



Bruno Pacheco,  
*White Poppies*  
(*Meeting Point*),  
2013, oil on canvas,  
260 × 160cm.  
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Pedro Tropa

## What Is the Contemporary?

– Peter Pál Pelbart

I

Two centuries ago, Immanuel Kant wrote an article in response to the question ‘What is the Enlightenment?’<sup>1</sup> His reply was categorical: the Enlightenment is humankind’s emergence from its minority — a minority which human beings themselves bear the guilt. Here is a definition that is simultaneously a realisation, a demand and a programme, under the shadow of which we have lived since. For Kant, the task consists in abandoning the state of tutelage, of dependency, of minority. Understood in this way, modernity is not a historical period but, rather, an attitude: a relationship to the present day, a way of feeling and thinking, what the Greeks called *ethos* — the ethos of modernity.

Michel Foucault emphasised the fact that this definition not only implies a relation to the present, but also a relation to itself, an elaboration of itself, a relation to behaviour, to feelings, to passions; indeed, to life itself. Hence the extravagant bridge that Foucault built between Kant and Charles Baudelaire: ‘Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself.’<sup>2</sup> Nowadays, the permanent creation of ourselves entails overcoming our contingency, that is, our current historical configuration, beyond all humanism.

At present, it is difficult not to agree with Kant’s conclusion. Who would oppose the defence of autonomy, the demand to think for oneself, the formal claim to freeing oneself from tutelage, from dependency, from delegating thought to others? Who would ignore the reservations of Foucault, for whom the flight from minority should not be based upon

### Peter Pál Pelbart presents a series of theses to undermine the covert demands of Enlightenment modernity.

a conception of humanism akin to religion and morality (universal tenets that he never ceased to question)? Who would refute the injunction to make a work of art of one’s own life, above all in a collective sense? Who would refuse the

practical transgression of that which we are? Finally — and in spite of Foucault’s having asked himself, with some scepticism, if we shall someday truly come of age — who would oppose this praise of maturity?

And yet, is it not clear that these demands of maturity, seriousness and responsibility come with a surreptitious expectation of obedience, bondage and submission? Does not the demand for majority conceal the demand for a so-called larger, dominant, hegemonic, even normative standard? Does it not seem that majority represents an ideal of servility and submission to an allegedly natural or moral already given humanity?

Hence, wouldn’t the most radical challenge consist precisely in escaping a majority that is individually and collectively imposed upon us, as an ideal, a nature, a progress or fate — questioning these majoritarian objectives, which always risk appearing (to the eyes of adults) frivolous, irresponsible and irrational, not to mention infantile and unreasonable? Was it not this majoritarian terrorism that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari fought against throughout their work and revealed as the standard of the white-rationalist-urban-European-consumerist-male, that figure who, despite being far from the numerical majority of the planet’s population, imposes itself everywhere as a measure, in philosophy or in the media, in politics or in the clinic, in economics or aesthetics? The schizoid, the nomadic and the deterritorialised are all

1 Immanuel Kant, ‘An Answer to the Question: “What is Enlightenment?”’ (1784), in I. Kant, *Practical Philosophy* (trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp.11–23.  
2 Michel Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment?’ (1984), *The Politics of Truth* (ed. Sylvère Lotringer and Lysa Hochtroth, trans. Lysa Hochtroth and Catherine Porter), Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), p.118.

ways of escaping the hegemony of this pattern. Is it not up to the becoming-woman, the becoming-child, the becoming-animal, the becoming-indigenous, the becoming-black, the becoming-molecule, the becoming-intense, the becoming-imperceptible to question this standard as human, all too human, universal, all too universal, anthropocentric, all too anthropocentric, enlightened, all too enlightened?<sup>3</sup> Even in political terms, Deleuze replied with great irreverence to Antonio Negri's question about winning the majority: how to win the majority is a totally secondary problem in relation to the advances of the imperceptible.<sup>4</sup> Against a rational, communicative, humanist majority; against a desire to become the majority, Deleuze and Guattari proposed not the dependent minority criticised by Kant, but a myriad of minor becomings, short circuits, slippages, lines of escape and detours. No puerility here whatsoever; only a map of the forces and signs that are subtracted, those that flee and lead towards flight from the empire of dominant (molar) powers; from the majority and its models, its gregariousness and its impoverishment.

## II

But these forces must be seen. Deleuze said that in a given situation the clairvoyant sees something that exceeds her, that overflows him; a phenomenon that has nothing to do with fantasy. The object of clairvoyance is reality itself, a dimension of reality where its empirical contours are extrapolated in order to better grasp its potential, entirely real albeit not yet unfolded. Like Samuel Beckett's exhausted insomniac, what the fortune teller sees are intensities — not the future, the dream, the ideal, or the perfect project, but forces in the process of redesigning reality.<sup>5</sup> Let us think of June 2013 in Brazil. That month, masses of protesters 'saw' something that had been right in front of everyone's eyes for a long time but suddenly appeared to be intolerable: the monopoly of representation by parties, the monopoly of force by the police, the monopoly of information by the media, the monopoly of investments in gigantic spectacles; in short, the abduction of the commons. Amidst that, they realised that transportation should be a common good, like the green of Taksim Square, like water, land, the internet, information, codes, knowledge and the city.<sup>6</sup> Within this context, wealth and influence represented an assault upon the conditions of contemporary cognitive production, which increasingly requires free sharing of the commons — the need to share knowledge, information, imagination. To make what is common ever more common — in times past some called this communism. Nowadays simply pronouncing the word amounts to an assault on common sense. But what represents a veritable assault is the expropriation of the commons: the attack and systematic impoverishment of the source and very material of the contemporary — communal life.

Recently, Maurizio Lazzarato referred to a need to think in political terms about the conjunction between mobilisation and demobilisation: mobilisation and suspension, acceleration and arrest, proliferation and indeterminacy.<sup>7</sup> The journalists asked: 'What do the demonstrators want?' No one had an answer. Slavoj Žižek said that it is easier to know what a woman wants than what Occupy Wall Street wanted.<sup>8</sup> But his misogynistic quip was made in the name of reason, of responsibility, of majority. One would need to speak of desire rather than of demands. The latter may be negotiated and satisfied,

3 On the differences between Kant's and Deleuze's approaches to emancipation, see Diogo Sardinha, *L'émancipation de Kant à Deleuze*, Paris: Hermann, 2013.

4 See 'Control and Becoming' (Gilles Deleuze in conversation with Antonio Negri), in *Negotiations* (trans. Martin Joughin), New York: Columbia University Press, 1995, pp.169—76.

5 Samuel Beckett, *Nacht und Träume (Night and Dreams)*, 1982), available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yWtIatoBK4M> (last accessed on 25 February 2015).

6 Editors' Note: Jornadas de Junho, or 'June Journeys', is one of the monikers of the mass demonstrations that shook Brazil in the spring of 2013. Building on the global social movements that emerged in the wake of the so-called Arab Spring in the winter of 2010—11, including the Occupy movement, the Brazil protests were sparked by a rise in bus fares in various cities across the country. They soon encompassed the public's broader disenchantment with the corrupt and classist policies enforced by Brazil's ruling elite. These demonstrations occurred at the same time as protesters were taking to the streets of Istanbul to contest the Turkish government's plans to develop Gezi Park near Taksim Square, and the regime's authoritarian drift more generally.

7 See Maurizio Lazzarato and Joshua David Morgan, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014.

8 Slavoj Žižek made these comments in an interview on *Roda Viva*, TV Cultura, 8 July 2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gECGJbW0ppo> (last accessed on 25 February 2015).



Bruno Pacheco, *Meeting Point*, 2011, oil on canvas, 215 × 375cm

whereas desire proliferates and expands itself. For the line of interest (conscious, negotiable, quantifiable) and that of desire (involuntary, proliferating, indeterminate) do not necessarily coincide, opening up a hiatus, a game-space. When asked about the purpose of his life's work, most of which was spent with autistic children, the pedagogue Fernand Deligny was fond of repeating his highly provocative answer — *it is for nothing* — a chilling statement for all those who had all too human intentions regarding the socialisation of autistic persons. Deligny was amongst the few who did not call for their inclusion. Rather, he wanted, through a kind of laterality and contiguity, to challenge our ways of communicating, grasping, socialising, speaking for, submitting and interpreting, as if this basic position, the For Nothing, were indispensable in order that something might come of it. For Nothing, in other words, preserves the rest from the Whole, which has always been truculent, totalising, violent. What is always at stake for Deligny is not the Whole, but the rest.

In 1948, Catalan psychiatrist François Tosquelles wrote a strange medical thesis titled *Le vécu de la fin du monde dans la folie: Le témoignage de Gérard de Nerval (Experience of the End of the World in Madness: The Testimony of Gérard de Nerval)*.<sup>9</sup> He refers to situations of collapse when patients feel that Nothing is possible any longer, when they are suddenly seized by the euphoric sense that from now on Everything is possible. Nothing is possible, Everything is possible, Nothing is possible, Everything is possible. Isn't it strange that we should experience something similar? When it appears that Everything is possible, the underlying truth is revealed: Nothing is possible. When excess of power or pain turns 'Everything is possible' into a frightening expression — because things could always be worse — we feel that the terms of this game deserve another arrangement, or even another playing field... It is a moment in which saturation becomes poverty, and that poverty imposes another need: demobilisation, rarefaction, vacuoles of silence in order that there may at last be something to say.

## III

At a moment that seemed reduced to the rawest impossibility — because of the exclusive faith in facts that he called 'faitalisme' (or 'factism') — Friedrich Nietzsche introduced the untimely, a new dimension of history that tore something in his age open. The untimely unharnesses itself from strict historical causality, unglues itself from the present or

9 François Tosquelles, *Le vécu de la fin du monde dans la folie: Le témoignage de Gérard de Nerval* (1948), Grenoble: Éditions Jérôme Millon, 2012.



Bruno Pacheco,  
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2014, oil on canvas,  
110 × 160cm

past, bears unprecedented intensity. Something new may come into the world through it. Nietzsche's description of this instant, when humankind is cast out from the circle of memory and escapes from time's leash, is among his most striking:

*It is the condition in which one is the least capable of being just; narrow-minded, ungrateful to the past, blind to dangers, deaf to warnings, one is a little vortex of life in a dead sea of darkness and oblivion: and yet this condition — unhistorical, anti-historical through and through — is the womb not only of the unjust but of every just deed too; and no painter will paint his picture, no general achieve his victory, no people attain its freedom without having first desired and striven for it in an unhistorical condition such as that described.<sup>10</sup>*

What is this injustice, if not the courage to free oneself from an endless debt, to cease owing the past — indeed, to cease owing the present, not to mention the future — we, infinitely indebted men and women? Only thus would we be able to validate the supreme right of that which is now born, even if we cannot recognise or have a name for it.

But none of this abolishes the strength of the past and its power to disrupt. Jean-Marie Straub captures it beautifully: the revolution is also 'putting back in place very ancient but forgotten things'.<sup>11</sup> Thus, we must incessantly excavate a non-visible past that slumbers in the ground beneath our feet and makes it tremble. Giorgio Agamben reminds us that a means of access to the present must take the form of archaeology, for what

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prevents access to the present is precisely the mass of that which, for one reason or another (its traumatic nature, its excessive proximity), we cannot experience in it: 'To be contemporary means in this sense to return to a present where we have never been.'<sup>12</sup> But a greater obstacle haunts us: the frenzy of the future. As Straub emphasises, 'the present time, stolen from us in the name of progress, is going by and is irreplaceable ...that they are ransacking human feelings like they ransack the planet ... that the price people must pay, whether for progress or well-being is far too high, unjustifiable.'<sup>13</sup> Hence, his curious concept of the political film: 'Militant films trap people into emergency again. And we are in an emergency situation: it's the outcome of the system that invented gas chambers.'<sup>14</sup> Another dimension of time is necessary — one that is not expressed by urgency.

#### IV

The Greeks already understood that alongside *Chronos* — time as measurement, the fixing of things and people, the development of a form and direction — there is another time, *Aion*: time without measure, indefinite, never ceasing to divide itself; always already there (the immemorial) and yet not there (the unprecedented); always too early and too late; the time of the 'something is going to happen' and simultaneously the 'something just happened'; the outpouring of forked, non-metric, non-vibrating, fluctuating time we sometimes see in psychosis, in dreams, in catastrophes, in large and in microscopic ruptures, whether collective or individual. Rupture occurs when time frees itself from its subordination to movement, as when Hamlet cries *The time is out of joint!!!* How to conceive a time free of movement, returned to itself, therefore unplanned, non-directed — a pure field of vectors without given orientations?

10 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations* (1876, trans. R.J. Hollingdale), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p.64.

11 François Péguy, quoted by Jean-Marie Straub in François Albera, 'Cinéma [et] politique: "Faucille et marteau, canons, canons, dynamite!" Entretien avec Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet', *Hors Champ*, August 2001; also available at <http://www.derives.tv/Cinema-et-politique-Faucille-et> (last accessed on 25 February 2015).

12 Giorgio Agamben, 'What Is the Contemporary?' (2008, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella), *What Is an Apparatus? and Other Essays*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009, pp.51 — 52.

13 F. Albera, 'Cinéma [et] politique', *op. cit.*

14 *Ibid.*



Bruno Pacheco,  
*Meeting Point*,  
2011, oil on canvas,  
220 × 400cm

Negri has gone so far as to suggest that postmodern time has freed itself from its bondage to the movement that it measures precisely because the value of work — in its immaterial reconfiguration — can no longer be stipulated by the measuring of time, or by time as measurement, given that its source is an invention-power that is present everywhere, in every brain, in every singularity, in every artist, and by definition immeasurable and inexhaustible.<sup>15</sup> Whence Negri's time 'beyond measure', in which immaterial labour overcomes the machine of the market and breaks from its insignificant and homogenising circularity, so that it may no longer be sucked dry by the vampire-like arrow of capital and its apparatus. Against the various figures that have attempted to domesticate time throughout the history of thought — from the Platonic 'moving image of eternity' to Hegelian circularity (in which beginning and end always 'rhyme') through to Aristotelian rationality or Kantian causality — in Deleuze's writing time emerges seemingly untamed and untameable; time as the Unequal in Itself. Only in this enigmatic modality does time cease to be circular or linear in order to open itself up as a multidirectional plurality, a temporal rhizome or Borgesian proliferation. If that which some call 'hypertime' makes any sense, it is only insofar as it does not preserve 'one' direction — an arrow of time — but multiple directions.

#### V

We do not yet know which becomings move through us nowadays; or in which directions we perceive (only barely) what they leave behind — the shed skins that we regard with some astonishment, scarcely imagining that was us yesterday. I am talking about doctrines, modes of organisation, political representation, ways of life, ways of thinking, ways of being. Frameworks that until very recently provided us with identity, direction, expectation and promise have disappeared, and we 'should' not grieve them. A single, univocal direction is no longer discernable: forward, for example, or upward (not to mention downward) — better to move sideways, I say. Time's totality — or time as totality — has been undone. Friedrich Hölderlin described such unbalances as caesuras: they do not allow beginning and end to rhyme, leading us to experience the gap and the monstrosities that occurred thence.

Of course, whereas some decades ago resistance followed a matrix of direct opposition between the forces at play — where there was a power conceived as a centre

15 A. Negri, *The Labor of Job: The Biblical Text as a Parable of Human Labor* (2002, trans. Matteo Mandarini), Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.



Bruno Pacheco,  
*Meeting Point*,  
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175 × 390cm

of command that it was up to everyone to dispute, with subjective positions defined by their reciprocal exteriority and dialectic complementarity (dominant/dominated, coloniser/colonised, explorer/exploited, boss/employee, intellectual/manual labourer, teacher/student, father/son, etc.) — the contemporary context, given its complexity, elicits more oblique, diagonal, hybrid and floating positions. Other lines of conflict emerge. In politics and culture, this may lead to a revision of the function of negativity itself. According to Negri:

*In modernity, resistance is an accumulation of forces against exploitation that come to be given a subjective determination through a prise de conscience. In postmodernity, none of all this. Resistance appears as a diffusion of singular behaviours of resistance. If resistance accumulates, it accumulates extensively, in circulation, mobility, flight, exodus, desertion ... the sense of rebellion is endemic. [...] Rebellion is neither a punctual event nor is it uniform; on the contrary, it traverses the expanse of the common and diffuses itself in the shape of an explosion of behaviours of singularities that it is impossible to contain.*<sup>16</sup>

## VI

If with Foucault we asked ourselves whether one day we would come of age, with Deleuze we ask ourselves if one day we will be *under* age. Deleuze and Guattari sought their own path: one not conceived in terms of individuals, but individuations and singularities; not of history, but events and becomings; not of subjects, but non-subjective and non-human affects. Here we can barely see any remnants of Kant, of humanity, of the liberties evoked; we find ourselves subverted, taken in movements of de-subjectivation that announce other possibilities of non-majoritarian existence.

Such reappraisal of minorities, in any case, doesn't entail a return to the privileges of the individual, the personal and the intimate, since singularities are necessarily collective. Think of the assistants, subalterns and unfinished beings that circulate in Kafka's worlds as messengers — of the crucial role they play, even if they remain inconspicuous. In a conversation with his friend Max Brod about contemporary Europe and the decadence of humanity, Kafka comments: 'We are nihilistic thoughts, suicidal thoughts that come into God's head.' Brod thinks of the gnostic world, of a perverse God and culpability, but Kafka smiles and replies: 'Oh no, our world is just a bad mood of God, a bad day of his.' To which Brod asks: 'Then there is hope outside this manifestation of the world that we know?' And Kafka contends: 'Oh, plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope — but not for us.'<sup>17</sup> It is a well-known assertion, which Benjamin interprets in his

<sup>16</sup> A. Negri, *Time for Revolution* (trans. Matteo Mandarini), London: Continuum, 2003, p.201.

<sup>17</sup> Franz Kafka, quoted in Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death', *Illuminations* (1955, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn), New York: Schocken Books, 2007, p.116.

own way: the hope is in those unfinished beings whose ambition was 'to use up as little space as possible. To that end they kept making various experiments, folding their arms and legs, huddling close together; in the darkness all one could see in their corner was one big ball.'<sup>18</sup> As Kafka argues, even the most useless and infantile might be sufficient for salvation. But that which Benjamin, and sometimes Kafka, call 'salvation', Deleuze and Guattari call 'escape'. It is not about freedom, they insist, but about taking flight.<sup>19</sup> The challenge is, again,

*to find points of non-culture or underdevelopment, linguistic Third World zones by which a language can escape, an animal enters into things, an assemblage comes into play. How many styles or genres or literary movements, even very small ones, have only one single dream: to assume a major function in language, to offer themselves as a sort of state language, an official language ... Create the opposite dream: know how to create a becoming-minor.*<sup>20</sup>

But then the question arises: isn't this becoming-minor just an aesthetic or literary matter; a philosophical issue; a problem for an aristocratic minority, a thinking elite; a minor caprice, in the worst sense of the word? This is true, to a certain extent, up to Nietzsche and his praise of the experimental philosopher. In Deleuze and Guattari, however, this attempt to formulate and learn processes of becoming-minor spans the most diverse fields: science, urbanism, architecture, anthropology, even politics. Yet, in Deleuze, the people — understood as the becoming-minor or becoming-people — is a people still to come. Above all, 'this people and earth will not be found in our democracies. Democracies are majorities, but a becoming is by its nature that which always eludes the majority.'<sup>21</sup> Representative democracy, the rule of the majority, conflicts, the big political theatre... For how long will we live under the sign of this dramatisation, which becomes more and more intolerable every day? The Deleuzian definition of the people implies that becoming-minor is a prerogative of all and each of us, and not of any one minority: 'Everybody's caught, one way or another, in a minority becoming that would lead them into unknown paths if they opted to follow it through.'<sup>22</sup>

Perhaps being contemporary, in its critical dimension, entails going through this narrow pass.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature* (1975, trans. Dana Polan), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p.10.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.27.

<sup>21</sup> G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (1991, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell), New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, p.108.

<sup>22</sup> G. Deleuze in 'Control and Becoming', *op. cit.*, p.173.

Translated from the Portuguese by Steve Berg.