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Book Review

Imaginal Machines: Autonomy and Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life, by Stephen Shukaitis. London: Minor Compositions, 2009. Pp. 256.

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IMAGINAL MACHINES: AUTONOMY AND SELF-ORGANIZATION IN THE REVOLUTIONS OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Stephen Shukaitis' *Imaginal Machines: Autonomy and Self-Organization in the Revolutions of Everyday Life* investigates, critiques, and theorizes the radical imagination. The radical imagination is defined as the collective capacity to "affect and be affected by the world, to develop movements toward new forms of autonomous sociality and collective self-determination" (p. 10). The main purpose of the book is to facilitate conversation about the intentions and effectiveness of revolutionary dreams and practices. The major argument of the book rests upon a reversal of perspective: the left's continual and seemingly unsuccessful attempts to change the world are not moments of failure, but rather moments of potential transformation and creativity that outmaneuver capital's institutionalizing power. As Shukaitis states:

What does it mean to invoke the power of the imagination when it has already seized power (through media flows and the power of the spectacle)? Does any subversive potentiality remain, or are we left with simply more avenues for the rejuvenation of questionable fields of power and rearticulating regimes of accumulation? ... Maybe imaginal machines, like all desiring machines, only work by breaking down. That is, their functioning is only possible, paradoxically, by their malfunction. (p. 10)

For Shukaitis, the goal is to maintain an open antagonism without closure; to create a formless form under continuous construction that resists capital's capture; to think beyond the narrative of

final victory in order to avoid cooptation and institutionalization. This may not be the grand crescendo of global revolution that is often associated with leftist politics, but that's the whole point. Radical thoughts and practices must be continuously evaluated in light of ever-changing social conditions. Rather than seeking a grand moment of ultimate liberation, we should work on creating multiplicities of minor moments that affectively-and-effectively recompose the social playing field in ways that precede and exceed the control and surveillance of contemporary, top-down power.

At first glance this may resemble the pessimism of French post-structuralist theory—for example, that nothing exists outside the text and we can only hope for some small fissures within an all encompassing system. But Shukaitis is hopeful rather than cynical, and his ideas are based on a desire for a post-capitalist, post-Statist world. But if that desire is to become a reality, then we must continuously rethink and perpetually change our radical imaginations. This is based on two well-reasoned premises.

First, Shukaitis borrows the “reversal of perspective” that is advocated by 1970s Italian Autonomism. That perspective argues that the radical imagination is the driving force of history, and that capitalism is a secondary, predatory power that feeds upon the ingenuity of that imagination. Thus, the radical imagination is not responsible for only responding to capitalism, but also, and more importantly, for responding to itself. This reversal of perspective is a moment of conceptual liberation that allows us to act and think in ways that precede and exceed capital's predatory control.

The second premise is already suggested by the first: that the radical imagination is socially and historically situated. According to Shukaitis:

Imagination is not ahistorical, derived from nothing, but an ongoing relationship and material capacity constituted by social interactions between bodies. While liberatory impulses might point to a utopian (no)where that is separate from the present, it is necessary to point *from* somewhere, from a particular situated imagining. The task is to explore the construction of imaginal machines, comprising the socially and historically embedded manifestations of the radical imagination. (p. 10)

In other words, what worked before may not work now, and what works now may not work in the future. But radicals—like all human beings, presumably—often fall victim to their outdated and thus ineffectual ideas and practices. Foregrounding these two premises helps social movements understand and avoid the pitfalls of previous eras. For instance, the anti-capitalism of early twentieth-century radical labor was subsumed by the Roosevelt Administration and transformed into a discourse on worker rights and minimum wage. Likewise, the decentered, structureless, anti-work ethic of the 1960s counterculture was transformed into the flextime and creative labor of today's post-Fordist capitalism. The Women's Liberation Movement and feminist critiques of the 1970s were institutionalized into affirmative action and maternity leave. Dadaist absurdities and surrealist abstractions are now cornerstones of the advertising industry. And the punk aesthetic (which was originally an anti-aesthetic) is now bought by mall-hopping teeny-boppers.

In every case capitalism found ways to respond to and incorporate the most oppositional critiques and demands, thus flattening the transformative power of the radical imagination. This analysis might induce a defeatist attitude, but that's not the point. Instead, Shukaitis is clearing away the debris of past eras/errors in order to make room for new thought and practice.

This is where the formless form mentioned above comes into play. Borrowing ideas from French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, Shukaitis talks of an intensity of affective compositions and collapses; small pockets of resistance that emerge, alter social relations, and then disappear before capital's capture. These self-guided collapses and disappearances starve capital of its vital nutrients—the creative, constituent energies of the radical imagination. In plain language, it's about flying under the radar of capital in order to more effectively combat the life-draining attributes of capital.

Shukaitis acknowledges that his focus on cooptation and call for continual rupture are not necessarily new or novel. He recounts, for instance, the concept of “recuperation,” which was used by the Situationist International to describe how radical thought is often incorporated into the overall functioning of the spectacle and thus rendered mute. Recuperation (or some variation thereof) is also a major theme for the three traditions that Shukaitis mainly draws from: autonomist politics, class composition analysis, and avant-garde art movements. The first seeks an anti-authoritarian, non-institutionalized political way of life. The second theorizes class identity as fluid and historically contingent, thus providing more effective strategies for revolution and worker resistance. And the third often conceives of itself as a catalyst for new forms of life that deconstruct the binary between art and everyday living. The tension between social change and the recuperative powers of capital is present within all three traditions. *Imaginal Machines* is participating in this tradition, trying to maintain an open dialogue about these issues.

Stylistically, the book is dense yet readable, nonlinear yet understandable, theoretical yet personal and witty. At times, though, the narrative flow is lost by the inclusion of so many voices (theorists, activists, artists, critics, song lyrics, movie titles, etc.). I understand and support the politics of inclusivity. But I want more of Shukaitis and less of the others. But it should be noted that *Imaginal Machines* was submitted as a doctoral dissertation. Through a personal email, Shukaitis explained that he intended it as a book, first, and as a dissertation second (March 12, 2010). Despite this nontraditional approach, I still believe it helps explain some of the hyper-inclusivity: graduate school itself is a bulky, complicated experience that (un)intentionally affects our approach to subject matters.

There is only one place that I really desire more theoretical clarification. Towards the end of the text, Shukaitis explains the formless form of continual change as a political strategy of social illegibility. He states that we should develop a radical imagination that “by its encoding is at least partially removed from the visibility of public legibility” (p. 215). Shukaitis, borrowing from Guy Debord, explains this as a politics of “necessary incomprehensibility” (p. 211). I believe there are two possible interpretations of what this means. One, that we should create imaginations (practices, strategies, styles, and spaces) that are not intelligible to state and capital power. Or, two, that we should not worry about state and capital power legitimizing or approving our imaginations; that we should do what we want regardless of what they think, want, or ask. I

believe there is a difference between these two interpretations and that the first is more nuanced than the second. I understand that outflanking state and capital power is the whole point and I am on board with that project. But if other people cannot understand what we are doing, how do we attract people to our social movements? How do we facilitate a critical mass of resistance? Who and/or what constitutes the “public” and “legibility?” How do we concretize the abstractions of state and capital power in terms of average, everyday people who might in fact be sympathetic to our radical imaginations?

Overall, *Imaginal Machines* is a theoretically rich and politically provocative text. The success of the book is based on Shukaitis’ experience and knowledge: he is personally invested in radical social change, intimately familiar with radical history, and very comfortable with sophisticated theory. *Imaginal Machines* is a necessary read for anyone interested in radical theory, and it will surely spark discussion about revolutionary strategy.