

Thinking with Runo Lagomarsino's work Horizon (Southern Sun Drawing) by Avi Alpert

Let's start with a question. Is a line what connects two points, or are two points what are formed when we draw a line? When we think of a line as connecting two points, we think of it as making connections. When we think of a line as creating two points, we think of it as making something new exist. Perhaps a line can do both.

Let's take an example. On October 12, 1492, Rodrigo de Triana saw a speck of land in the sea. The empty horizon, the never-ending line, suddenly closed in. A map could now be made. A line could now be drawn. From the Canary Islands to the Bahamas, one could run a pen over a map to mark routes of trade, bodies to be thrown to the sea, the outline of the future. But the line does only connect the points: the line makes the points. There is now an "Old World" and a "New World." Without the line of connection, the points themselves do not exist.

The presumption in this schema is that a line is straight and that it eventually ends. This is, as it were, the tyranny of the line against which modern art launched a prolonged battle. Duchamp insisted that measure was relative.¹ Piero Manzoni that art contains lines that stretch to infinity.² Hundertwasser made the battle theological: "the straight line is Godless." The tyranny was always, then, in how the line was drawn. But the line itself remained.

Such is the price of modernism's imagination: it can think an endless proliferation of forms, but in return it must give up the ability to think beyond the form itself. We find this similarly in modernism's inversion of the sun. One might think equally here of Victory over the Sun, the Russian Futurist opera of 1913. When Malevich unveiled his black square, he defeated the Sun, but he did not defeat what the sun represented: the form itself remained. The Platonic rational truth was dead, but a new truth, an "alogical" truth, had been enthroned in its place. It is precisely this binary which will soon unravel: finite line/infinite line; logical truth/alogical truth. The two exist with each other; they do not get past each other.

Perhaps a political analogue is of use. In the wake of World War II, as is well-known, the United States and Russia began not just an arms race, but a neo-colonial race. The question for the rest of the world became one of alignment: either one was with the Soviets or the Americans, or, like Bartleby, one could remain neutral, could "prefer not to," but in so doing would inevitably be trampled in the movement of history which demanded decision.

Alignment, of course, is a particular type of line. The Platonic Sun, after all, had always signified a movement upwards – away from the base facts of the world and toward the truth of the gods above it. If we follow Malevich's inversion schema, the U.S. was like the Platonic sun: seeking to pull countries "up" into the truth of capitalist democracy. The Soviets, with a positivity to the inversion, sought to pull countries "down" into the truth of socialist equality. In either case, the line was conceived of vertically.

Then in 1955 a new proposition was suggested in Bandung, Indonesia: non-alignment. To be non-aligned was to refuse the verticality of the line imposed by either the U.S. or the Soviet Union. The non-aligned movement thus offered something new to what was then (and often still now) called the

¹ 3 stoppages étalon

² Contiene una linea di lunghezza infinita

Third World: namely, a horizontal line. The axis of opposition expanded from up/down to vertical/horizontal.

The crisis in art which followed modernity can be seen as analogous to crisis in politics which followed Bandung. The essential contradictions between finite and infinite, or between a colonial past and a postcolonial present, were never reconciled – indeed, perhaps they were never reconcilable. Of course the question is not to map the art or the politics on to each other in a one to one relation, but rather to see how each speaks to crises that are at once formal and internal, and informal and external.

It should perhaps come as no surprise, then, to see the rise of calls for new and/or utopic visions on the international left. Slavoj Zizek, Fredric Jameson and David Harvey have all written recently on the concept of utopia.³ Gayatri Spivak has hinted at the need for a new politics of planetary re-imagination.⁴ The famous slogan of the World Social Forum condenses it all: “Another world is possible.” But again what we see here is a simple inversion: stagnation/imagination; closed/open; impossible/possible.

The instance of contemporary art has no more been able to reconcile these contradictions – it has only sought to engulf them further. Daniel Birnbaum’s title for the 53rd Venice Biennale is a case in point: “Fare Mondi // Making Worlds // Bantun Dunayin // Weltenmachen ...” In having the translation internal to the title (as opposed to appearing differently in different linguistic publications), Birnbaum suggested an art world that was in itself plural and active – it made worlds while at the same refusing to claim any of them as the world.

U.S. democracy, Soviet economy, Bandung horizontality, new imaginations, new worlds (novi mundi // mundos nuevos ...) all have their place in the shaping of the contemporary worlds we inhabit. But the mild suggestion I want to make here is that there remains something to do beyond this. These models deal with the world(s) we already inhabit, that is to say, the world of lines, the world of connections and relations, the world of 1492.

In her essay, “1492: A New World View,” Sylvia Wynter makes a provocative suggestion: Columbus’ coming to America was at once a travesty and genius of invention. He gave birth to precisely this world view of the very possibility of a world view: he made the tyranny of both the line and the anti-line possible. He gave us, as it were, both the honey and the vinegar of our present moment.

Wynter’s provocation in reply is not to stop at the moment of this world view. Rather, she insists, “We must now replicate Columbus’ creation of a ‘new image of the earth’ by creating a new ‘image of the human,’ based on a trans-racial mode of inclusive altruism, beyond the limits of the national subject and the nation-state.” In one sentence, then, Wynter both instantiates the need for a new vision and gives that vision.

The problem here is the production of the vision guarantees the production of opposites, of disagreements, of recriminations. Indeed, such subjects as “altruism” and “beyond the nation-state” have already come under attack from theorists of the postcolonial like Pheng Cheah and David Scott.⁵ What seems important then in Wynter’s suggestion is not the content of the sentence, but the open horizon of a new image to replace Columbus’ with which she begins.

³ Zizek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*; Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*; Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*

⁴ “Planetary” in *Death of a Discipline*

⁵ Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*; Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity*

Perhaps there is also another strategy. Let us return to October 12, 1492 and Triana's vision. Let us return, precisely, to one second before that. Let us return to the moment before the line, when all that was seen was the horizon. To return to the horizon is not to make utopic claims – indeed we know at the moment of the horizon that the line is about to be discovered; it is rather quite the opposite. It is to agree with the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas when he writes, "Entering too late into a world created without [us, we are] responsible over and above what [we] experience..."⁶ To return to the horizon is to remind ourselves of the fact that we cannot make worlds, we cannot imagine a better future, we cannot create a "new image of the human," until we have come to terms with the irrepressible demands of the world we have already created.

To return to the horizon is to remember the limits of our inventions and cleverness, but not necessarily to discard them. "Silence, cunning and exile"⁷ still have their roles to play, but they must stand among other models: demands, responsibility and engagement. The return is, furthermore, to add to the common question, 'What is on the horizon?' the equally necessary, 'What horizons behind us have we too quickly forgotten?'

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⁶ From the essay, "Substitution"

⁷ James Joyce, *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man*