

FAHIM AMIR

*you need a weatherbird to know which way the wind blows*¹

“For as long as we human beings can remember, we’ve been looking up. Over our heads went the birds – free as we were not, singing as we tried to ... Some of us once believed that the birds could carry messages, and that if only we had the skill we’d be able to decipher them. Wasn’t the invention of writing inspired, in China, by the flight of cranes?”

MARGARET ATWOOD

One of this city’s buildings is under fire: inside it is ominously warped, outside it is peppered with arrows. On closer inspection, the arrows turn out to be a group of birds seemingly petrified at the moment of impact. Their almost jet-black plumage apart from a blazing red crest reveals them to be black woodpeckers, the sacred birds of the Roman god of war.²

The ability of birds to move between the sky and the earth and to turn up out of nowhere often led people to see their appearance as a portentous harbinger or oracle. This is not only true of premodern constellations: when Fidel Castro gave his first television address to the Cuban people as their political leader in January 1959, two doves descended from above, alighted on the revolutionary leader, and remained at his side for the duration of the two-hour speech – an occurrence that was unanimously interpreted as a sign of divine favour.³

Something similar occurred in March 2016 when during a pre-election speech given by Bernie Sanders a little songbird settled on the aged rebel’s lectern – Sanders interrupted his speech, the eleven-thousand-strong audience rose with standing ovations, and the internet went wild.⁴

As the fate of the two politicians would later show, interpreting birds’ behaviour is a tricky matter – except when you are dealing with the weather,

1 “You don’t need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows” is a lyric from Bob Dylan’s song *Subterranean Homesick Blues* (1965). The Weathermen (also known as the Weather Underground Organisation) were a militant student group founded in 1969 who took their name from this lyric. Declaring their solidarity with the Black Panther Party and the Viet Cong, the organisation carried out bomb attacks on government buildings.

2 Men quickly get a red face at the climax of sexual acts and during fits of rage. Our ancient forefathers must have had this in mind when they declared the rather harmless-looking black woodpecker of all creatures to be an associate of Mars. This head-like sphere also shimmered red in the night-time sky. The figure of the Mars woodpecker also incorporated aspects of an older Roman woodland deity and the mythical king of Laurentum who is said to have had the power of divination – even after being transformed into a woodpecker by the witch Circe. The woodpecker thus wove together the various threads of virile, vegetative fertility, violent strength, and prophetic gift. Cf. for example Richard Broxton Onians, *The Origins of European Thought, about the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate*: New interpretations of Greek, Roman and kindred evidence, also of some basic Jewish and Christian beliefs, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 1954, p. 470f.

3 Ivor L. Miller, “Religious Symbolism in Cuban Political Performance”, in: *The Drama Review*, Vol. 44, No. 2, So. 2000, pp. 30–55, here: 30–32 and 38f.

4 Tweets and internet memes with the hashtag #BirdieSanders went viral. The venerable Audubon Society intervened promptly, announcing that the bird known as Birdie Sanders was a female house finch, a songbird from the finch family. Cf. Mary Bowerman, “Crowd Goes Wild After Small Bird Lands on Bernie Sanders’ Podium”, *USA TODAY*, 26 March 2016.

5 The woodpecker's quick, darting, twisting flying manoeuvres were indeed ideal for interpretation – particularly those of the spotted woodpecker, that performed dynamic choreographies of red, white and black. Those responsible for taking the auspices, Latin for “looking at birds”, i.e. for interpreting the flight of birds, in ancient Rome were civil officials, the augurs, who sought to divine the favour of the gods ahead of all important undertakings. The fact that the official acts of magistrates were always accompanied by augurs gave rise over the centuries to the expression “under the auspices” meaning “under someone's control or protection”.

6 Cf. for example Cristina Mazzonei, *She-Wolf: The Story of a Roman Icon*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 214ff.

7 It may not be possible to answer the question put in the subheading even conceptually, as the aggregated body of sound could be a hyperobject in the sense of Timothy Morton's “dark ecology”. Morton uses this term to refer to objects such as climate change that are of such monstrous temporal and spatial scale that they elude all localisation and also possess other seemingly metaphysical qualities and difficulties, cf. *The Ecological Thought*, Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010, and *Ecology without Nature Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2007.

8 High-rise buildings with their glassy skin resemble dioramas in that they deny the body passage and at the same time lend the view a sense of transparent expansiveness.

9 The figures issued by the US Department of the Interior are presented in the article under the heading “Bird Killers” – so according to the US government, architecture is the number-one bird killer. See Meere Subramania, “An Ill Wind”, in: *Nature*, Vol. 486, 21 June 2012, pp. 310–311.

a crucial matter for agrarian societies, and when woodpeckers are involved: when the woodpecker hammers its head against the mightiest of trees at a speed of more than twelve strikes per second, the sound from the woods is that of war drums. When the air is soaked with moisture prior to precipitation, the drumming becomes particularly audible among the other sounds of the forest, which is why the woodpecker is commonly regarded as a reliable herald of rain and fertility, and of storm and destruction.⁵

Although the contradictions of forest/wilderness and city/civilisation were not neutralised in the figure of the woodpecker, they were conceptually linked: as a result, it was the ideal candidate for the task assigned to it in Roman state mythology of protecting and feeding Romulus and Remus, the later founders of Rome, during their early childhood – together with a female wolf that generally appears rather undernourished in artistic portrayals⁶: within this temporary trans-species patchwork family, the woodpecker's partner was held to be proverbially insatiable, as insatiable as the hunger of the Roman empire in its quest to civilise and devour entire nations and regions.

What sound does the impact of a billion birds make?

Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber see the deadfall trap of built space as a material and metaphorical contact zone between nature and civilisation⁷: the bird-arrows of *Critical Mass* can be interpreted as the spirits of those birds that fly full speed into the cathedrals of capitals⁸ and the homes of a planetary petty bourgeoisie (Giorgio Agamben), perishing on impact. In an article published in the science magazine *Nature* in 2012⁹ it is estimated that buildings could be responsible for more than one billion avian deaths every year in the USA alone, thus surpassing the killing capacity of domestic and feral cats, pesticides, cars, wind turbines, power lines, etc. Only an NGO of godlike proportions can save them now.

In his article entitled “Beyond Birds: Biopower and Birdwatching in the World of Audubon”, Timothy W. Luke analyses the role of the National Audubon Society (NAS), America's self-professed leading organisation for protecting and restoring ecosystems. Luke objects that NAS efforts to protect birds are first and foremost another step towards the “Audubonization” of American society: “At the root of Audubonization is a discourse of pathos and a discipline of surveillance that turns birds into more performative sources of biopower. Beautiful but pitiable, the

beleaguered bird life of the nation is to be continuously watched, monitored, and counted so that human beings might feel sorrow from their destruction as well as feel moved in their pathos to protect any survivors.”¹⁰

Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber bring the collateral victims of house building back to life, raining them down like arrows on their murderers, the innocent-looking houses all around. The visible hand of nature strikes back – and hits.¹¹

Committed to the artistic production of the impossible, the utopias developed by Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber, for example in *Delete* and *Trouble in Paradise*, thrive on a surrealist reality principle. Reality is poetically charged in the trio’s works in order to allow it to discharge in utopian explosions. Yet the interventions and installations of Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber are not familiar conceptions of the utopian, that we generally imagine as physically isolated (island) or displaced in time (former paradise or future socialism): instead, they cause reality to trip over its own legs. The starting point of their utopias with which they unsettle the present is always the here and now.

Instead of the accountant-like pose of aggressive bean counting assumed by those vulgar Darwinists who would confine the excess and aesthetic of the social metabolism and ecological processes within the cost-benefit calculations of rational maximisers, Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber would rather seem to embrace the heterodox thought of philosopher Roger Caillois: both aim to reconnect analogue, connective and poetic thinking to processes of knowledge and meaning production whose form is that of “adventurous coherence”. In his book *The Necessity of the Mind* written in the 1930s but only published posthumously, Caillois develops the image of the chessboard as an ecological metaphor where “there is no movement of any piece which does not have repercussions on the others and which does not more or less modify the general situation.”¹²

The ventures of Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber are not just the operations of *chessmates*, but also of *messmates* (Donna Haraway). With their works, that question, for example, the contemporary constitution of public space not only in present-day urbanism but also with regard to figures of the natural and the regimes of their visual representation, Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber are on the trail of a disorder of things that is constitutive of modernism.¹³

10 Timothy W. Luke, *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 11:3, pp. 7–37, here: p. 8. See also Spencer Schaffner, *Binocular Vision: The Politics of Representation in Birdwatching Field Guides*, Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011, and Jeffrey Karnicky, *Scarlet Experiment: Birds and Humans in America*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016, pp. 73–104.

11 Dinesh Joseph Wadiwel argues, with Michel Foucault, in *The War Against Animals* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015) that the sovereign power of modern states is engaged in a constant war against animals. However, war can only be waged on an adversary capable of resistance. See also Jason Hribal, *Fear of the Animal Planet: The Hidden History of Animal Resistance*, Edinburgh: AK Press, 2011. For an elucidating exposition of instinct and emancipation, see Brian Massumi, *What Animals Teach Us about Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

12 Roger Caillois, *The Necessity of the Mind: An Analytic Study of the Mechanisms of Overdetermination in Automatic and Lyrical Thinking and of the Development of Affective Themes in the Individual Consciousness*, Venice, CA: Lapis Press, 1990, p. 560.

13 The *modus operandi* of Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber, particularly their meticulous examination of gazes and the production of (in)visibility and their re-narrative work on historical artefactivity, displays conceptual links to the notion of *diffraction* developed by *natureculture* theorist Donna Haraway: whereas reflection requires that there is something solid that is merely passively reflected in the form of sameness/identity, diffraction opens up the noninnocent metaphor of optics to describe processes and patterns of difference; see also: Astrid Deuber-Mankowsky, *Praktiken der Illusion. Kant, Nietzsche, Cohen, Benjamin bis Donna J. Haraway*, Berlin: Vorwerk 8, 2007, pp. 271–335.

14 Tom Klein, "Woody Abstracted: Film Experiments in the Cartoons of Shamus Culhane", in: *Animation: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 6(1), 2010, pp. 39–53. This led to a formal deepening of the Woodpecker character that hitherto – like most cartoons of the day – had "borrowed" above all from Afro-American rhetorics of minstrel and jazz, cf. Christopher P. Lehman, *Black Representation in American Short Films (1928–1954)*, dissertation, 2002, p. 93f.

15 At least in the US series *American Gods* released in 2017 that tells of the battle between the Old and New Gods. The premise of the series is the idea that beliefs can become real: ancient and contemporary gods coexist in rather uneasy harmony, for as long as someone believes in them, they all continue to exist. The modern power of the media is personified by the deity Media (Gillian Anderson) who, when requiring camouflage, appears primarily in the guise of the cartoon figure Woody Woodpecker so as to spy on her rivals, keeping an eagle – or woodpecker – eye on things from the television screen.

16 "Bling-bling" is a pop culture term describing the imaginary sound of light hitting jewellery that came from the US hip hop culture of the 1990s before spreading like an epidemic. Gold chains recall how people cast off the chains of slavery only to don the chains of capitalism. Bling-bling is a marker of painful continuities within changed coordinates. Cf. Krista Thompson, "The Sound of Light: Reflections on Art History in the Visual Culture of Hip-Hop", *The Art Bulletin*, 91:4, pp. 481–505.

17 Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature. Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 152.

The surreal laughter of another woodpecker echoes in this work: Woody Woodpecker, who seems to be engaged in a constant laughing contest with the rest of the world. Adding to the existing pop culture dimension of the woodpecker, this cartoon character created by Walter Lantz in 1940 in the midst of the Second World War brought in the influence of Russian formalists such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Pudovkin, central points of reference for the director of the *Walter Lantz Studios* Shamus Culhane for musical and cinematic experiments with the cartoon figure: in view of the fact that hardly anyone at the Lantz Studios would have agreed to an overtly avant-garde orientation of the pileated woodpecker, Culhane devised guerilla tactics allowing him to engage in his modernist mischief with the deliciously crazy and foolish figure of the cartoon woodpecker. Surprisingly, the frenetic power of the early Woodpecker short films gave him ample opportunity.¹⁴ The woodpecker got his characteristic laugh, that always edges on the maniacal, in 1947 and it would become his trademark, paving the way for him to ascend to the ranks of American media deities.¹⁵

As ambiguous and rich in associations as the woodpecker is as a real and symbolic figure, so too does this work by Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber elude any hard-and-fast interpretation: one cannot be quite sure whether the woodpeckers stuck in the façade are not in fact monstrous acupuncture needles stuck in the body of the city, seeking to restore its energetic balance at strategic crossing points – as the diorama *Shanghai* (2012) would seem to suggest. Or are they pins marking the topology of the city as a foraging zone for valorisation? If precarious balance is the status quo, the contemporary version of the scholastic question as to the maximum number of angels that can dance on the head of a pin would be: how many woodpeckers in a façade can be said to make a critical mass?

Or were the woodpeckers perhaps even conceived as libertarian alternative drafts to the garden gnome, to be draped upon buildings like dialectical "bling-bling"¹⁶ of testimony and liberation? The surrealistic beautification of the city, that is at the same time an artistic interrogation of ecomimetic mass culture in the age of mass ecological death, is possibly "radical ecological kitsch", as Timothy Morton conceptualises it in *Ecology without Nature*: kitsch as "other people's enjoyment" is hard to avoid – no matter whether it is a public space of visual art or the private intimacy of the home. If we can handle the immanent aspect of social distinction in a productive manner, then, according to Morton, it is by means of nuances: "Through the tiny gestures of the re-mark, high environmental art polices the boundaries between itself and kitsch."¹⁷

Deadfall trap Californication

A wholly new world that is beginning to bury the old world is arising today in California's Silicon Valley, the birthplace of Uber, Google and Facebook. Many celebrated Valley founders graduated from nearby Stanford University, that boasts to be partly responsible for the success of many of its graduates. But how did Stanford University and its associates in the form of high-risk investors, innovators and patent firms achieve this? "Disruptive innovation" is the buzzword for the business and growth model underlying these developments. This is a radical evolution of a concept introduced by the Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter – "innovation". Whereas Schumpeter simply implied the introduction of new products on the market, "disruptive innovation" describes the launch of types of products that are to begin with inferior compared with the competition, but which gradually completely oust their rivals. One popular example is the emergence of initially low-quality digital cameras that ultimately led to the almost total disappearance of analogue photography and such venerable companies as Kodak, who very quickly began to look like dinosaurs who had had their day.

Jill Lepore, a professor at rival Harvard University, points out that the term "innovation" only gained public ubiquity beyond specialist circles after 9/11: "The eighteenth century embraced the idea of progress; the nineteenth century had evolution; the twentieth century had growth and then innovation. Our era has disruption, which, despite its futurism, is atavistic. It's a theory of history founded on a profound anxiety about financial collapse, an apocalyptic fear of global devastation, and shaky evidence. (...) The idea of innovation is the idea of progress stripped of the aspirations of the Enlightenment, scrubbed clean of the horrors of the twentieth century, and relieved of its critics. Disruptive innovation goes further, holding out the hope of salvation against the very damnation it describes: disrupt, and you will be saved."¹⁸

There is no doubt that the theory of disruptive innovation owes its success in no small part to the rhetoric of its presentation, it is the twin of those products which it describes: business schools in particular are wont to put forward theories as brilliantly marketed commodities, "launching" them like new mobile phone features. Stanford succeeded in positioning itself as a shining example of a new species of university that, internally, is organised after the model of companies and, externally, views itself primarily as an incubator designed to bring forth new global corporations.

18 Jill Lepore, "The Disruption Machine: What the Gospel of Innovation Gets Wrong", *The New Yorker*, 23 June 2014.

19 Recently managers have started training their social skills in “horse-assisted leadership development” seminars. The idea behind this thriving training model is simple: if you can make horses do what you want, you’ll be able to make your staff do what you want too. Looked at that way, this seemingly new, exciting experiential product on the further education marketplace is in fact very old wine in new bottles.

The cannibalistic aggressiveness of this model of innovation, that is geared to destroying the competition, is legitimised by the not quite so innovative promise of old-school economic liberalism whereby the radical assertion of individual interests by the famous “invisible hand” of the market will ultimately create better conditions for one and all. Social opposition to this and kindred developments has in recent years increasingly departed from traditional structures of action and organisation, turning instead to emerging forms: critical mass, for example, describes the seemingly spontaneous gathering of people in public places that is effected with no central leadership and that becomes a political event by that very fact alone.

Autokinetic socio-political forms such as this are often associated with “swarm intelligence”: this is an attempt to describe the phenomenon of distributed agency that manifests itself in collective shitstorms on the internet, in view of the role of social media in the “Arab Spring”, but also in the flight of flocks of birds – for a brief time a group of individuals acts collectively as a single entity, without there being any central controlling instance such as a leader or manager.

The manager as the leading figure of organisation, administration and control derives from the verb to manage that first appears in the English language in the sixteenth century in the meaning of training horses inspired by the French *manège* (riding school arena).¹⁹

A horse that resists all training, a creature that is, so to speak, completely unmanageable, would have to be called crazy – it would be a crazy horse. Such a beast would also be unsuitable to be ridden by optimisation-crazy managers and would instead be predestined for declaring war on empires: Crazy Horse was the name of the Sioux chief who dealt the US army one of its most resounding defeats at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876.

But Crazy Horse is also the name of the rock band founded by the Canadian Neil Young to whom Jim Jarmusch devoted a masterful music documentary, *Year of the Horse* (1997). If the works of Steinbrener/Dempf & Huber were a rhizome, Jarmusch’s evocative, speculative thinking of narrative visuality would no doubt be an associative node in this network. In another film by Jarmusch, *Broken Flowers* (2005), for example, the resigned protagonist Don Johnston (Bill Murray) is asked by his friend and neighbour Winston (Jeffrey Wright) about a mysterious letter bearing a stamp with a woodpecker on it: “A woodpecker! What does it mean to you?” The film is set out on the basis of a model of con-

centric circles reminiscent of a tree's annual rings. The answer to the question of the woodpecker's meaning would be a call to act: like a woodpecker, we are supposed to hammer our way deep into the tree trunk, that is the history of our present.

