

Michael Marder

Pyropolitics

Fire and the Political

With a foreword by Slavoj Žižek

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ibidem
Verlag

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available on the Internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Cover picture: ID 19155633 © Ba-mi | Dreamstime.com

ISBN (Print): 978-3-8382-1972-1

ISBN (E-Book [PDF]): 978-3-8382-7972-5

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30457 Hannover
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Printed in the EU

לזיכרוןם של שרה בת מלכה, רחל בת שרה ומונייה בן יוסף

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Foreword

A Hologram of Our Present

Slavoj Žižek

While I cannot follow any of Bach's *Passions* without yawning, I find his solo violin and cello sonatas irresistible. Take the fugues of Bach's three sonatas for solo violin (especially that of N°1), in which the entire polyphonic structure is condensed in one instrumental line, so that, though we "effectively" hear only one violin line, in our imagination we automatically supplement it with other unheard implicit melodic lines and seem to hear the multitude of melodic lines in their interaction. It's a musical hologram at its purest. The actual condensation to one single line is thereby by no means simply suspended: the key element of the artistic effect is that we are all the time aware of how we effectively hear only one line.

The unique achievement of Michael Marder's *Pyropolitics: Fire and the Political* is that it is a book structured like a Bach fugue: the motif of fire serves as a prism, a single motif through which, like superpositions in quantum mechanics, all the antagonisms and threats of our predicament appear in their interconnectedness. Marder is breathtakingly imaginative in composing a list of all the modes and uses of fire, literal and metaphorical, a list that includes political theory, literature, theology, philosophy, biology, up to the analysis of current events like the "incendiary speech" of the New Right populists from Trump to his European counterparts. He is also far from focusing just on the two most obvious cases, namely global warming, which menaces to bring the entire surface of our planet to a boiling point, and the threat of nuclear warfare that could ruin all life on earth. He deals, among

other things, with books and heretics burnt on Inquisition pyres, with self-immolations at protest rallies, with the sun, with phenomena ranging from the massive burning of oil and coal to forest fires in Amazonia and Australia to gigantic volcanic outbursts, from revolutionary sparks which ignite radical social changes to the terrorist bombings of cars and buildings...

The choice of fire as a prism through which to analyze the complex interaction of multiple crises is much more appropriate than the obvious culprit—global capitalism—because it avoids the temptation to “essentialize” economy into the ultimate ground. Fire serves as a kind of filter, which makes transparent the interplay of all our antagonisms and threats. But there is an additional reason for the choice of fire: Marder argues that geo-politics, or the politics of the Earth, has always had an unstable, at once shadowy and blinding, underside—pyro-politics, or the politics of fire, which is increasingly dictating the rules of the game today, and that, as a result, it is necessary to learn to speak its language, to discern its manifestations, and to project where our world ablaze is heading. To do this properly, one should relativize some of our most elementary oppositions, like the one between nature and society.

In a recent text, Marder analyzes the effects of “Lavender,” an AI-based program developed by the Israeli army which has played a central role in the unprecedented bombing of Palestinians. Such digitalized destructiveness also produces as its outcome something which cannot be simply conceived in the old terms of “mutilated corpses” and “ruins”; rather, it is a specifically pyro-political event:

“Gaza is rapidly transformed into a dump, where high-rise buildings and human bodies, ecosystems (including the fragile riverine one, cutting between the north from the south

of the Strip) and orchards are mutilated beyond recognition and reduced to organic-inorganic rubble. A solidarity with dumpified lives, places and worlds requires something other than compassion, so what could that be? 'I am biomass' is a speech act that identifies with a vanishing life, with life's vanishing into dumped massiveness. The affirmation says: I am decimated being and stymied becoming, yet not exactly nothing. Dumped, I resist the dump with the surreal power of nothing. It is quite a stretch of the imagination to think that one can easily identify with the victims of genocide in Palestine. But what if Gaza were a condensed and particularly blunt version of a planetary tendency, as neoliberal new-speak with regard to 'compassionate genocide' leads us to believe? If so, then the biomassification of life, which proceeds at an uneven pace elsewhere, is accelerated in Gaza at the cutting edge of the most recent technologies of devastation. Rather than compassion, then, what is required is the solidarity of the dumped, who dare assert, 'We are biomass.'"¹

The "biomassification of life" is what a contemporary criminal use of fire does to us, albeit unevenly in different regions of the world. But Marder goes much further in undermining ordinary oppositions: in his overview of the existing literature on the modes of cognition, which do not involve any conscious self-awareness, not even the one that is sometimes attributed to highly developed animals, he convincingly argues that "plants are *res cogitantes extendentes*": "plants are constantly extending their cognition through the active extension of their bodies, and, with it, their functional cognitive apparatuses. And beyond that, plants also actively extend their cognitive process to the environment they are constantly engaged with and which houses a wide array of their biochemical substances."² Such an anti-Cartesian approach (rejecting the ontological distinction between *res*