemplify the specification of cultural experience, they are nonetheless contributing to a larger system that works in contradistinction to the enactment of these values.

5. Production and distribution

Although it may seem that the international exhibition operates under the premise of generating constructive antagonism through ostensibly performing aesthetic plurality, much of the produce is conditioned by the experience of those privileged enough to go through certain vectors to develop a language that these value judgements are made in. Despite the promise of plurality, what occurs is a conditioning of expression and the privileging of certain modes of presentation. The wider circuit makes artists individual agents competing for the same resources (including but not limited to exhibitions, funding, and residency positions). This is rooted in the systemic requirement for individuals to maximise their own personal economy and thus be unrestricted and freely autonomous. This socio-economic structure of atomisation resists the creation of political solidarities where declarations of difference can be antagonistically actualised contra to the ideology of the hegemony it is situated in. Individual progress or, in the case of marginalised identities, individual empowerment becomes prioritised over shared emancipation and so actioning structural change becomes incredibly difficult.

The vectorised condition of contemporary art is formed of a matrix consisting of: usually Western, usually fee-paying, graduate programmes; residency positions that symbolically signify a meritocratic development of the individual; and the international exhibition circuit that is comprised of galleries, biennales and festivals. These constituents condition actors within their network to either be or behave under a certain ideologically imposed logic. For instance, the inherent internal structure of a residency will, for the most part, require the participant to take a stretch away to allow time, space and sometimes resources to pursue their practice. Therefore the wage labour that this participant undertakes for subsistence between such 'opportunities', the wage labour that absorbs the costs of their art practice, must allow for flexibility and therefore be usually bereft of security. The practice developed at such a residency might speak in the language of emancipation, the residency itself might also sell itself in this language, but its essential structure tempers and domesticates such aims by coercing the actor involved to contribute to a wider socio-economic structure of precarity. It is clear that marginalised people and people with social and economic dependencies are most at risk from the precarity induced by hyper-liberalised business structures because they implicitly discriminate against vulnerable workers who need more security and an acknowledgment of the costs that are incurred in our society when your ability to work is compromised by uncontrollable factors. The interference of critique is thus pacified and hegemony may continue its incessant hum, its differentially ascribed audibility crescendoing in accordance with how vulnerable the subject is to its effects.

So we see these structures, through the soft power of culture, breeding a will to globality, while simultaneously promoting economic individualism and thus tending the ground of inequality. Thus the antinomy of liberalism that I have presented visibly plays out on the stage of art's global distribution.

6. Kira Muratova and Marwa Arsanios at BFMAF 2019

For instance, let us look at the work of Kira Muratova and its socio-political relationship to film history. *Brief Encounters*, the first film to be shown here at BFMAF 2019, presents a perspective of the rural condition during the Soviet era as desperately oppressive of the individual human spirit. We follow one of the film's leads, Nadia, as she leaves her native village in search of opportunity. She ends up working for Valya, the district committee leader, as a maid and falls into a love-triangle in which both women are seduced by Maxim, the perhaps paradoxically described free-spirited geologist.

It is interesting to question Muratova's inclusion in this programme. Most of her work was subject to Soviet censoring and *Brief Encounters* wasn't shown for about 20 years after it was made. The logic behind such a decision was due to the fact that the work didn't align with the Soviet socialist realism that the state was promoting. Her work didn't aptly enough, if at all, glorify the values of the Communist regime. They were too rich with the struggles of opportunity and the selfishness of love, too lacking in representations of emancipatory collectivity. In *Brief Encounters*, we see Valya's frustrations with the inefficiency of Soviet bureaucracy and her yearning to cut ties from these state-sanctioned responsibilities so she can live in accordance with the doctrine of freedom and pleasure that Maxim embodies, despite knowing full-well how empty and inevitably saccharine this promise would be. It is interesting to note too how Muratova has often been positioned in the canon of feminist film-making, a discourse that itself has debts to liberal values and their social manifestation in civil liberties. This is what the censors saw when they disallowed her film's the opportunity to present their reality: they saw these liberal values that posit that the desire for individual autonomy is inevitable and unshakable.

Within the context of BFMAF 2019, Muratova is heralded by her 'Filmmaker in Focus' position. So we see a repositioning of this work, from the characterisation of being too socially liberal, to being deified for exactly these values by the mechanism of the film festival that we find ourselves in. Under the performative first layer of exhibition, what is actually valued is the work's ability to be included in the homogenised structure of economic liberalism. Referring back to my premise, is this not a cause of ethical concern? When we ask for difference, all we are really asking for is a performance of culture that can be assimilated into this economic ideology. I think it is important to make clear that even though the judgement that unwavering individualism is performed in Muratova's work can be contested (in fact I would welcome the resistance to such a singular reading of the diversity of her oeuvre and would also encourage more nuanced readings of Soviet ideology's relationship to the individual), I think it is undeniable that this value is the same as that of the conceptualisation of our art's socio-cultural ideology. We could go so far as to claim that it is exactly the resistance to the censorship of these values which makes her work so celebrated today.

The second artist I would like to examine is Marwa Arsanios. Never losing her way in the haze of abstraction, Arsanios critically bleeds the canon of traditional Western documentary theory to form a miscellany of ethics capable of questioning societal and political structures of oppression, exposing alternatives to individualisation and the patriarchal and colonial structures that this gives birth to. For instance, in *Amateurs, Stars and Extras or the labor of love*, Arsanios works with the Domestic Workers Syndicate in Mexico City to draw comparisons between the gendered and racialised invisible labour of domestic work with that of the invisible labour of extras and crew on film-sets, taking the location of the film-set as a materialisation of capitalism's intrinsic hierarchies. In her most recent work, *Who's Afraid of Ideology*, Arsanios documents the lives of an all-women village in Northern Syria. This work's territory is set post the Syrian revolution and looks to the new democratic structures unfurling in the North. What we are presented with is the politicised notion of collectivity and redistribution *in practice*, something that is often theorised about in the West, as we try in small ways to temper the behemoth prescription of the rules and regulations of individualism that we all abide by.

Again there are complexities in this work that I cannot fully go into in the scope of this text, such as the community's reliance on NGO's and international support, but at its heart I read this film as a paean to the ramifying possibilities of the collective production of knowledge and the egalitarian redistribution of power. However, if we focus our gaze not on the content of these films but how they have arrived to us, we can see once more an ethical tension that arises from its complicity in the distributive circuits of contemporary art. Again, difference has to be performed and the very content of the films speak against the structures which give it exposure and a platform for visibilisation. Arsanios herself has written that one of the triggers for the 2011 Arab uprisings was the failure by states to provide cereal and bread, and the genealogy of this crisis in Syria can be traced back to the 'slow dismantling of socialist agriculture and to the ensuing liberalisation process' which led to the industrialised manufacturing of a grain monoculture. So a process of liberalisation leads to *economic* inequality, while at the same time providing the motivation for creating work that champions the alterity of these different *social* modes of governance that are developing in Northern Syria. Similarly, with Arsanios' work with the Domestic Workers Syndicate of New Mexico, the content of the film is explicitly about the invisible and gendered labour of the tens of thousands of domestic workers that enact the labour of care for a predominately white economically elite class. Yet the mode in which she must exhibit, within the international art circuit, authors her solely as the artist: she solely takes the economic, cultural and political capital, which is a form of extraction in itself.

7. Exiting the horizon

I would like to give a final rejoinder to these issues. I understand the problems of this text in that the issues I have laid out have stayed solely in the discursive. What are the practical ways to move forward, to not feed structures that on a larger scale produce inequality, while fighting for the exhibition and enactment of individual civil rights? When economic inequality is the affirmative objective of a systemic structure, regulatory measures in both the institutional and personal sphere become endlessly expending. Passivity holds a higher degree of immunity to critique and thus can be a tempting response to oppressions resultant of hegemony. The piercing monotony of hegemony is differentiated by privilege and those more susceptible to its screech will not accept deafness to these moral contradictions that form the ideological and uncritical dimensions of our ethical deliberations. However, the implicit ideologies that are laced through our very modes of expression, and through our modes of expressive distribution, tirelessly inflict complicity and we must be aware of how many of these paradoxical tensions we can hold in our human capacity.

The inevitable question of how to resist in practice is a subject worth a great deal many more texts. What I will say here is that I do not mean to invalidate the work of the artist in these structures, nor necessarily the work of the institutions we find ourselves in. There is still great import in the exchange and explication of cultural expression in service to dynamically plural emancipatory efforts and to disbelieve the force of instituent power in this endeavour is not an entitlement that many can afford. If we circle round to the beginning of this text, I would say that this short introduction to the liberal framework that manifests itself within the distributive circuit of contemporary art does not seek to colonise these structures in the singular definition I have laid out. Nor is it to condemn all those that labour in the reconstitution of our infrastructures by claiming that complicity erases all resistance. Even though the form of this text exhibits a dialectical strategy, I have not aimed to mimic liberalism's tendency to homogenise by providing a totalitarian answer to the question of how to alter its hegemony. Rather I hope that this text's aftermath can be characterised by problematisation.

The act of calling out power's name instigates the ramifying potential of the echo: the inevitable antagonism that must rise up in plural reverberation against the operation of proclaiming a singular definition. The mutability of freedom, its ability to oscillate in definition, forms the crux of liberalism's inherent antinomy that manifests complicity when navigating its social and economic spheres. However, the aural horizon of its hegemony can only be realised if this mutability is first recognised as a power that holds sway by its coercive ability to appear mute. Such a mute-ability must be spoken: only by first stripping hegemony of its inaudible power can our cognisance heighten and we can begin many processes of unthinking ideology.